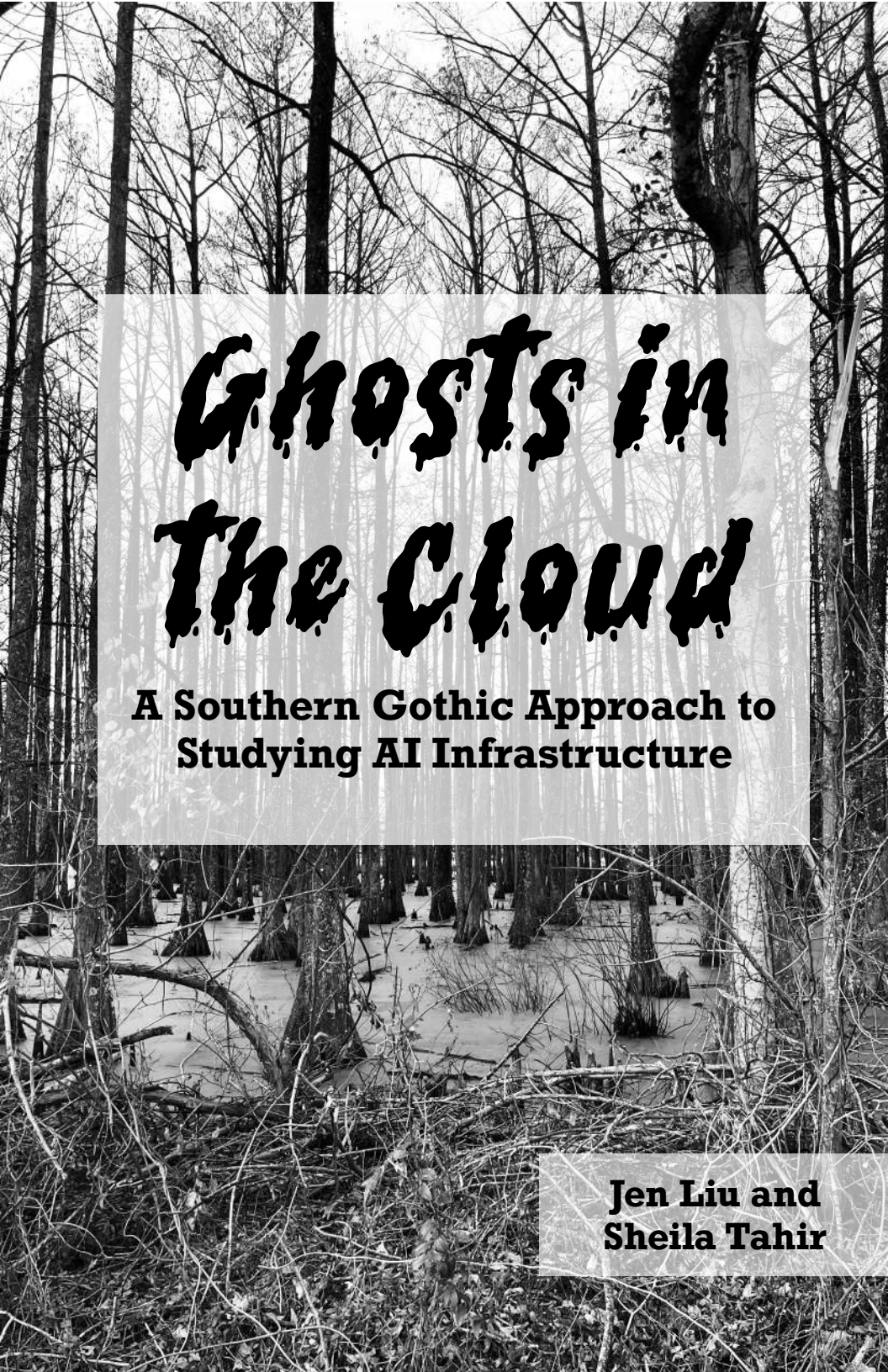




Ghosts in The Cloud

**A Southern Gothic Approach to
Studying AI Infrastructure**

**Jen Liu and
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Part 1: Following the Ghosts

We bring you a story of Big Tech in the Deep South.
How big and how deep you ask?

