

# POSTCOLONIAL OCEANS

Contradictions, Heterogeneities,  
Knowledges, Materialities

*// Edited by*  
**Sukla Chatterjee, Joanna Chojnicka,  
Anna-Katharina Hornidge and Kerstin Knopf**

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**ANGLOPHONE POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES 1****Series Editors**

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The contribution “Oceans: The Space of Future Thinking” by Bill Ashcroft has been retracted because the author has taken over text passages from his own works and from works of other authors without indicating this.

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# Table of Contents

Kerstin Knopf, Sukla Chatterjee, Joanna Chojnicka, and Anna-Katharina Hornidge	
Introduction—Postcolonial Oceans: Contradictions, Heterogeneities, Knowledges, Materialities	1
 <b>Oceans and Knowledges</b>	
Rapti Siriwardane-de Zoysa	
Interview with Robbie Shilliam and Nicholas Faraclas	23
Karin Amimoto Ingersoll	
Seascape Epistemology: An Embodied Knowledge	37
Nicholas Faraclas and Carlos Rodríguez Iglesias	
Subaltern Currents and Transgressive Waves: Transoceanic Agents and “Creole Languages”	53
Kerstin Knopf	
Postcolonial Sea Fiction: Salt Water and Marine Knowledges in Fred D’Aguiar, Dionne Brand, and Kiana Davenport	71
 <b>Oceans and Islands</b>	
<i>Retracted:</i>	
Bill Ashcroft	
Oceans: The Space of Future Thinking	107
Stefanie Mueller	
Sketches of Salt Water Poetry: Herman Melville’s “The Encantadas, or The Enchanted Isles”	123
Sebastian Jablonski	
A Different Kind of Hybridity— An Early British Depiction of Pitcairn Islanders	139

## Oceans and Ports

Varsha Patel

- Earlier Sailing Boats Moved (*Pehla Vahano Halta*):  
Memories, Princely Ports and Routes of Sailing Boats along  
the Bhavnagar Coast, Gujarat, Western Indian Ocean ..... 161

Ulrike Schmieder

- The Remembrance of Enslavement in the  
Atlantic Ocean Space in Postcolonial Port Towns:  
Barcelona and Cadiz, Havana and Matanzas ..... 189

Lilli Hasche and Janne Jensen

- The Colonial Making of Bremen's Peri-Urban Port Area ..... 219

## Oceans and Identity

Gigi Adair

- Archipelago-izing or Re-continentalizing Africa:  
Oceanic Paradigms in Two Recent West African Novels ..... 239

Frank Schulze-Engler

- From British Lake to Afrasian Sea:  
Recalibrations of the Indian Ocean in  
Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea* ..... 257

Arnab Kumar Sinha

- Mapping the Relationship between the Sea and the Humans:  
The Symbolic Sea in Mallika Krishnamurthy's *Six Yards of Silk* ..... 269

Iris-Aya Laemmerhirt

- “How Much of Me Is My Own?”:  
Imagining the Ocean in Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* ..... 285

Stephen Henighan

- Transcontinental Waters:  
The Anti-postcolonial Tide in Angolan Fiction and Film ..... 305

## Oceans and Responsibility

Rozena Maart

Meditations on the Sea and its African Subjects ..... 329

Sukla Chatterjee

“Water is Another Country”:

Waterscapes and the Refugee Crisis ..... 367

Marlena Tronicke

“Keep the secrets of the past buried”:

*Taboo's Salt Water Hauntings* ..... 397

Oluseun Adekunmi Tanimomo

Waterscapes of Waste and Wealth:

Environmental Pollution in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* ..... 415

Anne Collett

Building on the Strata of the Dead:

The Culture of Coral Reef Ecologies ..... 431

About the Authors ..... 455



Kerstin Knopf , Sukla Chatterjee , Joanna Chojnicka ,  
and Anna-Katharina Hornidge 

## Introduction—Postcolonial Oceans: Contradictions, Heterogeneities, Knowledges, Materialities

Postcolonial studies have a vested interest in oceans, their embodied and discursive, social and political, historical and ecological dimensions. They foreground histories of colonization, imperial wars, the dispossession of territories, enslavement of people, and circulation of goods and ideas, in their entanglements with contemporary postcolonial societies, substantially shaping decolonial knowledge production, postcolonial literatures, and academic discourses until today. In an interview on the third space, Homi Bhabha has pinpointed the inherent contradiction in the genesis of Western modernity: the progressive development of Western societies, individuals, and thought traditions according to ideas and values that were monumentalized as the “Enlightenment” on the one hand, and the history of the West as despotic power pursuing various forms of colonial aggression and dispossession on the other (Bhabha and Rutherford 1990). Walter Mignolo (2009) and Paul Gilroy (1993) have likewise defined histories of colonization and enslavement as Western modernity’s well-concealed darker side. Mignolo holds: “‘modernity’ is a European narrative that hides its darker side, ‘coloniality’. Coloniality, in other words, is constitutive of modernity—there is no modernity without coloniality” (39). To him, modernity was possible through: 1) capitalism; 2) scientific development that gave Europeans absolute control over the environment; and 3) the racial ranking of human beings and the expendability of human lives (i.e. enslaved humans) (41). Paul Gilroy stresses that enslavement is irreducibly entangled with modern capitalism, plantation slavery being “capitalism with its clothes off” (1993, 15). He has theorized the Black Atlantic—the complex legacies of the empire of enslavement—as the base matrix of

Western modernity, imperialism, racial politics, and philosophy. To him, the shared experience of the horrors of enslavement connects African diasporic cultures around the Atlantic and generates fluid and diverse Black Atlantic communities beyond national and ethnic boundaries (19).

These dark shadows of coloniality and enslavement, veiled colonial histories and legacies, cover up how colonization and displacement of Indigenous inhabitants worldwide, the colossal long-term extraction of natural resources from such areas, and the enormous and most inhuman enslavement of local inhabitants and of African people then transported to the Americas have not only devastated local populations. They have killed and accepted the death of large parts of these populations, considerably changed social, gender, political, and economic structures of said populations, realigned established territorial borders, and transformed whole landscapes through deforestation, agriculture, resource extraction, industrialization, and urbanization. The dark shadows also conceal how these entangled processes have likewise generated gigantic profits for mostly European colonizing nations, colonial agents, and business corporations that, reinvested in long-term perpetuating capitalist cycles since the beginning of economic colonialism, have produced the gigantic profits and hence all-encompassing wealth for such nations (cf. Hickel 2018). These profits and wealth yield immense economic power that is, in turn, continually invested to dominate political and economic realities and power relations in the world, which cause political and economic (and ecological) deterioration of weaker economies that happen to be, in most cases, former colonized nations and territories.<sup>1</sup> In his recent book *The Great Imperial Hangover*, Samir Puri astutely outlines how colonial empires and their politics have long-lasting legacies that “have helped to construct national identities [...] geopolitical realities and mentalities that prove hard to escape” and that still shape “the twenty-first century in profound ways through their abiding influences on present generations,” among others in terms of “matters of security, foreign policy, international aid and global commerce” (2020, 1-2).<sup>2</sup>

Oceans and rivers sailed have enabled the exploration of unknown territories, the spread of colonial empires, the trade in and transport of natural resources, goods, animals, human beings, diseases, ideas, and

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1 See, for example, the documentary films *Life and Debt* (dir. Stephanie Black, USA, 2001), *Hühnerwahnsinn* (dir. Joachim Vollenschier, Germany, 2009), and *Dead Donkeys Fear no Hyenas [Das grüne Gold]* (dir. Joakim Demmer, Sweden, Germany, Finland, 2016).

2 See, for example, Paul Gilroy outlining the implication of descendants of former enslaved people in the US in contemporary capitalist structures and ideologies in Gilroy 2010, 4–54.

knowledges. The study of the history of seas and oceans—particularly important for postcolonial perspectives is the study of the sea as a medium serving colonial exploration, settlement, enslavement, travel, resistance, extraction of resources, trade, and distribution of goods and ideas—is well established (see, for example, Buschmann 2007; Buschmann and Nolde 2018; Gilroy 1993; Hartman 2007; Klein and Mackenthun 2004; Linebaugh and Rediker 2000; Malekandathil [2010] 2015; Sharpe 2016; Weaver 2011 and 2014; Jowitt, Lambert, and Mentz 2020). Local maritime histories and cross-ocean relations in historical and contemporary perspectives were objectives of pioneering scholarly work and generated key terms that are still very much influential in the study of oceans and seas, for example “Maritime India” (Malekandathil [2010] 2015), the “Black Atlantic” (Gilroy 1993), the “Red Atlantic” (Weaver 2014), and the “Black Pacific” (Shilliam 2015). Also local and Indigenous involvements in extractional endeavours such as whaling have become a small but vibrant niche in ocean history (see Shoemaker 2014 and 2015; Russell 2012). Working against an all-encompassing Eurocentric notion of the sea as a male space are studies that look at female travel, female experience, female agency, and female governance at sea (see Creighton and Nordling 1996; Druett 1998; Grant de Pauw 1982; Gissi, Portman, and Hornidge 2018; Shellock et al. 2022; Stark 1998).

Oceans and river deltas serve as objects in the ever-increasing mass tourism industry, and were and are penetrated for exploitation of marine natural resources beside the canonical whale, such as sea cucumbers, pearls, fish, seafood, seals, and deep-sea minerals. Increasing plastic, faecal, toxic, and other wastes have polluted the deep and vast spaces of oceans (and rivers) to such an extent that this pollution is now one major aspect in our impending global environmental catastrophe. Oceans and marine spaces thus became an explicit category of study in environmental history and environmental studies (see Bolster 2006 and 2012; De Bont 2009; Gillis 2004, 2011, and 2012; Gillis and Torma 2015; Hoehler 2002; Hornidge and Antweiler 2012; Kehrt and Torma 2014). And they are an established field of study in geography (see Steinberg 2001; Peters 2014 and 2015) and maritime anthropology (see Astuti 1995; Helmreich 2011 and 2014; Schneider 2012). Likewise, studies of oceans and coasts have generated a wealth of understanding of the ecosystem processes and social-ecological system interactions to be found (see, for example, Helmreich 2009; Mack 2011; and Steinberg 2001) as well as of urban coastal dynamics (Siriwardane-de Zoysa, Low, Abdullah, Hornidge 2023). Furthermore, increasing attempts from the sociology of knowledge, social and cultural anthropology, geography, and social studies of science and technology,

very often from postcolonial critical perspectives, offer a growing insight into the cognitive, structurally determined, discursive, and power-laden processes of making sense of these ecosystems. Coastal areas, lakes, and rivers have always been inhabited environments, providing shelter, nourishment, lifeways, and relations that have generated marine cultures and knowledges (see Ingersoll 2016; D'Arcy 2006; Schneider 2012; Sharp 2002; Siriwardane and Hornidge 2016). Exceptional navigational expertise of Polynesian sailors past and present that sustained such marine cultures and their oceanic networks and that were not seldom employed to facilitate colonial endeavours brought forth diverse academic studies (see Druett 2011; Eckstein and Schwarz 2019; LaFeir 2014; Lewis [1972] 1994; Teriierooiterai 2013), while Indigenous cartographic knowledge around the world has received due academic attention as well (e.g. Woodward and Lewis 1998). Work on marine knowledges, their production, and organization enables reflection processes on human-ocean interactions (see, for example, Hornidge 2018; Gissi, Portman, and Hornidge 2018, Partelow, Hadjimichael, Hornidge 2023).

Such studies of the relations between colonial and postcolonial societies and practices, oceans and lands, oceans and humans, rejecting and/or complementing one-sided terrestrial perspectives, are nevertheless only gradually emerging. Rupert Emerson, for instance, roughly fifty years ago defined colonialism as “imposition of white rule on alien peoples inhabiting lands separated by salt water” (1969, 3), understanding salt water—in line with widespread Western ideas of seas and oceans—as separating lands, cultures, people, and ideas. In contrast, Gísli Pálsson argued twenty years later that different and isolated worlds were connected by colonial sea voyages into a “global but polarized network of power-relations” (1991, xvii). Epeli Hau'ofa (1994; 2008), introducing Indigenous Pacific epistemological perspectives and pioneering Pacifica-centred ocean studies, understands diverse Pacific islands, cultures, and environments as a network, not separated but linked by the ocean—a “sea of islands.” This notion allows a shift away from a land-based view of Pacific islands as small isolated entities towards an ocean-based, more encompassing view of oceans and islands as interrelated entities, “the conglomerations of islands with their economies and cultures” (1993, 6–7, 9; cf. Ingersoll 2016, 15). This notion is further taken up by Paul D'Arcy, who outlines the multifaceted and changing, indeed fluid, interconnections among island societies and interactions between them and their marine environments (2006). Parallelling and extending this idea, Édouard Glissant's “archipelagic thinking” suggests a perspective on the entire world as a connected archipelago, an epistemic shift that is a counterpoint to insular thinking

and allows registering the heterogeneities and myriad entanglements and creolization processes in our globalizing world (1997, 194; cf. Glissant 2008). In Hau'ofa's and Glissant's wake, Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2004) and others have pioneered what is now established as "archipelagic studies," focusing on island spaces and their histories and representations as well as on transoceanic spaces, histories, and representations. Such archipelagic approach is based on an ocean-centred perspective that decentralizes and decontinentalizes land-locked approaches, and unsettles established tropes of islands and sea (Stratford et al. 2011, 114; see Knopf in this volume). In due course, archipelagic American, Caribbean, and Pacific studies developed (see Cathcart 2021; Ernst and Glaser 2020; Stephens and Martínez-San Miguel 2020; Roberts and Stephens 2017; Roberts 2021), including historical, cultural, literary, and filmic perspectives, as well as studies solely focusing on islands in global history, geography, culture, and literature (see Shell 2014).

Kimberly Peters and Philip Steinberg stress the mobilities paradigm in ocean studies, and argue that oceans' dynamic force, fluidity, and complexity call for "wet ontologies," approaches that "not merely [...] endorse the perspective of a world of flows, connections, liquidities, and becomings, but also [...] propose a means by which the sea's material and phenomenological distinctiveness can facilitate the reimagining and re-enlivening of a world ever on the move" (Steinberg and Peters 2015, 248). The nature/culture divide tended to implicate water as associated with the domain of nature, "open to control and colonization by the other" (Strathern 1980, 181). In the construed nature/culture divide, Stefan Helmreich argues, "[w]ater oscillates between natural and cultural substance, its putative materiality masking the fact that its fluidity is a rhetorical effect of how we think about 'nature' and 'culture' in the first place" (Helmreich 2011, 132). Water thus appears as natural form and "uncontainable flux," moving "faster than culture," as opposed to "culture often imagined in a land-based idiom grounded in the culture concept's origins in European practices and theories of agriculture and cultivation" (132); or it is perceived as materiality (nature) to be channelled by culture as opposed to being a medium of pleasure, sustenance, travel and disaster (culture) (132). In the more recent perspective of naturecultures research, social, cultural, and natural sciences collaborate in establishing the oceans and seas as a new epistemological and ontological subject of relational enquiry and care (see Helmreich 2011, 2014; Gesing et. al 2019; Collett in this volume). Critical maritime history grappled with the opposition between a fully historicized land vs. a supposedly atemporal, "ahistorical" sea that is "outside and beyond history" and began researching oceans as polymorphous

and transnational contact zones (Klein and Mackenthun 2004, 2). Indigenous “seascape epistemologies,” such as in Hawai‘i, are often approaches explicitly stressing the nexus between sea and land, and knowing the ocean, wind, and land as interconnected system (Ingersoll 2016, 6). Karin Amimoto Ingersoll explains that “seascape epistemology” is not a knowledge of the sea, but “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 a visual, spiritual, intellectual, and embodied literacy of the ‘āina (land) and kai (sea)” (5–6). Also Indigenous epistemologies on the North American Pacific coast and further inland, for example the Syilx Okanagan, understand nature, culture, sea, and land as one non-hierarchical system interconnected by networks, relations, flows, and mobilities (see Armstrong 2009; Knopf 2015).

Colonial exploration, colonization, and (forced) migration via oceans have created cultural, linguistic, and epistemic contact zones where transcultural processes, contact language varieties or “mixed languages” (Mazzoli and Sippola 2021), and pluriversal knowledges and narratives emerged, however implicated in a hierarchical power matrix (see Pratt 1991; Warnke, Stolz, and Schmidt-Brücken 2016). The imposition of colonizers’ languages constituted a vital component of the imperial project, with many Indigenous languages—and knowledges encoded in them (Ngũgĩ 1981)—becoming endangered or extinct as a result. Following that, the relatively recent field of postcolonial language studies is concerned with asking how historical relationships of power, domination, and practices of imperialism and colonialism are reflected in and can be studied through language use (see Makoni and Pennycook 2007). Postcolonial language studies are also concerned with documenting emergent and changing postcolonial languages and dialects (Bakker 2020; Perez and Sippola 2021), challenging dominant traditions of linguistic knowledge, linguistic methods, and their application to postcolonial situations (e.g. Levisen and Jogie 2015), and critically reflecting on the dominant ideas and ideologies in linguistics and/or society (e.g. Schmidt-Brücken, Schuster, and Wienberg 2016).

The sea prominently features in colonial literatures as both facilitating sea voyages and sustaining colonial imaginaries and myth-making (take, for example, such novels as Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* [1719], Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* [1726], James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Pilot* [1824] and *The Red Rover: A Tale* [1828], Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* [1837], Herman Melville’s *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* [1846] and *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* [1851], R. M. Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island* [1857], and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* [1899], which

were analysed in studies of British, Black Atlantic, and Anglophone sea fiction [Klein 2002; Mackenthun 2004; Mentz and Rojas 2017]). Melissa Gniadek looks at how oceans, seafaring, and cultural contacts through ocean travel feature in nineteenth-century women's writing, texts that do not necessarily focus on oceans and were written by women who have not experienced seafaring themselves (Gniadek 2021). In postcolonial literatures, oceans and seas often appear as lethal force enabling colonization, enslavement, and exploitation of marine resources in, for example, texts by Dionne Brand (2001), Fred D'Aguiar (1998), George Lamming (1972), and Kim Scott (2010); they might appear as a life-giving force, sometimes as a destructive force, and as life itself, into which humans and other beings are equally integrated, in, for example, novels by Patricia Grace (2001), Linda Hogan (2008), Witi Ihimaera ([1987] 2009), Eden Robinson (2000), Amitav Ghosh (2005), Lisa See (2019), and again Dionne Brand (2001) and Kim Scott (2010); or they might be represented as a devastated life force struggling with humanity's wastes and pollutants as, for example, in novels by Alexis Wright (2006) and Helon Habila (2010) (see Knopf in this volume).

And yet, oceans and seas have prompted a wealth of visualizations, be it paintings, photographs, documentary films, and feature films. While early imagery cast the sea as an overpowering and often lethal natural force (e.g. in paintings of wild seas with distressed vessels in their centre) or presented most terrifying sea monsters, whales and octopi among them, later imaginaries of the twentieth century went in opposing directions, for example with the seminal underwater documentaries by Jacques Cousteau, and sensational feature films demonizing sharks or the ocean depths. These days our children look for Marlins and Nemos in aquariums, having grown up with Disney's underwater imagery, while underwater photography of colourful coral and fish still draws scientists and scuba divers into the ocean depths, and underwater footage of sleeping whales, swarms of jellyfish, and deep-sea bioluminescent organisms (some of it computer-generated and/or in the realm of fantasy) impresses viewers in the latest ZDF co-produced TV-series *The Swarm* (2023). Such all-encompassing richness of ocean images and imaginaries has sparked academic studies of such, for example Crylen 2015, Dixon 2013, and Elias 2019.

Contradictory and heterogeneous views and ideas of the ocean are commonplace, while knowledge production on and with oceans and salt water appear to be a small but burgeoning field of multidisciplinary scholarship within the humanities, which lately has emerged as "blue humanities." "The emergence of the blue humanities," as coined by Steve Mentz, "is a belated recognition of the close relationship between modern western culture and the sea," writes John Gillis (Gillis 2013, web). The scholarly

works discussed in this introduction, looking at oceans, seas, and river deltas from the perspectives of history, colonial and postcolonial studies, sociology of knowledge and epistemological studies, cultural and social studies, anthropology, geography, environmental studies, language, literature, and media studies, indeed, could be seen as setting the stage for, or as the pioneers of, blue humanities. Recent works in this field self-consciously employ interdisciplinary approaches and the “blue” denominator, such as the special edition by Alexandra Campbell and Michael Paye *World Literature and the Blue Humanities*, which engages with recent notions and writings of and on oceans (Campbell and Paye 2020) and Steve Mentz’s book just hot off the press *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities* (2023). In his monograph *Blue Ecocriticism and the Oceanic Imperative* (2021) Sidney I. Dobrin writes an ecocritical account of our oceans that interweaves historical and scientific information, and touches upon visualization and media representation of oceans in documentary film, cartoons, comics, literature, music—all in connection with understanding the ocean and with issues of pollution, fishing, and other resource extraction. Also Melody Jue insists on pluri- and interdisciplinarity as the basis for blue humanities in her book *Wild Blue Media*:

the ocean figures as a vital confluence of overlapping theoretical approaches that deal with global climate change, indigenous cultural histories of seafaring and navigation, shipping routes and global capitalism, the alterity of marine organisms, the Middle Passage, technologies of ocean mapping and remote sensing, marine resource extraction, maritime literatures and more. Such topics usually require expertise from more than one field—for example, geography and history, literature and media—giving rise to a number of interstitial scholars who loosely identify under the umbrella of ocean humanities. (Jue 2020, 16)

And yet, Jue argues that she is not out to study the ocean as an object from a diverse field of disciplines or perspectives, but rather wishes to extend terrestrial-based media studies to include perspectives on media and mediation from within the ocean, thinking media—in her words “interface, inscription, and database” (28)—through the ocean, this echoing the methodological concept of Ingersoll’s seascape epistemology. She applies “milieu-specific analysis” to understanding media and mediation as depending on “the conditions of perception” (21) and thinks about what pressure does to the mediality and mediation of the ocean, about non-inscriptive media of liquid ink clouds, and about how the ocean can function as a fluid storage system, albeit in completely different ways than established fixed storage systems.

We want to extend the study of oceans, seas, coastal waters, and rivers within blue humanities and engage in producing, extending, circulating, and interweaving knowledge about salt water, salt water epistemologies, and salt water narratives from pluriversal epistemological, geographical, cultural, and disciplinary perspectives. Exploring the manifold heterogeneities and contradictions in this conundrum of entanglements between oceans, coastal areas, rivers, humans, animals, plants, organisms, landscapes, knowledges, ideas, literature, film, and media throughout human history in our present and possibly future, specifically from theoretical and critical postcolonial perspectives, is the objective of this volume. We do not intend to study contradictions, heterogeneities, and epistemes as theoretical concepts as such but acknowledge that histories, stories, narratives, ideas, and images of oceans, seas, coastal waters and rivers and related protocols, politics, and negotiations are seldom straight forward, uncontested, linear, and clear. Thus we wish to focus on the manifold relations and pluriversal knowledges as well as contradictory and heterogeneous notions, narratives, understandings, and images with respect to oceans in an extended sense. Most of the articles contained in this volume go back to presentations at the conference “Postcolonial Oceans: Contradictions and Heterogeneities in the Episteme of Salt Water” conducted at the University of Bremen, May 30–June 2, 2019, on behalf of the Association for Anglophone Postcolonial Studies (GAPS) and the International Association for Colonial and Postcolonial Language Studies (IACPL).

The first part of this volume, “Oceans and Knowledges,” takes up issues of marine epistemologies and knowledges, discussing how oceans have figured in the colonial and postcolonial constructions of our understanding of the world, languages, and cultures. It opens with an interview given to Rapti Siriwardane-de Zoysa by two of our conference keynote speakers, Robbie Shilliam and Nicholas Faraclas. Shilliam and Faraclas discuss their own perspectives on the conference and its main themes, introducing and commenting on many of the conversations that the entire volume contributes to, for example Indigenous knowledges and sovereignty, death-seeking Western/Eurocentric science, or thinking about oceans as connecting and relating communities that share the experience of colonization and resistance. In the second chapter, another keynote speaker, Karin Amimoto Ingersoll, presents the concept of seascape epistemology as an embodied way of knowing ourselves and our being-in-the-world inspired by the currents and waves of oceans, experienced through the practice of surfing. She shows how seascape epistemology, thinking through ocean-related concepts, perspectives, and practices, can be a potent methodology of opening up our politics, economies, and imaginations to reaffirm and

recreate plural and progressive conceptions of knowing and being. Next, Nicholas Faraclas and Carlos Rodríguez take a radical creole anti-exceptionalist stance to offer a critique of such linguistic categories as “pidgin,” “creole,” and “language” itself. Challenging the prioritization of the influence of European languages, they propose a multi-directional account of language contact as dynamic entanglement and cross-cultural connectedness that de-emphasizes European involvement and celebrates the agency of all people involved in the colonial-era contact in the Atlantic and Pacific regions. The part closes with Kerstin Knopf’s discussion of postcolonial sea fiction, outlining this new subgenre of postcolonial literature. She analyses how three novels by Fred D’Aguiar (*Feeding the Ghosts*), Dionne Brand (*At the Full and Change of the Moon*) and Kiana Davenport (*Shark Dialogues*) conceptualize the human relationship with salt water, paying attention to practices and legacies of colonization and enslavement, people’s engagement with the ocean and ocean creatures as well as marine knowledge formed through closely being with and in the ocean.

The three chapters included in the part “Oceans and Islands” take us on a journey across literary history to show how islands have been conceptualized as in-between, “both-and” spaces. Our keynote speaker Bill Ashcroft considers islands as located between the “Old” and the “New” Worlds, offering the scope for transformation from imperial expansion to postcolonial utopian futures. He focuses on two regions in particular, Oceania and the Caribbean, which most aptly demonstrate the capacity for oceanic and archipelagic thinking about the future. Ashcroft uses the writings of Epeli Hau’ofa, Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite, Antonio Benítez-Rojo, and others, to show the utopian hope and imagination which lies at the core of postcolonial resistance. Stefanie Mueller discusses one of Herman Melville’s lesser known works, namely “The Encantadas, or The Enchanted Isles.” In this set of ten literary sketches about the Galapagos archipelago, Melville makes use of the genre’s affordances to establish narrative authority, challenging the narratives of naturalists of his time. Expertly navigating between these literary and naturalist knowledges, as Mueller argues, the author presents a vision of the Galapagos that is both remote and accessible to his readers. Last but not least, Sebastian Jablonski discusses the literary depiction of Pitcairn Islanders in John Shillibeer’s (1817) *Narrative of the Briton’s Voyage to Pitcairn’s Island*, which presents them as a mythical “both-and,” Anglo-Tahitian community. Jablonski applies the critical postcolonial lens to discuss the portrayal of the Islanders’ English proficiency, Anglican religious piety, exemplary morality, and loyalty to the British Empire, arguing that it constitutes an act of epistemic violence.

The part “Oceans and Ports” examines the role played by port towns in global maritime history from anti-Eurocentric, postcolonial perspectives. Varsha Patel draws on archival work, local folklore, memories, and material remnants to piece together the story of sailing routes and trade networks along the Bhavnagar Coast in Gujarat, West India. The region of the Gulf of Cambay with the former princely state of Bhavnagar exemplifies the inadequacy of imperial record keeping and Eurocentric grand historical narratives in describing the small-scale, regional, and coastal trading networks that form an important component of the Indian Ocean history. Ulrike Schmieder interrogates the silence of museums and monuments in the port towns of Barcelona and Cadiz (Spain) and Havana and Matanzas (Cuba) on the subjects of human trafficking, enslavement, and anticolonial resistance of the enslaved populations. She shows how these elements of the history of seafaring nations are completely or partly ignored, marginalized, or treated in ways that suppress any reference to racism as the legacy of enslavement in the memorial cityscapes of these ports. She then discusses the need and ways to decolonize maritime history. In the final chapter of this part, Lilli Hasche and Janne Jensen take us on a tour of the docklands of Bremen—the city that hosted our conference—to discover its involvement in the making of colonialism. By discussing the construction of what has now become Bremen’s hip modern district of Überseestadt, they show how studying local infrastructures of colonial port cities can help us better understand the colonial project as a global phenomenon, and interrogate the trajectories of asymmetrical power relations that still exist today.

The part “Oceans and Identity” contains five contributions that chart the influences of maritime spaces on peoples, their identities, and cultures, especially in the context of diaspora. Gigi Adair’s article explores Black diasporic history and culture through two exemplary literary pieces, namely Awake Emezi’s *Freshwater* (2018) and *The Sacred River* (2014) by Syl Cheney-Coker, in the light of the concepts of archipelagic thought and re-continentalization, following Édouard Glissant. It simultaneously interrogates the ways of reading and thinking continental paradigms. Rethinking and recalibration is also at the heart of Frank Schulze-Engler’s piece, which analyses the seminal East African novel *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor to explore Africa’s role in a multipolar world replete with complexities of cultures, memories, and relations. Without the ever-dominating presence of the West, how is the so-called “Global South” entangled in the struggle for power and hegemony? And how are the dominant/dominated, West/rest polarities dismantled in the novel? These are some of the key issues that the article explores. Memories and

relations in connection to the sea is a dialogue that is carried further in Arnab Sinha's article. His analysis of a lesser-known novel, *Six Yards of Silk* (2011) by Mallika Krishnamurthy, focuses on Indian immigrants settled in New Zealand. The characters are studied against the backdrop of forces that often define lives in general and diasporic lives in particular, namely alienation and bonding, death and intimacy. While living in the diaspora contains its own tug of war of forces defining peoples' lives and identities, the journey before such life also has its fair share of turbulences. Ocean and ocean journeys are associated with dislocation and relocation, anxieties and hopes in immigrants undertaking the journey. Iris-Aya Laemmerhirt's article is an exploration of the ocean's contribution to formation of identities in Vietnamese refugees as is manifested in Thi Bui's novel *The Best We Could Do* (2017). It connects refugee experiences with the larger history of Vietnam, keeping migratory sea voyages in focus. This part ends with the theme of resistance, which forms the core of ideas that shatter, rethink, and rebuild established paradigms and epistemologies that tend to confine and dominate. Stephen Henighen's article explores Angolan history and culture and its resistance to Anglophone postcolonial interpretations through the study of the Creole class. Here the ocean and the coastal regions channelled the emergence of the neo-Creole national imaginary that rendered the role of colonial power secondary. The formation and consolidation of creole identity is explored through three Angolan works, namely the novels of Pepetela and Ondjaki titled *A Gloriosa Família* (1997) and *Avó Dezanove e o Secreto do Soviético* (2008) respectively, and Maria João Ganga's film *Na Cidade Vazia* (2004).

Discussion on ocean spaces remain incomplete without exploring them as sites of disjunctive violence against humans and nature and without investigating political, historical, and environmental responsibility. The final part on "Oceans and Responsibility" includes contributions that expose the vulnerability of human lives and their inextricable attachment to oceans. Rozena Maart's article analyses Europe and the West's perverse interest and gaze on Black bodies as they arrive on European shores, dangling between stages of being alive and dead. Maart analyses newspaper reports from prominent Western media houses that reflect Western society's racist phobia of African bodies, and simultaneously situates such enquiry in the larger context of Black consciousness and Pan-Africanist critique. Sukla Chatterjee continues the discussion on the legitimacy of refugee bodies and their ordeals in the sea through her article that focuses on the precarity of maritime spaces, as experienced by refugees during sea migration. Focusing on the plight of African refugees on their journey to Europe and the Rohingya refugees, her article explores

the impact of the encounter between humans and seas and the state of extreme vulnerability in which refugees find themselves on rickety boats as they embark on what may as well be their final voyage. The article focuses on different themes of as-told-to refugee narratives through Melissa Fleming's book on the experiences of the Syrian refugee Doaa Al Zamel, *A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea* (2017), the Rohingya refugee Habiburrahman's experience as narrated to Sophie Ansel, titled *First, They Erased Our Name* (2019), and the Afghan refugee Gulwali Passarlay's autobiographical narrative documented by Nadene Ghouri, titled *The Lightless Sky* (2015), to study the fearsome maritime spaces through the affects embedded in such narratives. Marlena Tronicke's article continues the conversation through the analysis of the BBC television crime drama and historical fiction series *Taboo*, which reminds us that salt water is a signifier of colonial power and death. While various aspects of Victorian England are up for discussion, one needs to be reminded that this was the era during which Britain's imperial and enslaving agenda gained great momentum. Enslavement has not been the only aspect to add to the lethality of the sea, but the salt water, historically, has continued to be the grave of people and their histories—a fact which will continue to resurface time and again to haunt the consciousness of an imperialist nation. Our lifetime is experiencing an intense and intricate play of power, politics, and environment around the oceans, in which conflicts leave a lasting imprint on the ecology. Tanimomo Oluseun's article explores the petrofiction *Oil on Water* (2010) by Helon Habila to address this urgent topic and add another dimension to the concept of wasted lives. While violence runs as a connecting thread through this segment of articles, Oluseun's piece seamlessly connects violence on human lives to the violence committed upon the ecosystem in the age of petroleum modernity. The segment ends with an optimistic touch through keynote Anne Collett's article on understanding the biological and cultural ecologies of coral reefs through the works of two notable postcolonial poets and activists, Judith Wright and Kamau Brathwaite. For a planet plagued with conflicts and violence, reading the coral reefs is a step toward rebuilding the broken relationship between human and non-human world, as Collett argues.

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# OCEANS AND KNOWLEDGES



Rapti Siriwardane-de Zoysa

## Interview with Robbie Shilliam and Nicholas Faraclas

Interview conducted during the international conference “Postcolonial Oceans: Heterogeneities and Contradictions in the Epistemes of Salt Water,” University of Bremen, May 30–June 2, 2019<sup>1</sup>

**RSZ: It's been an honour having you with us. Tell us something about yourselves.**

**RS:** I am Robbie Shilliam and I teach International Relations at Johns Hopkins University. I work on race, colonialism, and anticolonialism, and the ways that anticolonial thought, and practice opens up different ways of explaining global politics.

**NF:** I am Nick Faraclas. I teach linguistics at the University of Puerto Rico at Rio Piedras and my family is actually Romani (aka Gypsy) and Greek. I do my intellectual work at the University—that is how I get paid—but most of my work is in communities. I work in the South Pacific, mainly in Vanuatu, and I also work around the Caribbean, especially with Indigenous peoples in literacy and popular education programs where children can learn to read and write first in Indigenous languages rather than the colonial languages and where adults can learn critical literacy.

**RSZ: How do some of the themes in this conference “Postcolonial Oceans” speak to and resonate with some of your writings, and probably even future forays?**

**NF:** Well, for me, coming here and meeting Robbie was amazing because so many of the things that I have been thinking about over many,

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<sup>1</sup> The interview partners and editors would like to thank Stephanie Najjar for transcribing the interview.

many years, Robbie has also been thinking about but in different ways, in ways that open new doors and new possibilities for me. So, one of the highlights of the conference has actually been meeting Robbie.

And then it is amazing to come to some of the sessions and hear people talk about, for example, pirates. In our work at the University of Puerto Rico, where we look at marginalized peoples and the role marginalized peoples have had in the emergence of creole languages, one group of marginalized peoples we focus on is pirates. And it has been a treat to come to a conference where people are looking at pirates in ways that are interesting and ways that are not like *Pirates of the Caribbean* but which actually see pirates as agents in cultural and linguistic transformation. There are not many conferences I can go to where I see people speaking like that about pirates.

- RS:** And I think for me it is something similar, and it has to do with the way a lot of the literature and the discussions that I take part in. They often have a center of gravity around what they call the Black Atlantic. There is a lot of amazing work being done in that field. But one of the things it is not quite so good at doing is figuring out the ethical, political, and historical connections between Indigenous peoples and peoples of the African diaspora, the interlinked issues of expropriation of Indigenous lands as well as the enslavement of African populations. In this respect, you cannot ignore the Pacific. It is the most significant topological feature in the world. And of course, in the Pacific, these connections are complicated and much more interrelated. Yet these complications and interrelations can help us to examine more acutely the Atlantic—as trope and as history. And this is why I was really happy to meet Nicholas and to hear his lecture yesterday, because that is precisely what he is doing with his work on the Atlantic and Pacific Creoles. He is showing in real detail how these areas are interconnected and what kinds of complexities we need to deal with if we are going to adequately address the key questions in postcolonial and decolonial studies.
- NF:** I was telling Robbie just after his presentation this morning that I was almost in tears by the time I was looking at the last slide because in that slide you had a person from the Afro-Atlantic looking at a symbol that has emerged from the Pacific, from New Zealand, and reading it in a way that was so powerful and made all of these connections. That is something Robbie talks about a lot: establishing deeper relations and establishing this connectedness. I see that time and time again in the way Indigenous peoples approach their understanding of the world. In other words, in the ways that they do their science.

Something else that Robbie has talked about is Indigenous science. My experience of living in Indigenous communities has shown me that Indigenous science has as its goal, not control or accumulation of wealth, but instead establishing connectedness between people, healing trauma, and healing things that have torn people apart. That kind of healing is powerful.

This morning, Anne Storch<sup>2</sup> gave a great talk that connects with something that Robbie and I were discussing earlier, namely, the situation among people in Europe and other places where Indigenous understandings and sovereignty have been made invisible or erased, or where people have lost their memories of Indigenous sovereignty and science. So, for example, in New Zealand / Aotearoa, some Māori still have a memory of sovereign power over land, and some are still living that sovereign power over land. In Vanuatu, almost ninety percent of the land is still under the sovereign control of the people, basically under their Indigenous laws and not under state law. This means that the state has no power over ninety percent of the land in the country. Ni-Vanuatu and other Indigenous peoples who have retained this type of sovereignty over land have so much healing knowledge that could be shared with other Indigenous peoples like Native Americans, whose experience of invasion has been much more traumatizing. Think of the healing that could happen by those kinds of connections being made. But then what about the people right here in Europe? What about the people in the US who are looking for healing? Their trauma is extremely deep because whatever the metropoles did to people in the colonies they came right back and did it to their own people. That is what the Industrial Revolution was about—they tested slavery on the plantations and impressed labor on the ships and once they perfected it in the colonies, then they established wage slavery on the assembly lines and in the factories here. So people are traumatized here in Europe as well.

Anne made this wonderful presentation in which she was “selling” products in her satirical video [running in the background as she presented] and showed how the ruling classes and the symbolic elites who represent them are promising you that they can heal you with the very things that have made you ill. The real healing, and the people who have the greatest capacity to do it, are in New Zealand / Aotearoa, Vanuatu, and West Africa. But nobody is listening. Nobody

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2 Anne Storch, “Terrible Magical Ways of Healing—Sea, Spa and Skin.” <https://postcolonialoceans.blogspot.com/p/anne-storch.html>.

is recognizing them as having something very, very important to contribute to how we are going to heal the damage to ourselves, not only from the traumas and the apocalypses that have been brought about through colonization but also the ones that are on the horizon now as well.

- RS: And I think that is really important. It does mean that if we are engaging with postcolonial oceans, we need to think in terms of knowledge formations as well. What are the sources of this knowledge? What difference does it make? One of the things I noticed when I lived in Aotearoa New Zealand was real insecurity over taking on the nomenclature of *Pākehā*—a Māori word referring to people of European descent. Almost every white New Zealander I ever taught at university would say something like, “oh but my uncle said *Pākehā* means white pig so I cannot call myself that.” No, it really does not. There are many different stories about what *Pākehā* means. One of those stories talks about the breath that turned the world upside down, meaning the English language, which came with the settlers, which then was part of the settler project. So, that is not derogatory. That is quite a sacred marker. To be called *Pākehā* means you have significance—and a place.

One of the things about white New Zealand culture is that it suffers from a suspicion of non-creativity. Settlers, after all, brought cultures from Europe. Regularly, *Pākehā* individuals would tell me that when they undertook their “OE” —Overseas Experience—and travelled to Europe or the Americas, people would ask them, once they knew they were from New Zealand: “Can you do a haka?” A haka, of course, is a Māori thing. I also noticed that many *Pākehā*—though they might not be in any way “anticolonial”—would often use two or three words from Te Reo, the Māori language, regularly. For instance, the Māori word for food is *kai*, which intonates collective sustenance; the word for work is *mahi*, which intonates collective endeavor towards a collective purpose; and the word for family is *whānau*, which intonates an extended set of loving relationships. So, all the basic human pursuits like food, work, and family are often presented in Māori terms. All I can think is that settler culture extracts all the joy from these pursuits, even for the settlers.

- NF: And this, I think, connects, for example, with the whole experience that immigrants are now facing in Germany. I think it would be very interesting for Germans to look at how people who come to this country, fleeing apocalypses at home, and facing new apocalypses here, manage to survive and even thrive. There is so much to be learned

from how immigrants are taking Indigenous ways that they bring from where they were born and raised and creatively adapting those knowledges and ways of relating to people and to everything around them in order to recreate incredibly complex and ingenious systems of survival and subsistence right here in Germany. And I think that if more Germans looked seriously at that and opened their eyes in such a way that they could give themselves permission to see that, this would give them permission to see themselves.

This is important because in the US and Europe, we are living in a system that seeks death. One very powerful thing you said this morning, Robbie, is that the western academy has been a death-seeking academy and that western science has been a death-seeking science. In societies such as that of Germany or the US, which are defined by death-seeking science and by death-seeking economics, in other words, in places where our whole society is defined by death, how do people manage to survive and even thrive? The fact that people survive in a death-seeking system must mean that they are constantly, but mainly subconsciously, bucking the system by inventing and deploying countless subaltern strategies for creating life despite the odds stacked against them, just to live and love another day. Once we start opening our eyes to that, I think this can be very powerful in the healing process for the people of Germany who are looking for healing and are erroneously thinking the Alternative für Deutschland and other far-right movements are going to give it to them. No, that is just like the fake healing products that are being sold in Anne's satirical video that never give us real healing.

The real healing that is going to give people fulfillment and give people what they are seeking, I think, is at least in part, the one that is going to come from opening our eyes to what Indigenous people have been doing for thousands and thousands of years in places like the Pacific and West Africa. This healing can come as well from opening our eyes to how those Indigenous peoples who have experienced invasion have creatively managed to confront it, and all the knowledges they have created to basically subvert those colonizing systems and transform them into something that can give them life and fulfillment. And then, once we open our eyes to that, we can also open our eyes to how the non-Indigenous people in Germany and the rest of Europe or the US, or the *Pākehā* in New Zealand are actually doing the same thing, because if we have managed to survive in this system, we must be doing all sorts of things to re-establish our life-giving sovereignty, even though we may not acknowledge it or give ourselves credit for it.

It is important to remember that all of our ancestors were Indigenous and sovereign. Once those linkages are made and those healings are done, I think we have something really transformative going on, and something very dangerous to systems that seek to just accumulate wealth or systems that seek to claim that one group of people is better than another group of people, or systems that claim that men are better than women. Once we remember our sovereignty, our indigeneity, all of these patriarchal, ethnocentric, and economically accumulative systems of domination become threatened, really threatened.

**RSZ: That was fantastic, because I was going to pose some further questions on those very points.**

**NF:** Another thing that Robbie said that touched me today was about how we become maps and the relationship of those maps to places. That really resonated with me because my ancestors are Romani, and I have been trying to figure out how being Romani intersects with Indigenous sovereignty, which is normally so closely associated with particular places, at least under the colonial gaze. My ancestors were people who moved a lot, so what does Romani sovereignty look like? My first breakthrough came when I heard Indigenous people say, “I have sovereign power not *over* this land, but *with* this land.” This helped me change the way I see sovereignty from something that is mechanically asserted over nature and the land, to something that is lived with nature and the land. As such, sovereignty is not static, defined and dead, as is ownership, but instead it is living, moving, dynamic, reinventing itself wherever one might find oneself. This made me think of the Levellers, Diggers, and Ranters who reclaimed sovereignty for all of the people in relation to the recently enclosed land in England at the dawn of the colonial era. By daring to radically reconceptualize the entire world as the commons of all of creation, I came to understand that sovereignty can be established by anyone, anywhere.

This connects with another powerful thing that Robbie said this morning about Indigenous peoples, movement, and interconnectedness, or what might be understood as a radical re-reading of “cosmopolitanism.” The colonizing view of Indigenous people sees them as people who live in small “enclosed” inward-focused communities, who never connect with the outside until the colonizer arrives and “opens them up” to the world. My work with Indigenous peoples in Africa, the South Pacific, and the Americas has convinced me that before the colonial invasion, most Indigenous peoples had millennia of experience with pluri-lingualism, pluri-culturalism, and pluri-identification.

This makes sense, because a sovereign relationship with the earth guarantees complete land security, food security, housing security, employment security, and social security. If you are secure, there is no need for conquest or invasion. That is why in many regions where Indigenous peoples live, there is tremendous diversity in language and culture, since no one has felt the need to invade and impose their language and culture on anyone else. Indigenous peoples who have not experienced colonial invasion do not know landlessness, homelessness, starvation, unemployment, and destitution. If you have never known those things in your life, if you have that level of security, you can be totally open to others, their languages, their cultures, their lifeways, you can be totally hospitable. If you have that strength in your own understanding of your lineage, your own culture, then you can be completely open to those of other people.

Every Indigenous group that I have worked with has stories in their oral tradition about how new people came to their communities and how they welcomed them. It is only people who have been traumatized, who are insecure, who have never known the security that comes with sovereignty, who demonize immigrants and run to fascist and other right-wing groups like Alternative für Deutschland, who think that they are better than somebody else and shut other people, other languages, other cultures, and other identities out of their lives, erroneously thinking that they will find healing for their traumas there. They are the ones who are enclosed, who cannot open up to others, not Indigenous peoples. Repeatedly you hear Indigenous stories about people coming from other places to join their communities, for example you hear the story that Robbie told this morning about the shipwrecked Africans who arrived on the shores of an Indigenous community in the South Pacific. And what did the local people do when these new people came? Did they shut them out? No, they embraced them. And that is another really powerful thing that I think can be learned from Indigenous peoples. This openness comes from the memory and the understanding of sovereignty and assuming sovereignty in your own life. And for the Romani, I think it is very similar, but the attachment, perhaps, is not to one particular area, but it is more to every place or to the roads that link places.

And then we come to the theme of this conference: the seas, the oceans. Some speakers in some sessions talked about oceans as *tabula rasa*, as “flat spaces” or “smooth spaces” or abstract places for the creation of utopias created from zero. My work in the South Pacific and elsewhere has taught me that the oceans and seas have

incredible living histories of all sorts of interactions and connections among peoples. As such, the oceans are not empty, but instead they are overflowing with real experiences of real interconnectedness and real sovereignty. The oceans are rich with knowledges and memories that can serve both as inspiration and as a foundation for healing processes that can promote the (re)creation of societies that serve our needs rather than the needs of just a greedy few, and that provide us with real fulfillment. This means that utopia does not need to start from zero or from an abstraction. Instead, humanity has hundreds of thousands of years of rich and diverse concrete experience, concrete science, concrete understandings, and concrete knowledges of building communities in the image and interest of everyone, where everyone has access to land, water, food, work, and everyone has agency as creators of knowledge and culture.

I think I would rather construct a utopia by creatively using and reconfiguring these tried and true methods and materials that have been created by all of our ancestors who actually realized sovereignty and fulfillment in the past, rather than try to realize sovereignty and fulfillment by pretending to imagine something completely new, but in practice falling back on the methods and materials of a system that has perpetuated so much trauma and apocalypse on ourselves and others. From all of that trauma, how do you create a new utopia from all of that? I would rather go to the people who have been making it work for thousands of years in societies where there is no accumulation of wealth, in societies where you only have to work for a couple of days a week to have food and housing security.

If you are doing subsistence, you have abundance, so after two days you have time to make music, to sit down and reflect on the world, to create and practice science. People have time to do philosophy. For example, I have never experienced such sophisticated philosophy as I regularly encounter in kava drinking sessions in villages in Vanuatu, and that is because people have days and days to do it. They do not devote their lives to this idea that survival is something that has to consume all their time, that they have to make themselves available to be used as labor power to enrich someone else. They are living in a state of subsistence abundance. One or two days is enough. The other five days you can do things that create connectedness between peoples and sciences that establish that connectedness.

That said, I think this conference has been a wonderful experience because of the kind of connections we can make among ourselves across the oceans.

**RSZ:** Robbie, I am so glad you also brought up the question of ancestral wounds and healing ancestral wounds, can you comment more on this and notions of past and future?

**RS:** That is right. If you think about Western social and political theory, what you get is this sense that no one's past is authentic except for the past of Europeans. Europeans have the only past that they can draw upon which is adequate for the present. All other pasts are retrospective or just antiquarian. I am often told: "Oh, you are talking about theory and philosophy before colonialism. Well surely all of that got displaced by colonialism and what you are really talking about is a colonially induced new canon which masquerades as authentic." Europeans, though, always seem to be able to rely on Ancient Greece. It is not even that Greece was admitted to the cultural heritage of European nations relatively late in the day. It is also that, somehow, we can still use ancient Greece to think about the ethical quandaries of the present. Only in this instance is the past allowed to be contemporary. Of course, that did not stop Greece being made into an EU colony by the financial crisis of the early 2010s. Still, that did not displace ancient Greece from the canons of Western social and political thought. There is a phrase: love Black culture, hate Black people. I wonder if you can apply that to Greece too. Anyway, it is similar to what you said, Nicholas, about languages vs. creoles: this other conceit is tradition vs. modernity. Tradition is fixed, modernity is fluid except for ancient Greece. But really, everything is a tradition and everything is fluid. All pasts are retrievable, for better or worse.

**NF:** I really like what you said about how in Māori, the past is in front of you and the future is behind you. So it really changes the frame of reference.

**RS:** Exactly, and of course, in a lot of Western societies, especially the US, Europe, and most of the settler colonies, there is this idea: "Do not talk about the past, about fixing the past. What you have to do is focus on the future and just go forward because things will naturally sort themselves out." Except when you talk about the war dead. Then everybody is suddenly Indigenous, and the past is in front of them and it is not going to go away, and it needs a reckoning with. The only time when Western societies think indigenously is when it is to do with the war dead. And again, there is this thing about death.

**NF:** The discourse about Greece is so important because my ancestors are also Greek. So the way that people understand Greece has nothing to do with Greece. Like you say, Robbie, it is a conceit. It is a completely artificial creation, based on cherry picking. In ancient Greece,

before Greece became an empire, it was a lot like Indigenous societies, although patriarchy had gone further than in many other Indigenous societies. The accumulation of wealth was starting, but there were still a lot of memories of sovereignty and indigeneity. There were lots of sciences, lots of ways of looking at the world, lots of philosophies. For example, Pythagoras had this philosophy where language is not a particle, it is not seen as something you can separate into units, it is waves, resonances between people. Somehow, Pythagoras's theory got marginalized in Western philosophy. We do not talk about Pythagoras too much. We talk about Plato, whose philosophy fits an agenda of domination. If you can convince people that what they experience in the world is not reality, if you can convince them that the real reality is somewhere up there—your whole talk on religion, Robbie, was spot on concerning that—then you can create a class of people whose responsibility it is to tell people what the real thing is. According to Plato, what is up there is not only the real reality, it is the good reality, so this conceit/deceit has a moral side too. Then you have a class of people whose work it is to tell everybody else what is real and what is good. It starts out with priests and religion, but then it becomes academics, and of course, now it has become the mass media and other things. But still, that was our job. Our job was to convince the world that what is real is what conforms to patriarchal, ethnocentric, and economically accumulative agendas of domination, so when we start to do our work in ways that question those things, it becomes dangerous. And that is another reason why I like this conference and the people that I am meeting with because I am meeting with a lot of dangerous people and it is a very dangerous conference. I love that.

I am just wondering about another thing that we did not talk about, because I am still trying to grapple with how Romani fit in this whole picture. I am thinking about Aboriginal Australians, and there I see a lot of commonalities with Romani. I am thinking about Australian Aboriginal paintings, where the focus is on the routes that people travel, not on a fixed position. In those paintings, you see all these dots that are the routes; then every once in a while, the chain of dots is interrupted by these heart-shaped marks. What are those heart-shaped marks? They are imprints of people's buttocks: this is where we sat down, and we connected with the land, we grounded. Because when you sit down, you talk. And you did "grounding" in that sense that you, Robbie, talked about this morning. That is what the people in Vanuatu are doing in their kava sessions. They are grounded. That, to me, connects with the Romani experience.

RS: I think that is really important. All traditions are fluid and present, meaning they are not the opposite of what we think modernity is. In fact, we might even conceive of modernity as a tradition itself. If we start from that conception, then a lot of binaries start to break down. And one of those is the apparent opposition between sedentary and nomad, which is heavily imbued with eighteenth-century European ideas of civilization. And of course, nomads do not just go anywhere; there are maps, routes, and circuits. I used to know a number of people who are in what they call the Black Power gang [in New Zealand]. In Te Reo, their name is Mangu Kaha. They came about initially from the predicament that young children, mainly boys, who came from rural areas to work in towns found themselves in. They did not have the support structures that they had in the rural areas, so the Black Power gang was an attempt to provide a social security net. Not saints by any means, lots of issues to do with drugs, to do with rape, even in the early days—there was a big confrontation with the practice of rape over the last ten or so years and people are trying to account for that now. This is not about saints and heroes.

Nonetheless, one of the things that one of the members—Eugene Ryder—was trying to agitate for was to say that Black Power should be understood as what they call an *iwi*, which means tribe, in the same way as all the other tribes. In that way, under the Waitangi Tribunal, they would then be able to move not for land restitution, but for reparation for growing up in racist urban areas.

So, of course, amongst many Māori, Ryder's claims and aspirations towards an *iwi* were a non-starter. Even some Māori politicians agreed that these guys were just thugs. But Ryder's argument was strong. He argued that the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, which most northern tribes signed, hypostatized *iwi*. Before 1840, it was not always evident what the bounds of an *iwi* were, and *iwi* were occasionally morphed through other groupings. In any case, the prime allegiance that people held was not always to the *iwi*. So why did all this mobility stop in 1840? That is Ryder's challenge to those who say there can be no new *iwi*. That is how he argues—along traditional lines, if you like—that Black Power is a new *iwi*.

NF: This connects to the work we are doing with Indigenous peoples in Louisiana. I was working with one called the Houma, who originally lived somewhere in the Appalachians when the Europeans arrived and were pushed by the colonists to the lands that nobody wanted, which are the last bayous, the swamps at the end of the Mississippi river. Nobody wanted that, and that is where they ended up. They

ended up there and they enjoyed this Indigenous security and sovereignty over who they were, what they were, their culture, their language, so they were very open. They welcomed a lot of people. Over time, they switched from speaking their ancestral language, Houma, and to speaking French.

It just so happens that this land nobody wanted before has rich deposits of oil under it, petroleum. They received Louisiana state recognition as Indigenous people long ago, but now they are seeking federal recognition to be able to officially claim sovereignty over this land, and the government in Washington, mindful of the fact that the land has petroleum deposits, is saying “you are not Indigenous people; you speak French; where is your language?” It is like the federal government is saying, “Dance for us!” “Prove that you are Indigenous!” “Where is your chief?” The government agencies were expecting a male chief, but the chief was a woman, and they said, “No, that is not a chief,” because for the government, women cannot be in those kinds of positions of responsibility under the colonial gaze on indigeneity. The Houma conveniently did not fit into the official “Indigenous” box, because their land has a lot of resources under it that the US government wanted to get their hands on.

So a Houma community asked me to come in to look at their variety of French, asking, “How can we prove to the US government that part of our indigeneity is this openness and this ability to shape-shift and to move from one culture to another? To move from one language to another, that is part of who we are and makes us the Houma people.” We started looking at the variety of French that they speak, and all of a sudden the vowels were going all over the place. In French, you have quite a complex vowel system, with something like fourteen vowels. What we found in Houma French was all this variation; vowels being realized in all kinds of different ways. Within that, we saw that there were clusters, not neat clusters but three clusters that centered around [a], [o], and [i]. The ancestral Houma language is no longer spoken and there are not a lot of written records of it, but all of the other languages related to it that are still spoken that have grammars and have accounts of their sound systems. Most of them have three vowels [a], [o], and [i]. In other words, their ancestral linguistic practices are living on in the way that they speak French. So, we tried to use arguments like that to convince the US government that these people do have sovereign control over this land and they cannot touch their land. This connects to this idea of authenticity that you raised, Robbie, with your example of the Black Power gang’s

claim. In other words, if you do not look and act according to how European-descended people think of Indigenous people, that is, if instead of living in an enclosed, isolated time-capsule, you have retained your Indigenous openness to the rest of the world and taken on new languages and cultures, you are somehow no longer “authentically” Indigenous. According to the US government, Indigenous people are supposed to be those people living in a little corner over there, closed off from the rest of the world, with a hierarchical social order dominated by a male chief.

- RS:** Bob Marley had a lyric for that in a song called “Babylon System”: “We refused to be who you wanted us to be, we are who we are and that is the way it is going to be.”
- NF:** That’s it! And this is something that you, Robbie, mentioned this morning in relation to how the Indigenous mariners of the Atlantic and Pacific practiced their Indigenous sciences, even when they sailed on European and US ships in the nineteenth century. This brings us back to your idea of Indigenous sciences as sciences that (re-)establish deeper connections, and in both of our presentations, that is what they were doing. The ways in which they sailed the oceans, even when they were on the new circuits that had been established by colonialism, involved using Indigenous knowledges to cultivate living, fulfilling, healing connections.

**RSZ:** Thank you both for this inspiring conversation.



Karin Amimoto Ingersoll

## Seascape Epistemology: An Embodied Knowledge

**ABSTRACT** This chapter explores how the ocean becomes both a metaphorical and physical body through which we can reimagine conceptions of our selves and our relationships with the surrounding world. The seascape can be expanded into a methodology about the movement of bodies, knowledges, and ways of being-in-the world. This way of knowing and being is termed a seascape epistemology, an approach to knowing presumed on a knowledge of the sea, which tells one how to move through the sea, and how to approach life and knowing through the movements of the world. The Native Hawaiian ocean-based knowledges (or oceanic literacies) of surfing and navigation are used to illustrate how embracing a seascape epistemology creates a counter politics to the dominant thought-worlds that impose rigid systems upon our identities, spaces, and places.

**KEYWORDS** epistemology, Native Hawaiian, navigation, seascape, surfing

### Introduction

When I am fortunate enough to be standing on the warm sand with a surfboard tucked under my arm, I look out at the vast ocean dancing before me and take a deep breath. I like to inhale the seascape: smell its salt, feel the tickle of its spray on my skin, listen to the roar and then purr of its waves, and remember its taste of fish. What I see when I look out are pathways that connect me to my ‘āina, the land and sea. My Native Hawaiian identity emerges as I become a historical being riding waves within a colonial landscape. In the seascape, I am able to autonomously reconnect, recreate, and reimagine through an ocean-based epistemology, a way of knowing and being that allows me to dive into my self. I term this epistemology, a seascape epistemology.

Each time I enter the time and space of the sea, I ponder how the seascape engages an embodied process of place-making, how a seascape epistemology can potentially bring ocean-based knowledges back into an ontological perspective that speaks to an ethical and political experience of movement through the world and life. There has been a predisposition of cultural and Indigenous studies to connect Indigeneity with territory, a “territory” that has been predominantly, although not entirely, land-based. My contribution speaks to the fluvial addition to the territorial through the Hawaiian seascape as a means of obtaining a geopolitical mapping of the political. Seascape epistemology dives into the ocean, splashing alternatives onto the Western-dominant and linear mindset that has led the world toward realities of mass industrialization as well as cultural and individual assimilation. Understanding knowledge as an always moving interaction through theoretical frames challenges colonial narratives that strive to determine absolute and rigid “truths.”

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. It is an approach to knowing through a visual, spiritual, intellectual, and embodied literacy of the land and ocean. It embraces an oceanic literacy which can articulate the potential for travel and discovery.

As a philosophy of knowledge, seascape epistemology is not a knowledge about the ocean or about the wind as things. It is not a knowledge of the sea. Instead, it is a knowledge about the ocean and wind as an interconnected system that allows for successful navigation through them. It is an approach to life and knowing through passageways, organizing events and thoughts according to how they move and interact, all while emphasizing the importance of knowing one’s roots, center, and location inside this constant movement. Like water, which is multi-structural as a formless phenomenon yet never loses its identity, seascape epistemology allows for an Indigenous identity that is linked to place, yet is also multi-sited and mobile.

Seascape epistemology engages a discourse about place that recognizes the ocean’s transient and dynamic nature, and even becomes the

fluctuation of a process that joins the world together. Moving with the fluvial seascape speaks to how we inhabit and shape the earth with our bodies, our emotions, our minds, and spirits. In this way, seascape epistemology can become an ethical way of moving through the world. As Native Hawaiians travel, modernize, and adapt as complex individuals, seascape epistemology also becomes a political epistemology which enables us to observe and interpret diverse knowledges from our own Native perspectives. It enables a disruption of the dominant narratives and systems established across places that place Indigenous knowledges, identities, and memories in the periphery. We know through our oral histories, such as *He Kumulipo*, that we have a genealogical relationship with the sea, and engaging ocean-based knowledges such as surfing and voyaging can help us find connections that offer flexibility and multiplicity in our lives.<sup>1</sup>

## He‘e Nalu: Surfing

I first realized the sea’s profound potential when I was hired in 2006 to act as a surf guide for the Australian owned surf camp Sa‘Moana on the island of Upolu in Samoa.<sup>2</sup> The first few days on Upolu fulfilled my every prefabricated fantasy about surfing a South Pacific destination without the crowds that infested my hometown of Honolulu. But the dynamite used to bomb the brilliant green and blue Samoan reefs, reefs which hold great cultural, economic, political, and environmental significance to Samoans, to pave a channel for the camp’s surf boats, shook my callow mindset. I began to see underlying political, social, and ethical issues hiding within my fantasy that had been glossed over by surfing films, magazines, advertisements, and the tourism industry.

In Hawai‘i, the evolution of surf tourism is directly tied to the larger project of political and economic colonization of the islands by the United States. After annexation in 1898, American businessmen needed to present the island to their fellow citizens as a valuable and desirable place, one of “soft primitivism.” The activity of he‘e nalu became a new commodity, a romanticized and chic selling point for Hawai‘i. Christina Bacchilega,

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1 *He Kumulipo* is a predominant genealogy chant composed by a Native Hawaiian priest around the eighteenth century that determines a genealogical connection between Native Hawaiians and the sky, ocean, cosmos, plants, animals, and land.

2 Aspects of this article have been published in my book, *Waves of Knowing: A Seascape Epistemology*, in three different parts.

professor at the University of Hawai‘i, argues that photography valorized this image on paper, offering a “visual vocabulary” that endorsed the economic and ideological ambitions of the businessmen in the islands (Bacchilega 2007, 62). In this way, tourism served Western interests at a crucial political juncture in Kanaka history, and surfing played a significant role in this purpose. The image of surfers in Waikīki on postcards that first took effect in 1898, for instance, helped lay the foundation for the creation of a promotional Hawai‘i: an idealized, tropical ocean fantasy. The making of Hawai‘i into a tourist destination, an open space available for consumption and entertainment, was supported by the appropriation and manipulation of he‘e nalu through advertisement.

Today, the surf tourism industry continues to brilliantly tap into people’s natural desire for a lost Eden. Many contemporary surfers, like most tourists, have slipped onto the path paved by colonialism which shields them from seeing or concerning themselves with the geopolitics within their surf dream. The ocean is commercialized, coaxing surfers into purchasing the perfect wave, the surf fantasy.

As more and more surfers drop into Hawaiian waves, ke kai (the ocean) becomes prone to this neocolonial fantasy of taking what serves them from the ‘āina. Underscored are the colonial lines etched into the Hawaiian islands by the Euro-American ideology and geopolitical structure of sovereignty, prioritizing an organization of place around the strong military and capitalist presence in Hawai‘i: airstrips across the reef, warships strategically placed along the coast, paved walkways, mass construction of beach-front hotels and shops, private hotel beach zoning, and surf lessons. Surf tourism promotes a static approach to place that cuts and divides ka ‘āina for ease of tourist use. Forgotten in this ideology is the body’s relationship to place, human memories stored over centuries in the reef and along the coast. Memories that act as adherent forces, bringing together people and places, arranging these historical memories into contemporary contexts.

The surf tourism industry has attempted to reduce genealogical and cultural space in the Hawaiian sea with an imperial understanding of history. For example, the surf media has created the myth that American surfers helped recover the “lost” sport of surfing in Hawai‘i, taming the native waves on the islands. California surfer and filmmaker Bruce Brown asserts in his film, *The Endless Summer*, that 1959 was the “first time” the big waves of Waimea Bay on O‘ahu were ridden. Stewart Holmes Coleman continues the imperialistic narrative, writing in his book, *Eddie Would Go*, that in the 1950s, “during those first expeditions to the North Shore, men like John Kelly, George Downing, Greg Noll, Pat Curren, Peter Cole and Fred Van Dyke would drive across the land in their old jalopies, camp on

the North Shore and surf pristine and unridden breaks that had yet to be named. Of course they suspected that the ancient Hawaiians had probably ridden these waves, but it seemed impossible with the long, heavy planks of wood they used to ride" (Coleman 2001, 45).

Native Hawaiians undeniably rode and named the waves at Waimea Bay and elsewhere. A *kau* (sacred chant) of Hi'iaka, goddess of dance and chant, for instance, tells that Pili'a'ama, the konohiki (the headman of a land division under the chief) of Ihukoko, enjoyed surfing both the point and the shore break at Waimea. Not only is Hawaiian history effaced through the surf tourism narrative, but forgotten from this dominant ideology of claiming waves is the body's relationship to place, human memories stored over centuries in the reef at Waimea, memories that act as adherent forces bringing together people and places, arranging historical memories into contemporary contexts.

Yet predominant surf tourism narratives and ethics are not absolute. The experience of surf tourism in Hawai'i cannot be universalized as neo-colonial, constructed as an entirely negative or inescapable system. Colonial power can be exaggerated, and Hawaiian surfers such as the Waikīkī Beachboys, most famously Duke Kahanamoku, and contemporary professional surfers, have used the industry as vehicles to experience and (re)affirm an Indigenous identity connected to and emerging through the ocean. They not only move within the industry in beneficial ways, but also help to shape it. Professional Native Hawaiian surfer C. J. Kanuha, for example, made headlines across the world in April 2008, as he was interviewed by ABC's *Good Morning America*, *The Telegraph*, and other international media corporations, for paddling his stand-up surfboard within twenty feet of lava flowing into the ocean from Kilauea's eruption at Waikupanaha in Puna, Hawai'i. What appealed to the media and the surf industry was the danger and novelty of the act. Kanuha, however, underwent respectful training for this event as a way to visit with Pele, the Hawaiian volcano goddess. His movement was primarily cultural. When Kanuha reached an area of the lava that had formed a black sand beach, he went ashore and prayed to his goddess, offering her ho'okupu, a gift of respect. Kanuha was employing his oceanic literacy of he'e nalu to strengthen his Indigenous ontology and epistemology independent of the cultural location of the corporate sponsors supplying his board, paddle, and financial support. What took place was an interplay between the surf industry and the Native Hawaiian space within it.

For contemporary Native Hawaiian surfers, he'e nalu is a process of acculturation. We have adapted to Western ways and materials such as fiberglass boards, plastic leashes, traveling on airplanes to distant waves,

wearing nylon printed suits with corporate brands, and using Internet access to determine wave conditions, while finding autonomous ways of moving through the sea. He‘e nalu continues to attune the body to the ocean’s liquid pulses, which create fluid earth passages between ideas and perspectives. It is an enactment that engages a profoundly nonlinear conception of the environment and of human relationships to it, privileging embodied connections that help to realize multiple and complex constructions of a multisided identity that resonates with the “language” of he‘e nalu.

For instance, Mary Kawena Pukui and Samuel H. Elbert’s Hawaiian Dictionary defines “he‘e” as

1. n. Octopus (*Polypus* sp.), commonly known as squid [...].
2. vi. To slide, surf, slip, flee [...] to put to flight, [...] flow [...].

“Nalu” is defined as

1. nvi. Wave, surf; full of waves [...] to form waves.
2. vt. To ponder, meditate, reflect, mull over, speculate [...].

He‘e nalu is not only sliding across waves, it is also sliding into a ponderous state of thinking and theorizing about the world through a specific context. It is also “putting to flight” the “formation of waves.” He‘e nalu is an act that helps the seascape to move, putting waves, concepts, and bodies into flight.

In the same way, the oceanic literacy of he‘e nalu requires me to “read” a visual text of the seascape with my body. Oceanic literacy of surfing involves a knowledge of the exact location on the outer reef where the surf breaks and where one’s footing can still be found. The oceanic literacy of navigation requires the ability to read the cloud colors that indicate a passing squall, the ripples on the water’s surface telling of an approaching gust, or a knowledge of where the sea is very shallow and impassable for canoes. There are rhythms involved in an oceanic literacy: the rhythms of the waves, moon, sun, tides, winds, and shifting sand. The rhythms of the clouds and currents communicate information, as living guides gliding along, within, and beyond the laws of the universe, requiring both an intellectual and a spiritual reading.

There is also a biological element involved in oceanic literacy rooted in certain facts that affect our notions of space and place: the body can only lie prone or stand upright and turn left or right. When surfing, however, the body breaks through these limitations. Surfers glide and float on water, sliding on a fluid floor, expanding the realm of gravity by vertically flowing

up and down, sometimes racing through a tunnel of pitching water. A navigator's sight, body, and gravity are also expanded as she floats on a moving mass of liquid, relying on the ever-moving sky, birds, and winds to guide her toward a destination seen only in her mind. Spatial conceptions are altered, as is one's sense of place when engaged in oceanic literacy, because of the ways in which one interacts kinesthetically with the ocean, the ways in which one is physically involved with the sea.

When surfing, my center moves with the sliding sea, tapping into its energy. I relinquish control by immersing myself in the mercurial place of the sea. My center is a pivot point; it finds a rhythmic alignment within the wave. I am, as Paul Carter states, "stitched into the passages of the world" (Carter 2009, 15). My body is the first point of contact with the ocean, and becomes the tool for ensuing investigations. As the rhythms of the seascape assemble with my body, identity becomes an affected process over time and through philosophical, spiritual, and kinesthetic interactions with place. An ocean-body assemblage emerges, a term borrowed from Manuel DeLanda's assemblage theory.

According to DeLanda, of the three forms of matter—solid, liquid, and gas—liquid has the most potential to create because it is always on the edge of chaos. Here lies the Native Hawaiians's potential to self-organize a complex identity: Hawaiian and American, author and oceanographer, logical and emotional, all while moving through a liquid form of cultural genealogy in rooted yet improvised rhythms.

And as the rhythms of the seascape assemble with my surfing body, identity becomes an affected process over time and through philosophical and kinesthetic interactions with place. As my body interacts with the ocean, ways of knowing and being are opened up to innumerable ways of moving, pausing, constructing, and deconstructing my ideas and identity. The sensorimotor pathways that the body creates for itself engage an embodied reading and writing of a specific oceanic space, which can be affective, philosophical, and spiritual movements of recovery. He'e nalu becomes a poesis of nonlinear movement between spaces and times that encourages a specifically Native Hawaiian worldview.

Imagine the Hawaiian sea moss, limu pālahalaha, crawling between the cracks of a concrete jetty. The moss is able to maneuver its way between the crevices of the concrete, creating alternative pathways atop and within an imposed structure (colonization). The limu pālahalaha exists in "smooth" space, which, defined by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, is nonmetric and acentral, a directional path that can rise up at any point and move to any other point, like a formless and amorphous space (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). The concrete jetty, however, exists within a "striated"

space that is limited by the order of its own space or by preset paths between fixed and identifiable points. The smooth space of the moss, and of the seascape itself, allows for diversity and for the emergence of marginalized identities simply because it allows for movement between the lines.

A politics of aesthetics emerges as the limu pālahalaha not only creates but also makes visible new spaces within the striated space of the jetty. Time and space configurations are ideological constructions of power within epistemology. They control constructions of identity in the global arena, or state-established and recognized ways of being-in-time and space. The smooth space of the sea offers itself as a means for disrupting power structures. It is not the momentary location in identifiable space but the continuous movement in amorphous space that is critical to understanding the political opportunity of seascape epistemology as well as human existence in time. The space of the ocean is an “occasion,” a moment that comes about through the experience of sensation. The fluid enactments of oceanic literacy are what allow Native Hawaiians to be part of the smooth space, to create an autonomous identity by engaging a discourse on colonization through movement.

Just as the Native Hawaiian professional surfer Kanuha exists both inside and outside the surf tourism industry, striated and smooth spaces cannot exist in isolation. They must always coexist and intermingle. The sea is a smooth space of autonomous creation for Hawaiians, because as a space that holds specific social meaning the ocean is simultaneously also a striated space for Hawaiians. The sea can become striated as it is coded and detailed to those familiar with wave shapes, speeds, and frequencies. The sea can be divided into specific fishing locales that might have seasonal kapu, prohibitions, during spawning times, for instance. Oceanic striations are also created by state-designated boundaries: conservation areas, swim-only zones, permitted surf contest zones. Grids have been formed that identify space within the ocean as being specific to one purpose, as being this and not that, designating belonging and exclusion.

Artificial grids and boundary lines, however, can be “deterritorialized.” Deleuze and Guattari would state that the limu pālahalaha that grows on the concrete jetty, while dictated by the shape of the jetty, “deterritorializes” the concrete (1987). The moss alters the space of the jetty from a geographic zone to a feeding ground for fishes and crabs. The meaning of the space initially created by the concrete jetty is altered by the limu. Striated spaces become smooth, just as smooth become striated. The ocean, inherently from within its own body, enables plurality.

In the same way, heʻe nalu enables plurality for Hawaiian spaces, times, and bodies. Within a Hawaiian context, heʻe nalu becomes an aesthetic

logic that remembers through performance. The movements of the body interact with language, reading, and writing so that the literacy does not merely employ the eyes, brain, and fingers but also a kinesthetic engagement with one's surroundings. It is both reading and writing through empirical observation as well as subjective sensations. Oceanic literacy remembers what was written in the coral and on the fins of turtles through an active interaction. This embodied literacy splashes mobile trails into the sea, inviting a response from the sea itself. The ocean is involved in the writing and reading process, affecting how we create and shape both our selves and our nations.

## Ho'okele: Navigation

For Native Hawaiian navigator Bruce Blankenfeld, the oceanic literacy of ho'okele, navigation, is a portal to access his Hawaiian ontology and epistemology through a specific way of reading and interacting with the seascape. Standing on a platform of the wa'a kaulua, voyaging canoe, which sits in the vast ocean, on the planet, which floats in an expansive galaxy suspended in an immense universe composed of tens of thousands of other galaxies, Blankenfeld, engages an ocean-body assemblage by expanding his identity to connect with his surroundings. "Those stars have to be a part of you," he explains (Ingersoll 2008). Being inside the ocean allows Blankenfeld to connect affectively through his spatial imagination by seeing the link between the earthly and heavenly bodies though his own body, a necessary link to read how the skies and universe move, so that he knows how he can and should move through them.

When navigating, Blankenfeld becomes an aesthetic subject whose movement articulates Hawaiian ontology and epistemology through the stimulation of his somatic senses: sight, smell, taste, sound, and touch. His body and the seascape interact in a complex discourse, or way of communicating, in which Blankenfeld is able to "see" his location in the world by reading the yellow stripes painted across the sky, tasting the water's salinity, smelling the cool north winds, and feeling the intensity of the sun's heat on his shoulders. Blankenfeld can "see" the stars on a cloudy night, or when he is closing his eyes in a half-sleep, because his feet and back can feel the direction of the ocean groundswells, and the roll and pitch of the canoe. This enables him to "see" his direction by feeling the direction of the swells. Thus, he knows where the cloud-covered stars are in relation to the direction of his canoe. This is because he knows how the groundswells, stars, and canoe (among hundreds of other factors)

should all be working together. He knows his location inside all of these constantly moving parts.

“Seeing” is a physiological process that involves more than the simple recording of light and images. It is a selective process in which environmental stimuli are organized into flowing structures that provide meaningful signs (Tuan 1977, 10). Blankenfeld explains that when voyaging, “Most of the seeing is inside, so before you even leave on a voyage, you have a very clear vision of what the target is” (Ingersoll 2008). He “sees” his destination as he voyages toward it, even when he’s weeks away from arrival, by responding to sensational messages collected through his feet, in his nose, and his eyes. Sight becomes corporeal: the feet, ears, and eyes all have a specific way of seeing, and this “sight” becomes emotions burned into muscles that are interpreted by the mind. It is this constant interaction between the body and the mind that generate a specific epistemological and ontological context that allows him to expand his world to include an intimate interaction with the white foam of open ocean swells that his canoe surfs.

There is a duality between an analytical awareness and sensational imagination when voyaging. The critical aspect, however, is not that his oceanic literacy allows him to reach his destination island. The significance of his literacy is that the way Blankenfeld physically moves through the ocean affects how he “sees” it. Seeing becomes a political and ethical process; as Blankenfeld’s sight is expanded through his oceanic literacy, so is his ability to think outside of a static mindset, a mindset that tends to enforce one specific way of knowing or seeing, and that relies upon one specific reality. Oceanic literacy engages a subjectivization, a transformation of the aesthetic coordinates, as Jacques Rancière would put it, or the ability to control what is visible (or invisible) in a community by making necessary the assumption that we are all equal (Rancière 2004).

Oceanic literacy becomes a political and ethical act of taking back Hawaiian history and identity through a rhythmic interaction with place: the swing of tides shuffling sand, the sharp tune of swells stacking upon each other at coastal points, the smooth sweep of clouds pulled down by the wind. Rhythms do not just represent the ocean; they constitute it as figurative layers. Merging the body with this rhythmic sea enables a reading of the seascape’s complex habits, as well as all the memories created and knowledges learned within this oceanic time and space that have been effaced by rigid colonial constructions of identity and place.

Affective rhythms of sight are political vision for Blankenfeld because what he sees when voyaging is a structure of his imagination: light hitting the retina of the eye is immediately processed through the subjective

brain. Author Jonah Lehrer notes that without the brain's interpretation of light flashing off the retina's photoreceptors, "our world would be formless" (Lehrer 2007, 105). Lehrer adds, "[B]ut this ambiguity is an essential part of the seeing process, as it leaves space for our subjective interpretations. Our brain is designed so that reality cannot resolve itself," requiring our imaginations to create a context for this "reality" (107). Blankenfeld is harnessing and mobilizing this image-making power inherent in all our brains by reaching beyond light reflection into a realm of seeing through intuition with the aid of the seascape. Blankenfeld dilates his sight by constructing a vivid yet malleable pathway toward a designation through his oceanic literacy: he can find his direction and location by extending his sight into his imagination and into the seascape itself.

Seascape epistemology becomes an embodied voyage for Native Hawaiians, a way of knowing through corporeal interactions. When navigating, Blankenfeld's body is soaked by the seascape. Each puff of wind and slight change in humidity moves through him. His oceanic literacy is accumulated into an experiential reserve so that, over time, he "begin[s] to anticipate the weather. It is like being inside the navigation, participating from the inside" (Low 2008, n.p.). Blankenfeld exists inside movement itself, as movement becomes a mode of experience transferred from place to body. His affective experience in the ocean introduces the power of creativity into the sensorimotor body, enabling an expression of imagination through kinesthetic movements.

In oceanic navigation, everything is connected and moving within the 12,000 miles of Pacific Ocean, creating a guidance system anchored in relationships rather than abstract geographic categories. The fundamental concept of oceanic navigation is that stars mark islands and reefs not in relation to the Western cardinal directions of north, south, east, and west, but in relation to other islands and reefs, all of which move in a synchronized pattern. The stars, for instance, rotate in a star path, above islands and reefs also moving along these same paths. Pacific Islanders understand that the islands and reefs are mobile, constantly expanding and contracting with the movements of their Indigenous inhabitants: the islands expand as fish, birds, and plants travel out, and they contract as their inhabitants journey back home. The "boundaries" of the islands and reefs are perceived as fluid and connected to the life within them; this is a concept that the Carolinian people, from the Caroline Islands, call "pookof."

Through this Indigenous thought-world, everything is pulled together: the seascape, body, and imagination, forging a relationship. Identity is assembled within the movements of the ocean as the body moves through it, meshing the two together. Blankenfeld is engaging an image-making

power through his spatial knowledge of the seascape. If he does not imagine the connection, it will not exist. He must actively “see” the relationships within the seascape with his body, and then sail with the seascape, not on, but as part of it. Movement is privileged within his Oceanic map, a way of constructing the world that allows, and even requires, the islands and stars to participate in the voyage. Blankenfeld is realizing a seascape epistemology by setting into motion an Indigenous way of traveling that orients the body inside the moving seascape as opposed to vectoring oneself off a point that intersects latitude and longitude, which is a way of moving that creates only one specific type of map about social and natural space.

A disembodied movement, on the other hand, fails to capture the collective experience of identity because the body would be left out of an understanding of self. Yet this is precisely how Euro-American reason, and how European theory, functions. It privileges the cognition of the mind over the movement of the body. For instance, in 1768 Captain James Cook was among other European voyagers who began moving away from the coastline and venturing into a realm of longitude. Sailing vessels began to venture “out there” with the goal of “arrival” and “discovery” within what was still perceived as a chaotic and mysterious ocean colored by biblical and mythical images of sea monsters, voracious whales, and catastrophic floods. The ocean was unknowable to Europeans; in fact, “to attempt to fathom the mysteries of the ocean bordered on sacrilege, like an attempt to penetrate the impenetrable nature of God” (Corbin 1994, 2). Native Hawaiians, however, were actively voyaging throughout the Pacific Ocean, which they perceived to be an ancestor, guiding them as they journeyed with it.

Cook’s new ability to jump across the abyss altered Western perceptions of space into organized territories filled with political and economic aspirations. Cook’s traveling instigated European discussions concerning humanity and power that supported various images of political legitimacy, ethics of engagement, and accounts of global justice. Philosopher and political science scholar Brian Richardson writes,

The representations of the world in Cook’s voyages have political implications. In Europe, the representations of the places in the South Pacific were used in debates over the limits and character of human nature, over the relationship between science and politics, and over the legitimate use of power, both at home and throughout the world. [...] What Cook found on the islands of the South Pacific, in other words, was used to idealize the natural political order that nationalists spent the next two centuries trying to create. (Richardson 2005, 7-8)

It should be noted that both Euro-settler and Pacific voyaging took and takes part in the production of specific politico-cultural orders that often articulate narrow horizons of identity, nation, participation, and government. Both Western and Indigenous voyagers establish(ed) the dichotomy between home and away. Every center is someone else's periphery, marginalizing those outside of the dominant theoretical landscape (Clifford 1989). Travel ideologies should not be uniformly demonized or romanticized; both European and Oceanic travelers participated in a quest for new knowledge as well as conquest and oppression. Yet the oceanic maps that guided Pacific Islanders to the islands they settled were inherently mobile. This privileging of movement within an oceanic epistemology resists the reduction of thoughts into an “algebra of points and lines” that divides the world into rigid lines and points because it places the self into the map. Furthermore, the body sits inside the oceanic map. Voyaging becomes an embodied engagement.

Alternatively, a disembodied way of moving and traveling neglects all the memories held within kinesthetic movements, and it erases all the historical journeys that our bodies have taken in the seascape; the knowledges accumulated, stories told, and discoveries made. Paul Carter illustrates this concept beautifully in his book *Dark Writing*: “Like photographers taking care their shadow does not get into the picture, we absent ourselves from the scene of discovery. A description of the world is accounted most authoritative when it contains no trace of the knower” (Carter 2009, 5). Omitting the body creates hierarchies and forces of power that come to constitute realities that, intentionally or unintentionally, marginalize Indigenous relationships to place and impoverish Indigenous identities. In contrast, Native Hawaiians do not try to control the seascape, but instead connect to it by placing their bodies and minds inside it. The knowledge within ho'okele illuminates an epistemology about movement that draws the world together, fostering an ocean-body assemblage that honors our human relationships and responsibilities to each other and to the places we voyage through.

## I Imagine

I imagine a school in Hawai'i located along an ever-shifting and interacting coastline of sand, reef, tide pools, and waves. In this school, children will come to spend the day immersed in the seascape, the land and sea, learning by observing and working beside kupuna, elders. This educational center would teach, apply, and support oceanic literacy of he'e nalu,

ho'okele, limu picking, reef and ecological care, as well as knowledge about the marine life and environment within the particular region. The school would be a place where community, culture, knowledge, and identity can be directly addressed and fostered. Bringing together academic strengths and abilities with the Native Hawaiian experiences of oral histories, songs, poems, dance, art, writing, and ceremony creates a power potential for Hawai'i. This educational center could offer us a space in which to engage the imagination for diverse and alternative futures.

Seascape epistemology allows us to see how we are, in fact, part of a whole. Behind the imagination of seascape epistemology is the potential to transform ourselves not only intellectually and culturally, but spiritually and ethically. Seascape epistemology illuminates the fact that we are intertwined with nature, not simply living alongside, but inside it. Seascape epistemology is a call for humanity to open our politics, economies, values, and imaginations so that we can reaffirm and recreate conceptions of knowing and being that are plural and progressive by interacting with a space and place that holds so much significance for so many of us, on so many levels.

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Nicholas Faraclas  and Carlos Rodríguez Iglesias

## **Subaltern Currents and Transgressive Waves: Transoceanic Agents and “Creole Languages”**

**ABSTRACT** In this chapter, we situate debates concerning the substantial similarities between the colonial-era Atlantic English-lexifier Creoles and the colonial-era Pacific English-lexifier Creoles in relation to some of the new ways of looking at language that are emerging within a transoceanic understanding of postcolonial linguistics. Critically questioning categories such as “pidgin,” “creole,” and “language” itself, we adopt a radical creole anti-exceptionalist stance that sees the study of colonial-era creolized varieties and repertoires to be more important now than ever before. The accounts predominating among creolists have largely privileged the influence of European languages and of Eurocentric understandings of language masquerading as “universals.” Here, we provide substantial evidence which suggests that other influences must also be taken into account, especially those, such as transoceanic diffusion, that reconfigure our understanding of the role of marginalized peoples from one of passive victimhood to one of resourceful and creative agency.

**KEYWORDS** pidgin, creole, diffusion, post-creole creolistics, Atlantic Creoles, Pacific Creoles

### **Introduction: Science, “Creole Languages,” and Postcolonial Linguistics**

When we look at oceans, it becomes difficult to avoid seeing what we do not give ourselves permission to see on land. When we look at “creole” repertoires and varieties, it becomes difficult to avoid seeing what we do not give ourselves permission to see as part of our “scientific” understanding of “non-creole” repertoires and varieties. While we can pretend, according to the dominant metaphysical paradigm, that what we encounter on land is largely of a particle, defined, static, and predictable nature, as soon as we

encounter the oceans, particles dissolve into waves, boundaries are washed away, stasis breaks like a wave, and predictability swirls into serendipity. While we can pretend, according to the dominant paradigm of linguistic science, that what we encounter in “non-creole” standardized European languages (as well as in the Eurocentric linguistic “universals” which are based on those languages) can be reduced to discrete units, isolated from context, immobilized, and predicted by mechanical laws, as soon as we encounter creole varieties, units morph into quantum shape-shifters, text and context merge, boundaries are transgressed, and the only constants that remain are emergent, unstoppable dynamism and unpredictable variation.

Physicists tell us that ninety-five percent of the cosmos consists of dark energy and matter, which their science cannot see, much less understand (Kuhn 1962; Merchant 1980; Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen and von Werlhof 1987; Alvares 1992). Linguists tell us that ninety-five percent of human linguistic behaviour is irrelevant to their obsession with idealized constructs such as Universal Grammar and Formal Semantics, and therefore does not need to be seen, much less understood, by their discipline (Lakoff and Johnson 1999). The oceans invite us to resolve and dissolve artificial oppositions such as land/sea, particle/wave upon which we have built our current ninety-five percent blind worldview. Creole repertoires and varieties invite us to resolve and dissolve artificial oppositions such as creole/non-creole, language/context, *langue/parole*, and competence/performance upon which we have built our current ninety-five percent blind linguistics.

In this chapter, we build upon the work of Nicholas Faraclas, Micah Corum, Rhoda Arrindell, and Jean-Ourdy Pierre (Faraclas et al. 2012) to reconsider the striking similarities between the colonial-era Atlantic English-lexifier Creoles and the Pacific English-lexifier Creoles, which in the past have been described and explained mainly with reference to linguistic “universals.” In our study of the multiplex ocean-mediated contacts, often in subaltern communities of hospitable cohabitation, among sea-borne agents involved in the shaping of the creole varieties and repertoires of the colonial Atlantic and Pacific, a fascinating, dynamic entanglement and connectedness of waves and currents of a historical, social, political, economic, and linguistic nature emerges which compels us not only to reconceptualize the ways in which we account for these similarities, but also compels us to reconceptualize the ways in which we study language.

Since we fully recognize the very problematic and colonizing nature of the assignment of the label “language” to a particular set of linguistic practices (Makoni and Pennycook 2006; Deumert, Storch, and Shepherd 2020), we will attempt to restrict our use of the term “language” to a generic one in the present chapter, except in those instances where the terms

*repertoires* and *varieties*, our preferred alternatives for the non-generic use of “language,” either fail to convey our desired meaning or render our prose too unwieldy.

