

BETWEEN TWO GULFS

Ecological Politics and Black Geographies in the Work of Regina Agu

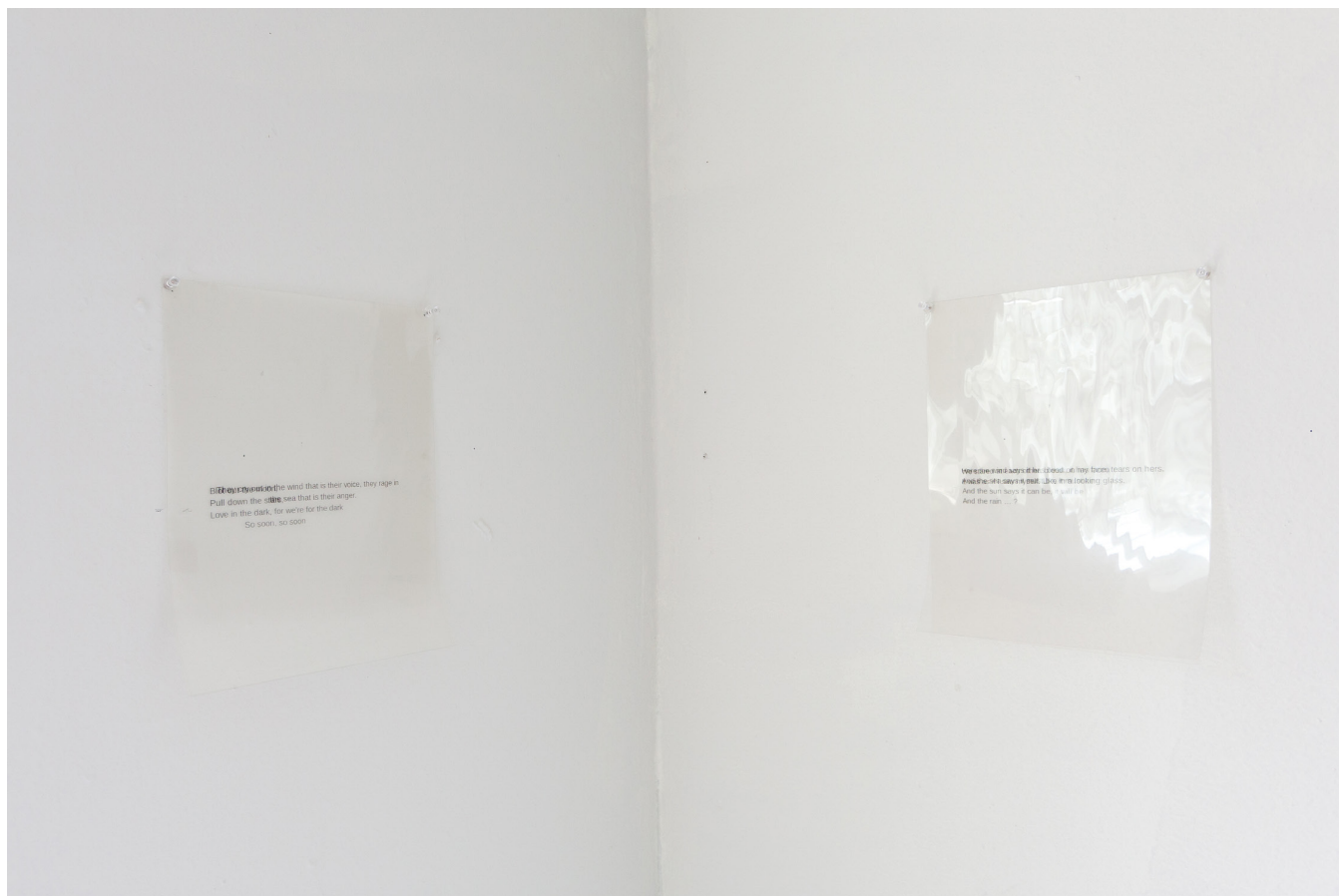
ALLISON YOUNG

IN INSTALLATIONS THAT COMPRISE LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY, FOUND TEXT, AND DRAWING, Texas-based artist Regina Agu examines the complex relationships between landscape and communities of color, as well as the historical and ecological connections between the U.S. South and West Africa. Born in Houston to a Nigerian father and a Louisianian mother, Agu spent her childhood in Texas before relocating to West Africa with her family, where she lived and traveled before returning to the United States in her early twenties. Her artistic practice is attentive to the maritime routes that define not only her biography, but also broader histories that have unfolded across the Black Atlantic, from the Middle Passage and European colonialism to the rise of petrocultures in the U.S. and West Africa. In her most recent bodies of work, the artist addresses the shared impacts of climate change across opposite Atlantic coasts, from America's Gulf of Mexico to Africa's Gulf of Guinea. Using landscape photography as one of her primary mediums, she seeks to produce an eco-critical history and geography of the Black Atlantic.

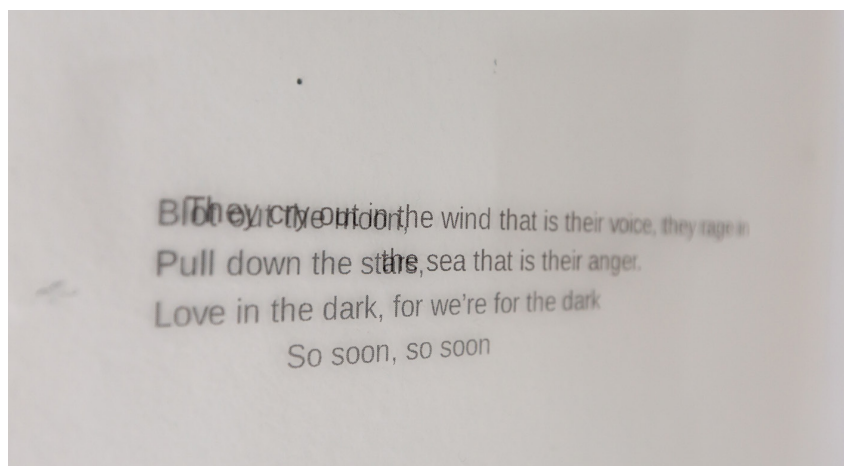
For her breakout exhibition at Houston's Project Row Houses in 2016, Agu created an 80-ft-long continuous photographic panorama printed on billboard vinyl, entitled *Sea Change*. The enlarged photograph wrapped around three walls of an intimate

gallery, which occupies a converted shotgun-style house in the city's Third Ward neighborhood. *Sea Change* documents a vista of artificially-constructed sand dunes along the coastline of Galveston, TX, which in 2014 was inundated by large quantities of red Sargassum algae — a consequence of the steady rise in global sea temperatures in recent years. As mounds of rotting, reddish-brown seaweed piled up along the shore, Galveston city officials declared an environmental crisis, fearing a steep decline in summer tourism. A team of engineers was brought in to come up with a solution — to bulldoze, remove, or somehow hide the algae, by any means necessary — and they later devised an innovative system of artificial dunes that would protect the beaches from future outbreaks while slowing the effects of coastal erosion.

