

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Breakbulk Pasts and Containerized Futures: Submergent Histories on a Saltwater Frontier

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Abstract

This article examines the history of Haitian-owned freighters that have been trading between Haiti and the Miami River since the 1970s, how this shipping economy became racialized in ways that marked it and the river with a “threatening” Haitian Blackness, and how local government agencies, real estate developers, and law enforcement officials worked to remake the aesthetics of the river as something other than Haitian and Black. Projects to re-racialize the riverway played with the spurious surface-and-subsurface spatial logic of racial discourses more generally—that is, the mistaken but widely-held belief that visible, physical markers of race reveal hidden capacities and propensities. Policing that pushed Haitian commerce into an economy of containerization—a race- and class-marked shipping technology on the river—allowed the Haiti trade to “pass” as non-Haitian on a gentrifying waterway. Law enforcement programs that seized and sank Haitian freighters to create artificial reefs off the Florida coast bluewashed the river’s surface and its ethnoracially coded, “polluting” vessels by transforming them into subsurface, “White” recreational ecologies. These processes reveal how politically fraught contests over racialization recruit layered material environments as part of larger projects of policing, re-racialization, and urban renewal. In exploring this history, the article pushes against arguments from some quarters for a “post-critical” turn by demonstrating that reflexive critique, with its focus on the hidden and the submerged, remains necessary for grasping the ways racialization processes operate through structures of material and discursive layering.

Keywords: shipping; ports; oceans; race; racialization; policing; gentrification; material semiotics; Haiti; United States

At the western end of the Miami River, not far from the saltwater intrusion dam that marks the end of the navigable waterway, are a series of terminals that cater to a small fleet of Haitian-owned freighters. I arrived at one of these terminals on a hot July afternoon to meet with the captain of a 100-plus-foot freighter tied up to the concrete

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bulkhead and scheduled to depart for the Haitian provincial city, Port-de-Paix, that evening. The terminal was little more than a waterfront lot, fenced in and secured with a guarded checkpoint. Crewmembers and stevedores were finishing up the process of loading the breakbulk cargo—discrete items moved as separate pieces, not as container loads—using a forklift to carry pallets of tightly packed cardboard boxes filled with sundry items, from used clothing to dry pasta, so that they could be stowed on the deck. Mattresses, jugs, old tires, swivel chairs, rope, PVC pipe, lawn chairs, and bicycles sat in piles in and around the marshalling yard. Sacks of rice, black beans, cornmeal, and flour along with 120 boxes of tobacco had all been loaded in the hold long before. A woman who was at once a co-owner of the vessel and the supercargo, or *soubrika* in Haitian Kreyòl, tallied the items received for transport under a tarp that provided respite from the summer sun. The look and feel of the terminal was typical of others catering to the breakbulk trade with Haiti.¹

The next lot over, home to Antillean Marine, had a different look entirely. Antillean was founded in the early 1960s by a family of Cuban exiles of Syro-Lebanese descent and is the largest shipping company on the Miami River. Its vessels also carry goods to Haiti but, in contrast to the Haitian-owned breakbulk freighters, Antillean transports its cargo in shipping containers. The Antillean property is physically ensconced in walls of these stacked metal boxes, which have become iconic of global maritime transport, the logistics revolution it has undergone since World War II, and the process by which once-bustling docklands were banished from urban centers to extra-urban sites that could handle the new infrastructures of emerging “container economies” (Leivestad and Markulla 2021; see also Bevan 2014; Campling and Colas 2021; Khalili 2021; Leivestad 2022; Levinson 2006). On this small stretch of the river, a turn of the head reveals that the tension between containerization and labor-intensive breakbulk shipping endures in urban Miami.

The difference between the breakbulk terminal and Antillean’s lot is embodied in the uniform, or what one economic historian has called “soulless” (Levinson 2006: 1), shape and look of container technology. The stacks of metal boxes fortify the property, blocking outsiders from seeing inside both the containers and the interior of the lot. More interesting than the fact of material difference between these shipping operations is what that material difference has come to signify in the symbolic economy of the Miami River. Ben Thompson, a tug boat captain whose family has worked on the waterway for more than three generations, captured the distinction this way: the containers, he explained, are regarded by many as the tools of reputable, or, in his words, “prestigious,” enterprises and distinguished from the stigmatized, noncontainerized breakbulk cargo carried on Haitian-owned ships.² The tug captain was quick to note, though, “If you open up a container [on an Antillean ship], it’s got the same stuff in it [as the Haitian-owned, breakbulk freighters]. It’s just, it’s in a container, so you can’t see it.” Despite there being little difference in his mind between the business of Haitian-owned breakbulk carriers and that of Antillean, the latter had sanitized the optics of the trade. “All [the public] sees,” he explained further, “is the container. It looks clean.”

¹This article is based on historically-oriented ethnographic fieldwork I have been conducting in Haiti, Miami, and The Bahamas since 2014.

²Names of non-public figures and names of ships have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Here we have a subtle commentary on the poetics of hidden interiors and “clean” surfaces that takes form through the opposition of breakbulk carriers owned primarily by Black Haitians and container vessels owned by light-skinned Cubans. The shipping container itself operates as a material nexus of distinction between these race- and class-marked categories on the river, allowing one type of commerce cast as “dark” to pass as another marked as “lighter”—key terms within the semiotics of race in the United States and elsewhere. Drawing on the tug captain’s incisive commentary about the “clean[ness]” of containerization, one could interpret the shipping container as, borrowing from Stefan Helmreich (2011: 132), a vernacular “theory machine”—a material “object in the world that stimulates a theoretical formulation”—that, in this instance, expresses ideas about race and class stigma but also, when critically foregrounded, can be used to interrogate them. Electrocoordinated clocks afforded theorizing simultaneity for Albert Einstein (*ibid.*); animal husbandry did the same with regard to evolution for Charles Darwin (*ibid.*); for purposes of this article, the shipping container’s material significations can either reinforce or draw critical attention to the relation between surfaces and interiors that structure a good deal of race thinking in the United States.

There is another, more fluid “entity” present in and around the river that is relevant to this discussion of maritime economies, race, and materiality. Like the container, it can also be used to play with and imagine surface appearances and subsurface “realities.” I am referring here to seawater. In the early 2000s, law enforcement officials began confiscating Haitian freighters suspected of drug trafficking and sunk them to create artificial reefs off the coast of South Florida. Seawater as a medium of submersion became a way to interact with, think, and guide material transformations on the river that relied on their emergent—that is, their changing and partially contingent—qualities. Drawing from the jargon of ecology—in which organisms that dwell beneath the waterline are referred to as submergent—and the argot of historical emergence, we might refer to these tumultuous and politically contested transformations taking shape beneath the waterline as significant elements of the submergent river and its surrounding seas.

While containers masked Haitian cargo on the Miami River, submersion in seawater transformed racialized conveyances seen literally and figuratively as polluting into lifegiving reef ecologies engineered as undersea playgrounds for human recreation. The container, as an encasing, obfuscating technology, and seawater, as a particular form of alchemically potent materiality, thus came together in responses to Haitian alterity in maritime Miami in ways that were both overdetermined and unexpected. These conjunctures of metal and saltwater afforded ways of conceptualizing and acting upon Haitian difference for those interested in controlling it. They also prompt reflection on the very structures and possibilities of racializing and critical discourses more generally.

In order to connect the encasing technology of the container and the alchemical effects of submersion in seawater back to race and, eventually, critique, I feel obliged to begin with the banal statement that racialization often involves a process of associating visible physical characteristics with a less tangible, less directly visible, set of presumed capacities and tendencies, whether that be morality, intelligence, sexual appetites, or something else. “Difference in the skin color, hair, and bones,” Stuart Hall explains (2017: 45), operates as a kind of “material surface” (*ibid.*: 51), or visible trace, that points to a “racial essence” (*ibid.*: 75). The immanent spatial structure of this discursive mode should be immediately apparent. In racializing

discourses, the indicia of “grosser physical differences” (ibid.: 34, quoting Du Bois) promise to reveal the “foundational” causes of “behavior ... culture, language, and so on” (ibid.: 56). John L. Jackson evokes a similar three-dimensional architecture of racial authentication when he references the tenuous link between, again, the visible dimensions of racial identity and an “interiority that is never completely and unquestionably clear,” despite dominant assertions to the contrary (2005: 18). Out of this fraught relation of surface and interior, anxieties of passing and racial counterfeiting are born (ibid.: 19).

