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Mohulatsi, Mapule

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Black Aesthetics and the Deep Ocean

Mapule Mohulatsi

A Research Report submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Declaration

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

_Mapule Mohulatsi_____ Signature _____ _27th day of May, 2019

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Black Aesthetics and the Deep Ocean: Archive or Rubbish Dump?

Introduction:

This research project aims at exploring the ways in which contemporary black writing has contributed to the imaginaries of the deep ocean. The project is interested in the ways the black aesthetic, in literature, looks to the deep ocean as an avenue to think with the ocean's emergent future, *and* past, as well as the ways in which perceptions of the ocean are influenced in turn.

Writing the ocean within the humanities and social sciences tends to look at the sea as a backdrop to human movement. However, recently there has been an attempt to engage with the materiality of the ocean; there is growing literature that engages with this terrain.[1] In southern Africa, at least, this has tended to be a bit of a binary affair with the ocean being seen as the site of European imperialisms and black intellectual traditions being cast in an anti-colonial, national and territorial mode. More recently however there has been an attempt to undo this binary and to decolonize the ocean by moving away from territorial nationalism and encompassing the ocean (and ecological questions more generally) as central to black intellectual traditions. Examples are black feminist reclaimings of the ocean via new histories of slavery (Gqola 2010, Baderoon 2014, Putuma 2017) and Indian Ocean work which stresses supra-national histories of slavery and indenture. I will enrich this scholarship by thinking about black aesthetics, the deep ocean, and questions of waste.

In his 'Revising "The Waste Land": Black Antipastoral and the End of the World' published by the *Paris Review*, Joshua Bennett analyses the ways in which black writers create a much larger context to clarify biased, racialized notions of the natural world. He writes:

There is a distinctly ecological tenor to the image systems that black writers have used in imagining the end of the world. These writers call to the fore a vision of civil society in which gratuitous violence against black people is not aberrational but *algorithmic*—which is to say, inextricably bound

[1] Most of this literature stems from scholars like Stacy Alaimo, Christina Sharpe, Joshua Bennett, Isabel Hofmeyr with Kerry Bystrom, Elizabeth Deloughrey, John Gillis, Gabeba Baderon, Meg Samuelson as well as Hesta Blum.

up with the normative order of things—and they provide a critical vocabulary through which we are able to imagine other, more ethical methods of organizing human and nonhuman life. (Bennett)

Water marks the beginning and the end of life. It is an avenue from which black geopoetics - a term coined by Kenneth White in 1978, defined as "concerned, fundamentally, with a relationship to the earth and with the opening of a world" (Bennett) - have been theorized. Water, the oceans, have shaped and gulped human history from the beginning, they are in and of themselves the opening to another world. The primary texts I have chosen are exemplary of such aesthetic.

Where black aesthetics are concerned, some of the texts I have chosen work from the assumption that the black subject is only known to the black author whilst others consider the black subject through experience. By "black writing", I do not necessarily mean black author, rather "the black subject's experience". As James A. Emmanuel writes in an essay included in Addison Gayle's *The Black Aesthetic,* titled 'Blackness Can: A Quest for Aesthetics', "the disparity between an experience and knowledge of that experience is the longest bridge that an artist must cross" (210). He goes on to add that "it is the combination of fact and meaning that black audiences require for the re-exploration of their lives" (Emmanuel 210). It is this sentiment that I adhere to when I refer to the black aesthetic.

The project at large works through how traditions of black thought have often operated at the limits of the human, in response to histories of racism and anti-blackness, in which black bodies have not always been accorded their full humanity. Alongside this proposition, the thesis notes the ways in which the ocean has become a predominant s/place from which to re-explore notions of being. This re-exploration involves seeing blackness as not separate from ecological spaces and histories, like the ocean; and offering a writing that engages with the more diverse ways the aquatic environment itself could be read and written. In fact, in many of the texts the sea shifts from setting or backdrop to foreground as an agentive character. The authors and the works discussed in these chapters explore not only the black subject's relation with the ocean or ecologies in general; they also reconfigure the aesthetics of how we read and write the ocean when the black experience is drawn into the conversation.

In the first section of the thesis I work through the myth of the Watermeisie/Mami Wata and her appearance in three art pieces, two from South Africa, and one from East Africa (Kenya). I then move on to engage with the more literary endeavours. I begin with *The Salt Roads* by Nalo Hopkinson, and then 'Black Venus' by Angela Carter; I then move on to 'Water', a

poem by Koleka Putuma, and *Lagoon* a novel by Nnedi Okarafor. In the third chapter I look into two other novels: *The Same Earth* by Kei Miller as well as *Reef* by Romesh Gunesekera.

This research attempts to take a submarine perspective on the texts I have selected. These make attempts at configuring black ecological perspectives especially when the ocean and history are concerned – these texts create an intersection between two streams of scholarship, the black aesthetic meets marine biology. In using these texts I aim at producing a new way of conceptualizing the ocean as an archive of waste; drawing on Caribbean intellectual traditions where the question of archive (as memory) and waste (as the devastation of the slave trade) are brought together. I draw on these ideas but supplement them with more recent ecological themes of waste – the ocean is after all littered with human waste. Most of the texts I have chosen organize this waste in improvisatory ways looking back to Caribbean traditions. The chosen texts also speak against or further stipulate anti-black notions of the natural world. There are various sightings in these literatures of what has disappeared into the ocean as well as emerging worlds; showcasing the ocean as both haunted and fecund. Through them, it is possible to read the deep ocean as either a rubbish dump in which human history is debris, or even as an evolving, alive, and maybe even conscious figure in the making of human history and social life.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The Sea is History

Derek Walcott's 'The Sea is History' is a scaffold in the analyses of both my primary and secondary texts. The poem states that human history, Caribbean history especially, is locked up in the sea. At the centre of the poem is the disillusionment of origin that modernity has introduced. 'The Sea is History' dismantles notions of immediate origin for a more watery history that is locked in that 'grey vault'. This vault is religiously fathomed using lingual and metaphoric inclinations suggested by the Bible. The poem simultaneously possesses a unique way of meditation upon suffering and death. The drowned bodies of slaves are imagined as shackled by white cowries clustered like manacles on the ocean floor. The plucked wires of sunlight on the seafloor are also envisioned. The imagery in the poem writes uses marine biological life to make sense of human history in the marine environment. In the poem, the

sea has many rooms, at some point the poet advises the reader to "strop on these goggles/ I'll guide you there myself/it's all subtle and submarine through colonnades of coral…" (line 57).

'The Sea is History' also invites creatureliness as a narrative point of view as opposed to the scientific perspective on the submarine. It recreates embodiment outside of the human body - there is the secretarial heron, the bullfrog bellowing for a vote, fireflies bright with ideas, and ferns with dark ears – a writing that seeks to place the reader out of their element, destabilizing the hierarchical structures that on land are presented as normalcy. The ocean then becomes transcendence because it presents an alliance and a slippage between human, land, and ocean. As a scaffold, 'The Sea is History' justifies archives and histories as unspeakable, unconfessable, characteristic of slave narratives generally and particularly on the ocean.

Rubbish Dump or Archive?

The rubbish dump introduces ideas of the impenetrability of the ocean, what Lindsay Bremner refers to as "the opacity of the ocean" (8). The rubbish dump after all is full of the nonsensical and the unimaginable; it becomes opaque, unclear. Rubbish dumps are actually particular, and where a rubbish dump is located, determines what is in it. The same goes for the marine world. The oceans are different in temperament, size, and depth; as well as what they contain and encompass. The rubbish dump is forever evading the possibility of definition. Likewise, the monstrous, eddying, swirling, abyssal, and colliding ocean cannot be easily defined. What gets lost in the rubbish dump, how and whether it is found, is all dependent on the nature of the rubbish dump; read ocean. The textual archive is often unable to bring the unreliability of the ocean into focus.

The nature of my research is aligned with current projects that dismiss the "humanist impulse to textualize the ocean" in favour of "the post-humanist aspiration to understand the sea as an actant not reducible to its human appropriations, […] to see the ocean as a key character" (Bystrom & Hofmeyr 1). Much inspired by Kerry Bystrom and Isabel Hofmeyr in their 'Oceanic Routes: (Post-It) Notes on Hyrdro-Colonialism' this research is also an attempt to "bring perspectives from and on the Global South into dialogue with what remains an often hegemonic Anglophone (North) Atlantic studies" (1). Hence, I am interested in reformulating

notions of the archive as a rubbish dump, rejecting the ordered textual archive for a heavy rubbish dump that can produce almost anything.

The two oceans (the Indian and the Atlantic) both operate as the archive as well as the rubbish dumps of human history. This is both in the literal as well as the figurative sense. In 'Heavy Waters: Waste and Atlantic Modernity' Elizabeth DeLoughrey writes that the Atlantic is a "place where the haunting of the past overtakes the present subject" (703). She expresses her alignment with Edouard Glissant whose sentiments have described the Atlantic as a beginning for modernity, "a space whose time is marked by…balls and chains gone green" (6): a sign of submarine history and its material decay. Thus, to Glissant and DeLoughrey: "Atlantic modernity becomes legible through the sign of heavy water, an oceanic stasis that signals the dissolution of wasted lives" (703).

Koleka Putuma's 'Water' brings the matter of wasted life as well as racialized paraphernalia to the forefront very incisively – "For you, the ocean is for surf boards, boats, and tans/And all the cool stuff you do under there in your bathing suits and goggles" (line 24)– "But we, we have come to be baptised here/We have come to stir the other world here/We have come to cleanse ourselves here/ We have come to connect our living to the dead here" (lines 25-28). Putuma histories the ocean in relation to capitalist modes of being; for the whites, the deep ocean is for goggles and all the cool stuff, yet for the blacks it is a place of ancestry and cleansing, where the living meet the dead whose lives were the waste production of slavery. Through 'Water', we get to understand that the myth of origin as well as the realm of ancestry are dimensions in black aesthetics/ hyropoetics of the deep ocean. 'Water' also complicates the myth of origin through narratives of slavery and prayer. In the poem the ocean is a figure that is both a threat as well as an altar; origin is also deliberated though notions of waste – black children are warned against the waves "for fear that we would be a mass of blackness swept by the tide/ And never return/Like litter" (lines 6-8). This fear, of course, is not innate; rather, it has been instilled by the historical tragedies the ocean has witnessed and committed. In the poem the ocean is both witness and perpetrator –

Yet every time our skin goes under
It's as if the reeds remember that they were once chains
And the water, restless, wishes it could spew all of the slaves and ships onto shore
Whole as they had boarded, sailed and sunk (lines 21-23).

Again, the black aesthetic meets marine biology. Reeds cannot grow in salt water, yet they are reminiscent of Mozambique (one of the places from which slaves were taken to the Cape) and her reed beds invoke notions of African creation and death. Reeds, which symbolize creation and rebirth, are also chains in the poem, showcasing that a black bathymetry and its project are intent on antagonising white watery mythologies with death, darkness, prayer, as well as the drowning unnamed corpse.

DeLoughrey is also invested with the concept of modernity and the ways in which heavy waters reassemble our stagnant notions of the concept. Quoting Zygmunt Bauman, DeLoughrey characterizes "our liquid modernity as a civilisation of excess, redundancy, waste, and waste disposal" (704). Amongst this excess, human bodies are also a part of "the waste products of globalisation" (704), drowned slaves and refugees are such examples. "The concept of patrolling heavy waters is vital to interpreting historical and contemporary representations of Atlantic modernity's waste, understood as a material residue of the past as well as the lost lives of transoceanic subjects" (704). The lost lives of slaves and refugees are papered in textual archives, yet the watery archive should also be taken into consideration – especially in the elemental sense. The refugee and the fugitive bodies at sea produce boundaries that reduce human beings to national refuse.

In my research I am keen to ask questions such as: if the marine world is an active character, if it changes our epistemologies of space, should this change how we archive the ocean and should we read what it takes and receives from us as archived by it? Maybe. I am much inspired by DeLoughrey's report that where death and depth are concerned "aquatic stasis reflects temporal depth and death, in fact, the water is an element which remembers the dead; [m]oreover human depth finds its image in the density of water" (704). David Scott also argues that "the ocean should not only be represented as *aqua nullius*, a space of transit in which the sea is barely present, subsumed by the telos of masculine conquest and adventure." (135)

Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* speaks of 'webbed networks' (29), a notion I am drawn to, especially when one considers the difficulties of localising the ocean, especially the deep ocean. Webbed networks need to be understood alongside the national and the military claims on the oceans so that we might complicate natural metaphors of liquid circulation and think more critically in terms of a modern ocean that Christopher Connery has aptly described as "capital's myth element" (289). Webbed

networks may help us understand the ocean's underworld, not as a separate entity, but rather, as a network that is connected to our localisation, not only as gulping and swallowing, but also as keeping and spurting, vomiting, and chewing. It is evident that the "sea prefers to not leave any traces, the ocean has no place names, towns or dwelling places; it cannot be possessed, it requires specific languages to be understood; and, above all, it has traditionally been considered the space of freedom par excellence" (DeLoughrey 705). This is especially true for slaves and refugees who surrender to the ocean which is unmarked territory and even in death may provide a degree of freedom. Edwidge Danticat writes of this beautifully when she states:

> The past is full of examples when our foremothers and forefathers showed such deep trust in the sea that they would jump off slave ships and let the waves embrace them. They too believed that the sea was the beginning and the end of all things, the road to freedom and their entrance to Guinin. ("We Are Ugly, But We Are Here", 1996)

Black geopoetics (hydropoetics in this case) have also envisioned the waste in the ocean in imaginative ways – the submarine environment is jam-packed with material decay, decay that varies by degree. In Kei Miller's *The Same Earth*, three panties that eventually break a community are lost to the Caribbean Sea, whilst *Reef*, by Romesh Gunesekera makes mention of the environmental waste of the Sri Lankan island and it disappearing reef. These two novels are concerned primarily with the environment as well as its connections to global as well as local political tensions. Kei Miller focuses on a small community in Jamaica and the strange case of the missing polka-dot panties. Miller works with religion, superstition, faith and fear to track the case of these three panties and their journey into, first the local river, and then into the Caribbean Sea. In the novel, ocean, sky, and river are interlocked as both metaphor as well as environmental reminders to the reader that the environmental is as much involved in small communal political situations as the government is. The missing panties are not merely waste as the whole community and its religious fervour become invested in them and their sudden disappearance. *Reef* does the same even though in its own way, marine biologist Mr Salgado is oblivious to the political tensions in his own country, Sri Lanka. As the narrative unfolds, the reef itself, threatened by pollution, works as a microcosm of the island nation threatened by corruption; and the abyss just beyond the reef surely symbolizes Sri Lanka's possible future.

