

Postcolonial Sea Fiction: Salt Water and Marine Knowledges in Fred D’Aguiar, Dionne Brand, and Kiana Davenport

ABSTRACT In this article I will introduce the concept of “postcolonial sea fiction,” first outlining my initial concept of this subgenre of postcolonial literature. In the second part, I will discuss the way in which the Atlantic and Pacific oceans and their connected histories, cultures, and knowledges manifest in postcolonial literature, specifically in the exemplary novels *Feeding the Ghosts* by Fred D’Aguiar (1997), *At the Full and Change of the Moon* by Dionne Brand (1999), and *Shark Dialogues* by Kiana Davenport (1994). The discussion will focus on how oceans and salt water, how being on and in oceans, how merging with salt water and connecting with sea creatures are represented in the texts.

KEYWORDS postcolonial sea fiction, marine cultures, marine knowledges, Fred D’Aguiar, Dionne Brand, Kiana Davenport

Introduction

Oceans are world history, world histories are oceans—these statements are inspired by Derek Walcott’s famous statement “The Sea is History” (see page 81), referring to the enslavement and transatlantic trade of millions of human beings in/from Africa. Better put, world histories happened through oceans as enabler of human movements across the waters. Throughout human history, nothing has changed the make-up of our world as much as travel and movement across seas and oceans. Early human societies realized that river, sea, and ocean travel was faster, cheaper, and safer than overland travel, also allowing much more cargo to be transported (Buschmann 2007, 6). The slow process of transforming rivers, seas, and oceans to connecting highways rather than dividing barriers “gave rise to the ‘Age of Sail’ (1450–1850)”—a

period of rapid expansion and connection enabling increasing globalization, as Rainer Buschmann and Lance Nolde explain (2018, xi). Oceans and seagoing vessels facilitated exploration, warfare, migration, trade, and the spread of knowledge, technologies, and religions, which in turn gave rise to transoceanic empires in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. European empires changed the face of the world through their colonialist, expansionist, and extractive politics. Settling in parts of Africa, Asia and the Middle East, and across the Americas, Europeans fundamentally changed landscapes through deforestation, agriculture, settlement, and resource extraction, subjugated and decimated local populations, impacted their cultures, lives, and religions, and imposed European languages that most often remain national languages to this day. Called the “empire of the sea,” Great Britain, enabled by the Royal Navy, would become the largest and most potent empire in the world. The colonization of the Americas and other parts of the world, enslavement of African people, and overseas migration involved the travel of humans, animals, plants, diseases, knowledges, and belief systems that fundamentally remade the Old Worlds (Africa, Asia, and Europe) and the so-called New Worlds (North and South America) (Cumo 2018, 207). In light of the recent turn towards the so-called blue humanities, the study of oceans within and connected between the various disciplines in the humanities, this article will look at literatures that contextualize histories, cultures, lives, and knowledges connected to oceans, coastal areas, and rivers.

In this article I will introduce the concept of “postcolonial sea fiction,” first outlining my initial concept of this subgenre of postcolonial literature. In the second part, I will discuss the way in which the Atlantic and Pacific oceans and their connected histories, cultures, and knowledges manifest in postcolonial literature, specifically in the exemplary novels *Feeding the Ghosts* by Fred D’Aguiar (1997), *At the Full and Change of the Moon* by Dionne Brand (1999), and *Shark Dialogues* by Kiana Davenport (1995). I would like to invite readers to embark on a sea journey with D’Aguiar from African shores to the Caribbean on board the fictionalized *Zong* and witness unspeakable events that metonymically and symbolically stand for the trauma of the Middle Passage; to experience the suffering and struggles in lives marked by ongoing legacies and repercussions of the mass enslavement of African people in Brand’s intergenerational novel; and to travel to Hawaiian islands to gain an understanding of Indigenous lives and marine knowledge, personal tragedy, and intergenerational resistance against settler-colonial oppression and control in Davenport’s long novel. The discussion will focus on how oceans and salt water, how being on and in oceans, how merging with salt water and connecting with sea creatures are represented in the texts.

Postcolonial Sea Fiction

With the concept of “postcolonial sea fiction,” I would like to extend the established genre of sea fiction, maritime fiction, and naval fiction established in British and American literary studies. While a general definition of the subgenre sea fiction does not seem to exist, I will draw on Bernhard Klein’s discussion of sea fiction in his introduction to *Fictions of the Sea: Critical Perspectives on the Ocean in British Literature and Culture* (2002).¹ Aware that he cannot provide an exhaustive outline of the genre, Klein mentions several characteristics of British sea fiction: a “range of imaginative uses of the sea in [...] literature and culture,” “writings which respond to important topics in maritime history” (e.g. the rise and decline of the British Empire), “ideological constructs projected onto the ocean” (e.g. legal conceptions of the sea, the image of the sailor), and “issues relevant to the historical experience of seafaring” (e.g. issues of navigation, orientation, piracy, enslavement, multi-ethnic crews and shipboard communities, masculinity and gender issues) (Klein 2002, 3). He explains that in the literary history of the genre, eighteenth-century accounts presented seafaring as a rather pragmatic practice, while the following Romantic period presented the sea as a space of unspoiled nature, of sea adventures, as a refuge from perceived threats of civilization, and as a reflector for inward journeys and psychological exploration. Contemporary nautical texts, however, again focus on realistic elements of life and work at sea (4). The genre of sea novels as part of sea fiction includes such classic texts as Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Pilot* (1824) and *The Red Rover: A Tale* (1828), Captain Marryat’s *Peter Simple* (1834) and *Mr Midshipman Easy* (1836), Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1837), Herman Melville’s *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846), *Omoo: A Narrative of the Adventures in the South Seas* (1847), *Mardi: A Voyage Thither* (1849), *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (1851), and *Benito Cereno* (1855), R. M. Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island* (1857), Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Jack London’s *The Sea Wolf* (1904), John Steinbeck’s travel journal *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (1951), Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), and many more.

1 While Klein’s edition looks at ocean-related British literature, Gesa Mackenthun analyses canonical and Black American ocean-related literature in *Fictions of the Black Atlantic in American Foundational Literature* (2004). These studies are followed later by such editions as Steve Mentz and Martha Elena Rojas’s *The Sea and Nineteenth-Century Anglophone Literary Culture* (2027) and Jutta Ernst and Brigitte Glaser’s *Shifting Grounds: Cultural Tectonics along the Pacific Rim* (2020).

The genre has almost exclusively constructed seafaring as a male practice and a masculine realm in the spirit of colonial endeavors, British empire building, US-American independence and nationalism, harvesting and exploiting natural resources, and working-class struggles, while often othering the inhabitants of distant shores and paying attention to technical aspects of sailing, whaling, and ships' routines. Interlaced with the myth of the sea as "a symbol of madness, irrational femininity, unruly or romantic anti-civilization" (Klein and Mackenthun 2004, 2), this genre has established the myth of the sea-hardened male that braves the challenges the sea poses and thus conquers and claims the sea, at the same time being tied to it in symbolic marriage. While sea fiction is a genre that has time and again featured non-Western characters more or less as subordinate and other to the white hero, ranging from the domesticated Freitag to the much-respected Daggoo, Tashtego, and Queequeg, it has hardly any room for women other than as betrothed wife left at home or abandoned, as wives waving from shore, or as passengers that need protection and pose a nuisance to a ship's routine. Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun point out that analyses of the role of women and female influences in the male sphere of seafaring began to appear in the late 1990s, and they reiterate Margaret Creighton and Lisa Norling's call for future studies of the sea that would "acknowledge seafaring as the site of multiracial and multicultural interactions" (2004, 4; cf. Creighton and Norling 1996; Grant de Pauw 1982; Cohen 1997; Stark 1998, referred to in Klein and Mackenthun 2004, 11)—a call that Klein and Mackenthun meet in their critical collection *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean* (2004). In due course, the participation of Indigenous and Black seafarers in whaling has been studied (Russell 2012; Shoemaker 2014 and 2015), as has maritime trade along Indian coasts and in the Indian Ocean (Malekandathil [2010] 2015). Likewise, ethnographic studies of marine cultures have emerged that centralize marine and salt water epistemologies, for example in northern Australia and Melanesia (Sharp 2002; Schneider 2012).