But what of the container? As a piece of moveable physical infrastructure, it is not just a means for achieving greater efficiency and higher profitability for shippers. It also operates as a “technology of concealment” that alienates and mediates value in part by rendering its interior contents invisible (Leivestad 2021: 54). Bound in metal, the cargo within dissolves into abstract value from the perspective of carriers and port operators (ibid.: 56). As such, merchandise can “pass” as other than what it is—though often imperfectly so (see, e.g., Leivestad 2022). The rhetoric of passing and its allusion to a U.S. racial politics of the color line is, of course, intentional. As I will demonstrate, the container, because of the way its architecture replicates the structural logic of surfaces and interiors in U.S. racial discourse, becomes a mnemonic through which the changing cast—in both senses of the term—of the Miami River can be imagined, felt, and manipulated. To move to containerization is to change the surface of the river, its complexion if you will, but also its temporality (modern versus antiquated), facilitating the passing, not of people, but of racially and temporally coded economic activity and objects.

And what of seawater? While cosmetic changes in river commerce may be linked to, or thought through, containerization, a different sort of transformation has occurred since the early 2000s with the seizure, cleansing, and sinking of Haitian freighters along the coast of South Florida. Freighters deemed to be dirty—because of how they are thought to both pollute and to carry illicit goods—become something else when intentionally scuttled by state actors. Rather than passing, these vessels are made to undergo an ontological alchemy of submersion that is itself a subtle re-racializing process by which the vessels marked by Haitian Blackness become re-coded as underwater playgrounds for the predominantly White, scuba-diving set. This creation of undersea ecologies relies on a form of submergent blue washing—the aquatic parallel to the green washing by which interventions, private or public, are meant to appear environmentally friendly, often to deflect attention away from their less-appealing impacts (Brent, Barbesgaard, and Pedersen 2020; Childs 2019; Deloughrey 2022; Steinberg 2008).

The submersion of Haitian freighters also raises questions about the affordances (Keane 2018) certain types of seawater offer to facilitate material and symbolic re-imaginings at the intersection of race and class. More specifically, we might ask what types of effects are produced when actors put the ethereal and “alien” (Helmreich 2009; see also Cohen and Quigley 2019: 1) tableaux of undersea worlds to use in their own transformative projects. That is, how does subaquatic aestheticization—picture, here, the signifying power of the dazzling colors and shapes of coral reef vitality—work a depoliticizing magic that is at the same time politicizing in its own way? To answer these questions, one must be willing to look below the water’s surface (Bear 2015; Deloughrey 2017; Hofmeyr 2020; Peters 2020).

Examining how racializing discourses play with the visible and invisible aspects of race as a lived category and how they mobilize material entities, whether shipping

container technologies or seawater, also raises questions about the very architecture of theoretical analysis itself. Take, for example, the post-critical turn in the social sciences and humanities. Post-critique urges a move away from modes of interpretation that diagnose sub-surface symptoms or that strip away obfuscating layers to reveal the truth concealed beneath false consciousness (Anker and Felski 2017; Barthes and Lemieux 2002; Latour 2004). Just as the theoretical moves of critique lean heavily on discourses of spatial qualities and structures, so too does post-critique, with post-critical theorists opting for the “thin” over the “thick” and the “surface” over the “depths” (Anker and Felski 2017: 16, 21).

But what happens when post-critique’s embrace of a “flat ontology” (Marston, Jones III, and Woodward 2005: 423) runs up against the “invisible ontologies” of race (Fields and Fields 2014), ontologies that work with a structure of visible surfaces that ostensibly reveal hidden interiority? And what of the ways in which these ontologies of race, what Jonathan Rosa and Vanessa Díaz have called “raciontologies” (2019), are embodied in, imagined through, and manipulated by contested built environments (Lipsitz 2007; Summers 2019), technological architectures, and other stubbornly material forms characterized by spatial qualities that conceal, hide, and reveal, but which are anything but flat? When the container promises to remake a riverway’s appearance by changing its racialized look, or when submerging “dirty” vessels beneath the sea does the same, is a postcritical flatness up to the task of dealing with this depth? Or, is a critical approach that is reflexively aware of the constructedness of its own spatial architecture but which also takes account of the effects of concealment, obfuscation, and submersion in a world of racialized and gendered exploitation still a necessity?

In order to engage these questions, I begin by examining the history of shipping between Haiti’s provincial ports and a racialized Miami River within the context of Miami’s shifting urban politics during the late twentieth century. I then explore the rise of regulatory and policing regimes aimed at cleaning and revitalizing the river in ways that have identified Haitian economies with the river’s social and ecological ills. I conclude with thoughts on what this history can illuminate with regard to our understanding of the materiality of racialization processes and its implications for wider arguments about the architecture of critical analysis in the social sciences.

Haitian Shipping on the Miami River

Phil, a longtime terminal operator on the Miami River, had given me access to his facilities so that I could observe the loading of one of the several breakbulk freighters carrying on a steady trade with one of Haiti’s provincial ports. Phil ran one terminal and managed another next door, which a Haitian-owned company leased to store its cargo and load its chartered 220-foot freighter, the *Aabenraa*. When I entered, the marshalling yard was abuzz with activity. Pickup trucks, vans, and even eighteen-wheelers lined up to pull into the lot, which was already crowded with used vehicles, tires, stacks of metal window frames, rolls of secondhand chain link fence, plastic blue drums, buckets, armchairs, stationary bikes, mattresses, generators, bicycles, and other items. A group of stevedores worked with a steady focus, loading pallets with sacks of rice, beans, and stretch-wrapped cardboard boxes.

The charterer’s supercargo invited me up onto the vessel to peer into the hold. He pointed out the pallets of dried tobacco leaves (*tabak mannòk* in Kreyòl) that were being unloaded and stacked toward the bow of the ship while the stevedores

rearranged other items on the second deck, the first already having been filled and sealed. Soon, this hold would also be filled, the accordion deck plates pulled closed, and the outer deck loaded with vehicles, mattresses, and other items, before being covered in tarps for the journey southward.

This particular loading proceeded like many such loadings have over the past four decades. Haitian-owned vessels have been carrying cargo between Miami and Haiti since at least the 1970s. At first, the commerce was limited to a small number of vessels sailing out of Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital. The ship owners operated with approval from the Duvalier regime, which, over the latter half of the twentieth century, had presided over a concentration of state and commercial power, including maritime trade, in the capital (Anglade 1982: 8, 24). By the early 1980s—the final half-decade of the nearly three-decade-long Duvalier dynasty—this centralized control over Haitian-operated shipping was about to weaken.

According to Haitian shippers who have long participated in the trade on the river, there was an explosion of commerce between Miami and Haitian provincial ports during the 1980s. It was driven, they recall, by three primary factors. First, there was a new and growing community of Haitians in Miami interested in sending items back to the provinces—both items for trade and personal effects for family members. Second, the corruption of the Duvalier customs regime in Haiti made it difficult for many to conduct trade in or near the capital. As one captain put it, “Under Duvalier, you had to be clever, or else those guys [regime members] would destroy you” (*sou Duvalier, fòk ou entelijan pou nèg yo pa fini avè ou*). This led captains to look for more peripheral sites where Duvalier surveillance networks were more forgiving to traders out of favor with regime insiders in the capital.

One of these sites of provincial opportunity was Haiti's Northwest Department (an administrative unit much like a province), where there had been a longstanding, albeit by all reports small, trade with Nassau, the capital of The Bahamas. This trade had stretched back across much of the twentieth century and was sustained by working sail freighters, at first, followed later by wood-hulled, diesel-engine freighters, and finally, steel-hulled, motorized freighters. One captain engaged in this trade explained that after a group of Haitian exiles attempted an invasion from The Bahamas via Grand Turk, Jean-Claude Duvalier restricted maritime traders' access to the archipelago.³ The closed Bahamas route meant that vessel owners in the Northwest were eager to find other foreign ports.

