

**Der Ozean in Uns:  
Schwarze verkörperte Relationalitäten im zeitgenössischen  
Kuratieren**

**Ocean in Us:  
Black Embodied Relations in Contemporary Curating**

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Dissertation for obtaining the academic degree of

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the ocean through an artistic lens and a curatorial context in contemporary art by examining this author's co-curated exhibition, *Undulating Currents: A Group Show* (2023) in Vienna, where Black local and diaspora artists Tshepiso Moropa, Ava Binta Giallo, Minia Biabiany, Tabita Rezaire, Eric Asamoah, Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, Ozhopé Collective, and Ebum Sodipo presented works engaging with the materialities of oil and water. Intersecting with queer, ecofeminist, and Indigenous perspectives, this thesis asks: In what ways can we relate to the Ocean?

With the exhibition as a study and by expanding the practices of its participating artists into broader curatorial contexts, the thesis proposes a *Black epistemology* – specifically, Black ways of being and knowing. It argues for a shift from exploitative to generative practices, situating this inquiry within the global neoliberal conditions that shape contemporary political and economic realities. Furthermore, it addresses critical gaps in ethics and aesthetics in contemporary art: The underrepresentation of Black artists in Vienna's contemporary art scene whilst touching upon the ocean as a site for situated and embodied experiences, tracing its significance from the transatlantic slave trade to present-day political and socio-economic implications.

Drawing from the discourse of blue humanities, applying material feminisms and Indigenous knowledge, this research challenges land centric notions of the ocean. This study argues for decentering the human, proposing an oceanic paradigm that engages entangled histories, relational ecologies, artistic and decolonial epistemic interventions in contemporary art.



## Abstract (German)

Diese Arbeit untersucht den Ozean durch eine künstlerische Perspektive und einen kuratorischen Kontext in der zeitgenössischen Kunst anhand der von der Autorin mitkuratierten Ausstellung *Undulating Currents: A Group Show* (2023) in Wien, in der die lokalen und diasporischen Schwarzen Künstler\*innen Tshepiso Moropa, Ava Binta Giallo, Minia Biabiany, Tabita Rezaire, Eric Asamoah, Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, das Ozhopé Collective und Ebun Sodipo Werke präsentierten, die sich mit den Materialitäten von Öl und Wasser auseinandersetzen. Im Schnittpunkt queerer, öko-feministischer und indigener Perspektiven stellt diese Arbeit die Frage: Auf welche Weise können wir uns zum Ozean in Beziehung setzen?

Anhand der Ausstellung als Studie und durch die Ausweitung der Praktiken der teilnehmenden Künstlerinnen und Künstler auf breitere kuratorische Kontexte schlägt die Arbeit eine Schwarze Epistemologie vor – insbesondere Schwarze Formen des Seins und Wissens. Sie plädiert für einen Wandel von ausbeuterischen hin zu generativen Praktiken und verortet diese Untersuchung innerhalb der globalen neoliberalen Bedingungen, die die gegenwärtigen politischen und wirtschaftlichen Realitäten prägen. Darüber hinaus werden kritische Lücken in Ethik und Ästhetik in der zeitgenössischen Kunst angesprochen: Die Unterrepräsentation Schwarzer Künstler\*innen in der zeitgenössischen Kunstszene Wiens sowie der Ozean als Ort für situierte und verkörperte Erfahrungen, dessen Bedeutung vom transatlantischen Sklavenhandel bis zu den heutigen politischen und sozioökonomischen Implikationen nachgezeichnet wird.

Auf der Grundlage des Diskurses der Blue Humanities, der Anwendung von materialistischem Feminismus und indigener Wissensansätze stellt diese Untersuchung landzentrierte Vorstellungen des Ozean in Frage. Die Arbeit plädiert für eine Dezentrierung des Menschlichen und schlägt ein ozeanisches Paradigma vor, das sich mit verwobenen Geschichten, relationalen Ökologien, künstlerischen und dekolonialen epistemischen Interventionen in der zeitgenössischen Kunst beschäftigt.

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This study is for our ocean, she is our kin. I am inspired by Pacific Indigenous leaders and activists, from whom I have learned how to honor and make-with the ocean. Caribbean activists have also encouraged me to take an active role in strengthening our bond with the ocean. And to all those who have been sailing along my oceanic journey—I thank them immensely.



# 1

## Prologue

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<b>1.1 Rising Temperatures, Rising Seas: The Ocean in Crisis</b> . . . . .	<b>1</b>
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Water has been my spiritual guide and relational element from my lived experiences.<sup>1</sup> As long as I remember, water has been my gateway to think and reflect about life. Water offers me stillness and remedies. Water serves my higher state of being ~ biologically, cognitively and bodily. A glance into water is a mirror that reflects me. In the water’s hue, I sense my gaze, wonder and curiosity that ripples into explosions of thoughts and actions. Swims in water bodies are strokes of joys, nurturing and healing. Sea salt, riverine musk or indigo lake, I float in wild submerges. Water is a part of me and I am a part of water.

As the Earth rotates around its axis, the clump of water is blissfully prominent in the starry glitters of the universe. Such is the magnitude and the profound effect of water. As living sentient beings, we are the land dwellers that are rooted firmly to the ground and live alongside water. However, our ancestral history is potent with watery worlds that surround us in a magnificent wave of glory.

Water connects us all with the Ocean. The rim of the Ocean is known to us. But the mysteries of the Ocean run deep. The stories of the ocean and its inhabitants are known to us and these stories are compelling in the way that they tease us about the expanse of the ocean that offers us so much more than we can even begin to imagine. If we begin to think with the Ocean, the Ocean whispers to us about revelations. But how do we relate to the Ocean, who gets to tell their stories? Who speaks for the Ocean?

### 1.1 *Rising Temperatures, Rising Seas: The Ocean in Crisis*

The ocean is omnipresent. As a vast body of water, it traverses our blue planet. According to the IPCC Sixth Cycle Report, the global ocean covers 71% of the Earth and contains 97% of water.<sup>2</sup> The ocean

<sup>1</sup> This passage was subsequently published in Mekhala Dave, “Undulating Currents: A Group Show – An Analysis into the Curatorial Process,” *On Curating, Redefine: Curatorial and Artistic Practice in the South East*, Vol. no. 59 (November 2023), accessed on 8th April 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>2</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), *Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate* (SROCC), edited by Hans-Otto Pörtner, Debra C. Roberts, Valérie Masson-Delmotte, Panmao Zhai, Melinda Tignor, Elvira Poloczanska, Katja Mintenbeck, Andrés Alegría, Maike Nicolai, Andrew Okem, Jan Petzold, Benjamin Rama, and Nicolai Weyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), accessed November 18, 2024, (cf. [link](#))

provides a home to multispecies, food services, medicinal ingredients, regulation of the climate, storage of carbon dioxide, shipping transportation as well as a portal for ancestral and cultural relations that spans genealogies and timelines.<sup>3</sup> The ocean is at deep peril from climate change and its impact. The IPCC report claims new heights of climate change impacts are observed that were never before, particularly, in terrestrial, freshwater, coastal and open ocean water that includes heat induced mortality, coral bleaching from warmer temperatures, and drought related tree mortality. Some of the losses are reportedly irreversible such as extinction of species or have driven species to the high levels of land, to polewards or to the Arctics. Even the viable food chain and security of shellfish aquaculture and fisheries from ocean pollution and acidification are affected, as per the report. As the planet takes on these challenges, it can feel the world is demonized from heatwaves and death of crops to water scarcity and ocean extractivism.

Further, the IPCC report states a certainty of warming of the ocean since the 1970s and has likely doubled since 1990s with ocean acidification, sea level rise, impacts on terrestrial and freshwater species, and loss of oxygen.<sup>4</sup> Coastal communities, in particular, indigenous communities, are impacted with climate related hazards like tropical cyclones, sea level rise and flooding, to name a few.<sup>5</sup> Some regions are disproportionately affected compared to others. For instance, the African region contributes less to carbon emissions yet disproportionately bears the effects of climate change, exacerbated by negligence and neoliberal extractive practices.<sup>6</sup> Africa, as a region, is abundant in natural resources; however, its wealth has made it a target of centuries of colonial injustices inflicted upon its communities and ecosystems.<sup>7</sup> The transatlantic slave trade epitomizes these exploitative movements between Europe, Africa, and the Americas from the 16th to the 19th century.<sup>8</sup> Today, extractive practices driven by neoliberal policies and activities continue to plague the region.<sup>9</sup> On a similar front, the Pacific and Caribbean small island nations are acutely vulnerable to climate change impacts as well, including rising sea levels, hurricanes and wildfires, etc.<sup>10</sup> The IPCC report identifies these regions as facing disproportionate risks due to their geographic and economic characteristics.<sup>11</sup> Sea-level rise threatens the very existence of some low-lying islands, whilst the intensification of hurricanes and tropical storms exacerbates damage to infrastructures as well as ecosystems and local communities.<sup>12</sup> In the Caribbean, rising temperatures and changing precipitation patterns have increased the frequency and intensity of droughts, which can lead to conditions conducive to wildfires, further straining already fragile ecosystems and economies reliant on agriculture and tourism.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, the Pacific region contends with land erosion, loss of freshwater resources, and displacement of coastal communities, underscoring the urgent need for adaptive measures and international cooperation to mitigate these crises.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>3</sup> National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), "Why Should We Care About the Ocean?," accessed November 18, 2024, (cf. [link](#))

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Environment Programme, *Adaptation Gap Report 2024: Come Hell and High Water* (Nairobi: UNEP, 2024), 2.

<sup>6</sup> World Meteorological Organization, "Africa Faces Disproportionate Burden from Climate Change and Adaptation Costs," accessed November 18, 2024, (cf. [link](#))

<sup>7</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 1st ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), accessed November 18, 2024, (cf. [link](#))

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Ives Bortolot, "Trade Relations among European and African Nations," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–), accessed November 18, 2024, (cf. [link](#))

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Mycoo, M., M. Wairiu, D. Campbell, V. Duvat, Y. Golbuu, S. Maharaj, J. Nalau, P. Nunn, J. Pinnegar, and O. Warrick, "Small Islands," in *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, eds. H.-O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, M. Tignor, E.S. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, A. Alegría, M. Craig, S. Langsdorf, S. Lösche, V. Möller, A. Okem, and B. Rama (Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 2043–2121, accessed November 18, 2024 doi:10.1017/9781009325844.017.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Rosanne Martyr-Koller et al., "Loss and Damage Implications of Sea-Level Rise on Small Island Developing States," *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 50 (June 2021): 245–259, accessed November 18, 2024, (cf. [link](#)).

<sup>13</sup> World Meteorological Organization (WMO), *State of the Climate in Latin America and the Caribbean 2022* (Geneva: WMO, 2022), accessed November 18, 2024, (cf. [link](#))

<sup>14</sup> OxJournal Editorial Board, "Climate Change and Violent Conflict in the Pacific Region," *The Oxford Journal of Global Studies*, September 20, 2023, accessed November 18, 2024 (cf. [link](#))

## 1.2 Ocean Space and its ontologies

Such climate change impacts are indications of long standing historical trajectories, unfolding over the past centuries. I write this prologue to the research which embarks on a journey to explore the ocean's layered history, touching briefly on its role during the post-war period when colonization was receding, and decolonization and independence movements were affecting and reshaping the global order. This is a vital part of ocean ontologies—how our knowledge of the sea is formed, and what ways of understanding and relating to it are made possible.

The history of ocean space has been central to colonial expansion and maritime dominance, which became a site of transformation as nations of the Global South asserted their independence from colonial rule.<sup>15</sup> A historical perspective, including Hugo Grotius's *Mare Liberum*—which framed the ocean as a space of freedom for navigation and trade during the 17th and 19th centuries—has held crucial insights into how oceanic space has been conceptualized and regulated by sovereign powers over time.<sup>16</sup> Whilst this prologue does not go into Grotius's legal doctrine or colonial maritime histories, it observes the critical shift in oceanic imaginaries from colonial administration to decolonial perspectives, reflecting a broader interrogation of the ocean's role in freedom of the seas and its governance models. From Hugo Grotius's *Mare Liberum* in the 17th century to the United Nations Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS) of 1982, the trajectory of international governance reflects a history of demarcation over nations' sovereignty.<sup>17</sup> Surabhi Ranganathan has in recent years noted that, "law-making is really a line-making activity," highlighting the centrality of boundaries and zones in framing the ocean that has always been a metric to exercise sovereignty by the powers of nations.<sup>18</sup>

The geopolitical landscape of the 1950s bore the indelible marks of upheaval and ideological divergence. In the aftermath of World War II, the global order was defined by a precarious balance between the competing paradigms from socialism to communism and also Western capitalism.<sup>19</sup> During these times, the Cold War had a bifurcated world order, with superpowers vying for influence through political weight on economic and technological means. Against this backdrop, the Global South began to assert its autonomy, as newly independent nations emerged from the shadows of colonial rule. Similarly, these tides of political and international order also affected the seas. A pivotal moment was the Bandung Conference of 1955. Led by India's Prime Minister Nehru and supported by leaders from Indonesia, Pakistan, and Ceylon, the conference brought together nations from Asia and Africa in a historic gathering.<sup>20</sup> Bandung served as the foundation for the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which articulated a vision of global politics that rejected the binary logic of Cold War alignments and asserted nations sovereignty and self-determination.<sup>21</sup> Such diplomatic initiatives and legal principles

<sup>15</sup> I also want to make a note that my understanding of Global North/South divide comes from Arjun Appadurai's reasoning of flows between the two geopolitical regions which acknowledges the history of colonial rule and imperialism influencing it even to contemporary times in Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> In *Mare Liberum*, Hugo Grotius advances a case for the free navigation of the high seas, primarily as a means to enable Dutch merchants' unrestricted access to Asian trade markets. This principle of navigational freedom is a subset of Grotius's broader argument advocating for the unimpeded access to global trade and commerce. See Peter Borschberg, "Hugo Grotius' Theory of Trans-Oceanic Trade Regulation: Revisiting *Mare Liberum* (1609)," *International Law and Justice Working Papers* (Rev. Aug. 2006), 3.

<sup>17</sup> Surabhi Ranganathan, "Decolonization and International Law: Putting the Ocean on the Map," *Journal of the History of International Law / Revue d'histoire Du Droit International* 23, no. 1 (December 10, 2020): 161–83, accessed on November 18, 2024, (cf. link)

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Koskenniemi in this article provides an overview of the evolution of international law after World War II, highlighting its role in addressing the geopolitical shifts of the post-war era, the decolonization process, and the development of legal frameworks for global governance. Refer to Martti Koskenniemi, "History of International Law, since World War II," in *Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Law*, edited by Anne Peters and Rüdiger Wolfrum, last updated June 2011, accessed November 18, 2024, (cf. link)

<sup>20</sup> James A. C. Mackie, *Bandung 1955: Non-alignment and Afro-Asian Solidarity* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2005). See also Christopher J. Lee, ed., *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

advanced at Bandung reverberated throughout the 1960s, influencing international protocols and instruments aimed at consolidating the processes of decolonization.<sup>22</sup> It was at this conference where the image of the ocean was first evoked, in his opening address at the Bandung Conference, Indonesian President Sukarno eloquently captured the role of oceans in the mechanics of imperialism. He declared:

“This line runs from the Straits of Gibraltar, through the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea and the Sea of Japan. For most of that enormous distance, the territories on both sides of this lifeline were colonies, the peoples were unfree, their futures mortgaged to an alien system. Along that lifeline, the main artery of imperialism, there was pumped the lifeblood of colonialism.”<sup>23</sup>

Sukarno’s speech was a searing indictment of the colonial systems that had dominated the Global South. His imagery evoked the centrality of maritime routes in sustaining colonial dominance, positioning the ocean as a linchpin in the imperialist project.<sup>24</sup> Sukarno’s invocation of the ocean not only illuminated its historical complicity in imperialism but also positioned it as a space of some potential—where the legacies of colonialism could be contested and new paradigms of cooperation and governance could emerge.<sup>25</sup> By linking the ocean to the objectives of decolonization and global governance, Sukarno underscored its symbolic and practical role in evoking a reimagined world order.<sup>26</sup>

Since this conference, decolonization as a social and political movement has evolved significantly since the mid-20th century. In the 1950s and 60s, during independence struggles of nations, thinkers like Frantz Omar Fanon saw decolonization as a radical break from colonial rule—something that had to happen on both material and psychological levels.<sup>27</sup> For Fanon, colonialism was not only the physical occupation of land and its people, but also an invasive force that penetrated the human psyche, distorting identity and self-worth of suppressed populations under colonial rule. Liberation, in his view, required more than a political reform—it demanded a radical break through militant resistance, guerrilla tactics and some other violent forms, as a means of reclaiming the land and human dignity as well.