Concurrent to the 2014 “summer of seaweed” in Galveston, extreme levels of Sargassum algae also inundated the shores of Mexico, several Caribbean islands, and the coast of West Africa, regions that rely just as heavily on their tourist economies, but which lack the economic resources to implement similarly large-scale infrastructural solutions. Agu's project sought to draw attention to global disparities that will only intensify as locales either struggle or succeed in responding to the inevitable costs and effects of climate change — from tropical storms to



Regina Agu
Sea Change Text installation
2016
Dimensions various
Installation view at Project
Row Houses, Houston, TX
Photo by Alex Barber
Courtesy of the artist



Regina Agu
Sea Change Text installation
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Installation view at Project Row Houses, Houston, TX
Photo by Alex Barber
Courtesy of the artist

seaweed invasions, as well as salinity, pollution, and erosion. Yet, the artist was also intrigued by the fact that these regions are so deeply connected by shared bodies of water, as they embrace the Atlantic and its adjacent Gulfs and Seas on all sides. Seen from the perspective of a kind of maritime cartography, perhaps, the land masses of otherwise disparate nations come to be united around a shared ecological system, subverting — or supplanting — the primacy of political and economic boundaries according to which we typically define our sense of place. On the other hand, those histories, too, are transoceanic in origin. The rise of imperialism, industrialization, and the modern nation state have everything to do with water. It is no surprise, from this perspective, that Sargassum algae simultaneously arrived in Côte d'Ivoire and Galveston: Both were major ports of the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, now lined with oil wells and refineries.