However, sea fiction has for the longest time remained a male Western genre that looks at the sea through a male, possessive, and often exploitive, even voyeuristic lens. Exceptions are, for example, Maxwell Philip's *Emmanuel Appadocca; or, Blighted Life: A Tale of the Boucaniers* (1854), George Lamming's *Natives of My Person* (1972), and Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) that symbolically, and also quite literally, take issue with colonialism and enslavement, the violence and horror of subjugation and the Middle Passage, and various forms of resistance. Since then, a number of works by postcolonial and female authors have emerged that not only look at seafaring, but the sea itself, with its historical, materialistic, cultural, and epistemological dimensions, which profoundly extends the genre of sea fiction.

Thus, I propose to read relevant texts by postcolonial and Indigenous authors as “postcolonial sea fiction”²—texts that make up a subgenre of postcolonial literature as, for example, the postcolonial gothic novel or postcolonial petrofiction,³ and that engage with the sea and human connections to the sea from various cultural, gender, and also non-anthropocentric perspectives. These texts are often set in littoral and coastal areas, in river and island environments, where the plot revolves around people and beings whose lives are determined by rivers and the sea. The characters of this fiction make a living through their knowledge of the rivers and sea; their spiritual, religious, and cultural histories, practices, and knowledges are tied to rivers and the sea; and their lives might be determined by ocean and river travel, or harvesting and stewarding river and sea resources. Postcolonial sea fiction looks at colonial histories made possible through ocean travel, including (forced) migration and enslavement, cultural contacts and transformations, and lives conditioned by ongoing migration, settler colonialism and enslavement. In this capacity, postcolonial sea fiction becomes a medium to write and rewrite histories, construct and deconstruct master narratives of histories from anti- and decolonial perspectives, including perspectives from silenced female, non-heteronormative, non-patriarchal, and even non-anthropomorphic

2 I am aware that many Indigenous authors would prefer not to be included under the label ‘postcolonial,’ as settler colonialism has not ended. I do not use ‘postcolonialism’ in a temporal sense, indicating an end of colonialism, but as a theoretical approach that, together with settler colonial studies, lends diverse theoretical concepts and tools to critique colonial history, contemporary settler colonialism, ongoing oppression, control, violence and other repercussions that formerly colonized and Indigenous people face.

I put forward ‘postcolonial sea fiction’ as a concept describing ocean, coastal, and river-related writings that are generated in colonial, neo-colonial, and postcolonial contexts and engage in anti- and decolonial discourses, centering water-related cultures, knowledges and approaches.

3 Postcolonial gothic fiction represents dispossession, removal, enslavement, colonial biopolitics, and related colonial processes and legacies as trauma, haunting, ghostly presences, zombification, and other such phenomena. Examples are Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* (1966), Mayra Montero’s *The Red of his Shadow* [*Del rojo de su sombra*, 1992], and Drew Hayden Taylor’s youth novel *The Night Wanderer: A Native Gothic Novel* (2007). Postcolonial petrofiction, a term introduced by Amitav Ghosh (1992) in a review of *Cities of Salt*, contextualizes the exploitation of oil in colonial and postcolonial territories, ensuing environmental destruction, and the ways in which oil extraction shapes, transforms, and/or destroys lives, cultures, communities, social structures, landscapes, and waters. Examples are Abdul Rahman Munif’s *Cities of Salt* (1984), Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* (2010), and Olumide Popoola’s *When We Speak of Nothing* (2017).

epistememes. Besides the ones discussed here, such novels include, among others, George Lamming's *Natives of My Person* (1972), Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* (1987), Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* (2000), Patricia Grace's *Dogside Story* (2001), Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006), Linda Hogan's *People of the Whale* (2008), Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* (2010), Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010), Padma Venkatraman's *Island's End* (2011), Diane Jacobson's autobiographic text *My Life with the Salmon* (2011), Ellen van Neerven's novella "Water" (2014), Lisa See's *The Island of Sea Women* (2019), and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019). The collection *First Fish, First People: Salmon Tales of the North Pacific Rim* (Roche and McHutchison 1998) also presents tales centering on the salmon and marine epistemologies from Indigenous North American, Japanese, and Siberian cultures. While British and US-American sea fiction very often centers on vessels travelling coastal waters and open oceans, postcolonial sea fiction does not necessarily do so, since it often does not focus on nautical and naval aspects, but rather on marine lives and knowledges tied to rivers and littoral areas. Postcolonial sea fiction, while indeed engaged in the field of ocean-related imagination with its inherent colonial and postcolonial histories, narratives, and images, does not necessarily develop out of or extend, revise, or write back to American and British sea fiction. Postcolonial sea fiction self-confidently develops as a genre in its own right, I argue, independent of American and British sea fiction (I am not saying without regard for, as two novels, for example, integrate intertextual references to *Moby-Dick*), a genre that engages with ocean-related lives, cultures, and travel, marine knowledges, and being in/on/with the ocean.

Postcolonial sea fiction not only puts forth texts tied to rivers and oceans that emphasize non-human, non-Euro-descended, or female cultures and characters; it also asks us to develop new ways of reading that encourage a shift away from land- and continent-oriented and centralized studies of histories, cultures, and literatures that tend to see oceans as ahistorical and timeless and islands as isolated, remote, static, and premature beyond modernity (DeLoughrey 2004, 301-2; cf. Klein and Mackenthun 2004, 4). Archipelago studies, for example, shift the focus towards ocean-centered approaches that dissolve the dichotomies of land/sea and islands/continent (Stratford et al. 2011, 115) and undermine the all-encompassing notion of the mainland as center. Such approaches promote island centers and view oceans and salt water not as dividing but connecting elements. The Tongan scholar Epeli Hau'ofa understands the multitude of Pacific islands, cultures, and environments as a network, not separated but *linked* by the ocean—a "sea of islands" (1994; 2008). In the Caribbean, Édouard Glissant

develops his concept of “archipelagic thinking,” which understands the entire world as an archipelago connected by oceans—an epistemic shift that is a counterpoint to insular thinking and creates space to register the heterogeneities and myriad entanglements and creolization processes in our globalizing world (1997, 194). In this sense, archipelagic thinking concentrates not only on island spaces and their histories but on seas and oceans, foregrounding the entanglements of European, American, Asian, Middle Eastern, and African transoceanic histories. Moreover, archipelagic thinking develops as a method employing ocean-centered approaches, decentralizes and decontinentalizes land-locked approaches, and unsettles established tropes of islands and sea (Stratford et al. 2011, 114). It thus allows and buoys nonlinear trajectories and network structures, relationality, multiplicity, and what Walter Mignolo calls “pluriversalist knowledges” (Mignolo 2007, 453). It furthermore assigns legitimacy to marine-based, local, and Indigenous knowledges, and moreover permits perspectives from above, right at, and below sea surface. Ships and boats, as Greg Dening (2004, 15) and Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2004, 300) suggest, can be seen as floating islands, not disconnected from main lands but connected through the oceans; their travel is redolent with meaning as they connect continents and islands as much as they are, in a sense, platforms of observations (cf. Gilroy 1993, 4 and Stratford et al. 2011, 124) and moving floats that engage with the materiality of oceans.

The notions of a “sea of islands” and archipelagic thinking are taken further by Paul D’Arcy (2006), who outlines the multifaceted, changing, and indeed fluid interconnections between island societies and their interactions with marine environments, while discussing Indigenous Pacific cultural narratives and travel routes as marine epistemology. He proposes a marine-centered methodology that understands marine environments as shaping Pacific lives, cultures, politics, and economics. In the same vein, the Hawaiian scholar Karin Amimoto Ingersoll, in her book on “seascape epistemology,” aims at pulling

indigenous people away from the binary oppositions between the “colonizer” and the “colonized,” to minimize the “otherness” from both sides, and to decenter the conversation toward independent and alternative ways of knowing and producing knowledge that allow for empowerment and self-determination within a modern and multisited world (2016, 3–4).