Around the same time, a former captain and boat owner from the Northwest explained, one of the captains who typically sailed from the capital, but who had moved progressively northward into the provinces in an effort to escape the grasp of Duvalierist power networks in Port-au-Prince, began shipping out of Port-de-Paix, the capital of the Northwest. Working as crew members aboard this freighter, the captains of the Northwest, primarily Tortugan sailors renowned for their maritime skills (Kahn 2023), memorized key landmarks, compass headings, and the passage of time between waypoints. They also identified suppliers and shipping agents in Miami, enabling them to join the trade as captains and boat owners, taking their own wood-hulled vessels to Miami.

³An invasion matching this description took place on January of 1982 (Gugliotta 1982). Based on the timeline provided by other interlocutors, shipping from the Northwest to Miami likely started prior to this but may have been given a push by the restrictions on trade with The Bahamas.

Many of the wooden ships that would join the Miami trade had already been outfitted with diesel truck engines converted for marine use in order to haul cargo between Port-de-Paix and Nassau. The journey to Miami was around 570 nautical miles, about 100 nautical miles longer than the, by then, long-familiar Nassau route, and, as such, a feasible undertaking. Once the profitability of the Miami trade became apparent in Port-de-Paix and elsewhere across the Northwest, some of the captains who were still using wooden sail freighters invested in their conversion to motorized vessels by reinforcing the ribs and deck of their ships as others had previously done, installing wheelhouses and adding converted diesel truck engines. They too would join in the commerce with South Florida.

On the river, a whole fleet of wood-hulled and, eventually, steel-hulled vessels from Haiti took hold by the early 1980s. Prior to the arrival of the Haitian freighters, the river had been known for many things—fish-packing and dockage for the fishers who brought in the catch; fruit-packing; ship repairs in various boat yards, including the famed Merrell-Stevens drydock; and shipping to the shallow draft ports of the Caribbean basin. By the early 1980s, it was a space in decline, a “dingy” and “dirty” part of the city with “a lot of abandoned properties,” as one terminal owner put it. By the mid-to-late 1980s, however, Haitian freighters would make use of these waterfront properties and begin to dominate the riverscape.

Initially, the Haitian freighters could be found up and down the river, from Brickell, near the river mouth, to the more industrial zones northwest of 22nd Avenue. As one former Customs Special Agent who began working on the river in the 1980s put it, “The Haitian freighters were really everywhere, other than right at the mouth of the river. . . . But, I mean, as soon as you started moving west, you would have Haitian freighters literally right there, and all along the 5 and a half miles of the river.” Others who recall what the river was like during the 1980s echo this description of a waterfront aesthetic defined by the presence of wooden Haitian freighters.

At many of the loading sites on the river, the logistics infrastructure was as informal as the virtually nonexistent immigration requirements. A place to tie up one’s vessel and access to a waterfront lot was adequate. A single berth could often handle multiple vessels—captains would stack their freighters horizontally, three abreast, in a practice called “rafting.” In terms of getting cargo onto the boats, many of the “terminals” from the early days of the Haiti trade operated without cranes, and the loading was done by groups of non-union stevedores who carried and stowed each item onboard by hand, sometimes moving the cargo across the decks of other vessels to reach the vessel they were loading at the end of the so-called “raft.” The loading crews drove vehicles directly onto the wood freighters via make-shift loading ramps and secured them to the decks. The whole process of placing cargo above and below deck was a very tricky business that one terminal operator described as its own “art form.”

The cargo shipped down to Haiti in the early days of the trade is not all that different from what is shipped today. The manifests look quite similar, although the vessels have grown in size and the wood-hulled freighters are a thing of the past—a development I will discuss shortly. Much of the shipments consisted of food items packaged for breakbulk handling—sacks of beans and rice and cases of cooking oil. Haitian shippers had credit at various food wholesalers in Miami, many of them owned by Cuban immigrants. In the early days, whiskey was an important trade item smuggled into Haiti—captains in the Northwest would unload the contraband

portions of their cargo in secluded coves at night. Carpet and mattresses would be sourced from salvage experts who had contracts with hotels to haul away these items during renovations or periodic mattress swap-outs. Smaller-time operations included the sourcing of what Haitians themselves called “junk,” which consisted of used mattresses, buckets, and doors, among other secondhand or discarded items. Used clothing and boxes of “personal effects,” which might include anything from a pair of jeans to a small radio, also made up a portion of the load. Used vehicles doubled as shipping containers—the vehicle owner could charge others to stow cargo in the vehicle’s interior without incurring additional shipping or customs fees.

In the early days of the Miami River trade with Haiti, the potential profits were high relative to other economic opportunities available to Haitian seafarers with limited social and money capital. One captain recalled borrowing money from a large landowner in the Northwest at 20 percent interest in order to finance his upgrade from a wood-hulled vessel to a steel freighter, but noted that given his profit margin, he was able to set aside \$25,000 a month to repay the loan and had cleared his debt in short order. At the same time, risks were also high. The vessels were not insured and maritime transport is, of course, risky. Still, the captains were remarkable mariners consistently carrying cargo hundreds of miles, navigating by compass and memory.

The Miami route offered some Haitians tremendous upward mobility. For example, the Bellegardes, a family from Haiti’s Northwest, transitioned, first, from fishers operating out of a coastal village on the offshore island of la Tortue during the early twentieth century to pioneers in opening sail freighter trade routes with Nassau and, later, Miami. According to a grandson of the first of the Bellegardes to travel to Nassau, the family used capital accrued from commerce with The Bahamas to begin trading between Miami and Haiti’s Northwest. Members of the family eventually procured long-term legal status and homes in the United States along with properties throughout Haiti. With this wealth, they were able to send their children to schools in Cap-Haïtien, Port-au-Prince, and the United States, and now hold an almost legendary status among the Haitian shipping community in Miami and Haiti’s Northwest. While they were not considered “elite” or even “bourgeois” within rigid Haitian class hierarchies, this extended family’s entry into the trade with Miami was part of a slow ascension of social and economic ladders. The shift is highly significant for a Haitian population that often feels locked *within* Haiti’s borders and locked *out* of larger circuits of capital—a feeling that predominates among the urban and rural poor throughout the country (Kahn 2019b).

More remarkable still is the fact that Black Haitians outside of the traditional bourgeoisie largely built this shipping economy in a country where the import sector had long been controlled by European trading firms (Trouillot 1990) and then, later, by a small group of light-skinned, mostly Christian expatriates—known locally as “Arabs,” “Syrians,” or “Lebanese”—who had fled religious persecution in the Ottoman empire and later became the “opening wedge” of the U.S. economic conquest of Haiti during the early twentieth century (Plummer 1981: 517). Several of these “Arab” families have become Haiti’s wealthiest merchants, dominating the commerce in bulk food and other imports (Hall and Charles 2021; Pierre-Pierre 2018). Still, provincial shippers managed to establish their own supply chains between Haitian ports and the Miami River that existed outside these centralized networks of trade.

Since the late 1990s, much has changed along the river. Where there was once a loosely regulated, relatively open commerce in the hands of primarily Black, Haitian vessel-owners, captains, and merchants using relatively inexpensive shipping

infrastructures, now one finds an economy that is increasingly regulated, subject to intense policing pressure, and dependent on the expertise of non-Haitian captains and officers, even on Haitian-owned vessels. This transition is the story of the remaking of the contours of the river as a class- and race-coded geography. While the loading and the cargo of the 1,087-ton *Aabenraa* I described earlier looks a good deal like the loading and the cargo of the 50- to 70-ton wood-hulled freighters of the early 1980s, its operations are situated in a river remade by regulation, policing, and a racializing politics of gentrifying urban renewal in which Haitian shipping took center stage. The river's historical dynamics, its depth, and the shifting place of Haitian commerce along the waterway demand a critical ethnographic approach attuned to the contested relationality of surfaces and subsurfaces, misrepresentations and misdirections, waterlines and seafloors, metal containers and cargo-laden interiors, pigment and personhood, all of which are at play in its transformations.