In the decades that followed, especially from the 1980s onward, scholars like Homi Bhabha, Aníbal Quijano, and Walter Dignolo, and some others began to critique how colonial structures continued to affect post-colonial societies through knowledge systems even long after their formal independence which continued to racially divide from sustained global tensions between developed and developing nations. Drawing from the Latin American context, it was Quijano who analysed the intrinsic link between modernity and coloniality where he critiqued the Eurocentric notion of modernity as a universal phenomenon, and argued that modernity is constructed through colonial domination, which imposes systems of control over

<sup>22</sup> *Supra* at 19.

<sup>23</sup> President Sukarno of Indonesia, “Address by the President of Indonesia”, in *Asia-Africa Speaks from Bandung* (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Indonesia, 1955), pp 19-25.

<sup>24</sup> Samera Esmeir, “Bandung: Reflections on the Sea, the World, and Colonialism,” in *Bandung, Global History, and International Law: Critical Pasts and Pending Futures*, ed. Luis Eslava, Michael Fakhri, and Vasuki Nesiah (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 81–94.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> For Fanon, his analysis of colonial systems dissects their organization into three distinct strata: (1) the workers, whose labor sustains the economic machinery of capital; (2) the intellectuals, who operate within the psychological and ideological realms, perpetuating or challenging colonial norms; and (3) the lumpenproletariat, a class of displaced, impoverished individuals excluded from productive labor and thought to be incapable of contributing to the colonial economy. These divisions, for Fanon, are critical to understanding the multifaceted impact of colonization, as they reflect the systemic fragmentation of national identities along lines of class, race, and economic disenfranchisement. Refer to Fanon, Frantz. 2001. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington. Penguin Modern Classics. London, England: Penguin Classics, 231.

human labor and also affects identities and knowledge systems.<sup>28</sup> Quijano also stated that if modernity is typically meant to be associated with “ideas of newness, the advanced, the rational-scientific, the secular. . . then there is no doubt that one admits that it is a possible phenomenon of all cultures and historical epochs.”<sup>29</sup> What Quijano challenged is the idea that if we were to believe modernity is about being innovative or rational, then we must also recognize that many different cultures have shown those traits in their own ways—long before or outside of what the West calls “modern.” This is something to be honoured through Indigenous knowledge systems, with their deep ties to nature and ancestral genealogies, for example.

Decoloniality from this lens, similarly, was also advanced by Mignolo as a map to think-with.<sup>30</sup> His coined term *delinking* was inspired by Fanon’s radical break from oppressive systems. For Mignolo, *delinking* signified a rejection not only of Eurocentric modernity but also of the binary logics of capitalism and communism that dominated postwar discourse. He asserted:

“...decolonization has been established in fifty-five years. . . it will be decoloniality all the way down. . . decolonial opens up a way of thinking that delinks from the chronologies of new epistemes or new paradigms.”<sup>31</sup>

Whereas postcolonial theorists like Bhabha, those of South Asia and its diaspora, complicated this discourse in post-independence national identities.<sup>32</sup> He highlighted how colonial legacies under globalization from the 1990s, for instance, continues to perpetuate inequitable economic systems wherein the Global North continues to exploit the Global South, thus, Bhabha contended what he called “in-between” or hybrid spaces as *third space* where colonisation still lingered in postcolonial notions of ambivalent cultural narratives and languages, equally affecting people’s identities. Essentially, he critiqued that colonialism is not a closed chapter, it continues to mutate through current dynamics of global power structures.

As such, taking it further, Achille Mbembe writing mainly in the 2000s within African context examined the contemporary relevance of Fanon’s ideas, particularly in post-colonial contexts such as apartheid South Africa.<sup>33</sup> He stated that Fanon’s decolonization is not merely about rejecting Western practices but is a process rooted in “being, time, and self-creation.”<sup>34</sup> For Mbembe, decolonisation is about understanding one’s existence in the current situation from how histories have affected us, and to truly locate how we should locally and natively push for more epistemic and structural challenges to Western practices. More recently, Arjun Appadurai has cautioned against the uncritical use of terms like “decolonization” suggesting that without careful contextualization, they risk becoming clichéd.<sup>35</sup> He warned against treating these as simple solutions or slogans, to reject a surface level rhetoric response but to truly maintain sustained critique and action to confront epistemic hierarchies from colonialism.<sup>36</sup> As such these thinkers show that a long-term process of unlearning and rebuilding beyond colonial legacies even in contempo-

<sup>28</sup> Anibal Quijano and Michael Ennis, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–80, accessed on November 18, 2024 (cf. [link](#)).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Walter Mignolo’s conceptualization of decoloniality, developed in dialogue with Anibal Quijano, originates from Latin American contexts, offering a framework that critically engages with the colonial matrix of power and its enduring legacies in knowledge production, identity, and geopolitics. Whilst rooted in the socio-historical realities of Latin America, their work provides a theoretical foundation that transcends regional boundaries. This research draws on Mignolo and Quijano’s insights to adapt and reinterpret decoloniality in ways that align with its specific focus on oceanic relations through contemporary art, curating and artistic practices. Refer to Walter D. Mignolo, “Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing: On (de)Coloniality, Border Thinking, and Epistemic Disobedience,” *Postcolonial Studies* 14, no. 3 (September 2011): 273–83, accessed on November 18, 2024, (cf. [link](#)).

<sup>31</sup> Walter Mignolo, “Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing,” *transversal texts* (2011), accessed December 2, 2024, accessed on November 18, 2024, (cf. [link](#)).

<sup>32</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 19.

<sup>33</sup> *Supra* at 7. See also Achille Mbembe’s keynote lecture titled “Frantz Fanon and the politics of Viscerality” at Franklin Humanities Institute for the 2 day workshop, accessed on November 18, 2024, *Frantz Fanon, Louis Mars, & New Directions in Comparative Psychiatry Workshop* (April 26–27, 2016).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Beyond Domination: The Future and Past of Decolonization,” *The Nation*, March 9, 2021, accessed on November 18, 2024, (cf. [link](#)).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

rary times requires careful consideration in continuing to challenge what we have come to inherit in terms of practices and knowledge systems. Their scholarly legacies form a scaffolding upon which I as a researcher and curator interrogate the essence of decoloniality but not certainly as an abstraction, as I see it as a lived and evolving praxis for my study. It is also here that I consider Appadurai's reflection, "I began to see that there was an East in every West... and a South within every North," where he recognized that these distinctions are far more political than merely geographical.<sup>37</sup>

Just as the ocean is an interconnected ecosystem, immeasurable in its vastness, depths, and the subversions of light that infiltrate its layers, I argue against making any separations or divisions of geographical or zonal lines as nations have done so and also, in the theoretical analysis of decoloniality. This study is largely inspired by Indigenous knowledge systems, particularly the teachings of Pacific activists and leaders with whom I have had the privilege to bond over the years as I contend that such imposed divisions and boundaries have long served colonial agendas, facilitating maintenance of power relations that have enabled resource extractivism from our lands to the seas.<sup>38</sup>

For this, I am indebted to the Hawaiian leader Solomon Kaho'ohalahala "Uncle Sol" for his wisdom, Hinano Teavai-Murphy for sharing moving and inspiring stories that have inspired me, Quack Pihiri for their fearless and unwavering activism, and Alanna Smith for pioneering innovative techniques in marine conservation that continue to illuminate pathways for ocean stewardship.<sup>39</sup> This research adopts a similarly non-linear approach through marginalized narratives—such as Indigenous oral histories and one's situated experiences—and to reimagine that there are far more just forms of ocean stewardship in response to our current ecological crisis from climate change and its impacts. Therefore, to truly being decolonial, in this research I emphasize, is also about rejection to zonal or geographical lines, and it is in mirroring the ocean's resistance to being fixed or fragmented, as Peter Steinberg has stated where he also has argued that nations treat the ocean as "static, bordered, and linear," which creates a sense of control that does not reflect how the ocean actually functions.<sup>40</sup> He calls attention to "rhythmic turbulence," which is the constant motion of waves, tides, and deep-sea currents of the ocean in ways that legal and cartographic models fail to capture.<sup>41</sup>

I sense that the sea does not conform to borders, nor do the multispecies that live within it. I realise that there is a gap—a fundamental misalignment—between the ocean's reality and the systems that try to govern it. And therefore, we also need to acknowledge that just one narrative or perspective to decolonise is not something we can truly go for, but we must instead draw from plural practices and knowledge systems which complicate notions of decolonial positions that challenge colonial structures and envision alternative pathways for just and equitable futures. It is also about going forward with a

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> I had the privilege to collaborate with UK-based artist Emma Critchley, legal expert Pradeep Singh, Indigenous Pacific activists, leaders, and scientific advisors to advocate for the "rights of the deep ocean," a visionary legal framework aimed at creating robust protections for the ocean. Through the design of an open letter titled *Rights of the Deep*, this initiative articulates collective concerns about the impacts of deep-sea mining. Framed through Pacific Indigenous genealogies, oral histories, and ancestral knowledge, the letter has deeply influenced my understanding of the ocean as an interconnected and living entity. See "Rights of the Deep," *Vital Signs* Exhibition, Science Gallery London (November 2024–May 2025), accessed December 2, 2024, (cf. [link](#))

<sup>39</sup> Through numerous conversations with Pacific Indigenous activists and leaders, the open letter *Rights of the Deep* became a transformative touchstone in shaping my understanding of the ocean. These dialogues fostered a profound shift in how I perceive oceanic relations, introducing a lens deeply informed by Indigenous genealogies and ancestral knowledge. This engagement has significantly influenced the trajectory of this research, offering invaluable insights into the interconnectedness and ethics of our shared relationship with the ocean.

<sup>40</sup> Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters, "Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume through Oceanic Thinking," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 33, no. 2 (2015): 247–264.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

commitment—an invocation of advocacy for the ocean’s vitality and for the silenced voices of vulnerable communities and multispecies who call the ocean their home. By integrating these perspectives, a comprehensive understanding of decolonization emerges that recognizes it as a multifaceted process involving the interrogation of historical narratives and the dismantling of oppressive structures to reimagining of futures grounded in alternative epistemologies of the ocean.

### 1.3 Navigating Oceanic Assemblages

I have established a brief yet comprehensive foundation tracing the history of ocean space, reflecting on some of the contributions of scholars and activists whose decolonial perspectives span diverse disciplines and interpretations. Building upon this groundwork, I form the basis for the ocean as a critical site for inquiry, examining within the emerging field of blue humanities who are contributing to an expansive *oceanic turn*.<sup>42</sup> The *oceanic turn*, emerging since the 1970s and 1990s, represents a convergence of disciplines—maritime history, literature, cartography, law and governance, environmental studies, and more—alongside ancestral and indigenous knowledge systems intricately tied to the ocean.<sup>43</sup> This turn encompasses the ocean’s material and cultural dimensions, submerging into its histories and speculative futures to form *ontologies of the sea*.<sup>44</sup> The *oceanic turn*, increasingly recognized as a transformative paradigm, has expanded across a multitude of disciplines and has seen its effects even in contemporary art. From the stark realities of the sixth extinction and ocean acidification to rising sea levels, warming waters, melting ice, overfishing, and widespread contamination, humanity faces a compounding crisis. These systemic disruptions necessitate a range of critical responses: from examining oceanic geophysics and constructing posthuman notions to exploring human/nonhuman marine relationships. Such inquiries challenge conventional ethical paradigms, urging a shift toward practices that are non-dominating and even embrace the erotic and pleasurable connections between humans and the nonhuman world. Thus in light of this, the study is intentionally scoped to prioritize analysis from the lens of contemporary art.

Let us look at how scholars have contributed to the blue humanities and helped craft this growing focus on the ocean. From the 1990s, island-led thinking is most powerfully expressed in earlier works of Édouard Glissant’s *relations* to embrace Islands as webs of connections and knowledge-making<sup>45</sup>, whilst Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s *tidalectics* has been about cultural mixing from diaspora imaginings<sup>46</sup> and Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* has helped for a more transnational Black identity connection, all of which are discussed in this study<sup>47</sup>. Each of them have been also enriched by former Pacific Island thinkers from the 1960s onward during Islands independence movements, including Epeli Hau’ofa’s expansive vision of

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Deloughrey, “Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene,” *Comparative Literature* 69, no. 1 (2017): 32–44, accessed November 18, 2024 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

<sup>46</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 38.

<sup>47</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

*Oceania*<sup>48</sup>, Teresia Teaiwa's intimate poems speaking out on Islands not just as tropical paradises, they have been marked by militarized zones, designed to undermine its natives and destroy its ecological fauna and flora<sup>49</sup>. Whereas, Albert Wendt encouraged Islanders to have more agency, to use their voices to actively challenge the harm brought on them through means of storytelling and uniting together in collective public moments and counter-cultures of resistance.<sup>50</sup>

These earlier thinkers have also pushed the discourse forward, encouraging more contemporary approaches that reflect the complex entanglements to the ontologies of the ocean. Steve Mentz's *wet globalization*, emphasizes the instability and flux inherent in oceanic environments as a counter-narrative to land-based histories is perhaps a way forward to critically thinking about global networks.<sup>51</sup> In reflecting the violence from colonialism, Christina Sharpe's conceptualization of *the wake* and its resonance with the Middle Passage (transatlantic slave trade) confronts that these are not something of the past, it still lives in the ongoing reverberations of racial violence for Black communities.<sup>52</sup> Elizabeth DeLoughrey also voices strongly on critically engaging with islands' role in colonial expansion and environmental degradation whilst advocating for a decolonial perspective that centres on Indigenous epistemologies<sup>53</sup>, whilst Alice Te Punga Somerville also similarly emphasizes on learning from Indigenous genealogies and kinships.<sup>54</sup>

In Stacy Alaimo's concept of *trans-corporeality* about human and non-human bodies, the harming of our environment is not just "out there" but it is catalysed by humans and is closer to us than we think it is.<sup>55</sup> The use of plastic straw ends up in the ocean and into marine life, which we then consume through fish food, and the plastic returns back into our bodies. This is illustrative that *trans-corporeality* is about how lines are blurred between our bodies and the environment around us.<sup>56</sup> Taking a feminist approach, Cecilia Åsberg shows us a messier picture of how the Baltic Sea is a toxic embodiment where pregnant women who consume local fish with toxic hormone disruptors in fish due to chemical pollution in water can reflect an environmental issue which is clearly a feminist one.<sup>57</sup> Data-driven science also influence on how we come to know the ocean and some scholars also raise concerns for it. That even if we do not know the extent of life within its depths, we can possibly imagine it beyond the tools of science and politics around it. Stefan Helmreich's *alien ocean* shows how scientists study the sea with cutting-edge technology, from deep sea ecosystems to tiny microbes in remote spaces where it is not so much about how they are taxonomized and are opened up for human knowledge, but rather, it can still remain as mysterious underworlds to help in our thinking and knowing differently than what we know from terracentric perspectives.<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, Melody Jue's *wild blue media* reimagines the ocean as a far more multisensory and phenomenological space that when we are submerged underwater from scuba diving, it can help us to reorient ourselves and to think about directional shifts and representations

<sup>48</sup> Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994): 148-161.

<sup>49</sup> Teresia K. Teaiwa, *Sweat and Salt Water: Selected Works*, compiled and edited by Katerina Teaiwa, April K. Henderson, and Terence Wesley-Smith (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2021).

<sup>50</sup> Albert Wendt, *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1979).

<sup>51</sup> Steve Mentz, "Ocean," in *Anthropocene Unseen: A Lexicon*, ed. Cymene Howe and Anand Pandian (Punctum Books, 2020), 307-11, accessed on November 18, 2024 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>52</sup> Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>53</sup> *Supra* at 42.