“Seascape epistemology” is grounded in marine-based knowledges and connects life and physical movement with ontological and epistemological realms; it is an “approach to knowing through a visual, spiritual,

intellectual, and embodied literacy of the ‘*āina* (land) and *kai* (sea)’; it explicitly stresses the nexus between sea and land, “knowing” the ocean, wind, and land as an interconnected system that asks for responsibly “being in” and “moving through it” (6). “Seascape epistemology” integrates empirical experience with marine-based knowledge *and* place, forwards decentered Kānaka (Hawaiian) ethics and politics, and lays the foundation for Kānaka-centered theories (7) with which to approach thinking, writing, and acting in relation to literature, languages, histories, and political, economic, and social issues. Such theories make up a wealth of pluriversal approaches to thinking about the world that together do the critical work of decolonizing knowledge production and knowledge practices.

Dark Times at Sea—*Feeding the Ghosts* by Fred D’Aguiar

“How many books are enough” to remember the inhuman institution of enslavement, asks the Guyanese writer Fred D’Aguiar in an interview (Frías 2002, 419). Likewise, in “The Last Essay About Slavery” he envisions “a last poem, a last play, a last novel, a last song about slavery” that would “kill slavery off” and “somehow disqualify any future need to return to it” (D’Aguiar 1997, 125). But he finds it impossible to do so given ongoing racism and anti-Blackness, squalid poverty, economic inequalities, national and global tensions and wars, which are the results of enslavement and colonial history and which still wreck African homelands and diasporas. Many scholars have accordingly argued that enslavism continues to shape our present societies in various forms of anti-Blackness and social death (e.g. Broeck 2014; Sharpe 2016; Patterson 1982), while the master narratives of enlightenment, rationality, and progress have blotted out this dark chapter in Euro-African-American history. For example, Robin Blackburn explains how enslavement is implicated in Euro-American history and processes of modernity: economic developments, the spread of market relations and wage labor, the rise of nation states, civil society, the press, and the growth of racially exclusive rationality (1997, 4). Also, James Walvin defines the most far-reaching legacies of the slave empire as British prosperity and nineteenth-century racialized thought that still takes hold today (1993, 334) as we, for example, must witness Black deaths at the hands of the US-American police. Sabine Broeck introduces the concept of “enslavism” in order to critique enslavement and the plantation regime not as an isolated historical event cut off from modernity but as an ongoing practice with ongoing legacies such as anti-Blackness and continued white profiting from Black abjection (2014, 114–5). Christina Sharpe,

in her book *In the Wake*, speaks of “the ongoingness of the conditions of capture,” of Black non/being, and of “terror in the varied and various ways that our Black lives are lived under occupation” when she ventures into “understanding how slavery’s continued unfolding is constitutive of the contemporary conditions of spatial, legal, psychic, and material dimensions of Black non/being as well as Black aesthetic and other modes of deformation and interruption” (Sharpe 2016, 20). Specifically, Paul Gilroy, in his seminal book *The Black Atlantic*, has theorized the Black Atlantic—the complex legacies of the slave empire—as the base matrix of Western modernity, imperialism, racial politics, and philosophy that largely goes unacknowledged (cf. Hartman 2007; Low 1999, 115). To him, the shared experience of the horrors of enslavement connects African diasporic cultures around the Atlantic and generates a transnational hybrid African identity and fluid, diverse Black Atlantic communities (Gilroy 1993, 19).

In her essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” Toni Morrison terms enslavement and the Middle Passage as the “ghost in the machine” of American literature and culture (1989, 11). North American foundational traumas are entangled with colonization of the American continent, dispossession of Indigenous people, enslavement, the Middle Passage, ongoing settler colonialism, and enslavism. They are known and familiar at the same time as they are displaced and repressed, and thus deeply incised into North American society and consciousness. The traumas, neurotic responses, deep-seated racism, white nationalism and white supremacism, anti-Blackness and settler-colonial violence resurface time and again (the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Coulton Boushie are only recent examples) and continue to haunt North America. The enslaved killed at sea and on land manifest as Morrison’s “ghost in the machine” that continues to sabotage and produce more hatred and racism, more violence and hostility. Likewise, fears of Indigenous revenge and rebellions of the enslaved, as well as the ghosts of the dispossessed Native people and the enslaved Africans, Jacques Derrida would insist, are symptoms of North America’s hauntology. He argues that specters of the past contained in memories, acquired knowledge, and discourses of a given society haunt the present, that the present does not exist without them, and that in a just society we have to learn to live with these ghosts and assume responsibility for them:

No justice [...] seems possible or thinkable without the principle of *responsibility*, beyond all living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born and who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist,

or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any form of totalitarianism. (Derrida 2006, xviii; emphasis in original)

Writers recreating Derrida's "being-with specters" assume this responsibility, as for example D'Aguiar when he tackles the task of speaking the unspeakable and lending humanity and voice to these ghosts. Diana Brydon thus declares that "Caribbean literature is haunted by ghosts—of slaves who died during the Middle Passage, who killed themselves and others in defiance of the institution of slavery; of Caribs annihilated during the Conquest; of the colonizers tied to the ruins of the places they once ruled" (Brydon 2004, 216). Such ghosts exist also beneath the ocean surface. In his much-quoted long poem "The Schooner *Flight*," the St. Lucian poet Derek Walcott imagines the deep sea and its materiality. After meeting ghost ships and slave ships going from east to west, his lyrical persona Shabine dives into the sea, which is "so choked with the dead" that Black bodies have become melted into the very materiality of the sea:

I saw them corals: brain, fire, sea fans,
dead-men's-fingers, and then, the dead men.
I saw that the powdery sand was their bones
ground white from Senegal to San Salvador. ([1979] 1993, 349)

This idea of African bodies merging into the materiality of the sea haunts the Americas and manifests as a ghostly presence in US-American and Caribbean fiction. Of the roughly 12.5 million Africans transported to the Americas, approximately 1.8 million, more than 14 percent, perished on board due to the devastating and inhuman conditions during the infamous Middle Passage (Eltis and Richardson 2010, 2). It was routine for the slave ships to throw overboard the dead to the sharks ever trailing the ships. One case in history is specifically appalling: Captain Luke Collingwood of the British slaver *Zong*, on its way to Jamaica in 1781, ordered the crew to throw 132 sick Africans including children into the sea over a period of several days in order to ease the water shortage onboard and to claim insurance compensation for the "lost human cargo." In the court case *Gregson vs. Gilbert* and its appeal hearing following this unspeakable crime, plaintiffs, defendants, judges, and abolitionists argued whether or not the Africans were to be considered cargo and if the case was about insurance loss or about multiple murder of human beings (Armstrong 2004, 172–3).

Ships do not always feature in postcolonial sea fiction, and yet my first example *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) features the slave ship as the microcosm of

the enslavement regime, as a totalitarian regime that determines and controls the completeness of the body, the mind, the senses, and the life itself of its involuntary passengers. The text takes up Paul Gilroy's notion of the ship as a chronotope that serves as the Black Atlantic's central organizing symbol; as a "living, microcultural, micro-political system in motion," travelling the spaces between the continents. The ship, to Gilroy, is thus a signifier of the atrocities of the Middle Passage; and it is also an agent and symbol for the transnational circulation of cultural, political, and intellectual ideas and artifacts that thus generate Black Atlantic cultures (Gilroy 1993, 4).