Submarine Futures and Post Humanism

Until recently, the oceanic has not been truly fathomed as a cultural or multi species ecology (DeLoughrey, 'Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene' 33). Ocean currents and rising sea levels have turned the marine world into a looming enemy to human existence. Yet, even though looming and demonic to humanity, the sea is a vast ecology that houses members whose interests are not sacrificed by the oceans dispositions. The aquatic environment has a future, for itself, that does not necessarily include human beings. "No longer relegated to *aqua nullius*, the ocean is now understood in terms of its agency, its anthropogenic pollution and acidity, and its interspecies ontologies – all of which suggest that climate change is shaping new oceanic imaginaries" (DeLoughrey 34).

Literature has also made attempts at joining already existing earthly dimensions that relate to the ocean with other worldly, planetary, dimensions. Afro-futurism as a genre has worked against modernity's anti-black imagination. Futurism since the 90's has made it clear that there is no safe place on land; instead the planetary system and the vast ocean offer conditions of possibility. Afro-futurism is concerned with the poetics of both demolition as well as creation. Afro-futurism, as an extension to the three dimensional world we know, poses important question such as 'what may we build out of waste?' Space, time, and the archive are important tools in the world of futurism, this is especially evident in the texts I have chosen to analyse. *Lagoon* by Nnedi Okorafor is an Afro-futurist novel that employs the physics of imagination especially where the ocean is concerned. The narrative is developed across three acts; 'Welcome', 'Awakening', and 'Symbiosis'. It imagines a post-capitalist Nigeria. Important for my research is the character Adaora who in real time is a marine biologist. Yet, when she discovers her secret powers, she can create a shield around herself and breath underwater. The narrative engages with ocean waste as it begins with a massive object crashing into the ocean off the coast of Lagos while the central three characters are wandering along Bar Beach (Adaora, the marine biologist, Anthony, the rapper famous throughout Africa, Agu, the troubled soldier). In due course they find themselves running a race against time to save the country they love and the world itself… from itself.

Methodology

In my research I conduct a textual analysis of both my primary as well as my secondary sources informed by principles of 'hydro-analysis'. This means that my method of reading will put the element of water in question, especially where waste and the black aesthetic are concerned. Through such hydro-analysis, I am interested in looking at what the water is doing to and with the narratives I have chosen to analyse. What kinds of agency does water have? Also, what part does it play in driving the plot, character, and overall feel of the narrative?

The ocean in the texts I have chosen to analyse represents transcendence, metaphor, symbolism, spirituality, materiality, body, the animalistic, as well as geology. John R. Gillis writes in his 'The Blue Humanities: In Studying the Sea, We are Returning to Our Beginnings' that the sea "has infused language and logical structures of thought in language" – this is exactly what my hydro analysis will be interested in; looking into the ways the sea alters language and thus our understandings of it as a space. The sea is infused in the chosen texts in such a way that at some point it reaches the level of being a character. It also alters the ways in which narratives accumulate, and as DeLoughrey observes in her incisive paper 'Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene', "the perpetual circulation of ocean currents means that the sea dissolves phenomenological experience and diffracts the accumulation of narrative". The sea as a material entity intensifies our structures of experience; some writers will speak of diving whilst others tell of drowning, both made possible by the perpetual circulation DeLoughrey writes about. However, because these are two different experiences, each narrative will accumulate differently; thus the sea alters language, structure, as well as genre.

In my analysis I will also consider the ways in which genre changes depiction; the Atlantic one reads in *The Salt Roads* is not the same Atlantic one reads in Okarafor's *Lagoon*. This is despite the fact that these narratives share similarities in genre. Hopkinson fuses the historical with the scientific; whilst Okarafor fuses the speculative with the scientific. My analysis is interested to know whether the sea modifies genre or vice versa.

In the narratives I examine, some characters have a more favoured access to the sea than others; for example, the marine biologist in *Reef* and Koleka Putuma have different vantage points to the sea. For Mister Salgado, the sea is to be respected because it is a scientific

haven, a world of possibility and enlightenment. For Putuma the sea is held in both contempt and veneration, contempt because of its history with violence, and veneration because of its links to the ancestral realm.

In my analysis – I will look at personhood in relation to the sea; whether the sea destabilizes our capitalist modes of being on land or actually just enhances them. For example, what is the difference between Putuma and Okarafor's Adoara? Adaora is a black female character with access to the sea as well as technology; she is also a marine biologist. Putuma stresses the fact that she does not have the diving material to make the deep ocean accessible, only the Shoprite plastic she uses to cover her hair for swimming. It is clear that the marine world is constantly implicated by our capitalist modes of being; it seems to bring to light the have's and don't haves. And those that do have the paraphernalia seem to have more access to the aquatic underworld. Yet, even those without the technological benefit can have access to this underworld through myth and fabulation, so is the ocean entirely capitalist?

Finally; and perhaps most importantly, my analysis will bring the question of the black aesthetic tradition into play, asking: what can be built from ruin? I will also look into the black ecological questions that have been raised by some of the scholars I work with, especially Joshua Bennett and Christina Sharpe whose work looks into black writing and its ecological tenor as well as the climate (in my case the ocean) as anti-black.

Chapter 1: Intimate Cartographies

Art production in Africa has deep and fundamental concerns with life and history underwater. One of the ways in which this is achieved is through the figure of the watermeisie; a figure who occupies different as well as perceptive understandings of life in the deep ocean. The watermeisie is a mermaid, a creature half-human and half fish. The term "watermeisie" is a South African rendering of the creature; she is branded otherwise in other parts of Africa. In Africa, the mermaid is interpreted in a way that brings forth cross cultural constructions of life underwater. The figure can also be read as having a deep-rooted history in slave memory, especially in the Southern and Eastern regions of Africa, as well as parts of the Atlantic. The figure gives us new kinds of access to understanding the undersea as an archive, or even a rubbish dump of our speculative cartographies. In this chapter I evoke the figure as mode or model, from which investigation into the before life, and the afterlife of slavery can be invigorated. I argue that the watermeisie is a speculative re-mapping of slave memory in Africa, the Caribbean, as well as the Americas. She presents us with cross cultural conceptions of slavery and how it is remembered, remade, and retold; through her, the archive is turned on its head as she is a nomadic traveller with no permanent dwelling. She thus reconfigures map making. In this chapter I deploy the western approaches to cartography underwater; "mapping" takes on a new meaning, this is without exempting it of its initial speculative nature. To give shape to my argument, this chapter proceeds in three parts: firstly, I look at debates on mapping the undersea; then I look at the historical background and context on the watermeisie; finally I analyse how the figure of the mermaid appears in selected works from three artists, namely Claudette Schreuder, Nelisiwe Xaba, as well as Wangechi Mutu. These artists have bought the watermeisie with all its diversity into focus by charting a map of slave genealogies using the roots and routes of slavery in and out of water.

The Heezen and Tharp Maps

Modern cartography has made significant attempts at mapping the undersea, and often, this is from a white, masculine, imperialist, as well as militarist, approach. The first comprehensive map of any ocean base was created in the US in the 1950s. It covered the North Atlantic region and was much inspired by cold war efforts (Doel et al. 605). The paper titled 'Extending modern cartography to the ocean depths: military patronage, Cold War priorities,

and the Heezen-Tharp mapping project, 1952-1959' published by the *Journal of Historical Geography* in 2006 details the profound advances in mid-twentieth century mapping. The first detailed maps of the seafloor were produced by geologists Heezen and Tharp and completed in the early Cold War period. The paper makes important points regarding maps and their speculative nature. The authors note that at the time, "both scientists and naval officers perceived the ocean floor as an international commons, and emphasized the importance of international cooperation in producing increasingly accurate ocean-floor maps" (Doel et al. 608). Of course in this case "international" is exclusive to the leading and most powerful countries at the time. What is important though is that sea mapping became "a far more nationalistic and secretive undertaking [as] World War 2 had caused the oceans to become far more relevant to national security because of two technological developments: long distance communications that utilised the acoustic properties of the sea, and antisubmarine warfare" (Doel et al. 608). Due to war, naval planners became concerned with "enemy lines" in the deep ocean, they improved maps solely for the basis of "understanding where submarines could travel undetected, where seamounts posed heightened risk collisions, as well as locating enemy submarines" (Doel et al. 608).

This mapping then was, is, infiltrated by contours detailing routes, ship tracks, and abstract and often unclear ocean territories without taking into account the multispecies ecosphere of the ocean, or even the evolving nature of ocean territory. The ocean was treated like an entity, with Navy officials worried more about robust antisubmarine defences and cartographic techniques. The maps were overdetermined. It would be false to write that the Heezen and Tharp physiographic map had no significant contribution to ocean mapping today; their physiographic diagram of the Atlantic Ocean "created the modern classification scheme for the world's ocean basis; moreover it was the most comprehensive map of any ocean ever produced until that time" (Doel et al. 616). The physiographic maps have "renditions" where "ridge mountains become sharper and more jagged; there are also familiar continental land forms and the more alien ocean-floor landscapes [that] became better understood with time" (Doel et al. 619). The maps were speculative not only for scientific purposes, but as stipulated by Doel and his co-writers, "the maps also resonated with popular as well as scientific audiences, […] their utility went beyond what [the] creators had originally envisioned or intended" (620). The maps were also entertainment since "they were scientific *and* subjective" (emphasis theirs; Doel et al. 620). No single narrative seems to capture the impact of the first Heezen and Tharp physiographic map (Doel et al. 620). In their

conclusion, the writers state that "all maps reflect the political and social circumstances and perspectives of their times [and that] scientific maps carry no fewer underlying assumptions than their political counterparts" (Doel et al. 620-21). To this day much of the oceans depth remains unexplored, and, much of what we know of the ocean is speculative.

Reading these maps with Astrida Neimanis and her concept of 'hydrologics' in mind would require a postmodern reading; a reading that will broaden our understanding as to the speculative nature of mapping. Maps have mixed heritages, and as the concept of the hydrologic teaches us that, "we can each chart our politics of location in a way that recognises our diverse aqueous implications and responsibilities" (Neimanis 24). In her discussion of the "hydrologic", Neimanis references Rosi Braidotti and also calls for "a 'cartographic method' that produces 'politically informed maps of the present' and acknowledges the changing and potentially contradictory locations in which one can find oneself" (24). Taking this statement into consideration, I argue that the deep ocean as location imparts the human not only as a body of water, but rather also as a body *in* water, and much of human speculation where the deep ocean is concerned has a lot to do with the human body itself. For one, for underwater maps to be drawn the submarine and the cartographer have to spend an incalculable amount of time underwater; and much of what is seen, is seen from the perspective of the body. In addition, the marine environment and our speculations of it are often associated with the political sensibilities of our times, because the undersea represents much of the undiscovered, unknown, territory. This unknowability is tied to our postmodern cartographic interest. It's also tied to the difficulty of getting down several kilometres. Furthermore, our speculation of the deep ocean today can only be accompanied by the historical. Hence, we cannot fathom the marine world without taking into account slavery, global warming, climate change, hydro-colonialism, species relations, the refugee crisis, and myths of origin, waste, the archive, race, power, gender, and the weather. In charting maps, we need be aware that "maps are not a neutral cartography, [t]hey rather chart a striated terrain where power circulates in multiple ways" (Neimanis 24). Water, the ocean, calls for a "politics of location that recognises that the subject is produced by their location and is thus implicated by the locations reproduction" (Neimanis 24) – we are implicated by the ocean and it by us.

The watermeisie can be seen as a mapping of our belonging and accountability as subjects in the deep ocean (Neimanis 26). She represents what Neimanis writes of as "figurations [that

are] precisely the way in which [we] powerfully incite an imaginative political space, while at the same time refusing to be cast as mere metaphor" (26).

Intimate Contact Zones

The watermeisie is a mythic nomadic subject that lives in the deep ocean, from the pelagic to the benthic with continuous resurfacings to the shore and other small bodies of freshwater. The figure is half-human, half fish; in other representations the figure appears as a huge snake. She is an often overlaid and contradictory subject, occupying various and overlapping spaces in the world of mythology. I refer to her as the "watermeisie" because that is how she was introduced to my imaginary. The name of the watermeisie frequents South African townships, where she is an urban phenomenon who is not entirely liberated from the traditional knowledges of her. The term "watermeisie" is an Afrikaans one and here one can make speculations with regard to the tenuous link between Afrikaans, slavery, and the already existing myths of the mermaid. The histories and lineages of the watermeisie are difficult to trace. However as an Afrikaans and hence creole word, we can at least speculate that its origins are tied up with the early histories of the Cape and that the term carries a creolized genealogy within itself. Traditionally, the mermaid is prevalent in Nguni and Shona cultures who understand her as embodying transformative powers in water.

