Migrating Fictions

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THROUGH THE COURSE of this book I have called attention to how internal migrations do not just happen in a flurry of confusion, naturally over time, or solely through individual choice. Instead, the governmentalities shaping mass migrations are part of a larger U.S. presentation of itself as exceptional that too often connects landownership to those empowered citizens who are seen to embody “American-ness,” an abstraction that is tinged with preconceptions about race, ethnicity, religion, class, and gender, among other things. Whether it is through environmental, economic, or wartime displacements, those outside of the expected image are kept on the move as precarious, bare life to provide the labor for this nation or are imprisoned, out of sight, with their individual identities and their larger communities obscured.

*Migrating Fictions* addresses these disparities by reconsidering the application and scope of the terms “refugee” and “internally displaced person,” with their concomitant assumptions about international and national law, space, and obligations. While applying the concept of refugee to internally displaced people can call attention to a failure in state support, it can also continue that very failure. For that reason, by comparing examples as seemingly diverse as the Mexican American migrant labor and Japanese American incarceration during World War II, this study has sought to fill in a gap in our thinking by theorizing an alternate location for the internal migrant that incorporates the ethical demand of the refugee into the disempowered status of the internally
displaced person. An awareness of critical concepts such as governmentality, precarity, the state of exception, and bare life shows how inequalities in landownership and citizenship often become more prominent during internal displacements. In many respects, as I argue, forced movement, rather than being just a result of larger oppressive forces, becomes a critical factor in defining citizenship.

While internally displaced people have been constituted as an unofficial category of precarious citizens by governmental forces, migration and movement can also serve as a means to critique and reformulate such systems and policies. Thus, this book has utilized the work of historic-geographic critics as well as that of postcolonial and race scholars to develop an intersectional concept of Thirdspace that can imagine beyond past and current configurations of race, gender, and citizenship. A primary source for Thirdspace, apart from the historical migrations themselves, is in fiction, where it can function as a political site that resists dominant governmental, legal, and economic forces, that collocates the collectivity of migratory movement, and that can challenge distinctions between the refugee and the internally displaced person in the pursuit of social justice.

Even though my chosen narratives were written in distinct literary styles across the modern and postmodern literary periods, viewing these migrations and their literary inflections together enables us to see continuities often missed and corrects our association of migration with only white masculinity. From the effects on experience and narrative of African American movement from slavery to the Great Migration, as shown in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; to the myths of possession that created and shaped the response to Dust Bowl farmers and Babb’s *Whose Names Were Unknown*; to the disorienting movement into U.S. concentration camps for people of Japanese descent and Otsuka’s *When the Emperor Was Divine*; to the disembodied labor of people of Mexican descent in the borderlands and in Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus*—these methods of migration constitute a broader, more inclusive history of movement in the United States. The progression of these chapters moves through the Depression, World War II, the postwar period, and beyond. Affecting all of these periods, however, is the specific moment in U.S. immigration history after the restrictions and quota system of the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 and before immigration reform under the Hart-Celler Act of 1965. During this time, “the United States allowed in a mere 7.3 million immigrants, about the same number that had come in a single decade before World War I.”¹ The governmentalities that limited immigration turned the country’s focus inward

¹ Gregory, *Southern Diaspora*, 22.
to watch and control the internal migrations under discussion. This history is structured by certain common elements, including the governmental and capitalist influences on landownership and movement, as well as how a perceived lack of American-ness has been linked to race and class.

These connections between the lack of landownership and disempowerment have been shown through the history as well as in each of the novels in this book through the symbols of the ground beneath the characters’ feet: the mud, dirt, dust, and tar. For the black migrants in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the earth is perceived as valuable, but their bodies are not: “The rich black earth cling[s] to bodies and bit[es] the skin like ants.”[^2] The migrants are antagonized by their relationship to the land and do not gain the benefits of ownership and full citizenship. In *Whose Names Are Unknown*, the white farmers own their land at the start of the novel, so that the land’s turning to dust shows how their landownership and citizenship rights are eroding, and with it their economic and overall stability. Although history reveals that the earth did turn to dust, it is through the symbolic use of the earth in California that the novel’s commentary is made apparent. The earth’s position as an emblem of their status in the eyes of the government is stressed when the image shifts to the representation of dirt, which indicates their “blackened” and dirty status through racialization and class-based stereotypes about cleanliness. In *When the Emperor Was Divine*, the negative presentation of the earth comes with the arrival in the U.S. concentration camp, where the dust invades the incarcerees’ bodies and their rights are lost. The symbolism focuses on the real violence that the dust does to privacy and to the body, with the land as the government that is able to watch over, harm, and imprison them. Additionally, the dust is alkaline, so its whitening effects reveal the governmental desire to assimilate the incarcerees into whiteness and distance them from Japanese traditions. Finally, while *Under the Feet of Jesus* offers an idealized conception of land as a borderless, empathetic space, Estrella concretizes the current entrapping, governmental notion of how power is related to landownership through the land’s representation in the tar pits. Here, the land and the fruits grown from that earth are built upon her bones, just like the oil derived from the bones of the girl trapped in the tar pit; the governmentalties that keep migrant workers in the fields use them as bare life that can be sacrificed without acknowledging their value. These various symbols of the earth and land work to expose the falsehood of societal claims that only provide full citizenship to those who own land rather than including the precariat who are working on it.

