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Chronotopophobias

Tia-Simone Gardner



Tia-Simone Gardner, From *The Chronotopophobias Series*, derived from White Toothbrush Drill, Fairfield, Alabama, ca. May 19, 1919, photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress. Courtesy of the artist.

Prologue

The landscapes of my childhood, Black and bitter and sweet, are always present with me. The past collides into the present. In the essay that follows, I have tried to take bits and pieces of mis-recognitions—from images, from historical texts, from

memories—to look again at a place that I thought I knew. While there is a story to tell about the Southern Black migrants who did not go North, but rather stayed in the South, in close proximity to their families and home places, here, I want to think about different proximities. Proximities to colorlines, the earth, the past, and to one another.

But "In the process of recollecting the story of the past, we repeatedly lose the plot."
—Tavia Nyong'o¹

On the periphery of Birmingham, Alabama, a former swamp, the future of a place was decided in 1910. After a series of transactions linked to other transactions, the Muscogee Creek lands that had become littered with cotton plantations were being industrialized at the turn of the last century. On this small plot where my life and the lives of my family would unfold for over seventy years, U.S. Steel contracted with the developer Robert Jemison, Jr. to cultivate 2,600 acres of agricultural land into a town for skilled white workers, and only white workers. What follows is not so much a chronological account past to present, but a jagged relay across space and time and in between the rise of an all-white town, called Fairfield, and the rise of a nearly all-Black town inhabiting the same

houses, compacting the same soil. That sameness, though, is not sameness—us, our Blackness, has radically changed this place, this topos, this landscape.

Chronos

Time (chronos) is not the sequential progression of an event or events. Time, in physics, is "an attribute of motion or change (kinêsis)."² Motion and fixity organize the U.S. American landscape, including the uses and abuses of its built and natural features. Time (chronos) is the pathology of the planned cities and planned communities, so time and landscape must be thought of together. City planning relies on time to determine how land and space can be changed, over time, to become more valuable, dense, or conversely, less dense and valueless. Deep time, geologic forces acting deep below ground made this place an industrial capitalist dream.³ Value and valuation haunt Blackness, not purely as a set of geoscopic problems of the past—such as the auction blocks and slave forts that mark the landscape—but as a set of present conditions that create a dialectic relationship between haunting, value, and the production of Black space. Or, perhaps it may be better to say that a Black

landscape is the erotic matter (pleasure, violence, ecstasies) that produces haunted spaces and the value derived from them. A Black landscape is kinetic, movement, the flow, the flowing, the unresting liveness of my places, our places. Undead, unsettling lands and the bodies that tend them.

Topos (Place)

Fairfield, Alabama, was/is a Black place, a Black landscape. It was then, and it is now.

Topophobia

Phenomenology scholar Dylan Trigg writes that "the advantage of using the term 'topophobia' . . . is that the concept remains ambiguous enough to include an entire spectrum of relations a person might have with place, including both the anxiety of being exposed (agoraphobia) and enclosed (claustrophobia), being in the darkness (lygophobia) or in the light (photophobia)."⁴

Topophobia feels like a Black reality, no? To experience simultaneous, disquieted states seems to be a familiar Black way of knowing and being in the world. Topophobia, that thin to thick topsoil of

political unrest: not quite buried, not quite visible. It is that unspeakable condition of living and breathing while Black, in place.

Landscape

is a site of struggle for Blackness.

Land-*scape*, land-(verb), land-(+an action/thing done/occurrence). If land can be coerced into action, it can be transformed into a weapon. We have seen the landscape become a site of struggle, for Black folks. Walter Johnson describes this manipulation of the earth as a carceral landscape, the conscription of the natural environment within the technologies of surveillance and control.⁵ A Black landscape does not undo a carceral system, but we must refuse to equivocate Blackness and carcerality. Black landscape, in all of its tangled fabulations, has more to teach us about freedom, pleasure, and imagination than about detention.

Black landscape. The aesthetic, historically charged, geographically unbound relationships between land, matter, and Black folks. The anxious, errant, or ephemeral spaces in the natural and built environment where the Black body

becomes mobilized or immobilized, where it finds erotics or discipline, where it produces scopic disgust and irreducible, unrepresentable pleasure. The Black landscape is the terrestrial space-time relationship that draws in all the senses. It forces us to realize the difficulty of delinking Blackness from the imposition of stasis and control. To think about Black landscape asks us to also think about the use of fixity as a social, political, and geographic organizing strategy.