Safety, Seizures, and the Layers of River Life

In 1989, reporter Barry Klein penned an exposé on the Miami River for the *St. Petersburg Times*, describing the waterway as both the “city’s birthplace” and “its biggest embarrassment” (1989). Klein’s goal seemed to be to peel back the river’s seedy layers, a spatial trope implicit throughout the piece, in order to get at the river’s degraded core. On the surface was the concrete materiality of Haitian shipping, an eyesore of “enormous piles of food, bicycles, mattresses,... water jugs ... old refrigerators, broken air conditioners, and even rundown cars,” all loaded onto “rusting freighters docked along the river” (ibid.). Below the veneer of legitimate commerce—even the “junkyard” incarnation of it presented by Klein—was a darker world of illicit smuggling, with kilos of cocaine hidden beneath the waterline in the holds of these same “rusting freighters” (ibid.). Voicing the position of unnamed South Florida “officials,” Klein pinned the blame for the cocaine trade on “foreigners, many of them Haitians,” smuggling narcotics into Miami (ibid.).

The semiotics of layering and an emphasis on what lies below the surface of river life is not peculiar to Klein’s piece; it permeates discourse on the river more generally. It has also shaped the logics governing significant transformations in the emergent and submerged river, including its racializations and re-racializations. If one is to grasp what is happening on the river and how its many reworkings have taken effect through material media, one cannot cling to an approach that flattens social worlds. Instead, one must be critically attuned to the ways the river is enacted as a layered entity and the ways actors differentiate among such layers, theorize their relation to one another, and use them. This is not merely the case for rivers (Bear 2015), oceans (Deloughrey 2017; Hofmeyr 2020; Peters 2020), and maritime logistics (Leivestad 2021; 2022; Rothenberg 2018). It applies to any number of phenomena, including palimpsestic histories of colonialism (Chari 2024), inquiries into the subterranean layers of public infrastructure (Chu 2014; Anand 2015), and accounts of “invisible” soil strata (Lyons 2020), to name only a few.

By the time Haitian freighters began appearing on the river in large numbers during the 1980s, a narrative had already taken hold in South Florida in which Haitians loomed as a quasi-unlawful presence, establishing themselves in an interstitial world at the margins of mainstream Miami. The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) had spent a good part of the late 1970s trying to rid the

city of Haitian asylum seekers whom they worked hard to depict as a “threat” to South Florida communities, taking their cues in part from members of Florida’s congressional delegation unhappy with a growing population of Black refugees in their midst (Kahn 2019a: 117; Stepick 1982). During this period, there always seemed to be some social ill at hand to pin on the Haitians, criminality and disease being foremost among them (Kahn 2019a; Stepick 1982).

By 1982, a novel immuno-deficiency virus joined tuberculosis, venereal diseases, and yaws on the list of stigmatized maladies associated with Haitians when a group of asylum seekers being treated at Miami’s Jackson Memorial Hospital were diagnosed with what would later come to be known as HIV/AIDS (Kahn 2019a; Farmer 1992). With the acute conjuncture of large-scale irregular migration of Cubans and Haitians by sea and a growing racialized, medicalized fear of asylum seekers, what was remarkable was not an antipathy toward the Haitian freighters arriving on the river but rather the fact that the INS did not attempt to shut them out of the port entirely. While the Haitian asylum seekers arriving by sea did face backlash in the form of a reconstituted immigration detention regime (Lindskoog 2018; Lipman 2013; Stepick 1982) and a new offshore interdiction program designed to keep them from reaching U.S. shores (Kahn 2019a), freighter commerce managed to take hold and grow without any serious crackdown (Kahn 2022).

The absence of a full backlash against the Haitian shippers was likely facilitated by the apparent transitory nature of their presence—they were there to trade, not to immigrate, after all—and the strange space of quasi-invisibility the river occupied within the city, despite its path through the heart of the urban core. As one journalist put it, “most Miamians are oblivious to the river, knowing enough only to curse it when caught by one of its 10 drawbridges” (Bell 1994). While immigration officials and others concerned with the river were paying attention to the expanding Haitian presence along the waterway, the wider community remained largely ignorant of the city’s new merchant seafarers, except when informed by occasional pieces in the *Miami Herald*, which provided a bit of titillating human-interest color without raising a full panic.

The government bureaucrats who did express concern with the changing face of river commerce were, at first, focused primarily on human smuggling. The INS warned of Haitian captains fraudulently adding names of non-crewmembers to their crew lists—after which those individuals would abscond—or of their practice of arriving in the evening, outside of INS and Customs business hours, during which time their passengers would step off the boats and disappear into the Miami night before the vessel they arrived on was fully cleared the following morning. By the 1990s, the lesser infractions of bringing in false crew members or ferrying in larger groups under cover of night had yielded ground to an illicit economy less tolerable for local, state, and federal officials—the smuggling of cocaine. Or, at least, that is the portrayal that dominates narratives of Haitian commerce on the river.

By the mid-1990s, the media was sounding the consistent note that a significant portion of the cocaine coming into Miami was arriving in hidden compartments, sometimes submerged in bilge water, aboard Haitian freighters. Law enforcement lamented the difficulties that came with searching the large number of vessels arriving on the river daily. As one former Customs official recalled to me, “It was a shell game. We’d get ten to twelve of these freighters a day. And they knew that even if we caught two of them, ten would come through with drugs.” Another former Customs official described something similar, remembering, “They brought in six boats a day, and we

send out inspectors, because we have intelligence on one boat, and then you search that for three or four days, and you have ten or twelve boats you can't cover." Although Customs would eventually intensify its policing of these freighters starting in the late 1990s, the first real blows to Haitian commerce on the river came not from Customs, the Drug Enforcement Administration, or the local police, but rather from the U.S. Coast Guard. Its approach was not counter-narcotics operations but safety.

"Of course, you can never argue with safety," Phil, the terminal operator, explained to me, recalling the regulatory wall the U.S. Coast Guard built in the mid-1990s to restrict the wooden Haitian-owned freighters on the Miami River by subjecting them to a host of rules regarding "firefighting, lifesaving, and crew requirements" (United States Coast Guard 1997). The new safety regime was rolled out as Operation Safety Net in 1994 (*ibid.*). After launching the program, the Coast Guard identified 238 foreign-flagged freighters under 500 gross tons that fell within its purview, many of them Haitian-owned wooden freighters (*ibid.*). Although Haitian vessel owners had already begun to add steel-hulled vessels to the fleet by the mid-1990s, Haitian-made wooden freighters were still appealing for their low cost. One terminal operator estimated that around sixty-two were calling at his terminal in 1997 (Hall 1997a), and, by some calculations, there were upwards of 150 wood-hulled Haitian freighters trading on the river in the 1990s (Hall 1997b). The new Coast Guard regulations were designed to drive these wooden vessels out of Miami.

According to officials I spoke with from the Coast Guard and Customs who were working on the river during the early 1990s, Operation Safety Net was a way to use "safety" measures to target Haitian drug trafficking aboard the wooden freighters. As one former Coast Guard official described it to me, "There was a conversation: 'well, how can we get these drugs to stop?'" The result, he explained, was that "the Coast Guard either was told or suggested enforcing the regulations about ships having to meet certain requirements." The Coast Guard responded by "outlaw[ing] the wooden hulled freighters, and that was a gut punch to the traffickers." Another Customs official recalled, similarly, "The Coast Guard was enforcing these safety rules and regulations in a sense to get rid of the wooden Haitian boats, because they were a threat for drug smuggling and human smuggling." When the regulations came into full effect in July of 1997, it was the death knell for the wood-hulled freighters (Kahn 2022).