The governmental and capitalist elements that disempower citizens through notions of race, American-ness, and ownership in internal migrations have been largely overlooked, but so has resistance to them. Some of the affected individuals respond to this discrimination by contesting larger narratives with their own actions and stories, specifically by imagining how they might create new religious amalgamations, cultural and community identifications, and, in general, pathways to a sense of home through the potential of Thirdspace. The chapters of this book unfold through a historical analysis of the internal displacements that have affected the real lives of hundreds of thousands of people over the course of the twentieth century. The combination of the history with literature, however, reveals the potential for change, to “imagine otherwise.” The novels investigated here show different uses of Thirdspace, especially through different female attempts at empowerment. Some women craft their own sense of authority and control of movement, community, and stories, while others attempt to find inclusion in labor unions and economic communities. Some women, reduced in a prison space, escape into dreaming and magical thinking, while others imagine a potential space for community by reworking spiritual narratives into political possibilities. By showing the importance of considering women’s defiance in various kinds of movement, I hope that Migrating Fictions has divulged not only some of those master narratives but also the narratives that challenge and reconfigure them.

I end by returning to Hurricane Katrina and the literature around it because the conversation about movement and literature is ongoing, and this story is not finished. Since I started this project, post-Katrina narratives both in fiction and nonfiction have emerged to tell us more about the experience during and after the hurricane, including columnist Chris Rose’s collected stories 1 Dead in Attic: After Katrina (2007), James Lee Burke’s mystery The Tin Roof Blowdown (2007), Tom Piazza’s novel City of Refuge (2008), Dave Eggers’s fictional biography Zeitoun (2009), Josh Neufeld’s graphic nonfiction A. D.: New Orleans after the Deluge (2009), and Sheri Fink’s nonfictional Five Days at Memorial: Life and Death in a Storm-Ravaged Hospital (2013). Jesmyn Ward’s novel Salvage the Bones (2011), my subject of inquiry here, even won the National Book Award. In light of the other narratives and displacements discussed in this book, one might expect these post-Katrina narratives to concentrate on the movement of people from the Gulf Coast to a new space elsewhere; intriguingly, however, many of these narratives follow the stories

4. Notable documentary films include Spike Lee’s When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts (2006), Tia Lessin and Carl Deal’s Trouble the Waters (2009), and Ashley Sabin and David Redmon’s Kamp Katrina (2009).
of those who stayed, and so I use *Salvage the Bones* as an example of this seemingly oppositional presentation of community and movement even as it continues many of the same discussions about race, gender, and class in the United States found in prior examples, revealing the ongoing nature of these problems. Particularly, the hostile perception of non-evacuators indicates racial and class dimensions surrounding the access to movement that need consideration prior to the next mass migration. A subsequent comparison of this novel and Hurricane Katrina to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the Okeechobee Hurricane of 1928 shows again the importance of analyzing literature and history together across the World War II divide to undermine prevailing hierarchical notions of territory that restrict ownership and safety to only certain configurations of wealth and race.