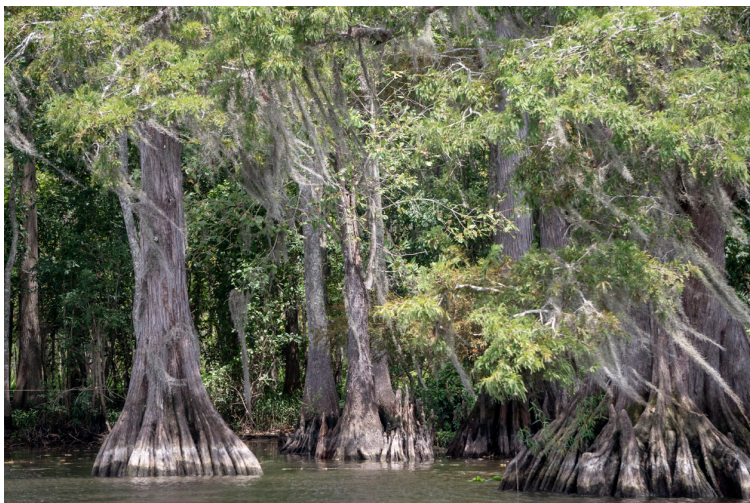
The particular red algae that seemed to wash up on every coast of the Atlantic, all at once, is so named for the Sargasso Sea — a body of water in the center of the ocean that is characterized by a network of huge, free-floating masses of seaweed that line its surface. It also has the distinction of being the only named “Sea” with no continents at its boundaries; instead, the Sargasso’s perimeters are a swirl of ocean currents and gulf streams that circulate in a clock-wise motion, from North America to Europe, to Africa, and then Westward again towards the Caribbean archipelagos. First mentioned in writing by Christopher Columbus, who crossed the Sargasso on his infamous maiden voyage, thus initiating the era of European colonial exploitation across the Americas, the sea later inspired the title of Jean Rhys’ 1966 novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, set in post-Emancipation Jamaica. Rhys describes the titular body of water as a kind of post-colonial aporia, and constructs a narrative that asks how emancipation politics and a shifting economic order impacted white (former) plantation owners. Agu, instead, scoured this text for passages that reflect the inner worlds of women of color portrayed in the book, and in which they describe the natural landscape around them. In a series of text-works that accompany the installation of *Sea Change*, the artist reprints these fragmented sections of dialogue from *Wide Sargasso Sea* on transparent vinyl, overlaying text over text until the words are rendered all but illegible. Partial fragments emerge — “the sea is their anger”... “the wind that is their voice”... “And the rain...?”

In this installation, Agu utilized the format of panoramic photography — a genre affiliated with the visual culture of the industrial revolution, and embedded in colonialist fantasy — in order to position the Texas coastline in relation to parallel flows of empire, natural resources, and human cargo across these waters. Circular, painted panoramas and cycloramas were popular attractions in 18th and 19th century Europe and the United States; these immersive visual spectacles enabled their viewers the illusion of travel, whether to faraway places or historical events. This apparent collapse of distance that characterizes the 19th-century modernity was fittingly described by Okwui Enwezor as “intense proximity” — the