Banishing the wood vessels from the river cleared elements of the Haitian freighter aesthetic from the surface of the waterway, an aesthetic that many had come to see as dominating the overall look and feel of the river. What was this look and feel? As one Customs official, Fred, put it to me, the river was "this dark, seedy, mysterious industrial, rusty kind of underworld environment." Another Customs official, Eric, described the river as "a Third World port in the middle of a First World city." He went on, asking me, "Have you ever been to the third world? You ever been to Haiti? That's what the river was like. It was the wild west. It was run down." Much of the look came from the freighters themselves, which Fred described as "pretty nasty.... If you've ever seen pictures of the boats loaded up with bicycles and mattresses, [it is] not something that you'd want to go around on, let alone crawl around in the bilge water [of], which was sewage and a great hiding spot for drugs." Another official echoed this description, commenting, "If [the Haitian freighters] had cargo, it would be stolen bicycles, stolen cars, buckets, pretty much whatever they could scrounge up, you know. And used mattresses, it was disgusting." According to Fred, "As soon as you started moving west [from the mouth of the river], you would have Haitian

freighters, literally right there, and all the 5-and-a-half miles [of the river].” In other words, what these officials described as the “nasty,” “disgusting,” “sewage” tainted freighters that lined the riverbanks had come to define the entirety of the river as “third world,” “wild,” and “Haitian.”

A member of the family that ran the container line, Antillean, hit the nail on the head when he said that, with the implementation of Operation Safety Net, “we’re going to lose some of that Singapore look we have,” but “I think a lot of people won’t care” (quoted in Hutt 1997). Losing that “look,” in fact, seemed to be part of the point. Indeed, the allusion to Singapore fails to capture the particularities of how Haitian Blackness shaped the ways in which the “feel” and “look” of the river was racialized and stigmatized.

Haitian Blackness, as I have argued elsewhere (2022; 2023), operates semiotically within U.S. racializing discourses as a particular iteration of a more general U.S.-centered vision of Blackness, itself far more varied than often acknowledged. As such, the “Ontological Lack” (Wynter 1989) often ascribed to Blackness within U.S. racial hierarchies manifests differently with regard to Black Haitians than with other Black populations in the United States, drawing on signs of a purer, threatening Africanness and, at the same time, a confounding Creole hybridity (Kahn 2019a; 2022; 2023). Haitian difference, like forms of Black alterity more generally, has signified in ways neither monolithic nor entirely stable. It is historically constituted and thus emergent—or, with regard to the river, partially submergent. On the Miami River of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Haitian freighters, Haitian breakbulk operations, and even Haitian cargo—more specifically, the secondhand goods that these vessels were known to carry—became racially coded within South Florida imaginaries such that they indexed Haitian alterity and the alterity of the river itself (Kahn 2022). Making the river “safer” became inseparable from what some saw as an effort to exorcise fragments of the perceived disorder, poverty, and degradation Black Haitian mariners had lodged within the heart of Miami.

According to a *Journal of Commerce* reporter covering the implementation of the new regulations, the Coast Guard officer in charge of Operation Safety Net “denied suggestions by some Haitians that racism and the fact that many vessels are an eyesore to passing chic Miami party boats have something to do with the pending action” (Hall 1997b). “Safety” and a “congressional mandate,” the officer said, were the real reasons behind the program (quoted in *ibid.*). As already mentioned, officials with whom I spoke remember the operation a bit differently. For them, it involved an intentional weaponization of safety regulations to combat human smuggling and drug trafficking. Moreover, the affinity between these sorts of riverine evictions and later efforts to sweep the waterway of Haitian traders and the terminals that served them suggest a more complicated interplay of policing interventions and the wider context of concern about the racialized look of the river and of the city as a whole than official discourse at the time acknowledged.⁴

Not long after Operation Safety Net had pushed the multiple wood-hulled freighters from the riverscape, government officials turned their full attention to what was left of the Haitian fleet. The expulsion of the wood-hulled freighters under

⁴This racialized policing is, in turn, part of a longer “anti-black punitive tradition in the United States” (Hinton and Cook 2021: 262) and is tied to its plantation pasts. Florida, of course, has long played host to the social and political formations central to this history (Connolly 2014).

Operation Safety Net reworked the surface aesthetics of the river to a degree, though the waterway remained crowded with busy marshalling yards and a reconstituted fleet of steel-hulled vessels. Ship owners able to weather the added costs imposed by the regulations and shift from wood-hulled to steel-hulled vessels did so by procuring relatively inexpensive cargo vessels from the Baltics and offshore supply vessels from the Gulf of Mexico, often using shipping agents in Miami to do so.

In the eyes of Customs, the transition to steel vessels did not bring respectability, but rather, according to one official, a situation in which there were fewer ships, but “more space ... more places to hide the dope.” Another Customs official confirmed this sentiment, pointing out that the steel-hulled ships were “larger” and more “complex” and thus,

There’s a lot more space to conceal without having to do anything to conceal it. Let’s say, you know, the pedestal that held the ship’s wheel [could now be] hollowed out and you could put cocaine up in it and bolt it back to the deck, right, and it would look like it was normal. You could take a large fuel tank, or the ballast tank, with the seawater, and ... they had a small person, [a] midget, whatever the correct term is of the day, that they could put into these tanks that could go and fetch the welded- or the bolted-on compartment in those tanks. And these guys, I mean they were going into human waste tanks, going into fuel tanks, going into ballast tanks. And they also had the parasitic devices that could be bolted to the outside of ships.

In other words, the steel ships created a more complex built environment of subterfuge and layered concealment.

The targeting of the labyrinthine built environment of the steel freighters began with Operation River Gate, an effort internal to Customs, and expanded later to a multi-agency operation known as River Sweep—the evocation of “cleaning” in the name speaking volumes. While Customs agents designed River Sweep, they also brought in various federal and state agencies to help execute it, including the FBI, the DEA, and the U.S. Coast Guard (Lebowitz 2002; House Subcommittee on Criminal Justice 2000). Between 1999 and 2001, law enforcement officials seized twenty-one Haitian freighters on the river along with 13,000 pounds of cocaine under the auspices of the operation (House Subcommittee on Criminal Justice 2000).

As part of River Sweep, Customs officials attempted to “remove” these steel vessels—multi-layered devices of subsurface concealment—from circulation, not through safety regulations, but through civil forfeiture actions. After being seized, the vessels were sold in government auctions only to end up back on the river, having been purchased by the very Haitians from whom they had been seized. What was viewed as a metaphorically sub-surface underworld of Haitian criminality—defined by literal sub-surface caches of cocaine and obfuscated purchasing and ownership arrangements—proved harder to excise than the wooden freighter aesthetic. A more sweeping set of interventions were, however, on the way.

Ecologies of Gentrification and Dredging

If criminality and its material instantiations—secret compartments and hidden bricks of cocaine, for instance—make up one subsurface world of the layered river, another is the underwater environment itself, with its contaminated sediment, its

algae blooms, its sunken shopping carts, and its half-submerged vessels. In Barry Klein's exposé, with which I began the previous section, the river of nostalgic memory was imagined as a quaint setting of "clean and wild" waters "filled with fish and frolicking manatees"—a subtropical estuarine idyll (1989; see also Kahn 2022). Klein was not the only one to mourn a river thought to have decayed since its bygone days of Edenic splendor. In 1991, a Miami-Dade grand jury opened its report on the state of the river with descriptions of the "clear water[s]" and the "beautiful palm and mangrove-lined banks" now long since spoiled by "benign neglect and planned desecration" (Dade County Grand Jury 1992: 1). The pellucid, life-giving waters had been replaced by a murky toxicity in the form of "industrial waste and untreated sewage" that had left a "'gel coating' of poison lying on the bottom" (Klein 1989) but also a substrate for the flourishing of unwanted organisms. This ecological devastation was the second half of the "embarrassment" Klein had described for his readers in the late 1980s, the first half being the river's criminal underworld. These multiple strata of the submergent river provided a material infrastructure for the symbolic architecture of reform.