As big as the clearest of skies as you float down a slow-moving bayou, adrift in a kayak, and as deep as the mouth of the twelve-foot gator sidling up aside you, bellowing with a roar.

Or how about: as big as the oil tankers creeping upriver past levees that might not be able to hold the water back for another storm and as deep as the drills that pierce the earth to extract even more oil from the furthest recesses of the Gulf.

Or let's try this: as big as a tech billionaire's bloated promises and as deep as the past they refuse to acknowledge, sending their foot soldiers to break ground and dig into the dirt for their next misguided profiteering venture. What will they exhume? What ghosts will they startle from their slumber?

In March 2026 we took a weekend roadtrip from New Orleans to visit the construction site of Meta's Hyperion data center in Richland Parish in northeast Louisiana. Construction has been underway following the announcement of the project in December 2024, already drastically transforming the small community of Holly Ridge and its surrounding towns. Several hyperscaler data center projects have since emerged, including a \$12 billion Amazon project in northwest Louisiana near Shreveport and a \$10 billion Hut 8 center in West Feliciana Parish to support Anthropic's operations.

These promises of technological progress are not met without concerns and calls for accountability. Across Louisiana, residents worry that the energy systems built to run these new centers will translate into higher monthly utility bills, even as the aging electrical grids they rely on continue to fail during hurricanes and increasingly frequent extreme weather events. In a place where outages have become ordinary, whose infrastructures are left to deteriorate and decay?

Southern Gothic is an enduring genre that lends itself to the moment. It is more than atmospheric bayous, the glint of the moon, the wind whistling through curtains of Spanish moss. A swinging rope, a fallen magnolia, white hoods crumpled in the back of a closet. The rotting pillars of a once stately plantation, the white of its façade turning red as blood at dusk while the cry of the cicada reaches a crescendo screaming louder than your own heartbeat. The picturesque, mournful landscape hides sinister truths while slipping into fantasies of the glory days that never existed—at least not equally for all. How can we not see the AI data center boom through the weight of the past?





New questions, old answers. Before Big Tech there was Big Oil and before that there was the Big House. Plantations economies extracted wealth on stolen Native lands while trafficking humans for the relentless conversion of life into profit: a color line engraved in human flesh, of blood seeping into soil, fomented through genocide and cultural erasure. Oil and gas industries inherited that landscape and these plantation logics¹, carving petrochemical corridors alongside riverine communities—many of which are historic Black freetowns. Toxic industries that are setting the world on fire while cancer, stillbirths, and respiratory illnesses are outsourced to people whose ancestors survived enslavement.

Each groundbreaking ceremony for each new AI data center in Louisiana breaks into these grounds marked by these histories. Yet each time we are told that this time is different. Think of all the jobs! Think of all the investment! Think of the future! Some things must be sacrificed for that all glorious, nebulous vista: progress.

And still, the plot grew alongside the plantation²; resistance and the vitality of life persists in defiance of the state's abdication of responsibility to its residents, in any reckoning with its past sins and current failures. Black ecologies remind us that landscapes are not just about the brutality that is enacted upon them³. They are also shaped by the people that survive in spite of generations of pain and trauma, creating beauty amidst the horror.

We read AI infrastructure as haunted by these histories that have never been fully reckoned with. How the past persists in the present, how spectacular promises can reek of rot, how prosperity is hoarded, how violence repeatedly returns in a new guise, and how we live to tell the tale. Perhaps this is what the tech bros should call "innovation."

¹ McKittrick, K., 2013. Plantation futures. *small axe*, 17(3), pp.1-15.

² Wynter, S., 1971. Novel and history, plot and plantation. *Savacou*, 5(1), pp.95-102.

³ Roane, J.T. and Hosbey, J., 2019. Mapping black ecologies. *Current research in digital history*, 2(2), p.5.

Part 2: A Warning

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Hi Sheila, this is mommy. Listen, I'm worried about this trip, okay? You need to be really careful because, no matter what you think, you look like an Asian, an Indian, and she looks Chinese, Jen*, and they are very prejudiced over there and I don't want you in trouble, okay? Keep in touch and call me back, I'm going to be worried about you, okay? Love you, be safe. Bye.

