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REPORT

COURTNEY DESIREE MORRIS

Seeing Stories Beneath the Surface

In a small Louisiana town swallowed up by the petrochemical industry, photographs capture haunting scenes of memory and Black place-making.

When a massive star dies, when it runs out of energy, it collapses on itself. Its gravitational force pulls all its constituent matter inward, creating what is known as a black hole. While it may appear to be simply empty space, a black hole is a site of infinite density, its gravitational pull so strong that not even light can escape. Our universe is peppered with black holes, yet until recently no one had ever seen one. Their presence could only be detected by reading how they affect the behavior of everything around them.

In 2019, astronomers captured the first photograph of a black hole. Located in the Virgo constellation in the Messier 87 galaxy some 55 million light years away, this enormous black hole—several billion times larger than the Sun—appeared, as science journalist Nadia Drake put it, as a "circular void surrounded by a lopsided ring of light." The image was so disquieting that one of the astronomers compared it to the Eye of Sauron, the archvillain of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

The photograph provided conclusive visual evidence of a reality that astronomers have known for decades. Following the announcement, Shep Doeleman, an astronomer at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics and director of the effort to capture the image, stated, "We have seen what we thought was unseeable."

This struck me as a provocative phrase. What does it mean exactly to see the unseeable? Or rather more to the point, what does it mean to mark something as unseeable, when in fact, you are discussing its visibility? The statement itself seemed evocative of other rational sleights of hand, where any number of things—people, communities, history, power relations—can be marked as unseeable despite the fact that there are many ways of knowing a truth whose meanings are not self-evident or readily visible. Some things, some truths make their presence known not by visibility—a dubious and often insufficient mode of political demand—but rather by the powerful influence they exert on everything and everyone around them. So we might ask: What forms of knowledge and truth-telling are marginalized in prioritizing the visual? How do we get to the stories beneath the surface of an image and connect with forms of collective memory—and patterns of what Rob Nixon terms slow violence—that are not readily apparent at first glance?

These questions are particularly important to consider in the urgent conversations around the ongoing effects of settler colonialism, white supremacist nation-building, and the politics of Black and Indigenous dispossession in the Americas. In the U.S. historical imagination, Black and Indigenous geographies exist as something like black holes, spaces that are fundamentally unknowable and unseeable yet whose inherent fungibility and worthlessness mark them as disposable sites where the perpetual dream of Manifest Destiny and endless capital expansion can unfold.

Consider the case of Mossville, a small, historical freedmen's community located in southwest

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Somnambulate – Mossville, June 9, 2016 (COURTNEY DESIREE MORRIS)

Louisiana just outside the city of Lake Charles. Before European settlers and enslaved Africans arrived in the region, this corner of Louisiana was home to the Atakapa-Ishak, an Indigenous people who lived along the Gulf Coast. They built massive shell mounds throughout the region, engaged in trade networks that extended into north Louisiana, and maintained a network of communities that stretched from Galveston to eastern Louisiana. Following the arrival of European settlers, disease and land theft decimated the Atakapa-Ishak.

By the early 20th century, only nine native speakers of the Atakapas language were living and most of the community's members had been absorbed through

intermarriage into European and Afrodescendant communities. Despite historical scholarly claims that the tribe no longer exists, the multiracial descendants of the Atakapa have been organizing to receive federal tribal recognition since the 1990s. Some of these Black Indigenous peoples lived in the community of Mossville. I know this because they were my grandparents' neighbors.

Mossville is my mother's hometown. There is some dispute about the town's origins, but varying accounts suggest the town was established in the 1790s, potentially making it one of the oldest free Black communities in the South. The town expanded rapidly after the end of the Civil War and became a haven for formerly enslaved peoples who secured land grants to begin homesteading. My great-great grandfather, Julius Williams, and my great-great-great grandfather, Leon Venice, owned approximately 120 acres between them that they held onto until the 1920s. The town continued to grow in the early 20th century as Mossville residents built churches, businesses, small farms, and a colored school.

