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Hydropolitical Textualities

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In his essay of the same title, Rinaldo Walcott offers the Black aquatic as a concept to name "the ambiguous and ambivalent relationship that Black people hold to bodies of water" (65). This relationship is inflected by fear, reverence and a deep reciprocity, in acknowledgement of long histories of water as a life-making and death-bearing element for Black people globally. Walcott notes that Atlantic slavery's foundational role in inaugurating global capitalism through its production of Blackness as both liquid (profit) and liquifiable (disposable) must be understood in the present continuous tense. It is an ongoing catastrophe that continues to produce "premature death for Black people in a global structure and relations where Black people are fungible as far as concerns the structure of governance, capital and social regulation that emerged from that moment" of inauguration (66). While there have been attempts to delink contemporary fungibility of Black life globally from this foundational birthplace of Blackness as liquid and liquifiable – the Middle passage – by pointing to corrupt governance, weak economies and internal strife as causative factors, these, too, are the afterlives of slavery, in Saidiya Hartman's sense of the term. Hartman uses the afterlives of slavery to reference structures that underwrite recursive Black fungibility in the shape of "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration and impoverishment" (15). Further, as Hartman reminds us in her interview with Frank B Wilderson, the end of Atlantic slavery ushered in a transition to the colonial project in Africa (193). On its part, the formal end of colonial rule did not yield the freedom anticipated by liberation struggle movements. To the contrary, these were systematically sabotaged in the heat of the Cold War, where Africa became a battle ground for proxy wars between the rival blocs, as many scholars have noted (Dirlik 1997; Shringarpure 2019; Popescu 2020). Put differently, what manifests as crises of governance, civil wars and political instability in many parts of Africa has roots that directly or indirectly reach back to direct interference by global superpowers and their corporate interests. In Christina Sharpe's words, subtending the economic, ecological and political refugee crisis currently unfolding in the Mediterranean "is the crisis of capital and the wreckage from the continuation of military and other colonial projects of US/European wealth extraction and immiseration" (59).

The four papers in this cluster by Buhlebenkosi Dlodlo, Confidence Joseph, Luck Makuyana and Hager Ben Driss reflect on the different faces of water in varied African spatio-temporal contexts as imagined in life writing, fiction and poetry. Across the four papers, water variously features as a medium of healing, life affirmation and fluid

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possibilities, but also as a weaponized element in service of death-making machineries of colonial and neoliberal capitalist harm directed at communities deemed disposable, fungible, liquifiable. Walcott insists that "the black aquatic requires what Wynter calls 'a deciphering practice,' in which a conscious rewriting of the human and a challenge of the 'cultural Imaginary of our present order' are central to what aesthetics can and might do" (68). As such, the four papers in this cluster showcase how a film on the construction of Kariba Dam, a poetry anthology on Mediterranean migrant tragedies, a novel on the Mozambican civil war, and another novel on colonial Rhodesia each stage new deciphering practices in reading the contradictions of the Black aquatic.

Buhlebenkosi Dlodlo's paper offers an ecocritical reading of celebrated Zimbabwean novelist Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning* (1998), which has often been read through a largely anthropocentric lens that underscores her critique of the interface between gender, history and colonial modernity in (then-)Rhodesia in the 1950s. Dlodlo's reading surfaces the bedrock of human-nature relations that frame the toxicities of colonial modernity's extractivism in Vera's portrait of Bulawayo, where the environment and Black subjects alike are subject to the appetites of colonial capital. By Dlodlo's reading of the novel, racist urban planning policies that were commonplace across colonial Africa not only displace Black communities to arid, infertile lands, but specifically locate Black townships "in the west towards which the wind blows the smoke and effluvia from the factories" on the banks of the heavily polluted Umguza River (34–45). The ongoing liquidity and liquification of Black life, referred to by Walcott above, is thrown into sharp relief by Vera's portrait of colonial Bulawayo's industrial landscapes which exile Black people from the profits of their labour, even as they bear the brunt of the ecocide produced by these industries and their waste.

