

# AFTERWORD

## Between spin and drift, or overviews and undercurrents

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In August 2022, I was invited to present a response to the conference *Hydrofeminism and wild engagements with ocean/s: Towards a justice-to-come in South African contexts* (which has since expanded into this book) under the theme “what bubbles up”. As a scholar of the Oceanic Humanities and an artist and curator who has participated in and facilitated cultural exchanges between islands in the Western Indian Ocean region and Eastern and Southern continental Africa, I have drawn on my ever-expanding and varied reception of the complex material-affective and socio-political oceanic frequencies transmitted across the region. Sounding within this are the always already entangled histories of interconnectivity, situated knowledges, migration, forced labour, mythology, spirituality, modernity, terra-biases, power, resistance, amphibious technologies and cosmologies, all of which thicken the present with the settled and unsettled presence of the past. Being of varied settler and migratory descent in the region,<sup>1</sup> I also take up and grapple with (post)colonial legacies that continue to divide eco-socio relations today. I pay specific attention to limits of knowability, taking up an in/corporeal openness (Alaimo, 2010; Grosz, 2017) that allows for adjustments to epistemological frameworks that are brittle and corroding.

Paying attention to histories in this context asks of the artist-researcher in me to congeal a praxis for rupturing the linearity of time-as-progress that has been largely asserted through modernity. This praxis notices the past that has been silenced by narratives of power. It listens to where the past has become stuck in the present – a noisy excess that refuses to disappear (Dayan, 2008; Trouillot, 1995). At its core, this rupture reshapes imaginaries of human figurations from the overdetermined figure benefiting from the Anthropocene to those that live in more harmonious ecological relations. While centring the human in this inquiry poses problems for noticing planetary imaginaries of more-than-human plurality,

staying with the trouble (Haraway, 2016) of such imagined figurations is essential to the project of deconstructing the active power that exercises agency over what is possible. Further, finding ways for *how to experience* is an important part of modular change towards an ethics of relational care. I thus cannot do away with the human entirely. This praxis is always moving towards potentials and possibilities for sensing and making sense of life outside of exceptionalism. It finds amphibious hydro-figurations where the socio-eco divide is less prominent (Neimanis, 2019), expanding and dissolving imaginaries where necessary.

This book works with the past to locate a thicker present (Barad, 2017), understanding this now-time as something to be sensitised towards. The book acts at the unruly edges (Tsing, 2015) of in/abilities to perceive what is here, congealing through the corporeal complexities of histories and presence in South Africa. As a person with varying ancestral lines that knot and ring through the apparatus of the whiteness project active here,<sup>2</sup> I understand the imaginary that the book grapples with as one of fullness and emptiness constructed by what counts as human (and is central to who benefits) and also what is pushed outside of this figuration – the less-than-human. Civilised Man is full and centred/those outside of this figuration are empty and othered; the land is full and ready for extraction/the ocean is empty and a backdrop for voyage. This imaginary asserts a dialectics for hierarchies of being, granting permission for dominance and control. As this book demonstrates, this imaginary extends into and through colonial technologies for erasing nature–human relations on lands and oceans, dividing bodies that once coexisted. The forwarding of hydrobodies as an alternative to this imaginary is a move away from the terra-bound centres of exceptionalism, recognising bodies as different, watery and mixing with the potential for what they might become – a future on its way, yet also remembered.

Engaging with the materialities of the ocean, especially in relation to the sonic that I work mostly with, I am reminded that some frequencies are beyond the hearing range of the hegemonic constructions of an over-terra-centric determined (Wynter, 2003; da Silva, 2007, McKittick, 2015) and exceptionalised human listener. This reminder calls two points together: the specifically constructed figurations of the human and the material activities of the ocean itself. These two points open a productive tension for inquiring into the ocean–human relations; the material and immaterial touch, move and become through the undercurrents that are driven by positions, density, winds and force. In this, it is possible to learn how to drift: to be moved by that which moves. Realising temporalities of matter active within planetary activities allows for reorienting outside of narrative construction – a before space where power over narrative construction is necessarily relinquished so that stories shape through encounters and relations.