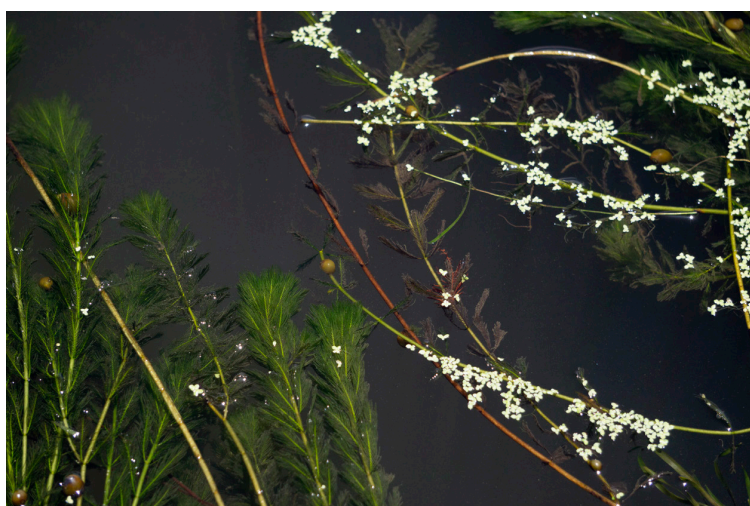
sense of nearness provoked by the invention of photography, the circulation of ethnographic travelogues (and artifacts), the proliferation of World’s Fairs, transcontinental railroads, and various other technologies that promised to transport modern subjects — literally or figuratively — across space and time. Indeed, Agu’s decision to print *Sea Change* on billboard vinyl speaks to another wave of urbanization — the post-war construction of America’s highway system — and its impact on the nation’s landscape. Yet, as roadways became the dominant means of traversing and beholding the vastness of America, the attendant infrastructure of bridges and highway overpasses frequently displaced or de-valued communities of color in cities across the country. Taken as a whole, *Sea Change* speaks to multiple histories of disenfranchisement that have often accompanied narratives of progress, industrialization, and modernity.

Agu also utilized panoramic imagery in a 2016–17 body of work that examined urbanization and overdevelopment in Houston. *Drape Panorama 02*, 2017 is a digital photo print mounted to the edges of a deep wooden frame. It mimics the composition and apparatus of early nineteenth-century “panoramic” photographs, in which individual images, shot along a single horizon line, were laid out side-by-side to create the illusion of a seamless vista. To create this piece, Agu digitally stitched photographs that she took of scaffoldings, tarps, and construction drop-cloths, which have come to define the urban landscape in gentrifying and overdeveloped neighborhoods across the city. Her images are closely cropped and shot from street level, obscuring any real legibility of place, and instead focusing our eye on the materials that wrap and abstract the edifices of high-rises and new luxury apartment buildings. Markedly rhythmic and haptic in nature, the work meditates on the passage of light and shadow across the surfaces of undulating tarps, forging a new aesthetic vocabulary for the representation of contemporary “landscape” in the United States. It is an aesthetic of transience, demolition, and flux.

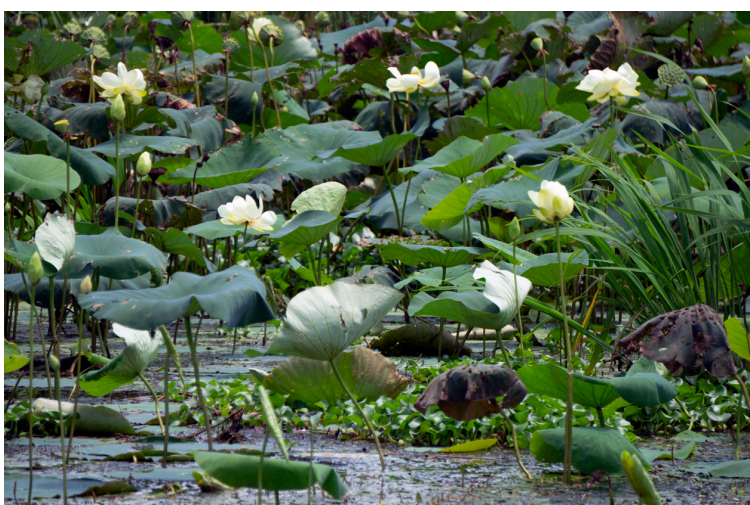
In Agu’s latest project, commissioned for the New Orleans Museum of Art, she deepens her engagement with panoramic imagery while turning to the ecology of Southeastern Louisiana. Entitled *Passage* (2019), the work takes the form of multilayered, photographic panorama printed on a canvas-like fabric, which wraps the museum’s Neo-Classical Great Hall space and features a multifocal documentation of the region’s changing marine ecosystems. Louisiana is a region at the frontlines of the impending climate disaster in America — one need only remember the oft-cited statistic which claims that the state loses a “football field” of marshland every hour — yet the state’s reliance on an oil and petrochemical economy has enabled a culture of obstinance, rather than intervention, in the face of crisis. Agu’s photographs depict the waterways that wind throughout its Southeastern coasts, where river deltas, bayous, lakes, and wetland forests have already been irreparably damaged by subsidence, salinity, and rising sea levels.



