

The background of the entire page is a dark teal color. Overlaid on this background are numerous abstract, glowing blue and white structures. These structures appear to be composed of many small, bright points and thin, elongated lines, giving them a particle-like or filamentary appearance. Some structures are more concentrated and bright, while others are more diffuse and spread out. The overall effect is one of dynamic, energetic movement.

e-flux journal

issue #112

10 / 2020

*e-flux Journal* is a monthly art publication featuring essays and contributions by some of the most engaged artists and thinkers working today. The journal is available online, in PDF format, and in print through a network of distributors.

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## Toward a Glossary of the Oceanic Undead: A(mphibious) through F(utures)

Julieta Aranda, Chus Martínez, and  
Markus Reymann

## Editorial: “the ocean”



Erna Lilje and Eben Kirksey, *Flourishing with Undead Kin*, 2015

Hannah Arendt coined a beautiful concept that describes the current situation we dwell in: *worldlessness*. If the word “world” is used to name the space of sociopolitical life, then to lose the world would mean to lose all the gains that have been made in the sociopolitical sphere, setting off all the dangers that this loss entails. Therefore, it seems mandatory, in this lack-of-world, to attempt to maintain the bonds between people, to preserve the decades of efforts dedicated to extending the social bond to nature. It is in this lack-of-world that we must try to reinvent the most important element necessary for this bond: a public realm. Now, it appears that today’s public realm is a complex composite of all the solitary cells inhabited by individuals in isolation, with all conversations happening through privately owned tools like Zoom, Webex, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, and Instagram, all the streaming, the sprawling autonomous media, and so on.

By the nature of its inception, this apparent public realm not only runs through private channels, but is also deeply fragmented. And it invites a question about social interaction: When the social body lacks a body, is it possible to regroup the pieces into a singular something? That is: In a moment when bodies, en masse, are virally dangerous, and when governing bodies increasingly



dodge democratic procedures to flaunt authoritarianisms, neocolonialisms, and corporate-state capitalisms, is it possible to regroup from our individually isolating cells (domestic, digital, molecular, political) into some other collective form of transformation? Is there another body to look to for inspiration? Take the ocean, for example: a body of water with limitless potential for reorganizing the coexistence of life and its ever-liquid spaces as we know them.

If there is a shared purpose to this fragmented human experience, beyond the repetition of limited variations of the exercise of self-confinement, it may be that in the past months we've become certain that it is indispensable to include nature in a new political contract to create another life for culture. Taking the ocean as a theme for this issue addresses the possibility of a new world, of a political philosophy capable of reopening a debate on justice, freedom, and public space. From concrete issues on conservation, exploitation, and infrastructures and technology, to the possibility of a new interpretation of the world-with-nature via indigenous thought and the transformation of current art and cultural systems, the texts here aim to create a sense of affirmation and a space for politics.

Perhaps when thinking about cohesion, it could help to revisit the notion of "oceanic feeling," a psychological term conceived by Romain Rolland in the course of his correspondence with Sigmund Freud. According to Rolland's definition, this feeling is a sensation of an indissoluble bond, as of being connected with the external world in its integral form. This feeling is an entirely subjective fact and is not an article of faith. To Freud, this feeling is a fragment of infantile consciousness from when the infant begins to differentiate himself from his human and nonhuman environment. (He goes on to criticize the oceanic feeling of limitlessness in *The Future of an Illusion* and *Civilization and Its Discontents*).

Issue #112 of *e-flux journal* is a special collaboration with TBA21–Academy, focused on the ocean as a living entity, an intersectional and intrinsically interconnected ecosystem of systems for coalitional imagination and collaborative inquiries. The ocean has been the subject and the theme of TBA21–Academy since 2011. By asking for new modes of engagement while insisting on the importance of keeping a multifaceted approach, the academy resonates with both life sciences as well as socio-anthropology, and with art as a crucial, bridge-building force for shaping a new oceanic literacy.

Our call in this issue of *e-flux journal* is simple. As the deck reshuffles, as our current forms of relation and isolation unravel, let's keep this in mind: the entirety of the ocean. Not as a memory, but, like the mystic poets, let's allow our senses to become ocean, so as to regain together a sense of all that is fundamental for our near times. It may be that oceanic feeling, and by extension the

image of the ocean, are the best places to start rethinking the differentiation and order of hierarchies between human and nonhuman environments, and to elucidate to what point this differentiation is real, and to what point it is a construct. As we live through the cascading effect of a zoonotic disease, and as we see the images of the other inhabitants of our cities coming out to play now that so many are locked in, the need to answer here and now for our life on earth *with others* becomes clear.

## X

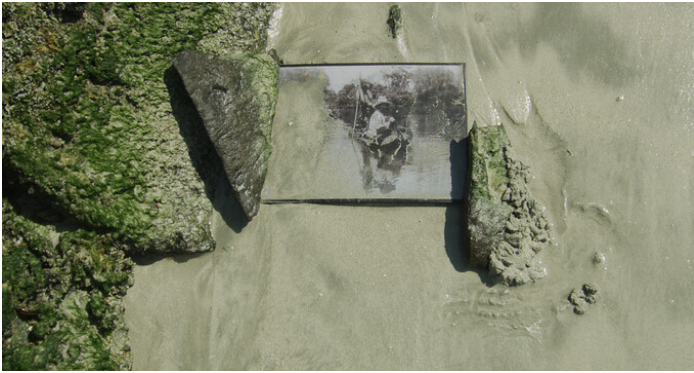
**Julieta Aranda** is an artist and an editor of *e-flux journal*.

**Chus Martínez** is head of the Art Institute at the FHNW Academy of Arts and Design in Basel. She is also the expedition leader of *The Current II* (2018–20), a project initiated by TBA21–Academy. Additionally, in 2021 and 2022, Martínez will hold the artistic directorship of Ocean Space, Venice, a space spearheaded by TBA21–Academy that promotes ocean literacy, research, and advocacy through the arts.

**Markus Reymann** is the cofounder and director of TBA21–Academy.

John Akomfrah  
The Sea Is About Us

















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**John Akomfrah** is an artist and filmmaker whose works are characterized by their investigations into memory, postcolonialism, temporality, aesthetics, and the experiences of migrant diasporas. He is the founder, along with Lina Gopaul and David Lawson, of the London-based film and television production company Smoking Dogs Films.

## Mary Walling Blackburn

# Swim to Us

[Preamble to the Tender Ones: . <sup>1</sup>]

We are the ones who used to hawk a loogie when we needed to<sup>2</sup> ... when official language was twisting and sinking us. Swimmers, let images float in this sea of spit, dunked and sunk.

Hawaii, 1887–1893: A phantom cell materializes from across the open water. The thirteen-member Committee of Safety, comprised of European and US sugar planters, financiers, and the descendents of missionaries, forms a cabal to overthrow indigenous Hawaiian rule. Could the volcanoes have erupted and selectively burned through their ambitions?

San Diego, 1969–1972: Another phantom cell of many phantom cells. This one is situated on another edge of the ocean, 82 years later. The Secret Army Organization, one of many FBI-funded, right-wing paramilitary groups that specifically targets communists, operates in San Diego. They aim and shoot from the curb. The bullet, as intended, goes through the window of Peter's home. He is a Professor of Economics. Inside, a journalist is visiting Peter. Both are Communist-Americans; but only she is shot in the arm. Nearby, salt water laps at the edge of a rail line, one on which government munitions are transported to the port. From the port, the munitions are bound for *Kháng chiến chống M* <sup>3</sup>, the Vietnam War. Might the Rose Canyon Fault Line shiver and San Diego's Mount Soledad slide over the railroad tracks?

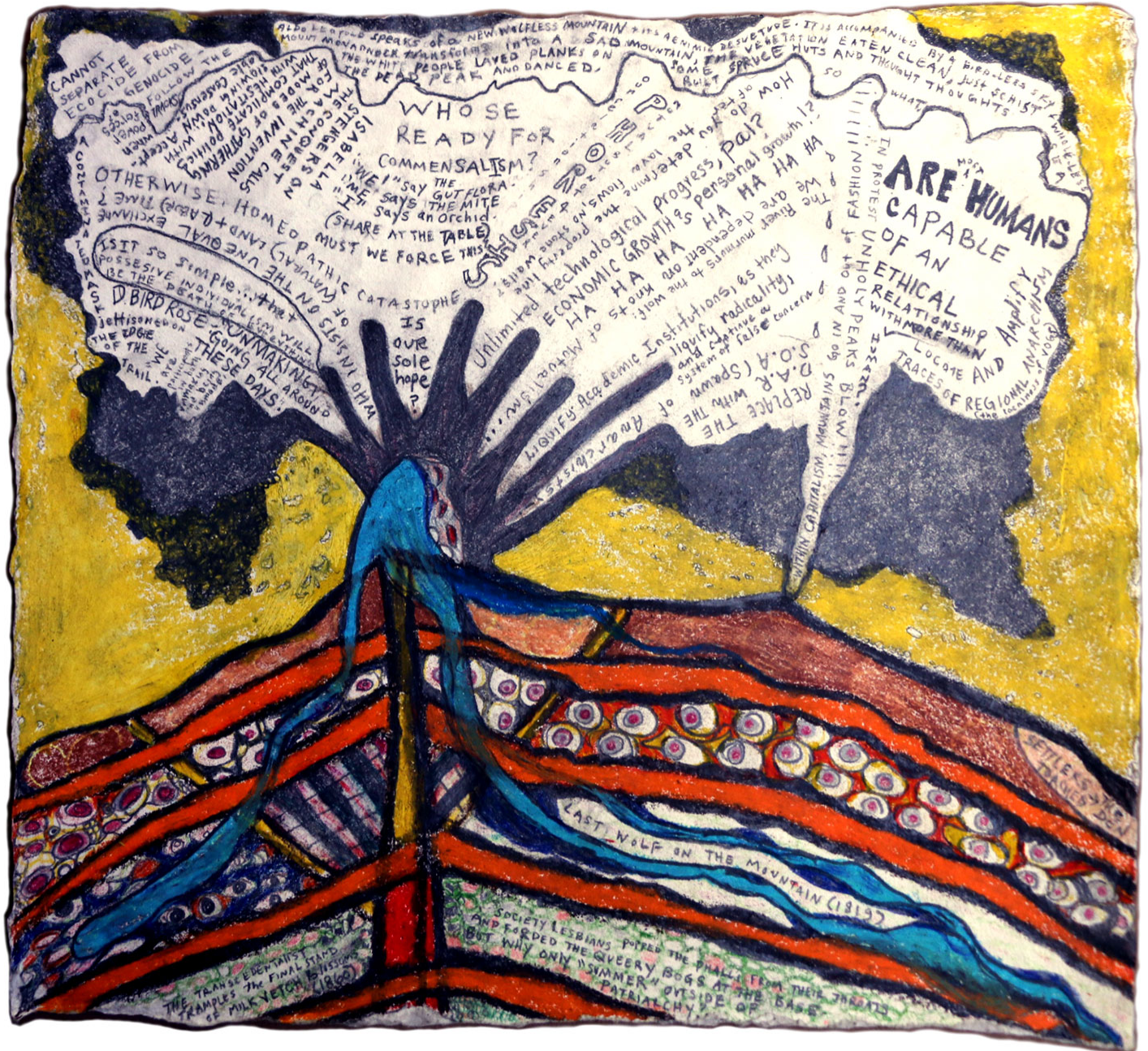
### Image goes here:

[A graphic of the ocean. It is one that charts global currents, and the commerce they hold—in this case, sneakers. This image communicates the kind of data that includes irradiated floaters floating backwards, body parts dissolving, buoyant waste.]

A graphic designer maps the location of running shoes washed ashore; each site holds a severed but socked human foot. The printed map displays brand logos: a New Balance. Amongst seaweed and seal and whale bones, behold: Nike; Adidas; Reebok; each holds air in its structures and essentially operates as a flotation device. From 2007–2017, authorities count thirteen human feet. By 2020, twenty.<sup>4</sup> The shoes are memento mori *and* boat. And the logos also float ideologies: Nike being a goddess that celebrates victory in war; Adidas being the portmanteau of a Nazi Cobbler; Reebok being antelope in Afrikaans, which was initially the language of Dutch colonizers of South Africa. A white wave of supremacy ... just visible in the names.

An oceanographer maps the locations of the left-footed running shoes as yet another data set. This set gives not





Mary Walling Blackburn, From the series: Volcanoes of New England (Mount Monadnock), 2020. Drawing on paper.

so much a geography of consumption and its kill, as it does a firmer sense of a singular ocean current's status—one that is being altered by the collapse of earth's climate. The coastline of British Columbia is served by the Parent Tide, as well as the Oyashio current and its large marine ecosystem (LME). An admixture of cold, saline bottom water delivered by feeder currents nourishes phytoplankton and microzooplankton. This drifting stuff sustains the entire marine food cycle.<sup>5</sup> Sans left foot.

What you are now reading is published in Autumn and the parent tide quickens, as it always does this time of year. It

speedily flows past volcanic forested islands, flows across and around decaying Russian nuclear submarines and depleted fisheries. In the water, the shoes that follow the curve of our human feet is the curve that sorts the left shoe from the right; coves of right footed sneakers are nestled elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

An engineer is curious about how newer shoe materials translate to large-scale boat building. But the thing itself, composed of a sneaker and its bone, knows *it* has floated



away from both the work and the worker, the factory and the market. All parties unconsciously distance themselves from the horror. They consciously breathe in while also forgetting that half of the oxygen in the atmosphere is generated by plankton. But the hiatus—so brief! All feet are state evidence now.

**After-image:** Yesterday and tomorrow, a beach stroller strolling with his furry bitch recalls the old headline and sneaker graphic. The beach stroller reads the news of the government defunding—or is it refunding?—"Anarchist Cities." Is removing the mental image from his internal moodboard like washing human shit off the sole of the shoe ... or not? Other walkers feel the sog and heft of bodies caught in the cogs, and remove their own trainers and wade way deep.<sup>7</sup> Their avant-garde, wealthy, white, elite, Virginia Woolf-style despair (the half-privilege<sup>8</sup> of drowning oneself in the River Ouse after many days at war with oneself—within a country many years at war) feels out of sync these days—to choose to die without a purpose.

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**Pre-step, Pre-hensile, Pre-sneaker:** Each day, remind the infant not to forget that they staggered onto the veldt from the canopy. Neonate toes will instinctively curl around a finger as if it were a tree limb. Coax the baby to retain that reflex. Grown and shoeless, they might be saved in the pursuit—if they can still cling.

**Step Aerobics:** After a summer of tear gas, the police have shifted their tactics. They run the protesters, like bulls, through the streets for hours. If they reach them, they bash them with billy clubs.

Six years ago, when my baby was small and sleeping, I walked through a gallery and looked at careful pencil drawings of billyclubs: long, hard, and smooth. In the spring, a friend's message, sent from outside the US, interrupts my remembrance: "ART IS DEAD! I am selling moonshine and muffins to survive. People on the street aren't begging for \$; they are begging for rice." After reading her message, and while looking at images of the protest, I fear the image and the actuality of a billyclub sticking straight out of an open skull, planted there.

If I see this as it happens, will I, like Tom of Finland, alchemize my fear by drawing an anonymous BORTAC (Border Patrol Tactical Unit) in riot gear with a gigantic erection? Will I cook rice substitute on a bonfire of billyclubs? I understand that our tactics must meet and surpass their tactics. Possible? I hum. I fiddle with the kindling.

#### Tips:

Prep the psyche for horror.

Inoculate self with a microdose of political trauma each and every day.

Locate the gorgon joke in that which terrorizes.<sup>9</sup>

Do this, in order to protect yourself later: from freezing in the shadow of a drone one moonlit night; tripping in panic as the piggies attempt lockdown; weeping tears without teargas.

#### More Tips:

Under a Helicopter Sky, everyone is heading away from the anonymous militarized beings outfitted with visors and long sticks. All are fleeing.

Try to refer to the fleeing as a work-out to delay the shock of having survived, the shock of the realization of what lengths the state will go to to quash rebellions.

Research BORTAC's training regime:

The grueling BSTC, which may last over a month, begins with physical testing involving push-ups, sit-ups, pull-ups, a 1.5 mile run and a pistol qualification. Candidates who pass the initial testing must then complete a timed, six- mile ruck march with a weighted pack. Additional testing is performed for swimming, treading water, and drown-proofing.

After completing the entire testing phase, candidates undergo weeks of intense training in small unit tactics, operational planning, advanced weapon skills, defensive tactics, and airmobile operations. Before graduating and putting the BORTAC wings on their uniforms, candidates must demonstrate the ability to function in a team environment under stress and sleep deprivation conditions.<sup>10</sup>

#### Another Tip:

Alternate running shoes to avoid injury.

For example, wear Women's Fate 9, by Newton, on Thursday. Allbirds<sup>11</sup> on Friday ... and so on.

Luxury products burrow into this text—products with high

marks on their carbon footprints but abysmal marks on their labor conduct. A Saloman Predict Soc in Lunar Rock floats out to sea. A handmade shoe washes in.

The handmade one is central in the obscured history of weaponized footwear in English class warfare. Cobblers crafting, printing, and distributing political verse asserted allegiance outside of a voting system (and today, in either a Cumbria, UK or Lawrence, USA New Balance manufacturing facility, someone please be versifying by way of Signal). Who knew that we once had had the capability of shoeing our own feet before we stampeded? Clap-clop.

In industrializing Europe, there were factory workers who lobbed wooden clogs in protest. This October, what could be initiated by a boot hurled in the American strawberry<sup>12</sup> processing plant? Cough cough (goes the worker). Bang-Clatter (goes the boot). I pick strawberry because a strawberry cannot be lobbed like the stinking boot—as might a turnip or potato. I pick strawberry because it is small and sweet. It contrasts nicely with company charges against dissenting workers, which are always amplified and foul, claiming that the worker has weaponized the berry and harmed the nation and some CEO. And then, what if a desperate one, sometimes called a scab, replaces the sick or dead worker at the factory? Instead of sorting out our moral obligations to all workers, should we instead imagine the scented Kenner Original Strawberry Shortcake doll as scab? Her plastic hair stinks like artificial fruit ... or maybe it's a soil fumigant, like Chloropicrin, that dusts the strawberry fields.<sup>13</sup>

14

A shoeless and swollen foot begs protection: protection from the punishing wheel, hoof, axe, cargo, boiling water, or frozen field. But there is an alternative: a sockless *tootsie* that does not only beg for mercy. This tootsie demands to be healed from every exposure—viral, toxic, and environmental; this tootsie stops her shit labor altogether and says: Cure this.<sup>15</sup>

Anyone! Press deeply the tootsie on the ball of the foot between the big toe and the little toe, where the lung meridian expresses itself. Find the tender spot. This is one attempt to temporarily relieve chest pain.

### Step One: White, Stop Being Someone

In the '90s strata, I was the nanny—the nanny for the children of the head archeologist at an archeological field school. That year there was a human skeleton in the

midden, located on the outskirts of the village ... its infant skull drifted apart and all other delicate bones scattered, over and through time. In my mind, something like an animation illustrating immensity unfurled ... baby bones floating through space, settling in different eddies of matter. Was it oceanlike? Yes. At that same site, I watched an enormous sunburnt man dislodge the tiniest seashell bead from a heap of dust, hundreds of miles from the sea.

Now, in strata 2020, after the cytokine squall—both national and personal—parts of my brain seem to have floated away from one another ... and I am suspended in an immensity that is something distinctly different from “being Someone.” Could this be a backdoor through and out of capitalism? For all whites to cease being *Someone*? I paw at the ground. The exit should be a trapdoor. A chute with no return.

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If a white, elite Reader-Scroller imagines this act of ceasing to be *white-Someone* [that is actively deaccessioning their name with (white) capital]: What does that imagining look like? If this imagining solely results in their own collective intestinal shifts (that bodily release after removing the shit of narcissism), then that reader is imagining wrong. If the White Scroller imagines that this process involves one losing oneself in a seemingly productive fashion, by way of crossfit cults and boutique reefer ... then the White Scroller is stoned and will be stoned.<sup>16</sup>

Dear White Elite Scroller: also, if you, when imagining the cessation of you being Someone, are conjuring the absolutes of fascism (the cell and the grave), make another mental U-turn.

### Trick or Tip?

If one of our dead fighters has no identity, traceable or visible, then when they are felled there is no face to photoshop stitch to far right propaganda.

Let me provide a fresh example of the obverse: A photo of Michael Reinhoehl's head was attached to an anonymous nude male shortly after his death. The GIF winces and throbs as this Frankenstein is spanked by another nude male. Within the image, maybe there is a stone hearth and a flickering fire; this must be a Far-Right skin flick. I have witnessed a shift: Reinhoehl mutating from free agent to property to commodity to .gif ... gift to the Right. Now, behind the supine left ... is that the head of the dead aggressor, Jay Bishop? Should I jack off or weep? I distance myself, like the beachcomber stumbling upon an

ocean-delivered left foot. Will there be a flood of foos and heads? If the future is both strewn with corpses and still wired to the internet, it is important to figure out how to see around this digital version of the smuggler's head on the pike.

For your own emotional integrity, float past any personal identification with bodies, literally or digitally dismembered, by the Right: in *The Someones*, the Alt-Right has virtually and joyfully repurposed the surface of anti-fascists to intimidate those who resist white supremacy.

There is no branding cosmos we can stitch to the politics of ceasing to be Someone. Consider this a productive image failure. Vaster unproductive imaging failures keep us tethered to our devouring present; see, corny illustration of galaxies catenating around black holes.<sup>17</sup> 'Artists' impressions' derail any sense of an operative immensity outside of monetary value—a realization which is desperately needed. So, instead, in the vacuum of the cavum, auscultate the black hole's shadow. Hear light bend in the center ... the radio loud and superluminous body of an entity with no surface, OMFG ... that SMBH.

Can Big Data be half-shucked off by Deep Listening? I recall a now vanished curator pontificating in a bar in Brooklyn (circa 2018) that sound art was seemingly the only relevant art form at this point. Later, in the endless spring of 2020, half-dead with Covid, in a sleepless delirium, the rain finally came down and I followed the sound into sleep.

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Florida Yahoo News reports a man cloaked as the Grim Reaper stalking its sandy beaches. I know it is a human in that costume, a no one impersonating Someone who, uh, makes us no one—or rather, alerts us to impending nothing. But for the first time in my life, in March, the Grim Reaper possesses a kind of pop—could even be described as approachable! GR is no longer a cartoonish animation, but a three-dimensional carapace that allows death to feel less abstract. The Grim Reaper's fresh presence makes it seem as if it is clear that I really am finally dying. I silently laugh with the musty, morgued one, then, alternately, I take a moment to admire how fabric can flow over stealth and speed—flow over an ending.

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Against the grain of American life, I didn't use the rope of the self to climb out of death. My heart was shorting out; the brain was spacious. Without a self, or out of my self, I jumped out of death. Now, less of a self seems left to dip into the Data Lake<sup>18</sup> that surrounds something I did call me. This Data Lake is not unlike a singular, contiguous sea wrapping around the medieval world. Those ancient maps feel like inauthentic steampunk jokes, but still, we

are encircled by our data wastestream.

*Glug glug ... A youtube video of an 8-millimeter home movie of Adrienne Kennedy, then a young playwright, bundled up and seated on a lounge chair on the deck of The RMS Queen Mary. It is 1960. Her hair is bound in a white scarf and she wears a long, pale trench coat. She holds three unopened books on her lap. The wind whips, riffing through them and her clothing. She walks the deck as her child plays shuffleboard. Her partner is shooting and his camera finds the surface of the water, cresting waves. She is bound east for a newly liberated Ghana. She will write An American Negro in the Funnyhouse while abroad ...*

I smell brine. The ocean is on the move. Stacks of art catalogs in the studio apartment are spotted with mold. We keep seeing the ocean throughout the day, glimpsed between buildings when we hit the streets; the cobblestones are purple.

*Glub glub ... Elska Cry Dead Traa Gaa Obadeea scrolling through an online Shetlandic dictionary, its language made in the remains of an ancient and broken sea kingdom, words describing bitter working dangers on their cold cliff-bound islands, sonic combinations that keep the guffaw and the gotchya intact. Yitter Yallicrack Uppadogga Tattie-Craa: the last is a children's toy—a potato with seagull feathers stuck here and there .... blub blub blub an island of pedophiles who market their honey on a crude internet "shop" ... uh uh uh ... a white American missionary, swimming off the coast of Borikén, is devoured by a shark; o sea dog, you did the dirty work of removing the colonizer and her social practice from our midsts.<sup>19</sup>*

Offline, I see a white shepherd, with many names and owned by no one, paddling through the swells. He is not eaten and he hauls himself ashore.

*... Ug ug ug ... winnowing through the photos of Mississippi Instagrammers, attempting to locate the bored Americans shooting dolphins for sport ... gug gug ... we log on to Hulu and watch Mati Diop's Atlantique (2019) . I zone into the pink darkening of the shore, where eros and illness operate in the wake of necropolitics. The plot hinges on dead workers seeking out their compensation after drowning in a storm that interrupts their migration north. I see vengeance meted out only when the dead repurpose living bodies; unpinned identities, dead and alive, float outside of state punishment. No spirits plasticuffed, ooo oooo ... where is the innocent rich man? Oooo oooooo oooo oo.*

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Night falls: Hundreds of ruby throated hummingbirds are flying nonstop, traversing the Gulf of Mexico. I like to imagine Forrest Bess, seated, maimed (bleeding or healing) on a quay, listening to the thrum; a painting, beside the painter's body, is drying. Since then, fossil-fueled hurricanes have destroyed the place where a queer one practiced a radical bloodlet.

Night fell: Beside an erupting volcano, a young girl floated in a small boat several miles out to sea, unconscious.<sup>20</sup>

At the base of the mountain, labor camp sugarcane was cut and covered by a ground glass tuff. When she awoke, the girl and the rescuers stitched together their present; it included 30,000 dead, and evacuees delivered to Dominica. But just before that, the girl had taken refuge in a boat her brother kept tethered in a sea cave. Further explosion propelled the craft from the cavern. Later, in the autumn of this same year, the psychoanalytic movement begins with a freshly tenured Sigmund Freud holding weekly salons in his Viennese home: *Psychologische Mittwochs-Gesellschaft*. Black coffee and cake and cigars—Caribbean colonial spoils—fuel the Wednesday discourse on pathology, power, the female body, and the unconscious. They puff; they feel good and they feel nausea. The Wednesday Psychological Society represses the origins of their sustenance, and they do it anxiously, hysterically. If they play Tarot, Someone will draw a card festooned with crude drawing of a Girl and Volcano.

I skim general human-interest internet posts about the 1902 eruption of Montagne Pelee. They tend to focus on Ludger Sylbarus, AKA Louise-Auguste Cypris. He is found damaged but alive in an underground jail cell. This contemporary fascination with Cypris is sometimes to the exclusion of Havrila de Fila, the girl who survives by her own right, or another adult male survivor who later died of wounds. There are people who still cling to a narrative that features a human saved by imprisonment. Later, Cypris/Sylbarus tours with Barnum and Bailey; the circus advert reads: "the only living *object* that survived the Silent City of Death." De Fila disappears from the historic record. She finds herself returning to no one; unlike Cypris, she is not subject to becoming the White's Black Someone. In other words, she eludes the fate of becoming a second *Living Object*, scrutinized by an audience—whether circus or academic.

Twenty years later, Frantz Fanon is born on this same island. As a toddler, F. feels the stratovolcano erupt (1929). In this event, catastrophe is evaded. It simply feeds the soil. Later, that fertile soil is helplessly contaminated: banana pesticides, American tourists, therapists, volcanologists scholars on vacation. Stick to the beachy edges? In vain, I search Fanon's works for specific mention of the girl and the volcano (Havivra Da Ifile, Mount Pelee, French-occupied Martinique), for the double

catastrophe of the island's forced labor camps (aka plantations) and volcanic eruption as incorporated into the pathopsychology of colonization. Away, does Fanon's mind drift to a childhood mountain communicating- not unlike Mount Tam talking to Anna Halprin after many murders on its flanks? The mountain murmurs subsonic: can a geological process provide a model for obliterating an oppressive structure?<sup>21</sup>

Fanon's position at the Blida-Joinville Psychiatric Clinic required that he treat the psyches of French torturers in between rounds of torture. The soldier-patients have lost their minds while plundering and torturing members of the Algerian resistance, chasing down the guerilla units of the FLN by helicopter, burning villagers until they speak, and so on ... So Fanon repeatedly descends into another kind of crater; noxious fumes spew from mental fissures and he is to fix that spume, to alchemize shell shock, and transform some of their sensations into sensations they can accept. He quits all that. The doctor turns in the opposite direction ... to collectively heal those who have been tortured by these same colonizers. And Dr. Fanon remains in volcanic terrain; 240 hot springs stud the country. Can survivors be coaxed into a restorative stillness by soaking in the water heated by magma?

Lately, I have been fantasizing that all the North American mountains we have perceived as benign will begin to communicate their dissent: hundreds of rock climbers, still attached to ropes, hurled from *Daxpitcheeasáao*.<sup>22</sup> Faces shear off Stone Mountain and Thunjkášila Sákpe.<sup>23</sup> When I explain, at dinner, that I think geological formations possess a sort of animist intersubjectivity, my child interrogates me:

"You want Monadnock to blow?"

"Sure."

The mountain has been communicating telepathically: *Stone walls are track marks. Wolves are dead. Time to go.*

A fantasy flexes both ways—anti-imperial or specific: Pleasures and horrors can swivel out from the same juncture, unreal or lived. The story and its bodies are buoyant. Underwater, another being's mouth—kelp, selkie, storm kelpie, sapien—gently suckles at the tube between human legs. Reverse this state ... to genitals, simply gone (snapping turtle, sated), scubadiver-circumciser (tank on, knife out).

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**[ Redacted Image and Caption**

Behold beheaded noggin with Airinum mask (\$99).]

Slick noggins are spiked now, in a nostalgic reverse of the populace piked in the eighteenth century. That was done in order to maintain certain economic orders, and this is done to unmake that economic order. Our contemporary pikers, in earbuds, tap into a cellular memory of the Cornish tea smugglers skewered at the behest of the East India Company (EIC).<sup>24</sup> Our new multitude elides actors who play Marie Antionette with Marie Antionette.

Our mob elides elite citizens coiffed and clothed and housed like influencers—for actors—and actors for influencers ... Mobs of No Ones dispatch with *The Someones* who rule.

Yes, its heads again, decorating a gate rusted by salty seas.  
Out of frame: breakers breaking on the shore.

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A friend has shot some Super 8 film of the house of Filiberto Ojeda Rios. Cell photos are posted online with remarks: "We found the marks of bullets and blood we expected but also cocoa trees full of fruit, a beautiful sunset light and a special tranquility in which we imagine listening to his trumpet." To re-sound. To rewind the assassination. Where I live for now, white garden club ladies at the annual garden sale boast that the proffered tomato plant "is the descendent of those grown by Thomas Jefferson"—rather, by chattel slaves at Monticello. There is another possibility: a North American synthesis of agriculture and nationalism that operates otherwise, where the fruit is gathered from Filberto's yard; these seeds travel; another kind of nationalist pridefully cultivates Ojeda Rios cocoa trees in San Juan, Charlotte Amalie, and Miami.<sup>25</sup>

The same morning the friend posts photos of Ojeda Rojas's house, I was reading up on right-wing paramilitary groups covertly funded by the US government. I hone in on one of many, on this one operating in PR: a phantom cell comprised of Cubans funded by the FBI.  
"Is it the one that killed Ojeda Rios, the ones who watched him bleed to death?"  
"It is the FBI."