Water is an "abode and manifestation of the life-generating snake/mermaid divinities, and its vitality is premised on a relational epistemology that insists on correct human relations and reciprocity with the natural/spirit world" (Bernard 141). As Penelope Bernard maintains in her '"Living Water" in Nguni Healing Traditions, South Africa':

> In the medium of water, these divinities occupy and move between the subterranean, the terrestrial and celestial worlds, uniting these together in a vital cosmic flow of life. Not only are these divinities believed to generate and constitute life, but, through the medium of water in its various manifestations, they communicate with, teach, initiate and establish reciprocal relations with certain individuals and groups. These communication links are achieved primarily through dreams, other living creatures and underwater submersion encounters […]. (148)

However, in South Africa, due to the forced or semi-forced migration many were subjected to during apartheid the divinities that occupy water were also modified. Migration and the isolationist nature of apartheid in some ways led to a distinct separation of communities from natural resources, such as bodies of water, the celestial powers that the medium of water

carries were also affected. The figure of the watermeisie frequents South African townships in a rather different light that tends to overpower the deific qualities she maintains in certain traditions and cultures. The meisie is usually said to have been sighted in local rivers and dams; she is used as a tool of terror towards children, this is to reduce the enticement of local rivers and dams as children are susceptible to drowning. The watermeisie is also said to be of help to, or even collaborates with those who meddle with witchcraft. In her more urban configuration, she occupies an enchanting and yet terrible space (in saying this I rely on the way in which she was introduced to my imaginary). Even though her existence is indeed questionable, it is interesting that she is associated with evil, malice, and disappearance.

Representations of her are predominant in West Africa too, in Nigeria she appears as the Mami Wata. Her name quite literally translates to "mother of the water"; and it is without doubt that water has held a dominant as well as ambivalent role in West African societies. Alex van Stipriaan notes that "on both sides of the Atlantic the water spirit came to be depicted as a very attractive, enormously wealthy mermaid-like woman with long, straight hair and a relatively light complexion, who lives in the waters in a paradise-like underworld, which, according to some, is the ultimate reversal of the daily reality of her worshippers" (van Stripriaan 324). Visual representations of Nigeria's Mami Wata have always had her feature a large snake, this snake is seen curled around her, its head between her breasts. Throughout African lore she is known for her lascivious nature, alluring and charming, especially to men. European sailors are also known to carry stories of her.

As Alex van Stipriaan in his 'Watramama/Mami Wata Three Centuries of Creolization of a Water Spirit in West Africa, Suriname and Europe' also maintains that European vessels arrived "with impressive figureheads of mermaids and other mythological figures, and the stories told by the sailors on board these ships, for whom mermaids, sirens, water-nymphs and other supernatural creatures from the water formed part of their daily world-view, and who sometimes even worshipped the figureheads on their ships" (van Stripriaan 325). Stories of the figure seem to live in a time capsule that moves with the process of modernity. In her more archaic personality, she appears in dreams and ancestral ritual with some supposed sightings. Yet by the time of the Atlantic slave trade she is more commonly associated with how she "kidnaps people while they are swimming or riding in a boat, and she brings them to her underwater palace. On other occasions she might be caught by surprise by people – almost always men – who unexpectedly happen to meet her near the water combing her hair while looking in a mirror. She always flees immediately, leaving behind her comb, mirror or

other items" (van Stripriaan 325). Combs and mirrors do of course indicate to a post-contact period but they equally encompass traditions translating these into modern categories. In visual representations Mami Wata's trinkets appear "expensive"; and this may be because they are still viewed with the same naïve eyes of the period. Often materials with little to no value were used by Europeans in exchange for slaves. As Joseph Conrad's Marlow accounts in *The Heart of Darkness*: "a coast caravan came in with trade goods – ghastly glazed calico that made you shudder only to look at it, glass beads value about a penny a quart, confounded spotted cotton" (40).

I read the urban legend of the watermeisie and the Mami Wata as embodying the link between water, spirit myths, and slavery in that they bring forth the flotsam and jetsam of African societies in flux with the global trade networks of the time. Nicolas Argenti writes that "the mami wata cults and stories of Africa are a modern phenomenon, tracing the imbrication of African societies into global trade networks in the form of extractive economies that find their apogee in the transatlantic slave trade" (237)". The figure's wealth, the objects she is associated with (the comb and the mirror specifically), the kidnappings, luck, submergence and her association with the deep ocean all seem to speak back to the "before life" and the "after-life" of slavery (to borrow a phrase from Bennett). Slavery did equal wealth to some Africans who were in positions of power; slavery also meant water and thus disappearance, a departure to the unknown through the crossing of water.

Saidiya Hartman in her engagement with the slave archive writes that "to read the archive is to enter a mortuary; it permits one final viewing and allows for a last glimpse of persons about to disappear into the slave hold" (23). In a heartfelt narration of a visit to Ghana, her "homeland", Hartman was saddened to discover that even in the 21st century Ghanaians "at least those of the elite classes in the south, [when they] thought about slavery, they envisioned a "distant cousin from the north" washing clothes and preparing meals in a well-appointed home, the pretty slave wife of their grandfather, or the foreigners in their village. They exulted in the wealth of slave-trading ancestors, if only because it was less humiliating to have been a merchant than to have been a slave" (58). And for those who crossed the waters and years later needed a sense of belonging beyond the hold, they had:

[N]o other world to forget. They might have tired of stories of life across the water, let the past fall away, and set their eyes on a future different from the present. Unlike the love of the bozales, the ones born in Africa or the "saltwater" blacks, for the country they had lost, the love of Creole children for

an imagined country across the ocean would not have been weighted by experience but borne by loss and fueled by fantasy. Yet for those bound to a hostile land by shackles, owners, and the threat of death, an imagined place might be better than no home at all, an imagined place might afford you a vision of freedom, an imagined place might provide an alternative to your defeat, an imagined place might save your life. (Hartman 76)

All is lost in the ocean - belonging, the mirrors and the combs, some of the slaves themselves, myth, truth, origin, past, present, the future; and figures like the Mami Wata and the watermeisie bring the crossings, the confusions, the amalgamations together beyond just the state of metaphor but as "imagined places", the "before life", the "after life", those who gained mothers like Mami Wata and her wealth and others who lost mothers, like Hartman.

These figures carry the intimate material histories of the ocean, histories that are not to be confounded with the "archaic", the "traditional", and the nonsensical all the time. Rather they are contemporary phenomenon re-shaped by contemporary histories of the ocean, like slavery. They are cartographic figures, while also through them we can read an oceanic historical timeline.

Art Production

The meisie produces cross cultural understandings of life underwater. Three artists who have bought the watermeisie with all its diversity into focus are Claudette Schreuder, Nelisiwe Xaba, and Wangechi Mutu.



Watermeisie,

Claudette Schreuder 2011

Cross-cultural ping-pong attains championship heights in Claudette Schreuder's hauntingly lovely *Watermeisie*. The figure has her head down facing the head of the snake. She seems to be communicating with it as it also faces her head on. Her hair alludes to a wetness which means that she is or has been in water. This watermeisie does not look terrifying or even evil; she also does not exude the outrageous femininity the watermeisie is known for; in fact, she looks introverted, somewhat kind, it is the snake that is so comfortable around her that might make one question her, if at all. Although the figure alludes to Eve, mermaids and carved, poly-chromed figureheads, there is also an African influence implicit in the stylised physiognomy of the sculpture. The figure is made of wood and resembles the Baule colon figures of West Africans that were made to represent Europeans in response to colonialism. The colon figures were often read as caricature as they had oversized heads and very small bodies. The genre of the colon figure has evolved into a decorative and a souvenir in West and Central Africa. Claudette Schreuder has managed to use what many would have seen as decorative to reflect the ambiguities of the search for "authentic" African identities; especially for white Africans. Her *Watermeisie* traverses three understandings of the

mermaid: the South African concept of the watermeisie, as Mami Wata (the figure has a snake wrapping itself around the tail), as well as a sort of Eve of the waters. Many descriptions of the watermeisie figure her as "pale"; yet Schreuder seems to have created her, quite clearly, as a white woman.

Born in 1973, in Pretoria, Schreuder now lives in Cape Town where she graduated from the Michaelis Art School. Her work, usually carved from wood, is that of narrative and storytelling. Her artist profile on The Artists' Press website indicates that her "sculptures demonstrate a convergence of African and European influences from the colon figures of West Africa to medieval church sculpture, Spanish portraiture and Egyptian wood carving. Their stocky bodies, solid stance and staring eyes 'own' space in a very particular way, partly indebted to the shape of the block of wood from which they emerge" ("The Artists' Press"). The website (The Artists' Press) also describes her work as showcasing "'modern deities' who face modern problems", continuing to state that her "figures have 'the potential to cure' as well as create space for ourselves in environments we have often viewed as 'alien'". Schreuder herself views her approach as being "western" and yet very much influenced by the African; and thus her work should be read as a mixture or the convergence of two identities that do sometimes clash. In an interview with *Between 10and5*, a digital publishing company with a focus on the contemporary art world, Schreuder explains that the figure of the mermaid appears quite frequently in her work because "she likes the idea of a mermaid as a kind of lost girl, not at home in either land or water" ("Between 10and5"); she reveals that she is "amazed at how universal this creature is, she exists in many diverse cultures, simultaneously attractive and repulsive (Claudette Schreduers).

Her *Watermeisie* is an ambiguous figure shrouded by multiple beginnings; it alludes to the primordial as well as the contemporary with an honesty that is distilled by Schreuder's excellent use of material. *Watermeisie* is the progeny of movement through both land and water by various people who disseminated in Africa through trade; she is inspired by West African figures of the mythic Mami Wata who conflates water and serpent spirits along with the attributes of European women. As I have already indicated, cult figures of Mami Wata loom large in the West African voodoo religion, which assimilated elements derived from African slaves dispersed in the Caribbean islands and the American south. This global array of diverse strands is plaited together by a white artist reinterpreting African prototypes derived from the voodoo icons of America and the Caribbean in the light of her European heritage. Schreuder practices a multi-faceted slave memory. Her *Watermeisie* provides an

example of the contact zone above and underwater as well as the dizzying labyrinth of echo and reflection that dismantles stereotypes to reveal the rich compost of symbiosis on which our art so heartily thrives.



The Urban Mermaid, Nelisiwe Xaba 2016

Similarly Nelisiwe Xaba also distances her urban mermaid from what we all know her to be. Xaba's mermaid, much like Schreuder's reconfigures the mythical figure in a much more contemporary light. "*The Urban Mermaid* takes its inspiration from the mythical creature with a body half-woman and half-fish, known by various names – Mami Wata, Sirene, Mamlambo, Watermeisie, Madame Poisson" (Goodman Gallery site). Xaba recreates these stories in her performance through costume – made of a children's swimming pool and blue plastic wrap – and sound, a mix of Diamanda Galas. The photo above was taken from an installation at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, June 2016. It was a once-off performance featured in an exhibition titled 'New Revolutions'. In the performance, the artist appears in various frames and positions; at one point she is swimming, in another she is sitting watching the audience look at her, and then eventually we get to the frame where she drinks wine in a laid back position with her goggles on. The movement was crystallized by the peculiar sounds of a Diamanda Galas mix. Diamanda Galas is a Greek- American dramatic soprano, composer and pianist whose sound and performances are known for their

thought provoking qualities. The sound is dark and gloomy; her rendition of 'Gloomy Sunday' by Billie Holiday rids it of its pop qualities for a darker, abysmal, sound. This sound contrasts quite starkly with the plastic feel of the *The Urban Mermaid.*

Xaba works with performance during her exhibitions; in this particular exhibition Xaba is focused on the urban experience of the watermeisie. Xaba also engages with interesting materials like plastic to connote life in the urban areas; plastic is also one of the leading waste materials in the marine world today. The urban mermaid also wears a silvery long wig, as well as plastic goggles; an adamant removal of the watermeisie from her traditional African self. Xaba's mermaid is a Sandton champagne sipping one; in fact, an expensive bottle of wine is featured in the exhibition; and the mermaid is seen drinking a glass in one of the photos taken from the installation. The watermeisie here represents a lavish, watery life. The swimming pool signifies an extravagant life, the wig self-care as well as the modern girl in Johannesburg today. She is indeed "a meisie"; in the sense that the word is often used to refer to those who can afford to keep maids. Born and raised in Soweto, Dube, Xaba is probably aware of the terror tales of the watermeisie in the township; she has in her own way spun the tale around. The terror of the meisie is the terror of city life. The Diamanda Galas mix also evokes this terror; the plastic looks exasperatingly bright compared to the sound. The meisie is care-free and lazing around; she seems to have no priorities or obligations, except drinking her wine. Xaba uses a lot of plastic in her installation; the mermaid's tail is made of blue plastic wrapping, the goggles are plastic, and so is the children's swimming pool – all plastic. Xaba may be making reference to the often fake and "plastic" lives of black modern girls who do it for the "gram" (Instagram); she may also be referring to the uncertainty of their lifestyles, using the figure of the mermaid. The mermaid here is given its typical Hollywood being; this is Ariel and not the watermeisie; and Xaba is making a distinct, albeit silent, distinction between the two.

Xaba's urban mermaid is perforated by her capitalist mode of being; she exists in the modern category. For her, her intimate histories are without the traditional garb; she is self-made. Titled 'The Urban Mermaid' and featured in an exhibition titled 'New Revolutions', the installation is obstinately removing itself from outdated conceptions. There is no sea but a plastic pool. Xaba is making reference to our modern extravagant lives and how very soon there will be no marine life but our plastic pools and glasses of wine, and as we languish, we lose both heritage and environment. The pool is situated in a garden that is covered by the

stage, the green garden is encroaching from the sides of the stage, and it is this side-lined nature that also catches our attention alongside the resting body of the mermaid.