## “Creoles”: Post-Creole Creolistics and Radical Creole Anti-Exceptionalism

In 1977, when the field of modern creolistics was still relatively young and linguists were still excluding “creole languages” from the category of “natural languages,” David DeCamp observed that: “there is no [...] agreement on the definition of the group of languages called pidgins and creoles. Linguists all agree that there is such a group [...]. Yet [...] any definition of these languages seems to be insufficient [...]. To a creolist, almost everyone else’s definition of a creole sounds absurd and arbitrary” (3–4). More than forty years later, there is still no consensus as to what, if anything, distinguishes pidgin and creole varieties from each other, and from other (“non-pidgin,” “non-creole”) varieties.

There is a long tradition among creolists that attempts to define creoles in terms of features that they seem to “lack” when compared to non-creoles. Among the most recent examples of this *creole exceptionalist* tendency is John McWhorter (2001) who makes the Eurocentric and largely refuted claim that creole grammars are the world’s “simplest” grammars. A rapidly growing number of contemporary creolists, however, have affirmed again and again that: 1) there is no reliable set of structural characteristics that distinguish creoles from any other group of languages; and 2) there is no reliable way to compare languages in terms of “simplicity.” The non-radical creole anti-exceptionalists who acknowledge this on one level or another usually assign a sociohistorical, rather than a structural definition to the term “creole language,” using it to refer to linguistic repertoires and varieties that have emerged from particular types of language contact, particularly those that predominated during the era of European ocean-based colonial invasion/expansion from the 1400s onward.

In the final analysis, however, all linguistic varieties and repertoires are by their very nature contact varieties and repertoires, because a primary function of language has always been to establish and maintain contact. Borrowing some terminology from postcolonial linguistics, we suggest that language and languaging are also about emergent, trans-local hospitable connectedness (Deumert, Storch, and Shepherd 2020). Robbie Shilliam (2015, 18–9) articulates how, in precolonial societies, both language and science are conceptualized through archetypes or deities, such as:

[Oceanian] Tāne/Māui and [Afro-Atlantic] Legba (as well as [pre-colonial European] Arcadian Hermes) [...] [have] personalities that embody the creative cultivation of deep relation. Their magic, i.e. their decolonial science, binds different domains together—individual, social, geographical and spiritual in the pursuit of restitutive justice [...]. The problem of binding back together is germane to the human condition. It is not a colonial creation. Colonial science was never that innovative [...]. European colonial science [is one] of segregation, which stands opposed to the decolonial science of cultivating deep relation.

Transoceanic contact is a paradigmatic case of such hospitable, non-invasive, non-colonizing connectedness. The non-European oceanographic and navigational sciences that were responsible for the spread of more than 1,000 Austronesian languages from Madagascar in Africa to Easter Island (Rapa Nui) in South America at least 500 years before Columbus, Magellan, or Captain Cook persisted well into the colonial era. Jeffrey Bolster observes that:

The expansion of European shipping was indeed a two-way process of cross-cultural contact, as seafarers from African, Asian, and Pacific waters joined the enterprise and counter-explored the new global maritime circuits [...]. Such groups defied attempts to be easily categorized or confined regionally, retained significant degrees of Indigenous agency, and ultimately reminded European colonialists that they were only visitors in ancient seafaring worlds. (1997, 86–7)

In his archaeology of the word “creole,” Peter Roberts (2008) traces the term back to the 1500s, when it began to be used to differentiate European-descended people born and raised in Europe from people of European descent born and/or raised in the colonies, who were considered to have been somehow “contaminated” or “corrupted” by their exposure to non-European peoples and places. He goes on to demonstrate how, while consistently retaining its association with contamination and corruption from non-European (especially African) sources, the meaning of the word was later extended not only to include people of African descent who were born in the Americas, but also to people of mixed Afro-European descent and/or Afro-Euro-Indigenous descent throughout the Atlantic Basin along with their linguistic, culinary, musical, and other cultural repertoires. Given that the term “creole” has been used in this way to articulate and operationalize the hegemonic, mutually exclusive, and conjunctively exhaustive colonizing binary that equates “European-descended/white” to “pure, natural” at one pole, and “non-European-descended/black” to “impure, unnatural” at the other, a number of creolists are initiating

a process of imagining a *post-creole creolistics* (for example, Faraclas and Delgado 2021).

Taking into account the considerable body of work that questions the supposed exceptional nature of creole varieties (DeGraff 2003) and the problematic nature of the term “creole” itself, Faraclas states that:

While we wholeheartedly agree with Mervyn Alleyne’s assessment of the inadequacies and dangers of using the word “Creole,” we also agree with him that the crisis in creolistics that could result from eventually eliminating the term should neither lead us to conclude that these varieties are essentially dialects of European languages, nor lead us to abandon the study of this set of varieties as a field of academic inquiry. On the contrary, it could be argued that the continued study of [...] these difficult to domesticate repertoires and] varieties, especially those that emerged during the colonial era due to intense and sustained contact among peoples of African, European, Indigenous American, Pacific and Asian descent, as a socio-historically (rather than structurally) defined set of (“creole”) languages is more important now than ever before. (2020, 269)

Because research on creole repertoires and varieties has often involved the study of unpredictable, uncontrollable paradigm-defying language patterns and practices, we assert that creolistics, or some form of post-creole creolistics, will continue to play a key part in subverting the dominant discourses of colonial linguistics. Adopting a *radically anti-exceptionalist* stance in relation to creole repertoires, we therefore continue to use the term “creole” in this chapter. We do so because we contend that in non-trivial ways, all of the linguistic repertoires and varieties of the world are creoles and, despite attempts by governments to standardize them and by linguists to define and domesticate them, all but the most artificial “languages” are multiplex, heteroglossic, contradiction-ridden intersectionalities of repertoires and varieties, and therefore should be re-considered by linguists “in the light of the insights gained from the study of creoles, where heterogeneity and contradiction are less easily ignored and erased than in [the study of] other varieties” (Faraclas 2020, 270).

## “Pidgins”: Linguistics, Colonialism and Social Darwinism

The term “pidgin” surfaced much later than “creole” (in print, as late as the 1800s) in reference to Chinese English-lexifier Pidgin, and unlike “creole,” it has always been employed in reference to language, not people.

English-lexifier colonial-era contact repertoires throughout the Pacific are commonly referred to as “pidgins” rather than creoles, as are many of the English-lexifier colonial-era contact repertoires spoken along the west coast of Africa, despite the many affinities that the latter have with what are referred to as “creoles” in the Caribbean. In fact, if we utilize the admittedly questionable criteria normally employed to measure “genetic relationships” in historical linguistics, it could easily be argued that West African English-lexifier “pidgins” and Caribbean English-lexifier “creoles” are all “dialects” of the same “language” (Faraclas 2012a; 2020).

Replicating the colonizing Enlightenment binaries of civilization/complexity vs. savagery/simplicity and the equally colonizing Romantic/Modernist socially Darwinian linear, unidirectional trajectories of the “evolution” of peoples, cultures, and languages, the standard textbook treatment of pidgins defines them structurally as “reduced” languages, at the least “developed” end of an evolutionarily defined scale. For example, Peter Mühlhäusler (1997) identifies three stages in the “development” of a pidgin, beginning with a highly variable and highly simplified “jargon”/pre-pidgin, progressing to a more complex and rule-governed “stable pidgin,” and culminating in an “expanded pidgin,” which, when it begins to be used as a native language, becomes a “creole.” By this logic, although not all pidgins “develop” into creoles, all creoles “develop” from pidgins. While this alleged evolutionary progression from pidgin to creole has been challenged by creolists such as Mervyn Alleyne (2002) and Michel DeGraff (2003), the current popularity of Salikoko Mufwene’s (2001) scenarios for language contact and change, which include a “founders principle” and “pools” of features in “survival of the fittest” and “winner takes all” competition with one another, demonstrates that many of the colonizing and patriarchal assumptions and mental models upon which such socially Darwinian notions are based are still very much alive (González-López et al. 2012).

A more functional distinction typically made between pidgins and creoles hinges on the idea of nativization, i.e. whether or not the variety has any “native” speakers. It is not difficult, however, to find linguistic communities that defy this simplistic distinction between “native creole” and “non-native pidgin.” Of particular relevance to the present chapter, Nigerian Pidgin in West Africa and Melanesian Pidgin in the South Pacific are some of the clearest examples of linguistic repertoires that continue to be labelled as pidgins when in fact they are both learned as a “first language” and used as a main language in daily life by millions of people. Ross Clark (1979) concludes that: “The classic dichotomy of pidgin vs. creole, according to whether or not the language has a community of native speakers, not only lumps under ‘pidgin’ systems of quite different types,

but may also place unwarranted emphasis on the native-speaker criterion” (quoted in Tryon and Charpentier 2004, 34).

The Eurocentric notion of a monolithic “native” or “first” language has been shown to be a highly problematic misunderstanding of how humans interact with language that emerged as both a justification and a tool for colonization (Makoni and Pennycook 2006; Canagarajah 2017). The colonizing nature of the mix of Enlightenment, Romantic, and Modernist thinking that underpins these and related categories, which are seldom questioned by linguists, is dramatically exposed when they are assumed to be the norm in the pluri-lingual societies that predominate in West Africa and the South Pacific and most of the rest of the colonized world. What sense does it make to speak of a singular “native” or “first” language in societies where children are typically raised speaking several “languages,” where translanguaging is prevalent, and where linguistic repertoires and varieties are in emergent, contradictory, and indeterminate flux, changing constantly to signal shifts in equally emergent, contradictory, and indeterminate identificational repertoires (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985).

In general, we concur with Frances Byrne and John Holm (1993) when they state that, irrespective of one’s definitions, our approaches do not have to be mutually exclusive, as both pidginization and creolization, however we define them, challenge the validity of traditional assumptions regarding the genetic relatedness of languages, in particular the family-tree model, and thus stand to make a valuable contribution to moving us beyond colonial paradigms in the study of language. In this chapter, we will adapt Byrne and Holm’s terminology as follows:

1. West African “pidgins” such as Nigerian Pidgin and Cameroonian Pidgin will be included under the category “colonial-era Atlantic English-lexifier Creoles” along with their Caribbean counterparts, such as Jamaican, Belizean, etc., which emerged from the late 1500s onward.
2. Pacific “pidgins” such as Melanesian Pidgin, which encompasses Tok Pisin (Papua New Guinea), Bislama (Vanuatu), and Solomon Islands Pijin, will be included under the category “colonial-era Pacific English-lexifier Creoles” along with other varieties, such as Hawaiian and Pitcairn-Norfolk, which emerged from the mid-1700s onward.

## ***Questions of Agency: From Plantation to Habitation to Cohabitation***

In 1981, Derek Bickerton formulated his very influential Language Bioprogram Hypothesis, which attempted to account for similarities between the

Atlantic and Pacific English-lexifier Creoles in terms of Noam Chomsky's patriarchal notion of Poverty of Stimulus and Eurocentric understanding of Universal Grammar (Chomsky 1966; 1971). According to Bickerton and the widely accepted current scenarios for creolization that invoke "universals" of L1 and/or L2 acquisition, plantation slavery impeded normal transmission of language, forcing the children of the enslaved to rely on "universals" to "reinvent" language (Bickerton 1981, 123–86). This facile erasure of the agency of women as our main and very hospitable facilitators of connectedness through language acquisition is typical of the "motherless creolistics" and "motherless linguistics" that we mechanically accept and propagate in our classrooms and publications (Faraclas 2012b).

Bickerton's stance reflects the still-dominant view that the colonial-era creoles emerged on vast cash crop *plantations* where a few mostly male European masters enslaved large numbers of people of non-European descent. Robert Chaudenson (2001) proposed that the colonial-era creoles emerged instead on *habitations* or small cash crop holdings that preceded the plantations in many colonies, where small numbers of both indentured Europeans and enslaved non-Europeans worked alongside their European masters. On that basis, he concludes that the colonial-era creoles began as dialects of European languages and remain so (2001, 146–67). This facile erasure of the agency of, and hospitable connectedness among, peoples of non-European descent and other marginalized peoples is typical of the Eurocentric creolistics and Eurocentric linguistics that we mechanically accept and propagate in our classrooms and publications (LeCompte et al. 2012).

These two positions, that of the Universalists, who see Eurocentric language "universals" as determinant, and that of the Superstratists, who see the European masters and their colonial languages as determinant, have become the two dominant views among creolists, and both erase the agency of women, people of non-European descent and other marginalized peoples. Cándida González-López et al. propose that the colonial-era creoles emerged not only in plantation and habitation societies, where European masters were in control, but also in a host of what we call *co-habitation* societies, such as those of the renegades and maroons that preceded and outlived both the plantation and the habitation, where the European masters were *not* in control (2012, 222). In the countless cohabitation societies that emerged in and around all of the seas and oceans of the world from the very beginning to the very end of the colonial-era, non-European-descended women and other marginalized peoples succeeded in recreating their traditional subsistence-based economies of abundance, their traditional inclusive politics, their traditional sciences

of deep connectivity, and their traditional pluri-lingual, pluri-cultural, and pluri-identificational repertoires. These cohabitation societies provided not only important venues for the influence of African, Indigenous, female, and working-class language structures and practices on the emergence of the colonial-era creoles of the Atlantic and the Pacific as we have argued elsewhere (González-López et al. 2012), but also important avenues for the diffusion of colonial-era creole language structures and practices from the Atlantic to the Pacific and back, as we will argue in this chapter.

Although we do not exclude influence from European colonial languages and statistical, “embodied” universals (Faraclas and Delgado 2021) in our accounts of the emergence of colonial-era creole repertoires, we consider neither of them to be preponderant, exclusive, and/or sufficient conditions in that process. Instead, we see them as necessary conditions that play a complementary role in a complex matrix of other equally significant influences, including African languages, Indigenous languages, proto-pidgin/creole varieties spoken along the West African coast, sailor/pirate varieties, cryptolects, performance genres, etc. The present chapter reflects some of our more recent work, where we have come to understand that “creolized” repertoires often constitute prototypical examples of some of the key aspects of linguistic behaviour that are beginning to be acknowledged and studied by postcolonial linguists, such as contradiction, emergence, hospitability, deep relations, trans-locality, and connectedness.

## Features Shared by the Atlantic and Pacific English-Lexifier Creoles

Momentarily leaving aside the problematic nature of the concept “linguistic feature,” some of the most heated debates in creolistics have revolved around accounting for features shared among different creole repertoires and varieties. Though much work remains to be done, published work on the common features found among the Atlantic English-lexifier Creoles is fairly extensive (for example, Hancock 1969). Comparisons between the Atlantic and Pacific English-lexifier Creoles, on the other hand, are fewer and farther between. One of the first to engage in such comparative work was Clark, who in 1979 assembled a modest list of twelve features which he called “world features” of English-lexifier creoles, in which he included lexical items such as *savvy*, “to know,” and functional items such as the past/anterior marker *bin*. He attributed these “shared features” to a hypothetical South Seas Jargon from which the Melanesian varieties of Pacific English-lexifier Creole emerged. Several years later, Holm (1993) identified

thirty-seven features shared by Hawaiian English-lexifier Creole and the English-lexifier creoles of the Caribbean. Contrary to Bickerton, however, Holm claimed these commonalities were due not to universals, but instead were the result of contact with Atlantic English-lexifier Creole-speaking sailors who regularly landed in the Hawaiian Islands during the 1800s. In this respect, much of the present chapter picks up where Holm left off.

To date, the largest and most comprehensive study of shared Atlantic-Pacific English-lexifier Creole lexical and functional items is that of Philip Baker and Magnus Huber (2001), who analysed 2,200 early texts, yielding seventy-five features shared by at least one Atlantic and one Pacific English-lexifier Creole. In 2004, Andrei Avram provided copious evidence which justified the reclassification as worldwide features of twenty-four of the items that Baker and Huber had listed as being exclusive to either Atlantic or Pacific English-lexifier Creoles, resulting in a total of ninety-nine common Atlantic–Pacific features. Using new sources, Faraclas et al. proposed extending the Avram list of worldwide features “by at least 50% to include most of the creole functions and forms that linguists had previously thought to be exclusive either to the Atlantic or to the Pacific” (2012, 147), bringing the total to over 150 worldwide features.

The substantial inventory of morphosyntactic features shared by creoles worldwide can be expected to further increase thanks to new databases and publications such as the *Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Language Structures* (Michaelis et al. 2013), which provides comparable synchronic data on the grammatical and lexical structures of seventy-six pidgin and creole varieties worldwide. This means that, according to the admittedly flawed criteria of colonial historical linguistics, alongside the increasing body of evidence in support of considering most or all of the Atlantic English-lexifier Creoles of the colonial era to be “dialects” of the same “language,” there is a rapidly growing set of shared features that suggest similar relationships between the colonial-era Atlantic English-lexifier Creoles and the colonial-era Pacific English-lexifier Creoles.

## **Accounting for the Similarities between Atlantic and Pacific English-Lexifier Creoles**

Bernard Comrie (1989) suggests that similarities between linguistic varieties can be attributed to: 1) independent “development”; 2) linguistic “universals”; 3) “genetic” descent from a common “proto-language”; or 4) “borrowing.” Many creolists vainly pretend to avoid taking any explicit position on the question of shared features across creole repertoires

altogether, and thus, by default, are implicitly positioned by the dominant discourses of colonial linguistics as proponents of a type of independent development scenario that is automatically subject to omnipresent Eurocentric “universals.” In our work, we avoid a moncausal, unidirectional, monodimensional, “zero-sum” game approach to this and other questions (Faraclas 2020; Faraclas and Delgado 2021). Instead, we consider similarities between linguistic repertoires and varieties to be the result of dynamic scenarios that involve all of the factors mentioned by Comrie plus others, but replacing conventional Chomskian linguistic “universals” with statistical, “embodied” universals, and expanding the limited concept of “borrowing” to include a broad array of diffusional and areal/typological phenomena that acknowledge the connective agency of marginalized peoples.

Using the tools of colonial historical linguistics, several linguists have proposed that the Atlantic English-lexifier Creoles can be “genetically” traced to a proto-pidgin/creole which emerged either in West Africa (Hancock 1969; McWhorter 1997) or on one of the Caribbean islands, such as St. Kitts (Huber and Parkvall 1999). Clark (1979) was among the first to do the same for the Pacific English-lexifier Creoles, proposing a late 1700s proto-pidgin/creole that he called Sino-Pacific that bifurcated into a northern branch, which gave rise to Hawaiian and Chinese Pidgin, and a southern branch that he called South Seas Jargon, which in turn gave rise to the Melanesian English-lexifier Creoles as well as some of the English-lexifier Creoles spoken in Australia. While we do not deny either the existence or the influence of “proto-pidgins/creoles” in these cases, we see them as only one contributing element in a much more complex matrix of factors.

When it comes to the similarities between the Atlantic and Pacific English-lexifier Creoles, accounts based exclusively on independent “development” and/or Bickertonian and neo-Bickertonian “universals” have predominated among creolists. Arguing for acknowledgement of African and Melanesian agency, Faraclas (1990) questions Bickerton’s analysis by demonstrating that many of the “universal” features attributed to the Bio-program can also be found in the West African languages traditionally spoken by Atlantic English-lexifier Creole speakers as well as in the Melanesian languages traditionally spoken by Pacific English-lexifier Creole speakers. In a similar vein, Roger Keesing (1988) and Emanuel Drechsel (2014) acknowledge the influence of creolized varieties that existed in the Pacific before European invasion, while Faraclas and Delgado (2021) do the same for West Africa and the Caribbean. To date, no serious proposal has been advanced that posits an Atlantic-Pacific proto-pidgin/creole.

As does Holm (1993), Clark (1983) hints at the possibility of diffusion of features from the Atlantic to the Pacific:

A number of grammatical and lexical features occur in examples of South Seas Jargon from a significantly wide range of sources to justify the belief that the language was not simply a series of local and ad hoc systems but that it possessed a continuity of tradition throughout the region and the period (1835–1890) [...]. Most of these features also occur in pidgins elsewhere in the world, which suggests that the jargon was not purely a Pacific creation but owed much to preexisting traditions [...]. In fact, among widespread features of South Seas Jargon, there is relatively little that is unquestionably of South Pacific origin. (14–5)

The few creolists who have suggested modest Atlantic–Pacific diffusion scenarios, however, have been attacked by Universalists who deploy arguments such as those originally articulated by Bickerton (1981): “the whole problem of this transmission thing is that there were no carriers [...]. Something crops up in A, something similar crops up in B, and immediately people jump to conclusions [...] [P]idgins are not transmitted; words can be transmitted, words were transmitted all over the Pacific [...] but syntax was not transmitted” (306).

Faraclas et al. (2012) provide linguistic and socio-historical evidence to support and substantiate Clark's (1983) and Holm's (1993) Atlantic–Pacific diffusion hypotheses, in order to demonstrate that, contra Bickerton, not only were there more than 150 lexical and *morphosyntactic* features “transmitted” via Atlantic–Pacific diffusion, but also that there were an abundance of “carriers” to do the job. Based on ample documentation of intimate and prolonged periods of contact and cohabitation between African, African-American, and Afro-Caribbean Atlantic English-lexifier Creole speakers on the one hand, and Indigenous Pacific peoples on the other during the formative period of the Pacific English-lexifier Creoles from the late 1700s onwards, they identify some of the key venues and actors in the process of diffusion mentioned in the paragraphs that follow.

Faraclas et al. (2012) contend that speakers of Atlantic English-lexifier Creoles made up both a socially prestigious and numerically important part of Pacific colonial societies from their beginnings in the late 1700s, throughout the sandalwood and sea cucumber trade period in the mid-1800s, until well into the plantation period toward the end of the 1800s. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker note that more than twenty percent of the individuals recruited to work in the sailing industry between 1800 and 1850 in both Great Britain and the United States were of African descent (1992, 311). The percentage was even higher in the case of the

American whaling industry, reaching an estimated forty percent (Farr 1983). Charles Foy (2008) describes how from the beginning of the 1700s onward, the maritime industry in the northern ports of North America provided enslaved individuals with a viable means to obtain freedom, with significant African-descended communities to be found in these port cities as well as in the larger Afro-Atlantic. There were so many ex-slaves who sought employment in the rapidly expanding merchant marine and whaling industries of Massachusetts that an African-descended community called New Guinea thrived on the southern side of Nantucket, with its own school, church, and graveyard to serve its needs (Farr 1983, 161). Likewise, the migration of African-descended Atlantic Iberian-lexifier Creole-speaking Cape Verdeans to nearby New Bedford to work in the whaling and other industries is well documented (Linebaugh and Rediker 1992).

Once the ships sailed off from ports in Britain and America, they continued to recruit crew members along the way, making stops for this purpose in the Caribbean, West Africa, and the Pacific islands. David Chappell states that “by the mid-1800s, one out of every five sailors in the American whaling fleet was Oceanian” (1997, 163). European-descended mariners were thus in the minority on many vessels, which became important venues for sustained contact between Pacific Islander sailors and their African-descended Atlantic English-lexifier Creole-speaking counterparts. British and US merchants regularly recruited sailors from the west coast of Africa during this period, especially from what is today the coast of Liberia and the Ivory Coast, who eventually became known as “Kru” or “Krumen.” Adams notes that in the Caribbean “Yankee skippers recruited West Indians to fill their crews, as it became increasingly difficult for them to find American seamen to go whaling” (1971, 56) in an article that focuses on Bequia, the second largest island in the Grenadines. Home to a cohabitation society of mixed African, Scottish, and Island Carib descent, Bequia is one of the few places in the world where limited whaling is still allowed under international law, due to the islanders’ long tradition of whaling and building of whaling boats.

By the 1800s, up to twenty percent of sailors who arrived in the Pacific on US and British ships were deserting and cohabiting with Pacific Islanders as casual workers in port cities such as Honolulu or as renegade beachcombers in islands throughout the Pacific (Chappell 1997). Faracclas et al. (2012) relate cases of African American renegades who became beachcombers and whose influence on the Pacific Islander communities where they settled is well documented. One of the best-known is African-descended Atlantic English-lexifier Creole speaker Edward Young, who

was born in St. Kitts and ended up as a leader of an Afro-Euro-Indigenous community on Pitcairn Island in the South Pacific. Many of Young's descendants continue to live in Pitcairn Island or nearby Norfolk Island, and there are at least fifty features of the English-lexifier creoles spoken on those islands that can be traced to the influence of Edward Young (Baker and Mühlhäusler 2013).

African and European-descended renegades were soon joined by a growing number of renegade sailors and beachcombers of Pacific Islander descent. These Pacific Islander beachcombers' mastery of the cultural and linguistic codes of Atlantic–Pacific colonial-era seaborne contact assured them positions of prestige in their own and other communities throughout the Pacific, where they became teachers of Afro-Atlantic-influenced English-lexifier creole varieties and repertoires and other survival skills to younger people who eventually would leave their islands to join the growing transoceanic colonial-era trading networks. Because of their fluency in Afro-Atlantic-influenced English-lexifier Creoles, renegades of Pacific Islander, African, and European descent were eventually hired as sandalwood logging camp managers, sea cucumber dealers, and plantation overseers, placing them in the kinds of positions of prestige and influence where their linguistic practices could be rapidly propagated by the workforces over whom they had authority (Chappell 1994).

Pacific Islander women were also key players in many of the sea- and land-based exchanges and partnerships of cohabitation and hospitable connectedness that eventually helped spread colonial-era Afro-Atlantic-influenced English-lexifier Creole repertoires across the Pacific. Some Pacific women were taken as plantation slaves, while others became beachcombers, travelled with sailors, and established their own commercial networks and empires. Chappell states that some of these women “spent so much time on ships that they helped in [...] cross-cultural mediation to the point that they often had the upper hand in trading with the sailors [...]. [These] women were in the frontline of cultural change” (1977, 18–9). Pacific women shared the fruits of their labour with their families, along with the Afro-Atlantic-influenced creolized languages and cultures that they helped to shape (Faraclas et al. 2012).

Finally, the pervasive influence of this substantial cohort of “carriers” of Afro-Atlantic influenced creolized linguistic and cultural repertoires was augmented over the course of the 1800s by the transfer of Atlantic English-lexifier Creole speaking bureaucrats, missionaries, and functionaries from the longer-established English colonial holdings in the Caribbean and West Africa to British colonial holdings in the Pacific (Faraclas et al. 2012).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have attempted to situate debates concerning the substantial similarities between the colonial-era Atlantic English-lexifier Creoles and the colonial-era Pacific English-lexifier Creoles in relation to some of the new ways of looking at language that are emerging within a transoceanic understanding of postcolonial linguistics. Critically questioning categories such as “pidgin,” “creole,” and “language” itself, we have adopted a radical creole anti-exceptionalist stance that sees the study of colonial-era creolized varieties and repertoires to be more important now than ever before, as we begin to question the colonial underpinnings of Western science in general, and of linguistics in particular. In an effort to initiate a process of envisioning some of the contours of what might take shape as a post-creole creolistics, we have proposed multi-causal, multi-directional matrix scenarios for the emergence of both the Atlantic and Pacific English-lexifier Creoles that: 1) allow for complex interactions among influences from “sub-/super-/ad-strates,” “proto-pidgin/creoles,” diffusion, areal phenomena, statistical embodied universals, etc.; and 2) acknowledge the transoceanic agency of all of the people involved in colonial-era contact in the Atlantic and Pacific, including those who have been marginalized as historical, cultural, and linguistic agents, such as women, members of the non-propertied working classes, and peoples of non-European descent. The accounts which have predominated among creolists both for the emergence of the colonial-era creoles as well as for the similarities between the colonial-era Atlantic and Pacific English-lexifier Creoles have largely privileged the influence of European languages and of Eurocentric understandings of language masquerading as “universals.” In this chapter, we have provided substantial evidence which suggests that other influences must also be taken into account, especially those, such as transoceanic diffusion, that reconfigure our understanding of the role of marginalized peoples from one of passive victimhood to one of resourceful and creative agency.

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## 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).<sup>1</sup> 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.

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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 exploitative, even voyeuristic lens. Exceptions are, for example, Maxwell Philip's *Emmanuel Appadocca; or, Blighted Life: A Tale of the Buccaneers* (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”<sup>2</sup>—texts that make up a subgenre of postcolonial literature as, for example, the postcolonial gothic novel or postcolonial petrofiction,<sup>3</sup> 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

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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 sombre]*, 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).

epistemes. 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 enslavement 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 “enslavement” 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 enslavement. 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).<sup>4</sup>

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:

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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 enslavement 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 enslavement. 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; Strolz 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 Laramée 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 exploitative (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 ridden 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 Molokai. 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 exploitative 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, limps 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 *‘aumākua* 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 exploitative 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).<sup>5</sup>

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 habitance.” Rifkin argues that the production of national space (e.g.

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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.<sup>6</sup> 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).

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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 induced 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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# OCEANS AND ISLANDS



***Retracted:***

Bill Ashcroft

**Oceans: The Space of Future Thinking**

This contribution has been retracted because the author has taken over text passages from (his own) older publications, in which he has in turn taken over text passages from other authors verbatim or paraphrased, without indicating this. Author, volume and series editors have been informed of the retraction of the contribution and have agreed to it.



Stefanie Mueller

## Sketches of Salt Water Poetry: Herman Melville’s “The Encantadas, or The Enchanted Isles”

**ABSTRACT** This article uses Herman Melville’s remark on the demise of the “poetry of salt water” as the starting point of an inquiry into the relationship between form and content in one of his seafaring pieces, “The Encantadas, or The Enchanted Isles.” It revisits claims that Melville’s use of a fragmentary style in “The Encantadas” undermines and thereby challenges hegemonic knowledges about the Pacific and its archipelagos, such as are at work in early nineteenth-century natural histories and travel writings. For this purpose, the article discusses “The Encantadas” as an example of the antebellum genre of the literary sketch and points out Melville’s use of the desert island trope. In conclusion this article argues that Melville may be challenging naturalist knowledge in “The Encantadas” but he is also prioritizing literary knowledge—what he calls the “poetry of salt water”—by rendering the Galapagos archipelago simultaneously remote and accessible to readers.

**KEYWORDS** Herman Melville, archipelagos, islands in literature, aesthetic form, empire

### Introduction

Herman Melville began his career as a literary author in the 1840s, with two books about his adventures as a young man in the South Pacific. These two books, *Typee* and *Omoo*, were so successful that Melville—then in his late twenties—was able to get married, settle down, and begin to think more earnestly about his career as a writer. However, a common scholarly narrative of his career highlights the degree to which it all went downhill for Melville after he took up writing in earnest: how his novels after *Typee* and *Omoo* were mostly commercial failures, for example, and how he

produced magazine fiction such as “Bartleby, the Scrivener” only because he needed the money. In the last few years, however, this narrative of demise has been partly debunked: yes, most of his novels were commercial failures; and yes, magazine fiction was better paid and more conventional by comparison. But magazine fiction also allowed Melville to write for a bigger audience, to reach a more diverse readership, and to develop and experiment with narrative forms that we also find in his novels.

To get an idea of Herman Melville’s sense of authorial identity at this early commercial height of his career, we can turn to a review he wrote anonymously, and which was published in *New York Literary World* in March 1847. It is a review of two books on whaling: factual accounts of the practices and the state of the whaling industry: J. Ross Browne’s *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise* (1846) and Captain Ringbolt’s *Sailors’ Life and Sailors’ Yarns* (1847).<sup>1</sup> In his review, Melville presents the two books as “faithful” accounts of seafaring, but it is also precisely this faithfulness that distinguishes them from what Melville calls the “poetry of salt water.” He begins his review by stating:

From time immemorial many fine things have been said and sung of the sea. And the days have been, when sailors were considered veritable mermen; and the ocean itself, as the peculiar theatre of the romantic and wonderful. But of late years there have been revealed so many plain, matter-of-fact details connected with nautical life that at the present day the poetry of salt water is very much on the wane. (Melville [1847] 1984, 1117)

These two new books, he adds, have “further [...] impair[ed] the charm with which poesy and fiction have invested the sea,” and he deplores the extent to which “the disenchanting nature of the revelations of sea life” turn the matter of writing about the ocean into a merely “practical one” ([1847] 1984, 1118). Melville’s own writing evidently aimed to *add* to rather than to diminish the charm of the sea, and, in fact, so much so that publishers had doubts about the veracity of Melville’s accounts of his South Pacific adventures (cf. Phillips 2007, 128).

This article uses Melville’s remark on the demise of salt water poetry as the starting point of an inquiry into the relationship between form and

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1 Sheila Post-Lauria discusses J. Ross Browne’s works as part of her study of Melville as magazine writer. She writes that Browne, like Melville, understood “the particular practices that marked the literary environment[s] of the magazine[s],” and that he accordingly employed sentimental registers in his work for *Harpers*, for example, while *Etchings of a Whale Cruise* testifies to his ability to “writ[e] more ‘realistic’ narratives” (1996, 192).

content in one of his seafaring pieces. “The Encantadas, or the Enchanted Isles” was first published in three instalments in *Putnam’s Magazine* in 1854 and later republished as part of his collection *The Piazza Tales* (1856). The subject of “The Encantadas” is the archipelago better known as Galapagos, the islands made famous by Charles Darwin’s *Voyage of the Beagle*, first published in 1839. The piece is divided into ten so-called sketches that can be loosely grouped thematically: the first four sketches introduce the islands geographically by way of the narrator’s recollections of his ascent of a high, tower-like rock formation and its panoramic view. The remaining sketches present anecdotal histories of individual islands, of their history of exploration, and of an attempt to create a free republic on one of them. “The Encantadas” is still one of Melville’s lesser-known works, though it was by far one of his most successful pieces of magazine fiction. Contemporary reviewers of the *Piazza Tales*, for example, often singled out “The Encantadas” from the other stories in the collection. One reviewer recommended “The Encantadas” by declaring that “[a] more vivid picture of the fire-and-barren cursed Gallipagos [sic] we have never read”; while another wrote that the piece “exert[s] an indefinable but irresistible sway over the imagination” (quoted in Beecher 2000, 88).

More specifically this article focuses on “The Encantadas” because recent scholarship has read its representation of the Galapagos archipelago as an intervention into the contemporary discourse on mapping and natural history. This scholarship compares the fragmentary style of “The Encantadas” and its preoccupation with questions of nature, hierarchy, and knowledge favourably against, for example, Charles Darwin’s account of the Galapagos in *Voyage* and his *Diary* (1933).<sup>2</sup> For example, “The Encantadas” contains a population table that is quite similar to the statistical table that Darwin presents in his chapter on the Galapagos archipelago. In the same vein, the fragmentary style’s challenge to ideas of wholeness and the possibility of complete knowledge have been taken as a critique of the imperial practice of mapping, for example.<sup>3</sup> However, almost none of the scholarship pays attention to the formal conditions of this fragmentariness in Melville’s piece and what this can tell us about the nature of his discursive intervention. This article fills this gap by locating “The Encantadas” in the tradition of the literary sketch and by detailing the ways in which the genre itself allows Melville to assert narrative authority and his authorial identity through fragmentation rather than through the

2 For example, see Tanyol (2007) and Blum (2008). As Denise Tanyol notes, Melville had purchased the first US edition of the *Voyage* in 1847 (2007, 244).

3 For example, see Smith (2019) and Blum (2008).

kind of totalizing reach we find in the naturalist discourse of writers like Darwin, for example.

## Melville's South Pacific Fiction

In the last two to three decades, such questions of power and discursive critique in Melville's South Pacific fiction have, for a large part, been addressed in the context of the scholarship on nationalism and imperialism in nineteenth-century US culture. Based on the work of Benedict Anderson, for example, scholars have analysed and pointed to the significance of maps in Melville's fictions: pictorial maps included in the publication as well as the literary maps drawn narratively, as part of the prose. Overall, such investigations have yielded ambivalent readings of Melville's work.

For example, both *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847) included maps of the Marquesas Islands to authenticate Melville's narratives. As Christopher Phillips explains, "maps served as powerful rhetorical devices with which to at least partially circumvent the need for suspension of disbelief in [...] audiences; because the maps were there, the narratives could by implication be trusted as true" (2007, 128). Such maps as part of literary fictions also contributed to the readers' imperial imaginary. As Benedict Anderson has famously argued, as the world entered the age of mechanical reproduction, the map—just as the museum and the census—was also an instrument that the colonial state used to determine "the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry" (2006, 164). Literature, and travel writing in particular, fulfilled a similar function, as Mary Louise Pratt's study *Imperial Eyes* (1992) has shown. Pratt analyses the way in which rhetoric enabled colonization: how the discourse of travel and exploration, through the figure of the imperial "seeing man" (1992, 7)—explorer or travel writer—desires, objectifies, and possesses. In Melville's literary cartographies, as Juniper Ellis has called them, similar desires can be detected. Both *Typee* and *Omoo* begin with the ocean as a blank space waiting to be filled, for example. And these blank spaces ultimately point to preceding "act[s] of erasure": erasure of Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous cartographies, for instance (Ellis 1997, 12). In the last degree, they become the setting for Melville's acts of self-authorization: the creation of his "identity as an eyewitness" (Ellis 1997, 15).

But such readings can be complicated. For example, Christopher Phillips points out that, while *Typee* and *Omoo* open with pictorial and literary maps, they also close with views of sailors lost and disoriented in what *Moby-Dick*

calls “the limitless, uncharted seas” (Melville [1851] 1983, 987). For Phillips, therefore, the function of the maps in Melville’s works is not so much to inscribe and to possess, but rather to expose maps as subjective, as limited, and therefore dangerous. Read in this light, Melville’s South Sea adventures stage the Pacific Ocean as a space of “epistemological opportunities and challenges” (Phillips 2007, 124). L. Katherine Smith comes to a similar conclusion in her recent discussion of cartography in Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851) and the US Exploring Expedition in the South Pacific and Antarctica (1838–1842). Through its representation of whales and the whale hunt as metaphors of cartography, she argues, *Moby-Dick* “engages issues of cartographic representation [...] in order to erode trust in the implicit claims to accuracy ingrained in the charts and maps produced” (Smith 2019, 51). For Hester Blum, Melville’s problematization of practices of knowledge production at sea, whether mapping, charting, or accounting, are also central to “The Encantadas.” Building on the similarity between Darwin’s statistical table of the Galapagos Islands and Melville’s population table in “The Encantadas,” she argues that the two authors’ epistemological approach is nonetheless quite different: “Melville requires the reader first to recognize the artifice of such structures of understanding and then to participate actively in their formation” (2008, 147). Rather than mocking Darwin’s and other naturalists’ attempts at writing and mapping the world, Blum maintains, Melville democratizes the practice by engaging his readers and simultaneously teaches them to be wary of the accuracy of such practices (Blum 2008, 147).

## “The Encantadas” and the Study of “Natural History”

From the start, the narrator of “The Encantadas” impresses upon his readers the difficulty of *knowing* the islands. They are famously hard to arrive at, he explains, on account of both winds and currents:

Nowhere is the wind so light, baffling, and every way unreliable, and so given to perplexing calms, as at the Encantadas. Nigh a month has been spent by a ship going from one isle to another, though but ninety miles between [...]. And yet, at other times, there is a mysterious indraft, which irresistibly draws a passing vessel among the isles, though not bound to them. (Melville [1854] 1998, 128)

Because each voyage to the islands therefore appears different, the narrator adds, Spanish sailors have called them enchanted: “[T]his apparent

fleetingness and unreality of the locality of the isles was most probably one reason for the Spaniards calling them the Encantadas, or Enchanted Group" (Melville [1854] 1998, 128). In this respect, moreover, the precarious epistemological status of the islands can be seen as part of the text's larger representation of the sea as a space that destabilizes hegemonic categories of knowledge. As Hester Blum has observed, "modes of oceanic thought are themselves predicated on relations whose unfixed, ungraspable contours are ever in multi-dimensional flux" (2013, 151). In "The Encantadas" this is particularly apparent in how the text signifies upon and challenges dominant practices of knowing and writing nature.

In the third sketch, for example, the narrator introduces the reader to a solitary rock formation called Rock Rodondo that rises like "a high stone tower" from the seas (Melville [1854] 1998, 133). Like the rest of the archipelago, the epistemological status of the rock is uncertain because it partakes of both terrestrial and aquatic space. For instance, because it is covered in guano, sailors often mistake it for a ship's sail from afar; and as for the birds that can be found on the rock, we are told that, "though Rodondo be terra-firma, no land-bird ever lighted on it" (Melville [1854] 1998, 135). Indeed, the narrator claims, Rock Rodondo is "the aviary of Ocean" (Melville [1854] 1998, 135). What is more, the rock's ascending tiers or "shel[ves]" give it the appearance of a naturalist's cabinet (Melville [1854] 1998, 135). The narrator exclaims that "I know not where one can better study the Natural History of strange sea-fowl than at Rodondo. It is the aviary of Ocean. Birds light here which never touched mast or tree; hermit-birds, which ever fly alone, cloud birds, familiar with unpierced zones of air" (Melville [1854] 1998, 135). In the passages that follow, the narrator describes the birds sitting on the ascending shelves of the rock formation in terms evocative of a naturalist's taxonomy of animals, with each group of birds occupying a separate shelf.

Yet, even as it pretends to employ them, Melville's sketch can be said to question the truth of naturalist categories. As Denise Tanyol has argued, once established, the taxonomy and in particular the hierarchy implied by the ascending tiers are undermined by the narrator's descriptions and classifications, such as when the narrator describes the birds on each shelf, but spends comparatively more time on the *lower* tiers, with their "outlandish beings" and the "woebegone regiments" of grey pelicans; or when the narrator suddenly includes submarine life in his description of what he calls the Pacific's aviary, thus mixing birds with fish, which is paradoxical from the point of view of a Western/Darwinian categorization of animals (Melville [1854] 1998, 135). In this way, Tanyol argues, Melville directly challenges the idea that naturalist taxonomies and their basis in Western ideas

about nature and non-human life can represent the world truthfully. She explains that “at a time when readers were captivated by the new hierarchies that Darwin and other naturalists so convincingly disclosed, Melville’s work wrests the Galapagos from the grasp of the naturalist, revealing that the marvels of the world are not to be easily mapped, counted, and classified” (2007, 245). As a result of this strategy, she concludes, Melville’s account “keeps the islands mystical, [...] indeed unfit for human habitation” (2007, 279). In this way, she argues, he recovers them from naturalist and imperialist epistemologies, and insists that the islands (but also nature more generally) “are not to be easily mapped, counted, and classified” (2007, 245).

A closer look at Melville’s use of literary conventions suggests otherwise, however. Most obviously, there is his use of the desert island trope in “The Encantadas,” whose more prominent iteration is the tropical island paradise, but which also comes in a more mysterious version. Scholars have often noted how undesirable the archipelago is depicted in Melville’s text and thus how apparently different from the trope of the tropical island paradise. The islands are described as “looking much as the world at large might, after a penal conflagration”: solitary, desolate, barren, and unchanging are dominant features of the Encantadas in Melville’s text (Melville [1854] 1998, 126). However, as Elizabeth DeLoughrey explains, this dystopian island is simply the flipside of the tropical island:

[S]ince paradisial islands do not always provide the kind of excitement needed for plot-driven adventure narratives, other island texts migrate towards the aspects of epistemological inscrutability suggested in titles that employ terms like “mystery,” “wild,” “secret,” “vanishing,” “uncharted,” “lost,” and “floating.” (DeLoughrey 2004, 23)

Nor does the narrator’s initial insistence that the archipelago is remote and inaccessible bear out. Throughout, the text presents the archipelago as a hub in a trans-Pacific network. For example, it served as refuge for buccaneers in the seventeenth century, its waters were a highly frequented hunting ground for whaling ships and more generally, the islands served as place where ships could stock up on provisions. In fact, the islands possess a (however rudimentary) infrastructure: a cemetery and “post-offices [which ...] consist of a stake and a bottle” (Melville [1854] 1998, 172). Finally, almost half of the sketches tell the stories of those who travelled to and, for some time, lived on the island, from a failed settlement on Charles’ Isle to a female castaway on Norfolk Isle. Hence, it is more accurate to say that the text establishes the islands as simultaneously remote and accessible. This tension is, once again, a staple of the desert island genre, as DeLoughrey

notes. In such narratives, “[t]he islands and inhabitants are paradoxically positioned as ‘contained’ and ‘isolated,’ yet this belies the consistent visitation by colonials, shipwreck, anthropology, and tourism—in fact, the narrative of island isolation depends upon these visitors” (2004, 26).

While Melville’s text presents attempts to know the islands through mapping, charting, or accounting as problematic and therefore an object of necessary readerly caution, knowing the islands through literary conventions and tropes is presented as much more unproblematic. In fact, Melville’s use of the literary conventions of the desert island trope warrants a closer look at his purported revisionism of taxonomies, his challenge to a totalizing naturalist and by implication imperialist knowledge of the world. Focusing on what he himself has called “the poetry of salt water,” the next two sections argue that the fragmentary style of “The Encantadas” serves to return to the literature of the Pacific Ocean some of the charm and enchantment that Melville had found wanting in the “matter-of-fact accounts” of travellers and explorers, as well as to affirm the authority of literary discourse. To this end, Melville turns to the affordances of the literary sketch, which was a popular literary form in Melville’s time, but which has received surprisingly little attention by modern-day scholars.

## “The Encantadas” and the Tradition of the Literary Sketch

The popularity of the literary sketch in the United States is often said to begin with Washington Irving’s *Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent*, a collection of essays, tales, and sketches published from 1819 to 1820. According to Graham Thompson, Irving’s *Sketch Book* provided a “blueprint” that many writers would follow, including “the figure of the educated, gentlemanly narrator, or the bachelor given to quiet disquisitions” (2018, 59). But blueprints invite creative redesigns, and the scene of authors writing literary sketches as well as their stylistic choices diversifies in the decades after Irving. In 1824, the British writer Mary Russel Mitford published *Our Village*, a collection of sketches based on her life in a village in Berkshire that was a popular success in the United States as well. Other authors followed suit: in 1829, for example, Sarah Josepha Hale published *Sketches of American Character*, and in the 1830s and 1840s, literary sketches became a staple of the market with publications such as Augustus Baldwin Longstreet’s *Georgia Scenes, Characters, Incidents, Etc.* (1835), Eliza Leslie’s *Pencil Sketches; or Outlines of Characters* (1833), and Catherine Maria Sedgwick’s *Tales and Sketches* (1833), to name just a few (cf. Hamilton 1998, 2).

Twentieth-century critics have tended to subordinate the emergence and development of the literary sketch to a variety of cultural developments. For instance, some scholars associate the sketch primarily with the period's picturesque aesthetic, in particular with regard to the genre of travel writing, while others have identified it as "the medium for early realism" (Hamilton 1998, 5). Yet other scholars have focused on the form's use by specific groups, including, but not limited to, the white male middle-class New Yorkers following in Irving's footsteps, New England Renaissance writers, and rural women writers. By contrast, Kristie Hamilton, author of the only book-length study of the genre to date, has argued that the diversity and ubiquity of the sketch in the first half of the century suggests that the genre offered specific affordances<sup>4</sup> that attracted these groups and the audiences for which they wrote (1998, 5).

Those formal affordances include, for instance, the sketch's "closer relationship to *space* than *time*" (Fash 2016, 170). Sketches often focus on a particular place which they portray in great detail—whether urban or rural, national or regional. This emphasis on space rather than time also means that they are often only loosely plotted or even plotless, since the unfolding of narrative would require a temporal dimension. Moreover, the narrative voice of literary sketches often assumes a personal, subjective, even intimate stance, that suggests that the sketch is rooted in experience and legitimizes the narrator's claim to what Kristie Hamilton has described as a form of "documentary authority" (1998, 149).

Of course, both qualities—its emphasis on space as well as its claim to documentary authority—made the literary sketch a popular genre for travel writing. But for Kristie Hamilton, it is not just the needs of travel writing per se that made the sketch so successful, but the impact of modernization, in particular technological and social change, which it served to capture and make more manageable for its audience. According to Hamilton, the literary sketch presented the period's "preeminent genre of the ephemeral," the genre that best afforded literary representation of a world under the conditions of modernization, because of its "aesthetic of fragmentation": "By making discontinuity a literary convention, sketch writers diminished the shock of the perception of constant change" (Hamilton 1998, 135). Rather than seeking to unify experience into a whole, the literary sketch's generic

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<sup>4</sup> I follow Caroline Levine's work on aesthetic form in this regard. Borrowing the concept of *affordance* from design theory, where it is "used to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs," she introduces it to the study of literary aesthetics: "rather than asking what artists intend or even what forms *do*, we can ask instead what potentialities lie latent—though not always obvious—in aesthetic and social arrangements" (2017, 6–7).

insistence and thus legitimation of discontinuity helped render the phenomena of modernization more familiar for its readers.

A closer look at “The Encantadas” suggests that Melville drew on this tradition of the literary sketch and tested its limits. To give an example of how he conformed to the generic conventions, “The Encantadas” is the only one of his magazine pieces that was published under a pseudonym: Salvator R. Tarnmoor. Such colourful aliases were characteristic for sketches and can be found, for example, in Washington Irving’s work, whose alter ego has the telling name of Geoffrey Crayon; but also in the work of British writers such as Charles Dickens and William Thackeray. Melville also tested the limits of the genre, going beyond what was established convention. As Graham Thompson points out, Melville wrote “The Encantadas” at the same time as his other sketches, all of which were diptychs: “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs,” as well as “The Two Temples” (cf. Thompson 2018, 72). The diptych structure allowed Melville to employ strong contrasts, such as the comfortable lives of lawyers in London as opposed to the hardships suffered by women working in a rural New England paper mill. In “The Encantadas,” Melville went beyond such simple dichotomies by designing “a multi-part sketch,” a sequence of no less than ten sketches. This multiplication of the form’s generic investment in discontinuity already tells us something about the special significance of the aesthetic of fragmentation in “The Encantadas.”

Yet, in their generous reading of the text, scholars who focus only on how Melville’s use of the aesthetics of fragmentation undermines colonialist and naturalist practices of knowledge production tend to overlook the extent to which it also renders the authority of the narrator vis-à-vis his readers more powerful. The aesthetic of fragmentation and the affordances that come with it allow Melville to craft an author-narrator persona that is in control over the islands as well as over the readers. It is, in fact, the form of the sketch that provides Melville with the ideal framework to craft the “poetry of salt water” in which he had found other accounts of sea travel wanting, and, in the process, successfully claim them for the American imaginary of the South Pacific.

## **The “Poetry of Salt Water”**

To this end, almost everything in “The Encantadas” offsets the importance of the narrator’s experience, his personal knowledge of the islands, and his intimate account of his visits. This imbalance of knowledge between

readers and narrators is a key characteristic of the sketch, which values what Hamilton describes as “documentary authority,” and in “The Encantadas” this generic feature is already inscribed in the pseudonym that Melville chose for the text.<sup>5</sup> For example, Hershel Parker claims that the name Salvator R. Tarnmoor is “simultaneously reminding readers of Salvator Rosa’s wild Calabrian scenes and Poe’s gothic tarns and woodlands” (quoted in Tanyol 2007, 256). But as Graham Thompson has pointed out, the pseudonym is also a pun on words that once more highlights the experience of the narrator. Because we can read the pseudonym as “a tar nor more,” which is to say that the narrator is an experienced sailor, albeit one who no longer goes to sea (Thompson 2018, 76). “Tar” is a reference to Jack Tar, a name that was popularly used to refer to a sailor of the British Merchant or Royal Navy. In other words, this Tarnmoor is an experienced sailor.

Tarnmoor’s expertise is soon displayed when, in the Rock Rodondo sketch, he explains to the reader what it takes to ascend to the summit of the rock.

If you seek to ascend Rock Rodondo, take the following prescription. Go three voyages round the world as a main-royal-man of the tallest frigate that floats; then serve a year or two apprenticeship to the guides who conduct strangers up the Peak of Teneriffe; and as many more, respectively, to a rope-dancer, an Indian Juggler, and a chamois. This done, come and be rewarded by the view from our tower. (Melville [1854] 1998, 137)

This is an exceptional list of qualifications that most readers of *Putnam’s Magazine* would be hard pressed to gain, and it serves to underscore the narrator’s expertise and the reader’s luck in being able to follow him up this rock, even if only imaginatively. Read in a more democratic spirit, of course, the imagination makes all the difference. For Hester Blum, the reader’s work begins once he or she has followed the narrator to the top, “incarnating a new proprioceptive vision” that ultimately reimagines and revises “received knowledge” about the islands (Blum 2008, 156, 154). Yet the imbalance between the narrator’s/author’s knowledge and the reader’s remains and is in fact central to the creation of the narrative persona.

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5 In *Putnam’s*, texts were generally published without the author’s name. Hence, the fact that Melville actually insisted on providing a pseudonym is evidence of his knowledge of the literary sketch conventions. In *The Piazza Tales*, he published the piece without the pseudonym.

In this respect, it is important to remember that this scene once more follows closely established literary conventions. To climb the rock all the way to the top, the narrator assures the reader, is “the very best mode of gaining a comprehensive view of the region round about” (Melville [1854] 1998, 133). But similar to the views of blank seascapes that open Melville’s South Pacific novels, upon reaching the summit, the narrator informs the reader that there is nothing to see—or rather, that the reader will see nothing at first. “Look edgeways, as it were [...] to the south. You see nothing; but permit me to point out the direction, if not the place, of certain interesting objects in the vast sea, which kissing this tower’s base, we behold unscrolling itself towards the Antarctic Pole” (Melville [1854] 1998, 137). What’s there to be seen—“certain interesting objects in the vast sea,” such as islands and shores in the distance—cannot be seen but through the mediation of the narrator. Only the narrator can see and make visible to the reader what remains otherwise obscure and invisible. The “unscrolling” ocean thereby serves as the blank piece of paper on which the author/narrator can set down his vision of the world.

In its sketch-form, the text itself makes manifest this authorial position. As noted earlier, “The Encantadas” is a multi-part sketch and consists almost equally of sketches that concern general aspects of the islands and those that concern only specific islands. As the narrator explains at the end of the fourth sketch, “[s]till south of James’s Isle lie Jervis Isle, Duncan Isle, and various lesser isles, for the most part an archipelago of aridities, without inhabitant, history, or hope of either in all time to come. But not far from these are rather notable isles—Barrington, Charles’s, Norfolk, and Hood’s” (Melville [1854] 1998, 142). Their notability derives from the fact that they were inhabited at some point: Barrington Isle was a refuge for buccaneers, Charles Isle home to brief republican experiment, while castaways lived on Norfolk and Hood’s Isle. Focusing on those islands, Melville stretches the generic limits of the sketch as he prioritizes plot over place. He tells stories of individual islands and their inhabitants rather than exploring what he calls the “archipelago of aridities,” which drops out of sight.

Most importantly, the narrator ultimately also masters the islands’ mutability and their location-shifting enchantedness. While he describes previous captains’ and buccaneers’ difficulties at mapping and naming the islands permanently, the narrator of “The Encantadas” casually succeeds in providing a map for his readers. And even though it is a little unorthodox, even this minimalist map serves to assert the author-narrator’s superior epistemological position. The islands Narborough and Albemarle, he tells the reader, “are neighbors after a quite curious fashion. A familiar

diagram will illustrate this strange neighborhood: “Cut a channel at the above letter joint, and the middle transverse limb is Narborough, and all the rest is Albemarle. Volcanic Narborough lies in the black jaws of Albemarle like a wolf’s red tongue in his open mouth” (Melville [1854] 1998, 140). The letter E (but turned by 180 degrees) and the simile of the wolf’s tongue serve to establish the islands’ position vis-à-vis each other for the reader—they represent and locate the islands more adequately than conventional maps. Literary discourse, the narrator suggests, can achieve what factual writing—whether travel accounts or natural histories—cannot.

The authority of experience thus repeatedly affirmed, the narrator is in control of both making the islands strange and making the islands familiar to the reader. While critics like Tanyol are right when they observe that Melville succeeds in *removing* the islands from the grasp of naturalist as well as imperialist epistemologies by making them strange, they do not account for the elements in the story in which the narrator exerts his literary skill to make them *less* strange. An important example for this familiarizing strategy that also undercuts the islands’ physical remoteness is the very first paragraph of “The Encantadas,” which begins like this: “Take five-and twenty heaps of cinders dumped here and there in an outside city lot; imagine some of them magnified into mountains, and the vacant lot the sea; and you will have a fit idea of the general aspect of the Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles” (Melville [1854] 1998, 126). Here as on other occasions, the narrative bridges the gap between the familiar world of the reader and the unfamiliar world of the Pacific Ocean; and here as on other occasions it is precisely the narrator’s experience in both worlds and his command of a highly figurative language that achieve this goal.<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

Rather than praising Melville for his revisionist approach to the naturalist discourse, we should investigate the aesthetic forms more closely that support his alternative taxonomies. While Melville’s text is not inspired by the desire for totalizing knowledge that characterizes naturalists’ texts and while it can be seen as challenging precisely this totalizing reach, I would argue that there is nonetheless a desire at work in the text. While the

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6 As Elizabeth DeLoughrey notes, the island’s remoteness is actually predicated on the city: “the construction of the remote island is contingent upon the metropolitan centre that employs it” (2004, 301).

accounts of Darwin and other naturalists were shaped by a *libido sciendi*, the investment into the rules of the academic field and a drive for knowledge, the kind of investment that shapes Melville's text is that of the fiction writer, a *libido scribendi* we could say. This *libido* is what ties Melville to the literary field of his day and age, in which he saw himself and his literary fictions competing with the factual narratives of writers like J. Ross Browne.<sup>7</sup> The text and how it presents its oceanic and archipelagic objects bears the marks of this libido, most distinctly in its creation of a narrative authority that challenges naturalists' narratives. It is to this end that Melville turns to the genre of the literary sketch and its affordances: its prioritization of place over time, its prioritization of experience over scholarship, and, most important of all, its aesthetic of fragmentation.

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<sup>7</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field and libido as, for example, in *Pascalian Meditations* (1997, 11).

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Sebastian Jablonski 

## A Different Kind of Hybridity—An Early British Depiction of Pitcairn Islanders

**ABSTRACT** This article analyzes early British construction of the Pitcairn Islanders' cultural-colonial hybridity as depicted in John Shillibeer's (1817) *Narrative of the Briton's Voyage to Pitcairn's Island*. The supposedly surprising encounter between the British and the descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers and Tahitian women had a tremendous impact on the creation of Pitcairn inhabitants' myth as an exemplary Anglo-Tahitian community. The critical analysis of the historical account highlights and scrutinizes such conceptualization of their identity as an act of colonial epistemic violence. This critique is conducted through reading of the primary source a postcolonial reinterpretation of Arnold van Gennep's concepts of liminality and Homi Bhabha's cultural hybridity. Shillibeer depicted Pitcairn Islanders' mixed ancestry as an amalgamation of British cultural-colonial tropes enabled in the Empire's "liminal space." Scrutinizing this amalgamation, this article considers its four pillars: Islanders' English language proficiency, Anglican religious piety, exemplary moral behavior, and supposed political affiliation with the British Empire.

**KEYWORDS** Pitcairn Island, Pacific, hybridity, identity, Englishness

### Introduction

The culturally widespread Western perception of the Pacific Ocean as an empty space represents an ongoing epistemic struggle between the still very present colonial-imperial narratives and the counter-narratives of the Indigenous *Islanders* contesting these biased discourses. As R. Gerard Ward states, the Europeans "viewed it as empty, and acted accordingly. Pacific Islanders have seen it as a mosaic of islands and interconnections" (Ward 1989, 235)—a situation also identified by Epeli Hau'ofa in "Our Sea of Islands" (Hau'ofa 1994, 148). However, there are spaces in the Pacific

that were in the past neither empty nor connected. Presenting the contradictions in the epistemes of salt water, this article zooms in on one such space—Pitcairn Island—and aims at taking a small step in decolonizing the knowledge and perception of its inhabitants' history.

On September 17, 1814, HMS *Briton* and HMS *Tagus* approached Pitcairn Island after their crews had seen signs of recent habitation. The island, wrongly charted on the maps by its (re)discoverer<sup>1</sup> British Captain Philip Carteret, was thought to be void of human habitation. A settlement had already been discovered on Pitcairn in 1808 by the American whaling ship *Topaz*, whose captain, Mayhew Folger, informed the British Royal Navy about it in a letter. It seems that the lack of sufficient communication resulted in this information not reaching the two ships: the approaching Englishmen were surprised to find that the island was in fact inhabited.

John Shillibeer, a Royal Marines Lieutenant on board HMS *Briton*, witnessed the first encounter and described it in his *Narrative of Briton's Voyage to Pitcairn's [sic] Island*.<sup>2</sup> The Islanders were “launching their little canoes through the surf,” while the English “prepared to ask them some questions in the language of those people [they] had so recently left” (Shillibeer 1817, 81). The author meant that they would need the services of an Indigenous Tahitian interpreter, referred to in the British Navy’s jargon as “Otaheitean Jack” and defined in a footnote as a “Native of Otaheite, who had been taught a little English by the Missionaries” (Shillibeer 1817, 44). However, as the Pitcairn inhabitants approached the *Briton*, the British were “hailed in perfect English” (Shillibeer 1817, 81), which initially resulted in a cognitive dissonance caused by the fact that the Islanders’ physique and apparel did not match their language proficiency.<sup>3</sup>

As the questioning of two young men from Pitcairn revealed, they were sons of the mutineers from HMS *Bounty*. After rebelling against their commanding officer Captain William Bligh, the mutineers had abducted Tahitian women and men, trying to escape the inevitable pursuit by the Royal Navy. Fletcher Christian, the leader of the mutineers, unsuccessfully tried to settle on one of the inhabited islands in the vicinity

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1 I opt for the term (re)discoverer to show the dichotomy between the British assumption that they were the first to “discover” the island and that of the Polynesians who inhabited the island before the British (at the time of the arrival of the *Bounty* they were already gone).

2 Though Shillibeer mentions Pitcairn Island in the title, he devotes only one chapter of his work to it. The island was neither the destination of the *Tagus* and the *Briton*, nor was its description the climax of the Lieutenant’s narrative.

3 Their clothes caught Shillibeer’s particular attention, as they resembled those of Marquesans (Shillibeer 1817, 96).

of the Marquesas. Having been driven off by its Indigenous inhabitants, he finally opted for Pitcairn, which was charted as uninhabited. After landing on the island in 1790, he ordered the *Bounty* to be burned, to conceal their presence, but also to make it impossible for the outlaws to leave the island. The tensions between the mutineers and their Tahitian male servants were steadily rising; they were finally to erupt sometime in 1793 or 1794. The servants revolted against their oppressors when one of the Englishmen “demanded and obtained the wife of one of the native men” after his own “wife” had died in an accident (Young 1894, 25). The outcome of this rebellion was the killing of all Tahitian men and most of the Englishmen, while another three English survivors died within a short period of time. By 1814 the island was inhabited by the mutineers’ descendants, the Tahitian women and the last of the original mutineers, John Adams.

In this article, I discuss the approach of the British (re)discoverers of the settlement as it was presented in Shillibeer’s narrative, which was published three years after his contact with the Islanders. The significance of his depiction of the encounter lies in the way he described the inhabitants of Pitcairn to his readers, using a well-known European trope of the Pacific as a “paradise” inhabited by “children of nature” and suturing it with an image of Islanders as perfect cultural-colonial hybrids within the British Empire’s liminal space. This notion seems to be connected to the mixed English-Tahitian ancestry of the Islanders born on Pitcairn, which is mentioned throughout Shillibeer’s work. Conveniently for his goal of presenting these people as “perfect,” this is not discussed by him in terms of racial differences. Though Homi K. Bhabha describes the notion of cultural hybridity “from the minority perspective” (Bhabha 1994, 2), it is crucial to stress that this concept will not be applied to analyzing the Pitcairn Islanders’ own identity claims, as it is impossible to unequivocally discern them in the Lieutenant’s biased imperial discourse. Rather, the concept will be considered from the point of view of the British colonizer, Shillibeer, who in this first encounter with the Islanders invented and imposed a new cultural-colonial hybrid identity upon them.<sup>4</sup>

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4 After studying the history of Pitcairn Islanders, I have concluded that an attempt at describing and/or analyzing their own perception of their identity/identities might result in an act of epistemic (post)colonial violence. Therefore, the notions of liminality and cultural-colonial hybridity will be applied only in reference to the British colonizers’ depictions of the Islanders in order to subject them to critical scrutiny.

## Hybridity and Liminality

In *The Rites of Passage*, Arnold van Gennep focuses on describing religious rituals that constituted the rites of passage which represented a threshold that the participants were to cross in order to ascend into higher social levels in their society (van Gennep [1909] 1993, 3). This threshold is known in anthropology as a liminal space “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner 1995, 95).

From the perspective of the Pitcairn Islanders, it is impossible to provide an unbiased historical statement that could illuminate us contemporary scholars as to how they perceived themselves. However, the analysis of Shillibeer’s work as, crucially, describing *the first* encounter between them and the Englishmen hints at how he himself classified the position of this island’s inhabitants within the areas of British expansion in the Pacific. The Lieutenant’s depiction located the Islanders in another sort of liminal space—at the fringes where British culture meets Rousseau’s trope of the “noble savage.” Whilst the actual phrase was originally used by John Dryden, the notion of a human being enjoying a natural and noble existence until corrupted by civilization is generally attributed to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who had a tremendous influence on the European perception of Pacific Islanders in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The performances of British culture by Pitcairn inhabitants described by Shillibeer—their perfect command of the English language, their Anglican piety, morality, and association with British political rule—constituted a novelty to his readers and a point where cultural-colonial hybridity emerges and “noble savages” become agents of “nature in its most simple state” (Shillibeer 1817, 88).

Shillibeer could not entirely place the Islanders either within the tropes relating to Pacific Islanders or, through their perfect performances of Englishness, as his “countrymen.”<sup>5</sup> This “interstitial passage between fixed identifications open[ed] up a possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertain[ed] difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha 1994, 4). Throughout his narrative, the author mixed the two aspects, unable to point to one single identification that could help him and his readers to pin Pitcairn inhabitants down to one cultural trope or the other. However, this is precisely where, contrary to Bhabha’s description of the “interstitial passage” as being “without an assumed or imposed hierarchy,”

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5 The notion of “countrymen” is discussed at some length in a later section of this article titled “Why, King George to be sure”—Colonial Politics.

Shillibeer placed Pitcairn Islanders in the colonizer's hierarchy above other Pacific Islanders, but below the British. Therefore, the Lieutenant diverged from what the modern scholar could denote as Turner's and van Gennep's identification of liminality as the "middle passage" (Turner 1995, 95)<sup>6</sup> and from Bhabha's notion of a cultural hybridity that includes no hierarchies. Instead, he invents an amalgamation—a hybridity of British cultural-colonial tropes—resulting in what he presents as a perfect community within a perpetual liminal space, geographically remote and outside the sphere of influence of Indigenous Pacific Islanders and the British Empire alike.

## "Always English"—Language

The first pillar in Shillibeer's construction of the Pitcairn inhabitants' cultural-colonial hybridity was the language they spoke. For eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British society "language was an index of intelligence and reflected human mentality, knowledge, memory, imagination, sensibility" (Chitnis 1976, iii). The linguistic intelligibility of the people encountered had a noticeable impact on how they were perceived by the colonizer. This idea is elaborated by eighteenth-century British "orientalist" John Richardson, who writes that a language "may be considered as one great barometer of the barbarity or civilization of a people. A poverty of dialect is generally accompanied by savageness and ignorance [...] No authority can, at the same time, so decisively fix the peculiar habits and pursuits of a nation as the sounds by which they articulate their ideas" (Richardson 1778, 2); consequently, when the British expanded their political-colonial influence around the world, the local populations' command of the English language was considered not merely a means of communication, but also an indicator of the level of their "civilization."

The previously mentioned "Otaheitean Jacks" furnished only a limited degree of assistance in the communication, due to their own linguistic limits. Therefore, when Pitcairn Islanders approaching the British ships "hailed [them] in perfect English" (Shillibeer 1817, 81), it was clear that this random encounter would differ significantly from the standard modes of contact practiced so far in the Pacific. The Islanders determined, to the

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6 In context of this article and Pitcairn Islanders, the "middle passage" does not at all refer to the Atlantic middle passage and the slave trade. It is a reference to a state "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner 1995, 95), in which a passenger "passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (Turner 1995, 94).

Englishmen's greatest surprise, that the discourse between them would be held in their common language, and thus the issue of the “poverty of dialect” denoting “savageness” (Richardson 1778, 2) was quite simply not an issue. Astounded, the English proceeded to inquire:

- What language do you commonly speak?
- Always English.
- But you understand the Otahetian [sic]?
- Yes, but not so well.
- Do the old women speak English?
- Yes, but not so well as they understand it, their pronunciation is not good.

(Shillibeer 1817, 86)

Having established the Islanders' language proficiency and the historical reason why these people spoke it, the British wanted to investigate in what context English was used in this small settlement. By declaring that they always spoke English, Pitcairn's inhabitants suggested to Shillibeer's readers that this language was more important than or maybe even superior to Tahitian, the language of their mothers. This is supported by the Lieutenant when he invokes their dismissive assertion that these “old women” from Tahiti did not understand English as well as their children did, nor could they properly pronounce it. Hence, from the beginning the young Islanders were portrayed as distancing themselves from, at the very least, their *linguistic* Tahitian heritage.

The exchange of information between Pitcairn inhabitants and the Englishmen achieved two main goals. Firstly, the colonizer presented it as a partial dissociation of native Pitcairn inhabitants from their Tahitian ancestry. Secondly, as in Britain at the time “language was [...] central to assimilation and advancement” (Wheeler 2000, 198) of peoples, Shillibeer pronounced them “performers” of British culture. Considering that “precision in spoken and written English became more central to a metropolitan English identity over the eighteenth century” (Wheeler 2000, 198), its exceptional presentation in this distant place made a tremendous first impression on the colonizers. At the same time, the author points to their partial Tahitianness, when in a dialogue transcribed by him, they admitted understanding their mothers' tongue. Though dismissing the physical aspects of it, he did not ignore the European cultural construct that their mixed racial ancestry elicited. He utilized the colonial trope of the Pacific as “paradise,” which Tahitianness still evoked in Britain, to amplify his depiction of them as perfect examples of cultural-colonial hybrids. This was attainable with the English-Tahitian community as “[culture] has always

carried [...] antagonistic forms of inner dissonance within it" and "even 'Englishness' has always been riven by its own alterity" (Young 1996, xii). Such understanding of Englishness allowed Shillibeer to establish a new image of the social discrepancies between the Islanders and the supposed English standard. Their Tahitian "admixture" enabled "the emergence of community envisaged as a project—at once a vision and a construction" (Bhabha 1994, 3). This "vision and construction" was not an intrinsic property of the Pitcairn Islanders, but a notion conceived by Shillibeer, whose epistemic influence created a biased colonial representation of their identity/identities.

## **"Nature in its most simple state"—Religion**

The second pillar in Shillibeer's construct was the Pitcairn Islanders' reverence for the Anglican religion. Ever since medieval times, "what it meant to be a Christian in a Christian nation [...] was integral to Britons' everyday lives, and this notion appears in travel accounts and novels" (Wheeler 2000, 9) even in the nineteenth century. Christianity, or more specifically Anglicanism, became inextricably connected to the notion of English cultural and national identity and spread around the world as British influence grew. As early as during James Cook's voyages around the Pacific, "the conversion of the South Sea islanders [...] became a *cause célèbre* in evangelical circles that sparked the formation of a new spate of missionary societies geared towards saving the debased savages from heathenism and French Enlightenment alike" (Wilson 2003, 80–1). Considering the British–French colonial rivalry in the Pacific, establishing which religion had the most influence on the island was paramount to the newly arrived Englishmen.

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, &c." (Shillibeer 1817, 85), answered one of the Islanders after being asked to clarify their belief in the first exchange when the young Pitcairn men boarded the ship. This declaration of faith, also called the Apostles' Creed, constituted the identification of a co-believer, providing a first important hint to the Englishmen. At this point it was not clear, though, which of the many Christian denominations the Islanders belonged to. Over the period of European colonization of the Pacific some of the Indigenous people were converted and then reconverted according to the changing political situation and fluctuations in local influence of one European colonial power or the other. Further inquiry as to who had taught them this belief revealed that: "John Adams says it was first by F. Christian's order, and that he likewise caused a prayer to be said every day at noon" (Shillibeer 1817, 85–6). This information led

the Englishmen to understand that, as Christian and Adams were Anglican, so must have been their teachings of the young Pitcairn Islanders.

The “British evangelical missionary work was held up by its proponents as the crucial bulwark for national survival and international order, stamping out simultaneously French and heathen infidelity and idolatry in Europe and the world” (Wilson 2003, 81). It was also regarded as an essential factor in “civilizing” the Pacific Islanders and thus expanding the “enlightened” British rule over them. Adams, as Christian’s successor, was presented by Shillibeer as an agent of this Christianizing force on Pitcairn. In British eyes, his story was the parable of a repentant sinner, who had redeemed himself through his fervent preaching. For the British colonizers it was obvious that the Islanders’ religious zeal that they subsequently experienced derived from the old mutineer’s work. In Shillibeer’s narrative, the Islanders’ Anglican beliefs were of particular significance in the subsequent conversations and constituted an important part of the Lieutenant’s general portrayal of Pitcairn inhabitants to his British audience.

The author specifically emphasized one situation when the Islanders’ behavior was supposed to awe the Englishmen. They were asked to join the *Briton*’s crew for a meal. Shillibeer depicted the interesting scene that followed:

I blushed when I saw nature in its most simple state, offer that tribute of respect to the Omnipotent Creator, which from an education I did not perform, nor from society had been taught its necessity. ‘Ere [sic] they began to eat; on their knees and with hands uplifted did they implore permission to partake in peace what was set before them, and when they had eaten heartily, resuming their former attitude, offered a fervent prayer of thanksgiving for the indulgence they had just experienced. (Shillibeer 1817, 88)

In his opinion, this incident further validated their claim to Anglicanism and even showed their piety to be exceeding that of the English. Such superiority ascribed to them by Shillibeer caused not only astonishment, but even embarrassment. Aside from the Islanders’ behavior, the Englishman’s own reaction to it made him feel uncomfortable, as in polite English society blushing was an attribute of young women (Trusler 1810, 71) rather than of a gentleman and hence could be considered unmanly. From the English point of view, this was problematic as “[gender] was one of the most obvious and telling means of fixing the differences between Europeans and others. There is a long tradition of representing the primitive cultures as feminine and child-like, with civilization as masculine and patriarchal.

In Byron, and more generally Romantic tradition of South Pacific representation, Polynesian culture is coded as feminine" (Edmond 1997, 74). By reacting in supposedly unmasculine way, Shillibeer briefly (and from the colonizer's standpoint, dangerously) reversed these colonial conventions. The Englishman's uneasiness around the Islanders continued:

Our omission of this ceremony did not escape their notice, for Christian asked me whether it was not customary with us also. Here nature was triumphant, for I should do myself an irreparable injustice, did I not with candour acknowledge, I was both embarrassed and wholly at a loss for a sound reply, and evaded this poor fellow's question by drawing his attention to the cow. (Shillibeer 1817, 88)

Shillibeer praised the "nature" that elicited the correct sense of religiousness in the Islanders, but at the same time received Christian's<sup>7</sup> inquiry as unintentional criticism of the British lack of piety. In his view, the English dominance was questioned by the people whom they regarded as being of lower status. Hence, he debased Christian in the eyes of his readers by calling him a "poor fellow." What is more, aside from ignoring the question, he pointed at the cow on board the ship not merely to amuse the supposedly ignorant Pitcairn Islanders, but also to reverse the position of superiority in favor of the British as the ones in possession of an animal unknown to the Islanders.

British superiority was also implied when Shillibeer suggested that the Pitcairn inhabitants' behavior was not innate, but rather stemmed from the work of John Adams. The former mutineer "was greatly respected, inasmuch that no one acted in opposition to his wishes" (Shillibeer 1817, 96), accepting him not only as a leader, but even as a patriarchal figure. Adams as a father-like figure was used by the English to place Pitcairn Islanders within the broader context of the European image of the Pacific, in which Pacific Islanders were presented as "child-like" (cf. Rousseau's "children of nature") and in need of European patriarchal "guidance." The author's repeated highlighting of this aspect brings to mind Turner's description of people in a liminal space as "unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated comitatus, community or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders" (Turner 1995, 96). There is no evidence from either Pitcairn Islanders or Shillibeer concerning their "state of transition," which in Turner's words had to be surmounted by the consummation of the ritual

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7 Thursday October Christian, son of Fletcher Christian the mutineer.

passage (Turner 1995, 94–5). However, the Englishman constructed his depiction of them as exemplifying some of the principles of this passage, like that quoted above. Indeed, the Pitcairn inhabitants' cultural-colonial hybridity is presented by the Lieutenant as attainable through their position at the thresholds of British *and* Tahitian cultural tropes. It could be argued that Shillibeer, being afraid of how an unconstrued perception of their identity could impact the core of colonial Englishness itself, established them in a *limen*. This can be supported by Young's argument that "Englishness [...] has never been successfully characterized by an essential, core identity from which the other is excluded" (Young 1996, 3). Was it possible then, that the Pitcairn Other could attain a British identity? A certain anxiety might have entered Shillibeer's mind had he pondered upon such a question, "an uncertainty that afflicts the discourse of power, an uncertainty that estranges the familiar symbol of English 'national' authority and emerges from its colonial appropriation as a sign of its difference" (Bhabha 1994, 113).

To prevent such an eventuality, Shillibeer disengaged the Islanders' Anglican piety from Englishness. In his view, it was the notion of "nature in its most simple state" (Shillibeer 1817, 88) rather than education or membership of English polite society that enabled such zealous practice of Anglicanism. His reference to nature in the context of the encounters with the Pacific peoples was closely connected to the previously mentioned concept of the "noble savage," which "arises in the eighteenth century as a European nostalgia for a simple, pure, idyllic state of the natural, posed against rising industrialism and the notion of overcomplications and sophistications of European urban society" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2000, 193). However, the Lieutenant, who established Pitcairn Islanders as culturally superior to Indigenous Pacific populations ("noble," yet in his mind still "savages") likened the inhabitants of Pitcairn to the British romantic trope of "nature" as unrefined and morally pure, nearly biblical "paradise." Although the author did not openly use this term, frequent evocations of Islanders living "close to nature" constituted an obvious parallel to other descriptions of Pacific Islanders in which the simplicity of their lives was compared to "the poetical fables of Arcadia" (Cook et al. 1821, 88).

The "cultural refinement" and the "natural simplicity" constituted a divide, a contrast, which applied in Europe initially in popular culture, as the "new Orient" in the Pacific stirred interests particularly in France and Great Britain. A product of this divide was the "colonial desire, whose attractions and fantasies were no doubt complicit with colonialism itself" (Young 1996, 3). This desire further enabled the colonizers to claim lands under the doctrine of discovery, which they used to establish and reinforce

their rule over people in the subjugated lands as a process necessary to “civilize” them. The “positive” literary tropes did not obliterate, but arguably even further supported the age-old European notion invoked in order to colonize lands under the pretense of proselytization. As early as the fifteenth century, the European nations claimed “that converting the infidel natives was justified because, allegedly, they did not have a common religion or laws, lived like animals, and lacked normal social intercourse, money, metal, writing, and European style clothing” (Miller et al. 2010, 10). Pacific Islanders, in the British view, were yet another instance of these “infidel natives.”

Matsuda perfectly summarizes the European “endeavors” in the Pacific:

The French and the British were not interested merely in “discoveries”. They meant to map out trading and strategic routes that would give them commercial and naval advantages, and significant political prestige. Remarkably, their early journals and logs instead created an indelible vision of Pacific islands as places to ponder paradises and lost elysian worlds. (Matsuda 2012, 133)

Considering the Pitcairn inhabitants’ Anglican piety, the parallel to the symbol of paradise would be even more obvious than in the case of Indigenous Pacific peoples.

### **“Minds and manners were [...] pure and innocent”—Morality**

The third pillar in the Lieutenant’s cultural-colonial hybridity construct was the Pitcairn inhabitants’ morality and behavior. At the time of publication, there were two predominant ways in which the morality of the Pacific Islanders was represented in British literature. The first was that practiced by secular authors, explorers, and scientists, and based on the aforementioned trope of the “noble savage,” which in itself did not directly invoke Christian doctrines. The second originated in British religious organizations such as the London Missionary Society (LMS), which had “a vision to ‘spread knowledge of Christ among heathen and unenlightened nations’ [...] [as the] church groups eagerly read shocking tales of island immorality” (Matsuda 2012, 145). They criticized the Islanders’ customs and behavior, especially their “indolence” (Ellis 1830, 450) or “inveterate idleness” (Prout 1843, 44), as the two LMS missionaries complained.

Being a layman himself, Shillibeer was one of the secular authors, distinguishing the Pitcairn inhabitants' piety from moral aspects of their behavior. In his narrative, he constantly compared the inhabitants of Pitcairn and the Indigenous Pacific peoples, contrasting the exemplary morality of the former with the latter's lack thereof, and thus reinforcing the European colonial misconceptions of nature / culture and savagery / civilization dichotomies. He was particularly focusing on the women, as at the time their "appropriate" behavior was regarded in European societies as a sign of civilized culture. Remembering that the Pitcairn Islanders were half Tahitian, the Lieutenant wrote that the local women's "minds and manners were as pure and innocent, as [his] first impression indicated. No lascivious looks, or any loose, forward manners, which so much distinguish the characters of the females of the other Islands" (Shillibeer 1817, 94). His perception of their morality approximated them to English women, who were expected to exemplify chastity, following the "civilized" social norms. The reason for his emphasis on this stemmed from the fact that a lack of chastity was considered by the British to be vulgar and immoral. In one of the earliest published accounts of Cook's second voyage to the Pacific, John Marra described Tahitians as an "effeminate race, intoxicated with pleasure, and enfeebled by indulgence" (Marra 1775, 54). This was due to the position and behavior of women in Tahitian society—in the European colonizer's perception "the potential for corruption increased in nations where women had too much power or too little chastity" (Wilson 2003, 25). Aside from that, Pacific women regarded as "uncivilized" were prone to vulgarity; they were "the antithesis of femininity [...]—that is, the commonness, impropriety, licentiousness, and depravity that femininity is liable to degenerate into in its lowest and most savage state" (Wilson 2003, 25). Shillibeer attempted to separate the image of females on Pitcairn from that of other Pacific women, which was prevalent at the time, and which was exemplified mainly in the accounts of embittered missionaries excusing their failures to establish missions on Pacific islands by blaming the Indigenous populations' morality.

Intriguingly, in ranking the Pitcairn women's morality above "females of the other Islands" (Shillibeer 1817, 94), Shillibeer was echoing Johann Forster. A naturalist on Cook's second voyage to the Pacific, Forster wrote of Tahitian manners and behavior that: "they are infinitely superior to the before mentioned [Pacific] tribes" (Forster 1778, 295). Contrary to Marra, the naturalist notably did not write, in this context, about the Islanders' unchaste conduct. So, what Shillibeer was doing was synthesizing Marra's reference to promiscuity with Forster's elevation of one people above others.

The Lieutenant derided Islanders other than those born on Pitcairn for a specific purpose—to enable him to depict the latter as cultural-colonial hybrids. To avoid the imperial anxiety of “pollution,” which their mixed ancestry evoked in the colonizers’ minds, they had “to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions” (Turner 1995, 95). Their position, designated by Shillibeer as a perpetual *limen* on the fringes of Indigenous Pacific and British imperial influences, had to be fixed in this space to make the whole account of the meeting acceptable to his potential readers. This issue is evinced by Turner in his paraphrase of anthropologist Mary Douglas: “that which cannot be clearly classified in terms of traditional criteria of classification, or falls between classificatory boundaries, is almost everywhere regarded as ‘polluting’ and ‘dangerous’” (Turner 1995, 109). By constructing the image of the Pitcairn Islanders’ cultural-colonial hybridity, the Lieutenant aimed at attenuating such apprehensions in the British metropole. Shillibeer’s construct can be further summarized with Edmond’s ironic commentary on Mary Russell Mitford’s epic poem about Pitcairn:<sup>8</sup> “Europe is tainted [...], Tahiti has failed to meet the promise of its first reports, but Pitcairn can be different from either of these. It will be predominantly European but remote from the accumulated historical guilt of that continent. Paradise is being rewon” (Edmond 1997, 82). Just as in Mitford’s work, this remoteness or perpetual liminality enabled the Lieutenant to praise the imagined identity/identities of Pitcairn Islanders. The Pitcairn Islanders’ intermediate position regarding their behavior and cultural-religious performances is also present in Shillibeer’s depiction of the Islanders’ assertion of British political identity.

## “Why, King George to be sure”—Colonial Politics

The fourth and last aspect of his perception of Pitcairn Islanders was their claim concerning their supposed political affiliation with the British Empire. Experience of the revolutionary turmoil in Europe and North America reinforced the British need for national pride in their political system. Therefore, when expanding their colonial possessions, they were predisposed to acknowledge systems resembling their own or based on similar values, but to dismiss dissimilar ones.

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<sup>8</sup> *Christina, the maid of the South seas; a poem* was published in 1811, describing a fictional history of the first encounter between Anglo-US American sailors and Pitcairn Islanders.

When exploring new lands and expanding their influence over them, the English “justified their claims to sovereignty and governmental and property rights over these territories and the Indigenous inhabitants with the Discovery Doctrine” (Miller et al. 2010, 2). This multifaceted doctrine required the British to gather information about the people who were to be colonized in order to present the entitlement in European colonial-diplomatic circles to avoid tensions due to “unjust” claims. The procedure of “questioning” the local population concerning their system of political rule is also discernible in the inquiry of Pitcairn Islanders recounted by the Lieutenant.

Shillibeer reported that the Islanders were asked who their king was, to which they answered “Why, King George to be sure” (Shillibeer 1817, 86). This brief and apparently self-assured response was an example of a reversal of standard procedure whereby upon claiming a land the colonizers would impose their European political rule over the Indigenous people. Here, Pitcairn Islanders put the Englishmen in a peculiar, even uncomfortable, situation when the Crown’s authority over Pitcairn was declared by its inhabitants and not the colonizers. Similarly to their unexpected display of exemplary Christian piety, the Lieutenant lacked a social-cultural blueprint for what he experienced; he could not clearly classify them and being aware of this, he could not fully cope with this revelation. The rest of the crew were equally baffled, and in their confusion and discomfort did not pursue this particular topic any further.

Another aspect of the inquiry Shillibeer found important was the notion of “countrymen.” The significance of the Islanders’ affiliation with the English was emphasized by the author when he described them as “our half countrymen as they styled themselves” (Shillibeer 1817, 87). By phrasing it like that, he made sure to emphasize that this was the Pitcairn inhabitants’ own self-characterization, unacknowledged by the British.<sup>9</sup> Denoting them as “half-countrymen” stemmed from the Pitcairn inhabitants’ claim that they were “[h]alf English, and half Otaheite” (Shillibeer 1817, 86), hence acknowledging their mixed ancestry. It is impossible to ascertain how they understood the concept, but there can be little doubt that in their secluded community terms like “nation” or “countrymen” must have been abstract ideas. Although the Islanders supposedly emphasized their Englishness, Shillibeer was not willing entirely to overlook their

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9 Pitcairn Island was only annexed by the British in 1838, but official British governance was not lawfully extended over it until 1898 (Allen 2012, 1153). Recognizing the assertions at this early stage (1817) could have caused a political outcry in Britain.

Tahitian ancestry, especially given their appearance and apparel, which to him displayed their Pacific roots. His construct allowed him to create a new type of hybrid “hyphenated identity” “which [had] no affiliation to the nation-state form” (Kalra et al. 2005, 33).

Considering this situation within a broader frame of what could constitute the English identity, such an attitude was not the only course of action open to Shillibeer. Should the Lieutenant have decided to acknowledge the Islanders as English, it would have been acceptable within certain philosophical frameworks. One such framework was provided by Samuel Johnson, who defined a nation as “a people distinguished from another people; generally by language, original [*sic*] or government” (Johnson 1799, n.p.). Shillibeer did indeed distinguish Pitcairn Islanders from other Pacific peoples, praised their perfect English language skills, described their (half-)English ancestry and their claims to be subjects of the British Crown. Yet he resisted fully embracing them as fellow “countrymen.”

One explanation for this caution could have been Shillibeer’s possible fear of an uncolonized cultural hybridity as “tainting” the British paradigm of their “enlightened” civilization. Being of English-Tahitian ancestry and openly acknowledging both elements meant that “the terms either side of the hyphen [were] not constituent parts, but rather what might be called a co-constituting—and often unstable, in-translation, interactive—entity” (Kalra et al. 2005, 89). The colonial social “order” demanded of Shillibeer to be cautious in such instances; the transition ought to stem from the Empire and not its peripheries. Moreover, at the time some Indigenous people started to adopt British cultural tropes in order to survive as biological and political entities, instead of being forcefully assimilated or even exterminated. “Englishness became a performance of non-English and even non-British peoples, a trope of white civilization, maintained through social and theatricalized practices and displays at all levels, that attempted to set off its performers from ‘indigenous’ savagery” (Wilson 2003, 17). Aware of this and faced with the cognitive dissonance mentioned above between the Islanders’ British performance and their Indigenous appearance, Shillibeer was unwilling to fully recognize the authenticity of their behavior.