The dovetail in research feels odd. Is Uncle Sam's severed phallus strung between my friend and myself? Maybe the connection is less communicable by the symbolic. Perhaps we both hope to publicly humiliate the neoliberal hold. To laugh and scold and refuse it any dignity, any erotic charge—any merit, any pleasure, any future.

Are we fools to think that a fact in the form of a film, a text, and a drawing can be a tomato, boot, or brick hurled at the occupiers? The question is, always: What will it take to disoccupy<sup>26</sup>—and will it take my life, too?

**Tip:**

This Covid Autumn, it might be a provident thing to lose your astrological sign, your name, your place of birth. Appear useless and untraceable—like rounded sea bricks.

Sea brick, sea brick, what can you do ... your own self an orphan heft in your own hand?

\*\*\*

Last night ... a friend fresh from protest. The friend studs the conversation with "What did you say?" A flash bang went off close to their head. Today, I crudely sign: *Colors; Egg; Dolphin*. It isn't sufficient. This is a daymare: all my fighting friends emerging from the smoke with ruined eardrums. My ASL classes begin in several weeks and with rheumatic claws I will slash at the air in front of the screen so that I can begin to communicate with

Instead: In the hands of ghosts, tear gas canisters became pucks. In the hands of ghosts, strangers' wounds are cleaned out with certain flowers that coagulate the blood.

Conjure screen ghosts. Sign to the screen ghost that there is rest and medicine if a ghost needs it. The ghost signs back: You know that yarrow powder coagulates the blood but you did not know that red yarrow does not. You sign: Fuck! Did you pour it in a ghost's wound and the wound just kept pouring?

\*\*\*

In a letter, Finnish comic book artist and novelist Tove Jansson writes that she is going over to the ghost side. She also names it the border. She means she will dedicate herself to love and sex with women. At this point, lesbianism is illegal in Finland. She sneaks through the connected attics of the buildings in her block to get to her lover at the other end. Later, they design a one-room cabin on a skerry in the Gulf; a foundation is blasted into the rock. Seabirds scatter. A window is built into each wall, and each faces the sea. Ghosts, sucking and holding, must know who is approaching. When the ghosts felt vulnerable to winter and returned to the city, the soldiers training in the archipelago broke in. Again. Technically, no one is at war.



# Someones: all the ones who ceased building and protecting careers, who ceased with writing and illustrating the disaster

There is a decorated veteran in their same city—also ghost. Touko Vallo Laaksonen carefully draws the lawless soldiers, not vandalizing homes but opening pants and asses. Each signed Tom of Finland.

## STEP TWO: RALLY THE SPAWN OF NON-REPRODUCTIVE SEX

The dried spores of the Wolf's foot clubmoss explode when gathered in high densities.

On the cool, dark floor of the forest, my hand handles lacy, alive parts without caution; the plant is benign at this juncture. No death by flash. But just wait for the necromancy; it rolls out.

Early magicians in the North American understories were collecting the reproductive material of Bear's Paw (*Diphasiastrum digitatum*) and Princess Pine (*Lycopodium clavatum*). They would set blazing fireballs across rural stages, circus tents, and rented town halls, claiming these flames were a visitation from the dead.

Pay them and ... behold a fireball that issues a burning great-patriarch!

*I am the two-headed sperm that made haste to the ovum—monstrous and lucky!*

Believe them and ...

Behold a second fireball! It is issued forth from the afterlife. Prior to my great great uncle Edward's iteration as fireball, he materialized in the photograph—he seemed to be living in the photo, locking eyes with the viewer while he sat there, close to his relaxed big blonde man friend. But on the magician's stage, my side-patriarch not only globes into fire but hisses, too. Edward says:

*If you subscribe to the mystic notion that every non-reproductive fuck still begats a spirit—potent and active in the air above us—then the atmosphere is thick with my babies: furtive queer things with my*

*continous black brow and wine-dark nipples and his cornsilk hair; these furious and poor demons crumbling your coercive sentimentality, your kitchen island, your photograph of the private beach. Spirit babies born of blowjob pregnancies, like errant cupids, crash your plague-born microschools.*

*Tots from Sodom, like motorized Chuckies, dismantle the white yacht engines of your floating commune ... that one for heteronormative half-victims of capitalism who have fashioned their getaway. My spawn, my sprites will redraw your supplicating drawings of capitalist catastrophe into a peachy surface ... they'll carve into your cork tree, your earpod, your collectors' embedded (pinkish) floating device ... their blade stuck in your gallerist's pate.*

\*\*\*

The ones who are fighting in Covid Spring and Covid Summer experience the nightly battles as unreal. An old tool for unseating the real is linked to Wolf's foot clubmoss, AKA Princess pine.

At some point, early American photographers headed to the local chemist to purchase *yellow baby powder*. Boom and flash—a memento mori, ma'am (an illuminated soldier corpse | babe in pine coffin). Later, lycopodium powder was transformed into fingerprint powder (to nab and cage) ... Today the spore, as a waterproofing agent, dusts the surface of medical gloves and condoms (a protected fist buried in the body, tender or carceral).

*We burn you. We reproduce you. We track you. We fuck you.*

Thus spoke the plant or the state? I hear this in the pre-echo of their groove.

This country's governing bodies use of the botanical is buried in the deathly objects severed from their origin.

Tear gas also begins as a plant to powder.

Its origin story is inseparable from riot control. Roll back to 1918. Whose gas? Who's gassed? The same companies invent the gases along with the gas masks, poison, and antidote—package deal, then as now.

Some herbalists will speak of the plant as an ally: Whose ally? Imagine a “pig” lisping vegetative allegiance to *capsicum*—while gloved, gassing, photographing, targeting the herbal medics on the street. If the cop acknowledges the plant *as central to* their weapon, it is still highly unlikely that this will become the transformation some seek. Just like the real pig gets lit on fermented apples, the real cop can toké or bake—and still love the slop of mud or blood.

Note: In the revolting cities, white-owned dispensaries line the former skidrows. I can't locate the sites of the SROs with their maze of weeviled rooms, peopled by runaways and ex-cons and madams; my mother, my aunt, my grandfather walked them in the '60s and '70s. But last year, I saw legal herbs nestled between crystals in lit glass displays. All those years, with scale and baggie, were stoners longing for a Shopping Experience? Here, a shopboy indicates several herbs that are grown without chemical intervention. Here is the one he recommends: *Squat in the Melt*.

For sixty days, the capsicum or cs gas—from pepper plant to powder to aerosol to liquid—has run down hair and skin, leaf blower and hockey stick, pavement and sewer ... to river, then ocean? Someone memes: What if the tear gas that soaks my clothes, is laundered out, draining into the wastewater system? I follow up as if I am the poster's Dear Abby: “The daughter of a retired wastewater management plant states that it will break down, but her dad is partial to Round-Up.” I remember the sunlight in this same man's pear trees, sprayed.

Last year, it seemed that the earth was well enough if we squinted: a blazing fireball radiating above us. This deathly summer, the reports roll in, dear reader, and the ecologists caution that the tear gas has entered the watershed. But it doesn't just wash away; it also drifts.

It drifts into the nearby houses, wending through cracks.

Necromancer: conjure the queer spirit babies with leaf blowers?!

Tear gas reassembles itself, re-aerosolizing if the floors and furniture are not properly decontaminated. Rag it right, before your period pours, protester. Some menstrual cycles will be disrupted.

*Like a news flash but anchored to the past: at the terminus of the Bonus March of 1932, where hungry and jobless WWI veterans and their families protested the withholding of a promised monetary compensation for their service, General MacArthur ordered cavalry and infantry men to*

*enter a DC encampment and disperse them with bayonets and adamite. Adamite is another lachrymer—you get tears, yes, but also vomit. During the attack, one woman protester miscarries. REPRODUCTIVE PROTESTERS WILL NOT BEGAT PROTESTORS: the recipe for this outcome includes gas and blood.*

But how shall protestors persist from generation to generation? Parthogenesis?

Years after another suppression and the following decontamination—Someone—cigar or e-cigarette dangling from craw—will throw a dirty rag in the corner. Baby Anarchists will rustle in the dried folds .... their iridescent afterbirth jammed in the seams of the empire.

This feels like the ending. But the damage has not ceased.

How does improvement or rescue function in a hyper-capitalist zone ... and what happens when a buoy is cast into a white human-thing that has no interiority?

The Uprisings surge. Fires burn and safes melt. And zines are printed. And the government archivist has collected them all, accessioned with a face mask emblazoned with the Trinacria: three bent human legs in a rotational spiral around a Gorgoneian head with wheat chaffs for ears and golden snakes for hair. I hear Medusa's face isn't so much a face, as a trick vulva—hear it curse ... like a sailor. I hear that Hélène Cixous writes: “*You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not dead. She's beautiful and she's laughing.*”<sup>27</sup>

\*\*\*

We float, be it through space or in spit. We float in the antumbra, the lighter part of the shadow cast by the occluding object. The object? In astronomy, the moon. In psychology? Braid the half-light of the half-life of trauma into the shadow of our Zombie reach. In other words, us half-dead ones rotate past our own deadness into a star spangled murk.<sup>28</sup>

(The luminescent muck of the Data Swamp: Is it fetid or is it ferment? It's where you teach your child the dead-man's float. )

## Stepping stone

The coyote algorithm includes skirting the industrialized shoreline. This is because *Canis latrans* have a calculus—geographical and nocturnal—as to how to eat,

fuck, and den without being murdered. Take a cue from the animals; at dusk, release your adolescent without record out onto your block. Frame it as play: "This is a video game, kid. You got to determine the best route through our port *c ity but one that is* without detection. If you are sighted by another human being it is Game Over." "Who is my avatar?" asks Kid Gamer who knows they must operate in absolute anonymity.

Hand the kid a fresh sketch of Tom of Moominland: a mutant queer figurine rising out of our raw fascism and escalating slaughter of transpeople. Moomin's snout and Tom's phallus have shifted shape in response to climate fluctuation.

"Why is Tom of Moominland wearing a tankini?"

"It is an aquatic mission. The goal is to reach the shore, bandage the dolphin, ride to the tankard filled with veggie oil, and eat and rest to begin the fight again; also, stop them from ... mining the moon."<sup>29</sup>

If the moon goes, there goes menses and tides.

There goes *adulescens cryptid*, loping and low, towards the shore.

## X

**Mary Walling Blackburn** was born in Orange, California. Walling Blackburn's work engages a wide spectrum of materials that probe and intensify the historic, ecological, and class-born brutalities of North American life. Recent publications include *Quaestiones Perversas* (Pioneer Works, Brooklyn, 2017) co-written with Beatriz E. Balanta; "Gina and the Stars" published by Tamawuj, an off-site publishing platform for the Sharjah Biennial 13, and "Slowness," a performance text in the sound-based web publication *EarWaveEvent*. Walling Blackburn is the founder of the Anhoek School, a pedagogical experiment, and WMYN, a pirate feminist radio station, whose writing has been featured in publications including *Afterall*, *BOMB*, *Cabinet*, *e-flux journal*, *Grey Room*, *Grafter's Quarterly*, *Pastelegram*, and *Women and Performance*. Group exhibitions and events include Beta-Local, San Juan, Puerto Rico; New Museum, NY; Art in General, NY; Sculpture Center, NY; Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY and Centre Pompidou, Paris and Tate Modern, London.

1  
A certain gentleness that Tender Ones require takes time; it requires a circuitry, a circling around trauma. But here, images will surge forward because the earth's hourglass has shattered. It was only belatedly that we committed to a strategy akin to a gentle fisting—in other words, engaging in a process that requires patience and slowness, and a desire to reimagine the limit. Me and you both, Baby—we hope we have not exceeded the possibilities of a gradual and peaceful return to sinuous anarchisms, local and mutual. Moreover, this text will unfurl without trigger warnings, because the United States of America is always giving head to its own gun barrel; its pistol suck includes old phantom cells and official armed forces, militarized police, right-wing militias, campus public safety officers, private security guards, self-deputized wing nuts, and even, legislatively speaking, mass shooters. Obvi, the Capitalist State is so turned on by its own crisis that it doesn't taste the endings, the materials, their motion. So let the contaminating images fly forward ... as some of them might allow for unspeakable resistance.

2  
Longing for a fictional compendium, *The Philosophy of Spit*, which would include "Let's Spit on Hegel" by Rivolta Femminile, and also a tract that references Tefnut, the Egyptian goddess of moisture, who was spat out like saliva by Ra. According to spells carved into the interior surfaces of Unis' pyramid, she is lion-headed and human-bodied, and pure waters drip from her vulva. Splosh.

3  
While living briefly in Vietnam in the '90s, I quickly realized that the war initiated by the US (1954–1972) was referred to as the American War. *Kháng chiến M* translates to "Resistance War Against America," another designation.

4  
See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/13/canada-human-foot-british-columbia>. For decades, my research included forensic remains in relation to femicide. These sneakers and their feet disrupt a repeated narrative of intimate dismemberment and insist on an analysis that imbrocates global states as animated by capitalism.

*Sally sells single sneakers at the seashore*.

5  
For more detail on the Parent Tide, see [https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/8814/GIWA\\_regional\\_assessment\\_31\\_Oyashio\\_current.pdf?amp%3BisAllowed=&sequence=3](https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/8814/GIWA_regional_assessment_31_Oyashio_current.pdf?amp%3BisAllowed=&sequence=3).

6  
It is a trick to not be intoxicated by the material patterning and to remain focused on ascertaining the scope of global supply chains; their connection to necropolitics and the ways to cease their machinations. Phil A. Neel does a worthy job of that here: <https://libcom.org/library/swoosh-phil-neel-china-nike-production>.

7  
On March 28, 1941, Woolf, loaded her coat pockets with rocks, not to be a floater, and walked into the River Ouse.

8  
It was a privilege because this type of person killing themselves circulates in a realm where no one else, kith or kin, neighbor or conspirator, materially or spiritually depends on them to exist. The people they surround themselves with all live within equal economic security and political confidence.

9  
The violent joke and/or laughing at violence is a tactic practiced by the miscreants in my family. Filthy, angry, heartbreaking humor is incubated in the home. It helps me, my aunts, nieces, cousins ... survive the bad jobs, incarceration, sickness, drug addiction, evictions, and so on ... of our family members. When my aunt kicks a knife from my cousin's hand, we laugh and marvel at my aunt's skill ... we smirk-cry when a cousin born in jail is named "Liberty" ... we guffaw when a neighbor plants cannabis in the sheriff's yard, in a state where it remains illegal.

10  
See <https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Border%20Patrol%20Tactical%20Unit.pdf>.

11  
Allbirds receives high marks on its carbon footprint but not on its labor conduct. "There is no evidence it has a Code of Conduct. It sources its final stage of production from countries with extreme risk of labour abuse.

There is no evidence it ensures payment of a living wage in its supply" [https://directory.goodonyou.eco/brand/allbirds?\\_ga=2.209894805.1235551413.1601148752-1127630246.1601148752](https://directory.goodonyou.eco/brand/allbirds?_ga=2.209894805.1235551413.1601148752-1127630246.1601148752).

12  
I also choose strawberries as they will still be late-harvested when this text is published. I choose strawberries because my grandmother and her siblings and my great grandparents and their siblings worked in Salinas and Visalia fields as migrant workers where strawberries are also cultivated. My family was harvesting cotton, not berries. My mother was born in Salinas. There are no stories of their dissent; no boot in the face of the landowner. No joke.

13  
See this authoritative text on California strawberry industry workers: Miriam J. Wells, *Strawberry Fields: Politics, Class, and Work in California Agriculture* (Cornell University Press, 1996).

14  
In the 1980s, one of the few plastic-molded action figure lines marketed towards young girls produced the Strawberry Shortcake Series by Kenner. The dolls contain a spectrum of gender and racial affronts. Yet is hard to resist an attempt at imagining an alternate universe where the membership of the United Farm Workers of America does not shrink in the 1980s; and in this moderately improved universe, instead of cartoon parades and housewarmings, Blueberry Muffin, Orange Blossom, Strawberry Shortcake, Apple Dumplin, Plum Puddin, Raspberry Tart, Almond Teacake and their animal familiars take on agricultural union grievances and crush villainous corporate henchmen ... like ... Purple Pie Man and Sour Grapes. Yes, Purple Pie Man communicates a kind of pansexual, mediterranean-by-way-of-Burning Man vibe in very tight pants. He has a moustache insert that is easily misplaced. Yes, Sour Grapes, a tall, black, blue-and-purple tressed, high Femme villain with a snake side kick is nothing short of an age-old sexist reprisal of Medusa operating on the interlaced seam of race and gender. How does an ideologically careless child play hard with the dolls who straddle the seam? I don't know. The surviving figurines are very susceptible to mold.

15  
In early October 2020, in Salinas, California, stronger Covid measures were required, as workers were felled by Covid and smoke from the fires.

16  
In a scattered, dissociative way, I recall a never-worn souvenir T-shirt in the giveaway bin ... It read: It included a cartoon drawing of a wall—the wall of apartheid. The gifted T-shirt operates within a contagion heuristic. It's implicit violence contaminates even an ocean apart from what the Israeli government refers to as a security barrier. Who wears this?

17  
A couple links to artist depictions of black holes as disseminated by NASA: <https://www.jpl.nasa.gov/spaceimages/details.php?id=pia22085> and <https://www.jpl.nasa.gov/spaceimages/details.php?id=pia16695>. Moreover, a general overview of black hole illustration over time: <https://www.discovermagazine.com/the-sciences/the-decades-long-struggle-to-draw-a-realistic-black-hole#.XMCPr-tKIL8>.

18  
Define data lake. Online? You are in it; your wake, your waste, your piss in the pool, collected and monetized.

19  
Thanks to Ramón Miranda Beltrán here. In conversation at a studio visit at Beta-Local, I was speaking of Social Practice as missionary work and Beltrán was clear that one must go further in that qualification of Social Practice as part of Colonialism's unfinished violences. Later, online, I located a newspaper clipping reporting the shark attack and subsequent death of a US missionary in early twentieth century San Juan.

20  
Roiling turbulent flows of gas, ash, and rock can reach a speed of 700 km per hour.

21  
Fanon returned to Martinique shortly before accepting the appointment in Algeria. Reportedly, he no longer felt at ease there. Can a part of him be or not be the girl expelled from home by forces beyond her control?

22  
In Kiowa, this butte or latholithic 20

is named *Daxpicheeasáao*. In Lakota, it is called *Mató Thípila*. Kiowa, Lakota, Crow, and Cheyenne nations have requested that its name be restored and that rock climbers cease scaling a holy site. It is currently operated as a monument by the National Park services under the name Devil's Tower. Nearly 5,000 rock climbers ascend the site each year.

23

This is the name of the mountain in Lakota. It is also called Mount Rushmore.

24

The price of tea in England, managed by the EIC, also known as "The Company," exceeded the domestic budget of local worker households. These workers were just becoming incorporated into an expanded colonial economic structure that included the liquidation of land held in common. Smuggling operations that studded remote coastlines provided tea at a lower cost, allowing disadvantaged laborers access to a new energy drink that enhanced their ability to work in worsening conditions. "The Company" was not a purveyor of tea and spices alone. Its own imbrication in both the Atlantic Ocean and Indian Ocean chattel slave trades began in 1621, when EIC transported 22 enslaved people from India to Batavia. This was six years prior to what's generally recorded as "the first English slaving voyage across the Atlantic." After destroying indigenous systems of governance, the European company states engineered a flow of labor and goods that resulted in enslaved peoples producing, for example, cloves, nutmeg and tea sold in the UK.

25

After reading the draft of this essay, S. writes that she actually did pocket and plant the cocoa. My fantasy was in fact a reality.

26

Utilizing this term as coined by Tosquelles.

27

Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Diane Prince Herndl and Robyn R. Warhol (Rutgers University Press, 1997), 355.

28

Made spacious by dementia,

Silvia Campos haltingly wrote *La Promesa*; it is a slender, purple novella. When the libraries were closed down in the beginning of the pandemic, it was next to my bed. There was no returning it. In *La Promesa*, the protagonist, crossing the Atlantic eastward by cruise ship, is accidentally hurled overboard. As she swims eastward, she attempts to remember everything. Is she wearing running shoes? Her brand is extinct. But ultimately, I don't remember the book ... only the feel of drowning in my lungs. I can't verify the plot or the details. The book is now back in the library, circulating. I want to check if the floater is apolitical. Is that a dealbreaker these days? Still, after all of this, I will see the vague lines of our erasing selves in her stroke.

29

I don't imagine you believe them when the various corporation-states (not so different from colonial era trading companies) announce that they would stop extraction of rare earths at 1% of total lunar mass.



Elizabeth A. Povinelli

# The Ancestral Present of Oceanic Illusions: Connected and Differentiated in Late Toxic Liberalism

I had sent him my small book that treats religion as an illusion [ *The Future of an Illusion* (1927)], and he answered that he entirely agreed with my judgement upon religion, but that he was sorry I had not properly appreciated the true source of religious sentiments. This, he says, consists in a peculiar feeling, which he himself is never without, which he finds confirmed by many others, and which he may suppose is present in millions of people. It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of "eternity," a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded—as it were, "oceanic." This feeling, he adds, is a purely subjective fact, not an article of faith; it brings with it no assurance of personal immortality, but it is the source of the religious energy which is seized upon by the various Churches and religious systems, directed by them into particular channels, and doubtless also exhausted by them. One may, he thinks, rightly call oneself religious on the ground of this oceanic feeling alone, even if one rejects every belief and every illusion.

—Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*

## 1. Neither, Neither

The geontological division of being between Life and Nonlife is beginning to lose its effectiveness in securing privilege for the settler liberal capitalist elite and in governing the hierarchy of human and more-than-human. As this happens, new conceptual figures and axioms are emerging, new moods are being torn from or anchored to older ones. I discussed three of these conceptual figures (the Desert, the Animist, and the Virus) in my last book, *Geontologies*, and elaborate on four newly arising axioms of critical theory in an upcoming book, *Between Gaia and Ground*. These four axioms are: entanglement of existence; the unequal distribution of power to affect the local and transversal terrains of this entanglement; the multiplicity and collapse of the event as the *sine qua non* of political thought; and the racial and colonial history that has informed modern Western ontologies and epistemologies and the concept of the West as such. As with the figures discussed in *Geontologies*, so the axioms examined in *Between Gaia and Ground*: I am not interested in promoting a new universally applicable frame, but rather in helping to amplify the broader anticolonial struggles from which these figures and axioms have emerged. I also aim to examine a reactionary formation—late liberalism—which has attempted to remold, blunt, and redirect these struggles. After all, these figures and axioms are part of much broader discursive surfaces that reflect opposing currents of political thought

and action in the wake of geontopower. The way we approach them—including a seemingly casual syntactic arrangement of theoretical statements—results in dramatically differing paradigms for figuring the present both as a coming catastrophe ( *la catastrophe à venir*) and as an ancestral one ( *la catastrophe ancestral/historique*).

Nowhere is this point more important, I think, than in how we approach oceanic feelings, forces, and ancestral presents. From Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, C. L. R. James, Claudia Jones, Edouard Glissant, through Sylvia Wynter, Christina Sharpe, and so many others, critical anticolonial and race theory has been written from the specific histories that marked the Black Atlantic. Glissant opens his reflections in *Poetics of Relation* on a boat in the middle of the Atlantic, in the midst of the radical exploitation and dispossession of the West African men, women, and children “who lived through the experience of deportation to the Americas.”<sup>1</sup> Three abysses unfurl on this turbulent sea: the abyss of the belly of the boat, the abyss of the depths of the sea, and the abyss of all that has been severed and left behind. The stakes of what existence is—essence or event—shrinks to a vanishing point relative to, on the one hand, how the world became entangled in these sadistic practices and, on the other hand, how the Relation that opened in this specific scene continues to entangle existence. By anchoring his concept-building in the horror of the slave boat, Glissant does not, however, merely seek, as “every great philosopher,” to “lay out a new plane of immanence, introduce a new substance of being and draw up a new image of thought.”<sup>2</sup> Nor does he only seek to initiate and provide a new course for old affects and discourses. He does both of these things, yes; but he also does something else, something slightly errant to the obsession of his friends Deleuze and Guattari: he asks whether any concept matters outside the worlds from which they come, and toward which they intend to do work. What do we ultimately care about: The ontological status of existence, or the modes of being and substance that a specific commercial engorgement of humans and lands produced and continues to engage?

In other words, by commencing from this specific abyss, Glissant reminds us, firstly, that the liberal politics of empathy, of putting oneself into another—acting as if anyone can experience and everyone should act as if they could experience this cavity of being in Relation—is not merely wrongheaded, but a continuation of the devastating political relations that opened in the Black Atlantic. This does not suggest that those who were, and are, in a different relation to the Abyss—those who benefit from the three abysses—should shove wax in their ears and force others to paddle them forward. Instead, the questions are how specifically one has emerged in relation to the ancestral present of this abyss; how the entanglement of existence is not some abstract starting point, but the social situations that different persons are given in the present in a world structured to care for the existence of some and not others; and how one can

change the given relations that have sedimented into existence from the depths of these seas and severed shores. Glissant also reminds us, secondly, of how cunning the absorptive powers of late liberal capitalism are—how quickly specific relations are remade as relations-erasing universal abstractions. “An abyss opened here for them” is reformulated as “we all live in the abyss.” This absorptive, relations-erasing universalism is especially apparent in some contemporary discourses of toxic late liberalism and climate collapse—what some call the Anthropocene—especially those that anchor the crisis in a general Human calamity which, as Sylvia Wynter has noted, is merely the name of an overdetermined and specific European man.<sup>3</sup> Like geontopower, the toxicity of colonialism and its spawn, liberal capitalism, operated in the open in large swaths of the earth where European diasporas stripped and drained away what they saw as valuable and left behind the toxic processed remains that condensed value. Longstanding ecological enmeshments, species relations, and analytics of existence were approached with a genocidal rage or, no less rancid, a callous disregard.

In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud rehearses the primitivist trope by which man becomes man as such insofar as he is differentiated from animals. Here he is just one of many Western thinkers stretched across numerous disciplinary formations who assert the human difference as a difference of worldedness. Another is Heidegger, with his famous three theses of world distribution: the stone is world-less; the animal is world-poor; and man is world-forming because man’s very being (Dasein) is always attuned to the world where being is by being irreducibly being-there. We hear this mood lurking behind Hannah Arendt’s logic for differentiating colonialism and imperialism. According to Arendt, unlike imperialism, “Colonization took place in America and Australia, the two continents that, without culture and a history of their own, had fallen into the hands of the Europeans.”<sup>4</sup> European imperialism occurred much later in Africa and Asia (1884–1914), by which time the earth had become a thing and capitalism had emerged from the engorgement of human and material value in the triangular trade that defined the Atlantic from circa 1500 through the 1800s. No desire to create new forms of human pluralities defined European “adventures” in imperial worlds. Imperial territories were considered solely in relation to what they could provide for the further enlargement of wealth in the metropole. John Adams was not Cecil Rhodes, so Arendt’s argument goes, because Adams sought a “complete change of society” in his consideration of “the settlement of America as the opening of a grand scheme and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth.”<sup>5</sup> Rhodes simply thought of his Rabelaisian body.

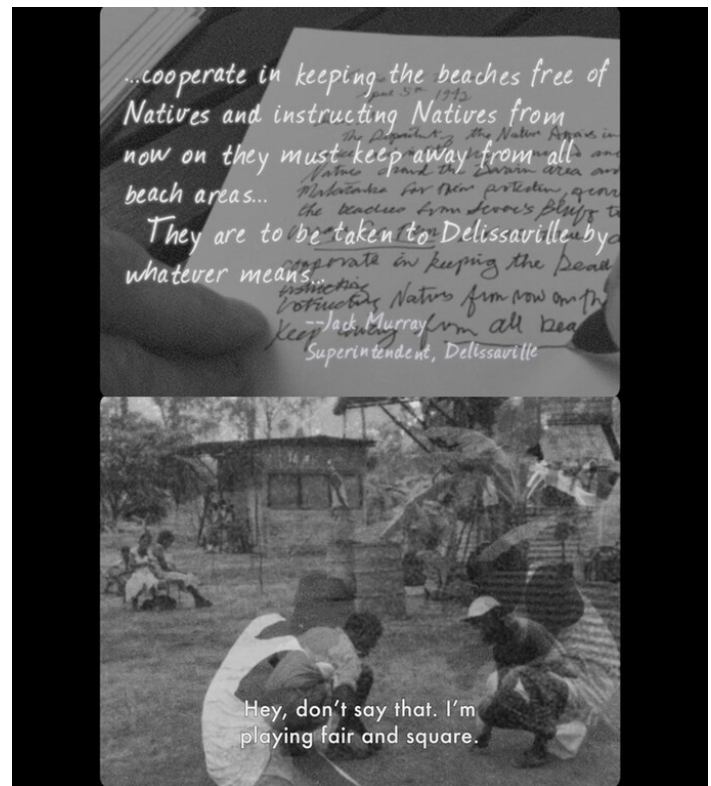
Kathryn Gines, Fred Moten, and others have written trenchant critiques of Arendt’s account of race and

colonialism. Moten, for instance, agrees that the advent of settler and slave colonialism in the “Americas” did usher “another way of being” into the world, but the condition of creating this new common European world was the destruction of a multitude of existing black and brown worlds.<sup>6</sup> The tsunami of colonialism was not seen as affecting humanity, but only these specific people. They were specific—what happened to them may have been necessary, regrettable, intentional, accidental—but it is always *them*. It is only when these ancestral histories became present for some, for those who had long benefited from the dispossession of other people’s labor, thought, and lands, that suddenly the problem is all of *us*, as human catastrophe. The phrase “all of us” is heard only after *some of us* feel the effects of these actions, experience the specific toxicities within which they have entangled the world. Let’s not have critical oceanic studies be taken by this con—not have an oceanic feeling be that which annihilates the specificity of how entanglements produce difference in order to erase the specific ancestral present.

The following moves the longstanding insights emerging from the Black Atlantic to late liberal oceanic feelings in the Indigenous Pacific. On the surface, the following might seem ethnographic in the sense of a translation project—lots of words, concepts, and analytics that characterize Karrabing understandings of the relations that exist among themselves and their more-than-human worlds. But, as might be apparent very quickly, the purpose is in keeping with Karrabing strategies for how to face the governing forces of settler late liberalism and capitalism without giving away everything in the process. The idea is to provide just enough to know, but no more, since it’s not really yours to know—remembering that how you know the world, the moods of the world, and your relationship to it may or may not be part and parcel of the forces of late liberal geontopower.