If the previous artworks reference the transcultural character and modern urban manifestation of the watermeisie myth, Wangechi Mutu's exhibition *Nguva na Nyoka (Sirens and Serpents)* at London's Victoria Miro gallery, showing from 14 October to 19 December 2014 deploys the African mermaid symbolism in a third direction:



History Trolling, Wangechi Mutu 2014

"Wangechi Mutu looked to ancient mythologies from Africa and the Arab world, exploring the troubling spirit of mermaids and the abyssal mystery of the sea, where sailors are seduced and annihilated" (Victoria Miro site). The exhibition is accompanied by a film titled *Nguva*, the film, directed by the artist is only three minutes long. The film opens with an unsettling scream; we get the sense that the nguva is in the deep waters as it is completely dark for the first few seconds. Then there are flashes of movement in the dark water, we see the nguva swimming deeper into the water. Around her there is a red hue that dyes the water, it might be blood. In the next scene the nguva is walking on a sandy shoreline. She is veiled with a dark cloth. She is walking away from the ocean. The third scene opens with her in a garden, completely covered in the black veil. She seems lost. Then it is night and she appears as a hysterical beast whose menacing force slowly dissipates, eventually, she cannot breath, her eyes have a red otherworldly glow to them. She is disappearing into thin air. She cannot

survive without, and above the water. The film takes us into the literal darkness of the undersea as well as the suffocating life outside the sea. The nguva, despite her wishes to fully occupy her human body, cannot survive long without water.

Through this magical metamorphosis, Mutu creates a surreal landscape between life and death, reality and dreams, the female body transforming into sites of geo-political existence. In her works Mutu proposes worlds within worlds, populated by powerful hybridised female figures. For Mutu, the nguva and news of it being sited in East African coasts is also evident of the various ways rumour can turn into news, this is interesting to Mutu as she imbues fact and fiction in her own work. In most of her work Mutu "uses unexpected materials such as tea, batik fabrics, synthetic hair, Kenyan soil, feathers, and sand, amongst other media - many of which are imbued with their own cultural significations" (Victoria Miro site).

In the painting titled 'History Trolling' the nguva is represented as a beast whose body is of a multiple worlding, she is not merely half-woman half-fish; but also has an elephant's nose for a head as well as tusks and a leopard tail. Her arms seem to be made of spiky material that could either be plant or bone. She is inside the ocean. We can see the blue of the upper ocean and the black muck of the underneath. It seems like she carries waste with her; actual litter as well as what looks like the heads of people, and traditional masks. She is surrounded by floating stone. "History" in this painting takes a material significance, it is also being brought into the ocean by the nguava. History itself becomes a literal and a figurative waste material. The nguva is either drowning history, or drowning in history. Mutu here does not confound history with a single narrative; she has bought even contemporary histories such as the waste the ocean carries into the forefront. In drowning history or rather configuring the ocean as a place in which, as Derek Walcott teaches, history is confined, Mutu simultaneously evokes the very end of the world. The painting suggests two things, that without history there is no world, and that without the ocean, there is no history and thus, no world. Mutu also brings all that will end with the ocean into the undending depths of the ocean; and the nguva, who has the privilege of calling the deep ocean home, acts as a tour guide for those whose final home will be the ocean.

Conclusion

Although these art projects highlight the amalgamation of cultures, they are also in fact riddled by the violence of slavery at sea, except for Xaba's work which is more centred on

the urban. They, however, all refer to the oral and material narratives to make sense of the terror of both slavery and the urban life; they also yield and produce the afterlife of slavery, arrayed and adorned by the before life.

History is indeed locked in the confines of the deep sea, and read as dimension, the sea is both matter and metaphor. The ocean layers are places from which notions of waste and the archive and their relationship with the "figurative darkness" can be envisaged and new cartographic contact zones drawn. The figure of the watermeisie encapsulates this figurative darkness as well as what Bennett speaks of as the afterlife of slavery – she propels us to "theorize black ecopoetics not as a matter of ground but as an occasion to think at the intersection of terra firma and open sea, surface and benthos, the observable ocean as well as the uncharted blackness at its very bottom" (Bennett 103). She forces us to think through the possibilities of becoming and being multiple as well as rethinking sociality outside of the human body. Her presence is that of a deathly persistence, pushing us away from stereotypical notions of the female body and its relation with birthing. The ocean is the archive of her being. In her we find both "otherworldly despair and fugitive possibility: uncharted, uncommon marronage made possible by the opacity of the oceanic realm" (Bennett 108). She is "drowned and undead" (Bennett 109). The watermeisie allows us to rewrite the myth of origin as well as memory making in the deep ocean, looking into the multiple ecologies and femininities below the sea, femininities that exist even above sea.

Chapter 2:

‘From shining sea to shining sea’: Feminist Epistemologies of the Ocean

In this chapter I look into feminist epistemologies of the ocean in order to examine the ways in which contemporary writings, from women, have attempted to rewrite the masculine and often indulgent narratives of the ocean. This genealogy of “feminist subjectivity, watered” (Neimanis) is especially prominent in, Nalo Hopkinson’s *The Salt Roads*, Angela Carter’s ‘Black Venus’, Koleka Putuma’s ‘Water’ and Nnedi Okarafor’s *Lagoon*. These texts write femininities into the ocean through stylistic expansivity using racial and sexual metaphors to speak back to slavery in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, except for *Lagoon* whose focus is not on slavery. For the writers, history is in the ocean; and it is also through the marine environment that we can begin to understand a more-than-human sociality. The ocean is also a place from which blackness can be explored; these writers provide a swift response, as well as significance, to Bennett’s connection of blackness and the deep ocean.

Feminist writing has made great leaps into the domains of feeling, and fact. There are also some advances in the field gesturing towards post-humanism and the politics of sensibility. Much of feminist writing is still focused on the female body and the everyday, without making connections to the natural world. However, writers like Astrida Neimanis (2013), Stacy Alaimo (1994), Koleka Putuma (2017), and Gabeba Baderoon (2009) do have bodies of work on feminist subjectivities and their relationship to the ecosphere. Water and the ocean have become a predominant conceptual as well as material possibility for creative and scholarly feminist writings. Feminist discourse then, has become watered, and watery. In her ‘Feminist subjectivity, watered’, Astrida Neimanis calls for a “conceptual creativity” in thinking through contemporary feminist subjectivity (23). She proposes that “reimagining oneself as a ‘body of water’ opens possibilities for a posthumanist feminism that specifically addresses the need to cultivate more ecologically responsible relations to water” (24). In her writing Neimanis evokes the politics of location, calling for a critical materialist approach to cartography, emphasising the centrality of water, “beyond the abstracted notions of fluidity” (24). She refers to this as the “hydrologics in which watery bodies partake […] water already swims through various feminist writings, creating an ontological, epistemological and ethico-

political space for feminist subjectivity, *watered*" (24). I am enchanted by the term, "hydrologics" because where the deep ocean is concerned, cartography continues to resurrect theories that consistently mark the ocean as a space for discovery. Hydrologics help us chart new maps, new imaginaries, new crossings, and new histories of and in water; problematizing as well as rewriting the ideas surrounding "discovery". Notions of "discovery" are implicated in those of colonialism, marking the ocean, as Isabel Hofmeyr and Kerry Brystrom illustrate, as the principal location for hydro-colonialism. Hydrologics demand that we rethink our political and materialist conceptions of the deep ocean, as well as the historical, and often masculine, endeavours to conquer it.

The texts in this chapter create an epistemological space for feminist subjectivity using water as a conceptual framework. As a conceptual framework for these texts, water is understood beyond the abstract notions of its mutability, but rather as a material that maps new imaginaries within feminist writing.

The Salt Roads

Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads* reconstructs entire mythologies from Africa and the Caribbean with an intense vision of black social life beneath and above the sea. Caribbean born, Hopkinson has lived in Canada from the age of sixteen. It is no secret that despite its omission from Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, Canada has a profound history of slavery. As indicated by Nancy Kang in her 'Revolutionary Viragoes: Othered Mothering in Afro-Caribbean Diaspora Literature'; "the roots of black Canadians and their literature [are] established by the abundant traffic commodities, both human and non-human, which eventually spread, as the national motto goes, 'from shining sea to shining sea'" (696). *The Salt Roads* is a novel that joins the world's seas and rivers as well as bodily waters in an exploration of becoming in a world that is not only anti-black, but also anti-female. The oceans are indeed roads; and Hopkinson is crafty in how she writes the black body as a traveller of these roads.

In *The Salt Roads* three women are connected in time and space by the water goddess Lasirén who is able to inhabit their bodies despite physical remoteness from each other. The novel is a sequence of narratives offered by all three women - firstly by Mer, a slave woman who doubles as midwife and doctress in the colony of San Domingue, secondly by Jeanne Duval who is the mistress of poet Charles Baudelaire, and finally by Thais who becomes the sanctified prostitute St. Mary of Egypt. These women are united across African diasporic

waters by the fluid presence of Lasirén, a newborn goddess, whose voice meanders through vignettes. Lasirén, also referred to as Ezili in the novel, is able to connect with these women because of their relationship with salt – be it the salt of tears or that used to baptize slaves to alien regions. Lasirén is the water mother, the migratory, polymorphous, goddess who traverses the salt roads as well as these women's minds and bodies.

The novel begins with three Caribbean slave women (Mer, Tipingee, and Georgine) who have assembled to bury Georgine's stillborn baby on the island of St. Dominigue, now Haiti, when Lasirén is called upon by their prayers and lamentations. Lasirén uses the stillborn baby's "unused vitality" (40) to gain access into the physical world. After the burial and with her new powers, Lasirén traverses the everyday realities of Mer, Jeanne, and Thais, who despite physical distance across the African diaspora face similar struggles under unjust anti-black systems. They struggle through a hostile world without knowledge of the goddess' interference, but with her guidance nonetheless. She enters their thoughts and their bodies, through her, we see that these women are significantly bound by the salt road – the roads of their sweat, blood, and tears. Hopkinson uses sexuality as a method into these roads, albeit avoiding caricatures of women as merely diminished prostitutes, stereotypes that often offer usable histories. Hopkinson delves into the fabulous to offer us something more than just "the black woman's narrative".

By the end of the novel Mer, despite her magic and ability to heal, continues to suffer as a slave. Lasirén plants the seed of revolution in her mind and the slaves eventually hatch a plan to bring down their masters. Jeanne Duval suffers with syphilis and she still cannot free Charles Baudelaire, her lover, from his mother's control, yet at the end of her life Jeanne is described as having found love and contentment through Lasirén. The third woman Thais flees her enslavement for Egypt where is she known as Saint Mary.

In the novel, salt and water are used to signify the ocean as well as the human body. The novel brings together sea salt with corporeal salt to distil a kind of transformative continuity of the black female body from ocean to land as well as the experience of the Afro-diasporic woman. An example of this is when Georgine gives birth to her stillborn baby and Mer, her midwife, sees the miscarried baby as a "soul gone beneath the waters" (30). The foetus is then "buried" in the river which acts as a conduit between mother, ocean, and child. The unnamed river will transport the baby to the ancestral realm in the ocean. Through this burial we can also see that; again, the water is used as gravesite, re-visiting the millions of slaves

who died at sea. During the burial the baby is said to "return beneath the waters to the spirits" (30); much like Toni Morrison's baby ghost, Beloved, who emerges from the waters, from the spirits. The watery underworld here is envisioned as a spiritual world for both dead and alive slaves; in fact, the ocean is so heavily implicated in slavery. Mer relates to the reader that when a slave arrives on the shores of St. Domingue the "white god's priests used sea water to make the magic cross on our foreheads and bind us with salt to this land" (10). Hopkinson forces us to rethink the cleavage between nature and culture (Neimanis 27), reminding us that, as Neimanis writes, "we carry other life forms in us, inscribed in our own movements, expressions and capacities […] we are bodies of water, but we also reside within and as part of a fragile global hydrocommons where water – the life blood of humans and all other bodies on this planet – is increasingly contaminated, commodified and dangerously reorganised" (27).

Much later in the novel when Mer is aware of Lasirén's presence, they begin to meet and communicate. Lasirén takes the form of a mermaid and Mer is directed by Lasirén to find out why the salt roads are blocked, stagnant and swampy. Mer supposes that Lasirén is speaking of the actual sea, where they, Lasirén and Mer, meet. In anger, Lasirén replies "Not this sea! Stupid child!" (65). Lasirén is speaking of "[t]he sea in the minds of my Ginen, the sea roads, the salt roads. And the sweet ones, too; the rivers", and from Mer, "salt tears sprang from my eyes" (65). The novel consistently fuses bodily and aquatic water. Nancy Kang in her analysis of the novel also references Gretchen J. Michlitsch's observation that "Salt is the blood of birth, of stillbirth, of women's courses, and it drips off the backs of men and women whipped in the cane fields" (711). Thus, the human body is implicated by the ocean's salt, the ocean by the human's blood.

Nalo Hopkinson works with a feminist narratology to give body to the figure of the speculative traveller:

> I can direct my own pulse now. I see how to do it. I, we, rise, flow out of ebb, read the wet roads of tears, of blood, salt, break like waves into our infinite selves, and dash into battle. (305)

The body is written as oceanic in more ways than one in the novel; the body becomes a perspective into the deep ocean. Another example of the latter: sea and salt are heavily instigated through the vagina – tongues "dip in" the hole and when Lise and Jeanne are together in bed, Jeanne speaks of "the salty liquor of her spread in my mouth" (15). The vagina is also associated with depths one might associate with the deep ocean, and

Hopkinson uses the homosexual love between Jeanne and Lise (who are both prostitutes) to navigate otherness. In bed, Jeanne and Lise perform a magical feat using their chamber pot to see who their true loves will be. When Jeanne smokes during the ceremony, she sees the swirl of her smoke in the piss pot (20), "floating on its bloody waters" (20). She stares in the pot and waits, remembering how her "grandmamman would sometimes buy live chickens in the market for us to eat; [s]he would cut their clucking throats on our back stoop, let the blood fall there. For the spirits to drink, she said. Fresh blood was life, she said. But she said the blood of a woman's time was stale, not fresh" (22). The female body, and its bloody waters, is evoked here as something both remarkable and dirty.