The Lieutenant’s amalgamation of cultural-colonial hybridity with perpetual liminality was not without risk for Englishness. At the same time, from Shillibeer’s imperialistic perspective, the idea of Islanders dwelling “in the beyond” [was] part of a revisionary time” (Bhabha 1994, 7), but not a remodeling of their own “cultural contemporaneity” (Bhabha 1994, 7) as Bhabha notes; rather, the revision of “the beyond” served to reinvigorate

and reinvent the colonial image of Pacific islands as paradise. As “the Eden ideal had worn off [and] the benevolent state of nature was now fallen paradise” (Matsuda 2012, 145), in the eyes of the colonizers Pitcairn and its inhabitants remained symbols of a perfect arcadian community for a span of over twenty years after the arrival of HMS *Briton* and HMS *Tagus*.

## “[A] unique community”—Conclusion

When the Englishmen met Pitcairn Islanders for the first time, neither group knew what significance this first contact would have for them. For the former, the Islanders quickly became symbols of perfect morality, an epitome of Anglican virtues and Pacific “children of nature,” “a unique community of Anglo-Tahitian descent which turned a naval mutiny into a celebrated romance” (“Pitcairn’s History,” n.p.). Although some vague information about the settlement had reached the British public before 1814, it was Shillibeer’s narrative, the account of an eyewitness, that to a great extent validated the colonial perceptions of the Islanders.

Shillibeer’s description of Pitcairn’s (re)discovery reflects his constant astonishment, but also expresses a certain degree of mental discomfort that the British experienced. The Islanders’ language fluency might have determined how they were perceived by the colonizer over the course of this event, and in future interactions. However, though the crews of the *Briton* and the *Tagus* did not need Indigenous intermediaries, the perception of Pitcairn inhabitants was contained within an imperial-colonial construct, which was advertised and sold to British society with its own self-righteous opinions on people with whom it had never had contact. Although it is impossible to discern how much of Shillibeer’s narrative conveyed facts concerning, particularly, the conversation with young Islanders, his depiction of them was undoubtedly biased, aimed at preserving the waning imperial image of the Pacific “paradise.” It is only possible to maintain this image within a contained space, a perpetual *limen*, where the invention of cultural-colonial hybridity is feasible, and where it can be kept “untainted” by the Pacific Indigeneity but is also not able to “pollute” the revered Englishness itself.

Shillibeer openly acknowledges the Islanders’ piety, which exceeded that of the colonizer and embarrassed him. Their practice of religion sets them apart from the English not as inferior, but indeed as superior, leading the author to divert his readers’ attention towards reinstating British superiority. Whereas religion distinguished them from the British, their sense

of morality distinguished them from other Pacific Islanders. Following in the footsteps of Forster, praising Tahitians over other ethnic groups, Shillibeer presents the example of Pitcairn Islanders as the most chaste and virtuous people. At the same time, he is cautious not to compare or fully align them with the British.

Colonial politics was at the center of Shillibeer's "uncertainty that afflicts the discourse of power, an uncertainty that estranges the familiar symbol of English 'national' authority and emerges from its colonial appropriation as a sign of its difference" (Bhabha 1994, 113). The hyphenated Anglo-Tahitian identity proclaimed by Pitcairn Islanders epitomized this uncertainty or even anxiety. This is why these people had to be contained in a space "betwixt and between"—to avoid intermixing either with the British or with Indigenous Pacific peoples. In his report, the Lieutenant depicts his imagined "emergence of community envisaged as a project—at once a vision and a construction" (Bhabha 1994, 3), which had a tremendous influence on the further history of Pitcairn Islanders. As previous portrayals of Pacific peoples faded over time, so did the romantic image picturing Pitcairn inhabitants as embodying all virtues; it was forgotten, changing the general British view of them from utmost positive to very negative. The racist discourse in the latter half of the nineteenth century led to the capture of one of the Islanders who, when visiting Great Britain, was "secured as a highly prized specimen of the human species, to be exhibited in the Westminster Aquarium" (Young 1894, 219).

It is with the aquarium, essentially a container of water, that I return to the Pacific Ocean. The European imperial projections of this ocean space as vast and empty, and of its human inhabitants as distant objects of colonial desire had a tremendous impact on the history of Pitcairn Islanders. Just like the remoteness of the Island itself, modern postcolonial scholars' investigation of its history is still only on the outer fringes of academic discourse. Analyzing the contradictions in liminal-hybrid-colonial constructs in John Shillibeer's narrative, the forgotten epistemes of salt water, constitutes a step towards lessening this neglect and exposing the colonizer's epistemic violence.

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# OCEANS AND PORTS



# **Earlier Sailing Boats Moved (*Pehla Vahano Halta*): Memories, Princely Ports and Routes of Sailing Boats along the Bhavnagar Coast, Gujarat, Western Indian Ocean**

**ABSTRACT** Drawing upon archival research and nine months of fieldwork, this article collates divergent views of the maritime history of the former princely state of Bhavnagar in Gujarat, India. In doing so, it shows how this region appears through the academic lens of Indian Ocean history and how it is preserved in the archival records of the British Empire and the native princely state. These partial pictures are enriched with the local history of the littoral that is assembled from folklore and the lived memories of various peoples associated with sailing boats, smaller ports and the littoral's remote villages and islands. This micro history traces the sediments of sailing boats and the once active coastal trade routes that remain entrenched in the memories of the littoral's inhabitants. It highlights the connections of the littoral with the land and makes space for micro history of a maritime princely state.

**KEYWORDS** ethnography, historical anthropology, India, Indian Ocean, princely states

## **Introduction**

Indian Ocean history has long battled Eurocentrism. Scholars have detected and unpacked the bias in previous scholarship that conceived of the Indian Ocean as a static zone of limited interconnections that became active with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498. Ashin Das Gupta's pioneering work emphasized the importance and prominence of Indian merchants in the Gulf of Cambay in the early 1700s (Das Gupta 1979). Sources for highlighting a history of the Indigenous peoples who played important

roles in Indian Ocean history and trade (Palsetia 2008; Martin 2008; Ho 2006) outnumber those with a Eurocentric bias. Perhaps we can even say that there is now a new India-centric bias that excludes Africa and most of East Asia in the field of Indian Ocean history (Mukherjee 2013). Scholars have demonstrated that “there is no simple correlation between the rise of European powers and the decline of Asian trade in Indian Ocean history” (Ray 1995, 454). However, the activities of small-scale merchants, who did not always align with or circumvented the networks of empire and operated from the ports of princely states, remain to be told; and this paper takes a step in that direction. A prominent trend in scholarship that challenges the Eurocentric bias highlights that the people from the Gujarat region traded with and established themselves in the ports of Oman and Aden well before the Portuguese entered maritime trade in the Indian Ocean (and paved the way for European colonization) (Markovits 2008, 11). This article, which focuses on the Bhavnagar coast of Gujarat, is not free from the Indian bias as it looks at maritime Western India. However, it contributes to a postcolonial oceans perspective by emphasizing an aspect of the maritime history of a princely state in Western India that bordered the British Empire.

This article depicts the Bhavnagar littoral and the Gulf of Cambay in which it is situated through the lens of Indian Ocean history. This lens highlights transregional trade networks that often overlook the more regional connections of the littoral with both the land and the sea. The article reassembles a maritime history of the Bhavnagar coast from the grassroots level by drawing upon archival research and ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2014 and 2015 along the Gulf of Cambay. The fieldwork involved understanding changes in the maritime connectivity by examining the culture and lifestyles of the littoral peoples and tracing memories and histories of sailing boats. Interviews were conducted with members of various castes and occupational groups, including merchants, brokers, sailors, captains, insurance agents, stevedoring companies, port officers, salt pan workers, and residents of the Bhavnagar littorals’ port towns, harbours, and villages, including school principals, businessmen, tea sellers, and philanthropists. Most of the interlocutors who shared memories that enabled understanding local coastal trade were either directly involved in coastal trade or knew people who owned or operated sailing craft. The material remnants and ruins of sailing boats and sediments of memories of coastal trade helped to select the persons and villages to interview.

The first section of this article introduces the Gulf of Cambay in Gujarat, of which the former princely state of Bhavnagar was a part. It does so by culling out information on the port city of Bhavnagar and on the Gulf of

Cambay as it is presented in the field of Indian Ocean history. It draws upon existing research and publications of established Indian Ocean historians who have encountered Bhavnagar as a smaller port that fed the larger ports of the region that were in turn connected with other ports across the Indian Ocean world. The second section of the paper builds upon archival research and fieldwork and carves out a micro history of the two ports of Bhavnagar town that shows the importance of the port of Bhavnagar for the region. The third section traces the actual sediments of coastal trade and ruins of sailing craft along the coast of Bhavnagar. It presents folklore, oral history, and lived memories of coastal trade and the stories of the port towns and villages that thrived or subsisted on coastal routes of sailing boats from the perspective of the Bhavnagar coast's residents. The article presents data from archival research, references local scholars, and narrates the tales of littoral villages and occupational groups associated with coastal trade that remain unknown in a way to the discipline of Indian Ocean history. This micro history of the Bhavnagar coast suggests that the entire rim of the littoral is linked with the land as well as with the sea.

The princely states of India are often overlooked in mainstream histories of India and of the Indian Ocean. This gap is even more relevant for the history of the Western Indian Ocean, as there were over 200 territories of Indian princes and chiefs in the peninsula of the contemporary state of Gujarat and some of these were never directly under the rule of the British Empire. Overall, one third of the land of India was under princely states and only indirectly under British rule in India in 1947 at the time of independence (Roy, 2006). The ports of the princely states in maritime Gujarat comprised eight of the fourteen ports belonging to princely states at the time of the British Empire in India (McLeod 1999, 88–113). These princely ports were perceived as a threat to the British Indian ports because they could reach markets in North and Central India faster with the aid of railways and they were competitive (if small) as they charged lower customs duties on imported goods in comparison with British Indian ports (Ramusack 2004, 202–3). For example, Ushakant Mehta mentions how the Bhavnagar state supported the local mill by granting free use of water from a pond and exempting machinery imported for the mill from customs duties (Mehta 2013, 75–7).

Archival records of the European powers in the Western Indian Ocean document long-distance trade along the networks of the Empire. Scholars show how Indigenous Asian merchants also capitalized on these new networks of circulation and mobility, while their presence in the Indian Ocean predicated the arrival of the Europeans (Ray 1995; Palsetia 2008). However, existing research overlooks the small-scale, regional, and coastal trading networks that, this article argues, were parallel to the networks of the Empire.

Many of these coastal trade routes were perhaps too regional, small-scale, and economically insignificant to invite the attention of influential people, states, and empires whose records are preserved in the archives.

The article differs from the established academic trends in Indian Ocean history, as it builds on extensive fieldwork, interviews, oral history, and memory that enable assembling histories and perspectives of peoples and places that are not adequately recorded in the colonial archives. Oral history technique enables documenting personal recollections, opinions, experiences, and memories of respondents. It facilitates accessing historically interesting data pertaining to individuals from their own perspective, including the emotions and meanings that they attribute to particular events, memories, thoughts, reflections, and affects associated with the past that would otherwise be missing from broader, more comprehensive histories that tend to focus on larger and more prominent groups of people. Nevertheless, the method does not inherently challenge existing power imbalances (Williams 2018, 787). In fact, by emphasizing the views of the specific interviewees, it might even contribute to accentuating existing micro hierarchies, such as views of men and certain caste groups that were significant for addressing the present research concern. Oral history interviews comprise the bulk of primary sources for this research, which complement information from the archives. This integral approach is required especially for understanding the princely states because the records in the colonial archives are both limited in quantity and adhere to a particular perspective. Records of maritime princely states of Gujarat are often incompletely preserved. In the case of the Bhavnagar princely state, the personal archives of the royal family are open only to the biographers of the royal family who belong to a particular caste and lineage according to local informants. This makes it pertinent to include the biographies and narratives by local historians and the legacies of the past in material culture, memories, and folklore. For example, the Gujarati book *Prajavatsal Rajvi* (2013) by Dr. Gambhir Singh Gohil is the only biography of Maharaja Sir Krishna Kumar Sinhji of Bhavnagar, the erstwhile princely state of Bhavnagar's last Maharaja. Sir Krishna Kumar Sinhji's photographs adorn the walls of offices, universities, photocopy shops in street corners, sweet shops, swanky modern offices of shipbuilders, NGOs, private hospitals, and homes of some residents of Bhavnagar town. The Maharaja reigned from 1919 until the independence of India from the British Empire in 1947, after which he served the South Indian region of Tamil Nadu as its governor for merely a token salary (Gohil 2013, 378–9). However, the photographs of the generous and benevolent ruler were ubiquitous in the Bhavnagar region even at the time the fieldwork took place in 2015. The flag of the

former princely state of Bhavnagar prominently features a sailing boat and eagles that were a symbol of the ruling Rajput clans.

Indian Ocean historians acknowledge that Gujarat region is “a land of the Indian Ocean as well as of India” (Machado 2009, 55), but most of the scholarship in Indian Ocean history focuses on the ocean and on long-distance trade. This article focuses on short- and medium-distance coastal trade that brings the littorals’ connections with the land into the picture. It demonstrates that coastal and transregional maritime routes were sometimes parallel to each other and not always connected. It argues that, contrary to the assumption of an integrated Indian Ocean world, the Bhavnagar coast and consequently the entire coastline of the Gulf of Cambay in Gujarat was not entirely oriented towards the Indian Ocean. Mapping the parallel small-scale routes of coastal trade and portraying the memories of people associated with this trade, the article documents the decline of maritime trade along the coast of the former princely state of Bhavnagar (1723–1948) in Western India between 1900 and 2015.

## Port Bhavnagar through the Lens of Indian Ocean History

This section draws upon existing published research and literature on the Indian Ocean and presents the view of the Gulf of Cambay as it emerges through this academic lens. This view from the field of Indian Ocean studies highlights transregional connections across the Western Indian Ocean and emphasizes the networked nature of this space. It also emphasizes the historical importance and geographical uniqueness of the region within the Indian Ocean world.

Ashin Das Gupta’s seminal work *Indian Merchants and the Decline of Surat c. 1700–1750* (Das Gupta 1979) paved the way for macro analysis of Western Indian Ocean’s ports. His path-breaking analysis chronicled the decline of Port Surat (located opposite to Bhavnagar on the other side of the Gulf of Cambay), which until 1750 was one of the most prominent ports of the Gulf of Cambay, located in the southwest part of the Gulf. He demonstrated that the reason for the decline of Port Surat was not competition from Port Bombay (which came up only later), nor siltation and political instability in Western India as was formerly believed. Instead, Port Surat fell into oblivion because the forelands and markets that the port’s history was deeply intertwined with suffered due to the decline of the Mughal, Saffavid, and the Ottoman Empires across the Western Indian Ocean (Das Gupta 1979) (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).

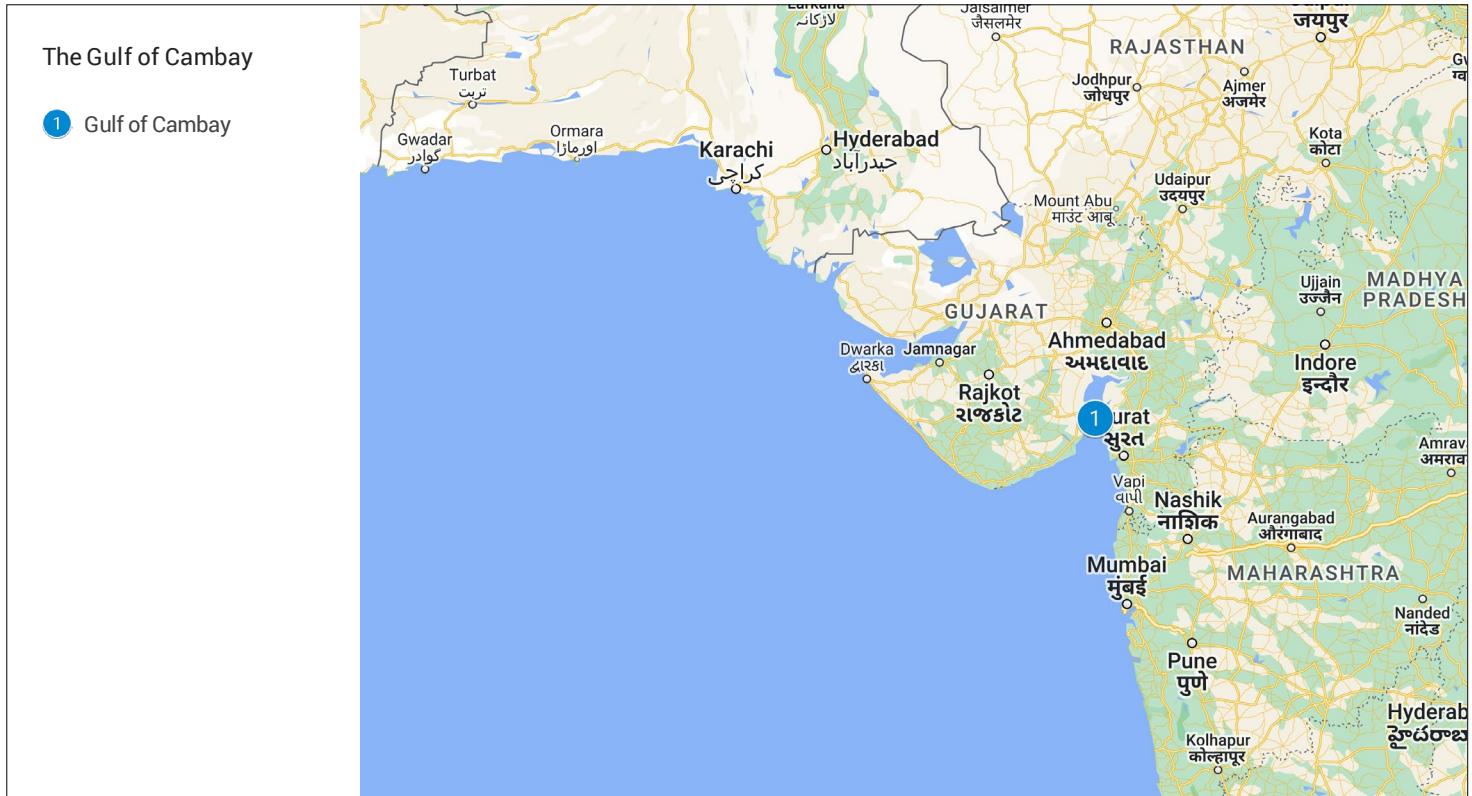
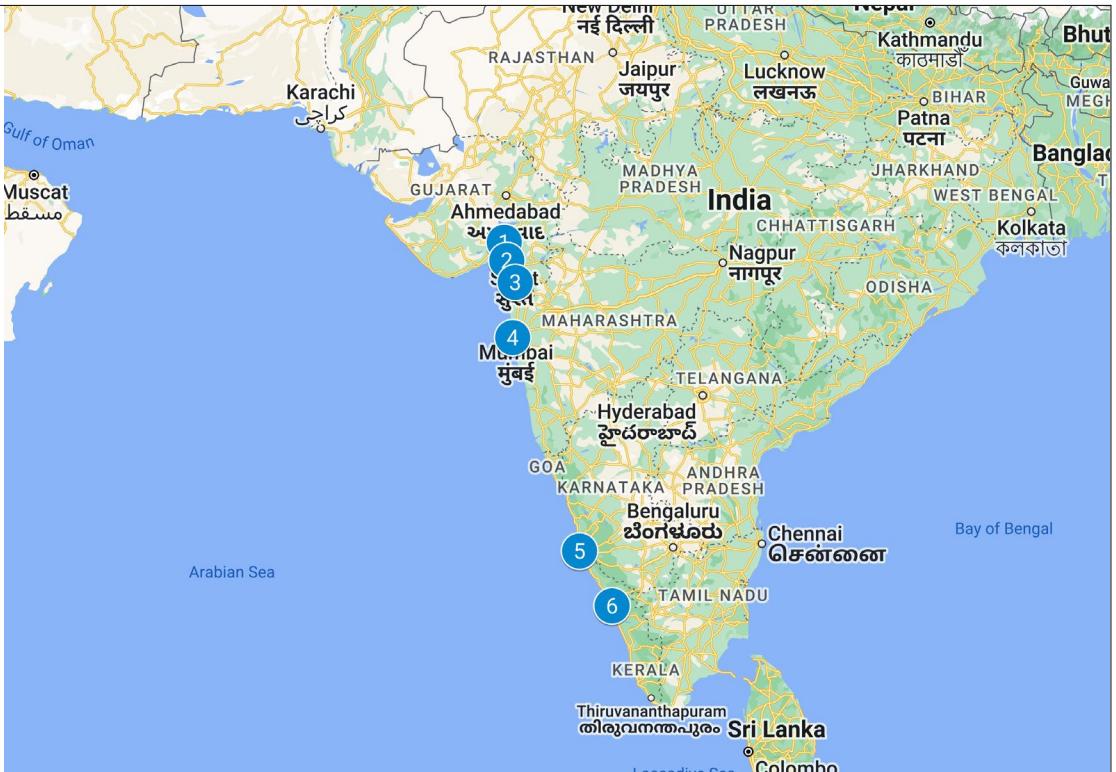


FIG 1. Map of Gulf of Cambay (2020), Gujarat, Western Indian Ocean. © Google

## Coastal Western India

- 1 Dahej
  - 2 Surat
  - 3 Valsad
  - 4 Bombay
  - 5 Mangalore
  - 6 Calicut

### Short and medium distance coastal trade



**FIG 2.** Map of ports connected with the Bhavnagar coast in the Gulf of Cambay (2020). © Google

Archaeological excavations in the Gulf of Cambay have revealed a “trapezoid, brick walled structure” in Lothal, Gujarat (c. 2350–c. 1800 BC) that was identified as a “dock” that might be one of the earliest tidal docks worldwide (Rao 1979, 22–3; Mehta 2009, 22). Geographically, the Gulf of Cambay in Gujarat has one of the highest tidal ranges (40 feet or 12 metres) in the world. It merges into the Arabian Sea. In the heart of the Gulf of Cambay, Port Cambay had carved out a special niche for itself by the tenth century, although “the reasons for the success of the ports of the Gulf of Cambay with its long-broken coastline, shoals, siltation, dangerous tides, numerous creeks have never been clear” (Sheikh 2014, 43). Gujarat’s ports became the hubs of Indian Ocean trade from the eighth century onwards, connecting East Africa, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Persian Gulf with East and Southeast Asia with its exports of “textiles, luxury fabrics, rugs, perfumes, jewellery” (Sheikh 2014, 44; Grancho 2015, 260).

The 200-kilometre-long coastline of the former princely state of Bhavnagar in Gujarat, which this article focuses on, comprises a portion of the northern side of the Gulf of Cambay. Most of the existing literature focuses exclusively on the central and the southern side of the Gulf of Cambay. Through the lens of Indian Ocean historians, the ports of Bhavnagar and Gogha served as feeder ports to Surat and formed “a port system or complex in which Surat was the most prominent” (Nadri 2015, 98–9). According to Nadri, the port complex of Surat includes the hinterland and smaller ports that send commodities to Surat that are destined for far-off places. The smaller ports complement, supplement, and at times compete with the larger port (Nadri 2015, 100). Rila Mukherjee also uses the terms “subsidiary” or “satellite ports” that get swallowed up into a hierarchy of ports as well as “port complex” or networked space that operates in combination. Samira Sheikh deploys the idea of an “auxiliary port” to argue that the ports of Gandhar and Gogha were loading points as well for Cambay in the tenth century, but they may also be seen as a network of smaller ports that revolve around a larger port (Mukherjee 2014, 11–42; Sheikh 2009, 44).

It is difficult to refute the idea that coastal trade connected the smaller, regional ports with the larger ports of the Indian Ocean. Nevertheless, Indian Ocean scholarship on coastal trade is sparse and Pearson’s *Coastal Western India* is an exception (Pearson 1981). It is possible to assume that the colonial administration considered the coastal and foreign trade as separate, since the closing of Indian coastal trade to foreign vessels and restricting the employment of Indian lascars (sailors) on such vessels was mentioned in 1919 (Shipping Control Branch, Department of Commerce and Industry 1919). It is known that coastal trade was undertaken on sailing craft called *vahano* in the Gujarati language. James Hornell, the director

of Fisheries of Madras in British India (1918–1930), who examined boat designs along the entire Indian coastline, describes the craft of South Kattiawar (Northern Gulf of Cambay) and the Gulf of Cambay and Bombay. They include the Arab *baggala*, the native craft of Kutchh (currently spelt as Kachchh) and Kattiawar built in India called *kotia*, and the Gujarati *machchwa* (Hornell 1920, 14–6).

The work of Pedro Machado also corroborates the idea of Bhavnagar as a feeder port when he mentions the competition that Bhavnagar's merchants provided (albeit temporarily) for the Gujarati merchants based on the Portuguese island of Diu. Machado notes that Diu was served by many hinterlands (although Jambusar was by far the largest). According to him, the textile exports from Bhavnagar, which was foreign territory, threatened the business of the Vanias (merchants belonging to the business castes, families, and communities) from Diu in Mozambique so much that they asked the Portuguese to intervene (Machado 2009, 79). Machado shows that Jambusar to the southeast of Cambay served as an export hinterland for the Portuguese ports of Diu and, to a lesser extent, Daman, supplying these with piece goods and textiles that were tailored to cater to the tastes of remote African markets. Although the bulk of the trade from Gujarat was with West Asia and particularly the Persian Gulf, the linkages with Africa show the intricacies of the trade. Machado traces the shift in prominence of Gujarati merchants of Diu after whom the merchants of Kachchh became prominent later. Finally, the traders of textiles from the Americas took hold of the market and these textiles were circulated also in the interiors of Africa by the Gujarati firms (Ray 1995, 537).

In contrast to the depiction of the “small” port of Bhavnagar that fed into the networks of larger ports, the archival records of the Bhavnagar state throw light upon the importance of Port Bhavnagar for the maritime princely state, and they showcase the prominence and the “largeness” of this port in comparison with the other ports on the Bhavnagar coast.

Ghulam A. Nadri also mentions that the “regular flow of merchandise between the two ports of Mandvi (to the North of the Gulf of Cambay) and Surat (in the Southern portion of the Gulf of Cambay) was maintained by local merchants” (Nadri 2015, 98–9) that would have traversed the Gulf of Cambay and crossed to the Bhavnagar coast. However, who these merchants were can be speculated by drawing upon data from oral history and memories that the next section of this article outlines.

In contrast to the view from the outside and above, through the lens of established Indian Ocean historians that draws upon the colonial archive and positions Bhavnagar as a small feeder port, the next section presents a view from within the Bhavnagar littoral, drawing upon records of the

former Bhavnagar state and oral history and referring to the work of local researchers and writers. It points towards an intricate network of localized coastal trade that was oriented towards the coast of the Gulf of Cambay and in which Port Bhavnagar was the largest port.

## Local Histories of Port Bhavnagar

As said above, the Indian Ocean history lens provides a detailed account of how Bhavnagar was merely a feeder port that enriched the networks of larger Indian Ocean ports. Records from the local archives, however, highlight the localized importance of the port of Bhavnagar for the Bhavnagar coast. Port Bhavnagar was the largest port of the Bhavnagar coast and the only port of Bhavnagar state involved in long-distance Indian Ocean trade during the twentieth century. This section presents information on the infrastructure of Port Bhavnagar from the archival records of the former Bhavnagar state and concludes with an outline of contemporary Port Bhavnagar that continues to be celebrated as a site of modernity with its unique dock gate infrastructure.

Port Bhavnagar was established on a creek several miles away from the open waters of the Gulf of Cambay together with Bhavnagar town in 1723 (near the older port of Gogha) (Spodek 1974, 455). Port Bhavnagar had the status of a British port due to a special treaty of 1860–1864. Such “British ports” levied customs duty at British Indian rates and retained this revenue for their princely state (RISEC 1932, 98). The privileges of the ports of Bhavnagar state were curtailed by the British Empire and Bhavnagar’s rulers consistently defended their rights by requests for honouring the treaty of 1864 (Commerce and Industry Department 1908; RISEC 1932, 98). Bhavnagar state is remembered for embracing modern technology and innovations of its port are congruent with this trend. The Maharaja of Bhavnagar was the first to bring in the railways to princely Western India that was indirectly under the rule of the British Empire. The Bhavnagar started work on the Kundla-Mohwa section of the proposed Kundla-Bhavnagar railway in 1911 as part of famine-related works (Commerce and Industry Department 1911) and strengthened transport linkages across modes of communication for smoother trade.

Archival records of Bhavnagar state enable tracing the history of Port Bhavnagar’s infrastructure. As early as 1902–1903, a new dioptic light was provided in the Bhavnagar lighthouse (one of the five lighthouses maintained by the Bhavnagar state). The substitution of coconut oil by kerosene further resulted in “greater efficiency and economy” (Bhavnagar Darbar

1902, 1903). In 1903–1904, around 91,000 tons of mud was dredged until the average depth of fifteen to eighteen feet was reached in Bhavnagar harbour. In 1903 a 600-ton-steamer accidentally landed at Bhavnagar. Bhavnagar's entrepreneurs looked forward to the arrival of larger steamers during high tide which could then lie on the mud of the boat basin creek. The tidal range touched nearly 40 feet at Bhavnagar (RISEC 1932, 109). This process would save the lighterage cost and reduce the prices of imported goods. A temporary wharf was also built and about 45,000 square feet of land was reclaimed near the wharf (Bhavnagar Darbar 1903; 1904).

According to a newspaper clipping from May 30, 1906, the first ocean-going steamer entered the Bhavnagar creek with 3,500 tons of cargo coal and 500 tons of bunker coal. Demonstrating the appreciation of the Maharaja of Bhavnagar, the highest official of the state bureaucracy, the Dewan of Bhavnagar presented the captain and his officers each with purses of gold, welcoming direct trade with European ports in the future (*The Pioneer* 1906). In 1930–1931, fifty-nine ocean-going steamers and 3,710 coasting steamers and other craft called at Port Bhavnagar. In 1930–1931, the volume of imports was Rupees 239.99 lakhs (296,011 euros)<sup>1</sup> and the volume of exports was Rupees 147.61 lakhs (182,540 euros). The customs duties on imports in 1930–1931 were Rupees 51.05 lakhs (62,902 euros) (a steep rise from Rupees 9.18 lakhs [11,322 euros] in 1926–1927) (RISEC 1932, 110). This story of Port Bhavnagar is assembled through the traces it has left in the archival records and there are many missing pieces. The increments in port infrastructure and maintenance are documented in Bhavnagar's archive but little is known about the people whose lives were associated with the port infrastructure and trade. The following paragraphs outline a broad history of Bhavnagar town's two ports during the twentieth century. Long-distance trade received a further impetus in 1932 when the New Port of Bhavnagar was inaugurated with modern infrastructure, complete with a steel jetty, and long-distance maritime traffic was routed through this port. The leading salt merchants of Bhavnagar town mentioned how their families (fathers and grandfathers) sent consignments of salt to Japan on steam ships from the New Port of Bhavnagar in the early twentieth century. This trade soon dwindled due to several reasons, including silting and policy constraints. This all-weather lighterage port is located ten kilometres away from Bhavnagar City and while it is still operational, its capacity and economic significance is limited, especially in comparison with the newer and larger container port of Pipavav (India's first private port, 20° 54' N 71° 30' E, located near the former Port Victor).

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1 According to the current exchange rate in 2022.

In 1957, the construction of a dock gate complete with a tidal gate and permeable gravel flanking dams at the entrance channel of the new port of Bhavnagar was started at a cost of 720,000 pounds (833,832 euros) (Beckett, Oza, and Taylor 1964, 769). This unique machinery for reducing siltation within the dock basin was advanced for the region. The dock gate, locally called the lock gate (because it locks in water when the tide recedes, enabling the barges to keep floating) continues to be celebrated by the people of Bhavnagar, many of whom introduce it as a prominent tourist attraction. The people of Bhavnagar proudly continue to associate this infrastructure with the modern outlook of Bhavnagar town and the progressive rule of the Maharajas of Bhavnagar. While common people continue to perceive the dock gate infrastructure as another example of modernity in princely Bhavnagar, the younger brother of the former prince denied his family's association with the dock gate as it was planned long after the Bhavnagar state willingly merged with independent India in 1947. The territory of the former princely state of Bhavnagar is administratively in the Indian region of Gujarat that was previously within the regions of Saurashtra and Bombay.

Since 1932, the original and henceforth old port (*junu bandar*) of Bhavnagar took over all the medium- and short-distance coastal trade when the new port of Bhavnagar was inaugurated. The old port remained a central node in coastal trading networks until the 1960s, and according to the memories of some timber merchants in Bhavnagar even until the 1980s when the creek of the port nearly dried up and sailing craft became obsolete with the expansion of roads and the concurrent arrival of trucks (see Fig. 3). The land route connecting the old port with Bhavnagar City is still lined with timber shops (*lati*). Many families of timber merchants in Bhavnagar belong to the farmer castes, who continue to purchase timber from other sources and manufacture furniture today. Memories of timber merchants of Bhavnagar are presented in the next section of this article alongside the memories of timber merchants of other ports along the Bhavnagar coast.

Around the time of the decline of sailing boats and of the old port of Bhavnagar, a ship-breaking yard emerged in Alang Sosia village, around fifty kilometres away from Bhavnagar City and many maritime entrepreneurs reoriented their skills in accordance with the new opportunities that the ship-breaking industry provided. The media and Indian Ocean scholarship paint a gloomy picture of the Alang region and highlight the dangerous impacts of ship-breaking on the health and safety of workers and the environment (Rahman 2016). In contrast, Sumanben Chaudhary's PhD dissertation on Bhavnagar depicts an insider's viewpoint, highlighting



FIG 3. The creek at the old port of Bhavnagar in 2014. © Varsha Patel

the economic opportunities and development that have been possible because of the ship-breaking industry. A longstanding resident of Bhavnagar, Chaudhary is an academic of Bhavnagar City where she runs a charitable organization for underprivileged women and a girls' hostel.

Regional historians, scholars such as Sumanben Chaudhary, and Gujarati fiction writers (many of whom remain unknown to the wider world of Indian Ocean history) align closely with the local people and folklore. They corroborate the memories of local residents and help position as well as inform the oral history narratives of the region. Shivprasad Rajgor's famous book in Gujarati titled *Gujratna Bandaro: Ek Parichay* [Ports of Gujarat: An Introduction], which lists all the ports of Gujarat and notes down the unique features of each one, also mentions the smaller ports of Bhavnagar state. The information from interviews portrayed in this article is also congruent with the affect and the way of life of sailors as it is depicted in famous Gujarati language fiction. In this genre, Gunwant Rai Acharya's *Dariyalal* [The Beloved Sea] (1934), a novel based in the Gulf of Kachchh, and Dhruv Bhatt's work based on field visits, *Samudrantike* [At the tip of the Ocean] (1993), stand out as the most appreciated masterpieces. Although these books are not situated in Bhavnagar itself, they carry the flavour of the ocean-side lifestyles that Bhavnagar's residents echo, as they almost always mention these books. The protagonist of Dhruv Bhatt's novel is an outsider who sets out to survey the coast for setting up a chemical factory. He observes the culture of the coast, which is different from his own,

appreciating the idea of time and the vastness of the ocean that informs the worldview of the littoral peoples, as he gradually blends into their world and involves himself with village development work in the 1980s.

In contrast, Gunwant Rai Acharya's historical fiction puts the reader into the shoes of Gujarati seafarers in the nineteenth-century Western Indian Ocean. It mentions some important historical events since the sixteen century and famous sites for seafarers such as Mandvi. The work introduces the caste (community) based nature of Gujarati seafaring tasks, introducing merchants, owners of sailing boats, sailors, and servants, as well as Gujarati trade in East Africa. It shows the power, wealth, and high social standing of some prominent Gujarati merchant communities. It puts the spotlight on a Gujarati slave dealer called Ramjibha and mentions the dangers of rhinos in the forests of Africa and the violence meted out to slaves in East Africa who were under the Gujarati slave dealers. According to Riddhi Shah, while the novel displaces the Eurocentric history of slave trade in the Indian Ocean, it presents a Gujarati Hindu male version of the slave trade that omits the history of the Siddis (Africans in India) and keeps intact the stereotypes of both Gujarati women and black African slaves (Shah 2018, 234). Legacies of trade and business continue to shape the stereotypes of the Bhavnagar and Gujarati cultures.

This section reassembled a history of the Port Bhavnagar's infrastructure by piecing together available information from the archive of the former princely state and oral history. Drawing upon local folklore, oral history, and memories of residents of the various littoral towns and villages of the Bhavnagar coast, the next section aims to assemble a maritime history of the Bhavnagar littoral's tryst with sailing boats.

## **Small Ports, Coastal Routes and Sailing Boats along the Bhavnagar Coast**

Drawing upon oral history, memory, and folklore that revolve around coastal trade and its decline, this section reassembles a maritime history of the Bhavnagar littoral. It introduces the many ports along the Bhavnagar coast that harboured sailing boats loaded with timber, roof tiles, husks of peanuts, jiggery, salt, *ghee* (clarified butter), and goats. The routes of sailing boats brought together the merchants, brokers of prosperous port towns, and skilled sailors and crew from remote impoverished villages and pirate islands. Memories of sailing craft along the Bhavnagar coast show specific and intricate networks of coastal trade which drew upon the specialized occupational skills of workers from specific villages and

towns. These lived memories often coalesce with what came after the sailing boats. Different families, occupational groups, and villages adopted diverse trajectories as they coped with the decline of maritime trade. These variations depict the social, economic, and cultural fabric and carry the flavour of the Bhavnagar coast.

The prominent ports that are mentioned in the administrative records of the Bhavnagar state and in Shivprasad Rajgor's *Gujratna Bandaro: Ek Parichay [Ports of Gujarat: An Introduction]* are in ruins with silted channels, except for the new port of Bhavnagar (established in 1932 and refurbished in the 1960s). The other two currently operational hubs along the Bhavnagar coast are the Alang beach, which took shape as a ship-breaking yard in the 1980s, and Port Pipavav, which was founded as India's first private port in 1996 (see Fig. 4). The ports of the Bhavnagar coast from east to west along the northern coast of the Gulf of Cambay are: 1) the formerly famous Gogha and Talaja, which were the first competition of Bhavnagar; 2) the ports of Bhavnagar City; 3) the ship-breaking beach of Alang; 4) the remote and difficult-to-reach impoverished village of Sartanpar, which has the only three remaining ruins of sailing boats (Sartanpar near the former port of Talaja specialized exclusively in supplying skilled sailors who knew how to navigate the difficult waters of the Gulf of Cambay; see Fig. 5); 5) the remote rural region and port of Katpar, dotted with home-based rope-making initiatives that once supplied sailors and crew for Port Mahuwa; and 6) the prosperous town of Mahuwa, lined with coconut trees and famous for peanuts, red onions, and children's toys. Around 1950 there were around forty-eight to fifty sailing boats in Mahuwa and while some families owned one or two only, others owned around seven. Most of Mahuwa's merchants have adapted their livelihoods, and families that owned many sailing craft are now making peanut butter and processing onions for export. There are ruins of stone warehouses at the port that once stored a variety of commodities for exports (see Fig. 6). The Bhavnagar state spent considerable sums on the improvement of Port Mahuwa in the early 1900s (Bhavnagar Darbar 1904) and elderly residents of the town remember the transition from coconut oil to kerosene for lighting the lamp at the picturesque lighthouse, which is a tourist attraction. The creek where boats were once anchored in 2015 was a mere trail of water with a few small fishing boats tied to wooden logs.

Furthermore, there is 7) Port Victor, the village with no farming land that is an urban area with a silted port surrounded by vast expanses of salt pans belonging to the islanders of Chanch in 2015. Port Kathiwadar was renamed Victor after Prince Albert Victor. Here the marble grave of Sir Proctor Sims (the state engineer of Bhavnagar) is located inside a private

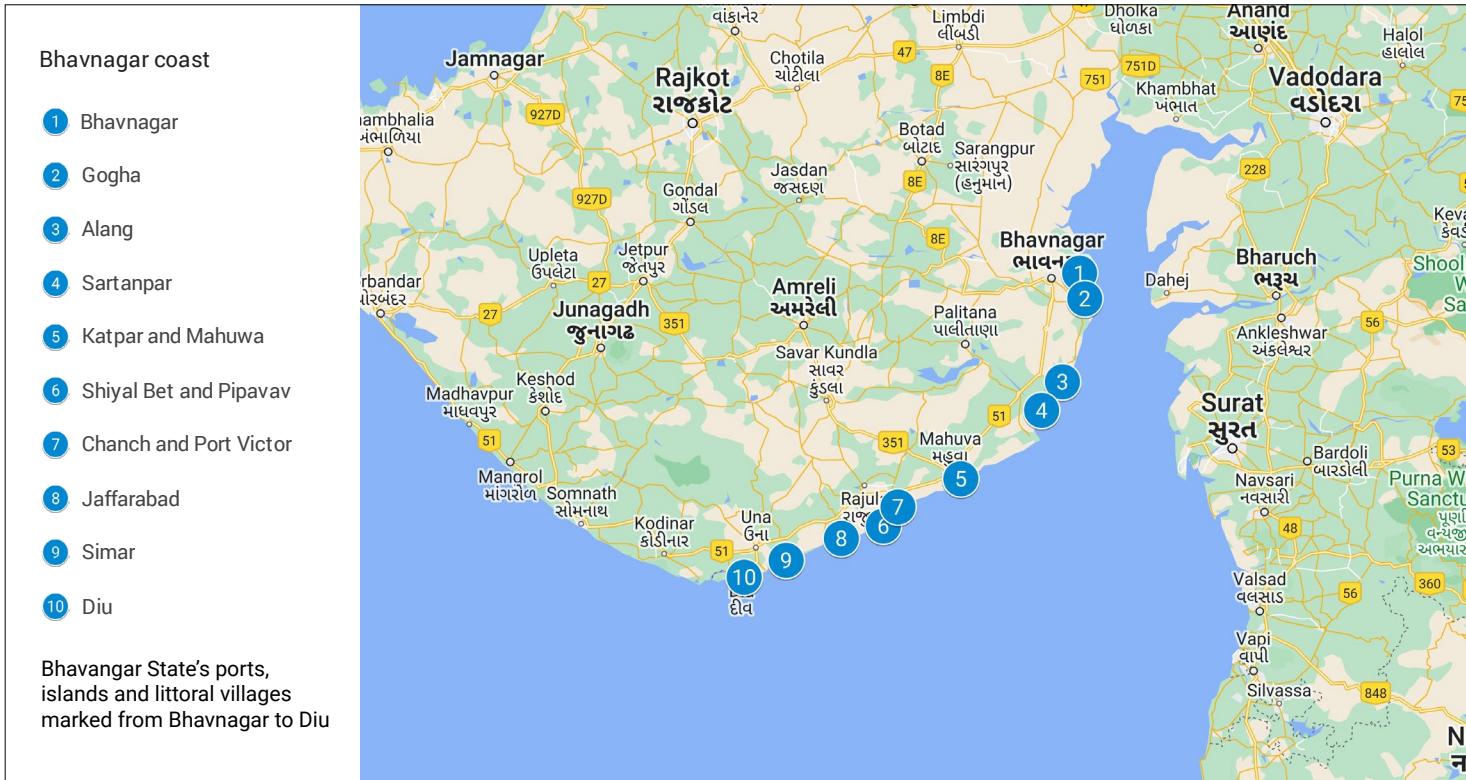


FIG 4. Map of Bhavnagar coast (2020). Port Pipavav and the neighbouring island of Shiyal Bet are marked as one point on the map as they are next to each other. © Google



FIG 5. Ruins of sailing craft in Sartanpar village in 2014. © Varsha Patel



FIG 6. A view of warehouses in Mahuwa in 2015. © Varsha Patel

courtyard and some people revere it as the grave of a British prince. 8) Next to Victor is the adjoining pirate island of Chanch (named after the Gujarati word for pirate—*chanchiya*), where the former Maharaja of Bhavnagar's summer palace is located near the site where the Bhavnagar state was planning to set up a larger port (the elderly members of the royal family remember visiting the island on helicopters in their childhood). According to folklore, a seven-foot-tall pirate ancestor from Chanch once broke the prison bars of Bhavnagar with his bare hands and when the Maharaja of Bhavnagar finally convinced him to forego piracy in exchange for an alternative livelihood, the villagers of Chanch chose to practice agriculture and later to make salt but they still refuse to fish as it is inconsistent with their caste identity. 9) Next to Chanch is the small island of Shiyal Bet, which currently thrives on fishing. The entrance of Shiyal Bet Island off the coast of Bhavnagar is from inside the present Port Pipavav.

Finally, 10) further westwards along the coast, after passing the former Portuguese island of Diu and the fishing and boatbuilding port of Jafrabad, which previously came under the princely state of Janjira, is the once-prosperous port town of Simar, which was ruled by Bhavnagar state. Residents of Jafrabad recall a time when a steam ferry transported people from Jafrabad to Bombay across the Gulf of Cambay. The village of Simar has empty, locked homes since most residents migrated to the active port towns such as Bombay. The nearly deserted village is located outside the Gulf of Cambay, near the open waters of the Arabian Sea.

Which kinds of boats sailed the coastal waters? The larger Arab *dhow*s could not enter the rough waters of the Gulf of Cambay where the Gujarati sailing boats called *vahan* moved. The average tonnage of a Gujarati sailing craft was around 100–200 tons, and these boats were specially made in the Gujarati towns of Billimora, Valsad, Veraval, and Porbandar (on both sides of the Gulf of Cambay). The routes of sailing boats covered medium distances (along western coastal India, a maximum of ten days on the sea) and short distances (local, under forty-eight hours on the sea). Most of the sailing craft became obsolete by the 1980s. Residents of Port Victor remember the last journey of a sailing boat with a cargo of salt (made in local salt pans) from Port Victor (along the Bhavnagar coast, near Pipavav) to Bombay (in the southerly direction, across the Gulf of Cambay) in 2003. Other brokers who were formerly active in Port Victor suggest that country craft completely declined by 2007.

“Earlier sailing craft moved” (*pehla vahano halta*) was a common phrase all along the Bhavnagar coast. Nearly all the elderly residents of the Bhavnagar region saw boats with sails (*shad wada vahno*) in their childhood at a time when the ports of the Bhavnagar princely state and especially

the ports of Bhavnagar, Mahuwa (97 kilometres from Bhavnagar), Victor (near the port of Pipavav), and Simar along the Arabian Sea were active, loud, and vibrant ports (*dham dhamata bandar*) that were operational day and night. The specialized occupational skills of workers from specific villages and towns contributed to these active ports. Merchant families who financed the coastal trade often owned or sometimes rented sailing craft through brokers. These merchants liaised with moneylenders and insurance agents stationed in the port towns of Mahuwa, Bhavnagar, Simar, and Victor. Some merchants found alternative sources for commodities that they continue to trade in (especially timber), while most others ventured into other businesses as coastal trade declined, often migrating to Bombay. Sailors and crew (including captains, skippers, crew, and cooks) from the remote littoral villages of Sartanpar, Talaja, and Katpar learned how to navigate the difficult waters of the Gulf of Cambay. Nearly all the men from these villages worked as crew on sailing boats; and according to insights from a group discussion at the village of Sartanpar, the villagers operated as many as 111 sailing boats in the past that were owned by a few villagers and mostly by the wealthy merchants of different port towns. For example, almost all the men of Shiyal Bet Island worked as crew on around 150 boats that operated from the neighbourhood of Port Victor. Most of these sailing craft were owned by outsiders and only two to three families from Shiyal Bet owned sailing boats, while no family from Chanch owned boats. The pirates of Chanch still sometimes operated on tiny boats (*hodkas*) which their ancestors used for migrating from Port Simar. Sartanpar and Shiyal Bet's sailors turned towards fishing and agricultural labour, migrating across Gujarat to survive the decline of coastal trade. The islanders of the Shiyal Bet Island, who eked out a living by working as crew on the sailing craft and who sometimes worked as pirates, share that in the past there were material hardships. They mention how their ancestors, who did not have fish or vegetables to eat, prepared vegetable curry (*shak*) with pebbles instead, eating the curry and throwing out the stones after the dish was cooked. Such memories passed down by grandparents demonstrate the stark differences in economic strength and food baskets of different families and villages along the Bhavnagar coast.

Local memories of sailing boats along the Bhavnagar coast enable piecing together intricate networks of coastal trade routes. Salient amongst these are the routes of timber and salt as they depict the extent of specialization, division of work, and organization. Timber was imported by specific merchants in Bhavnagar and Mahuwa either from Valsad in South Gujarat (a short distance across the Gulf of Cambay and south of the famous Indian Ocean port of Surat) or from Calicut (a medium distance,

further south along the coast of Western India). Elderly merchants in Bhavnagar and Mahuwa confirmed that specific families who sourced timber from the forests of Valsad imported timber only from these forests and not from any other source. The merchants who sourced timber from Calicut simultaneously imported roof tiles (*nadiya*), as did the families who imported timber from Calicut. The coastal trading networks did not overlap. The timber merchants of Bhavnagar, whose shops line the old port area, belong to the farmer caste. In Mahuwa, the former timber merchants, whose shops line the Katpar port area, also belong to the Vania caste of merchants. Bhavnagar's elderly timber merchants shared experiences of a few adventures in the thick forests of Valsad. They explained in detail how they delegated work to different employees, such as managers to oversee the trade and coordinate with bullock cart owners, labourers for loading and unloading vessels, *dalals* or contractors and brokers for insurance and liaising with owners and crew of sailing craft. The merchants seldom travelled on the sailing craft themselves. A former timber merchant of Mahuwa explained how the two to three sailing craft that he owned were filled with mud before the journey to Calicut to bring back goods, to prevent the boats from toppling over. An elderly merchant of Mahuwa, who took over the business of importing timber from his father, once accompanied the crew on a few adventurous journeys on his own boat. He describes how timber logs were tied and made to float on rivers for easy transportation, taking care that the wood did not rot. An elderly lady whose father and brother owned sailing boats remembers that they looked forward to the boats returning from Calicut as they would bring back a few jars of pepper for home consumption for their families and not for sale. Timber was also imported at Port Simar in the past and the former residents of its carved wooden houses would have enriched the narratives of timber trade. Unfortunately, the village was almost completely deserted in 2015 (see Fig. 7).

Various commodities were exported from the Bhavnagar coast. These included the husks of groundnuts (with the oil taken out), vegetable oil, agricultural produce including red onions, cotton, cereals, and clarified butter. A middle-aged man from the village of Pati, which bordered the territory of the princely states of Baroda and Bhavnagar, shared that his great-grandfather had a clarified butter (*ghee*) making company that employed around twenty to thirty men belonging mostly to the agrarian castes of Ahir, Bharwar, and the Brahmin priests. During this time, neighbouring villages used to send *ghee* to his village and daily around twenty bullock carts went with *ghee* to the village of Bherai near Port Victor. Around two to three horsemen accompanied these bullock carts



FIG 7. A locked house in Simar in 2015. © Varsha Patel

for security. From Port Victor the *ghee* was taken by sea to the larger port of Jafrabad (northwest into the Arabian Sea further along the coast of the peninsula of Gujarat) that belonged to the princely state of Janjira, which was ruled by a Siddi ruler of African descent. An elderly man in Jafrabad pointed out a certain place in Jafrabad town that he called the *ghee chowk*. According to him, *ghee* was collected on that spot and then transported on sailing craft to Bombay and Surat in his great-grandfather's time. Such isolated memories of *ghee* were immediately pointed out by two more persons when the topic of sailing craft came up during conversation; the other residents of Jafrabad and Bherai village did not recall the tale of Pati village's *ghee*, nor did they remember or introduce the *ghee chowk*. Another anecdote points towards the route taken by pastoralists and their goats and sheep from Bhavnagar coast to the port of Dahej in South Gujarat (opposite the Bhavnagar coast) on the other side of the Gulf of Cambay. A middle-aged informant whose father unloaded products at Port Dahej remembers the infrequent groups of nomadic shepherds with their sheep and goats.

Residents of the Bhavnagar coast shared that in the past when various commodities were exported there were no salt pans near Port Victor. As the sailing craft dwindled over time, salt pans expanded such as the business of Madhwani (Madhwani, 2009). Salt became the primary commodity

that was ferried from Port Victor to Bombay. Towards the end of coastal trade in 2003, only around 40,000 tons of cargo (mostly salt) was traded, unlike the 70,000–80,000 tons of cargo that used to go previously from Port Victor to various ports in coastal Western India. The composition of commodities and routes of trade changed over time, but the people of coastal Bhavnagar fondly remember the benevolent and generous rule of the Maharaja of Bhavnagar.

Folklore blends with popular history and the affect and pride of celebrating the benevolent and efficient rule of the Bhavnagar state that was generous and protective towards the people of the Bhavnagar coast. Elderly residents of Bhavnagar and Chanch share that, according to regional history in the Gujarati language, the British wanted to take over Port Victor when the astute bureaucrats of the Bhavnagar state acted in the interests of the local people by giving a *bandar* (monkey) to the British instead of the *bandar* (port), as the Gujarati word *bandar* has two meanings—port and monkey. While the good governance of the Bhavnagar state is remembered, residents of other coastal towns along the Bhavnagar coast continue to avoid going past Victor to keep away from the notorious island of Chanch.

The residents of Chanch and Shiyal Bet proudly remember and share that their ancestors' lives revolved around piracy. Bhavnagar's scholars contribute to and align with popular versions of local tales of the past. For example, during an interview in November 2014, Prof. P.G. Korat's views concurred with the representation of Vir Mokhdaji in contemporary popular culture. Prof. Korat is a well-known academic and he has edited a history of the Bhavnagar region in Gujarati language (Korat, Jani, and Bhal 1995). His PhD dissertation details the life story of a former Dewan of Bhavnagar state (Shri Gaurishankar Oza, who lived from 1805 to 1892). Unfortunately, Korat's publication does not mention Mokhdaji Gohil, who was being commemorated in 2014. In 2015 some of Bhavnagar's residents held celebrations in honour of the victorious Mokhdaji Gohil, who in the 1750s lived on the island of Piram Bet, just off the coast of Bhavnagar, close to the port of Gogha in Bhavnagar state. According to contemporary popular culture, Vir Mokhdaji was not just a simple pirate but one of the first Indian freedom fighters who resisted British rule. These local narratives throw light upon the fuzzy identity of pirates, who are pirates or heroes, thieves or protectors, depending upon one's perspective. A similar point is argued by Jatin Dua, who writes about piracy as protection in Somalia in the Western Indian Ocean (Dua 2013). Pirates, which are an integral part of ocean cultures, blend with the narratives that highlight similarities across the Indian Ocean.

The regional ports of the Bhavnagar coast and the people associated with them did not directly link up with the larger Indian Ocean routes,

and interlocutors reveal that the networks of coastal trade were separate and parallel to the routes of long-distance Indian Ocean trade. However, one exception shows the intersection and connection of the Bhavnagar littoral with the wider world of the Indian Ocean. A sailor from Katpar village, who was first sent as a cook on sailing boats by his father (who also operated sailing boats), ventured to work for a merchant in the Gulf of Kachchh whose large sailing craft were active in transregional Indian Ocean trade. This middle-aged sailor returned to Katpar after many adventures in Western Asia and Africa and he currently recruits local sailors who want to participate in long-distance trade. Therefore, the connection between the persons and commodities associated with local coastal trade that supported the majority of the peoples of the Bhavnagar coast and the larger ports that weave together the Indian Ocean world is rather weak. A micro history of the Bhavnagar coast challenges the view from the Indian Ocean history lens of small feeder ports that cater to the port cities of the Indian Ocean world, and emphasizes instead the unique local history of the coastal region that was perhaps more in tune with coastal Western India than with the Indian Ocean world.

## Conclusion

The examination of the Bhavnagar coast, which was governed by a maritime princely state and only indirectly ruled by the British Empire, reveals the past of a portion of the Indian Ocean rim that is not adequately documented in historical records but that has lived on in the memories of the littoral peoples and places. This article contributes to a postcolonial oceans perspective and suggests that alternative sources for assembling histories and memories of the past, such as oral history, interviews, life stories, and folklore contribute to a more comprehensive Indian Ocean history. Archival records of improvements in port infrastructure, oral history, and memory enable picturing the ports of Bhavnagar in a different light—as modern places with innovative infrastructure and proud residents with a rich maritime history. Oral history also facilitates reassembling the past of remote villages and islands that subsisted on, and of the prominent port towns of Bhavnagar coast that thrived on, local coastal trade. The lives of various peoples and entire villages are not documented otherwise; thus, a study like this supports the writing of a rather neglected local history.

Ruins of sailing boats and memories of littoral people, merchants, and sailors of the coastal villages of the former princely state of Bhavnagar reveal intricate networks of coastal trade that were both separate from and

parallel to the long-distance trade. This paper traced the sailing routes of prominent commodities along the Bhavnagar coast—imports of timber from Valsad and from Calicut (the latter with roof tiles) to the Bhavnagar coast (at the ports of Bhavnagar, Mahuwa, Simar), export of salt to Bombay (from Port Victor) and to Japan (from the new port of Bhavnagar), *ghee* to Jafrabad, and goats and nomadic herders to Dahej in South Gujarat across the Gulf of Cambay. Merchant families specialized in specific commodities traded over specific coastal routes and they did not usually venture beyond. These local coastal trade routes sustained the local people, who did not usually go outside the hereditary occupations of their families for their livelihoods. The boats were largely owned and commissioned by merchants of Bhavnagar's prominent port towns who operated through brokers and contractors. Almost all the men of remote villages and islands (Sartanpar, Chanch, Shiyal Bet) specialized as sailors or as pirates who operated the sailing boats of the Bhavnagar coast.

These findings enable challenging the assumption that the entire Indian Ocean rim is oriented towards the ocean, forming an interconnected zone. Scholars highlight the need for studying the land, which has taken a backseat with Indian Ocean studies' focus on the water (Pearson 1981, xi; Simpson 2015, 115). Examining smaller distances of maritime routes and coastal trade brings this focus back onto the littoral space and enables understanding a coastal society in relation to both the land and the sea.

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# The Remembrance of Enslavement in the Atlantic Ocean Space in Postcolonial Port Towns: Barcelona and Cadiz, Havana and Matanzas

**ABSTRACT** The chapter refers to the remembrance of seafaring in the Atlantic Ocean in two Spanish and two Cuban port towns. The memorial cityscapes of the Spanish ports are full of symbols related to the sea. Museums and monuments reflect pride in brave seamen and adventurous merchants trading exotic goods. They ignore completely (in Cadiz) and predominantly (in Barcelona) that the main “merchandise” were human beings and the Atlantic Ocean was a big wet graveyard. Captives were deported from Africa to the Americas and the Caribbean to be exploited until an early death on sugar, coffee, and cotton fields. In Cuba, plantation slavery is remembered, but separated from the sea’s history and without looking at racism as a legacy of enslavement. The voices of the enslaved are absent on both sides of the Atlantic. The chapter asks for the reasons for these silences and ways to decolonize the images of maritime history.

**KEYWORDS** Atlantic Ocean, decolonization, enslavement, memories, museums

## Introduction

This article presents results from my research project on *Memories of Atlantic Slavery in France and Spain, the French Caribbean and Cuba*.<sup>1</sup> During archival stays on both sides of the Atlantic for a book on enslavement and

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1 This article presents results from a project funded by the German Research Foundation (project no. 393718958). I summarize here the research on Spain carried out between 2018 and 2022 and Cuba in 2019.

post-emancipation in Martinique and Cuba (Schmieder 2017),<sup>2</sup> I came across the silence about sites related to trafficking of African captives via the Atlantic and distorted narratives on places where enslaved Africans had arrived and had been exploited. That is why I chose the focus on physical sites of memory, *lieux de mémoire*,<sup>3</sup> museums, monuments, and relics of enslavement<sup>4</sup> on both sides of the Atlantic, such as the departure and arrival ports for the traffic of African captives and tropical staple goods, the ruins of sugar mills, enslavers' houses, barracks, villages, and cemeteries of the enslaved in the Caribbean, private residences and public institutions financed by enslavement in the space of the Atlantic Ocean, and sites connected with enslaved Africans in Europe. This is, of course, a topic closely related to oceans as spaces for the movement of persons, goods, and ideas, in the past and in the present. "The Atlantic" as a historical space was created by the trade in African captives and the related slavery-based economy, whose legacies still shape the relations between the three continents today. The Antillean writer Édouard Glissant used the terms *gouffre* (chasm) and *abîme* (abyss) to describe the experience of deported African captives confronted with three abysses: the ship's belly, the sea into which the corpses were thrown, and the terrifying unknown fate that awaited them (Glissant 1990, 17–8). This idea was taken up as the title of a recent exhibition "The Abyss. Nantes's role in the slave trade and colonial slavery 1707–1830" (Musée d'Histoire, Nantes, 2021–2022, Gualdé 2021), in which the audio-visualization of the

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2 I study the memories of enslavement in regions where I have expertise in its history. For the current project it was important to include the (former) colonial powers as spaces where the profits went to. Besides, the maritime cityscapes of French and Spanish port towns are marked much more by the involvement in the traffic of African captives than is usually admitted. The selection of countries as research object shall also fill research gaps; for the lack of comparative studies referring to the history and memory of enslavement in France and Spain and the Francophone and Hispanophone Caribbean see the chapter on historiography in my forthcoming book: *Versklavung im Atlantischen Raum: Orte des Gedenkens—Orte des Verschweigens*.

3 Pierra Nora (1984–1992) defined "site of memory" in a very broad sense, which may also include a person such as Jeanne d'Arc, or the Larousse Encyclopaedia. I have researched only the set of memorial sites described above, but I take from Nora the idea that a monument becomes a *lieu de mémoire* only if ritualized ceremonies of remembrance take place there.

4 I use the term "enslavement" as referring to the violent process of enslaving humans, reducing them to a commodity, against their resistance, and I understand "slavery" as meaning the legal institution (abolished in Cuba in 1886) and the economic system related to European and American capitalism.

ocean-crossing Nantais ship *Marie-Séraphique* with 192 enslaved Africans onboard plays a central role.<sup>5</sup>

Spanish port towns involved in human trafficking are far removed from such a decolonial approach to ocean history. Maritime and oceanic history there is associated with challenging encounters with untamed nature, heroic adventurers who cross dangerous seas, scientific explorers who “discover” other worlds and peoples, and successful merchants who bring back glamorous exotic products. This chapter will examine whether the narrative of a glorious maritime past changes with a (possible) decolonization of memorial sites. With respect to Cuba, one would suppose that maritime history is automatically remembered in connection with human trafficking and the exploitation of enslaved Africans on which the island’s economy has been based for nearly 400 years. In practice, enslavement and resistance are silenced and downplayed at many historical sites and museums. Where they are remembered, this often occurs uncoupled from maritime history told as the history of pirates and wars omitting human trafficking. This chapter will look at these gaps and the reasons for them.

With respect to Spain and Cuba, the following questions are relevant. Where do the memories of the Atlantic Ocean, seafaring, ships, and maritime activities appear? Is the celebration of maritime history related to the remembrance of the ocean traffic of enslaved Africans to the Americas and of goods produced by them and sent to Europe, or are those entanglements silenced? If maritime memories are connected to enslavement, in which sense are they connected, in a still colonial or a decolonized mindset? What references are made to the perpetrators, the profiteers, and the victims of human trafficking? Is there an awareness that the Atlantic Ocean was a graveyard of enslaved humans, but also a space of resistance and liberation wars (Taylor 2009)? What allusions are made to African societies?

This study is based on the documentation and analysis of the visual and textual representations of the enslavement in the Atlantic Ocean space (and related omissions) in museums, at monuments and material vestiges left by enslavers and the enslaved in Spanish and Cuban port towns. The author interviewed persons who have an agency around the sites of memory, museum staff and functionaries of cultural politics, scholars, activists, artists, and politicians engaged in local politics of memory. Special attention was paid to the inclusion of Afro-Spanish and Afro-Cuban experts as interview partners. Participant observations at guided tours in museums or on the traces of enslavers and enslaved in towns, public discussions about the memories and silences about enslavement, commemorative

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5 My observations were made on November 17 and 18, 2021.

ceremonies, and protest manifestations on the occasion of anniversaries and commemorative days complemented the research. Publications about the sites and events of commemorations in the press and websites (of towns, museums, memorial associations, etc.) were also analysed.

In investigating the under-researched case of Cadiz and comparing Barcelona and Cadiz with very different cultures of memory of enslavement, this chapter goes beyond the existing studies about sites of memory of enslavement in Spain, which focus on Barcelona, predominantly (Surwillo 2014) or exclusively (Tsuchiya 2019; Guixé Coromines and Ricart Ulldemolins 2020; Rodrigo y Alharilla 2021b). Critical studies on the silence about or distortion of the history of enslavement in Cuban museums and plantation sites and alternative forms of remembrance are produced mostly outside Cuba. But they refer to arts (de la Fuente 2008), not museums and monuments, or to one single site of memory (Annecchiarico 2018; Toutain 2017), except for my studies that systematically document monuments and museums in the Cuban West, the zone of big plantations (Schmieder 2021a and b). The exceptions refer to memories of enslavement in general, not particularly to sites of memory (Romay 2015; Zurbano 2021), the latter with the brief mention of the museum in Triunvirato. Some Cuban or Spanish–Cuban co-produced studies describe the maroon settlement archaeology in the island's interior and related sites (Hernández de Lara et al. 2013) or provide a descriptive history of museums (Granado Duque 2018). They do not offer a critical decolonial view on the representation of enslavement at these places. There are no studies that compare and connect Spanish and Cuban sites of memory and sites of oblivion of the enslavement past as this chapter does.

## **Maritime Colonial Nostalgia and an (Almost Complete) Silence about Enslavement in Spain**

Spanish port towns were starting points of the trade regulated through licenses or monopoly contracts (*asientos*) in certain periods, and they were constant hubs during the free “legal” commerce and illegal trafficking of enslaved Africans (1525–1789, 1789–1819, 1820–1867/73) (Borucki, Eltis, and Wheat 2015; Zeuske 2004, 395). The late trade in human beings went particularly to Brazil and Cuba, Spain being the second most important nation in human trafficking via the Atlantic Ocean in the nineteenth century (after Portugal/Brazil) according to recent research (Borucki, Eltis, and Wheat 2015, 440, TSTD II 2022). Here, I focus on Cadiz, with

116 voyages of human trafficking between 1717 and 1866 (Chaviano Pérez 2018, 171), and Barcelona, with 146 deportation voyages between 1789 and 1820 and an unknown number of illegal ocean crossings (Fradera 1984, 124, 138–9). Barcelona, at that time, was the “capital city of financial return” from enslavement (Rodrigo y Alharilla 2012), followed by Madrid, Cadiz, Santander, Bilbao, and Valencia (Cayuela and Bahamonde 1987, 135). As most deportation voyages between African coasts and Cuba did not follow the triangular route, but moved directly between African bases and Cuban ports, Spanish port towns’ involvement in enslavement was based on the traffickers born there (Zeuske 2015, 323–44), and on the above-mentioned capital transfer from the slavery-based economy. The historical role of Cadiz and Barcelona as leading Spanish port towns in the traffic of enslaved Africans and the material vestiges left in the port area and cityscapes suggested choosing these two maritime cities as research objects for an analysis of the (non)remembrance of this specific past.

Whereas Cadiz is situated on a peninsula in the Atlantic, opposite North Africa, Barcelona’s ships had a longer route to pass from the Mediterranean to the African and Caribbean coasts. This did not prevent Catalan ship owners from participating in this lucrative human trafficking (Zeuske 2017). The urban topography of Cadiz and Barcelona is marked by their nearness to the sea. On the peninsula of Cadiz, the coastline is situated only a few steps away from the city centre. Barcelona is marked by a long seafront and urban beaches. The giant hotel “La Vela” in the shape of a sail is a permanent reminder to inhabitants and tourists that Barcelona is a town of ships and seafarers.

Aside from their maritime character, the towns are very different: Barcelona is a vibrant, rich city with an impressive industrial past, which has successfully survived the transformation into a metropolis of modern services. Cadiz is an impoverished provincial town marked by nostalgia for a lost glorious past. The towns also handle their colonial pasts differently, although maritime colonial nostalgia is present in both. Multicultural Barcelona, the Spanish capital of social movements, radical trade unionists, and the left in general, is situated at one end of the spectrum of the treatment of enslavement and its heritage, while Cadiz is at the other end. The colonizer’s view of the Spanish Empire and the silence about the enslavement of Africans as part of it have been contested recently by scholars engaged in a decolonial public history, trade unionists, and anti-racist activists (López Badell 2016; Tebar Hurtado and Laviña 2020; Saliba Zeghondi 2020).

Antonio López y López, the first Marqués de Comillas, was a merchant of enslaved Africans and plantation owner in Santiago de Cuba, then

banker and estate speculator in Barcelona, but above all an entrepreneur running a fleet of steamships on the ocean between Spain and its former and remaining colonies (Rodrigo y Alharilla 2021a, 63–90, 131–66). His statue was, for the longest time, a thorn in the flesh of those who wanted to end the glorification of “great entrepreneurs” whose original fortune was based on enslavement. The monument’s pedestal refers to the shipping businesses of López, and it stands on a coastal avenue, the Passeig de Colom, next to the Lotja de Mar, formerly the seat of the Consulado del Mar and since 1886 seat of the Chamber of Industry, Commerce and Navigation. In March 2018, the leftist City Council under Mayor Ada Colau removed the statue of Antonio López at the request of various anti-racist NGOs and trade unionists (Tsuchiya 2019). This was and is a controversial decision as descendants of this wealthy family and conservative politicians from Cantabria, López’s home country, protested at the fall of the statue (Rodrigo y Alharilla 2021a, 9–29; Vinyes 2020). Engaged historians see the fact that the pedestal with its inscription glorifying Comillas on the bas-relief was left as an incomplete act of decolonizing Barcelona. They criticize the sparse content of the new explanatory panels, and the lack of reference to recent research (Laviña 2020; Rodrigo y Alharilla 2020).

Martín Rodrigo y Alharilla, the most important historian studying the city’s involvement in enslavement and capital transfer to Barcelona, was asked to speak at the *diada nacional* in September 2018, at the municipal celebration. This event is worthy of note as a national day normally serves to glorify a nation, not to look at the grim sides of the national past and the crimes behind prosperity. The historian emphasized the wide participation of Catalans in human trafficking from Africa, pointing not only to the merchants, but also to the captains and seamen involved. Thus, he contradicted the romantic or heroic narrative of the audacious seafaring nation which is supposed to be proud of its bravery on the high seas (Rodrigo y Alharilla 2018).

Interviews with Ricart Vinyes, Comissionat de Programes de Memòria from September 2015 to June 2018 (Vinyes 2020), responsible for the removal of the López statue, and with Jordi Rabassa, Regidor de Memòria Democràtica, and his colleague Angela Llorens (Rabassa and Llorens 2020) had left the impression that the former was more interested in decolonizing the urban cityscape than the latter. Obviously, the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 with many demonstrations in Barcelona changed the priorities.<sup>6</sup> In 2021 the city council decided to rename part

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6 See also the conference series (“Barcelona and Slavery: A Silenced History,” November 2021), inaugurated by Jordi Rabassa, BORN 2021.

of the Antonio López Square to Idrissa Diallo Square (Servei de Premsa 2021), a young man from Guinea who died in a refugee camp in 2012, as anti-racist and refugee-assistance NGOs had demanded, particularly the association Tanquem els CIE (Tanquem 2021). Now, the square is a reminder that even when African refugees do not die in the Mediterranean, which has become a graveyard as the Atlantic Ocean had been in the time of enslavement, they are not safe in Europe. Anti-Black racism as a legacy of enslavement continues to devalue Black lives.

The critical postcolonial view of a part of Barcelona's political class, academia, and civil society co-exists with a nationalist discourse which neglects the past of enslavement and presents Catalans as the permanent victims of the rulers of France and Spain. The Museum of History of Catalonia, an institution of the Catalan government, La Generalitat, refers to the ocean in celebrating Catalan cartographers and Catalan discoverers of the new world, Catalan overseas merchants, and Catalan overseas fishermen travelling as far as Patagonia. Besides the pride it expresses in Catalan participation in colonial ventures, it explicitly downplays the proven role of capital transfer from colonial trade to Catalan industrialization (Solà Parera 2012). In 2020 the museum admitted that between 1789 and 1819 30,000 Africans were transported on 146 Catalan deportation voyages to Cuba (numbers from Fradera 1984, 124), visualizing this commerce with a map focusing on the Atlantic Ocean. However, it said nothing about the more important illegal human trafficking (1820–1867). As merchandise, the enslaved were symbolized through chains; as human beings, they were nowhere represented in the museum.<sup>7</sup> The curator and historian-consultant stated that the department of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would be refurbished. This should lead to a more critical view of the elite's involvement in colonial politics and enslavement (Rodon i Borras and Iturralde Valls 2020). However, after the renovation of the museum, the number of trafficked persons and the map of the trade with African captives had disappeared, but the chains as a symbol of enslaved persons as merchandise had been maintained. There was less information about enslavement than before, given in one single sentence that cannot be interpreted as a postcolonial revision of discourses: "The Catalan bourgeoisie had a large presence in Cuba in various businesses (sugar, coffee, tobacco, etc.) and they defended the slave base of the island's economy (70 % of its population), in addition to the slave trade that many of them profited from

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7 My observations were made on March 22, 2017 and January 30, 2020.

throughout the 19th century and that helped to create many fortunes in the Principality of Catalonia.”<sup>8</sup>

The Maritime Museum of Barcelona is situated in the *Drassanes* (dockyards) near the seafront. Its main attraction is the *Galera Real*, the flagship of the Holy League fleet in the battle of Lepanto (1571), symbolizing a glorious past of Spanish overseas dominance. In 2019 a new permanent gallery of the museum was inaugurated,<sup>9</sup> which was obviously designed without a hint of decolonial thinking. Explanations do not express the slightest doubt as to whether Spaniards and Catalans had the right to conquer, dominate, and exploit oceans and territories, natural resources, and human beings on other continents. The war to defend their last colonies (Cuba and the Philippines, whose wars of independence are dismissed as “revolts”) is mentioned as a matter of fact, the genocidal warfare in Cuba omitted.

Here, the ocean is presented visually and textually (in written explanations and audios) as a space of shipping and seafaring, the acquisition of new skills, and the scientific exploration of unknown worlds, a space inspiring new technologies, a gigantic site for “overseas trade” with the Americas, migration to the Americas, and “war as business.” In a room devoted to “A huge market” an audio explains: “The Atlantic Ocean was the great transportation route for manufactured products and raw materials. With overseas trade, entrepreneurs, companies, and families of the metropolis made a fortune. It was a time of prosperity with a lot of light, but also of darkness that must not be forgotten” (Audio “The Atlantic Ocean – Cargoes and routes,” Maritime Museum of Barcelona). A big map of the Atlantic Ocean on the floor visualizes trade routes and shows all the colonial products (“cargo”) crossing the sea: sugar, coffee, cocoa, tobacco, spices, cotton, leather, silver—and enslaved Africans. They are reduced to merchandise, represented through chains, as said earlier; in addition, one kneeling enslaved African is represented imploring his liberation, the typical white abolitionist icon. In different display cases colonial products like sugar and cotton are shown and their uses is explained. The visitor can glimpse through bars at the shadows of nameless African captives in chains on board a ship. The corresponding audio says in a whispering, mysterious voice:

There is a type of cargo that nobody speaks about or which is spoken about in secret, a tremendous silence that still lives on. Human traffic to be exploited, the slaves. It was a very profitable business and one of the darkest moments in Western history. Without forced labour and the

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8 These observations were made on November 17, 2022.

9 My observations were made on February 2, 2020 and November 3, 2021.

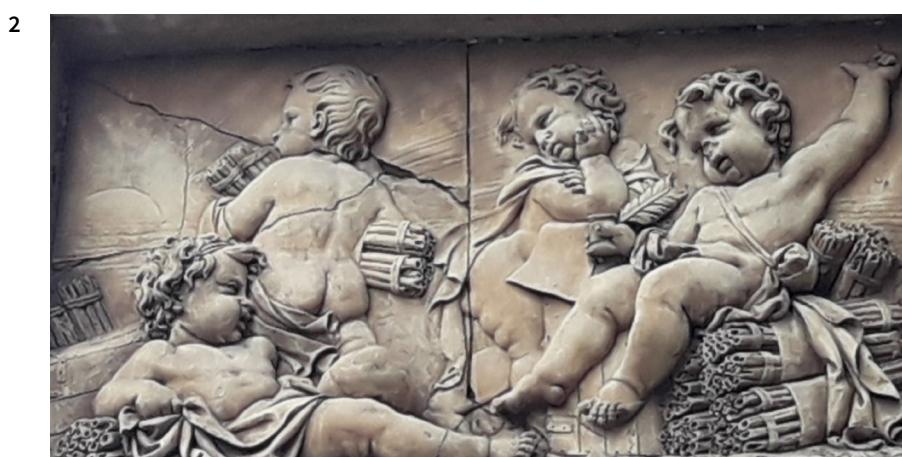
inhumane conditions of the slaves brought from Africa and other parts of the world, overseas trade would not have been so favourable or even possible. (Audio “Slaves,” Maritime Museum of Barcelona)

Although to mention enslavement is already an achievement in comparison to the deep silence of other Spanish museums about the topic, the enslaved are presented as merchandise, anonymous cargo, and not as subjects of history and resisters.<sup>10</sup> The enslavers residing in Barcelona, for example Antonio López and Miquel Biada (Rodrigo y Alharilla 2007, 84–9), are presented as maritime entrepreneurs and heroes of industrialization. The origin of their fortune in the trade of enslaved Africans is omitted. The museum team is planning an exhibition about the involvement of Catalonia in the trade and exploitation of enslaved Africans. This exhibition has been announced since 2017. The lack of funding and a change in the museum’s management had stopped the project, which will now be held in 2023 (Garcia i Domingo 2020; Rodrigo y Alharilla 2020; 2021).

The enslavers and colonial merchants of the nineteenth century were proud of their businesses related to enslavement and did not try to hide them. Some of them displayed ocean-related commercial activities at their residences. The mansion of Tomás Ribalta (Palau Marc, today the seat of the cultural administration to the Catalan government), owner of three sugar plantations in central Cuba with several hundred enslaved workers, the uncle and associate of a human trafficker (Rodrigo y Alharilla 2007, 146–66; 2012, 84), displays a ship, an anchor, ropes, and the wheel of a sugar mill over the portal (Fig. 1). The palace of the Catalan enslaver José Xifré i Casas (Rodrigo y Alharilla 2012, 84–8), Porxos do Xifré, is decorated with portraits of maritime discoverers and conquerors, the heads of an Indigenous American and an African man, and technical seafaring items. Scenes from sugar fields are shown where *putti* represent the enslaved workers, an extremely perfidious form of belittling the deadly work regime in sugar-cane fields and a reproduction of the racist image of Africans as eternal children. One scene shows the challenge of an ocean storm and an attack by a sea monster, equating human traffic to an adventure story (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3).

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10 The revindication that the enslaved should be re-humanized in museums and sites of memory through the narration of life stories and focus on their agency and resistance is not only a demand of the Afro-descendant activists all over Europe, it is also claimed by decolonial and anti-racist museum studies, see for example the request: “bringing the history of slavery to life through the power of individual stories especially those that go beyond traditional slave narratives, to reflect the historical agency of free and enslaved black Americans” (Gallas and DeWolf Perry 2015, xvi).



**FIG 1.** Spain, Barcelona, detail of Palau Marc, mansion acquired 1876 by Tomás Ribalta, enslaver in Sagua La Grande, Cuba (2017). © Ulrike Schmieder

**FIG 2-3.** Spain, Barcelona, reliefs of Porxos do Xifré, luxury apartment house in 1840 built for trafficker of enslaved Africans, José Xifré i Casas (2020). © Ulrike Schmieder

In contrast to Nantes, the most important port town involved in the traffic of African captives in France, where an urban trail (with plaques in the public space) connects the Castle and Museum of History and the Memorial of the Abolition of Slavery and points to some enslaver residences,<sup>11</sup> in Barcelona such plaques do not yet exist. Postcolonial walks in the footsteps of enslavers and abolitionists are offered by engaged historians and memorial associations.<sup>12</sup> One can also do these tours following printed maps and websites indicating this conflicted heritage (Ajuntament 2016; Guzmán, Berenguer, and Laviña 2018).

At the opposite end of the spectrum of the treatment of the enslavement past is Cadiz. Cadiz had the monopoly of trade with the Americas in the eighteenth century, an era of prosperity, when the giant Catedral de las Ámericas was financed with colonial profits. This is reported everywhere with pride, not shame.<sup>13</sup> The nostalgia for the “glorious” colonial and maritime past appears for instance on plaques on the main street, which mark the tricentenary of the transfer of the monopoly trade from Seville to Cadiz (2017). They show pictures of the harbour, the city, arriving sailing ships, and portraits of naval commanders and military engineers.

The touristic *Ruta de los Cargadores a Indias*, the route of monopoly traders with the Americas, does not mention the monopoly over human trafficking held by the Compañía Gaditana de Negros between 1765 and 1779 (Torres Ramírez 1973). The mansion of the Marqueses de Recaño, cargadores a Indias with the Torre Tavira belongs to that route and hosts a major tourist attraction, a *camara oscura*. The 45-metre-high tower became the official watchtower of Cadiz to observe the ships returning from ocean crossings in 1778. The permanent exhibition inside the tower explains to tourists in English, French, and German how Cadiz wishes to be seen. Below a world map, situated on a panel above the traded goods gold and silver (earned by Indigenous Americans in a forced labour system, which is not mentioned) and tropical staple goods sugar, coffee, tobacco, and cotton (produced by enslaved Africans, who are not mentioned either as workers or as merchandise), one reads:

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11 My observations were made in October 2019.

12 I took part in such a tour with Javier Laviña and Omar Guzmán (tour guide of the Asociació Coneixer Història) in March 2017. Martín Rodrigo y Alharilla offered a walk in the footsteps of enslavers during the conference “Barcelona and Slavery” in 2021. The traces of less known enslavers buildings have been revealed in: Rodrigo 2022.

13 My observations were made in September 2018.

The XVIIIth century is the golden age of Cadiz. In this century, and in parallel with the prosperity of international trade, the city developed in every sense to such an extent that it could be considered one of the most important and advanced towns not only in Spain, but in Europe and in the whole world. [...] But the trading in Cadiz did not only involve the transport of goods, but also knowledge communication and the exchange of ideas between different cultures. This fact favoured the development of a much more liberal mentality amongst citizens of Cadiz, who became more open-minded, illustrated and cosmopolitan. (Plaque inside Torre Tavira)

The Museo de Historia Municipal (also Museo de las Cortes) refers to wars on the ocean, for instance with the model of the warship *Victory* (launched in 1765, the vessel on which Admiral Nelson met his death in 1805 during the Battle of Trafalgar), but it does not mention the traffic of enslaved Africans. Cadiz is proud of the liberal constitution of 1812 promulgated there, honoured with a big memorial dedicated to the Spanish Parliament, Las Cortes. But neither there, nor in the in the Centro Cultural del Doce celebrating the constitution, nor anywhere else in the city, is there any mention of the fact that the fundamental law did not abolish slavery, nor even the trade in enslaved Africans (Vila Vilar 2018) and gave citizen rights to Afro-descendant men only in exceptional cases. Colonial nostalgia is also expressed in streets named after the former colonies in America and various busts and statues on the sea promenade honouring white Spanish-American personalities. The ocean is conceived as space of lucrative commerce and source of the town's historical prosperity, but also as a space which unites Spaniards and (white) Hispano-Americans still today. The reasons Spanish-Americans had for forming their own states, independent from Spain, are silenced.

The “Calle de los negros” commemorates, without explanation, the African captives who were driven through this street from the port to the city. Up to 30,000 enslaved Africans were taken to Cadiz between the sixteenth century and the 1830s, the peak period being 1650–1700 (Morgado García 2013, 326). The existence of a confraternity of Africans in Cadiz (Nuestra Señora de la Salud, San Benito y Santa Ifigenia), which was forcibly closed and whose religious objects were stolen by white confraternities (Parrilla Ortiz 2001, 160–4), also goes unmentioned.

In the Cultural Foundation of Cadiz, the historian Fernando Osuna García explained to me that he mentions the slave trade and the Compañía Gaditana de Negros when he shows the Torre Tavira to visitors to the city. On Osuna's initiative, the topic of the trade in African humans appeared once in a municipal cartoon exhibition for young people on the occasion of the tricentenary of the transfer of the monopoly of American trade from

Seville to Cadiz. The main official exhibition in the Palace of the Provincial Government did not touch on such controversial matters (Osuna 2018).

Osuna was not aware that Cadiz also has a nineteenth-century history of enslavement. Research about enslavers and capital transfer from the illegal traffic and Cuban slavery economy to Cadiz (1820–1866) is still in its beginnings (Cozar Navarro and Rodrigo y Alharilla 2018; Cozar Navarro 2021). The recently published books referring to the role of Cadiz in Atlantic slavery received less attention than a similar publication about the slave traders of Catalonia (Rodrigo y Alharilla and Chaviano Pérez 2017b). This has also to do with the fact that the principal investigator of the topic in Cadiz, María del Carmen Cozar Navarro, married to a descendant of the enslaver Ignacio Fernández de Castro, had been reluctant to bring the results of her work to the public beyond the academic community (Cozar Navarro 2018; Pastrana Jiménez 2018; 2021). The local enslavers' residences in town were revealed recently (Pastrana Jímenez 2022; Vázquez-Fariñas 2022). This will make it possible to publish a guide on their traces in a city that still honours enslavers of the nineteenth century in the public space. Antonio López, the developer of the town's economy through his steamship company and a wharf, has a street named after him and a big memorial is dedicated to his son Claudio López Brú, II Marqués de Comillas. The latter had been the director of the Cadiz branch of his father's steamship company, and co-director of his colonial businesses. He became president of the Banco Hispano-Colonial, which financed the war against Cuban independence at exorbitant interest rates, and who was himself involved in colonial ventures. These included the exploitation of the inhabitants of the island of Biokó in the Spanish colony of Equatorial Guinea, who worked on cocoa plantations in a neo-slavery system (Martino 2020). He acted as a Catholic donor with the slavery-based inheritance of his father and the profits of his own colonial enterprises (Rodrigo y Alharilla 2000, 184–92, 203–12, 236–40, 269–92, 295, 308–16). The giant memorial for Claudio López on the sea promenade, a column with a bust of Claudio López and the genius of Christianity at its top, reads on its pedestal "HOMENAJE AL CONSTANTE PROPAGANDISTA DE LA UNION HISPANOAMERICANA." The figures of a lion and a condor symbolize Europe and America united. The relief of a sailing ship alludes to ocean seafaring as the basis of the family wealth (Fig. 4).

"Counter-memories," voices of the descendants of the enslaved, are seldom to be heard in Cadiz. Most people of African descent in Cadiz are recently arrived refugees. They suffer from Anti-Blackness as a legacy of enslavement, but they are not descendants of those sold in America or Andalusia between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. A small



**FIG 4.** Spain, Cadiz, detail of monument for Claudio López Bru, II Marqués de Comillas (2018). © Ulrike Schmieder

Black Lives Matter demonstration took place on June 14, 2020. The local newspaper alluded to the involvement of Cadiz in the traffic of enslaved Africans on this occasion (Vera 2020). However, there was no demand to topple the monument of Claudio López or to decolonize the memorial cityscape (Pastrana Jiménez 2021).

As my observations revealed, in Barcelona, members of the academic community and anti-racist associations are aware that the Atlantic Ocean was a space where not only goods, but also human beings were traded. In the museums, however, the ocean remains above all a place of prosperous commerce, the legitimate source of Barcelona's wealth. The ocean is not seen as Glissant's abyss devouring African captives. There is no reference whatsoever to African resistance during the ocean crossings. References to enslavement are made during commemorative walks in the footsteps of enslavers, but not on plaques in the public space. The only text referring to the enslavement past is the plaque near the half-removed monument of the enslaver Antonio López, admitting at least that this man had "made his fortune during the slave trade" and fought with the Círculo Hispano Ultramarino for "the colonial *status quo* based on slave labour in Cuba and Puerto Rico."<sup>14</sup> In Cadiz a handful of historians and journalists are aware of the town's involvement in enslavement. Even less is known about of

14 I quote from the plaque photographed on February 19, 2020.

the participation in the illegal traffic in human beings of the nineteenth century. Museums omit the topic completely. In the public space and in the museums the ocean is represented as a space where the lost golden age of Cadiz and the cosmopolitanism of its inhabitants were formed. In both towns visualizations and discourse about the maritime past in the public space and in the museums have not been decolonized. The removal of one enslaver's statue cannot be more than a very first step in that direction. The difference between both cities is that in Barcelona there is at least a continuous public debate with many social actors about the necessity to remember enslavement as part of the colonial past. In Cadiz, permanent discussions about the topic that reach the public consciousness are lacking.