<sup>54</sup> Alice Te Punga Somerville, "Where Oceans Come From," *Comparative Literature* 69, no. 1 (2017): 25-31, accessed November 18, 2024 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>55</sup> Stacy Alaimo, "Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature," *Material Feminisms* 25, no. 2 (2008): 237-264.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Cecilia Åsberg, "A Sea Change in the Environmental Humanities," *Ecocene: Cappadocia Journal of Environmental Humanities* 1, no. 1 (2020): 108-22, accessed November 18, 2024 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>58</sup> Stefan Helmreich, *Alien Ocean: Anthropological Voyages in Microbial Seas*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2009), accessed November 18, 2024 (cf. [link](#))

from and within the waters underneath the waves.<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, Astrida Neimanis's assertion that "we are all bodies of water" poetically reflects that water is porous: if we care for water, we care for all forms of life—both human and non-human—emphasizing our ultimate interconnectedness.<sup>60</sup>

As it can be seen, these perspectives show that the blue humanities encourages us to move beyond terrestrial limitations, embracing a *transoceanic imaginary* and a *hydrocolonial* lens to critically examine the intricate relationships and histories tied to these salty, gurgling, brackish, and fresh realms of waters. These thinkers collectively chart the epistemological shifts inherent in the *oceanic turn*, unsettling static notions of the sea as merely a site of transit or extraction. Their pioneering contributions have not only defined the contours of the blue humanities but also shaped adjacent fields such as critical ocean studies, *hydro-criticism*, and *liquid ecologies*.<sup>61</sup> Thus, their work offers a vital foundation for this research. The provocations they have are not only acknowledged within this study but also serve as critical undercurrents, influencing its engagement with contemporary artistic and curatorial strategies that address oceanic crises.

This expanding body of work has also been increasingly informing artistic and curatorial practices, which are now being reconceptualized through the theoretical and methodological angles taken from blue humanities. These practices foster interdisciplinary exchanges, positioning art and exhibitions as critical platforms for examining the intricate cultural narratives to include ecological and political dimensions of oceanic spaces. Within this, contemporary art has emerged as a critical medium for engaging with these discourses. Artistic practices, curatorial strategies, academic research, and activism converge to address colonialism in which it has exacerbated extractivism and to respond to this, epistemological shifts between nature and culture is thus much needed.

This research recognizes the pivotal role of contemporary art, which currently stands at a unique and critical juncture. Art institutions, artists, curators, and cultural producers are increasingly positioning natural elements at the center of their work, addressing the global and localized impacts of climate change. Through nuanced interpretations of meaning-making with incorporating aesthetics from diverse methods and means, contemporary art seeks to transform the overwhelming complexities of planetary crises into both actionable and imaginative responses. It embraces situated practices and innovative representations that are relational and intuitive with creative means, fostering interactive assemblage between humanity and the natural world.

I perceive that contemporary art remains an ever-evolving and moving field—between perception and narratives. It thrives on multifaceted perspectives that challenge established paradigms—embracing both fragmentation and contradiction, involving one's self-reflection as well. This quality has a compelling departure for reimagining knowledge systems beyond modernity's extractive and

<sup>59</sup> Melody Jue, *Wild Blue Media: Thinking through Seawater* (Duke University Press, 2020), accessed on November 2024 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>60</sup> Astrida Neimanis, "How to Think (as) a Body of Water: Access, Amplify, Describe!" in *Lonely Vectors*, ed. Joella Kiu, Kenneth Tay, and Mi You (Singapore Art Museum, 2022), 150–55, accessed November 18, 2024 (cf. [link](#)) Also see Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

<sup>61</sup> Laura Winkiel, "Introduction," *English Language Notes* 57, no. 1 (2019): 1–10, accessed on February 8 2025 (cf. [link](#))

colonial motivations. By bridging disciplines and generating new imaginaries, contemporary art not only interrogates existing structures but also provides alternative pathways for understanding and responding to the ecological challenges of our time.

This research aligns with these efforts, using the lens of contemporary art. Throughout this thesis, I will be engaging with some moments and in critical debates, analyzing the significance of contemporary art in emphasizing the urgent need to reimagine and establish emerging imaginings for ocean stewardship. These are aimed to reflect on the potential of rethinking our relationships with the ocean, advocating for more inclusive, equitable and sustainable approaches to its care and governance. By drawing on the *oceanic turn* and decolonial praxis, this thesis seeks to contribute to evolving narratives that embraces the ocean.

## A Black Epistemology-An Introduction

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The thesis critically examines the ontology of the ocean—what it *is*—and its epistemology—how it is *known*. Since the rise of the blue humanities and the *oceanic turn* from the 1990s, contemporary art has also undergone a shift.<sup>1</sup> In response to planetary crisis, artists and curators are engaging with art institutions to critically examine human-ocean relations, how the ocean is understood and managed for so long.

Through this thesis, I propose a Black epistemology— interventions by Black artists from aesthetic strategies inspired by the slave trade journey, alongside my own curatorial methodology. I argue that such alternative epistemologies are necessary to expand cultural understandings of the ocean. I present three interrelated arguments. First, Black contemporary artists produce epistemic interventions that contest and move beyond dominant Western knowledge systems. Second, their practices are situated and embodied, emerging from island and water-based strategies of relations. Third, curating operates as a methodological tool—both analytical and imaginative—that deepens these modes of knowing and opens relational possibilities with the ocean. The study employs a curatorial methodology, from my co-curated exhibition *Undulating Currents: A Group Show* (2023) in Vienna, to critically examine artists and in expanded curatorial practices.

Ultimately, the thesis argues that contemporary art creates pathways toward ocean stewardship—challenging global structures from local relations that prioritize exploitation over protection, generating new imaginaries, and fostering practices of care and reciprocal relations with the ocean.

<sup>1</sup> Deloughrey, *Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene*, 32–44 (see preface, n. 42 and Ranganathan, *Decolonization and International Law: Putting the Ocean on the Map*, 161–83 (see preface, n.17).

## 2.1 Methodologies and Practice-based

In 2023, curator and artist Pakathi invited me to co-conceive an exhibition at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. In this academic endeavor, our collaboration became a space to explore the ocean's cultural and historical ties to Black history, whilst also addressing ecological and socio-political concerns through curatorial practice. Vienna, as a landlocked city, feels distant from the ocean—both physically and conceptually. This raised key questions: How could an exhibition bring the ocean closer, not just as a metaphor, but as something material and historically significant? Could this distance, rather than being a limitation, open new ways of thinking about the ocean's presence in contemporary art?<sup>2</sup>

Central to this was the deep connection between Black communities and the ocean, a history that is less so examined. Such perspectives, especially from Black communities, are rarely explored in exhibitions, making *Undulating Currents* distinct in its approach and context. The connection between the ocean and Black communities is not something new—it is a complex history that deserves recognition. Rather than presenting something new, my role is not to define this history but to contribute a perspective that emerges through contemporary art, acknowledging both its limitations and its possibilities. The thesis and the exhibition remain inseparable, drawing from each other. Whilst the thesis provides a theoretical foundation, the exhibition puts these ideas into practice, making them tangible and experiential.

I draw directly from the exhibition's conceptual and curatorial processes: *Undulating Currents* examines the materiality of oil and water—two of the most exploited resources on a local and global scale. It brings together eight Black local and diaspora artists whose practices intersect with queer, feminist, and Indigenous perspectives, addressing the materiality of oil and water. The artists who contributed were Tshepiso Moropa, Ava Binta Giallo, Minia Biabiany, Tabita Rezaire, Eric Asamoah, Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, Ozhopé Collective and Eburn Sodipo.

The exhibition, presented as a group show, showcased a diverse spectrum of artistic practices and mediums: from video essays to video game, sculptural installation, and photomontages, and a curated collection of books capturing the expansive nature of contemporary artistic inquiry. My analysis extends beyond the context of this exhibition to situate the artists' work within other curatorial frameworks. By exploring their artistic practices in diverse contexts, I aim to expand the scope of my analysis, positioning their work not only within the curatorial narrative of *Undulating Currents* but also in dialogue with other exhibitions in which their work was also presented. This dual perspective—as a curator within the project and as an external participant observing their work in broader contexts—enables a more comprehensive understanding of their artistic practices. This exercise serves as a reflective tool, enabling me to critically

<sup>2</sup> Stefanie Hessler's *Tidalectics* (2017) exhibition at Augarten, Vienna which have similar overlaps in the thematics of this thesis that are raised, accessed December 24, 2024, (cf. [link](#))

engage with my own curatorial methodology. Also, it allows me to critically reflect on the layered meanings of the artists' practices and how it contributes to both the discourse of contemporary art and the theoretical frameworks underpinning this thesis. I am particularly interested in how these processes come together and the ways in which the artists themselves articulate their approaches towards oil and water, thus, which forms part of the ocean. For this thesis, I interviewed nearly all the artists from the exhibition. This was a key part of my methodology. Connecting with the artists—through both the curatorial process and interviews—gave me valuable insights that added layers, thus, contributing further to this study.

In thinking about diversity and inclusion, my study considers that in Vienna, the underrepresentation of Black artists is affected by many complex factors within institutional structures. One key issue is tokenization, where Black artists are included in exhibitions not for the depth of their work but to check a box for diversity. The difference between genuine representation and tokenism is unclear, making it difficult to distinguish between meaningful inclusion and superficial gestures. This argument is explored in Chapter One where I discuss how the exhibition serves as a first step in confronting the marginalization of Black artists in Vienna. Whilst it is only one effort, I believe it acts as a ripple in the water—small but significant in pushing for change. I acknowledge that the interviews conducted have certain limitations, as they depend on what the artists and cultural producers are willing to disclose, leaving some aspects inevitably with gaps in my study. I also include shorter interviews from cultural producers in Vienna on the city's art scene. Their insights provided a firmer understanding of the challenges of representation, further adding to my reflections on these issues. I also received unique feedback on the exhibition from a viewer. This conversation illuminated how the exhibition was experienced from a viewer's perspective.

## 2.2 *Framework of Chapters*

The Black artists I examine in my chapters bring forward queer, Indigenous, and feminist perspectives. To confront this, in Chapter One *Undulating Currents: A Group Show*, I reflect on *Undulating Currents* beyond its exhibition, revisiting it conceptually. As curators, we were inspired by the gallery space itself—how could it become a space where visitors could step in and experience the ocean, or connect with materials like oil and water? What artists could we think of including? To create this atmosphere, we painted and carpeted the gallery black, a neutral color representing both oil and water. The artworks were displayed in varied ways—horizontally, vertically—accompanied by curatorial texts and a curated collection of books on Black art and history borrowed from the university library. For us, all of this was a form of knowledge. Our research was rooted in the history of the transatlantic slave trade, which we explored as we

developed the exhibition. Conceptually, Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* and Édouard Glissant's *relations* were key inspirations, as well as some others included in this chapter.<sup>3</sup> The artists' practices reflected hybridity in complex ways, aligning with Glissant's vision of *shared knowledge*—connecting the ocean, the environment (gallery/space), artworks, and spectatorship. This chapter expands on my curatorial positioning, how curating serves as my methodology for the thesis, outlining my conceptual framework and approaches. It also highlights the critical role of Black artists whilst addressing their underrepresentation in Vienna's art scene. The year 2023 serves as a referential point with *Undulating Currents*, as I gathered research and materials through direct contact with the artists, which helped contextualize their artworks and provided deeper insights into their practices.

Following this, in Chapter Two *Translocating: Ocean as forgotten space* I examine how trans artists Brathwaite-Shirley and Sodipo reflect on the term *trans* as an identity in multiple ways, influencing both their artistic practices and perspectives of their world. I discuss Brathwaite-Shirley's video game *Pirating Blackness* (2021) and Sodipo's video essay *And the Seas Bring forth New Lands* (2019) and *Celeste* (2021), the artist's book publication. Their work expands our understanding of the transatlantic slave journey, not just as a historical event but as a crossing connected to transness and movement. Through imagination and multiple meanings of the ship, the hold, containers, and cargo that so defined the slave ships, these artists create spaces to remember trans bodies that have been historically erased—bodies that were never documented but continue to exist through storytelling and acts of speculations of histories. This leads to key questions: How can we understand transness in relation to the material history of the ocean? How do these artists challenge colonial and capitalist ways of seeing, which have long shaped how we think about bodies and movement across a space? They encourage us to see the transatlantic slave trade—and oceanic crossings more broadly—as ongoing, embodied experiences that we still see it unfold in the present.

It is followed by my inquiry of feminine and queer artists' relationship to their practices within a broader curatorial framework that considers the act of care. It asks: What does the act of care mean for the ocean when viewed through a lens of feminist labor? How does this approach to care extend into both the process of art-making and the curatorial context? This leads into Chapter Three *Relational Flows: Feminist Labor and Spatial Negotiations*, where I examine practices of artists Giallo's site specific work *Water's Skin* (2023), Moropa's short film, accompanied by collage *Selekana le Modimo wa Noka (Selekana and the Goddess River)* (2023), Rezaire's *Deep Down Tidal* (2017), and Biabiany's video essay *Musa* (2020), further exploring how water and islands are feminist strategies to ties with history and the spatial.

In the final Chapter Four *Between Oil and Water: The Commons in Ozhopé Collective in Lake Malawi*, I draw from artist collective

<sup>3</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 15 (see preface, n. 47) and Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 8 (see preface, n. 45).

Ozhopé's participatory project *Row* (2017) and the broader artistic practice of its co-founder, artist Massa Lemu, to explore the idea of art collectives—what it is, how it is formed, and how Ozhopé embodies this within the material realities of Lake Malawi. This study takes place in the context of ongoing disputes over the lake's ownership between Malawi and Tanzania, and the looming prospects of oil drilling, driven by neoliberal forces seeking to exploit its resources. Such extractive ventures threaten not only local communities but also the biodiversity of the lake, confronting environmental and economic justice. I examine how this collective works within a "collective structure" engaged with local fisherfolk communities, using artistic practice to highlight pressing local issues whilst fostering forms of collaboration as well as resistance on the ground. This inquiry also leads me to reflect on the concept of the commons, a term widely used to describe shared public resources, yet one that is increasingly contested within the blue economy, particularly in debates around fisheries and oil drilling or deep sea mining as part of marine governance. Can there be a world where communities practice shared authorship and sustainable stewardship over their environments? What role can artistic and curatorial interventions play in imagining and enacting these possibilities?

These are the questions that I examine between my final chapter and conclusion, as I think about how interventions in contemporary art intersect in the struggle for more sustainable futures. Thus, using this exhibition as a pivotal reference point, this circumferential approach enables a nuanced way to examine artists' practices, positioning *Undulating Currents* as both a methodological tool and a conceptual anchor whilst situating the research within a broader curatorial and contemporary art discourse.

### 2.3 *Theoretical framework*

Engaging with *Undulating Currents* means inevitably reckoning with the transatlantic slave trade. I invoke Derek Walcott's powerful poem *The Sea is History* when reflecting on the transatlantic slave trade, a pivotal moment in Black history.<sup>4</sup> When Walcott wrote this poem, he inscribed water images into his poem to show enduring loss of people to the sea and along with it, their cultures—he spoke about tribal memory and what that meant to the people of the Caribbean who witnessed the slave journey across the sea. This poem is inspiring as it opened up many ways to think about relationships—not just human to human, but also human to non-human, and even among non-human entities. From this, the question of how to relate to being Black—or non Black, becomes even more intricate.<sup>5</sup> For me, in navigating this, it was not simply about recognizing differences but about understanding the relationships and responsibilities that come with these differences.

The transatlantic slave trade was a foundational system in the development of European colonial expansion and global capitalism,

<sup>4</sup> Derek Walcott, "The Sea Is History," in *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> The term 'non-Black' is used here to denote anyone who does not identify as Black. Whilst racial discrimination based on skin color is a complex and multifaceted issue, this distinction specifically highlights the Black/white racial dichotomy. However, this framing is not meant to exclude other racial identities, but rather to allow readers to consider broader racial dynamics within the discussion. See Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139–67.

operating between the 16th and 19th centuries. It forcibly displaced millions of Africans across the Atlantic in what became known as the Middle Passage, marked by extreme violence and dehumanization that resulted in the ocean serving as a graveyard for Black people.<sup>6</sup> Chapter One lays out the formal, technical, aesthetic, and conceptual foundations of *Undulating Currents*, explaining the curatorial choices and their impact on the exhibition space and spectatorship. A key focus is on the idea of being and non-being of Black (ontology), which I am indebted to thinkers Sylvia Wynter, Fanon, Gilroy, Glissant, Sharpe and others, who have examined identity and how Black lives have been influenced by the shared past of transatlantic slave trade.