Lasirén is an interesting character for me, the one who survived drowning, and adapted to the ecosphere of the ocean, as well as the social life beneath water. When she emerges, she emerges as goddess and enchantress of the ocean; she is prayed to by her living ancestors above water:

I'm born from song and prayer. A small life, never begun, lends me its unused vitality. I'm born from mourning and sorrow and three women's tearful voices. I'm born from countless journeys chained tight in the bellies of ships. Born from hope vibrant and hope destroyed. Born of bitter experience. Born of wishing for better. I'm born. It's when my body hits the water, cold flow welling up in a crash to engulf me that I begin to become. I'm sinking down in silver-blue wetness bigger than a universe. I open my mouth to scream, but get cold water inside. Drowning! – (40)

Lasirén reminisces of her own drowning, her becoming. When she is called upon by the "three women's tearful voices" (40), these women are Tipingee, Mer, and Georgine who summon the goddess, nomadic spirit traveller, and implore that she take the stillborn child underwater. It is almost as if she is woken up from her death at sea, her grave:

The iron links of the chains break. Freed, I push out in front of me with my fingers. Those things kicking behind me are my legs. I pump them harder. Begin to rise, rise up through the blue water. No, I am not drowning. I do not seem to be a breathing creature, to be drowning. I rise faster and faster till I am flying. The water heats from the speed of my passing – heats but does me no harm – boils to mist until it is no longer liquid, but clouds I am flying through. (42)

References to slavery and freedom are made simultaneously here, signifying that even though the ocean's surface is complicit in the transportation of slaves, the oceans depths might pertain to an unrivalled, afterlife, freedom. For Lasirén, the iron links of the chains break, and she pushes in front of her with her fingers, she also remarks that "those things

kicking behind me are my legs" (42). It is clear that she may still be in human form, as you'd expect creatures in the undersea to need more than just fingers and legs to survive and swim. From this, we can conjecture that Lasirén is a drowned slave, who has survived the underworld and exists in the afterlife. The water also heats from her speed, but it does her no harm, eventually, it is no longer liquid but clouds that she is 'flying' through. Hopkinson seems to suggest that Lasirén's body has overcome or is in the process of overcoming the fear of water. Water becomes companion, and a different sort of transportation. She pulses through it until it is cloud.

> How do I know them as clouds? How do I know anything? How is it that my arms stretched out in front of me are so pale? How do I even know they should be brown like rich riverbank mud, as they were when I was many goddesses and many worshippers, ruling in lands on the other side of a great, salty ocean? (42)

Cloud, unlike water, suggests not heaviness but the ability to float, happily, dream like. Lasirén is on her way to the river where Georgine's stillborn will be buried; and through her, Hopkinson gives water a different, otherworldly, significance outside of the world of slavery. Her body becomes pale unlike the muddy brown she remembers. This passage and the burial before it also connote the ocean as a place for the ancestors. Lasirén has become an ancestor. Through her death, and birth, at sea, Lasirén has become – she exalts in the sheer power of her now powerful body. The deep ocean for her is an "elsewhere, however remote or deeply submerged, where black life [her black body] can flourish" (Bennett 109). The opacity of the ocean makes this possible. Hopkinson uses the figure of Lasirén to engage with the "non-human sociality, [so] that we recognize the work of Afrodiasporic ecopoetics – and black study more broadly – as species thinking, as ecological thought at the end of the world" (Bennett 111). Through Lasirén, the pelagic hell and black fugitivity in the deep ocean are not without possibility; especially when the black aesthetic comes into play. The black aesthetic is able to fathom a social world out of death itself. The activity of remaking birth in the face of death is cross cultural, it crosses waters, hence Lasirén cannot belong anywhere, but is different everywhere.

Black Venus

Carter and Hopkinson both work through the archival, historically derived stories surrounding the historical figure Jeanne Duval to unpack notions of dispossession and sexuality. Jeanne Duval was a Haitian-born actress and dancer of mixed French and black

African ancestry. For twenty years, she was the muse of French poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire . They met in 1842, when Duval left Haiti for France, and the two remained together, albeit stormily, for the next two decades. Duval is said to have been the woman whom Baudelaire loved most in his life, after his mother. She was born in Haiti on an unknown date, sometime around 1820. Her passage to France, although Carter says very little of it, is at the heart of the short story: "The custard-apple of her stinking Eden she, this forlorn Eve, bit – and was all at once transported here, as in a dream; and yet she is a *tabula rasa*, still" (1). In *The Salt Roads*, Jeanne Duval and her story centre around financial and economic freedom; she is also in some ways intellectually enslaved by the poet Charles. Yet at the end of the novel there is some redemption for Jeanne, she is loved and content. Her narrative does not pan out in exactly the same way in the short story.

In the short story we meet an unhappy Jeanne whose life is spent in Charles' flat as a kept woman. Carter uses the historical figure to debunk the myth of exotic femininity. The short story begins with the deconstruction of Baudelaire exotic myth; we see Jeanne's sadness as well as her sass. She teases and mocks Charles, and it is only after a drink or two that she allows him to unpin her hair. The story progresses and we also notice that Carter has been constructing Jeanne as an ordinary woman whose dark skin and creole origin allows for her subjugation. We understand that Jeanne is a muse to Charles, he keeps her in the flat for his own poetic insights, "his eloquence denies her language" (9), and his poetry is a "perpetual affront to her" (18). Jeanne spends her days idling and dancing for Charles, who only treats her as an object and not a human being. The short story is a description of her life in the flat. We notice almost immediately that she keeps a particular disdain for him, but also a financial and economic dependence. At the end of the story, Charles has died, and Jeanne has syphilis; she manages to travel back home with a new found brother. Her passage is described as comfortable, compared to the slave route her grandmother endured. Jeanne's redemption is that Baudelaire's literary production, with her as muse, has secured a material existence for her. She herself is surprised to know how much she is worth after his death. She sells some of his manuscripts and gifts too, which carry her till her old age in the Caribbean; at the end of the story we are told that "she succumbs to the ache in her bones" (13). Yet, for Carter there is no full redemption for Jeanne despite her economic freedom; Charles' writing has taken away her personality, his disease has also destroyed her physical existence. At the end of the story she is described as one who had to snatch herself away from the lion's mouth (13). By

the end of *The Salt Roads*, Jeanne, the *tabula rasa*, is filled with love and contentment; in the short story, she remains empty, albeit, saved.

The sea is a conceptual framework for both narratives, it brings forth the poetics of destruction as well as discovery – and in each instance Jeanne Duval is the hydropoetic jewel, whose lineage is that of dispossession and demolition. Carter and Hopkinson work with fabulation and desire to track Duval's origin – the myth of her origin is not as clear cut in 'Black Venus' as it is in *The Salt Roads*. Carter writes:

> Nobody seems to know in what year Jeanne Duval was born […] Where she came from is a problem; books suggest Mauritius, in the Indian Ocean or Santo Domingo, in the Caribbean, take your pick of the two different sides of the world. […] The splendid continent to which her skin allied her had been excised from her memory. She had been deprived of history; she was the pure child of the colony. The colony – white, imperious – had fathered her. Her mother went off with the sailors and her granny looked after her in one room with a rag-covered bed. (8)

Carter is clearly interested in the myth of her origin although she will not let loose with a definite dot on the map. We are however led to believe that Jeanne has a vicious history with the ocean and its various members – her mother went off with sailors, and her great-grandmother was eaten by sharks: "Her granny said to Jeanne: I was born in the ship where my mother died and was thrown into the sea. Sharks ate her. Another woman of some other nation who had just still-born suckled me". (8)

It is clear then that the ocean and its viciousness are Jeanne's lineage, the history that has been "excised from her memory", especially the memories of the painful demise of both her great-grandmother and her mother. Her great-grandmother having been eaten by sharks is an important factor when considering death at sea. Marcus Rediker writes of the role of the shark in the slave trade: "The shark played an important character in the drama of life on the slave ship, indeed a symbol of the violence and the terror of the trade" (286) – the bodies of slaves as well the masters were a huge attraction for sharks; and what was thrown overboard whether it be object, body or offal, did not always reach the ocean's floor. Slave ships played a significant role in shaping the terror associated with sharks today; many slaves were fed to sharks to dissuade others from drowning themselves. In conjuring this terror Carter discourages us from the simple romanticization of a slave drowning; it also emphasises the drowning itself, slaves continued to drown themselves despite the horror presented by sharks.

Through evoking the genealogy of Jeanne and its terror; Carter reminds us of the gendered commerciality of the time – Jeanne, unlike her ancestors has survived. This survival of terror allows her to "put on" and masquerade her sexuality for her lover Charles. Charles becomes the saviour, and Jeanne the wench who is in a fact prize in the afterlife of the ship and the hold. She keeps him for financial security; she obtrudes her unorthodox body onto Charles so that he may never forget her corporeal existence.

Carter is presenting us with histories of hydropoetics; signalling to the ways in which water is used as a conceptual tool to think about history, memory, and globalization. Jeanne's own passage into the poet's arms is that of terror, desire, climate, and charm. Whereas her ancestry and their femininity were nothing to be treasured, Jeanne is the poet's jewel: "Venus lies on the bed, waiting for a wind to rise: the sooty albatross hankers for the storm" (9).

To reiterate Christina Sharpe – "In the wake, the river, the weather, and the drowning are death, disaster, and possibility. They are some of the impossible possibilities faced by those Black people who appear in the door and dwell in the wake" (*The New Inquiry*). Considering her lineage of death, Jeanne is drowning and loss. She represents, in Carter's instance, some sort of terrible survival. In the short story, her life with Charles reaches a fantastic level of squander, "on these days, nipped by frost and sulking, no pet nor pussy she; she looked more like an old crow with rusty feathers in a miserable huddle of smoky fire which she pokes with spiteful sticks" (2); and yet Jeanne still prefers to be kept, as this means being kept from the streets.

The poet Baudelaire is the impossible possibility, and Jeanne the one who dwells in the wake:

> She was acquainted with the albatross, a scallop-shell carried her stark naked across the Atlantic; she clutched an enormous handful of dreadlocks to her pubic mound. Albatrosses hitched glides on the gales the wee black cherub blew for her. (9)

Carter uses the fabula to conceptualise Jeanne's passage; making it visible that the weather and the ocean, which also can be read as climate, are the poetics that can be used to understand her passage. The ocean also gives the material means of her passage – the scallop-shell; whilst the weather guides her as she "hitches glides on the gales the wee cherubs blew for her" (9). She is also given an angelic, goddess like identity – mind it is the wee cherubs who blow the wind, and she travels stark naked, as if she were the Eve of the Atlantic. However, the use of the fabula is taken further by Baudelaire himself, who in the short story

rationalizes Jeanne's dispossession through the ocean's depth: "They have this in common, neither has a native land, although he likes to pretend she has a fabulous home in the bosom of the blue ocean …". (3)

In the story the myth of her origin is continuously fathomed through desire, the weather, as well as the ocean. Carter is never solving the mystery of Jeanne's origin but rather becomes a "feminist critical geographer who elaborates the ways in which gendered subjectivities are produced not only by social configurations of power, but also by the material configurations of their environment" (Neimanis 34). Jeanne's dispossession is of a material significance because she is in the position she is, due to her slave history; and even though she is not slave but kept mistress, Charles is her master. And more often than not "she will sometimes be persuaded to take off her clothes and dance for Daddy who, she will grudgingly admit when pressed, is a good Daddy, buys her pretties, allocates her the occasional lump of hashish, keeps her off the streets". (3)

For Carter, as well as Hopkinson, feminist ideology is woven through the act of rewriting. They engage a lot with the archive, bringing real life, historical, characters to the forefront with a creative zeal that gives the characters, like Jeanne, new life. The textual archive yields to them with ease, and from there they are able to retrieve their subjects and rid them of the exotic and the erotic usable histories they are so easily associated with. The sea is another sort of archive, and because of its opacity, and its unwillingness to be easily defined, it is a place from which fabulation becomes possible for these authors. The marine world textures their prose with an aquatic consciousness – the mystery of the waters their characters are connected to allows the authors to impart the untold histories surrounding these characters, what Toni Morrion refers to as "ripping the veil apart" (1993). In *The Salt Roads* and 'Black Venus', the sea emerges as place and as a chief character, it also drives the plot for the narratives, especially in *The Salt Roads*. For Carter and Hopkinson, the women they write about are made possible by the sea itself.