D'Aguiar, in his novel, tackles the task of "speaking the unspeakable," as Morrison would have it, of translating into words and plot the horrific events aboard the ship. Based upon the fact that 132 people were thrown overboard and 131 murdered people were claimed as "loss" (Pedersen 2002, 196), D'Aguiar imagines the rebellious Mintah, who is thrown overboard but rescues herself, climbs back onboard, hides in the storage room, helps to organize an unsuccessful rebellion of the enslaved, and records all events in her notebook that will be produced in the British court case. Her notebook is dismissed as evidence by Chief Justice Mansfield at the insurance hearing, since, as Carl Pedersen suggests, to Europeans she is "illiterate, unthinking 'stock'" (2002, 198).⁴

D'Aguiar's *Zong* is a moving transnational microcosm disconnected from land and civil societies; disconnected from any forms of humanist rationality and empathy; and yet it connects Europe, Africa, North America, and the Caribbean into one Atlantic empire of enslavement. Its extreme adherence to market principles manifests the ship's function as capitalist agent, while reproducing the totalitarian control of the transported bodies, one third of whom are submitted to "cynical mass murder [...] for something as banal as an insurance claim that belies the sensibility of the Age of Enlightenment" (Pedersen 2002, 196). The case painfully shows the contradiction between enlightenment claims to achievements in terms of knowledge, rationality, and, above all, humanity on the one hand, and the ruthless and systematic colonization of non-European lands and the violent submission and enslavement on the other, that the enlightened Europe systematically subjected the local populations to.

D'Aguiar starts his novel with an image echoing Walcott's notion that the sea dissolves, swallows, and incorporates the bodies of killed Africans:

4 There is an inconsistency in the several sources as to the number of people thrown overboard. While historical sources, D'Aguiar, and Pedersen speak of 132 people, Tim Armstrong mentions 134 out of 470 people murdered in this fashion (Armstrong 2004, 172).

The sea is slavery. [...] Sea refuses to grant that body the quiet of a grave in the ground. Instead it rolls that body across its terrain, sends that body down to its depths, its stellar dark, swells the body to bursting point, [...] and gradually breaks fragments from that body with its nibbling dissecting current. Soon all those bodies melt down to bones, then the sea begins to treat the bones like rock, there to be shaped over time or ground to dust. (4)

D'Aguiar underlines his connection to Walcott's notion with the first sentence "The sea is slavery," which harks back to the title and a line in Walcott's poem of 1979 "The Sea is History," from which he adds four lines as an epigram in the front matter of his novel:

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
In that grey vault. The sea. The sea
Has locked them up. The sea is history.
(Walcott quoted in D'Aguiar, n.p.)

To Walcott and D'Aguiar, the history of enslavement and its horrors have inserted themselves into the very substance of the sea so that it becomes its physical and symbolic manifestation. The sea will never be pure again after the history of enslavement; it will always bear that memory in its depths and in its waves lapping the beaches.

D'Aguiar succeeds in writing the unspeakable regime of past enslavement with story, personality, and humanity, and, moreover, he does so from the fictional perspective of the enslaved (Mintah), alternating her voice with other focalizers and an authorial narrative voice. He generates sympathy and even empathy in his readers by describing again and again the act of dumping people into the sea. This is one example of how he re-imagines the incredible horrors:

Fins in the ship's wake dipped out of sight. Blood darkened the trail of the ship and spread wider into the sea. Captain Cunningham added two strokes to his ledger and looked up from it to see another two men in chains struggling with the crew. Another two men hoisted off the deck and over the side. And two more. And two women who screamed and begged and then kicked and started to bite and spit. Then another two who had to be thrown on the deck and bound and gagged then lifted and rushed to the side and flung over. And two children who shrieked and whose eyes were ready to pop from their sockets at what was happening to them. They were not ready for the sea. [...] Another child managed to wriggle from the clutches of the crew and run from them around the top deck until she was

cornered, and as they closed in on her she sat down and buried her eyes in her hands, and screamed, kicking her legs and keeping her hands on her face. She was scooped up by one of the crew, who lifted her high at arm's length to avoid her kicks and flung her into the sea. (99)

D'Aguiar creates such emotionally very challenging passages again and again, the horror being intensified by the literary device of repetitive frequency. In another instance the text reads: "Mintah slumped down on to the floor and clasped her arms around her knees and thought about the little girl she had saved to live another day, only to see more things no child should see, only to end up in the sea. [...] Her last cry poured into the sea. Her small bones adding to the sea of bones" (90). These passages buoy the notion carried through the text that humans enter the sea, become the sea, the texture of which is bones ground to microelements and coral. D'Aguiar creates a polyphony of voices telling and retelling the killings in five parts: 1) through an authorial voice in the prologue; 2) through Mintah and several other focalizers who reflect the events onboard in the first part; 3) through an authorial narrator in the second part who reports the insurance claim court case in 1783; 4) through the personal narrator Mintah in her notebook that makes up the third part; and 5) finally in the epilogue through the group focalizer of drowned Africans.

The events continue to haunt all the main characters: still after many years Mintah cannot go near an ocean and knows that the spirits of the dead roam the sea. She creates 131 wooden sculptures, unsettling shapes "reaching up out of the depths" (208), who are physical memorials for the dissolved dead and homes for their spirits. The sculptures are her symbolic children, children she refused to bear in a regime of enslavement. Captain Cunningham is surrounded by the ghosts of the dead calling his name in court so that he breaks down and cannot give testimony (165). And the cook's assistant Simon, who delivers Mintah's notebook as evidence in court, is haunted by visions of a sea of Black bodies:

Thoughts of the sea, his spoiled sea, brought him more misery. Instead of a gigantic body of breathing salt water, he saw black skin and flesh. The ship's prow parted, not sea, but flesh, cut through it like water, splashed it skywards in fragments like the sea, broke it up in the expectation that it would mend behind, but looking back he saw not sea water mending in a ship's wake but broken bodies ploughed through. (179)

Throughout the novel, the text works with a dichotomous imagery of wood and sea: wood is associated with home and land, life and wholeness,

memories and connectedness, while the sea is associated with horror and death, loss and fragmentation, oblivion and dissolution of ties—an untraceable materiality that swallows and dissolves lives, bodies, connections and memories:

First she [Mintah] wanted to feel soil, mud, stone, rock, clay, sand, loam, pebbles, boulders, grass. Then wood. [...] Wherever she went, earth would be with her because she would have become inseparable from it. Land would figure in her dreams like a lover or a friend or parent. [...] she would be indistinguishable from earth, invisible as anything but rock or stone, mud or sand, and therefore beyond the clutches of an enemy. (115)

Land is home and protection, Mintah grows out of land, becomes land, while salt water kills: “The sea leapt up the sides of the ship to claim them. Losing patience with them for taking so long to deliver themselves up to it. Surrender to its depths. [...] become loose-limbed like water. As boneless” (117). With Mintah as focalizer, the narrator describes life at sea as suspended life, as a life in a liminal state, as a rite of passage between two worlds: “Water promised nothing. A life on water was no life to live, just an in-between life, a suspended life, a life in abeyance, until land presented itself and enabled life to resume” (61). D’Aguiar, who engages with the ocean in connection with the Middle Passage and its horrors, clearly presents salt water as deadly force, not nourishing and giving, only killing and taking. In the epilogue, an unnamed African announces herself as a ghost come to haunt the living: “I am in your community, in a cottage or apartment, or cardboard box, [...]. There is only the fact of the *Zong* and its unending voyage and those deaths that cannot be undone. Where death has begun but remains unfinished because it recurs” (229–30). The *Zong*’s voyage continues, feeding the ghosts of the history of enslavement; it continues as the regime of enslavism and anti-Blackness.

A Child of the Sea—Dionne Brand’s *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999)

With the notion of human bones from enslaved African people ground to sand and transformed into corals, Walcott provides a material symbol for the entangled histories of colonialism and trade in enslaved Africans in the Caribbean, as Anne Collett has pointed out (cf. Collett in this volume, 431–54). On the Atlantic, the persona Shabine meets ghost ships of the British and French Navies on their way to the Caribbean, where they

would be embroiled in conquest of the islands, European battles over the islands and the American revolution; he meets ghost slavers with “flags of all nations,” “our fathers below deck too deep,” making Shabine himself a carrier of Atlantic memory of colonization and the slave trade. During his travel in the Caribbean archipelago he witnesses Caribbean history with “the screams of burning children,” Caribs killed “by millions, some in war, / some by forced labor dying in the mines / looking for silver;” his flesh “raining with sweat” until his ship enters a storm and almost sinks. Shabine imagines himself to be “the drowned sailor [...] corkscrewing to the sea bed of sea worms.” Like Pip in Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (1851), who out of sheer fright jumps from a whale boat and spends a night alone at sea, Shabine parallels the trajectory of African bodies falling from the ship into the sea. But Shabine remembers God and entreats him to “heave Leviathan upward by the winch of His will,” here symbolically merging with the whale. The Black captain drives the ship through the storm, until morning “make[s] these islands fresh” and the poet blesses the Caribbean islands that they might aspire to a new future (Walcott [1979] 1993, 353–60).