## 2. Seaside Conversations

It’s March 1985 at a little coastal area called Madpil, in the Northern Territory of Australia. Marjorie Bilbil, Ruby Yarrowin, Alice Wainbirri, some of their children and grandchildren, and I are sitting on the beach at the edge of a mangrove talking over a meal of rice, sea snails, mud crabs, and sweet tea. The city of Darwin is shimmering across the harbor. I met these women, ranging in age from late forties to early sixties, soon after arriving in the Northern Territory in 1984, straight out of my BA in philosophy. Since 1975 they had observed and participated in a contentious land claim over the Cox Peninsula, where Madpil is located. At the center of the peninsula was the community in which they lived, and, for the most part, had grown up and had children. Their parents and grandparents had traveled up and down the coast we were sitting on, dodging and taking advantage of



Karrabing Film Collective, Delissaville Internment Camp, 2017. Film stills.  
Courtesy of the author.

a new virulent pestilence called settler colonialism while they maintained the connective practices undergirding the stability of people’s different lands stretching along the coast to Anson Bay some two hundred miles south. These practices included formal rituals that reenacted the ancestral travels of specific *durlg* (in the Batjemalh language; “*therrawin*” in the Emmiyengal language; “totems” in Anthropological English; “Dreamings” in public English) that created the topology of the region; formal rituals that acknowledged and reflected the *durlg*-infused landscape’s response to the new conditions of the settler pestilence; and ordinary ways of looking out for and caring for land, such as our day spent sweating in the mangrove.

In the 1930s, the Northern Territory government doubled down on the forcible internment of indigenous groups. Bilbil, Yarrowin, and Wainbirri’s parents were forced into the Delissaville Settlement at the center of Cox Peninsula. (With the passage of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act in 1976, the settlement was renamed “Belyuen,” after its waterhole.) From then on, all movement would be strictly monitored by settler superintendents as part of the federal state’s new tactic to eliminate the indigenous otherwise (than through murder and violence), through forced containment and assimilation. But the land and its peoples at Delissaville refused the authority of settler law. They came together around the Belyuen waterhole and its underground aquatic tunnels stretching to the seaside

around the Cox Peninsula and down to Anson Bay. Belyuen was a *maroi* (Batjernalh; “*mirrhe*,” Emmiyengal; “conception totem,” Anthropological English) site (a place of dynamic interplay between the spirits of the deceased and the spirits of yet-to-be-born children). Belyuen would keep alive the connective tissue of dispersed places—the ways in which the land was specifically entangled—so that each place could stay alive.

As we rested from a long sweaty slog through the mangrove, Bilbil, Yarrowin, and Wainbirri described struggling to explain to the anthropologists and lawyers working on their behalf to have the lands around Madpil returned to their families how they could at one and the same time have and hold specific coastal lands that hugged the coast of Anson Bay, much further south, and still be irreducibly connected to the lands around Belyuen as well. The creole phrasing that they used to describe the situation was “Mebela got roan roan country, yeah, but they imjoinedupbet got that Belyuen waterhole. Belyuen, im now been make mebela properly bla dis country.” (We have our own lands, but they are joined to others in an original and ongoing way through the Belyuen waterhole. Belyuen made us properly from here.) Their “roan roan” countries were within Marritjaben-, Marriamu-, Menthayengal-, Emmiyengal-, Wadjigiyn-, and Kiyuk-speaking countries, and included nearly twenty therrawin (Emmiyengal; “*durlg*,” Batjernalh; “*totems*,” Anthropological English). Yes, some of the connective tissue was derived from the topologically formative effects of ancestral *durlg* who moved across the region, but the effects were not done and dead. They were present and dynamic.

Bilbil used her eldest daughter, AA, as an example. AA was a Murrumurru (Long Yam therrawin) Emmiyengal woman through her father. From notes, Bilbil told me,

Your edje, im picks up that murrumurru from Mabaluk from im father, though im also think back la my Redjerung (Red Kangaroo therrawin), Marritjaben side. But im got ingaraiyn maroi (Batjernalh; “*mirrhe*,” Emmiyengal; “conception totem,” Anthropological English) from Belyuen, and must be here langa other side, Imaluk. That Belyuen waterhole been smellim sweat when me I ben bogey there, and im think, “yeah, gonna send baby spirit into that sea turtle.” So when that old man got that ingaraiyn langa Milik, imself been look and think, “im different this turtle. Too many seaweed tangled up lei im back.” Then AA been come out gamenawerra. Too many hair lei im back. We sebe. Im sign.

She gestured east toward where an Ingaraiyn therrawin sat in the tidal zone as the likely source of the turtle spirit Belyuen sent into an actual sea turtle, which acted as a



Karrabing Film Collective, *The Jealous One*, 2017. Film stills. Courtesy of the author.

material conduit into her husband and then her and then her child. As she did so, AA's body stretched and extended (*ex-tendēre*) into and across the topological shapings of the ancestral present, folding and pushing inward (*in-tendēre*) an immanent spacing.

Leave aside hoary anthropological debates about totems and animistic cultures for a moment.<sup>7</sup> Note instead the porosity of modes of embodiment (water, organic bodies) and the multiplicity of connectivities posited as potentially codetermining them substantially. Some are actual, some immanent, all to a more-than-human world that is constantly signing to its human co-participants, who must weigh what is and isn't a sign of a manifestation. A Long Yam site, located at Mabaluk some 150 kilometers as the crow flies from where we are sitting, passed to AA through her father's body (“What this word? What they say, perragut for this kindabet? Here look, Beth, ‘patrilineal.’” [What is this word? What do white people say for this kind of connection to land? Here, look at this, Beth. “Patrilineal.”]) A sea turtle *mirrhe* passed into AA from a saltwater encounter between a human, a sea turtle, and a waterhole during a hunting event, creating a connection to a Sea Turtle site proximate to where she was born, did the ceremony, and hunted (all sweat). And a waterhole inside the community acts as a material communication. It is a site through which ancestral beings travel across aquatic underground tunnels to nearby and far-afield places.

Bilbil, Yarrowin, Wainbirri, and the other Belyuen elder men and women were right. They faced a state law that only recognized (i.e., that *demand*ed, as the basis for the return of stolen property) a singular form of human-land relations—some form of a “local descent group” (Anthropological English for “socially inflected biology such as patrilineality and matrilineality”). They also faced the theoretically conservative consultant anthropologists who wrote reports adjudicating their claim, and the lawyers who read the reports. Both the anthropologists and the lawyers remained puzzled, if not downright skeptical, in the face of questions like: How could these women, and the men of the community, say that their therrawin were always where they were, and were continuing to engage in the same events? How could the unchanging be dynamic, the permanent alterable, and the persistent eventful? Not all anthropologists were confused in this way. Barbara Glowczewski describes a similar reality among her Yuendumu colleagues, in which ceremony pulls into actuality the immanent cartographies that transverse human and more-than-human worlds.<sup>8</sup> These actualizations are the consequences of previous sedimentations that remain beneath and across the overlay of the settler state.

What troubled Bilbil, Yarrowin, Wainbirri, and other older men and women was that anthropologists and lawyers saw all forms of dynamic permanence as somehow less important than the frozen framework of a settler law that recognized only one kind of relation—the descent of man. This was a biological reduction by which their thick relations to the more-than-human were nothing more than a question of what man birthed what person. It was like trying to maneuver across an endless series of funhouse mirrors. As these women described a durlg-determined but dynamic relation to their country, the state and its anthropologists would attempt to re-determine the dynamic by reducing its complexity to a stunningly hermeneutically stupid biology lesson that cut the ties across people and place to produce an enclosed mini nation-state. The land claim dragged on for twenty-plus years; forests were plundered to produce all the law and consultant reports and formal evidence. But under the guise of liberal recognition, no conversation was actually allowed to occur. As Aimé Césaire wrote in his *Discourse on Colonialism*:

I admit that it is a good thing to place different civilizations in contact with each other; that it is an excellent thing to blend different worlds; that whatever its own particular genius may be, a civilization that withdraws into itself atrophies; that for civilizations, exchange is oxygen ... But then I ask the following question: has colonization really placed civilizations in contact? Or, if you prefer, of all the ways of establishing contact, was it the best? I answer no.<sup>9</sup>

Some twenty-five years after our conversation at Madpil, I am sitting near a tent camp with many of the now-adult children of Yarrowin and Wainbirri, their partners, and their children. We had grown up side by side as I commuted back and forth from the US two or three times a year. They are living at the edge of the northern coast of Anson Bay, having decided to leave Belyuen. Belyuen had been engulfed by violence, caused in large part by the aftereffects of the same land claim that kicked off the conversation among Bilbil, Yarrowin, Wainbirri, and me in 1985. A piece of federal legislation celebrated as recognizing indigenous law refused to acknowledge one side of the dynamic that the older women struggled to explain. The Land Rights Commission found one small section of the community to be the legally recognized “traditional Aboriginal owners,” even while stating that the entire community had the same rights to the area through indigenous cultural and ceremonial law. Indigenous law could be recognized as existing but would not be allowed to determine the operation of the state. The divisions settler law sliced into the community had enormous social and economic consequences. All decisions about how the surrounding lands would be developed were made by only a small group, which also reaped all the benefits flowing from such decisions. The tensions that the state created did not affect the state; they went inward and then exploded.

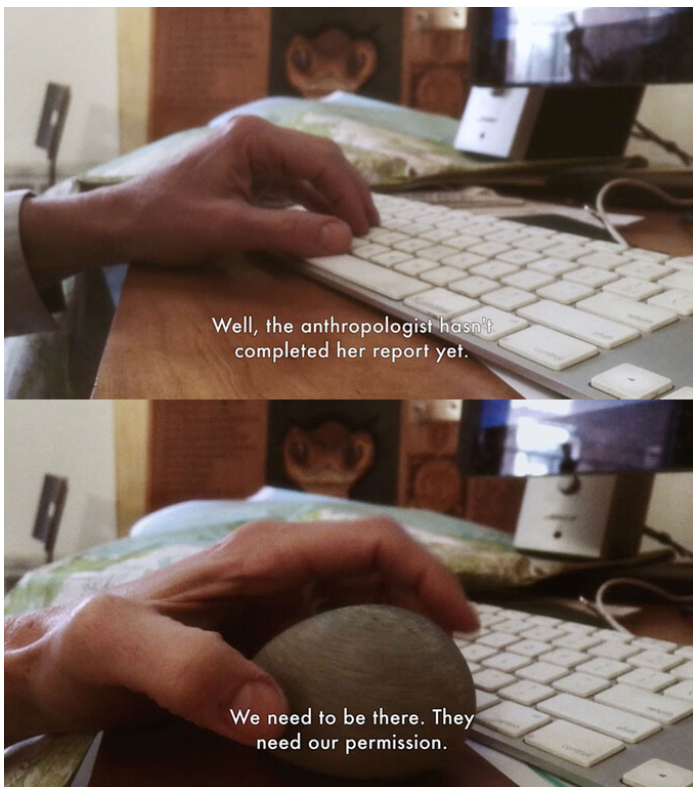
Told they were strangers in their own land, the fifty odd men, women, children, and I were discussing how to keep from sliding into destitution but also refuse to open their land to mining. Mining is like a phalanx of circulating capitalist scavenger birds, promising to separate and extract while preserving and enhancing—science fiction inversions of ancestral durlg. Everyone had seen the consequences of such promises: gaping holes from pervious mines, poisoned rivers, and unexplained cancers. Liam Grealy and Kirsty Howey describe “the politico-bureaucratic edifice of uniform drinking water governance and service provision across the NT [Northern Territory]” as “a state-curated fiction” that “produces a racialised ‘archipelago’ of differentiated islands of drinking water governance.”<sup>10</sup>

A couple of people suggested running a green tourist outfit and creating a corporation for it through the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations.<sup>11</sup> Very quickly, everyone struggled with the state-set trap inherent to this plan. If they selected a place name, say Mabaluk, then the state would immediately consider other family members from adjacent countries and languages as outside, or subsidiary. “Karrabing” was proposed as much as for its semantic content as its conceptual pragmatics. “Karrabing” is an Emmiyengal word referring to when the vast regional tides are at their lowest. Karrabing opens possibilities as it connects distinct places—it opens fishing, crabbing, and clamming as it shows and makes available the reefs, mangroves, and shore banks connecting (“joining up”) the countries of the indigenous



inhabitants of the shoreline. “Karrabing” was not merely a referential term. It was intended as a concept, foregrounding the dynamic process of emerging and submerging connections across places. For the people who would become the Karrabing, “karrabing” signals how families best strengthen their relationship to, and the health of, their “roan roan” country by keeping robust the connective tissue between them (*joinedupbet*). They learned this from their parents, who had learned from theirs. This learning is a practice.

Karrabing would become the framework through which a set of land-oriented filmic practices would embody an ongoing resistance to the state’s effort to divide and pit indigenous people and their lands against each other. In other words, making films would not only represent the Karrabing members’ views about the irreducible condition of connectivity among the different countries. It would also practice this counter-discourse intergenerationally.



Karrabing Film Collective, *The Jealous One*, 2017. Film stills. Courtesy of the author.

### 3. Property Relations, Oceanic Feelings

The frustrations that the older women described to me in 1985 when trying to explain to *perragut* (white people as a general category for settlers) how they had their own distinct countries—even while these countries could not be separated into small sovereign fiefdoms—have been

mirrored by the surprise many Karrabing members have expressed after encountering audiences for their films inside and outside Australia. No one expresses anger, nor even the anguish of Bilbil, Yarrowin, and Wainbirri. But the problem remains, persisting across time and space—the struggle some *perragut* have in comprehending these simultaneous statements: “Each of us got our roan roan country from our fathers. Places can’t be made separate separate.” Two general responses to this kind of statement suggest what is still at stake as critical theory continues to try and break with the concept of sovereign objects. On the one hand, when they describe their durlg relations to their land, Karrabing members are often taken to mean that they own that land. On the other hand, when they discuss the undergirding connectivity between them and the more-than-human world, they are heard to be describing an undifferentiated oceanic feeling, sometimes compared to a colloquial understanding of the Buddhist falling away of all difference.

The first misunderstanding has been under constant pressure in critical theory and indigenous theory. Aileen Moreton-Robinson has powerfully critiqued the “white possessive” whereby the settler state’s gift of self-determination is a demand that indigenous people mimic the psychosis at the heart of Western liberalism: namely, the fantasy of a sovereign body that determines itself, has final say over its use and the use of things within it—that speaks on the basis of its own sovereign self-possession. When Karrabing members describe being a group with multiple lands and durlg stretching across the coasts of Anson Bay and beyond, they see audiences hearing them as saying something like: “I” have a country that is different from his or her country, much as a citizen would say his or her country was distinct from another, or capitalists would say they owned what was theirs. That is, some in the audience hear members evoking a liberal property relation. I often use Mikhail Bakhtin as a counter to this misunderstanding. For him, all words, including “I,” are mere rejoinders to a world within us, because it formed us, before we were us. We can quote him at length from his “The Problem of Speech Genres”:

The very boundaries of the utterance are determined by a change of speech subjects. Utterances are not indifferent to one another, and are not self-sufficient; they are aware of and mutually reflect one another. These mutual reflections determine their character. Each utterance is filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances to which it is related by the communality of the sphere of speech communication. Every utterance must be regarded primarily as a response to preceding utterances of the given sphere (we understand the word “response” here in the broadest sense). Each utterance refutes, affirms, supplements, and relies on the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account.<sup>12</sup>



But often at such film screenings I don't get into long Bakhtin quotes, since Karrabing members, like Cecilia Lewis, powerfully describe their form of belonging to their own lands as an ethical position irreducibly stretched through the other more-than-human worlds of other Karrabing members. In a conversation upending the Judeo-Christian narrative about Babel, Cecilia and other Karrabing members describe not merely an original linguistic multiplicity, but an original ethical relation to the other's language:

Yeah but here where you talk to det person le you joinimupbet det tubela—and det nuther language where you speak le, that other person dem inside you again. You think bla det person.

(Yeah, but here we think that when you speak to that person in this way, you connect or articulate, you and him—when you speak their language to them the other person comes inside you and you go inside of them. You are thinking of/with/through that other person.)<sup>13</sup>

The land claim legislation clipped all the connecting tissue that provided conditions for holding lands. Karrabing would work to restore this tissue. For Karrabing member Rex Edmunds, this is the connective tissue without which proper caring-for cannot be done. It is materially analogous to how ceremonies must be held:

Well, you need your uncle or aunt or cousin, in our way it's a cousin, like your mum's brother's kids or your dad's sister's kids to do the burning of the clothes. Because they are your aunt (father's sister) or uncle (mother's brother), they are always from another clan, so another country. Best if the uncle, aunt or cousins are close, but as long as it's connected in this way it's okay. How could I burn my mum's or sister's or father's clothes myself: no one who is in my totem group can touch those things during the ceremony. I am boss of them, but I cannot do it myself. I need my relations from that other totem or country.<sup>14</sup>

Ironically, in the lead-up to the establishment of the land rights law in 1976, the Land Rights Commission noted how this principle fucked with Western notions of property without negating the fact that people knew which lands belong with and to them. One can say that "religious rites [are] owned by a clan," but the rites "could not be held without the assistance of the managers whose essential task it was to prepare the ritual paraphernalia, decorate the celebrants and conduct the rite."<sup>15</sup> And lest readers

reduce the importance of these managers to something analogous to hired labor, the Commission notes that the "agreement of managers had to be secured for the exploitation of specialised local resources such as ochre and flint deposits and for visits by the clan owners to their own sacred sites."<sup>16</sup> Rex Edmunds understands this as a strategy by which recognition is a trick severing the relations between groups in order to create hostilities across them.

Karrabing foreground the connective or joint nature of themselves and their lands as they fight against the reduction of their sense to a contractual logic which presupposes the very thing they are fighting against, the irreducibility of the sovereign subject. The contractual imaginary may be explicit, as in a monetary or compensatory debt between two subjects. It can also be affective, such as the feeling of what one owes a mother or a nation. The contractual subject can be a mass subject, such as a nation-state connected to other nation-states by treaties. And it can be an abstract person, as in a corporation. Everyone acknowledges that the realities of such sovereign bodies are messy, and hardly sealed. Human bodies leak inside out and absorb the outside in. State borders become distended, their organs laying on foreign grounds, as governments stretch hearings offshore. How did Australian migration enforcement end up on Christmas Island, on Nauru? How did Haitian interdiction become a maritime affair?<sup>17</sup> How did existential desperation result in the ideology of the political treaty? Moreover, mass subjects bear all the traces of the racial and class logics that compose the proper subject. But whichever way you look at the contractual subject, it has nothing to do with the heart of what Karrabing are saying.

In a video commissioned by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Cecilia Lewis, her daughter Natasha Bigfoot Lewis, and Rex put it this way:

CL: Like we have Suntu group wuliya Kiyuk and wuliya roan. They got their roan place and roan story le they roan country. We got Trevor mob. They got their own country, roan language, roan story. Bwudjut mob, they got their own story. Emmi mob got their roan story here la Mabaluk. Methnayengal got their roan story la Kugan mob. But we're still one mob. We different language group.

RE: ... but we're one mob.

CL: All one big family down the coast. Married family relations.

NL: Because we're connected by the coastline.

RE: And by those stories (ancestral paths crisscrossing countries).

This position of interdependent respect extends to the more-than-human world. In a part that didn't make it into the broadcast, Cecilia, Natasha, and Rex discuss some of the ancestral dynamics that demand human attention and commitment. Natasha notes that if Karrabing do not continue to care for ancestral lands by coming and being with them (in the concept of "sweat") then the "land dies; it shuts itself up." Note the qualification of death—the divergence from a geontological understanding. Karrabing understand the "dying" of the more-than-human world as an active withdrawing, a going under, a withholding that in turn can catastrophically transform the human world. Karrabing understand that like they themselves, durlg persist in an ancestrally past, frozen, but ancestral present. Durlg are responsive to the forces torqueing topology and ecology, now especially the pestilence of extractive consumptive capitalism.



Karrabing Film Collective, *The Jealous One*, 2017. Film stills. Courtesy of the author.

If Karrabing must continually correct those who might unwittingly collapse their understanding of "roan country" into the Western concept of property, they also must combat a second, perhaps stranger, evacuation of all specificity between various human and more-than-human worlds. Addressed through the imaginary of People-at-One-with-Nature, Karrabing find themselves cast into an undifferentiated sea, heard to be saying that

they are connected to everything, rather than to specific multilayered territories and relations. This is somewhat along the lines of Romain Rolland's 1927 idea of religion as an affective intuition of being not merely connected to the whole of the universe but also being diffused across it, distinct from any specific creedal proposition or theological content. For Rolland, the distinct ground of religion, what distinguishes it from a mere psychic projection, is felt as "an oceanic feeling." Freud responds directly to Rolland in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. At this point, Freud had turned from the technical aspects of his theory to rewriting anthropological and sociological debates from a psychoanalytic perspective. The question of how one accounts for the sources of this oceanic feeling was prompted by Freud's earlier text, *The Future of an Illusion*. There he recast the origins and functions of religion as a recapitulation and projection ("an infantile prototype") of the son's relationship to the father. Man's relation to nature was one of helplessness; as a child, one was helpless yet thoroughly dependent on one's parents, longing for protection from the very people that had the power to destroy you. As Freud put it, "One had reason to fear them, and especially one's father; and yet one was sure of his protection against the dangers one knew."<sup>18</sup>

The oceanic feeling was, Freud claimed, similarly situated within the dynamics of the psyche, though dynamics that moved one from discussions of the Oedipus complex per se into the formations of the ego. In *Ego and Id*, his earlier text, the notions of Cs. (conscious), Pcs. (preconscious), and Ucs. (unconscious) were supplanted by the dynamics of id, ego, and superego. The ego is an immanent encrustation, a scab, that develops as a membrane differentiated from but sunk within the id's pleasure principle and the superego. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud emphasizes less the ego as a compromise formation, and more the original perennial dynamism that sinks and expands: "An infant at the breast does not as yet distinguish his ego from the external world as the source of the sensations flowing in upon him."<sup>19</sup> Our oceanic feelings come from a time when "the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external world from itself. Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive—indeed, an all-embracing—feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it."<sup>20</sup> Using something like Schrödinger's cat, the rest of *Civilization and Its Discontents* tries to suggest how an ancient psychic architecture, unlike the ruins of imperial Rome, are there and not there: "The same space cannot have two different contents."<sup>21</sup>

Not only are we only experiencing the infant ego when we experience oceanic feelings. We are not even *feeling* something the infant ego actually felt at the time that her ego had yet differentiated itself as a space between an inside and an outside. Lacan draws on this strange material temporality even as he alters it in "The Mirror Stage," where he begins to overlay, or excavate, the

structural logics of Freud's psychoanalysis.<sup>22</sup> Here is the first glimpse of the retrospective projections that preserve and distort the entrance into subjectivity. Each progression of the Lacanian psyche, its entrance into the Imaginary, into the Symbolic, reactively reconstitutes the content of the previous. Whatever the phenomenological experience of the Imaginary is has been dynamically foreclosed by the Symbolic. The same is true for how entrance into the Imaginary dynamically foreclosed the Real. As Lacan famously put it, the Real isn't reality. Far from it. The Real is a feeling of the undifferentiated absolute, of infinity, of being in without having difference, something horrifically compelling and unfathomable because mediated by the Imaginary and the Symbolic. Here we see a similarity to Freud's idea that the infant ego remains, changing to a remainder that cannot remain.

Freud might have swapped the child's psychic development for the truth of a supernatural or metaphysical being. We might wonder whether the reduction of such nuanced specificities that Karrabing describe to a spiritual embrace of some undifferentiated all reflects some other unconscious. It is important to emphasize the difference between what someone like Rex Edmunds is saying when he speaks about his specific *mudi durlg*—how it resides at a specific place; how it reacts to him and him to it because of their ancestrally present relationship; how it is inside and outside of him, passing through the reef and specific fish he encounters; how it is connected to another site to the east, Bandawarrangalen; and how he and it must struggle to persist together against the ongoing pressures of settler extractive capitalism—and a spiritual quest to experience an undifferentiated emptiness, or a psychological stage surging up and cracking the crust of the ego. Both sovereign possessiveness and the undifferentiated whole are the unconscious of geontopower. They are two sides of what Luce Irigaray called “the other of the same”; oceanic feeling that seeks to stop being attuned to our specific and different immanent and ancestrally present entanglements is an ideological fantasy, a desire not to face and hold actions and consequences.<sup>23</sup> This kind of oceanic feeling exemplifies the contrasting analytics between toxic colonial liberalism and the Karrabing and others who have long borne the changing moods of colonizing capitalism.

When Natasha Bigfoot Lewis noted the consequence of neglecting one's ongoing relationship with the more-than-human worlds of Karrabing lands, she referenced Karrabing's film *The Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland*. *The Mermaids* is an exploration of Western toxic contamination, capitalism, and human and nonhuman life. Set in a land and seascape poisoned by capitalism where only Aboriginals can survive long periods outdoors, the film tells the story of a young indigenous man, Aiden, taken away when he was just a baby to be a part of a medical experiment to save the white race. He is then released back into the world to his family. As he



Karrabing Film Collective, *The Jealous One*, 2017. Film stills. Courtesy of the author.

travels with his father and brother across the landscape, he confronts two possible futures and pasts embodied by his own tale and the timely narratives of multinational chemical and extractive industries. Natasha also knows that the contaminations of colonialism can secrete and sediment below human perceptibility. In a three-channel video work commissioned by Natasha Ginwala for the 2017 Contour Biennale, Natasha and others describe how, in making our second film, *Windjarrameru, The Stealing C\*nt\$*, Karrabing learned that lands they had long hunted and camped were contaminated by the toxic remains of an abandoned military radio installation. The nearby perragut community had been informed years before, but not the members of Belyuen. As the older women, their children and grandchildren, and I sat eating our hard-won crabs and sea snails at Madpil, we—but they more than I because I didn't arrive until 1984, and then came and went—were ingesting in these coastal foods the sedimentations of toxic colonialism. Oceanic tides bring in and out these toxicities in all too predictably distributed patterns—the world poor continue to act as the kidneys of the world rich.

X

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Latai Taumoepeau and Taloi Havini

## The Last Resort: A Conversation

*Cockatoo Island is the largest of several islands in Sydney Harbour. Its forty-four acres of sandstone knolls, which sit where the Paramatta and Lane Cove rivers meet, belong to the traditional custodians and owners of the lands and waters of Sydney Harbour. These are the Borogeggal, Birrabirrigal, Cammeraygal, Gadigal, Gayamagal, Wallumedegal, and Wangal people.*

*Over the course of the nineteenth century, these people were forcibly removed from their homes as the colonial project built prison blocks on the island. Cockatoo Island was also deforested of its heavy timber and vegetation, and from the 1850s onward became a base for shipbuilding. This trajectory continued through the 1990s. In 2010, the island became a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It was also one of the performance sites for the 2020 Biennale of Sydney (titled "NIRIN").*

*As part of the Biennale, and during the height of the ongoing Covid epidemic, Tongan-Australian artist Latai Taumoepeau performed her most recent work, The Last Resort. The performance took place on Cockatoo Island. Taumoepeau's performance fit well with artistic director Brook Andrew's vision for this year's Biennale of Sydney—to conjure "optimism from chaos." Optimism from chaos, Andrew continues, "drives artists in NIRIN to resolve the often hidden or ignored urgency surrounding contemporary life."<sup>1</sup>*

*The Last Resort, performed inside the Turbine Hall of the island's industrial precinct, was an unforgettable and spectacular sight for those of us who braved the longer-than-anticipated ferry ride from Circular Quay (an international passenger shipping port in Sydney Harbour) to Cockatoo Island. Any ideas that ferry passengers may have had around escaping to an idyllic island for light relief were slightly skewered when we disembarked. We turned a corner to stand and watch Taumoepeau and her co-performer, Taliu Aloua, each armed with an 'ike (Tongan wooden mallet), smashing and beating glass bottle after glass bottle.*

*Standing together in a dystopian setting, Taumoepeau and Aloua were channeling their ceremonial Tongan practices. With worn-out hotel bathrobes on their backs and brick sandals strapped to their feet, they both adorned their necks with lei or sisi—fresh tropical flowers and leaves typically worn as formal body decoration across the Pacific. Visitors could hear the sharp tap of glass breaking from the other side of the gigantic Turbine Hall. The sound of smashing glass alongside an accompanying droning soundtrack created a live, human-induced cacophony.*

*The Biennale describes the performance as follows:*

*The Last Resort excavates a dystopian image and experience of idyllic island landscapes, mostly*





Latai Taumoepeau, *The Last Resort*, 2020. Performance view for the 22nd Biennale of Sydney (2020), Cockatoo Island. Commissioned by the Biennale of Sydney with generous assistance from the Oranges & Sardines Foundation. Courtesy the artist. Performer / Co-devisor: Taliu Aloua; Lighting Designer: Amber Silk; Soundtrack: James Brown; Costume: Anthony Aitch. Photograph: Zan Wimberley.

*considered as holiday destinations to outsiders. This endurance performance installation explores the fragility and vulnerability of saltwater ecologies and communities of Pacific Island nations in Oceania. Responding to the emotional, geopolitical and physical labour of Pacific people and their struggle in the acceleration of rising sea levels due to the melting of ice glaciers, threatening mass exodus and displacement.<sup>2</sup>*

*Aloua and Taumoepeau's relationship can be traced through their shared matrilineal genealogy. Aloua temporarily left his homeland of Tonga to be an integral part of the performance with Taumoepeau. Although Taumoepeau lives in Gadigal Ngurra (Sydney), her return to her ancestral island nation of Tonga is ever-present. Taumoepeau makes and presents work in the world, and will soon physically return to Tonga to learn and continue the faivā (performing art) of sea voyaging and celestial navigation before one day becoming an ancestor.*

*Crossing the Pacific Ocean is not a new concept to islanders, who are expert travelers over large bodies of water, land, time, and space.*

*Longtime friend and fellow artist Taloi Havini traveled back to see *The Last Resort* on Cockatoo Island once again, on the last day of the Biennale of Sydney exhibition this September.*

*Listen to the audio at: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/112/353919/the-last-resort-a-conversation/>*

*What follows is an edited transcript of their conversation in September 2020.*

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**Taloi Havini:** As an islander, or someone from the Pacific Ocean—this ocean—it's all about relationships. I also

come from a matrilineal land, and we have to work within our matrilineal lineage to protect and to take guardianship over the whole place: the site, the air, the land, the sea. In this particular performance, *The Last Resort*, you and your co-performer were both wearing bathrobes that had the words “The Last Resort” written on them. What is your relationship with your co-performer here?

**Latai Taumoepeau:** Taliu Aloua is my best friend—we grew up together. Taliu is also related to me through my mother and his mother. He’s actually my uncle, generationally. The origin of our relationship is that I had a great-great grandmother, and, at one time, she and Taliu’s great-great grandfather were brother and sister. This is an important relationship to observe in Tongan culture—particularly if you are the descendent of the female, being that it’s a matriarchal society.

So, we are very close, and we talk about all of our artistic endeavors together. Some of them see daylight, and some of them become pipe dreams. When we first made *The Last Resort*, it was out of necessity. I didn’t have a very big budget. I really wanted to look at our relationship—and in looking at that relationship, to think about our obligation to one another as Tongan siblings.

In our culture, Taliu is actually a mother to me. That kind of reverse gender role is completely invisible in this performance. However, it’s what binds our obligation to each other while we perform inside very dangerous conditions that we create using glass. So, it’s a very important role. As I continue to make work about climate change, I wonder what it is we lose as a result—not only because of sea levels rising, but also what else climate change forces. What are these situations that force our people? Forced relocation is something that you know about really well. I don’t mean to tell you about that. When making work about climate change, I think: What are the things that don’t survive in forced relocation? It is the most intangible cultural practices that don’t survive—the things that are not object-based.