## **An Island in the Caribbean Basin of the Atlantic Ocean: Memory Gaps and an Ambiguous Remembrance of Enslavement**

On the other side of the Atlantic, the national identity of socialist Cuba is based on the joint fight of white and Black Cubans for independence from Spain and against Batista's dictatorship and neocolonial domination by the United States. What role do the memories of enslavement play in the dominant historical discourse and how is this master narrative expressed in museums, at memorials, and in the vestiges of the related maritime and inland history?

The research focuses on the port towns of Matanzas and Havana because of their leading role in the slavery-based plantation and urban economy as well as human trafficking, and as places where the most important museums and monuments are situated. In local museums the remembrance of enslavement has a certain place, as I observed in Matanzas itself, the town Colón in the province of Matanzas, and in the Afro-Cuban quarters on the margins of Havana, Guanabacoa, and Regla. In the province of Matanzas, there are tourist sites that present a distorted version of the enslavement past (e.g. the Dionisia coffee plantation near Matanzas). In the village of Méjico, formerly Álava, on the site of an old sugar plantation and modern sugar mill near Colón, the memories of the descendants of the enslaved are enacted, a unique grassroots initiative (Annecciarico 2018; Villegas Zulueta 2019). Only the Museo and Monumento del Esclavo Rebelde in Triunvirato focus on the resistance of the enslaved. The site of memory is also situated in this province, on the former plantation where a famous insurrection of the enslaved took place in 1843 (Finch 2015, 79–110).

The Museo de la Ruta del Esclavo in Matanzas is the only state museum in the Cuban West specifically devoted to enslavement, and an important site of the UNESCO Routes of Enslaved Peoples project (until 2022 “Slave Route”). The choice of the location makes sense because the province of Matanzas is the area of the industrialized mass enslavement of the nineteenth century, the so-called Second Slavery (Tomich 2004, 75–94; Zeuske 2004, 310–31). However, Havana would have been the better choice. Havana, the capital surrounded by plantations, was the political and economic centre of Cuba as a sugar colony, the landing port of most African captives,<sup>15</sup> and the centre of urban enslavement (Deschamps Chapeaux 1971). The most prominent enslavers lived in Havana even if their haciendas were situated in the Matanzas region (Perret 2008). A museum in Havana would reach a much bigger international public and more national visitors because the severe transport problems in Cuba prevent most Cubans from travelling around their country.

Matanzas is situated on the margins of tourist Cuba. Moreover, the place chosen for the museum, the Castillo San Severino, is located outside the city centre, on the waterfront of the port of Matanzas. There is no direct bus route to the place. The museum is not part of the regular tourist circuit. The historical reasons for choosing this isolated building are not very convincing. The fortress was built by the enslaved, like everything else in colonial Cuba; it guarded the port that was also, but not only, a port of arrival of enslaved Africans; it served as a place of punishment for the enslaved but also for free patriots. It was not a place for holding the enslaved, like the forts in Africa that are part of the Routes of Enslaved Peoples. Any former enslaver mansion in the city centre could have been selected as a memorial site with just as much reason.

The museum has only two rooms related to the topic, one devoted to enslavement itself, one devoted to Afro-Cuban religions and thus to the omnipresent folkloric-touristic concept of *Afrocubanía*. The director Isabel Hernández has big plans for a multimedia, interactive room (*centro de interpretación*) with much more visual and textual information about slavery, as well as about human trafficking. For instance, an interactive tool will show the routes over the ocean and the landing points (Hernández 2019).<sup>16</sup> Until now the displays refer to plantations, work, and torture, resistance

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15 TSTD II 2022: Under “itinerary, principal place of slave landing,” one finds 1,147 entries for Havana, 619 for other Cuban ports.

16 This room was to be opened in September 2022 according to the information given by Mrs. Hernández in a telephone call on June 23, 2022, but in the media there is no information about the inauguration of that space to be found.

through rebellions, and the archaeology of maroon settlements.<sup>17</sup> A map of Africa and “documents related to the trade in African slaves in the port of Matanzas (19<sup>th</sup> century)” are exhibited. The museum did not portray the ocean as a space of deportation of human beings and a giant graveyard, until in 2021 a model of a “slave trade ship” had been installed. The nearness of the Atlantic is referred to also in one room that tells the general history of the fortress, which is narrated without reference to local human trafficking. The Museo de la Ruta del Esclavo does not display any document expressing the views of the enslaved, despite the existence of petitions and judicial proceedings in which the enslaved made their voices heard (García Rodríguez 1996; Hevia Lanier 2011; Perera Díaz and Meriño Fuentes 2015). The remembrance of resistance is connected to liberation wars on plantations, not to resistance on board of deportation ships, even though rebellions did occur on Cuban ships, including the famous *Amistad* case (Zeuske 2014). Matanzas retains its nineteenth-century definition as the “Athens of Cuba” given to the town in the age of socio-economic and cultural prosperity based on enslaved labour. The origin of its wealth and culture in the profits of enslavement is admitted, but not focused on, for instance in the Provincial Museum in a former enslaver residence.

Interestingly, in the port town of Matanzas, historical reminders of the ocean, sea, and ships are less present in the public space than in Barcelona and Cadiz. In the surviving mansions of plantation owners and merchants, such elements are not (or through decay no longer?) to be found. Recent visualizations of the intertwining between the ocean and human trafficking are in two very different places. Street art in the historic centre presents images of urban Matanzas and rural sugar centrals with ocean waves, underwater scenes, and a Black mermaid. The inscription on this painting in the city centre describes enslaved rebels (who appear in one scene of the mural) as “precursors of our social revolutions,” quoting Fidel Castro. What is exceptional and not to be found in state museums is the commemoration of African heroes by mentioning their individual names: “Antonio Congo, José Dolores (Mayimbe), Micaela, Carlota, Fermina, Manuel Mandinga, Eduardo, Pedro Gangá,” all prominent leaders of the local liberation wars on the sugar plantations of Triunvirato and Ácana in 1843 (Finch 2015, 79–110) (Fig. 5).

Another piece of street art of the semi-private Afro-Athens project in the Afro-Cuban quarter of Pueblo Nuevo (without a tip no tourist will get there) shows two ships, one with enslaved Africans on board cresting the ocean waves, and a mermaid looking towards them. Some captives are

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17 My observations were made on February 8 and 14, 2019.



FIG 5. Cuba, Matanzas, detail of a mural in the historic city centre (2019).  
© Ulrike Schmieder



FIG 6. Cuba, Matanzas, detail of mural in Pueblo Nuevo, Callejón de Tradiciones (2019). © Ulrike Schmieder

depicted with symbols of Yoruban deities (e.g. the double axe for the God of Thunder, Shangó), pointing to the cultural heritage brought to Cuba from West Africa (Fig. 6). The aim of the social-cultural project is explicitly the empowerment of a poor and marginalized community via turning to African roots and their values (Torres 2019).

In the port town of Havana, the ocean surrounds the city centre, Habana Vieja, a peninsula in the Caribbean Sea. The town was built by free African artisans and enslaved African workers. The wealth that allowed the construction of the historic centre, which is nothing other than an accumulation of enslaver mansions, came from the exploitation of enslaved labourers on coffee and sugar fields in the provinces of Havana and Matanzas. Afro-Cuban academics I interviewed were deeply annoyed about the restoration of Old Havana for the 500th anniversary of the city in 2019 (Zurbano 2019; Chailloux 2019; Herrera 2019; Rubiera Castillo 2019). Old Havana is reconstructed as a colonial white city; the commemorative plaques mention ennobled human traffickers and owners of enslaved workers living there. Not a single plaque informs people that a mansion was built by the enslaved and that enslaved people lived there. Some Afro-Cuban guides in mansions converted into museums told me on their own initiative where the family's enslaved lived. There is no monument to the enslaved as victims or rebels in the capital of Cuba. Afro-Cuban

intellectuals have asked for a monument for José Antonio Aponte, the Black leader of the antislavery, anticolonial conspiracy of 1812, executed on a very central square in Havana (Childs 2006). Promises were made, but nothing has happened as yet (Feraudy Espino 2019). In 2020, the still existing monuments for enslavers and defenders of slavery remained untouched (Schmieder 2021a).

The remembrance of enslavement stays confined to a few museums (and there is none exclusively dedicated to that topic) and the remembrance of the traffic of African captives has been eradicated nearly completely. The two museums most connected with the history of oceans, the Museum of Navigation/Castillo de la Real Fuerza and the Museo del Castillo de la Punta, focus on discovery and conquest, wars, and pirates in the Caribbean. They omit enslavement as part of their history, even though Havana had to be defended by forts against the English and the French because the other powers wanted to control Cuba's lucrative slavery economy. The Castillo de la Punta was the place where deportation ships landed after quarantine (Zeuske 2021, 490–1). Neither this site nor the site where the enslaved were sold, the Plaza Vieja in Havana (Zurbano 2019), have got even a small plaque in memory of this criminal commerce and its victims.

Enslavement is explained in one room in the Casa de África. It is not connected here with the traffic and the Atlantic, except in one caption about "*la trata*," trade, showing a ship transporting African captives. The focus is more on plantation work in the interior and the resistance of the enslaved there, through rebellions and maroonage. A connection between enslavement and the Atlantic is made only in the new Museum of History in the Palacio de Segundo Cabo. Human trafficking appears in a documentary film about the geographical origins of Cubans, also showing a deportation ship arriving with enslaved Africans. In the cartography room, maps and documentaries refer to wars between European powers in the Caribbean, but they do not mention the role of trafficking of enslaved Africans therein. The museum's references to rural enslavement (without documents reflecting the perspectives of captives), agricultural goods produced by enslaved workers, rebellions of the enslaved, and Afro-Cuban religion and music are uncoupled from ocean history and human trafficking. The history of Cuba is narrated as if the maritime history and the history of the island's interior had nothing to do with each other.

As in Matanzas, I found a hidden place on the margins of Havana where the ocean is visualized as a space that connects the descendants of African captives with their mythical African roots: in the house of the Afro-Cuban priest, Julián Hernández Jova, priest of the Asociación de los Hijos de San



**FIG 7.** Martinique, Le Diamant, monument CAP 110, *Mémoire et Fraternité* (2022). © Ulrike Schmieder

Lázaro in Guanabacoa. Here the enforced coming of the forefathers in a ship that crossed the ocean is evoked in a indoor mural inside the house.<sup>18</sup>

Not hidden, but highly visible and much frequented, is Martinique's memorial *Cap 110, Mémoire et fraternité* in Le Diamant, created in 1998 by Laurent Valère (Fig. 7).<sup>19</sup> It is located at Anse Caffard, a beach where a deportation ship sank in 1830, and consists of 15 giant white statues placed on the shore looking back to the Gulf of Guinea across the Atlantic Ocean. The ocean is interpreted here as a graveyard from which the victims will one day be resurrected (Reinhardt 2006, 139–43).

Cuba, where nearly one million African captives were deported to between 1511 and 1866 (Eltis and Felipe-González 2020, 204–5), has no such memorial. As the research showed, some archival documents or fragments of documentaries exhibited in museums and some references in street art are all that exists as public remembrance of that infamous human traffic. On the other hand, maritime history is told in state museums as a history of ships and fortresses, piracy, and war as if those had nothing to do with

18 My observations in his Casa de Santos were made on February 5, 2019.

19 My observations were made on April 11, 2022. The memorial becomes a *lieu de mémoire* in Nora's sense through celebrations each May 22, the national commemorative day remembering the self-liberation of the enslaved (Schmieder 2021a, 380–2).

enslavement. In museum narratives, the ocean is a space crossed by all populations who arrived in the island; it is not a watery grave, an abyss, a space of horror. In contrast to Spain, armed resistance and maroonage of the enslaved play a role in museum discourse about inland plantation slavery. However, family relations, everyday life and resistance, and life stories of individual African captives are missing.

## Concluding Remarks: Tentative Explanations

Why then does this silence about the trade in African captives and enslavement on plantations (in Cadiz and other port towns)<sup>20</sup> or distorted narratives without identifying perpetrators, victims, and resisters of enslavement (in Barcelona) exist? Why the not at all postcolonial pride in the seafaring “adventures” of the brave conqueror, warrior, and merchant ancestors? And why the remembrance of the ocean as a space that enriched these admirable forefathers, not as the space of a centuries-long crime against humanity? Tentative answers were given in the above-mentioned interviews with historians engaged in the politics of memory with respect to enslavement (Laviña 2020; Rodrigo y Alharilla 2020; Fradera 2020) and the below-mentioned conversations with members of the Afro-Spanish movement. They refer to three points.<sup>21</sup>

- 1) The still unhealed traumas and legacies of the Spanish Civil War and Franco’s dictatorship overlay the memories of colonialism. Left-wing city councils like that of Cadiz and Barcelona aspire to remove Falange symbols and to establish sites of memory for murdered Republicans first. They postpone a decolonial revision of the memorial sites in the urban space (Osuna 2018; Rabassa and Llorens 2020). This approach should be contested because the politics of memory referring to the Franco dictatorship should look at possible continuities between the enslaver elites of the nineteenth century and the oligarchic and fascist elites of the twentieth century. Historians in Cadiz should find out if there is a clandestine influence on public opinion and political decisions by descendants of enslavers *today*, as has been proven for the Catalonian and central Spanish governments (Rodrigo y Alharilla 2021a, 9–26; Rodrigo y Alharilla and Chaviano Pérez 2017a, 7–10).

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20 I can confirm from personal observation the deliberate oblivion of the enslavement past also for San Fernando de Cadiz, Bilbao, and Valencia.

21 These ideas about Spain were developed with Martín Rodrigo y Alharilla (Rodrigo y Alharilla and Schmieder 2023).

- 2) Most of the Spanish population obviously does not want to challenge the image of Spain's glorious imperial past, related to the idea that Spaniards were and are less racist than other (post)colonial nations and that Indigenous populations such as the Aztecs should be grateful for having been freed from their despotic rulers and missionized in the Catholic faith. They do not connect colonial history with the enslavement of Africans, which is ascribed to other colonial powers alone. The historical narrative of colonial pride is expressed in the book *Imperiofobia* by María Elvira Roca Barea (2016), a bestseller despite its many errors and failure to meet basic academic standards. The book omits enslavement completely.
- 3) The Afro-Spanish movement is less influential than the Afro-Caribbean associations in the United Kingdom and France with their advances in a decolonial critical remembrance of enslavement (Hourcade 2014, confirmed by my own research on Spain and France). The underdeveloped relations between critical historians studying the enslavement past and its repercussions on the Iberian Peninsula and the Afro-Spanish communities prevent an effective lobbying for a decolonial reform of memorial cityscapes. According to the UNCHR Report (2018) and interviews conducted in the Afro-Spanish community (Toasije 2018; Caballero 2018; Caballero and Rocabruno 2018; Moreno 2018), the exclusion of the Afro-Spanish community and associations from representation at all parliamentary and state governance levels, cultural institutions, the media and academia, as well as the heterogeneity of the Afro-Spanish community and internal conflicts, impeded any significant influence on state politics of memory until now. Thus, the Afro-diasporic counter-memories remain separated in community-based commemorations like Conciencia Afro in Madrid or Black Barcelona.

With respect to Cuba, the reasons for the general neglect of the remembrance of enslavement, the absence of the perspective of the enslaved and their descendants in the museums, and non-recognition of the contributions of Afro-Cubans to national history in anti-Black racism of the governing white middle class, and the taboo of speaking about it, have been affirmed in the above-mentioned interviews (Zurbano 2019; Chailloux 2019; Herrera 2019; Rubiera Castillo 2019; Feraudy Espino 2019) and in the publications of de la Fuente (2008), Romay (2015), and Zurbano (2021). I agree with these evaluations and add here a cause of the memory gaps about enslavement the underrepresentation of Afro-Cubans in leading positions in the curatorship of museums and cultural politics. Out of twelve museums and archaeological sites that referred in detail to enslavement, only

two were directed by Persons of Colour (the Museo de la Ruta del Esclavo and the Museo de Arqueología in Trinidad). All the other directors or leading researchers of state museums, including the municipal museums of the Afro-Cuban towns of Regla and Guanabacoa and the Museo de la Rebeldía Esclava in Triunvirato, were white. This is one explanation for the absence of the voices of the enslaved and their descendants in the museums, and the silence about the human trafficking where it happened. White state functionaries decide what to tell about the history of Afro-Cuba.

The specific neglect of the traffic of enslaved Africans in maritime history has gone largely unnoticed in Cuban and international historiography until now. This might have to do with a decades-long silence about the topic in Cuba, between the early works of José Luciano Franco (1976) and a new historiography (Barcia Zequeira et al. 2017). During visits to the mentioned museums and touristic sites, massive gaps in knowledge about that topic by museum staff and guides became apparent.

To summarize finally, in Spain maritime history is represented in museums and at memorial sites in the public space as a history of adventurous seafaring, “discoveries” and conquest, piracy and sea wars, and lucrative commerce in exotic goods. The Atlantic Ocean is not described as space of traffic of African captives, and where some remarks on the topic are made, as in Barcelona’s museums, the enslaved are dehumanized as merchandise and their historical agency neglected. Whereas some specialized Cuban museums refer the resistance of the enslaved, museums devoted explicitly to maritime history omit the commerce in enslaved Africans, too. Visualizations of human trafficking are rather to be found in street art and at the Casas de Santos. In both countries, a decolonization of the language and discourse in museums and in the public space has not taken place yet.

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Lilli Hasche and Janne Jensen

## The Colonial Making of Bremen's Peri-Urban Port Area

**ABSTRACT** The colonial endeavor, being a project of extraction and expansion at its core, depended on stable infrastructures and affected both colony and metropole. Bremen's docklands, now marketed as the *Überseestadt*, come up as one such structure and indicator of the effects of colonialism in European metropoles. This article contrasts the event-centered narrative of the construction of the port with praxeological and postcolonial approaches to the making of colonialism. To lay open how ports can be described as colonial, we conceptualize Bremen's docklands through two distinct sets of practices in its global-historical context: 1) practices of representation of interests and politics of port construction; and 2) practices of technoscientific port construction. Researching the colonial and global-historical foundations of port cities and their infrastructures allow us to better understand colonialism as global praxis. They offer a trajectory through which to think about contemporary postcolonial power asymmetries and inequalities.

**KEYWORDS** colonial port construction, imperial infrastructures, postcolonial Science and Technology Studies, waterfront revitalization

### Introduction

Since the early 2000s, after the so-called *Überseehafenbecken* in the Hanseatic town of Bremen was filled up with sand from dredgings in the outer Weser, the former port area has been transformed into a mixed-use area, now called the *Überseestadt*. This transformation follows a global trend in urban development discussed as waterfront revitalization. Alice Mah has coined the term "global legacies" to speak about the colonial histories of such spaces where urban streetscapes are packed with maritime clichés (Mah 2014). Only rarely is the expansionist and colonial context of European seafaring acknowledged when it comes to such clichéd discourse on maritime

spaces. We took this as our point of departure in 2014 to develop a critical walking tour on the post/colonial traces inscribed in the *Überseestadt*.

Both in the scope of our walking tour as well as in this paper, we start from the assertion that colonialism, being a project of extraction and expansion at its core, affected both colony and metropole. The colonial endeavor depended on stable infrastructures. Bremen's docklands, now marketed as the *Überseestadt*, come up as one such structure and a worthy object of study about the effects of colonialism in European metropoles.

Commonly, port construction is explained as a result of merchant or economic needs respectively. This claim is in line with recurring narratives about the Hanseatic city's long-standing outward orientation and the sole acknowledgment of its positive effects on the state's prosperity. Both fall short of the complexities at hand. Diverging from this argument we contrast the event-centered narrative with praxeological and postcolonial approaches on the making of colonialism. In order to reveal how these ports can be described as colonial, we conceptualize Bremen's docklands through two distinct sets of practices in its global-historical context: 1) practices of representation of interests and politics of port construction; and 2) practices of technoscientific port construction. Researching the colonial and global-historical foundations of port cities and their infrastructures can then offer a trajectory through which to think about contemporary postcolonial power asymmetries and inequalities.

We will start with a short introduction to the theoretical set we use to look at maritime and port infrastructures. In a second part we situate Bremen's port infrastructures in a colonial context, firstly by showing how they are inherently interwoven with the increase of colonial overseas trade and secondly how the field of port construction and waterways engineering itself profited from colonial expansion. In the third section we synthesize two sets of practices that allow us to better understand colonialism as global praxis. We then give an outlook on how to use this perspective for a critical engagement with contemporary phenomena of inequality in maritime and affiliated industries.

## Imperial Infrastructures

Much of this research has resulted from our practice of guiding critical walking tours through the former docklands in Bremen. Methodically our undertaking could thus be best described as tracing and unearthing global legacies inscribed in dominant narratives and port city identities as well as in the material structures themselves (Mah 2014). Stuart Hall has famously

brushed off the “false and disabling distinction between colonisation as a system of rule, of power and exploitation, and colonisation as a system of knowledge and representation” (Hall 1996, 253). While *in situ* we deliberately intersect issues of memorialization of Bremen’s former docklands with counter-narratives of entangled history that speak of dispossession and systemic violence, our focus in this paper lies on the technoscientific, infrastructural and material underpinnings of colonialism. We are interested in how port construction and overseas trade enabled and benefited each other in the colonial era, and especially in post-Suez times, and how both helped to further an exploitative and extractive system.

Infrastructures and engineering projects have played a significant part in the implementation and maintenance of colonial rule, resulting in lasting asymmetries and continued violence (van Laak 2004). The idea however that a pre-configured, seemingly neutral, and universal technoscience diffused from the European metropoles to the colonial margins is called into question from a postcolonial perspective (Cooper and Stoler 1997; Anderson 2002; Tsing 2005). In the wake of such epistemological reconfigurations and calls to provincialize Europe, scholars have begun to research the global entanglements of formerly contained historiographies and to engage in attempts to transcend the local-global dichotomy in research designs (Chakrabarty 2010; Knecht 2010; Beckert 2015; Conrad, Randeria, and Römhild 2013). These attempts are of significant interest for a renewed understanding of knowledge production, science, and technology.

It is not within the scope of this paper, especially with regard to the archival material at hand, to reconstruct and document colonial ways of knowledge production across the co-productive tensions between non-Western epistemologies and Western modes of knowledge production (Cooper and Stoler 1997; Eckstein and Schwarz 2019). Beyond these constraints, the sole examination of written European accounts inevitably produces a bias. In effect, the notion of colony as laboratory of modernity rather serves as a continuous reminder to question local history back to front.

Studies on imperial infrastructures have long focused on “rail imperialism,” as railways exemplarily highlight both inner and outer tendencies of imperial integration and expansion (van Laak 2004). Daniel Headrick (1981) has slightly expanded the debate to the marine realm. He writes on technical innovations in shipbuilding, the construction of canals such as the Suez Canal and the introduction of submarine cables (cf. Barak 2013). Yet, both in Headrick’s work and in other classics of transnational or global history, port construction in the “post-Suez” colonial era has been an underexplored theme (cf. Headrick 1981, 165–79; Osterhammel 2014).

This holds especially true for the German context, in which the critical reassessment of its colonial past has only recently gained momentum.

Despite their transformations in the colonial era, ports are all too often treated as seemingly a priori facts that serve the transit of global flows. But does it suffice to use “harbor” as a containable and stable frame of analysis, in which interactions between goods and people can be analyzed (Brugger, Schürch, and Tremmel-Werner 2018)? Ports are not just places “where mobility is interrupted, at least temporarily” (Heerten 2017, 166). Instead, we suggest regarding these places as continuous consolidations, based on heterogeneous processes and with often unintended effects. In short, we argue that marine infrastructures should be investigated in their material and nature-cultural becoming. We herewith loosely plug into approaches that are interested in the making of colonialism through heuristics of practice. We think of practice as a historical process acted upon by specific actors while at once providing a hook for further practices to hinge on.

John Law has famously shown how colonial trade and its securitization depended on “heterogeneous engineering” (Law 1987, 230ff). He therewith wishes to conceptually grasp the dialectic interactions of diverse actors beyond the nature/culture divide. Such approaches contrast both dominant and recurring narratives: firstly, the paradoxical fashion in which port cities tend to regard the development of their ports as a locally contained process; and secondly, stories about the construction of infrastructures, in which authorship is solely attributed to engineering geniuses. Latour writes about such narratives, that in the light of far-reaching effects it would seem absurd not to ask for equally enormous causes (Latour 1986, 2). Nonetheless, both Latour and Law have been famously criticized for their *en passant* rearticulation of the diffusionist idea (Anderson 2002).

Furthermore, we would like to reaffirm the critique of the myriad of hydraulic metaphors and especially “flows” that lack explanatory power (Rockefeller 2011, 558). Instead, “[p]ostcolonial approaches [...] can reveal the terrain that channels [...] circulation, showing the historical and political forms and interactions, the systematic exclusions and inclusions that make these flows turbulent” (Anderson 2015, 652). We would like to build on this apt description. For us, in order to study specific cases of colonial port construction, Anderson’s call implies scrutinizing the robust field of civil engineering itself and situating it in its colonial context. In the following, we thus want to give a suggestive account of how (technical) transformations in port cities could be studied in their interrelations with the colonial project, specifically with the demands of colonial trade but also in their dialectic relation with nature.

## Bremen's Docklands as Imperial Infrastructures

Against this conceptual backdrop we symmetrically regard both colonial and metropolitan ports as imperial infrastructures that have to be scrutinized in their making of and through the interactions of heterogeneous actors beyond the nature/culture divide. But in what ways can we speak of the Bremen ports and today's *Überseestadt* as imperial infrastructures? To approach this question, we will draw a brief historical sketch of the Bremen ports from 1800 until the beginning of World War I in 1914 as colonial infrastructures.

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, as Europe's imperial powers controlled the access to their respective colonial "possessions," Bremen traders were bound to trade via the European ports of France, Britain, Portugal, and the Netherlands. It was not until the independence of the North American Thirteen Colonies in 1776 that the traders could establish direct trade relations with a then former colony. Despite the absence of formal German colonial territories, Hanseatic merchants thus became a force in the imperial endeavor by trading colonial goods like coffee, tobacco, cotton, tea, and rice (Müller 1971, 47–8; Becker 2002, 64).

Meanwhile the river Weser, an artery of Bremen's Hanseatic past, had silted up. Trade to the inner-city ports slowed as ship owners preferred less obstructed destinations further downstream. In the town of Brake, then part of the competing Grand Duchy of Oldenburg, the number of unloaded goods rose steadily—a serious threat to Bremen's dominant position on the lower Weser. While shipping and colonial trade in particular became increasingly important, Bremen's traders and politicians feared being disconnected and losing its title as port of call.

Two deciding treaties then made the year 1827 a turning point in Bremen's trade history. In response to the siltation and the danger of disconnection from overseas trade, the Bremen mayor Johann Smidt acquired land from the state of Hanover and founded a new port and the corresponding city of Bremerhaven at the mouth of the Weser estuary. With the signing of a free trade agreement with the young American republic, trade could flourish. Early on, the shipment of tobacco played a predominant role, while from 1850 onwards, cotton became the most important good. With 95 percent of the imported cotton coming from the USA, Bremen became the main importer of raw cotton in continental Europe (Schwermann and Wellmann 1997, 14; Liffers 1994).

Furthermore, the cotton import was of major importance for German industry: around 1900, the German cotton processing industry was the largest on the continent and employed 13 percent of German industrial

workers. The textile industries produced rich surplus value, with textiles among the Reich's most important articles of exportation (Beckert 2015, 328). But trade relations intensified for yet another reason: as Bremerhaven was one of the main ports of departure for migrants to the United States, transporting cotton on the return journeys was of mutual advantage for both shipping companies and cotton traders (Liffers 1994, 93–7; Becker 2002, 53).

Whereas the principal importance of cotton is well regarded in common narratives about Bremen's history, discourse on the conditions of cotton production is hardly ever present: through the trade of raw cotton Bremen is linked to the enslavement of Black people of African descent in the Americas—the Maafa. Enslaved people suffered excessive violence and inhuman living and working conditions on tobacco, cotton, and sugar plantations. Furthermore, the cotton business was responsible for the violent displacement and murder of American Natives and the exploitation of the European working classes in textile factories. Across locales, this business model depended on the availability of cheap labor to enable the production of cotton and textiles in huge quantities and at low prices. Bremen's cotton traders significantly benefited from that violent business model. Yet they upheld an ambivalent stance with regard to their involvement: like most Hanseatic merchants, they identified as progressives and liberals, while at the same time their actions condoned the exploitation of up to four million Black people. Rarely did they advocate for abolition or the amelioration of living conditions (Liffers 1994, 98).

From 1857 onwards, trade further accelerated when traders from merchant families like Vietor, Lahusen, Lüderitz and Meyer, Oloff and Kuhlenkampf complemented their barter trade on so-called *Spekulationsfahrten* with the establishment of trading posts along the West African coast (Müller 1971). Not only were these strongly connected to the missionary activities of the Northern German Mission, they also culminated in the creation of German colonies in 1884. In Togo, the *Kolonialwirtschaftliches Komitee* (KWK) with financial support of Bremen merchants would later establish the *Baumwollvolkskulturprojekt* to reduce the dependencies of the German cotton industry on the US-American market (Bärwald 2017; Schwarmann and Wellmann 1997, 14; Habermas 2016; Beckert 2005).

In 1872, Bremen-based cotton traders founded the Bremen Cotton Exchange (*Bremer Baumwollbörse*) in order to facilitate trade. This meant the provision of general trade conditions and fire insurance and the introduction of a warrant system, quality standards, and frameworks of arbitrage (Schwarmann and Wellmann 1997, 10–1). The *Baumwollbörse* later initiated the foundation of the *Bremer Lagerhausgesellschaft* (BLG),

a public–private company operating the turnover in Bremen ports from 1877 onwards.

Yet the Weser was still barely navigable. Furthermore, since 1867 a new railway bridge hindered sailing ships from reaching the old inner-city harbor, which was desperately in need of repair (Schwerdtfeger and Aschenbeck 2002, 44–56). In 1870 the siltation had then proceeded so much that some sections had a fairway depth of only 40 cm. To reach Bremen, goods thus had to be transshipped downstream. Both to maintain Bremen's prominent position among the riparian states and to further overseas trade, new infrastructures were needed: a navigable Weser, new and accessible harbor basins, and efficient port infrastructures (Hofmann 1995).

In 1878 Ludwig Franzius, the city's *Oberbaurat*, provided the first draft for the regulation of the Weser to the commission entrusted with the task of making the river navigable again. The straightening and deepening of the river then took place between 1887 and 1895 “so that ships with a draft of up to five meters could reach the city of Bremen without any difficulties” (Schlottau and Hofschen 2005, 26, translated by the authors). As a result of the regulation, the tidal amplitude increased from an initial 20 cm to 145 cm in 1900.<sup>1</sup> Even today, the tidal change bears witness to this massive intervention.

To meet increasing demand, three new harbor basins were constructed on the right bank of the river between 1880 and 1906. The new basins were supplemented by port infrastructures: sheds and storage buildings were directly connected to a two-track railway system—an innovation called the *Bremer System*. Incoming goods such as heavy and bulky cotton bales could be unloaded into the sheds with cranes and further transferred to storage buildings, from where the owners could sell and deliver on demand. The cotton bales would then be loaded onto trains and transported to textile factories in the hinterlands.

## Port Construction: The Colony as Test Bed

The overall project of the regulation of the Weser is attributed to Ludwig Franzius, honored as the man who “opened Bremen to the shipping world,” as inscribed on an inner-city monument. Lindon Bates, a US-American civil engineer and colleague of Franzius, further stated that “the world is

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1 The river has since been dredged several times, resulting in an average tidal amplitude of 3.88 m.

indebted to Oberbaurath Ludwig Franzius, whose monumental success on the Weser attests the genius which won an erratic river to a regular flow" (Bates 1905, 65). Both of these statements signify common beliefs about engineering geniuses and their alleged ability to control nature. They further mirror colonial imaginaries of domination over both nature and people, as well as male fantasies of omnipotence. Colonies were imagined by Europeans as an empty space to be shaped by their own interest, imaginations, and necessities.

In the following, the transnational interrelations of the necessities of colonial trade, public and private capital with the dredging and channeling of the river Weser and the creation of the docklands have to be critically engaged with. More generally, we further think that in order to shed light on port construction in the colonial era and the transnational constitution of the technosciences of port and waterways engineering, their networks, and communities themselves, have to be taken into consideration. We will therefore sketch out connections that illustrate the global context in which the *Weserkorrektion* (correction of the Weser River) and port construction in Bremen took place.

In contrast to Bremen's popular narratives of engineering geniuses, the idea of self-enclosed docklands originated in London, Hull, and Liverpool, from where it was transferred to the docks of Marseille and Bremen's peri-urban port area (Osterhammel 2014, 278). In late August 1885, the commission for the intended customs union with Prussia (*Deputation für den Zollanschluss*), among them Mayor Buff, Ludwig Franzius, some of his civil engineers, as well as business representatives, traveled to Britain to inspect the docklands of London, Hull, Newcastle, Liverpool, and Glasgow (W. Franzius 1982, 47). Only after did they develop what became known as the *Bremer System*.

Beyond his activities in Bremen, Franzius as well as many of his engineering colleagues were consulted when it came to the planning and construction of water infrastructures across the globe. Early in his career, Ludwig Franzius took part in the opening ceremonies of the Suez Canal as a member of the German delegation. Later, he not only oversaw the projects in Bremen, but his position also made him engage in international maritime congresses as well as providing his expertise to projects overseas, such as the regulation of the Hwang Pu in Shanghai (Ye 2015; L. Franzius and Bates 1902). In sum, these episodes raise the question of how to attribute historic agency to seemingly self-contained individuals.

This is reflected in another brief account of colonial port construction. In the spring of 1897, Georg Franzius, engineer for the German navy in Kiel and the younger brother of Ludwig Franzius, was posted to China in

order to find a German port in the Pacific to supply the German merchant and military marine. His expedition was part of Alfred von Tirpitz's larger strategy to advance the Reich's naval power. Franzius argued for the potential suitability of Jiāozhōu Bay for establishing a German naval base and coaling station (Warner 1996, 81; Osterhammel 2014, 278). Franzius' assessment then led to the conquest of Jiāozhōu Bay and parts of Shandong province.

Upon return he reported to the German Colonial Society (*Deutsche Kolonial-Gesellschaft*) in Berlin that "one will probably not be allowed to use wood for marine structures" due to the presence of shipworms (G. Franzius 1898, 81). The *Reichsmarine* had long struggled with the sudden appearance of these relatively unknown mollusks in its domestic ports and was thus eager to find solutions to the potential threat (Grundig 1957, 2:10f). In Bremen, wood traders suffered from the loss of imported wood due to shipworm infestation (Troschel 1916, 350). The government in Qingdao thus ordered diverse sorts of hardwood from across the Pacific and mobilized German firms and experts in wood conservation for them to send treated mine props to Qingdao. C. Vering, a Hamburg-based construction firm tasked with the construction of the Great Harbor in Qingdao, tested and patented a ferro-concrete sheet pile system in close coordination with the *Reichsmarineamt* in Berlin (Rechtern 1900). Subsequently, for the later construction of the port of Qingdao, the *Reichsmarine* set up a sophisticated test bed in order to study and control shipworm, said to be especially "ravenous" in the colonies (Troschel 1916, 208).

Similar, yet less sophisticated, efforts to control potential shipworm damage were made in Swakopmund and Lomé, where the frequent deaths of Kru boat operators and the subsequent loss of goods were common due to the strong surf. In both locations new jetties were built. In Swakopmund, from 1899 to 1903—right before the genocide against the Herero and Nama—German engineers updated the pier against the dangers of shipworm infestation in order to facilitate the increased arrivals of the Woermann-Line (Kalb 2018). In Lomé, in May 1902 the situation worsened when two members of the Tuskegee delegation drowned after their landing boat capsized upon arrival in Lomé. The delegation of experts in agriculture was appointed to Togo to help the Germans with the *Baumwollvolkskulturprojekt* encouraged by the *Kolonialwirtschaftliches Komitee* in order to decrease the German cotton industry's dependency on raw cotton imports from the United States (Zimmerman 2010; Beckert 2005; Habermas 2016). The colonial authorities thus constructed a similar pier under the direction of Maschinenfabrik Augsburg-Nürnberg (MAN) in Gustavsburg (Preiss 1904).

## Practices of Port Construction in the Colonial Context

Through these brief sketches of historical events, we have situated the ports of Bremen in broader schemes of colonial expansion and the exploitation of resources and labor. Further, we highlighted how the construction of port infrastructures was itself shaped by transnational connections and how engineers and state officials used the colonies as test beds to solve persistent issues in port construction.

As outlined, overseas trade was central (and perhaps principal) to the colonial endeavor, as colonies served as important markets and spaces of extraction (Mezzadra and Neilson 2017). The history of Germany's African colonies reflects this emphasis on the primacy of trade. On the West African coast, it was the establishment of trading posts that initiated the following securitization and formalization of imperial rule into so-called *Schutzgebiete*. Yet across various locales colonial trade tended to be dependent on port and waterway infrastructures for the turnover of the extracted resources and cheap imports. The transport of enslaved people across the Atlantic had already required great logistical effort. Traders were well aware of this dependency. They prominently advocated their interests and thus lobbied for the construction of capable infrastructures.

The regulation of the Weser and the construction of the peri-urban docklands in Bremen was no exception in this regard. But does the *Weserkorrektion* and the subsequent construction of Bremen's ports qualify as a project of imperial or colonial extent? Narratives about those events are commonly established in regional frames. The port of neighboring Hamburg certainly experienced accelerated growth in times that are often described as precolonial for the German context. Yet such localized accounts miss the bigger picture of the colonial setting.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the existing infrastructures reached their limits in Bremen, due to the increase in trade and shifts towards other types of goods. More seriously, the natural state of the river Weser was called into question, as its end as a public utility, waterway, and commercial transport route became foreseeable. Against this backdrop, Bremen's traders realized their need to secure and maintain functioning trade infrastructures. They were necessary to connect Bremen to the colonial world. Efforts were thus made to address the issues functionally, through the construction of new docklands and the regulation of the river. Yet in understanding the development of Bremen's peri-urban docklands, adopting this functionalist argument falls short of the complexities at hand.

This is where we wish to depart from event-centered accounts. Instead, we take the course of events as a starting point to situate the construction

of Bremen's ports through the analysis of two distinct sets of practices in its global-historical context. Our aim is not to assert any colonial essence with respect to ports or their construction. Projects of port construction of the late nineteenth century are of course not one-dimensionally colonial. We rather wish to bring to light the making of such infrastructures and their workings in the colonial context. For the sake of analysis, we condense the sketches provided into two specific sets of practices significant in the making of port infrastructures and their utilization. These practices can only be understood against the backdrop of colonial expansion. Put differently, because we are convinced that the needs of colonial trade offer a starting point to analyze the making of ports, we argue for a historical saturation of local processes and practices. The focus on the practices of port construction in their socio-economic historical context allows us to pinpoint the colonial aspects.

Firstly, we identify practices of representation of merchants' interests aimed at port construction and river regulation. In this, specific private interests culminate and manifest themselves in public infrastructures. Secondly, we look at the interactions of distinct application-oriented practices and object mobilizations in the name of science. Determining these practices may further help to better understand contemporary dynamics in the postcolonial maritime industry, including persisting inequalities and asymmetries of power.

The first set of practices revolves around the representation of merchant interests towards the state and the following transfer of private into public interests. As traders were well aware of their needs, they lobbied for the construction of new port facilities and the fight against siltation. Political contestations around trade politics and infrastructure projects indicate that traders could advocate their interests against the city without much objection, as both political and economic spheres had a shared interest and merchant and political circles often overlapped. The creation of Bremen's docklands goes back to the commitment of associated cotton traders. The regulation of the Weser was a particularly capital-intensive undertaking, for which the city had tried to acquire financial backing from the riparian states for decades, as it could not afford to undertake such a project on its own. It therefore stands to reason that the project became worthwhile with the massive increase of colonial trade. This situates the *Weserkorrektion* in a broader process of transforming private into public interests as a strategy for their enforcement (Miles 2010, 12). We have thus far based our argument mostly on selective but recurring observations: overlaps in personnel between the city's political sphere, port construction authorities, and merchants, or the actions of associations like *Bremer*

*Baumwollbörse* or *Bremer Lagerhausgesellschaft*. It seems worthwhile to trace these relations and the involvement of commercial circles in issues of port construction in a more systematic manner.

This leads us to the second set of practices, namely technoscientific practices of waterways engineering and knowledge transfer in the making of ports as a transnational and colonial endeavor. Ports were, even back in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, constructed through transnational technoscientific networks. In order to build ports that could adapt to the needs of modern trade and shipping, technoscientific research and testing was conducted. This is a field of expertise that is often denied or at least disregarded when it comes to speaking about colonialism. In addition, technical innovations did not solely come into being by virtue of great minds, nor can they be explained through atomized accounts. Instead, we argue, knowledge was transferred between expeditions and experiments across multiple locales, as illustrated by the travels of expert commissions to Britain (and Togo) and experiments against shipworm in the colonies. Colonialism further offered opportunities for engineers to advance their personal careers as well as their field's technologies. In short, studying the work of engineers in the colonial setting calls for an analysis of how control over nature and people were interrelated and how colonial imaginaries and opportunities shaped the technosciences. Accordingly, careers of engineers like Ludwig and Georg Franzius and their practices can only be understood as informed and facilitated by transnational networks. Finally, research on port construction reasserts approaches of how colonies were used as test beds to find solutions to both domestic and global challenges.

We hereby diverge from the functionalist argument both in terms of problem definition as well as in terms of its resolution. Most genealogies of imperial infrastructures escape simple narratives of localized problem definitions, as their construction cannot be sufficiently understood through localized explanations nor those based on the idea of a great mind. By extending our understanding of the history of the colonial state to metropolitan spaces, which were often at the heart of empire, local narratives quickly fall apart. What we have tried to do here is an attempt to come to an understanding of the colonial state in its making through a diverse and entangled set of practices. In our case, the history of Bremen's inner ports, we can see the entanglements of material practices of trade, finance, and lobbying, as well as knowledge, technoscience, and the construction of infrastructure—perhaps the most material in a literal sense. Through the focus on the making of such infrastructures, colonialism becomes comprehensible as praxis. Apparently, colonialism itself is praxis. A praxeological and material understanding can further help to shed light on the fact that

more often than not, dual distinctions such as the private / public divide are social and constantly reproduced and reconfigured. Simple functionalist arguments fall short of acknowledging this circumstance.

## Postcolonial Inequalities Today

After having shown how colonial ports were made through entangled colonial practices, we would now like to sketch out how to use this perspective to analyze ports and trade relations today. As we have come to think about colonial trade infrastructures not solely with a historical interest, we wish to gain a deeper understanding of persisting and contemporary inequalities and asymmetries of power. Our aim in future research is to adopt this approach to study the contemporary making of distribution centers, quality standards and labor conditions, and racial segregation in maritime industries and logistics. For example, the side-effects of containerization, the so-called revolution of logistics, and sustained neoliberal policies have led to the decline of Bremen's former port areas, commonly remembered among locals for their hustle and bustle over much of the twentieth century. While the area has since been revitalized to great effect, many of the benefits of a functioning peri-urban seaport and a commercially usable riverbed have been able to be transferred to affiliated realms. In the revitalized docklands, now marketed as the *Überseestadt*, material traces and street names with colonial references bear witness to the historical context of its creation and subsequent transformations.

For our understanding of the present, we find it useful to analyze contemporary global infrastructures of trade, logistics, and ports against the backdrop of their colonial becoming. Rarely does cotton arrive via the ports of Bremen nowadays, yet institutions such as the *Bremer Baumwollbörse* together with the newly founded International Cotton Association (ICA) Bremen have maintained a powerful position as arbitrator in the international trade of raw cotton. Furthermore, the ICA Bremen also puts forward terms of trade and quality standards and acts as the highest instance when it comes to technical assessment of raw cotton. It promotes cotton standards as a neutral instrument to facilitate trade, while their implementation privileges Western cotton producers and therefore (re)produces postcolonial structures of inequality (Hasche 2017). Adopting a wider notion of "infrastructure" here opens up trajectories of analyzing the needs of trade, commercial interests, and their field of political interference. Cotton quality standards and their colonial legacies then become infrastructures of their own kind.

Two of the major beneficiaries of the imperial cotton trade, the *Bremer Lagerhaus-Gesellschaft* as well as the former transport service provider Kühne + Nagel, better known for its involvement in the “Aryanization” of Jewish-owned property under the Nazi occupation of the Low Countries (Beermann 2014), have transformed into global players in contemporary logistics. All of these actors do not publicly acknowledge their foundations in colonial exploitation. More work needs to be done on the (commercial) activities of such companies both regarding the critical reflection of logistics and supply chains as well as on their foundations in colonial trade and unjust dispossession.

## Conclusion

In what ways can we speak of the Bremen ports and today’s *Überseestadt* as imperial infrastructures? First and foremost, the extractive and expansionist character of colonialism has deeply inscribed itself in infrastructures of trade. This holds true across locales, for infrastructures in both colony and metropole. The complex history of Bremen’s *Überseestadt* and the constant remaking of that formerly buzzing port area serves as a pronounced example of how imperial infrastructures came into being in the European metropoles themselves.

Starting from the history of its construction we followed a trajectory towards a theorization of port construction as colonial practice—referring to both postcolonial and praxeological theory. Against this backdrop, the making of Bremen’s peri-urban port areas can only be understood adequately through the acknowledgment of successful representation of merchant interests to the city state and an awareness of the transnational constitution of related technosciences. Thus, the colonial port of Bremen was co-enabled by two distinct sets of practices: politics of representation and the circulation of knowledge in the field of waterways engineering.

We tried to show how several colonial localities were confronted with obstacles hindering the flow of goods and people. Instead of asserting those flows to be givens, we started with the hindering of colonial trade, or what Anderson has framed as the “terrain that channels [...] circulation” (Anderson 2015, 652). Looking at the practices of port construction allows us to make visible the necessary work to be done to open specific locales for effective flows. We subsequently argued that articulated and manifested infrastructural solutions to these problems were in fact often global in scale. And instead of theorizing the flows, we retraced the making of flows through infrastructures. By analyzing the siltation of the

Weser and related events as issues of transnational and colonial relevance, seemingly singular events are set into a global-historical context of colonialism and capitalist exploitation. The regulation of the Weser does not attest a "genius which won an erratic river to a regular flow" (Bates 1905, 65), but rather the material and economic efforts made to keep colonial trade flowing.

Trade infrastructures then become the materialized witnesses of colonial trade. Questioning common narratives and the city's infrastructures enables us to uncover Bremen's connections to colonial expansion and extraction. Ultimately, this means extensive colonial violence such as enslavement and genocide. It is therefore important to understand port infrastructures not as a given but as infrastructures tailored for colonialism and through (colonial) practices. Researching port construction and its motives and politics is central to understanding ports in colonial metropoles as part of a global infrastructure of colonialism. Port construction serves as an example of how colonialism itself is made through various practices.

Combining praxeological approaches with postcolonial theory helps to theorize port construction as colonial practice. In effect, it makes it possible to describe the making of the colonial state through entangled practices. Furthermore, this makes it possible to show how historically contingent distinctions, categories, and concepts come into being, where functionalist arguments do not question these distinctions. Working on trade and port infrastructures further allows us to pick up on fundamental lines of debate in postcolonial theory. Taking a postcolonial stance enables us to think about how to conceptualize the relation between colony and metropole and what that means for research methodologies: it opens up trajectories for treating both colony and metropole with analytical symmetry, while upholding an understanding of colonialism as a fundamentally asymmetric and violent power relation. This is what makes possible inquiries into how these asymmetries are put in place and still maintained today.

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# OCEANS AND IDENTITY



Gigi Adair 

# Archipelago-izing or Re-continentalizing Africa: Oceanic Paradigms in Two Recent West African Novels

**ABSTRACT** This article examines two contemporary African literary engagements with Black diasporic history and culture and the meaning of the diaspora for African identity. *Freshwater* by Akwaeke Emezi (2018) turns to diasporic cultures and the history of slavery in order to develop an understanding of its protagonist's identity within Igbo cosmology and to seek a new wholeness achieved by shattering and mutilation: a process that might be described as archipelagic thought (Édouard Glissant). In contrast, *The Sacred River* by Syl Cheney-Coker (2014) eventually imagines the continent washed clean, purified of diasporic—particularly Haitian— influences, a paradigm that I, drawing on the work of Glissant in *Philosophie de la Relation*, call re-continentalization: both a forgetting of the influence of the diaspora in Africa and a reinstatement of origins, linearity, and hierarchy.

**KEYWORDS** archipelagic thought, Édouard Glissant, queer diaspora, African literature

## Introduction

In this essay, I examine two recent novels by West African writers that turn to the Atlantic Ocean and its African diasporic cultures and history in order to consider questions of African modernity. Both *Freshwater* by Akwaeke Emezi (2018) and *The Sacred River* by Syl Cheney-Coker (2014) deal broadly with questions of African identity and society in a globalizing world. The former is more personal and individual, the latter more interested in political and cultural communities, but both turn outwards towards the ocean, following the freshwater rivers of their titles and the

old routes of the slave ships across the Atlantic to the Caribbean. The relationship between Africanity and the African diaspora—and the ocean—that they develop is radically different, however. One turns to diasporic cultures and the history of slavery in order to develop an understanding of its protagonist's identity within Igbo cosmology and to seek a new wholeness achieved by shattering and mutilation, while the other eventually imagines the continent washed clean, purified of diasporic—particularly Haitian— influences, a paradigm that I, drawing on the work of Édouard Glissant in *Philosophie de la Relation* (2009), call re-continentalization.

Oceanic paradigms are hardly new in African diaspora studies. Paul Gilroy's model of the Black Atlantic—despite its many critics still the most influential paradigm in the field, and also influential in diaspora studies more generally<sup>1</sup>—suggests taking “the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis [...] and [using] it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective” (Gilroy 1993, 15). As numerous critics since the 1990s have noted, however, Gilroy's model tends to position Africa as an origin and past for the diaspora, but not a participant in ongoing diasporic exchanges or diasporic experiences of modernity, and thus it “replicated the problematic exclusion of Africa from discussions of modernity” (Goyal 2014, v). We might say that, particularly in Anglophone scholarship, there is a conception of a one-way current from Africa to the Americas, Caribbean, and (to a lesser extent) Europe, which then circulates around the North Atlantic without returning to African shores, inhibiting the recognition of African modernity and thinking about connections between the diaspora and *contemporary Africa*.

This conceptual framing of cultural influence and exchange also affects disciplinary framings and the focus of scholarship: for example, while much important work has been done about the *présence Africaine* in the Caribbean, there has been much less attention paid to diasporic influences in Africa, although some work in this area is now emerging, such as Jemima Pierre's (2013) study of the importance of diasporic encounters to racialization in Ghana. The dominant reading paradigms for African literature have, for many decades, been either national or continental, but several more recent studies on the representation of slavery in West African fiction (Christensen 2012; Murphy 2012; Osinubi 2014) point to a tentative opening of African literary studies towards the diaspora and the potential for greater exchange between African studies and African diaspora studies. Yogita Goyal suggests that “we need new diasporas” (2017) in order to understand the contemporary meanings of migration and blackness (see

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1 See Evans (2009) for an overview of responses to Gilroy's work.

also Koser 2003; Manger and Assal 2006; Okpewho and Nzegwu 2009). In this essay, I suggest that new conceptualizations of the African diaspora—particularly the relationship between Africa and the diaspora—are relevant to understanding not only migration, but also African modernity and identity on the continent. I argue that African literature may and indeed must also be read through a diasporic, in addition to a continental or national, paradigm. Fittingly enough, it is the work of African diasporic, Caribbean thinkers, particularly that of Édouard Glissant, that provides the conceptual tools for thinking through an “archipelagic Africa.”

## Archipelagic Africa: *Freshwater*

Akwaete Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018) at first appears to fit broadly into the category of the Afropolitan novel: the story of a young woman, born into a middle-class family in Nigeria, who moves to the USA to study before assuming an apparently comfortable (at least materially) itinerant existence between Africa, Europe, and America, seemingly without encumbrances such as regular paid work. The plot takes an unexpected turn, however, when it is revealed that she is in fact an ogbanje: a spirit child. Ada is the daughter of the Igbo goddess Ala, whose symbol and messenger is the python, and is inhabited by a cohort of somewhat malevolent spirits who influence and at times control her—and who narrate a large majority of the novel (although Jesus Christ, called Yshwa, is also a regular visitor). The novel therefore combines the Afropolitan interest in African identity in a globalizing world with an earlier tradition in African writing concerned with African (rather than national) identity: the mythopoetic turn to African traditions, dubbed by Anthony Appiah a “postcolonial recourse to Africa” (1992, 153). Unlike the earlier texts, however, which were oriented to the continent as opposed to the nation, *Freshwater* turns to the diaspora, particularly Caribbean cultures and the history of transatlantic slavery, to represent both a form of transgender African subjectivity and to find a new connection to almost forgotten African beliefs and knowledges. It thereby offers a vision of African “wholeness” not derived from origins but rather sutured together from broken pieces of African and diasporic cultures: an archipelagic rather than continental Africa.

*Freshwater* is not the first novel to narrate such a story of spiritual possession, of course, but it displays several key differences from its most famous predecessor, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), which tells the story of an abiku child—the Yoruba equivalent of the Igbo ogbanje. *The Famished Road* is frequently read as a critique of Nigerian economic and

political realities (Obumselu 2011); its abiku figure understood either as an allegory for the Nigerian nation-state (Mathuray 2009) or a regenerative force for his society (Cezair-Thompson 1996). It does not celebrate the abiku figure itself, however; rather, the novel charts the abiku's *rejection* of his own liminality in favour of "the construction of an inviolable African identity" that is above all self-sufficient, formed by an "innate capacity for self-formation and self-transformation on an epic scale" (Cezair-Thompson 1996, 40). Okri's novel is therefore broadly in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*: the abiku child overcomes his initial alienation from human society and finds his proper place in that society once he rejects his "refusal to be" (Okri 1991, 487)—a phrase taken from Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1965, 231), an early work in the West African tradition of contemporary mythopoetic writing—and becomes determined to live.

*Freshwater* can also be understood as a *Bildungsroman*: it is also about a child and young woman's search to understand herself and her place in society (or rather multiple societies), but the resolution it offers is significantly *not* based on the protagonist's adaptation to social—or national—norms and expectations. Emezi's novel does not reject the liminality of its ogbanje figure in order to imagine a social or national unity; rather, it embraces the difference of its representation of ogbanje being: its fluidity and multiplicity. Yet this embrace of the ogbanje and refusal of social norms nonetheless enables a reimagining of the (African) social: one which refuses the cultural logic of filiation (and its heteronormative logic in the realm of human relations) to arrive at an understanding of an Africanity which is non-unified, non-homogeneous, and generated in interaction with diaspora cultures.

In order to narrate this unusual story, and to explore the ontological and epistemological questions that it poses, the novel turns to three interlinked metaphorical, cultural-historical, and theoretical resources: the language and imagery of water and liquidity, the African diasporic cultures of the Atlantic and the history of slavery, and the Caribbean philosophy of the archipelago. The "freshwater" of the title, it soon becomes clear, is both a sign of the novel's location in a specific Igbo cosmology and its protagonist's spiritual status in that cosmology, *and* a medium of connection to other bodies of water and diasporic locations and cultures. This apparently paradoxical claim is made early on: "All water is connected. All freshwater comes out of the mouth of a python" (Emezi 2018, 9). The novel highlights the importance of water and water spirits in Igbo cosmology even as it also suggests that this culture and knowledge has become rare, at least in the urban and middle-class world into which Ada is born. The watery world of Igbo cosmology comes to stand for other forms of fluidity and liminality:

the spirits which occupy Ada are said to exist in a “liminal fluid” that is also a symbolic space of transition, especially gender transition: the “liminal fluid” is a place the ogbanje spirits are “suspended in,” both “between the inaccurate concepts of male and female” as well as between the human and spirit worlds (Emezi 2018, 193).

The novel’s representation of the ogbanje and the spirit world, and Ada’s process of coming to understand her identity, are decisively diasporic rather than continental. Although Ada is born in Umuahia and grows up in Aba in Igboland, Nigeria, her ogbanje nature goes unrecognized there. The people around her, including her Igbo father and other relatives, appear to have little knowledge of Igbo cosmology—just one uncle “knew the songs and dances of Uwummiri, the worship that is drowned in water” (Emezi 2018, 9). He dies when she is a small child—and Ada is raised as a Christian. Ada’s first real understanding of who and what she is arrives much later and via a diasporic detour through her friendship with Malena, a fellow student in the USA originally from the Dominican Republic, and “a daughter of Changó, of Santa Bárbara” (Emezi 2018, 88). Malena’s knowledge of the syncretic religious pantheon of Santeria, and her own self-understanding as the daughter of a Yoruba Orisha translated into a Santeria saint, enables her to recognize Ada and her collective of spirits. Translating Igbo cosmology into her own Santeria cosmology, she defines Ada as “the daughter of Santa Marta [...] La Dominadora” (Emezi 2018, 89). Malena’s “prophecies” prime Ada for the highly inconstant existence—both psychically and physically—which her ogbanje nature grants her: “the shifting, the quick skinnings and reshapings, the falling and revival of the scales” (Emezi 2018, 193). Years later, Ada gains further self-understanding and self-acceptance through her conversations with Léshi, a decidedly unorthodox Yoruba priest and sound artist living in Paris. It is only at the end of the novel, after these diasporic encounters, that she begins to learn more about Igbo cosmology and thus her own “roots” (Emezi 2018, 223)—a term that acquires, however, a particular meaning in this text.

The language and imagery of the Atlantic diaspora and the history of slavery are central to the novel’s representation of Ada’s occupying spirits, and the trope of capture and transportation comes to stand both for their experience of being placed in Ada’s human body and for their further displacement from the spirit world that is their homeland when Ada leaves Nigeria. The spirits are “wrenched, dragged through the gates, across a river” (Emezi 2018, 4) to be placed in the growing foetus, and the image of a gate between the spirit and human worlds is repeated throughout, recalling the common post-slavery diasporic trope of the “gate of no

return.”<sup>2</sup> The gate between the spirit and human realms is described as open but uncrossable for the spirits (they can return to the spirit world only upon Ada’s death), and, like the metaphoric gate of no return that marks the violent and irreversible rupture and catastrophic loss of the Middle Passage for black diasporic subjects, it is therefore a gate towards which they are constantly drawn, feeling keenly both the call of the spirit world and its inaccessibility. The imagery of enslavement and transportation is used to show how the spirits too have been “carried away like cargo [...] deposited in the land of the corrupters” (Emezi 2018, 47). While they consider this a grave insult, they also understand that this experience joins them to many other once African, now diasporic, gods and spirits: those “godly stowaways that came along when the corrupters stole our people” (Emezi 2018, 87). The spirits are therefore paradigmatic diasporic subjects: violently and forcibly displaced from their homeland, to which they repeatedly turn, but are unable to truly return; the novel employs the diasporic metaphor of “scattered seed” to describe their exile: “We were ejaculated into an unexpected limbo—too in-between, too god, too human, too halfway spirit bastard. Deity seed” (Emezi 2018, 34). The exile of the spirits is painful; they describe the “open” (but unpassable) gates between the human and spirit worlds as being “like sores that can’t stop grieving: they infect with space, gaps, widenings” (Emezi 2018, 35), and this diasporic “gap” is shared by many migrant characters in the novel, although they respond to it differently. It is this diasporic displacement, this “limbo”—another Caribbean cultural borrowing—that binds Ada to her friends from other parts of Africa and the African diaspora, not race. Ada “didn’t quite fit” with the African American students at her university, who find her strange (in part because she does not share their understanding of race); instead, she becomes friends with those who “didn’t quite fit either” (Emezi 2018, 50).

Why turn to the Caribbean to understand African and Igbo cosmology and ontology? The novel suggests that Caribbean writing and thought, particularly the work of Édouard Glissant, provide valuable philosophical resources for thinking through at least some forms of contemporary Nigerian or African identity in the context of, among other things, substantial cultural change, urbanization, migration, diaspora, and queerness. In this context, identity is not assured or given; towards the end of the novel, the narrating spirits suggest that they desire “wholeness,” but

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2 This term is used for historical and contemporary structures commemorating the forced transportation of Africans in several West African coastal cities. See also Brand (2001).

that “when a thing has been created with deformations and mismatched edges, sometimes you have to break it apart before you can start putting it back together again” (Emezi 2018, 210). Precisely such a process—of patching together a subjectivity and identity from broken pieces, of creating a whole that shows its sutures—has long been a focus of Caribbean writing. Derek Walcott identified this “gathering of broken pieces” (1993, 262) as the motor of Caribbean cultural creativity, and many other scholars have highlighted the “foundational ambiguity of Caribbean subject formation” (Munro and Shilliam 2011, 162). But according to Kwaku Larbi Korang, “that fracture in black ontology produced by Western Imperialism is not the exclusive property of the diasporic branch of the Black Atlantic: it is to be seen both here, in the Old World, and there, in the New” (2004, 285).

The work of Caribbean thinkers and writers over at least the past century to describe the experience of dislocation, the reformulation of culture, and the creation of non-essentialist identities now makes Caribbean identities and cultures paradigmatic for understanding Ada’s experience. Ada’s human experience already shows enough signs of fracturing and dislocation: her Christian upbringing in an Igbo family, with one migrant parent from South Asia via Malaysia, and later her own migration. The novel suggests that these are *compounded* by her spiritual status as ogbanje. The fact that Ada is the daughter of an Igbo goddess does not automatically lead to a stable, let alone enclosed, African identity; rather, it is only the circulation of meaning and knowledge via the Caribbean that helps her to understand her African, Igbo self. This is necessary in part because very few Africans—Nigerians or Igbo—are able to understand Ada or recognize her for what she is. Ada is therefore displaced from herself by colonial and post-independence politics, including the Nigerian civil war and its effects on Igbo culture. She is a metaphysical diasporic subject, displaced from norms of individual, unitary selfhood and rationality that reign both in the West and in contemporary, postcolonial Nigeria. In addition to Ada’s ontological ambiguity, the novel adds a layer of epistemological ambiguity: in the Nigeria of the novel, the knowledge of Igbo cosmologies that might help Ada to understand herself has been widely forgotten. Furthermore, the novel offers no clear epistemological guidance for the reader, that is, it never fully resolves whether we are to understand the spirits as real (as in Okri), or whether they are to be understood as an analogy for what, in Western terms, are understood as mental illnesses. Ada’s experiences of self, gender, and even body are multiple, and the novel turns to the cross-gender subjectivities and modular discourse of personhood of Afro-Diasporic religions like Santeria and Vodou to understand these, and to understand the knowledges that many modern Africans have (almost) forgotten.

As a result of historical and contemporary political, social, and economic processes, the Igbo characters have suffered a version of the “erasing of the collective memory” that in the work of Édouard Glissant generates a “nonhistory” (Glissant 1989, 62). That is, not a lack of history (and certainly not in the Hegelian sense), but a sense of dislocation from the past, rendering them unable to relate to their own history. It is telling, therefore, that Ada is encouraged to pursue her understanding of Igbo cosmology and her own ogbanje being by a man referred to only as “the historian” (Emezi 2018, 218). In doing so, the novel recalls the longstanding Caribbean debate on the relationship of history and myth. Rather than myth offering a way to rewrite history and refuse colonial historiography, as in the work of Glissant, Wilson Harris, and Alejo Carpentier (among others) (see Webb 1992, 3–25), in Emezi’s novel it is history—that is, a realization of the ruptures in recent Igbo and Nigerian history that have led to this collective forgetting—that leads Ada to myth, in the sense of finally accepting and acknowledging her spiritual status. This acceptance does not lead to a sense of wholeness or cultural purity, however: in contrast, Ada recounts that she “fell apart that night” (Emezi 2018, 219). The Igbo and African identity which *Freshwater* imagines for its protagonist is as syncretic as Santeria: Ada’s Christian childhood is recuperated, the Igbo spirits reconciled with “Yshwa.” The “roots” (Emezi 2018, 223) that Ada seeks are not genealogical—as an ogbanje she “did not come from a human lineage” and has “no ancestors” (Emezi 2018, 225)—nor do they stand for a conservative understanding of Igbo traditions and beliefs, which the novel clearly does not offer, but rather a creolizing and creative connection to Igbo spirituality and epistemology. It can therefore be understood as an *archipelagic* identity and understanding of Igbo-ness and Africanity.

For Glissant, archipelagic thought (*pensée archipelique*) is first and foremost opposed to continental thought (*pensée continentale*)—his term for the hegemonic Western tradition. Continental thought is “system thinking” (Glissant 2009, 45) that seeks synthesis from above and is grounded in fixed hierarchies. Archipelagic thought instead starts from the particular, recognizing even the “smallest rocks in the river” (Glissant 2009, 45), and is committed to preserving that particularity rather than imposing homogeneity (see also Murdoch 2015). Archipelagic thought is an alternative to the colonial logic of filiation and origins. It is characterized by the absence of a stabilizing centre or any claim of pure origins or a fixed identity; it is drifting and tends toward diversions, “anything but linear or teleological” (Wiedorn 2018, 114). Crucially, Glissant described archipelagic thought as “the thinking of the ambiguous” and thus suited to a globalizing world that is “archipelago-izing” (quoted in Wiedorn 2018, 115), that is,

becoming *more* ambiguous. Archipelagic thought therefore moves from geographically existing archipelagos to the archipelago as a model for culture in global modernity, with the Caribbean as the model of a “repeating island” (Benitez-Rojo 1996) that may expand and “chaotically repeat across the entire planet” (Roberts 2013, 123). In *Freshwater*, the Caribbean archipelago, that is, its cultures, history, and literary debates, wash back to the West African coastline. This is a diasporic “return” that does not promise an unproblematic wholeness, but rather more fracturing and rejoicing—not a fantasy of pre-modern, pre-colonial, pre-globalization cultural purity, but rather a newly created “wholeness” that is always in becoming—as cultures, peoples, and epistemologies collide and become entangled—and that shows its scars. Ada learns that she is the daughter of the Igbo freshwater goddess, but also that “all water is connected” (Emezi 2018, 9): modern culture and identities on the continent today can only be made sense of via ocean circuits.

## **Re-continentalization and the Burden of History in *The Sacred River***

Syl Cheney-Coker’s second novel was published in 2014 as a very belated follow-up to *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* (1990). Like its predecessor, it is set in the imaginary West African land of Kissi and its capital Malagueta, Cheney-Coker’s fictionalized version of Sierra Leone. It takes place in the last decades of the twentieth century, concluding with the (fictionalized) end of the Sierra Leone Civil War around the turn of the twenty-first century. One of the strangest, hardest to parse themes of this sprawling novel is that of Caribbean, specifically Haitian, influence on the political and economic fate of this West African country. At the beginning of the novel, Tankor Satani, president of Kissi, is repeatedly visited in his dreams by Henri Christophe, the one-time king of Haiti, who encourages Tankor to pursue a dictatorship, have himself crowned emperor, build Xanadu (an extravagant hilltop castle that recalls Christophe’s Citadel and Sans Souci Palace), destroy his enemies, wreck the economy, and generally leave the country in ruins, ripe for the civil war that erupts after his death. The novel’s exploration of the frustration of hopes for liberation and democracy in post-independence Africa, replaced by political corruption, crony capitalism, further resource extraction, and armed conflict, is thereby represented as a diasporic influence, a second and belated diasporic return after the arrival of black settlers in the eighteenth century. Against this diasporic influence, and against the horrors visited upon Kissi

by the dictator and his military and business accomplices, West African forms of spirituality associated with rivers and oceans appear to offer the only hope for renewal and peace.

The ghost of Henri Christophe first appears in response to a historical neglect: a severe storm is interpreted by local people as a sign of “the vengeance of the dead at the bottom of the ocean for the neglect they had lately suffered” (Cheney-Coker 2014, 8); and the president briefly considers “rectifying that neglect” (8) by holding a remembrance ceremony—a tradition begun by the first, ex-slave settlers who founded the city. After Christophe’s visit, however, this idea is forgotten, so that this neglect of Black Atlantic memory, this forgetting of the relevance of slavery and the diaspora to West Africa is cast as a historical mission and bequest from revolutionary Haiti. “As you know,” he says to Tankor Satani in a dream, “Haiti was the first republic created by ex-slaves; and Malagueta was established by the children of former slaves and recaptives, who had been deprived of their kings. So it is up to you to start acting like an emperor” (Cheney-Coker 2014, 8–9). Christophe tells Tankor that he is the “chosen one” (Cheney-Coker 2014, 9) to complete Christophe’s “unfinished work” (11), which was interrupted two centuries prior by “that damned Napoleon” (256). That is to say, he carries “the burden of history” (Cheney-Coker 2014, 9). There are many possible parallels that might be drawn between Christophe and Tankor in this case of history repeating as farce, but the claim that Christophe is passing on the burden of history to Tankor is perhaps the most intriguing.

Nick Nesbitt argues that “two of the processes that came to distinguish the twentieth century were invented in Haiti: decolonization and neocolonialism” (2005, 6) so that “in the two centuries since its foundation, the history of Haiti has become the development and perfection of a system of total exploitation by a tiny elite and the most absolute lack of popular sovereignty and governmental mediation imaginable” (2005, 10). If in the mid-twentieth century Caribbean writers frequently represented Haiti as the birthplace of anticolonial consciousness—for Alejo Carpentier, Haiti was “the antithesis and antidote to European cultural domination” (Webb 1992, 17), for Aimé Césaire it was the place “where negritude rose for the first time and stated that it believed in its humanity” (2017, 29)—it is therefore equally fitting that Haiti might also be drawn upon to explore “the bankruptcy of postcolonial regimes [...] the rampant corruption and vicious authoritarianism” (Scott 2004, 1–2) of postcolonial states in the current era. Yet there is a certain discomfort generated by Haiti being invoked in this way as well. The novel’s story of post-independence corruption and conflict is, unfortunately, hardly an uncommon one, and the claim that it is initiated by the bad influence of Henri Christophe might be read as

an excuse: European colonialism is apparently no longer to blame, and while the local “Corals” (Lebanese traders, resident in Kissi for generations) are corrupt and exploitative, they are clearly not responsible for the worst crimes. Even as the corruption of politicians and military officers is described unsparingly, there is nonetheless an implication that the supernatural visit from Haiti set the worst of it in motion, thereby absolving the country’s African elite from blame.

The novel therefore invokes diasporic connections seemingly in order to reject them as a bad influence, despite the people of Kissi being in part descended from returned diasporans, and its history and culture therefore, as in the Caribbean, a product of the encounter of the Old and New Worlds. This heritage was explored in Cheney-Coker’s first novel, *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* (1990), a story of the Black Loyalists, those mostly African American migrants who settled in Sierra Leone, via London and Nova Scotia, after the American Revolution. While that novel shows various moments of disconnect and inequality between native Africans and the settler population, these are largely resolved in favour of a claim of a shared community and the possibility of a functional multicultural state, including the triumph over postcolonial corruption (Borman 2016, 59). This is made possible in particular by the poetry of Garbage, the child of a native African and a returnee, which is both the vehicle of political and social critique and which proposes African spirituality and magic as a means for the settlers to affiliate themselves with Africa. In *The Sacred River*, in contrast, poetry, philosophy, and critical journalism are shown to be powerless against the corrupt regime, and only magic remains. Tankor Satani’s reign is finally ended when his young lover is revealed to be a Mami Wata, a mermaid-like spirit, who causes a huge wave to wash the emperor’s Xanadu down into the sea, thereby also symbolizing the end of Christophe’s influence, and positioning this African water deity as the counterpoint to the Haitian king. The turn to magic and spirituality is therefore not a sign of chauvinistic ethnocentrism, but rather a rejection of the “burden of history.” It remains unclear, however, how that is to be defined.

The novel’s engagement with Haitian history is significantly complicated by the fact that the Haitian revolution is *misremembered* throughout the novel: it is repeatedly claimed that Napoleon defeated the Haitian revolutionaries, when of course it was Napoleon’s armies that were defeated, leading to Haitian independence in 1804. This claim of Napoleonic victory is extended to the founding of Malagueta—and perhaps more importantly, shared even by the opponents of Tankor Satani—a part of which is reported to have been built by settlers who arrived “following the defeat of the Haitian revolutionaries by Napoleon Bonaparte’s forces” (Cheney-Coker

2014, 242). The “burden of history” of the actual Haitian revolution—that is, its demonstration “that the colonized can take hold of their own historical destiny and enter the stage of world history as autonomous actors, and not merely passive, enslaved subjects” (Nesbitt 2005, 6), its effects on Caribbean literature, Atlantic cultures, and the Negritude movement (see Geggus 2001; Munro 2004), and of course on European literature and philosophy, particularly Hegel (Buck-Morss 2009)—is therefore *not* the “burden of history” that the novel confers upon Tankor or Kissi.

By claiming this rewritten story of the Haitian revolution as the foundational event of the country, the novel assigns its fictional people not the burden of the difficult and complex history of post-independence Haiti, but a simpler story of defeat. Tankor’s understanding of *this* “burden” leads him to imitate European history: he feels his mission from Christophe is complete when he has himself crowned emperor at a “Versailles Conference of West Africa leaders” (Cheney-Coker 2014, 211)—an echo of Christophe’s decision to establish an aristocracy in Haiti and his own building projects, popularly understood as “meant to impress the *blan* (whites/foreigners), meant to provide the world with irrefutable evidence of the ability of the black race” (Trouillot 1995, 35).<sup>3</sup> This mimicry of whiteness and European history as the path to historicity, the means to overcome Hegel’s denial of history to Africa and Africans, is emphatically rejected by the novel, and Hegel’s claim that the progress of history leads to universal freedom embodied by the state is revealed as a bitterly false promise by events in Kissi. Instead, Tankor’s reign, inspired by Christophe, recalls Derek Walcott’s characterization of the Haitian revolution as a story of “the corruption of slaves into tyrants” (2002, 93)—an overly simplified understanding that according to Chris Bongie testifies to Walcott’s “longstanding disengagement from, his disinterest in and contestation of, History itself” (2005, 74). For Walcott, the assertion that the “sea is History” (1992, 364) is a means to start anew, to assert the validity and vitality of the Caribbean cultures which emerged from the rupture of the Middle Passage, rather than forever lamenting the New World’s apparent lack of history. Other Caribbean writers, such as Glissant, do not share Walcott’s rejection of history (that

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3 Trouillot reports this as the popular interpretation; however, he later notes that one of Christophe’s closest advisers, Baron Valentin de Vastey, chancellor of the kingdom, evoked the 1813 completion of Sans Souci and the adjacent Royal Church of Milot in grandiose terms that anticipated Afrocentrism by more than a century: “These two structures, erected by descendants of Africans, show that we have not lost the architectural taste and genius of our ancestors who covered Ethiopia, Egypt, Carthage, and old Spain with their superb monuments” (Trouillot 1995, 36).

is, the European and colonial norm of historicity) and embrace of myth in quite the same way, or to the same extent, but they too are interested in using myth not to *forget* but to reimagine history and thereby disrupt colonial historiography.<sup>4</sup> Glissant advocates a “prophetic vision of the past” (1989, 64), that is, a poetic engagement with history that seeks to disrupt the authority of colonial thought and historiography by “imagin[ing] the world differently: open, fractal and creolizing, always resistant to the habitual appeal of a common aesthetic, and always refusing the security of a final end or purpose” (Parham and Drabinski 2015, 4).

In contrast, *The Sacred River* disengages from history entirely, instead reinstating a strict binary between history and myth. Having rejected the “burden of history,” the only “stubborn hope” (Cheney-Coker 2014, 425) left against the ravages of the civil war and the corrupt state are spiritual beliefs in the power of the “sacred river,” which in the final scene of the novel is represented as having the power to wash clean: washing clean the young woman whose brutal rape opens the novel, and washing clean the country as magical forces create a sudden storm to wash the guerrilla soldiers and rapists out of Africa into the sea. The novel thereby not only criticizes postcolonial efforts to emulate European imperialism—Tankor’s dream of Versailles in Africa—but also suggests that myth might wash Africa clean of its recent history, the worst of which is represented as a diasporic influence. *The Sacred River* therefore draws extensively on diasporic thought and a (misremembered) version of its history *not* in order to extend the Caribbean archipelago across the Atlantic, but to effect a re-continentalization, that is, both a forgetting of diasporic influence in Africa, and a cementing of *pensée continentale*, with its focus on origins, linearity, and hierarchy. The river and ocean are not a medium of connection, but of a renewed separation, as the crimes and tragedies of post-independence West Africa are washed out of the continent to join the other forgotten dead at the bottom of the sea.

## Archipelagic Thought and Gender Fluidity

One of the most striking differences between the two very different oceanic imaginaries developed in these novels is their effect on gender representation. It is remarkable that amidst the rich variety that *The Sacred*

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4 In a further twist, Bongie suggests that a similar critique of colonial historiography was formulated in the early nineteenth century by none other than Baron de Vastey, the private secretary to Henri Christophe (2005, 79).

*River* attributes to its West African world—its landscapes, flora and fauna, cuisines, cultural practices, spiritual and religious beliefs, the ethnicities of its inhabitants, and more—there is no indication of any variations of gender or sexuality. Instead, the gender politics of the novel might be described as strenuous heteronormativity: the African women beautiful and seductive in their youth, great cooks and wise advisors to their husbands and children as they age; the men inevitably virile and well endowed. This gender binary underlies the novel's reinstatement of other conceptual dualisms: while politics and history are masculinized domains, magic and spirituality are primarily practiced by women and eunuchs, and the novel's privileging of the latter does little to unsettle this binary thinking. In contrast, *Freshwater* is, among other things, a story of African transgender identity—one that comes to be understood through Ada's engagement with diasporic cultures and effected by surgery in the USA. The protagonist and her occupying spirits must negotiate the contemporary Western discourse of “gender reassignment” and “transitioning” (Emezi 2018, 189) in order to gain access to surgical procedures. The novel, however, offers a counter-discursive understanding of Ada's desire to make changes to her sexed body derived from its (reimagined) Igbo epistemology. In this understanding, Ada is motivated to transform her body into a fitting “vessel” for her collective of multi-gendered but nonhuman spirits, a process described as “mutilating her [...] all the way to righteousness” (Emezi 2018, 186). Ada's transition, arrived at via both Santeria beliefs and American medical and trans identity discourses, makes her, if anything, *more* African: the final scene of the novel imagines her in rural Igboland becoming “the source of the spring” (226), that is, becoming like her python goddess mother.

## Conclusion

The gender politics of the two novels thus appear to match their more general approach to diasporic and African spirituality and history: while *Freshwater* rejects the logic of origins, traditions, authenticity, and strict binaries, *The Sacred River* tends to reinstate them. In *Freshwater*, the turn to diaspora and archipelagic thought is also a rejection of the logic of lineage and origins in the form of heteropatriarchy, while the imagining of an Africa washed clean of foreign influence in *The Sacred River* is accompanied by a naturalization of heteronormativity. This suggests that the turn to diaspora, at least in African writing, might often be a turn to a form of queer diaspora that works against the logic of genealogy and patriarchy as

much as against the logic of pure cultural origins. The currents that wash the shores of the archipelago—of which Africa might also be an island—are “recurrent, eddying, *troublant*” (Sedgwick 1994, viii).

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Frank Schulze-Engler

## From British Lake to Afrasian Sea: Recalibrations of the Indian Ocean in Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea*

**ABSTRACT** This essay aims to show that Yvonne Owuor's novel *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019), the first major East African novel exploring Africa's relations to China, breaks new ground in African literature. Recalibrations of the Indian Ocean lie at the heart of this extraordinary text that explores Africa's role in a multipolar world where the centrality of Europe and North America has already given way to complex new realignments between countries, cultures, memories, and people, and is likely to erode even further in the future. Owuor's novel has crossed a threshold into a new phase of African literature that can by no stretch of the imagination be called "postcolonial" any longer. It is not the ideologically constituted "friendship between peoples," but the struggle to find connections between individuals that constitutes the Afrasian space in this novel, and it is relations that constitute home, not territory, biology, or culture.

**KEYWORDS** Afrasia, African maritime literature, Africa–China relations, Indian Ocean, multilingualism

### Introduction

I would like to commence my essay with a scene from Yvonne Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) in which many of the important themes of her novel are present in a condensed form. At the centre of this scene (and of Owuor's novel as a whole) we find Ayaana, a young African woman from the small island of Pate off the Kenyan coast, who is said to be a descendant of Chinese sailors who some 500 years ago survived the shipwreck of their vessel belonging to one of the naval expeditions of the famous Chinese Admiral Zheng He. Ayaana received a stipend as a guest of honour in China and now finds herself in a marine science classroom, where

she is embroiled in a heated debate on the name of the ocean connecting Africa and Asia with her fellow students.

One hot and humid day, Ari, a student of maritime engineering from India, observed that the Mandarin Silk Road initiative subsumed the *Indian* Ocean—he emphasized “Indian”—to “others.” “It is not for nothing that the ocean is called Indian,” he noted.

Ayaana retorted, “Ziwa Kuu?”

Ari turned to her. “Oogle Boogle?”

“Ziwa Kuu.” Ayaana refused to cede territory.

Ari said, “We’ll discuss this with your good self the day your country acquires a motorboat to start a navy.”

Ayaana said, “Ziwa Kuu, and we have a navy.”

“Doubtless its fish bounties are commendable, but what else?”

Titters.

“Ratnakara,” said an Indonesian.

“*Indian Ocean*,” emphasised Ari. “Ziwa Kuu,” repeated Ayaana. “*Indian Ocean*.”

Two Pakistani students chimed in: “Ziwa Kuu!”

The class slipped into an uproar that did not change Chinese foreign policy. The lecturer, who had watched the disintegration of order in his class in disbelief, his face becoming blotchy, at last screamed, “The Western Ocean! You are in China.” (288–9)

This essay will unpack this passage along three different trajectories that show to what extent Yvonne Owuor’s *The Dragonfly Sea* breaks new ground in African literature and how recalibrations of the Indian Ocean lie at the heart of this extraordinary novel.

## Beyond Bandung Nostalgia

The first of these trajectories entails an exploration of South–South relations beyond what might be called Bandung nostalgia. What is at stake here, in a nutshell, is how far the social world of Owuor’s novel differs from earlier versions of African–Asian links that were formulated in the heyday of anticolonialism. To take a particularly striking example, here is a section of the speech Kenyan novelist and literary activist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o delivered in 1973 when he received the Lotus Prize for Literature awarded by the Afro-Asian Literature Association:

This is an African story: it is also an Asian story, and any cursory glance at the history of China, Indo-China, India, Africa, the West Indies and

Afro-America, will see the testimony in tears and blood. We are truly a colonial people whose sweat has been cruelly exploited by western-monopoly capital to build the monument called western civilization. [...]

So why not now dream the hopes of millions: of a United People's Republic of Africa joining hands with a United People's Republic of Asia in the service of the true Republic of man and works. What greater story can we as writers be privileged to tell? We can only hope that our hearts and pens will always be equal to the task. (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o [1973] 1981, 102; 106)

This passage may resonate well with contemporary attempts to recuperate the grand narratives of anticolonial solidarity embodied in what has been called the “Bandung Spirit” (named after the famous conference of Non-Aligned Nations held in Indonesia in 1955);<sup>1</sup> and it may also strike a note with those in postcolonial studies who engage in what I have elsewhere called “enchanted solidarity” (Schulze-Engler 2015, 22) in an attempt to cling to the great historical moment of decolonization as if that constellation could be reproduced at will decades later.<sup>2</sup> Against the background of contemporary African–Asian relations in a rapidly globalizing world, these attempts arguably amount to little more than epistemological nostalgia, and the grand vision of looking at South–South relations in general and Afrasian interactions in particular through a common history of colonial oppression is hardly convincing any longer in the contemporary world.<sup>3</sup>

A few years ago, Mukoma wa Ngugi, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's son, characterized the need to “rethink the Global South” in the following terms:

Writers and scholars from the Global South often engage with one another through their own relationship to the West. But triangulating ideas, whether political or literary, through the West ends up masking historical South–South relationships while feeding and giving cover to cultural nationalism and protectionist scholarly practices. We need to fracture this dialectical linkage to the West and allow South–South cultural, historical and political conversations to take place. [...] Unable to escape this locked and unequal dialectic, many postcolonial thinkers end up affirming the very relationships they are trying to undermine. (Mukoma wa Ngugi 2012, 5)

Mukoma wa Ngugi continues his thoughts on “rethinking the Global South” with a passionate plea for leaving the “comfort zone” which has arguably become the heuristic habitat of much of contemporary postcolonial studies:

1 See, for example, Phạm and Shilliam 2016, and Wardaya 2005.

2 See, for example, Halim 2012 and Yoon 2015.

3 For a critical assessment of current attempts to revive the “Bandung Spirit” in Postcolonial Studies see Schulze-Engler 2019.

The idea is not to look for what Glissant calls “ideological stability” [...]. To think about South-to-South relations is to enter a place of great intellectual vulnerability. Once we leave the relationship of, let’s say, Africa and Europe via colonialism, the world suddenly becomes very vast, complicated, and scary as the knowledge of just how little we know settles in. Yet, this place that is just outside our comfort zone is a beautiful place to be in—it’s a place of discovery of new ideas and seeing old ideas anew. (Mukoma wa Ngugi 2012, 6–7)

In a nutshell, I would like to argue that Yvonne Owuor’s novel is resolutely set outside the comfort zone of anticolonial friendship between Africa and Asia, and manages its exploration of historical and contemporary Sino-Kenyan relations entirely without recourse to the postcolonial triangulation with the West that Mukoma wa Ngugi has referred to. In the classroom scene in China presented at the beginning of this essay, Europeans and North Americans are totally absent, and the participants in the heated debate are all from what has often been called the “Global South.” Yet there is no romanticization of “peoples’ solidarity” at work here: the entanglements between Africa, India, China, Pakistan, and Indonesia across the Indian Ocean do not simply follow a benign agenda, but are part of new regional power negotiations based on China’s aspirations to global hegemony, India’s claim to be the major power hub in the region, Pakistan’s undermining of that claim, and Indonesia’s assertion of its lead role as the most populous nation in the Southeast Asian part of the Indian Ocean.

Owuor’s novel thus resolutely moves beyond clichéd notions of “the West and the Rest” and seeks to explore the contours of what Edward Said described as a “decentred or multiply-centred world” at the beginning of the new millennium:

[W]hat if the world has changed so drastically as to allow now for almost the first time a new geographical consciousness of a decentered or multiply-centered world, a world no longer sealed within watertight compartments of art or culture or history, but mixed, mixed up, varied, complicated by the new difficult mobility of migrations, the new independent states, the newly emergent and burgeoning cultures? (Said 2002, 470–1)<sup>4</sup>

This multipolar world is by no means one in which the machinations of the “Global West” and its enemies have stopped to matter altogether, as the murderous presence of Islamist terrorists and the no less murderous

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4 On the notion of a multipolar world order, see also Clegg 2009 and Hiro 2010.

incursion of the American-led “War on Terror” on Pate Island amply testify, but the reassuring cognitive framework of a Manichean world split into the “Dominant” and the “Dominated,” the “West” and the “South,” or “Europe” and its “Others” is firmly dismantled in *The Dragonfly Sea*.

Instead, the novel seeks to explore the puzzling multitude of social, economic, political, and cultural relations emerging in a multipolar world in which China and Africa no longer interact in a triangulated space dominated by “the West,” but participate in the making of a bewildering new world order that generates new hopes and solidarities, but also new forms of power ambitions and oppression. Ayaana’s presence in China itself is part of this scenario and goes back to Chinese power politics in the framework of the Road and Belt initiative pushing for global hegemony. Tiny Pate Island, where Chinese sailors may have foundered and survived centuries ago, has become incorporated into this push, and Ayaana is transformed into the “Descendant,” a cypher of friendship between the Chinese and Kenyan people:

Five weeks ago [...] her hostess had declared to her, in a heartfelt speech: “There is one memory. Like blood. It is on your skin.” Ayaana had wanted to protect her body parts. [...] Cohabiting with shadows—here was the weight of a culture with a hulking history now preparing itself to digest her continent; here she was, with something of this land already in her blood, being made into something of a conspirator, anointed with a sobriquet: “the Descendant.” (275–6)

While entanglements across the ocean are everywhere and inevitable, one major trajectory of Ayaana in Owuor’s novel is thus to free herself from being the pawn of a Chinese power game, and to disentangle herself from a narrative that is not hers. When she leaves China and returns to Pate in the last part of the novel, this is by no means a retreat to a pristine island paradise, not only because Pate is located next to Lamu, where China plans to build a gigantic deepwater port that will have dire ecological effects on Pate, but also because Pate has always been a melting pot of innumerable cultural influences. Ayaana’s return to Pate is rather an attempt to find an African perspective in a rapidly changing transregional world and to explore African agency in that world:

China says she has come back. An “old friend.” But when she was here before, we also had to pay for that friendship. Now she speaks, not with us on Pate, but to Nairobi, where our destiny is written as if we don’t exist.

[...]