Unsurprisingly, the Haitian freighters came to be associated with the "desecrated" ecology of the river just as they had with its criminality. Admittedly, they were never held up as the primary source of its pollution. That role was reserved for the untreated sewage that had long flowed freely into the waterway along with the industrial waste from boatyards, fuel suppliers, and scrap businesses that lined its sea walls. But Haitian vessels were also seen as contributing to the damage by "routinely violat[ing] environment laws" with their unregulated "paint touch-ups," "repairs," and "dumping [of] waste" (Hutt 1997)—including "sewage" and "fuel-laden bilge water" (Lantigua 1996). The Coast Guard official who headed up Operation Safety Net described the freighters as a "historic scourge and source of pollution on the river" (Quality Action Team 1998) and as "detrimental to the United States marine environment" (quoted in Hutt 1997). Marine pollution, then, joined other modes of naturalizing an ethnoracialized Haitian pathology that had already included its biologization, through, as previously discussed, an express association of Haitians with various diseases, from tuberculosis to HIV, over much of the twentieth century (Kahn 2019a).

Even when Customs had seized ships from their Haitian owners and put them into the hands of custodians on the river, the vessels remained as visible icons of what was imagined to be a polluting Haitian pathology. Once in forfeiture proceedings—or while subject to a less drastic "port hold"—a vessel would begin to accrue burdensome costs in the form of dockage fees and also mechanical complications from rust, water damage, and general lack of use that required significant capital to remedy. Some owners, their identities often hidden behind the corporate veil of offshore shell companies, would simply abandon their vessels. The result was a riverway littered with decaying ships.

These "derelict" ships were a major concern for those interested in cleaning up the river. The Quality Action Team—a public-private partnership that included the Coast Guard and river businesses, among other institutions—warned in 1998, "As vessels deteriorate, material on board—including hazardous compounds—breaks down and disintegrates into the water. Residues of oils and fuels become pollutants in the water column and sediment. Corroding metal and debris contribute to the problem, as do the vessel's attraction for mosquitos and rats, creating a public health hazard" (Quality Action Team 1998: 1). From the surface down through the

water column and into the sediment, these “deteriorat[ing],” “disintegrat[ing],” and “corroding” vessels were seen as an environmental and public health disaster, not to mention an eyesore. A *Miami Herald* piece from 2000 made it clear that the public regarded Haitian-owned ships as making up a substantial portion of these “hulking vessels under foreign flags, their sides streaming with red rust stains, their names painted in wobbly amateurish lettering,” that marred the aesthetics of the river (Driscoll 2000). The Miami-Dade grand jury report from the early 1990s had set the tone for this equation of the freighters and the perceived environmental mess that was the river, indicating in descriptions of the abandoned ships that they were a prime example of Haitians “polluting the water and the view” (Dade County Grand Jury 1992).

Going back to the 1980s, marine businesses on the river, particularly those serving the trade with the shallow draft ports of the Caribbean, had begun to exhibit concern over a nascent effort to redevelop properties around the waterway, which they saw as hostile to the “working” character of the river (Nordheimer 1987). By the early 1990s, the Miami River Coordinating Committee and its Chairman, attorney Robert Parks, were openly pursuing just such a redevelopment project. From the start, some saw the Committee plans as amenable to higher end shipping businesses while also “targeted at driving all Haitian boatmen, including law-abiding shipping, off the river” (Baker and Katel 1990). More generally, the marine businesses, represented by the Miami River Marine Group, perceived a “sneaky undertow” in these discussions of renewal, denouncing them as cover for real estate “developers eager to gentrify the riverbank” (Lantigua 1996). Fran Bohnsack, Executive Director of the Miami River Marine Group and a tough advocate for the working river, described the plans as a “land grab” (ibid.). Decades later, a former Miami police officer who had worked closely with Customs officials on the river acknowledged to me that there was likely a push by real estate developers and property owners to get rid of Haitian commerce on the waterway. “They didn’t want a Haitian trader there next to [their property],” he explained, “because who wants to look out their window and see a boat with all this stuff on it, waiting there to have enough to make a trip back. So... I’d say that there were people that wanted to move ’em out because of the way it looked.” This is exactly what Haitians working on the river and the businesses that catered to their trade feared.

If the river was ever to be transformed into a hub for tourists strolling along its banks, as some had long hoped, it was apparent that the waterway would have to present a new image, one in which it appeared, at the very least, to have been cleaned up from top to submarine bottom. The effort to do just that had been building steam over the course of the 1990s and gained new momentum with the creation of the Miami River Commission, which became the state- and locally recognized body acting as a clearinghouse for river policy issues. Right out of the gates, the Commission began developing plans to “revitalize” the river.

One of the River Commission’s revitalization plans was a state, federal, and local collaboration meant to combat drug trafficking while spurring economic development on the waterway. Florida Governor Jeb Bush announced the program as Operation River Walk in 2001 (Lynch 2001), while Republican Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen sung its virtues to the *Herald*: “The Miami River has been known as a place to dump dead bodies, dead refrigerators ... it’s been a transit point for drugs. Any criminal activity that can take place took place on the Miami River.... We’re going to change this whole environment. We’re going to change this into a jewel” (quoted in Lynch 2001).

Rotting bodies, discarded junk, nefarious criminality, all would be scraped away in an operation that explicitly combined the River Commission's rhetoric of environmental and newbuild gentrification—that is, gentrification premised on environmental clean-up (Dooling 2009; Kern 2015) and the creation of new, as opposed to renovated, housing stock (Lees, Slater, and Wily 2008)—with a dredging project and an intensified, multi-agency policing operation. The goal of the real estate projects and the policing, the latter explicitly targeting Haitians (Lynch 2001), was to rework the surface of the waterway. The dredging, in turn, would clear its toxic underwater sedimentations.

At first glance, dredging, an intervention aimed at deepening the river for large vessel traffic, might seem a peculiar priority for a project many saw as hostile to shipping interests. Certainly, it signaled that the Commission was not against all forms of river commerce, although it seems clear that its members' preference was for a higher-end variety of business on the river, like the Merrill-Stevens Drydock Company and its mega-yacht clientele, or the more established container shipping lines, like Antillean Marine (Stronge, Alpert, and Schild 2008; Kimley-Horne and Associates 2002). Still, the benefits of dredging devolved to all shippers and facilitated collaboration between the Miami River Marine Group and the Commission.

The dredging of the river had a strong signaling dimension as well. It is hard to market the water views of expensive condos, riverside dining, and upscale retail without removing the “toxic sludge” below the surface, even if it is not visible (Lynch 2001). Robert Parks, the head of the River Coordinating Committee and later the River Commission, described the term dredging as a misnomer, “because the river was deep enough. The problem was the accumulation of sludge and debris over the years that had washed into the river and reduced the depth. So, you weren't dredging, what you were doing was scraping and taking all that muck out.” The working river, the real estate river, and the retail river, in other words, all stood to benefit from the underwater “scraping” away of this unseemly “muck.” Dredging, as an intervention embedded in a wider set of projects, highlights how submarine sedimentations and status-marked “styles” of shipping come to take on significance at the intersection of “formal economic policy and the diverse life-worlds of popular economies” (Bear 2015: 5)—in this instance the agendas of the Commission, real estate developers, and high-status shipping industries on the river, but also the interests of Haitian freighter-owners, seafarers, and merchants.

One might say that there were two types of dredging operating on the river in tandem, one literal and one metaphoric. There was the cleaning of the debris and polluted sediment from the riverbed, but there was also an attempt to “scrape” away the Haitian boat owners themselves. Haitian shippers, after all, had become synonymous with the moral toxicity of the river while also being linked to its physical toxicity. Environmental gentrification, as Leslie Kern has noted, often involves just this sort of “displacement of environmental and industrial pollution” onto “symbolically ‘dirty’ bodies” in ways that allow “a neighborhood to define itself as clean (whether it is environmentally clean or not) once those bodies are displaced” (2015: 68).

Despite its association with toxicity, Haitian shipping could be tolerated so long as it could be sequestered in the western reaches of the river or pass as something other than what it appeared to be. Robert Parks, again, the first chair of the River Commission, explained that “we told everyone, ‘we’re not trying to limit any of the shipping, but we want it in one place,’ and that was all moved down [to the industrial

part of the river], and that's where it is to this day." Containerized shipping, like this geographic sequestration, also facilitated the optical transformation of Haitian goods and Haitian commerce, hiding the messiness of breakbulk logistics within the abstract value unit of a standardized metal box (see Leivestad 2021). As Phil, the breakbulk terminal operator who had long served a clientele of Haitian shippers put it, with containerization, even on the river, "It's no different than looking at the nicest ports in Antwerp [or] Long Beach, all stacked containers and machines moving it around, no people moving on the ground, running around, scurrying." Haitian shipping, in other words, would receive more favorable treatment if it were to take on the look of high commerce by adopting its logistical infrastructures. These contested reshufflings and re-layerings—social, economic, and political processes with a signifying material depth—would soon be accompanied by other techniques of concealment and re-racialization that would use literal submersion within saltwater ecologies, not encasement in metal shells, to resurface the river.