Taliu and I created conditions in *The Last Resort* that came from a previous work, which we titled *Stitching up the Sea*. For the Biennale of Sydney, I retitled the work and performance *The Last Resort*—a site-specific work on Cockatoo Island. It was important for us to acknowledge the island’s own history in Australia.

To go back to talking about the relationship between Taliu and I: this obligation between us is related to a concept called *Tauhivā*, which is the observance and the obligation of the space between us. And of our relationship, which is based on our genealogy. In this work, I also like to think about our relationship to the environment. What is our relationship to our homelands? To our ancestral lands? Our coastlines?

These questions are not just for the “him and I” as Tongan

people, but also for all of us people from the Pacific—particularly the diaspora in Australia. So, this relationship is a really, really important thing to think about. The relationship extends to the one we have to the region, especially as it is under threat as a result of climate change—human-induced climate change, which puts developed countries like Australia in a very particular position in terms of being held accountable. You know this from your own work around the extraction and mining industries.

I think when we’re looking at our Pacific Island nations, one of the things that holds us together is the body of ocean which we know as the Pacific—also a name that’s come from somebody else. That’s why it becomes crucial to look at the relationships we have as Pacific Island people to this body of water—the largest continent in the world.

We are not separate from this body of water, as some scholars from this region have explained. Tongan and Fijian writer and anthropologist Epeli Hau’ofa talks about the “Sea of Islands,” which isn’t necessarily something that is evident in my work. However, these concepts are important to reference. They represent an indigenous perspective from this region that goes back more than three thousand years in having a relationship to this ocean.

**TH:** Yes, in fact it’s that “three-thousand” years—when people say “three-thousand years BC,” that for us is a disruptive, demarcated, violent rerouting and removal of us from our ocean. In your artwork and in mine, I see a similarity with the work that I just did, with *Reclamation*, where I filled up the whole gallery space (Artspace Sydney) with topsoil.

This was a purposely uninhabitable surface. And yet, on top of all of this soil, I placed sculptures which are made from cane harvested from my land. They indicate a form of navigation of space and knowledge, and how we perceive our world as opposed to the West—whereas mining and extractive industries rely on topographical maps. The West looks down on the world and on the ocean. They look down on the land. Whereas we look out and from within. In our generation, our works are really playing with perceptions of place and of being.

When I stood in your work and watched this whole bed of glass glistening with light, it looked to me in many ways like how the light hits the surface and reflects on and through the ocean. You were walking on the glass with bricks as sandals. I felt it was quite site-specific to Cockatoo Island, an island within Sydney Harbour which has had a lot of aggressive history—colonial history—and was a penal settlement.

**LT:** The island was an industry. And the jail there was mostly for women and children, and who endured hard

labor. In making *The Last Resort* on Cockatoo Island, I wanted to look at the labor and ask: Who is doing the heavy lifting in terms of the impact of climate change?

The ocean is heating up: it's not a habitable environment for sea creatures, you know? This is all human-induced, so I think that having this demonstration of dangerous work was also about emphasizing who is doing all the heavy lifting around climate change in the region. And it is people who are living on their island nations. They have to do the most, and have the most to lose. And while they are doing a lot of the work, they are being ignored by countries like Australia and New Zealand. *The Last Resort* used glass bottles and waste matter from Sydney nightclubs. The performance wanted to expose the relationship, the genealogy, between glass and islands and sand, and that led to the "resort life."

**TH:** Yeah, I actually wanted to ask you about the glass in particular. Visually, there's tons of glass in the installation. The connection of glass to sand, the rawness, the materiality—the sand is what our feet touch on the beach, and yet glass is human induced. I wanted to ask you about the element of danger that you brought—you did so in a very sensual way. When you were smashing the glass, the sound of it went all the way to the back of my ears.

I currently live in a studio opposite a pub in Sydney (a studio in Artspace, Sydney).<sup>3</sup> On early mornings after weekends, the rubbish trucks come to collect the glass bottles. I hear the alcohol bottles being smashed, and I immediately think of your performance. It certainly is an industry. I wanted to talk to you about wearing the bathrobes—they looked quite worn, and yet they were still hotel bathrobes. I wanted to ask you about this idea around economy, industry, tourism, and how evident all of this was on your bodies. Why were you wearing those hotel robes on your bodies in the performance?

**LT:** Many people in Australia see the Pacific Islands as their holiday destination. It's a very different perspective to the one that you have of your homeland, and I have of my homeland. And so for me, when we're talking about the impact of climate change on these islands, it's a very vulnerable position that our relatives, our kin, our neighbors are experiencing.

The use of glass is about showing that vulnerability. I like to work with the authentic body, this body. I work from memory; I work from empathy. So, I have to work with material that produces a level of risk for me personally, as that's what it means for people who are forced to face climate change every day. They don't have the luxury of being in an air-conditioned office and feeling as if climate change only affects other nations. That's not a reality for the people who are of the Pacific, and who are living in the Pacific Islands.

They are seeing overfishing in the region. They are already seeing an increase in tsunamis and king tides, and dealing with that on a daily basis. So, to make work that represents people from the region, there has to be a level of vulnerability and risk. And that's what the glass represents and creates. It creates a circumstance where I, too, must be in danger just like they are, in order to let the bystanders make other decisions that have an effect. I mean political decisions.

Australians need to understand that their everyday choices have an impact on other people, and they're not going to get that from a pretty idyllic postcard that they got from their relatives while they were on holiday. Using the robes and renaming the work *The Last Resort* became reasons to speak directly to those people who access our Pacific Islands, our Pacific Ocean, in a very particular way that's different from our way.

I also come from the theater. Costuming is part of what people can read. Everything that you introduce into the space becomes available for them to try and understand what you're trying to convey. For me, it's a bit cheeky as well. It's part of my personality to make a little joke about some things. So the robes are a way of taking a little stab.

**TH:** After seeing, witnessing, and being part of the performances that you and your cousin Taliu were doing, I started to read John Puhiaata Pule's book *The Shark That Ate the Sun* (1992). In the book is a legend, and upon reading that legend I immediately thought of the Carteret Islanders. And it also made me think of you. It's quite prophetic, this legend. John Pule wrote this quite a long time ago now, and here I am in the year 2020 reading a passage that says (toward the end of the legend):

The airport had more than ten flights a day come in and take off, bringing passengers from all over the globe to see the hole. Documentaries, religious investigations, and interviews kept the government as well as the village elders busy. The tiny country appealed to the tourist trade as the prime spot to build hotels for the millions of people who have lost paradise or wanted to see one and were encouraged to visit the Last Resort. When uranium was discovered on the Rock, the owners of the land as well as government officials sweated at the thought of money and were saying *yes, yes, yes* to the company that would supervise the project. TV was introduced. Each village had more than two hotels. The Sheraton was built over spiritual land removing the bones that had been sleeping there for hundreds of years; they cleared away the middens and burial caves and built a hotel to sleep two hundred people and employed only Europeans. *Ze capital looks lik za streets in Nu York*, said the French man who had an appointment with the head of government that hot day. In his pocket a fat cheque book stood up to the





Latai Taumoepeau, *The Last Resort*, 2020. Performance view for the 22nd Biennale of Sydney (2020), Cockatoo Island. Commissioned by the Biennale of Sydney with generous assistance from the Oranges & Sardines Foundation. Courtesy the artist. Performer / Co-devisor: Taliu Aloua; Lighting Designer: Amber Silk; Soundtrack: James Brown; Costume: Anthony Aitch. Photograph: Zan Wimberley.

sun to shine. He was planning to build a port before the year 2020 and more hotels, hotels, hotels. That is all you see along the coast. Hotels, hotels, hotels. American warships watched from the harbor.<sup>4</sup>

**LT:** Crazy!

**TH:** *The Shark That Ate the Sun* was published in 1992, and here he is, as it turns out, writing about the year 2020. And here I was witnessing the artwork-installation-endurance performance you did of *The Last Resort* this year, which speaks to all of these issues.

All these experiences made me think about Tulele Peisa, an organization from the Carteret Islands.<sup>5</sup> The community living there has had to relocate to Bougainville—or some people are choosing to not relocate, but there are forced relocation programs to move the whole population from the island because it is becoming uninhabitable. You can still live there, of course, because we believe in living on the ocean, and we know how to do that.

But as the survival rates drop, and the need for fresh water and crops increases, all of these things are causing us to adapt, move, be uprooted to higher ground. What happened there was that they actually had to stop documentary filmmakers and news reporters from entering their island because it became “Hollywood”—the landowners started calling the island “Hollywood.” They banned people from coming, because even reporting on climate change created an inundation of people, and this disaster tourism became an industry in itself.

**LT:** Exactly. I think this is a huge, huge problem. After you read that part of John Pule’s book and brought it to my attention, I couldn’t believe it! I’m a huge fan of his but I have never read this book, so it was crazy to get that message from you. It was so serendipitous, and I just love it. Now there’s this connection! Absolutely. It makes total sense to me that you thought of the Carteret Islands.

Back in 2007, I met people from the Carteret Islands. Hearing them talk about their deep sorrow at having to move to higher land in Buka (Bougainville) and negotiate this fact was one of the most touching, emotional stories for me—especially after having met Rufina, a Carteret Island elder. Rufina was a seventy-something-year-old woman from the Carteret Islands, and we met while traveling to the United Nations Climate Change conference in Bali that year. She told me about her production of *Beroana*, a traditional shell currency made by women, and how they have been exchanging *Beroana* for land as a result of the sea levels rising. She also told me that they are not able to grow food anymore, because of the salinity levels coming through the water table and contaminating their food gardens. To think about this

woman at that age ... and she was a chief, as well.

She also taught me a dance from her home. She’d never left her island before. So to think about this—that this story also reminded you of that—is really important, because people from the Pacific have been talking about these things for a long, long time. This didn’t just start recently, but now that people in the West—people in developed countries—are starting to suffer themselves, they are finally thinking about it. Yet this is the human injustice of it all. Other people—let’s call them the canaries in the coal mine—have been saying this for a long time. And the delayed reaction is coming at the cost of their precious islands in the Pacific Ocean. Showing this is the important work of artists.

I’m not surprised that John Pule has already written about this and foreseen this. You know about this yourself, from your experience as part of a family from Bougainville who were exiled as a result of the extraction industry. And so you know how that experience of exile doesn’t just go away—you know it’s important that these things are documented from our perspective, from our own oceanic indigenous Pacific perspective. Otherwise, there are other historians that respect the dominant voice and the dominant culture. So, in the arts we have our work that we make and it’s important that it exists. And I think that this serendipitous experience is testament to that—that another artist from the region has already spoken about it. I make work about it. You’ve been making work about it.

**TH:** How these things materialize and intersect ...

**LT:** ... it’s so important.

**TH:** It’s a continuum. It’s a continuum of our stories. I find that there’s a cynicism in the title *The Last Resort*, but there’s also a relief. If it’s the “last resort”—I feel like that’s fine ... and what *is* beyond the last resort?

**LT:** The last resort is always going to be where we find ourselves. It’s our fight for a place that we belong to, not that we own. *We belong to it*, and that’s where *The Last Resort* comes from. It’s from our own sense of self-determination, our own independence, our own relationships that we have and continue to form and regenerate as we go, even as a diaspora. *The Last Resort* is really a continuum.

**X**

**Latai Taumoepeau** makes live art. Her *faivā* (performance practice) is from her homelands, the Island Kingdom of Tonga, and her birthplace, Sydney, land of the Gadigal people. She mimicked, trained, and unlearned dance in multiple institutions of learning, starting with her

village, a suburban church hall, the club, and a university. Her body-centered performance practice of *faivā* centers Tongan philosophies of relational space and time, cross-pollinating ancient and everyday temporal practice to make visible the impact of climate crisis in the Pacific. She conducts urgent environmental movements and actions to create transformation in Oceania. Engaging in the sociopolitical landscape of Australia with sensibilities in race, class, and the female body politic, she is committed to making minority communities visible in the frangipanni-less foreground. In the near future she will return to her ancestral home and continue the ultimate *faivā* of sea voyaging and celestial navigation before she becomes an ancestor.

**Taloi Havini** was born in 1981 in Arawa, Bougainville and is currently based between Sydney and the Hakö constituency in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Papua New Guinea. Havini's work is often a personal response to the politics of location, exploring contested sites and histories in the Oceania region, and employing photography, sculpture, immersive video, and mixed-media installations. Taloi holds a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) from the Canberra School of Art, Australian National University, and has exhibited internationally in the Royal Academy of Arts, London; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Sharjah Biennial 13, UAE; 3rd Aichi Triennale, Nagoya, Japan; Dhaka Art Summit, Bangladesh; Honolulu Biennial, Hawaii, USA; and Musée du Quai Branly, Paris.



1

Brook Andrew, "Briefing Speech,"  
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12, 2020 <https://www.biennaleofsydney.art/brook-andrew-briefing-speech/> .

2

See <https://www.biennaleofsydney.art/artists/latai-taumoepeau/#:~:text=Photograph%3A%20Zan%20Wimberley.,Latai%20Taumoepeau%2C%20'The%20Last%20Resort'%2C%202020.,from%20the%20Oranges%20%26%20Sardines%20Foundation> .

3

See my latest exhibition at  
Artspace, Sydney <https://www.artspace.org.au/program/exhibitions/2020/taloihavini/> .

4

John Puhia tau Pule, "Tales of  
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5

See <https://www.equatorinitiative.org/2017/05/30/tulele-peisa/> .

*The Trouble with Wishes Coming True*

It would be radical—but probably right—to say that the rising interest in nature among artists and art professionals has less to do with nature and a lot more to do with the institutional structure of the art world itself. The rise and development of museums, public collections, and all other participating institutions in this history has been dependent on an idea of social structure and citizenship that is now radically changing: one could even say that nature embodies the last institutional twist in the history of institutionalized art, as the emergence of Nature—as a space and a ground—embodies not so much an institutional alterity to the museums and white (and nonwhite) cubes, but rather the very possibility of a rebirth outside the frame of history. Yes, history. I do believe that more important than the problem of culture is the question of history and national identity that art has been dealing with for so many centuries. However, this is not the question that preoccupies me here.

Both democracy and museums had a short-lived, minor revival at the very edge of their decay, before continuing their descent. The transition from the twentieth to the twenty-first century was marked by the energy of discourses inhabiting art institutions, an energy of renewal that affected not only the big institutions, but also the role of medium- and smaller-sized ones. The question of the future of representation within the Western democratic system was answered by the proliferation of philosophers and different curatorial and artistic agents promoting access, ideas, and the archive. The past gained a plurality and the question of history started to fragment into the problems of the legacy of postcolonialism. The archive was the first door: the document—still white—preceded the entrance of materials and artistic voices from different territories and histories. Restitution started to gain body and reality, in regard to the question of race in the art world. Still, the energies of renewal were possessed by enthusiasm, by an economic and social growth that unprecedentedly empowered art to see itself as capable of opening the social to its past through new and different ideas of education, participation, social wealth, and access. The art world believed in itself and many politicians in Europe supported this wave—at the beginning—as a way of activating the Union and creating a resonance between the old continent's dreams and this new political organization, which on its surface seemed a genius development of all those historical loose ties among nations that were never friends, but permanently interdependent. It was only natural that the Union needed to spread a strong sense of culture, one that was critical and, at the same time, capable of capitalizing on the old flavor of history through a renewed "park" of art institutions. This also explains why the tsunami of critique of the old and the belief in its force were interwoven. But, more importantly, this also explains why the whole exercise of investigating the limits of established art

Chus Martínez

# Gathering Sea I Am!

institutions and the possibilities of new formats was a very controlled impulse; one was absolutely convinced that at the end of the rainbow was a pot of gold. The emerging interest on the part of the press in museums and the “stars” that created exhibitions enhanced an idea of access that was mostly sponsored by low-cost airlines.<sup>1</sup> All of a sudden, cities were like the musicals that reemerged as a genre in new North American cinema. Thanks to Zara, Uniqlo, or Swatch, many old forgotten buildings in city centers started to sing and to smell. All the glories of past centuries responded to the arrival of all these tourists as if they were new wings in old art institutions presenting both the identity of the past and the city under a new form and a new light—and, of course, wearing new clothes.

The art world said “access” and access it was! The citizens started to open the doors of their houses. Did you say hospitality? Et voilà, millions of apartments were redecorated with white and bright elements and opened—in a competitive quest—to visitors. Who said that shelter was not the notion that would reign in the old continent? Who could now claim that the wishes expressed by art and its institutions were not listened to? Millions listened to the call ... Never had it been possible to peek into the private houses of the Catalan bourgeoisie, for example, if you did not belong to their inner circle, but now, just log into an app and you can not only see their spaces, but also compare their prices with yours. It is true that this could be seen as an undesirable development, but this development still has everything to do with us, with the language and the desires we expressed with these words which cannot be entirely and independently blamed on tourism and the marketing of all the city centers of Europe. Tourism is the complex result of seeing the enormous importance and impact of the transit of people as an incredible source of income, as well as of using this type of transit as a veil to cover the arrival of those thousands of people that seek refuge and a future in the developed territories. These two forms of transit cannot be separated from one another.

But what has all of this to do with art? Or contemporary art? One cannot truly claim that development occurred in the right direction, that museums and art institutions gained relevance, that curators were established in a new and unprecedented way, or that criticality and the new formats are visible, now that collectors and the market rule the art world in the absence of public money or foundations defending the common interest. I would say a lot of it has to do with how contemporary art sped up and was used to speed up a transformation of our society in directions that, while overall positive, are at the same time rapidly growing dangerous as we are unable to create a political frame for it. Art has been obsessed with the tensions created between elites and public communities. No other field of practice and study has dedicated so much effort and speculative thinking to addressing this question. And it is this very question that determines

today’s development of technology and politics.

### *Ocean*

The field of art has indeed contributed massively to generating a sense of experience about gender, nature, and race, and has served as an amplifier of other disciplines concerned with the same questions and rights. However, it is equally important to face and to discuss the transformation of our institutional structures regardless of their scale, to understand the interdependency of the evolution of our public sphere and the capital dedicated to it and the future of art, and to reconsider the relationships we are building not only with technology as an industry, but also with technology as a substance that itself needs to be reevaluated in terms of gender, race, and in relation to nature.

Art and its world have been from their origins directly dependent on urban and industrial developments. Even if in the past—and also in recent years in a limited way—many have been pointing towards the nonurban as a possible context for future artists in which to make art, the fact is that it always sounds like a last resort and, in actuality, the countryside (read as an “other” to the wealthier urban centers) is neither fully considered to the extent of its possibilities nor stands to make a comeback. Art has never—for reasons related to the development of education and our physical and necessary dependency on demographics, on the presence of an audience—reflected properly on an “other” contrary to and outside of the modern models of production and transmission. Why should we? Art, in the way it has been conceived, has not needed fields and farmers but rather citizens and scholars. Institutions need to be where the bureaucracy is and where politics are formed. But are politics even really taking shape in cities today?

The question of understanding the nonurban context is a very complex one, and one that also relates to the rise of the internet in an intriguing way.

Art in nonurban contexts has historically taken other forms, ones that relate to craft and to community values, such as tradition, but also to traditional notions of gender and work. And until now, projects proposing contemporary art in the countryside have mostly stressed the historical interest artists have in the landscape or the way they conceptualize certain elements of earth and nature, but have failed to engage with the reality of the people inhabiting those areas. Probably only Canada and some northern parts of Scandinavia have created institutions with collections responding to indigenous art and First Nation concerns and views on the world. Otherwise, it is still very difficult to find examples of logics that defy empirical—even if some are critical—views on different knowledges.



TBA21–Academy, The Current II, Summer School #2: Phenomenal Ocean led by Chus Martínez. Photo: Enrico Fiorese.

Postcolonial theories and debates have raised enormous awareness about the realities of those suffering the normalization processes imposed by imperialisms of all kinds, and yet, those same realities have been the subject of an enormous fictionalization of local cultures and indigenous wisdoms. Somehow, our institutional and academic ways of reading the real have left space for exceptions of the best kind. Art has displayed an enormous interest in the testimonials of the oppressed, forcing those voices to sound oftentimes like factory workers displaced in a nonindustrial context. Furthermore, the antagonism towards technology, social media, and all the miseries left behind by the evolution of labor in our developed and service-oriented centers has created an idealized view of indigenous peoples as possessing an original wisdom that we have lost. The rise of interest in ayahuasca and the growth of an industry dedicated to substances that are supposed to enhance our quality of life—like superfoods—go hand in hand. Many scholars—such as oceanographer Osvaldo Ulloa—have denounced the systematic construction of the indigenous as the original ecological subject, as if nearness to their lives will serve to provide benefits to ours that we can incorporate into our ways of production and consumption,

without much change except a new empathy for their way of living. Indeed, there is a space for difference and an attention that were not there before, but these have come with a failure to deal with more complex differences that cannot be easily described. Further, the political situations of many indigenous communities are endangered like never before and any mechanisms to protect their resources are silenced in the face of public and private interests, such as capitalist extraction.

It is not only radical ways of conceiving life that are affected or at stake here, but the many millions living in territories that are of no interest—not even for an exercise in exoticism—to the powers that be. The reality of the countryside is leading to the rise of old-fashioned right-wing values. Poverty marks the lives of many who see how educational systems only shape individuals according to models of labor and life that have nothing in common with the reality they are living in: a reality of millions of kilometers of country dispossessed of any beauty, sense of sustainability, or health, and also remote, disconnected, and suffering from endemic class, gender, and discrimination problems.

In these circumstances, it is a prerequisite to read the interest in nature not as a subject, but as a necessary turn towards new conditions of space, politics, action, gender, race, and interspecies relations. As of late, it is much more common for art practitioners to say “nature” than “countryside,” for example. The reason is to be found in the philosophies common in the art sphere: those that proffer a systematic thinking against nature, on the background of nature, on the otherness of nature, in a dialectical manner with nature, which have made nature much more legible, in all its nonurban forms.

It is because of the prevalent discourses and understanding of nature that we are still nonspecific about the future of art in a nonurban context. Nature and art are other names for life, and life needs to be reintroduced into our thinking in a big way. But the interest in nature preserves—probably for good reasons—a level of indeterminacy regarding the actions that attract artists and inspire us to think about the spaces that exist outside institutionalized life. This seems easy to say, but it is radically difficult to imagine it in nonnegative terms. Institutions have been our language and the form we invented to organize ourselves. Therefore, every time a scientist says they have discovered a new species of fish, they are saying that there is a whole part of life—a sentient part—that we have not responded to. And this response is not just a question of “expanding” our aid or action towards it. Rather the contrary: intelligent life and sentient life should—and eventually will—function like an imperative to organize differently every structure that plays a role in our relationship to nature.

This idea of coexistence, interspecies communication, etc., is not entirely new. Such notions have a long history, and yet it has been mostly science that has paid attention to intelligence existing in nonhuman realms, but also more importantly, to the different philosophical minds that have tried to describe the political and epistemological dimensions of this crucial phenomena. Humanities and the sphere of visual culture have been skeptical and conservative in embracing any theory or study taking this possibility seriously. The entanglement of the questions of rationality, language, and labor has acted as a barrier for those presenting ideas of intelligence based on forms and dimensions of consciousness that defy the classic parameters that safeguard the status of the human and uphold production as one of the most important functions of our human lives. Language and labor structure two of the pillars of our early, modern, and late capitalist life: education and production. Both go hand in hand, since the major goal of education—and more and more so—is none other than being able to work. Education makes labor possible, by producing capitalist subjects, and it has as a secondary mission to familiarize workers with future labor scenarios. Education for the sake of knowledge, or for the nourishment of our capacity to speculate or preserve old forms (classical studies, for example) through new forms (computer science, etc.) has dramatically lost its

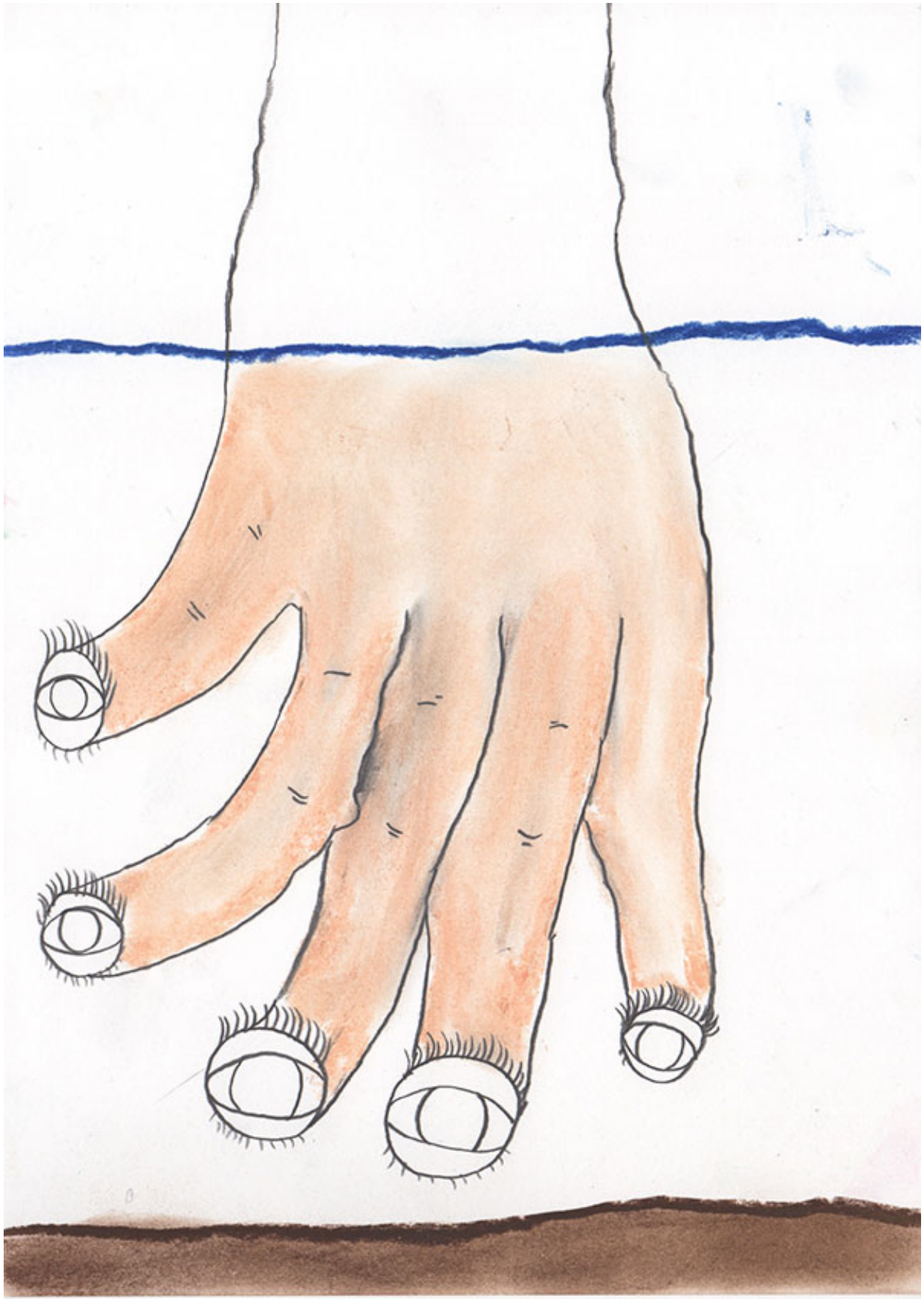
importance. We speak of research, and there are a few who still believe that research does name the speculative worlds that ancient academia nourished and protected, but research nowadays is mainly a tool that extends hypothesis to the doors of industry.

Another of the big prejudices that culture and the visual arts have with regards to the idea of nature possessing an intelligence that may influence our political forms and languages has to do with gender. Women have historically been seen as those defending sensorial forms of communication that defy classical—and narrow—understandings of rationality and the role it plays in the definition of social norms. Therefore, to accept expanded views on the sensorial implies accepting and undertaking a reform of the social norms that situate certain behaviors, knowledges, and artistic productions in a secondary realm in relation to the canons that cultural and artistic institutions have created. And this has been the case for centuries: a misogynistic prejudice runs all through the history of Western philosophy and art and has determined the silencing of so many other forms of relating to life that would have rendered the premises of, for example, institutional critique radically conservative and opportunistic towards the old order—as indeed they are.

While it would be wrong to think that when one says “ocean,” one is naming a “subject,” we might be so radical as to posit that to say “ocean” is, today, to say “art”—art without the burden of institutional life, without the ideological twists of cultural politics, art as a practice that belongs to artists, art facing the urgency of socializing with all who care about life. In other words, to say “ocean” is to replace the historical notion of the avant-garde with a code that is not determined by form and the invention of new gestures, but by an investigation of the substance of life, identifying this as the mission of art.

This would imply that all those artists directly interested in life underwater, in nature, in new forms of sensing from nonhuman-centered perspectives, are “in.” But it also means that all those not directly interested in thinking along these lines—who do not identify the intelligence of art as lying in its radical interest in life—are even more important than those who are. Think about the current situation of all the structures constituting the art world; about the impoverishment of a language inherited from past left and liberal social visions, and the impossibility of reinventing these dreams and their premises under a late-capitalistic economic system; and about the need for a new sensorium to invent new notions, to build new sentences, to embrace a new idea of equality and social justice. If we do, we can see that to say “ocean” is to say the expansion of museums, of public space ... that the ocean is a source that reprograms our senses and contains a potential for transforming the future of architecture, of communications, of gender entanglement, of economy, of art.





Eduardo Navarro, (New Friends, New Senses), 2018. Pastel and graphite on A4 printer paper. TBA21–Academy The Current II.



*The Teacher-Curator*

At the end of 2017, I was invited by the TBA21—Academy to curate an oceanic expedition for their program *The Current*, a series of three-year cycles organized around the state of the ocean. I was the third curator, preceded by Ute Meta Bauer, who successfully finished a three-year cycle, and César García-Alvarez, who did only one trip. For my cycle, the artist group SUPERFLEX and I were commissioned to curate three expeditions led by artists and scientists and three public gatherings whose form would be defined by the person or collective in charge. The crucial part of this initiative and its programs was the problems it posed to curatorial practice and to my own individual work as a curator within an art institute.

The invitation not only provided me with an opportunity to see curatorial practice in “a new light” or an “expanded” field, but actually forced me to reimagine the whole question of the future of curatorial practice. Am I still a curator if I direct an art school but do not program exhibitions in a consecutive and publicly accessible manner? Is the title “curator” needed for an organizer of expeditions that take their name from the old habit of exploring territories to enhance not only knowledge but also frontiers and possessions? Will there be a role for curators—as well-trained mediators—in a world where seeing is not only a human or animal trait but a technological threat?

Our field—as curators—is constituted by the questions we are able to ask.

When I moved to an art school, I was motivated by several inquiries. A very simple one: How are art schools to become part of the art institutions that nourish our social space through artistic and speculative production? Why has our view of art schools been so reductive? If they contribute to the development of artists and thus art, they should also actively participate in forming the field of attention and study around nature, and also around the questions about the future of race and gender that are so crucial to the future art practice. What does the term “education” include today? If education is the key to curing all of our social ills—from doubts about the reality of climate change to gender and racial inequality—then why don’t countries, private foundations, and all the forces in favor of a free and democratic society unite to create educational programs capable of responding to this?