Water

Koleka Putuma brings the conversation closer to home in her poem 'Water'. In the poem Putuma engages the myths that permeate everyday discourse in South Africa concerning black people's relationship with water. She recalls a New Year's Eve experience and memory, one she supposes she shares with "most people raised black" (line 2) – that of going to the beach with "black tights and Shoprite plastic bags wrapped around our new weaves"

(line 4). Putuma also recalls the elders who forbade her (and others) from riding the waves, elders who feared that "we would be a mass of blackness swept by the tide/and never return/like litter "(lines 6-8). For Putuma, being black makes her vulnerable to the ocean; so much that her body can easily be reduced to the waste, litter, in the ocean that never returns. The elders, Putuma recalls, forbade them from riding the waves "as if the ocean has food poisoning" (line 9) and every time Putuma looks out into the sea she feels as if she is drowning. The poem, amidst relating the contemporary relation black people have with the ocean, is also adamantly reminiscent of slavery and aparthied– and their legacy in the Cape. Born and raised in Cape Town, Putuma relays the post-slavery narrative of the Cape; one that is, for Putuma made unforgettable by the very presence of the sea. It is not only Putuma who does not forget, the ocean too remembers. Putuma writes:

Yet every time our skin goes under
It's as if the reeds remember that they were once chains
And the water, restless, wishes it could spew all of the slaves and ships onto shore
Whole as they had boarded, sailed and sunk
Their tears are what have turned the ocean salty,
This is why our irises burn every time we go under.
Every December sixteenth, December 24th and December 31st
Our skin re-traumatises the sea (lines 21-28)

Putuma smears the festivity of the December holiday with her own recollections and those of history. Her relationship with the ocean is a complicated one; the ocean in the poem is simultaneously personified and turned into place. It is at once the prison and the captor; it is also guilty, its reeds "remember that they were once chains" and the restless water "wishes it could spew all of the slaves and ships onto shore", and every time the masses of blackness enter the ocean, their skin "re-traumatises the ocean". Here the ocean shares some innocence: it was traumatized as well; hence it has kept all the tears, and that is why its waters are salty. Like Hopkinson, Putuma associates bodily and oceanic salt in order to extend the histories the human body has with the aquatic environment. Putuma uses the ocean's own material to rationalise the pain of slavery, not just her body, but the ocean as well is complicit in the slave trade. The reeds and the sea salt become powerful metaphors whilst her body remains a possible waste material, litter. Although Putuma admonishes the ocean, she also reveres it:

But we, we have come to be baptised here
We have come to stir the other world here

We have come to cleanse ourselves here
We have come to connect our living to the dead here (lines 33-36)

The ocean is also a site of veneration. For many communities water is a spiritual medium, so much that bodies of water each have their special significance in the spiritual realm. Sea water is all-powerful as it is the source of water to other bodies of water. Water is also the space of transcendence to the other world, and Putuma will not forsake these aspects of the sea. The poem suggests that for Putuma the ocean has two histories, that of pain and that of rejuvenation. In fact, the mere fact that the ocean is also a space to cleanse oneself and yet it is unable to cleanse the memory of slavery from itself should make one aware of the immense suffering slavery bought with it; unwashable pains. "We have come to connect our living to the dead here" (line 36); the ocean is a grave site; and Putuma sees the masses of blackness as following the tradition of visiting the gravesites of lost ones at every year's end.

Much like Carter and Hopkinson, Putuma is invested in the histories of slavery in the marine environment. These writers look into how these histories are the residue of modernity and capitalism at sea. Nnedi Okarafor looks into the more contemporary detriments of modernity and capitalism in the ocean.

Lagoon

Nnedi Okarafor extends the conversation beyond the perimeters of slavery, focusing on the more urgent questions surrounding today's aquatic environment. Okarafor in *Lagoon* uses speculative science fiction to mediate the relationship we have with the ocean in the 21st century. Set in 2010, Nigeria, *Lagoon* is the story of alien invasion in the city of Lagos as well as in the undersea. It is a postcolonial novel that does not actually depart from "nation-writing" but rather alters and amplifies it. The novel has strong feminist as well as environmental undertones. In the novel, a meteorite hits the ocean and a tidal wave seizes three characters – Adaora a marine biologist, Anthony a famous rapper, and Agu a troubled soldier. These characters, along with Adoyele - a visitor from the stars who wishes to save Lagos from itself - set out on numerous adventures, many of them underwater, to save Lagos, and Nigeria as a whole.

Lagoon opens with a cheeky swordfish, whose physical powers have been enhanced by the aliens, attacking an offshore oil rig – "she slices through the water, imagining herself a deadly beam of black light" (3), "she is the largest predator in these waters. *Her* waters."(3)

With such a powerful opening, the novel departs from the human body and its histories of and in the sea from the onset. Creatureliness in *Lagoon* is a narrative point of view, a trait that runs throughout bodies of work that centre on environmental issues. Creatureliness is also a point of action, note it is the swordfish who takes action; it is also the aliens who wish and do save Nigeria against itself. It is also through creatureliness that issues of waste production are first highlighted in *Lagoon*, especially waste that is due to oil production. When we speak of waste, or rubbish dumps in general, we imagine them to be external materials, man-made materials. In *Lagoon*, the first waste materials are the distorted and destroyed bodies of sea creatures:

She awakens. Gently but quickly, she pulls her spear out. The black blood spews in her face from the hole she's made. She turns away from the bittersweet tasting poison. *Now* they will leave soon. As she happily swims away in triumph, the loudest noise she's ever heard vibrates through the water.
MOOM!
The noise ripples through the ocean with such intensity that she tumbles with it, sure that it will tear her apart.
Then the water calms. Deeply shaken, she slowly swims to the surface. Head above the water, she moves through the bodies that glisten in the moonlight. Several smaller fish, jellyfish, even crabs, float, belly up or dismembered. Many of the smaller creatures have probably simply been obliterated. But she has survived. (4)

In *Lagoon*, we see that beyond oil, the dismembered bodies of affected creatures are also waste products that float, belly up, in the wake of their own deaths. Later in the book, after another sonic catastrophe, a destitute woman on Bar Beach calls to the ocean to "take her"; perhaps as a part of the "dead fish, large and small, [that] littered the sand and the gentle waves that moved in and out. She saw deflated jellyfish and the lumpy red and white claw of a large crab. She splashed past them" . (129)

Furthermore, *Lagoon* also insists that when we think of waste in the ocean we can also begin to consider the bodies in the sea as carrying waste. The affected bodies of sea creatures, ones that we eat, are also becoming waste material in that many of them carry the disease/rubbish we throw into the ocean in their bodies. Oil production in the marine world affects and infects the very sea creatures that we consume. *Lagoon* reminds us that we live in the atomic age where the dumping of rubbish and radioactive waste will have catastrophic consequences

for life itself. Stacy Alaimo explains that "radioactive waste will not only be widely distributed by the water's movement, but through living creatures, who, unknowingly, distribute radioactivity throughout the global seas" (486). Thus, the body itself is a carrier of waste; and the ocean is indeed becoming an infectious rubbish dump in more ways than one.

In the novel, oil, of course, is the predominant waste production - before going back to the clean, sweet waters of the deep ocean, the swordfish tastes "the bittersweet poison": oil. As Gemma Field writes, "Okorafor employs this framework to draw attention to the consequences of neo-imperial developmentalism in Nigeria, chiefly, the deleterious, even poisonous, politics surrounding the country's involvement oil industry that Rob Nixon (2011) refers to as 'slow violence'" (8).

Another part of the pollution is also the impact of the noise itself, in the beginning of the book, Okarafor draws attention to the ways we should start to think of waste and destruction. In one case, the sea creatures may have been killed by the blasted oil rig; and in another, the blasting noise could be the perpetrator. Even the swordfish is afraid that the noise will "tear her apart", although she survives and witnesses the alien invasion. Okarafor does not underplay the fact that the principal, protuberant, waste material is the oil rig itself. As Gemma Field observes: "the rig is the alien in this ecosystem, an unwanted human imposition on a slick, wet world; a representation that is strengthened by Agu's description of the 'decades-old monster, a hulking, unnatural contraption of production facilities, drilling rigs and crew quarters…usually a place of noise and activity'" (95) (Field 12).

In *Lagoon*, Nnedi Okarafor creatively explores waste in the marine environment. The novel is an explosive imagining of the various ways ocean pollution will lead to the detriment of the postcolonial society. The novel is a prime example of the ways speculative fictions are effective in that they bring to the forefront the mixed, the co-present, the interspersing, jumbling, and eddying natures of the natural and the technological world. From the onset, Okarafor riddles us by changing the territory, we enter the ocean and its multifaceted action packed everyday away from the land based drama of Nigeria. At the heart of the novel is the intersection between the imagination, technology, the future, and liberation (Field 9).

Conclusion

Writing by women that looks to the ocean presents us with multiple possibilities in terms of language, structure, and genre. These texts manage to fuse the human with the non-human to showcase the various histories that reside under and above water, as well as how they allude to and influence femininities. In fact, we see that histories above water are easily associated with the aquatic environment, so much that our own bodies are connected with this environment. This connection is a hydrologic from which we can begin to conceptualise our histories and their relationship with ocean. The sea and its material (salt, shells, reeds, and swordish) also feature so much in the writing that it emerges as not just a place but a character, a social ecology, an ancestral realm, as well as a rubbish dump.

Chapter 3: The Social and the Political in the midst of Ecological Collapse

In this chapter I look into Romesh Guneskera's *Reef*, a novel about Sri Lanka, as well as *The Same Earth* by Kei Miller from Jamaica. Both these novels evoke the undersea and coastal flooding in order to narrate social and political disorder in communities that are characterised by situational violence's and trauma. *Reef* is set in the years before and after Sri Lankan political tumult and *The Same Earth* is set in postcolonial Jamaica. Whilst the novels are focused on subjectivities affected by national time and space, they are also haunted by the threatening undersea and coastal floods. These novels whilst dealing with issues such as social hierarchy and political tumult simultaneously work through ideas around physical geography, looking into questions of borders and land-water boundaries. The novels also speak back to waste in the ocean; and in these novels the undersea emerges as rubbish dump more than an archive.

As Timothy Clark notes in his 'Some climate change ironies: Deconstruction, Environmental Politics and the Closure of Ecocriticism': "climate change does not present any one easily identifiable antagonist" (146). In fact, as he asserts, climate change marks the end of modernity as we know it; this is especially if we define modernity with its associations that the natural world exists for human ends. The natural world does not exist for human ends, in effect, humanity has never faced an apocalypse as severe as the one posed by climate change and the environmental crisis more generally. The predicament of the human in relation to the ecological crisis is based on the false supposition that the earth, nature, is unconscious as well as inexhaustible, what Clark writes of as "an inexhaustible externality in both space and time – that natural resources (air, water, soil, and tolerable weather) are free gifts, and finally, that future time and the terrestrial space can act as bottomless repositories for waste or for issues that thinking wishes to avoid" (133). Climate change has bought the concept of ethics closer to home – individuals and communities have, more adamantly than before, been made to question themselves and their treatment of the environment. It is without doubt that our political and social issues are not insular and have affected the environment; a cognitive environment that may, to some extent, have inherited our modes of thinking and practices and has started *defending* itself. Climate change is not a monster of action but a monster of reaction; so much that it has managed to deconstruct many of our own modes of being, like modernity, like time, as well as space.

Due to climate change and global warming the ocean has become increasingly threatening to human existence. The earth's waters are estimated to have risen at a rate of roughly six-tenths of an inch per decade since 1880 (EPA website). The rate of increase has accelerated in recent years to more than an inch per decade (EPA website). Sea levels are not the only problems as the sea's temperature is also being affected, the oceans heat content not only determines sea surface temperature, it also affects the sea levels as well its currents. The ocean is also becoming more acidic disrupting coastal and marine ecosystems like coral leading to coastal flooding. Coastal floods have also become increasingly threatening and coastal communities are being disproportionately impacted by rising sea levels, leading to coastal and marine degradation. Climate change then demands that social spaces develop a radical means to addressing environmental problems, asking that we "rethink the material and cultural bases of modern society" (Clark, *Literature and the Environment* 2). This is an important gesture as some of the ecological problems we face today are a result of social structures of hierarchy that have been geared to exploit not only people but the environment as well – hence political and social reform are necessary if we wish to address the ecological crisis.

The Same Earth

In Kei Miller's *The Same Earth,* Imelda Richardson, a young Jamaican woman with a law degree obtained in England "drowns" in the deep waters of village gossip. In the small Jamaican village of Watersgate a thief stirs – no fewer than three panties of Teresa Walcott have gone missing. When Imelda Richardson suggests forming a Neighbourhood Watch to curb the crime-wave, she couldn't possibly have foreseen the trouble it would lead to – from Pastor Braithwaite, from Evangelist Millie and from God Himself! Pastor Braithwaite despises Imelda because of her education, her foul mouth, as well as her absences from the church house. This suggestion of a Neighbourhood Watch, to Pastor Braithwaite, is Imelda Richardson doubting the all seeing eye of God, again. He plants this seed in the minds of his followers, and before long, Imelda is seen as the enemy. As a hurricane hits Watersgate , the river swells and floods Imelda's house. For the people of Watersgate, nature has come for vengeance. Imelda is forced to leave, her house has been flooded and no one is willing to open their doors for a non-believer. Imelda's "crime" is a very mysterious one; and little does everyone know that the three panties she is eventually accused of stealing have actually been lost to the Caribbean Sea. The apocalypse, like most writing that looks into the ecological collapse, is a major theme in the book, written really as a collection of short stories that come

together to form a novel. At the end, we find out that the panties were lost first to the river, and then the Caribbean Sea.

Kei Miller's *The Same Earth*, as Evelyn OCallaghan writes, "envisions Caribbean people accessing epistemological resources of their cultural fashioning, resources which properly harnessed admit the possibility of growth, transcendence and fulfilment beyond the strictly material realm" (42). Yet the novel also raises questions about communal problem-solving in the face of ecological terror. Miller overtly critiques Jamaican society for its rampant religiosity, he looks into terms like faith and redemption in Jamaica through an ecological lens, critiquing the realm of Spiritual belief in Jamaican society. False accusations, wild passions and guilty pleasures, evangelism, and hypocrisy, flood the pages; making it apparent that for Miller the difficulty facing Jamaican society is how it renders spiritual epistemology; where the metaphysical can only be understood in the realm of spirit and not really in ecology. The novel can also be read beyond the panorama of postcolonial writing, instead, it is a postcolonial novel that exalts an environmental ethic. The novel partakes in ecocriticism by attending to the environmental crisis. As Timothy Clark indicates , "many ecocritical studies may be like other research in cultural history, excellent as such but differing only in taking the environment in some sense as the topic" (*Literature and the Environment* 5). *The Same Earth* presents a layered narrative: Watersgate and its societal apocalypse are investigated concurrently with the environmental catastrophe. The novel is obviously dealing with the hurricanes that have devastated the Caribbean coasts in an intelligent and creative way.