In her novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999), Trinidadian-Canadian writer Dionne Brand suggests that such a hopeful futuristic vision of the Caribbean must remain wanting. This work of postcolonial sea fiction is a six-generation epic of an Indigenous and African diaspora haunted by the entangled histories of colonialism and enslavement. With this novel Brand extends her exploration of the slave regime and its aftermath in contemporary societies that she began with the novel *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996) and continued in the memoir *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001). Brand illustrates what Gilroy has theorized as the Black Atlantic and Broeck as enslavism. Her novel sometimes employs realistic and sometimes magic-realist language with various characters as focalizers. The novel begins in 1824 when Marie Ursule, an enslaved woman on a Trinidad cocoa plantation, successfully plots a mass suicide of the enslaved people, which, together with a failed crop, ruins the plantation. She was taught by Carib Native people how to find and prepare the *Woorara* poison that the group cuts into their skin in a ritualistic procedure one early morning. For her heroic resistance against the slave regime she is tortured, mutilated, burned, and hanged like her historic “model” Thisbe, who is described in V.S. Naipaul’s history book on Trinidad *The Loss of Eldorado: A History* (1969) (Naipaul [1969] 2003; cf. Walcott and Sanders 2000, 22; Stolz 2010, 259). Another form of resistance is Marie Ursule’s self-imposed barrenness so that she will not further enrich the slave owner with more humans he can exploit. Her only child, the four-year-old Bola, she has sent away with her father Kamena before the slave resistance. They live in an abandoned

convent in Culebra Bay, where two decaying nuns, Marie Ursule's former masters, keep watch from the doorway, "eroding like dead coral and dusty like an eternity" with barnacles clinging to their skin (Brand 1999, 10, 38). Eroding and tied to their former estate, they still control Bola and Kamena like ghosts of the slave regime. In death the nuns' bones are likened to coral—however without connection to the sea; these bones, as the text suggests, do not transform into the matter of the ocean like that of murdered Africans. Bola grows up on her own as her father Kamena repeatedly leaves the convent and his child to fend for herself. He is obsessed with finding the evasive maroon community *Terre Bouilliant* in the mountains, which he however fails at. With each return he grows thinner, "his heart beatless in his hands and his face so shadowy he stroked it into existence else he would fade" (65). In death he is marooned in the woods, also without connection to the sea.

Bola, however, is a child of the sea—she weeps the sea from her eyes, almost drowning her mother (45–6). She lives off the sea, lives in it, the sea turning into living knowledge: "and she learned [...] how a trumpet fish sings, how seaweed tastes, how to swim like fish" (56). Unlike her mother and father and the numerous enslaved Africans suffering the Middle Passage and the plantation regimes, Bola transforms the sea into her freedom space as the nuns (and the slave regime by extension) "had no control of water" (60). The salt of African sweat and tears, the deathly essence of the salt water oceans that symbolizes pain, loss, and trauma (Brydon 2004, 218), is reappropriated by Bola, who converts the materiality of salt and salt water into a supportive element that carries and penetrates her body and soul. She even transforms into a sea creature, daily swimming to her sacred rock in the bay: "[t]he sea is rising, her dress is like water and her legs like seaweed and the cold does not matter and with only one hand she holds to the rock as the water lashes her [...]. She dips her head into the ocean and becomes seaweed. The sea is always changing and so is the sky. She is never tired of drowning in both" (61). The sea, as Michael Laramee argues, "provides her with a sense of power and agency" (2008, 3).

And Bola knows the whales: "She sensed the whales days before they arrived, because she lived there and had come to know the breathing of the sea. [...] Whale-watcher they called her, because no one could undo her from the sight of whales, [...], no one could swim as fast toward them when they arrived or hear them so long before they surfaced" (Brand 1999, 65). At the rock she blows a conch shell to talk to the whales and to warn them against approaching whale ships. She even blows it long after the whalers have killed and cut up a whale. This is a non-anthropocentric answer to the exploitive (mainly) American whale industry that has considerably

reduced the species; and it is an answer to Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, in which Melville approaches the whale from a scientific and a whaler's perspective and in which the Indigenous, Black, and Māori harpooners are presented as successfully supporting the exploitation of the "natural resource" and animal species.

As a young woman, the sexually independent Bola undoes her mother's self-willed barrenness and bears fourteen children. Motivated by the collective traumas of enslavement that become hers to bear, Bola gives all surviving children away to their different fathers, thus spreading "her children around so that all would never be gathered in the same place to come to the same harm" (198). Her descendants come to live in the Caribbean, North and South America, and Europe, sometimes not knowing who their ancestors are. However, the scheme of spreading her children out to various parts of the world in order to protect them against the aftermath of the slave regime fails: hardly remembering her own mother and cutting her children off from her family line, Bola repeats the loss of origin, genealogy, cultural knowledge, and human attachment that her descendants suffered through the Middle Passage (cf. Moynagh 2008, 59). Since enslaved people were separated from family, from fellow speakers of their language, and from people sharing their culture and knowledge system, once they came to the plantations most enslaved were on their own in the New World, unable to build connections that were linked to their past, their culture, and language. All new connections were built with enslavement as the common denominator, in a new language, in new lands, in a new way of being in the world as a person having lost one's humanity. Bola and her children re-enact such loss of family, names, language, traditions, and knowledge; as well they manifest the simultaneous emergence of a New Black Atlantic diaspora in the rite of passage as Brand has described it in *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001). To her, the Middle Passage is "the fissure between the past and the present [...] that place where our ancestors departed one world for another; [...] [t]he place where all names were forgotten and all beginnings recast. In some desolate sense it was the creation place of Blacks in the New World Diaspora at the same time that it signified the end of traceable beginnings" (Brand 2001, 5). Unwillingly Bola transmits the trauma of enslavement because her lines of descendants do not share her knowledge of the sea, they do not know their genealogy, they do not even know of each other. Many become melancholic subjects marked by lingering pain and violence in colonial and racist worlds, designed by enslavement—"cargoes of human beings without a recognizable landscape" (Brand 1999, 36). As Brand says "everyone here [in Trinidad] was unhappy and haunted in some way [...] with] a wound [...] which somehow erupted

in profound self-disappointment, self-hatred, and disaffection” (Brand quoted in Moynagh 2008, 59).

Similar to Derrida’s hauntology, Nicolas Abraham’s notion of the “phantom,” “a formation of the unconscious that has never been conscious [...] and passes [...] from the parent’s unconscious into the child’s” (Abraham 1994, 173) helps to diagnose this melancholia and self-hatred as transgenerational haunting going back to traumas caused by the slave regime, ongoing exploitation of Black labor, anti-Blackness, and enslavism throughout following generations without them being very much aware of the cause. Bola’s descendants intermingle with Indigenous people and indentured Asians laborers and are dispersed throughout the Caribbean, Latin America, Canada, the US, England, and the Netherlands. They manifest the emergence of a New Black Atlantic diaspora as Brand has described it in *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001) and as Paul Gilroy has theorized in *The Black Atlantic* (1993). They become oil workers, shop owners, nurses, artists, or hustlers, drug dealers, and prostitutes, often with a self-destructive trajectory. Some cross the Caribbean Sea from Venezuela to Trinidad and Jamaica as boat people to find better economic opportunities. They suffer from transgenerational haunting that continues master–slave relations, melancholia, and self-denial in the following generations. For example, Private Sones dreams of equality but is not allowed in combat in World War I because he is Black (Brand 1999, 87). He is dismissed for opposing his superior Colonel de Freitas, who is the son of a cocoa plantation owner and his former white friend. Sones ends up a ghost of a man spending his time under a tamarind tree, his colonized mind having accepted his “low status” as slave descendant: “It was his fault. [...] He deserved it for pushing himself up and thinking he was more than he was” (96). Also other characters have internalized racial color-coding, for example Cordelia Rojas is proud of her Indigenous ancestry simply because it makes her skin color lighter, which she uses to gain social prestige. The violence in times of the slave regime continues in the new sugar and oil industries. Ragoonanan is blinded by a fire in a cane field; Dovett senior is killed by a fire in an oil field; Dovett junior is a union activist in the Venezuelan Shell oil fields and is killed by anti-union henchmen. Modernity’s industrialization transforms the colonial Caribbean islands: old plantations change their structures and cater to growing international trade, oil fields emerge that cause accidents, and environmental pollution in the form of “black soot” covers the surrounding villages. Thus, Brand illustrates the transformation of the plantation regime into a capitalist regime, where Caribbean islands after independence are in the clutches of neocolonial business structures and continue to be exploited.