Specifically, Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* is key to Chapter One and Two, helping me think about identity beyond fixed national or racial categories. He frames the ocean as a space of movement and hybrid cultures—where histories of slavery and migration shape diaspora and its cultures in fluid evolving ways.<sup>7</sup> As belonging is not confined to one place, Black as an identity (or identities) is something that is continually being redefined, creating new cultures and tongues of languages that enhance ways of relating.<sup>8</sup> Wynter's work further deepens this understanding. Her critique of the category of "man"—the idea that man is the centre of the world, and a Eurocentric idea of what it means to be fully human—challenges ways of being and knowing.<sup>9</sup> She argues that being Black has historically been excluded from this definition (non-being or not fully human), which also shapes how knowledge itself is structured. I feel this also has had direct implications for how we come to recognise the complexities of the ocean. Much of what we "know" about the ocean comes from a human notion, Eurocentric colonial view that treats the ocean as something to be used and conquered, rather than a space of cultural inheritance of connections.

But this history of the sea that Walcott mentions is rooted in global capitalism—a system that moves goods, capital, and labor across borders, valuing profit over people and nature. From its beginnings, capitalism relied on exploitation, treating those seen as "lesser," especially non-Europeans as profitable labor and natural things as resources. The transatlantic slave trade is thus a key example. This system of violence and displacement fueled capitalism, creating inequalities that still see its effects on the world in contemporary times in different forms, such as land grabs and environmental exploitation which have led to further destruction and marginalisation of people and of all natural things. The ocean is also central to decolonization in the 1960s, a period marked by rising tensions between developed and developing nations. This shift was driven by technological advancements that enabled large-scale extraction of oil, gas, and rare earth minerals from the ocean, resources essential for modern economies. As industries expanded, particularly in the Global North, the ocean became an increasingly exploited frontier, where unchecked extraction led to environmental degradation.<sup>10</sup> From the 1990s onward, globalization intensified these extractive processes, as

<sup>6</sup> Ted Aris-Wolf, review of *Many Seasons Gone: Memory, History, and the Atlantic Slave Trade*, by Anne C. Bailey and Saidiya Hartman, *NWIG: New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 83, no. 1/2 (2009): 99–104. Accessed on February 8 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>7</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (see Prologue, n. 47)

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337.

<sup>10</sup> As elaborated in my Prologue, I rely on both decolonial and postcolonial thinkers Walter D. Mignolo, Anibal Quijano, Arjun Appadurai, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and others who rely on the Global North / Global South distinction. This framework is referenced from a historical perspective, wherein the division is rooted in the dynamics of coloniser/colony and the broader context of developed and developing economies.

capital and trade moved more freely across borders, enabling state-industrial corporations to dominate movements across the ocean for goods, capital and labor.

This, in turn, is how I interpret the neoliberal condition—a system where the regulation of oceanic resources is increasingly decentralized, allowing private and multinational interests to dictate their use. Such regulations on life, termed by Michel Foucault and scholars like Micheal Hardt and Antonio Negri, further complicate neoliberal conditions. Foucault’s term biopolitics refers to the ways in which power operates through the regulation of life itself—governing bodies and populations over biological and technologically interrelated processes to control economic and political systems.<sup>11</sup> Hardt and Negri expand on this idea in their concept of *Empire*, where power is no longer tied to a single nation-state but instead functions through decentralized, global networks of governance, capital, and control, making resistance more diffuse and challenging.<sup>12</sup> Whilst politics remains broad and subjective, I understand it through this neoliberal condition, where the expansion of capital and labor flows accelerates environmental decline, reinforcing patterns of extraction that continue to erode the ocean’s ecological and cultural significance. These aspects of biopolitics and *Empire* are explored in greater depth in Chapter Four where the working methods of the art collective Ozhopé Collective and the artist Lemu’s theoretical contexts and art practice take more focus as they touch upon these themes. Due to Lake Malawi’s dispute between Malawi and Tanzania, it has intensified potential oil drilling on the lake—it is a threat to the local environment and fisherfolk communities that continue to rely on the lake for their livelihood.<sup>13</sup>

There is also a similar global turn in contemporary art on the ways globalization has also influenced how artists produce their work, what curatorial practices surround them and which exhibition structures support their work. For instance, Anna Maria Guasch argues that contemporary art is increasingly defined by fluid connections between the local and the global.<sup>14</sup> Rather than viewing globalization as a force of homogenization, she highlights its paradox—it can create both uniformity and new possibilities for exchange and diversity in artistic and curatorial practices. Furthermore, Guasch challenges the traditional Western canon, advocating for an expanded art history that deconstructs national categories and embraces hybrid cultures, drawing on Bhabha’s *third space* on layers of new meanings and experiences.<sup>15</sup>

In Chapter One I elaborate on my curatorial approach and position that is research based. Academic training in art history and curating has shaped my orientation toward expansive knowledge—I argue that through curating, research has allowed me to situate various epistemologies when it comes to experiencing and presenting art in time and space. Economic models carry a certain logic in how art is presented, influenced by market forces, making some artists more visible or celebrated than others. But for me, it is about breaking

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979*, edited by Michel Senellart, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1–22. accessed February 8 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>12</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, “Preface: Life in Common,” in *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Refer to Personal Interview with Massa Lemu. 2024. Appendix 4.1. Also refer to Massa Lemu and Emmanuel Ngwira, “Row: a thinkivist art intervention\*,” *Nordia Geographical Publications* 47, no. 5 (2018): 43.

<sup>14</sup> Anna Maria Guasch, “The Cosmopolitan Turn in the Contemporary Art,” in *The Global Turn: Theories, Research Designs, and Methods for Global Studies*, ed. Eve Darian-Smith and Philip McCarty (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014), accessed February 8, 2025, (cf. [link](#))

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

out of that mold—reconsidering how politics, relations, social dynamics, and economic conditions shape art, and I focus on how such forces can simultaneously be critiqued through exhibition formats from experimental curating. I am drawn to artists whose practices clearly intensify and expand these tensions, whose work confronts and questions these very structures. I also find it crucial to think of curating as a form of care—not necessarily only for artworks as objects, but more so in terms of how to be responsible and sustainable in times of climate crisis. It is about storytelling and narrative in the work of artists—what these can reveal and what remains hidden or invisible. At the same time, for me, curating becomes a way to think through space and relations, to engage with participation, to create moments where viewers have agency and become part of the space and artworks itself. Therefore, I am interested in how this challenges traditional notions of authorship and authority in contemporary art. Personally, as an advocate of the ocean, I gravitate toward curatorial practices that align with the themes of the ocean. I believe we still know far too little—there are oceanic epistemologies we have yet to uncover, to understand and for it to come forward in contemporary discourse. The ocean, for me, becomes a site to think through the unknown, the submerged, whilst at the outset to think from an entangled space of such political tensions and socio-economic conditions.

In line with this, my thesis is also a personal inquiry and an experiment in curatorial practice—a way of exploring how curating contributes to shaping our perception of the ocean through modalities of curating, artists and their process, artworks and its reach with the viewers. Therefore, I argue that curating is a tangible experimental extension of my research on the ocean. I am interested in how the act of curating can not only mediate artistic practices but also bridge the theoretical reflections through research methods that underpin them. How does curating frame the ocean as both an ecological and political space? How does it guide the viewer's engagement with artistic practices that challenge extractive histories? By positioning curating as both a method of inquiry and a site of knowledge production, I explore how exhibitions can be a space for reconceptualising the ocean—not only as a site of historical and economic contestation but as a relational, living space in the circulation of knowledge production. In a way I reflect on my role as a curator and I see that Guasch also emphasizes the role of curators as “seismographs” of these global shifts, detecting and responding to the evolving dynamics of art circulation and exhibition-making.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

If contemporary art is increasingly shaped by globalization, how are artists, curators, cultural producers, and institutions responding? One major response has been the rise of biennales across different regions, where artists are often exhibited within national pavilions, underscoring state-based representation even in global contexts. Anthony Gardner has critiqued global exhibition formats such as biennales and festivals for prioritizing neoliberal agendas under the

guise of neutrality, marginalizing truly diverse artistic expressions.<sup>17</sup> Whereas, Angela Dimitrakaki similarly insists that artists' political positions should not be neutralized; instead, exhibitions must confront antagonisms to reveal underlying power dynamics.<sup>18</sup> Okwui Enwezor had previously contributed to strategies of "nearness" as proximity to better understand the global from political and economic positioning<sup>19</sup>, whilst Ranjit Hoskote has also recently challenged that global art circuits must be flattened, warning that such moves can undermine cosmopolitan possibilities.<sup>20</sup>

In response to this, however, some curators are taking different approaches—challenging national structures by curating transnational exhibitions that focus on some shared and common histories. Others develop site-specific projects that resist the dominance of global capital, instead emphasizing grassroots networks, and decolonial exhibition-making that are grounded in local agency. Oceans have also become an important framework for many curatorial approaches. Anthologies such as *OCEANS: Documents of Contemporary Art* (2023) and *Art and Climate Change* (2022) highlight how interdisciplinary and multimodal approaches are particularly suited to addressing the boundlessness of the ocean.<sup>21</sup> Some I broadly illustrate: Koyo Kouoh's *Streamlines: Oceans, Global Trade and Migration* (2015–2016) in Hamburg who took the role of oceans in linking North and South global movement, addressing themes like migration, trade, isolation at sea, and the loss of cultural identities by diverse contemporary artists.<sup>22</sup> As another method, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's *14th Istanbul Biennale: Saltwater – A Theory of Thought Forms* (2015) in Istanbul, used salt as a metaphor for energy transfer, navigating the river Bosphorus.<sup>23</sup> It was spread across multiple venues on both the European and Asian sides of the Bosphorus, including cultural institutions ranging from boats and gardens to shops and private homes. This dispersion created a fluid and immersive experience, encouraging viewers to engage with the city's waterways and diverse spaces. Whereas, Stefanie Hessler's *Tidalectics* (2017) in Vienna was inspired by Brathwaite's concept of *tidalectics*, investigating fluid circulations across geography and history.<sup>24</sup> She put together a space for ongoing research, critical exchange with evolving interpretations in response to Eurocentric and land-based perspectives. More recently, the *13th Shanghai Biennale (Bodies of Water, 2020–2021)* in Shanghai drew from Neimanis's idea of 'bodies of water' to examine fluid solidarities and shifting territorial bodies, extending beyond the exhibition space through workshops, public programs, and site-specific interventions.<sup>25</sup>

Whilst this is not all encompassing and is later expanded in Chapter One, I mention these exemplary exhibitions here to emphasize that the global turn in contemporary art has long inspired curators and institutions to rethink how they work with the ocean through art history and exhibition spaces. More importantly, these projects demonstrate how curators are attempting to subvert terralogic applied to the ocean. They are also placing artists in dialogue with

<sup>17</sup> Anthony Gardner, "Whither the Post-colonial?" in *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, ed. Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 45–60.

<sup>18</sup> Angela Dimitrakaki, "From Space to Time: Situated Knowledges, Critical Curating and Social Truth," *On Curating*, no. 53 (2024), accessed February 8, 2022, accessed February 8 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>19</sup> Okwui Enwezor, "The Black Box," *Documenta 11 Platform 5: Exhibition Catalogue* (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 42–55, quoted in "Globalization and Contemporary Art," *Third Text*, accessed April 5, 2025.

<sup>20</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis and Gerardo Mosquera, "The Geopolitics of Contemporary Art," *Ibraaz*, November 6, 2014, accessed April 5, 2025, (cf. [link](#))

<sup>21</sup> Pandora Syperek and Sarah Wade, eds., "Oceans: Documents of Contemporary Art" (London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023), 12–20. Also to Maja Fowkes and Reuben Fowkes, *Art and Climate Change* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2022), 12.

<sup>22</sup> Deichtorhallen Hamburg, "Streamlines: Oceans, Global Trade and Migration," accessed February 8, 2025, (cf. [link](#)) Also see Deichtorhallen Hamburg, "Streamlines: Oceans Global Trade and Migration", accessed February 18, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>23</sup> 14th Istanbul Biennial, "Saltwater: A Theory of Thought Forms," curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Istanbul, September 5 - November 1, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Stefanie Hessler, "Tidalectics," exhibition curated at TBA21–Augarten, Vienna, June 2 - November 19, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> 13th Shanghai Biennale, "Bodies of Water," curated by Andrés Jaque, Power Station of Art, Shanghai, November 10, 2020–June 27, 2021.

diverse thinkers, scientists, and activists, expanding the scope of exhibition-making beyond conventional art-world frameworks. Formats such as public programs that include workshops and interdisciplinary collaborations offer more opportunities for discussion and encounters, extending spectatorship beyond the artworks themselves.

Through blue humanities, there are critiques of territorial logics imposed on the ocean where scholars such as Irus Braverman and Elizabeth Johnson, who in *Blue Legalities* call for thinking with “messy registers” that acknowledge the ocean’s complexity rather than reducing it to a series of mapped zones.<sup>26</sup> Ranganathan critiques the United Nation Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) fragmenting the ocean by depth, function, and space<sup>27</sup>, whilst Steinberg’s concept of *wet ontology* resists static, bordered imaginaries, embracing the ocean as immanent and ever-becoming.<sup>28</sup> Todd’s idea of *fishy refraction*, drawn from Inuvialuit legal orders, further challenges the rigidity of state law by proposing relational, fluid forms of governance rooted in Indigenous epistemologies.<sup>29</sup> There are of course more scholars and some I already highlighted in my prologue, but together, these scholars specifically reveal the dissonance between the ocean’s lived realities and the systems that seek to contain it, imploring for more adaptive, relational understandings. Therefore, it can be seen that ocean studies are quite transdisciplinary and to tackle this, it requires new forms of imaginings.

In situating my exhibition in these discussions, it also emerges from the vantage point of islands and watery perspectives, indebted to thinkers such as the late Hau’ofa, who reimagined *Oceania* as a vast, interconnected space of kinship and movement, and Glissant, whose poetics of *relation* and archipelagic thought conceptualized islands as central to global imaginaries.<sup>30</sup> Thus, such Caribbean and Pacific intellectual and literary traditions, along with early 2000s poetic works by Dionne Brand and Mayra Santos-Febres, inscribed feminine and queer diasporic experience through poetic imagery of Islands surrounded by the sea.<sup>31</sup> The rich body of Caribbean literature holds great significance, yet it also exposes gaps and silences. As pointed by Vera Kutzinski, the silencing of queer and feminine narratives continues to narrow the scope of Caribbean literary studies and underscores that heteronormativity prevails—the idea that gender roles are assumed and is the natural way to be.<sup>32</sup> These exclusions show that it is so important to examine how gender, sex, and race are represented—or left out—within literature and culture and it is a focus in Chapter Three. I find that my thesis is well situated within these past and present dialogues, centering such narratives as integral to reimagining oceanic and decolonial thought.

With *Undulating Currents*, with co-curator Pakathi, we charted our own approach. For us, it was essential to present the ocean as previous exhibitions have done so—as a space for contemplating global flows of movement of capital and labor to multispecies entanglements and for further seeking to reflect how this would look like

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth R. Johnson and Irus Braverman, “Introduction: Blue Legalities: Governing More-Than-Human Oceans,” in *Blue Legalities: The Life and Laws of the Sea*, eds. Irus Braverman and Elizabeth R. Johnson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 1-24.

<sup>27</sup> Surabhi Ranganathan, “Ocean Floor Grab: International Law and the Making of an Extractive Imaginary,” *European Journal of International Law* 30, no. 2 (2019): 573-600.

<sup>28</sup> Steinberg and Peters, *Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume through Oceanic Thinking*, 247-264.

<sup>29</sup> Zoe Todd, “Refracting the State Through Human-Fish Relations: Fishing, Indigenous Legal Orders and Colonialism in North/Western Canada,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 7, no. 1 (2018): 60-75.

<sup>30</sup> Hau’ofa, *Our Sea of Islands* (see Prologue, n. 48) and Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 8 (see Prologue, n. 45).

<sup>31</sup> Mayra Santos-Febres, “Black Water Flower,” in *Boat People*, trans. Vanessa Pérez-Rosario (Phoenix: Cardboard House Press, 2021), 25. Also refer to Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2001).