In the Caribbean, "the twenty-first century began with catastrophe and the fear of catastrophe; [a]n apocalyptic feel to the millennium and obsessive media coverage of natural and terror disasters since then have contributed to […] a resurgence of evangelical fundamentalism" (OCallaghan 44). In *The Same Earth* the actual thieves are the river and the sea who work through collaboration and flow; not so for Evangelical Millie and Pastor Braithwaite who, both threatened by the idea of a Neighbourhood Watch, insist that God is the All Seeing Eye. The novel writes the tragedy of religion in such a way that when the hurricane comes, flooding Imelda's house, we are not sure whether it is God Himself come to fix his Earth or whether it is nature taking its course; or maybe eventually it is all the same thing? What is clear though, as OCallaghan maintains, is that the spiritual realm can be extended to spaces outside the church (44). Miller puts the hypocrisy of the church in the forefront whilst simultaneously addressing the misreading of natural developments; the question at hand for

Miller is if ever religious belief will be able to look that things for what they are .The novel is interested in the interconnected aspects of the numinous.

When the hurricane attacks Imelda's house, no one wants to help her out:

In a village like Watersgate everything is seen, every movement known. There were at least a dozen people who had witnessed Imelda's exodus, but they each felt that the woman deserved this, that it was punishment from God himself, so to call out to her at that moment would be to cohort with the devil and who would want that? For destruction to fall on their houses overnight, as it had on Imelda's? (2)

To the villagers; there is no other possible explanation for the hurricane attacking Imelda's house accept it being news from God:

Some will say that a river changing course is a river remembering itself. Rivers having, as most of them do, histories longer than the civilisations that spring up around them are likely, now and then, to recall a different time when they chose to run in a different way. Geologists and meteorologist would give a more sober explanation as to why Imelda's house ended up in the middle of the river on that dark morning of 29 September 1983. (15)

Miller makes reference to more sober explanations that are not in themselves outside of the realm of spirit – soberly, the river's swelling is due to cloudburst. Simply, the river swelled and remembered a path it had run before. Miller makes reference to Toni Morrison in her well acclaimed essay 'The Site of Memory' (1987); the river r*emembered* a course it had run a long time ago. A river remembering makes the river a conscious figure not only in its own narrative, one that is also on-going, but now also in the community's narrative. But due to the passing of time, and as Miller puts it: "*rivers having, as most of them do, histories longer than the civilisations that spring up around them" (15)*, the river is made complicit and is implicated in the Lord's own work. The case of the missing panties is eventually blown out of proportion. The narrative spans across intimate histories not only to solve the case of the missing panties, but also to showcase the ways in which small matters, in society and in the environment, are often misread. In Miller's narrative, various bodies also hold innumerable relationships; and there is no doubt the river has a serious relationship with the sea – these relationships are also very much held by real time, "real time" being the developments in society that are seen as independent of natural time. When Tessa Walcott lost her three panties, she had just finished her washing in the river when a slight tilt led to their new

journey. At the end of the narrative, by the time Tessa is driven mad by other bigger issues at hand, the panties are permanently lost to the Caribbean Sea:

> What was it that caused Tessa Walcott to go mad? Because this is what people said – that Tessa, widow to a deacon, mother of six sons, former owner of three pairs of panties now permanently lost to the Caribbean Sea, had gone stark raving mad. (199)

Here Miller stages two forms of narrative movement; one that is driven by societal whims, and the other by causes of nature. This happens throughout the narrative, the movement of nature, and that of society are always interlinked. When Imelda Richardson leaves the small village of Watersgate, Jamaica, armed only with one small suitcase, she is doing so for the second time. She is in fact one of the throngs of young Jamaicans who left the island after the devastating hurricane of 1974. Imelda's first journey had taken her to England, to the home of ganja-growing rebel Purletta Johnson, the arms of Ozzie, and a law degree. But when her mother dies Imelda returns to Watersgate, choosing Jamaica over England. At the time 1983 is still "a couple of years shy of the great dancehall explosion in which artists like Shabba Ranks would sing how he 'loved punany bad'" (10), and the village is still dominated by the Evangelical church and the thundering voice of Pastor Braithwaite. When Tessa Walcott's panties are stolen — and in the absence of Perry Mason, known thief - a Pentecostal fervour sweeps through the village, the tensions between old and new come to a head. Yet it is not merely the tensions between old and new that come to a head, but also those of ecology. The hurricane of 1974 forced many to migrate, it was a societal problem, and the hurricane of '83 only forces Imelda to migrate; it is *her* problem. This also speaks to what has happened to Jaimaican society through the passing of time, "Miller uses the movement of time in ecology and narrative to appropriate 'soul force' beyond its humanist impulse" (O'Callaghan 47).

And where the deep ocean is concerned, the three panties can be read as debris in numerous ways. Firstly, they are an ecological threat; waste material. But also they are the debris of a society torn apart by hypocrisy, and in some ways, filth. It is not a shirt lost to the sea but three panties that belonged to an elderly woman; and that a whole neighbourhood would be in uproar over this, is metaphor. The sea holds secrets; it liaisons, in this instance with the river, it also carries on with objects lost within it. Some of these objects may resurrect in other parts of the world, churned out, whilst others will not. The situation about lost objects in the ocean is that there is no telling where they will end up; but each holds a story, some big, some

small. In the case of the three panties, a whole village was torn asunder by the forces of Spirit. The sea was not external, but internal.

Reef

Reef is the poignant story of Triton, a young chef who reveres his master, Mister Salgado, a marine biologist. The narrative is told through memory; Triton remembers his time in Sri Lanka from London where, when the novel begins, he now owns a restaurant. As a young boy and very much engulfed by pleasuring his master's palate, Triton is oblivious to the Sri Lankan political tumult and its threat to the Sri Lankan paradise. In his intimate narrative Triton details the nation's devastating move from a young democracy to an island brutalised by war. The novel explores the interconnected lives of Mister Salgado and Triton whilst detailing the forty years of political disintegration as well as the devastation witnessed by Sri Lanka's coral reef.

In Gunesekera's 1994 novel, the socio-political disintegration of the country and the destruction of its natural ecosystems are written as one; in fact, the denigration of the ecosystem is used to comment on that of the socio-political. The novel opens at a petrol station in London with an encounter between Triton, the narrator, and a Tamil station attendant. Triton through the attendant learns about the upheaval in his native home, Sri Lanka. Through the collaboration of history and memory Triton recalls his childhood in the island country now ravaged by war: "I could see a sea of pearls. Once a diver's paradise. Now a landmark for gunrunners in a battle zone of army camps and Tigers" (Gunesekera 12). For Triton, the war is an affront to the paradisiac Sri Lanka he remembers. Triton is also a name purposely derived from an ancient sea god. Having said this, *Reef* should be read as an ecocritical intervention as well as an encounter with Sri Lankan political tumult; or rather, it is doing both simultaneously. Susanne Pichler significantly states that Gunesekera's novel is about "a Sri Lankan im/migrant's recollections of his native Sri Lanka turning from 'paradise' to a 'fallen paradise', of his perception of this 'paradisiacal' place as he experienced it as an innocent carefree child and youth, and as a more alert, critical, man who has witnessed the atrocities of war" (92). In this sense, time, and the passing of time bring with them a sense of loss, and not just of nation, but also of environment. The passing of time represents detriment and loss of nature; for Triton, and even Mister Salgado; they become "completely unmoored, adrift on the open, wild, voracious sea, a sea that might destroy not

only [them] but also the eponymous reef keeping the ocean and the forces of chaos at bay". (99)

Inevitably, by destroying the reef, Sri Lankans are ultimately destroying themselves. The reef is not entirely self-renewing as Mister Salgado knows:

> You see, this polyp is really very delicate. It has survived aeons, but even a small change in the *immediate* environment – even *su* if you pee on the reef - could kill it. Then the whole thing will go, And if the structure is destroyed, the sea will rush in. The sand will go. The beach will disappear. That is my hypothesis. You see, it is only the skin of the reef that is alive. It is real flesh: *immortal.* Self-renewing […] but who cares?" (58)

The novel has been repeatedly critiqued for its exoticism and eroticism; critiques that insinuate that the book has an exotic register that fails to address the political turbulences of Sri Lanka at the time. Shalini Jain notes:

> Although Gunesekera's novels deserve approbation for highlighting the environmental impact of the protracted ethnic conflict and for offering a valuable corrective to the dominant tendency of modern Sri Lankan literature in English, which tends to be 'written and read against the backdrop of civil war, nationalist ideology, and ethnic conflict' [she quotes Deckard] my critique of his novels nonetheless takes into account the implications of its ecocritical interventions when these are informed by an explicit exotic and erotic register that runs the runs the danger of objectifying, gendering and colonising nature, and reinforcing the human-nature binary in asymmetrical power relations (30).

I read the book in a different vein. The landscape and the waterscapes in *Reef* written in what is referred to as "purple prose" actually call to question the ethics of human engagements with the natural world and humanities responsibility toward their environment. The environment is conscious, and the purple prose seeks to bring this to light.

Gunesekera does not see humans as outside of nature, but rather in nature, complicating notions of externality. Mister Salgado, Triton's master and marine biologist, and his romantic approach to Sri Lanka's dissipating coral reef actually speak back to our inability to recognise the role of intuition in our relationship with nature (Jain 31); and thus our failure to comprehend even the basic social ills. As Charne Lavery notes in her 'Outsides and Outsiders: Environmental critique in Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle* and Romesh Gunesekera's *Reef*' "[t]he real reef, far from the manageable ideal that Mister Salgado's research project suggests, is fearsome and enigmatic" (89). Triton is incessantly bewildered by Mister Salgado's hunger for knowledge where nature is concerned, since for Triton, his

social context is independent of natural surrounding. When he reads newspapers, he states that they:

[g]ave some inkling but not enough to give shape or sense to the place. I read about brawls in taverns, drug trafficking, courtroom drama's about the price of onions, the Profumo scandal rocking England; but I could not visualize the lie of the land, the real geography of the city or the sea between countries. The few grainy black-and-white pictures in the newspapers formed a shadow world of petrified garlands, smiling stupefied politicians and gnomic sorcerers' boxes (39).

It is only when he is in Mister Salgado's household that Triton is aware of the world in the undersea, of the reef, and its implications not only for the food he makes, but the world he lives in. This is because Mister Salgado is a marine biologist, and this alters Triton's life as he is exposed to Salgado's knowledge of the surrounding environment. Gunesekera insists that the undersea is not even merely an outside space but an encroaching one; the dissipating reef then becomes further evidence of this. As Lavery indicates, "the oceanic reef and the encroaching jungle form the spatial and discursive limits to the imagined island. It is the portrayal of the natural world, independent of and yet interlinked with the lives of the protagonists, [*Reef*] engages with and critiques the construction of an outside space" (89). For Triton, the grainy photographs and the tavern brawls are an outside space, but Gunesekera insists otherwise. In his master's household Triton engages with Mister Salgado's outside, watery, world:

Although he had been to the best of Colombo's schools, Mister Salgado regarded himself as largely self-educated. He came from a line of people who believed in making their own future. To him there were no boundaries to knowledge. He studied mosquitoes and swamps, sea corals and the whole bloated universe, and right from the early days wrote long articles about all of them. He wrote about the legions under the sea, the transformation of water into rock, plankton, coral, and limestone – the yield of beach to ocean. (34)

Mister Salgado is ineffective in how he uses this knowledge for social betterment. Yet, as Shalini Jain writes, "through Tritons developing consciousness [of the not so outside space], we too soon register the implications of governmental and private investments in natural resource utilisation, and the ways these can go awry, misled by false ideologies, changing value systems, and a transition from a colonial to a neo-colonial, market-driven export economy, all of which are exploitative of natural resources in their own varying ways" (33). The relationship between the internal and the external are in constant conversation in *Reef*; they are also constantly interchangeable. What you put in, you get out. Marine life depends

on sustenance, something that conveys the question of externality. For Sri Lankans the reef is an external, what matters is what they can get from it, yet the reef has its own internal needs, it eats, and carries life forms in it that make protection from the sea possible. As Mister Salgado says, *it is real flesh* (58*).*

The novel is also concerned with the exploits responsible for the wasting, and the wastage, in the ocean and the coral reef. *Reef* considers the idea that the wasting reef and the encroaching ocean intimate a paradise lost. As Susanne Pichler suggests; "the sea will reclaim all the islanders, given the rate with which the Sri Lankans are destroying their protective coral reef. Salgado foresees impending, non-generative floods" (99). I read the ocean and the coral reef in *Reef* as representing both sustenance and threat; they are both spatial configurations that are reachable as food source, as picturesque, yet also unreachable; places beyond reach, to which return is impossible, where permanent inhabitation is illusory, places that remain a dream.

Human waste as well as mining from the aquatic environment (also very much the internal and the external) destroy it in a slow violence. As Lavery indicates in her discussion of Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, not all violence is as instantaneous as we suppose it to be, neither is it spectacular (89). Nixon proposes a violence that is "accretive and incremental, its calamitous consequences drawn out and only gradually revealed" (Lavery 89). The reef experiences a gradual death, much like Sri Lankan society. The ecological collapse is measured, plodding, and continuing – it is also due to the aftermath of waste, war, mining, underdevelopment and as Nixon suggests, it is "a long dying", a violence with delayed effects (Lavery 89). *Reef* is a postcolonial as well as ecocritical critique of societal and environmental domination and decay. Gunesekera reads and writes them as co-dependent; he does not underwrite the scenery and the setting; instead the setting is raised to the level of being a character (Lavery 90).