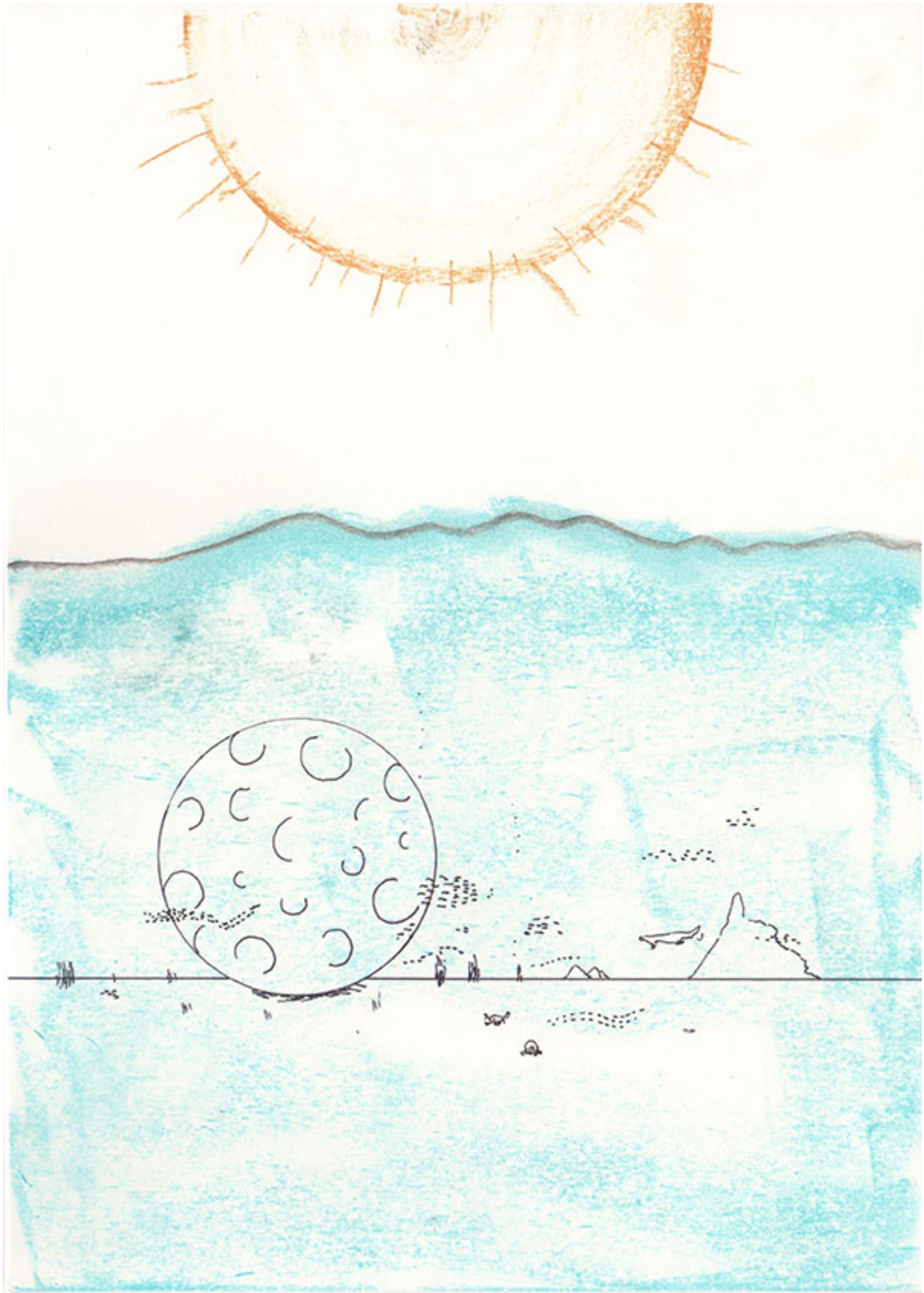
Never before has a term said so little. From literacy to digital skills, “education” names basic requirements to be part of a system, but it lacks the force of an approach to thinking that is capable of tackling the biggest challenges we will face. No one seems to be ready to gather the many parties—contemporary art included—that are searching for new modes of communication and pedagogical systems, for a collaborative effort toward bringing younger

generations and populations with less access to art to experiences that would help them renegotiate their relationship to nature and formulate new knowledge.

Few people saw how my plan to introduce into the curricula of an art institute ways of rethinking nature, race, and gender could contribute—modestly, but steadily—to a transformation of a field otherwise bound to the processes of exhibition and the market. Moreover, as a woman my move toward education was perceived as a retreat to something minor—perhaps important in principle, but incapable of having the same impact that art spaces or galleries have. Once the hype of education as a twist in exhibition-making—as reported by numerous articles in art magazines—had passed, the reality of art education returned to the way we knew it from the past. There seemed to be a big difference, as well, between an art school directed by a man and one directed by a woman, a difference that negatively affected the ambitions I had. When run by men, the schools are seen as still possessing some of the charm of the avant-garde heroic gesture of advocating for a free space, which resonates with radical politics. However, the very moment a woman was in charge, questions about teaching—versus curating—began raining down upon me. But if we once proposed the idea that artists can curate, surely today we should propose the idea that teachers can curate? What are the kinds of methods, exhibitions, and public exchanges this would generate? In post-liberal Western societies we face a recurrent problem of failing to identify women—and all minorities—as capable of producing a meaningful and strong public sphere, and this affects and distorts the perception of what is possible in the future of our art and cultural systems. So the idea that teachers can curate makes sense. Teachers, understood as practitioners of *paideia* (the rearing of citizens), aim to cultivate a closeness, an insight into a subject that helps each individual communicate their experience and therefore create a sensing system that goes hand-in-hand with a language to convey it, to make it communicable.

So, let’s embrace the imbalance and all the imbalances that are needed to create new balance. Anyhow, the teacher-as-curator is nothing new. We accept the expert, the magician, the shaman, the leader, the CEO, the collective as curators, yet we seem to have a problem with curation by the harmless teacher or the person in charge of creating a bond with a group of young people.

One of my favorite examples of this exercise of turning everything into a classroom, then into an exhibition, was performed by a school teacher: Raphael Montañez Ortiz. He was a primary school teacher in a public and very poor school in Harlem, New York City. He was asked by the parents of his students to create a method to convey their experience of being Caribbean and African—mostly of Puerto Rican descent—to their children, who were in an educational system that taught them in English and in a culture very different from their own. It was this



Eduardo Navarro, (When We Don't See the Moon), 2018. Pastel and graphite on A4 printer paper. TBA21–Academy The Current II.

teacher-curator who founded El Museo del Barrio, a museum that miraculously appeared in the classroom to perform the many operations of explaining, demonstrating, and translating cultural realities that were very far from the city.

In my short, but very intense, time at El Museo del Barrio, I had the great pleasure of talking to Raphael and many other artists of his generation about the challenges of conveying diasporic culture to children, such as introducing them to “the sound of the *coquí* frog.” At the time, I did not understand the meaning of this statement, and so I underestimated it, or perhaps more precisely, categorized it as a beautiful metaphor. But it was meant literally. The *coquí* gets its name from its mating song. The male of the species sings “*coquí, coquí*.” For Puerto Ricans in the US, missing the sound of this song is one manifestation of the enormous pain that colonial processes of the past and present have created. Their exile is perceived as migration, and they have a political status that never allows them to arrive at full citizenship, nor fully retreat into their native land and its symbols.

Raphael represents a specific paradigm in a theory of the teacher-curator that I want to put forward.<sup>2</sup> He embodies a model that is helpful for understanding what this teaching-curating function may mean. In the late '60s he was highly involved, alongside Gustav Metzger, in the question of destruction—a question that he never truly abandoned in his practice as an artist. In the '70s, with the publication of his *Physio-Psycho-Alchemy*, he revitalized his research on behavior and creation. He very soon—at least in his thinking—identified in the myth of destruction the question of a potential new and authentic origin. One of the most interesting traits of his thinking is how it surpasses radical individualism, seeking profound political responsibility. His teaching was not understood—not even by himself—as part of his artistic and curatorial practice. And yet I would claim that his study of Mesoamerican rituals and of all kinds of therapies that allow one to be “born again” were part of a long research practice that worked to propose a vision of how to deal with all we are not: how to deal with knowledge if we don't have it, how to deal with whiteness if you are not, how to deal with feminine sensing if you are male, how to deal with wealth if you are not rich ... how to deal with all these dualities if you don't want to be bound by any of them, and how all these poles and dialectical systems affect our ability to deal with complex racial, cultural, and economic realities.

### Conclusion

Like Raphael Montañez Ortiz and many artists of his generation, it is imperative now to learn to situate behavior inside art practice, inside artistic production, and to become aware of the *how*, observing not only the language we use to address problems, but also the conditions we create to allow for different experiences of



Albert Serra, *Oceaneering*, 2018. TBA21–Academy, The Current II, Expedition #1: To Find the Vegan Lion, led by Chus Martínez.

volumes, symbols, images, power, connections, media, etc. Doing so holds the key to understanding the future of a practice of mediation that can be identified with the teacher, and with all the hyper-pedagogical resources we may need to invent, positioning art as the experience of freedom, nature as the experience of gender. The teacher-curator is that figure that insists on the importance of matching together gender and nature with the efforts that are ahead of us in the decolonizing processes that we need to maintain—or actually, activate—in all cultural structures, which seems to be a relevant task to collectively undertake with young artists. At the same time, the continuous production of opportunities to include alumni and a broad community of artists and those interested in art is also a must.

And yet, there is another key question, different from but parallel to those mentioned above. It concerns the status of ignorance: the ill-suited tools we have inherited to deal with it, the question of transmission when reading decreases, and the challenge of embracing with joy those spaces that function outside our institutionally shaped modern minds. I have come to believe that the many multiple and different futures that may lie ahead of us are dependent on our ability to interpret ignorance and its structure: an ignorance that suggests that knowledge absorption as our traditional educational methods conceive it is in deep crisis; an ignorance affected but the structure of media, like it was in the late eighteenth century; an ignorance radically dependent on self-affirmation, just as traditional class structures are eroding. Recently, a researcher from the media analysis nonprofit Harmony Labs in New York explained to me in a private conversation that people share news and tweets that they identify with, not those that inspire them or make them change their minds. What goes viral on social media are thus those things that reinforce of our own views, while we keep private the things that alter our views. The reason for this, as writer Ingo Niermann explained to me, is that stability is privileged before change. Even when a person or a piece of information or a documentary

changes our views, it also creates a vertigo, a sense of losing the old ground before having a new one to stand on—a new ground from which to be assertive and defend this new acquired sense of the real. It is the production of a ground from which to defend one's values that matters, from which to create a sense of identification that does not—or at least not only—consist of ultra-conservative views, or the rehearsal of the liberal and left-progressive ones that we need to work on.

Therefore, I would insist that ignorance is a real active force, and in order to reach the goals of equality and freedom, it is important to invest in the understanding of the structures and the experiences that constitute the transmission of ideas and feelings today.

## X

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1

There is a very beautiful and unexplored aspect of this story: the word “star” and its function. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu remarked that “sociology and art do not make good bedfellows.” His reasoning was grounded in the tension between the art world’s desire to focus on individual creative genius, and sociology’s insistent aim to explain phenomena in terms of social forces. No better term than “star” describes how easily men—no matter how many conscious public programs one has attended and despite how many women have warned about the dangers of assigning them power—have been able to sit as heads of museum boards and entice journalists to cover them. But the “stars” find their own Bourdieu-predicted predator: the influencer. The influencer is like an avenger defined positively in market terms: it modifies the course of a decision and reunites all like-minded thinkers—like a shepherd—under its influence. If a “star” is like a king or an old-fashioned boss, the influencers are the true children of the model developed by big companies in defining and putting to work indirect leadership—that is, acting upon very large structures in which the message reaches the recipient through an indirect source of command.

2

Before I proceed, I would like the reader to set aside all prejudices against the word “teaching,” as well as against the possible roles a teacher may have. Those prejudices are key to understanding the radicality of what these artists did and the potential of what I would love to describe as a proposal for the future of contemporary-art culture.



*The S/pacifics of Salt Water*

Humanity emerged from the oceans, as did all life on this planet. Our bodies are 60 percent brine—we carry this marine heritage with us however far we travel from the sea, detached and diasporic as we may become. Perhaps we could even think of ourselves as self-contained mini-oceans teeming with fluid universes that have tragically lost their consciousness of shared oceanhood. While these poetic imaginations appeal to a collective human yearning for the sublime, the universal, and the utopian, such a metanarrative skips over the real lives, bodies, and territories of those people most intimate with the sea on islands and coastlines across the planet.

Specificity matters. Having grown up between the Marshall Islands, the United States, and Japan, I am concerned with a specific ocean—the Pacific—and in it, the specific islands and communities of people, as well as the art in this part of the world. As my late friend and mentor Teresia Teaiwa, a scholar of Banaban and I-Kiribati heritage and one of Oceania's greatest minds, punned in her own writing, it is essential to emphasize the urgency of specific notions—or rather “S/pacific n/oceans”—of Oceanian history and art: the specificities of genealogies, crossings, colonialisms, wars, struggles, and resilience of the people who live throughout the Great Ocean.<sup>1</sup> It is in this spirit that I write this essay, which is not meant to be a curatorial text narrating a tidy story of which artists to watch from Oceania. Instead, I am interested in nudging this conversation beyond the ambiguities of the ocean to the specificities of Oceania, in order to foster more receptivity toward art and artists from this region.

I use “Oceania” in conversation with the influential and oft-quoted Tongan thinker Epeli Hau'ofa, who used that word to gesture toward an expanded and decolonized view of the Pacific Islands as the largest region on earth, and who described it as a “sea of islands” interconnected by ocean, rather than disparate and remote landmasses. But I find utility in both “Oceania” and “Pacific,” considering how the latter is a colonial term, a reminder of the embedded and entangled imperial forces that named and mapped this ocean, and that still need to be confronted. Increasingly, historians and curators from outside the region over-quote Hau'ofa's landmark manifesto “Our Sea of Islands” with utopian and pan-Oceanian glee, thus making it seem as if decolonization is complete, while wallpapering over the immense differences between island topographies, Islander cultures, and contrasting colonial histories.<sup>2</sup> After all, just as there are diverse islands, there are multiple Pacifics: competing imaginaries seen from different colonial vantage points. Western mappings of the Great Ocean created the legacy of the “nesias”—Polynesia, Melanesia, Micronesia—based purely on racialized perversions and fantasies of European explorers and colonists. Mapmakers romanticized Polynesians as “noble

Greg Dvorak

# S/pacific Islands: Some Reflections on Identity and Art in Contemporary Oceania



Lisa Reihana, *In Pursuit of Venus [infected]*, 2015–17. Ultra HD video, color, 7.1 sound, 64 min. Image courtesy of the artist and Artprojects, and New Zealand at Venice. With the support of Creative New Zealand and NZ at Venice Patrons and Partners.

savages,” termed Melanesians solely for the darkness of their skin and a perception of them as being murderous barbarians (simply because they successfully fought white invaders away for so long), and coined “Micronesia” as a belittling term to cover all the miscellaneous scraps and leftover islands of the equatorial and northern Pacific that didn’t fit into the prior two categories. And from these Western biases emerged hierarchies—with Polynesia at the top, leading to a sense even today of a privileging of Polynesia as metonym for the entire region at the exclusion of all other places, cultures, and histories, sometimes referred to as “Polycentrism.”

Japan, too, had its own imaginary of Oceania, which it called *Nanyō*—a vague and broad frontier originating in Micronesia and eventually including all of the island Pacific and Southeast Asia. (“*Nanyō*” simply means “The South”—from a Japanese perspective.) In the twentieth century, Japan would attempt, and mostly succeed, to subsume this entire southern frontier, until it was wrested away by the United States and its allies and mostly reborn in the form of the postwar American Empire.

This essay says nothing new, at least in terms of what scholars and artists in and around Oceania often talk about. Rather, I want to propose an understanding of Oceania as a verb and not a noun, as dynamic rather than static, an open-ended conversation, sentence, question, and to recenter Oceania, to demand its centrality in the Middle of Now and Here as opposed to “the middle of nowhere.”<sup>3</sup> As Teresia Teaiwa poignantly wrote, “We

sweat and cry salt water, so we know that the ocean is really in our blood.”<sup>4</sup> She meant this not as a universalist call to all humanity, but rather as an affirmation of a shared Pacific Islander identity and heritage in the context of decolonizing history, with an investment in the larger project of trans-indigenous solidarity. I would reverse that paradigm as well, to suggest that the ocean itself is made up of the blood and sweat and tears of countless generations of Islanders who have struggled and persevered there, against incredible colonial and environmental adversity. We must remember, too, that humans cannot survive in water; we live on land, and land—especially in the Pacific Islands—is part of the fabric of one’s very being. It is flesh. In many Austronesian languages, for example, the word for “land” (*whenua* in Māori, *fenua* in Tahitian, *fanua* in Samoan) is the same word used for “placenta,” which is typically buried in the land. As many Pacific writers have emphasized, land—the island itself—is thus also a mother.<sup>5</sup>

My own connection to Oceania is not as an Islander, but as a person who grew up riding the currents of colonialism. I am a fourth-generation European American, descended from the combined Atlantic crossings and subsequent struggles and romances of Jewish, Romanian, Italian, Czech, Dutch, and other immigrants to the United States. I am also a first-generation immigrant and a twenty-year permanent resident of Japan, where I live most of my life speaking Japanese and working as a university professor in Tokyo. But most importantly, though I am not indigenous to it, I consider Oceania my

first home. In the early 1970s at the height of the Cold War, my father—an earnest, peace-loving systems engineer who worked for a major American defense company—brought my mother and one-year-old me with him to the Marshall Islands, where for nearly eight years he would help to test intercontinental ballistic missiles (minus their nuclear warheads) at Kwajalein, the largest coral atoll in the world.

Kwajalein Atoll is a vast and beautiful ring of land and lagoon that has been inhabited by brave and resilient Marshall Islanders for thousands of years. Along with much of the surrounding islands of Micronesia, after hundreds of years loosely under Spanish domination, it was colonized by Germany (1885–1919) and Japan (1919–1947).<sup>6</sup> The United States colonized the Marshalls even longer, beginning with its so-called “liberation” of these islands from the Japanese government in the 1940s, followed by sixty-seven devastating nuclear tests conducted at Bikini and Enewetak Atolls between 1946 and 1958, and then by its ongoing missile-testing and space defense projects at Kwajalein Atoll, which began in 1964 and continue through to the present day, even after the formation of the sovereign Republic of the Marshall Islands in the mid-1980s. This is a proud S/pacific nation that symbolizes the perseverance and optimism of Islanders over the horrors of colonial and military violence and climate change; yet it rarely is mentioned in Western descriptions of the Pacific, which tend to favor fantasies of tropical pleasure and escape rather than the bitter truths of conquest and domination.

As a teacher, artist, and curator working with Islander colleagues between Japan and Pacific places, I situate my own story here to invite others like me with non-Pacific heritage to realize and acknowledge their own indebtedness to Oceania and the violent histories of colonial exploitation. As a child, in my privileged position derived from legacies of stealing Marshallese land for the sake of American security and wealth, I lived and breathed the military settler colonialism hidden in plain sight all around me. Had it not been for Islander teachers and friends who patiently shared their stories with me, I might have completely ignored the deeper truths that Kwajalein wanted me to learn. Through them I would begin to unpack the horrors of imperial trespass and feel humbled by the incredible resilience, strength, wisdom, and agency of Pacific Islanders.

Outside of the Pacific Islands, most of us are indeed beholden to these histories, and yet our imaginary of this Great Ocean is oddly vague and romantic. I often ask new students to “draw the Pacific.” 99.9 percent of their illustrations are maps—typically rendered as if looking down at earth from space or the heavens, the ubiquitous “God’s eye view” that most Google Maps users take for granted today as “reality.” They draw a political/economic map that emphasizes the contours of “important” countries that border the Great Ocean, and in the middle

of the map is always little more than a vast and undefined stretch of blue—a void, sometimes peppered with little dots that are supposed to represent islands, sometimes not. Sometimes the islands are labeled—at most, the Hawaiian Islands, Aotearoa-New Zealand, perhaps Fiji or Papua New Guinea. This is an imperial worldview, an overview that audaciously and even violently attempts to encompass the wholeness of the largest region on earth and reduce it to remote specks in blue vagueness. Zoom in on Google Earth on any of these ill-defined dots, however, and you will soon discover that even the smallest islands can take a human being days to traverse by foot in the hot sun.

A more S/pacific view invites us to look at how an ocean wayfinder, a navigator, would visualize Oceania, if they even privileged the visual in the first place. True navigators in the distant islands of “Micronesia,” like Mau Pailug—the influential Satawalese teacher of wayfinding—could feel with their bodies the rhythm and the texture of the ocean, the subtle echoes of waves and surges and currents crashing against and flowing around islands. Chants passed down through generations and perpetuated in hula and other Islander oral traditions gesture toward specific markers on the surface and depths of ocean, even the smells of seaweed, of places and islands—as Chamorro-Pohnpeian scholar Vince Diaz writes, the olfactory map of the Pacific is also rich and nuanced.<sup>7</sup> And so, a S/pacific perspective demands that we remember the contexts, the relativity of size to one human body, and the importance of place and environment. If it is even worth “drawing the Pacific” to begin with, at the very least it is essential to realize that at sea level, from an island-based visual perspective, one might not sketch out a map but rather a single unbroken line dividing the expanses of sky and water, what Westerners commonly refer to as “the horizon.”

### *Coral and Concrete*

Triangulating across and between horizons helps Islanders navigate Oceania and the current crises of our world. Even in my own triangulations between Japan, America, and the Marshall Islands, I find a deeper sense of located-ness amidst the complexity of coral and concrete. These two substances are rich metaphors that can help to narrate S/pacific histories in helpful ways that facilitate more humility and interaction between islands, oceans, and people in relation to each other while being mindful of power and inequality.<sup>8</sup> Oceania’s culture and geography is all about connections between islands, maintained through the passing of knowledge from one generation to the next through stories and the genealogical bonds of family (not necessarily blood relations as much as kinship through shared affinity and commitment). Coral is like this—organic, migratory, relational, ancestral, rhizomatic. But we must also call out the abuse of power and





Nearing the edge of the reef, Ishigaki Island, Okinawa, August 2020. Photo: Greg Dvorak. Courtesy of the author.

violence—to identify the aggressors who literally and figuratively crushed those coral reefs and mixed them into “concrete” to pour for their imperial endeavors. Amidst the turbulence of globalization, climate change, militarism, and even the Covid pandemic, Oceania is the site of an ongoing competition between coral—the “little histories” of real human lives—pitted against concrete—the “big histories” of empires and wars.<sup>9</sup> In the grander scheme of things, despite the imperial or military pretense of concrete permanence, it is always the coralline collective struggles and creative ingenuity of individuals formed into communities which overcome and survive across generations.

Coral is a microorganism that spawns annually, coral polyps projecting their eggs and sperm onto the ocean currents, which become baby polyps that navigate the seas on epic journeys to find hospitable new sites where they can attach and build new reefs. Coral thus builds a genealogical structure out of diverse and disparate

journeys, making sense of chaos, growing in deep time over thousands of years, literally transforming from the microscopic to the macroscopic. I liken the crossings of people to coral. It is estimated that Austronesian people left their homelands in or around present-day Taiwan about five to six thousand years ago, voyaging and wayfinding across tremendous distances in waves of outmigration as they developed better and better maritime technology and knowledge, settling different corners of island Oceania from west to east. These progressive crossings and layerings gave birth to diverse but interconnected island cultures and transoceanic trade routes, languages, heritages. But I include in my metaphor of coral the other crossings of ordinary people—of castaways and people who drifted off course, of missionaries, of people captured and forced away from their families, of the later flows of settlers like laborers and prisoners, of the migrations of soldiers and colonists.

The coral image doesn’t condone the horrifically violent

encounters that happened along the way as a result of these migrations; rather, it as an allegory for an inventory of all of these contradictory influences, an inclusive metaphor for the sloppy but strangely elegant sedimenting of diverse truths into complicated reefs. In English, it is said that coral “colonizes,” but in fact coral actually *de* colonizes: reclaiming, resistant, dynamic, strong. And reefs embody how colonial encounters *always* entail resistance, nuance, and peril; for coral can be soft, colorful, and beautiful, but also messy, harsh, fragile, sharp, and jagged. The reef can sink a ship; coral can infect a wound and kill. Coral is built upon the bones of those who came before, simultaneously life and death, sometimes strong as rock and sometimes frail as flower petals. Coral is thus the embodiment of resistance to all that would attempt to flatten, essentialize, or appropriate it into a singular narrative of domination.

In contrast to the complexity and resistance of coral, concrete is the stuff of oversimplification: imperial contrivance, the farce of permanence, the lie that the people who came before were somehow complicit and submissive in their own colonization. Before and after the Pacific War, Japanese and Americans both literally dredged up the Marshallese coral reef ancestral fishing grounds that surrounded the main island in Kwajalein Atoll, pulverized it, and mixed it with cement to make airstrips and fortifications in the service of empire and war. Bunkers, blockhouses, and bureaucracies: concrete is collective violence and oppression—it is orientalism, nationalism, and fascism. Concrete is war. It is ecocide. It is the wall that separates us and the sickening hubris of petty world leaders who boast of building walls. It is the output of general contractors who dump tons and tons of it onto islands and oceans. It is the giant blocks poured by the United States military at Henoko in Okinawa to coat the reef there and make yet another new and unnecessary Marine base. It is the gargantuan tetrapod objects heaped along the coasts of Japan in a triumphant (but futile) warning to the ocean that no tsunami shall wipe away the seaside infrastructure of capitalism, is if the waves would listen. Concrete is the rotting carcasses of Japanese war-era administrative buildings and bomb shelters buried deep in the jungles of Chuuk, Peleliu, Jaluit, Saipan, or Palawan, the aircraft carriers asleep on the bottoms of lagoons. It is also the golf courses and tourist infrastructure spread out across the Pacific today. They say that concrete has a lifespan of only a hundred years, which is really about the same as a human life, and yet empires praise it as if it were eternal.

Even if coral is bleaching because of our warming seas, its reefs will always stand as ruins and monuments to these incredible histories that far outlast concrete, and it is plausible that long after humanity has perished and oceans have cooled, coral will regenerate and continue its (de)colonizations. Over millions of years, coral reefs have built islands out of their migrations and interconnections. In the clockwise-flowing Kuroshio/Pacific Current along

which I live alone, in this part of Northern Oceania, oceanographers know that the reefs of the Marshall Islands give birth to the reefs of Kosrae and Pohnpei, which in turn beget the islands and atolls to their west, all the way across to the Philippines and up across Okinawa and Amami, up to Kyushu and Honshu. This eternal cycle is overlaid with the millions of crossings of canoes and ships and airplanes, the landings and flights, the unions of individuals that result in children and their children’s children. We are deeply, deeply entangled with each other, but the concrete our nations pour can make some of us the inheritors of great privilege and others the inheritors of dispossession. In fact the coronavirus pandemic starkly reveals this: the biggest factors enabling mass infections among the poorest and most marginalized might well be our concrete cities and concrete barriers of capitalistic inequality. But it is also the coming together of disparate people for common causes that build new reefs of resistance, to fight for the health of Pacific Islanders and also to insist that black and brown lives matter—not only in predominantly white places but everywhere, including in Oceania itself, such as in Indonesian-occupied West Papua, where Islanders are oppressed and killed simply for asserting their own identity.

### *Consuming Oceania*

It is the Western obsession with concrete that explains why Spain has already begun making a big fuss about the voyage of Ferdinand Magellan, notwithstanding that 2021 also marks the five-hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the European-led genocidal violence he initiated in Oceania. It was really only Magellan’s bad luck, ignorance, and the sheer enormity of the Great Ocean that enabled him to cross southeast to northwest without making landfall once until his crew, starving, exhausted, and bored, reached Guåhan (Guam) in March 1521, having declared this ocean so uneventful and unimpressive that it earned the moniker “*pacífico*”—the name Pacific stuck. Sailing into the bay of Humåtak, Magellan proceeded to order the burning of the entire village and the murder of many innocent Chamoru people, after which his crew reportedly cannibalized these bodies to replenish their health. The first recorded European history of cannibalism in the Pacific was thus by white people eating natives, and not the other way around.

That was the gruesome beginning of Western consumption of “The Pacific,” and it has continued ever since. And since the trespasses of Magellan, James Cook, and many others like them, it has been fashionable for Outsiders to project their imperial fantasies of Paradise onto the Pacific Islands, erasing like the military airstrips and concrete resort hotels of Honolulu the lives of real people and the bitter truths of the very colonization they themselves and their forebears wrought upon those islands on behalf of various empires.<sup>10</sup> Many artists, from





The arrival of canoes from across Micronesia at the Festival of Pacific Arts in Guam, 2016. Photo: Greg Dvorak. Courtesy of the author.

Picasso to Gauguin, were particularly notorious for this in their pursuit of “the primitive” fantasy that they sought in Pacific Island cultures. Gauguin, for example, gladly invited himself to Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands, where he spread syphilis and slept with teenage girls, all the while painting a vision of an eden that existed as if solely for the pleasure of European hetero-hungry men. And despite this, French tourists still seek out their dream of the Polynesian wahine dusky maiden, and Air Tahiti Nui has Gauguin paintings decorating the interior of its aircraft. And for all the fantasies of Pacific Paradise there are just as many nightmares of a Pacific Hell; for the Pacific Islands regularly show up in Western imaginations—including in journalism and contemporary art<sup>11</sup>—as the condemned nuclear wastelands of the past or the doomed bleached reefs and submerged homelands of the future, often devoid of the Pacific Islanders for whom these places matter the most.

Thus, the Pacific has long been consumed in very “concrete” ways, absent its deeper “coral” histories and of S/pacific localities and local communities in all their diversity. So my hope here is to advocate against one-sided consumption and rather for a more equal

conversation, collaboration, and engagement with Oceania and the artists of the Pacific Islands region. It is not my intention to attempt a history of art in Oceania, which would be audacious and inadequate, given that I am not an art historian, nor has that been my research specialization up until now. There are many meticulous art historians and curators, such as Peter Brunt, Nicholas Thomas, Sean Mallon, and their colleagues, who have done magnificent work in this arena with their *Art in Oceania: A New History*,<sup>12</sup> and later, the “Oceania” exhibition in 2018–19 at the Royal Academy in London and Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. This show, which painstakingly pulled together hundreds of works by people all over Oceania from past centuries, gathered from European collections and mindfully chosen with regard to the integrity of their provenance, also included a substantial body of works from contemporary Pacific artists that were highly engaged with urgent questions over colonialism, militarism, racism, war, the environment, and globalization. Still, this exhibit was criticized, for example, by Native Hawaiian curator Noelle Kahanu, one of its advisors, who lamented that although these precious objects, many imbued with immense spiritual and ancestral significance, were presented in Europe, the

show was also significant in that “those [Pacific people] who would most benefit, who would most deserve to see that which is here, [were] absent.”<sup>13</sup> She added that it remained the task of the visitor to draw their own connections to realize the violent history that confined such collections to European audiences, far away from the Pacific Ocean, with the work of contemporary Islander artists asked to bear the burden of interpreting all of this, as is if it were an afterthought. This is a crucial critique that echoes those previously leveled against the Musée du Quai Branly itself, which anthropologist Margaret Jolly argued enables a forgetting of modern art’s “primitivist” colonial collusion, concluding that “if cultures are talking [there], it appears that only certain people are party to those conversations and empowered to talk.”<sup>14</sup> And so, although “Oceania” was a breathtaking exhibit that marked a turning point in the reframing of art made by Pacific Islanders, perhaps with a more coral-like attention to the lives of real communities and real artists with names, this was only the beginning of truly embracing indigenous art from Oceania on the global scene.