<sup>32</sup> Vera Kutzinski, “Improprieties: Feminism, Queerness, and Caribbean Literature,” *Macalester International* 10, no. 18 (2001), accessed February 10, 2024, (cf. [link](#))

for our space. There are so many issues that have been taken up through different curatorial approaches and exhibition formats that I have briefly illustrated here. However, we specifically framed our exhibition through the perspectives of Black artists whose practices and artworks respond transnationally to these neoliberal conditions, drawing from personal and collective memory, and to also speculate on futures. In a way, *Undulating Currents* also responds to Guasch's ideas on identity, particularly in how it navigates both local contexts and diasporic thinking from Black perspectives. In doing so, it distinctly saw that identity is not fixed but rather fluid and ever-shifting by the flows of people and imaginaries, aligning with Guasch's vision of contemporary art as a space for transnational exchange and interconnected narratives.

Thus, curating *Undulating Currents* was both timely and important. This meant it could remain intentional, resisting the pressures of neutrality or dilution that often accompany global exhibition formats. It was a space where Black artists engaged with oceanic thinking on their own terms to reimagine the ocean as a space of relations. I reflect on an interview I had with the artist Brathwaite-Shirley who spoke about an unspoken recognition between Black people on the street—a moment of connection when they look each other in the eye.<sup>33</sup> It is a recognition that is difficult to explain or comprehend but is immediately understood between them. I have heard similar anecdotes from others, and I find this both beautiful and complex. I argue that I see this as an acknowledgment of shared histories and experiences—a quiet but powerful recognition of what Black people, as a community, have endured under colonial and neoliberal conditions. This recognition speaks to an intergenerational trauma defined by collective memory who have been resilient, forming a bond that transcends words. I further argue that it validates the importance of creating spaces that center these experiences, ensuring that Black artists are represented on their own terms. Whilst histories of oppression and displacement may connect them, each artist's experience and trauma remain uniquely their own. In this way, *Undulating Currents* has offered a way to think beyond them. The exhibition introduced distinct curatorial modalities, which are unveiled further in the following chapters.

I situate this discussion within the material conditions of artists' labor, recognizing that global flows under the neoliberal condition pinch contemporary art, influencing both its political and social positions. What I specifically argue is that whilst artworks function as commodities with economic value, the labor behind them—Black artists and cultural producers—remains precarious. The conditions of artistic production are affected by the same global inequalities that structure other forms of labor, where race, sex and gender determine who has access and who has visibility. Of course, there is a continued prioritisation of the visibility of artworks and the authorship of artists themselves, at the expense of the many cultural producers—workers, technicians, and others—who sustain the very

<sup>33</sup> Personal interview with artist Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley. 2024. Appendix 2.1.

structures that make artistic presentation possible. But even within this emphasis on visibility and recognition of artists, I argue that hierarchies remain intact depending on who the artists are and how they are presented in exhibitions. For artists who are non-European, non-Western, or who do not conform to normative structures of gender, race, and sex, there is discrimination that still persists. Their inclusion may “appear as visible”, but I argue it is conditioned by extractive logics or institutional tokenism. Thus, this is the contradiction that cannot be ignored. Capitalist systems not only commodify art but also show how systemic inequalities continue to thrive to determine who can participate, under what conditions, and with what forms of recognition. These realities inevitably shape how artists engage with the contemporary world and, in this case, how they perceive the ocean and its many entanglements through their practice are also affected.

I also uniquely identify that this invisible or unseen labor is closely linked to Rob Nixon’s slow violence, where destruction unfolds gradually or obscured from immediate perception.<sup>34</sup> In the same way that environmental degradation and geopolitical exploitation of the ocean occur out of sight, so too does the labor of thinking, making, caring, and creating—in a sense, this communal way of living and reacting to life. Such is also the process that has the tendency to inform the making of art. It is also through the labor of artistic creation that these invisible violences are negotiated and can be made tangible. Black labor has always been precarious, from the forced exploitation of slavery to the undervalued and disordered, unstable conditions of today. Whether in global supply chains or maritime industries, it remains essential yet unrecognized. Moreover, the legacy of slavery is inseparable from the exploitation of labor—both on plantation fields and across the ocean. For me, what does it mean to reckon with this history, especially when its traces are so submerged, out of sight but never truly gone? Nixon’s idea of slow violence—harm that unfolds gradually and invisibly—feels especially relevant here. The sea has always concealed labor, whether in the past, when bodies were packed into ships as cargo, or today, in the exploitative conditions of remote maritime work itself.

This is something Sharpe captures when she reflects about *The Forgotten Space* (2010), a film by the artist Allan Sekula.<sup>35</sup> Sharpe observes a moment in the film where a Black woman is interviewed, but her words seem out of place, disconnected from the film’s broader narrative.<sup>36</sup> She speaks, yet her presence is almost treated as an interruption, something that does not quite fit. It is here that I find a connection between the artists in my exhibition and the histories of Black labor. The artists within the exhibition respond to the conditions that have long sought to erase or exploit Black labor, both on land and at sea. In this way, they not only reflect but also constitute a form of slow violence, unfolding in ways that are unnoticed yet impactful.

I do not diminish the significance of the artworks, which serve

<sup>34</sup> Rob Nixon conceptualizes *slow violence* as “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.” This term describes environmental harm that unfolds incrementally, often imperceptibly, such as climate change, toxic pollution, deforestation, and oil spills. Lacking the immediacy and spectacle of conventional violence, slow violence struggles to sustain media and public attention, disproportionately impacting marginalized communities, particularly in the Global South. See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>35</sup> Allan Sekula and Noël Burch, dirs., *The Forgotten Space* (San Francisco: Icarus Films, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, 26-27 (see Prologue, n. 52).

as materials for analysis in this study, offering ways to interrogate the ocean's exploitation—both its histories of colonial and capitalist extraction and the artistic perspective to such forces. Artworks hold critical knowledge, in how we interpret and grapple with the ocean's presence and absence. Moreover, artworks in spectatorship reveal much about themselves through their engagement with viewers, shaping encounters that can lead to awareness that can have multiple interpretations or even cast some indifference. This subjectivity is important, from a curatorial perspective, the way artworks are presented—whether through conceptual framing or spatial presentation—or both play a crucial role in how they are experienced. These choices reveal new dimensions of the work, influencing its interaction with the spectatorship, ultimately impacting how viewers engage with and interpret the artworks, as well as the contexts in which its meaning is constructed and understood.

At the same time, it is to be reminded that artworks are also commodities that circulate within global capital flows, embedded in the very systems they critique.<sup>37</sup> Whilst they may act as critical interventions against extraction and exploitation, they are also stuck in the same market-driven structures within the art world. This contradiction—both as sites of critique and as objects of circulation—reveals the complexities of contemporary artistic production, particularly in the context of neoliberal economies that commodify not only physical resources but also cultural and intellectual labor. Art world continues to privilege the Western canon, can at times sideline or tokenise artists and diaspora from the Global South. The process of canonization with Eurocentric bias reinforces colonial hierarchies, revealing how art is valued. My exhibition responds to this directly as I believe some corrective measure to continue to expose and critique this is necessary especially through curatorial approaches and some examples of curators such as Natasha Ginwala, Léuli Eshrāgh, Rasha Salti, among others through their work across art institutions have been engaging in unsettling the institutional frameworks that continue to reproduce Eurocentric authority and colonial epistemologies in the circulation and interpretation of art.

These lenses of critique have been long influenced by feminism, postcolonial studies, and queer theory that have played a critical role, from the 1970s onwards, in expanding this canon beyond its historical limitations, integrating artists whose aesthetics are created in the encounters of social contexts, and also, they are what may have some given order, which makes them inherently political. This given order can be visual, audible, sensorial, or thinkable. There are also evolving debates about aesthetics, however, it is not something that I discuss in this thesis.<sup>38</sup> In doing so, I analyze the artworks from the concerns how artists approach their practices and the curatorial aspect of exhibition-making. I examine this in artists Sodipo, Biabiany and Moropa's artworks in the traditions of fabulation, collage-making as Black ways of storytelling and weaving materials which is so fragile, tempered in intimacy and imagining, that speak to both the tangible

<sup>37</sup> Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 12.

<sup>38</sup> Some of the discussions are informed by Nicholas Bourriaud, in *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), who redefines aesthetics beyond the contemplation of objects, emphasizing art as a social experience structured through interhuman relations. He argues that contemporary art should be understood as the creation of encounters, fostering new modes of sociability and collectivity within everyday life. This framework challenges the autonomy of art, positioning it within a dynamic political field where aesthetics becomes relational and participatory rather than object-based. However, I also take note of Jacques Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004) which offers a more critical perspective on the political dimensions of aesthetics. Whilst Bourriaud conceptualizes relational art as inherently democratic and socially engaged, Rancière challenges the assumption that aesthetic relations necessarily produce egalitarian structures. For Rancière, aesthetics is political not because of its social interactions but because it reorganizes the *distribution of the sensible*—determining what is visible, audible, and thinkable within a given order. This divergence raises questions about whether relational art, often dependent on institutional frameworks, can truly enact political transformation or if it risks reinforcing existing power structures. See Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002). Also Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).

and the ephemeral in the exhibition. I also look into video essays and gaming cultures, where artists are using technology to question how certain subjects are positioned, what stories are told, and how viewers engage with them. It is very telling in artists Rezaire and Brathwaite-Shirley's works that sometimes they highlight how digital spaces have gendered and racialized biases, whilst also creating room for new ways of seeing and experiencing the world. Shirley, through gaming, adds another layer of participation, inviting players to imagine and build worlds that look different from the ones we know and have come to understand. These tools of imagination not only challenge existing structures but also open possibilities for storytelling in recognising there are multiple narratives in which spectatorship can become implicit in it.

Artists have long been fascinated by their natural surroundings, using them as subjects in their work. Nature is wild and unpredictable. Ecology, on the other hand, can be understood to be about relationships, the interconnectedness between humans and their environment. For the thesis, it is important to clarify this distinction in order to avoid romanticising or misrepresenting the ocean, and to offer a critical and informed perspective through contemporary art. Timothy Morton points out how we can think of nature by questioning the very idea of "nature" itself.<sup>39</sup> He critiques the Romantic idealization of nature in Western art and philosophy, arguing that it creates a false separation between humans and the natural world. He suggests that this aesthetic distancing—where nature is something to evoke emotions—prevents us from fully engaging with ecological realities. For Morton, ecology is not an external realm but something entangled with human existence in ways that challenge clear distinctions between subject and object, human and non-human. He calls for an ecological thought that recognizes this entanglement rather than thinking on the lines of nostalgic or idealized visions of the environment.

These are some things that have been explored by artists through land art or environmental art since the 1970s where artists, in opposition to white cube galleries or commercial ways of making and presenting their art, reflected on natural elements in their practice to create interventions in real time, natural environments.<sup>40</sup> These are also similarly taken up by all the artists discussed in the thesis through various techniques and mediums of their practices. Further, Donna Haraway's concept of nature/culture, challenges the divide between the two and instead emphasizes their constant entanglement.<sup>41</sup> Nature and culture are not separate forces; they shape and influence one another in ways that cannot be reduced to simple binaries, she claims. Haraway, drawing from both scientific and philosophical perspectives, critiques the way Western science has historically classified and named nature—a system of taxonomy that imposes categories, and fixed definitions of order onto the living world. Whilst this method of understanding is useful in some ways, it also overlooks the cultural and relational contexts that define how hu-

<sup>39</sup> Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>40</sup> Some examples of this include artist Robert Smithson – *Spiral Jetty* (1970), a large coil built into Utah's Great Salt Lake, or artist Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas Series* (1973-1980) in Iowa, US and Mexico, described as 'mini oceans,' artist Heidi Bucher's *Bodyshells* (1972), wearable sculptural fragments, which exemplify early connections to the ocean and artist Agnes Denes – *Wheatfield—A Confrontation* (1982), where she planted a wheat field in Lower Manhattan, highlighting land use and food politics, to name a few. In these works broadly, there has been an evolution in the treatment of nature as well as de-aestheticizing of nature in art: in the 1960s–70s, nature was still somewhat an aesthetic "subject" or used for monumental yet largely apolitical whereas Land Art; in the 1970s–80s, art became more site-specific, working alongside nature; and from the 1990s onward, it became increasingly interdisciplinary, community-driven, and critical of extractive practices, incorporating climate justice. Thus, ecology, human relations and contemporary art are not new to each other's constellations.

<sup>41</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 1.

mans engage with the more-than-human world, she states.

I am cautious about the terms “non-human” and “more-than-human,” as they are sometimes used interchangeably, yet each carries distinct implications. It is important to question what it means to be human, and as I mentioned Wynter is a key thinker in this regard. In this system, “Man” is seen as the universal standard—white, European, and linked to science, reason, and secularism, she echoes.<sup>42</sup> Because of this, other ways of knowing, especially Indigenous, Asian, African, and non-Western perspectives, have been ignored or dismissed as irrational, she adds. Wynter encourages us to rethink knowledge and make space for different histories, perspectives, and experiences that have been left out. So whilst both terms, “nonhuman” and “more-than-human” acknowledge that not everything in the world is human, it is essential to emphasize that we exist within a multispecies world with intricate entanglements between human and non-human beings and ecological systems. My intention in using these terms in this thesis is to decenter human privilege or, at the very least, to emphasize the relations and entanglements between humans and both living and non-living forces. Rather than positioning the human as the central reference point, I use these terms to acknowledge the agency of other entities—whether animals, bodies of water, ecosystems, or material context—that shape and are shaped by human existence.

Haraway pushed this further, arguing that we have adopted a binary thinking that separating nature from culture actually creates more problems rather than clarifying our place within ecological systems. She suggested that instead of viewing nature as something external to human life—something to be controlled—we should recognize the web of connections and co-existences that define our shared world. This means embracing what she calls *tentacular thinking*, where species, machines, and ecosystems are understood as interwoven, rather than existing in isolation. Additionally, her discussion of sympoiesis which simply means *making-with*—the idea that life is co-created through multispecies relationships—illustrates that ecology cannot be reduced to biology alone.<sup>43</sup> She argues that species do not evolve or function in isolation; they exist in relational networks that include politics, technologies, economies, and human interventions. I am indebted to her and Wynter’s approaches which is partial yet critically engaged but woven and layered as “situated knowledge”<sup>44</sup>, where I am conscious of how my own thinking and research process unfolds throughout this thesis that I expand in Chapter One.

To support this idea, I also take inspiration from material feminisms. Matter is commonly understood as something that has substance and occupies space, but different traditions interpret it in distinct ways. For instance, as Haraway pointed out, the nature/culture divide assumes that the natural world (plants, animals, oceans, landscapes) exists separately from human society (culture, technology, politics, art).<sup>45</sup> I wish to refer to Todd’s take: “material might act as a bridge, instead of a mirror” is particularly thought-provoking

<sup>42</sup> Supra at 71.

<sup>43</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 58.

<sup>44</sup> Haraway advocates for a feminist epistemology (way of knowing from a female lens) that acknowledges how knowledge is always mediated through particular locations—cultural, historical, material, and discursive. This does not lead to relativism but to a more accountable and responsible way of knowing, where partial perspectives can be critically engaged, layered, and woven into more complex, multi-vocal understandings of the world in Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575-599.

<sup>45</sup> Alaimo, *Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature*, 237–264 (see Prologue, n. 55).

because then we can think about how material is intertwined in our world rather than just a reflection of how we place importance on humans and human actions over everything else which are affecting the way our world operates.<sup>46</sup>

Across Chapter Two, Three and Four, my analysis is largely informed by Alaimo and Susan J. Heckman, who also challenge this strict separation between nature/culture.<sup>47</sup> They emphasize how human and non-human worlds are interconnected through *transcorporeality* and material agency. These ideas highlight how bodies—human and otherwise—are permeable and constantly impacted by ecological and social forces. Alaimo’s *transcorporeality* entails that no body—human or non-human—is isolated; rather, bodies are porous, constantly exchanging matter with their surroundings.<sup>48</sup> In my view, the ocean: perceived as separate from human life, is in fact entangled with our existence—through salt water in our body, weather systems, food sources, underwater fibre optic cables that provide internet and even microplastics that move through marine life and back into human bodies. In each of the following Chapters, I argue that this interconnectedness challenges boundaries between self and environment, the idea that bodies are shaped by forces beyond their immediate control.