Emergent Black to Submergent Blue

With Operation River Gate and Operation River Sweep, law enforcement's focus was on contraband narcotics. Operation River Walk changed the game by combining narcotics policing with a larger constellation of river development schemes, from expanding recreational space to attracting retailers and real estate developers. Still, a key component of River Walk was the policing of Haitian vessels. As various federal and state agencies pursued these operations, reporting in the *Herald* reached a fever pitch with regard to the Haiti drug trade. This, in turn, provided a sense of urgency that supported the commitment to policing. In one article announcing Operation Riverwalk, the *Herald* quoted from a Miami-Dade grand jury report that "estimated" every Haitian freighter on the river had been "seized, forfeited and resold" or had "been suspected of smuggling" (quoted Lynch 2001, my emphasis). Customs officials with whom I spoke shared this sentiment. According to one official, there were "no boat owners that were not bringing in coke. They couldn't make money bringing in old mattresses and bicycles down to Haiti." Of course, the discarded items the Haitian traders carried were the most visible but least valuable cargo shipped to Haiti, with the larger, more expensive, and more lucrative, shipments of cooking oil, rice, beans, and tobacco packed below deck, though Customs officials rarely took note of this aspect of the trade.

Fueled by a public discourse that drew on memories of Miami's cocaine cowboy days and a sense that the Haiti trade was, across the board, a front for narco-trafficking, Operation River Walk came down hard on the Haitian freighters. It began with a law enforcement "surge" that "augmented U.S. Customs and Coast Guard" resources by assigning 241 addition personnel to "supplement drug enforcement efforts" on the river (Kimley-Horne and Associates 2002: 69). This was a thirty-fold increase. The result was a bulked-up policing campaign directed primarily at businesses owned by Black, Haitian immigrants.

Over the first two years of Operation Riverwalk, officers seized forty-one freighters from owners of varying nationalities (Partnership for Public Service 2020). Rather than auctioning them off, as they had done with previous operations, authorities began scuttling the vessels to create artificial reefs off the coast of South Florida and take the freighters out of the river economy entirely. According to the Miami River

Commission's proposed urban infill plan, the reef program allowed "school children and drug prevention groups" to "adopt/sponsor seized vessels," observe the "environmental cleaning" process, and then watch the actual sinking of the vessel (Kimley-Horne and Associates 2002: 69). One of the Customs officials, Fred, who was instrumental in establishing the program, explained to me that the intent was to take "a conveyance of death, and create a habitat of life, because by sinking that drug smuggling vessel we were now creating a place for coral to grow, for fisheries to spawn and breed and flourish.... And the biggest point was that it sent a really strong message to the drug smugglers that 'we're gonna find your dope, and [even] if we don't find all your dope, we're gonna seize your boat and sink it.'" The end result of the operation, according to Fred, was that Customs officials had "changed the face of the river."

By 2016, the sunken freighters stretched across the ocean floor off Palm Beach in a mile-long chain of wrecks dubbed the Governor's River Walk Reef, a nod to Governor Jeb Bush, who participated in the inaugural sinking event. Dive videos posted online show hulls encrusted with coral and teaming with sea life—snapper, grouper, barracuda, blue tang, wrasse, moray eels, to name only a few, dart and weave about the submerged carapaces of steel.⁵ Julie Bishop, an environmental director with Palm Beach County, described the ensemble of artificial reefs as creating "an underwater city with activity everywhere you look" (quoted in Swisher 2016).

At first glance, the aquatic scenes appear as the hopeful "flourish[ing]" of "life" described by Fred, the aforementioned Customs official, wrested, as it were, from capitalist ruin (Tsing 2021; Stoler 2008). In other words, one might imagine such aquascapes as a glimpse of an ocean commons revitalized by the material discards of the river's physically and socially polluting shadow economy. Here a reconstituted nature and human leisure (recreational diving) intersect in a space that is "blue"—the marine cognate to "green," as in sustainable "green technology" and "green economies" (Brent, Barbesgaard, and Pedersen 2020; Childs 2019; Deloughrey 2022; Steinberg 2008). One might even see the reefs as undersea extensions of the "greenways" and "blueways" planned as part of the Miami River revitalization project—the blueways imagined as aquatic lanes set aside for recreational kayaking and canoeing along what was to become an ecologically healthy and recreationally appealing riverway (Kimley-Horne and Associates 2002).

In addition to being color-coded in terms of its ecopolitics, the reef program was color-coded in terms of its racial politics, producing spaces that were not just blue, but also White. As the Customs official who helped design the program explained to me, the reefs "also created an economic impact, because the dive community here is very big. It contributes a lot of money to our local economy. And now, by creating these new dive locations, you're creating an opportunity for people to come back and dive on them, so you're generating even more business." Recreational diving has long been an activity associated with White leisure, marketed as White and catering predominantly to a White clientele (Blue Planet 2020; Shore 2019). While associations of Black scuba divers have worked to carve out a place for Black divers within the scuba community, the association of diving and White recreation persists. In this sense, Governor Jeb Bush's River Walk Reef, which is made possible by the erasure of a maritime materiality marked by Haitian Blackness, emerges—or, rather, submerges—here as blue and White, but not Black.

⁵See, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C7VmVmbRsIs&t=55s>.

The artificial reefs off the coast of Palm Beach are remarkable in that the submarine, multispecies “cities” they foster are crafted, in part, out of the refuse of Haitian commercial networks. These economies, associated in the public imagination with a strain of foreign Blackness, were transformed through spectacular policing rituals into a blue economy of White, middle-class leisure. The creation of these wrecks was both a memorialization and a forgetting. The sinkings monumentalized the Haitian freighters while erasing them under a layering of new life. To return to River Commission Chairman Robert Park’s term of choice, material traces coded by Haitian Blackness were “scraped” from the river and then sunk in the “forgotten space,” as Alan Sekula has called it, of global capitalism—the sea—in ways meant to submerge and disappear the Black, Haitian economic vitality of the river (but see Sharpe 2016, critiquing Sekula and Burch 2010 for the erasure of Blackness from their portrayal of maritime capitalism). The racialized detritus of the river is alchemically remade by the sea in ways that facilitate re-racialization—or de-racialization, as the category White in the United States is more often than not the unmarked category, the default, the signifier of a perceived absence of race and culture (Bucholtz 2011).

In this poetics of saltwater purification, the reefs stand in opposition to the derelict vessels of the brackish river and its bottom muck. Each is a site of multispecies flourishing, but the submerged, largely invisible—except to those with the capital to access it—blue ecology of the artificial reefs is meant to replace the pathologized “ruderal ecology”—the life that emerges in “disturbed environments usually considered hostile to life” (Stoetzer 2018)—of the river freighters. These metal hulks, with their mosquito-breeding pools of fetid water and nooks and crannies in which vermin multiply, were present to all as a triple index of submerged referents: of an interior Haitian lack, of the literal subsurface rot of the river, and of the metaphorical decay of the city as evidenced by its burgeoning *underworld* (see Lavery 2016 on connections between the underworld and the undersea). The ocean reef effects a reworking of river “trash.” Immersed and washed, Haitian freighters were sunk in the production of a new, re-racialized “submarine aesthetics” (Deloughrey 2017: 36) designed to shift from Black to “blue.” None of this is stated as such. It is, however, a strong undercurrent in this play of surfaces and depths.