We hear China will build a harbour, and ships will come; we hear that an oil pipeline shall cross our land. We hear a city shall emerge from our sea, but first they will close our channel. These are the things we only hear. China does not talk to us.

[...]

She said, “We hear that Admiral Zheng He has emerged from out of time to resume his voyages.” A twist of her lips. “Me, though, I desire Pate’s dreams.” She paused and shook her head, softened her voice: “If they can be retrieved. You see, we have lost even the memory of the name for our seas.” [...] Ayaana added, “China is here. With all the others—al-Shabaab, everyone else... China is here for China.” She shrugged. “What do we do?” (470)

## From Indian Ocean to Dragonfly Sea

I would now like to turn to the second trajectory of Indian Ocean recalibrations that hinges on renaming the Indian Ocean the “Dragonfly Sea.” One of the central ironies in the classroom scene that has already been touched upon several times in this essay is the fact that the name of the Indian Ocean that the Indian student in a fit of nationalist fervour claims as a semiotic marker of Indian entitlement does, in fact, have its origin in the preponderance of Europeans in the region; it was British colonial and maritime power that finally ensured that the ocean that had been known by so many names before (and that the British in a bout of imperial arrogance often referred to as a “British Lake” located between their prized possessions in India and East Africa) became globally known as the “Indian Ocean.” The struggle for the ocean’s name that lies at the heart of the classroom quarrel constitutes a major theme in Owuor’s novel, and it is highly significant that Owuor’s poetic renaming does not seek to set up a geostrategic African counter-position to the “Indian” Ocean, as embodied, for example, in terms such as the “Eritrean” or the “Swahili” Sea.

Renaming the Indian Ocean the “Dragonfly Sea” (after the millions of insects that cross over from Asia to Africa every year with the monsoon winds) constitutes a highly effective method of poetically easing the Afrasian Sea<sup>5</sup> out of the stranglehold of nationalist semiotic strategies and imbuing it with the fluidity and connectivity across national boundaries that the novel is so centrally interested in. While the very word “dragonfly” could possibly conjure up poetic associations of East Asian flying dragons or Chinese ships flying across the water, the dragonflies in the novel clearly do not belong to any one nation or continent; like migrant birds they cross

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5 On the notion of the “Afrasian Sea,” see Pearson 1998 and Karugia 2018.

man-made and natural boundaries and set up connections that long pre-date contemporary international relations. The dragonflies in Owuor's novel thus serve as mobile polysemic metaphors that connect Asia and Africa across the ocean in a manner that echoes the poetic suturing of the shared and disjointed histories of Africa and the New World across the Atlantic by means of the needle-sharp beaks of the sea swifts in Derek Walcott's *Omoo* (1990).

Renaming the ocean the "Dragonfly Sea" thus forms part of a vision that might be called a "cosmopolitanism from below,"<sup>6</sup> a vision that seeks out new connections between people (rather than nations) based on an interconnectedness across continents that includes Arabia, Turkey, and a number of other African countries, not all of which are located by the sea. This interconnectedness does not rely on nationalist identifications or on grand victimological tales of joint suffering, and it cannot be reduced to the bloodlines that the Chinese government eagerly wants to discover in Ayaana or to "national cores" of identity. Instead, this interconnectedness emerges from friendship (and even love) between fragile, marginal, and often enough wounded individuals across cultural, ethnic, religious, and national borders, from acts of solidarity between citizens from different countries who stand up against oppressive nationalisms, and from the lived experience of transcultural maritime lifeworlds.

After the "official" Chinese attempts at turning Ayaana into an embodiment of ancient bloodlines connecting "the people of China and Africa" have failed, the novel somewhat surprisingly ends with a successful African-Chinese love affair between Ayaana and Lai Jin, the captain of the ship that had transported Ayaana from Africa to China, re-travelling the route once taken by Admiral Zheng He. Lai Jin discovered that the ship carrying Ayaana was in fact engaged in massive illegal smuggling of ivory and animal parts, had the containers holding the booty thrown overboard, and fell out with the high-level Communist Party official who had set up Ayaana's triumphant sea journey as a smokescreen for his smuggling business. He is thrown into prison, and later becomes an internationally successful potter whose yearning for Ayaana eventually leads him to Pate.

Before Ayaana and Lai Jin can finally come together, they both have to unlearn the nationalist identities and identifications that they still partly inhabit. Ayaana has to learn to see Lai Jin as a unique person rather than as a cypher for another nationality:

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6 For an interesting exploration of this concept see Kurasawa 2004, 233–55.

She said, “On my plane home ... there were more of you than there were of us on board. China is our typhoon.” Her mind grasped for clarity. At last she really looked at him. “Why are *you* here?”

Lai Jin’s hands opened and closed; opened and closed. “*Hǎiyàn*,” he said through gritted teeth. “I’m not ‘China.’ I am Lai Jin. A man. I am here. My purpose is to find you. A man. He has come to find *Hǎiyàn*. A man, not ‘China.’” Pain spots in his eyes. (463)

And Lai Jin has to learn that his presence on Pate Island is by no means as extraordinary as he, still influenced by a Chinese exoticist discourse of wild and primitive Africa, likes to think. Visiting old Chinese tombstones generally attributed to the fifteenth century, the time of Zheng He’s Ming Dynasty expeditions, Lai Jin suddenly realizes that these graves are several centuries older and probably date back to the seventh to tenth century Tang Dynasty. Once more it is the dragonflies that poetically set the tone for what turns out to be a life-changing insight:

A moment in dusk. Migrant dragonflies flitted above Lai Jin’s head as he stopped to stare at Pate’s old crescent-spaced tombs. Tang, he suspected—not Ming, as was presumed. [...] Goose bumps. A realization: there was nothing unique about his presence here. He stroked the curves on a tombstone. Ebb. Flow. Repetition. Rhythm of the ages. Nothing new or unusual about the arrival or departure of souls from here or elsewhere. It was the warp and weave of existence. (467)

## The Anglophone Novel as Worldly Contact Zone

The last part of this essay will address the third trajectory of the Indian Ocean recalibrations in *The Dragonfly Sea* and discuss how Owuor manages to turn her Anglophone text into a worldly contact zone. To return to the classroom this essay began with one last time, the heated argument is conducted in English, but the text is shot through with items from other languages such as “Ziwa Kuu” (Swahili for “Great Lake”) or “Ratnakara” (Sanskrit for “treasure chest”). In fact, the whole text of *The Dragonfly Sea* is a veritable linguistic contact zone in which English shares literary space with Swahili, Chinese, Arabic, and Turkish, to mention only a few of the many languages that have left their imprint on Owuor’s novel. Some of these items from other languages are translated, some are indirectly glossed, and some remain completely untranslated. Older debates on English as a literary language that pitted self-enclosed worlds of African

languages against an equally self-enclosed world of English (such as the notorious stance of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o against English as an allegedly "foreign" language in African literature)<sup>7</sup> seem to have lost their relevance as we witness Owuor's text in the act of "doing English."

In an essay called "O-Swahili—Language and Liminality," Yvonne Owuor has characterized the mutual permeability of languages in the East African context in the following manner:

What if, in an East African context, languages like Kiswahili and English were vehicles of transportation—metaphorically, *matatus* (there is subtle order to the seeming chaos)—through which symbols, experiences, messages, meanings, maps, and archetypes of one cultural zone not only visit one another but oftentimes hop aboard and contribute to the blend of passengers heading to Destination Wherever? (Owuor 2015, 142)

In *The Dragonfly Sea*, Owuor has arguably turned the novelistic text into such a *matatu* (or rather, to remain within the sea-bound semiotics that characterize what is effectively the first major maritime African novel) into a *dau* that, in a manner strikingly similar to other recent novels exploring multilingual contact zones such as Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* (2008, 2012 and 2015) or Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), has allowed a multitude of heteroglossic passengers to hop aboard. Her text thus incorporates multilingual dialogicity and testifies to what Arundhati Roy, in her 2018 W. G. Sebald Lecture on Literary Translation entitled "What is the Morally Appropriate Language in which to Think and Write," has called the "mind-bending mosaic" of language politics and practices in the contemporary world (Roy 2018).

## A Threshold Text

To conclude: to non-African or non-Asian readers, *The Dragonfly Sea* might at first sight seem to be a novel that is not written for "us." It explores

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7 Ngũgĩ's largely polemical and one-sided critique of English-language literature in Africa and his rejection of "Afro-Saxon writing" seems to have found a permanent place in the inventory of contemporary postcolonial studies; see, for example, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1986. What is often less noted or totally neglected is Ngũgĩ's return to English in his critical writings—see, for example, Gikandi 2000—and his more nuanced assessment of African literature in former European languages in his seminal essay on world literature "Globalectical Imagination: The World in the Postcolonial," Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 2012.

Africa's role in a multipolar world where the centrality of Europe and North America has already given way to complex new realignments between countries, cultures, memories, and people, and is likely to erode even further in the future, and the "postcolonial" impetus of writing back to European colonialism and its legacies is no longer a primary literary concern. One of the central themes of *The Dragonfly Sea* is the crossing of thresholds, and as the first major East African novel exploring Africa's relations to China and as probably the first African maritime novel, *The Dragonfly Sea* is decidedly a twenty-first century text that has crossed a threshold into a new phase of African literature that can by no stretch of the imagination be called "postcolonial" any longer. It is not the ideologically constituted "friendship between peoples," but the struggle for finding connections between individuals that constitutes the Afrasian space in this novel, and it is relations that constitute home, not territory, biology, or culture. That is why *The Dragonfly Sea* is, after all, written for readers in Europe, North America, or any other part of the globe, too. Like all great literature, it is not just an expression of a particular history, culture, or locality, but a gift to the world.

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Arnab Kumar Sinha

## Mapping the Relationship between the Sea and the Humans: The Symbolic Sea in Mallika Krishnamurthy's *Six Yards of Silk*

**ABSTRACT** This article analyses the various facets of the relationship between the sea and human characters in Mallika Krishnamurthy's diasporic novel, *Six Yards of Silk* (2011). Focusing on the anxieties about assimilating into the New Zealand mainstream community, this novel portrays the life of two Indian immigrants, Ramesh and Sharmila, who are settled in New Zealand and are unable to adjust to the cultural lifestyle of the adopted nation. A strong sense of alienation from the hostland culture turns Ramesh into a neurotic patient, and in a state of neurosis, he develops an affective bonding with the sea. This connection between the sea and the diasporic characters has been critically examined using Lisa Samuels's concept of "wet contact" and Keren Chiaroni's theoretical paradigm of "fluid philosophy." While exploring Ramesh's deep connection with the sea, this article also offers a psychoanalytical reading of Ramesh's neurotic condition.

**KEYWORDS** neurosis, wet contact, fluid philosophy, sea

### Introduction

Representation of the sea in literary narratives offers interesting dimensions to the interpretation of the sea. Authors belonging to different generations, cultures, and nations have often dealt with the sea to find a meaningful relationship between humans and the sea. While applying various symbolic connotations to the sea, creative writers have attempted to map the sea using imagination, fantasy, and aspirations of humans. Homer's *Odyssey*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), and John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (1904) are a few instances of literary writing which seek to interpret the

sea and connect it with human ontology. In the domain of diasporic literature, descriptions of sea voyages figure prominently in narratives that represent the experiences of the indentured labourers. So-called Indian “coolies,” through the system of indenture, were transported by sea to the colonial plantation fields in the Caribbean islands, Fiji, Guyana and the other regions of the Asia-Pacific. Literary accounts based on the lives of these coolies describe their travel experiences, boarding the ship to cross the sea and reaching their respective destinations. Ramabai Espinet’s *The Swinging Bridge* (2003), Peggy Mohan’s *Jahajin* (2007), and Gaiutra Bahadur’s *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (2013) are prominent examples of such texts that are reflective of the trauma, anxiety, and suffering of the coolies. In fact, diasporic writers often represent the sea as a space that separates the homeland from the foreign land, and in doing so, they tend to link the sea with the diasporic sensibility of the migrants. Mallika Krishnamurthy’s *Six Yards of Silk* (2011) is a specific instance of a diasporic novel that captures the pain and suffering associated with migration, through a captivating narrative centring on the migrant subjects’ engagement with the sea. Set in New Zealand, this diasporic novel seeks to represent the migratory experience through a narrative that foregrounds the multilayered dimensions of the sea. This article studies the representation of human anxieties and sufferings in *Six Yards of Silk* in view of the relationship between humans and the sea. An analysis of this relationship using various theoretical perspectives enables us to comprehend the intensity of a diasporic sense of loss and anxiety.

## Sea and Human Experience

The novel begins with a reference to an accident occurring in the sea. Ramesh, an Indian living in New Zealand for many years, is a neurotic who decides to row a boat in a dusky evening to tackle the side-effects of the medicines that have been generating an uneasy feeling in his mind and body. After rowing his boat for some time, he falls from it when violent waves hit his boat and he drowns. He is “reported missing,” and the police, unable to find his body, believe that the act of drowning is an “unfortunate accident” (Krishnamurthy 2011, 1). Reference to this incident at the beginning of the novel is followed by a narratorial remark that emphasizes the link between the ocean and human feelings. The narrator states that “ocean,” “rain,” “wind,” and “rocks” associate with secret human desires and “seek discovery” (Krishnamurthy 2011, 1). This remark, in a sense, is the keynote of the entire novel, as it situates Ramesh’s death in the context

of an affective bonding between the ocean and the human. Ramesh's death is not represented as an accident by the text; it is indeed the outcome of Ramesh's attraction to the sea, exhibiting his desire to become united with the boundless sea. The novel, to a certain extent, explores Ramesh's psyche—its intricate functioning in the context of his diasporic life in New Zealand—to find the possible reasons for his unusual intimacy with the sea. Ramesh's sister, Sharmila, is the central character in the novel, and she is deeply affected by the news of her brother's death. Ramesh has been an integral part of Sharmila's life since her childhood days and his death creates a vacuum in her life, alienating her from the familiar space. Her family consists of her husband, Keith, whose parents migrated from Scotland to permanently settle in New Zealand, and her three children, who were born and raised in New Zealand.

Sharmila and Ramesh's parents emigrated from India to New Zealand in order to attain financial stability and to provide a better life for their children. Despite achieving financial stability, Sharmila and Ramesh fail to assimilate into the mainstream culture of New Zealand. Memories of their life in India haunt them, and they often discuss various incidents associated with their childhood experience in India. Ramesh is an inseparable part of Sharmila's childhood memories. Hence, Ramesh's absence depresses Sharmila, which leads to her seclusion. In fact, Sharmila, after Ramesh's death, fails to perceive his absence, strongly feeling the need to connect with him. She often nourishes the feeling that probably Ramesh has disappeared for a few days to keep her in a state of anxiety. His death seems unreal to her and often in her dreams she finds Ramesh lying at the bottom of the sea. While imagining his drowning body, Sharmila captures the image of a person communicating with the ocean, an entity who talks to Ramesh like a friend: "He could hear the ocean muttering. It spoke to him in a woman's voice and told him again and again to make up his mind, drawing him to her" (67).

Ramesh's drowning and his imaginary friendship with the ocean are reflective of a certain kind of insanity, arising out of his inability to integrate with the socio-cultural environment of New Zealand. The narrator does not consider his drowning as an accident, interpreting the entire idea of death by drowning as an act of either "madness" or "instinct" (67). The ocean, symbolic of flux and liberty, attracts Ramesh, who has been trying to escape from a metaphorically imprisoned life in an alien nation, and therefore the narrator states: "Where could he go except back to the ocean?" (67). During his period of growing up in New Zealand, Ramesh develops a strange kind of fear of an invisible power watching his daily activities. Considering this invisible power as the "Authorities" (110), Ramesh

often assumes that the “Authorities” are not granting him freedom to lead a life according to his wishes. His parents, according to Ramesh, are the “Authorities” and the doctors examining his health become the “Watcher” (113). This psychological illness, which the doctors interpret as a case of schizophrenic anxiety and also an instance of “bipolar” disorder (109), situates Ramesh in a vulnerable position. He imagines people torturing and abusing him, and also hears strange noises. The world around him appears to be “a gray flat landscape” signifying the idea of “prison” (110). His parents believe that probably this illness is the result of Ramesh’s migration from India at a tender age, leading to psychological depression occurring due to loss of contact with their homeland culture and his inability to assimilate into the alien culture (106).

In the context of this psychological disorder, Ramesh’s intimacy with the ocean is significant. While imagining that he is in a state of exile in New Zealand, Ramesh considers the land as symbolic of a hostile culture, believing that the ocean offers him a release from the tyranny of the land. The land/sea binary, in Ramesh’s mind, acquires multilayered symbolic dimensions: imprisonment/freedom, repression/expression, and alien/home. Escape from the land means acquiring freedom and also reaching home, amplifying the fact that the sea is like a home offering the necessary comfort and peace. Sharmila understands this aspect when she realizes that Ramesh’s love for the sea is unalterable. She nurtures the view that probably the sea offers something like “mother’s warmth” (135) to Ramesh. Indeed, the bonding between Ramesh and the sea is very well expressed by the narrator: “He could hear the ocean muttering. It spoke to him in a woman’s voice and told him again and again to make up his mind, drawing him to her” (67). Reference to this affective bonding between the sea and Ramesh is a noteworthy aspect in the novel, providing ample scope for analysing the sea as a familiar space. The sea appears to offer Ramesh “a magnificent big life full of hope, success,” and “truth,” generating a strong feeling that humans can live in the ocean (135). This feeling is irrational, however; in the context of this narrative the author seeks to dismantle the general notion that views the sea as unfamiliar, unknown, and unidentified. If the sea is generally considered as wild and furious, Ramesh’s insanity enables him to overlook the fury of the sea and connect with it in friendly terms. Opposing the view of the Watcher that the sea does not support human life, Ramesh imagines life in the ocean, believing that if life has originated “from the sea and the sun” then there is a possibility of “living in the ocean” (135).

Though Ramesh’s attachment to the sea is an important aspect in the narrative, another significant thread that runs throughout the novel is the

use of the sari as a metaphor of connection between Sharmila and Ramesh. The title of the novel, *Six Yards of Silk*, refers to the sari that Sharmila intends to offer as a gift to her dead brother during the memorial ceremony. The sari is symbolic of their Indian identity, and in the context of diasporic experience, this enables Sharmila to realize the need for connecting with homeland culture. After Ramesh's death, when Sharmila's aunt comes from India to stay with her niece's family, the childhood memories appear strongly in Sharmila's mind. She narrates many incidents of her young days spent with Ramesh. The sari, as a sartorial metaphor, therefore, assumes a cultural dimension in the context of Sharmila's relationship with India. At Ramesh's memorial ceremony, Sharmila offers a sari to the ocean, imagining that this act will lead to an eternal bonding between them. This memorial ceremony, which takes place near the same coastal spot where Ramesh drowned, allows Sharmila to express her feelings about her brother. She stands on a rock near the ocean and unfolds a sari, which is carried away by the sea waves. While the sea waves and the strong wind carry the sari away from her, she imagines Ramesh accepting this gift and ensuring that the bonding between them will remain intact. Sharmila imagines Ramesh to be alive inside the sea, looking at her, whereas the sea and the sari seek to bind Sharmila to Ramesh: "The sea tempted Sharmila to follow Ramesh's sari. It called to her to come with it, to find him. The sari sang that it would wrap itself around her, care for her and lead her to her brother" (158).

The sari is an important component of the scheme of chapter division in the novel. Chapter titles such as "Weave," "Border," "Tuck," "Pleat," "Pin," "Fold," and "Cross" are reflective of the method of wearing a sari. In New Zealand, Sharmila has rarely worn a sari, but after Ramesh's death when she decides to take a sari out of her wardrobe, the feeling of touching it gives her satisfaction. The threads of a sari that is "six yards long" passing through the fingers of her hands appear to be "one seamless river" (88). River imagery surfacing in Sharmila's mind evokes a strong connection between the threads of a sari and a river, suggesting the idea of infinity since the threads like the water of a river connote a sense of limitlessness. This idea of infinity is re-emphasized when she recalls the mythical figure of Draupadi,<sup>1</sup> whose sari "spinning like a tornado" amplifies the concept of

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1 In the Indian epic *The Mahabharata*, Draupadi is the wife of the Pandavas. While playing a game of dice against Sakuni (representative of the Kauravas), Yudhisthir (the eldest brother of the Pandavas) is tempted to bet all his valuable possessions. In this process, he bets Draupadi and loses her. Then Draupadi is claimed by the Kauravas and an attempt is made by Dushasana (one of the Kaurava princes) to disrobe her. While disrobing Draupadi, Dushasana fails

an “infinite sari” (141). Sharmila’s decision to wear a sari on the occasion of Ramesh’s memorial ceremony reflects her desire to become united with the infinitude of river. The sari that Sharmila wears and the same one that she imaginatively gifts Ramesh act as a connector between them. In fact, the sari symbolizing the notion of infinitude releases Sharmila from the restrictive and claustrophobic environment of mainstream New Zealand. It affectively associates her with India and also with Ramesh, and in doing so, it also connects her with the river and the ocean. This connection between the human experience and the sea can be interpreted through the lens of various philosophical perspectives.

## **Theoretical Insights into the Relationship between Humans and the Sea**

In the novel, the ocean is imagined having a friendly relationship with humans. It provides the warmth of a mother and also talks to Ramesh like a friend. This aspect, as mentioned earlier, indicates an affective bonding between humans and the sea. Foregrounding this bonding, Kira Gee in her essay “The Ocean Perspective” mentions that the ocean can be considered as “an aesthetic and affective space” (Gee 2019, 24). She further argues that “oceans are also social spaces, communication spaces, and cultural spaces,” enabling humans to interact with it and shape their identities in relation to it (24). Though Gee’s essay discusses the various methods of “conceptualising the ocean” (24), there is one section in this essay in which Gee deals with the “human dimension of the ocean” (38). In this section, the ocean is conceived of as a “place” that bears deep symbolic significances in the human mind, indicating “attachments” to this “place” (Gee 2019, 38) and also creating a “strong sense of belonging” (Gee 2019, 39). Gee’s emphasis, in this discussion, is on the affective dimension of the ocean. Humans, Gee believes, can think about the idea of emotionally transacting with the sea, considering the sea as a place that they could inhabit. Developing this notion, Gee argues that if “landscapes” are “cultural” spaces which have been “shaped by man” (41), the idea of “cultural seascape” is also emerging with the increasing human desire for transforming the sea into a familiar space (42). As ships are sailing on the sea, “bridges” are being built, “platforms” and railway tracks are

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to unwrap Draupadi’s sari because the length of the sari mysteriously keeps increasing. The mysterious sari by virtue of its infinite length protects Draupadi from being molested by the Kauravas.

being constructed, and “off-shore wind farms” are being made, the sea is becoming more accessible to humans, enabling humans to transact with the sea and conceive of it as a cultural space (Gee 2019, 42).

Gee’s perspective on oceans provides a suitable theoretical lens for interrogating the relationship between the sea and humans in *Six Yards of Silk*. Indeed, Ramesh’s strong bonding with the sea enables him to consider the sea as an “affective” and a “cultural” space, which is a noteworthy aspect of the novel. He emotionally associates with the sea, believing that it is like his mother or his friend. His creative conversation with the sea, and also nurturing the notion that the sea is like his home, illustrate Gee’s notion of the sea as a “place.” The idea of “cultural seascape” is evidently reflected in Ramesh’s understanding of the sea as home, which also means that sea is symbolic of India. The narrator, while interpreting Ramesh’s association with the sea, considers the sea as symbolic of home. This sea, as the narrator analyses, is Ramesh’s “home” and he wants to “go to sea” because the “water would fill his ears with reality, home, home, home” (113). While the landscape of New Zealand appears like a prison, the sea seems to be offering “mother’s warmth”; this binary amplifies the cultural distinction between home and exile. Sharmila transacts with the sea through her saris. The act of gifting a sari to Ramesh and allowing the sari to float in the sea can be interpreted from the perspective of Gee’s idea of the sea. As a signifier of Indian culture, the sari associates with the sea, and the sea assumes the idea of home. Though the sea surrounding the country of New Zealand offers a liberatory space to an Indian immigrant, the land and the mainstream culture of this country is like a prison. This dichotomy between the land and the sea of New Zealand is evidently reflected in the outlook of Indian diasporic subjects like Ramesh and Sharmila. In the context of Indian diasporic imaginary, the sea as a space lies beyond the cultural impositions of the land and therefore it signifies freedom.

The second significant perspective on the idea of ocean is offered by Keren Chiaroni. In her article “Fluid Philosophy: Rethinking the Human Condition in Terms of the Sea,” Chiaroni introduces a new mode of thinking based on the connection between humans and the water. While urging people to detach from “earthbound foundations,” Chiaroni proposes to initiate a discussion on a “liquid way of thinking” which may form the base for a new kind of theoretical paradigm known as “fluid philosophy” (Chiaroni 2016, 108). This philosophy is used by Chiaroni to analyse the deep implications of the use of water or “fluid states” in some creative “performances” that seek to offer ecological perspectives on the relationship between humans and the sea (109). These “performances,” Chiaroni

argues, emphasize the need for considering the “human condition in terms of the sea,” endorsing the idea that “our being-in-the-world becomes a being-in-the-water” (109). Thus, Chiaroni’s notion of “fluid philosophy” attempts to study the lived experience of humans from the point of view of fluid substances, which offer humans flexibility and freedom (109). In her essay, Chiaroni also refers to an author cum critic, Lisa Samuels, whose concept of “wet contact” (108) has been used by Chiaroni to build the theoretical paradigm of “fluid philosophy.” Samuels’s essay “Membranism, Wet Gaps, Archipelago Poetics” uses the concept of membrane to develop the idea of “membranism,” which evokes the thought of “wet touch,” linking bodies and objects “within our wet neural network” (Samuels 2010, 156). Cell membranes function in human bodies to allow the transfer of various fluids and substances from one part of the body to another, and this idea of a “contact and transfer” mechanism, which enables the flow of wet substances, is used as a “metaphor” by Samuels to substantiate the fact that humans connect with the external world through a sense of wetness (156). With respect to this connection occurring through a fluid medium, Samuels states that “the eye” looking at any object is “wet,” “the air” circulating around contains water “droplets,” “the brain” involved in interpreting objects is “wet,” “the ear’s drum” also contains fluid matter which aids in hearing, and in this manner, the entire idea of human contact with the external objects is founded on “membranism” (156).

This concept of wetness plays a vital role in representation of human characters in creative literature, particularly in the context of New Zealand, where the whole country is surrounded by the Pacific Ocean. Samuels believes that the “presentness of the ocean” around New Zealand generates a desire to know the sea, motivating humans living in the island country to indulge in mapping the “ocean as fact and idea” (160). An engagement with the sea, in the case of New Zealanders, is the result of less access to the land, which propels the islanders to shape their lives based on “oceans of uncertainty, change, extinction, and the unseen that arrange and derange the stand-out possessed lands” (Samuels 2010, 160). Representation of this lifestyle in creative works, focusing on a sense of negotiation between the islanders and the ocean, is termed “archipelago poetics” by Samuels (160). “Archipelago poetics” is a literal manifestation of the idea of “membranism” or “wet contact,” and this can be explored in the creative works of many authors belonging to New Zealand (Samuels 2010, 160). In fact, Samuels refers to some poems written by Indigenous New Zealand authors to explain the use of this poetics. Chiaroni, too, refers to Samuels’s concept of “archipelago poetics” to interpret the presence of “fluid philosophy” in some creative performances by New Zealand artists.

## *Six Yards of Silk* as Archipelago Poetics

In view of the discussion on Chiaroni and Samuels, *Six Yards of Silk* can be analysed using the theoretical ideas of “fluid philosophy,” “membranism,” and “archipelago poetics.” Since the beginning of the novel, when Ramesh’s accidental death is reported, Sharmila laments for her brother’s death and cries while recalling some incidents of the past. This past is represented by images that are amorphous and watery. Examples of Chiaroni’s “liquid way of thinking” can be traced in Sharmila’s actions, especially when she is deeply lost in remembering Ramesh. While bathing, Sharmila recalls the past events “as the water of the shower mingled with her tears” and in the bathroom when “Ramesh’s screams receded,” the bathroom glasses covered with steam seem to be moving “upward in tendrils as water caught in the sun trailed down the glass like liquid crystal” (Krishnamurthy 2011, 51). This description reflects the presence of “fluid philosophy” and also emphasizes the idea of “wet contact.” Water, ocean, and fluid images are used by Sharmila to imagine her association with and dissociation from Ramesh. She thinks about the ocean instead of the land, and there are references to her walks on the beach. In her dreams when Sharmila meets Ramesh, the ocean is the place of their meetings. During one such imaginary meeting with Ramesh, Sharmila searches the “southern ocean,” finding Ramesh’s body “preserved by some miracle of a salty ocean” and she fancies Ramesh’s eyes looking at her, “silent and watery” (118). This imaginative encounter explicates the concept of “liquid way of thinking,” also elucidating the idea of “wet contact.” In the context of this contact with wetness, Sharmila evokes the notion of “membranism” through multiple correspondences with Ramesh which occur in the sea. While engaging with the sea, Ramesh and Sharmila treat the sea as representing their anxieties and lived experiences. At the end of the novel, when Sharmila, thinking about Ramesh’s body inside the sea, nurtures ideas like “the ocean would help him,” “the ocean would distract him,” and “the ocean would keep him alive” (Krishnamurthy 2011, 170), the sea emerges as a repository of ideas to exemplify a notion of human ontology based on “wet contact.”

The third perspective on the sea, in the context of the discussion on the interrelationship between humans and the sea, can be explained using the binary idea of home/exile. This binary, which is prominently reflected in the act of cultural uprooting of Sharmila and Ramesh, contributes to an experience of diasporic existence lacking the urge to assimilate into the new culture. Sharmila’s attachment to the sari and Ramesh’s mysterious fear of the “Authorities” are signs of psychological unrest produced due to their inability to integrate into New Zealand culture. In their mind,

India as a concept of home is so deeply rooted that their engagement with New Zealand does not generate any desire to create a new home. This aspect is evidently reflected in Sharmila's constant recalling of festivals celebrated and religious ceremonies performed in India. In New Zealand, Sharmila and Ramesh fail to develop any sort of relationship with mainstream New Zealanders, realizing that they are at the margin of the "adopted country" (125). The narrator expresses this fact by stating that they "had become cornered within their own lives" and they never desired to meet "people" who were culturally different (124). After staying in New Zealand for several decades, the places and the people appear to be alien to Sharmila and Ramesh, as they are constantly haunted by the past days spent in India. Sharmila is reminded of the celebration of the Pongal festival (a popular harvest festival) in India and the rituals associated with this. Hindu culture and religious ceremonies are deeply ingrained in their mind. There are several occasions when Sharmila refers to the Hindu religious text Bhagavad Gita, and on one occasion, she wishes to imbibe the real "language" and "meaning" of this text (103). After Ramesh's death, Sharmila realizes that in New Zealand, they "were supposed to fit in, achieve, live well" (125) but they failed to adjust to the new cultural environment and this failure is pertinently expressed by Sharmila when she repeatedly says, "We did nothing wrong" (125). While reiterating this statement, Sharmila underscores the importance of being rooted in homeland culture and memories. Ramesh's attachment to India is so intense that during his twenty-first birthday in New Zealand, when his friends arrange for a "growing-up birthday" (130) party in accordance with the host culture, he feels depressed. Celebration of the twenty-first birthday is considered to be special because Kiwis believe that it marks the entry of a person into adulthood (130-1). Ramesh is not keen on performing the rituals linked to the celebration of this special birthday party. Sharmila recalls Ramesh's reluctance to join the birthday party, as he probably did not want "to be twenty-one in this country" (130). This disengagement from a prominent New Zealand ritual reflects a distinct desire to liberate himself from the process of assimilating a new culture. Ramesh's mental illness or his insanity alienates him from the mainstream culture, as he becomes an "other" to the New Zealanders. In a bid to liberate himself from the "Authorities" or the "Watcher," Ramesh's insanity situates his self in a space beyond the dynamics of cultural transactions. His madness, from the perspective of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, is therefore a sign of "deterritorialization" and "rupture" (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 2). In the context of Ramesh's madness, the sea plays a pivotal role by foregrounding this aspect of "deterritorialization." By virtue of its wildness and constantly

changing pattern of waves, the sea is an untamable natural entity, symbolizing chaos and disorder. Ramesh perceives the sea as an entity that mirrors his psychological disorder, evoking a sense of liberation from the fixed, static, and normative state of being on the land. If the land is a space meant for cultural impositions symbolizing the idea of “prison,” the sea signifies freedom and maternal care. Because of his lack of interest in assimilating into the New Zealand culture, he escapes from the restrictive atmosphere of the land in order to embrace the sea.

Discussing the issue of the relationship between humans and the sea, Nandita Batra and Vartan P. Messier in their essay, “The Multitudinous Seas: Matter and Metaphor” refer to Jacques Lacan’s concept of the “mirror stage” and argue that “the sea’s reflection of our own sense of being [...] institutes a libidinal relationship with our own image” (Batra and Messier 2010, 5). They also observe that “the sea does not have its own distinct ontology” as it is “a reflection of our own” self, and “its existential relevance” is associated with “human experience” (5). Batra and Messier’s perspective can be appropriately used to study the link between Ramesh and the sea. The ocean secretly talking to Ramesh in a female voice, Sharmila’s belief that Ramesh’s accident is an act of “instinct,” and her realization that Ramesh has no other place to go except the sea are such incidents that amply illustrate Batra and Messier’s theoretical perspective. Sharmila connects with the sea through a sari which is metaphorically “infinite” like Draupadi’s sari, and this reflects her desire to assimilate to the infinitude of the sea. In their essay, Batra and Messier refer to Hegel, who considers the sea as evoking the idea of “the indefinite, the unlimited, and the infinite,” (as quoted in Batra and Messier 2010, 6) and in capturing this essence of the infinite, humans, according to Hegel, are “stimulated and emboldened to stretch beyond the limited” (as quoted in Batra and Messier 2010, 6). Sharmila views the sea from the perspective of this idea of limitlessness because she too intends to escape from the claustrophobic imprisoning New Zealand society. While throwing the sari into the ocean waves, Sharmila considers the ocean to be a boundless space that can offer freedom and release her from the monotonous and depressive ontology of the land. Her belief that the ocean will offer happiness to Ramesh is a way of pacifying herself to cope with her grief.

In assuming that the sea is like a “home” space, Ramesh forms an affective bonding with the sea, explicating the functioning of affect that, according to Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, “marks a body’s *belonging* to a world of encounters” (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 2). While receiving the warmth of mother’s love and friendly affection from the sea, Ramesh considers the sea as a part of his ontological feeling. His affectionate encounters with the sea during his act of rowing reflect his body’s

linkage with the ocean. The “world of encounters,” in Ramesh’s context, is the sea, which tends to build a relationship with Ramesh’s body in a manner that seeks a reconfiguration of the idea of a human body. Explaining this phenomenon of affective bonding between a human body and a thing, Seigworth and Gregg observe that, “[w]ith affect, a body is as much outside itself as in itself,” forming a web of “relations” with the outside world in a way that the difference between “the world” and “the body” becomes less perceptible (3). In seeking his freedom, Ramesh configures an oceanic world of existence, eradicating the distinction between his body and the world. Reference to his missing body at the beginning of the novel is suggestive of this affective web of relationship between Ramesh and the ocean. His disappearance from the land and union with the ocean are symbolic acts bearing an affective connotation. Thus, Krishnamurthy’s *Six Yards of Silk* maps the relationship between humans and the sea through various theoretical perspectives, and it attempts to engage with “a thalasso-ethical world” (Batra and Messier 2010, 17). This ethical perspective, as Batra and Messier argue, seeks to decentre land-based viewpoints and “anthropocentrism,” providing scope for discussions on oceanic imaginary and poetics (17).

Apart from the issues related to the relationship between humans and the sea, this novel also depicts the intercultural relationship between the people of New Zealand and the Indian migrants settled in the same country. Dieter Riemenschneider, in his insightful study of the history of the settlement of Indians in New Zealand, explicates the evolution of the Indian diasporic community in New Zealand, focusing primarily on the rich “cultural diversity” (Riemenschneider 2016, 156) of this community. In his essay, Riemenschneider refers to several critics who have made sincere efforts to investigate the methods adopted by the Indian community in New Zealand to assimilate into mainstream New Zealand culture. This process, indeed, has not been easy because Indians came to the island in the nineteenth century, and in due course of time, they have now “become a visible minority” (Riemenschneider 2016, 156). While describing the brief history of the formation of the Indian diasporic community in New Zealand, Riemenschneider mentions Jacqueline Leckie’s book, *Indian Settlers: The Story of a New Zealand South Asian Community* (2007), which presents an overview of the entire “history of Indian migration and settlement” in New Zealand, using “resources” from the archives that contain the “narratives” of Indian settlers (156). In addition to this book, Riemenschneider also refers to Jacqueline Leckie and Paola Voci’s edited book *Localizing Asia in Aotearoa* (2011). This critical anthology, according to Leckie and Voci, shifts the focus of discussion from “macro-national” realities of Indian

diasporic condition to the “micro or local histories and cultural spaces” (as quoted in Riemenschneider 2016, 156), evoking critical responses that seek to address issues related to ethnic identities in the context of Indian diasporic community. Such a shift is necessary in the context of the study of Indian settlers in New Zealand because the entire diasporic community is a “heterogenous group” (Reimenschneider 2016, 156). In the context of his discussion on the culturally diversified aspect of Indian diasporic community, Riemenschneider draws attention to Sekhar Bandyopadhyay’s phenomenal text *India in New Zealand: Local Identities, Global Relations* (2010). Bandyopadhyay claims that Indians in New Zealand have formed a community that is culturally varied because Indian migrants have “come from practically all the regions of India” (as quoted in Riemenschneider 2016, 157) and this phenomenon, according to Riemenschneider, has indeed given a “multi-ethnic character” to the community (156). In an interesting newspaper article called “From lascars to skilled migrants: Indian diaspora in New Zealand and Australia,” Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Jane Buckingham trace the history of the emigration of Indians to New Zealand, commenting on the formation of a diasporic group that is evocative of “inner pluralism” (*The Conversation* 2018). Contemporary Indian migrants, according to Bandyopadhyay and Buckingham, require “multiculturalist policies” in order to adapt to the changing socio-cultural scenarios in “both Australia and New Zealand” (*The Conversation* 2018). These critical studies centred on the formation of an Indian diasporic community in New Zealand provide an appropriate lens to investigate the varied aspects of Sharmila’s and Ramesh’s lived experiences. Riemenschneider’s essay offers a critical study of *Six Yards of Silk* while considering the insightful observations of Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, Jacqueline Leckie, and Paola Voci. He argues that the novel has a strong “psychological fabric” (Riemenschneider 2016, 162), which highlights the characteristic traits of “migrants’ predicament” (163). Sharmila and Ramesh, according to Riemenschneider, are typical Indian diasporic characters engaged in the act of negotiating the “conflicting pulls” of two different cultural traditions (162).

## Conclusion

As a postcolonial diasporic subject, Ramesh is an interesting character because his insanity (loss of mind), which is the outcome of his loss of home, leads to his loss of life. The sea is connected to these losses, and it emerges as a space that provides relief to an anxious diasporic subject. Being alienated from the New Zealand mainstream culture, Ramesh

suffers mainly because of his inability to deal with the fears and anxieties associated with settlement in an alien nation. His neurosis originates from the dual feelings of being separated from his homeland and also from the host country. Indeed, Ramesh's insanity can be analysed from the perspective of "separation-anxiety" (Brown 2004, 53) experienced by a postcolonial subject. In his book, *Freud and the Post-Freudians*, J. A. C. Brown refers to Otto Rank to explain two kinds of fear: "life fear" and "death fear" (53, original emphasis). These fears, as Brown observes, are related to the anxieties arising in an individual mind with regard to his social relationships (53). The "life fear" is caused by the occurring of an "anxiety" in an "individual" when he realizes that "assertion" of his identity, cultural values, or "creative capacities" may lead to his "separation from existing relationships" (Brown 2004, 53). The "death fear," on the other hand, generates a sense of insecurity because of "losing one's individuality," which implies loss of identity, loss of cultural values, leading to annihilation of selfhood (Brown 2004, 53). A neurotic, according to Brown, is affected by both of these fears (53), which confuse the mind, as it always seeks to resolve the crisis emerging out of the conflict between these two fears. Ramesh's neurosis is reflective of the unresolved tension between the "life fear" and the "death fear." In New Zealand, Ramesh's "life fear" prohibits him from asserting his Indian identity and cultural idioms, as this may lead to his alienation from the mainstream New Zealand society. Simultaneously, the "death fear" in Ramesh's mind makes him insecure as he realizes that lack of assertion of individual identity may lead to eradication of his self. Ramesh's fears are expressive of his diasporic dilemma and anxiety. As a diasporic subject, stuck between these two fears, Ramesh looks at the sea as an alternative space that offers him relief from the ongoing tension. The sea space is beyond human habitation and Ramesh conceives of this space as his dwelling. At this dwelling space, his fears diminish, and he expects to live in harmony with the sea ecology. This fact is vividly expressed in the last lines of the novel: "the ocean would help him. The ocean would distract him. The ocean would keep him alive" (Krishnamurthy 2011, 170).

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Iris-Aya Laemmerhirt

## **“How Much of Me Is My Own?”: Imagining the Ocean in Thi Bui’s *The Best We Could Do***

**ABSTRACT** In many American narratives, oceans play a significant role, often as routes that are traveled in order to start a new life. The voluntary or involuntary journey across the ocean often changes the protagonists, hence rendering the sea a space of identity formation. The ocean in Thi Bui’s graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do* (2017) is not only a reoccurring motif, but signifies the ordeal, trauma, and dislocation of refugees from Vietnam. The images of the ocean and waves visually connect the personal story of the protagonist to the larger history of Vietnam and the trauma of her parents and, at the same time, signify the hopes and anxieties connected to flight and relocation experienced by refugees.

**KEYWORDS** refugee narratives, ocean, postcolonialism, trauma, Southeast Asia

*„How much of ME is my own, and how much is stamped  
into my blood and bone, predestined?“*

(Bui 2017, 324)

### **Introduction**

Currently, the world is witnessing—again—a massive global refugee crisis as we see women and children fleeing from the Russian invasion and war in Ukraine to Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania. While European Commissioner for Crisis Management Janez Lenarčič has noted that “[w]e are witnessing what could become the largest humanitarian crisis on our European continent in many, many years” (France24 2022), it is important to remember that the conflict in Syria had triggered the 2015

refugee crisis. To date, it is striking how significantly differently Europe has treated refugees from Ukraine and refugees from Syria and North Africa. While Ukraine's neighboring countries have responded with generous public and political support for the refugees, refugees from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan were trapped in border camps under horrendous conditions, proving that not all refugees are treated equally.

When thinking of the 2015 refugee crisis, haunting images of shipwrecked and drowned people from Libya who tried to cross the Mediterranean Sea come to mind. In 2015 alone, approximately 137,000 refugees crossed the Mediterranean Sea (UNHCR 2015). Since 2014, approximately 23,566 people are missing or have lost their lives trying to reach Europe via the ocean (Missing Migrants Project 2022). The images of hundreds of refugees crammed on small boats and dinghies in the Mediterranean Sea eerily reminded us of the images of Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

As Violeta Moreno-Lax and Efthymios Papastavridis argue, “[m]aritime migration, despite increased media attention in recent times, is not a new phenomenon. People have been crossing the oceans in search of protection or opportunities since the beginning of mankind” (2017, 3). Consequently, oceans play a significant role when it comes to transportation and are experienced in many different, often contradictory ways by different people: they can connect as well as divide, provide food and pose serious threats.

Literary as well as filmic representations mirror these manifold, juxtaposing experiences of humans with the sea. Stephen Crane's short story “The Open Boat” (1897), for example, renders the ocean as an unforgiving natural force that has the potential to destroy human life. In Hermann Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) the ocean becomes a route of escape and space of initiation for Ishmael, the narrator and sole survivor of the novel, and it brings death and destruction to the rest of the crew. While the ocean in *Moby-Dick* is more than just a backdrop to the story of Captain Ahab chasing the white whale, many narratives—fictional as well as historical—create a myth of an “empty” ocean that follows Western imperialist conceptions, reflected in map-making traditions that assumed and then rendered the sea a blank space. The explicit link between colonialism and different patterns of migration turn oceans into significant sites where power relations are exercised in the context of both voluntary as well as forced migration.

Especially when discussing US-American history and an American identity formation, the Atlantic continues to hold a central position in most narratives as the ocean that both divides and connects the “new

world” and the “old world.” In the early seventeenth century, for example, Puritans, considering themselves to be God’s chosen people, embarked on a providential quest, crossing the waters of the Atlantic to create God’s kingdom on earth. For mainly European immigrants, the Atlantic continued to retain its significant role as a waterway to the “new world” when they arrived at the east coast of the United States in the nineteenth century and moved westwards to explore and claim new territory, further pushing the Indigenous population to the margins. At the same time, to millions of enslaved Africans, who were forcefully shipped from Africa across the Atlantic, this ocean meant something completely different. For them, the ocean turned into a traumatizing site of loss and suffering. Being critical to the origin of African Americans, the ocean remains a crucial part of the Black American experience. The Atlantic takes center stage as thousands of captured Africans had to endure the Middle Passage. For these people, the ocean became their route to enslavement, an escape through death, or, for a few fugitives, a route to freedom (Mustakeem 2016, 129). At the same time, the huge and remote space of the Atlantic Ocean granted the mariners on slave ships “[...] complete autonomy to impose the most intense dismantling of their human goods [...]” ultimately serving as “[...] a staging ground for the circulation of violence, terrorizing abuses, and the medical decline of slaves.” (Mustakeem 2016, 56). These experiences of African American slaves with the ocean are reflected in works such as Caribbean poet Derek Walcott’s poem “The Sea is History” (1979) or Fred D’Aguiar’s novel *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997).

In the Pacific, Americans were latecomers, only joining European colonial forces such as Great Britain, Spain, and the Netherlands in the 1890s. It was only after the Spanish—American War of 1898 that the United States expanded its territory into the Pacific by annexing the former Spanish colonies of Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines, before annexing Hawai‘i the same year. As Janet Hoskins and Viet Thanh Nguyen claim, the Pacific has been relevant for Europe and America since the sixteenth century “as an area of economic development and imperial fantasy” (2014, 3). This notion is further reflected in nineteenth-century literature set in the Pacific, written by white, male, Western authors such as Hermann Melville, Mark Twain, Jack London, Robert Louis Stevenson, and F. E. Manning, who focused their works on the adventures of white men in an “exotic” environment.

In the United States, the Pacific was used as a waterway by many Asian, mainly Japanese and Chinese, immigrants to start a new life in the United States. Whereas Ellis Island in New York served as a gateway for millions of mainly European immigrants, Angel Island in San Francisco was the

entry point for the majority of immigrants arriving via the Pacific. While stories of Asian immigrants such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* ([1976] 1989), Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* ([1989] 1995 [1989]), or Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic* (2011) have already been widely discussed within the canon of American literature, until more recently the history and stories of refugees from Southeast Asia have not been investigated in much detail.

Furthermore, the genre of refugee narratives, which significantly diverge from immigrant narratives, has not yet been defined as such. Part of this lack of definition can be traced back to the fact that a definition of the term "refugee" was only provided in 1951 by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR 2015). This means that many supposed "immigrant narratives," for example many narratives of Puritans, who fled persecution in Great Britain, are indeed refugee narratives. Given the fact that the immigrant experience is essentially different from refugee experiences, merging these terms is problematic. Indeed, refugees can become immigrants after their arrival in their host country when they have settled and built a new life there, yet the initial impulse for why they left their home country is crucial to their experience and status. While the majority of immigrants willingly move for economical, educational, or other personal reasons from their country of origin to another country, refugees have no choice but to leave. They have to flee their home due to war or political, religious, or any other forms of persecution. Within an American context, the terms "immigrant" and "refugee" are connoted very differently. As Viet Thanh Nguyen argues in his article "On Being a Refugee, an American—and a Human Being," the term "refugee embodies fear, failure, and flight" (V. Nguyen 2017a), while the idea of immigrants is closely connected to the American Dream and the idea of the United States being a melting pot and promised land. The fact that immigrants actively choose their new home country leads to the assumption that they consider, in this case, the United States superior to their country of origin, hence catering to the idea of American Exceptionalism. Asian American immigrants in particular are considered to be a model minority, described as an "ideal" racial minority excelling in school and working hard for their successful careers. Yet, no matter how ostensibly positively connoted this term seems, it is still a term that is used "by outsiders, especially whites with power over them" (Chou and Feagin 2010, 2). Rosalind S. Chou and Joe R. Feagin argue in their book *The Myth of the Model Minority* that this label "creates great pressure [on Asian Americans] to conform to the white-dominated culture" (2010, 2), often forcing them to assimilate to the American culture. As Nguyen explains, being an immigrant is part

of the American myth of the American Dream, while “refugees are unwanted where they come from [and] where they go” (V. Nguyen 2017a). Often being denied a choice, refugees have to move to the country that is willing or obliged to take them in. Their uprooting experience is repeatedly reflected in numerous refugee narratives, which unlike the majority of immigrant narratives, do not necessarily depict the United States as an ideal country. Instead, most refugee narratives reflect a certain nostalgia and yearning for their home country, while the United States is a rather hostile, unwelcoming place to which they need to adapt. As one of the Vietnamese refugee characters in Viet Than Nguyen’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Sympathizer* (2015) says, “My American Dream is to see once more, before I die, the land where I was born, to taste once more the ripe persimmons from the tree of my family’s garden in Tay Ninh” (V. Nguyen 2015, 227), hence challenging America’s self-proclaimed idea of being the greatest nation in the world.

Refugees are constantly depicted by the media and narratives written from a non-refugee perspective as distressing figures without agency, who had to flee from supposedly uncivilized nations with non-democratic governments, hence suggesting that their tragic fate will not befall Westerners, thereby completely ignoring the role of the West and the post/colonial history of many nations that ultimately led to upheaval, war, and their distress. Timothy K. August observes in his book *The Refugee Aesthetic. Reimagining Southeast Asian America* “for a long time, the experiences of refugees have been reductively cast as unusual and marginal, used to garner support through pity rather than identification of those afflicted with the refugee condition” (2021, 1). This again is problematic, as pitying inferiorizes the other. Similarly, when it comes to representing wars, there is usually a dominant narrative of what a war was about and how it was fought; and in most cases those who win the wars also represent the wars.

This is true for the Vietnam War, which is still dominantly represented through a Western, mainly American, lens. Yet critical Vietnamese perceptions of the Vietnam War are especially important as they question the dominant white American narrative of this war. The extent to which a one-sided representation can alter history writing and understanding becomes evident when looking at the different names of this war. While Westerners call this war the “Vietnam War” or “Second Indochina War,” in Vietnam the war is called “The Resistance War Against America.” The different terms for this military conflict suggest that this war (just as any other war) has been perceived differently by the different parties involved. Hence, while the United States creates a narrative that focuses on

the Vietnam War as a “just” war against Communism, in which America aided South Vietnam, from a Vietnamese perspective, the US involvement is perceived as a result of the long, violent colonial history of Vietnam, a history dominated by oppression and exploitation of the Asian nation by Europeans, Americans, and other Asians. The majority of American accounts, both fictional and non-fictional, have been written by authors who have either fought in this war or witnessed it as journalists. Often being highly traumatized by this experience themselves, many of them used literature to “purge the self-torment, hostilities, frustrations, and moral doubts haunting them” (Herzog 1980, 682), hence turning the Vietnam War and its aftermath into an American tragedy. More recently, Southeast Asian American refugee narratives like Chanrity Him’s *When Broken Glass Floats* (2000), Vaddy Ratner’s *In the Shadow of the Banyan* (2012) and *Music of the Ghosts* (2017), Variy Yim’s *The Immigrant Princess* (2016), Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), as well as the poetry collections *Sông Sing* (2011) by Bao Phi and *Dance Among Elephants* (2016) by Krysada Panusith Phounsiri added Lao, Cambodian, and Vietnamese voices to the memory of the Vietnam War. In many of these narratives, the ocean plays an important role as a site of trauma and transitions as well as the gateway to a new life.

The following chapter will focus on the experience of Vietnamese refugees who, as a result of the Vietnam War, had to leave their home country by boat and were subsequently transferred to the United States. Focusing on Thi Bui’s graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do* (2017), it will be argued that the ocean in Vietnamese-American refugee narratives is not only used as a recurring motif. Instead, it is a vital part of the narratives that signifies the ordeal and subsequent dislocation of these refugees. In many of these narratives, such as Lê Thi Diem Thúy’s *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2004), Viet Thanh Nguyen’s short story “Black-Eyed Women” (2017b), or Matt Huynh’s short comic *Ma* (2013), the ocean frequently serves as both a route of escape as well as the root of loss. In Bui’s graphic memoir, the image of the ocean and waves connects her personal story as the child of Vietnamese refugees who has been raised in the United States to the history of Vietnam and the trauma of her parents. *The Best We Could Do* does not only visually feature the ocean as a natural as well as symbolical border. In the text, the fluidity of water as well as the incessant swelling and receding of the tides also mirror, both on the narrative and on the stylistic level, the experiences and unstable lives of many refugees, dominated by constant struggles and changes. The journey to this new life started for many refugees of the Vietnam War on rocky boats and continued to be unstable and hard once they arrived at shore.

## Boats and the Ocean in Refugee Narratives

Whereas the Fall of Saigon in 1975 marked the end of the Vietnam War for the US, it was only the beginning of a decade-long ordeal for many Vietnamese as well as Cambodian and Laotian people. Almost overnight, those who had resisted the Communist forces became refugees. The so-called first Indochinese refugee crisis in 1975 was followed by a second wave of refugees from 1978–1979 that continued until the early 1990s. Threatened in their home country, thousands of desperate Vietnamese boarded boats to flee from the new communist regime.

The approximately two million Vietnamese who were forced into exile on ships or boats in the aftermath of the Vietnam War are referred to as “boat people,” a term that has come to be considered as rather offensive by many Vietnamese. Although the term does not exclusively apply to refugees from Southeast Asia but is used to refer to all people who are forced to leave their home country due to wars or other crises and use boats in their flight, it has been closely associated with exiled Vietnamese refugees. The term, however, is not devoid of derogatory implications, as “beneath its purely descriptive meaning lies a more sinister intention of stigmatizing and racializing” these people (Wann and Henken 2008, 186). As most Southeast Asian refugees were rendered poor and desperate, the utilization of the term “boat people” helped to shape public opinions, led to hostility by local host communities and fostered enduring negative stereotypes (Wann and Henken 2008, 186). Photographs showing refugees crammed on small boats being rescued in the South China Sea by passing ships were spread by the mainstream media in the 1970s and 1980s, instrumentalizing their fate for political interests (P. Nguyen 2017, 55).

The conditions on these boats, often riverboats not made to navigate the rough waters of an ocean, were horrific. Hundreds of people were crammed below deck, scared and often soaked in salt water, as the boats were barely fit to sail. As one survivor recalls, “people were crying and vomiting and praying in terror to Buddha, to Fatima, or Christ. I prayed, ‘Let this boat not break apart’” (Minh 1989, 17). Many refugees did not survive the passage, as they were robbed, raped, and killed by pirates or drowned when their overcrowded vessels sank. The majority of those who survived first sailed to Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and British Hong Kong, where they were gathered in refugee camps to eventually be resettled in Canada, Australia, West Germany, the UK, France, and the United States.

The traumatizing experiences at sea are retold in Southeast Asian refugee narratives, assigning water in general and oceans in particular

a significant role. Viet Thanh Nguyen's "Black-Eyed Women," for example, revolves around a female Vietnamese author, who came to the United States as a child and is highly traumatized by her refugee experience. In the course of the story, it is revealed that she has suppressed the memories of her and her family escaping Vietnam on a boat that smelled "rancid with human sweat and excreta" (V. Nguyen 2017b, 8). Just as slowly as the narrator starts to cope with her past and uncovers her own story of suffering, the short story reveals layer after layer the whole extent of the horrors and suffering that she, her family, and other refugees had to endure. The nameless author recalls that she and many other young girls were raped by pirates while on the boat and that her brother was killed and thrown overboard when trying to protect her. In this story, the boat, and by extension the sea, become a battlefield, where not only the narrator's brother loses his life, but where the narrator herself also stops living. Feeling guilty for the death of her brother, she is not capable of talking about her traumatizing experience. Furthermore, her relationship to her parents is also disturbed as they cannot stand the memory of witnessing their daughter being raped and their son being murdered. The narrator realizes that this incident at sea has had a significant impact on her life and that although she physically survived the flight, it has prevented her from living a life worth living. Instead, she only exists in the shadow of society as a ghost writer, preserving the memories for other people at night in her basement.

The New York-based Vietnamese Australian graphic artist Matt Huynh similarly refers to the ocean and its traumatic implications for refugees in his works, such as his biographical graphic novel *Ma*, which traces the story of his family's journey from Vietnam to a Malaysian refugee camp. The black-and-white comic opens with eight frames, each showing a very calm ocean. The last two frames visualizing a calm ocean are arranged on one page with an additional frame that shows a solitary man standing on the beach, gazing at the water. The first frame on the next page shows a close up of the face of this man, suddenly screaming for help. The reason for his agitated behavior is revealed in the following frames, which show a boat in distress that is almost sinking. The former quiet and rather peaceful imagery of this graphic novel is suddenly disrupted as the reader sees chaotic scenes of people running into the water, trying to rescue the drowning refugees. As for many refugees, Huynh's story starts with the ocean as well, and plays with the image of a beautiful sea that people gaze at from the shore that can suddenly turn into hostile waters. Similarly, for many Southeast Asian refugees, the ocean was both a route of escape as well as dangerous territory where many lost their lives.

In Huynh’s graphic novel, images of the ocean keep recurring as the rescued refugees wait in the refugee camps of Pulau Bidong in Malaysia for permission to relocate to another country. Sitting on the beach and watching her children, Ma, the mother and female protagonist of the narrative, is haunted by traumatizing memories of their journey on the boat and constantly panics when her children approach the waves on the beach. While she is obviously afraid of the water, she also constantly longingly gazes at the ocean, “ready to leave who knows when to build a home who knows where” (Huynh 2019, n.p.). Here, the ocean becomes an in-between space that separates the protagonists from their past and home country as well as from their future and the place they will ultimately relocate to.

This central position of the ocean in Vietnamese refugee narratives is once more emphasized in Huynh’s interactive webcomic *The Boat*, which is a visual adaptation of a short story by Nam Le of the same title. *The Boat*, as the title already suggests, solely focuses on the harrowing experience of Vietnamese refugees on the open sea. Like *Ma*, the webcomic is created using the Japanese *sumie* ink painting style, which is traditionally used to capture the beauty and complexity of nature. The plot traces the story of Mai, a Vietnamese refugee on a boat. The reader can choose at which pace to scroll down on the webpage to follow Mai’s journey. The reading and viewing experience is intensified by the moving imagery behind the text as well as the unsettling sound of rain and thunder that accompany the beginning of the story. The constantly moving waves, as well as unexpectedly tilting frames put the reader onto the boat with the refugees, hence making the reading experience even more uncomfortable, sometimes even literally nauseating. Again, the ocean is a rather unpleasant space, where the refugees are exposed to the relentless elements, which they have to survive in order to be able to start a new life.

Similarly, Thi Bui’s illustrated memoir *The Best We Could Do* (2017) uses the ocean in general and the Pacific in particular as a recurring motif. However, unlike in the other narratives, water in general, and the ocean in particular, have a more complex and significant role in this narrative.

### ***The Best We Could Do***

Written from the vantage point of the adult Thi Bui, *The Best We Could Do* traces her history and the history of her parents, who fled Vietnam after the Fall of Saigon. Like many refugee narratives, this graphic memoir does not recall the family history of the narrator chronologically. Instead, it jumps back and forth in time, connecting the current life and problems

of the narrator with her parents to the history of her ancestors as well as the history of Vietnam. While tracing these histories, images of the ocean and the boat on which her parents sought refuge ripple across the pages of the book, visually connecting the past of her parents to the present life of the narrator, making clear that the family history has a significant impact on her own life. By tracing and writing her family history, the narrator conjures up episodes from the past, transmitting history, the memories of her parents, and her own memories into powerful images.

Already the front cover of the graphic novel features the ocean, as we see Thi Bui's family gazing across the Pacific.

It is striking that Thi's parents as well as her older siblings are all looking towards the water, while the young girl is turning around, hence looking at the reader. The direction of the characters' view is interesting taking the geography into account, as it foreshadows the dynamic of the whole narrative. Likely gazing at the ocean somewhere in San Francisco, as indicated by the Golden Gate Bridge at the right hand side of the cover, Thi's family is looking westwards towards Asia, while she is turning to the east, towards the United States. The different attitudes of the characters towards the United States and Vietnam are hence visually represented on the cover and turn out to be one of the main sources of conflict in the narrative. Thi is the person in her family most closely related to the United States, since she has lived most of her life in America and remembers neither Vietnam nor their flight as vividly as her parents and older siblings. Gazing across the water of the Pacific close to the Golden Gate Bridge, which spans the strait connecting San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean, Thi's family seem to remember and, to a certain extent, long for their past life in Vietnam, turning the ocean into a liquid border that disconnects them from their homeland and their past.

The flyleaf of the graphic memoir also focuses on the younger Thi and the ocean, as it features the little girl calmly sitting in the trough of a plunging wave. Plunging waves, also known as plunging breakers, occur either when the ocean floor is steep or has sudden depth changes. The crest of a plunging wave becomes much steeper than the crest of any other type of wave and turns almost vertical before it curls over to form a tube and then drops to the trough of the wave, thereby releasing a significant amount of energy (Pretor-Pinney 2011, 36–7). Although much cherished by surfers, who enjoy riding the tubes of plunging waves, this particular type of wave is considered especially dangerous, as surfers or swimmers can be picked up by the wave and thrown with great force onto reefs or sandbanks. The image of the little girl sitting in the trough of a swelling wave suggests the wave symbolizing an uncontrollable force that has the power to crush the

girl. In the context of the graphic memoir, the wave could symbolize the history of Vietnam, the personal history of Thi’s parents, as well as the personal trauma of the narrator. Like a wave, slowly building up to break at some point, Thi’s past and her family history will at some point crash down on the narrator, turning her life upside down before either releasing her to recover and recollect or ultimately destroying and drowning her. It can be argued that this image, which opens the graphic memoir, already visually summarizes the narrative. It foreshadows the trauma that Thi and her family have been exposed to, influencing their lives, leading to estrangement and silence. Like a natural force, she has no chance to withstand these influences, but has to find a way to manage and survive the situation in the best way she can.

## Waves of Trauma

The first chapter of *The Best We Can Do* is set in New York City in 2005. It introduces the reader to the narrator and protagonist of the graphic memoir, Thi Bui. The chapter entitled “Labor” shows Thi giving birth to her first child, at the same time already hinting at the problematic relationship between the narrator and her mother. While giving birth to a child and having her mother close to her should have been a bonding moment between the two women, the situation turns into a nightmare for both. Although her mother has come from California to help her when she has her first child, the birth triggers traumatic memories connected to their flight from Vietnam, leaving her incapable of helping her daughter and leaving Thi alone, angry, and scared. The birth of her first child makes the narrator aware of her new immense responsibility (Bui 2017, 22). Now, being a mother herself, she decides that it is time to learn more about her parents and their history, in order to understand the disturbed relationships in her family and to prevent handing her own trauma on to her child. On her metaphorical journey to find out more about her parents and their history, she recognizes that facing her family history and her own traumatizing experiences, which are both inseparably tied to the colonial history of Vietnam, very much resembles facing waves, as this journey has the potential to be both liberating and destructive.

Although the first panel of the chapter does not feature a visible wave, it does reference the term, as the reader sees a flashback of Thi in the New York hospital, in labor and stating that “the pain comes in twenty-foot waves and Má has disappeared” (Bui 2017, 1). Comparing her labor pains to “twenty-foot waves,” the mother-to-be verbalizes the pain that she is in,

evoking images of massive bodies of water approaching with great force and retreating only to return. The painful yet rewarding experience of giving birth changes the narrator's feelings towards her estranged mother. Now being a mother herself and having suffered through hours of labor, she realizes what her mother must have suffered through fleeing from Vietnam while pregnant, almost giving birth on a boat. This is the first time that Thi is able to reconnect with her mother; and being a mother herself now, who is concerned about the well-being of her child, she feels the urge to learn more about her heritage in order to understand why her parents have been incapable of showing affection and to understand her own feeling of being displaced. On the last panel of the first chapter, Thi states that "[a] wave of empathy for my mother washes over me" (Bui 2017, 22), comparing the unexpected feelings of sympathy towards her mother once more to an overpowering natural force. Opening and closing the first chapter of the graphic memoir with wave images, using them to verbalize extreme emotions that are hard to explain or to transmit, the narrative makes clear that waterways in general and oceans in particular will have a significant meaning.

As the plot evolves, it becomes evident that Thi's problem with her parents and their inability to maintain emotional relationships emerge from an intergenerational trauma. The term "intergenerational trauma" refers to a traumatic experience that is inflicted on one generation but affects the well-being of the future generation as well (Connolly 2011, 609–11). Hence, intergenerational trauma has to be understood as a transmission of trauma that connects the parent's or ancestor's trauma to the well-being of future generations, as it affects their behavior. Marianne Hirsch similarly argues in her book *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* that trauma is passed on to the so-called "hinge generation" (2012, 1) and thus that traumatic events such as the Holocaust do not only affect people who were immediately exposed to this trauma but also affect family members and their close environment. Hirsch introduces the term postmemory, which describes how later generations, often second generations, are affected by traumatic experiences of their parents. These memories are "[...] transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right." (5). This further implies that these second-generation children "[...] grow up with overwhelming inherited memories and that to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors." (5). In *The Best We Could Do*, the trauma of the Vietnam War and the subsequent refugee experience extend far beyond the horrific moments and have a significant impact on

Thi’s parents. Her father in particular is barely approachable and sometimes even acts violently while being mostly detached from his family. His behavior remains a mystery to Thi as there are gaps and discontinuities between her and her father that make it hard for her to understand him. She recalls how his anger, which seemed to erupt from nowhere, as well as his paranoid behavior, left her and her siblings scared as children. In the course of the narrative, she learns how the experience of being crammed together with many other refugees on a small boat was an especially traumatizing event for her father, who had to take responsibility for the boat and its passengers, as he turned out to be the only one capable of navigating the vessel, since the captain of the boat turned out not to be able to. Probably overburdened by the task of navigating not only his own family but all the people on the boat to safety, he starts to distance himself after their arrival in the US and becomes increasingly paranoid. Thi recalls how her parents, especially her father, were constantly alert and indoctrinated their children with what she calls her “refugee reflex” (Bui 2017, 305). As she explains, this reflex is “not any particular piece of Vietnamese culture” but her “inheritance: the inexplicable need and extraordinary ability to RUN when the shit hits the fan” (Bui 2017, 305). It is interesting that she refers to the reflex, which causes her to flee from supposedly dangerous situations, as being an “inheritance,” something that was passed on to her by her parents. Moreover, the constant stress her father was exposed to on the ocean very likely triggered a traumatic disorder that ultimately leads to the breakup of Thi’s parents and further estranges him from his children. Hence, the ocean, which first brings salvation to Thi and forces the family to work closely together on the boat, becomes the source of the intergenerational trauma and the family falling apart.

Her parents’ trauma also evoked a constant feeling of insecurity and guilt in her. This becomes evident at the beginning of the second chapter, when the boat on which her parents fled is shown for the first time. The caption in this panel reads: “My parents escaped Viêt Nam on a boat so their children could grow up in freedom” (Bui 2017, 30). Obviously, Thi is haunted by the fact that she owes her life in the United States to the sacrifices her parents made. This notion is further emphasized by the second caption: “You’d think I could be more grateful” (Bui 2017, 30). In fact, this panel as well as the subsequent panels address the recurring issue of intergenerational traumatic experiences for children of Vietnamese refugees and their often problematic relationship to their parents. While the children of refugees hardly remember their country of origin and tend to grow up in their host country, closely relating and adapting to its culture, their parents suffer more in starting a new life in an unknown

country. The more the children identify with the new culture, the more they become estranged from their parents, who tend to cling to cultural practices and values of their home country, making it hard for both parties to keep an emotional bond. In the graphic memoir, Thi remembers in retrospect how as a young adult she moved to California to be closer to her aging parents, only to recognize that “proximity and closeness are not the same” (Bui 2017, 31).

The absence of an emotional bond between Thi and her mother is visually emphasized a few pages later. Thi Bui decides to trace and write down the history of her family in order to understand what has happened to them as well as to keep the memory alive. She further sees writing her memoir as an opportunity to seek reconciliation with the past. At the same time, while tracing the history of her family and the Vietnam War, she also starts to come to terms with her identity as a Vietnamese refugee in the United States, adding a therapeutic purpose to her project. She understands that only readdressing the displaced memories and writing about the unspeakable will enable her to overcome her own trauma and anxieties. For Thi, the only access to the past of her parents is to talk to them, which turns out to be a challenging endeavor. In one central scene of the narrative, she tries to talk to her mother about her memories of Vietnam and the flight. Yet this conversation turns out to be difficult, as her mother constantly changes the topic, leaving Thi sitting frustrated at the table. Visually, the connection between Thi’s struggle to come to terms with her identity and the history of her parents is depicted across two pages (Bui 2017, 36–7).

At the top of the left page, the reader sees Thi sitting at a desk, recollecting her family history. Her thoughts are displayed in four boxes, in which she explains that she believes that recording her family history will “bridge the gap between the past and the present,” allowing her to “fill the void between [her] parents and [her]” (Bui 2017, 36). While Thi is working on her memoir, the orange watercolor drawing of the outline of Vietnam bleeds into the lower part of the page. The image of Vietnam draws a connection between the images of the older Thi and her younger self, who is standing with her back to the audience, gazing at the image of Vietnam. The naked back of the young girl reveals a hole, ripped into her body, which resembles a mirrored shape of Vietnam. The image eerily recalls photographs of a napalm attack on a Vietnamese village, which became part of the global collective memory of the Vietnam War. Associated Press photographer Nick Ut took a series of photographs that show a naked Vietnamese girl in different stages of the attack, including images of her burnt back (Kay 2015). While his famous picture of Thi Kim Phúc,

also known as the “Napalm Girl,” won the Pulitzer Prize, the other images of the girl and her actual injuries, as well as the pain that she has been in ever since this attack, remain widely unknown.

The image of a younger Thi with a hole in her back visually connects the individual trauma of her being ripped of her home country, which she had to leave when she was three years old, and thus has no memory of, to the national trauma of Vietnam. As she explains: “if I could see Việt Nam as a real place and not a symbol of something lost ... I would see my parents as real people ... and learn to love them better” (Bui 2017, 36). This quote underlines that being disconnected from her country of origin is not only painful, but also has the effect that she has trouble understanding and appreciating her parents, as they do not share the same cultural values. Although the younger Thi gazes at the image of Vietnam, it is clear that she cannot fill the void she feels, as the image she is looking at is mirrored and too large to fit the gap in her body. The war and her flight clearly deprived her of her home and part of her identity. The image further suggests that the trauma, although usually not visible, is still existent and causes physical as well as psychological harm.

A connection between her personal trauma and a potential chance to metaphorically fill the void and heal the injury inflicted on her by learning about her family history is created by the waves that connect the two pages. While the full-page panel on the left-hand side focuses on Thi and her thoughts and feelings, the reader sees her on the right-hand side sitting with her mother at a table. The gap between Thi and her mother is visually emphasized by placing their conversation on the next page, with the only visible connection between these two pages being the ocean that spans across the panels. Interestingly, echoing the cover of the graphic novel, Thi is again seated on the left, representing the West (the US) while her mother is seated across the table on the right, representing the East. Given that the journey across the ocean has been one of the most traumatic refugee experiences of her parents, it is not surprising that the ocean in these panels functions as an element that connects mother and daughter, while it is at the same time the dividing force, as it represents the site of trauma for Thi’s mother that she is still suffering from. In the background, almost like a looming reminder of the flight, the reader notices the image of a boat that is positioned exactly between the narrator and her mother. The boat not only serves as a visual reminder of the ordeal of Thi and her family, but also signifies a point of no return. After embarking on the vessel, the life of the Bui family changed forever, not only because they had to leave their old world behind for good, but also because this experience traumatized all the family members, leading them to become estranged from each other.

A few pages later, the reader sees Thi again gazing at the ocean, contemplating about her project of “tracing our journey in reverse … over the ocean through the war … seeking an origin story … that will set everything right” (Bui 2017, 40–1). Again, the ocean serves as a border between Thi and her Vietnamese identity. The images again span across two pages that are visually divided, with Thi again standing on the left side of the image (West) while the narrative “moves” towards the right-hand page (East). Similarly to her parents, who fled Vietnam for a better future, Thi embarks on a metaphorical journey into her past and the past of her parents, to learn more about her heritage and cultural background and to ensure that she will not pass her trauma on to her son. Her metaphorical journey happens “in reverse” not only time-wise but also geographically, as she travels westwards from the United States to Vietnam, hence following the traditional movement of frontier narratives, turning the Pacific Ocean into her own frontier and using it as a route to her past. While the ocean in the left panel reflects the narrator’s calm decision to seek closure and to overcome her intergenerational trauma, the rough waves in the right panel foreshadow a psychologically exhausting and daunting metaphorical journey.

In an attempt to reconcile with her parents and to save her own family, Thi travels across a metaphorical ocean in order to uncover her family’s history and repressed memories. This connection of the ocean and memories resonates with Carl Jung’s idea that large bodies of water symbolize the vastness and depth of the unconscious mind. Jung argued that the quintessential nature of water is a reflection of emotions, representing the often unknown depth of the inner life of human beings (Jung 1980, 18). Indeed, whenever Thi or her siblings struggle with anxieties, the motif of water, waves, and floating is used, signifying escape and freedom. The narrator, for example, recalls how as a child she was afraid at home in their house in the United States and escaped in her dreams, in which she was floating in water away from her sorrows (Bui 2017, 89). On the last pages of the narrative, the image of the younger Thi floating away from her fears is echoed when she watches her son playing in the ocean; imagining him floating in the water, she states: “But when I look at my son, now ten years old, I don’t see war and loss or even Travis and me. I see a new life bound with mine quite by coincidence, and I think maybe he can be free” (Bui 2017, 328–9). Her words underline her hope that by working through her family history and her own problematic relationship with her parents, she might have broken the vicious circle of the intergenerational trauma, freeing her son from feelings of guilt, thus ending *The Best We Could Do* on a hopeful note.

But does the narrative really provide closure and hope? It can be argued that Thi’s parents very likely also imagined a better future for their children

when they fled their home country and they probably never wanted their children to feel guilty. However, as the intergenerational trauma is too engrained in the family, Thi and her siblings were indeed affected by the trauma of their parents. Additionally, more recent studies suggest that traumatic effects might even be “transmitted through DNA modifications” (Yehuda and Lehrner 2018, 243). Researchers investigated how events in someone’s life can change the way their DNA is expressed and if and how such changes might be passed to their offspring through so-called “epigenetic marks encoded on DNA and passed through the germ line” (Yehuda, Lehrner, and Bierer 2018, 2). This transmission of effects to the offspring is understood as a form of biological learning. These findings would mean that, no matter how hard Thi tries, she might have already transmitted her trauma to her son when he was born, indicating that she and her family might not be able to escape the trauma of war.

## Conclusion

Until more recently, the majority of Vietnam War narratives have traced the fate of American soldiers and were written from a dominantly male American perspective, turning this war into an almost exclusively *American* tragedy. Thi Bui’s graphic memoir offers a different, female Vietnamese perspective on this war, remembering the history of Vietnam as a *Vietnamese* tragedy. This perspective is further underlined by the painting style and the dominant orange color, which are reminiscent of the Southeast Asian country that the narrator constantly imagines and reimagines—a country that she somehow feels connected to, yet can barely remember, while struggling to find her own identity. As in many US-American narratives, the crossing of an ocean in *The Best We Could Do* signifies a journey to a yet unknown place and, consequently, the division from the country of origin.

As an element of connection and disruption, waves and the ocean visualize the emotions, hopes, and anxieties of the narrator and her family. Furthermore, the instability of waves, as well as the fact that the ocean is fluid and in constant flux, mirrors the refugee experience as well as the postcolonial refugee identity of Thi and her family. Thi and her parents literally crossed an ocean to survive the war and its aftermath, rendering the ocean an escape route from the communist government in Vietnam and not necessarily as dangerous as such. Yet the journey itself in the hull of the boat was indeed a traumatic nightmare. During their flight, the threat never came directly from the water but from other passengers misbehaving, panicking, and hence calling the attention of patrol boats,

as well as from mechanical problems with the engine and approaching pirates. Here, the ocean serves as a site of human conflict and endurance that needs to be overcome for survival. The time on the boat, crammed together with many strangers, requires the family to work together and to encourage each other, turning the ocean into a site of bonding. This bond, however, is broken once the family has settled in the United States and the parents adapt differently to the new culture than their children, who are anchored much more in the American culture.

The lack of temporal linearity and consistent chronology not only reflects the trauma from which the narrator suffers. The fragmented timeline of the graphic memoir further resembles the motion of waves, which are constantly moving back and forth. The time shifts from 2005 to 2015 and then again back to 1999, 1987, 1978, 1974 and 1965, before fast-forwarding again to 2015, only to pull back to 1951 a few pages later, reminding readers of the movement of water receding and returning. By mimicking the movement of waves, the narrative indicates that nothing in the life of the refugee family is fixed or stable. On the contrary, the refugee experience leads to a fragmentation of Thi's identity. Like the labor pain Thi refers to at the beginning of the narrative, the trauma attached to the refugee experience comes and goes in waves that she cannot control. The title of the last chapter, "Ebb and Flow," further indicates that this trauma might never really recede and that the best Thi Bui and other refugees can do is to remember and share their stories. Assembling personal memories into the historical context of the Vietnam War and its aftermath, *The Best We Could Do* reimagines and redraws Vietnam and the post/colonial history of Vietnam from a Vietnamese perspective, hence turning the tide in Asian American literary writing.

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Stephen Henighan

## Transcontinental Waters: The Anti-postcolonial Tide in Angolan Fiction and Film

**ABSTRACT** This article assesses the historical roots of resistance to postcolonial interpretations of Angolan history and culture, tracing this reluctance to Angola's distinctive history, particularly the rise of the Creole class, which ran the slave trade, served as a nascent national bourgeoisie, was deprived of its privileges by the Salazar-Caetano dictatorship, then regained them on independence in 1975. The neo-Creole national imaginary, as funnelled through images of salt water, is explored in three Angolan artistic works: Pepetela's novel *A Gloriosa Família* (1997), which describes the consolidation of Creole identity during the Dutch occupation of Luanda in 1641–1648, Maria João Ganga's film *Na Cidade Vazia* (2004), about a young war refugee's friendship with a fisherman in 1991 Luanda, and Ondjaki's novel *Avó Dezanove e o Secreto do Soviético* (2008), in which identities formed by the ocean assist children who are fighting a construction project that threatens to destroy their homes.

**KEYWORDS** Angola, postcolonialism, Pepetela, Ondjaki, Ganga

### Introduction

Intellectuals from the five Lusophone African countries of Angola, Mozambique, Cabo Verde, Guinea Bissau, and São Tomé and Príncipe, like academics who work on Lusophone Africa, regard the postcolonial paradigm with attitudes that range from the skeptical to the dismissive. While the degree of acceptance of postcolonial approaches varies from country to country, and writer to writer, it is safe to say that in Angola this resistance verges on a consensus. The reasons for this are historical, rooted in the processes by which Angola constituted its idea of *angolanidade*, or distinctive national identity, and reach back at least four centuries. It is instructive to

contrast this outlook with trends in Mozambique, the country whose modern history most closely resembles that of Angola, where postcolonial ideas have greater currency and academic studies, such as Hilary Owen's *Mother Africa, Father Marx: Women's Writing of Mozambique, 1948–2002* (2007), have made a persuasive case for the viability of postcolonial criticism. Ironically, the roots of this difference appear to lie in Mozambique's greater distance from, and weaker historical attachment to, the colonial power. Simply too far away for Lisbon to control, Mozambique was officially subordinated to the crown colony of Goa from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, so that Bantu Africans were taught to speak in Portuguese by Lusophone South Asians, while large tracts of the country were rented out to Swiss and British land-holding companies. The pervasive influence of South African ideas, from adherence to a colour bar between the races to the decision to drive on the left-hand side of the road, were imported wholesale from white-ruled Anglophone Africa. Bordering on six English-speaking countries, Mozambique even debated whether or not it should retain Portuguese as its official language once it became independent, or whether English, the language in which the independence movement's founder, Dr. Eduardo Mondlane, wrote *The Struggle for Mozambique* (1969), should be adopted. Such discussions continued even after independence in 1975, reviving after Mozambique joined the British Commonwealth in 1995. In other words, many of the historical phenomena which burdened post-independence Mozambique, though specific to Lusophone experience, did not exist in an antagonistic counterpoint to the historical contours of those predominantly Anglophone colonies, whether in Africa or Asia, which served as the models for Anglo-American academic postcolonialism. In Angola, by contrast, the coastal regions, and particularly the city of Luanda, became the site of the creation of a distinctive culture that defied postcolonial paradigms. Many of this culture's central tropes—from fishing and fish-based meals to distinctive forms of cultural and racial mixing, slave trading, and close commercial, political, and cultural ties to Brazil and Cuba—were nourished by the salt water along the Angolan coast.

## Precolonial Angolan History and the Rise of the Creoles

The nascent sense of Angolan national identity coalesced around being a counterpart to, rather than a possession of, a European power. Colonialism, for all its racism and brutality, was difficult to define as a system of European exploitation. Various anomalies made Angola different. Angola's early history blurs the colonial model of a European power entering, disrupting,

and exploiting a millenarian African, Amerindian, or Asian civilization. As Adebayo O. Oyebade points out, the original inhabitants of the space we know as Angola were light-skinned Khoisan hunter-gatherers (Oyebade 2007, 21). The Bantu people, who are the present-day majority, migrated from the north between the seventh and thirteenth centuries, with the bulk of the immigration occurring in the later stages of this period (Marbot 2021); the Portuguese, hot on their heels, arrived in 1482. (Though burdened with negative connotations in an Anglophone southern African context, the term “Bantu,” increasingly employed in Lusophone and Francophone studies of the region, is useful in an Angolanist context, particularly in historical discussions of the country’s settlement, and may be preferable to the alternatives: “Black” risks converting the society’s majority population into an alien “other,” while calling Bantus “African” would deny the Africanness of *mestiços* and old-stock whites, some of whose Angolan lineages go back centuries. The present paper prefers “Bantu,” but will occasionally use “Black” when referring to European-dominated contexts.)

Bantu expansion into Angola was gradual, and relatively sparse in many regions, because, on the western side of the African continent, the terrain “became increasingly less attractive the further south they went towards the desert lands of the Namib and the Kalahari” (Fage 2002, 30). The Bantu found more of the green river valleys where their Iron Age farming culture thrived on the eastern side of southern Africa; there they also encountered pastoral cultures, some of whose innovations, such as milking cattle, they were able to adopt, as well as new crops, imported from Southeast Asia by Indonesian sailors, which expanded their agricultural repertoire (Fage 2002, 30). The draw of the east coast of southern Africa restrained Bantu migration into Angola, except for a few key areas, such as what would become the northwest of the country, between the bay where the city of Luanda would be built, and the Congo River; the Central Plateau, whose high-altitude grasslands were well suited to agriculture; and the slightly less fertile northeast, where subsistence agriculture was also possible. The Bantu migration assimilated, marginalized, or exterminated most of the Khoi and San hunter-gatherer groups: “in so far as they were not hunted to extinction, [they] survived only by retreating into the arid refuge of the Kalahari” (Fage 2002, 30).

The uneven distribution of Bantu settlement is key to later debates about Angolan identity. The strong identification of the Bantu with farming, and their preference for fertile terrain, meant that there were significant regions of the future Republic of Angola that they did not settle: “The first Bantu pioneers probably were few in number, selected wet-forest areas suitable for their yam agriculture, and leapfrogged over

drier areas, which they left to Khoisan hunter-gatherers" (Diamond 1997, 398). This "leapfrogging" left certain areas largely, or apparently, uninhabited. As a result of this pattern, European colonization occurred in a more ambiguous context than in many areas of Africa, the Americas, or Asia, where local populations had enjoyed a millenarian claim to the land that European conquerors usurped from them. Anecdotally, one hears in Angola that there were some areas of the country that the Portuguese reached before the Bantu. The Angolan writer José Luandino Vieira reports that during the 1960s, when Portugal imprisoned Bantu, *mestiço* and white independence activists together in the Tarrafal concentration camp on the island of Santiago, one topic they discussed was, "as migrações dos povos Bantus para Angola. A propósito de haver migrações de Bantus mais recentes que a chegada dos portugueses" (Vieira 2015, 727) ["the Bantu peoples' migrations to Angola. On the subject of there being Bantu migrations more recent than the arrival of the Portuguese"]. While this claim may appear dubious and is to some degree refuted by the fact that early Portuguese settlements were concentrated close to areas where Bantu population density was high, such as the region south of the Congo River and the southern coastal stretch where the cities of Benguela and Lobito would be founded, it is true that the cultures disrupted by colonialism were themselves of relatively recent "colonial" vintage.

Bantu culture was still in the process of colonizing Angola at the time the Portuguese entered and began to mingle with the Bantus as part of their own colonizing efforts. Mixing between Bantus and Portuguese began at a time when both cultures were in the formative stages of their adaptation to Angolan territory. The extensive miscegenation, as a matter of habit, custom, and even policy, that occurred in Portuguese Africa and, during the colonial period, in Angola far more than in Mozambique, stands in contrast to the relatively limited degree of racial mixing in Anglophone or Francophone Africa. In Malyn Newitt's summary:

Most of the Portuguese took African wives and their children, while retaining their Portuguese identity, were brought up in the country and after two generations were indistinguishable from the local populations [...] With the founding of Luanda and the control of the Kwanza valley the Afro-Portuguese had their own sovereign territory. Although the king of Portugal was nominally the sovereign, in practice the new settlement was dominated by powerful Afro-Portuguese families (2008, 25–6).

The high degree of transculturation was epitomized by the group known as the Creoles. In the Creoles, Angola forged a national bourgeoisie more than

three centuries prior to independence. In the Angolan context, the word “Creole” refers to Bantu families with some Portuguese or Dutch ancestry who converted to Roman Catholicism and, after a generation or two, often ceased to speak African languages—a decision which, in the African context, was unique to Angola. In the absence of a substantial settler population prior to the early twentieth century, the Creoles—a term which refers to a specific cluster of Black families with distant white ancestry and does not include other culturally and racially mixed groups such as *mestiços* or more recent Black *assimilados*, ran the colony. They enriched themselves by shipping more than three and a half million of their compatriots to Brazil, the Caribbean, and the southern United States as slaves (Meredith 2014, 125). As the historian David Birmingham writes of the Creoles:

In the nineteenth century some of the great families even owned private regiments of slave militias which could be used to further colonial aspirations at little cost to the empire. Creoles were appointed captains of the half-dozen forts which held the two-hundred-mile Portuguese enclave behind Luanda. They were also given directorships of the great “factories” where goods were stored for the long-distance trade [...]. These families greatly valued receiving colonial honours and titles in return for their services (2015, 23).

The scale of the Creole class’s divergence from traditional African culture, and their integration into, and even partial control over, Portuguese colonial structures, disrupts the colonial paradigm; by extension, it neuters the efficacy of postcolonialist criticism. Starting with King Afonso, the ethnically Bakongo, Christian, Portuguese-speaking king who ruled the Kingdom of Kongo from 1506 to 1543 and wrote letters to the King of Portugal, in which he addressed the European sovereign as “my brother king” (Meredith 2014, 103), Africans in Angola who occupied roles of authority saw themselves as substituting for a largely absent or ineffectual Portuguese administrative structure rather than being subjugated by such a structure. Jacopo Corrado, for example, stresses how this “colonial bourgeoisie was deeply rooted in Angola and disconnected from the metropolis, and how its economic links were far stronger with Brazil—or better with the Brazilian colonial bourgeoisie involved with the [slave] traffic—than with Portugal” (Corrado 2010, 67–8). Repeated crossings of the South Atlantic Ocean were essential to the formation of Angolan culture. The author of the first work of modern Angolan literature, the Romantic poetry collection *Esportaneidades da Minha Terra* (1849) [*Spontaneities from my Land*], José da Silva Maia Ferreira, was a Luanda Creole who had been

educated in Brazil. As Luís Kandjimbo observes of Brazil's mid-nineteenth-century influence on Angola, “[a]lém de ser um dos países destinatários do comércio de escravizados africanos, uma certa burguesia escravocrata para lá enviava os filhos, onde realizavam os estudos e nele investiam adquirindo bens imobiliários” (2015, 210) [“In addition to being one of the recipient nations of the commerce in enslaved Africans, a certain slaveocrat bourgeoisie sent its sons there, where they undertook studies and made investments, acquiring real estate”]. Some Luanda Creole families went so far as to relocate to Brazil after the formal abolition of slavery in Angola in 1878. By the seventeenth century, Portuguese in Angola had become both a language of colonization *and* the lingua franca of Angola's dominant endogenous class. As Patrick Chabal has written, the Angolan Creole class “is undoubtedly both singular to Angola and of protracted significance” (2008, 4).