Reef does not underplay the existence of other life forms like "the cycle of light, plankton, coral and limestone" (34). Indeed it pays attention to the incredible life underwater, intensifying the notion of an active ecology, outside of the political economy. Gunesekera brings the ignorance of those whose interests are in the political economy to the forefront through the character of Dias, one of Mister Salgado's friends who sees Salgado's new projects as a "glass-bottomed job" (57). Dias during one of Mister Salgado's extravagant party's states: "It's incredible, like you say, all that stuff underwater. Gave me vertigo just

looking. I didn't realise there were so many fantastic shapes. Some of these fish are something else, no?" (57). For Dias, the life underwater is 'stuff' and 'fantastic shapes', 'something else'. Perhaps Gunesekera stages some sort of divine providence when almost at the end of the novel Dias is murdered and thrown into the ocean, a fantastic shape himself.

Creatureliness and the body in the novel also become narrative objectives. The sea and the reef are often referred to as alive, hungry, and devouring of surrounding. For Triton, the reef is scary due to its bodilyness, in that it is a body that carries other weird, other worldly, bodies in it:

The one time I did swim out to Mister Salgado's real reef, back home, I was frightened by its exuberance. The shallow water seethed with creatures. Flickering eyes, whirling tails, fish of a hundred colours darting and digging, sea snakes, sea slugs, tentacles sprouting and grasping everywhere. It was a jungle of writhing shapes, magnified and distorted, growing at every move, looming out of the unknown , startling in its hidden brilliance. Suspended in the most primal of sensations. I slowly began to see that everything was perpetually devouring its surroundings. I swam into a sea of sound: my hoarse breathing suddenly punctuated by clicking and clattering, the crunching of fish feeding on the white tips of golden staghorn. My own fingertips seemed to whiten before me as trigger-fish, angel-fish, tiger-fish, tetrons, electrons and sandstone puffer-fish swirled around me, ever hungry (186-7).

There are various bodies at hand here, distorted and transforming, slimy and whirling, writhing shapes, darting and digging bodies. Triton's own fingers "whiten as trigger-fish". There is also a vaster body beyond the reef and its occupants; the unknown from which they all loom. The reef is "startling in its own brilliance", and yet, it and all these creatures are "suspended in the most primal of sensations" – and that, for me as reader and for the purpose of this research, is the deep ocean. I read the undersea as one of the protagonists, and antagonists, in *Reef*. It is the one thing Mister Salgado with his skills of measurement cannot comprehend; it is eating, giving birth, and encroaching, slowly. In the novel the deep ocean is an impending antagonist alongside the approaching war and alteration of social hierarchy; and to get back to Timothy Clark, "climate change [even environmental change] does not present any one easily identifiable antagonist" (146). Triton often refers incredulously to the nature of what lies beneath the seas surface and what it holds for Sri Lanka. When he looks at the sea he notes:

The colour of it, the roar of it, was overwhelming. It was like living inside a conch: the endless pounding. Numinous. You couldn't get away from it. No wonder Mister Salgado said the sea would

be the end of us all. During those two nights we spent on tour I felt the sea getting closer, each wave just a grain of sand closer to washing the life out of us. They say the sea air makes you feel better, but I reckon that must be to lull us to sleep, it made me feel helpless. After a while it terrified me. And it was no comfort when we eventually got to see Mister Salgado's instrument that was going to save us all from the watery grave (70).

The relentless bodilyness in *Reef* is evident from the onset – *Of his bones are coral made* – signifying the relationship the human body has with the sea and its material. This is a notion I worked with more closely in the previous chapter. The body is a material the sea can work with in the same way the sea is a material the body can work with. When taking the tour with Mister Salgado, Triton speaks of chunks of dead, bone-like coral by the side of the road, what Lavery sees as "an almost spectral intrusion of an outside space, the undersea world, into the socio-political landscape of the narrative" (96). It is almost as if the undersea has churned out what it has been given; and it wants more, ever hungry. The intrusion also marks the end of those who had been thrown into sea during the civil-war; the bodies that Mister Salgado speaks of as "the bodies [that] would roll again and again in the surf, they would be washed by the tide and beached by the dozen" (183). There is the constant slippage between body, sea, reef, all living bodies. All these bodies will eventually end up in the abyss, the deep ocean:

Beyond the reef it's a cliff. The floor plunges thousands of feet. The bottom of the world. You can't see it. Only all these prehistoric structures. Huge mountains rising up. But it's safe. Once you are out there you could drift to Indonesia and back. No problem. (119)

The deep ocean is imagined to be a body of work; the hidden utopia with far more agency than imagined. When Triton relates the story of Sri Lankan violence at the time, there is the suggestion that the ocean played a very proactive role. The tides absorb the violence and the evidence of human killing, serving as powerful witness to the wrongs (Mallot 91). The sea is written as witness and avenger; it will eventually reclaim the lives of the islanders given the rate at which the reef is dissipating – the sea represents impending bodily death:

The bodies would roll again and again in the surf; they would be washed in by the tide and be beached by the dozen. The lives of brothers, sister, men and women, lovers, fathers and mothers and children would be blighted time and again, unremembered (182-3).

Triton makes it sound like a chewing and spewing landlady whose appetite is selective and unending. The deep sea is the ultimate devourer. Without doubt the novel holds an exalted

obsession with the undersea – it appears suddenly, anywhere in the midst of the purple prose, as threat and giver, and also as premonition. It also gives an importance to the decaying reef since the reef offers some protection from the looming watery grave. As Walter Perera explains; "Gunesekera for his part focuses on nature's tendency "to devour" itself. The reader does not have to make a particularly arduous, imaginative leap to conclude that the "anarchy" shown here is reflective of the anarchy that prevails in the rest of the country" (74). The deep ocean is the ultimate anarchist, also reacting to the modes of anarchy around it. The violence visited upon the ocean and the reef, like coral-mining is part of the slow violence that leads to the oceans very own anarchy and reclamation. A study of coral mining published in *Eos* demonstrates how such mining created defenceless "low-resistance paths" that allowed water jetting into the land in the 2004 Tsunami, intensifying destruction in unsupervised beaches.

To echo what I have already demonstrated concerning the novel and slow violence, Gunesekera calls for a postcolonial environmental ethic, showcasing what Lavery speaks of as "nature that can neither be ignored nor easily managed […] since the natural world requires a shift in timescale, one that resets the balance between nature and culture, the human and nonhuman world" (3). Facing slow violence, the long dying, a postcolonial environmental ethic also calls attention to what is usually dismissed when we speak of colonial and postcolonial violence: attention is given to people and subjectivities, whilst the ecology is left to fend for itself. "Gunesekera, in this civil-war era novel, refocuses attention on slower manifestations of violence, waves of colonialism and gradual environmental destruction, rather than on the explosive, immediate violence of the civil war" (Lavery 94). Slow violence and a postcolonial environmental ethic demand that we pay attention to the temporal shift introduced by nature's reaction to what is external to human beings and internal to it; noting, as Lavery teaches, that externality can be a matter of space; that the novel actually imaginatively merges the "islands human and natural subjects as joint victims of war and destruction" (94). Gunesekera reworks the connections between time and tide (Mallot 89): in the novel the sea and its entities are written as containing their own history as well as the earth's past. Again, history becomes the debris carried by the waters – "the ocean absorbs and facilitates history" (Mallot 90).

The ocean, as Edward Mallot suggests, is "history and historian; [i]t facilitates regeneration and records the signs of change, but can be polluted only so long before it seeks vengeance" (92).

Conclusion

The postcolonial novel, typically known for its engagement with the nation has made notable advances in the field of ecocriticism. In *Reef* and *The Same Earth* the nation has taken the back seat whilst environmental issues are tackled in original and innovative ways. The novels bring us closer to the actual horrors of postcoloniality in the face of ecological collapse. *Reef* specifically envisions the deep ocean as both paradise and purgatory.

Postcolonial critique demands that we base all our criticism on the political and social orders of the day; yet these novels insist otherwise. We are given snippets of the political order and revolution at hand, and then most of the focus is given to the environment; and still we cannot really read the novels as simply 'nature writing'. It is not "nature writing", but postcolonial critique that bases its argument on the events in the natural environment. Gunesekera and Miller through their conventions alter the aesthetic of postcolonial writing in that conceptions of personal identity are shifted and readjusted to a more materially inclusive analysis. The novels bring to the forefront the "structures, substances, and causal powers that are the watery universe" (Clark 6).

Conclusion:

The ocean complicates our ideas of both the past and the future; with the present idling in between. When I started thinking with the idea of the deep ocean and its contemporary relations with black intellectual traditions, I was, to say the least, very ambitious. I expected to find, albeit through much speculation, not only the drowned slave body but volcanic vents, new species, sunken ships and airplanes, ocean current and a whole lot more. But, the ocean cannot be easily directed nor intimidated. Nevertheless, it did allow me to find a little from which I think it is safe to say that the watery underworld is indeed a container of history as well as a site that forewarns of the future. At present, the world's oceans are not only under threat but are also themselves a threat due to global warming. Whilst writing the thesis it became increasingly hard to speak of the ocean without invoking apparent contradictions – it is very much victim and perpetrator, antagonist and protagonist, mother and killer, the place of origin and the place of death. The ocean also alters how we look at modernity: in many ways it instigated modernity and yet it also looks as if the marine environment is a culmination of modernity at its end.

In my proposal for this thesis I had hoped to look into varying periods in human history where the ocean played a significant role; but I only managed to focus on slavery and not the current refugee crisis, for example. And even though this is a downside, the event of slavery did yield a lot of the ocean's mysteriousness, as well as depths. Slavery has changed our reading of the aquatic world, not only its surface and our understanding of ocean as a mode of transport, but the deep as well. The deep ocean offers a new way to look at blackness; it makes it possible to associate slavery's racial inflection with the ocean's darkness. The deep ocean is a literal as well as a "figurative darkness" as Joshua Bennett explains, and where "blackness" and "darkness" meet, the ocean is a pelagic hell, a grave site, purgatory, and a place of origin. This darkness presents us with both the known and the unknown – dimensions from which a black hydrologic and hydropoetic can be envisioned. The pelagic evokes a sense of the vertical pendulum, neither at the surface nor at the bottom; but moving lower and lower , and then again up; and where "blackness" and "darkness" meet is at the benthic level; which is right at the bottom of the sea. The pelagic and the benthic offer variations of colour and as Joshua Bennett writes "impractical colours take hold […] shades and hues that serve no known evolutionary process, given the utter lack of light" (Bennet 102). And where colour becomes impractical is the very place where we can begin to understand the drowning slave body. The pelagic zone can be thought of in terms of an

imaginary cylinder or water column that goes from the surface of the sea almost to the bottom; and it is a s/place from which black histories of slavery can be recuperated and made new.

In the first chapter, I tried to work against western understandings of cartography in the ocean by looking into slavery and the figure of the watermeisie, mermaid, as alternative mappings of the undersea as well as histories above water. What happens above water does have some sort of relationship with what happens beneath; the amphibious figure of the mermaid and its cross cultural interpretations shows this. In cultures and places that have been affected by slavery she appears in similar ways; occupying a strong hold in traditional and modern myth as an undersea dweller. She reconfigures our understanding of the watery underworld; giving us the sense that there are other, mythical, life forms in the ocean. Modern cartography then, considering that all maps are speculative, ought to pay some attention to the ocean as a spiritual realm. There are some things that cannot be reflected by maps, but do map out entire histories underwater.

The undersea is divided into columns and layers of depth. These layers, to revisit Du Bois, are oceanic colour lines, where pelagic life, and death, decrease and increase with depth, where life and death are affected by light intensity, pressure, temperature, salinity, the supply of dissolved oxygen nutrients, and the submarine topography, which is called bathymetry. In the first chapter, I conducted a visual art/literary bathymetry. I do this to see whether it may help us re-write the death, and the birth, of the black human body at the surface of the sea as well as at the pelagic level and benthic levels. Through a literary bathymetry, we may also begin to understand the body's relation with the benthic, the black body's relation with dimension, as well the ecological region right at the bottom of the sea. The black human body is embedded in and embodied by the deep ocean, and no other incident in history and historiography has staged this embodiment as much as the Middle Passage. Mapping in the deep ocean then needs be affected by this incident in history. The ocean is a grave site and as noted by Hortense Spillers the "African persons in the Middle Passage were literally suspended in the 'oceanic' […] without names that their captors would recognise, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also nowhere at all; […] they were culturally unmade thrown in the midst of a figurative darkness" (quoted in Bennet 102).

In the second chapter I looked at feminist epistemologies of the ocean. Slavery continues to be a trope from which I look into the deep ocean, however with Nnedi Okarafor's help I also

look into waste and the ecology. The chapter is interested in the material possibilities water provides for feminist outlooks on history. I begin with Caribbean and American centred outlooks but then through Putuma and Okarafor look into a Global South perspective. These women provide what Astrida Neimanis writes of as the "hydrologics" of "feminist subjectivity, watered" (Neimanis, 2013). Okarafor allows the chapter to move on to more contemporary questions around ecology and survival, introducing a theme I work with more explicitly in chapter three, that of slow violence.

In chapter three, I am interested in the intermingling between the natural the societal. I also look at the impending apocalypse in the ecology and what it means to the ways we often read our societal and political economies. Rob Nixon's notion of slow violence is helpful in reading waste in the ocean and the how ecological collapse is and can be a form of narrative accumulation.

All in all, the ocean features in these narratives as both archive as well as rubbish dump. From the ocean, things are taken and others thrown in. The ocean is a reproductive ecology; and these writers and artists showcase its birthing qualities; they take, and from this taking they have also thrown in some of their own conceptions of what the ocean is.

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