Holding this matrix together makes Fairfield, a home that I know intimately, a difficult but important Black landscape to mine. To talk about home is to talk about a place, within a place, within, a place, within a place. A body, a built environment, a landscape, a territory. A pile of attachments to time and matter that are stuck together like soggy stacks of forgotten photographs. A Black landscape held together not by a systematic ordering of space but rather by an anxious disordering.



Tia-Simone Gardner, From *The Chronotopophobias Series*, digital video stills from drone flown above Fairfield, Alabama, January 2020. Videography by J. Whitson. Courtesy of the artist.

A man-made natural barrier. A street foreclosed at a hedge.

Otherwise known as a dead end.

I grew up on a dead street, not realizing the larger meaning of this place/non-place until I was older. It is strange, I think, but also hauntingly precise, to call a place filled with so much Black life dead, and ended.

To be clear, our street was not a cul-de-sac, those outlet-less streets that bring up images of idyllic suburban landscapes. It seemed at the time that ours was an afterthought, the result of poor planning, a

benign error. As an adult I realized that nearly all of the streets in my nearly all-Black part of the city were dead ends or led to dead ends, with only certain streets used for entry and exit. This is not suburban planning, designed to maximize space, slow traffic, or delineate residential from other zoned uses: these dead ends are a part of racial-temporal landmarking. The green barrier hedges that repeat Black block by Black block are a visual, tactile colorline.

"Fairfield represents the ultimate expression of planned worker communities in the iron and steel industry. The design for this model industrial city reflects the influence of the 'City Beautiful' movement of the Progressive Era in the history of the United States. Extensive, surviving planning documents detail goals of social engineering in their generous provision for civic and green spaces in the new city. While no expense was spared in the planning and construction of streets, parks, sidewalks, residences and landscaping for this community, Fairfield housed only skilled white labor."⁶

That last statement is imprecise, of course, but the desire was present.

Just as the shift from agrarian systems to industrial ones were changing the social, racial, and material landscapes in the South, so too were the strategies of planning cities. Forms of discipline that had been tested on Black bodies living in varying degrees of unfreedom to deter interracial intimacy

were now being tested on the landscape and built environment. In the new industrialized world, folks would no longer be separated by fields or plantations. They could, if unprohibited, be neighbors, sharing a connecting wall or waste facilities. Robert Jemison's white model industrial town was not a sundown town—Fairfield began with class division. Jemison wanted skilled white workers, not working-class, low-wage workers, thus disqualifying the Black workforce.⁷ My town began as a sanctuary, of sorts, with an a priori colorline. All that was within its borders would be white. The world beyond could manage its own rules, but this was to be a utopia with fixed, impermeable borders. And this is how colorlines begin, with psychic relationships and impulses.

When Jemison laid out our town, the original plan ended sharply just beyond the tree-lined residential streets adjacent to the civic district—park, post office, town hall. This abrupt break became our part of the city. The Black side of town was there, in the unmapped blankness just beyond Jemison's terminated development.

Fairfield could not just depend on metaphor for separation—our town was, is,

small, and that closeness required creativity. In other places, colorlines functioned, still, as markers of boundaries, but they could be spacious and ideological rather than sharp and intimate. Though folks may be tempted to synonomize the colorline with a redline, these two things are not 1:1.⁸

The colorline could be:

a set of railroad tracks, as in "the other side of the tracks"

a freeway system

the transition from a dirt road to a paved one

a river

a ditch

it could even be the earth itself.

I grew up in a place where this was the case. The colorline was made nearly imperceptible because it was not necessarily a fence or concrete wall. It was an eco-psychological separation of races, materialized in a raised earthen barrier that

not only segregated but also drew a thick, green circumscribing border not to be transgressed by those within. Perception was its magic trick. To the senses, it did not seem particularly tall, burdensome, or even awkward in appearance—it looked and felt natural. In actuality, the barriers were small hills, similar to a system of levees created to regulate and dam out people, not water.⁹ Ramparts, everywhere around the city, that on approach seemed nothing, but the body labored to maneuver them. They had to be climbed, not simply walked across. One needed a bit of force to mount and trespass against them. As a small child, running or rolling up and down a hill was a kind of sport. How could we know that the thing we were touching, the mountains of soft green grass, were placed to reject and threaten us away rather than invite us to play? I think now this must have affected my understanding of ecology. To have the landscape used against me and my community, our bodies, in such an intentional way. We knew—of course we knew somewhere within ourselves—that the green sightlines were not playthings at all, but a passive aggressive shield for what was supposed to be the better parts of the city.