Creole dominance facilitated Portuguese governance of Angola in the absence of a substantial settler population. As late as 1846, after more than 350 years of Portuguese colonialism, there were only 1,830 people defined as “white” in Angola (Bender 1978, 64). When the Portuguese began to send large numbers of white settlers to the colony, in the early twentieth century, and particularly after the formation of the fascist dictator António Oliveira de Salazar's *Estado Novo* [New State] between 1926 and 1933, the Creoles became an obstacle to white superiority. Wealthier and better educated than the poor, often illiterate peasants and *degradados* (convicts) that Portugal dispatched to Angola, the colony's elite could be displaced only through the imposition of race laws. At the same time that *mestiços*, *assimilados*, and the Creolized elite became an obstacle to settler dominance, they enabled the Portuguese government to claim, through its adoption of the ideology of *Lusotropicalismo*, that Portuguese colonialism differed from, and was less pernicious than, the British, French, or Belgian varieties, because, they maintained, extensive miscegenation proved that the Portuguese did not subjugate Indigenous populations but rather fused with them (Bender 1978, 3–18). Lusotropical ideology originated in the work of the Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre, *Casa Grande e Senzala* ([1933] 2002) [translated as *The Masters and the Slaves. A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization* (1963)], which provided the basis for the dubious assertion that due to racial mixing, Brazil's patriarchal society had created a racial democracy. The invocation of Lusotropicalism became a particularly vital thread of Portuguese colonial ideology after 1960, when British and French African colonies had achieved independence, and Portugal was forced to mount an argument at the United Nations to explain why it had failed to relinquish its African colonies.

Creole assumptions and Lusotropicalism were internalized by many Angolans. Before addressing contemporary Angolan intellectuals' resistance to postcolonial characterizations of the nation, and how this influences the framing of evocations of salt water in contemporary Angolan fiction and film, it is pertinent to mention examples of this internalization. The Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) [People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola], the country's governing party since independence, distinguished itself from the two competing independence movements by virtue of its multiracialism. The pro-Western FNLA (Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola) [National Front for the Liberation of Angola] was based in the Bakongo culture of the north of the country. UNITA (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola) [National Union for the Total Independence of Angola], whose ideology migrated over the years from Maoist to Reaganite, was rooted among the Ovimbundu people of the Central Plateau. The MPLA, by contrast, was a Marxist-Leninist party; but as it was also militantly multiracial, its upper ranks were filled with coastal people such as radicalized whites, *mestiços*, and the grandchildren of Creoles who had lost their privileged status to the race laws of the *Estado Novo*. In this sense, Angolan independence did not so much establish a new nation as re-establish the society which had existed in the Creole imagination prior to Salazar's creation of the *Estado Novo*. As the historian Malyn Newitt, who refers to the Creoles as "Afro-Portuguese," emphasizes, "it was the Afro-Portuguese who seized power in 1975 and subsequently took control of Angola's wealth" (Newitt 2008, 19). MPLA multiracialism can be seen, in this context, as a resurgence of Lusotropicalism, though its roots reach even farther back to the Creoles' rise to prominence in the seventeenth century. As David Brookshaw writes: "if the literature of its Afro-Marxist founding generation began on the periphery to assume control of the centre, the Luso-Tropical ideal of the late colonial years was banished to the periphery to live on" (2002, 3).

This sense of a continuum was accentuated by the fact that in Angola none of the three independence movements that fought against Portuguese colonialism—the FNLA, the MPLA, or UNITA—won the war for national independence. Unlike Mozambique and Guinea Bissau, where nationalist guerrillas defeated the Portuguese army on the battlefield, in Angola Portugal held the three guerrilla movements at bay and kept them away from the major cities. Independence occurred because the fascist regime in Lisbon collapsed on April 25, 1974 and its radical successors freed the colonies, leaving the three rival Angolan independence movements to fight a twenty-seven-year war for control of the country. Even though independence brought with it many distinctive features, such as Marxist-Leninist

ideology, a new flag, and a close alliance with Cuba, post-independence society continued to feature warring guerrilla factions, as in the 1960s, and a dominant Creole elite dependent on transatlantic connections (now primarily to the former slave destination of Cuba), as during the period between the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries. Nowhere was the Creole model so dominant as in linguistic preferences. At independence in 1975, in the wake of the flight of hundreds of thousands of Portuguese-speakers, only 5 percent of Angolans spoke Portuguese (Hodges 2001, 25–6). Thirty-nine years later, the 2014 census revealed that 75 percent of the population of over thirty million considered itself fluent in Portuguese, with 40 percent describing Portuguese as their first or only language. In cities this figure rose to 100 percent, with almost no urban Angolan under thirty reporting fluency in an African language (Simons and Fennig 2015). This post-independence boom in widespread acquisition of the former colonial language, and the progressive extinction of African languages, has few parallels. In adopting Portuguese—the only language Creoles speak—Angolans who had grown up with African languages were assimilating into the hegemonic Creole ideology of Portuguese unilingualism implicit, and sometimes explicit, in the MPLA's seizure of power. As the American travel writer Paul Theroux, who had assumed that his ability to speak two Bantu languages would enable him to communicate during his journey through Angola, discovered to his chagrin: "I did not speak more than a few words of Portuguese. This was a handicap, not merely because the country was generally Portuguese-speaking, but because [...] Angola was an anomaly: apart from Portuguese, nothing else was spoken" (2013, 225).

## A Porous Prospero, a Paucity of Postcoloniality

In spite of these crucial historical factors, postcolonial critics such as Robert J. C. Young attempt to shoehorn the five Lusophone African nations into an Anglo-American postcolonial mold. Though Young concedes the existence of Lusophone African difference in the greater importance lent to culture as a form of resistance (2001, 288–92), his inclusion of these nations in his book *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (2001) received a hostile reception from Lusophone Africans, who see "postcolonialism" as both an assimilationist Anglophone discourse and one that simply gets their history wrong. As Phillip Rothwell writes,

[d]espite being the first European power to subscribe to a process of global colonization, and the last to relinquish the dream that direct colonization

could be made to work to its advantage, Portugal rarely controlled the rules of the colonial game, which became increasingly dictated by a normative colonialism designed with the interests of the British Empire in mind (2004, 197–8).

If Rothwell's statement applies more clearly to Mozambique, where British influence was significant, than to Angola, where “the rules of the colonial game” were administered, if not controlled, from the mid-1600s until the 1920s by the Creole class, his rejection of the viability of postcolonialism as a useful analytical framework in Lusophone Africa is widely shared. Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues that Portugal brought its language, culture, and genetic inheritance to Angola and Mozambique, but afflicted them with a deficiency of both capitalism and colonialism, and finally retreated into internal upheaval in 1974, leaving its nominal colonies alone to face a global capitalism that had, in any event, been ravaging them for centuries. Summarizing Santos's arguments, Rothwell writes: “the injustices perpetrated on the vast majority of the Angolan people bear only a trace of Portuguese intervention on the continent” (2004, 199). Alluding to the Shakespearean paradigm often employed to capture the colonial relationship, Santos characterizes Portugal as a Prospero who “oscillated between Prospero and Caliban” (2002, 36). An indebted junior partner to Great Britain during the colonial era, and a subordinate of the United States during the later Salazar years, Portugal lacked the unquestioned autonomy and cultural authority of colonizing powers such as France or Great Britain. Northern Europeans regarded the Portuguese themselves as a dark southern race; writers such as V.S. Naipaul categorized the Portuguese as non-whites (Santos 2002, 28). The Creolized Angolan bourgeoisie derived more of its image of “civilization” from the mixed-race bourgeoisie of Rio de Janeiro than it did from Lisbon. Both before and after independence, the primary factor impeding national autonomy was the global capitalist economy, rather than the extremely porous structures of Portuguese colonialism. This led to a situation in which “postcolonialism in the Portuguese space is very little post- and very much anticolonialism” (Santos 2002, 37).

For this reason, Marxist and neo-Marxist frameworks hostile to postcolonial discourse have dominated in Lusophone African, and, particularly, Angolan art. Fernando Arenas, in *Lusophone Africa: Beyond Independence* (2011), balances Marxist and postcolonial perspectives on Lusophone Africa, noting the unpopularity of the latter. Anne Garland Mahler, in *From the Tricontinental to the Global South* (2018), takes a position which, echoing that of Santos, lends the independence struggle contours that are

more familiar to Angolans themselves: that of the revolutionary discourse of tricontinentalism, which links Cuba, the most recently independent of Spanish American territories, to Angola and Guinea Bissau through Fidel Castro's "Black Atlantic/Marxist Atlantic" collaboration with these countries' independence movements. The Cuban–Angolan alliance dates back to at least 1962, when six Angolan guerrillas, including Ndalu (who, like a number of prominent Angolans, including the writers mentioned below, uses only one name, and who would later serve as an important battlefield commander in the wars against apartheid South Africa and then as Angolan Ambassador to Washington), went to Cuba for academic and military training (George 2005, 22–3). The Angolan–Cuban alliance, developed through Che Guevara's faltering orchestration of the collaboration of Cuban and Angolan guerrillas in the Congo and Angola in 1965, was strengthened immensely by the 1966 Tricontinental Conference in Havana, which forged the first outlines of what might be described as an ideology of the Global South and, as is well known, blossomed into the service of more than 400,000 Cuban soldiers, doctors, and teachers in Angola between 1975 and 1991 (Hatzky 2015, 4). These *cooperantes* ensured the survival of Angolan independence against invasion by the South African apartheid regime. Thinking about Angola as a nation consolidated through tricontinentalist ideals restores agency to Angolans, shifting the focus away from postcolonialism's emphasis on the European experience of colonization. Postcolonialism, as Mahler writes, "has not had a reach commensurate with the transcendent geocultural boundaries of globalization" (2018, 34). The theories of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak are too rooted in the Middle East and India, and in Anglophone histories, to have broader applicability. For Bhabha, postmodern hybridity occurs when the migrant moves to the metropolis (1994, 212–29); in Angola, hybridity is the 400-year-old endogenous reality that forged the nation's governing class.

## Angolan Literature and Film

Young's concession of the heightened role of culture as a form of resistance in Lusophone Africa, even though he deploys it to bring Lusophone Africans back within the orbit of Anglo-American postcolonialism, provides a paradoxical corroboration of the importance of the Creoles and, in political terms, of the multiracial intellectuals of the governing MPLA, as a nation-imagining "literate bourgeoisie" in the sense developed by Benedict Anderson (1983, 9–36). The three examples of Angolan film and literature discussed below are from after 1990, when the MPLA abandoned

the socialist ideology that had served as the glue of the nation. Accepting the concept of Angola as a nation unified by tricontinentalist ideology entails questioning how this ideology adapts to the end of the Cold War and the onset of an accelerated form of globalization. This crisis provokes a reaction, a retrenchment within the cultural sphere, of the socialist ideals of egalitarianism and anti-racism. These values become linked to more long-standing Creole values of an *angolanidade* defined by mixed-race, culturally hybridized identity and anchored in the use of Portuguese not as a language of colonization, but rather as the language in which Angola's Andersonian "literate bourgeoisie" has expressed itself throughout its history. In this context, coastal life and the oceans become the locus of the forging of the nation, a reminder both of Angola's early history, and of the role played by the city of Luanda as the epicentre in which that culture was forged. During the war of independence (1961–1975), the wars of resistance to South African invasion (1975–1992) and the civil war (1992–2002, with short truces), the capital was the one safe place to which refugees from the war zones could flee. This caused the city's population to bulge from 500,000 inhabitants to probably about eight million. In the process, Luanda forcibly integrated people from the countryside into the Lusophone, Creolized interculturality of the capital and its hegemonic national imaginary.

The most surprising characteristic of Creole ideology is how resilient it is. Not only the literate bourgeoisie constituted by MPLA intellectuals, but even opponents of the MPLA, provided they are also "literate," embrace hybridity as a defining trait of *angolanidade*. The first novel published by José Eduardo Agualusa, a longstanding MPLA opponent, *A Conjura* (1989) [literally *The Conspiracy*], dramatizes an uprising against the first attempt to impose race laws in Angola in 1910; one of the best-known of Agualusa's later novels, *Nação Crioula* (1997) [translated as *Creole* (2002)], praises the cultural mingling of the Black Atlantic. Yet it was the pro-MPLA writers, who were heavily invested in a socialist Angola, whose ideology was most severely challenged by the conclusion of the Cold War. One of the multiple responses of Pepetela, the country's most prominent novelist, a former MPLA guerrilla and cabinet minister, to the end of the Cold War was to write a historical novel, *A Gloriosa Família* (1997) [literally *The Glorious Family*] about the origins of the Creole elite, suggesting that Creole ideology was Angola's enduring source of unity and that it would outlast the collapse of socialism. As Rothwell notes, the date of the novel's composition "followed the discrediting of alternatives signalled by the fall of the Berlin Wall and pre-dated the rhetoric of terrorist threats and axes of evil" (2019, 98). To some extent, the virtually global 1990s acceptance of international trade as a positive force enables Pepetela, a lifelong foe of capitalism, to

overlook the fact that the source of the Creole elite's wealth is the slave trade and allows him to concentrate on the Creoles as nation builders.

*A Gloriosa Família* is set during the Dutch occupation of Luanda between 1641 and 1648. Baltazar Van Dum, a white trader with eight *mestiço* children, is the barely fictionalized stand-in for the founder of the historical Van Dúnems, Angola's most powerful Creole family, who are descended from a Portuguese Jew who fled to the Netherlands, took a Dutch name, then moved to Angola and intermarried with Bantus (Birmingham 2015, 23). This family's power remains pervasive in business and politics in Angola—and even in Portugal, where, from 2015 to 2019, one member of the family, Francisca Van Dúnem, served as Portugal's Minister of Justice, the first Black woman to hold this position. In the novel, the Van Dums incarnate the hybridized coastal microcosm of the future nation while the narrator, an unnamed mute slave, regards the interior behind Luanda as “a pátria dos Ngola, a minha” (1997, 10) [“the homeland of the Ngolas, my homeland”]. Baltazar Van Dum fights a battle on two fronts, on the one hand struggling to maintain his business operations under the hostile rule of the Dutch occupying forces, and on the other attempting to extend his business interests, and with them his Creolized, Portuguese-speaking culture, into the Bantu-dominated interior. The agility he develops to balance these interests is portrayed as exemplary of the intercultural forces that will consolidate *angolanidade*. Baltazar recognizes that, as *mestiços*, his sons will not benefit from a colonial order which privileges whiteness. Nor will they fare well in an Angola defined by Bantu cultures. The society Baltazar begins to sketch out, in his manoeuvring between the Dutch, the Portuguese, and the Bantu kingdoms of the interior, is one in which mixed-race people such as his sons will be able to play important roles. At one point Baltazar's son Rodrigo even goes into battle with the Dutch against the Portuguese (1997, 356), an event that sketches the ultimate independence and self-interest of the Creoles as an autonomous group who define the coastal area of Angola rather than being subject to any particular European empire.

In this seventeenth-century consolidation of the national imaginary, the ocean and coastal regions offer both threats and liberation. The coast is a fertile liminal zone in which a new, Creolized, national imaginary is taking root. At the same time, in the novel's opening pages (1997, 12–3) the invading Dutch forces destroy the waterfront business district, forcing merchants such as Baltazar to move uphill to the Cidade Alta (Upper City). Baltazar's retreat away from the water becomes the first step in the diffusion of his culture into the interior. As he moves deeper into Angolan territory, he relies on his transatlantic business dealings with Brazil to

support him. His Brazilian connections include both Catholic merchants from Portuguese-controlled Rio de Janeiro and Protestants from Dutch-occupied Recife in northern Brazil. This submerged tension comes to a head when a timid Huguenot asks for the hand of Baltazar's assertive daughter, Mathilde, who participates in political arguments with men and flouts Catholic concepts of female chastity. Baltazar lays the basis for new forms of morality by inveigling officials of both Christian churches to consent to a wedding with which neither religious authority is in agreement. When the marriage fails, Mathilde moves herself and her infant son back into her father's *sanzala*, the yard identified by Gilberto Freyre as the locus of racial mixing, where, traditionally, in Angola as in Brazil, many children are the offspring of absent European fathers. Born of the improvisation of interracial coastal merchants, the ideology of *mestiçagem*, whether racial or merely cultural, as in the case of Mathilde's son, prevails over both Portuguese and Dutch attempts to impose their respective colonizing doctrines. At the same, as Denise Rocha maintains, the marriage's failure sketches the limits of Luanda Creole culture, which, though able to absorb people of different nationalities and phenotypes, remains a Catholic preserve where the Protestant French Huguenot is ultimately viewed as heretical (2017, 567–9).

The novel's unspoken core, never plumbbed in detail, is the most glaring heritage of the salt-water world: slavery itself. As Rothwell explores, Baltazar does not think about the moral implications of his acts in selling men and women from the interior, transporting them to the coast and dispatching them across the Atlantic to Brazil or Cuba: he "acts as both agent and product of the slaving system to which he subscribes" (2019, 100). This salt-water crime is facilitated by the freshwater Kwanza River, which flows into the Atlantic Ocean south of Luanda. In a scene in which Baltazar stands on the battlements of the São Miguel fortress overlooking the capital, "[o]lhou o rio Kuanza, onde pirogas iam e vinham da ilha" (Pepetela 1997, 279) ["he glanced at the Kwanza River, where canoes came and went from Luanda Island"]. In an ambiguity typical of the novel, as of the formation of the Creole class, the Kwanza connects the beleaguered proto-Angolan merchants of occupied Luanda not only with their human merchandise in the settlements upriver where their boats pick up shipments of enslaved people destined for locations on the other side of the Atlantic, but also with the surviving Portuguese administrators and their followers. Unable to flee Luanda at the time of the Dutch occupation, these figures have gone into hiding at Massangano, thirty kilometres upriver, where they live from hand-to-mouth for seven years (also mainly by selling slaves) until the colony is rescued. The river which leads from the

interior out to the coastal capital and the ocean both secretes the hope of deliverance from occupation and perpetuates the crime of a bourgeoisie consolidated and enriched by slavery. The salt-water environment reduces slaves to incidental cargo on journeys that preoccupy the novel's protagonists for other reasons. When an annoying Dutch official is recalled to Europe, the narrator notes in passing that, before he can leave: "O veleiro tinha antes de ser lavado e carregado com alguns escravos, além de abastecido de comida e água" (1997, 321) ["first the sloop had to be washed and loaded with some slaves, as well as supplied with food and water"]. The status of the enslaved people as merchandise, offhandedly added to the sloop's load, could hardly be clearer.

If salt water facilitates the Creoles' original sin, it also furnishes their salvation. At the novel's close it is from Brazil that deliverance arrives in the form of a fleet commanded by the governor of Rio de Janeiro, which liberates Luanda from the Dutch. The image of sails glimpsed far out at sea, with which the novel's final chapter opens, inverts an image of colonial conquest—European sailing ships appearing off the African coast—by reimagining this stock allusion as an image of liberation. The final confrontation between the Brazilians and the Dutch takes place on the water, in the bay where slaves are loaded and sent to the Americas, as the Dutch ships see that they are outnumbered and must surrender. The use of the conquest-oriented image of the sails advancing towards the African coast is not an argument in favour of colonialism, but rather an assumption that, once the Brazilians—who, at this point in history, remain technically Portuguese, though they, too, exemplify a mixed-raced coastal culture—have expelled the Dutch, the nascent Creole families such as the Van Dums will be free to develop an Angola congruent with their hybridized vision. At the same time, the fact that Luanda's liberators are not from the colonial metropolis, but from a fellow colony, adumbrates the future outlines of the Global South described by Mahler (which fell into relief when Brazil became the first non-communist country to recognize independent Angola in November 1975). The coast, with its hybridity and the cultural variety brought by the ocean, is the point of origin of the national imaginary. At the novel's close, as the Dutch are about to leave, the slave narrator is revealed to be not pure Bantu, but a "mulatto" (1997, 393). His identification with the Ngolas, the traditional Bantu rulers of the Kwanza River area south of Luanda, is exposed as a form of false consciousness now discredited by the copious history that he has narrated of the rise of the Creole class. In spite of his enslaved status, the narrator, too, is part of a mixed-race *angolanidade*. The novel concludes with the formal incorporation of Luanda as a city and with a prophecy that the Van Dums

are destined to become a glorious family. This prophecy, which in the present presents Creole ideals as a nationalist substitute for the ideals of a defeated socialism, resonates in the twenty-first century as well as the seventeenth. The anti-postcolonialist subversion of the vision of sails out at sea approaching the coast as a positive, nation-building development recasts what in a different colonial context would have been a threat rather than a source of salvation.

The second work I would like to discuss is Maria João Ganga's 2004 film *Na Cidade Vazia* [*Hollow City*]. Set in 1991, it follows Ndala, an eleven-year-old war orphan from the country's interior as he wanders through the disorientingly modern streets of Luanda. 1991 is the year of transition from socialism to capitalism, when no set of values is hegemonic. One of the film's opening scenes portrays a schoolteacher instructing a class in front of a blackboard on which are written the words: *1991—ano da reestruturação da economia e da democracia multipartidária* ["1991—year of economic re-structuring and multiparty democracy"]. Here, the sandy coastline of the peninsula known as Luanda Island, which encloses the natural harbour on which the capital lies, acts as the repository of traditional coastal Angolan values. Fleeing from the chaos of the city, Ndala meets a fisherman on Luanda Island. A wise bearded sage, the fisherman feeds him and lets him sleep in his tent. The fisherman's traditional culture differs from that of the boy from the interior. The beach and the ocean serve as a safe haven, a margin of security where the boy can take refuge when the unpredictability, chaos, and violence of the city overwhelm him. The film's thematic arc depends on the tension between the retreat of the values of socialism, which are depicted as self-abnegating and heroic, and the advance of incipient capitalism, which the film portrays as corrupt, indolent, and larcenous. The Creole elite, too, has been corrupted by the temptations of capitalism; in fact, the film's villain is a *mestiço* who has given up his job as a mechanic to become a burglar.

The ocean, depicted as an open vista and a place of freedom, yet also a source of cosmic morality, where the coercive forces of the nation do not intrude, is shorn not only of association with colonizing incursions, but even of any trace of modern civilization. On the beach the juvenile protagonist can return to an Edenic reality similar to that of his rural community prior to the slaughter of his family during the war. Yet this Eden is not primitive; rather, it is layered and hybridized. The old fisherman introduces Ndala, who has been catechized by Portuguese nuns into belief in a traditionalist Catholicism, to the Kimbundu sea-goddess Kianda. Ndala, who comes from Bié province, is of Ovimbundu heritage, and hence unfamiliar with Kimbundu (coastal) deities such as Kianda. When Ndala

asks the fisherman whether he enjoys his profession, the old man replies, “Trabalho aqui na terra para o mar até que Kianda me venha buscar” (2004) [“I work here on the land for the sea until Kianda comes in search of me”]. The sea is his governing entity: the source of morality and justice, which provides a refuge from the ever more rampant injustice found in the modernizing capital which is shedding the moral imperatives of socialism. Exemplifying Creolized cultural mixing, the fisherman responds with a tolerant syncretism to Ndala’s confusion of the Catholicism he has been taught with the goddess Kianda, whom he has now adopted into his personal pantheon. When the boy, impossibly, claims to have seen an image of Kianda in a Catholic church, the old man replies, “Todas as santas são boas” (2004) [“All saints [female] are good”]. Ndala is on the point of following in the footsteps of Pepetela’s characters and developing a mental space in which African and European heritages intermingle. His fascination with the ocean as a zone of syncretic mixing, however, leads to his downfall. The thief Joka and his accomplice recruit Ndala to help them in a burglary by offering him a night-time trip to the beach. While Ndala imagines himself cavorting in the waves that he is coming to see as his salvation, the two men plan to break into the waterfront mansion of a corrupt military officer who is about to leave on a shopping trip to Paris. The imagery of the film’s final scenes associates the destruction of the boy’s village in Bié province during the war with his death in a burglary-gone-wrong in the capital. Zé, an older boy who has befriended Ndala, is unable to save him. Though poor, Zé lives with a caring godmother and attends an inner-city public school. On the night that Ndala participates in the burglary, Zé is acting in the school play: a dramatization of Pepetela’s first book, *As Aventuras de Ngunga* ([1973] 2002) [translated as *Ngunga’s Adventures* (1988)], which propounds the moral, self-abnegating revolutionary values that are now at risk as a result of the official adoption of economic restructuring (Hodges 2008, 186–8).

The processes which doom Ndala are inextricably linked to Angola’s transition to capitalism, announced on the teacher’s blackboard at the film’s outset. While the traditional values of the fisherman on the beach of Luanda Island are depicted as honourable, the film mocks the pretensions to authority of the vestiges of the Portuguese colonial apparatus. These are embodied by the anxious Portuguese nun who brought Ndala to Luanda and longs to place him in a Catholic orphan school. The nun pursues Ndala throughout the film, unable to locate him in the streets of Luanda. Her inability to catch Ndala once he arrives in the city symbolizes the impotence of European cultural values and Portuguese colonial history to influence the present. In the end, only hybridized Angolan values, exemplified

by the culture of the fisherman, can save Ndala; but the socialist Angola that, in theory, tried to care for its orphans is being abandoned in 1991. Though *Hollow City*'s depiction of the ocean is very different from that in *A Gloriosa Família*, it is equally unexpected in that it erases the history of colonialism, depicting a society that has leapt from tradition to capitalist modernity, and risks forgetting the intervening centuries when the Creole identity fashioned a locally determined blending of African and European cultural traits.

By contrast, the last work I would like to mention, the novel *AvóDezaneve e o Segredo do Soviético* (2008) [translated as *Granma Nineteen and the Soviet's Secret* (2014)], by Ondjaki, fits well with the tricontinentalist analytical framework proposed by Anne Garland Mahler. Born in 1977, two years after Angolan independence, Ondjaki belongs to the first generation of writers born into Angolan citizenship. Set in a beach-front suburb of Luanda in the socialist period of the early 1980s, the novel portrays a group of children trying to save their houses from being demolished to make way for a huge socialist construction project. At the same time, the child narrator's grandmother, a lively widow known as Granma Nineteen, is being courted, with obvious allegorical implications, by both a Cuban doctor and a Soviet soldier. In this version of the 1980s, conceived from the globalized perspective of the twenty-first century, Angolan nationality can be consolidated only by the emergence of a hybridized third term, a socialist national identity that defies the binary oppositions of the Cold War. Yet the cross-fertilization which will produce this term depends on interconnections forged by tricontinentalist socialist internationalism. The incarnation of this mixing is a character named Sea Foam, an Angolan who studied mathematics in Cuba until he went insane. He wanders the beach spouting a mixture of Angolan Portuguese and Cuban Spanish. Sea Foam's hybridization represents the promise of a flexible, creative, insouciant nationhood, in contrast to the doctrinal rigidity represented by the Stalinist construction project. Sea Foam inherits the revolutionary example of Cuban mixed-race socialism, yet he is loyal first and foremost to the natural world of Angola. Another minor character, a fisherman who lives on the beach and whose self-sufficient lifestyle is threatened by the construction project, resembles the fisherman in *Hollow City* so closely that he appears to be a deliberate allusion to this figure. The children who collaborate to thwart the building project are assumed to be of a range of cultural backgrounds, yet in deference to socialism's insistence on equality, their individual racial identities are never specified. At the same time, the image of children who discover their unity and independence alludes to both *Verano Azul* (Blue Summer), a 1980s Spanish television

series widely broadcast in socialist countries during the final years of the Cold War, whose plotline revolved around children and adolescents living on a beach; and the Brazilian writer Jorge Amado's novel *Capitães da Areia* (1937) [translated as *Captains of the Sands* (2013)], in which street children take over the beaches of the city of Salvador (Bahia). These allusions form an intertextual fabric that bolsters socialist Angola's links to, respectively, the Eastern Bloc, and its traditional Creole transatlantic connections to northeastern Brazil.

Though one Soviet soldier is a sympathetic character, overall the children on the beach deem the free-flowing, racially mixed Cuban form of socialism as superior to the Soviet variety; in this they are the inheritors of Pepetela's pioneering Van Dum Creole family, and share the nascent yet truncated syncretism of Ndala in *Hollow City*. The decisive argument in this regard is made when one of the boys opines that, "Cuba tem sol, praia e mulheres mulatas bonitas" (Ondjaki 2008, 160) ["Cuba's got sun, beaches and pretty mulattas" (2014, 142)]. The syncretized culture the children inhabit, in which African animist beliefs coexist with European rationalist ones, means that the narrator treats his dead grandmother, Granma Catarina, who appears in the children's daily lives as a ghost and participates in conversations with them, as frankly and openly as he does his living grandmother, Granma Agnette (known as Granma Nineteen). The natural world, particularly that of the beach and the ocean, also impinges heavily on the children's lives. At the novel's close, when the children are about to take action to save their houses, they are held suspended in motionlessness by a seemingly endless afternoon. When the sun finally sets into the South Atlantic Ocean, authorizing them to proceed, the salt water reflects the children's mixed racial heritages: "O sol se afundou amarelado no azul-escuro do mar e inventou un pôr do sol bonita numa cor mulata sem palavras de uma pessoa poder falar" (2008, 157) ["The sun sank, yellowed, into the dark blue of the sea and invented a beautiful sunset of a mulatto colour no words could capture"]. At this point Granma Catarina disappears, never to return. Her vanishing symbolizes the emergence of the children from an infantilized, war-wounded magical realm into a postmodern hybridity that invests the imagined community of the future post-1991 post-national state with the flexible yet thorough reception of the revolutionary heritage necessary to resist globalization.

In the novel's conclusion, the narrator and his best friend discover Sea Foam breaking into the construction site to set free Angolan birds that are being kept in boxes, apparently as part of a Soviet contraband scheme. It is Sea Foam who propounds the novel's final lesson. Once the birds have been freed, and as soon as it has become clear that the narrator's grandmother

will marry neither the Cuban doctor nor the Soviet soldier, the children follow Sea Foam's example by jumping naked into the waves to be reborn as creatures of the aquatic natural world. They adopt the madman's hybridized language and irrational sayings as the text of an imagined community which is capable of resisting both the doctrinaire Soviet socialism of the novel's 1980s present, and the nation-denying globalization of the new millennium in which the book was written. As in *A Gloriosa Família* and *Na Cidade Vazia*, the ocean is a source of solace and support for the 400-year-old hybridized Angolan nation.

## Conclusions

Angolan diffidence towards postcolonial approaches to analysing the country's cultural production is rooted in the forging of the educated, culturally Lusophone, religiously Catholic, somewhat racially mixed Creole class. Having acted as a burgeoning national bourgeoisie from at least the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries, and having developed strong cultural ties across the Atlantic Ocean to Brazil and Cuba through its management of the slave trade, this group provides a paradigm of Angola's engagement with the transnational financial system, often on exploitative terms, in a way which rendered the role of the colonial power, Portugal, of secondary importance. Portugal's later attempt to assert a normative control, particularly under the *Estado Novo* between 1926 and 1974, demoted the Creoles; yet it was they, now reborn as Marxist guerrillas, who took over the state at independence in 1975. Inextricably entwined in Marxist imagery and ideals during the first sixteen years of its existence, Angola returned to Creole cultural syncretism as a defining trait in a significant number of post-1991 cultural productions. The former MPLA guerrilla Pepetela's novel *A Gloriosa Família* (1997) depicts the consolidation of the transatlantically oriented Creole class, in opposition to a seven-year Dutch occupation, in the Luanda of the 1640s, implying that this older set of values offers an enduring means by which to define Angolan distinctness after the end of the Cold War has forced the abandonment of Marxist ideology. In Maria João Ganga's film *Na Cidade Vazia* (2004) [*Hollow City*], the tragedy of Ndala, the war orphan from the country's Central Plateau, is that his apprenticeship in the values of Creole syncretism, promoted by the old fisherman on the Luanda beach, is curtailed by a thief who offers him a trip to the waves he loves as a way of recruiting him for a dangerous burglary. Ondjaki's novel *Granma Nineteen and the Soviet's Secret* (2008) reprises the beach imagery of *Hollow City*, including an echo of

the film's fisherman character. Like *A Gloriosa Família*, Ondjaki's novel depicts Angolan independence as inseparable from transatlantic connections—here to Cuba rather than Brazil—that stem from the same salt-water alliances and imagery that make many Angolans conceive of their nation in terms of a tricontinentalism-turned-transcontinentalism that rebuffs postcolonial analysis.

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# OCEANS AND RESPONSIBILITY



## Meditations on the Sea and its African Subjects

**ABSTRACT** In this chapter I engage with various online newspaper accounts of the African body that lands on European beaches via the Mediterranean Sea. Dead by exhaustion from crossing the ocean or dead as a consequence of boarding a sea vessel, which has capsized because it was not equipped to carry the embodied subject identities of Africans leaving the continent in droves to seek refuge on the continent of the European colonizer, the African body as a matter of concern for Europeans has garnered perverse and troubling interest in various United States and European online newspapers over the past ten years. The European colonizer usurped African land and people from the fifteenth century onwards, kidnapped African labour, whilst simultaneously exploiting and extracting raw materials to develop its wealth in a starving, ailing, and disease-infested Europe.

**KEYWORDS** African bodies, the Mediterranean Sea, Black Mediterranean, African phenomenology, death-bound subjects

*I should like to demonstrate three things: First, that philosophy is not a system but a history, essentially an open process, a restless, unfinished quest, not closed knowledge; second, that this history does not move forward by continuous evolution but by leaps and bounds, by successive revolt, and consequently follows not a linear path but what one might call a dialectical one—in other words, that its profile is not continuous but discontinuous; third, after this rough sketch of a theory of theoretical development, of a theory of theoretical history, that African philosophy may today be going through its first decisive mutation, the outcome of which depends on us alone, on the courage and lucidity we show in bringing it to its conclusion.*

—Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*

*The concept associated with Black Marxism that I find most productive and most potentially transformative is the concept of racial capitalism [...]. Global capitalism cannot be adequately comprehended if the racial dimension of capitalism is ignored.*

—Angela Davis, *“An Interview on the Futures of Black Radicalism”*

The coronavirus pandemic kept people around the world indoors. Conferences, seminars, and research trips were suspended and then cancelled. Like all scholars, one examines possibilities to stay abreast with contemporary events, and in the digital age, reading online newspapers and searching through links has brought about a new possibility for research, scholarship, and engagement with a community of scholars.

I was struck by my first online reading of Africans depicted as a nuisance to the beach officials of European shores, who had to record deaths as well as find families of the survivors. In reading online newspapers on a regular basis, I realized that I had saved several notes of previous articles on the same subject matter. I was both drawn to and disturbed by the images of bodies strewn across long sandy beaches, the lack of dignity afforded to an African body, physically sprawled across the sand, the ambiguity of disgust and pity of the European gaze,<sup>1</sup> captured as a still: frozen,

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1 There are several references to “the European” in this text, some of which include: European scholars, the European colonizer, European enslavement, and also European humanitarianism. These references are particular to the person of European descent, and who in the context of the African continent is first and foremost a usurper, a colonizer, and an enslaver who entered African soil uninvited, and as such a beneficiary of African forced labour and forced extraction of minerals for European profit. There are also several references to: European shores, European beaches, European soil, and the European continent, which refer to the physical place, the topographical and geographical location of Europe with its physical borders. On the African continent, the European who lives and benefits continually from the history of colonialism is called a colonial; he/she/they represent the colonizer’s interest in Africa and continues its mission. On the European continent, the European is the person who is born into a life of privilege acquired through African colonization, who learns, adopts, reproduces, and maintains the ethos of its ancestry and is raised to protect Europe, as such to protect its borders from African entry. It is well known that children born of one European parent and one African parent are never considered European; they are in fact, almost always asked: “where are you from?” The question in and of itself suggests that appearance and belonging are key indicators of European identity for a claim to the European continent is restricted to those who bear and carry a physical identity with no trace of Africanness. Black experiences bear testimony to the fact that the definition of “the European” is only afforded those who resemble the physical features consistent with Christianity, cast in the image of an illusion of God as White,

unmoved, and the narrative that suggests both. Clipboard in hand, tallying African bodies destined to be sunk into the earth—unnamed, unclaimed, unrewarded, unpaid by European reparation, born with one foot in the grave and the other at the bottom of the ocean, the European humanitarian is tasked with counting how many black bags and coffins will be needed for the daily disposal of African bodies. The African body, in death, is both criminalized for the failure of the sea voyage that led to death and for leaving the African continent via the sea to enter the European continent, which is always constructed as an illegal act.

In 1641 Descartes published his first meditations,<sup>2</sup> showing the significance of critical thinking, and what it means to interpret and reason within the world he lived in. The task undertaken here, in writing meditations, immediate, off the cuff, guttural responses upon sight of the visual images displayed of dead African bodies, is very much in the tradition of intention that Descartes set out. The daily loss of African bodies at sea, which online newspapers have reported on for several years, needs analysis and interpretation along with a historical critique of how the bodies got there, and why the sea route to Europe is the alternative to a life of destitution that is mundane and banal.<sup>3</sup> Any form of study of subject matter that addresses the life of Africans comes with a history of social and political thought that informs such a study; it is, therefore, significant to foreground African phenomenological thought and Black Consciousness thought—from Angela Davis, Paulin Hountondji, Steve Biko, Leonard Harris, and Lewis Gordon. The work of these scholars is crucial in paving the way for an engagement of African bodies<sup>4</sup> as subjects of the sea.

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blonde, and blue-eyed and Europeans being the closest in physical appearances with any one of the characteristics that define such physicality.

- 2 René Descartes, a French philosopher, published his *First Meditations* in Latin in 1641 and then in French in 1647.
- 3 I use the terms “mundane” and “banal” here to refer to the day-to-day grind of labour, which for many Africans does not allow the sustainability of a livelihood. A mundane act offers the actor no social or economic interest; it is dull. Banality here also refers to the repetition of the same act, the various performances of labour, as carried out by mine workers, for example, that bring little monetary reward, except survival at most.
- 4 The argument in this chapter is framed around the African body whose subject identity is taken away as he, the masculine stereotypical *he* (articulated as the threat to Europe because he is an African man with desire for the White woman who he will impregnate and make Europe impure), enters Europe via the sea as either an unwelcome trespasser and therefore a criminal, or dead, and therefore a burden for burial on European soil. The focus on the body here is not to diminish the embodiment of African existence nor to assert any form

The first epigraph above, taken from Beninese philosopher Paulin Hountondji's *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (1983), enables the scholar of African philosophy to consider the history of Africa's colonial past and present—within which a multitude of philosophical questions lie bare, naked, and unretrieved. It is with this historical landscape in mind that one begins to question the death of Africans as subjects of the sea, en route to a future that is linked to Africa's history of usurpation (the illegal act of seizure of land and people) and colonialism (the practice of control over the illegal seizure of Indigenous land and people, accompanied by the occupation of settlers who engage in exploitation and oppression in order to maintain a life of governance and ownership over the land), and as such crucial to the study of philosophy. There are various moments in the history of Africa—as the place where African philosophical thought evolves from continuous engagement within the world of experience—which emerges as a dialectical one. It is within this cruel and contentious African past that scholars ought to examine critical events as sites where African philosophical thought can be generated. The second epigraph, offered by Angela Davis, which is taken from an interview conducted by Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin and published in *Futures of Black Radicalism* (2017), shows her appreciation of the concept of *racial capitalism*<sup>5</sup> as well as her public acknowledgement of the work of Cedric J. Robinson, whom Davis credits with the term. Davis, speaking on how she learnt from Robinson regarding the uses of history and how his work facilitated her theorizing, draws out some of the content of Hountondji's assertion by situating both ontological dialectics (in my view, the relation between the African and the European) and relational dialectics. The concept of *racial capitalism* also brings us to a South African moment not only where we link the prevalence of historically charged terms that encompass racialized and politicized identity such as *Black* but where we recognize, through the trial of Bantu Stephen Biko, the significance of Biko's precise use of the English language, grounded in the history of colonialism, when addressing relations between the colonizer and the colonized, the usurper and the usurped in South Africa. Biko is concerned with the historical accuracy of the subject's identity and calls the subject who usurps the usurper; the

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of dissociation between the mind and the body but rather to offer a critique of select newspaper articles that have reported on African subjects as bodies: as a nuisance, an unsavoury entity that becomes a problem for Europe.

5 The term is utilized here as per Cedric J. Robinson's conceptualization in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983), to indicate the process of extracting labour of the racialized subject in order to gain social and economic value.

subject who colonizes, the colonizer. Biko connects the word to the act (that which the person enacts with their agency) and therefore to the actor, linking the act and its benefits to the actor, as is evidenced in Biko's collated collection *I Write What I Like* (1978): "connecting the act (usurpation) to the actor (the usurper), the act of colonization to the actor (colonizer) and examin[ing] the features that mark these acts of cruelty, such as the actor who benefits from colonialism (the beneficiary) who benefits from racism and colonialism" (Maart 2020b, 27).<sup>6</sup> Biko had argued for the necessity of the dialectic in 1970s South Africa.<sup>7</sup> Relying on Hegel, like so many Black Consciousness ideologues before him, as evidenced in the work of Frantz Fanon, the emergence of the Black Consciousness movement was Biko's articulation of *the dialectic as reason*: that Black Consciousness was the logical response to White racism. The Black Consciousness ideologues within SASO, like Barney Pityana, Biko, and others, had weighed the considerations of adopting Black Consciousness—as a philosophy of consciousness and as a politics of consciousness. Thus, they offered the reasoning of the relevance of Black Consciousness to confront racism and the racist regime, and more importantly to transform and change the society within which they lived. Karl Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach"<sup>8</sup> (eleven short philosophical notes, written very much in the tradition of Descartes' meditations) were drawn into the very process of creating a Black Consciousness movement to address, confront and transform the aftermath of colonialism and meet racism head-on. Further along in the same collection *I Write What I Like*,

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6 For scholars who are familiar with the Black People's Convention—South African Students Organisation (BPC-SASO) trial, especially the period where Biko was the key witness, which took place the first week of May 1976 under the spiteful and fearful command of Judge Boshoff, the last segment of the transcript, "The Importance of Language," speaks to the importance of Biko's and SASO members' interest in forging a language of historical agency that links the act to the actor: a vernacular that shifts the focus on the acts perpetrated by the settler colonial. In this way, the Black Consciousness scholar takes control of the language of his historical experience of the settler.

7 Biko's use of the dialectic in his articulation of Black Consciousness emerges very early on, although noted in 1971 in "The definition of Black Consciousness," collated in *I Write What I Like*. Of note is the fact that Biko, in his written account, cites "historical materialism," instead of Hegel's *historical idealism*. Marx, whom Biko also cites, puts forward dialectical materialism as a materialist philosophy, and in the printed version of Biko's paper, he evokes Hegel's historical materialism, thus erroneously citing Hegel but offering a blend between Hegel and Marx, which in itself offers food for thought.

8 Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach" (1845) was never published in his lifetime but was put in print by his friend and comrade Friedrich Engels in 1888 as an appendix to a pamphlet.

in chapter 12 entitled “Fear—an Important Determinant in South African Politics,” Biko addresses what settler colonials in White-dominated South Africa were afraid of—not Black people but Black Consciousness. The title of Lewis Gordon’s book, *Fear of Black Consciousness*, addresses this very topic. “Fear of Black Consciousness is the fear of truth. It’s a truth in which Black people are recognized, treated and understood as agents of history. And as agents of history, we also are able to live our freedom with dignity and respect.”<sup>9</sup>

## On Writing Mediations as a Methodology for Writing African Philosophical Thought

In his *Discourse on Method* and *The Meditations*, Descartes believed that he had invented a method of reasoning based on mathematics. The critique of the sea and its subjects undertaken here, whilst inspired by Descartes’s method, is guided by the philosophical thought of Paulin Hountondji, Leonard Harris, Lewis Ricardo Gordon, and Steve Biko. The critique offered in the following six selected meditations is also influenced by the work of Guyanese-Tanzanian Walter Rodney’s<sup>10</sup> (1982 [1972]) critique of historical materialism, especially Rodney’s exposé of Europe’s hand in carving the historical relationship between colonialism and imperialism that left African countries impoverished, which in turn set the basis for an afterlife of destitution for many that resembles a state of a continuous massacre. I assert that it is the magnitude of this historical brutality that Africans still struggle to recover from, much of which lends itself to a theory of economic destitution, with all its contradictions (Harriss-White 2002).

In offering these meditations—as a methodological approach to thinking, analysing, and writing (the latter for dissemination)—I am mindful of the intertwined relationship that histories of usurpation, enslavement, colonialism, and capitalism encapsulate for Africans. Thus, whilst offering a critique of histories of the sea and its subjects, it is noteworthy to consider a broader spectrum of events that still inform both the afterlife and the continuum of dispossession within the day-to-day lives of Africans. I am

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<sup>9</sup> See Lewis Gordon’s lecture on “The Fear of Black Consciousness,” April 8, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9DpFaKpkEyY>.

<sup>10</sup> Racial capitalism as a concept is first evidenced in the work of Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. I employ the term “racial capitalism” here, firstly vis-à-vis Walter Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1982 [1972]) and secondly vis-à-vis the work of Biko.

also mindful of the work of Francoise Vergés, especially her contention that there is no capitalism without racism, some of which she articulates in her chapter “Racial Capitalocene” (Vergés 2017, 73). Questions posed by Vergés in the said chapter are ones many scholars of African descent ask when undertaking work that draws on both scholarly and existential experience simultaneously for which there is often little to no precedent. Black scholars are often positioned by European scholars as survivors of the racism and colonialism one is meant to have endured, and which should have destroyed one’s spirit, which leads to verbal and non-verbal questions of how is it that one is still present, and active, in the intellectual space of the master. The measure of how Black or African a person is, when determined by European scholars, is often one of suffering. For the latter to see evidence of it in the form of verbal articulations that are considered inferior to theirs or evidence of dress and physical appearance that suggests that one is a candidate for an Oxfam handout is generally the preferred requirement. I speak here of questions on methodology because the European “we” as a standard for scholarly engagement is not a position I care to embrace, nor is the denunciation of existential presence one I care to undertake. Research methodologies or approaches when studying African subjects of the sea, as per the title of the chapter, are not simply undertaken to draw attention to Africans as refugees or illegal aliens in Europe but ones that place my existential experience of enslavement and forced removal within the very parameter of the study. European scholars have on many occasions attempted to inflict guilt upon Africans like me, who survive the brutalities of colonialism and enslavement from which they most generously benefit, despite their verbal protestations to the contrary. This somehow leaves them outside of the critique as conscientious storytellers of Black subjugation and leaves people like me, in our overcoming, with little evidence showing in the way that the European gathers social evidence, the target of disbelief, and as such, the target of possible ridicule. Likewise, when one sits at conference tables with European scholars, they often assume that by talking to them on matters of the world, that separation, disassociation, and alienation must have settled within the body of “the African” they left behind after the usurpation, the looting, and the killing; that “the African” must have been erased within those of us who make it across the ocean, to face them as scholars and intellectuals in our own right, albeit in the very language of our colonization, because we show not one sentiment of the memory of their colonization nor the manner in which they would like to see it manifested.

Being treated as a “not-so-African African” comes with an unwritten script of having to be grateful and as such happy to enact the separation

from the impoverished and “suffering” African that the European scholar has already put in place; all one has to do is follow along like a good post-modern “not-so-African African.” Adopting a “we” is not afforded to those who approach events within and outside of the African continent with an ethical responsibility in addressing matters that take place on African soil and the African seas, both past and present. For most European scholars, the evidence of suffering is less evident in the pen of the African intellectual who inscribes with rigour and thoughtful consideration in English, the language of the colonizer. This is a language I was forced to speak and had to wrestle with, where I did not exist, was not wanted, and therefore had to challenge to a fight, break into like a thief when no one was looking, take apart, assert myself within the lined grammatical corridors that removed the tongue of my ancestors on slave ships, the weight of which lies heavily on my tongue. I had to inject the English language with words it chose to forget and hoped I would too; I had to learn to take charge of the English language so that when I speak it and write it, it knows that whilst it has changed hands from master to previously enslaved, I command it to do its job of representation, expression, precision, and persuasion, under my watchful interrogation. On the question of methodology, Vergés asks:

What methodology is needed to write a history of the environment that includes slavery, colonialism, imperialism and racial capitalism, from the standpoint of those who were made into “cheap” objects of commerce, their bodies as objects renewable through wars, capture, and enslavement, fabricated as disposable people, whose lives do not matter? (Vergés 2017, 73)

History as philosophy, and as such the African body as the focus of its history, is an important consideration for African philosophy. The African body<sup>11</sup> carries the consciousness of its history—through the flesh, with the body as materiality, the body as material evidence and material witness,

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11 Whilst I am acutely aware that the African continent is composed of fifty-four countries, eight territories and two independent states with little to no recognition, the individualized, national, and ethnic identity of the subject who is from the African continent and lands on European beaches, dead or alive, is ignored because to the European, there is only one identity that comes from Africa, however erroneous, that is, the African who comes begging, who enters European land illegally to extract the benefits of what Europe has to offer, who wants something from the European, and brings with him only disease, poverty, a strange culture, a foreign language, customs that are backward and that are scoffed at and considered unworthy, and uncivilized. As such, as per the discussions that fostered the meditations I offer here, I use the African continental identity as per the online newspapers selected for unpacking and discussion.

and the body as historical memory, in flight across the sea. These acts of fight and flight must be noted as part of the contemporary stage of African history.

All philosophical inquiry demands that we tell the truth; that we question the assumptions of everyday life, and everyday consciousness of presence. Here, I wish to assert the necessity of a metaphysics of presence that turns the boat back 400 years. The African producer of philosophical knowledge reflects through meditation as a form of thinking-through, a process often of painful contemplation and cruel realization of what presents itself as a condition of the present. The Black Consciousness scholar as knowledge producer is thus occupied with the task of examining the conditions under which history inscribes itself upon the African body: as fleshed, in flight, undressed and disrobed by the oceans' currents. To the Black Consciousness scholar, the glare of the humanitarians—the very definition of oxymoronic cruelty that bears the act of kindness—who position their gaze at the dead African body on the banks of the Mediterranean, whether in Italy or Spain or the coastal banks of Libya, one of the most historical fifteenth-century seaports of European enslavement, pierces past the pretence of polite political paradoxes.

What makes any phenomenology African is the experience of the African as the subject of study, the African location from which lived experience informs the construction of knowledge of the said subject, and the history of the thinking subject who inscribes and produces knowledge from her ancestral roots within the African continent. Much like philosophy, phenomenology as one of its branches is not considered unified in any way. It is rather an area of philosophy where the reflection of structures of consciousness and the phenomena within which consciousness is present as self-consciousness is what offers phenomenology its core. African phenomenology, as such, demands a process of thought and reflection on activities and events that constitute the consciousness of the people of the African continent.

## Philosophy and the Newspaper

Renowned philosopher Leonard Harris, drawing from the philosophical discourse of Frederick Douglass, is diligent in his assertion that we develop philosophies born of the struggle of peoples who strive for justice (Harris 1983). Harris references Frederick Douglass in his formulation of *philosophy born of struggle*, especially when Douglass asserts in his 1857 West India Emancipation speech: "The whole history of the progress of human

liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle" (Douglass 1857, web). In *A Philosophy of Struggle: The Leonard Harris Reader*, edited by Lee McBride III, Harris contends that "genuine philosophy is *philosophia nata ex conatu* (philosophy as, and sourced by, strife, tenaciousness, organisms striving) *ex intellectualis certamen cum sit* (the result of intellectual struggle with corporal existence), always inclusive of undue duress—it is sentient beings that can be afflicted, and thereby no concept of form, dialectic rationality, phenomenology, sagacious insight, confessions, testimonial, or witnessing is warranted without the expressed inclusion of the afflicted seen as such" (McBride 2020, 20). The meditations offered here draw on one of Leonard Harris' key tenets of his philosophical thought: *philosophy born of struggle*.

Online European and United States-based newspapers, with their informative headlines, and their alleged concern for human rights when reporting on events from the African continent, usually depicted as catastrophic, bring a particular here-and-now moment to one's understanding of daily events. Peculiar as it may seem to some, especially to a younger generation of avid online readers, the delight a freshly printed newspaper brings to one's daily grasp is no longer a privilege one can enjoy. Printed newspapers that cover events on the African continent are often hard to come by. For those Black Consciousness readers who wish to stay abreast with news online, disturbing as the content is and can be with its graphic display of the *damned of the earth*<sup>12</sup> caught in floods, African children sold into sexual slavery, or images of the contorted bodies of drowned Africans in flight to Europe, where the emphasis is overwhelmingly on Black<sup>13</sup> dead bodies that are strewn across sandy beaches, the news is debilitating. These bodies are often cinematographically photographed, as though the death of Africans is a fictional, cinematic account, and yet they are sites from which to take political action whilst also developing philosophical thought.

In the newspaper narrative of the African recklessly entering European waters, as is evidenced by those selected and cited for this paper, the story

12 Frantz Fanon's 1961 title, *Les Damnés de la Terre*, offers an account of the dehumanizing effects of colonialism. The English translation of *Wretched of the Earth* utilizes the phrase "wretched" instead of "damned" as the appropriate translation. I return to both wretchedness and damnation, later in the text.

13 The European identifies Blackness, the visual embodiment that draws on the racialization based on skin colour and erases the physical and geographical location of the subject. In doing so, the European erases its relationship to the very African it robbed. The African is then just "the Black," the one who is not White, who does not belong.

is usually centred on the plight of West Africans and Central Africans (the specificity noted here as per the newspapers that occasionally cite regions and not countries) escaping poverty and famine, en route to a “better life” not somewhere but anywhere in Europe: the continent of their colonizers.<sup>14</sup> As a scholar of African history reading online newspapers within the geographical location of the African continent, surrounded by materiality that situates one into the narrative one is reading, with the accompanying image that acts as captivator, one is immediately drawn to the pattern one detects: a pattern that begins to look familiar, a repetition of sorts, a depiction of drowned African bodies as irresponsible, and the death a site for spectacle and ridicule. Identifying with the dead African boy on the beach, the image of the “irresponsible parents” immediately established in a crude sentence, one is soon drawn into the frame of the European gaze—as the object of derision—a subject that has lost its subjecthood because it committed a crime, a transgression. That crime is leaving the African continent; that crime is rejecting wretchedness and damnation by attempting to enter the shores of Europe; that crime is not recognizing that the limitations of one’s movement lie within the borders of one’s Africanness and one’s Blackness. This Africanness and Blackness, as physical in shape, in form and flesh, as contained, confined, and trapped within one’s own body, one’s skin, with its pigmentation, after centuries of dehumanization *should serve as its border*.

Calling into question this time of the now—the moment of my thinking and reflection before any of my thoughts emerge as writing—the return of my gaze is compounded by images I have received, and the visual scrutiny my examination fosters. My throbbing colon—the large intestine within the body that regulates it and controls all substances that enter the body—is where the experience of the visual theatre of coloniality resides, and where it elicits a guttural response that echoes in my blood. It produces a shudder, a tremor, a moment that places my body within the soil of the earth. My composition is disrupted, shaken, and my thoughts race toward the constant reminder of the colon in coloniality, the word made flesh. Ancestral waves that travel through the earth’s crust and draw my body into the event are precisely how my thoughts register the moment: drawn into the mechanisms of coloniality through the colon. My meditations create a visual collage of the history of the African body engaged in activities that are not preoccupied with death but with life, such as pleasure and enjoyment. Death appears as the destruction of African life created by the colonizers.

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14 The term “colonizers” as plural is utilized here for reasons which speak to the many European colonizers of the African continent.

To be engaged with journalistic writings on the African plight where death is imminent immediately places one in a mode of tension. One feels a compulsion toward offering an account of the phenomena one reads about, and of which, as an African who returns the gaze plastered with the photographic history of forced removal from my ancestral home, protests against settler colonialism, memories of the banning of fishermen from the sea by the apartheid government, which destroyed the livelihood of Indigenous fishermen, I recognize with staggered immediacy that I have placed myself in the frame of the image that produced my discomfort. This placement forced itself into my reading and brought about my clenched jaw, the curses that flow from my pursed lips on the unspoken history of the African subject who was robbed of land and sea, the knowledge of which now collides, throbs, pulsates in my loaded veins. My existential reading starts to spread with images of past and present; whether I care to place myself outside of the reading or not, I am very much in it: in flight, a subject whose maternal ancestry speaks from the land from which her ancestors were forcibly removed—Bengal, Java—cargoed, transplanted, in the name of Dutch colonization and Dutch enslavement. A subject that speaks from another branch of ancestry, who was robbed of life at the sea where work as fishermen and fish as food provided livelihood to my grandfather's Xhosa history along the coast of the Eastern Cape. As subject I speak from the South Atlantic Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Southern Ocean: in the murmurs of the water, in the roughness of the 1650s seas, the Dutch-orchestrated theatre of cruelty gushed against the water and thrust my maternal ancestors from the cargoed Indian ocean into the choppy currents of the Cape. My reading has forged a presence for my biographical history; it is not merely an existential one but one that is locked into my lived experience as a descendant of the previously enslaved, still colonized, still bearing the calendar names Maart and September, as a testimony to the month of Dutch enslavement, Dutch timing and colonization of my ancestors, Dutch ownership over Bengal, Java, and the Cape, among others. European colonizers relied on the physical, geographical, and natural resources of the earth, like the soil and the sea, to create the unnatural condition of enslavement, and colonialism bore its fruit.

My reading of the content of the online newspapers is held together by a tortuous gaze; it simultaneously questions, interrogates, and then forges an examination of philosophers who sought out newspapers to write philosophical meditations. Michel Foucault, for example, points to several tensions between philosophy and journalism in the manner one gives an account, and to the fact that such an account ought always to be historical. About his work Foucault had often said: “This is why, for me, philosophy

is a sort of radical journalism" (quoted in Vandeputte 2020, 220). Walter Benjamin was a diligent reader of *Die Fackel*, a German newspaper styled in the gazette format, which was published by Karl Kraus (1874–1936), who studied law, philosophy, and German literature, and whose father was a papermaker. Kraus focused his commentary and journalistic critique on Viennese society, which philosophers of the day took great interest in. Michel Foucault and Walter Benjamin are among a great many philosophers who relied on newspapers for their daily dose of philosophical debate. One such newspaper, the German weekly newspaper *Der Spiegel*, was founded by British-born journalist John Seymour Chaloner and Hanover-born journalist, publicist, and politician Rudolf Karl Augstein in 1947. *Der Spiegel* played an enormous role in the everyday dissemination of thoughts and ideas that were indicative of its era, and upon which philosophers relied. In South Africa, the journalistic writings of settler colonial Donald Woods, whose ancestors were part of the 1820s British settlers in South Africa, wrote for the Eastern Cape's *Daily Dispatch* during the apartheid era. Woods' journalistic writing drew the attention of medical doctor Mamphela Ramphele,<sup>15</sup> who challenged Woods' depiction of Biko when writing on the Black Consciousness Movement of Azania. Ramphele demanded that Woods meet Biko not only to correct the error of his unsavoury liberal judgments that inked the newspaper pages but to go to one main source of where the South African Black Consciousness discourse was articulated.<sup>16</sup> Wood's subsequent engagement with Biko and his determination to publish Biko's words opened up the historical dissemination of Black Consciousness philosophical thought in South Africa in a very public manner. The settler, whether journalist by profession or simply journeying as a privileged, entitled liberal during the apartheid era, often took credit for discourses of liberation that came to the attention of the masses because the conditions of apartheid and racism fostered such relations of mastery of the experience of the colonized. The Native<sup>17</sup> was kept out and prohibited from reporting on the conditions of his experience of racism by the hero-hungry settler, whose

15 Mamphela Ramphele studied and graduated as a medical doctor. She is known for her contribution to the history of Black Consciousness, some of which include the open secret of her being Steve Biko's girlfriend and the mother of one of his children, Hlumelo Biko.

16 Mamphela Ramphele confronted Donald Woods at his office at the *Daily Dispatch* newspaper and challenged him to meet Steve Biko.

17 The "Native" is a term that the apartheid regime used to refer to Black Africans. When used by White South Africans it was used in derogatory ways to suggest naked, uneducated, non-humans. In the 1903 Intercolonial conference, the term "aboriginal natives" was also used.

verbal protestations against the very racism that he benefits from, and candidly reports on, he expects, no, demands recognition for, and applause from, the African colonized masses.

For direct engagement with the online newspaper articles in question, and in full recognition of the limitations that such reproduction offers, this segment offers six meditations, based on the selected online articles (amid hundreds, each with similar threads), that offer an account of African bodies in flight, declared dead on the coastal shores of Libya and Morocco on the Mediterranean Sea, either en route to Italy and Spain or on the shores of the latter, dead before entry.

## Newspapers as Trackers of Massacres

### **First Meditation: “IOM Fears Over 300 African Migrants Drown En Route to Europe.” February 11, 2015 (IOM 2015)**

In the above-noted online article, journalist Joel Millman reports from Switzerland with a caption: “IOM Fears Over 300 African Migrants Drown En Route to Europe.” IOM refers to the International Organization for Migration, which considers itself a lobbying group. It has headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, was under the leadership of Director General William Lacy Swing until 2018, and was subjected to the legacy of his influence until he died in Malaysia in June of 2021. Further along in the same article, it notes: “IOM denounced the actions of Libya-based people smugglers responsible for the deaths of hundreds of African migrants sent to sea during a storm in unseaworthy inflatable dinghies” (IOM 2015). Swing goes on to say, “What is happening now is worse than a tragedy—it is a crime—one as bad as any I have seen in fifty years of service” (IOM 2015). It is hard to believe that North Carolina-born Mr Swing has neither seen nor heard of crimes worse than 300 people put into a boat to cross a stretch of water, starting from one coastline to another, even if the destination is in Europe. The unseaworthy nature of the dinghy is not only a put-down on the choice of vessel that attempts to transport Africans but speaks to the general tone of how the plight of Africans is undermined, the vessel’s significance minimized, and the assertion that it is not worthy of sea travel. The minute the African leaves his<sup>18</sup> place of abode, he is transgressing the European law of African confinement, whether the African travels to Europe or not.

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18 The masculine “he” is utilized here with intent as the construction of the “feared” immigrant to Europe is a masculine construction. As such, whilst I am fully aware that White women are partners in colonialism and racism, unless

The African body is constructed as its own fleshed, psychological, and geographical border, not worthy of leaving the land from which he is born, and any instrument or vessel that transports the African to another place is unworthy, whether of sea or sky travel. The European construction of the African's presence is unwanted and illegal, defying the law of memory. European law is devised so that the European does not see the African from whom he stole. The African is meant to stay where he is, to live and dream within his flesh, his skin, contained by it, determined by it, not reaching outside of it. "These smuggling networks act with virtual impunity and hundreds are dying. The world must act," Swing continues (IOM 2015).

The author of the article, in keeping with the notion that Africans should be allowed to speak out against the reason for their plight, reported the words of one of the IOM staff members—a non-African at that—who had allegedly spoken to one of the newly arrived Africans on the beach who made it to the shore alive: "We know what fate we are going towards and (understand) the probability of dying," one of the African survivors told IOM staff. 'But it is a sacrifice we consciously make to have a future" (IOM 2015). The content of the latter statement could only be repeated by and cited by a non-African, for whilst the African does not need a translator, the words of the African, once spoken, are immediately reinterpreted, re-issued, renamed, rephrased, repeated from a mouth that is not African. For the African to speak, to assert the truth of his condition, is for the European Human Rights watchdog a bark that he does not want to hear. The bark is a cry that must be quelled. The IOM staff must be the victor, the carrier of the knowledge that has been spoken, the carrier of the death that the African speaks of not fearing, which the humanitarian appropriates: reciting it, believing that its spoken-ness is worthy because he has said it. The African appears again, as having been translated, spoken for, and spoken on behalf of. There is no permission sought. None is needed from an African in flight. His reasons are animated explanations, which he does not have the right to put forward; the humanitarian has to do it on his behalf.

### **Second Meditation: "Dozens of bodies wash up on Libyan beach." February 21, 2017 ("Dozens of Bodies" 2017)**

The article noted above shows images of dead bodies strewn across the beach lying a few metres apart from one another with contorted facial expressions, which the camera captured for the reader, fully exposed

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outrightly feminized, I employ the masculine terms he/his when referring to humanitarians by gender pronoun.

to the last aching grimace. The images are offered to the reader who is assumed to be European—directed at the gaze of negation, not empathy, disgust not sympathy; the faces are agony fraught, and the flash of the camera has managed to capture the aftermath of a death, an expression frozen by the iciness of the sea, which has not yet left the body. The bodies are numbered, hence the assertion of dozens, which are arranged like eggs, in trays, countable, pointed to from a distance, silent, not hatched. These “dozens” that the “Libyan beach” has “washed up” are brought to our attention as debris, as waste the sea spat out. From the caption and spread out across the online pages, we see images of what constitutes the expression “washed-up.” Like unwanted corks from a cheap bottle of wine, African bodies lie lifeless among the litter, with expressions still frozen, captured by the moment of death—the moment when the last breath was exhaled in disbelief. There was nobody to help, and the African was not delivered to his family living in packed accommodation in Rome, nor to the refugee camp on the outskirts of the metropolis of Madrid with bleached floors and steel doors. There was no biblical exodus for the Africans who sought to leave via the sea, no pathway paved in recognition of previous enslavement, as negotiated by Moses. Moses did not open the sea for the plight of the Africans whose birth in Africa is without a cradle, without the stolen minerals and raw materials that manifest Africa’s wealth that European colonizers stole. It is clear from the onset of the article that no measure of dignity has been applied to the African bodies whose importance is acquired through the coffins that are ordered in advance to bury the unwelcome dead bodies as quickly as possible.

The author of the article continues: “The Libya-Italy human trafficking route claimed at least 4,579 lives last year [2016] and the true number is thought to be much higher” (“Dozens of bodies” 2017). This is noted just below another image of contorted flesh, formed by the onslaught of death. The article continues: “January 2017 saw 288 migrants perish en route to Europe, the highest monthly toll seen since the 2011 uprising that drove Libya into chaos and turned the country into a death trap for the many Sub-Saharan Africans seeking to escape conflict, famine or poverty” (“Dozens of bodies” 2017). The author did not hesitate to take aim at Libya as a site of unrest and instability nor resisted drawing Gaddafi into the scene of the crime, as many articles of the kind have done. At the Africa-Arab summit of 2010, Muammar Gaddafi apologized for the Arab slave trade, noting: “On behalf of the Arabs, I’d like to condemn, apologize, and express deep sorrow for the conduct of some Arabs—especially the wealthy among them—towards their African brothers. The wealthy Arabs treated their African brothers in a disgraceful way in the past” (Chiwanza

2020). The Arab slave trade is not unknown nor are European humanitarians unfamiliar with how they relied on wealthy Arabic people to trade Africans to Europe. The article goes on to further note: "After years of civil war that ousted former strongman Moammar Gadhafi, Libya continues to be ruled by one UN-backed and one rival government that are locked in a protracted conflict, as well as several militias" ("Dozens of bodies" 2017). The holier-than-thou sentiments of the humanitarian approach ring loudly. European humanitarians are the descendants of the colonizers who massacred Africans for raw materials; they are also the financial and moral beneficiaries of colonization and are directly responsible for the continued dehumanization of Africans for over 300 years, now starring in their own Hollywoodized, hero-friendly broadcast, showcasing their civility, silent on their cruelties. The colonial crimes of their European ancestors have been carefully hidden. Now, in the twenty-first century, in guilt-free bliss, they throw food parcels from the sky to starving children on the African continent in acts of desperation to demonstrate postmodern photo-ready humanitarianism in imitation of the Christian gesture of manna dropping from heaven, which (according to biblical scriptures) the Israelites were gifted with during their exodus when food was scarce and the plight was to get away from slavery and oppression.

The humanitarian interventionist approach seeks to allegedly stop the deaths of Africans who swim or sink their way to the Libyan coast; not that Libya is not in Africa but that it is the first leg of the journey towards Europe. Yet the discourse of the desperate African, when journeying to Europe, is an act of transgression according to the unspoken law of European humanitarianism. The European humanitarians erase the crimes of their forefathers, erase the repercussions of past cruelties, and appear in full newsworthy gaze to hand over food and sustenance to people from the African continent which they robbed but we, allegedly, cannot feed or clothe ourselves. Usurpation and continued extraction determine the basis for the conditions of destitution. The European who extends the pious hand does so on the condition of colonial amnesia: that the African who seeks entry into Europe is destitute, and apparently through his own fault, his own neglect. This forgetting is not one any African can undertake since the material conditions of existence forbid it. The article notes further along: "The pandemonium has created an ideal situation for human traffickers profiting off misery and many who have survived the journey to Europe have described atrocities like rape, torture and forced labour happening to migration inside Libya" ("Dozens of bodies" 2017). Exploitation, colonialism, and usurpation were given magnificent names and their head-hunters—and I mean this in every sense of the word—enslavers, murderers, and rapists were called explorers,

voyagers, empire builders, expansionists, missionaries: the latter were titles that gun-slinging missionaries carried with pride for they believed God had sent them to civilize through the Christian name. “Onward Christian Soldiers,” a hymn written by the Christian priest Sabine Baring-Gould in 1865 and put to music in 1871 by Arthur Sullivan a few years before the Berlin conference of 1884, proclaimed European Christians to be soldiers of Christ. This performance of song and posturing was the mantra of British soldiers who killed and massacred Africans with the belief that God was on their side. In the twenty-first century, the hymn remains a regular feature in English-speaking Africa, encouraging the Christianized colonized to sing in praise of our ancestors’ murder and massacre, our own demise.

Another such gesture is one of celebration and reverence of colonialism, as is the case in many African countries during colonialism. For example, Jan Van Riebeeck’s day was celebrated in South Africa from April 6, 1952 onwards to commemorate 300 years of his “discovery.” To the Black Consciousness scholar, this was the celebration of uninvited usurpation and settler coloniality whereby the colonized were given the day off to enjoy our enslavement with a braai (barbeque), which is usually accompanied by alcohol.<sup>19</sup> The liberals within the apartheid regime thought it best to change the name of this celebration to “Founder’s Day” in 1980 at the height of the national liberation struggle until the demise of the celebration in April 1994 and the birth of the “one person one vote” policy. Returning to the caption: the reference to “Libya-based people smugglers” is a criminalization of the present acts of aiding and abetting Africans in flight, set on crossing the Mediterranean, and of the profiting of funds from the voyage, with the clear intention of steering away from any unearthing of Arab slavery, and the complicity of the Arabs in selling their African brothers to the European enslavers. European colonizers usurped, enslaved, and shipped human cargo to various parts of the world, their boats and voyages paid for by European royalty, which never bore the stamp of criminalization but of biblical reverence. European hypocrisy permits the criminalization of smuggling when such acts perform the trade of transporting human bodies, which are illegal according to those having written

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19 The Kaaps (the language the enslaved spoke when they were brought to the Cape as human cargo as a result of having been colonized by the Dutch in Java, Malaysia, and Bengal) and the Afrikaans word *braai* is not quite the same as a barbecue but similar. Under colonialism and apartheid, farmworkers were paid in alcohol, also known as “The Tot-system,” which meant that farmworkers did not receive any monetary payment for their labour. Alcohol, as such, has systematically been used in South Africa among the Indigenous population, who was made landless, to further the wretchedness of usurpation.

the law, without the consideration that the African body as a person, who has agency, consented. The callous care-economy of the Europeans, which hides behind the laws they write and put into practice, constructs the “poor African” as one that is bamboozled by thugs and money-grabbing Arab North Africans, destined to sink them to the bottom of the ocean or washed up on European beaches as dirty laundry.

**Third Meditation: “The Libyan Slave Trade Has Shocked the World. Here’s What You Should Know.” *Time Magazine*, December 1, 2017 (Quackenbush 2018b)**

In the online article above readers are again introduced to a multitude of images of African bodies accompanied by a narrative indicating that they have been barred from entering the coastal borders of Europe, especially those with proximity to the African continent. With several images of youthful Africans in a detention centre in Zawiyah, 45 kilometres west of Tripoli, stacked side by side, cuddling distance from one another, one of the images showed bodies packed to the capacity of tinned sardines that have been drawn from the sea. The focus was on Libya (as it often is), a country whose world-renowned leader was known for his apology for the Arab slave trade, allowing for a swift shift in blame, once again, and on a North African country. In this article, the focus was on the African bodies that survived the trip. As a reader one’s gaze is led by the photographic images on the computerized screen and one’s reading capacity is driven by the titles and subtitles, one of which reads: “Why is there a slave trade in Libya?” This is the question posed in the article, as though there had never been a slave trade where Africans were forcibly taken as human cargo to Europe and the Americas with the help of Libyans and the Arab North African region. The article continues:

The Libyan Coast Guard—supported with funds and resources from the E.U. and more specifically, Italy—has cracked down on boats smuggling refugees and migrants to Europe. With estimates of 400,000 to almost one million people now bottled up in Libya, detention centres are overrun and there are mounting reports of robbery, rape, and murder among migrants, according to a September report by the U.N. human rights agency. Conditions in the centres have been described as “horrific,” and among other abuses, migrants are vulnerable to being sold off as labourers in slave auctions. (Quackenbush 2018b)

Leonard Doyle, Director of Media and Communication of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), according to *Al Jazeera* accused Libya

of not having a “Rule of Law” (Donelly 2017); calling out the above-noted events with language purporting to awaken us from our slumber, he notes: “as shocking as it seems, it’s indeed true” (Donelly 2017). Doyle had previously worked in Haiti and the Philippines in the humanitarian sector, and before that was Washington Editor and Foreign Editor of *The Independent* (UK). As a White man of European descent, Doyle must be aware of the global oceanic slave trade, initiated by the Portuguese and Dutch and then pursued and enacted by the French, Belgian, British, Spanish, Italians, and Germans. Despite the lavish education Doyle has had the privilege to enjoy, he exhibits the classic amnesiac lack of knowledge when it comes to European history. Why would either rule of law or the practice of slavery be shocking to readers interested in the plight of Africans? Unless Doyle is trying to place the events of Africans seeking “refuge”—a phrase I use with caution and contention—in Europe via Libya as a practice that only occurs on the African continent where the “poor” innocent and caring Europeans have only the task of drawing our attention to what Africans are doing to “themselves.” Doyle, like so many humanitarians, sandwiched between hypocrisy and leisurely ignorance packaged together by an inflated saviour-of-the-African mentality, shows no signs of questioning his role in the after-life of colonialism that has given rise to a process whereby Africans, in wretchedness and destitution, leave the depleted African continent for which Europeans are responsible. Further along in the same article in *Time Magazine*, the author notes:

On Wednesday, African and European leaders met at a summit in the Ivory Coast and agreed on an urgent evacuation plan that would see about 15,000 people flown out of Libya. Most of the migrants will be sent back to their home countries. Speaking at the summit, French President Emmanuel Macron, called the abuse “a crime against humanity” and vowed the summit members would “launch concrete military and policing action on the ground to dismantle those networks,” according to *The Guardian*. The deal also included initiatives to target traffickers, including setting up a task force to dismantle trafficking networks. (Quackenbush 2018a)

Macron is quick to draw our attention to the use of the phrase, “crimes against humanity,” first used in the Nuremberg Charter in 1945, then at the Nuremberg Tribunal in 1946 where twenty-four prominent members of the leadership in Nazi Germany were tried in a court of law. The phrase hides in the flesh, under the knuckles of the 1884 leaders at the table of the Berlin conference, where premeditated murder against Africans was planned with fisted precision—death, murder, massacres, and perpetual incapacitation for those who were spared death and instead were subjected to brutality

so unspeakable that the pain would continue in the muscle memory of their children's children centuries later. France is built on crimes against humanity. Macron must have entered his position as president with little to no historical memory of how France was established as a European empire, or he suffers from colonial amnesia so much so that he simply fails to mention that more than two million Africans were enslaved by France between 1625 and 1848. King Louis XIII legalized the slave trade in 1642 and King Louis XIV offered a subsidy for each enslaved person who was brought into France's colonies. Many of the enslaved that France acquired came from Angola and the Congo: the Belgian King Leopold II was not the only beneficiary of the massacre of ten million Congolese. As King Leopold II's property, the people of the Congo lived under forced labour conditions, extracting raw materials for Belgium and its ally France on their own land, mourning the massacred. Whilst the Portuguese led the process of usurpation, colonialism, and enslavement in Africa, France, Spain, Italy, Germany, and Britain followed suit in what they then called expansionism. The concept of "crimes against humanity" was not part of their vocabulary because, in their vocabulary based on their mindset, Africans were not human. Likewise, thievery and forced labour were not crimes—they were the rights of usurpers who built themselves into European powers, many with the royal approval of the kings and queens who facilitated the massacres. Knighthood and royal medals were bestowed upon blood-stained shoulders at lavish ceremonies, with invisible blood dripping from the walls onto the floor where gleeful and glutinous attendants removed their gloves to showcase their diamonded fingers with casual cruelty and shook hands with one another, sealing their unspoken agreement as murderers. In his book *Civilisation: How We All Became Americans* (2019), Régis Debray notes that Emmanuel Macron sings the French national anthem with his right hand on his heart, as is practised by citizens of the United States of America, and not with his hands at his side as is customary in France. When asked in an interview why he focused on this, Debray responded:

That is the cost of his youth: for this generation has known nothing other than the hegemony of American visuals, an unconscious domination that has become like second nature. And the Finance Inspectorate or banking is also a mental ecosystem in which the United States, the parent company, takes the code name "globalisation." (Aeschimann 2017)

Further along in the book, Debray takes another pierce at the conscience of the reader: US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley condemned the abuses, saying: "To see the pictures of these men being treated like cattle,

and to hear the auctioneer describe them as, quote, ‘big strong boys for farm work,’ should shock the conscience of us all” (Quackenbush 2018a). There is nothing unusual in the descriptions offered in the *Time Magazine* article discussed here. Not only is the article riddled with descriptions of enslavement that date back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries it mimics the very history that the US-American and French leaders now want to bury. Instead of addressing the matter of the African bodies that lie visibly stacked together, in flight, the article focuses on the role of Libya to suggest that Libyans are responsible for the flight of Africans to Europe. Africans are not fleeing to Europe because Europe is more beautiful or because it offers better culinary experiences than the continent; Africans are fleeing to Europe because it is where the stolen wealth of Africa lives, which today still greases the wheels of modern-day European capitalism with accumulated interest, which started in the sixteenth century and climaxed after the Berlin conference of 1884.

**Fourth Meditation: “More than 110 immigrants die in the Mediterranean in three days.” *The Guardian*, November 12, 2020 (Tondo 2020)**

The above article was followed by a bolded subtitle: “Bodies of 74 people wash up on beach in western Libya as baby boy dies on rescue boat” (Tondo 2020). To be washed up is to be treated as an object of the sea not a subject of the sea—the water has cleansed you, washed from you the dirt that you entered it with, and the ocean served you dead and clean to the beach, as the ocean does, indiscriminately, of all unwanted matter. The baby boy that has died is further evidence of the active construction of the reckless African who offers death to a child as its possibility for survival—the contradictions of destitution from the volcanic ashes of colonial cruelty births and rebirths to sustain its ancestral line. “Four shipwrecks in the space of three days have claimed the lives of more than 110 people in the Mediterranean, including at least 70 people whose bodies have washed up on the beach of al-Khums, in western Libya,” the article continues (Tondo 2020). Below the caption, there is a photo of several life jackets strewn across the beach, against neatly smoothed white sand that stands in stark contrast to the suggestion of the white beach as a gift of God, which has to be preserved; the disruption was caused when it met the dark bodies of the “immigrant” (Tondo 2020). In this article, it was reported that local fishermen were able to save many from the sea, who were all, “in shock and terrified [...]. They saw loved ones disappear beneath the waves, dying in front of their eyes” (Tondo 2020). In all the articles, the response from

a humanitarian organization would be noted; in this case, it was *Alarm Phone*. “This is a massacre at Europe’s borders,’ said a spokesperson for *Alarm Phone*, a hotline for migrant boats in distress. ‘What else can we say? We have called for radical changes for years and still dying continues. It is devastating” (Tondo 2020). Staff from humanitarian organizations, NGOs and the Red Cross all offered their commentary. “We did all we could to rescue those on board,’ said the medical team of the NGO Italian Emergency, operating onboard the *Open Arms* [a rescue vessel]. ‘All this took place just a few kilometres away from an indifferent Europe. Instead of preparing a structured search and rescue system, they instead continue to bury their heads in the sand, pretending not to see the cemetery that the Mediterranean Sea has become” (Tondo 2020). The etiquette of care and the new amnesiac generation of care-capital drivers who withdraw capital from the banks of Europe feeds this economy of humanitarianism that features prominently in all the news articles covering the events of “immigrants” who have washed ashore, as the phrase notes.

Alessandra Di Maio first coined the term “Black Mediterranean” in “Il Mediterraneo Nero: Rotte dei Migranti nel Millennio Globale,” in *La Città Cosmopolita* (later translated into English), noting “Black is the colour of the sea during the crossings of the million migrants who have ‘burnt’ it in the past three decades. It is the colour of the Mediterranean when Africa and Europe meet in its waters” (2012, 145). Whilst Di Maio may have considered her title strategic or politically astute enough to draw attention to Black identity, the Black bodies she draws into her title become bodies without a history, without a continent, which plays into the denunciation of African history as part of European empire history.

In Gabriele Proglia et al.’s collection *The Black Mediterranean: Bodies, Borders and Citizenship* (2021), the editors cite Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* as their inspiration. Whilst Gilroy’s text, by situating Hegel’s master and slave dialectic as integral to the era of modernity, offers a more elaborate account of the psychosocial components of African cultures that were transported to the United States by the enslaved Africans, the same cannot be said about Proglia and Hawthorne’s text. The African continent is composed of fifty-four countries, and five disputed countries and/or territories, two independent states with over 3,000 Indigenous languages, cultures, ethnicities, and dialects. Proglia and Hawthorne, along with the contributors in their collection, do little justice to the history of African civilization. Although *The Black Mediterranean: Bodies, Borders and Citizenship* contributes to the study of the politics of the Mediterranean, there is an overwhelming focus on Black (as racialized identity), and not African (as continental identity), and certainly a narrative of immigration precedes

any other narrative, which lacks the flesh of the history of which they write. Referring to the Mediterranean as Black and not African refers directly to racialized identity and skin colour, which speaks to the question of whether upon sight—where the seer is *only* the European and the African the subject who is *being seen*—the mere visualization (the seeing) of the person, the identification which takes skin pigmentation as its primary source, meets the one and only criterion of the person as an immigrant and therefore a refugee. A refugee is someone who leaves their country because of war, famine, persecution, violence, or natural/environmental disaster. And whilst I take issue with this emphasis on refugees and immigration, the editors vehemently oppose Fernand Braudel's inability to acknowledge the slave trade and the role of Africans in the making of Europe and European capital in his book *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949). Europeans who live as settler colonials in the colonies are never referred to as refugees or immigrants; their presence is put forward, legally, as Europeans as in the case of South Africa; classified as White, they enjoy all the privileges that the system of White domination ensures.

In the meditations offered above in response to the title of this article (and several of the ones I perused), particular importance is given to the Mediterranean: as though it has biblical and Godly status. The Mediterranean is portrayed as though it is part of Europe's heritage, a border but more significantly a physical and metaphorical *opening* that has to be preserved for the exclusive use of Europeans. Those who are forbidden from entering the *opening* are generally dark, Black (as racialized), and African, and as such constructed as seeking refuge inside of what that *opening* represents. Andrea Dworkin in her ground-breaking text *Intercourse* (1987) offers an account of the sexual act of intercourse as a prerogative of men who are socialized and groomed by other men since boyhood to take up their place in the world as dominators and violators of women. This grooming entails the simultaneous elements of seduction as violence and violence as seduction and can include physical chasing, cajoling, sweet-talking, belittling, humiliation, beating, strangling, and any form of violation to obtain the submission of a woman. Rape, battery, and sexual assault are all acts of violence: taking, stealing, usurpation, annihilation, destruction, and gaining illegal, unlawful access to a woman's body, which is known to produce trauma from violence and an afterlife of that violence where various forms of humiliation, oppression and exploitation under patriarchy is guaranteed. Dworkin and her radical feminist peers equated the cultural premise of heterosexual sex with rape; the radical feminists of her generation argued that there is a pervasive heterosexual culture where women are hated, and all forms of violence can be enacted against women

that is always justifiable in a patriarchal world. Yet the very same White women who utilize the critique of patriarchal oppression, within which they locate themselves as the oppressed and exploited, somehow cannot see themselves as perpetrators, as violators of Black people and African peoples, even when the benefits of continued coloniality and racism offer them each and every day of their feminist lives that delicious dessert called White privilege. The hole, as opening, that they are guarding—as per the Mediterranean as *an opening* to Europe, which allows access—is the entrance passage to the land where the stolen wealth of Africa was utilized to sustain and enrich a dying, disease-infected, impoverished Europe. Europeans will guard all holes from Africans which lead to the entrance to their White privilege.

Many Black Consciousness scholars-cum-activists are either accused or branded as hating White people, particularly Europeans and settler colonials in South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, for example, because we dare to challenge and confront the rewards that the afterlife of slavery and colonialism offer the agents and beneficiaries who participate in White Supremacy yet deny the significance in their lives. Similarly, Dworkin was very clear in her understanding of what she believed being human meant: “Questions of what is human, what is being, suggest questions of what is naked, what is sexed. Questions of metaphysics are questions of sex” (Dworkin 1988, 28). Dworkin detailed all aspects of human existence, especially the body and all its parts against which violence was committed. She believed that *when* we are attacked and hated, it is all of who we are as a human that is attacked. I offer Dworkin’s words here alongside a quote from my forthcoming book *Black Consciousness and the Politics of the Flesh*. Writing on skin in her second chapter, “Skinless,” in *Intercourse*, Dworkin notes:

The skin is a line of demarcation, a periphery, the fence, the form, the shape, the first clue to identity in society (for instance, color in a racist society), and, in purely physical terms, the formal precondition for being human. It is a thin veil of matter separating the outside from the inside. It is what one sees and what one covers up; it shows and it conceals; it hides what is inside. The skin is separation, individuality, the basis for corporeal privacy and also the point of contact for everything outside the self. It is a conductor of all feelings. Every time the skin is touched, one feels. All feeling passes through it, outside to inside. The skin is electric, hot, cold, opaque, translucent, youth, age, and sensitive to every whisper of wind, chill, and heat. The skin is our human mask; it is what one can touch of another person, what one sees, and how one is seen. It is the formal limits of a body, a person, and the only bridge to human contact that is physical

and direct. Especially, it is both identity and sex, what one is and what one feels in the realm of the sensual, being and passion, where the self meets the world. (Dworkin 1988, 26)

Racism has no boundaries, no borders, no lines of warning, no distinct shape or form, no smell or texture only *the condition*—created by the White subject—of Black presence, in every shape, every form, every life, and every subject whether one is considered “lighter” or “darker” than the expected physical skin colour of what “the Black” is [...]. Your African heritage is extracted whether seen or unseen and every person whose skin pigmentation suggests that not enough evidence of “the European” can be detected will be subjected to the scrutiny and interrogation whether physical, emotional, psychological, verbal or non-verbal that structural, systemic and institutionalised forms of racism teaches its agents within their schools, churches, homes and within the culture, language, pedagogy of the benefactor who is always agent first, and beneficiary second, both equally criminal, both essential for the reproduction and maintenance of the system of White domination, which the subject as White liberal fiercely denies. Skin pigmentation is the outer part of the flesh; it covers the flesh of the body, and acts as a sheath, shielding the body against the weathering of being and time. Skin covers the flesh, envelopes it, and is the outer form—the very containment of the body. For the body is the personhood, the human, which also acts as a vehicle and transports, carries the history of the subject wherever the subject ventures. And then, along comes the White subject who transports their racialised history and acts, as taught by White Supremacy, and stamps, marks, determines that skin pigmentation is the foundation for racialisation. (Maart, forthcoming)

If what is human stems from nakedness, and if what is naked exposes us, exhibits us in front of the *seer*, *who does not see but examines*, looks only for the difference in skin pigmentation, nose shape, eye shape, eye colour, hair texture, and hair colour, and on that basis is confronted with emotion that generates fear, then racism speaks to the revelation of that difference as the fear of not being what one fears. The fear of the other is always riddled with desire—and the fear of such desire, the denunciation of that desire, the withholding, denial, and repression, fuels the fear of sex, the fear of reproduction that erases the European, transforms the physical identity of the European to an identity that is unrecognizable. The European master cannot recognize his presence in a subject whose enslaved identity he relies upon to be the master.

Placing excerpts from *Intercourse* and *Black Consciousness and the Politics of the Flesh* upon the same page, one followed by the other, allows for a more elaborative joining of forces: a critique that places the African

subject of the sea at the centre of the European imaginary, and places the politics of sex, the politics of the flesh, and the politics of racism alongside one another.