Alaimo and Heckman also consider material agency which very much influenced me. Typically, agency is associated with humans, agency has been thought of as something exclusive to humans, tied to choice and free will. But when I look to the ocean, at shifting tides, at the way pollution seeps into water and re-enters bodies, it is clear that agency extends far beyond us as humans. In Alaimo’s work, this expanded view of agency is central. Alaimo and Heckman also point out, marginalized communities, mostly people of color, and Indigenous populations “bear a disproportionate toxic load” in extractive and industrial systems, facing the harshest consequences of environmental degradation.<sup>49</sup> This aspect is taken further by the artist Lemu as “racial capitalocene” which emphasizes that environmental degradation from oil drilling would disproportionately affect the local Malawian fisherfolk communities and through Ozhopé Collective, I elaborate on these discussions in Chapter Four.<sup>50</sup>

Although environmental destruction knows no boundaries like gender, race or sex, it indeed affects people who are more vulnerable, unprotected, with little access to public infrastructures, funds or health care systems. Alaimo and Heckman also critique the “wilderness model”, a Western way that treats nature as separate from human civilization.<sup>51</sup> It is based on the idea that nature is pure, untouched, and only exists in remote landscapes, far from human influence, critiqued by Morton as well. In Alaimo and Heckman’s point of view, they argue that environmental issues are not confined to distant forests or the ocean but exist in urban neighborhoods, homes, and bodies—whether through toxic waste, petrochemical pollution, or climate disruptions.

Furthermore, if capitalism monetizes water, ecofeminist perspec-

<sup>46</sup> Zoe Todd, “Indigenizing the Anthropocene,” in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, ed. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 244.

<sup>47</sup> Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, eds., *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008). Accessed February 8 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>48</sup> Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>50</sup> *Supra* at 74.

<sup>51</sup> *Supra* at 108, 4.

tives question these logics, advocating for relational and care-based approaches to the environment. Janine MacLeod mentions how water is treated both materially and metaphorically in capitalism. She argues that financial discourse co-opts aqueous metaphors—such as liquidity, and circulation—to make it seem that such economic systems are natural, making them seem inevitable and self-sustaining.<sup>52</sup> MacLeod also highlights the double-edged nature of these metaphors, compelling a reconsideration of how financial and ecological systems are narrativized. She notes that whilst water is often associated with life and necessity, it also symbolizes unpredictability and risk. Capitalism frequently employs water-related terms like flows and liquidity to describe economic movements, suggesting that these processes are as natural and essential as the water cycle. By likening capital to water, these terms may naturalize economic systems, making the resulting social and environmental harms appear inevitable or natural, she argues. She claims this metaphorical framing can mask the destructive impacts of capitalism, such as environmental degradation and community displacement, by presenting them as unavoidable consequences of economic “flows.”

An ecofeminist approach acknowledges how gender, race, and class influence political, economic, and social struggles—especially in the context of environmental degradation. Patriarchal system which sees everything through the importance of being male, heteronormative and also deprivileges other ways of being, in which women and children are the most vulnerable to discrimination, but also treat natural resources as inferior and exploitable. These discussions are taken up in Chapter Three, where I examine how artists work with materials ranging from digital interfaces, soil to water and plant matter where artists commune with these—co-creating instead of alienating them and I argue that in applying unique aesthetic strategies, where the act of making art and creating, becomes an act of entanglement with the material world. Additionally, I also acknowledge spirituality in these discussions, its role in relationships between women and nature. For instance, Carolyn Merchant stated that ancient rituals and goddess worship which symbolise Mother Earth continue to show us ways of rethinking ecological and feminist struggles even today.<sup>53</sup> This is also practiced in many indigenous traditions and cultures like mana wahine in Pacific feminisms.<sup>54</sup> I also see this in artists Rezaire, Biabiany and others in this chapter whose own definitions of spirituality guide both their practices and are observed in my analysis, which are informed by their own ancestral traditions and indigenous knowledge.

I also draw on Jane Bennett’s concept of *thing-power*, where she argues that matter can create reactions and shape events.<sup>55</sup> Her discussion of assemblage, which emerges from the interactions between things and bodies, is especially relevant in the context of Ozhopé Collective’s work, where they emphasize the dugout canoe—a vessel transformed into an artwork from a boat abandoned on the shores

<sup>52</sup> Janine MacLeod, “Water and the Material Imagination: Reading the Sea of Memory Against the Flows of Capital,” in *Thinking with Water*, eds. Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013).

<sup>53</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1980), 2-4.

<sup>54</sup> Celia Bardwell-Jones, Joyce Pualani Warren, and Stephanie Nohelani Teves, “Ocean Feminisms,” *Amerasia Journal* 48, no. 2 (2022): 96-106, accessed on February 10, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>55</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 23.

of Lake Malawi. This is particularly compelling because, as I explore in Chapter Four, the dugout canoe holds significance beyond its cultural meaning; it carries environmental, political to material relevance. It functions as an assemblage, shifting between utility and symbolic power repurposed as both a recycled material and an artistic statement. In doing so, it also embodies a call for justice and equity for stewardship by having been shaped by the local fisherfolk community, reflecting broader ecological and community concerns.

If one thinks about the role of contemporary art as entangled in ocean imaginaries, then what is its scope? T.J. Demos argues that contemporary art can critically engage ecological crises by exposing how capitalism and colonialism shape our relationship to the environment. His *political ecology* critiques conservation narratives that ignore structural forces like extractivism and climate injustice, urging more activist practices.<sup>56</sup> Demos's notion of *decolonial ecology* is deepened by Malcolm Ferdinand's idea of a "double fracture", linking the exploitation of Black bodies and nature under colonialism and naming slavery as ecocide.<sup>57</sup> This applies to my thesis, where I demonstrate that Black artists and cultural narratives mediate human-ocean relations. This study takes up cross-disciplinary routes across art history, blue humanities and material feminisms which aligns with Andrew Patrizio who similarly challenges disciplinary hierarchies in art history, advocating for eco-centered, relational approaches.<sup>58</sup> Terry Smith's *contemporaneity*, alongside Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's distinction between the globe and the unknowable planet in what she coins as *planetarity* expands on how we may have mapped the world through political systems and legal apparatus which are regulated, but the planet should be thought of with curiosity and care in which relations are more reciprocal.<sup>59</sup> In this way, *contemporaneity* is not just about a period of time but it invites a pluralistic vision of the planet with multiple narratives and experiences.

Thus, it leads to my engagement with the ocean being considered as global commons in blue humanities, a concept where there is a shared sense of responsibility and inheritance which are entangled between people and ecologies, which I expand in Chapter Four. It examines Ozhopé Collective's practices and, more broadly, the role of art collectives in shaping ethics and the values we place on our environment. It considers what it means for a community of people to come together with a shared purpose—to engage with and rethink our relationship with the environment. The artist Lemu raises the idea that contemporary art can function as a site of reflection, that allows us to critically engage with our political and social relations to the environment whilst also holding space for resistance and intervention. Through a collective lens, art can possess more agency, opening possibilities for new forms of activism and participation. Yet, Lemu also compels me to think about the limits of contemporary art, about the extent of its impact and the spaces in which it operates. His scholarly investigations consider dissent and resistance—how art not only critiques dominant narratives but also

<sup>56</sup> T.J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), accessed February 10, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>57</sup> Malcolm Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*, trans. Anthony Paul Smith (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), 175.

<sup>58</sup> Andrew Patrizio, *The Ecological Eye: Assembling an Ecocritical Art History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 131-185.

<sup>59</sup> Terry Smith, "Defining Contemporaneity: Imagining Planetarity," *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 24, no. 49 (2015): 12. See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Planetarity," *Paragraph* 38, no. 2 (2015): 290-292.

exposes the structures that sustain them.

Drawing from Neimanis, I consider her *hydrocommons*, a shared yet differentiated materiality of water, as a way to imagine relations beyond extraction and diminishing binaries.<sup>60</sup> In my conclusion, I draw from Black epistemology to consider its contribution to rethinking the ontologies of the ocean. Black artists critique the plight of histories from colonialism and current neoliberal violence, are developing aesthetic strategies that expose and respond to the socio-political and ecological crises of our time—including those contributing to climate change. By engaging with Black artists through my exhibition in Vienna, it also confronts questions of equity and representation within the contemporary art world. Furthermore, it assesses the effectiveness of curatorial practice as both a methodological and critical tool—if they reveal relational understandings between humans and the ocean. I consider if it meaningfully contributes to a transdisciplinary study of the ocean, deepening on cultural narratives of the ocean. Ultimately, the thesis considers whether such curatorial and artistic engagements can open new pathways toward ocean stewardship.

<sup>60</sup> Astrida Neimanis, “We Are All at Sea: Practice, Ethics, and Poetics of ‘Hydrocommons’” *Mousse Magazine*, August 26, 2020. Accessed February 8 2025 (cf. link)

Figure 2.1: *Undulating Currents: A Group Show*, Sala Terrena of University Gallery Heiligenkreuzhof, Vienna November - December 2023. Poster design © Maria Rudakova



## Undulating Currents, A Group Show<sup>61</sup> The University Gallery of Die Angewandte

### Contributing Artists:

Tshepiso Moropa | Ava Binta Giallo | Minia Biabiany | Tabita Rezaire | Eric Asamoah | Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley | OzHopé Collective | Ebum Sodipo

*Undulating Currents* opens at Sala Terrena of Die Angewandte for the public on November 8th, 2023 until December 23rd, 2023

Curated by Brooklyn J. Pakathi and Mekhala Dave, and designed by Maria Rudakova, all students of Die Angewandte — *Undulating Currents* is a research-led exhibition that asks the question: In the face of our current ecological crisis, shaped by both historical colonial legacies and contemporary capitalist impulses, how do we begin to engage with our material world?

The exhibition focuses on the materiality of oil and water—two of the most exploited resources. *Undulating Currents* brings together international and local Black diasporan, ecofeminist, and queer\* artists to explore layers of decolonial perspectives, hidden narratives, and aesthetic sensibilities that liquefy place-based struggles. Originating from a commitment to celebrating Black life, *Undulating Currents* crystallises moments of resistance by merging storytelling and lived experiences. It opens up possibilities for world-making that interweaves the past and present, aiming toward a collective future.

Extensively, it serves as a site for the exchange of knowledge, exploring the intersection of art, mind, and matter through the juxtaposition of two distinct yet interconnected resources: oil and water. *Undulating Currents* combines artistic practice, scholarly research, and curatorial practice to address the interconnections of environmental and social injustices.

The exhibition is framed as part of Mekhala Dave's doctoral research at the University of Applied Arts Vienna, which employs an epistemological approach, integrating decolonial thinking and situated knowledge to weave a kaleidoscopic tapestry of fluid encounters through collaborative and participatory forms of action in rethinking ocean stewardship.

<sup>61</sup> *Undulating Currents: A Group Show*, co-curated by Brooklyn J. Pakathi and Mekhala Dave, Sala Terrena of University Gallery Heiligenkreuzhof, Vienna November - December 2023. *University of Applied Arts Vienna*, accessed on April 8, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

## **Part I**

# **Chapter One**



# 3

## *Undulating Currents: A Group Show*

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Figure 3.1: *Undulating Currents: A Group Show*, Sala Terrena of University Gallery Heiligenkreuzhof, Vienna November - December 2023. Image credits © Maria Belova

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes my position as a researcher and co-curator of the exhibition *Undulating Currents: A Group Show* which was presented at the galleries of the University of Applied Arts Vienna in 2023 (fig. 3.1). Investigating into the formal, technical, aesthetic and conceptual description of this exhibition, I propose this exhibition as the main study and curating as a tool for methodology

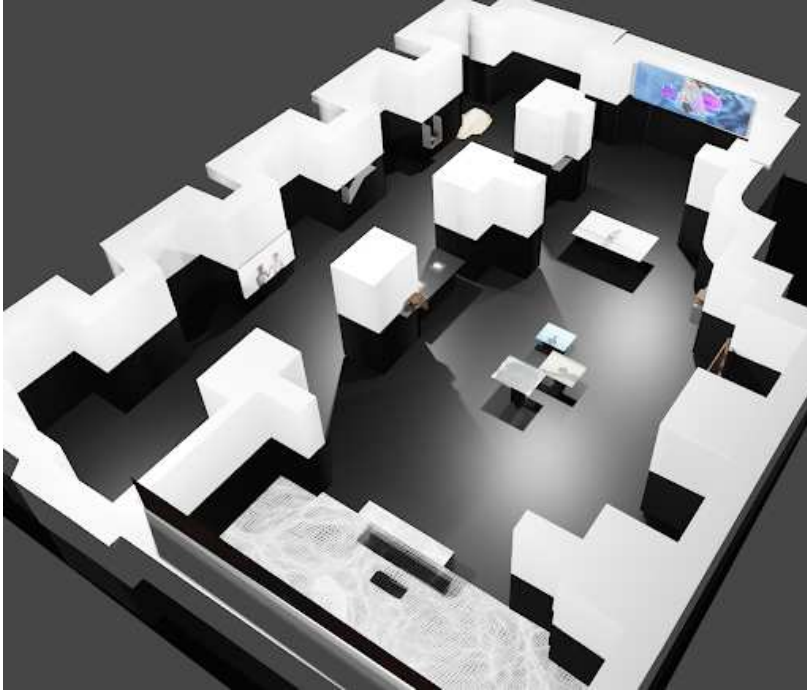


Figure 3.2: A screenshot image of a 3D mock of the Sala Terrena space that shows the design of the exhibition and representation of the artworks. Screenshot by © Brooklyn J. Pakathi

of this research. The exhibition, within an academic premises was co-curated between me and curator Brooklyn Pakathi, designed by Maria Rudakova, supported by the University team. The exhibition ran between November until December, with eight local and diaspora Black contemporary artists. With diverse mediums ranging from video works, sculptural forms, audio, gaming and photomontages, the exhibition welcomed its audiences. The artists who contributed were Tshepiso Moropa, Ava Binta Giallo, Minia Biabiany, Tabita Rezaire, Eric Asamoah, Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, Ozhopé Collective and Eburn Sodipo. The intersecting queer, ecofeminist and indigenous perspectives to the artists' conceptual and aesthetics approach in their work were about the materiality of two elements: oil and water.

Considering the ocean as a vast entity encompassing both water—as a liquid and a commodified resource—and petrochemicals such as oil and gas as sites of potential extraction, through this spatial composition, it was essential to examine how the artists contributed to global neoliberal conditions through place-based and transnational perspectives. In this thesis, extractivism refers to the removal of natural elements without care or consideration for its impact on local and marginalized communities that depend on them. It involves profiting from these resources without engaging in generative or sustainable practices. Moreover, extractivism is a key driver of climate change, whose long-term effects disproportionately affect these communities. Such extractive practices are linked to control and ownership which is usually orchestrated by state-industrial cooperation. The point I make is to emphasize that we must critically think about: Who is responsible for these destructive practices? How can we un-

derstand the complex power systems that enable certain groups to profit at the expense of others? And how might we reconceptualize natural elements beyond human benefit and profit, fostering a shift toward generative and sustainable practices? What forms of resistance and by whom can we conceive in our efforts to alleviate these issues and activate generative and sustainable practices?

These were some of the discussions I had with Pakathi as we co-conceived this exhibition. Two primary concerns emerged from our conversations: first, our observations of the experiences of Black artists and cultural producers, and second, the complex relationship that Black communities have with oil and water. As these discussions unfolded, it became increasingly clear that the exhibition could serve as a platform to bring these issues into sharp focus. In recognising these issues, the exhibition was conceptualised from the starting point of this intergenerational trauma—transatlantic slave trade. Specifically, it addressed the relations between Black people and the ocean. Many renowned Black thinkers and artists, as I will discuss in this chapter, have examined this historical moment, using it as a framework to demonstrate how cultural narratives of languages and aesthetics held multiple meanings through which they come to understand identity and politics. This complexity that they address also challenges singular notions and interpretations of Black identity. Whilst Black identity is a delicate and complex issue to address, this exhibition sought to present it on the terms of the Black artists, carving what this thesis proposes as Black epistemology.

Through their work, Black artists—both local and from the diaspora—express their perspectives within the social fabric of transnational political and economic contexts, highlighting their positions and alliances across these spheres. This is why, even as the exhibition unfolded, it became crucial for this thesis to include interviews with nearly all the contributing artists in order to gain a deeper understanding of their positions through conceptual approaches and aesthetics—elements that shaped the exhibition itself. These interviews were not only an integral part of the thesis but also became a key methodological approach, along with curatorial input.

