

Far away from HOME

More than 12 million enslaved Africans endured the horrific Middle Passage to the Americas. For their descendants, there's power in remembering.

When your ancestral home is well beyond the ocean's horizon – and the horizon was the scene of unspeakable trauma for your ancestors – the ocean swirls with mythic power.

"River rise, carry me back home," says Dr. Tara T. Green, quoting an India Arie song. "There's this whole idea of water being the medium to take us back to a place where we want to be."

The professor of African American and African Diaspora Studies and Linda Carlisle Excellence Professor of Women's and Gender Studies recently published the book "Reimagining the Middle Passage: Black Resistance in Literature, Television, and Song."

For Green, who grew up close to the former slave port of New Orleans, Black resistance and water are inextricably joined. "What does water mean to African descendants?" she asks. "What does death mean? What does home mean? That's what I tease out in the book, because it's clear to me that Black artists try to do that as well."

There's physical death, but also "social death," she explains, when the enslaved accept and internalize their oppressors' viewpoint – that they are less than human.

The enslaved Africans sometimes found opportunities to overtake their captors. More commonly, they resisted by simply finding ways to maintain life. "Survival itself is an act of resistance," Green says.

So is remembering. And telling the story of your memories and of your ancestors' trauma.

Her book explores the works of artists wrestling with that remembering, from Alex Haley's "Roots" to Jesmyn Ward's "Salvage the Bones," from Bessie Smith's "Back Water Blues" to the TV series "Treme."

"No one had to be there to know about there," she observes about the Middle Passage. As storytellers, the slaves' descendants now hold power.

"Singing the blues was most certainly a form of resistance, just as spirituals were, because sometimes those spirituals brought the singer back to a historical and ancestral space," she says. Those musical forms led to rock, to soul, to hip-hop. The resistance continues.

Green was teaching in Arizona when Hurricane Katrina flooded much of New Orleans. An uncle nearly drowned in the flood. She watched on TV as tens of thousands sought higher ground. Many huddled in the Superdome, others in their attics, some punching their way to their roofs if they were lucky. Her book traces connections between the Middle Passage, the 1927 Mississippi River Flood, and Hurricane Katrina.

"I cannot think about – and many of us cannot think about – the flooding and see photos of Black people and not go back to the Middle Passage."

By Mike Harris

Learn more at go.uncg.edu/green

Green is co-editor of the Voices from the African Diaspora Studies series from Mercer University Press. She wrote "Reimagining the Middle Passage" with support from Vanderbilt University's Callie House Center for the Study

of Global Black Culture and Politics. At UNCG, she has taught two courses on the Black Lives Matter movement. She uses historical studies, music, and popular culture as access points into deep material.