### **Fifth Meditation: “Death, despair on Europe’s African frontier.”**

*Northwest Arkansas Democratic Gazette, May 26, 2021*

*(Northwest Arkansas Democratic Gazette 2021)*

Three key concepts in the title above stand out: death, despair, and Europe’s African frontier. The erroneous declaration that it is Europe’s African frontier—the frontier that belongs to Europe, is front and centre in the title of the online newspaper article. The photographic display shows dead African bodies as well as those barely alive clamouring for life onto rocks jutting out of the sea, marking a territory between Africa and African-occupied Spain (as per the vernacular of the article, and as per the legal claim to parts of the African continent Spain once had). This is an oxymoron that mocks the demise of the empire-building Spain, with its colonial slogan of “the empire on which the sun never sets” that it once was so proud of. The expression was used to show how it was always daylight in at least one part of Spain’s many colonized territories; unfortunately, the same slogan was used by the British Empire during colonialism. The words *death* and *despair* stand beside each other in the title of the article; anyone who reads the article with such wording expects the word African or Black to feature in it; this is the conditioning that we have received within the world where the mention of Africa is usually followed by the words: famine, disease, war, and violence. To have despair, or be faced with it, means that one has a complete loss of hope. The caption tells the reader that they are about to read about the plight of Africans, and as such, a death-bound journey is implied each time such a caption is used. The reader, in visibly reading the title, and then seeing the familial bodies of despair and destitution, relies on the memory of the narrative that is in circulation: a recurring theme from which repetition develops into familiarity.

“They piled pebbles on the fringes to stop the shiny golden covering from blowing away. Two burly men in white coveralls then arrived with a plastic coffin. Their boots scrunched on the shingle as they carried the corpse away: yet another body, picked up off yet another European shore” (*Northwest Arkansas Democratic Gazette 2021*). The tone of the article appears sympathetic yet riddled with “humanistic” overtures—spitting distance from sheer patronization. The objective is to show how poverty-stricken and desperate the Africans are. “After beaches in Greece, Italy and elsewhere,

a fleck of Spanish territory on the northern coast of Africa this week became the latest deadly flashpoint in Europe's battle to stem migration flows from less fortunate regions of the world wrecked by conflict, poverty and other miseries" (*Northwest Arkansas Democratic Gazette* 2021) Further along, it noted: "In an unprecedented 48-hour siege that quickly overwhelmed Spanish authorities, more than 8,000 people clambered around border fences and swam from Morocco to the Spanish-governed enclave of Ceuta" (*Northwest Arkansas Democratic Gazette* 2021). Many European countries still maintain active ownership of land and countries they usurped and colonized and declare African land as theirs without flinching, expecting the colonized to accept such a declaration. To the English-speaking world, colonized in language and culture by the British, the Malvina Islands off the coast of Argentina do not belong to Argentinians and are known as the Falkland Islands. It is after all Margaret Thatcher's reputation of being the "Iron Lady" in 1982 that convinced the British that it was worth going to war for. When usurped and occupied territories are located in other parts of the world, the colonized are expected to erase their ancestral memory and accept the illegality of European law.

Abdul R. JanMohamed in his text *The Death-Bound-Subject*, from whom I borrow the term, undertakes a critique of death and subjectivity of the enslaved in the literary texts of Richard Wright. JanMohamed argues that the death-bound-subject is fully aware of the threat of death. For JanMohamed the death-bound-subject is formed from childhood onward, in other words, birthed into the afterlife of destitution created by transatlantic slavery, which was furthered on United States soil. Parents are, as such, aware of the imminent threat of death—for themselves and their children. For Africans who flee their homes, their journey often starts in one country; they travel through several to eventually cross the Mediterranean ocean. The prospect of death is no more real than the death of the material conditions under which they live—one that has been depleted from mineral wealth in particular, by Europeans. Social death, which can also take the shape of wretchedness and melancholia, in many parts of the African continent is one of perpetual exclusion from enjoying the rewards that one's labour produces, which one cannot afford to purchase. The modern-day hierarchies of class, skin pigmentation, gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation have their roots within the colonial period and cannot be overlooked and simply placed as histories of oppression that emerged without the hand of the colonizer. Persecution based on racialized identity, ethnicity, caste, class, gender, and sexual orientation, as well as on how ostracization is inflicted, are key indicators that drive despair. Social death was also exercised against Jewish peoples in Venice in 1516, where the

government forced Jewish people to live in the Venetian ghetto. Likewise, as per the many racialized geographical spaces Jewish people were forced to live as marginalized and ghettoized throughout Europe, a similar measure was legally introduced for Jewish people who migrated from Europe to South Africa after the First World War, who lived and owned businesses in the old slave quarter of the Cape, District Six, as they were not allowed to own businesses in the Central Business District (CBD). The ghetto's separation from the city of Venice was only ended in 1797 by Napoleon. Forcing people who have been racialized to confined spaces, like ghettos, homelands, reserves, and townships, which we see in the lives of Jewish peoples and African peoples, Indigenous peoples in Australia, New Zealand and Canada, for example, and places where social death was instituted to force a nation to die out, is well documented in European history.

I return to JanMohamed's *The Death-Bound-Subject*, in particular his discussion of "Uncle Tom's Cabin: The Dialectics of Death" in chapter two. Abdul JanMohamed analyses one of the chapters in the said text by Wright, "Big Boy Leaves Home," to show readers what happens when a White woman sees two boys swimming. "When the white woman who stumbles on the boys swimming, 'black and naked' which implies that their blackness was as offensive as their nakedness, she immediately panics, and her fiancé, who follows her to the pond, immediately assumes that she has been molested" (JanMohamed 2005, 43). Although JanMohamed's text examines the work of African American Wright's work of the deeply racist 1940s United States of America, the similarities of the threat of death in the formation of Black subjectivity are extended to any context where enslavement and colonialism set the ground for the life of the Black subject, which is always linked to Africa.

### **Sixth Meditation: "Dead children washed up on Libya beach, says charity." BBC News, May 25, 2021 ("Dead children" 2021)**

The title above appeared on the BBC website on May 25, 2021. The online article is laden with images of Africans in flight. The opening of the article shows an image of a designated official assisting an exasperated African youth, with an orange and white rescue ring around his body. The wetness of his body is visible to the reader, and it is clear from the location of the photo that it captured the young man as he was "rescued." In the distance, a younger youth with his hand raised, as though in a classroom asking for permission to speak, signalling, "don't forget about me," could be seen in the water. Further along, a series of photos are used as embellishments to

the caption. The most daunting image of the article is the one where five officers in militant camouflage attire chastise and restrain a young African man. The young man is kicking and screaming, and the photo image was able to capture the moment of his despair. The article does not address the treatment of the officers, many of whom are armed, but instead shifts the focus back to Libya, and brings us back to the question of recklessness and danger, and the irresponsibility of the African parent. It notes as follows:

The NGO *Proactiva Open Arms* received some of the photos from inside Libya and said they are of people who had tried to cross the Mediterranean to Europe, a dangerous route for migrants. They show the partially clothed bodies of small children and a woman, bloated and half-buried in the sand. (“Dead children” 2021)

In this edition of the news, several Africans are “caught in the act” so to speak, as the images to support the title of the article are posted in abundance. The images show coast officers escorting “the African as criminal, and as trespasser” caught in the act. In all the online articles I perused on the topic, including this one, there is a fascination with images, posting them, sharing them, and unpacking the details of Africans who had been caught and fished from the sea. One of the images posted online in the newspaper, which has since been removed, shows a small child in a polka-dot one-piece sleepsuit. Sand has partially obscured the body of the child, and there is a stillness, a quiet; the visual placement of the image directs the reader to a head buried in the sand, which is suggestive and reads as a sign of ignorance, which the reader cannot overlook. Another photographic image (also now removed) shows a woman in green trousers with her body spread out, like a bird in flight, but whose wings were not large enough to swim ashore. The woman’s top is pulled up over her head where her physicality pays testimony to her feminine form but her faceless posture, with a body in a stage of undress, is very much the image that is presented. Dead. Feminine form. The sea. Faceless, nameless, she is a statue of death. This is where her theatre of cruelty ended.

The humanitarian gazes at the African’s exhausted, sea-eaten body and calls for plastic burial bags to bury the frozen gaze of the African whose ancestors were never poor but rich, and who was robbed by the very Europeans who now cast pity upon them. The European then showers the drowned African with religious piety, asking why in the name of God Africans take such death-laden risks, stacking themselves together in a sea vessel like chickens in a coop knowing that they will not survive the trip. The gaze penetrates the subject without permission. Dead or alive,

the oppressive and dehumanizing nature of the European humanitarian gaze as the finder, discoverer, revealer, capturer, and exhibiter, both with physical eyes and with the lens of the camera, which undresses and fosters a pathology of pornography, is set on satisfying the viewer for whom the image is designed. The European humanitarian not only displays the body of the dead African but also poses with their freshly acquired poor dead people—images that I call, without hesitation, *pornography of the poor*.<sup>20</sup> My contention of pornography of the poor is grounded in the visual depictions, which serve as evidence and show a clear preoccupation with descriptions by the European journalists of the African body (in the articles engaged with above): the shape the African subject's body arrives in and is seen in death, the journey towards death, and thus which condition, position, posture, and form the body is found upon arrival on European shores. In putting forward this notion of a pornographic gaze of the poor, I am suggesting that the intrusive, undignified gaze that reveals the flesh of the African subject is objectified, constructed as a site from which Europeans draw pleasure.

The viewer is meant to be European; the viewer is meant to be disgusted, for disgust also serves as pleasure, as the pleasure of the perversion of poverty that makes the colonizer feel superior, good about themselves, and as the perpetual, eternal dominator. The image is designed for the viewer who seeks satisfaction from the knowledge that African bodies, in all nakedness, seek entry onto the European continent to live under European law as the modern-day enslaved. This photographic evidence of conquest in its afterlife—where the master is still the master because the previously enslaved return to him, uninvited, driven by the poverty of their condition, is the aphrodisiac of the colonizer. This is the eroticized and exoticized climax, the high, the euphoria, of the African-fleshed nipple and the navel, who returns to the colonizer, in death, for final recognition. The condition of the colonized becomes unbearable because living in the afterlife of extraction from the earth of minerals such as diamonds and gold and plundering the African earth with forced labour and enslavement drives the colonized to the very source of the reproduction of its capital interest. Now, dead on the beach, the colonizers rub shoulders with the “real” oppressed of the African continent, much like the colonials before them who fooled themselves into believing that the Africans need them like a priest needs a sinner.

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20 I have made several references to my conceptualization of this term that stems back to 2004. See, for example, Maart 2004 and 2020a.

The pornographic eye sexualizes the subject by making him an object, while the objectified subject unravels and unpeels its layers of mind and flesh through a bodily posture of debasement as per the conditions that are created and to which he must respond, bringing pleasure to the gazer. The pleasure of the onlooker is derived from the condition of defeat exhibited by the subject's body: contorted, auctioned, camera-captured, and displayed for the gaze of the onlooker who experiences debasement as pleasure. Pleasure is not only the sensation of sexual arousal toward climatic satisfaction; pleasure is also the observation of suffering as gratification. Gratification of any kind has to include the satisfaction of desire; desire always includes pleasure. The master sets the material conditions of enslavement for the enslaved to relish in, and out of which the enslaved must meander, from the trappings of confinement to the condition of impoverished-ness, and from which all acts of escape are merely acts of cruelty towards further dehumanization.

It is the amalgamation of these images that produces the animalistic, which in turn sets the stage for disgust. Between and among spaces where pause and reflection meander around text and images, the question of transgression emerges as a key theme, as well as the question of the African transgressing the prohibitions imposed on the enjoyment of life in the afterlife of colonialism. Dispossession brings about a lived experience that produces a lack of fulfilment; the desire for fulfilment can be as basic as eating, seeing one's family, and living with the belief that one will live tomorrow, and it is this afterlife that the African who flees is robbed of.

To generate horror and disgust at the actions of Africans by showing the African as animalistic, the European humanitarian reporter directs its European citizens to disqualify the Africans from any form of human dignity. Images captured amid the blazing sun suggest that the flesh of Africans is not only rotting among the debris but that a dead body, an African one at that, has carried and brought disease that will spread among Europeans. In an instant, disgust overtakes pity and becomes the rallying point for a politics of disgust, where the European master holds the power over decision making, which instantaneously becomes the basis for illegality. Disgust is not only the fundamental refusal of another person's humanity, but when the other person is a dead African on a white sandy European beach, disgust has reached the lowest level of tolerance, of life, of existence.<sup>21</sup>

Oscar Camps, the founder of *Proactiva Open Arms*, tweeted photos of the bodies of "young children and women who had only dreams and ambitions

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21 See also Nussbaum 2004.

to live" ("Dead children" 2021), noting they had been left there for three days. Freelance journalist Nancy Porsia—who also posted images of the bodies online—tweeted however that a contact of hers found the bodies on Saturday and informed the authorities, who buried them the same day in Abu Qamash cemetery. The assumption that the dead were Muslim and thus the same-day burial practice observed in Islam would apply, despite the inconsistencies, serves to further humanize the humanitarian. Further along, in the same article, the question of bodies and territory rears its head again:

And in the western Mediterranean last week, some 8,000 people including children swam or waded around a border fence to get to the Spanish territory of Ceuta from Morocco. Authorities returned several thousand soon after. ("Dead children" 2021)

Ceuta is physically very much part of the African continent; as such Africans in Ceuta are on home ground not on the European continent. A Wikipedia search cites it as: "A Spanish autonomous city on the north coast of Africa" (Wikipedia 2022). The city is composed mainly of Christians, Muslims, and Sephardic Jewish people, most of whom claim their African origins. When Spain recognized the independence of Spanish Morocco in 1956, Ceuta and the other *plazas de soberanía* remained under Spanish rule. Spain considers them integral to the Spanish state, but Morocco has disputed this (Wikipedia 2022).

What Europeans seem to forget is that memory is a key component of African culture across the continent. The role of grandparents, elders, and the day-to-day conversations with the ancestors is an existential practice that enriches the lives of Africans—in speech, dreams, writing, and the imagination. The genocide of the European Roma between 1939 and 1945, similar to that of the Shoah, shows a clear indication of Europe's insistence on ridding itself of people it considers impure, and therefore an imposition: physically, socially, and economically. Roma peoples were also called "Gypsies" because Europeans considered Roma people "dark skinned" and initially assumed that the Roma were from Egypt. But Europe today is still inflicting the same measure of hatred and disgust at Africans as death-bound subjects; if not through social death, then through various measures that allow for destruction, massacres, and extermination. I am often reminded of how Hitler racialized Jewish people. Hitler was renowned for making statements that depicted Jewish people as the carriers of Blackness into the Rhineland and secretly ruining the German race through what he believed was bastardization. Not only did Hitler see Jewish people as

African but he depicted Jewish people as secretly conspiring to destroy the cultural and political height of Germany (Hitler [1937] 1974, 295). It was not only the racialization but the depiction of Jewish peoples as nothing more than a racial slur, which by not referencing the African continent suggests it without the courtesy of naming it: the place that denotes Jewish origin, Jewish history. The magnitude of such a racial trope stripped Jewish peoples of a country, a continent, and a history of civilization.

## Conclusion

The newspaper accounts discussed above, each accompanied by a strategic image, offer us a narrative of the desperate African who is also an irresponsible African, who after leaving the African continent drowns with his family and small children before reaching the coastal borders of Europe. In turn, the narrative of the European accumulation of dead bodies suggests a performance of care and sets the stage for benevolence. Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur 1970, 32), which he asserts is drawn from his masters of suspicion—Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—is useful when understanding journalistic accounts in newspapers that are meant to give the appearance of straightforward reporting yet hide, mask, and forbid a historical reading of Europeans as violators of African land and African people. Instead, the thieving, plundering European is cast as the pious, philanthropic humanitarian, who does his Godly duty and buries his uninvited African burden six feet under the ground.

Today it is the twenty-first-century European colonizer—the descendant and beneficiary of African usurpation, colonization, extraction, and exploitation—that denounces the materiality of the African body: a construction that emerges out of a set of intertwined power relations indicative of coloniality, race, enslavement, among others, that strips the African body of the wealth Europe does not want the African to be remembered for. Eighty-six years may have passed since 1937 when Hitler published his racial rhetoric that sought to justify the murder, massacre, and extermination of Jewish peoples as Africans. It does not take much reading of online newspapers, to place these readings within the broader context of the day-to-day construction of racism in Europe that feeds from the despair of Africans, to understand that the creation, perpetuation, and reproduction of racial tropes against Africans, whether of Arabic, Jewish, or any other racialized, religious, cultural, and ethnic background, remain at the forefront of the European imagination. If only the imagination was this place where thoughts and ideas were simply displayed against a mental screen with no agency, and no

possibility for murderous action. The European imagination is real, active, and put into action every single day to ensure that the African who seeks any form of permanent entry from any of its *openings*, whether through sea or land, has to know that if extermination is not achieved, a borrowed life of social death as the premise for temporality is extended, upon which conditions are always placed. In the words of David Olusoga, in *The Guardian* in September 2015: "The roots of European racism lie in the slave trade, colonialism—and Edward Long" (Olusoga 2015). The aforementioned quote speaks volumes of the belief system of Edward Long: English-born British colonial administrator, slave owner and historian, and one of the most renowned eighteenth-century defenders of slavery, who died in the early nineteenth century. The Europe depicted in these newspaper accounts is a Europe that still *dismembers* the African: picks up, picks apart, and discards Black flesh as a means to erase Africa from the currency that offered Europeans the life they are now privileged to enjoy.

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Sukla Chatterjee 

## “Water is Another Country”: Waterscapes and the Refugee Crisis

**ABSTRACT** This article explores the recent resurgence of maritime spaces in the light of refugee crisis. Through a confluence of factual data, theories, and refugee narratives, the article evaluates the role of seascapes as spaces of transit, analyzing the affects that are generated during the encounter between the sea and the refugees. Two maritime spaces are taken into consideration—the Mediterranean Sea and the Bay of Bengal region—in the context of refugee journeys to Europe and the movement of the Rohingya refugees respectively. The article theorizes the precarity of maritime spaces reflecting the precarity of refugee lives and bodies.

**KEYWORDS** refugee, Mediterranean, Rohingya, sea, refugee narratives, Bay of Bengal, affects and sea, violence

### Introduction

The quoted line in the title is from the Black Canadian author Dionne Brand's book *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2012, 56), where among other things, the author explores the idea of home, nation, and Blackness in connection with the powerful, traumatizing, “ubiquitous and mute” (56) entity of water.

Maritime spaces have occupied central positions in the worldviews of different cultures, involving a spectrum of ecological, economic, political, and cultural dimensions—be it the projection of oceans as taboo spaces of *Kalapani*<sup>1</sup> prohibiting their crossing in India, or as spaces of trade and economic sustenance to countries like Japan and China, or as

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<sup>1</sup> *Kalapani* literally means “black water.” It refers to the taboo associated with sea voyage in Hinduism and Indian culture. It was a Hindu religious sanction

spaces hosting the colonial, entrepreneurial, and adventurous enterprise of Europe, or the outlawed spaces of crime of sea raiders and pirates, the vast waterscapes spread across the globe have sustained a multitude of worlds. Most recently, maritime spaces have resurfaced in particularly painful and layered ways in the context of various migrations. The journeys of displaced and dislocated people occupy a place of particular importance due to their transformative potential; they can be life-defining, life-threatening, and have the power to stay in the individual, collective, and social memory for generations. However, these journeys are often neglected due to the emphasis put on the situations before (that triggers the journey) and after (on arrival at the destination) (BenEzer and Zetter 2015). This article looks at the two maritime spaces of the Mediterranean and the Bay of Bengal in the light of ongoing forced migration through a confluence of factual figures, theories, and refugee narratives, to arrive at a nuanced understanding of the recent resurgence of the sea in our consciousness. Furthermore, refugees<sup>2</sup> have been systematically used as figures of transience and absence, their experiences of journey lost behind statistical data of living and dead. This article brings together refugee voices and their experiences of the sea.

## Navigating Maritime Spaces

Maritime spaces of the world, to a lesser or greater extent, have been defined by the cultures surrounding them and they have in turn shaped the dynamic identities of the people around them. Waves of scholarly attention have unraveled the historical, political, ecological, and cultural dimensions of these spaces and have established that the sea does not end with its shores but spills, builds, transforms, and stays with the land around it<sup>3</sup>.

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against crossing the seas, stipulating that one supposedly lost one's caste and social respectability by doing so.

2 I am aware of the criticism that the term “refugee” has garnered in recent times. However, at the heart of this article are people and their narratives who have been forcefully removed from their homelands and compelled to undertake journeys risking their lives. In such a context, I find refugee an apt term. Other alternatives like “migrant” would be mellow and insufficient to capture the violence, precarity, and lack of rights that are associated with such people.

3 See Paul Gilroy's watershed concept of the Black Atlantic, explored in the book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) where he provides a critique of cultural nationalism and explores the connection between slavery and African diasporic cultures through the cultural-political formation, transcending nation and ethnicity.

Due to the overwhelming human activity that has ruled the waters of the two maritime spaces that concern this article, it is imperative to briefly summarize the Mediterranean and the Bay of Bengal, delineating their importance to the civilizations surrounding them. Seascapes have been analyzed by scholars and thinkers as rich sites of transnational and inter-cultural exchange, as geopolitical spaces where borders of the lands are dissolved, and cultural currents travel and converge through languages, music, cuisine, diet, and ideas—this cannot be any more fitting for the Bay and the Mediterranean.

Mediterranean historiography is a scholastically well-attended area. Some of the most comprehensive works, like *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Horden and Purcell 2000), harness anthropology, history, archeology, economics, and geography to exemplify the region's ever-transforming and diverse environment simultaneously with a constant engagement with Fernand Braudel's pioneering study of Mediterranean history (1949). David Abulafia's exploration of the human societies and the movement of goods and people around the Mediterranean titled *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* ([2011] 2019) is a periodic study about the history of the sea and the people who crossed it. Maritime spaces in general and the Mediterranean in particular, following the arguments of Iain Chambers in his seminal book *Mediterranean Crossings* (2008), have been, since eternity, environments harboring forces of waves, storms, winds, tides, and currents serving as means and zones of contact and communication. This is in dissonance with the creation and erection of human-made barriers, borders, and perception, as has happened in the case of the Mediterranean, a space that shares borders with and thus connects Europe, northern Africa, and the Middle East. Chambers further offers his arguments against homogenizing the Mediterranean and erasing or appropriating the diversities and cultural currents that have inundated its spaces. Evaluating the Mediterranean as “a concept and historical and cultural formation” (2008, 10) which is “imaginatively constructed” (10) by the rich cross-cultural interactions of the civilizations bordering its shores, Chambers asserts that colonial encounters, imperial enterprises, trade, and commerce are inscribed on the space of the Mediterranean and have transformed it into a site of “multiple mediations and memories” (131) with “overlapping territories and intertwined histories” (3), which sits uneasily with the narrow identity politics and provincialism of the nationalisms that plague Europe. Such a postcolonial reading of the Mediterranean successfully detaches it from the Eurocentric notion of the western/European civilization's exclusive claim over modernity and reminds us that Europe was not always a seat of power, modernity, law, and

democracy, and that Asian, African, and Middle Eastern civilizations were once at the helm of prosperity, power, and progress and still contribute to Europe's advancement. Due to these shared spaces, Europe has benefited greatly from the cross-cultural exchanges, hence the current geographical and political limitations and classifications of these spaces as controlled borderlines between the "developed West" and the "impoverished other" are unjustified and hegemonic. However, intermingled with the narratives of cooperation and exchange lies the notoriety of these spaces as watery graves of refugees. Periodic booms in emigration from African countries to Europe, especially from countries like Libya, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, have caused a spike in attention on the Mediterranean and much of it due to boat tragedies that have caused thousands of people to go missing or die. The Black Mediterranean, following Paul Gilroy's concept and theorization of the Black Atlantic, is a term that is used by scholars, artists, and activists "to describe the history of racial subordination in the Mediterranean region. [...] [T]he 'Black Mediterranean' invites us to place the contemporary refugee crisis in the context of Europe's constitutive history of empire, colonial conquest, and transatlantic slavery" (Danewid 2017, 1679).

The Bay of Bengal, the northeastern part of the Indian Ocean, geographically surrounded by India (northwest), Bangladesh (north), and Myanmar (east), has been for centuries crucial to both the Asian and the European powers. In the beginning of colonial expansion, the Dutch, Portuguese, Chinese, and English charted its waters and the Bay has been deeply entangled with the economics and politics of the region, carrying across cultural artefacts, foods, relics, indentured laborers, enslaved people, soldiers, and imperialists. Despite having a significantly active and diverse historical status, the Bay, compared to the Mediterranean, remains a less attended area from a historical and cultural studies perspective, although some work has been done on its physical oceanography, hydrography, and biodiversity. The most important and relevant study that has significantly informed the background of this article comes from Sunil Amrith, who in his exhaustive study on the Bay of Bengal *Crossing the Bay of Bengal* (2013) details the diverse history of the region, the massive rise and temporary fall of the maritime space's contribution to the cultural, emotional, political, and economic life of South and Southeast Asia, as well as its current vulnerable situation as a densely populated, ecologically fragile space on earth where powerful nations like India and China wrestle over control of the waters. Summing up the spectrum of activity and movements on the waters of the Bay, Amrith writes:

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the connectedness of the Bay of Bengal underwent a change in scale. It was remade as a region at the heart of the global, imperial economy. It was soldered by the force of capital in search of new profits on South Asia’s forest frontiers. It was animated by the power of fossil fuels as steamships made the ocean crossing faster, cheaper, and easier than ever before. It was governed by the imperial laws that both uprooted and immobilized people, locking some communities in place (as “peasants”) while compelling others to travel under contracts of indenture or under the weight of debt. It was shaped, above all, by human labor—and human suffering. (2)

One of the most crucial aspects of the history of the Bay has been migration, which had global impacts. Malaya’s rubber plantation tapped by Tamil workers fed the American automobile industry and Burma became the largest rice exporter of the world (Amrit 2013, 2). Much like the Mediterranean, the Bay also became a space for exchange of ideas and languages:

The port cities of Southeast Asia, where the Bay of Bengal met the South China Sea, were as plural as any on earth, and more so than most. A rich exchange of ideas and languages were the result of transient encounters or cross-cultural relationships. Ethnic conflict and cultural cosmopolitanism coexisted in uneasy balance, a result of this meeting of many Asian diasporas. (3)

The Bay of Bengal has occupied a significant place not only in the history but also in the cultural memory of the region, all the more so due to its current environmental precarity. The Sundarbans mangrove forest is home to 1,136 animal species and 334 types of plants and comprises 35 percent of Bangladesh’s biodiversity. It is home to around four million people who gain their livelihood from the ecosystem of the Sundarbans delta. The Bay and its surrounding regions have regularly featured in the creative literary productions of notable authors like Amitabh Ghosh, who have illuminated the mesmerizing tryst of humans with nature and the Anthropocene and have uncovered cultural resources of the region.

## Refugee Migration and the Sea

This section summarizes the state of the two most recent and ongoing refugee movements on sea, one across the Mediterranean and the other at the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal, focusing on the key migratory conditions that emerged and grabbed headlines across the world. Death,

human trafficking, and rescuing of refugees have been the three most discussed and debated topics that are common to both migratory instances and spaces. Ours is an increasingly volatile planet riddled with an ongoing pandemic, wars, climate change, and various other instabilities that periodically drive people out of their homelands. Widespread unrest in a number of countries in the Arab world in the form of armed rebellions, military coups, anti-government protests, and uprisings has caused major political, social, and economic instability in the region that triggered a significant refugee exodus. Around 2015–2016 this evacuation reached its peak, with around 5.2 million refugees reaching the European shores. Europe, which became a primary destination of this mass migration, has since then seen a significant influx of people from countries like Libya, Eritrea, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Afghanistan, the Syrian Arab Republic, and other areas torn by civil war, violence, and massive human rights abuses. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in its report of this mass movement observed:

[T]here has been a major increase in refugees and refugees taking the “eastern Mediterranean route” from Turkey to Greece. More than 85 per cent of those arriving in Greece are from countries experiencing war and conflict, principally Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia. From Greece, most move onwards across the Balkans to western and northern Europe. Italy remains the primary destination for Eritreans, Somalis and other people from sub-Saharan Africa. (UNHCR 2015)

A significant number of arrivals from these regions have been and continue to be by sea due to relative lack of travel restrictions, formalities, and border control. UNHCR reports on January 30, 2019:

Refugees and refugees attempting to reach Europe via the Mediterranean Sea lost their lives at an alarming rate in 2018, as cuts in search and rescue operations reinforced its position as the world’s deadliest sea crossing. The latest “Desperate Journeys” report, released today by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, says six lives were lost on average every day. An estimated 2,275 died or went missing crossing the Mediterranean in 2018, despite a major drop in the number of arrivals reaching European shores. In total, 139,300 refugees and refugees arrived in Europe, the lowest number in five years.

Within the span of 2018–2022 for example, UNHCR data shows that in 2020 the number of refugees who arrived by sea was 84,961, compared to 7,389 land arrivals (UNHCR 2022). Out of these a significant number of lives were lost in transit. In the process of migration, an estimated number

of more than 20,000 refugees have perished in the waters, especially the Mediterranean. In 2021, more than 114,000 people risked their lives trying to reach Europe by sea; over 3,200 of them are dead or missing. Besides the obvious risk of losing lives in perilous sea voyages, such journeys are also fraught with other risks and difficulties. There have been reports of rampant incidents of human trafficking, smuggling, and other forms of violence against the refugees before they embark on their journeys:

There is extensive evidence of violence—including beatings, kidnappings, forced labour and arbitrary detention—experienced by refugees and refugees along the entirety of their journeys—including within Europe. Many respondents had witnessed death through starvation, violence or drowning. This violence takes place at the hands of smugglers, fellow travellers and agents of the state, including police and border guards. Refugees and migrants are prepared to risk violence and death because they do not believe there are any alternatives available to them. (ESRC 2017)

Another discussion that gained momentum simultaneously is the contentious issue of rescuing refugees from the seas. A report that came out in INFOREFUGEES states:

Four NGOs involved in the rescue of refugees experiencing difficulty at sea have issued a statement calling for Italy to stop blocking their ships. The NGOs Doctors Without Borders (MSF), Sea-Watch, Open Arms, and Mediterranea have urged the Italian government to stop blocking their rescue ships in the Mediterranean ahead of the National Day in Remembrance of the Victims of Immigration on October 3. (INFOREFUGEES 2020)

Besides, there have been instances of direct interference with rescuing refugees at sea. Italian authorities confined the refugee rescue vessel *Sea-Watch 4* under an alleged false pretense of an inadequate sewage system among others as a move to prevent civilians carrying out sea rescues in the central Mediterranean (Deutsche Welle 2020). These instances of deliberate prevention of rescuing refugees make news headlines despite the clear directive of “rescue of persons in distress at sea” as mentioned in the SOLAS Convention (International Convention for Safety of Life at Sea). In addition to that, the 1979 International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR Convention) obliges state parties to “ensure that assistance [is] provided to any person in distress at sea [...] regardless of the nationality or status of such a person or the circumstances in which that person is found (Chapter 2.1.10) and to [...] provide for their initial medical

or other needs, and deliver them to a place of safety (Chapter 1.3.2)" (UNHCR 2015). However, SAR (search and rescue) at sea has not been the only contentious issue. Overall, there has been a resistance from political parties against sheltering refugees also on land, thereby signifying that the legitimacy of certain bodies is debatable. In an instance that happened in the Rhineland-Palatinate,

Pastors have been under police investigation since 2018, after allowing Sudanese refugees to sleep in church buildings in rural, western Germany. [...] These pastors are among the hundreds of Europeans who have been arrested, investigated, or threatened with prison or fines over the past five years under a range of different laws that rights advocates say are *criminalizing solidarity* with refugees. (Open Democracy 2019, emphasis added)

Italy even went one step ahead and imposed a fine of one million euros for defying a ban on entering Italian waters to land refugees, a move that came when *Sea-Watch 3* Captain Carola Rackete entered the port of Lampedusa to land forty refugees, defying the Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini's second security and immigration decree (INFOREFUGEES 2019). UN bodies have urged Europe to restart rescuing refugees at the Mediterranean: the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR have called on the EU to implement a series of measures aimed at assisting people trapped in Libya or at risk of dying on the Mediterranean. The suggestions include restarting a program of organized sea rescues (Deutsche Welle 2019). These incidents form a part of the grand narrative of refugee crisis and refocuses on Europe's centuries-long violent relations with the Global South, fraught with colonialism, slavery, genocide, which forms the core of Europe's modernity. It also brings into light renewed discussions on European humanism that necessitates the presence and nurturing of the "subhuman other." Europe's convenient amnesia about her fascist and colonial past is often reflected in the thought that contemporary forced migration and crisis originates outside Europe while she is the innocent bystander, and that European states have to bear the white man's burden by showing sympathy and granting refuge to the displaced and dislocated:

This overlooks that the majority of refugees seeking asylum in Europe are coming from countries that until recently were under colonial rule. Libya and Eritrea were Italian colonies until 1947; Somalia was ruled by Italy and Britain until 1960; Syria was a French protectorate under the Mandate System until 1946; Britain invaded and occupied Afghanistan

three times until formal independence in 1919. From the days of colonial conquest and genocide to the economic exploitation under the Mandate System, and recent years’ interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, any serious consideration of what lies behind the surge of refugees into Europe must account for this colonial history and the way in which it continues to structure the present. (Danewid 2017, 1680)

While international heads were turned toward Europe and her dealing with the refugee question, South Asia has been grappling with her share of one of the most difficult refugee migrations since 2017. The conditions of mass migration of Rohingya refugees, who were a Muslim ethnic minority in the predominantly Buddhist country of Myanmar, also involved some of the common factors, namely massive violence, discrimination, and human rights abuse, forcing thousands of Rohingyas to flee the Rakhine State. The persecution of Rohingyas intensified in 2017 when, according to reports, Myanmar led a campaign against this ethnic group with genocidal intent, unleashing executions and mass rape. A distinct and further complicating aspect of Rohingya migration was their lack of citizenship since 1982,<sup>4</sup> which makes them one of the largest stateless populations in the world. In 1982 the Burmese dictator U Ne Win, decided to redefine national identity and released a list of 135 recognized ethnic groups to retain Burmese citizenship. Rohingyas did not figure in the list and hence overnight they became outsiders and a target of state-sponsored persecution. UNHCR estimates that more than 742,000 people sought refuge in Bangladesh, and that over a million Rohingya refugees have fled violence in Myanmar in successive waves of displacement since the 1990s. A majority of such stateless people have taken shelter in Bangladesh and Malaysia under extremely harsh and unstable economic and environmental conditions and have been called “the most persecuted minority in the world”<sup>5</sup> from the United Nations (UNHCR, n.d.).

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4 In 1974, Burma’s military-run government enacted a new constitution establishing one-party rule. The new Emergency Immigration Act passed in the parliament limited the rights of individuals seen as “foreigners” from Bangladesh, China, and India. Rohingyas fell into this group and their national registration cards were confiscated. In 1978, Burmese militia launched Operation Naga min or Dragon King to register and verify the status of people seen as foreigners, which led to assault and terrorization of the groups. In 1982, the parliament passed a new law that based citizenship on ethnicity and excluded Rohingya and other minority communities. A timeline of the events is available here: <https://exhibitions.ushmm.org/burmans-path-to-genocide/timeline>.

5 See for further details: <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/rohingya/>

Inter-communal violence between the pro-Buddhist Rakhine and the pro-British Muslims in Myanmar dates back to World War II when the Japanese forces invaded the country while it was still under British colonial rule. Scholars claim that Buddhist nationalism gained momentum during the British colonial rule cemented together with anti-Islamic sentiments and the fear that if neighboring Islamic countries like Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia were to attack Myanmar, the Rohingyas would fight against their own country. Sectarian conflict and systematic and repeated massacres and attacks between the two groups have torn and divided the country since the 1940s, while most recently the Myanmar junta forced the Rohingyas to either leave the country or face ethnic cleansing. Scholars have identified not only religious but also political and economic motivation behind such persecution.

As a part of the response to the deadly coronavirus pandemic, many countries in Southeast Asia tightened their borders, which left many fleeing Rohingya refugees stranded at sea, sometimes floating in boats at sea for months with or without any food, water, and other necessary provisions. A report published in the *New York Times* stated:

Hundreds of Rohingya have died trying to get to Malaysia. Some were thrown overboard from overloaded boats when the journeys lengthened because countries refused them safe harbor. Others were buried in mass graves in the jungle when their families could not afford trafficking fees that suddenly increased during the trip, a common tactic by human smugglers to squeeze more money out of the trade. [...] Conditions on the boats have been likened to those of modern day slave ships, with Rohingya women and children packed together so tightly in the darkened hold that they can barely stretch out. (Beech 2020)

While nations shut their borders and recalled their citizens, the statelessness of the Rohingyas and lack of sovereign protection of a state exposed them to new levels of precarity. Malaysia and Bangladesh, which are two of the most preferred destinations of the Rohingya that had previously sheltered them, restricted their borders, citing public health concern due to the ongoing pandemic, while Malaysia repeatedly refused refugee boats, citing pandemic-related economic struggles and scarcity of resources. However, xenophobia fueled by rumors of Rohingyas demanding Malaysian citizenship and overall anti-Rohingya sentiments are also responsible for the country's shutting its doors to the refugees. Malaysia also witnessed an increasing number of threats against activists, reporters, and human rights defenders who spoke against the government policies of rejecting refugees (Khanna 2020, 2), contradicting Malaysia's image as the model destination country, observes Khanna. She writes:

[T]he situation remains grim as Rohingyas living in the country have reported how they live with the mental trauma on a daily basis and face a continual fear of detention and harassment by police making their life worse than that in the refugee camps of Bangladesh. [...] This pandemic has further questioned this image of Malaysia as a model reception state by causing a counter-stream of migration of Rohingyas back to Bangladesh resulting in further boat tragedies. (Khanna 2020, 2)

Forcing refugees to return to Bangladesh is reported simultaneously with forcing refugees to stay at sea. The Indonesian military pushed back boats that ventured into their waters, including vessels carrying Rohingyas. The same procedure was followed by countries like Myanmar and Thailand. The situation had momentarily improved in mid-June 2015 when Myanmar closed its borders and Indonesia and Malaysia allowed refugees at sea to land. However, in 2016–2017, with fresh military attacks on the Rohingyas, mass migration gained a speedy momentum. UNHCR stated that 2020 was the deadliest year for Rohingyas crossing the sea. Reports emerged underlining the precarity of existence of the stateless Rohingyas:

The green and red fishing boat, packed with men, women and children squatting on the deck with only plastic tarps to protect them from the sun, had been turned away by the Malaysian authorities on Wednesday, passengers said. They said that they had been on the boat for three months and that the boat's captain and crew abandoned them six days ago. Ten passengers died during the voyage, and their bodies were thrown overboard, the passengers said. (Beech 2020)

In terms of death statistics of Rohingyas, estimates are made on a yearly basis and every year hundreds of people die or go missing while crossing the seas.

## Seascapes in Refugees' Narratives

Refugees divided by cultures, societies, and geographical spaces find unity in their tales of persecution, their journeys of suffering, and their longing for a home that is meant to last. There has been a surge in interest in refugee narratives, thereby bringing into existence UK-based projects like *Refugee Tales* (by the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group) which is modeled on Chaucer's pilgrims' journeys in *The Canterbury Tales* (c.1400) and communicates the experiences and testimonies of refugees. These stories are

narrated<sup>6</sup> by poets, novelists, and journalists who “create a space in which the stories of those who have been detained can be safely heard, a space in which hospitality is the prevailing discourse and listening becomes an act of welcome.”<sup>7</sup> Through uses of first-person narratives (a point of departure from *The Canterbury Tales*), other narrative strategies come to the fore, for example in “The Detainee’s Tale,” narrated by Ali Smith (2016), where readers are put into the refugee’s shoes. These narrations address relevant themes like religious persecution, which remains relevant from during Chaucer’s time (“The Man of Law’s Tale”), reconnecting spatial violence with human lives through storytelling. In the wake of the refugee crises, these seascapes have resurfaced, bringing discourses of violence, vulnerability, and resilience with them concerning the lives of humans in transit. Refugee narratives encompass a wide range of genres, from biography, autobiography, graphic narrative, and short fiction, to drama, children’s literatures, and epistolary forms, among others. They can also be single-authored or collaborative. Anna Bernard writes, “unlike the spaces that refugees traverse or in which they are trapped, there are no hard borders between these genres” (Bernard 2020, 66). Refugee narratives revolve around common tropes of the detention center, the prison, the border officials, the shipping container, and have been inspired by the centuries-long traditions of pilgrimage, exile, and migration writing and cannot be “conceived in isolation from the age of mass displacement and statelessness” (66). Bernard further states that the pages of the literature “provides an alternative site for refugees’ claim for recognition and justice, a site where such claims might be received with openness rather than suspicion, and where the readers might be willing to act as an ally rather than a judge” (67).

The three narratives discussed in this article are collaborative projects where the refugees narrated their stories to writers. While two of them are written in autobiographical form, one is a biography. Autobiography, due to its claim to authenticity and truth, is often a fitting and impactful genre to disseminate the pathos and seriousness of refugee narratives. However, when the narrative borrows from memory, and trauma is related to or forms a part of such memory, remembrance and narration can be selective and revised since memory is about how we experience incidents (Smith and Watson 2010, 16). Refugee narratives give voice to the experiences of refugees, who are otherwise not heard and often not

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6 Also available as storytelling sessions on YouTube.

7 This quote is from the publisher’s announcement for volume 2 of the *Refugee Tales*. <https://www.refugeetales.org/books>.

trusted. Hence autobiography, which is also associated with intimacy of experience, the personal, and the authoritative way of narrating, offers credibility to the voice of the refugee. What is striking in all their narratives is the straightforward narrative shorn of any literary ornamentation, where incidents are merely documented as they happened. One can safely assume that the main purpose of refugee narratives is to inform; to bring home the horrors of the process of migration. In a general atmosphere of voicelessness, biographies and autobiographies ascribe certain agency to such voices, even though the stories are told to a writer / scriptor, and they reach the readers through mediation. All the three stories addressed in this article belong to the “as told to” style of narration, where the voice of the refugee is captured and written by a professional. Majorly used in the fields of ethnography and journalism, such narrative strategies bring the stories to the readers through an empathically neutral writer, restricted in their interference in the narratives, and the narratives themselves are marked by monologic dominance.

This section focuses on three contemporary narratives which vividly document brief or long transits at sea. All the three narratives discussed in this section are mediated by writers who documented the refugees’ experiences.

The second time Doaa nearly drowned, she was adrift in the center of a hostile sea that had just swallowed the man she loved. She was so cold she couldn’t feel her feet, and so thirsty her tongue had swollen in her mouth. She was so overcome with grief that if not for two tiny babies in her arms, barely alive, she would have let the sea consume her. No land was in sight. Just debris from shipwreck, a few other survivors praying for rescue, and dozens of bloated floating corpses. (Fleming 2017, 6)

This terrifying and violent yet familiar description is from the life of nineteen-year-old Doaa al Zamel, who had a near death experience in the Mediterranean in August 2014 while fleeing from Syria. Doaa currently lives in Sweden and her story is narrated by UNHCR spokesperson and author Melissa Fleming. The book, named *A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea* (2017), gained immense popularity due to its piercing description of a refugee woman’s life and her harrowing journey of survival. While the book is about a couple’s attempt to leave for Europe from a war-torn Syria, the most overwhelming part of the book is the description of the protagonist Doaa’s five-day-long survival in the choppy waters of the Mediterranean with two little children she was entrusted with by her fellow dying passengers, while people, including her husband, died around her and their

bodies sank and resurfaced. While Doaa is eventually rescued by a ship, the story is about human resolve in the face of extreme adversity.

Gulwali Passarlay's story of his nearly a year-long escapade as a twelve-year-old boy from Afghanistan to Europe is narrated to Nadene Ghouri, and titled *The Lightless Sky: An Afghan Refugee Boy's Journey of Escape to a New Life in Britain* (2015). Finally, *First, They Erased Our Name* (2019) by Habiburahman (with Sophie Ansel, trans. Andrea Reece) is the story of a Rohingya who fled from Myanmar as a refugee and now lives in Melbourne. Coming from three distinctly different cultural and political backgrounds yet finding a common ground in their narratives of violence, persecution, and escape via the sea, these three documentations unfold a range of themes that are not only defining for refugee narratives but also illuminate the sea as a space where the violence of the land spills into its waters and that offers a strange labyrinth of hope, resilience, life, and often death. Every aspect of these narratives demands attention due to their contribution in delineating the power asymmetries inherent in our societies. However, for the sake of relevance, the discussion will mainly focus on the depiction and role of the sea.

## A Hostile Sea that Consumes

Gulwali Passarlay's story follows some familiar tropes of refugee stories, namely life-threatening situations at his homeland, Afghanistan, a lengthy journey spanning Iran, Turkey, and Bulgaria, people smugglers, terrifying violence, imprisonment, escape from prison, a precarious trip on a boat that capsized before reaching the destination, his brush with death, and his eventual arrival in Europe. Even after his arrival, Passarlay survived humiliating conditions with adult asylum seekers, which eventually culminated in a more stable and successful residency in London. Passarlay's account of his journey, as is typical of the genre, carries overwhelmingly within it the themes of violence, vulnerability, and resilience. Violence starts early in his life when his father and grandfather are massacred in a shootout with US troops in Afghanistan, instantly robbing him of the pillars of his family. He and his brother were wanted by the Taliban to become freedom fighters, while the Americans wanted them as spies. After paying a sum of 8,000 US dollars as smuggling fee to a trafficker from Kabul, his mother secures a passage for the two boys out of the war-torn country. In the entire span of his journey, the sea voyage to Italy occupies a decisive part due to the intense emotions of fear and uncertainty that are attached to the seascape in Passarlay's mind, and also because the sea trip

is the last leg of the journey (the shortest though not the least precarious) to arrive in Greece, which has been the destination in Passarlay's mind. What is noticeable in the description of the sea voyage is a teenager's first view of the sea and the immediate emergence in his mind of the timeless primal fear of the liquid space in its dark and turbulent form:

[B]efore I died, I contemplated how drowning would feel. It was clear to me now; this was how I would go: away from my mother's warmth, my father's strength and my family's love. The white waves were going to devour me, swallow me whole in their terrify jaws and cast my young body aside to drift down into the cold, black depths. [...] I have heard somewhere that drowning is a peaceful death. Whoever said that hasn't watched grown men soil themselves with fear aboard an overcrowded, broken-down boat in the middle of a raging Mediterranean storm. We'd eaten what little food and water the captain had on the boat within the first few hours. That had been more than a day ago. Now, fear, nausea and human filth were the only things in abundance. Hope had sunk some time during the endless night, dragging courage down with it. Despair filled my pockets like stones. (2015, 5)

The sea thus emerges as an antithesis to everything that is associated with comfort and security in the author's mind, the warmth, love, and strength that was foundational to his life. His vivid description of the precarious situation envisions and situates the sea as an animated entity, devouring and swallowing. The intensity of his description clearly transmits the overwhelming fear that the author feels. The drowning metaphors not only connect to his physical body but also signify the death of hope and courage, and the heaviness of despair, which are poignant techniques of embodying and spatializing the fear attributed to the sea. Fear of the sea is intricately associated with the fear of the unknown and is one of most primal of human fears hardwired in our genes due to its evolutionary nature. Across cultures, the sea is also often associated with apocalypse and punishment (the biblical flood). Fear in our current context of crossing seas is intricately associated with violence and the danger of dying. Violence and the sea have been most strongly attached to each other as a trope in the context of the Middle Passage, a route that transported millions of enslaved Africans to their lives of slavery and horror in the Americas. Sowande Mustakeem in her book on the horrors of the Middle Passage notes that in instances like these, where the connection between the sea and human suffering becomes so intense and inseparable that the sea stops being a space and instead turns into "an agent that imposed significant impact on people, further bridging the relationship of man and the sea" (2016, 5). She further speaks of a "climate of terror" in the

world of slavery at sea that unleashed a spectrum of violence on enslaved people “that resulted in mental disorientation, familial and communal separation, malnourishment, lack of sanitation and cleanliness, severe isolation, debilitating diseases, miscarriages, sexual abuse, psychological instability and bearing witness to physical violence committed against kin and shipmates” (2016, 8). Often resonances of the Middle Passage have been found in refugee experiences of the sea. For a teenager like Gulwali, who has never seen a vast body of water, let alone experienced it, this encounter gains existential proportions:

I screamed for my mother, the mother who was far away in Afghanistan. I was a lost little boy, about to meet his death in a cold, foreign sea. Before getting on this boat, I had never even seen the sea before; the only knowledge I had had of it was from pictures in school text books. The reality was beyond the wildest reaches of my imagination. For me, those waves were truly the entrance to the gates of hell. (Passarlay 2015, 9)

In multiple instances the author compares the turbulent sea to hell, which sucked out any relief of escape and instead filled the passengers with anxiety and dread. The sea being a tangible, scary environment coupled with the psychological anxiety of unfamiliarity and not knowing how to swim, creates a contradictory impact on the minds of the refugees, where the dread of the imminent surpasses the happiness and hopefulness of a safe future.

The Rohingya refugee in Habiburahman’s story further solidifies human vulnerability in the face of the power of the waters. On his way from Indonesia to Australia during the last leg of his journey, Habib writes about his experience of being exposed to the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean:

The journey starts auspiciously but, once we are out on the open seas, the Indian Ocean becomes increasingly menacing. After a few days, we find ourselves on raging, stormy seas. Some of the passengers are begging to return to *terra firma*, but there is no way we can turn back. The waves crash incessantly against the hull and splash onto the deck. Soaked to the bone, we cling on desperately to avoid being swept overboard and drowned in the depths of the ocean. The first engine packs up, followed by the second. The boat is spun and tossed about like a compass gone mad, but we eventually manage to get back on course, heading into terrifying walls of waves. The ocean is stronger than us. Driven by an instinct for survival, some of the group try to make a small sail with pieces of fabric. I attempt to read the maps while others try to fix the engines, without success. The men bail

liters of water out of the boat in a stubborn refusal to be swallowed up so easily by the ocean. We spend the night drifting. [...] We are exhausted and starving. I am horribly thirsty. Most of us have already said our final prayers. I have thrown into the sea the few stones that I was carrying in my pockets, in memory of my grandmother and the stories of sailors. (2019, 154–155)

Incidentally, the terrifying journey ends successfully for Habib as his boat is rescued by Australian coastguard authorities. Gulwali and Habib’s stories are about various precarious spaces encompassing the volatile nation, prison, unsurmountable and violent borders, claustrophobic vehicles, rickety boats, and the space of all spaces, the looming large sea. In these narratives, the malevolence of nature—i.e. the turbulent sea, the rugged terrain, and the inclement weather—coincides with the malevolence of human nature—the traffickers, corrupt authorities, human smugglers. The precariousness of spaces intersects and coincides with the precariousness of refugee lives. When the world’s attention was captured by the tragic death by drowning of Aylan Kurdi, a three-year-old who along with his mother, father, and brother had boarded a boat to cross the Mediterranean, an important aspect of the news was highlighted: that none of the members of the family knew how to swim, and the mother was petrified to undertake the sea journey but nonetheless went ahead with it, like Doaa did in her journey from Egypt. Precarious spaces make the lives inhabiting them vulnerable. Refugees navigating through such spaces reach the apex of vulnerability where their lives are also rendered disposable. Death by drowning in the sea or being shot while crossing borders or being thrown into prison to rot for an undefined length of time are several ways in which refugee lives are disposed of. Stateless refugees like Habiburahman and refugees devoid of legal papers become the quintessential example of Giorgio Agamben’s concept of bare life (1995), lives which are just alive and breathing, without any agency or rights. The journeys of refugees run a risk of being perceived as some form of agency, agency that is exercised through their mobility. However, in the context of refugee movements, Kaufmann’s concept of *motility*, which is defined as “the way in which an individual appropriates what is possible in the domain of mobility and outs this potential to use for his or her activities” (Kaufmann 2019, 37 as quoted in Bromley), becomes more apt. Roger Bromley asserts that “in a residual sense, the displaced have traces of motility but, in most cases, lack any agency, or choice, with which to appropriate anything in the realm of mobility” (2021, 12), and it is this motility that brings refugee lives further toward bare lives (12).

In Judith Butler’s words, such lives are “ungrievable”; “lives regarded as disposable [...] are so stripped of value that when they are imperilled,

injured or lost, they assume a social ontology that is partially constituted by that regard [...] their potential loss is no occasion to mourn”<sup>8</sup> (Butler 2014, 35). Bare lives, ungrievable and disposable, are also deviant/aberrant bodies since the category of refugees and asylum seekers is a deviation from the mainstream ideas of citizenship; thus, the precarious space of the sea becomes a repository for deviant and disposable bodies—bodies *sans* the sanction of nation and citizenship, bodies which carry within themselves the dysfunctionality of societies, and bodies which are forced to embrace danger, a contradictory human behavior. Such a projection of the sea, notes Joseph Pugliese, “delineate[s], specifically and insistently, the spaces inhabited by those marked as deviations from the norm: refugees, asylum seekers and the ‘undocumented’ from the Global South that are branded as ‘unlawful,’ ‘illegal,’ and ‘unauthorized’ because they have failed to go through the ‘proper’ institutional channels in their seeking of asylum” (2009, 672). One is reminded of Australia’s Howard government’s involvement in the 2001 “children overboard” scandal, where it was falsely alleged that seafaring asylum seekers (after sabotaging their vessel) threw children overboard as a ploy to compel the navy to rescue them and secure a passage (Parliament of Australia Website, n.d). Such narratives further indicate a tendency to invest deviant bodies with unnatural and aberrant behavior and determine the sea as the space where they perform such aberrancy.

## Sea of Affects

Refugee narratives, like any other form of literature, capture human experiences. These texts capture and express feelings and intensities<sup>9</sup> that refugee bodies embody in their environments of precarity and unfamiliarity that they come into contact with. There is a certain universalism in such affects, as refugees in their common journey share as well as transfer their affects through moments of fear, resilience, and solidarity. In transit, the refugees form their own imagined communities, bound together by what affect theorists term “forces” and “intensities” (Rogers 2019, 204; Deleuze and Guattari 1988; Massumi 2002) that push toward survival. Refugees as protagonists in their own stories encounter such intensities and sensations and transmit them to the readers through rhetorical strategies and the

8 Butler here connects refugee lives with affects of mourning and grieving.

9 The term “intensity” is sometimes used interchangeably with “affect” and can be defined as an individual’s reaction to an encounter.

mood of the texts. Traumatic realities and violence leave their imprint on the psyche, which often makes refugee narratives tales of powerlessness and victimhood, while at the same time containing the power to subvert victimhood through resistance. However, the precarious of the sea has a deep resonance with the emotional and psychological realm of humankind in general and refugees in particular.

Watery spaces have often been associated with emotions, sensations, and intense reactions: the emotional attachments of indigenous people living on their shores, intense encounters of enslaved people who were forced into traversing them, feelings of people who lost their loved ones, and a myriad other reactions. Refugee narratives add to these affective experiences and are powerful case studies of affects in literary narratives. In Passarlay's description of the sea, as quoted in the previous section, the association of seas with chaos, forces of waves beyond control, abundance of death, anxiety, suffering from hunger, exhaustion, and physical brutality, nostalgia for the homeland and longing for the mother, and, more urgently, an insufficiently strong vessel where conditions of claustrophobia and filth are abundant, amply demonstrates the mental conditions of the fleeing people. Fear and anxiety are the two most common feelings in the pages of refugee narratives. Gökariksel and Secor (2018) establish anxiety as the affect that characterizes the encounter with the other, which has the power to disintegrate the self:

Anxiety arises when the subject is confronted with their own constitutional incoherence. In the anxious encounter, the subject experiences the other as a provocateur that threatens to expose the worst: to reveal that the subject does not fully correspond with itself, that there is a disconcerting gap between the subject and the image of its ideal self. Anxiety is an affect of encounter because it always comes from outside [...] [T]he anxious encounter with the other is one that threatens the subject with its own disintegration. (2018, 10)

These texts exemplify how narrative trajectories, specifically in the case of refugee novels, are shaped by the space of the fearsome sea, which becomes more than a space, and instead an entity that has the power to disintegrate the refugee, on both the psychological and the corporeal level. The space of the sea can conjure up all other fears; it becomes the other, threatening to destroy all hopes and plans and epitomizing the culmination of all fears in its depths. Incidentally, since seafaring has been predominantly a masculine affair, there is a consistent and distinct tradition of associating sea voyage narratives with bravery, the indomitable

adventurous spirit of man that eventually and successfully tames the turbulent waves. Refugee narratives offer a stark opposition to this saga of human struggle, even though the resilience of spirit is unmistakably conspicuous. The vast expanse of the sea without a horizon and the land offers no shelter or stability and is a constant reminder of the vulnerability and displacement of refugees; it signifies a place that nullifies human effort. While every human enterprise in general, and for refugees in particular, is directed toward safety and security and keeping inimical and hostile forces at bay, the sea appears as a space that annihilates such an effort.

One can also read the strong reactions of fear, especially among African refugees in Gulwali's boat, in the context of transgenerational trauma. The horrific and powerful experiences of the Middle Passage travel across generations and manifest themselves as dread for the sea, a limitless, dark space that has engulfed so many people. Fear of the sea can also be interpreted as a loss of connection with nature, which citizens of postcolonial societies often manifest due to forceful industrialization and sustained loss of habitat caused by colonialism that has violently detached them from their nature and installed in the minds of people an attachment to concrete (noun) cosmopolitanism in the name of progress. Along with fear, sadness, longing, and anxiety, shame and humiliation find mention on multiple occasions in Passarlay's narrative. Coming from a society and cultural background where social emotions of shame and honor are deeply entrenched, he writes,

Even before the arrival of the Taliban, my family were religiously and culturally conservative in their outlook. We lived by *Pashtunwali*—the strict rules every Pashtun must abide by. The codes primarily govern social etiquette, such as how to treat a guest. Courage is a big part of the Pashtun code too, as is loyalty, and honoring your family and your women. (2015, 29)

However, all sense of honor had to be suspended during his journey. Passarlay's description delineates not only his personal humiliation at the hands of guards and prison officials but also gives a vivid picture of the less-than-human state, and yet again the bare life status of refugees in transit.

I stank. And I was soaked with sweat. I hadn't washed since leaving Iran. That was a whole week ago: one night and day to cross the border, a day with the old man just after entering Turkey, and then five days in the truck. In that week I had climbed mountains, fallen over in mud, ridden a horse for several hours and slept next to a hundred other unwashed bodies. All in the same set of clothes. No wonder I smelled so bad that even I gagged

when I caught a whiff of myself. For Muslims, *being dirty is a great shame*. The reason we take ablution before our five daily prayers is to stand clean before our Creator. Not being able to wash myself was a great source of distress for me, as I’m sure it was for all of the other *human cattle* kept in that vast, damp room. At that moment, I felt *less than human*. (222, emphasis added)

Being reduced to a subhuman entity is a theme that manifests powerfully in Habiburahman’s narrative as well. However, that status is conferred to Rohingyas during their stay in their ancestral land of Myanmar. Habib, who was just three years old at the time, writes:

I am three years old and am effectively erased from existence. I become a foreigner to my neighbors: they believe that we are Bengali invaders who have entered their country illegally and now threaten to overrun it. They call us *kalars*, a pejorative term expressing scorn and disgust for dark-skinned ethnic groups. In a different time and place, under different circumstances, *kalar* would have meant wog or nigger. The word is like a slap in the face; it undermines us more with each passing day. An outlandish tale takes root by firesides in thatched huts across Burma. They say that because of our physical appearance *we are evil ogres from a faraway land, more animal than human*. (2019, 8, emphasis added)

However, in the worst of conditions, refugees in transit have experienced solidarity, sharing the same fate as the others and experiencing hope in togetherness. Doaa’s story speaks of refugees from Palestine, Yemen, Egypt, and Syria reading the Quran together during their stressful boat journey. Besides sharing food and drinks, they shared their stories. When the boat was capsized by the pirates on sea, leading to the gruesome deaths of most of the passengers, the remaining ones floating on the sea show compassion toward their fellow survivors: “[A]mid the despair, a solidarity emerged among those who were left. People with life jackets moved toward those without them, offering a shoulder to hold on to for a rest. Those with a little food or water shared it. Those whose spirits remained strong comforted and encouraged people who wanted to give up” (Fleming 2017, 256). Doaa eventually saves two small children that she was entrusted with. Trusting strangers with one’s children in the face of imminent death is heartrending on the one hand and on the other is an act of extreme trust and desperation. Furthermore, the floating refugees also prayed together and listened to the Quran in a way of getting some comfort from faith.

Theorizations of affect in refugee narratives reveal what Jamie Rogers calls “structures of feeling” that condition the different realities in which we live” (2019, 202). Such affects reflect the encounter and interaction

between the environment and the body, thereby establishing a network between the bodily, material, cultural, and social world. Refugee narratives firmly establish affects as social and collective and bring to the forefront the effect of spaces and spatial encounters in triggering forces and intensities. That impact is longer lasting than the encounter with temporary spaces of transit such as oceans, but also extends to societies in which the refugees find themselves. Finally, refugee narratives are also effective in offering an alternative discourse to what Sara Ahmed calls the narratives of assumed crisis. Such narratives are formed when hate that circulates in host societies are organized to invent and generate a subject who is “presented as endangered by imagined others whose proximity threatens not only to take something away from the subject (jobs, security, wealth), but also take the place of the subject” (Ahmed 2004, 117).

## Violence and Dislocation at Sea

“Home”

no one leaves home unless  
home is the mouth of a shark  
you only run for the border  
when you see the whole city running as well  
[...]  
you only leave home  
when home won’t let you stay.  
[...]

you have to understand,  
that no one puts their children in a boat  
unless the water is safer than the land  
[...]

i want to go home,  
but home is the mouth of a shark  
home is the barrel of the gun  
and no one would leave home  
unless home chased you to the shore  
[...]

(Warsan Shire 2011)

The British-born Somali poet Warsan Shire poignantly sums up the violence that characterizes a refugee’s homeland. In her poem, the comfortable,

welcoming space of the homeland transforms into an uninhabitable space laced with violence, a space that forces people to leave. Violence lies at the core of any refugee crisis. What originates in their homeland, accompanies the refugees throughout their journeys. Such violence not only defines refugees' lives, but also accompanies their discourse and eventually ends with their dehistoricization. Scholars like Joseph Pugliese, Hakim Abderrezak, and Mariangela Palladino (2020) have delineated the dehumanization and violence that refugees at sea (and their bodies) undergo. *A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea* describes one such scene of tragic violence on the sea, when the sea devours not only humans but also their hope and spirits:

Approximately one hundred people had initially survived the shipwreck, but as the night wore on, more people would die from cold, exhaustion, and despair. Some who had lost their families gave up, taking off their life jackets and allowing themselves to sink into the sea. At one point Doaa heard desperate shouts as fellow passengers attempted to give hope to one young man who had removed his life jacket. “Don’t do it,” the other survivors pleaded. “Please don’t give up.” But the young man pushed the life jacket away and sank head down into the sea. He was so close to Doaa, she could almost touch him. (Fleming 2017, 161)

The violence of dying a slow death in sea is further burdened by the trauma of witnessing people give up on their lives. Rohingya testimonies of being left adrift in boats at sea for months without food, water, and medication is a narrative of extreme tragic violence. Rejection of refugees by closing down borders and not allowing them to deboard and refoulement, or forcibly returning refugees to their land of persecution, are other forms of violence that these people face often.

Hakim Abderrezak connects the structural and racial violence on refugee bodies with the “anxiety about particular racialized bodies passing through the sieve [of the sea]; finally, as ‘seametary,’ he addresses the irony that a place of flows can also become the world’s largest marine cemetery” (as quoted in Farrier 2020, 354, also see 383–7). Violence at sea can be further contextualized through Joseph Pugliese’s concept of *zoopolitics*, to situate deaths and dehumanization<sup>10</sup> at sea in a biopolitical framework, thereby institutionalizing violence on refugee bodies. He writes,

Zoopolitics, in the context of asylum seeker marine deaths, evidence the lethal effects of that combinatory form that I have elsewhere termed

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<sup>10</sup> Pugliese further speaks about how Italian fishermen turf corpses back into the sea “as though they were simply an unpalatable part of their catch” (2020, 356).

racio-speciesism, which binds targeted human subjects to the possibility of being killed or being allowed to die with impunity, precisely as though they were non-human animals. I deploy the term racio-speciesism as the subjects of the Global South who have died in their thousands in the Mediterranean are people of color from Africa, Asia, and the Middle-East branded with the racio-speciesist imprimatur of being less than human. (2020, 357)

In their article on the global refugee crisis, J. Craig Jenkins and Susanne Schmeidl sum up the main factors behind such a major boom in the refugee population in the recent years: “a combination of ‘weak’ neo-patrimonial regimes, ethnic and class exclusion, state-building demands for ideological and ethnic homogeneity, competition between rival ethnic groups, economic peripheralization, and political dependence on the major world powers” (1995, 63). Climate change has also had a major impact on the movement of the refugees; the three-year-long drought in Syria in 2007 caused massive displacement when farmers were forced to abandon their lands and move to the cities for employment. Such significant displacement and the ensuing discontent are said to have set off a culminating wave of protests in 2011. These factors have in one way, or another contributed to political violence: “[W]hether it stems from ethnic pogroms, guerilla insurgencies, state terrorism or as a result of international wars and military invasions, political violence has been the common factor in all of these refugee flows” (1995, 72). Large-scale human rights abuse is at the center of these situations, combined with more specific and relevant situations unique to such turbulent societies. However, violence in postcolonial societies can be traced to their colonial pasts. Racial violence practiced through colonialism, genocide, and the slave trade forms the core of European modernity, its very essence, and it is the presence of the subhuman other in the periphery that stabilized and centered European humanism. From this point of view,

[t]he current refugee crisis is a part of Europe’s ongoing encounter with the world that it created through more than 500 years of empire, colonial conquest, and slavery. [...] From the beginning of the Pan-European movement in the 1920s to its institutionalization in the European Economic Community (EEC), European integration was inextricably bound up with the question of Europe’s continued dominance over Africa. (Danewid 2017, 1680)

Violence has manifested in Arab and African societies in many forms. While the body of the nation state has been the site of civil war, political uprisings, and necropolitics, the body of its citizens has been the site of

displacement, deprivation, and allied forms of violence. In some cases, the battered bodies of the citizens merged with the violent necropolitical state, as exemplified in Doaa’s narrative. In Syria, Bashar Al Assad’s government called dissenting protesting citizens “conspirators” pushing an “Israeli agenda”:

Doaa was confused as she watched the broadcast. When Assad was talking about “terrorists,” he was referring to her friends, family, and neighbors? *We are not terrorists!* She thought adamantly. But when it came to the shooting of unarmed demonstrators in Daraa, all Assad would say was that “mistakes” had been made and that “not all the demonstrators were conspirators.” He wouldn’t condemn the acts of brutal repression that were carried out by the security forces. At that moment Doaa realized that the struggle was just beginning and her country was coming apart. (Fleming 2017, 38)

From repression of citizens and killing of dissidents, to stripping citizens of statehood and the authoritarian regime turning against its own people—such societies exemplify the uninhabitable spaces that are filled with violence, which eventually extends to the sea with fleeing people. However, leaving such uninhabitable spaces behind is sometimes only the beginning of more violence. Displacement and dislocation, which are in themselves violent processes, bring refugee lives into a state of suspension. Bromley succinctly summarizes the impact of displacement:

Displacement, in all senses of the word, dominates the experience of asylum seekers as their journey from country to country, crossing borders in search of refuge. Although they are moving in time, in a sense they are out of time as well as out of place, in a state of arrested development, being temporarily arrested in time in the waiting zone, whether it be airport, accommodation center or detention center. When the journeying stops and they find themselves in the waiting zone, they will be infantilized, rendered static and inert, subject to curfews and a behavioral regime of containment that strips them of agency, vice and adulthood: sleeping in bunk beds, barred from alcohol, regulated and reduced to passive dependency and submission. (2021, 65)

## Passengers in the Same Boat

The figure of the boat, which has been an integral part of sea voyages and symbolic of adventure, aspiration as well as tragedy and trauma, has become a trope in refugee literature. This cultural artefact has come a long

way from housing and transporting colonial aspirations, to being analyzed as a heterotopic space, “a floating piece of space” (Foucault 1980, 27) and finally becoming an integral part of refugee deaths at sea. While Foucault’s conceptualization of the vessel as heterotopia is “celebratory colonialist,” as Pugliese terms it aptly, his concept of a boat “as a place without a place, that exists by itself, [...] is given over to the infinity of the sea” (1980, 27) somewhat resonates with the unsettling, undetermined, and unending journeys on sea. Boats have resurfaced in this context as a particularly treacherous space, very much like the sea. However, so many refugee narratives give similar accounts of rusty, rickety boats unfit for oceans that re-emphasize the aspect of disposability of refugee lives. Overcrowded boats capsizing in mid-sea, killing everyone on board, have become a regular feature of migration headlines. A substantial part of the fear about crossing the sea is attached to the dilapidated conditions of these vessels that smugglers use to continue with their business. Pugliese in his article explains how boat capsizing tragedies, which are preventable, are not investigated and these disasters are written off as “phantom shipwrecks” (2009, 676), since refugee bodies are termed by him as “bodies of water” (2006, 18) and “literally signified nothing: invisibilized, transparent, they were mere phantoms that could neither represent themselves nor be represented” (676). There have also been narratives of desperate refugees intentionally throwing themselves and their children off their boats in order to be rescued by the navy and the coastguard (referred to earlier in this article), which are often false narratives reflecting racial violence and anxiety in the societies that generate such ideas.

Boats have been described in refugee narratives as one of the uninhabitable spaces, overcrowded, instable, and often rendered uninhabitable due to the stench of long journeys or from refugees soiling themselves out of fear of the sea (Passarlay 2015). Refugees are very often forced to continue with their journeys in these boats due to lack of other options and also because of their dilapidated condition. Doaa’s narrative speaks of such boats being wrongly advertised to lure in more refugees for a dangerous trip:

Doaa felt a chill of panic. She and Bassem had never quite believed that the ship that would take them to Europe would look like the cruise liners that were advertised on some of the smugglers’ Facebook pages, or the “four-star ship” their front man had described to them over the phone. But this boat’s decrepit state was far below their expectations. Its blue paint was peeling and its rims had turned to rust. The apparatus on board for hauling nets made it clear that the boat was a fishing trawler, not a passenger ship. (Fleming 2017, 145)

Additionally, such narratives speak about relationships and solidarity that are forged in the precarious spaces of the boats since human connection provides some relief in an otherwise very stressful journey. People share stories and pray together and hope for a successful culmination of the voyage. A lonesome boat packed with humans floating at sea can symbolize human bonding in the face of inclement nature, full of hopes of survival and a better future. Maritime spaces, despite their power to instill dread in the human heart, will remain as repositories of such hopes.

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Marlena Tronicke

## “Keep the secrets of the past buried”: *Taboo’s Salt Water Hauntings*

**ABSTRACT** Whilst fiction classified as “neo-Victorian” has provided radical interrogations of Victorian discourses concerning gender, sexuality, and class, critical enquiries into Britain’s imperial past have long played a comparatively minor role. One recent exception is the BBC’s *Taboo* (2017), whose first series reimagines Britain’s involvement in the trading of enslaved Africans. This article explores the series’ ambivalent spatial politics, specifically its positioning of salt water as a signifier of death and colonial power. *Taboo* depicts various ways in which the colonized oceans return to haunt the British—no doubt a commentary on Britain’s reluctant reappraisal of its imperial history. At the same time, however, the series repeatedly resorts to colonialist narrative patterns and tropes of the imperial Gothic. In doing so, I suggest, *Taboo* eventually undermines its own critical stance, instead betraying a considerable amount of perplexity regarding the question of how to narrate empire in the twenty-first century.

**KEYWORDS** empire, (neo-)Victorianism, period drama, salt water, *Taboo*, transatlantic enslavement

### Introduction

*Taboo* opens with an aerial shot across the sea. The camera tracks over the calm water until a ship comes into view, moves up to its masts, and then cuts to a small dinghy being rowed away from the ship. In the next shots, we see a dark, hooded figure riding ashore on horseback. He digs a hole, takes off the hood to reveal himself as the protagonist James Keziah Delaney (Tom Hardy), and then buries a bundle in the earth, which we later learn contains stolen diamonds. Subsequently, the camera cuts to the skyline of a gloomy and rainy London, and here the editing makes clear it is through Delaney’s eyes that we encounter the metropolis for the first time.

In this way, the opening sequence establishes salt water as a vital theme, an element that defines its protagonist and that charts a cartography in which imperial oceans are connected with the metropolitan “centre.” In addition, the opening sequence thus introduces the predominant theme of *Taboo*’s first season: the breaking of surfaces in the search for what lies concealed beneath; the digging for, as well as the burying of, secrets.

The inaugural episode of the BBC’s 2017 neo-Victorian series, which is co-created by Steven Knight, lead actor Hardy as well as his father Chips Hardy, and produced by Ridley Scott, follows James Delaney returning to London to attend the funeral of his father in 1814. He has inherited a plot of land, Nootka Sound, which is located on the west coast of Vancouver Island. It is of strategic importance to both parties involved in the British-American War of 1812 because it provides a gateway to China. Based on this premise, the first season follows the East India Company’s (EIC) attempts to secure the land from Delaney. In the process of this, layer by layer the company’s involvement in the trading of enslaved Africans (see Pinkston 2018), the greatest of the series’ many taboo topics, is unearthed. Delaney spent several years in an undefined part of Africa, and soon it becomes evident that he returned not only a rich but also a traumatized man, haunted by what he experienced there. In terms of both themes and aesthetics, *Taboo* thus embraces imperial Gothic traditions, prototypical examples of which include late-Victorian texts such as H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885) or Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle* (1897).<sup>1</sup> Like *Taboo*, the imperial Gothic envisions the British Empire as a realm of endless opportunities on the one hand and an imminent threat to the colonizers’ physical as well as mental well-being on the other. Patrick Brantlinger identifies the three central themes of the late-nineteenth-century imperial Gothic as “individual regression or going native; an invasion of civilization by the forces of barbarism or demonism; and the diminution of opportunities for adventure and heroism in the modern world” (1988, 230), which are all present in *Taboo* at least to some extent. Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), another staple of imperial Gothic, is perhaps *Taboo*’s most immediate intertext, but the premises of the two scenarios are reversed: whereas in Conrad’s novella Marlow lays out the “horrors” he saw, Delaney does not speak a single word about what exactly happened in Africa. Instead, access

1 Tropes associated with the imperial Gothic are also traceable in Victorian classics such as Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) or Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), but the imperial Gothic originates in what is commonly labelled “Oriental Gothic,” that is, eighteenth-century texts such as William Beckford’s *Vathek* (1786). On the relationship between Romanticism, Orientalism, and the Gothic see Kitson 2015.

to the past is relayed in haunting images reminding him of his intricate involvement in Britain’s imperial venture.

As mentioned above, the show is preoccupied with surfaces and surface-breaking, with dissection. Throughout, surfaces are first smoothed and concealed, only to be ripped apart in the next instant—as for example in the case of Delaney’s father, whose body is buried, then exhumed, and finally anatomized. At first glance, this imagery seems indicative of a critical interrogation of imperial legacies. In this article, I therefore explore the ambivalent spatial politics of *Taboo* by focusing on its most pertinent and frequently recurring surface: the ocean. The history of empire is inextricably linked with, or founded on, salt water. Oceans opened pathways to the “new world” and, thus, to the expansion of empire. Ever since its beginnings in the fifteenth century, colonialism increasingly advanced “[t]he politicization and militarization of oceanic space” (Mancke 1999, 226), rendering oceans the sites of ever more violent competition between European colonial powers. Most importantly, however, salt water recalls the effects and aftereffects of transatlantic enslavement. As Paul Gilroy has argued, the continuous “movements of black people—not only as commodities but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship” articulated a Black consciousness on either side of the Atlantic (1993, 16). This notion of a “black Atlantic,” Gilroy suggests, “provides a means to re-examine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory” that shape Britain (and, indeed, other parts of Europe) until the present day (Gilroy 1993, 16). Against this backdrop, I suggest, it is particularly through the motif of salt water that *Taboo* unfolds its enquiry into the afterimages of empire. The show’s usage of salt water both establishes and complicates narrative as well as symbolic continuity. Whilst on the one hand propagating what Mark Stein has termed “*unfixing* the discourse of empire” (2000, 153; emphasis in original) by properly dissecting the past, *Taboo* repeatedly resorts to colonialist narrative patterns and tropes of the imperial Gothic, thus foreclosing its own critical stance in the same instance.

## **Neo-Victorianism and the Troubled Memory of Empire**

Scrutiny of Britain’s imperial past gains special relevance with regard to neo-Victorianism, which has solidified as a popular mode of contemporary British cultural production. Even though *Taboo* is set in the Regency period and thus is not exactly neo-Victorian in the strictest sense of the term, the framework nevertheless has currency. The benefits and disadvantages of

drawing the line precisely at the dates of Queen Victoria's reign have been discussed at great length. Particularly in the context of the British Empire's *longue durée*, Kate Flint's view that "the length of a reign [...] provides at best only the most tenuous of containers for intellectual and social movements that spill beyond it" (2005, 230) appears apt. We can therefore subsume under the umbrella term "neo-Victorian" those texts that are set sometime in the long nineteenth century. What those texts classified as "neo-Victorian" have in common is that they re-narrate Victorian concerns from a twenty-first-century perspective, highlighting subjects and subjectivities that the Victorians glossed over. Such works therefore exceed a mere regeneration of ideological or aesthetic truisms about the nineteenth century. Instead, they are, as per Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's seminal definition, "*self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" (2010, 4; emphasis in original). Neo-Victorian criticism and creative production expose the ways in which cultural memory has recycled misconceptions about "the Victorians," such as the longstanding critical orthodoxy of an all-white Victorian society. Neo-Victorianism's interrogative potential therefore lies in the challenge or subversion of what is considered a historically "accurate" account of nineteenth-century Britain; it has the potential to expose presumed historical truth as textually inscribed—or "textualized," to use Linda Hutcheon's term (1989, 93).

Despite its revisionist potential, neo-Victorianism is not politically radical *per se*. In fact, critics have justly identified tendencies towards "period fetishism" (Llewellyn 2008, 168), a presentist imposition of twenty-first-century sensibilities and epistemological categories (Hadley 2010, 26),<sup>2</sup> or as a form of historical Orientalism dwelling in the past's alluring Otherness (Kohlke 2008b). Further, they have called attention to the amount of nostalgia traceable in both neo-Victorian texts and attendant academic debate. The latter is particularly prevalent, since the hey-day of neo-Victorian cultural production at the beginning of the twenty-first century coincides with a cultural moment that repeatedly glances back at Britain's former imperial grandeur. Jingoistic nationalism and neo-imperialist rhetoric has pervaded all levels of political discourse prior to, and in the aftermath of, Britain's withdrawal from the European Union—including, but not limited to, then

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2 Hadley adds that "Neo-Victorian fiction, however, seeks to avoid such charges. Its concern with historical narratives is connected to both the Victorian context that it evokes and the contemporary context in which it was written. Consequently, neo-Victorian novels hold out the possibility of establishing an empathetic connection to the past without resulting in presentism" (2010, 26).

Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson’s recital of Rudyard Kipling’s imperialist poem “Mandalay” (1890) during a state visit to Malaysia in September 2017, or Tory backbencher Jacob Rees-Mogg’s invocation of “Victorian greatness” in *The Victorians: Twelve Titans who Forged Britain* (2019). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, whilst neo-Victorian creative output has often provided radical reimaginations of Victorian discourses concerning gender, sexuality, and class, critical enquiries into Britain’s colonial past—transatlantic enslavement in particular—has long played a comparatively minor role. In *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire* (from which I borrow the title for the subsection at hand), Elizabeth Ho has therefore identified postcolonial readings as a relative blind spot in neo-Victorian studies, remarkable insofar as “the Victorian” [...] has become a powerful shorthand for empire in the contemporary global imagination” (2012, 5).<sup>3</sup>

This is not to say that neo-Victorian studies remain entirely ignorant of questions of matters of space as well as their underlying politics. Indeed, scholars have extensively discussed the question of how to define their subject matter, of where to locate the neo-Victorian geographically. Should the label be applied to Britain and countries of the former British Empire only, or would it be more productive to speak of a “global neo-Victorianism” that equally includes the literatures of countries and historical contexts outside of British colonial rule? (Kohlke 2008a; Primorac and Pietrzak-Franger 2015; Llewellyn and Heilmann 2013; Joshi 2011). Despite such an awareness of spatial concerns—as well as of the possible neocolonialist implications the debate brings with it—thorough enquiries into the legacies of empire have only gained momentum in recent years. Neo-Victorian cultural production remains predominantly Anglocentric and white, scarcely featuring Black, Indigenous, or People of Colour (BIPoC) characters, particularly in leading roles. Colonial settings, in many neo-Victorian texts on both page and screen, are still often restricted to the settler colonies of Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, in other words, “these *improper* postcolonialisms defined by a present still haunted and seduced by colonial structures or privilege” (Ho 2012, 11; emphasis in original). More recently, however, neo-Victorian scholarship and cultural production has begun to reorient such debates, specifically focusing on how Blackness—and, with it,

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3 More recently, Ho has reiterated the necessity to broaden the scope of neo-Victorianism beyond the British imperial context. Referring to the history of Hong Kong, which complicates any straightforward investigation into imperial legacies in that it entwines British and Japanese imperial dominion with Chinese hegemony, she remarks that “the nineteenth century can stage many memories of many empires” (Ho 2019, 2), which is why she has edited an entire special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* dedicated to “Neo-Victorian Asia.”

legacies of transatlantic enslavement—are negotiated within the Victorian cultural imaginary (see Espinoza Garrido, Tronicke, and Wacker 2021). And yet, the spatial politics of many neo-Victorian texts remain dubious, because they all too often disregard the realities of empire altogether, convey the notion of a predominantly white empire, or else suggest that imperialism “happened elsewhere,” securely located outside the British Isles. In conceptualizing the field of neo-Victorian studies, the centring of salt water therefore significantly impacts the debate on whether “Victorian” should be understood as an exclusively British or rather as a transatlantic phenomenon.

## Fluid Imperial Surfaces

*Taboo* forms an exception to the ostensible imperial obliviousness found in so many neo-Victorian texts, as it engages the (material) traces of empire head on. To name but a few examples, there are various BIPOC characters (most notably in the areas surrounding the London docks), the stately rooms of the Prince Regent (Mark Gatiss) are decorated with taxidermied zebras, ostriches, and giraffes, and the programme showcases an almost excessive number of maps. Also, Delaney’s newly acquired stepmother and former actress Lorna Bow (Jessie Buckley) is not only Irish but has also appeared onstage in the (fictitious) play “The Painted Savage,” whose grotesque title metonymically reflects the many similar, starkly racist nineteenth-century publications. That way, *Taboo*’s London is clearly marked as the imperial metropolis, a capital whose everyday texture is shaped by the intersections of numerous imperial strands. Admittedly, these are superficial examples. What stays below the surface and threatens to emerge, however, is of greater significance. The imagery of surface-breaking already touched upon in the series’ exposition is fully established in the opening credits, which depict various characters floating in the ocean. Some of them are white (including Delaney himself), some are Black and in chains; some of them are already dead and some are alive for now, still producing bubbles. The credits conclude with Delaney himself trying to swim to the surface, yet we do not see him succeed; instead, the camera remains under water with him. This TV show, the opening credits therefore suggest similarly to the exposition, is about taboos trying to surface, about truths revealing themselves. At the same time, it is indicated, this will be a laborious and maybe fruitless endeavour, full of possibly deadly pitfalls. As both the horrors of the Middle Passage and the boats carrying refugees in the Mediterranean Sea a couple of centuries later powerfully remind us,

salt water is not only a life-giving but also lethal element in which people as well as their histories continue to drown. On a larger scale, this can surely be read as a metaphor for Britain’s reluctance as regards coming to terms with its own imperial past and its self-stylization as an abolitionist nation, “the givers of liberty and freedom” (Hall 2020, 173) rather than enslavers. Whereas this kind of symbolism suggests a progressive and critical portrayal of British imperial legacies, *aesthetically*, the opening credits look much more problematic. On the one hand, the dead bodies resemble a type of jellyfish that have become one with the ocean, an image that touches on the ocean’s ontological status as a salt water graveyard for those who did not, or chose not to, survive the Middle Passage. However, vis-à-vis *Taboo*’s overall grey-and-black colour scheme, which effectively conveys the gloom and menace associated with the imperial Gothic, the luscious blue of this sequence communicates a sense of coolness, of calm and—somewhat paradoxically—of vitality. This not only stands in stark opposition to the “messiness” of empire the show portrays elsewhere but also reduces the victims of transatlantic enslavement to mere aestheticized objects the camera indulges in, thus already prefiguring central ambivalences of the show itself.

As explained in the first episode, the opening credits hint at Delaney’s backstory. He was a crew member aboard the fictionalized EIC ship *Cornwallis* which sailed under the alias *Influence* whenever it illegally carried enslaved Africans. The ship sank close to the African coast with nobody, except Delaney, surviving.<sup>4</sup> The name “Delaney” might thus be read as a reference to Amasa Delano in Herman Melville’s novella “Benito Cereno” (1855), which is equally set on a ship carrying enslaved people. Within the symbolic structure of *Taboo*, the EIC not only functions as the supposedly benign face of aggressive British imperial politics but also represents that which it controls and which its economic power relies on: oceans. In this respect too, salt water functions as a connective element. As Delaney remarks to the lawyer Mr Thoyt, who has betrayed confidential details of his father’s business to the EIC: “You are their whore. The same as

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4 As Andrea Major rightly observes, the sinking of the ship is dated to 1804, i.e. to a time when the trading of enslaved people was still legal in Britain (it was officially abolished with the Slave Trade Act in 1807, but covertly continued in various guises beyond this particular date); thus, this practice only infringes on the EIC’s own trade policy. As far as historical records are concerned, this is only one of the many creative liberties the show takes with regard to historical accuracy. Major writes that “[t]he EIC’s involvement in slave trafficking is a story that deserves to be told, but it was largely confined to the 17th and early 18th centuries, and to the Indian, rather than the Atlantic Ocean” (2017, n.p.).

almost everyone else in this city" (ep. 2, 40:12–40:19), thus acknowledging the extent to which society as a whole is implicated in the imperial system via Britain's colonized oceans. As its main source of Britain's economic prowess, the EIC is introduced in all colonial amenities and pomp—yet also as the seat of sin and decadence, as suggested by this scene's juxtaposition to the preceding scene which shows Delaney's disgust at the gluttony taking place at his father's funeral (ep. 1, 14:15–14:31). Analogously, the EIC's cabinet meeting begins with the close-up of a silver teapot, and afterwards Sir Stuart Strange (Jonathan Pryce) ritualistically pours three cups of tea (ep. 1, 14:44). He is framed by two globes on either side, which denotes the company's claim to global economic control. As the camera zooms out, other insignia of colonial splendour come into view. Within this positioning of the EIC as a global power, the Indian continent as the company's original source of revenue is strangely absent. For historian Andrea Major, the resulting portrait that is painted of the EIC is a distorted one. As she remarks,

many of the crimes it actually did commit, such as facilitating the opium trade, exacerbating rural poverty and famine, and aggressively extracting revenue in India are written out of the narrative. Admittedly, the institutionalised exploitation of colonial resources through over-taxation and the slow drain of wealth are not particularly televisual, but they had long-lasting consequences for Indian society and economy. The silences and exaggerations in the depiction of this period of Britain's colonial past are also important because they speak directly to how we understand the relationship between colonial exploitation and Britain's social, economic and political development. (Major 2017, n.p.)

Put differently, *Taboo* presents a simplified and streamlined version of British colonial rule fashioned for TV audiences. It prioritizes graphic shock value and visual efficacy over less tangible but exceptionally robust forms of exploitation, thus erasing colonial structures and ideologies that are still prevalent today and adding to their normalization or trivialization in socio-political discourse.