For Dlodlo, the novel embodies what Mariko Lin Frame considers to be a definitive attribute of capitalism, "its tendency to develop pockets of extreme wealth and vast swathes of poverty simultaneously on local, national and global levels" (32). Still, Dlodlo underscores Vera's celebration of Black communities' modes of insisting themselves into being, to paraphrase Christina Sharpe's theorization of what she terms living in the wake. Sharpe writes that despite the climate of death-making that haunts contemporary Black life, Black people insist on their humanity; they refuse to be known to themselves as fungible, disposable. In a similar vein, Vera's characters repurpose waste products into toys and musical instruments for Kwela music; they mobilize their ingenuity and spirit of refusal to generate life-affirming forms of music and dance that allow them to "survive within the cracks of turbo-capitalism" (Dlodlo 34–45).

Confidence Joseph turns to Mia Couto's *Sleepwalking Land* (2006), which offers fictional commentary on the Mozambican civil war that started in 1977 – a mere two years after Mozambique's attainment of independence from Portugal – and raged on till 1992. This war exemplifies the worst of Cold War interferences in post-independent African political landscapes, as the two warring camps were actively supported by the respective Cold War blocs. Joseph's paper celebrates the Mozambican novelist's trademark intermeshing of indigenous African epistemologies with the conventions of the modern novel that captures Couto's preoccupation with "blurring the distinctions between the human and non-human, land and water, the natural and the supernatural" (Joseph 6–20). Joseph's paper draws our attention to a text that uses water spirits to comment on the Mozambican civil war and its devastating implosion of normalcy. Through the use

of water spirits as well as rivers, oceans and rain, Joseph argues that *Sleepwaking Land* captures wartime's modes of collapsing logical temporalities as well as spatial logics. In this regard, water's fluidity and the shape-shifting ambiguities that attend water spirits in many indigenous cosmologies enable Couto to stage a cyclic narrative that honours multi-temporal frames that unfold in wartime. Equally, water and water spirits salute the capacity for improvisation amidst the anarchic context of the Mozambican civil war.

Where the forms of wartime displacement that Couto writes about formally ended in 1997 – even as their repercussions, in line with trauma's timelessness, continue to reverberate – other patterns of displacement still intensify elsewhere in Africa, and, indeed, the global South, forcing people to seek survival in Europe. These displacements and the new forms of death-making that continue to unfold through drownings in the Mediterranean Sea are the focus of Hager Ben Driss's paper. Driss offers a reading of Libyan-American poet Khaled Mattawa's poetry collection *Mare Nostrum* (2019) as a form of lyrical testimony that bears witness to the plight of so-called illegal immigrants in the face of seeming global indifference to what is fast becoming an everyday catastrophe. Driss makes a powerful case for Mattawa's anthology as a form of documentary poetry that mobilizes the activist potential of literature to counter problematic, often highly abbreviated official documentation of migrants' experiences in the Mediterranean by fleshing this out through what he terms lyric documentary. In the poet's words, "official documents heap a lot of language on human suffering, and so the poet's role is to remove all that unfeeling language … poetry can perform acts of rescue as in an earthquake, to save the living word from the rubble of lifeless speech" ('Big Story'). This paper makes a strong case for the role of literature as a political weapon that challenges the silence and sustained quiet that in turn sustains the continued disposability of populations deemed fungible. In recent years, undocumented migrants from the global South have been the face of normalized disposability. Driss pinpoints the interplay between the literary and the documentary in Khaled Mattawa's poetry which is firmly anchored in "an ethical responsibility to witness, report and speak" (46–60).