*Salvage the Bones* follows the Batistes, an African American family, in the fictional town of Bois Sauvage, Mississippi, during the days before and shortly after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. It illustrates the continued significance of choice in relationship to movement, reminding us that the inability to move can be just as detrimental as being forced to move. The history of slavery remains always at the periphery of this family’s reaction to their environment. For instance, the book’s very first mention of the storm says that “they knock against the old summer mansions with their slave galleys turned guesthouses” (4) with the knowledge that previous confinements for the enslaved now demonstrate a new generation of wealth that can afford to have guesthouses.\(^5\) In addition, more contemporary notions of racism undermine the family’s trust of the news’ presentation of the impending storm because “everytime somebody in Bois Sauvage get arrested, they always get the story wrong” (6). These characters, though their family has lived for generations on this land, feel an ongoing sense of precarity and denial of their bodies and stories. They barely have enough to feed themselves, so the notion of fleeing the storm is not even considered; moreover, the “help” of the federal and local government is nothing more than a recording on the telephone that tells them that if they do not leave, the government cannot be blamed. The novel, with yet another example of a female protagonist, features fifteen-year-old Esch, who reports what she hears when she answers the automated call:

*Mandatory evacuation. Hurricane making landfall tomorrow. If you choose to stay in your home and have not evacuated by this time, we are not responsible. You have been warned. And these could be the consequences of your actions.*

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There is a list. And I do not know if he says this, but this is what it feels like:

You can die. (217)

This call, which arrives on the day of the storm, does not provide the Batistes any concrete details as to how to leave; current research recommends that warning messages include specific information in order to function effectively. The Batistes are not given any way to leave on public buses or trains, and yet they are told that the warning is all the help they can expect from the government. Esch feels that she is being left without consideration for her life.

Esch reacts to this warning by feeling abandoned and culpable but does not start planning for evacuation; in this sense, her experience is parallel to that of actual non-evacuators, who were labeled as “stupid and passive” and therefore at fault if harm came to them by middle-class observers, as a study specifically about Hurricane Katrina showed. This attribution of blame highlights how different social and racial groups perceive “agency,” which white middle-class people generally define as independent control over the environment, while black working-class people emphasize interdependence and resilience. The Batiste family’s seeming inaction is worthy of note on many levels, then, representing expected raced, gendered, and class patterns. They do not discuss leaving, but they are not passive, with much time dedicated to gathering water and food and preparing the house for the storm while the father, injured during preparations, gives cogent directions from his bed. The Batistes’ endurance is shown through their dedication to these tasks, and they demonstrate concern for others through their sharing of resources not only with members of the family but with friends and the family dog. There are limits to this support system, however, as there is no mention of outside adult relationships to confirm the need to leave after they receive the official warning. This absence makes sense, since this family has no living mother figure and the only female in the group is Esch, and women are most commonly the source for those external relationships.

Beyond the limits of their social networks to help them verify the call and start to take action to leave, the call also reveals their limited access to the means to flee. The Batistes are a prime example of the mobility poor, some-

7. Stephens et al., “Why Did They ’Choose’ to Stay?”
8. Ibid.
9. Perry and Lindell, “The Effects of Ethnicity on Evacuation Decision-Making,” 64. Also, the adult caveat is essential to mention because the teenagers do have strong friendships, but they are not old enough to fully take on this level of mature decision making.
thing geographer Tim Cresswell discusses in relationship to this same historical storm. As he shows, the lack of mobility was a key problem for the 15 percent of New Orleans residents who did not leave; the politics of mobility are strongly associated with issues of identity such as race and class. Without access to mass transportation, the money to acquire any transportation, or housing outside the city, many were in effect deserted there. A disproportionately high number of the city’s populace did not own a car: one-third of the city’s population as opposed to the national average of one-tenth, with the percentage of carless black households more than twice that of white ones. As the storm approached and the buses and trains shut down, about 200,000 people had no way out of the city. Even with a car, Ward explains that it is not financially viable to evacuate for every storm in an area prone to hurricanes. Instead, she says that individuals hope that each impending disturbance will change direction even as they board up the house and get food, water, and preparations: “We survived like that for generations, that’s what we do, we don’t evacuate.” These studies and Ward’s personal narrative point to another kind of formation of community through (non-)movement, one based on economic and regional exploitation as well as the sensible response of individuals over time. For a family where all share clothes and struggle to afford food, the idea of fleeing a storm should start to be understood as a luxury they, and many others in the path of the actual storm, cannot and could not afford. Although class and its intersection with racial and gender demographics are clearly configured here in the statistics and the stories of the storm as a reason why some did not leave, Ward still says that part of her motivation for the novel was the “really awful ideas” people had about those who stayed, implying she felt the same blame that readers can hear in the prerecorded voice of the government in her novel as well as reflected in studies. Ward’s story potentially can alter the presumed narrative of ignorance and obstinance derived from prevailing notions of movement—in this case the choice to leave

15. For more details on race and class in relationship to the evacuation of Hurricane Katrina, see Elder et al., “African Americans’ Decisions Not to Evacuate.” Specially in relationship to class the study stated: “One barrier to evacuation was financial: being of low socioeconomic status and having little cash on hand. This barrier reflected in 2 subareas: personal transportation and cash for travel and incidentals. Many possessed personal transportation, but the availability of cash for gas to evacuate at the end of the month before payday was a constraint (the hurricane struck on August 29)” (S126).
the path of the storm—that fails to consider economic limits and differing responses based on gender and racial disparities.