"The provisions made in the general town plan for beauty, convenience and economy, for sanitation and cleanliness and for the social life, combine to attract a superior class of workmen who offer the adjacent industries a high potential ability to work. Further benefits are already being shown in the wholesome civic spirit and efficiency of citizenship which such conditions cannot fail to develop."¹⁰

It should be noted that Fairfield, like most cities, had phases of development, and each phase was anti-Black in its development strategies. In the pre-Black city, the one from Jemison's plan, the streets and routes had names taken from industrial capitalists and U.S. Steel executives: Debardeleben, Carnegie, Gary. And then we came and the intimate contract between people, paths, and trees was too intimate. In the next phases of development, more trees, entire forests in fact, were invaded for the new Fairfield. Unlike other parts of the South that felled whole acres of pine forests for housing subdivisions, these woods were carefully raided, then pruned in order to keep the residential neighborhoods within them hidden while the other Fairfield, where my family lived, remained exposed. So beloved were these timberland fortifications that the new divisions discarded the Steel men and took the trees as their names: Forest Hills, Fair Oaks, Belwood.



Tia-Simone Gardner, From *The Chronotopophobias Series*, digital video stills from drone flown above Fairfield, Alabama, January 2020. Videography by J. Whitson. Courtesy of the artist. Top: View of Fair Oaks and Forest Hills, a residential subdivision disguised by trees; Center: View of former commercial center dividing Fair Oaks/Forest Hills from Old Fairfield; Bottom: View of Old Fairfield, the second development following Robert Jemison's original plans.

Southern landscapes are a familiar genre of imaging practices, including the early U.S. American South of romantic landscape paintings and "The South" of more contemporary photographers and filmmakers. I am trying to understand and situate the bittersweet town of my childhood and its long lines of earthen

apartheid as "The South," but I am also attempting to read it as a distinct Black landscape. I often tell people that I grew up in the South, but it is important to trouble this idea, to trouble how we understand place, location, and time. I grew up in a very particular place, Alabama. Birmingham for the uninitiated, Fairfield for the familiar. Fairfield cannot escape the inventory of places and spaces flattened into one hegemonic imaginary because images of The South are inescapable, exceeding comprehension, mind-numbing, unbearable. I am referring to the most circulated images, of weaponized fire hoses used on Black children and adults, of crosses in flames, and men, women, and children in starched white sheets. These images of violence and protest are the predominant way that The South—and I should say now more specifically Birmingham—has come to be represented to the world: Bull Connor, white supremacy, Black suppression. An assemblage of names and concepts linked to the idea of Birmingham that cannot but fail to hold the complexity of this place. The images that we have inherited from the past still hold representational power in the present, obstructing our memories and the ongoing struggles for spatial justice.

I have certainly understood this place through images, including those described. However, the pictures from which I truly draw my sense of place are the administrative, the quotidian, and the documentarian. Photographs of steel furnaces being erected and children in Easter outfits. Inside the colorline we had joy all our own, for which the archive of images is disbursed among our family's keepsakes rather than above the fold of national newspapers. Staged family portraits on a newly-built front porch, action shots on tennis courts and soccer fields of our childhood sports teams sponsored by D.A.R.E. programs, the pageant of suites and dresses lining the church steps for our pastor's retirement, or posing akimbo by an auntie's yellow Cadillac before the annual pilgrimage to the *Ebony* fashion show. Even as calculated misrepresentations, these images rely on intimacy and familiarity, specific ways of understanding relationships between one place and another rather than generic assumptions. I want to name something shared among all of these, between public struggle and private peace, something belonging to images of Black landscape.



Walker family and members of Galilee Baptist Church blessing their newly built home in Fairfield, Alabama, c. 1957. Photo by Eugene Morrow of Morrow's Photo Studio Fairfield. Courtesy of Tia-Simone Gardner and the Walker-Gardner family.