### 3.2 *Curating as a Methodology*

In previous years, my legal practice and formal education in curating and contemporary art have largely been in parallel. Whilst I primarily worked in legal practice, I pursued curating and contemporary art within an academic setting. As a researcher, I have contributed to several projects and occasionally had the opportunity to design artist contracts. Through these legal practices, I have been fortunate to work closely with cultural producers and artists, fostering relationships through legal representation and collaboration. However, *Undulating Currents* marked my debut as a co-curator—an experiment as well as a formative experience. Whilst I had critically engaged with curating from an academic and theoretical perspec-

tive, stepping into its practical aspects was a fresh endeavor for me. Although I do not personally distinguish between experience and novelty, I see curating as balancing both experience and novelty in a way that keeps it dynamic and evolving. Whilst experience undoubtedly deepens one's understanding of curating, there is always a need for fresh approaches to sustain and contextualize meaning between artists, cultural producers, artworks, and viewers. For me, the most important aspect was the conceptual approach to curating and framing this exhibition—just as it is for many curators.<sup>1</sup>

My position is that curating is not simply a means of display—it is a tool for research and throughout my thesis, I demonstrate it with *Undulating Currents*. I am invested in how forms of certain forms of knowledge can firstly be questioned, and secondly, how they can also be brought together by making meaningful connections between them, and how these can be experienced through different modes and formats. Which is why I chose to draw from *Undulating Currents* and to position my research on Black epistemology and ocean relations through its modes. I gravitate toward approaches that prioritise participatory practices, which is why I also consider it essential that research is accessible and can be experienced by viewers—who, I believe, should have the agency to decide what research means to them, how research is interpreted or even be indifferent to them. It is also in my interest to experience the exhibition space as a space of relations and growing viewership—I believe it is vital to challenge notions of authorship as well, allowing meaning to emerge through shared encounters rather than interpretations from a restricted model of engagement. By authorship, I do not refer to who has created the artwork, but rather to the blurring of lines of participation within the exhibition space—when viewers engage with the artworks and, in doing so, begin to become part of the artwork itself. Broadly, viewers in the exhibition space also can shape context and meaning, thus, activating the space itself. So the viewers also become part of the space as well. Without this kind of activation—research, for me, feels incomplete.

When engaging with urgent issues concerning the ocean—particularly around epistemic intervention and oceanic relations—it becomes necessary that research centres the viewer as part of this process. *Undulating Currents* in this way really helped me to observe and demonstrate the tangible outlines of this research such as how the viewers responded and engaged with the artworks and the space, etc. Much of the discussions in later chapters around artworks of the artists in this exhibition also have critical gaps in terms of fully knowing how their artworks had been curated by other curators and were received by viewers in a broader curatorial discourse. For me, *Undulating Currents* through my own experimental curating could bridge this gap in research.

Moreover, for me, curating artists is not just about presenting their artworks, it involves confronting the positions that artists bring, how they communicate with one another, where tensions or alignments

<sup>1</sup> The exemplary curators I am inspired by are Okwui Enzawor, Koyo Kouoh, Aindrea Emelife, Eric Golo Stone, Elke Krasny and some others. In particular, I wish to acknowledge Daniela Zy-mann (see *Territorial Agency: Oceans in Transformation*, Venice 2021), Chuz Martinez (see *The Current II: Phenomenal Ocean*, Venice 2019), Stefanie Hessler (see *Tidalectics Augarten Vienna 2017*), and Natasha Ginwala (see *Ocean Imaginaries*, Gerrit Rietveld Academie Amsterdam 2022) for their active involvement in exhibitions addressing ocean and climate change impacts. But also, each of these curators has their own distinct style, approach, and perspective when it comes to exhibitions and the messages they aim to convey. Even within contemporary discourse, their contributions remain highly pertinent—both guiding and challenging the direction of contemporary art and its scope.

emerge, and how their aesthetic strategies can offer different eco-sensitive and sustainable practices, or in some cases, probably offer no resolution. It is here I believe curating, then, becomes both a mode of inquiry and a space for critical reflection in the face of the climate crisis and its impacts on the ocean. I believe that a research position can be most effectively articulated by aligning with—or at times confronting—the positions of artists, because aesthetics bring forth multiplural and multimodal perspectives. I further argue, this process involves knowledge making as well. When grappling with complex and intricate issues, aesthetics offer a way of accessing and communicating understanding that might otherwise remain inaccessible. For example, understanding the impacts of the climate crisis on the ocean is, in itself, a difficult task. How can we even begin to collect information which could replicate the magnitude and complexity of such a climate crisis when there is no single strand of reasoning to even define it or to hold accountable for it?

Research itself is not just about one field, in the context of blue humanities, it is a transdisciplinary exercise. Thus, I argue that by deploying aesthetic strategies in relation to such issues, and enriching them with research across multiple and diverse disciplines, it becomes possible to shed light on aspects that may not have been previously considered. By bringing together artists in a group show, the exhibition powerfully demonstrated the richness and depth of diverse perspectives on ocean relations. It also contributed to shaping a Black epistemology—in a shared history of the transatlantic slave trade, yet branching out to explore the ocean through the distinct concerns and perceptions of each artist. These were expressed through unique and nuanced aesthetic techniques, which expanded the scope of how the ocean could be imagined and also revisited in a given space.

I also do not believe that aesthetics simplify these challenges; rather, they open space for critical and imaginative possibility and expansion, allowing us to think through complexity in ways that are embodied and experimental. For me, it is especially important how research translates into the exhibition space—where it not only takes form but is more clearly defined. Within this space, research can unfold more succinctly through its conceptual horizon, whilst also being expanded by the agency of artists and the activations by viewers. This interplay enables a deeper intervention and a more layered understanding of ocean relations. For me, curating is also about finding ways to respond meaningfully to questions of equity as well—especially when it comes to artists from the Global South. I see curating as a space where I can prioritise decolonial practices, by creating conditions where different artistic voices can be heard on their own terms, and where cultural knowledge is not ultimately filtered through a Eurocentric narrative. In this way, equity is about shifting the structure and intention of curatorial work itself.

But this, of course, is far easier said than done. Whilst I hold firmly to my position, I am also not overlooking how curatorial prac-

tice itself can be a slippery slope—on the contrary, it is entangled with the kinds of art institutions to which it is tied, whether off-spaces, private foundations, or public museums. One must also consider the financial conditions within which curators operate: who provides the funding, what agendas underpin it, and what constraints are attached to financial budgets and support on managerial / technical sides. There are countless demands placed on curators and navigating the intricate networks of the art world becomes part of the curatorial task itself. It is precisely within this navigation that I argue for the importance of identifying and aligning with certain values, like I have attempted to do so. Increasingly, curators are working independently—a shift that, as I later expand on in this chapter, became particularly possible since the 1990s with global modalities of exhibition-making. Whilst such independence can offer room to articulate and expand one’s values within a given exhibition space, or in some cases, multiple exhibition spaces, it must also be acknowledged that these values are often vulnerable to compromise due to the networks and positions one holds in their relationships to art institutions, funding and the art market which speak to the canon of contemporary art history.

Thus, curating, as I have come to understand through both theory and experimental practice, extends far beyond the traditional notion of “caring for objects” within art and cultural institutions. I further substantiate the above points of my position I made here with the following theoretical underpinnings. For Boris Groys, curating transcends the role of mere preservation or maintenance of art objects; it becomes an active, reflexive practice that destabilizes established norms even as it sustains them.<sup>2</sup> Groys provides an interesting take that is worth examining. This paradoxical dynamic means that curating, rather than being a neutral activity, acts as a critical intervention in the art world. By treating art as something that is subject to reinterpretation, curating becomes a tool for generating new discourses and possibilities within cultural contexts. Curating, as theorized by Groys, transcends the traditional role of merely preserving art under the assumption that artworks lack the capacity to present themselves autonomously.<sup>3</sup> Rather than simply serving as a neutral carer, the curator engages with the critical act of revealing and interrogating their own intentions and methodologies. This process involves a self-reflexive practice where curating is not just about sustaining art but about exposing its own curatorial strategies and inherent biases.

Since the 1990s, with the rise of globalization, exhibition formats have expanded to include biennales, site-specific projects, itinerant models, and more. These developments opened up new curatorial demands and approaches, positioning exhibitions within a dynamic network of global alliances whilst also engaging with local and decolonial perspectives. This shift embraced both diversity and locality, challenging curating to be more than just institutional care but an evolving, responsive practice to political, economic, social and ecological contexts. The role of the curator also became more itinerant,

<sup>2</sup> Boris Groys suggests that the ideal curatorial practice must make its interventions visible rather than concealing them in Groys, *Art Power*, 44-46 (see Introduction, n. 98).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

requiring a nomadic and dynamic approach, where curators could be more independent and less confined to a single cultural space which offered more possibilities. The spaces that curators could navigate—across different institutions and formats—allowed them to be far more experimental. This shift, as articulated by the curator Paul O’Neill, marks a movement away from object-centered exhibitions toward methodologies that integrate more dynamic, process-oriented approaches that emphasize on discourse for collaboration and critical engagement.<sup>4</sup>

This is why there is such a wide array of exhibitions and formats, and why a balance between experience and novelty is essential—it keeps being engaging and responsive within curating to the ever-changing political and economic landscape. In my opinion, the ability to move fluidly across cultural spaces not only provides fresh critique but also shows an understanding of how each space operates and what critical discourse must be engaged in. It allows one to be critical of one’s own position whilst also stepping back to witness and reflect on the work.

The scholar Simon Sheikh provides a critical analysis of the evolution of curatorial practice, tracing its transformation from traditional exhibition-making to research-driven and theoretically engaged methodologies.<sup>5</sup> He delineates a crucial distinction between ‘curating,’ which pertains to the operational and logistical aspects of organizing exhibitions, and ‘the curatorial,’ which signifies a more expansive, conceptual framework that interrogates the epistemological and institutional underpinnings of the practice.<sup>6</sup> Sheikh identifies a paradigm shift towards what he terms the ‘post-curatorial’ era, a moment where the emphasis transcends exhibition formats to encompass critical interventions in knowledge production and systemic critique of institutional structures.<sup>7</sup> This shift, he argues, reflects a heightened engagement with the sociopolitical implications of curatorial work, compelling practitioners to reimagine their roles beyond object-display toward facilitating discursive spaces that challenge certain existing power dynamics.<sup>8</sup> Sheikh’s critique shows the necessity of a reflective and self-critical curatorial practice capable of navigating the complexities of contemporary cultural production. This dual perspective is something I carry throughout my thesis. Building on *Undulating Currents*, I not only examine my own exhibition but also, through the artworks and conceptual approaches of the contributing artists, situating it within a broader curatorial context. This approach enables me to study other exhibitions and curatorial methodologies, creating a dialogue between my own practice and the wider field of curating. But it also allows me to navigate within a dual observation, that is active in my own practice, and the other, as a participant and “outsider” looking into another curatorial practice.

Also, I see the value in reflecting on my journey through curating this exhibition, and I also agree with Sheikh that the term ‘curatorial’ carries a certain edge—an adaptability that recognizes the curator’s role in challenging established epistemologies. In this sense, my ap-

<sup>4</sup> Paul O’Neill, “The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse,” in *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*, ed. Judith Rugg and Michèle Sedgwick (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 13–26

<sup>5</sup> Simon Sheikh has been a scholar to contribute to institutional critique. Simon Sheikh explores the evolution of curatorial practice in “From Para to Post: The Rise and Fall of Curatorial Reason,” where he distinguishes between the operational aspects of ‘curating’ and the conceptual frameworks of ‘the curatorial.’ He critiques the transition towards a ‘post-curatorial’ moment that prioritises knowledge production and systemic critique, urging practitioners to interrogate the sociopolitical implications of their work and reimagine curatorial roles within and beyond institutional contexts. For more, see Simon Sheikh, “From Para to Post: The Rise and Fall of Curatorial Reason,” *Springerin*, no. 1 (2017), accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>6</sup> Simon Sheikh refers to the curator Paul O’Neill whose text serves as a foundational contribution to understanding the “curatorial turn” and its implications for contemporary art and cultural discourse.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

proach aligns with this perspective. By proposing a Black epistemology, I seek to elevate the contributions of the Black artists in this exhibition, acknowledging that their work has not been widely engaged with at the intersection of academia and contemporary art practice. I also recognize both the merits and limitations of examining this exhibition. I acknowledge that it carries certain biases. My proposal of Black epistemology is not intended to override alternative epistemologies but rather to include and acknowledge the gaps in contemporary art discourse. It seeks to demonstrate that Black epistemology is a necessary addition—that enriches and expands the field rather than replacing existing perspectives. The exhibition was also situated within an academic setting, constrained by budget limitations and the scale of the gallery space, which made curating under such conditions a unique and distinctive challenge.

Curating also allowed me to mediate and be an interlocutor between theory and practice, as well as between knowledge and advocacy, exposure and resistance. It gave me the space to navigate these intersections in a nuanced way, something I fully decided to embrace. For me, curating brought together my different interests and roles—as a mediator, researcher, advocate, and activist. Assembling knowledge from various perspectives, and positions is one aspect, but advocacy takes it a step further, requiring the defense of certain positions. This becomes especially significant when addressing historical injustices, such as the intergenerational trauma of the transatlantic slave trade—bringing to light what has been forgotten or obscured by Western narratives. Resistance, in this context, is not just about confronting these omissions but also about reckoning with one’s own ethics of practice and considering ethical approaches to exhibition-making in contemporary art. In this way, curating became a method and useful tool for research for this study. I also recognize that curating can be interpreted in different ways, from both personal and professional perspectives, for others. However, I argue that for me curating has the potential to create a rupture in knowledge—bridging theory and practice whilst allowing one’s position to be in dialogue with others. As a tool, these perspectives can be embedded and presented for spectatorship, grounded in aesthetic encounters.

In light of this, I acknowledge some research agencies and artists whose work have similar strands of response which critically engage with colonial histories and Indigenous resistance to ecological destruction. Their projects not only expose environmental harm but also challenge dominant narratives combining visual storytelling and scientific data through artistic interventions. For instance, the research agency INTERPRT has investigated ecocide—using satellite imagery, public data, and 3D models in *Ecocide in West Papua* (2014–2016) which has revealed the extent of oil palm, mining and lang grabbing in the region.<sup>9</sup> INTERPRT’s *Moruroa Files* examined nuclear testing in Mao’hi Nui (French Polynesia) from 1966–1996 and its devastating impacts on local communities.<sup>10</sup> Their advocacy

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> INTERPRT, Disclose, and Princeton University’s Program on Science & Global Security, “Moruroa Files,” interactive platform, accessed February 10, 2025, (cf. [link](#))

video *Blue Peril* (2022) speculated on the ecological effects of deep-sea mining, culminating in the exhibition *Mining the Abyss* (2022) at the 17th Istanbul Biennale and the UN Ocean Decade Conference in Lisbon.<sup>11</sup> Founder Nabil Ahmed described these initiatives as working “towards an ecocide investigation in the Pacific,” utilizing experimental mock trials and tribunals, such as the *Inter Pacific Ring Trial* (2019).<sup>12</sup> All of this reminds me that these activists, artists, researchers, and curators bring attention to the ecological and cultural crises facing the Pacific, using forms of research modalities such as digital tools and advocacy to challenge the ongoing impacts of colonialism and environmental destruction.

There are some other scholarly thinkers and curators I am particularly drawn to, one of these scholars is Wynter, who critically examines how knowledge is produced and challenges dominant ways of thinking. She argues that Western ideas of “man” have been dominated by a white, Eurocentric perspective, which has historically dehumanized Black ways of knowing and being, reducing them to “non-being.” Wynter was particularly interested in how knowledge is created and handled, questioning who gets to define reality. Her concept of *liminality* is central to *Undulating Currents*, as it frames curating as both a process and an act of resistance.<sup>13</sup> Her ideas are especially relevant here because they challenge the notion of who gets to decide history, how history is constructed and disrupted, and how dominant Western knowledge systems can limit other ways of knowing. Furthermore, in interpreting Wynter, *liminality* is positioned as something “othered”—a condition of marginalization.