Furthermore, global urban centers house millions of the Indigenous and Black diaspora, often in dire circumstances. The tightness and closed atmosphere of a former maroon town suffocates Carlyle, who migrates to New York City and turns into a violent drug dealer. He can never get rid of his sense of shame because of his ancestry and the colonized mind that makes him accept anti-Blackness marking his relations with the world: “the waking up in the mornings ashamed, washing his feet and his face and his mouth ashamed, eating whatever little there was with his head bowed, ashamed, and walking up the street [...], ashamed. An enveloping sense of shame wrapped around them all, and there was no cause he could point to for all this shame, and he didn’t understand it” (139). Also other characters struggle with ongoing legacies of the slave regime and a society that does not offer them opportunities for self-development. The union man’s son Adrian Dovett is a drug courier in Curaçao, New York, and Amsterdam and dies from an overdose. His sister Maya, who works as a prostitute in Amsterdam’s red-light district, sits in a shop window to attract sex customers, highlighting the ongoing commodification of Black and other women’s bodies and recalling that enslaved women were sold naked at the auction block, sized up, touched, exploited, and raped by white men. Her condition might be read in the light of Hortense Spillers’ notion of the “captive flesh” that is submitted to procedures of “total objectification” (Spillers 1987, 68).

Another of Bola’s descendants, the estranged Eula, lives in “rubble” parts of Toronto, feels like “debris” herself (Brand 1999, 238) so that she cannot connect to her lover from Ghana and bring up their child. In her “letter” to her dead mother she longs for a genealogical line: “I would like a line I could trace [...] I would like one line full of people who have no reason to forget anything” (246–7), not being aware that the Middle Passage and her ancestor Bola have cut off such a line. She longs for a localized ancestry: a “village and a seashore and a rock out in the ocean” (247), not knowing that her ancestor Bola is just that family matriarch she desires. She sends her baby, whom she unknowingly has named Bola, home to be raised by her mother in Trinidad. Her mother is cut off from her children as well: she knows them to be in England and Canada, but the contact is limited to blue airmail letters. This child Bola, who grows up with her grandmother, whom she takes for her mother, loses her mind when her grandmother dies. She is in fact the only one who reclaims the losses of family lines and connects some of the family line fragments. Being left in her grandmother’s house and growing up on her own like her ancestor Bola, she lives and speaks with the ghosts of Marie Ursule, Bola, and her grandmother (cf. Moynagh 2008, 66). She is the next Bola that has it in her hands to end the fragments of family lines and create future generations connected to their past and family.

The polyphonic structure of the text highlights the heterogenic variety of lives and cultures in the African diasporas; at the same time the chapters present only fragments of the lives of Bola's descendants and are written in a sometimes pointed realistic and sometimes eerie magic-realist language. This way of writing supports the overall notion of hybrid and pluralistic, yet fragmented, alienated, and haunted Black and Indigenous Atlantic communities (Moynagh 2008, 65), which are shown as being transnational, transcultural, multireligious, and multilingual. Brand does not so much create a pathological African diaspora, Maureen Moynagh holds, as a pathological modernity that does not acknowledge its genesis in colonialism and slavery (58), as both Walter Mignolo and Paul Gilroy insist (2009, 39–41; 1993). While the protagonist Bola frees herself from the slave regime through claiming the ocean as her space of autonomy, Brand's novel also illustrates extreme poverty, proxy wars, and the travel on oceans and its facilitation of both colonialism and enslavement and the forming of Black Atlantic diasporas. There is a continuity to a haunted Black Mediterranean in the twenty-first century as well (cf. Di Maio 2012; The Black Mediterranean Collective 2021). Numerous African refugees, driven from their homes because of religious extremism, physical violence, extreme poverty, proxy wars, natural and human catastrophes, which are all related to Euro-American prosperity, continue to drown in the sea year after year. Europe voyeuristically keeps count (cf. Maart in this volume) and does not move an inch from its strict immigration laws and “Fortress Europe” politics. Brand's polyphonic text shows that entangled historical legacies of the ocean—colonialism and enslavement—are repeated in present-day capitalist modernity with its power matrices and economic hierarchies.

Seascape Epistemology—Kiana Davenport's *Shark Dialogues* (1995)

An ontology and epistemology of the ocean—what Karin Amimoto Ingersoll terms seascape epistemology—are a motif that runs through Kiana Davenport's seven-generation family saga *Shark Dialogues*. Ingersoll, in her article in this volume, outlines such epistemology as follows:

Seascape epistemology is an approach to knowing, presumed on a knowledge of the sea which tells one how to move through it, how to approach life and knowing through the movements of the world based on a visual, spiritual, intellectual, and embodied literacy of the seascape. The seascape includes birds, the colors of the clouds, the flows of the currents, fish,

seaweed, the timing of ocean swells, distinct ocean depths, fluctuating tides, and celestial bodies—the stars, moon, planets—all circulating and flowing in rhythms and pulsations. This approach to knowing tells one how to move through the sea, how to approach life and knowing through the movements of the world. (Ingersoll in this volume, 38)

Davenport's spellbinding novel relays the history of Hawaiian Islands through the Pono family dynasty in a history riddled with colonization and US imperialist annexation, economic and touristic exploitation, and the gradual decline of Hawaiian people, cultures, power, and knowledges. It tells of the whaling industry, the development of large sugar, pineapple and coffee plantations and their complex labor history, of alcohol and opium dens, brothels and abject poverty, illegal trade of champagne, jade and gold, of the ruthless leprosy colony, of neo-enslavement of Asian laborers called “coolies” and other Pacific people through Blackbirders (that Pono’s ancestor Mathys has a hand in), and of Japanese attacks and Japanese internment. It reflects on anticolonial resistance and the way Hawaiians, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and *haole* (white) colonists become a creolized Hawaiian community in Édouard Glissant’s terms, and on how the Pono family members carve out a living during the turbulent past 200 years.

Pono is the central family character, her name meaning “balance, harmony, justice in Hawaiian” (Ho’omanawanui 2014, 676). She is still an impressive woman in her eighties, standing six feet tall with her hair “a luxuriant gray shawl billowing round her hips” (Davenport 1995, 23). She is a *kahuna*, can read people’s minds and foresee events, she is loved and feared, having survived poverty, exploitation, and terrible blows of fate. “She was a woman who had dared everything, committed every conceivable act, for the man sitting nearby” (23). Duke Kealoha, her lover of sixty years, was once an impressive man, a surfer and “bronze, Polynesian God” (24), who had contracted *ma’i Pākē* after they just met—a disease that the *haole* people, who brought it to the islands along with syphilis, call Hansen’s disease. The couple flees into the Wai’pio mountains, trying to resist the strict orders of King Kamehameha V to separate and intern the affected at Kalaupapa settlement on Moloka’i. Their life in the mountains is one of ever hiding from officials and bounty hunters and a constant fight for the survival of their bodies and their love. Desperate Pono tries to get infected to circumvent separation, but the bacteria refuse to affect her as she refuses to be shunned by Duke. She consequently bears him four daughters, conceived during her intermittent visits to the Kalaupapa settlement. Such a woman is hard to crush for she grew to be this iron-willed woman by keeping her emotions in check. She is sent off by her

mother twice, who ends her days in lengthy imprisonment, punished for her labor union struggles on sugar plantations. As a worker on a sugar plantation and in a pineapple cannery, Pono's strength grows in response to the dehumanizing and exploitive working conditions, to her engagement in union struggles, and to being repeatedly raped by a brutal Portuguese overseer whom she finally kills. As a token of her strength she uses a cane made from the overseer's spine that reminds everyone around her of her losses and her tenacity. Contained in her is so much love and so much hardness that she is feared by her daughters and granddaughters, who never seem able to live up to her expectations. As she struggles to maintain Polynesian endurance and family lines, she alienates her daughters, who marry Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, and white American men. Although her granddaughters also marry non-Hawaiian men, Pono realizes that she needs to continue her family line and brings her granddaughters home to her Kona coffee farm every summer, where the girls grow very close, yet vie for Pono's love, which none of them seems worthy enough to have. At the age of eighty-four she summons her four granddaughters from various parts of the world in order to connect them to *their* land and sea and finally tell them their family history.