There has, nonetheless, been momentum building toward a fairer conversation and reclamation of agency by Pacific artists closer to home for many decades, and Pacific art is linking more and more with indigenous art around the world in fascinating and exciting ways, with the advance of social media and better communications facilitating more trans-indigenous and global connections with audiences worldwide and in the international art world. For over forty years, the Festival of Pacific Arts and Culture (FESTPAC) has been held every four years to celebrate and perpetuate indigenous Pacific Islander art throughout the region, most recently in Guåhan in 2016. Aotearoa-New Zealand has also long been a major, thriving center for Pacific art, as a gathering place of both Māori indigenous communities and the Pacific Islander diaspora in urban spaces like Auckland and Wellington, who have had to negotiate the tough tensions of settler colonialism and racism but have nurtured rich and meaningful government-sponsored protocols and indigenous arts support infrastructures that foster effective creative production and networking. More recently, however, indigenous art, especially from Oceania, has gained an international foothold, such as in the formation of the Honolulu Biennial or the latest iteration of the Sydney Biennale, which featured mainly indigenous and First Nations artists.<sup>15</sup>

But these kinds of spaces and movements are still few and far between, and are lacking in significant parts of the greater Pacific Ocean area, particularly in smaller islands and up in the northern hemisphere, such as in Japan, where “art from Oceania” still means dusty artifacts devoid of context or genealogy on display at the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka. Isolated showings of contemporary Pacific artists have been held from time to time, most recently in the 2015 Aichi Triennale or 2020 Yokohama Triennale,<sup>16</sup> but these works have not been

linked to larger conversations around decolonization or confrontation with Japan’s colonial past—nor has there yet been any meaningful curatorial project that brings Pacific Islanders into conversation with the indigenous communities of Japan, such as Ainu or Okinawans. Mayunkiki, a contemporary Ainu musical artist from the colonized northern lands of Ainu Moshir (commonly known as Japan’s Hokkaido), was invited to participate in the recent Sydney Biennale, but for the most part Ainu artists today are virtually unknown in Japan—even if, for example, Ainu cultural histories have been featured (or appropriated) in the work of Japanese artists, such as Nara Yoshitomo. Works by Okinawan artists, whose ancestral Ryūkyū Kingdom was overthrown and annexed by Japan, have gained international attention in recent years, such as the art of Yamashiro Chikako or Miyagi Futoshi, both of whom reference the gritty realities of war and militarism in past and present Okinawa in their work. Okinawan Ishikawa Mao’s stunning oeuvre of photography and activist writing has for decades shown how Japanese public complicity in the Japanese-American military embrace perpetuates more racism, base construction, and sexual violence against women and girls in Okinawa; yet her work—which is, in fact, highly nuanced and conscious of interisland tensions—is almost impossible to show in Tokyo. As recently as 2019, when Ishikawa was granted a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Photographic Society of Japan, a photo of hers was censored from the accompanying exhibition—an image depicting a likeness of prime minister Shinzo Abe being crushed by one of the huge concrete blocks used to cover the reef and build the new base in Henoko.

### *S/pacific Art*

I remember being with Samoan/Rarotongan/Tahitian artist Michel Tuffery in Kanaky (the indigenous name for New Caledonia) many years ago, marveling at the exhibition “Kanak: L’Art est une Parole,” a show which was curated by Emmanuel Kasarhérou and shared between the Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre in Noumea and Musée du Quai Branly (a rare example of art collected in Europe being shared back in its place of origin). As we walked through this exhibition, the first of its kind to gather intricate carvings and sculptures, masks, and other creations of centuries of Kanak heritage, I remember looking at Michel, who stood silent, seemingly awestruck. He was not beholding these items as artifacts in glass cases mounted on plinths but rather conversing, it seemed, with their ancestral creators—human beings who could have been ancestors along the Great Migration, people who had encoded messages and knowledge and wisdom into these treasures. Visibly moved, he looked up at me and said, “You can just feel the *mana* leaping out at you, can’t you?”

*Mana* is a Polynesian word, which has some equivalents in other Pacific languages as well, meaning something

along the lines of “power,” a life force or energy that can flow through all humans and objects and places, and can be cultivated. More importantly, it is appreciated and respected. There is also the Polynesian notion of *tapu*, which basically means “sacred” and is where the adapted English word “taboo” comes from, mainly because *tapu* can essentially mean “so sacred that it is off-limits to ordinary people.” This is similar to the Marshallese concept (which would commonly be thought of as “Micronesian”) of *mo*, which also imbues places and people and things with a sacredness and energy, similar to *mana*, that only chiefs and other powerful people can access.<sup>17</sup> As the authors of the book *Art in Oceania* emphasize, art from these communities has thus been not only about aesthetics but also about transmitting power and purpose through carvings, intricate tattoos, weavings, barkcloth, paintings, drawings, sculptures, performances, songs, dances, and other creations that communicate and convey this kind of *mana* or energy for the community and for other generations.<sup>18</sup> As is true for most indigenous communities, art often belongs to a space of ritual and even sacredness.

*Mana* can be felt in the work of Māori artist Lisa Reihana—who represented New Zealand in the 2017 Venice Biennale with her phenomenal and epic multimedia piece *In Pursuit of Venus Infected* (part of an installation entitled *Emissaries*)—which imbues her work with a ceremonial consciousness and multiple perspectives that embrace the diversity and collective trauma of transoceanic and transcolonial encounter in the Pacific Islands. Focusing on the expeditions of James Cook in Polynesia, whose mission was in part to observe the transit of Venus from the South Pacific while also “discovering” and claiming Australia for Britain, Reihana’s work digitally hijacks the eighteenth-century decorative wallpaper designed by Joseph Dufour based on painter Jean-Gabriel Charvet’s romantic and orientalist vision of a Polynesian utopia. Animating this wallpaper with meticulously rendered live-action reenactments of the violence, resistance, wretchedness, and messiness of these encounters between specific Islander communities and white colonists, Reihana subverts (“infects”) this paradise with Oceanian agency. The artist, who has pointed out that POV can stand for both “pursuit of Venus” and “point of view,”<sup>19</sup> reconfigures the narratives of first contact that are common throughout the islands colonized by British Empire, defying the hackneyed trope of Cook’s heroism that runs through so much of Western versions of Pacific history. Reihana explained to me that the inclusion of scenes of contact with Aboriginal Australians, who suffered enormously as a result of Cook’s conquests, in the final iteration of the work were a way of bringing the story around full circle and honoring the very first migrants to the greater Pacific (the first Aboriginal people likely arrived nearly sixty thousand years ago in what we call Australia today) and the last migrations of Pacific Islanders to Aotearoa to become Māori (over seven hundred years ago). In the scrolling, we see seamless

scenes and audioscapes, moments of confusion, despair, rape, and murder, disease and dispossession of Islanders—but we also see the boredom, sickness, and discontent of the white settlers, the extensive gifting of objects and knowledge by Islander elders to Joseph Banks and others in Cook’s crew, the fluidity of *faafāfine* third-gender Samoans, the angry responses of chiefs, the myriad rituals of mourning and war, and the ritual return of Cook’s dismembered remains to the British after he has been killed in Hawai’i. While her work critiques a Cook-centric narrative arc that deals mainly with the southern hemisphere and a story that is most familiar to Polynesians, it is a project that resonates powerfully with indigenous and colonized, marginalized people all over Oceania and everywhere else. Her art speaks on its own terms to collections of indigenous art and compels curators to rethink how and what they exhibit with respect to real people and the communities they belong to.<sup>20</sup> It broadcasts *mana* across horizons in ways that help to fuel a trans-indigenous conversation about decolonization. It is coral infecting concrete: creating space to ritually acknowledge these trespasses and reclaim stolen narratives.

### *Opening Up Ocean Space*

Creating space for conversation, respect, and ritual is perhaps one of the most central elements—both in practice and outcome—of art from Oceania. We see this even in the work of emerging artists from the region, such as Auckland-based young urban Pacific Islander artist collective FAFSWAG, who see themselves as “navigating together as a family” around core values of mutual respect for each other and for their communities, while also holding space for marginalized queer indigenous and Pacific Islander youth.<sup>21</sup> Functioning together as a group and also as individual artists, their projects have crisscrossed interactive filmmaking initiatives, online spaces, Instagram-driven drag vignettes, vogue ball events and sites,<sup>22</sup> and reconfigurations of postcolonial gender and sexuality, drawing on tradition and bravely tackling missionary and other Western influences to carve out a queer and gender-nonconforming genealogy of their own that is built on support and care. As artists Elyssia Wilson-Heti and Tanu Gago point out, their collective navigation is also an important model for artist support in the predominantly white world of contemporary global art—how to move through space and how to define “success” on their own terms.<sup>23</sup>

Increasingly aware of this honoring of space, family, community, process, and agency, the Asia Pacific Triennial, held by the Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA) in Brisbane, Australia, has embraced more and more art from Oceania in its recent iterations, learning from its mistakes and using more grassroots approaches to engage on equal terms with local practitioners. Ritual matters in all encounters in



Oceania—an asking for permission to enter, the granting of that permission, the mindfulness that one is on someone else's land, and some form of ritual to bless this new connection and relationship, or the return of people who have come back. The opening ceremonies for the 9th Asia Pacific Triennial (APT9) in 2018 were not only emblematic of this kind of respect for one's hosts and the ceremonies of joining and gathering; they were, in fact, also a fundamental part of activating and blessing the art itself and bringing people together. The Welcome to Country, led by representatives of the different indigenous custodial communities of the land where the gallery sits, began with a number of protocols in which all artists and visitors were invited to participate, together with brief speeches, songs, chants, and words of welcome. In return, artists from different indigenous communities were invited to respond with their own gifts and performances. Watching these rituals unfold, as artists from Kiribati, Bougainville, and Aotearoa shared their responses, it was clear that space was being made for connection, that something was being *opened* in the true sense. Ishikawa Mao, whose early photographs were on exhibit, explained to me that she was impressed by the solidarity between marginalized groups and the honoring of ancestral land, having never seen anything like this in Japan—where she has always felt like an outsider to the scene.



Curator Sana Balai (center, with microphone) and members of "Women's Wealth" at the opening of the 9th Asia Pacific Triennial, Queensland Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia, November 2018. Photo: Greg Dvorak. Courtesy of the author.

"Women's Wealth," an exhibition within APT9, cocurated by Sana Balai, together with at least twenty women artists, is a stellar example of how Pacific art can be conceived and exhibited in ways that are beneficial to local places and communities while also facilitating further connections. Emphasizing an onsite intensive weeklong workshop in Bougainville, a matrilineal society that has

been heavily colonized by mining and strained by years of civil war, the project emphasized and celebrated women's ingenuity and resilience and encouraged them to share and create together. Exhibited together with *Habitat, 2018*, a powerful video work by Bougainvillean/Australian artist Taloi Havini that compassionately helped to contextualize the trauma of capitalism and patriarchal power around the Panguna region, while articulating the many intricate works made by these women—most of whom were present for the opening in Australia—this was a showing of Pacific art in the truest sense: grounded in both tradition and contemporary social engagement. It was also grounded in a larger conversation that had more to do with a living, breathing community and land than with the air-conditioned white cube.

Approaching its thirtieth iteration, I am humbled to be able to work as cocurator with Ruth McDougall and Ruha Fifita for the next (10th) Asia Pacific Triennial to be held in late 2021, for which I am helping to facilitate a similarly workshoped and collaborative curatorial process together with Micronesian counterparts in Northern Oceania.<sup>24</sup> As part of this, I have been fortunate to team up with Marshallese artist Kathy Jetn̄l-Kijiner and observe her process, which is also deeply imbued with a consciousness for ritual. Jetn̄l-Kijiner, who has become known globally for her influential climate change activism and charismatic spoken-word art, is keenly aware of the challenges of nuclear testing and ecological disaster her country faces. Setting aside the important but repetitive quotes and statistics that render Marshallese people as victims of military and ecological colonialism, her work enacts and channels a deeper sense of indigenous spirituality, drawing on legends and chants to stand up to the horror of atomic catastrophe and displacement, while opening space to grieve and express anger. She expresses her fury passionately and evocatively, rightfully calling out the abuses of the past and present but simultaneously and gracefully rising above them. One example of this is how in her video work *Anointed* (2018), conceived in collaboration with cinematographer Dan Lin, Kathy voyaged to the former nuclear testing site of Enewetak Atoll, where local communities returned to live after American soldiers in the 1970s—in an inadequate gesture of compensation—buried tons of irradiated surface soil (only a fraction of the horrific amount of waste generated) under a colossal concrete cap. Standing atop this dome—known by local Islanders as "the Tomb"—she places coral stones atop the concrete, a ritual gesture of mourning and purification. This work, like all of Kathy's art, is simultaneously a call to action, a lament, and an act of healing that summons local knowledge and projects it defiantly, resistantly, throughout the world. It is fluent, literally and figuratively, in the language of coral, honoring living and dying and the endurance of culture and identity via the resilient reef.<sup>25</sup>



Kathy Jetnīl-Kijiner holding a basket of coral stones on the concrete dome of Runit Island, which houses radioactive waste from nuclear testing at Enewetak Atoll, from her video work *Anointed*, 2018 (HD digital video, 6 min). Photograph and cinematography by Dan Lin. Image courtesy of Kathy Jetnīl-Kijiner.

### *Valuing the S/pacifics of Oceania*

The international art world seems more concerned with concrete than with coral. It is a world that moves and functions primarily in terms of material culture and money, in the logistics of transporting and exhibiting, buying and borrowing physical objects, and privileges those histories of Things over the ephemeral, the microscopic, the ritual, the coralline, the contradictory. But opening up to coral and what it offers us in terms of deep time, deep connections with origins, compassion, care, may be the shift that is needed in these challenging times. Art from Oceania, and art grounded in indigenous thinking in general, provides hints for how to do this.

And in considering the ocean, I return to where I began in saying that valuing and opening minds to ocean space requires us to value the intimate and specific passages, traversings, and encounters of real people who connect the dots and link these islands together across that ocean space. As with the Indian, the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and the Arctic, Oceanian space is a space of turbulence, violence, and change—nothing truly “pacific” at all. I argue for S/pacificity, for the awareness that the ocean is no void—it is inhabited and alive and loved, and it has much to teach us. Sensing the entirety of the ocean is one thing, but what truly matters is to learn from those who know

how to navigate, weather, resist, and ride its waves.

### X

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- 1  
Teresia K. Teaiwa, "Bikinis and Other S/pacific N/oceans," *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994): 87–109.
- 2  
Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," in *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 27–40.
- 3  
"The Middle of Now-here," the name of one of the sections in my book *Coral and Concrete: Remembering Kwajalein Atoll between Japan, America, and the Marshall Islands* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2020), was adopted as the title for the inaugural Honolulu Biennial in 2017, which focused especially on contemporary art from Oceania and for which I served as one of the curatorial advisors.
- 4  
Teresia Teaiwa, "We sweat and cry salt water, so we know that the ocean is really in our blood," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 19, no. 2 (2017): 133–36.
- 5  
Burying of the placenta in the earth as ritual and linkage to land appears in the literary and theoretical work of Samoan writer Albert Wendt, French Polynesian writer Chantal Spitz, and Māori writer Witi Ihimaera, for example.
- 6  
These dates are based on the adoption of international treaties that officially conferred governing status to Germany or Japan, respectively. In terms of local realities, the "Japanese period" began as early as 1914, when Japan defeated Germany in a significant battle of World War I and subsequently began settling the Marshall Islands and other island groups. Likewise, though a clear postwar treaty was not worked out until 1947 with the formation of the US Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, Japanese civilians and military, and all Japanese rule, had been eliminated from Micronesia by 1945.
- 7  
Vicente Diaz, "Stepping in It: How to Smell the Fullness of Indigenous Histories," in *Sources and Methods in Indigenous Studies*, ed. Chris Andersen and Jean M. O'Brien (Routledge, 2016), 86–92.
- 8  
I explore these metaphors more deeply in my book *Coral and Concrete*.
- 9  
Here I pay homage to Tessa Morris-Suzuki's meditation on intersecting "little" versus "big" histories in her book *Exodus to North Korea: Shadows from Japan's Cold War* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 13.
- 10  
As a scholar of Pacific history, I am especially concerned by how the Pacific has often been framed a sort of "new frontier" by faraway academics, artists, and curators who sometimes appropriate Pacific knowledge, designs, stories, and secrets deprived of their original context, recolonizing the Pacific over and over again with no respect for who and what was already there.
- 11  
Take, for example, Bruce Conner's 1976 *Crossroads*, which features twenty-seven minutes of edited archival footage of the Baker test, one of the first atomic weapons tests conducted at Bikini Atoll, which meditates on the sublime spectacle of nuclear warfare without regard for the displaced Marshallese people and their brave acts of resistance and ongoing fight for compensation. More recently, Julian Charrière's photographic work in Bikini Atoll (in his 2018 Berlin exhibit "As We Used to Float") is an example of important and devastating work that brilliantly draws attention to the horrors of nuclear war in its depiction of unnatural, irradiated Marshallese landscapes and seascapes, but it also emphasizes remoteness, desolation, and annihilation as it literally ponders Cold War concrete ruins while relegating Islanders to the past. As harbingers of impending climate apocalypse, Pacific Islands are also often portrayed as sites of future ruin by environmental activist artists from outside the region, who typically render Islanders as helpless victims or leave their voices out of the story entirely.
- 12  
Peter Brunt, Nicholas Thomas, Sean Mallon, et al. *Art in Oceania: A New History* (Thames & Hudson, 2012).
- 13  
Noelle Kahanu, plenary comments during the "Oceania" Exhibition Curatorial Talk, 23rd Pacific History Association Conference, Royal Academy of London, December 3, 2018.
- 14  
Margaret Jolly, "Becoming a 'New' Museum? Contesting Oceanic Visions at Musée du Quai Branly," *The Contemporary Pacific* 23, no. 1 (2001): 123.
- 15  
In 2017, I helped to advise the inaugural Honolulu Biennial, directed by Fumio Nanjo and Ngahiraka Mason, who prominently featured Hawaiian and Pacific indigenous artists—a curatorial intention that was built upon again in 2019 by artistic director Nina Tonga. In 2020, the Sydney Biennale made history when it highlighted over one hundred artists mainly of First Nations heritage from around the world, under the artistic direction of Brook Andrew, who titled the exhibition "NIRIN," a term from his maternal Wiradjuri Aboriginal heritage that translates approximately to "Edge." "NIRIN" is an example of how international networks of indigenous curators have been catalyzing meaningful changes in how artists are chosen and exhibited globally, and Oceania is a major hub of these movements, particularly between Aotearoa-New Zealand and Australia, but also in conversation with First Nations communities in Canada, and in collaboration with artists, curators, galleries, and initiatives in Hawai'i, Guåhan, Sāmoa, Vanuatu, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and other island sites. Indigenous artists from Taiwan, too, with their ancestral Austronesian links to Oceania, began participating in the Festivals of Pacific Arts in 2004, and have since collaborated with and exchanged with Pacific artists in Kaohsiung, Taipei, and other cities. Later this year, "Toi Tū Toi Ora: Contemporary Māori Art" at the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki will be the largest ever exhibition of indigenous art from Aotearoa-New Zealand.
- 16  
These were Australia-based Bougainvillean artist Taloi Havini and Marshallese artist Kathy Jetnīl-Kijiner, respectively. I also curated a special program of indigenous Pacific Islander film at the 2019 Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival entitled "Am/nesia: Forgotten 'Archipelagos' of Oceania," which focused on the virtual disappearance of Micronesia as a result of the war between Japan and the United States in the Pacific.
- 17  
See Ingrid Ahlgren, "The Meaning of Mo: Place, Power, and Taboo in the Marshall Islands" (PhD diss., Australian National University, 2016).
- 18  
Brunt, Thomas, Mallon, et al., *Art in Oceania*, 11.
- 19  
Dee Jefferson, "Lisa Reihana: A Monumental, Immersive New Artwork Reanimates the Story of Captain Cook and First Contact," *ABC News*, August 31, 2018 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-01-31/lisa-reihana-in-pursuit-of-venus-reimagines-australian-history/9376114>.
- 20  
Personal communication with Lisa Reihana and James Pinker, August 27, 2020.
- 21  
Personal communication with FAFSWAG, September 3, 2020.
- 22  
See for example <http://www.fafswagvogue.com/>.
- 23  
Personal communication with FAFSWAG, September 3, 2020.
- 24  
When the Covid-19 pandemic erupted we had already been engaging in conversations on the ground, visiting artists in Guåhan, Kosrae, Pohnpei, and Majuro, talking locally with singers, chanters, navigators, weavers, painters, and poets. This process, though seemingly interrupted by the grounding of planes and closing of borders, has actually gotten richer and more innovative as artists in each community facilitate their own conversations and share with us and each other in weekly transoceanic Zoom workshops. Micronesians, who are experts in overcoming distance and isolation, are patient teachers of bridge-building and celebrating togetherness across the water.
- 25  
Australian-based Tongan artist Latai Taumoepeau also deserves mention here for her attention to ritual and custom in her performance and video art while addressing the severe injustices of colonial encounter and environmental harm. *I-Land X-isle*

(2012), in which the artist suspends herself bound intricately by ropes to a massive melting block of ice, symbolizing the direct consequences of the melting polar glaciers for Pacific Islander communities, could be read as a direct response to the kind of climate art I mentioned earlier that deprives Islanders of agency by disarticulating islands from their inhabitants. In the 2020 Sydney Biennale she performed a piece called *The Last Resort*, referencing the resilience, struggles, and vulnerability of Pacific Islanders living on the front lines of climate change. The piece evokes the communities stacking up sandbags to fend off the rising sea, symbolized by bags filled with glass bottles (originally derived from melting sand/silica), which she pounds using traditional practices and crushes wearing shoes made of bricks.

Ben Woodard

## Slime on a Wire

In 1853, the aging brig *USS Dolphin*, under the command of Otway Henry Berryman, tested the depths of the sea in a region of the North Atlantic. Dragging a partially hollowed cannonball fitted with hooks—a custom device designed by the military engineer John Mercer Brooke—across a great swath of the bottom of the ocean in a method called sounding, the crew mapped a massive and (supposedly) flat region previously studied by the American oceanographer Matthew Fontaine Maury. Berryman found the region far more geologically uneven than Maury had believed, much to the latter's displeasure. In 1857, at Maury's request, the British *HMS Cyclops* expanded the search, and in its soundings supported Maury's earlier claim of flatness. Thus the region kept its name: Telegraph Plateau. Captain Dayman of the *Cyclops*, who was also instructed to take samples for scientific research, reported a curious sludge on the sounding device's rope.

Soon after, the first of many attempts to construct a transatlantic telegraph cable began as a joint venture between the US, Canada, and England, funded largely by Cyrus West Field, an American businessperson who had been consolidating telegraph companies for years. The project had a short-term success lasting just over a month in 1858, followed later by a redesign and many more failures. The construction drama involved the support of elaborate economic syndicates and drew notable physicists such as Lord Kelvin into its service. Differing ideas about the proper design and operation (in terms of power level, construction materials, signal detection) and ever higher costs finally led to the completion of a fully functioning cable in 1866.<sup>1</sup> The endeavor combined industrial and naval feats and made large contributions to marine exploration, physics, and global politics (especially the military reach of the British Empire), including many shared congratulations, such as between Queen Victoria and President Buchanan.<sup>2</sup>

The cable also casts a peculiar shadow over the stock understanding of the conceptual links between physics and biology, as defined in the era of Darwin's rise to prominence. The typical historicization is that biology had begun to describe organisms in terms increasingly amenable to physics—that mechanical explanations took over materialist ones. Yet the historical episode of the telegraph exposes the more dialectic nature of the relation between materialism and mechanism as epistemological programs within the nascent science of biology and how biology in turn affected physics. In the nineteenth century, materialism was defined negatively as the refusal of nonnatural or irrational explanations of materially existent phenomena, while mechanists believed living things were composed of interdependent recognizable parts externally moved and motivated. Both materialism and mechanism attempted to slip between the long-standing rationalist and empiricist conceptions of the sciences, between the authority of hypothetical inquiry and that of experimental result. But beyond this general orientation, the historical



Illustration of a Sonrel, Leon (1872) *Bottom of the Sea*, New York City, NY: Scribner, Armstrong & Co. Image: Public Domain/Freshwater and Marine Image Bank, University of Washington.

approaches to these epistemologies have diverged significantly over time, especially as they apply to living phenomena.

Historian Jessica Riskin's 2016 *The Restless Clock* impressively demonstrates that for Descartes and those that preceded him, adhering to mechanism (via rationalism) did not mean to deprive organisms of life. Machinery implied a designer and that designer was either divine (the God of Christianity) or inspired by the divine (the rational soul). For Descartes, describing organisms as machines expressed the need to isolate the rationality of the soul from the sensitivity of the body in order to shift to a mechanistic *method* of science. The extended physical world could be parsed and understood, while the unextended rational mind could not, since it was not only god-given (and hence immaterial) but needed to be separate enough from the body in order to think the extended world rationally.<sup>3</sup> Descartes's famous doubt (how do I know I see what I think I see?) is the basic claim

for the necessity of separating rationality from materiality in this way.

Following Cartesian rationalism, a swath of systematic approaches to life gave rise to biology around 1800, which then became associated with the more general principles of materialism and mechanism. *Naturphilosophical* investigations into the self-organization of matter and the dynamic movement of forces grounded materialism, while mechanism sprouted out of a rationalism freighted with teleological concerns about the capacity of living things to act spontaneously and with purpose. As biology advanced in the 1850s and '60s it became increasingly incompatible with theological articulations of life and mind, rational or not. As Riskin shows, mechanism could still be made compatible with even a "hands-off" deistic god, but materialism (especially in the form of Darwinian evolution) pressed even further against the divine—no god at all could be admitted into the natural world with its causes, forces, and matters.<sup>4</sup> But this did not mean Darwin

accepted the strict opposition between materialism and mechanism. Darwin's great achievement was to synthesize these approaches (at least as they applied to biology) by emphasizing the materiality of inheritance (evident in variation between individuals shared in offspring) and the mechanism of competition (evident in the behaviors of populations).

But this epistemological difference is known predominantly through historical reactions to it rather than its specific positive content. Materialism invoked the wrath of the natural theologians because it submitted humans to the causal forces of nature, construing us as the evolutionary descendants of "lesser beings." Mechanism seemed to deny any purpose or inherent meaning to human existence other than the struggle for survival. While Darwin suppressed his materialist tendencies in print, T. H. Huxley, who I will discuss at length, pursued the materialist consequences of Darwinian evolution to the bottom of the sea. Huxley studied medicine and, like Darwin, spent a long sea voyage playing naturalist, as he was particularly interested in marine life. While initially unconvinced by any theory of species transformation, Huxley was immensely impressed by Darwin and was so swept up by *The Origin of Species* that he became not only a convert but a tireless defender of evolution and of Darwin. But despite this, Huxley was less interested in the complexities of variation and natural selection (the mechanistic aspect) and far more enthralled by the notion of common descent—that humans, and all other existent species, shared a common lineage.

In 1868, Huxley wrote a report on the dredging of the *Cyclops*, published in the *Quarterly Journal of Microscopical Science*. Huxley identified various new species of monera, single-celled organisms with no nucleus, sent to him from the *Cyclops*'s expedition (Captain Dayman was an old friend). Among the samples, Huxley noted an exceedingly primitive substance, which he identified as "protoplasm" (a concept first introduced by Lorenz Oken in 1802) but named, in honor of the concept's resurrector, the German biologist Ernst Haeckel, *Bathybius haeckelii*. Huxley believed this protoplasmic ooze was the basal matter of all life, that he had discovered the primordial substance proposed in various forms by the aforementioned *Naturphilosophie*.

Unfortunately Huxley made the very public error of becoming too enamored with the slime found by the *Cyclops* and therefore leaping to conclusions about its importance. In emphasizing the biological role of this generative scum, Huxley downplayed the mechanistic aspects of life, the understanding of populations, as well as the functional approach to living things. It is tempting to see Huxley's use of materialism here as the reduction of living beings to physics in such a manner that deprives them of their liveliness or vitality. But this not only contradicts Huxley's debts to physics, it also assumes a false opposition between the inorganic and the organic

that Huxley never entertained.

But does Huxley's materialism, suspended between reason and evidence, allow the same object to be both epistemic and material, to be a formal explanation and a biological thing to be explained? For Huxley, protoplasm was simply the first emergence of living matter from the nonliving, the first result of abiogenesis.<sup>5</sup>

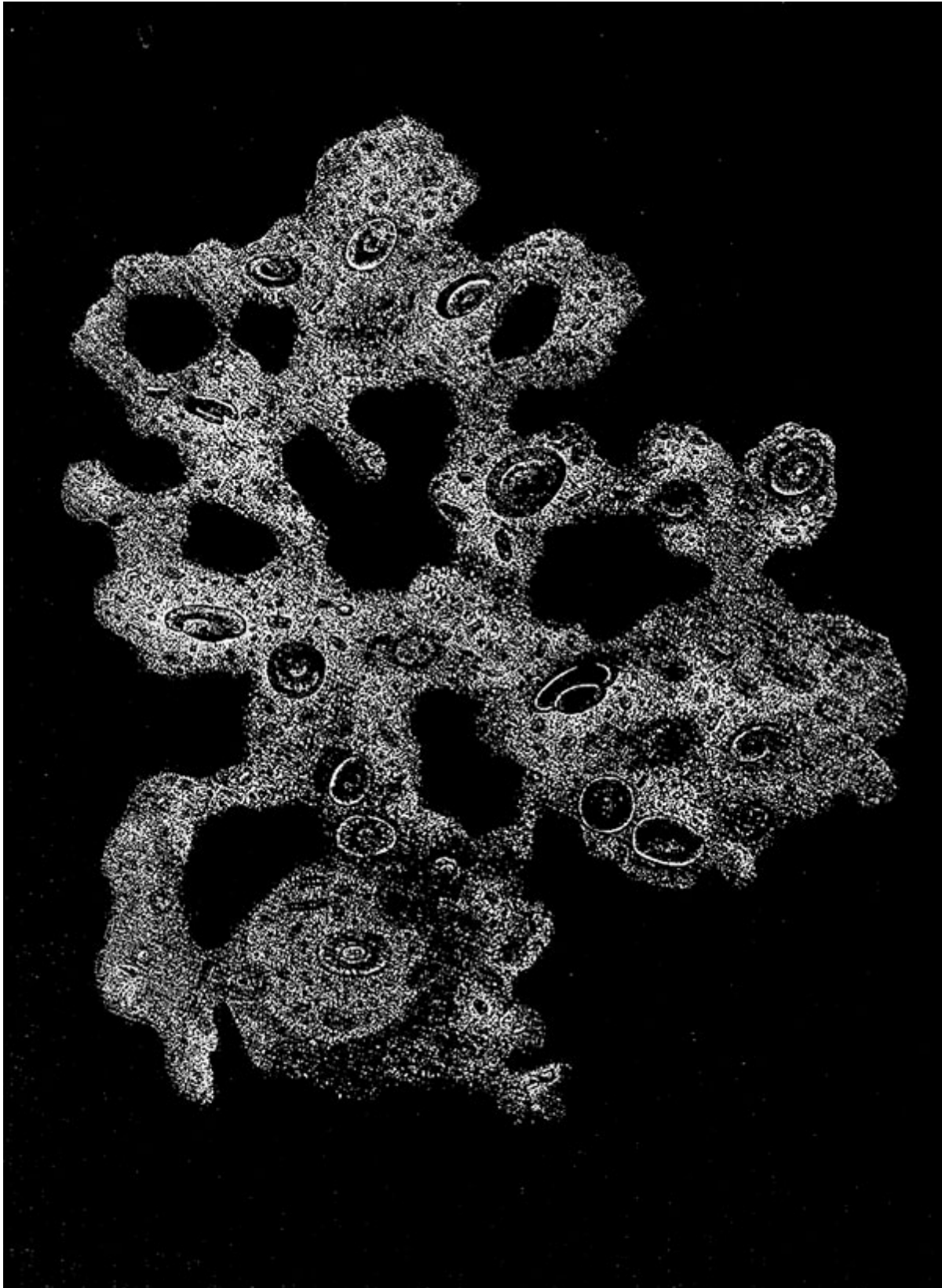
In "On the Physical Basis of Life" (1868) Huxley follows very much in Descartes's spirit and disentangles materialist philosophy from materialist science. While he allows that materialism in biology implies a chain of causes, he maintains that there is an empiricist limit to rational speculation, due to human ignorance surrounding the full complexity of matter. While Descartes maintains a metaphysical separation between mind and matter as part of his mechanistic methodology, for Huxley the materiality of the living world requires (albeit in a limited fashion) the divisions and categorizations of empirical science. Huxley writes:

Protoplasm, simple or nucleated, is the formal basis of all life. It is the clay of the potter: which, bake it and paint it as he will, remains clay, separated by artifice, and not by nature, from the commonest brick or sun-dried clod. Thus it becomes clear that all living powers are cognate, and that all living forms are fundamentally of one character.<sup>6</sup>

Huxley asks us to imagine what could possibly be shared between beasts as colossal as whales and animalcules so small as to be invisible to the eye, and suggests that what they have in common is the most basic organic matter and the physical forces it receives, transmits, and modifies. As historian Robert Brain points out, Huxley's protoplasm is not only foundational matter (in a formal sense) but also a medium for waves of energy and of flowing biological material.<sup>7</sup> Brain argues that Huxley's protoplasm functioned as an epistemic object, as an experimental site for testing the boundaries between physics and biology. This is supported by Huxley's use of the word "formal"—protoplasm as the "formal basis of all life"—and yet, his remarks on the slime on the telegraph cable potentially push this particular instance of protoplasm beyond merely an epistemic form.