”



*For the record, Sheila is Pakistani and Jen is Taiwanese.

Our trip to Richland Parish marks the third year of our annual ritual exploring some obscure corner of Louisiana.

Last year we followed a military veteran into a pine forest in central Louisiana to find the remnants of a WWII Japanese internment camp. On the other side of the forest was the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention center where Mahmoud Khalil was being imprisoned at the time.

The year before we traveled south and snaked up and down the coastal bayous to observe infrastructural reinforcement projects. We watched the sun set from a newly built fishing pier on Island Road leading to Isle de Jean Charles, where the road was repaired only after a messy relocation process for the Indigenous communities living on the land was underway. They are now the first federally recognized climate refugees in the country, yet this is not the first time they've been displaced from their home – and it likely won't be their last.

As we hit the road again, this year's trip marked the first where we received a cautionary voice note from Sheila's mom.

The worry was understandable. At the end of 2025, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security announced "Operation Catahoula Crunch," a targeted ICE raid throughout Louisiana and Mississippi. The situation in rural, northeast Louisiana where we were headed was unknown. In the New Orleans metropolitan region, immigrants, in particular Vietnamese and Central American communities, took precautions to avoid being detained including keeping out of public spaces and temporarily shutting down businesses. Who were we to think we could escape being swept up in this racist dragnet? Were we so confident in our citizenship? Two women of obvious Asian descent, the forever foreign face of the other neither white nor Black. Did we believe we could bypass the indiscriminate eyes of the AI facial recognition apps that ICE agents used to scan who is in and who is out?

At a coffee shop we stopped in New Orleans before embarking, a barista upon hearing our plans joked, "Don't trust anyone wearing Realtree camo up there, they're probably not queer."

The warnings stayed with us. It reminded us that doing research is not just about what is being studied and where, but also about who gets to conduct research unmarked versus whose presence becomes suspect. To undertake this trip was to acknowledge that these conditions shaped not only what we could see, but also how we are seen. Perhaps Sheila's mom wasn't just cautioning us against this trip, but voicing her own worries of being an immigrant in America. Despite living in this country longer than her natal land, her accent and her physiognomy will forever set her apart. Who's allowed to belong? Who's allowed to take a closer look?

Southern Gothic stories sometimes begin with a warning: *that house is haunted, don't linger after dark, those people aren't like us*. Ours did too. To heed the warning is to understand that these fears, rumors, and cautions are not peripheral or distractions, but important ways of knowing and moving through a landscape.



Part 3: Embrace the Spectacle

Less than an hour after departing New Orleans, we encounter a spooky phenomenon. As soon as we cross the Bonnet Carre Spillway on I-10, a dense fog begins to descend. The surrounding bayous are shrouded as the road dissolves. For a moment it seems as if we were hurtling into the ether. Has there been a chemical explosion at one of the many refineries that we saw moments before, glittering on the horizon? Is this another instance of Louisiana's increasingly strange climate, a super fog formed by inextinguishable marsh fires mixed with humidity? Or maybe it's metaphor come alive where we enter the literal computing cloud, where a portal to the data servers has suddenly yawned open at the edge of Lake Pontchartrain and swallowed us whole? Perhaps it depends on your perspective, and in the end it is simply fog.

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Cloud computing, after all, has always been a spectacle⁴. The vision of a cloud distances computing from the material worlds that sustain it. Big Tech has invited us to imagine AI infrastructure as floating abstractly in the skies above, devoid and detached from the ground beneath our feet. Yet the recent boom in hyperscaler data centers has created another kind of spectacle of monumental visibility. Meta's proposed data center has become an icon of technological progress, with a footprint repeatedly compared to the size of Manhattan. Its nickname, "Hyperion," evokes the Titan god and translates to "watcher from above." Perhaps a name too fitting and on the nose for an infrastructure that will potentially extend new regimes of computational control and surveillance.