I struggle, productively, with the question of where in this place—Fairfield 2020, not Birmingham 1960—can we think of Blackness, landscape, and image? Within this genre we could consider movement images of Modern Civil Rights campaigns as Black landscape photographs. And in this moment of yellow-painted Black Lives Matter street monuments and flower-covered sidewalk memorials, what is the relationship between a line of dirt and grass and the Black folks that became its neighbors?

Professor Michelle M. Wright taught me something that should have been obvious to all Black bodies in all places and times: Blackness—the physics of Blackness—is a phenomenological state. It changes across space and time in unpredictable ways that

defy generic codification. To think about Blackness, in this place, it is perhaps useful to ask: *When* is this line? *When* is this landscape? We have to think beyond the cartographic to answer, but it is difficult to uncover such an idea because it lies within a repository of "negation in abundance," to quote the artist Renée Green. She writes that this "can be read as the cancelling-out effect which is possible when confronted with more than is comprehensible, that which is mind numbing, more than one can bear."¹¹ I had lived so long inside the invisible walls of exclusion that I failed to detect they were there. This line is in 1919, when the city was incorporated. It is in 1957, when my mother's parents finished building their home on Avenue H. It is in 1969, when Fairfield Industrial High School, the Black high school, burned to the ground, forcing the integration of Fairfield High School. And it is in 2020, when my mother and I went with a drone operator to trace this line, or chase it, from above.

The line and the landscape are living structures, animated by our presence. Over time, the soil continues its sedimentation, being rarely disturbed by new development, thickening the division perhaps but not the intention. This is no

longer a line of racial separation—white folks have completed their departure flights.

Fred Moten writes, "The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist. Blackness—the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption that arranges every line—is a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity."¹² This colorline is an ongoing irruption, but it is uncharacteristically quiet. So how do you interrogate such a thing? How do you read it? What images can one make to capture it, particularly when it is Black on both sides? Perhaps by feeling, by unknowing, by the coproduction of spatial histories and a Black *sense* of place. I want to be cautious not to reconcile these things. The rupture is productive and I cannot rush to close the unhealable wound that this green thing was made to be. Between the imagination and the reality of such a thick place, I want to think about points of view. The aerial presents us with a different measure of scopic power to perceive Black landscape relationships between one thing and another through the surveillance apparatus of satellites and drones. The adjacent

emphasizes that it is by closeness, by touch, by a haptic want, that a psychic power of perception emerges from the senses.

From above, we can see the carceral line that circumscribes our para-city. Of course, we have been conditioned by the abundance of drone photography, like the landscape paintings and photographs that preceded it, to see something of sublime beauty from our dislocation in the sky. Though we are not at a god-like distance, nor a plane's, the drone allows a terrestrial proximity to the scene in front of us—we are close enough to still belong to the earth. And from this distance the material barrier comes into view.



Tia-Simone Gardner, From *The Chronotopophobias Series*, digital video stills from drone flown above Fairfield, Alabama, January 2020. Videography by J. Whitson. Courtesy of the artist.

It exists by design not as an unsightly, intimidating stone wall or an electrified fence, but as a thick row of trees, a prickly olive-colored underbrush, barriers that

quietly but abruptly pronounce dead-end street after dead-end street, cleverly disguised as nature.

There are several questions yet to answer: When and where was the first house built in this part of the city? Who was the first Black resident (or residents) in the new industrialized Fairfield? Where did they come from? I cannot answer except by, perhaps, a critical fabulation such as how did they think about living adjacent to these barriers? How did that affect their everyday lives? How did they transgress? To that, my uncle has provided some humorous if chilling insight that involved walking home in groups.

I have been living in Tulsa, Oklahoma, for the last few months. Somehow, in my dislocation from a familiar city in the midst of a pandemic and immense Black political unrest, the idea of Black landscapes has landed on me intensely. Perhaps it is driven by a lack of some scenic familiarity—even when the trauma is a reprise, as with Tulsa. The flesh knows its place, its topos, and the flesh tells time. I am grateful to the elders in my life who raised me on both sides of these green enclosures and in their own ways constantly showed me the meaning

without allowing me to be harmed. Looking back, a trip to the store with my play grandmother might be called a transect walk or a critical landscape study. I have confronted the contradictions, mysteries, and mythologies of the place that I am from. I have confronted its representations, the desire and disgust that it conjures and spills from the imaginations of others. I have been buried beneath these ways of seeing and thinking about this place—really I should say places, as these are complicated sets of social and spatial relationships that form the innumerable places, colliding together, that assemble this one location, Fairfield.