However, Huxley's identification of the substance as protoplasm was due to an experimental error, the result of an unexpected reaction between the inorganic materials scraped from the ocean floor and the preservation agent used to keep organic samples intact. In 1872, during its four years studying the seas, the *HMS Challenger* confirmed that *Bathybius haeckelii* was an inorganic





Thomson, C. Wyville, *Depths of the Sea: An account of the General Results of the Dredging Cruises of H.M.S.S. 'Porcupine' and 'Lightning' During the Summers of 1868, 1869, and 1870 under the Scientific Direction of Dr. Carpenter, F.R.S., J.Gwyn Jeffreys, F.R.S., and Dr. Wyville Thomson, F. R. S., (1873).* London: MacMillan and Co. Image: Public Domain/Freshwater and Marine Image Bank, University of Washington.

byproduct that appeared alive because of the chemicals used in laboratory preservation. Huxley accepted his mistake; Haeckel did not.<sup>8</sup> At the time, Huxley's error was seen as a grave injury to the young discipline of evolutionary theory and it has served as a cautionary tale for attempting to explicitly ground biological claims with philosophical ones, for using outdated models of biological thinking, or for being too zealous about one's hypotheses.<sup>9</sup>

While Huxley admitted his laboratory error, he did not seem to see a flaw in his overall reasoning; the coincidence of an actual biology entity and a model of biological life was, according to him, a necessary avenue, in particular for studying the porosity of the membrane between the physical and the biological.<sup>10</sup> Over a decade after the *Bathybius haeckelii* coated the dredging lines of the *Cyclops*, Huxley continued to wonder about the possibility of protoplasm being the first form of life generated from inorganic matter. The difficulty in thinking through the problem of Huxley's slime in its historical context essentially is this: the status of a theory, or model, or form in a fully materialist biology (one that is ultimately an exchange of matter and force) must itself be the result of matter and force. Of course this could potentially be avoided if one distinguishes between materialism and mechanism (as a philosophy) and materialism and mechanisms as scientific epistemologies. But then this in turn raised the question: Which epistemic tool should one then use to make that distinction?

Mechanism's piecemeal treatment of reality—in which reality is made of separable parts, or at least treated as such—appears to better evade these difficulties above. But whereas the concept of material continuity risks error when overzealously applied, the mechanistic model contains an inverse problem. If the problem for biological materialism is the materiality of the concept or model, for the mechanistic view the problem is the choice and applicability of the model organism.

The tension between the mechanistic and the materialist approach was not apparent only in biology, but attempts to resolve it within biology showed possible solutions for problems in materials physics and electrical engineering. While the potentially primordial sludge of the soundings and dredgings may have seemed like only a byproduct of the surveys to pave the way for the telegraph's construction, it indicated a deep affinity between the electrical and the material that cut across the divide of the inorganic and the organic.

When the final and longer lasting construction of the transatlantic cable was made in 1866, it was in no small part due to Lord Kelvin, then known by his birth name William Thomson, a British engineer and physicist who was knighted partly in thanks for the task. In particular, Thomson's use of a measuring device called the mirror galvanometer proved central. His device was a more precise update of a preexisting version constructed by

Hermann von Helmholtz, which could detect minute electrical signals by receiving current that charged a coil, turning it into an electromagnet. Helmholtz's version utilized a fixed needle and was designed to measure the speed of nerve impulses. Thomson paired the electromagnet with a small mirror with magnets fixed to it, suspended on a silk string (which reduced resistance extensively). The polarity differential caused the mirror to spin, which then projected light from a lamp or other source onto an external ruler. Looking at Helmholtz's device takes us deeper into the materialism/mechanism relationship.

Helmholtz was a physicist and physician who, among his many accomplishments, spent 1849–50 attempting to measure the signal speed of nerve impulses. He did this by connecting a detached frog leg with an exposed sciatic nerve to a myograph—a device (pictured above) that Helmholtz adopted and updated to provide a demonstration and a proper measurement of the time required for a nerve impulse to travel through the muscle fibers, coupled with the effect of the reaction. The device used a fine needle attached to the exposed nerve that, when receiving the impulse given to the other end of the frog leg, caused the leg to contract and thus move the needle along a rotating glass tube that had been blackened with smoke—thus making the two lines etched by the needle easier to read.

Helmholtz's frog-writing device (as he referred to it in a letter to the physician and physiologist Emil du Bois-Reymond)<sup>11</sup> is part of a long history of the use of amphibians as model organisms. As the French physiologist Claude Bernard put it, the frog had long been the Job of experimental physiology.<sup>12</sup> At least since the experiments of Luigi Galvani and Alessandro Volta, frog bodies functioned as an experimental site and a temporal circuit, which was interpreted in terms of organically produced chemical electricity (Galvani's animal electricity) or in terms of chemical and physical energy that was thought to be independent of organic bodies (Volta's electromagnetism). Helmholtz's myograph not only measured the speed of the reaction of the frog muscle to the electrical pulse but also indexed a complex process of action and reaction, rather than a straightforward cause and effect, in the curve's rise and fall.

While the frog-writing device demonstrated the material and mechanical complexities of nerve action, it also opened a gap between forms of life as physically or materially conditioned, which ran against the notion of the frog's "neutrality" as a model organism. Namely, the results suggested that the action and perception of an organism (including temporal perception) could be conditioned by the interior fine-scaled composition as well as the bulk and mass of a living thing. This was noted by Helmholtz himself, when in a lecture titled "On the Methods of Measuring Very Small Portions of Time" (1853) he invited his audience to feel pity for the

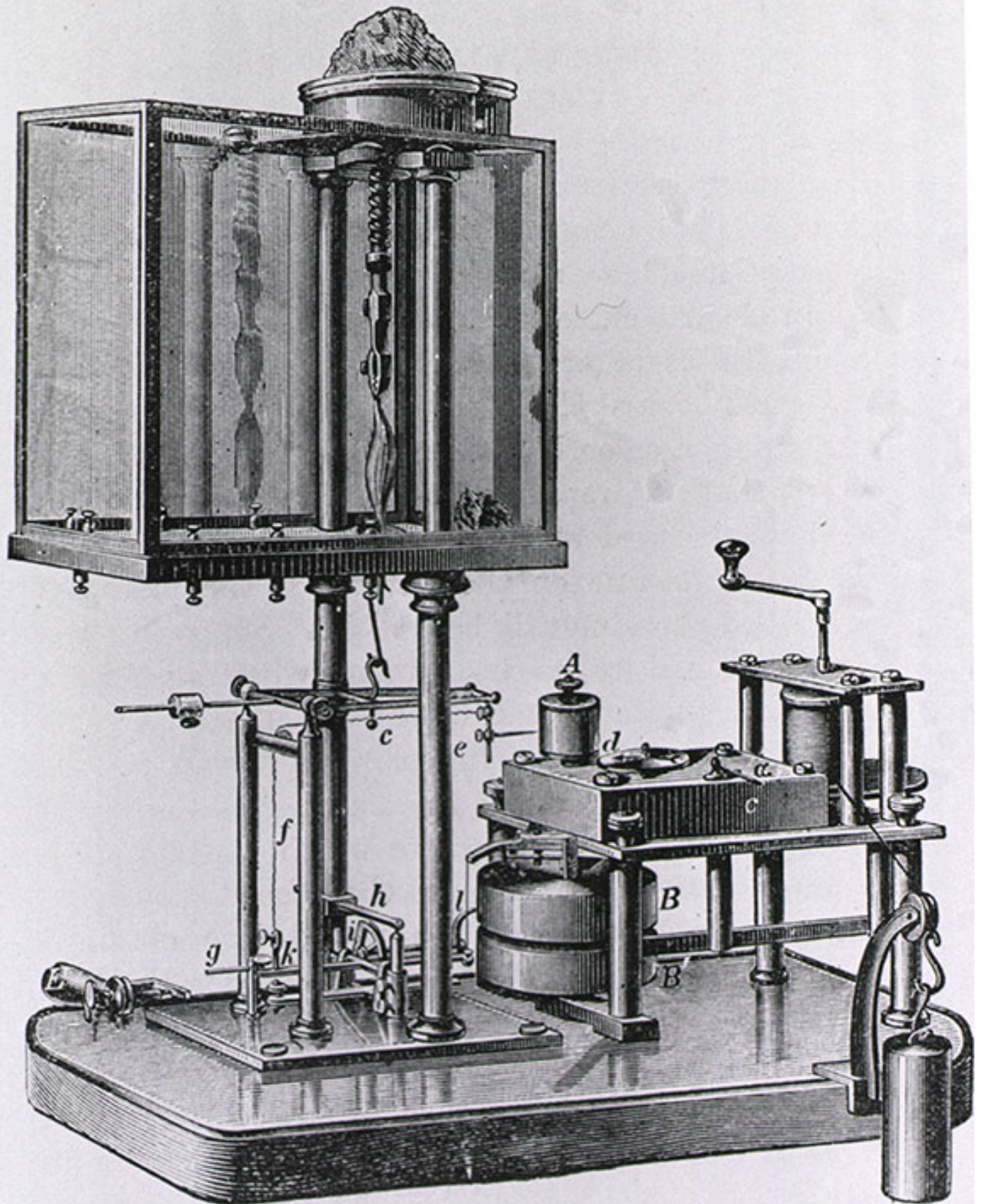


FIG. 17. MYOGRAPH OF HELMHOLTZ.  
(One quarter natural size.)

harpooned whale, who would not learn of the harpoon in its tail for a second or so after it was pierced.

Thomson and the telegraph's electrician, E. O. Whitehouse (a surgeon by training), repeated the amphibian drama between Volta and Galvani noted above about the circuit of propagation, the signal, material composition, and power level. Even before constructing his mirror galvanometer based on Helmholtz's frog machine, Thomson argued that Whitehouse's approach of increasing voltage to guarantee the telegraph signal made it across the ocean ignored the problem of noise if the cable was simply large and high-powered. Thomson proved that variations in frequency in the line would "pile up" and cause exponential interference.

In their respective mediums, both Helmholtz and Thomson argued that a purportedly continuous process of excitation or transmission was in fact saltational: a series of jumps and variegated events indicated multiple simultaneously operating processes, indexing different materials as well as different forces. In this regard, the synthesis of the mechanical and the material approaches checks the debilitating excesses of both: the continuity of material composition pushes against the limitations of mechanical focus, while the partition of living or mechanical things into components or organs emphasizes the localization of forces relative to their material grounds. In terms of their respective conceptual investments, materialism reigns in the teleological temptations of mechanism, while mechanism localizes the massively wide field of forces for materialism.

Thus the construction of the telegraph and its operation exhibit these differences not only as an engineering problem but also as concepts that have been redeployed into other fields.<sup>13</sup> Helmholtz embodies this place of synthesis, and it is telling that both Thomson and Huxley, who drew from his results, took from them mechanistic ramifications on the one hand (Thomson) and materialist ones on the other (Huxley). For instance, Helmholtz's reverse-engineering of the physiology of the human eyeball (and of sight) dethroned the visual organ as a bastion against the evolutionary explanation wielded by the natural theologians that had haunted Darwin. While working feverishly on modifying Helmholtz's galvanometer for the laying of the telegraph, Thomson wrote a letter to Helmholtz with the following postscript:

P.S. When will your book on the eye be completed, or is it so already? I find people greatly interested in it, especially regarding the adjustments.

I was out with a shooting party a few days ago at Largs, and looked into the eyes of various birds immediately after death. I saw the three images of the sun well in a woodcock's eye, but was puzzled by the position of the image by reflection at the posterior surface of the lens. I had a very curious view of the

interior by simply pressing my eyeglass on the front of the cornea so as to nearly flatten it. Have you seen an owl's eye? It is a splendid thing. I cut one open, but learned nothing more than that the cornea is very tough.<sup>14</sup>

Huxley provided similar descriptions of Helmholtz's experiments described as "beautiful methods" before summing up the measure of nerve signals in his "On the Present State of Knowledge as to the Structure and Functions of Nerve" (1854):

Science may be congratulated on these results. Time was when the attempt to reduce vital phenomena to law and order was regarded as little less than blasphemous: but the mechanician has proved that the living body obeys the mechanical laws of ordinary matter; the chemist has demonstrated that the component atoms of living beings are governed by affinities, of one nature with those which obtain in the rest of the universe; and now the physiologist, aided by the physicist, has attacked the problem of nervous action—the most especially vital of all vital phenomena—with what result has been seen. And thus from the region of disorderly mystery, which is the domain of ignorance, another vast province has been added to science, the realm of orderly mystery.<sup>15</sup>

For Thomson, the eye's mechanisms could eventually be fully understood, albeit with difficulty, while for Huxley, the impact of his myograph experiments deepened the understanding of the dynamic richness of matter and its effects in and on living things. For Huxley (and Darwin), Helmholtz's work on the eye provided a great weapon against the natural theologians and other purveyors of design—the eye was far from perfect and vision was a shoddy physiological and cognitive patchwork that bore no fingerprints of divinity.

A materialism as thorough as Huxley's and Darwin's could still be (and was) recombined and audited in ways that attempted to reinstall human importance, naturalize progress, or otherwise bring back some form of direction or development. In the decades following Darwin, this was done by retroactively justifying existent hierarchies between cultures, often mediated by technological capacity, while remaining blind to decidedly contingent conditions of material wealth, climate, fortuitous landscapes, and so on. Cultural and technological outputs could then be read back into the structures of living matter—in terms of dispositions, habits, and capacities. "Playing god" should not be an accusation reserved for Dr. Frankenstein but rather a description of the national pastime of self-appointed superiority.<sup>16</sup>



But the externalization of supposed “inborn” capacities via technology is not motivated solely by interhuman dominance; it is also a condition of thought. It results from collectivized knowledge and its subsequent epistemological programs (like mechanism and materialism). To see technology only as a form of anthropogenic violence would again ignore the generative synthesis of mechanistic analysis and materialist supposition. The denial of progress, even if limited to the technological output of human beings, requires treating technological objects both mechanically and materially, as well as demonstrating particular forces and matters. Or as philosopher Gilbert Simondon approached it, technology can be defined as a designed tool on the one hand and as having a life of its own on the other.<sup>17</sup>

A matrix arises between the intentional and unintentional effects of mechanistic design, and between the intended and unintended ramifications of technology. If the rationality of the mechanistic approach can no longer be isolated from its own mechanisms, then the effects of intentional and unintentional design can be mapped onto, or extrapolated from, the human mind. The theme of technology as organ projection, heavily employed by the geographer and arguably the first philosopher of technology Ernst Kapp, treated tools and devices as externalized sections of human anatomy and physiology.

Writing in 1877, Kapp refers to the recent transatlantic telegraph as the globalization of the human nervous system. But in line with the tension between the intentional and unintentional aspects of technological design, Kapp sees this feat as exhibiting both conscious and unconscious tendencies. He finds that the designed artifact revealed both forms of knowledge simultaneously and believes technological objects (and therefore human beings) can only emerge in situ:

Our point of departure is the human being, who, in all he thinks and does, unless he breaks with himself entirely, can proceed from nothing other than his thinking, acting self. We are not dealing with a hypothetical bathybius-being nor with a hypothetical ideal human being, but with the human to whose being may attest only the traces of and changes in the things he has made with his own hands.<sup>18</sup>

Kapp sees himself as poised between mechanism and materialism, as occupying a position like Helmholtz, whom he often cites approvingly. But by operating from a technological position rather than a biological one, Kapp essentially restores the mechanist position as a means to return to the anthropocentric and teleological mode of thought. He misrepresents Darwin as essentially Lamarckian and insists upon “original dispositions” teleologically necessary in humans, such as for speech,

mind, and toolmaking. Simondon's position can be taken as a materialist alternative to Kapp's, as Simondon sees technology as a crystallization of labor. For Simondon, the human interpretative capacity relevant to technology is to construct devices that maximize this materialist open architecture of formed matter.<sup>19</sup>

As a further counter- and materialist reading of the telegraph, one might follow cultural historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch's well-known portrait of the earlier railway telegraph, which inaugurated the modern trope of technology as the annihilation of space and time:

The landscape appeared behind the telegraph poles and wires; it was seen through them. As we noted earlier, the rail traveler's perceptions were changed by the intervention of the machine ensemble between him and the landscape; there was a material demonstration of that intervention in those poles and wires, which were a part of the machine ensemble. They interposed themselves, both physically and metaphorically, between the traveler and the landscape.<sup>20</sup>

The panoramic effect of the visible telegraph does not apply to the underwater cable. The underwater cable more strongly represents the archaic and submerged nature of the physiological system, since we receive messages but do not see the structures that deliver them. While Schivelbusch notes that when riding on a train one embodies the nerve flash across the muscular landscape (because the train follows the telegraph wire's path), in the submerged cable one exists on a shoreline, waiting for a signal and also uncertain that one has comprehended what was heard. Living in a world of measured temporality, we are in many senses more like Helmholtz, observing the lost time of the electrophysiological curve, or like his wound-ignorant whale—lived time is somewhere between a measure of time and the knowledge that the signal's path determines our very sense of time—temporality is conditioned by materiality.<sup>21</sup> This marks the central difference between Kapp and Schivelbusch. The feats of engineering involved in measuring mechanistic and material time externalize communication so time and space are folded up in such a manner that our bodies or voices can cut across the earth in mere minutes with or without our bodies moving through space. If Kapp sees the technological object as a prosthesis, Simondon sees it as a fossil. Both views invite regular reinterpretation but for the former, the mode runs from anthropological to psychological, while for the latter it goes from technological to cultural.

In the mechanistic view, any disparity between time scale and its perception is an engineering mistake or limitation, and an apparatus can smooth out the differences through



measuring and averaging. But from the materialist perspective, the effect of externally measured temporality, as it involves structures that redirect and situate the measure and perception of time, is not reversible—it is a historical change in how time and space are understood and experienced. Without the checks and balances of materialism, mechanism can cast drastic differences as essentially calibration problems (inciting the design of finer instruments) without questioning the relative ground of human perception.

Kapp's displacement of the mechanistic/materialist difference from its older teleomechanistic perspective allows him to utilize Helmholtz to reinstate a radical split between organism and machine, and to claim that the mechanists of the past foolishly thought that living beings were automata that needed no winding up.<sup>22</sup> For Kapp, by way of his reading of Helmholtz, mental work must remain qualitatively separate from physical work: the body can be a machine but the mind cannot. In this regard, Kapp essentially restates the mechanistic program but in terms of the codependency of anthropology and technology as the naturalistic emergence of human thought—the human machine is made of special purposive parts that can be materially exported but not materially grounded.<sup>23</sup>

Again, following Riskin, the clockwork of life did in fact require winding, but the clock key was turned by divine fingers.<sup>24</sup> What is insidious about Kapp's view, and what Riskin critiques in twentieth and twenty-first century biology (especially in cybernetics), is that mechanism in biology increasingly disavowed its teleological roots by attacking any epistemological program in biology that would grant agency or intentionality to living things as materially intrinsic to their organic nature. This classical mechanistic paradigm, Riskin argues, continuously foreclosed any possibility of naturalized agency, of the possibility that disquiet could be a central part of living things, of the possibility that organisms could be viewed as restless clockwork. But the question of how to articulate this restlessness divided even Thomson and Huxley.

Thomson calculated that the age of the earth was not sufficient to allow for evolution to take place. Huxley refuted this in his address to the Royal Geological Society in 1868. Since neither party had any inkling of nuclear fusion, the debate was in many ways about experimental certainty between calculations regarding types of known energy. The disagreement raised the issue of whether the evolutionists were in fact suggesting some force unique to living beings, something that could cheat the laws of physics. Huxley's main point was that Thomson's calculations assumed a relatively stable world devoid of catastrophe, while evolutionary time was the synthesis of temporal forms:

It is very conceivable that catastrophes may be part and parcel of uniformity. Let me illustrate my case by analogy. The working of a clock is a model of uniform action; good time-keeping means uniformity of action. But the striking of the clock is essentially a catastrophe; the hammer might be made to blow up a barrel of gunpowder, or turn on a deluge of water; and, by proper arrangement, the clock, instead of marking the hours, might strike at all sorts of irregular periods, never twice alike, in the intervals, force, or number of its blows. Nevertheless, all these irregular, and apparently lawless, catastrophes would be the result of an absolutely uniformitarian action; and we might have two schools of clock-theorists, one studying the hammer and the other the pendulum.<sup>25</sup>

August Weismann's theories of the mechanisms of inheritance, combined with the rediscovery and development of genetics by the early botanist and geneticist Hugo Marie de Vries, formed the proper synthesis of the material and the mechanical for the theory of evolution to operate. This solidified form of Darwinism, however, became increasingly mechanical (in the sense of measurable and predictable) at the beginning of the twentieth century (in the so-called "modern synthesis").<sup>26</sup> Both Huxley and Darwin's materialisms were retroactively painted as foolhardy by those who eventually gave rise to population genetics and those who placed a heavy emphasis on DNA-based explanations. The historical element of evolution became antithetical to the genetic program as evolution was cut off from its structural-mutationist and historical-epigenetic roots. The relevant paths of evolution became genetic information and not the forms and histories of species nor the radical contingency of how the branches of life on earth took shape. Huxley's dreams of generative slime were a means of maintaining this material continuity as a research program to explore the maximal possibilities of Darwinian evolution, regardless of what it did to human stature.

Riskin is also concerned with the twentieth-century emphasis on information by way of cybernetics, piggybacked on the modern synthesis in evolutionary biology and later integrated in the discovery of DNA.<sup>27</sup> With cybernetic information, agency becomes an appearance of negative feedback, since to say any more would be to theologize or philosophize. At the same time, the critics of these tendencies tend to draw a straight line from Descartes to Darwin to Dawkins, as if the reduction of life to machines or information has been a well-organized march towards modernity—as if what we think by "machine" has not radically changed in the last five hundred years.

Yet mechanism in biology, without its materialist accompaniment, is not a blanket reductionist program but a formalization of life that desperately, and often

disastrously, leaves open a path by which one can decide the relevant timescales and the desired contingencies in advance—a desire to be a machine that can wind its own key in the name of progress.<sup>28</sup>

## X

**Ben Woodard** is an independent scholar based in Germany. His work focuses on the relationship between naturalism and idealism during the long nineteenth century. He is currently preparing a monograph on the relation of naturalism, formalism, and embodiment in French and German continental thought. His book *Schelling's Naturalism* was recently published by Edinburgh University Press.

- 1 Arthur C. Clarke dramatizes this in his *Voice Across the Sea: The Story of Deep Sea Cable-laying, 1858–1958* (Muller, 1958). See also John Griesemer, *Signal & Noise: A Novel* (Picador, 2004).
- 2 There have also been several fictional and historical accounts of the *Great Eastern*, the ship that unspooled the cable. See Griesemer's *Signal and Noise* as well as Howard Rodman's *The Great Eastern* (Melville House, 2019).
- 3 Jessica Riskin, *The Restless Clock* (University of Chicago Press, 2016).
- 4 Riskin, *Restless Clock*, 70–71.
- 5 T. H. Huxley, "Biogenesis and Abiogenesis," 1870 <https://mathcs.clarku.edu/huxley/CE8/B-Ab.html>.
- 6 <https://mathcs.clarku.edu/huxley/CE1/PhysB.html#note1>.
- 7 Robert Michael Brain, *The Pulse of Modernism: Physiological Aesthetics in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (University of Washington Press, 2015).
- 8 Haeckel spent several years of his life documenting the thousands of species of microorganisms sent to him by the *Challenger Expedition*. On this, see the short film *Proteus*.
- 9 For a critique of this "dangerous" mixing of philosophy and biology, see the preface to Peter Brian Medawar and Jean S. Medawar, *Aristotle to Zoos: A Philosophical Dictionary of Biology* (Harvard University Press, 1983). For a critique of Huxley being too old fashioned (and mechanistic), see Loren Eiseley, *The Immense Journey: An Imaginative Naturalist Explores the Mysteries of Man and Nature* (Vintage, 2011). For a closer analysis of Huxley's error and what it came to represent in evolutionary science, see Donald J. McGraw, "Bye-Bye Bathybius: The Rise and Fall of a Marine Myth," *Bios* 45, no. 4 (1974): 164–71.
- 10 There are of course many ways a model can be wrong, and an incorrect or incomplete model can, and has, led to significant gains in scientific knowledge. For a helpful overview of the importance of false models, see chapter 6 of William C. Wimsatt, *Re-engineering Philosophy for Limited Beings: Piecewise Approximations to Reality* (Harvard University Press, 2007).
- 11 Cited in Alison Abbott, "Lost Curve Hits a Nerve," *Nature*, no. 464 (2010): 681–82.
- 12 Henry Schmidgen has written extensively on Helmholtz's myograph experiments and has noted how, when working in Paris, Helmholtz referred to the curve made by the needle as "*le temps perdu*" (an utterance of "lost time" some hundred years before Proust). Such treatments of animals and especially model organisms has a long and ugly history. Both Claude Bernard and his teacher François Magendie describe some of the most sickening reports of vivisection I have encountered. In terms of frogs, the happiest report I have found is the work of the great Lancelot Hogben who devised a quick pregnancy test for women by injecting their urine into the frog species called *Xenopus*. The frogs would then lay eggs within hours, thereby confirming a woman's pregnancy. This did not harm the frog and replaced dissections of injected rabbits and mice which were previously used to identify pregnancies in women. Huxley's own "Has a Frog a Soul?" is steeped in details of frog torture and dissection over the ages.
- 13 Too often the figure of the engineer is caricatured as the pragmatist against the theoretician. Mark Wilson's work on the philosophy of engineering is very helpful in this regard as he demonstrates how engineers utilize theoretical concepts but treat them as pliable in a way that too often philosophers of science do not. See, for instance, *Physics Avoidance* (Oxford University Press, 2018).
- 14 Cited in Silvanus Phillips Thompson, *The Life of William Thomson, Baron Kelvin of Largs* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- 15 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00222935709487876?journalCode=tnah08>.
- 16 Peter Bowler and Stephen Jay Gould have documented the decades following Darwin and the various forms of progressive or directed evolution. See Bowler's *The Eclipse of Darwinism* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992) and Stephen Jay Gould's *Ontogeny and Phylogeny* (Belknap Press, 1977).
- 17 See chapter 1 of Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
- 18 Ernst Kapp, *Elements of a Philosophy of Technology: On the Evolutionary History of Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 29–30.
- 19 Here I am following Henning Schmidgen's text "Inside the Black Box: Simondon's Politics of Technology," *SubStance* 41, no. 3 (2012): 23–24.
- 20 Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Railway Journey* (University of California Press, 43).
- 21 Henri Bergson's portrait of the intuitive mind as caught between thought and perception seems structurally not far off from Helmholtz's perch between rationalism and empiricism (although their motivations for such an island are opposed). In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson attempted to avoid idealism and materialism, even describing the conscious mind as a telegraph operator suspended between waiting for a message and sending one. For Bergson the brain is a bureaucratically boring central office, while for Helmholtz it is the ship that navigates the unknown. Bergson's metaphor has been criticized, notably by Catherine Malabou, as there is no central power anymore, nor is the mind best understood as a computer when one takes into account the plastic nature of synaptic activity. Incidentally, Bergson gave the Huxley lecture "Life and Consciousness" in 1911.
- 22 Kapp, *Elements of a Philosophy of Technology*, 97.
- 23 In this sense Kapp is quite Kantian in maintaining a difference between a constitutive and a regulative role regarding purposiveness in human organisms. But while the split for Kant was at least in part to engender a normative dimension regarding the treatment of living things as non-mechanical, for Kapp it is about using the productions of thought to strengthen the case for a human or non-divine teleological program.
- 24 Riskin, *Restless Clock*, 370–74.
- 25 Huxley, "Geological Reform," 1869 <https://mathcs.clarku.edu/huxley/CE8/GeoR.html>.
- 26 The term "modern synthesis" was coined by the evolutionary biologist and eugenicist Julian Huxley, grandson of T. H. Huxley as well as brother of the writer Aldous Huxley.
- 27 Riskin quotes Ernst Schrödinger as an exception to the strict mechanist trend and cites a passage about the chaos of clockwork that is very much in line with Huxley's reasoning.
- 28 I am of course speaking of the eugenics programs which were overwhelming the product of the biometricians and biostatisticians of the early twentieth century such as Ronald Fisher, Walter Weldon, and Karl Pearson.