To embrace the spectacle is neither to be seduced by it nor to dismiss it as hype. It is to take its promises seriously enough to ask what lies just beyond the frame of the image. We set out to drive five hours to see Hyperion for ourselves, to stand before this so-called god in its half-built form. We wanted to bask in its technological sublime⁵ - structures that cover the span of an urban island emerging from the middle of a soybean field. Mundane monuments at best though. Windowless warehouses and endless fences. Their grandeur lies less in these physical buildings than in the abstract futures they promise. Yet as we all know too well throughout the Deep South, a monument is only a monument to some in making claims about what deserves to be remembered.

⁴ Debord, G., 2024. The society of the spectacle. PM Press.

⁵ Nye, D.E., 1996. American technological sublime. MIT Press.



Part 4: Attend to Ruins

As we drove north on Highway 15, we cruised along the curves of the Mississippi River. Along the river, roadside signs advertised plantation tours and restored antebellum mansions. We passed through Natchez, Mississippi, a town perched on bluffs overlooking the river. Once one of the wealthiest cities in the South, Natchez built its fortunes through buying and selling enslaved people. Planters built extravagant houses that were largely spared during the American Civil War. Over the decades, however, many of these estates fell into disrepair as inheritances ran dry and fortunes faded. Beginning in the twentieth century, descendants and historical societies restored many of these homes, often presenting them through the romanticized myth of the Lost Cause and the imagined grandeur of the Old South. Another hour north, in Claiborne County, Mississippi, stand the twenty-three Corinthian columns of what was once one of the state's largest Greek Revival plantation houses. The mansion itself has long since burned down. Even decay, it seems, can become part of the attraction.

The land beneath the Meta data center has similar origins though it followed a different trajectory. In early documents, the project was named "Project Sucre," referring to the French word for sugar, one of the major cash crops for the plantation economy. The region of northeast Louisiana, however, primarily had plantations that grew cotton worked by enslaved people. By the twentieth century, much of that land transitioned to growing soybeans and corn, including Franklin Farms, a 1440 acre plot of land that is now part of the construction site for the data center. Before Meta arrived, the property had already been purchased in anticipation of an automobile manufacturing plant that never materialized.





A short drive away from Holly Ridge is Poverty Point. Long before plantations, highways, and the news of an impending singularity, Indigenous communities constructed monumental earthworks there nearly 3,500 years ago. The site takes its contemporary name from the plantation that occupied the surrounding land less than two hundred years ago, a reminder of how the language through which we know the past bears the imprint of colonialism. Between Poverty Point and Hyperion, it becomes difficult to see where the past ends and the future begins. Instead the landscape becomes a palimpsest where Indigenous engineering, plantation economies, industrial extraction, and AI infrastructure become sedimented one on top of another without fully erasing what came before.

Ruins are not static objects – they are ongoing political process through which some landscapes are repeatedly remade, abandoned, and made available once again⁶. We see this when the agreements surrounding the Meta data center were negotiated largely out of public view, through expedited legislative processes and generous tax incentives. Many residents were unaware of the project's scale, let alone its presence, until construction had already begun. At any moment, Meta could abandon its contract, leaving Louisianans stuck with the bill. A plantation becomes a chemical plant becomes a data center becomes a prison becomes an ICE internment camp becomes...Rather than signaling a departure from Louisiana's past, this development of AI infrastructures enters a familiar realm shaped by cycles of extractions: hauntings that persist in the landscape.

⁶ Stoler, A.L. ed., 2013. Imperial debris: On ruins and ruination. Duke University Press.

Part 5: Wander the Side Roads

Entering the empty playground of Holly Ridge Elementary School didn't feel like trespassing. We peered through a chain-link fence only to look at another fence in the distance. The immense mounds of dirt piled as if by oversized, industrious ants, the construction equipment lying about like a giant's abandoned toys, maps that signaled entryways: lo and behold, the data center. It felt a bit anti-climatic. Even on a Saturday afternoon, construction trucks thundered past, many bearing out-of-state license plates. Their speed kicked up clouds of dust and gravel, causing us to squint and cough while we tried to take closer looks from the perimeter of the data center. During the school week, we had read, children no longer played outside because the traffic made it too dangerous.

The closer we tried to get to the data center, the less there seemed to be to see. So we began wandering the roads around it.