I cannot escape the temporality of this place, of these lines. I do not want to. There is a part of me that feels more powerful for being able to live in and out of sync with space and time. But I do want to see the present, not only the past. The years have of course marked this place in ways that are both obvious and elusive, but, in case it needs to be said, life is still lived here, above, below, and beside this barrier. Its temporality is felt at human, non-human, and geologic scales. This line has existed for four generations of my family's life on earth and impacted each of us differently, a small

blip in the fossil record. I wonder how many inches, how many reconfigurations of earth, ore, and water will it take to undo?

Epilogue

Of course I started writing this during an epic event, the beginning verses of the COVID-19 pandemic. And during this writing, another epic event happened, and then another, and then another: the murder of Ahmaud Arberry, the murder of Breonna Taylor, the murder of George Floyd, the setting to flames of more than thirty buildings in my Minneapolis community, the toppling of the monument to Confederate officer Charles Linn in Birmingham, and so many more events. And finally, last Saturday, as I watched John Lewis's funeral procession over the Alabama River, over the Edmund Pettus bridge, again I thought about monuments and monumentality and these brief flashes in which Blackness, deadness, and endings shock us into place. These scenic moments in the present are Black landscape.

In these last few months, I have thought more about the places that I belong to and the places that in my most intimate understanding of myself belong to me.

"Belonging" is not some colonialist fantasy of possession by conquer or by price, but possession as some sharper, unbreakable ferocity, with *punctum*, the *demonic ground* on which the colonial conqueror could not build his house. Fairfield and Birmingham, Minneapolis. They are mine, and so these landscapes, with the full weight of the verb, I mine them.

Tia-Simone Gardner is an artist, educator, and Black feminist scholar from Birmingham, Alabama. Her practice is grounded in interdisciplinary strategies that activate ideas of ritual, iconoclasm, and geography. She received her MFA from the University of Pennsylvania in 2009 and is currently working on a photographic/writing project with her mother that juxtaposes questions of biopolitics, Black Southern familial memory, and geology with vignettes of extractive capitalism. She is currently a resident of the Tulsa Artist Fellowship in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She lives today in Tulsa, tomorrow in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

1. Tavia Nyong'o, "Deep Time, Dark Time: Anarchaeologies of Blackness and Brownness," in *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 99–128.

2. Thomas Chelsea C. Harry, *Chronos in Aristotle's Physics: On the Nature of Time* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2015), 1.

3. Near the former cotton fields were mountains of red iron ore, coal, and limestone, three of the main ingredients needed to make steel. See Bobby M. Wilson, *America's Johannesburg: Industrialization and Racial Transformation in Birmingham* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2019) and Kathryn Yussof, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

4. Dylan Trigg, *Topophobia: A Phenomenology of Anxiety* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), xxi.

5. Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

6. Excerpted from the description of an aerial photograph of Fairfield, Alabama, archived by the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., accessed May 27, 2020, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/hhh.al1002.photos/?sp=1>.

7. Charles E. Connerly, "The Most Segregated City in America": *City Planning and Civil Rights in Birmingham, 1920–1980* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 26.

8. "Redlining" was a legal measure taken by financial institutions that used mortgage loans to create segregated areas in cities. Red lines were drawn on maps around communities deemed to be declining, usually Black or communities of color. Yves Zenou and Nicolas Boccoard, "Racial Discrimination and Redlining in Cities," *Journal of Urban Economics* 48, no. 2 (September 2000): 260–85; J. Hernandez, "Redlining Revisited: Mortgage Lending Patterns in Sacramento 1930–2004," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 33, no. 2 (2009): 291–313; "Redlining," *Washington Post*, March 9, 1976.

9. The reference to levees was a sharp observation by the artist Monica Moses Haller, who has been making work about her family's land in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana. On seeing the images of Fairfield from above, Haller immediately recognized these structures as levees, a sharp and stinging observation for me about this built-natural environment and the politics of race that produce it.

10. George H. Miller, "Fairfield, a Town with a Purpose," ed. Arthur Hastings Grant and Harold Sinley Battenheim, *The American City* IX, no. 3 (September 1913): 213–19.

11. Renée Green, "Survival: Ruminations on Archival Lacunae" (2002) in *The Archive* (London ; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 49.
12. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1.

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