Regina Agu
*Documentation of Site Visit to
Lake Maurepas — Cypress Trees*
2019
Digital photograph
Courtesy of the artist



Regina Agu
*Documentation of Site Visit to the
Mississippi River — Floating Marsh*
2019
Digital photograph
Courtesy of the artist



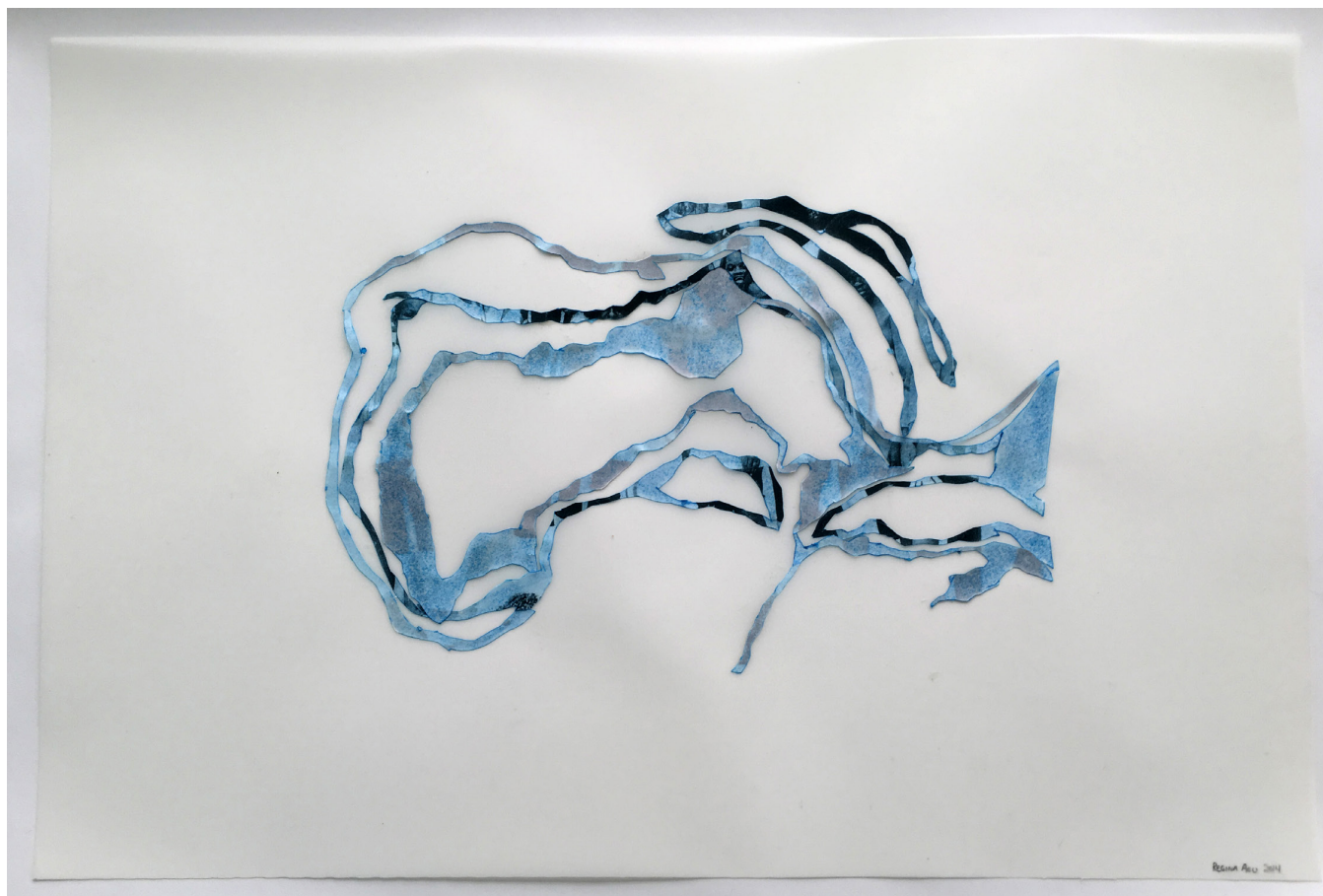
Regina Agu
*Documentation of Site Visit to the Mississippi
River — Floating Marsh*
2019
Digital photograph
Courtesy of the artist