Julieta Aranda and Eben Kirksey

# Toward a Glossary of the Oceanic Undead: A(mphibious) through F(utures)

A, a

**AMPHIBIOUS**, adjective:

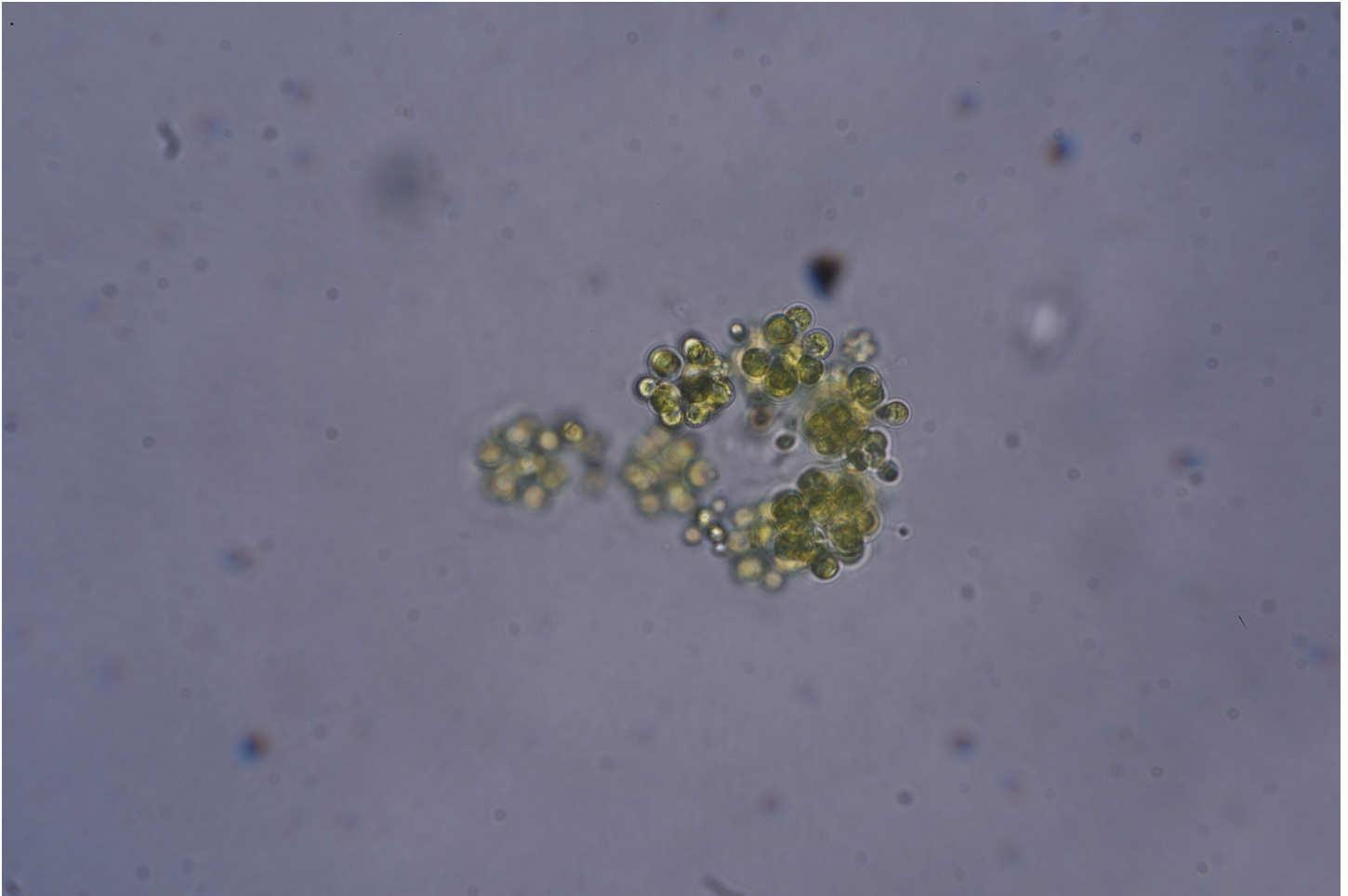
Moving between air and water.

Literal amphibians, like frogs and salamanders, can choose among modes of existence. Generally, amphibian species can sun themselves on a rock, dive deep in muddy waters, or even burrow underground.

May 15, 1989. A single Golden Toad, *Bufo peregrinus*, was spotted by a scientist in the elfin cloud forest of Costa Rica. A little later on, a Costa Rican naturalist named Eladio Cruz saw more Golden Toads as he studied the dull edge of extinction. Within five years, the Golden Toad was officially declared extinct. Several hypotheses emerged to explain the disappearance of this charismatic animal in a protected forest: global warming, the drift of pesticides, collection for the pet trade. Then, dead frogs began piling up in puddles in Australia and lakes in California. Another idea emerged in 1999 to explain the wave of death sweeping through amphibian populations: a pandemic disease, a kind of chytrid fungus, was driving hundreds of amphibian species extinct.

Chytrids generate spheres nested within other spheres. They form clear bubbles containing darker bubbles. They often gather in a swarming multitude on the skin of frogs and salamanders. These gatherings invade and destroy the amphibians' spheres of immunology, and also create them. Other kinds of chytrids channel death back into life. When surrounded by other beings and things, when living in microbial ecosystems, chytrids can be ontologically indeterminate. In other words, chytrids are ontological amphibians.

Ontological amphibians flit among social and ecological worlds, deciding which ontology to inhabit or create. An octopus changes its shape and color as it engages in a mimetic dance with the architecture of a particular world. The best kinds of ontological amphibians are cosmopolitical nomads who tend to worlds as they move among them. They create niches, they cultivate, and they curate. For the octopus, gardening is world-making. They mark their territory with the shells of dead scallops and crabs. This is an undead aesthetics in a multispecies world. Other amphibious forms of life are destructive—they expand exponentially, pushing a given world to its limit before moving on to colonize new territory. Think of the novel coronavirus: it moves between the watery environment of hosts through bubbles of water in the air, living through phase changes as it transitions from viral particle to distributed molecular forms inside a host cell. Humans are ontological amphibians. Cosmopolitical possibilities are in tension with colonial legacies. Piles of shells and dead bodies continue to accumulate.



A chytrid fungus viewed under a microscope. Photo: Erna Lilje.

*B, b*

**BOATS / BODIES / BIOPOLITICS**, adjective (plural);  
adjective (plural); noun (plural):

By speaking about the ocean, invoking some of the bodies that inhabit it, we invoke: the disappeared, the decaying, the poisoned, the waterlogged, the bodies that float back to the surface and haunt us.

May 10, 1816. Ruha Benjamin recalls the Middle Passage, somewhere between the Door of No Return and the New World:

Mostly there was silence. And the murmurs of those who are trying to make sense of where we are. In several dialects I understood the words “aliens,” “catastrophe,” “abduction,” and “jump.” All of us packed so tightly. Lying on my back I cannot bend my knees without bumping the slab of wood holding the person above me. Finally, it’s time to go above deck for the afternoon meal. But most of my companions refuse to eat the daily ration of horse beans ... Just

then I felt the chain around my ankle yank, and caught the eye of the Mende woman on the end of the line. In seconds, we all made it overboard, and hovering over the restless sea, I look back at the alien ship. One last time before we flew away.

September 6, 2001. Wellem Korwam, a thirty-two-year-old black man, is cut into seven pieces and dumped into the sea. The large plastic bag holding his body bulges with gas and floats in the water near a palm-fringed beach in West Papua. Whitish-green eyes stare unfocused at the man with the camera. His mouth gapes open in a distorted yawn. A jumble of seven different body parts are in the bag: two legs, two arms, his head and torso, and two pieces of the body’s trunk. Memories surface from another moment in time, when 157 indigenous people were dumped off a ship in nearby waters. Thirty-two bodies washed ashore on the beautiful beaches of Biak Island.

Strange fruit. A cargo boat glides across the water’s surface, smooth as a mirror. The ship ferries fresh exotic dreams, mostly grown in developing countries. Lychee



and rambutan from Indonesia, Brazilian limes, dragon fruit from Vietnam, papayas, passion fruits, pineapples, and bananas all glow below decks with the sun-kissed allure of the Global South. Logistics experts from each country of origin must adhere to strict requirements to ensure that the pallets inside the reefer containers arrive at their destinations without malarial mosquitoes, or traces of corruption, hunger, and civil war to ruin the fruit. New flavors satisfy increasing demands. No compromises can be accepted when it comes to hygiene. Temperatures must be controlled.

April 18th, 2015, in the middle of the night. In international waters between Libya and the Italian island of Lampedusa, a nameless wooden boat issues a distress signal, invoking the International Law of the Sea. The boat, a former fishing trawler, carries upwards of 1,1000 migrants who are trying to reach Europe. Alerted by the Italian Coast Guard, *The King Jacob* (a Portuguese container ship that is 147 meters long) comes to the rescue. The two boats collide. This collision happens on more than one plane simultaneously. Up until a few minutes before the encounter, the boats were navigating parallel oceans. Only one of those oceans—the one through which goods are transported—is considered fully visible. The other ocean, the one that is ferrying black and brown bodies towards Fortress Europe, is more clandestine and much more cruel. Opportunists with faulty navigation instruments traffic in people amidst shifting legislation, greed, and the flow of capital.

After the collision of both boats and both oceans, hundreds of bodies began to sink into the Mediterranean. Restless on the seabed, some 370 meters below, they joined the subhuman sea state with other decomposing evidence of European necropolitics.

June 30, 2016. One last image: a nameless wooden boat arrives in the Port of Augusta, Sicily. It had been hoisted to the surface, at a cost of 9.5 million euros. The boat was given a name, *Barca Nostra* ("Our Boat," but who are "we"?). It was shown as a ready-made at the 2019 Venice Biennale. One person's death goes into circulation as another person's work of art.

C, c

**CIRCULATION**, noun:

To read a rubber duck.

Plastic flotsam and jetsam has been moving across the seas for nearly one hundred years, navigating ocean currents, converging into the Pacific Vortex. An undead plastic bag speaks through Werner Herzog about its journey. In a soliloquy, alone on a beach, the bag says: "No one needs me here anymore, not even my maker." After a perilous voyage, after swimming with jellyfish past monstrous leviathans, the bag sings: "And I was born

again / I learned to use the currents of the water as I had used the currents of the wind / I made it to the vortex. I was with my own kind. We covered an area the size of a small continent. We were free and happy. I loved going in circles. In circles. In circles."

Pick up a piece of sun-bleached plastic from the shore, and test it for legibility. Peel the brittle flakes with your fingernail as if you were scraping a palimpsest, uncovering layers of meaning. Hydrocarbons of a dinosaur, you say. They are undead plankton, I counter—the "weaponized fossil kin" of Zoe Todd. Look again then, squint your eyes just right. You hold a timepiece. Diamonds last forever.

January 10, 1992. A cargo ship travelling from Hong Kong to Washington State lost a dozen cargo containers when they were washed overboard during a storm in the North Pacific Ocean. Bathtub toys—some 28,800 red beavers, blue turtles, green frogs, and yellow ducks—began travelling on oceanic currents. The ducks were actually plastic, not rubber. The initial landfall was in Alaska. Some of the plastic animals bobbed back east to Japan, Indonesia, Australia. Some got stuck in Arctic ice; others eventually washed ashore in Europe. Bleached by sun and seawater, the ducks and beavers have faded to white, but the turtles and frogs remain bright blue and green, some thirty years later.

White ducks continue to tumble in the Pacific Vortex, completing a circuit every three years. Theirs are plastic bodies that cannot be put to rest. Imagine if they could be liberated from this undead dance, this endless circulation. "I spun around so fast that I was free," says Herzog, as the bag tumbles away from the vortex, in search of its maker. "Like a fool, I still have hope I will meet her again. And if I do, I will tell her just one thing: I wish that you had created me so that I could die."

D, d

**DOUBLE DEATH**, compound noun:

Life is becoming nonlife on a planetary scale.

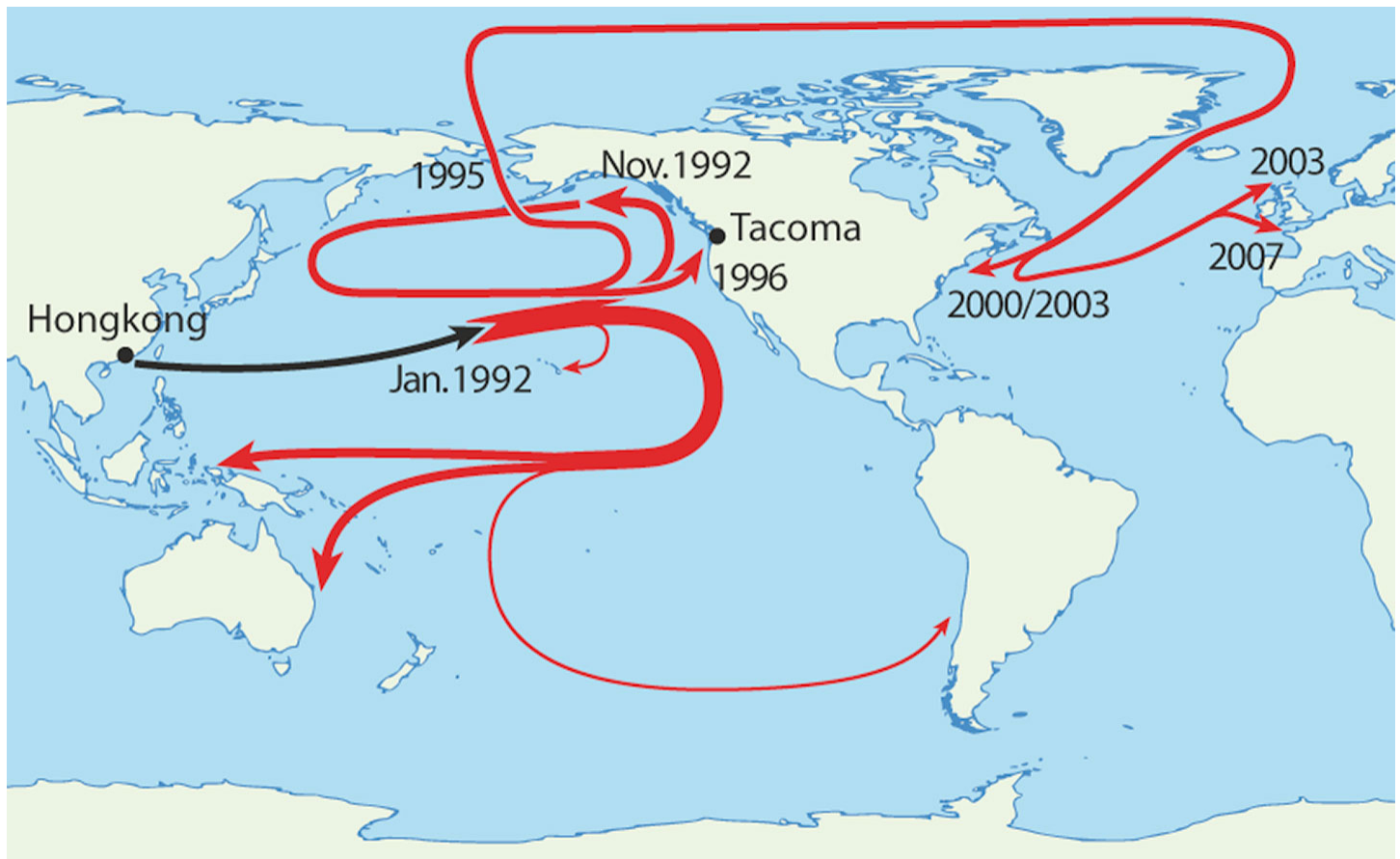
Ecological communities—associations of predators and prey, omnivorous scavengers, parasites and hosts—normally depend on ongoing intergenerational cycles of life and death. The food web is premised on reciprocity among species. Life usually offers an intergenerational gift with death.

October 19, 2019. "Ohhhhhh, a whale fall!" croons a man—a researcher taking part in a remote-control submarine expedition, with the Monterey Bay Aquarium. "YESSS!" hisses a woman with joy. "That is phenomenal," says another man. "Oh my god there are so many," says the woman, as fifteen giant purple octopi come into view around a partially decayed whale skeleton, upwards of five meters long. The video is streaming live on YouTube. "This



A Seasprite helicopter performs a recce flight over grounded ship Rena. Photo: New Zealand Defence Force from Wellington, New Zealand / CC BY 2.0





Different routes taken by the friendly floaters initially lost in the Pacific Ocean in 1992. Photo: Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 3.0

is a baleen whale and you can see the baleen," says another woman. "Somebody tell Twitter," someone says. "Twitter is with us." "Oh my goodness," a man says. "Look at them." "Wooooow." "Talk about the dinner bell ringing, right." "Do we have any bone-eating worms?"

*Hercules*, the submarine, hovers over the skeleton. The camera zooms in on the whale's protruding ribs, which are covered with brown fuzz. A woman confirms that the fuzz is a forest of "bone-eating snot flower worms," also known as genus *Osedax*. "These are worms that have symbiotic associations with bacteria," the woman continues. "They have no more gut themselves, instead they have these rootlets that burrow into the bone and then the bacteria are able to metabolize the fats and oils that are in the bone itself." Octopi, eels, and ghostly white fish take a break from their meal to peer back at the bright lights. "Think of how many calories are in a whale," says a man. "Episodic falls of food are a ... *bonanza*, I think is the word."

Sea burials for humans were once commonplace. From Bronze Age Crete, to the Pacific Islands of the early twentieth century, many people have marked the passage of ancestors into the oceanic underworld with rites of dignity, grace, and ecological reciprocity. Then the

moderns arrived with colonial hygiene. Enlightened people began pretending that they were outside intergenerational cycles of death and life. But foundational errors in modern ontologies and epistemologies are becoming apparent again as life becomes nonlife on a planetary scale.

Processes that uncouple life and death, diminishing death's capacity to turn dying back toward the living, produce "double death." This idea of double death emerged on land, in the context of white settler colonialism in the Northern Territories of Australia. Ranchers and conservationists trying to kill "invasive species" in Australia often use poison, as Deborah Bird Rose describes in her 2011 book *Wild Dog Dreaming*. One of the main targets of Australia's widespread chemical campaign is the dingo, a companion species of Aboriginal Australians.

Humans share basic biology with the dingo. If you were to eat one of the poison baits used in this campaign—a compound known as 1080—you would experience nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, sweating, confusion, agitation, followed by cardiac abnormalities, seizures, and unconsciousness. You would become progressively impaired over a few hours. Eventually you would fall into a

coma and die. Carcasses of animals killed by 1080 continue to kill others in the afterlife. Double death reverberates through ecosystems as living creatures feed on poisoned carrion for sustenance. As the poison moves through generations and across species lines, life becomes nonlife. 1080 poison is just one industrial product among many others that are producing double death on a planetary scale.

Our oceans are full of double death. The seas are awash with fungicides, insecticides, and broad-spectrum biocides that were developed for commercial agricultural production. DDT, the broad-spectrum insecticide that is now infamous for its accumulation in the food web, still lingers in the waters, as Rachel Carson predicted in 1962. Poisons disperse in plumes, well beyond their intended targets. Petroleum by-products, paints, solvents, glues, battery acid, and binding agents are accumulating in landfills, seeping into waterways. As industrial chemicals react with each other, they become beside themselves with dissolution and glee. Plastics spinning in the Pacific Vortex generate double death as birds, marine mammals, turtles, and fish try to eat them.

If life and nonlife usually exist in a dynamic relationship—with gifts of energy and matter across time—processes of double death are scaling up. They are starting to embrace and endanger planetary ecologies. Elizabeth Povinelli describes geological forces that show a planetary trend of becoming-nonliving. “Life and Nonlife breathe in and breathe out. And if Nonlife spawned Life, a current mode of Life may be returning the favor.” Plantation economies, capital flows, and global war are producing a massive thanatological becoming. Forms of nonlife are overcoming the living.

Eugene Thacker argues that philosophers should abandon fundamental questions like “what is life?” and “what is not life?” Instead, Thacker is interested in “the question of the life that becomes not-life, an other-than-life, a becoming-nonliving.” Writing in an allied spirit of animist exuberance in *Vibrant Matter*, the classic book on “thing power,” Jane Bennett makes an argument for flattening ontologies. Bennett (echoing John Frow) suggests that differences between things like a dead rat, oak pollen, a plastic glove, and a bottle cap need “to be flattened, read horizontally as a juxtaposition rather than vertically as a hierarchy of being.” Bennett insists that “everything is, in a sense, alive.” Instead of sharing this enthusiasm “about the liveliness of ‘matter itself,’” we are haunted by the oceanic undead.

Life is becoming not-life and other-than-life, in ongoing chains of destruction within precarious human and multispecies worlds. Exposing and reconfiguring this new form of death is critical to planetary survival.

*E, e*

## EXTRACTION, noun:

Conjuring the dead is black magic. And this is the magic of modernity. Speed is a parlor trick, a sleight of hand. Really bad vibes.

January 10, 1901. The first gusher erupts with Texas black gold. Undead sea life trapped beneath a cap of salt deposited during the Jurassic erupts into the sky for nine days. Pent up, packed away, undisturbed, inside the earth for millions of years the undead are destructive and generative. Unimaginable pressure. The Spindletop gusher blew out existing extraction technologies with a flood of oil that dwarfed the production rate of all previous wells in the United States combined. New technologies, modes of production, forms of capital, and practices of mobility emerged from this flow of fossil fuel.

Exhuming dead plants and animals from the ground—channelling them into pipelines and machinic assemblages—produced new, emergent worlds. Death-energy accumulated across millennia began to animate new, post-human beings and things—making them move faster, and faster still. A precipice of time emerged with coal-powered steam engines and railroads. This was the beginning of modern speed. For a while, nobody bothered to read the small print. But of course, there was a catch: as life became fast, death came faster. Moving at hyper-speed only accelerates collective death. Now we ship chytrid fungus zoospores and coronavirus particles through global supply chains and transportation infrastructures like never before. At the same time, the undead become free carbon, wheeling around in the atmosphere—liberated from their geological beds. The greenhouse effect is runaway.

April 20, 2010, approximately 9:50 p.m. A BP oil rig worker is rushing the job. On the ocean floor below, under nearly one mile of water, he is drilling deep—past 18,360 feet, pushing up against the limits of human agency and action. His name is not important. Even though so many things had already gone wrong with what he called “the well from hell,” the companies that summoned him to the job—British Petroleum, Transocean, Halliburton—were prodding him forward. Another veteran oil-field worker who worked the same well recalled, “Safety didn’t get you promoted. They wanted speed.” The well was slapping back at the rig workers, with hazardous gas belches called “kicks.” The Deepwater Horizon team was forty-three days behind schedule, and management was demanding that they throw caution to the wind. Then, as Carl Safina reports: “A sudden influx of gas into the well. Rushing up the pipe ... Explosion. Fireball.”

Oil flooded into the Gulf of Mexico for months. Pelicans, turtles, and even hermit crabs became new iconic abject figures. Undead animals covered in a sheen of crude oil. They were barely able to live; unable to quickly die. Obama



Fire on the drilling rig Deepwater Horizon as viewed from the offshore supply vessel Laney Chouest. Photo: Sallad997 (Richard Sullivan)/CC BY-SA 3.0

fined BP \$20 billion USD. Clean-up crews and conservation workers were busy along the Gulf Coast. But the event could not be undone. The magic of petrochemical capitalism revealed its limits. "The law says that for every animal that BP is liable for killing, they have to replace," says Scott Eustis of the Gulf Restoration Network. But the law has limits too. Eustis says: "Dolphins can't be conjured out of the air."

*F, f*

**(POSSIBLE) FUTURES**, plural noun (modified with adjective):

The future? There is no way to predict how any of this will be read over time.

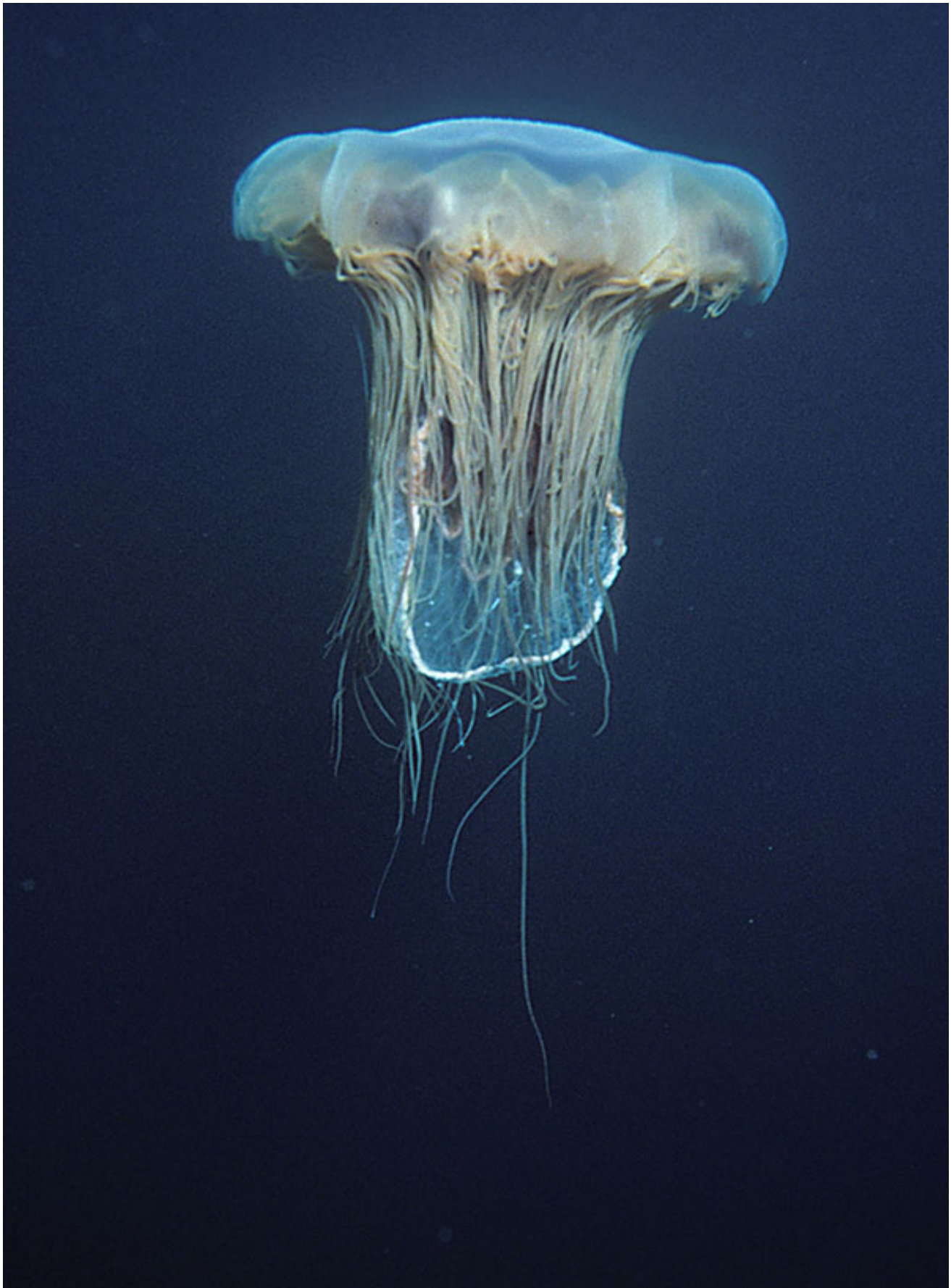
One present that we know is southern, equatorial. Suspended time is held together with bobby pins and chewing gum. Pandemic glitches and workarounds are

nothing new in worlds that exist in a patchwork of imperfect infrastructure.

**Julieta:** The southern future is an impossible place where the real lived pain of people is obscured by foreign anecdotes and holiday photographs. This is a time-register that I have never been able to leave, no matter how far away from it I travel. Even if geographical dislocation allows me to live in two, three, or four time zones at once, equatorial time seems to be the only temporality and futurity that really counts. And some days, when I try to imagine the world that lies ahead, I end up feeling as if there is no point to that thought exercise, because I am already extinct. This has nothing to do with reproduction. It is about looking toward ready-made futures, and always getting a bleak picture in return: there is nothing there that looks like me. Is the future a space of possibility, or is it a resource to be deployed and exhausted?

Perhaps a big part of the problem is that the colonial





Lion's mane jellyfish, or hair jelly, *Cyanea capillata*, the largest know jellyfish in Newfoundland, Canada. Photo: Derek Keats / CC BY 2.0.

project of the West ran out of space. It must have been easier when the maps had blank spots, and unknowns upon which to project totalizing ambitions. Without any planetary territory left to claim, and with outer space being both expensive and hostile to life, the colonization of time probably appeared like a viable alternative. The dreams of capital started to extend beyond the present, turning time into something to spend, where all wishes could be anticipated by algorithms.

At this point of algorithmic wish fulfilment, the majority of projections of futurity currently in circulation reveal themselves to be glaringly insufficient. This year, 2020, has shown us the modest limits of human techno-scientific power, and the ease with which future projections can be dismantled. Yes, we can get another Amazon delivery tomorrow—a temporary palliative—but is that really the future?

So let's try again. But instead of letting Jeff Bezos colonize time itself, let's revisit the idea of "oceanic feeling." In 1927, Romain Rolland—a prominent French art historian, Orientalist, and mystic—penned a critical letter to Sigmund Freud about the latter's book *The Future of an Illusion*. An intuitive feeling of contact with immense (often religious) forces exists in millions of people, according to Rolland, "without perceptible boundaries," like the ocean. According to Freud, this is "a sensation of 'eternity'... something limitless, unbounded—as it were, 'oceanic.'" One might harbour this oceanic feeling "even if one rejects every belief and every illusion" of established religious traditions. Freud sneers at oceanic feeling as "an early stage in ego-feeling"; he denigrates it as "limitless narcissism." Sidestepping this dispute between an Orientalist and a psychoanalyst—each with their own ego-feelings—we reach instead toward the wonder of eternity and the boundlessness of the ocean. Oceanic feelings open into multiple temporalities, with simultaneous and (possibly) conflicting narratives.

Oceans are acidifying and getting hot. But an apocalyptic story line does not capture the complexity of the moment. Worlds are ending, even as new forms of flourishing become possible. Jellyfish populations are exploding with exuberance, even as coral reefs are bleaching. While leaning into oceanic feelings, we must remember the ongoing cascades of death, and the cruelty of optimism.

Some dreams are cruel because they are "*im* possible, sheer fantasy," in the words of Lauren Berlant, "or *too* possible, and toxic." Global climate change is outpacing all attempted solutions. The distributed enterprises filling the ocean with plastic seem unstoppable, at least in the short term. But even if we are powerless to prevent certain futures, or even transform our present circumstances, a dystopian perspective is nothing but a trap. Dystopia is not generative. It produces passive resignation to the unavoidable—resigning the future to fate.

**Eben:** Born in the homogenous empty time of Regan and

Bush, when capitalism gunned down democracy. This is a time that I learned to leave—finding glimmers of hope at the intersection of social and multispecies worlds. In times of extinction and extraction, it is time to own up to the ways that our own modes of existence are entangled with the dead and the dying. Tactical opportunities lie ahead. We can expose and derail the predictable functioning of power. Careful articulation work is needed to establish and sustain new life-support systems. We can dismantle the assemblages generating double death, and discover new possibilities of love and life.

We escape the monolithic (and insufficient) depictions of calamity and dystopia by way of modest thinking. It is time to address the things that we want a future for, individually, carefully, thoughtfully, and most importantly, with imagination. Not the Future with a capital F, but the many futures: contradictory, complex, interwoven.

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## X

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