Pono's great grandmother was Kelonikoa, the headstrong daughter of a Tahitian high chief, who refused an arranged marriage with a cousin of Hawaiian King Kamehameha III in the late 1830s, and fled from Honolulu to Maui, where she escaped the whaling town of Lahaina that is full of "men bestial from months at sea" (37) to a remote coastal stretch. Starting to live off the sea, she became

a woman of the sea, and in the sea was solace. [...] Her skin darkened from sun, her hair grew coarse and tangled, she lost the language of humans, hearing only wildlife, the sea's rhythms. She ate raw fish, slept in rock caves [...]. Her clothes disintegrated into little more than tattered rags, so that diving in and out of waves, limbs draped with seaweed, she resembled a creature half human, half fish (37).

On the beach is where she meets Mathys Coenradsten, who having endured hunger and the loss of an eye, is reduced to looking like a wounded, wild dog. Mathys has fled Lahaina in order to escape shame and accusations of cannibalism. Born to a family of poor Dutch colonists in New York State, he faced the death of his bay horse, his last possession, and was hired on a whaler in 1834, not knowing what was in store for him. Being a sensitive young lad, he loved the sea animals. He thought of whales as god-like creatures and not as a resource. He could hardly endure the

sailors' massacre and rape of nursing seals on the shore of Tierra del Fuego during the ship's journey to Pacific waters, at night "trembling violently, his eyes numb rivers, his lips working silently in horror" (30). And yet, this massacre could not prepare him for what he would have to endure on board the whaler—the repeated slaughtering of creatures he thought magnificent and beautiful, as belonging to human clans. He understands their "speech" as a talking "through code-songs sung for fifty million years" (34) and wonders what they are thinking with their large minds. Mathys grows increasingly mad in his whale ship prison. When a whale rams the ship, a nod to Melville's *Moby Dick* that also takes revenge for the ruthless hunt, Mathys ends up in a small boat with the captain and endures sixty-three days adrift at sea with "provisions long gone, [... and is found] jabbering, sun-blind and half insane" (35). When asked what happened to the captain he replies: "Stringy, he was [...]. When they all began to expire, he was the first we *et*" (35; emphasis in original).

Pono's ancestors, a Tahitian princess and Yankee sailor, are linked by their common fate of being prisoners and refugees, fleeing from humanity, needing to survive together, and by their non-invasive love for the sea. They start a family dynasty that is marked by intercultural mixing in turbulent times. They gain and lose wealth and status, braving poverty, labor struggles, blows of fate, and above all, the racism and interference from outside society. Kelonikoa releases the placenta of all her children into the sea beyond the reef where the ancestors live, "their *mana* flowing into the newborn child so it would be fearless and strong" (54); she offers her finger to the sea to spare her daughter leprosy; and she swims out to sea to join her ancestors in death. Mathys loves whales and "would spend his life mourning the ones he had slaughtered, remembering the songs of the humpback, wondering at the mind of the sperm" (39). What has helped to maintain the family economically and symbolically through the years is a pouch of seven black "legendary, priceless South Seas pearls" (42) that Kelonikoa brought to the islands as her dowry. One after the other is very carefully placed at critical moments into the hands of helpers, or sold for capital to start a family business. Hence, the ancestors of Pono's clan come from the sea with sea knowledge either through cultural upbringing or through connection by choice, and their economic and symbolic base inheres from the sea as well.

Pono is a creature of the sea, salt water her element:

She learned to float for hours, calmly accepting all matter of sea life swirling around her. Clicking dolphins, barracuda like swimming stilettos, silver blizzards of sprats. One day a twenty-foot oarfish wrapped itself round

her, thick red Samurai fringe down its spine jangling like tambourines. It slowly tightened its embrace, opened its great jaws round her head, then looked into her eyes. Something registered. Some common wisdom forever known. (100)

Pono often eats glowing seaweed and its hallucinatory effect transforms her into a shark; she dashes and plunges about in the ocean for hours, “released from gravity. [...] Huge sharks suddenly bladed along beside her, playful, amorously nudging her” (101). The sharks, her family gods, are always revered. Even in old age, she swims with them, “a gentle, sand-papery seduction. [...] There would be times for dialogues, watery eons of shark-dreaming, her *‘aumākuā* time” (171). During the Pearl Harbor attack, Pono makes her daughters swim out into the sea beyond the reef and dive, which eventually protects them from the Japanese planes and guns that razed all humans in the coastal area of Honolulu. She teaches her granddaughters marine knowledge, “ocean ways” that will make them worthy clan members: “How eating certain seaweeds let them swim for hours without tiring. How to outsmart riptides by giving in. What shellfish were poisonous, and how to ride giant manta ray and dolphin. How to roll up in a ball when facing shark, follow them to sleeping coves, and float beside them” (189).

But Pono also teaches them “how women could do anything, and do it completely” (190). It is no surprise that after Pono the family becomes one in which men play only minor roles (cf. 187). Each of the four granddaughters, in her own way, controls her own life as Pono did, initially depending on men but outgrowing dependencies: Rachel is the concubine of a Japanese Yakuza, who makes his wealth through illegal trade, drugs, and prostitution in Asia. After his complete body tattoos suffocate him and he gets killed, Rachel travels to Thailand and spends his wealth on the very people he exploited, with aid programs and scholarships for boys and girls; she even relocates some of them to Hawai‘i. The teacher Ming, ravaged by lupus that slowly kills her, self-consciously continues using opiates to ease her pain after her lover Toru has discontinued the use of drugs. She goes down that path alone, fighting her “wolf” with the “dragon,” her body finally being eaten by both. Vanya, a lawyer, has to overcome the deep pain she is left with when her son Hernando drowns, swimming from his arrival boat to the shore of his protest camp against bomb-testing on Kaho‘olawe. Something had pulled him down, which Vanya is convinced was the Navy’s doing, since the US government was trying to crush the movement. This character is a literary memorial for George Jarrett Helm and Kimo Mitchell, two Native Hawaiians who died participating in the

political resistance against bomb testing on Kaho‘olawe and who were declared “‘lost at sea,’ their bodies never recovered” (Ho‘omanawanui 2014, 681). Vanya supports the Hawaiian sovereignty movement, first with her legal expertise, and later in radical ways after protests and legal means do not seem to achieve more freedom for Hawaiians nor control of their lands and livelihoods. Finally, there is the veterinarian Jess, who is left by her racist white husband and daughter because of her family and skin color. Her mother dies alone in a religious retreat in Algeria and her father slowly dies from radiation poisoning after being exposed as a soldier to radiation on battleships and bomb-testing sites.