What emerges in the following dialogue is not only the company's ruthlessness in their pursuit of Delaney's inheritance but also their forging of history, which stands in for British imperial politics at large. Whenever one of the members raises his hand during the meeting, the scribe automatically stops recording the conversation. So, here, too, truth is prevented from reaching a surface—in this case, paper. This continuous purging of historical records is mirrored in the strategic withholding of information about Delaney. In doing so, *Taboo* makes use of a recurrent trope of

historical cinema, the positioning of the personal in relation to society, which Leger Grindon terms “a vehicle for historical explanation” (1994, 10). However, historical explanation, as far as *Taboo* is concerned, is difficult to unlock, as are Delaney’s personal antecedents. According to one of the company’s members, the rumours about him are “awful and unnatural” (ep. 1, 19:46). Before he gets to reveal what kind of rumours he is talking about, the camera cuts away to Delaney at the shore of the Thames and furthermore only captures him from behind, thus characterizing him as a dubious figure. In this way, *Taboo*’s editing links the EIC with Delaney’s own implication in their scrupulous colonial politics. As a former cadette in their service, he knows what they did and do, as he points out repeatedly. In fact, his first (English) line in the entire programme is “Forgive me, father, for I have indeed sinned” (ep. 1, 03:20–03:27). Yet more importantly, through the character of Delaney, the positions of colonizer and colonized are merged in convoluted and ideologically questionable ways. Delaney himself reveals that rather than from Naples, as has been claimed all his life, his mother was a Canadian Indigenous woman “bought” by his father alongside Nootka Sound in exchange for gunpowder (ep. 1, 24:38–25:00). To attest to his somewhat hybrid status, his body is covered in tattoos that look like a blend of images from various Indigenous cultures, and he repeatedly monologizes in Twi, the language spoken by the Ashanti people in Ghana. In episode three, he even performs a ritual that covers his face in soot and hence symbolically racializes him (ep. 3, 21:23–22:20). Echoing the practice of blackfacing in the minstrelsy tradition, *Taboo* here—inadvertently, I assume—discloses its own problematic politics of representation with the white English actor Tom Hardy in the leading role, as well as an all-white team of lead producers.

At large, the cinematography renders Delaney an inaccessible character, not only via a top hat which habitually projects a shadow across his eyes, but also through a range of irritating close-ups that never fully capture his face. Hardy’s portrayal of Delaney implicitly invokes Heathcliff in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847)—another brooding and racialized Victorian character that ultimately remains rather opaque—whom Hardy played in Coky Giedroyc’s 2009 adaptation for ITV. Throughout *Taboo*, the only glimpse into Delaney’s interior is provided via two kinds of visions or flashbacks. The first evokes the deadliest qualities of salt water, depicting enslaved Africans fighting for their lives on the sinking ship. We first see Delaney, in the present, using hammer and chisel on the wooden floorboards of the ship he just bought in the docks. Triggering a flashback, these movements then cut to a number of Black hands reaching through a cargo hatch and then someone applying the hammer to the hatch (ep. 2,

31:19–31:33). It was Delaney, the camera suggests by way of this visual match, who nailed the cargo hatch shut and thus bears the responsibility for their brutal death. This scene draws heavily on Britain's iconographic archive and is especially reminiscent of the 1999 controversy surrounding the National Maritime Museum's Gallery of Trade and Empire. As part of their permanent exhibition, the Greenwich museum showcased "The Drawing Room," an exhibit distilling Britain's profiting from the horrors of transatlantic enslavement of African people into a single, gruelling image. Deliberately referencing the tacit acceptance of enslavement as Britain's economic base in Jane Austen's 1814 novel *Mansfield Park* (Ezard 1999, n.p.), the installation depicted a figure dressed in the typical Regency fashion drinking tea, with a bowl of sugar as well as bread and butter next to her on the table. Below, and outside of her field of vision, visitors could see a Black hand stretching through the cargo hatch of a ship. Prior to the exhibition's opening, the museum "warned that its new permanent exhibition on the British empire would be 'unflinching'" (Ezard 1999, n.p.), designed to force visitors to confront Britain's, and thus their own, complicity with transatlantic enslavement in a particularly visceral manner. Across the board of various media, however, the exhibit caused outrage, with various critics accusing the museum of "depriving the British people of any aspect of their history in which they can take justifiable pride" (Ezard 1999, n.p.). After increasing concern from its trustees, the museum decided to remove the exhibit.<sup>5</sup> If read alongside this exhibit as a meaningful, if ill-fated, attempt at addressing Britain's imperial legacies, *Taboo* relates its own struggle to provide an adequate response to this question. It positions itself in a cultural context in which such a reappraisal of history is not only laborious but also, at least to some extent, unwelcome.

The second vision Delaney encounters repeatedly features a female figure standing in water. She wears a black, feathered dress as well as face paint, and whenever this vision occurs, her face is distorted in agony. The Canadian Indigenous, namely Nuu-chah-nulth, origin of Delaney's mother Salish (Noomi Rapace) suggests that the figure might be her, an assumption which is confirmed in episode two, when the vision occurs to Delaney whilst he tries to locate the Nootka Sound treaty (ep. 2, 24:25–24:32). The choice of "Salish," i.e. an Indigenous language group neighbouring the Nuu-chah-nulth, as the name for Delaney's mother bespeaks the show's repeated conflation and streamlining of cultural contexts and communities. In episode three, Delaney finally finds the black dress the woman wears in

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5 For a more detailed analysis of the exhibit, including images as well as an overview of its discussion in the press, see Stein 2000.

his own house. We learn that Salish died from some form of “madness,” and that she spent much time in Bedlam whenever she refused to impersonate Spanish and Italian nobility to amuse her husband. Echoing the fate of Charlotte Brontë’s Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* (1847), she spent the last months of her life locked up in her room. According to Delaney’s manservant Brace, who in turn was told by Delaney’s father, Salish attempted to drown the baby James a few days after birth; this, it can be inferred, is the moment Delaney revisits in his flashbacks. Throughout the series, other characters conjecture that Delaney might have inherited his mother’s “madness,” and so in addition to the Victorian trope of what Elaine Showalter has termed the “female malady”—that is, “a cultural tradition that represents ‘woman’ as *madness*” (2008, 4; emphasis in original)—the label “madness” here functions as an oppressive tool that not only genders but racializes Salish’s Otherness. Because Salish is already dead, there is no counter-discourse to these reports, except Delaney’s own scepticism.

All we get of the two colonial contexts of North America and Africa are images, but they are fragmented and hence deny access. Unlike Marlow’s detailed account in *Heart of Darkness*, here colonial space resists narrative containment and interpretation through the white British colonizer, thus objecting to a second colonization through narrative. The colony as a traditionally coercive space of intersecting racialized power structures is reimagined as a space of resistance, if only tentatively so. Salt water, then, controls the spatial politics of *Taboo*: it connects individual characters, all of whom have crossed oceans at one time or another; it opens a window into the past which remains otherwise concealed to the audience; and it announces itself as a powerful, if not unavoidable, anchor for critical forays into Victorian Britain that cannot be contained or suppressed.

Despite thus identifying both Indigenous populations and enslaved peoples as the victims of Britain’s predatory politics, the ways in which *Taboo* employs the tropes of madness and haunting divulge a questionable politics of emotion. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed establishes “emotion as a form of cultural politics or world making” (2014, 12). She challenges the common assumption that feelings occur naturally, as it were, elicited by others. Rather, she understands emotions as resulting from the attribution of specific interpretive categories, which in itself forms a political act. As Ahmed suggests, we experience others as fearful only once we, prompted via discriminatory discourses, have attributed the label “threat” to their bodies (Ahmed 2014, 72). Against this backdrop, the question of who suffers and who is in turn portrayed as causing harm, is pertinent. In *Taboo*, all suffering is mapped onto the male hero, who, even though racialized within the diegesis, is played by a white actor and

hence *visually* reads as white. Whilst Salish's suffering, conveyed via flashbacks only, serves as a substitute to position Delaney in a larger history of suffering and violation, Black bodies are identified as a source of threat. Apparitions of enslaved people drowned in the sinking of the *Cornwallis* haunt Delaney's sleep, their agonized cries disturbing his peace of mind and demanding a final reckoning. In this manner, *Taboo* not only reprocesses and reaffirms the imperial Gothic's narrative of the suffering white, male colonizer but also feeds into the discourse of Britain's imperial past as painful for both sides involved.

The question of exactly how critically *Taboo* engages with imperial legacies equally concerns the question of genre. Critics have addressed the show's general over-the-top-ness, which seems to be the prime reason for its lukewarm critical reception.<sup>6</sup> Granted, Hardy's Delaney is a constantly ill-tempered character in an incestuous relationship with his half-sister who habitually beats up or slashes other people; in all corners of a dark, mud-ridden, and simply filthy London bones crack and blood spurts; and Delaney's harrowing flashbacks hardly fall within the realm of other popular forms of contemporary period and heritage cinema à la *Downton Abbey*. The diegetic prioritization of imperial crimes, too, could be deemed atypical of conventional period drama. Most overtly, glossing over of the realities of empire applies to the so-called heritage films in the manner of the 1980s and early 1990s Merchant Ivory adaptations of Victorian classics. As Andrew Higson points out, this filmic tradition promotes "conservative ideals, and avoids addressing the cultural and racial diversity of a changing Britain" and instead "focus[es] on a highly circumscribed set of traditions, those of the privileged, white, Anglo-Saxon community who inhabit lavish properties in a semi-rural Southern England, within striking distance of the metropolitan seat of power" (2003, 26–7). Whereas since the 1990s various adaptations of Victorian classics have moved a little further and critically investigated notions of gender and sexuality, many of them remained, and in fact often remain, rooted in Orientalist aesthetics and imperial ideologies (see Primorac 2018, 55–95). For its obvious departure from heritage cinema, Sarah Hughes locates *Taboo* in the legacy of *Hammer House of Horror* (1980), *Witchfinder General* (1968), and *The Wicker Man*

6 For Sonia Saraiya, "[p]onderous and heavy-handed, this new period drama wastes its talented actors on chiaroscuro and angst" (2017, n.p.). Paul MacInnes rather fittingly likens *Taboo* to "one of those hidden stages at Glastonbury where you turn up expecting Mumford and Sons and instead get three circus performers riding naked on a bear while a wrinkled man, equally naked, shouts polemical blank verse over his cousin's remix of the Prodigy played entirely on squeezebox" (2017, n.p.).

(1973); in her words, a filmic tradition that “cares little for actual historical detail, operating instead under its own weird rules where atmosphere is everything and each plot development comes accompanied by its own sense of creeping dread” (Hughes 2017, n.p.). Clearly, her use of the phrase “historical detail” is contentious, but in the case of *Taboo*’s engagement with British imperial politics, it even seems that the opposite is true: by struggling to keep the “creeping dread” of empire beneath the surface, *Taboo* is *more* historically “accurate” than most other period films and TV series that eschew the topic altogether. At the same time, its rendition of images of empire is conventional and in various instances suspect. *Taboo*’s emphasis on violence, dirt, and the general unpleasantness of nineteenth-century Britain are generic features of post-heritage cinema, which Claire Monk defines in opposition to heritage cinema as such films “self-consciously seek to distance themselves (aesthetically, politically, and/or in terms of content or its treatment) from heritage filmmaking” (2011, 101). A tenet of post-heritage cinema is a professed lack of nostalgia towards the past—Antonija Primorac more accurately speaks of “reflective” as opposed to “restorative nostalgia” (2015, 38)—yet arguably *Taboo* is a distinctly nostalgic series. The outright fetishist depiction of Delaney and particularly his physicality (which no doubt caters to Hardy’s fan base) betray a nostalgic longing for a long-lost, hands-on, and violent “imperial masculinity.” Delaney solves problems through blackmail, violence, and bribery—in other words, attributes that similarly underpin the wide-ranging support for such transgressive male figures as Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro who propagate the end of what is widely and dubiously labelled “political correctness” and display a striking penchant for a return to imperial grandeur and exploitative structures. Even if identification with Delaney is intentionally complicated, the show’s entire appeal stands and falls with the viewer’s attempt to at least root for him as the protagonist. Tied to him as the only possible focal character, the recycling of the above tropes is too pervasive not to be deemed nostalgic and, hence, perpetuates neo-imperialist sentiments.

## Conclusion

Imperialism, as depicted on this programme, is a distinctly messy undertaking, a message that is equally communicated by the serialized format. Rather than presenting a straightforward narrative, background information and supposed truths are unlocked gradually from one episode to another—often via flashbacks that are difficult to pinpoint—and even at the

end of series one, many questions regarding Delaney's backstory remain unanswered. All of this complicates the notion of narrative coherence as such, particularly when it comes to narrating empire. Regarding the concrete use of salt water on this show, I have shown how in *Taboo*'s most prevalent imperial surface, the ocean consistently features as a symbol of violence and colonial exploitation—in the various flashbacks of enslaved people drowning aboard a sinking slave ship as well as in the visions of Delaney's mother, in dead bodies floating in the ocean, or embodied by EIC representatives. Whereas both the Americas and the African continent feature as absent presences only, through Delaney's mother and drowned Africans, the recurrence of water thus spans a spatial imaginary of imperial power, with the true nature of its concealed atrocities only gradually rising to the surface. At the same time, though, through both the legal investigation into the sinking of the *Cornwallis* and Delaney's fragmented memories, the colonized oceans return to haunt the British. As Toni Morrison has famously put it, “[a]ll water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was” (1995, 99). These salt water hauntings counter the subliminal submersion of imperial legacies and attendant guilt, not only within the show's diegesis itself but also in British society at large. “I hope I can trust you to keep the secrets of the past buried—buried in a deeper grave,” Delaney's sister Zilpha (Oona Chaplin) writes in a letter to him at the end of episode one (ep. 1, 54:30–54:40). What she means is, of course, their past affair, but these lines equally apply to the theme of empire critique. In the same way as Delaney's affair with his sister is taken out of the grave the very moment it is mentioned in the series, Britain's imperial legacies cannot remain buried either. They will inevitably rise to the surface—of political and critical discourse as well as cultural production. In true neo-Victorian fashion, *Taboo* thus contours cultural continuities between nineteenth- and twenty-first-century discourses of empire, more specifically a convenient forgetfulness of Britain's acquisitive greed.

As Stein asserts with reference to the aforementioned exhibit “The Drawing Room” at the National Maritime Museum, “[t]he British Empire cannot be *undone* in the sense of reversing it or restoring preceding historical conditions. Likewise, its effects cannot be annulled or cancelled. However, *unfixing* the discourse of empire, opening it up, and interpreting its history and its current efficacy, such types of undoing are both possible and necessary” (2000, 153; emphasis in original). As its own muddled, and indeed often troubling, imagery and ideological inconsistencies demonstrate, *Taboo* discloses a considerable amount of perplexity with regard to the question of how to “unfix” the discourse of empire in neo-Victorian

fiction. Both the show’s politics of emotion and its nostalgic presentation of the hero reaffirm rather than deconstruct colonial hierarchies. Another such example is the “white saviour” trope the show taps into when the Sons of Africa lawyer George Chichester (Lucian Msamati) can only prove the EIC’s involvement in the sinking of the *Cornwallis* with Delaney’s help. Considering how influential the nineteenth century has been, and continues to be, regarding the question of how to define Britishness, neo-Victorian literature more than any other form of historical fiction takes a strategic position in such “types of undoing.” It is thus all the more imperative for re-readings of Britain’s imperial history to take seriously their own reliance on conventionally imperialist narrative tropes and images. Such re-readings need to scrutinize their own hauntings of imperial salt waters to move beyond mere lip-service to postcolonial reappraisals of nineteenth-century British politics as well its aftereffects on the present day.

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Oluseun Adekunmi Tanimomo 

## **Waterscapes of Waste and Wealth: Environmental Pollution in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water***

**ABSTRACT** Helon Habila's 2011 novel, *Oil on Water*, fictionalizes the socio-political effect of petrol extraction on Nigeria and relies on bodies of water to convey its focus on environmental pollution by constructing through imagery and sentient personification the decay, foulness, and death in the aftermath of oil pollution. Thus, this study draws from Elizabeth DeLoughrey's examination of Atlantic modernity as a receptacle of wasted lives. In the novel, petroleum modernity's violence is embodied in the way the bodies of water are burdened with the weight of oil pollution, which has a telling effect on the ecosystem and the lives of the characters. Therefore, the water bodies can be read as signs of the burdens of industrial modernity's violence enacted on certain bodies and places. The subsisting extractive regime has resulted in a historically violent and destructive inscription on the novel's waterscapes.

**KEYWORDS** Helon Habila, Niger Delta, environment, water, oil

### **Introduction**

Much has been written on the environmental harm committed by oil multinationals in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. These writings have amplified the discourse of the resource curse and have further exposed the ecological degradation that is reshaping the economy and geopolitics of the Niger Delta. This does not neglect the fact that adequate attention has still not been paid to the oil spills and environmental damage in the region; that is, there is continued invisibility in global awareness about the catastrophe, which is caused by the power dynamics in the world and the spatial and temporal distance of the hazards. Environmental scholars interested in

the Niger Delta have all noted these points. I seek to further the debate by pointing at how, in Helon Habila's novel *Oil on Water* (2011), water and waterscapes direct and shape the lives and geographies of the Niger Delta and subaltern subjectivities that are represented as forgotten, suppressed, and avoided. Furthermore, water bodies are viable environmental categories that squash the nature/culture dualism of established Western/Northern thought and specific environmental concerns. However, they carry the weight of oil pollution in more critical ways as they occupy important positions in structuring the novel's narrative frame.

## A World Shaped by Water and Waste

Elizabeth DeLoughrey, in her article "Heavy Waters: Waste and Atlantic Modernity," uses the concept of heavy water to demonstrate "an oceanic stasis that signals the dissolution of wasted lives" (DeLoughrey 2010, 703) in Atlantic modernity. She discusses further "how Atlantic inscriptions rupture the naturalizing flow of history, foregrounding a now-time that registers violence against the wasted lives of modernity in the past and the present" (2010, 704). DeLoughrey is concerned chiefly with the traumatic, violent, and military history that the Atlantic embodies and its import to enslavement and neo-imperial history. Accounts of brutal Atlantic modernity of heavy waters are extant on the Atlantic portion of the West African subcontinent, where corporal and environment violence manifest in uncontrolled waste production, the domination of oil multinationals, and military complexes of government apparatuses. Here, the focus is on the Niger Delta, where water bodies can be designated as heavy because they contain the superfluity of petrol production and the wasted lives of ongoing industrial modernity fuelled by petrol energy.

Helon Habila's novel *Oil on Water* shows this heaviness by presenting land- and waterscapes that are burdened by the imagery of foulness caused by the waste matter of oil on water; this leads to environmental, social, and physical decay and death. Therefore, the water bodies are an apt metonymy for the ecological destruction and ontological instability that follow the extractive oil economy. While this article understands that the topography of the Niger Delta includes lands, creeks, swamps, rivers, and an ocean, it argues that Helon Habila utilizes the oil excess and dead matter on the bodies of water categorically to illustrate the extent of environmental pollution around the Niger Delta. In this way, the bodies of water align with DeLoughrey's use of heavy water to describe the Atlantic Ocean as a receptor of dead weight and modernity's waste, such that the

history of modernity “is registered by the heavy metal waste in its waters [...] and the rise of modernity [w]as reflected in its maritime waste” (707–8). Though DeLoughrey’s work concentrates on the traumatic memory of enslavement and the “violent corporal history of the Atlantic” (703), her idea can be extrapolated to the issue of environmental degradation and waters in the Niger Delta as the aqua-physical environment of the Niger Delta is, in many ways, heavy with ecological waste production of oil exploration and industrialization. According to Zygmunt Bauman, this production of waste is an inevitable outcome of modernization and “an inseparable accompaniment of modernity” (Bauman 2004, 5). In this way, one may understand the production of petrol waste and environmental degradation in the Niger Delta as consequences of industrial modernity’s dependence on energy and fossil fuel and the continuous extractive economy which was engendered by (post)colonial exploitation. Oil thus contradictorily marks modern development as a significant source of energy for contemporary subsistence in the way that Stephanie LeMenager has described as “a medium that fundamentally supports all modern media forms” (2014, 6), and on the other hand, oil results in high carbon emissions and environmental pollution in many places. As a result, oil contributes to the socio-cultural and materialist production of place as habitable or uninhabitable and alters Indigenous people’s cultural and economic practices through the chemical and toxic transformation of the environment. In the case of the Indigenous of the Niger Delta, the “economies of violence”<sup>1</sup> that oil extraction, transformation, distribution, and financialization manufacture are detrimental to land and water.

This article focuses on the marine environment and argues that there seems to be a binary opposition that constructs land as lived space and water as threatening, vast, and uninhabitable in studies of the biophysical circumstances of life. Antonis Balasopoulos (2006) and Daniel Brayton (2012) have, for example, discussed how the Hellenic, Greek, and Judeo-Christian cultures constructed the sea and ocean as unstable, dangerous, vast, and chaotic. This false contradiction has been disputed by scholars like Paul Gilroy (1993) and Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2010), who demonstrate that the Atlantic constitutes the epistemologies, cultures, and histories of many people. In his well-cited work *Poetics of Relation*, Édouard Glissant (1997) has shown how, beyond the rhetoric of an untameable empty nature, the Atlantic Ocean contains the traumatic memories of enslavement, shared knowledge, and erasure. All these contribute to understanding the

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1 Michael Watts (2004, 55) uses this term to point at the series of conflicts, violence and ungovernability that oil exploration produces.

ocean and other water bodies not as “empty” space but as space shaped by experiences, epistemologies, history, and politics. Similarly, Stefan Helmreich has pointed at the inadequacies of conceptualizing seas as “nature” in binary opposition to the category “culture.” He instead argues that “water as culture, meanwhile, can materialize as a medium of pleasure, sustenance, travel, poison, and disaster” (Helmreich 2011, 132). This deconstruction of dichotomies between water bodies as nature, as opposed to land as culture, will animate my arguments. Therefore, the conception of water here hinges on the grounds that waterscapes are multiplex, natural, and cultural phenomena, well imbued with symbolisms and embodied with the tangible materiality of nature. Thus, through its geographical, historical, social, cultural, and religious interaction with the bodies of water, the Niger Delta merges the categories of culture and nature and provides a pretext to understanding the social, cultural, and environmental impact of oil pollution in the area, as represented in *Oil on Water*.

The emphasis on land- and waterscapes serves two purposes in the novel. Firstly, by reading the contiguity of waterscapes and landscapes, the novel defies the premise of water as vast and uncountable nature that is opposed to culture. Instead, the novel’s spatial setting is represented in such a way that the imagined emptiness of water bodies is cut into tiny lived spaces through which characters have a sense of place. Hence, narrative events and actions occur on land and water, and both spaces have social and historical importance for the novel’s plot. In this way, the novel participates in the deconstruction of earlier narrative writings like Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, which saw the ocean and seas as timeless and outside history and merely a passage for adventure. On the contrary, in *Oil on Water*, the seas and water bodies bear marks of both human and natural history as petrol waste ecologically, toxically, and spatially alters the biosphere of the represented Niger Delta. Secondly, *Oil on Water* continues in the tradition of environmental writing in the Niger Delta that uses the trope of polluted oily water to depict the extent of environmental degradation. The environmental narratives of Kaine Agary (2006) and May Ifeoma Nwoye (2015) and the poems and writings of Nnimmo Bassey (2002) have used this trope of polluted rivers and ocean in their writings, often to show the grotesque extent of oil extraction pollution. Furthermore, Oyeniyi Okunoye (2008) and Sule Emmanuel Egya (2016) have analysed, in social, historical, political, and ecological ways, how two rivers in the Niger Delta, the rivers Nun and Omoja, have symbolic and spiritual importance for the representations of the environment in the works of writers like Gabriel Okara and Tanure Ojaide. In Habila’s writing, what is also evident is how land- and waterscapes are mapped

out and appropriated by individuals and multinationals to demonstrate the disproportionality in oil wealth benefits.

Therefore, by focusing on the rivers, creeks, sea, and islands, the novel demonstrates how the political economy of oil values financialization over the environment by fictionalizing multinational oil pollution as destructive of flora, fauna, and the ways of being of the characters. The Indigenous people represented in the novel have to contend and live with the consequences of a despoiled environmental space. The novel relies heavily on watery topographies to convey its aspect of environmental pollution by constructing, through imagery and sentient personification, the tragic experiences and conditions of being invisible, which are mostly fictionalized through foulness, grime, and subjugation of both people and “nature.” The text’s reliance on waterscapes is, in fact, remarkable when one considers the cultural, religious, and economic importance of water to the people of the Niger Delta since the “Delta’s myriad rivers and creeks not only define a geographic region; they also form a cultural confluence” (Anderson and Peek 2002, 13) through which fishermen, farmers, and traders carry out their economic activities. This “water ethos” carries an aesthetic, religious, and artistic significance, as shrines, masks, and myths are usually invested with a thematic of water and water spirits. This points at the imbrication of water bodies in the daily lives of the inhabitants of the Niger Delta, which in many ways is reflected in the way bodies of water imaginatively mark the economic, social, and geographical world of their artefacts, albeit in complex heterogeneous ways. Importantly, by reading the transformational force of fossil energy on water bodies, this study does two things. Firstly, it recentres environmental concern from a land-centric discussion to an encompassing biophysical consideration that takes into account bodies of water. Secondly, this study reads Habila’s focus on water as a strategic ploy to address the environmental disruption of oil exploration and its human and socio-cultural cost.

## **Analysing *Oil on Water*: Waterscapes and Environmental Pollution**

Helon Habila’s novel *Oil on Water* narrates the adventure of two journalists, Rufus and Zaq, in search of a kidnapped British lady, Isabel Floode, who is also the wife of a multinational oil employee. Presented through a homodiegetic narrator, the text moves through the rivers, creeks, and islands of the Niger Delta, and shows the existential conditions of inhabitants of the island and villages like Chief Ibiram, Chief Malabo, Boma

and Gloria, whose lifeworlds have been altered by the polluted environment. The novel is at pains to show the many actors, like state operatives, militant groups, and journalists like Zaq and Rufus, who shape the perception, materiality, and discourse of the environmental catastrophe. Consequently, *Oil on Water* portrays the environmental injustice and the “resource curse” of petrol in the Niger Delta and creates a fictional account of the ebbs and flows of petroleum prosperity, the extreme poverty, the suffering from the deteriorating environment, and deaths due to toxins, the highhandedness of militants, and government-sanctioned violence. Objects like the pipeline are metonymies for the extractive and appropriative quality of multinational oil companies. The novel then participates in a depiction of petro-culture where the petro-economy results in economic inequality, environmental devastation, and deaths. By petro-culture, I imply that the novel, thematically and formally, takes into account the distinct ways that fossil fuel shapes the social and economic lifeworlds of a text; such texts consider and demonstrate “all points or links in oil’s value chain from (semi-)periphery to core (refined) pipeline liquid to global stock liquidity” (Macdonald 2017, 300). In *Oil on Water*, petrol destructively alters the fictional landscape and creates an immiserated class of Indigenous people whose livelihood is threatened by the polluted environment and existential violence of national militaristic powers and an equally violent guerrilla militia. However, the devastation highlights the socio-economic dynamics of the environmental threat in antagonistic terms in such a way that the producers of pollution and the victims of oil pollution reside in different locations. Byron Caminero-Santangelo has read this in terms of privilege and power for the likes of James Floode. What is important for this study is how the islands and villages are acted upon and shaped to produce “a geography of injustice shaped by oil” (Caminero-Santangelo 2016, 366). Consequently, the division of geographies into hospitable and habitable is an anthropocentric domination and mapping of nature that is shaped by the structures of powers and the oil economy.

Furthermore, geographical features like the creeks, rivers, and sea are depicted as toxic spaces and waste depository. In this way, they carry the burden of oil pollution and relate the precarious conditions left in the wake of uncontrolled and irresponsible oil extraction. Through the waters, the narrator mostly conveys the imagery of pollution that evokes the sense of putrid smell and hideous sight. In contrast to the serene and sublime qualities usually adopted to describe oceans and mangroves as spaces of natural beauty, like in John Steinbeck’s *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (1951) and Carl Safina’s *Song for the Blue Ocean* (1999), this region is not depicted as a pastoral space of natural beauty but as a degraded space that struggles

with its former glory of being home to a diverse ecosystem. The ocean, rivers, creeks, and islands of the Niger Delta are described as diseased, evident in Rufus's belief that it is "somewhere in these godforsaken waters, that's where he [Zaq] must have picked it [his fever] up. There are plenty of bugs flourishing here" (Habila 2011, 90). The novel is at pains to link the ominous waterscape to the oil and belligerence on the island. The doctor confirms this position by connecting death and decay to the "faraway orange sky" (90). Furthermore, by constructing a temporal frame that shows a before-and-after causal chain, the doctor acknowledges the deadly power of oil infrastructure. This historical knowledge is likewise validated by the scientific authority of the doctor, who, through his samplings in the laboratory, is able to measure the steady elevation of toxicity in the water (92).

However, this dis-ease is not restricted to a particular region or the villages where the doctor carries out his sampling. Instead, the overreaching fluidity and viscosity of oil permeate the water bodies that are contiguous with the area of pollution. To narrate the extent of the pollution, the novel reiterates the islands' turbulent historical trajectory as a site of multinational oil extraction by recognizing the traces of its once beautiful, idyllic diversity depicted by the seeming environmental sanity when "these islands used to be a big habitat for bats" (129) and when "the sea was just outside our door, constantly bringing surprises, suggesting a certain possibility to our lives" (26). Contemporary extractive activities within and around water bodies are therefore constructed as progressively destructive enterprises that are calamitous to the social formation of the Indigenous, sense of place and the biosphere.

The link between pollution and multinational extractive recklessness is further demonstrated through signs of disruption in the ecosystem by the novel's formal aspects and by its employment of imagery of visual and olfactory dis-ease caused by eco-imperialism. The novel utilizes a formal structure that evinces entanglements and disruptions, which is evident in the use of a nonlinear story whereby the novel begins at the end, and the end is not an end but a further descent; this is crucial in articulating the interruptions and retrievals of memory which allows going back to verify a pre-extractive time. In this way, the story thematizes and formally represents the social and militarized conditions of places subjected to brutal national and oil multinational regimes. The figuration of populated water further enhances the story aspect as a propellant for militant action. The militants are spurred to action by the visibility of oil on their water. The concreteness of the pollution bears significance in how it disrupts the people's livelihood and how it leads to ill health. Hence, the militants justify their belligerency on account of the material reality of gas flaring

and oil on water; as the leader of a militant group, Professor, tells Rufus, “we are for the people. Everything we do is for the people [...]. Write only the truth. Tell them about the flares you see at night, and the oil on the water” (209–10).

Habila’s narrative in this way articulates the violence, deadness, and dis-ease caused by oil exploration on land and in the water. The bodies of water in the fictive Niger Delta in *Oil on Water* bear witness to a dead space emptied by a consumerist modernization that is dependent on oil and fossil fuels. As an embodiment of foulness, death, and pollution, water bodies are inscribed with a heaviness that carries the weight of the death of humans, flora, and fauna. This image of polluted water bodies cuts across the novel, and the reader from the very first pages of the novel is already aware of the ecological grotesquery as the journalists “followed a bend in the river and in front of us we saw dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fishes bobbed white-bellied between tree roots” (9). Consequently, the narrator shows that the deadness of the water is a consequence of environmental catastrophe produced by irresponsible oil exploration. To this end, water is burdened with the weight of oil, as depicted in the title, *Oil on Water*. The helplessness and vulnerability of all forms of life to the environmental burden of oil are then described in a representative mode that evokes deadness. The asphyxiating and hostile force of oil on water assumes an agency of destruction in its comparison to the hangman later in the novel: “the weight of the oil tight like a hangman’s noose round the neck of whatever form lay underneath” (215). The figure of the hangman and their noose is here haunting and ambivalent. Constituted in this figure is the state’s repressive power to negotiate with oil multinationals and seek foreign investments that may be beneficial to an elite few. Therefore, the denigration of the environment demonstrated by a polluted waterscape provides gruesome and gory details of multinational oil activity and militaristic invasions in the Niger Delta. This can well be understood in the sense of Rob Nixon’s explication of the resource curse, whereby

a mineral strike, though less immediately spectacular than a missile strike, is often more devastating in the long term, bringing in its wake environmental wreckage, territorial dispossession, political repression and massacres by state forces doing double duty as security forces for unanswerable petroleum transnationals or mineral cartels. (Nixon 2011, 70)

The extent of the resource curse appears to be uniform around the islands and villages as the novel adopts a comparative descriptive model to show

that “the next village was almost a replica of the last” (9). The novel’s aesthetic choices also demonstrate the similarities and uniformity of environmental degradation that cut through multiple islands and villages by juxtaposing villages and islands in the same chapter in such a way that it is at times difficult for the reader to tell the difference between one island and another. This maze of spatial interpolations serves as a mechanism to articulate the (dis)similarities of victimhood, degradation, and loss.

Nevertheless, *Oil on Water* is careful not to attribute a broad human agency and responsibility to these destructions. The novel carefully presents certain characters and agents as culpable in producing the ruins while also creating actants who, on the other hand, are mostly victims but are more considerate of the consequences of their interaction with the environment. Furthermore, the forceful appropriation of land and the mapping of space into useful and non-useful places are, in a sense, a means of social and spatial segregation enabled by the water bodies. Port Harcourt, the seat of the oil multinational’s operations, is mapped out and populated by a demographic group that is sustained by oil wealth. This is important in reading Helon Habila’s novel, as the leading characters, Rufus and Zaq, are depicted as venturing from Port Harcourt into a form of Conradian “heart of darkness” distinguished by its maze of mangroves and high fever. The novel contrasts two coastal places’ prosperity and geography to represent the asymmetric prosperity that oil wealth embodies. Thus, Port Harcourt serves as a foil to the impoverished villages and islands where oil exploration and the attendant oil spill are the order of the day. This contrastive spatial configuration is further heightened by the presentation of Bar Beach in the commercial city of Lagos.

Bar Beach, swelling with new oil wealth and hedonism, stands as a symbol of capitalistic abundance and military irresponsibility from the oil boom’s degradation of the environment. At Bar Beach, there are “makeshift bar rooms and restaurants lined up along the beach” (121). When juxtaposed with the villages that Rufus narrates, Lagos stands in superfluous contrast to the Niger Delta islands and villages, which are deprived of government development, with “abandoned villages, the hopeless landscape and the gas flare that always burned in the distance” (Habila 2011, 24). The harmful dimension of oil extraction is then constricted to a particular space, a form of environmental red-zoning, one might say.

It may be argued that on a national level the novel presents a spatial narrative frame that depicts the plundering of the Niger Delta for another region’s infrastructural “development” and prosperity. The people are thus doubly alienated from the resource wealth of their land. On the one hand, an extractive economy exists that transports the region’s wealth away to

distant countries through multinational oil companies. On the other hand, through its power to determine oil prospecting, tax, and “legitimacy” for all lands within its sovereign territory, the nation-state of Nigeria selectively directs oil wealth to specific regions and elites. In this way, the state’s institutional apparatus focuses on some regions, producing some form of capitalistic consumerist and flourishing economy.

Consequently, oil shapes the production of space and inequalities, as the water bodies act as boundaries and are adopted as exclusionary matters related to the construction of social life. Because of this, places like Port Harcourt and Lagos (61), two other coastal cities, are depicted as prosperous and sites of opportunity even though the wealth and rentier economy are built on the oil resources of the impoverished oil-producing islands and villages. Despite the oil wealth, characters are soon disappointed at the vague opportunities in these places, as Rufus, for example, realizes, when he arrives in Port Harcourt for the first time, that the oil wealth is only available to a select few.

Despite these exclusionary spatial politics, the novel retains the ownership of space for the Indigenous dwellers by depicting a localized sense and knowledge of a place, especially in the knowledge of the water networks. It is, in fact, only the locals who know and understand the labyrinth of waterways and villages. For example, none of the first journalists recruited to look for Ms. Floode have heard of Irikefe (Habila 2011, 78). Therefore, despite the presumably superior navigational technology of the multinational oil companies, it is the characters Rufus and Zaq who are contracted to penetrate the dense network of rivers and islands in search of Isabel. These characters also have to rely on information from the islanders and villagers they encounter. The bodies of water these characters navigate construct barricades around what forms of knowledge and information they can obtain. Narratively, James Floode, the multinational oil expatriate whose wife Zaq and Rufus are recruited to find, becomes a synecdoche for multinational oil extractors. By shutting out James Floode from the island and depriving him of knowledge of his wife’s whereabouts, the narrative subverts the hegemony of expatriate expert knowledge of place that is derived from geolocation gadgets and multinational proprietorship.

## **Representing Environmental Pollution in *Oil on Water***

In *Oil on Water*, water bodies shape narrative linearity as the traversing of waterscapes delineates major chapters and sub-chapters of the novel; furthermore, as already discussed above, the novel’s environment is one

in which land- and waterscapes interpenetrate. Importantly, through water bodies, the text mostly conveys the effect of oil pollution; this is done through the imagery of suppression and weight: the environment is asphyxiated under the burden of pollution and waste. The title of the novel itself points at this imagery through its use of the preposition “on,” which shows a hierarchized relation between oil and water, and pollution on water. As a signifier of oppression, oil represents the financial and military strength of the government’s oppressive apparatuses in league with oil multinationals and further depicts the tedious burden and excess of petro-modernity on the environment. Lives and the environment are thus depicted in their wasted states resulting from oil pollution, mainly as the novel portrays the physical decay and death that pollution heralds quite early in the novel when the journalists encounter “strange objects [...]: a piece of cloth, a rolling log, a dead fowl, a bloated dog belly with black birds perching on it” (Habila 2011, 34). Death and waste are tropes that the novel sustains to articulate the negative impact of irresponsible oil exploration in the Niger Delta.

Therefore, the novel demonstrates the transformative action of oil on water by depicting the transmogrification of one of the waters into an embodiment of offensive matter, with Rufus narrating, “the water underneath us had turned foul and sulphurous” (9). In using the past perfect tense of the verb of change, the narrator traces a historical dimension to the pollution of water in describing a completed process of “change.” The reader is left to imagine the condition before the metamorphosis of the water into brackish, oily, and dirty, which is only traceable through memory and recollections by Rufus and the other characters. Effectively, in his encounter with Chief Ibiram, one of the village chiefs, Rufus learns about how the village was a paradise where the dwellers “lacked for nothing, fishing and hunting and farming and watching their children growing up before them, happy” (38). This memory of the past, narrated through the elderly chief, when juxtaposed with the present situation of the village that Rufus and Zaq encounter, shows a destructive environmental metamorphosis that contrasts the earlier tranquil state of nature against the “new” condition of living that has left the villagers in unliveable conditions. Similarly, the island nurse, Gloria, points out to Rufus that “these islands used to be a big habitat for bats; only a few dozen remain [...]. Gas flares. They kill them” (129). Oil, therefore, leaves in its trail terrible devastation on both water and land. However, it appears that from the early days of oil exploration to the present that was being narrated, there is a sense of recurrent violent circles; this is evident in the sense of similarity in regard to how time is rendered in a repetitive gesture. This repetition evinces a temporality of

horror, where destruction is cast as recurring and non-remediated. In fact, the memory of the beginning of the pollution is unrecoverable as the narrator Rufus demonstrates, “I am walking down a familiar path, with incidents neatly labelled and dated, but when I reach halfway memory lets go of my hand and a fog rises and covers the faces and places and I am left clawing about in the dark, lost” (1). When one considers the age difference between Chief Ibiram and Rufus, it becomes evident that oil pollution and exploration shape the memories of Rufus and the younger characters like Boma, such that the only past that Rufus can retrieve is one conditioned by gas flares and oil on water. The fogginess of the past resulting from gas flares illustrates a disruption of the social, cultural, economic, and political pasts.

In addition, the juxtaposition of the past and the present establishes a critical discourse on the claims of the collective anthropogenic destruction of the environment. The extent of the human as a collective geological force is underlined through the novel’s attention to the scale and extent of the destruction wrought by different actors. The multinational executive and the violent national agents are depicted, on the one hand, as significant destroyers of the environment. On the other hand, the islands’ inhabitants take from the ocean for daily sustenance; a symbiotic relationship of mutual respect exists between the ocean, environment, and the individuals. A textual example is the worshippers of the waters who are one with the waters, during their ceremonies “swaying rhythmically, imitating the movement of the waves.—They believe in the healing powers of the sea” (127). Nevertheless, the novel does not paint a romanticized relationship. The villagers of the island had once despoiled the island by bloodletting through intra-community violence. Nevertheless, they tried to move beyond the violence by building a close communion with the sea as “each day the worshippers go in procession to the sea, to bathe in it, to cry in it and to promise never to abominate it ever again” (130).

On the contrary, while the locals aim to keep the sanctity of the water, the outsider force of multinational greed and avarice pollutes the land and water through oil mining, oil spillage, and gas flaring. One may then add that the abomination that the inhabitants aim to evade is reintroduced through the destructive power of land and water damage. The scale of such pollution is also a temporal and spatial issue as the future is threatened and at risk on account of oil pollution; spatially, gas flaring cannot be restricted to space as the distant gas flare is transported and seen in Irikafe. Time here is also problematized on account of oil pollution since the apocalypse is no longer in the future but has already occurred; this is most evident in the eschatological diction of sulphur and death on the

waters of one of the dense mangrove swamps where underneath Rufus and Zaq's hired boat the water had turned "foul and sulphurous; insects rose from the surface in swarms to settle in a mobile cloud [...] The atmosphere grew heavy with the suspended stench of dead matter [...] they] saw dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fishes bobbed white-bellied between tree roots" (9). Here the apocalyptic quality of this scene derives from the materiality of environmental catastrophe and its gothic aftermath as the two men travel on water. The imagery evokes deadness and irrevocable devastation through its familiar association with similar apocalyptic tropes and metaphors in the Bible. These images work in two dimensions. Firstly, by focusing on the mortal bodies, they communicate the annihilating powers of irresponsible oil exploration in the Niger Delta. Secondly, the deployment of "foul and sulphurous" imagery hints at the hellish conditions that activities like gas flaring and oil spillage engender. In this case, drawing on its parallels to the biblical hell that burns with sulphur and brimstone, the result of petro-extraction can only lead to eternal torment and Hadean existential conditions.

Scholars like Leerom Medovoi (2014), Sule Egya (2016), and Maximilian Feldner (2018) have majorly discussed *Oil on Water* in light of its representation of petro-violence and oil pollution. While this has in many ways shown the aesthetic and thematic elements that the novel employs to depict the dire environmental conditions of the Niger Delta, it is essential to note the futuristic outlook of the novel as it envisions a world of oncoming threat from water. Hence the novel pays attention to the anticipated climatic disaster of rising water levels, which will further pose significant environmental risk to and will cause crisis for the Niger Delta. Thus, when Rufus watches a science-fiction movie (presumably Kevin Costner's *Waterworld*) "about a submerged world [where] the polar ice cap has melted and land has sunk under water" (Habila 2011, 101), the planet-wide post-apocalyptic future of the movie draws attention to the futurity of environmental risk. However, Rufus's reaction to the film raises the question of whether a mode of environmental narrative like apocalyptic fiction can sufficiently stimulate interest and action as regards the oncoming climate change disaster. Although Rufus feels empathetic towards the plight of the characters, he is, in fact, unmoved to action because of its distance in time. The lack of urgency towards such threats and the apocalyptic mode that the film utilizes to convey its message raises the question of the affective effect of such futuristic representations when environmental threats are ongoing in many parts of the Global South. In contrast, the environmental risk that *Oil on Water* represents is one already in motion; the materialized

risk threats are further produced by agents whose actions—oil exploration—are directly linked to pollution. It is in this way that Habila's novel may produce an urgent and achievable effect in ending the environmental risk of oil pollution. This is compounded by the fact that the producers of the hazards are not its victims; hence the novel raises ethical and political questions that differentiates it from planetary anthropogenic visions like the one in *Waterworld*.

## Conclusion

The extent of environmental damage in the Niger Delta is conveyed mostly through water bodies that evoke foulness, decay, and rot. Toxic components in the waters and the dwindling water organisms represent the environmental degeneration closely linked to oil exploration. As demonstrated above, Helon Habila's 2011 novel *Oil on Water* imaginatively addresses the petro-culture and multinational/government despotism as evident in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. The novel depicts the sustained entwinement of ways of life in the post-oil-polluted space at the interface of the global financial system and contemporary postcolonial oppressive regimes as a crucial way of understanding the ecological mess in the Niger Delta. Oil is demonstrated as suppressive on water; it similarly alters the history and ways of life of the novel's Indigenous people. Indeed, by formally juxtaposing the past with the present, the narrative voice evokes a pathos for a past that was environmentally sane by using retroversion to put this death in comparative terms. At different points in the novel, the narrative voice describes a before-oil-exploration period and a period after exploration, with apocalyptic sceneries representing the extent of oil damage.

However, in its representation of such geographical marks like mangrove swamps, seas, and islands that still appear pristine, *Oil on Water* disrupts the romanticist depiction of ocean and wilderness as it presents an environmental context that is both “natural” in its depiction of forests, creeks, islands, and ocean albeit these ‘natural’ features have been altered by the anthropogenic force of oil pollution. In this way, Habila straddles the binary between inside and outside, within and without, as the panoramic description of the ocean and the environment produces a “nature” that is sublime yet possessing an underbelly that is despoiled and deadly. Perhaps in reference to the fluidity of water bodies, the narrative structure follows this fluidity and interpenetration of land with water in the Niger Delta by annihilating the boundaries between events that happen on water and land with not much textual evidence of change or interruptions. Events in the

chapters interpenetrate one another, creating a maze of interwoven experiences and victimhood. A new category of explanation for the Niger Delta situation is a dystopian wilderness, when one considers the mangrove, creeks, swamps, rivers, and seas seemingly untouched by modern influences but even more so by the fluidity of oil and its ability to permeate and pollute space. The novel disrupts an easy categorization of wilderness as untouched by modernization technologies and urbanity. While the swamps and mangroves maintain trees on the banks (68), hence an implied sense of greenness, the penetrative power of petrol permeates the fictionalized bodies of water, land, and the bodies of the characters as if to insinuate a dystopian wilderness. Hence, contrary to the Thoreauvian “nature,” usually depicted as hospitable, rejuvenating, and welcoming, the penetrative fluidity of oil-stained water and the destruction of livelihood makes the mangrove swamps and islands undesirable and deadly. The green forest, the blue Atlantic Ocean, and islands are disrobed of the self-serving idealizations and symbolisms by multinational corruption and despoliation.

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Anne Collett

## Building on the Strata of the Dead: The Culture of Coral Reef Ecologies

**ABSTRACT** This chapter considers the complex biological and cultural ecologies of coral reefs as understood by two influential postcolonial writers of the twentieth century—Australian poet and activist Judith Wright and Caribbean poet and social historian Kamau Brathwaite—in order to demonstrate how a “deep collaboration” (Nassar) between the arts and sciences might assist with the work of making coral reef “legible” (Schuster). Learning to read coral is in part a learning to read our changing human selves within a planetary history. The chapter argues for the disruptive and restorative work that an unsettling ecological poetics can do, in the main through its imaginative power to rebuild broken relationships between human and apparently nonhuman worlds—worlds that are utterly entangled and interdependent. In saving coral we save ourselves.

**KEYWORDS** coral reef, Judith Wright, Kamau Brathwaite, natureculture, postcolonial environmental poetics, Romantic Imagination

*This is life's promise and accomplishment—  
a fraction-foothold taken.*

[...]

*Alive, alive, intent,  
love rises on the crumbling shells it shed.*

*The strata of the dead*

*burst with the plumes and passions of the earth.*

*Seed falls there now, birds build, and life takes over.*

**(Judith Wright, “The Builders” [1949] 1994, 45)**

Published in her second volume of poetry, *Woman to Man*, in 1949, “The Builders” is founded on Judith Wright’s complex response to Lady Elliott Island, the southernmost of the Great Barrier Reef’s coral isles, on which she holidayed in 1949. In the opening chapter of *The Coral Battleground*, the

story of a valiant attempt to save the Reef from industrial sabotage—a battle that began in the mid-1960s with the Australian government’s declared intention to mine limestone from Ellison Reef for use as fertilizer in the sugar-cane industry—Wright speaks of her qualification for writing the book. This was not the qualification of expertise, of belonging, or even of familiarity; rather, it is a qualification available to everyone—the responsibility of planetary care and the obligation to voice outrage and indeed to act when that care is violated. She writes:

My qualification for writing this book is that I was privileged to be one of the people who fought the battle for the Reef itself. My own contacts with it have been few. I was ten years old when I passed through the Reef waters, in a steamer sailing north [...] I did not see it again until in 1949 I spent a few weeks on Lady Elliott Island [...] [T]he offshore reef was still beautiful [...] I fell in love with the Reef then [...] Fourteen years later, I helped to form [...] the Wild life Preservation Society of Queensland, and here my part in the Reef’s story begins. (Wright 1977, 1)

But Wright’s part in the Reef’s story of course begins much earlier. It might begin with Captain Cook’s “discovery” of Australia, his voyage through the dangerously shallow reef waters up the eastern coast (and upon which his ship ran aground in June 1770), “when the first white men stared down in awe at its crags and underwater gardens” (Wright 1977, xiii). This beauty and awe sit in contradistinction to the ugliness of invasion, war, and colonization that followed European discovery and enabled the migration and settlement of Wright’s family and the associated accumulation of wealth at great human and environmental cost. As she comments in her introduction to *The Coral Battleground*, her story “is a political story” whose complications

stretch far beyond Australia, for the Reef has its enemies, and its lovers, in many countries and in the whole complicated structure of the world, its industry, its science and its commerce [...] the *Endeavour*’s voyage brought it into the world and exposed it to all the dangers of a civilisation that lives by exploiting everything in land and sea. (xiv)

Written almost thirty years after that life-changing encounter with the Reef as a young woman, the closing lines of her introduction express the deep sadness of loss:

For many thousands of years it saw no men at all; the Aborigines were not seafarers and few if any of the Pacific Island voyagers can have been

blown so far as to see it. But the *Endeavour*'s voyage brought it into the world and exposed it to all the dangers of a civilisation that lives by exploiting everything in land and sea. The Reef will never be alone again until the world ends; and then it may not be a living assemblage. It may be a dead, blackened and crumbling hedge of limestone rock, its gardens withered and its creatures decimated. (Wright 1977, xiv)

But in 1949, the war over and in love with Jack McKinney,<sup>1</sup> Wright is valiantly positive: seeds grow, birds build, life takes over—"love rises on the crumbling shells it shed." In this poem, at this stage in her life, there is belief in "life's promise" and a sense that passion and beauty—indeed, poetry—is a creative force to be reckoned with. It *will* triumph; indeed, it did. In 1965 an act of vandalism that threatened to destroy "life's promise" as represented in this instance by the Great Barrier Reef was forestalled by a group of people who refused to be cowed by the powerful united forces of government, industry, and commerce. It was not insignificant that one of the prominent leaders of that effort was a well-established, indeed, celebrated Australian poet.

Although Wright gave up writing poetry in the last fifteen years of her life, devoting herself to the activist work she came to feel did more "real" work, her poetry did, and continues to do, the "real" work of imagination. This is the beauty of poetry whose action Shakespeare claimed, perhaps counterintuitively, was as strong as a flower.<sup>2</sup> Here material and symbolic realms are joined. In "Words, Roses, Stars," a poem included in her last volume of poetry, *Phantom Dwelling*, Wright concludes:

If I could give a rose to you, and you,  
it would be language; sight and touch and scent  
join in that symbol. Yet the word is true,  
plucked by a path where human vision went.  
(Wright [1985] 1994, 411)

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1 Jack McKinney was a published Australian philosopher, essayist, and award-winning novelist. Because McKinney was unable to obtain a divorce from his wife although they were separated, Wright and McKinney lived together in what, at the time, would have been understood to be "living in sin." They were partners from the mid-1940s until McKinney's death in 1966. Their only child, Meredith, was born, out of wedlock, in 1950. For more information about their life / work partnership see Veronica Brady's biography of Wright (1998).

2 In Sonnet LXV Shakespeare "asks," "How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea, / whose action is no stronger than a flower?"

When Wright speaks here of the word as “true” she acknowledges the lineage of “human vision” from which the poet’s words are drawn—she acknowledges her debt to the imaginative creative work of those who came before: poetry necessarily builds upon “the strata of the dead.” We might stretch the point to claim then that Poem *is* Coral Reef: poetry’s living beauty is built on the strata of the dead—on the poetic ground of ideas, images, form, language of our forefathers and mothers; and those ephemeral things like ideas and images are intimately bound to the material world of which we are part. Culture is utterly entangled in Nature.<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare might again be called to mind with Ariel’s lines from *The Tempest*: “Full fadom five thy father lies; / Of his bones are coral made” (Act I, Sc. ii). It is interesting here to bear in mind the relationship between a poetic “fancy” and a scientific “reality”: being made of very similar material to human bone, coral has been used effectively as a substitute for new bone in transplant operations since the 1970s (see Demers et al. 2002). Here is “the passionate touch and intergrowth of living” of which Wright speaks in the second stanza of “The Builders,” and here too is example of the human capacity to imagine that is so central to the greater understanding of ourselves and our world, whether that understanding be advanced through the arts or sciences.

What difference might it make to “saving the Reef” if we understand that we *are* coral, that Reef is us—that in acting to save coral we are saving ourselves?

In an impassioned opinion piece, posted in April 2017, Ian McCalman, then co-director of the Sydney Environment Institute, reminded readers of the historic moment that staved off destruction of the Reef, if only temporarily. He asks readers to remember “the poet, the painter and the forester” (the poet Judith Wright, the painter John Busst, and Len Webb, a forestry scientist) who, in the mid-1960s,

campaigned themselves into the ground: they lobbied politicians of every stripe, as well as unionists, scientists, students, schools, workers, Indigenous custodians and business people; they wrote countless letters to newspapers; they spoke at scores of meetings, visited schools, wrote

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3 Rather than using inverted commas for nature and culture to indicate the dubious distinction between the two, I have elected to capitalize each term to lend them a more abstract character, i.e. these terms carry an historical and ideological weight; they represent a particular way of thinking about the world and our place in it as determined by a variety of factors. Representing abstract ideas, the terms should therefore be understood to be not only larger than our vernacular understanding of “nature” and “culture” but also unstable and contingent.

books, poems, and stories [...]. If these three ordinary, caring citizens could help to save the reef once, we are asking you to do something about it. (McCalman 2017)

These caring citizens were hardly ordinary, but their purported ordinariness serves the needs of rhetoric that must move and marshal the necessary support of the demos fifty years on. McCalman's piece was a response to the Australian Federal Government's promise to provide a billion-dollar loan to build a railway line from the proposed Adani Mine, west of Rockhampton, to a port north of Bowen in the Whitsunday region of Queensland: the Reef was again under threat. He writes:

the [Australian] Federal Government is providing the billion dollar loan to build a railway line to carry tonnes of coal from the Adani Mine to load the 80,000 container ships a year that will travel along the narrow, shallow, fragile Reef channel, which will, as a result, need constant dredging and be extremely vulnerable to oil-spilling accidents. That sum of money could instead have been used to try to save the greatest marine ecosystem in the world, or even to offset the plight of the 75,000 people who work in the tourist industry and generate seven billion dollars a year in revenue for Australia.

[...] WE CAN SAVE THE REEF: there is just time to do it, but the window of possibility is closing fast, and we absolutely must act now. Everyone of us, every citizen of this country who cares can do something needs to lobby the politicians, even if you live a long way from the Reef. All Australians will be diminished and diminished forever if it dies. (McCalman 2017)

Some two years later (May 2019), a conservative government was re-elected by the Australian people to serve another three years. The election was won in part on the promise of jobs and prosperity that the Adani Mine would bring to North Queenslanders. But government endorsement of the project was given without the consent of the Wangan and Jagalingou people, without undertaking appropriate consultation with the Juru, Jaanga, and Birri people, and at the risk of destroying a vast marine park—its natural and cultural heritage, its history, and its future.<sup>4</sup> When, in the 1970s,

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4 In August 2019 the Queensland State Government extinguished native title over 1,385 hectares of Wangan and Jagalingou country. “Under the native title system First Nations people can only obtain royalties or compensation for their land if they sign a land-use agreement with the proponent. If an agreement is not reached the native title tribunal then makes a decision and rarely rejects mining leases. In the case of Adani’s Carmichael mine, seven of 12 native title applicants endorsed a land-use agreement with the company. Five native title

Wright excluded the possibility of relationship between the Reef and the Australian Aboriginal or Pacific Island peoples, she wrote in ignorance of a long history of relationship that has more recently been “discovered” by non-Aboriginal people.

The Indigenous peoples of Australia have recorded and retained the history of relationship with the Reef and Sea Country in song and story, passed down through generations over thousands of years. In reciprocal relation, to quote the Indigenous (Kanaka) Hawaiian scholar, Karin Ingersoll, “human memories [are] stored over centuries in the reef [...] memories that act as adherent forces bringing together people and places, arranging these historical memories into contemporary contexts” (2016, 43). In accord with Ingersoll’s notion of “oceanic literacy” (44), Australian Aboriginal memory/knowledge of Reef flux, as the sea has covered and uncovered this vast living structure over thousands of years, has recently been corroborated by scientific method with the extraction of fossil cores that can be read like ice cores or tree rings. Dateable calcium carbonate density bands in coral cores enable the reconstruction of climate conditions from past epochs: in other words, they enable us to read the history of the Earth’s changing environment over the long *durée*.

The work of extracting and interpreting coral cores employs the language and practice of science. But where J. E. N. Vernon speaks of corals as structures capable of sending us “messages from deep time” (Vernon 2009, 16), marine climate scientists Janice Lough and Timothy Cooper speak of the bands in coral cores as “page[s] in an environmental archive” (Lough and Cooper 2011). Messages, pages, archives: this is a language drawn from culture. Science and Art, Nature and Culture are understood—by Ingersoll, Vernon, Lough, and Cooper—in relation to each other. Knowledge gleaned of and through our extensive and complex human interaction with non-human worlds across space and time is archived in multiple material and nonmaterial, concrete and ephemeral structures to which we need be more open, more attentive, more willing to learn to read sameness and difference. Coral not only speaks of a history of which we are part, we might understand ourselves within that history *as coral*, or at least, not as dissimilar to coral as we might have thought. So learning to read coral is in part a learning to read our changing human selves within a planetary history that is more intimate than the notion of “the planetary” might suggest.

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applicants opposed any deal, and unsuccessfully fought against it in the courts” (Smee 2020, n.p.).

For updates on campaigns to halt the Adani Carmichael Mine see #StopAdani ([https://www.stopadani.com/campaign\\_updates](https://www.stopadani.com/campaign_updates)).

## The Natureculture of Coral Reef Ecology<sup>5</sup>

The most recent science suggests that the Great Barrier Reef was laid down about 500,000 years ago, the current living reef having begun growth on the old platform 20,000 years ago. Corals are marine invertebrates that typically live in colonies of many identical individual polyps. The polyps are 1–3 mm in diameter and connected to one another via a thin layer of tissue. Beneath the soft bodies of stony corals, polyps secrete a calcium carbonate skeleton that becomes the foundation of coral reef ecosystems. While all stony corals deposit calcium carbonate skeletons, not all grow large enough to build reef structures. Tropical reef-building corals are able to grow and secrete their calcium carbonate skeleton with the aid of *zooxanthellae*, a group of single-celled dinoflagellates that live in the tissue of corals. But reef building is slow, branching species of coral only growing 10–20 mm per year while massive species grow 1 mm per year or less.

Both temperature and salinity affect calcification, restricting tropical coral reefs to waters between 23–29 °C and in a salinity range of 32–40 percent, thus most reef-building corals occur in less than twenty-five metres of seawater—a depth that is particularly sensitive to temperature increase and pollution. High sedimentation rates can also bury or smother them; and turbidity (like that produced by hurricane/cyclone activity) reduces light penetration, which restricts coral growth. Corals derive their pigmentation from *zooxanthellae*. Because tropical corals live at the uppermost boundary of their temperature tolerance, even a 1 °C increase in sea surface temperature can stress *zooxanthellae* and thereby cause coral “bleaching.”<sup>6</sup> In addition to the effects of temperature on reef health, increasing carbon dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere, and subsequently the ocean, lowers the pH—a process referred to as ocean acidification. While the net impact of lower pH on coral reefs continues to be studied, data to

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5 The term “natureculture” points to the indivisibility, or at least, the utter entanglement, of “nature” and “culture,” in this case as apparent in the history of human relationship with coral. Referencing Donna Haraway (2003) and Agustin Fuentes (2010), Nicholas Malone and Kathryn Ovenden define “natureculture” as “a synthesis of nature and culture that recognizes their inseparability in ecological relationships that are both biophysically and socially formed” (Malone and Ovenden 2017).

6 While bleaching can be fatal to corals, especially when bleaching occurs over a large portion of the coral colony, some corals can recover by obtaining new *zooxanthellae* from the water column. As Joshua Schuster notes of a bleaching event: “The coral is not dead yet, but in a highly stressed condition. While some corals are able to recover, many succumb to disease or lack of nutrients” (Schuster 2019, 5–6).

date indicates that decreases in pH can reduce the calcification rates of corals and other calcifying organisms, in some cases ultimately resulting in reef death.<sup>7</sup>

There is no question that the climate crisis of the Anthropocene is having a destructive impact on coral reef systems across the globe. With increased ocean warming, increased ocean acidity and pollution, increased frequency and magnitude of cyclones, and increased traffic (industrial and tourist) in shallow reef waters, many coral reefs are in danger of extinction. Although there are estimated to have been five prior “extinction events” from which the Great Barrier Reef has recovered, many scientists fear current conditions may undermine the possibility of recovery. As Joshua Schuster has recently remarked, “[t]he recent dire depictions of reefs across the planet indicate the need to make coral legible for coral’s own sake as well as for the sake of human existence” (2019). How might coral be “made legible”? Although some fear it is already too late to save the world’s tropical coral reefs, in this essay I want to consider the value of what philosopher Dalia Nassar describes as “deep collaboration.”

Drawing on Arne Naess’s influential distinction between shallow and deep ecology (1973), Nassar argues that the work of deep collaboration between the arts and sciences is one that “recognises not only the power of art to touch us emotionally, but also its ability to transform the ways we see and think about the world—in other words, its ability to enhance our cognitive capacities” (Nassar 2021b).<sup>8</sup> To this I would add the need for a kind of art that questions, and encourages us to question, assumptions, deeply held beliefs, and set patterns of thinking and being. Making coral legible requires the tools of translation that we might more easily recognize similarity and better appreciate difference. In his *Defence of Poetry*, written in 1821, Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley believed that poetry had the capacity to:

purge from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being. It compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know. It creates anew the universe, after it has

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7 I have used a wide variety of sources for the information included here on coral reef growth and death. These include Birkeland (2015), Bowen (2015), De’ath et al. (2012), Gardner et al. (2003), Henkel (2010), Lough and Cooper (2011), and Vernon (2009).

8 The 2021 Iain McCalman Lecture, “Shallow and Deep Collaboration: Art, Ecology and Alexander von Humboldt,” delivered by Dalia Nassar on February 3, 2021, can be viewed online (Nassar 2021b).

been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration. (Shelley [1840] 2002)

Following in Romantic tradition—a tradition based on the revolutionary idea that poetry was capable of re-establishing the intimate co-dependency of social and natural cultures—this essay argues for the disruptive and the restorative work that an unsettling ecological poetics can do, in the main through its imaginative power to build, indeed rebuild, broken relationships between human and apparently nonhuman worlds.

## A Postcolonial Environmental Poetics

Building on recent comparative research into the relationship between English-language poetry and hurricanes/cyclones in the Caribbean and Australia,<sup>9</sup> I want to consider the complex biological and cultural ecologies of coral reefs as understood by two influential postcolonial poets of the twentieth century—Judith Wright (1915–2000), with whose work I began, and Barbadian poet and social historian Kamau Brathwaite (1933–2020). I want to consider an entanglement of postcolonial environmental and social activism and the act and art of poetic word craft in order to demonstrate how poetry might assist in the work of “making legible.”

You might ask what a white woman born into the privilege of the Australian squattocracy<sup>10</sup> and a black man born out of the dark history of plantation slavery in the Caribbean have in common. Separated by 18,000 kilometres of salt water (as the albatross flies), they are bound into a shared inheritance of European “discovery” and British colonization of “the New World.” Wright situates the “golden spike”<sup>11</sup> in 1770 with Captain Cook’s

9 See for example the collection of essays I edited with Russell McDougall and Sue Thomas, *Tracking the Literature of Tropical Weather: Typhoon, Hurricanes, and Cyclones* (2017).

10 Historically “the squattocracy” referred to those who illegally occupied large tracts of Australian “crown land,” primarily used to graze livestock. In this case, the illegality refers to the lack of authorization by the crown, but it should be noted that this was land that had never been ceded by the Aboriginal population. Acknowledging the play on “aristocracy,” the term has come to refer to the families of wealthy land owners (particularly graziers) who wield social and political power in Australia.

11 In environmental scholarship, “the golden spike” refers to the historical marker that signifies the beginning of a new geological age, recognized by scientists as the Anthropocene—the age of human impact on the earth. The term is derived from the ceremonial golden spike (also known as “The Last Spike”) which was

voyage up the east coast of Australia—a voyage that ultimately gave rise to invasion, colonization and large-scale violence done to Indigenous peoples and the natural environment. Brathwaite nominates Columbus’ “discovery” of the Americas in 1442 as the moment that precipitated the collapse of Indigenous cultures and the destructive impact of a plantation economy, enabled by the enslavement and transportation of African peoples to this “New World.” The wealth generated by plantation economies in Australia was also enabled by the capture and forced labour of Indigenous peoples from within Australia and throughout the South Pacific (known as “blackbirding”).<sup>12</sup> So, although differentiated by size (7.69 million square kilometres to 430 square kilometres), both Australia and Barbados are island nations for whom the ocean is a harbinger of change: both could be said to be shaped, at least in part, by salt water epistemes. In addition, the warm shallow waters of the Coral Sea off the northeast coast of Australia and the Caribbean Sea off the western coast of Barbados share the geological and oceanic conditions in which tropical corals thrive, enabling the growth of extensive coral reef. Over time the corals fragment, sand accumulates, shells and rubble break down—all adding to the gradually evolving calcium carbonate structure. In effect, new life builds on “the strata of the dead.”

“The Builders”—the poem by Wright with which this essay began, is a poem “about” coral reef: “Alive, alive, intent, / love rises on the crumbling shells it shed. / The strata of the dead.” But it is also a poem about social and cultural reconstruction in Australia post-World War II, and a poem that might reflect the very personal battle that Wright was waging against the restraints of a conservative society and family when she made the decision to live “in sin” with a married man: “Only those men survive / who dare to hold their love against the world.” But more: this is a poem that again reminds us of a cycle of life that necessarily builds upon the dead. As a daughter “born of the conquerors,”<sup>13</sup> Wright, as the poem “N...’s Leap,

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driven into the earth in May 1869 to join the rails that connected the Central Pacific Railroad and the Union Pacific Railroad of the United States, thereby creating the First Transcontinental Railroad. The railroad facilitated the vastly increased speed and volume of goods and people across the continent but also had devastating impact on indigenous peoples, forests and native animals like the buffalo.

12 “Blackbirding” is a term used to refer to the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century capture and enslavement of South Pacific islanders (referred to collectively as Kanakas), forced to work on cotton and sugar plantations in Queensland (Australia), Fiji, and Samoa.

13 The phrase is drawn from Wright’s poem, “Two Dreamtimes” [Alive, 1973], *Collected Poems* (1994), 317. See also the line, “I’m a stranger, come of a conquering people” in “At Cooloolah” [The Two Fires, 1955], *Collected Poems*, 140.

New England”<sup>14</sup> makes clear, was acutely aware of the dead upon whom modern “Australia” was built. In this poem, included in her first volume of poetry (*The Moving Image*, 1946), Wright sheds light on the darkness at the heart of Australian “settlement” with the story of Indigenous peoples herded to their deaths over a cliff by her forefathers:

The eastward spurs tip backward from the sun.  
 Night runs an obscure tide round cape and bay  
 and beats with boats of cloud up from the sea  
 against this sheer and limelit granite head.  
 Swallow the spine of range; be dark, O lonely air.  
 Make a cold quilt across the bone and skull  
 that screamed falling in flesh from the lipped cliff  
 and then were silent, waiting for the flies.  
 [...]  
 Did we not know their blood channeled our rivers,  
 and the black dust our crops ate was their dust?  
 O all men are one man at last.  
 [...]  
 Night floods us suddenly as history  
 that has sunk many islands in its good time.  
 (Wright [1946] 1994, 15–16)

In its act of bearing witness and indeed for its refusal of racial discrimination—“O all men are one man at last”—this poem is important not only for Wright personally, but for Australia. Significantly, the poem insists upon recognition of “the strata of the dead” upon which modern Australia has been built, and the reality of our planetary life cycle in which the separation of human and nonhuman is dissolved: dust to dust, ashes to ashes is the reality. We are Earth, Earth is us. But more, landform is given human-form—the rock of the cliff itself retains the memory of human action—a kind of thinking that recalls Karen Ingersoll’s claim that human memory is stored in coral reef over centuries, over millennia. Wright’s poem also reminds us that no matter how deep or wide the ocean, time and tide

14 Given the deeply offensive nature of the racist “N” word, I have elected to remove it from Wright’s title. But I think it important to keep in mind the relationship between title and poem, i.e. that the poem itself “calls out” the racism of the attitude and actions taken toward Indigenous Australians by the invader population as identified by relationship between the “local/settler” racist renaming of the geographical feature and the horrendous violence associated with it. As such, within the context of the poem and Wright’s work, the title is a reminder of that ignominy.

inevitably uncover the skeletons: the bones of the disappeared ones—the Indigenous peoples, the indentured and enslaved peoples—are flung back onto the shores into the light of day; the voices of the dead return to haunt us. We might understand those shores to be literal: graves are uncovered on the excavated ground of modern building sites; skull and thigh, finger and hip are revealed when rising sea levels undercut and wash away apparently stable land. But these skeletons are also uncovered by the archival work of historians and laid bare in the shore lines of poetry, or speak through a kind of poetic ventriloquism. Some turn a deaf ear to the whispering of ghosts; and a blind eye to the altered forms of eroded remains that *might* be something else if we just wish hard enough; but Judith Wright and Kamau Brathwaite insist on remembrance and recognition of the ground upon which our present and our possible futures might be built.

In his Preface to *Mother Poem* Brathwaite writes:

This poem is about porous limestone: my mother, Barbados: most English of the West Indian islands, but at the same time nearest, as the slaves fly, to Africa. Hence the protestant pentecostalism of its language, interleaved with Catholic bells and kumina. The poem is also about slavery (which brought us here) and its effect upon the manscape. So we find my mother having to define her home as plot of ground—the little she can win and own—and the precious seedling children planted for the future. But that plot and plan is limited and constantly threatened or destroyed by the plantation. (Brathwaite 1977, n.p.)

Published in 1977, after the success of *The Arrivants* (a “new world trilogy” that sang the history of the poet’s African forebears’ capture, enslavement, and dispersal throughout the “new world” over hundreds of years), *Mother Poem* is a volume of poetry that charts the history of the poet’s “mother,” Barbados—the island of his birth and birthright/rite. Although the island and island peoples bear the deep and painful scars of violent conquest and colonization, the poet offers the Barbadian mother and her children a life beyond plantation through word art. In *Mother Poem* the poet becomes “my mother”; s/he is the porous limestone of the coral island and the history of its making—mineral, vegetable, animal. The poet’s imagination is the water that runs through the coral limestone, seeking out things hidden, giving new life to the dead and a future to the living—the stony coral itself is imagined as leaf, as embryo. This Mother Poem is the stream that gathers all things into itself. In the poem “Driftword,” the poet “reassembles” his broken black mother—gathering the remnants, the evidence, of cultural and environmental destruction into a work of art: this is poetry as “driftword” and poem as a collage of found objects. Poetry is an act of re-making.

Perhaps Mother Poem is the female creature of Frankenstein's nightmare,<sup>15</sup> who will revenge the violence done her:

But my mother [...]  
[...] stifles a dream as the whip raids her  
and she calls on glint, echo of shell  
the protein burning in her dead sea eyes

on those who will say no to distortions  
who will pick up the broken stones

sloping them with chip and mallet out of the concave quarries

who will sharpen them to blocks, to bricks [...]

for her history is long and will not always bleed on other people's edges:  
shards, shreds, broken tools, cast off political clothing, spittle of monkey  
parsing

so she dreams of michael who will bring a sword

(Brathwaite 1977, 112)

But although Brathwaite, like Wright, warns that these crimes against humanity, crimes committed against the planetary mother who has given us nurture and sustenance, will not go unpunished—there will be judgement and retribution—this is not his (or her) role. Rather, theirs is one of revelation. They are poets of Shelley's ilk who work to remove that film of familiarity from our inward sight, a familiarity that might be labelled complacency. Like the Romantic poets they share a humanitarian impulse that moves them to assist in the building of more equitable societies; a belief in the responsibility of the poet to remind us of our debt to our forefathers and mothers; a recognition of the imperative to care for the planet that supports all life; an awareness of the vulnerability of beauty and the strength of love and truth; and finally, they share the Romantics' faith in the power of the imagination to reveal us to ourselves that we might change our ways before it is too late.

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15 In Mary Shelley's great Romantic novel, *Frankenstein*, the scientist Frankenstein accedes to his creature's request to create a female that he might not be alone in his outcast state of difference, but part way through the creative process, with growing concerns that he may be thereby creating a race of monsters who would wreak havoc on mankind, Frankenstein destroys the female creature (see Vol. 3, Chapter 3, Shelley [1818] 1996, 114–5).

In an earlier poem, “Coral,” published in *Islands* (1969), Brathwaite dreams the history of the Caribbean through a kind of poetic coral time-travel in which the limestone of human bone and coral intermingle with the detritus of nonhuman and human lives to become the fertile ground on which new life grows and a creative revolution of imagination is nurtured:

Even when I was a slave here  
I could hear the polyp's thunder  
crack of the brain's armour  
the ducts and factories sucking  
the rivers out, engineering  
their courses, as if the stone  
were a secret leaf, or a fist curled  
in embryo slowly uncurling [...]

Here now are canoes, huts, yellowing corn husks, cassava,  
hard harpoon heads, broken pots on the headland;  
broken by time, by neglect, the tough boots  
of Columbus, of pirate, the red boots of flame;  
cracked soles of Africa, broken by whip,  
bit of pain between teeth; broken by rain,  
the new shoots of the green-dollar cane.

But the coral builds  
quarries, explosions,  
limestone walls,  
bougainvillea churches, plantation halls  
[...]

the narrow dead of the islands  
chalk chalk  
bone burning to limestone,  
hills, porous tears, showers;  
  
rain unhooks flowers,  
green stars  
of soil stare up from the stalks,  
the sky glints in the wet mud  
streaked with trees,  
hedges, darker  
ponds. I hear the boom  
of the mango bursting its sweetness, spectacular  
cloud riders through the tall  
pouis: [...]

And slowly slowly  
uncurling embryo  
leaf's courses sucking grain's armour,  
my yellow pain swims into the polyp's eye.  
(Brathwaite 1973, 232-4)

The fist uncurls and opens itself up to pain that it might be released of the hurt. It is not the boom of canon or gun that Brathwaite's poetry releases but the boom of mango exploding with sweetness—mango tree watered by the underground stream that meanders to the sea and thereby reconnects Caribbean Island people with their African past (cultural and natural), drawing into its life-force the lost ones of the Middle Passage:<sup>16</sup>

so she lies  
mutter of echoes, folded to silence  
surrounded by the multiple deaths of her children  
surrendered to their ancient histories

their hopes walking like rain across the distant water  
[...]  
you will slowly restore her silent gutters of word-fall  
[...]  
linking linking the ridges: the matchbox wood houses  
past the glimmering downward of gully and pebble and fountain

the ancient watercourses

trickling slowly into the coral  
travelling inwards under the limestone

widening outwards into the sunlight  
towards the breaking of her flesh with foam  
(Brathwaite, "Driftword," 1977, 114-7)

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16 The "Middle Passage" refers to the middle section—across the Atlantic Ocean from West Africa to the Americas, including the Caribbean)—of the Atlantic Slave Trade. The route between Europe, Africa, and the Americas was known as the triangular trade. The Middle Passage however connotes much more than a section of a route. The phrase is a reminder of trauma, death and suffering endured on that passage, but also recognizes the unburied or "undead"—the ghosts of the African captives who lost their lives on that Middle Passage, estimated to be something in the order of two million.

These are the concluding lines of *Mother Poem* where the poet listens, hears, and speaks the poetry of coral. This is a poetry that does not distinguish between human and nonhuman histories because they are embedded in each other. Here the poet brings that hidden history to light, reanimates the dead, and makes coral legible.

But no matter the healing undertaken through a cultural rejuvenation of the kind envisaged and enacted by Brathwaite, the Barbadian people and their island home are today threatened by coral death and the impact of rising sea levels.<sup>17</sup> Climate change itself might be understood to be the direct result of colonial greed and a plantation economy,<sup>18</sup> founded not so much on cheap labour but on what Jason Moore has called “Cheap Nature” (2015, 5). According to Moore and his co-author, Raj Patel, the abstraction “Nature” is a “hidden form of violence,” an “undetonated word” that reflects “the interests of the powerful.” They explain how “capitalism’s cheap nature strategy [...] turned the work of human and nonhuman alike into cheap things. But there’s nothing like an ecological crisis to remind civilization that nature is never cheap” ([2017] 2018, 44). The poetry of these postcolonial poets does likewise but does it have the power to do more than warn? Does it have the power to bring about the urgent and necessary change in our understanding of our relationship with the planet and, accordingly, our actions? Can poetry save us? Not of itself, but perhaps in

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17 The 2010 UN Climate Conference released a report outlining the likely devastating economic impact of global warming and attendant rising sea levels on Caribbean island nations: “Rising sea levels caused by climate change are set to cause damage of billions of dollars to the islands states of the Caribbean by the middle of the century, including wiping out more than 300 premium tourist resorts, a remarkable new report suggested yesterday. Airports, power plants, roads, and agricultural land in low-lying areas, as well as prime tourist locations on islands from Bermuda to Barbados, and from St Kitts and Nevis to St Vincent and the Grenadines, will be all be lost or severely damaged, with dire implications for national economies and for the welfare of hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of people, according to the report” (McCarthy 2010, n.p.).

18 The term “Plantationocene” has relevance here, as Donna Haraway notes in her 2015 commentary, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,” published in *Environmental Humanities*: “In a recorded conversation for Ethnos at the University of Aarhus in October, 2014, the participants collectively generated the name Plantationocene for the devastating transformation of diverse kind of human-tended farms, pastures, and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations, relying on slave labor and other forms of exploited, alienated, and usually spatially transported labor [...]. Scholars have long understood that the slave plantation system was the model and motor for the carbon-greedy machine-based factory system that is often cited as an inflection point for the Anthropocene” (Haraway 2015, note 5, 162).

accord with the connections it both reveals and makes between human and nonhuman history; and the affective power it harnesses to act in accord with the knowledge we gain.

## Further Connections

When Wright engaged in battle with the Queensland government over mining coral limestone, she was informed that the reef was “dead.” Perhaps to the inexpert eye, much of the reef appeared to be made up of dead matter, and of course this was a convenient lie that would assure concerned citizens that nothing untoward was happening. But Wright had done her scientific homework: she informs her readers that

all coral reefs contain within their growth cycle much “dead coral,” broken by weather into coral rubble, lying on the reef surfaces as [...] broken coral branches and sand. Such “dead coral” is an integral part of Reef life and forms breeding areas not only for algae and small marine organisms, but for fish themselves. Like the dead leaves under trees in the forest, it has an important part to play in replenishing Reef life; it is not an expendable “dead” product, but teems with life of many kinds. (Wright 1977, 9)

The protestors convinced a number of amateur and professional divers to volunteer for a specimen count. The dive identified eighty-eight species of live coral, sixty species of mollusc and 190 species of fish living in the so-called “dead” reef: the reef was undeniably “live.” But the results of such investigation would not be so affirmative today. Coral and human beings are remarkably resilient, but climate change, global warming, increasingly high levels of carbon dioxide in our atmosphere and dissolved in our seas are pushing us to a tipping point. In 2003 Gardner et al. reported that: “Although there are about 500 marine reserves in the wider Caribbean, this area has lost 80 % of its living coral cover during the same period that the Great Barrier Reef lost over 50 %” (Gardner et al. 2003). In 2012 De’ath et al. observed that local strategies can “only be successful if climatic conditions are stabilized, as losses due to bleachings and cyclones will otherwise increase” (De’ath et al. 2012). Writing about coral reefs in the Anthropocene in 2015, Charles Birkeland warns:

In the past, corals have typically recovered promptly after large-scale mortality from outbreaks of crown-of-thorns, hurricanes, lava flows, and other events. The drop in coral community resilience may be based on

a lack of replenishment more than coral mortality [...]. In corals, fecundity decreases as the colony is stressed [...] [I]ncreases in CO<sub>2</sub> may be chronically stressing corals and thereby reducing fecundity. (Birkeland 2015, 11)

In conclusion to *The Coral Reef Era: From Discovery to Decline: A History of Scientific Investigation from 1600 to the Anthropocene Epoch*, where James Bowen calls for the “collective energy of every nation and government” to prioritize the problem of climate change, he claims the value of historical record lies in “its contribution to an extensive fund of data” that can provide “a reliable context within which political decisions and socially consensual Judgements can be made” (Bowen 2015, 180). But although important, this material does not of itself provide the catalyst that will transform potential to kinetic energy—it will not of itself become action. More is needed. Where McCalman asked us to remember “the poet, the painter and the forester” who, in the mid-1960s, “campaigned themselves into the ground,” he might have placed more emphasis on their artistic activities—the “books, poems, and stories” (McCalman 2017)—that I believe ultimately did the big lifting work of *moving* a society to act—to do something.”

When Nassar speaks of a “crisis in knowledge”—that we “know” and yet “don’t *really* know” and that “our knowledge doesn’t *move* us” (2021b)—I am reminded of the Creature’s plea to his scientist creator Frankenstein, “how can I *move* thee?”<sup>19</sup> To “move” is to shift an entrenched position, but to do so through feeling. “How can I move thee?” is a plea for action—a change of direction—motivated by empathy. This is the capacity for feeling that the Romantics understood to be enabled by Imagination. As Schuster points out, “[o]ne way [...] to think the entanglements of Anthropocene, extinction, and capital, involves thinking with and as coral” (2019), but how is this thinking to be achieved? It’s not easy to think with and as coral but story, literature, poetry encourages this kind of thinking—a kind of thinking that is also feeling. It demands the state of Wordsworth’s “wise passiveness,”<sup>20</sup> described by fellow Romantic poet John Keats as “negative

19 In Volume 2, Chapter 2 the creature implores Frankenstein, his creator, to love him as a mother/father should—to acknowledge and act upon his parental responsibilities. He pleads with Frankenstein, “Oh, Frankenstein, be not equitable to every other, and trample upon me alone, to whom thy justice, and even thy clemency and affection, is most due. Remember, that I am thy creature [...] How can I move thee? Will no entreaties cause thee to turn a favourable eye upon thy creature, who implores thy goodness and compassion?” (Shelley [1818] 1996, 66).

20 The phrase is used by William Wordsworth in the poem “Expostulation and Reply,” included in *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798. See Wordsworth 1965, 106.

capability”<sup>21</sup>—a state of mind/heart/being that enables an openness to difference. Poetry, and Art, exercises the muscles of the empathic imagination, allows us, if we let it, to try out and to practise seeing, feeling and being different, and to recognize similarity where before we only saw difference: coral is not human bone but it is very like—the difference is important but so too is the similarity. Poetry encourages the recognition of relationship—it makes connections. Shelley observed in the early nineteenth century that we had a plenitude of scientific knowledge but that what we now required was the “creative faculty to imagine that which we know” and “the generous impulse to act that which we imagine” (2002 [1840]). In the third decade of the twenty-first century when Delia Nassar speaks of a “crisis of knowledge”—we “know” and yet we don’t act (2021b)—she calls for a “deep collaboration” between the arts and sciences to enable the kind of “knowing” that moves us to act to save ourselves and others in this time of precarity, or indeed crisis.

Judith Wright’s and Kamau Brathwaite’s poetics are integral to a life of political activism, and entangled in an intimate relationship with coral (this, despite Wright having spent very little time on, in, and with the Reef). My reading of their poetry “about” coral is testament to the power of imagination when combined with a political purpose that recognizes the deep entanglement of human and nonhuman life—of “culture” and “nature”—and the need to develop and retain meaningful relationship between thing and word, between knowledge, belief, being, and doing. Wright and Brathwaite lived and promoted an unsettling ecological poetics—a “strata of the dead” upon which we might build.

But it is not just poetry that has the power to move us: it is art in its many forms. In interview with Anthony King in 2017, Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson talks about his collaborative work with Greenlander geologist Minik Rosing,<sup>22</sup> and art’s affective capacity to make our climate challenges tangible:

Art can offer people direct experiences of phenomena, which can be more effective than just reading an explanation of something or looking at charts, graphs and data. A perfect example is *Ice Watch*. By bringing blocks of Greenlandic glacial ice to a public space, giving people the opportunity to

21 John Keats used the phrase “negative capability” in a letter to his brothers George and Tom, written in 1817. See Keats 1969, 308.

22 This collaboration resulted in *Ice Watch*, created in City Hall Square, Copenhagen in 2014 and at the Place du Panthéon in Paris for the UN Climate Summit of 2015 (see <https://olafureliasson.net/archive/artwork/WEK109190/ice-watch> and <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/ice-watch-olafur-eliasson-climate-summit-384704>).

see, feel and experience the effects of climate change first hand, Minik and I were able to reach people in a way that reports, graphs and data cannot. I feel that this is an important step towards motivating people not just to know something but also to respond to it, to feel the urgency of it and to take action. (Eliasson 2020)

In closing then, I want to move away from poetry to the visual arts and leave you with a story of climate change activism and “deep collaboration” between artists and scientists at the University of Wollongong, Australia. Their aim was in part to bring about a change in the public’s understanding and perception of coral reef—primarily through the power of affect. In a paper published in *Leonardo* in August 2021, the author-creators, textile artists Jo Law and Agnieszka Golda and scientists Helen McGregor and Speidar Syyar, speak about an art/science collaboration that incorporated “innovative materials such as, conductive graphene and low-energy electronic devices, slow textiles techniques, and climate data into original artworks.” Inspired by McGregor’s climate work with coral fossils, they hoped to “engage art’s affective capacities to convey not only the urgency of current environmental challenges, but more importantly, the hopes art, science and technologies can inspire” and to “communicate the stories of our changing climate” so as to “inspire meaningful actions” (Law et al. 2019).

The artists used Japanese metallic-thread embroidery techniques to incorporate new materials such as graphene and intelligent polymer to embed micro-electronic circuitry into the fabric, thereby creating programmable sound, light, and movement that respond to a visitor’s presence through sensors in the museum space. *Spinning World*, a multi-sensory artwork that explored the relationship between art, emerging technologies, and ecology, was exhibited at Sydney’s Powerhouse Museum from July 2018 through January 2019. It included a magnificent electronic textile wall hanging, a more diminutive but very beautiful second (animated) wall hanging, and two lengths of touch-sensitive screen-printed graphene.

Of the large interactive textile installation (see Fig. 1) the authors explain: the idea of coral fossils as bio-archives is visualized in the hanging in which “colonies of coral polyps thrive in a fantastical environment. When triggered by a viewer’s presence in the museum space, hand-embroidered speakers within this coral-scape played an underwater sound recording of the Great Barrier Reef (made by XL Catlin Seaview Survey).” The second textile hanging was animated by hand-fashioned electro-magnets and the third textile work used magnified light microscope images of coral polyps from McGregor’s research which lit up when touched. Here coral is experienced as response—it lights up to our touch. Here coral is communicative—it



**FIG 1.** *Spinning World*, 9.2 m × 3.3 m, Agnieszka Golda, Martin Johnson, and Jo Law, 2018. Ink, silver wire, magnets, proximity sensor, and microcontrollers on cotton canvas. Installation at the Sydney Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences, Powerhouse Museum, July 7, 2018–January 6, 2019.

speaks. It lives in a vital sensory world like us, with us. This is a different kind of communication between coral and human than that engaged in by coral scientist Les Kaufman—a practice he refers to as “coral whispering.”<sup>23</sup> But for those of us who are not scientists and those of us who do not have ready access to the real world of corals, this kind of interactive collaboration between scientists and artists provides an imaginative means of establishing human relationship with coral that we might not only “conserve” coral but move toward what Irus Braverman describes as “a more relational, or ‘coralated,’ world” (Braverman 2018, 3).

Across the duration of the *Spinning World* exhibition, over 26,000 visitors experienced the world of coral. Here science and art were brought into an affective relationship. This was exemplary of a deep collaboration that enabled people to inhabit the magical world of coral reef ecologies through an embodied, imaginative experience—an experience that increased appreciation for the beauty and vitality of this bio-archive of which we are part, and to better understand the gravity of its demise and ours.

23 In an interview with Irus Braverman in 2017, Les Kaufman observes that “[t]he point of [coral whispering] is to diagnose problems with corals before they’re actually dead because once they’re dead, it’s not helpful. So we’re listening to the corals, this is how they talk [...]. Coral whisperer means I’m whispering to the corals. But the coral is whispering back” (Braverman 2018, 1).

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This book contributes to the study of oceans, seas, coastal waters, and rivers within blue humanities by broadening, circulating, and interweaving knowledge about such waters, ocean epistemologies, and sea narratives from pluriversal epistemological, geographical, cultural, and disciplinary perspectives. The contributors from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, North America and the Pacific explore the interconnections between oceans, coastal areas, rivers, humans, animals, plants, organisms, and landscapes in the fields of cultural history and cultural studies, critical race and post-colonial studies, marine and environmental studies, linguistics, literature, film and media studies.



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