This specific narrative shows not a simple continuation of the dominant white view that restricted black movement during slavery but an assumption now that African Americans can and should move whenever it is necessary while that potential remains limited. The earlier oppressive ideology viewed black movement as a threat, but in this instance non-movement is thought to be a sign of ignorance; instead, it shows how movement is still being controlled and other tactics for survival are being utilized. In each era, the same abstract, impersonal commands demand that they have the ultimate control of one’s body and movement, whether that call is to stay on the plantation or to leave one’s house immediately. Recall the words of a slave law from 1680, “It shall not be lawfull for any negroe [. . .] to goe or depart from of his masters ground without a certificate,” versus the contemporary “Mandatory Evacuation. [. . .] You have been warned.” Though the commands are contradictory, the overall configuration of authority is the same.

Preceding chapters have shown how individuals are often forced to move while also disclosing how some can be considered part of the mobility poor, either through economic or legal means. This limitation is true for both the historical migrants and the literary characters discussed: Whose Names Are Unknown and Under the Feet of Jesus show how a lack of money directly affects migrant laborers’ ability to buy gas and get to work, When the Emperor Was Divine reveals how enemy status can imprison because people of Japanese descent cannot legally move from their incarcerated spot, and Their Eyes Were Watching God articulates the same issue when the characters have trouble fleeing the hurricane in the heart of the narrative. Hence, the status of being mobility poor, of being unable to move, rather than existing in opposition to histories of migration, is in effect another component of the governmentalities studied throughout this book from the earliest slave laws. The lack of access to transportation and its inhibiting effects becomes clear when, as seen with Katrina, the mobility poor may remain unmoved only until a critical combination of discrimination and disaster is reached.

In many respects, the issues of racism and classism raised in Ward’s presentation of a recent hurricane can be usefully read through this book’s earliest environmental migration and its literary representation. The historical Okeechobee Hurricane of 1928 and its description in Their Eyes Were Watching God demonstrate the difficulty of travel for black migrant workers during a catastrophe and also display how those outside oppressors have been in

Afterword

some ways internalized. This storm acts as the most direct literary and historical “precedent” of Hurricane Katrina seventy-seven years later, with even the number of dead, marked at 1,836 for years, uncannily close to the 1,833 estimated for the later storm.\footnote{The estimate for the Okeechobee Hurricane has since been revised to between 2,500 and 3,000, and that is only for those killed on the mainland United States (Mykle, \textit{Killer 'Cane}, 213). See also Knabb, Rhome, and Brown, “Tropical Cyclone Report,” 11; Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals, “Hurricane Katrina”; and Brunkard, Namulanda, and Ratard, “Hurricane Katrina Deaths, Louisiana, 2005.”} During the Okeechobee Hurricane, Hurston’s main characters, Tea Cake and Janie, discuss the lack of access to transportation:

Tea Cake says, “Tain’t no cars, Janie.”
And she responds, “Ah thught not! Whut we gointuh do now?”
“We got tuh walk.” (161)

Their legs are their only means of transportation, but Hurston also shows the characters’ own difficult choices and influences prior to that moment in the midst of the storm. Hurston’s characters do contemplate leaving earlier but reject it for a variety of reasons, including that the fleeing Indians are “dumb,” that there is too much money on the muck for there to be a storm to disrupt it, and that the white landowners do not seem to be leaving, so “if the castles thought themselves secure, the cabins needn’t worry” (158). In part these excuses mask the difficulty of finding a way out, as Ward articulated, but importantly, Janie and Tea Cake have a chance to get a ride from a friend. Even in this brief moment of possibility, though, the limited access to mobility is revealed—two seats are available with many possible takers.