Mattawa pointedly titles his collection of poetry *Mare Nostrum* – the Roman name for the Mediterranean Sea, which translates to 'our sea'. As Driss notes, this claim of ownership has in recent years been reframed into a threatening sea, open to the unwanted presence of migrants via Lampedusa, Sicily and Puglia. In Mattawa's poetry, the turmoil of the Syrian civil war, Libyan unrest and economic and climate distress across Africa are mapped out, as the poetry excavates the histories of inequality, exploitation and extraction that result in the Mediterranean drownings popularly abbreviated as 'the migrant crisis'. For Driss, this collection of poetry strikes a crucial balance between speaking up about the dehumanization of migrants in the Mediterranean basin, though doing so without pathos. In centring migrants' experiences, Driss argues, Mattawa counters indifference towards these tragedies: "each poem is an endeavour to rally the reader as an ethical knower" (46–60). Driss's discussion of Khaled Mattawa's poetry underscores the reality of ecological and economic precarity as important levers generating the forms of unlivability that render unsafe Europe-bound boats a more liveable option.

Last, Luck Makuyana's paper takes us to the mid-20th-century development of Kariba Dam in colonial Rhodesia by the British. The paper explores the forms of precarization produced by mega-dams and hydro-infrastructures that popular imaginaries celebrate as indices of modernity and development. Makuyana offers a hydrocritical reading of

two journalistic, creative non-fiction texts on the construction of Kariba Dam – Frank Clements' *Kariba: The Struggle with the River God* (1959) and David Howarth's *The Shadow of the Dam* (1961) – which he sets in conversation with a documentary film by Bob Nyanja, titled *Nyami Nyami: The River God* (2018). The paper mobilizes Rob Nixon's 2011 concept of slow violence, paired with Isabel Hofmeyr's notion of hydrocolonialism and Hofmeyr, Nuttal and Lavery's idea of the hydro-infrastructural (2022) to think through the hidden costs of the construction of Kariba Dam, the payment for which continues in the form of displaced and economically marginalized Tonga communities who were forced out of the valley during the dam's construction. Makuyana's use of a hydro-critical lens in this paper powerfully brings to view the extractive, carceral, military and epistemic uses to which colonial governmentality put water. On its part, Nixon's concept of slow violence underscores "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all," a violence (often environmental as concerns much of Nixon's work) that is typically enacted on the poor by the powerful – multinational corporations, military industries, neoliberal governments (2). Reading Makuyana's paper alongside Driss's exploration of the Mediterranean waters, it is hard to overstate the connections between colonial extraction, its exclusionary economic logics and the tragic statistics of the Mediterranean. As Makuyana demonstrates, to date, the displaced Tonga people who were relocated to arid, infertile lands remain locked out of the circuits of the water, electricity and waste management infrastructures fed by the dam.

An important strand of the Kariba Dam history is the figure of Nyaminyami, the river deity believed to have lived in the Kariba gorge, and whose protection, intertwined with occasional flashes of anger when offended, was part of the Tonga people's cosmology. The parallels between Nyaminyami and the shape-shifting water spirits explored in Joseph's paper point to resonant indigenous cosmologies that spill beyond the rigid boundaries of ethnicity, the nation-state and even time. In this manner, we note flows of resonance between Couto's water spirits and Nyaminyami as forms of aqueous divinity that have little regard for the rationalities of secular boundaries.

Tragically, the forms of violent displacement explored by Driss, Dlodlo, Makuyana and Joseph form a cyclic pattern, seeming to recur in different parts of the continent. In Walcott's phrasing, this is "the repeating sea of Black life" (66). Here, the insights offered by these papers bear horrific resonance with a similar narrative of displacement offered by Jeremiah Mosese's award-winning film, *This is not a Burial, It's a Resurrection* (2019). Mosese's film meditates on the displacement of communities in rural Lesotho by mega-dam projects. Writing this introduction in 2024, at the peak of the so-called *zama zama* (illegal mining) crisis in South Africa, which is stereotyped as featuring undocumented migrants from Lesotho, it is hard to miss the death-making linkages between the mega-dams in Lesotho and these patterns of migration. The ultimate irony in this is that Lesotho supplies a significant amount of water to South Africa. Writing this from Johannesburg, I am confronted by my implicatedness as an unwitting beneficiary of forms of precarization that continue to unfold even as I critique them. The hydropolitical textualities explored in this cluster are far from fictional or past tense. They are present continuous. Still, we write. In the spirit of Mattawa's work, we bear witness to these truths.

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