The chapters in this book work through the present as a movement as it dips and splashes along the surface of undercurrents and atmospheres, bubbles spinning around differing bodies that plunge between past and future, above and below the waterline. Stories are shaped through skin and salt. These bubbles act around

bodies in oceanic relations, churning in a temporality that diverges from the linear assertions of colonial spacetime. The South African context offers a scaling of attention through frequency ranges that are too often silenced by dominant narratives of historiography, yet always corrode into their edges.

The book moves towards justice, towards rest, but is not quite there yet. As such, the chapters do not sound in harmony, but instead perform through differences that noise together. This book rings through such noise, it rings with the release of ghosts that haunt an amnesiac climate, shaking the scaffoldings of colonial apparatuses. In this ringing the air is smudged and the smog of racialised structures cleans towards clearer breathability. Below, I move through the chapters without order, responding instead to the ways that they well up and rumble together in mixed temperature, generating movements in their shared activity.

I begin in the middle of the book with Zayaan Khan's chapter, *Listening with the ocean through deep time and ancient futures: sea/shore sound piece* that draws us into the cyclic movement of the ocean. Khan draws our attention towards a final outbreath, a resting place, the exhale that we give to the ocean after an inhale that the ocean gives to us. In this, the work takes up rituals for death that draws the reader into a cycle that is born and dies in the ocean. Her work is a reminder of the ocean as an ancestor, a womb, a breeder of bacterial multi-species climate-changers that give and take life. In times of such anthropocentric climate precariousness, it may be wise to recall ways, as Khan does, to breathe in the deep time of photosynthetic activities. That is, to remember beyond a single lifespan and sense what already exists. The work presented by Khan shapes the imaginable by listening and responding to the sounds of consciousness submerged. What sounds is from the inside, an already-present and already-there frequency below hearing range that asks for a different perceptive attunement. Khan's proposed attention shift activates through oceanic memory, funnelling down to the depths, where, in the ocean, deeper mixed layers contain greater heat content that confer more thermal inertia. Khan's rituals rise through such heat, drawing up and transmuting the nutrients and gasses that are released into the thick uppermost memory surface layers for dissemination and spread.

Oceanic rituals continue in the book through grandmothers whose technologies of relations already exist. The presence of these rituals store memory and refuse cultures of amnesia built into colonialism and capitalism that erase shared eco-socio-sentience. For Gogo Nomalibongwe, Gogo Margaret, Gogo Nomalibongwe, Gogo Charlotte and Gogo Jolene, the grandmothers in Buhle Francis and Dylan McGarry's *Grandmothers of the Sea: Stories and lessons from five Xhosa ocean elders*, time has become stuck between their embodied knowledge recalled through ritual and systematic erasure. They spin in the present unable to move forward, pulled by the past and pushed by the future, a tension in unproductive disturbance. Buhle and McGarry listen to the clash of these epistemic and ontological oceanic relations in the present and seek out how they can create divergent currents for hierarchical, socio-political knowledge through ocean policy that can release

the past into the future. They seek ways to align with the yearnings of these grandmothers for a state of relations that rests in its past in ways that are present, accessible and felt.

The care demonstrated in such listening extends in McGarry's *When ancestors are included in ocean decision & meaning making* and is joined by Aaniyah Martin's *Collaborative innovations into pedagogies of care for South African hydrocommons*, Adrienne Van Eden-Wharton's *Restless Remains and Untimely Returns: on walking and Wading* and Barry Lewis' *Diffraction forests: Making home in the (Post)Apartheid city*. These authors propose various practices that encompass embodied caring at intersectional edges. In this, community-making at the edges of difference congeals through empathy. Here, empathy becomes a glutinous mode for perceiving inter-species justice through embodied practices. These chapters work through different sensibilities that are evoked through story-making and the narration of storytelling, where unusual parts are allowed to come together like chimeric worlds of the ecotones. The chapters pose that opening through empathic sensing across worlds of difference allows for necessary becoming-through-community that moves across multi-species zones of contact.