Regina Agu
Drape Panorama, '02
 2017
 Digital photo print, wood
 50 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ "
 Courtesy of the artist



Regina Agu and Hadeel Assali
 Still from *Louisiana Water*
 (working title)
 2019
 Digital video
 Courtesy of the artist



Regina Agu
Gulf Water, '02
 2014
 Laser print, ink, collage on vellum
 15 x 13"
 Courtesy of the artist

This is not Agu's first engagement with Louisiana, to which she can trace her own maternal lineage, as a site of artistic inquiry. In her ongoing experimental short film, *Louisiana Water* (begun in 2013) she collaborated with anthropologist Hadeel Assali, whose Palestinian father also immigrated to Louisiana, to create a poetic reflection on migration, family history, and geopolitical intersections; the piece features small vignettes of performances shot along the Louisiana coastline. In *Gulf Water '02*, Agu renders the meandering flows of water as an abstracted collage into which archival portrait photographs are delicately embedded; blurred faces seem to rise and recede at the surfaces of winding, aquatic shapes. One is reminded of Elizabeth Deloughrey's meditation on Atlantic modernity and the "heavy waters" of transoceanic histories; the writer invokes the words of Gaston Bachelard, who writes that water "remembers the dead."

Passage was commissioned in connection to NOMA's forthcoming exhibition *Inventing Acadia: Painting and Place in Louisiana*; both opened to the public in November of 2019. *Inventing Acadia* tells the story of nineteenth-century landscape painting in Louisiana, positioning the state as a "testing ground" of artistic innovation and global confluence, and featuring the work of itinerant artists who grappled — to fascinating ends — with the region's enigmatic ecology. Charting these artists' portrayal of the region's wetland forests, bayous and swamplands as wild, mysterious or untamable, it also spotlights a historical period in which that very landscape was transformed by an emergent plantation economy and large-scale colonial enterprise. Agu's choice to print her photographic panoramas on canvas, then, speaks to this history and to the long-standing connection of art and ideological assertion.



Regina Agu
Gulf Water, '02 (Detail)
 2014
 Laser print, ink, collage on vellum
 15 x 13"
 Courtesy of the artist

During a residency at A Studio in the Woods, in the autumn of 2019, Agu ventured into the bayous and river tributaries that surround New Orleans. Accompanied by experts in environmental science, she traversed, by airboat, a complex web of serpentine waterways that connect Lakes Pontchartrain and Maurepas, down to the Mississippi River Delta and the river's confluence with the Gulf of Mexico. While these sites are represented by painters in *Inventing Acadia*, the effects of climate change and industrialization have all but erased the landscape one would see in those paintings, which are simply incommensurable with contemporary experience. The photographs reproduced herein represent just a few of the hundreds of images that Agu has overlaid together across the panorama, which present different viewpoints of flooded cypress forests and semiliquid marshes.

Through the lens of Black diaspora narratives, cartographies, and histories, Agu's panoramic installation ultimately seeks to envision the region's shifting landscape through the lens of multiple geographies — as an industrial site, a site for natural resource extraction, and an ecology marked by histories of slavery — that mark the impacts of global modernity at the Gulf Coast.

ENDNOTES

1. This concept was developed by Okwui Enwezor on the occasion of his exhibition of the same name. *Intense Proximity* was the 2012 Paris Triennial, presented at the Palais de Tokyo from April 20 – August 26, 2012. See *Intense Proximity: An Anthology of the Near and Far*, ed. Melanie Beaucamp and Okwui Enwezor (Palais de Tokyo and Artlys, 2012).
2. Elizabeth Deloughry, "Heavy Waters: Waste and Atlantic Modernity," *PMLA* Vol. 125, No. 3 (May 2010): 704. Deloughry cites Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, trans. Edith R. Farrell (Dallas: Pegasus Foundation, 1983).