Additionally, though, all of the presented reasons disclose the systemic racism and classism that has been accepted by Hurston’s characters to create a hierarchy of power and a considerably flawed logic. Because of the world in which these characters live, Native Americans are not worth listening to, “else dey’d own dis country still” (156), even as white landowners and the presence of money weigh more heavily in their decisions. Martyn Bone also argues that Tea Cake’s “dismissive attitude” when offered a ride by Lias and his uncle may be because Lias is a “Bahaman boy” (155), adding yet another group that Tea Cake does not heed.\footnote{Bone, “The (Extended) South of Black Folk,” 770.} With each of these examples, Hurston lets us see the mystifications of ideology. For instance, while it may have seemed that the white individuals stayed, there is a big difference between a “castle” and a “cabin” both in its fortitude and location, so there is every reason to be fearful in a cabin. After all, the proportion of deaths were predominantly black—three out of every four, and even during Hurricane Katrina, the low return
rate of African Americans to New Orleans has been tied to the fact that their neighborhoods were hardest hit by the storm. Therefore, the Okeechobee storm and the novel show us the paradoxical lack of mobility available to these migrant laborers and that the power structure that lauds the whites and diminishes everyone else is detrimental on many levels.

A hint of a solution to how the storm should have been handled to minimize death and destruction in *Their Eyes* appears in a symbolic critique of human hierarchical structures through the human and animal interactions during the storm. The text shows that predator versus prey relationships should be equalized and territory shared, at the very least during a crisis, just like white and black relationships should not be built upon a hierarchy that gives safe haven to only the economically and socially powerful. During the storm, Tea Cake and Janie encounter several scenarios in which human beings and wild animals take shelter together without the usual fear or hostility as everyone attempts to survive, including a snake who does not bite a human and a rabbit who is not hunted by humans. The text tells us, “Common danger made common friends. Nothing sought a conquest over the other” (164), but when humans are involved, this symbolic presentation falls to the reality of race relations. This contrast is shown by Tea Cake and Janie’s exclusion from a hill where the whites “had preempted that point of elevation and there was no more room. They could climb up one of its high sides and down the other, that was all” (164). The white people have claimed this territory and are unwilling to share it, something borne out in America’s longer history of conquest, but this desire to control all the valuable terrain is also reflected in the one animal that acts more like a possessive human—the rabid dog that bites Tea Cake. The dog, having claimed the real estate of a cow, a ridiculous location, will not even let the characters hang onto the cow’s tail. The text is stating that only a diseased thing would fight for dominance and conquest in such a moment, and yet it does. Thus, Hurston’s treatment long ago presented us with knowledge that could be applied to more contemporary storms and movements when we consider what is lost if, even during the most difficult moments, those in power continue to grasp for that sense of superiority through territory.

In *Salvage the Bones*, Esch presents a similar symbolic sentiment about animals as representing the problems of humans in relationship to space, with her argument developing the need for empathy and respect. She makes this

20. Mykle, *Killer ’Cane*, 211; Kleinberg, *Black Cloud*, xiv; Fuller, Sastry, and VanLandingham, “Race, Socioeconomic Status, and Return Migration to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.”
argument when moving from her initial assumption that all animals flee hurricanes to determining that some cannot flee, eventually concluding:

Maybe the small don't run. [. . .] They prepare like us[, . . .] tunnel[ing] down [. . .] until they have dug great halls so deep that they sit right above the underground reservoirs we tap into with our wells, and during the hurricane, they hear water lapping above and below while they sit safe in the hand of the earth. (215–16)

Esch describes herself and her family as the small animals, the prey to the predatory world around them. She empathizes with these creatures and foreshadows her own future surrounded by water, although with a less clear sense of safety because she knows that staying is the only possibility for her family as well. Because the automated call to flee immediately follows Esch’s statement, the book argues that a better escape plan could have been developed with a more empathetic understanding of the people being told to leave and of their different sense of agency as defined through resilience and interdependence. For instance, more understanding of the prohibitive cost of escape, of the general lack of personal transportation, and of “public” ownership and responsibility should have led officials to acknowledge an ethic of interdependence and employ some of the city’s school buses for public egress, instead of leaving them parked, unused, soon to be submerged by the floodwaters.

Overall, these mass displacements and their texts have demonstrated the problems created by larger governmental and corporate entities that present their dominance over people and spaces in ways that exacerbate seemingly natural happenings and seek to diminish people to a precarious, bare life; they also have demonstrated how individuals respond with their own stories as well as the potential empowerment of disadvantaged groups, including women and people of color. All of these stories about race, gender, discrimination, migration (or inaccessibility to it), community, and survival, Ward would see as central; they need to be “salvaged.” Migrating Fictions has shown the importance of stories about and by women across racial categories in understanding the causes and results of mass migration in twentieth-century history and literature. The Thirdspaces they imagine offer us a way of reexamining the problem of the internally displaced person legally, politically, and ethically, without relieving the state of its responsibilities for all of its citizens.