Across an entrance to the data center, located on its eastern edge alongside Highway 183, is the Holly Ridge Food Park. A number of food trucks lined the gravel lot, currently closed for shop and advertising Cajun and Creole classics like boudin, catfish poboys, and jambalaya. There was even a workwear store housed in a trailer advertising boots, gloves, and high-vis clothing. These roadside businesses revealed a different infrastructure - one of temporary, parallel economies that follow boomtowns with workers traveling to build the site and enterprising entrepreneurs following closely behind.



We later stopped for coffee at a small doughnut shop in Rayville a few minutes west of Holly Ridge. We struck up a conversation with the Cambodian family who ran the store. They had lived in Southern California for over a decade before moving to north Louisiana eight years earlier, following family who had settled here previously. Business, they told us, had picked up noticeably since construction began. The wife explained how her husband preferred Louisiana because he could fish and hunt deer, pointing to the mounted antlers decorating the walls. Despite the barista's warning in New Orleans, the only person we met wearing Realtree was an Asian immigrant who had made this corner of Louisiana his home.

Hyperscaler data centers concentrate computation, capital, and political attention into a single site. Yet their influence extends far beyond the layers of fences enclosing them. Like celestial bodies that exert a gravitational pull, data centers reorganize the worlds around them. In finding it impossible to enter Hyperion, we chose to orbit and look beyond the spectacle and allowed our own expectations to become unsettled. In doing so, we found no singular story of technological progress or rural decline. Instead, we encountered the contingent realities through which AI becomes grounded in place: ad hoc economies, immigrant-owned businesses, and schoolyards transformed by construction traffic. The data center may occupy the center of the map, but it is along the side roads that its social, political, and material worlds come into focus.



Part 6: As AI Lays Dying

Perhaps Southern Gothic is a tired trope, and yet. The Louisiana sky is immense: wide and blue, its sunsets tinted with chemical hues, vibrant pinks and reds, a tangerine dream or wistful lavender that is slowly sickening us with invisible pollutants as we grow dizzy from all this beauty. The swamps are primordial, a land before time filled with magnificent beasts and birds, all manner of life. The flowers of spring fierce in their fragrance, a holy trinity of gardenia and jasmine and magnolia. The jasmine climbs high as towers, covering the rusted hulks of cars and abandoned houses. The greenery here is ravenous. Green could eat you alive.

This Southern Gothic is more than aesthetic. It is critical sociopolitical commentary, a lens to view AI infrastructure as monuments built upon landscapes structured through centuries of extraction. Lives and lots shaped along racial lines, over who was property and who owned property, calcified through class divisions and generational wealth. The intersections that muddy such neat demarcations, the mixing of blood lines and the spillage of blood that poured into the land, yielding both profit and death. The cold calculus of the state, ever poised for profit, determining who deserves to live and who deserves the slow death⁷ that comes a myriad of ways: resources poured into tourism while schools shutter throughout the state, utility providers in service to data centers, roads pitted with potholes, whole communities swallowed by oil and water. Instead of asking how much electricity a data center consumes or how many jobs it creates, we ask what histories it inherits, what kinds of futures are being made visible. The cloud is no longer placeless as we pull it down to lay it to rest in the fields.

⁷ Berlant, L., 2007. Slow death (sovereignty, obesity, lateral agency). *Critical inquiry*, 33(4), pp.754-780.

The stories told about AI today are stories of inevitability, scale, and acceleration. The need for speed. Southern Gothic asks us to tell different stories in the form of histories that refuse to stay buried. The question is not whether AI will transform our landscapes. It already is. The question is whether we can imagine infrastructures devoted not only to computation, but to collective life: to flood protection before server farms, reliable electricity before GPU clusters, and climate adaptation before algorithmic acceleration.

One day Hyperion, too, will be a story of the past. Whether it becomes another monument or another ruin depends on which stories we choose to tell: the narratives we choose to uphold or resist.





Jen is a researcher and designer studying the ecological, social, and political dimensions of computing technologies to build alternatives for livable and equitable climate futures. Her work can be found at jenliujenliu.com

Sheila is a born and raised New Orleanian who fiercely loves her beautiful, complicated home of Louisiana. The stories of this place, its people and its myriad cultures, have a hold on her soul. You're sure to find her at a festival or in the streets. Email her at satahir504@gmail.com.

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