The potential for thinking through embodied encounters with the ocean have been dived further into by Cheri Hugo's photo-essay *Re-imagining troubled spaces of academia while thinking with and through oceans: Black feet white sand*, Karen Graaff's *Surfing as a space for activism and change: What could surfing be(come)?*, Tamara Shefer, Nike Romano and Vivienne Bozalek's *Oceanic swimming-writing-thinking for justice-to-come scholarship*. Here, the sea becomes both a place for fugitive escape from the overdetermined pressures of terra-centric life in the South African context, as well as a place for reckoning with the tension that pushes these bodies below water. The chapters from these authors grant permissions for being with the ocean by mixing; becoming rearranged within the ocean's material activities offers a necessarily affective rearrangement from the overburdening grooves of work and life on land. In their writing, an underwater breath of calm is drawn so that the inevitable return to the doldrums and atmospheric pressures on land can be somehow survived. A common thread here is the finding of a practice for return that, again and again, dips and threads through the disrupting and caring surface line as it holds both above and below together in a potential for existing through and with both.

In storying, this book draws attention to the notion of aesthetics which is raised by the works of Delphi Carsten's and Mer Roberts' *Octopus Aesthetics*, Joanne Peers' *Relational bodies of memory, time and place: Hauntings in salty waters* and Kristy Stone's *Affect in the Archives and Object Refusals: Toward an Oceanic Aesthetic*. The aesthetics here are drenched in the researchers' implicit involvement with and in their oceanic work, wherein the researcher inquires open-endedly finding themselves within their work. The projects in these chapters slow down to notice the mutations of researcher in relation to the storying process, and how the image that the story holds adjusts through the inquiry into it. The affective

aesthetics gathered in these works seep towards the reader, offering pools for slipping into the research that is itself opened and shaped by movements, creatures and temporalities of the oceanic.

The practices that pulse through the chapters mentioned above materialise within an utterly unjust landscape, demonstrating different attentions and abilities to attend. The works dive into and rise from the very core of the imaginaries that perpetuate the unjust, remaking this core from multiple directions and discourses. And yet, it does not feel like this is enough. The justice never feels enough, it is on its way there but not there yet – as Derrida points out, justice is never here: it is yet to come.

The rage of this unrest bubbles up in Hugo's photo essay *Black feet on white sand*, where she dunks the build-up of heat, the fever, into the chaotic ocean. This acts as a re-orientation with and in the waters, accompanied by a mass of bubbles from land that spin around her body. Hugo self-dunks, again and again. This is a practice towards cooling, towards becoming amphibious. Her story is with and through the restless past that is stuck in and haunts the present. Here, the ocean is a space for processing what it means to swirl between rage and "spots of enjoyment". Such spots echo the acupuncture points for reconciliation that McGarry's locates in a messy chorus of voices, pierced and piercing through the sinews of now. Finding such points requires slowing to the rupturing prick of disruption, then sinking into the opened hole at the surface to allow the linear progression of time to rush overhead so that alternative and wayward temporalities might be sensed.

Doing this, Shefer, Romano and Bozalek's storytelling "hiccups" like a breath within a breath. Their storied bubbles pop into the continuously moving background from submerged under spaces. Each bubble holds its own anxious terra-bound breath, yet their thinning edges exist in a threshold of oceanic encounters, transparent and quivering between bodies and touching worlds. This touching together and apart offers a staying-place to sense the in-between – a useful analogy for the notion of slowing down and listening in order to "re-navigate", as Stone forwards in her writings. Navigating relies on orientation, noticing what is already present and moving and what is moved by that which moves. Finding drift within this Van Eeden-Wharton delineates from overdetermined "atlases", calling for slow returns that iteratively orient a different sort of "being-with". These atlases are sensory openings that leak towards colours and emotions of multispecies decay, holding affective potentials for (joining Stone again) "attuning" towards a palette of entangled sensitivity. Such palettes of entanglement also well up in Peers' configuring of the colour brown that mixes and sounds in her porous skin as she swims with salty ghosts.