There is a long history of working with the materiality of seawater and the “submarine aesthetic atmosphere” (Cohen and Quigley 2019: 2) to evoke a range of moods and sensations, from alien-ness (ibid.: 1), to “permanence and timelessness” (ibid.), to dreamy surrealism (ibid.: 5). A common theme of this expressiveness is the possibility of “escape,” through aquatic submersion, “from the social and cultural processes that characterize everyday life” (Starosielski 2012: 149). The aquatic documentary *Underwater Impressions*, directed by Leni Riefenstahl and released in 2002, exemplifies this genre of submergent antipolitics layered over churning undercurrents of political contestation, and, in part because of the larger historical context from which it emerges, can illuminate the semiotics of the submergent re-racializations of Operation River Walk.

Infamous as a propagandist for the Third Reich, Riefenstahl is perhaps best known for her 1935 film, *Triumph of the Will* and its depiction of the 1934 National Socialist Party Congress. A friend of both Hitler and Goebbels, Riefenstahl struggled to shed her Nazi associations over the years, despite repeated efforts at reinvention that, according to Susan Sontag, merely reaffirmed her “fascist aesthetics” (Sontag 1975). *Underwater Impressions* was Riefenstahl’s swansong and offers up a final attempt at

casting aside her Nazi associations with a pageant of gliding angelfish and swaggering lionfish while Riefenstahl, the only human to make an appearance in the film, floats against the backdrop of the chromatic brilliance of the reef and the deep blues of the sea. There is a painterly aspect to the film, one of modernist, impressionistic aestheticization that fits with Riefenstahl's self-characterization over the years as someone oriented not toward politics, but to, in her own words, "what is beautiful, strong, healthy, what is living" (quoted in *ibid.*). And that is what one finds in the waving corals and shimmering barracuda—a phantasmagoria of living movement and color apparently devoid of the political. "Is this an escape act," one critic queries, "designed to free its director from her past by creating the illusion of leaving the human world behind?" (Tyree 2013). Perhaps so.

Given that *Undersea Impressions* exhibits an intensification of the modernist aestheticization (see Foster 1983) of her earlier oeuvre, but with all human elements washed away—save for Riefenstahl herself—it would be hard to ignore the biographically transformative work saltwater submersion seems designed to perform here. As with all phantasmagorias, the considerable technical and artistic labor involved in making the film is concealed (Adorno 2005[1952]) in order to foreground a pure and alien nature in which Riefenstahl levitates, freed from the weight of terrestrial life. Her renewed insistence on her naivete with regard to the Third Reich's genocidal machinery and her apparent yearning for the absolution that would come with the status of "pure aesthete" (Tyree 2013) finds its watery materialization in these hypnotizing aquascapes.

In both Riefenstahl's underwater scenes and in the South Florida artificial reef projects carried out by U.S. law enforcement, there is an effort to recruit saltwater materiality and reef ecologies as assemblages of actants in an alchemical transformation of polluted pasts. Seawater and undersea life generate "alien" effects of light, color, and apparent weightlessness that operate as interpretive affordances (Keane 2018), facilitating readings of, in Riefenstahl's case, an aestheticized letting-go of worldly politics. With regard to the Haitian freighters, seawater and coral ecologies effect a simultaneous bluewashing and whitening of riverine materiality previously coded as Black and "brown" (the latter used here in the sense of brownfields, which are contaminated or potentially contaminated sites of past industrial use). While there is no interpretive essence, no fixed ontology, of seawater (Helmreich 2011) or its vital encrustations (Helmreich 2016; Reno 2019) that preordain these effects, the architects of these submersive visual experiences use subtropical undersea environments and the nonhuman labor of aquatic life (Besky and Blanchette 2019) to facilitate attempts at alchemical transformations of racialized materiality.

Conclusion

Over the past four decades a complicated politics of racialization, policing, and gentrification unfolded on the Miami River. As Haitian freighters began trading on the waterway in earnest during the 1980s, journalists, government officials, and politicians publicly linked the vessels and the economic networks of which they were a part with the river's pollution and crime, itself portrayed by many as a symptom of a broader decay festering beneath the glitzy surface of the city. Haitian Blackness in combination with the highly-visible aesthetics of Haitian shipping—that is, the look of its undercapitalized vessels, its secondhand goods,

and its reliance on the intensive physical labor of breakbulk loading and transport—signified on the river in ways that conflicted with efforts to redevelop its centrally located, waterfront real estate.

A constellation of articulated processes emerged as part of this history with the effect of constraining the location and visibility of Haitian shipping on the river. As property values increased near the riverfront of the urban core, Haitian shipping terminals moved into the westward reaches of the waterway. There, in a small corridor zoned for industrial use, they became less visible than they had been during the days when one could find Haitian freighters tied up along the full length of the river. Law enforcement operations stigmatized and imposed heavy costs on Haitian shippers as well, resulting not only in arrests but in the seizure and theatrical sinking of their ships for the purpose of creating artificial reefs off the South Florida coast. Finally, there was the sense that these Haitian shipping economies were tolerable so long as they were carried out through a form of containerized transport in which the hustle and bustle of loading, and thus of the typical look of a Haitian breakbulk shipping terminal, was replaced with the “cleaner” logistics aesthetic of the container yard. Sequestration, sinking, and containerization, then, became key features of a terrain hostile to Haitian-operated shipping networks.

What one can see in this history is a topography of deeply contested racializing, de-racializing, and re-racializing processes, all of them reliant on the multi-layered materiality of shipping technology and seawater to affect the landscape of the river, the city, and the coastal seas. Metal boxes allowed cargo marked as Haitian to pass under the anonymity of the standardized container, and the alien qualities of seawater and undersea ecologies transformed ships that were coded as Black, Haitian, and poor into vital subsurface assemblages recast as “blue” and White.

What is so fascinating about this history is that rather than merely revealing the particularities of a relatively small set of maritime supply chains connecting Haitian ports to South Florida, it provides a glimpse of a more general architecture of racialization processes in the United States. Racialization, as has been widely argued, operates through patterns of signification in which exteriors index interiority. Here, this nefarious play of outsides and insides articulates with and through a semiotics of urban, marine, and logistics materiality.⁶ The structure of these material forms—in this instance the technologies of containerization and the qualities of voluminous seawater—afford ways of imagining relations between the surfaces and submerged “underneaths” of raced environments. On the Miami River, such articulations allow racialized economies to be re-“skinned” by the anonymity of metal boxes so that they can “pass” as non-Haitian. When vessels are banished from the Miami River and remade through offshore submersion, this, too, is an articulation made possible by the material affordances of the depth, consistency, and alien vitality of seawater.

The layered structure of the environments I have been describing and the way that this layered quality has been instrumentalized and manipulated for purposes of exclusionary re-racializations of waterfronts, economies, and objects illuminates

⁶Here, I use the concept, “articulation,” following Stuart Hall, to denote a “working together” of two processes, practices, or even material arrangements (insofar as they have a role in a somewhat-coherent formation) without reducing one element of the formation into an effect of or a subsumed part of the other (Hall 1985: 113 n2).

not only how maritime geographies can be racialized but also how maritime and other materialities may be recruited to assist and naturalize the work of racialization. The form and physicality that shape these processes also invites reflection on the structure of analysis appropriate to the task of understanding how these processes operate. The material semiotic infrastructure that facilitates racialization, in other words, should give one pause when considering analytical frameworks in which it seems naïve, simple, old-fashioned, passé, and elitist to take note of techniques of veiling, masking, manipulating, and misleading.

The world is not flat, both in a material sense and in the way it is imagined to be. Everywhere, it would seem, humans recognize the hidden, the concealed, the invisible, and the possibility of misrecognizing what is in front of one's eyes. It is this feature of existence and experience that yield up the very affinities I have been describing and that renders their strange articulations—as between re-racialization, containerization, and saltwater submersion—so potent. Similarly, the world is not devoid of intentional and unintentional misdirection—including racist assertions of spurious relations between surfaces and interiors, pigmentation and personhood. While taking note of the masked may have grown stale for many and the hubris that characterized certain brands of critique is, decidedly, itself misleading, too sharp a turn to the flat, the shallow, the thin, or the transparent misses much. After all, where would we be if we turned away from what is hidden, what is brought to the surface, and what is submerged on the Miami River, the coasts of South Florida, and other sites where race, policing, and mobility intersect in politically fraught encounters.

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