In the 1930s, however, as southwestern Louisiana became an increasingly important site for the development of the U.S. petrochemical economy, various companies began to construct facilities around Mossville. Eventually the town was surrounded by 15 petrochemical plants manufacturing the many products that make our carbon-based consumer lives possible. In 2012, a South African petrochemical company named Sasol announced plans to build a new ethane cracker complex in Mossville, prompting a full buyout of the town. I knew that the buyout was the final nail in the coffin for a community that had been slowly dying for many years. Mossville had survived slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the terror of Jim Crow, but it would not survive the Age of Oil.

Throughout the African diaspora, Black communities have developed complex and beautiful mourning rituals to celebrate the dead. As an anthropologist whose work has taken me to many diasporic communities, I have had the chance to witness these practices. As I mourned the death of Mossville, I found myself wondering: How does one mourn the loss of a place? How are Black spaces made to die? And what does it mean that those deaths are so often "unseeable" to society at large?

I have been exploring these questions in a photography series that I have been working on since 2016.

Church Lady #1 – Mossville, June 10, 2016 (COURTNEY DESIREE MORRIS)

Pray For Me – Mossville, June 9, 2016 (COURTNEY DESIREE MORRIS)

Plant Construction Site #1 – Mossville, October 31, 2018 (COURTNEY DESIREE MORRIS)

Driveway #1 – Mossville, October 30, 2018 (COURTNEY DESIREE MORRIS)

Solastalgia explores the impact of the petrochemical industry on this small Black community. The term "solastalgia" was coined by the Australian environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht, who defines it as the sense of existential loss and displacement that people feel when they lose the landscapes that they call home to ecological and social forces beyond their control. When I encountered this term, it helped me put language to the deep grief and rage I felt about what was unfolding in Mossville. Although I felt powerless to stop the buyout, I felt an urgent need to document what was taking place and to create my own archive of the community's Black and Indigenous social life.

I photographed everything that I could: the old Mount Zion Baptist Church where my grandfather had once been a deacon, the industrial plants that have engulfed the community, the historical colored school that Sasol purchased and used as an office to process Mossville residents' buyout claims and then subsequently demolished, the Jacob Rigmaiden Center where we celebrated family reunions. I photographed my grandmother in the last two years of her life as cancer tore through her body—another result of a lifetime of living in the shadow of the plants. I photographed my mother and my niece. I staged self-portraits in the Morning Star cemetery where all my grandmother's people are buried just across the street from the new Sasol facility.

I also photographed seemingly empty sites in order to consider how emptiness can also speak volumes. I photographed streets that had once been lined with modest homes. I photographed the foundations of homes that had been demolished—the Sasol buyout agreement required Mossville residents to demolish their own homes. There are photographs of driveways and porch stairs that lead to nowhere, abandoned wood frame cabins being consumed by nature, and street signs with the names of the community's original founding families. Or a grassy field, once a dense pine forest where my grandfather used to take my male cousins and uncles hunting. Viewers may not have the kind of historical memory of Mossville that I do, but you do not in fact need to know that history in detail to know intuitively that this is a haunted landscape, that these ruins are full of stories. My goal with this work is to incite the viewer to cultivate a visual reading practice that allows you, as Heather Davis suggests, to "[see] a disappearance." I want the viewer to become practiced in seeing the unseeable.

In *Demonic Grounds: Black Woman and the Cartographies of Struggle*, Katherine McKittrick argues that the claim to transparent space—the idea that space simply "is"—naturalizes hierarchy and spatial inequality. But rather than accept geographies of domination as the final, authoritative word on the social production of space, we should read their existence as the product of struggles over space and dynamic tension between differing geographic visions of the world. The claims to space that subordinated subjects make through their quotidian cultural practices, collective knowledge, and place-making strategies constantly contest geographical domination. By paying attention to the spatial practices of Black social life, we begin to understand this process, the alterability of space, and the necessary incompleteness of all geographical projects. And we also comprehend Black people, throughout the African diaspora, as subjects who can tell different stories about place than the ones that we are accustomed to accepting as fact.

Nothing is unseeable. We simply lack the capacity or the inclination or the tools to see. What is a black hole? A black hole is simply a cosmic ancestor—a dead star—waiting to be acknowledged, trying in the only way it can to touch the living. There is more than one way to know the truth of a thing, and we need not wait until we can see something to intuit its presence and power. The gravitational pull of the past is strong. It is there to be known and felt if we are prepared to see it with more than just our eyes. n

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