Through Pono and her family members, readers learn how the precious islands slowly changed hands from Hawaiians to colonizing outsiders. Readers learn of the land division reform that King Kamehameha III was forced to comply with, which started the gradual sell out of Hawaiian lands and which reduced Hawaiians to live at the margins of a US-American-dominated territory and state. Readers also learn about the overthrow of Queen Lili‘uokalani in 1894, of the slow deterioration of the Hawaiian population through epidemics and social degradation, and about the corrosion of Hawaiian cultures, languages, and knowledge practices. Readers are also informed of the stinky pestilence, as the novel has it, of Honolulu that grows too fast, of the growth of huge *haole* (white) plantations as the quality of Hawaiian life decreased (Davenport 1995, 51); they learn about the extreme exploitive working conditions on the plantations for Hawaiian and Asian laborers, of the brutal crushing of labor movements, and of the slowly growing resistance against US settler colonialism.

This resistance is targeted against geothermal power plants releasing sulfur dioxide, space ports, stationing and testing of nuclear weapons, and building of ever more extensive hotel resorts, cruise ship ports, and wider highways. All these pollute the people, lands, coral gardens, and fish populations, devastate fragile ecosystems, destroy villages and ancestral lands, encroach more and more upon the local populations, and make room for more outsiders, slowly impoverishing and annihilating local populations, cultures, languages, and knowledges (Davenport 1995, 225, 317).⁵

Hawaiians, as the text illustrates, are increasingly reduced to what Mark Rifkin, leaning on Giorgio Agamben’s *homo sacer*, has called “bare life” and “bare habitanace.” Rifkin argues that the production of national space (e.g.

5 See discussions of the novel’s criticism of gradual dispossession of Native Hawaiians and ecological imperialism by Toyosato (2000) and Indriyanto (2019), as well as of exoticization and exploitation of Hawaiian Islands and people through tourism by Ingersoll in this volume, 40, Trask (1991), and Carrigan (2009).

of the USA) depends on defining Indigenous people and their dispossessed lands as an exception reduced to “bare life” and deprived of any rights, in the sense of being reduced to “bare life” like inmates of a concentration camp (Rifkin 2009). Indigenous people, also Hawaiians in that logic, live in a continuous state of exception: subject to the power of the state to be killed or let live and controlled in terms of their political and natural life. Shona Jackson corroborates the notion of the Indigenous as the *homo sacer* with the caveat that Indigenous people were never assigned the subjectivity and meaningful life equated with *bios*, but occupied a liminal position within the emerging settler-colonial logic and state. She says: “Indigenous peoples inhabit the role of a recapitulated (in the biological sense) *homo sacer*, so placed by the market in [a] necropolitical sense [...] hence their status as a necessarily underdeveloped, internal South” (Jackson 2023, 149).

Rifkin connects the settler states’ biopolitics that regulate Indigenous peoples, for example assimilation, education, administration, representation, definition of identity, surveillance, and disciplinary regimes, with the states’ historical and contemporary geopolitics, for example dispossession, displacement, herding people into defined zones like reservations and ghettos; he defines them as entangled conditions and practices.⁶ He says: “I am suggesting, then, that the biopolitical project of defining the proper ‘body’ of the people is subtended by the geopolitical project of defining the territoriality of the nation, displacing competing claims by older/other political formations as what we might call *bare habitance*” (Rifkin 2009, 94; emphasis in original). Similar to Black people being exposed to death in the afterlife of enslavement, Patrick Wolfe argues Indigenous people are exposed to death existing in the colonial settler states (Wolfe 2006).

Vanya perceives the Hawaiians’ lives as “bare life” and “bare habitance,” and becomes more radical in her protest. After her political activism involves bombing minor facilities of a geothermal plant and a hotel resort, and the murder of an FBI officer, she and her lover Simon are on the run. As Pono and Duke did years before them, they hide in the Wai‘pio mountains being protected and fed by the locals. They slowly absorb the land that feeds them, gradually becoming the earth: “Their odors were less human. They had begun to absorb the fragrance of flowers, vegetation, humid smell of soil” (460). As a mixed couple and symbol of the Hawaiian resistance movement they become the hybrid future of Hawai‘i as Duke has foretold: “You’re hybrids, all of you. You’re what the future is” (371).

6 For an extensive discussion of Indigenous lands transformed into deterritorialized Indigenous lands and produced as territorialized settler space cf. Knopf 2023, 251–9.

In the end it is Jess, the most *haole* of all, who will move home to the Big Island from New York City to take over the coffee farm, and will step into Pono's footsteps. After Pono and Duke paddle out to sea to die and be with their shark ancestors, Jess by and by becomes the family hub, acquires Pono's gift of dreaming the future, starts looking and carrying herself like Pono, who has inducted in her granddaughters the reverence and respect for the land that nourishes: "The land doesn't belong to us, you see. We belong to the land" (337). As Jess learns to love the land and coffee farm and connects herself to it through her own sweat, she likewise claims the ocean as her element as Kelonikoa and Pono did. As a young girl she encounters an octopus, which she "remembered [as] something childlike, human, in the desperation of those slender arms wrapping round her so tightly, as if asking for protection. Black eyes blinking steadily at her, Jess stared back, seeing such intelligence and intuition" (372–3). When she mourns her mother's death and swims like a maniac for hours on end, the sea "became like an amniotic fluid that kept her alive" (296). Pono, realizing Jess' deep ties to the sea, instructs her to drink seawater: "you must spend more time in the sea. Eating from it, drinking from it. [...] Seawater is the best tonic, best cleanser. Three tall glasses every day. Once it is running in your veins, you will never drown, for you will have lost the fear of drowning. You will *become* the sea" (372; emphasis in original). Moonwalking into the sea at the end of the novel, Jess starts swimming again:

She stroked for hours. [...] She swam like a racer, arms spinning in her sockets, swam like a starving creature for whom the sea was food. *Just like my mother, and tūtū. A race of swimmers, ocean in our genes.* [...] After that, no one could keep her from the ocean. It took her in again, purging, strengthening. She sat on beaches eating seaweed, dragged home prawns and mussels for cleaning. (457; emphasis in original)

Jess will nurture the family's inheritance that is both land and sea; she and the future clan will be nurtured by what land and sea grow—as it has always been for the Pono clan.


Conclusion

The discussion of the three texts has highlighted different ways that the ocean and salt water may figure in postcolonial literature. In Fred D'Aguiar's text, the sea is the Black Atlantic in Gilroy's sense—it is the element that carries the slave ships and swallows human beings who are

deported across the sea against their will as dehumanized and objectified cargo. Even to the humanized, enslaved characters in this novel, the sea is a space of violence, horror, and trauma, in diametric opposition to the nourishing land and wood that give and hold life, memories, genealogies, and knowledges. Dionne Brand's novel rather merges sea and land as sustaining elements for the people surviving enslavement history. Especially to Bola, the sea, her bay, and rock become a place where the nuns as representatives of the slave-holding regime cannot control her, for the sea protects her as she protects her sea and "her" whales. Furthermore, the sea is also the space for the passage of her descendants, to arrive in lands where they carve out their independent lives, but who are yet marked by the transgenerational traumas and enslavement that the ocean has facilitated. Kiana Davenport's novel, to a greater degree than the first two, brings Indigenous (Hawaiian) marine knowledge to the reader and seeks an understanding of the land and sea in their reciprocal connection and of human beings' complex relationships to them. This text shares with us what Amimoto Ingersoll terms seascape epistemology (Ingersoll 2016). The text not only imparts marine knowledge but transmits a sense of what being in the ocean means for the characters, here physically swimming for hours and building relationships with sea creatures, for example with an octopus, oarfish, and sharks, who are the clan's ancestors. Likewise, the novel creates a strong sense of how the sea needs to be ingested, sea water swallowed, sea plants and creatures eaten, which strengthens human beings and their physical connection to salt water.

The three novels engage with the sea in different ways; as examples of postcolonial sea fiction they represent histories of dispossession and enslavement, of colonial geo- and biopolitics from an anti- and decolonial perspective and present narratives that resist established historical master narratives. The novels contextualize various ways of connection to the ocean, of practices of living with the oceans, and of marine knowledges, while focusing specifically on female perspectives. These texts, wonderful examples of postcolonial sea fiction, offer postcolonial and Indigenous ways of seeing, understanding, feeling, and being in salt water.

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