The poetic patterning that occurs throughout the chapters brings together importantly overwhelming terrains, where the excess of what can be is sensed. Carstens and Roberts, Peers, Hugo and Stone's aesthetics of unbecoming and becoming reveal the oftentimes overwhelming sensations of slow reconfiguration in the world. In part, the discomfort politicised here is an opening to Graaff's notion

of making the unusual usual, and goes some way to responding to the need for better, more just narration about different bodies set in states of trauma and unrest, configured through colonial, apartheid, capitalist and anthropocentric frameworks that materialise varied and situated positionalities. The now-time that this book presents communicates within pasts and futures, sounding within the frequencies of the hydro-relational, at times rising, like Shamier Magmoet's film about coming into a relationship with the ocean from the nearby but historically segregated "Cape Flats",<sup>3</sup> as if to lift off the sea floor and fly with the marine creatures towards a something that is "more" – "more-than" the violence that grips so much of the lived daily experiences that seep through unsettled pasts. Martin proposes that, if we are to clean up and repair damaged spaces for co-existence, this can only happen with and through the presence of hauntologies in acts of community that are relational. Shefer, Romano and Bozalek open to being permeated by hauntologies where porous relations make and re-make bodies that are malleable, like Carstens and Roberts *Octopus Aesthetics*, which propose a shifting of perception towards a different kind of alive.

Such aliveness found in the amphibious potentials of hydrobodies are critical to troubling the scaffolding of hydroviolences that affect the social and the ecological. Hydrobodies slip through the binary lines that slice up scattered littoral cultures and livelihoods co-existing within oceanic relations. As Graaff points out, these binaries can be queered by tracing the unevenness of what they divide and weigh. The authors in this book critically play along the surface of these binary lines, rising and sinking between tensions of terra and ocean to recall amphibious atmospheres across social and ecological constructs. Playing here takes up being and becoming along varying wet-dry lifelines, offering differing vantage points for considering the ocean itself, oceanic relations and situated geographies, where social and ecological justices are drawn together.

Toni Giselle Stuart's opening poem, *Ocean Home*, is perhaps a good ending place for this overview, as it seems to scatter any attempt at universalising and "higher vision" that the very word overview suggests. In the poem, the reader is swept through the cyclic activity of the tides, along with the many parts moved within it, including the tides of history and an imaginary of time itself. The heaving inhale and exhale of her poetic utterances release a sense of now-time, of presence where past and future act together, felt most acutely before the tide comes in and before the daily preparations of labour at the harbour begin. Dawn marks a new return. Her words generate a hum of presence that she describes as both yesterday and tomorrow, yet tilting all the same towards what is to come. There is an offering here, a pause for reorientation within and amongst the movements of the ongoing beginning again.

## Notes

- 1 Some of which come through: the adoption of a baby girl (my grandmother) during the depression of the inter-war years of coastal Scotland; a few sailors working for fleets in the Indian ocean trade who found opportunities for their families during a climate crisis in Norway on an island in the Western Indian Ocean but landed up in South Africa following the lure of the opportunities set up in the whiteness project at the time; and a somewhat reluctant move from a musician escaping “the troubles” in Ireland (my father), who fell in love with a South African woman (my mother) in London and subsequently moved here for a period of time to raise us children, despite his disdain for Apartheid rule. As oral knowledge fades, so does broader knowledge of my ancestral lines, notably on my great grandmother’s side.
- 2 This project exceptionalised and bloated the white population through carefully constructed racial binaries that, in the face of much resistance, violently othered and extracted from black and brown bodies, as well as lands, animals and oceans essentially building the (post)colonial Anthropocene (Yusoff, 2018).
- 3 [www.myhero.com/rise-from-the-cape-flats](http://www.myhero.com/rise-from-the-cape-flats)

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