However, I also consider *liminality* to be both a position and an embodied experience. By drawing from one’s own marginalized position, one can expose dominant narratives for what they are and reveal how they operate. At the same time, because being human is not only a cognitive experience but also connected to the body, *liminality* extends beyond just intellectual critique—it is something that can be felt, sensed, lived, and embodied. This is why I also believe that engaging with aesthetics—through sensorial experience in exhibition-making—is so important. It allows for a deeper, more embodied way of understanding and engaging with the themes and narratives being presented. Thus, the contributions of Black artists, through aesthetic and sensorial experiences, create a space where the themes of this study can be truly felt and understood. At the same time, these artists bring their own positionalities, countering dominant narratives and allowing their work to intimately touch others. Even when considering the ocean, aesthetic sensibilities play a crucial role in shaping how we experience and connect with it—not just as a human-centred entity but as something beyond the human, charting human-ocean relations. Engaging with the ocean through aesthetics also invites reflections on post-human and more-than-human embodied experiences, expanding our understanding of interconnections between bodies, environments, experiences and sensory perceptions.

<sup>11</sup> Nabil Ahmed, “Mining the Abyss,” 17th Istanbul Biennial, September 17–November 20, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Nabil Ahmed, “Inter Pacific Ring Trial,” TBA21, 2019, accessed February 10, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>13</sup> Sylvia. *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom*, 257-337 (see introduction, n. 71).

The work of Haraway is also critical here, her idea of “situated knowledge” which also influenced the exhibition’s curatorial stance—an awareness that knowledge is shaped by one’s own perspective and context.<sup>14</sup> Haraway argues for the importance of acknowledging the “politics of location”—as Haraway terms it, where knowledge is always partial and situated rather than universal. She critiques the detached, objective stance, which she terms as “god trick,” that claims to see everything from nowhere.<sup>15</sup> Instead, Haraway emphasizes the need for perspectives grounded in lived, embodied experiences.<sup>16</sup> This stance challenges the ideals of absolute objectivity, particularly within fields like science and technology, which often aim for static knowledge and some form of control.<sup>17</sup> I feel that Haraway’s idea applies well to curating and exhibition-making, as it allows for embracing subjectivity and for deeper reflection through curatorial practice, whilst also encouraging ethical and responsible approaches to knowledge production. But what this thesis highlights is that operating within global neoliberal conditions also requires an awareness of how these structures impact one’s own position and dynamics in networks within art institutions. For example, Dimitrakaki critiques art institutions’ reliance on ethical relations—like diversity sensitivity and visibility politics—as mechanisms for resolving global inequalities.<sup>18</sup> This approach translates political imperatives into surface-level ethical gestures, she writes, such as the co-existence of oppressor and oppressed artists, without addressing the penetrable historical forces that sustain these dynamics.<sup>19</sup> Further, she argues, (feminist) curating must resist being reduced to a spatialised practice that seeks to reconcile artists from unequal positions.<sup>20</sup> Instead it should confront the complexities of antagonistic histories and the enforced complicities that shape global realities.<sup>21</sup> She elaborates how this requires a shift from “politics of recognition”, in her words, to a more interrogation of the socio-political forces that maintain systems of exploitation and imperialism.<sup>22</sup> This resonates with me, as Dimitrakaki makes a strong point that diversity should not be about simply checking a box or engaging in tokenism. On the other hand, it should involve a meaningful attention to the artists’ positions, recognizing their versatility and the ways they contribute to the complexities of global networks. Such lines of argument is also supported by Gardner who makes the point that, from the rise of biennales and art festivals, and even in art competitions, there is a danger to neutralise the formats so much that the diversity of artists and their positions that we are championing can be diluted.<sup>23</sup> He cautions us to remain attentive to this issue, allowing us to reflect on how the global neoliberal agenda can actually play a role in shaping the direction of such art spaces. For me, these are valuable considerations. As I have pointed out earlier, curating inevitably comes with certain limits. It is by remaining cautious of such biases, and by navigating these conditions more critically by actively questioning them, that the potential of curating can be fully realised.

<sup>14</sup> Donna Haraway’s concept of “situated knowledge” challenges the notion of objective, universal knowledge, emphasising that all knowledge is shaped by the specific perspectives and contexts of those who produce it. Haraway argues that embracing partial, situated perspectives allows for more responsible and accountable knowledge production. This idea critically informed the exhibition’s curatorial approach by acknowledging how knowledge and interpretations are contingent upon the curators’ own positionalities. Haraway, *Situated Knowledges*, 575-599 (see Introduction, n. 105).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 589.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 589.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 589.

<sup>18</sup> For an in-depth examination of curatorial practices that critically engage with temporal dimensions and challenge the presumed neutrality of spatial arrangements, see Angela Dimitrakaki, “From Space to Time: Situated Knowledges, Critical Curating, and Social Truth,” *On Curating*, no. 53 (2022). Dimitrakaki critiques the dominant model of exhibition inclusivity, which often prioritises visibility and ethical frameworks without interrogating the deeper political and historical antagonisms embedded in global art practices. Her analysis argues for curatorial approaches that resist simplistic spatial resolutions in favour of temporally layered presentations that acknowledge uneven histories and structural inequities. As a former mentor to the author of this PhD research, Dimitrakaki’s critical insights into curatorial methodologies have profoundly shaped the author’s understanding of curatorial practice, particularly in relation to decolonial and socially engaged frameworks. Her work is referenced here for its significant contribution to the author’s conceptualisation of curating as a site of critical inquiry and resistance. The full article is available at [and](#) accessed February 8 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>23</sup> Gardner, “Whither the Postcolonial?”, 45–60 (see Introduction, n. 79).

As for institutions, Irit Rogoff's concept of *potentiality*, drawn from Giorgio Agamben's philosophy of becoming, critiques the rigid outcome-driven focus of traditional institutions.<sup>24</sup> She advocates for spaces of "not-yet-known" knowledge production—spaces where inquiry remains open-ended and holds out against predetermined conclusions. In curatorial practice, Rogoff's interpretation of *potentiality* reimagines exhibitions as experimental and relational sites, where the unactualized holds as much significance as what is realized, fostering an interplay of possibilities. In considering the exhibition's academic context, I turn to Rogoff's reflections on how academia, as a space for knowledge production, has been transforming. In Europe, the Bologna Process has standardized higher education, flattening its structures and stiffening disciplinary boundaries. However, Rogoff challenges such academic structures, questioning how knowledge within academia could be moulded differently—allowing for more interdisciplinary and generative forms of learning and partaking. For me, I align with Rogoff's view that academia and education—particularly when considering artists and curators as key stakeholders—can be transformative. As conduits of knowledge, artists and curators have the potential to produce and disseminate knowledge in alternative ways, expanding the scope of how it is both created and experienced. Art institutions, in turn, can function as experimental sites for knowledge production, offering open-ended formats that blur rigid distinctions between learning and unlearning, Rogoff suggests. Such facilitation embraces knowledge that is dynamic, where its impact extends beyond traditional classroom settings into gallery spaces, museums, and exhibitions or vice versa, she adds. I align with Rogoff that in these environments, learning takes on new forms, creating more embodied and experiential encounters that challenge conventional academic structures. This "education turn", as Rogoff describes, is what also drew me to curating and exhibition-making as tangible forms to this study that learning and gaining through formats of curating and exhibition in the facilitation and mediation of aesthetics can be dynamic and immersive.

### 3.3 Curating and Collaborative Practice

Curating is a collaborative effort and the same is true for *Undulating Currents*. Its co-curator, Pakathi is currently pursuing their formal education at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. As both a trans-media artist and curator, they have participated in numerous exhibitions as an artist and have also significant experience in exhibition-making as a curator, particularly in the Global South. Their curatorial practice is described as decolonial, exploring and experimenting with alternative curatorial strategies, aiming for cultural equity.<sup>25</sup> Some of their exhibitions as curator include *Touch: The Fantasy, The Mixed Reality Workshop*, Johannesburg (2022); *ambient occlusion: desired paths*, LA Artcore, Los Angeles, California (2022); *Concrete Metamorphosis*, Sehsaal, Vienna (2023) and some others. Pakathi reflects

<sup>24</sup> Giorgio Agamben's concept of *potentiality*, rooted in Aristotle's philosophy, explores the dual nature of capacity: the ability to act and the simultaneous ability to refrain from acting. Agamben distinguishes between *generic potentiality* (the inherent capacity to learn or become, such as a child's potential to acquire knowledge) and *actualized potentiality* (the ability to act based on existing knowledge or skill, as with an architect's capacity to design or a poet's ability to write). Crucially, Agamben emphasizes that potentiality exists in relation to its own incapacity, encompassing the possibility of both action and inaction. Irit Rogoff, a scholar in visual culture, introduces the concept of "potentiality" as a critique of traditional academic structures in her essay *Academy as Potentiality*. Rogoff argues for educational spaces that transcend rigid frameworks, advocating instead for dynamic and transformative approaches to knowledge production. Further, Pakathi's curatorial practice imbibes transdisciplinary frameworks, questioning the boundaries of each discipline and blending them into encounters for the audience in exhibition spaces. See Irit Rogoff, "Academy as Potentiality," in *A.C.A.D.E.M.Y.*, edited by Angelika Nollert and Irit Rogoff (Frankfurt: Revolver, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> See Brooklyn J. Pakathi's personal website, accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. link)

on their practice as a Black curator in Vienna:

“At its core, the practice is deeply community-centered, prioritizing accessibility and creating sustainable dialogues between artists, technologists, and communities, whilst ensuring fair compensation and ethical documentation practices.”<sup>26</sup>

Reflecting on the exhibition after its completion, I can say that Pakathi and I come from different fields of study. I find their practice particularly useful, as they fluidly navigate between artist and curatorial roles. Of course, these roles come with distinct objectives and expectations, as Pakathi themselves mentioned in our conversations.<sup>27</sup> Their role as a curator involves a different kind of engagement than their role as an artist. However, in my opinion, this dual lens enriches exhibition spaces, adding layers of intimacies and subjectivity. Pakathi’s keen interest in transmedia also shaped the direction of the exhibition in compelling ways. For instance, *Undulating Currents* leaned more toward digital artworks, aligning with Pakathi’s interests and intersecting with the exhibition’s curatorial direction. Their particular focus on technology—especially how artists from the Global South engage with it, whether by themes of technology in art, as a tool for making art, or by blurring these boundaries—is, for me, an especially different approach. In my view, and as discussed in my conversations with Pakathi, artists from the Global South engage with technology in unique and complex ways. Their cultural, political, and economic contexts complicate the very notion of technology, influencing how it is used and understood in artistic practice.

For instance, in another exhibition *Between Worlds: Technology, Spirit and Digital South* (2024), we recently co-curated at *SCHOOL*, an alternative and off-space in the 5th district of Vienna, we explored how artists from the Global South navigate the intersections of technology and spirituality.<sup>28</sup> This exhibition explored how artists used modern technology with Indigenous knowledge and interpret notions of spirituality. It also experimented with curatorial approaches that not only highlighted the diversity of artists from the Global South but also positioned the exhibition as a decolonial response to western ways of scientific thinking and rationale when it comes to modern technology.

Given the exhibition’s more intimate and small scale format, we considered how best to present “research in process” through curatorial decisions—selecting artists whose practices tease out the conceptual thematics at play. This approach sought to test the limits of knowledge, particularly where Western epistemologies have dominated, whilst emphasizing the creation of space for Indigenous knowledge systems and to interpret the broader definitions of spirituality. I believe that knowing itself has limits; much of it is subjective and intuitive. In this sense, curating extends the boundaries of how knowing is transferred—a fundamental means to reverse the dominant optics of knowing in aesthetic terms—through seeing, feeling, touching, hearing, and thinking.

<sup>26</sup> Personal Interview with curator Brooklyn J. Pakathi during exhibition and by email. 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> *Between Worlds* (2024), curated by Mekhala Dave and Brooklyn J. Pakathi, *SCHOOL* Vienna, accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

Curating, then, becomes a space for intertwining academic theory, practice, intuition, spontaneity, and relations. Further, I argue that research and curating are entangled processes, intersecting at moments of rupture and fluctuation, which takes it away from the expectation to have the notion of a fixed or conclusive endpoint. A significant curatorial step through research lies in fostering relationships between curators and artists, allowing these dynamics to become more visible within the exhibition space. This approach acknowledges the multiplicity of artistic perspectives, particularly those that draw from various knowledge and disciplines in practices, making the lines between them blur. For example, it becomes especially crucial when addressing the entanglement of environment and technology within our lives whilst simultaneously honoring Indigenous ways of knowing and being, which are multifaceted and embedded in relational worldviews. Effectively communicating through display and presentation these subjectivities within the exhibition space is also about spontaneity, intuition, mapping and encounters—how artworks, ideas, and visitors interact in fluid and open-ended ways.

Whilst I do not intend to delve too deeply into this exhibition, I want to highlight that collaborating with Pakathi has given me insight into each of our positions and expertise. Unlike Pakathi, I do not consider myself an expert in transmedia, its theories or technology. I also do not per se focus on technology or digital formats within the artworks featured in *Undulating Currents*. However, I acknowledge the significance of these debates and their contributions to contemporary art discourse. I perceive that by engaging with the discourse of digital mediums of artworks and the politics of technology could have also directed this study differently. But this limitation is something I have come to reconcile with. As mentioned, my primary interest lies in research strategies (what that process is like for this thesis), curating and exhibition-making, allowing the artworks and conceptual approaches of the artists to underpin this thesis.

For *Undulating Currents*, we also collaborated with Maria Rudakova, an exhibition designer.<sup>29</sup> As a former student of the University, she made a significant contribution to the exhibition space. Specifically, it was her idea to consider a simulation of the ocean in the exhibition space by way of painted black walls and carpeted black floor, with specifications of each of their materials. She also created the 3D mock-up design of the display and placement of the artworks, in discussion with us which further contributed to the space. Further, she also designed the short curated texts in terms of style and look, choosing specific typeface and styling, which was also mirrored in her design of the main poster (fig. 2.1). I can add that Rudakova's designs are bold and unapologetically dark—they stand out, almost as if making a deliberate statement on their own. Her aesthetic was informed by her study of visual strategies found in Black revolutionary posters from the 1970s protest movements in the US which follow a common pattern of two tones that give off high contrast, Black and white, enlarged raised fists, raw typefaces with effects of

<sup>29</sup> Maria Rudakova, *Conversations on Harm*, diploma project, supervised by Oliver Kartak, Winter 2024/25, multimedia installation (text, audio installation, map), University of Applied Arts Vienna. Accessed April 6, 2025. (cf. link)

intensity. She shared this with us, and its translation is clearly visible in her work, where those graphic impressions echo throughout her designs. Thus, her design unfolded within the exhibition space, envisioning a simulated oceanic environment as a key strategy—that immerses viewers in a state of fluidity, where they drift in unfixed or wavering ways.

What her design strategies ultimately did was, it gave life to the identity of the exhibition which I feel is as much of a necessary step to solidify its conceptual framework. Moreover, it is also a conversation with the history of Black culture and to place the exhibition within its radius. In terms of post-production, pinpointing individual contributions became difficult—the careful selection of artists and their artworks to underlying concepts emerged through a collective effort and shared curatorial spirit. It was a highly communal endeavor. The design element that brought the exhibition to life, however, was distinctly Rudakova's vision. Ultimately, the exhibition evolved into something more layered and complex, particularly in its conceptual and theoretical dimensions, serving as a testament to our collective collaboration.

### 3.4 *Spatial Display and Presentation*

The University is known for its abundant spaces across the city to exhibit artworks of students/artists and even external thinkers and artists, and the strength of the University is that it is often these open and public events, more or less, which attract a wider public, contributing to a broader contemporary art discourse. One of the spaces of the University is the Sala Terrena, tucked away in the 1st district neighborhood of Vienna. Formerly part of a church space, this space—currently rented by the University—functions as an exhibition venue. This is a neighborhood where the assimilation of people from migrant backgrounds appears comparatively limited, rendering it, arguably, a predominantly white space. Nevertheless, it does attract a diverse group of students, academics, artists, and other cultural producers, resulting in board public engagement. In this sense, the University has facilitated a certain degree of diversity, albeit within specific social and institutional boundaries. The area also occasionally draws tourists, adding yet another, albeit transient, layer to its demographic makeup.

As for the gallery space, it has broad white arches as ceilings and cold tiled floors. From a formal and technical standpoint, the exhibition required some degree of transformation, since it was working with the logic of subverting land-based perspectives in order to include more oceanic ways of relating to space. Considering the eight artists whose artworks also touched upon the themes of oil and water, we wanted to bring a more cohesive presentation that illuminated these artworks within the space as well. Thus, the exhibition's spatial design was intentionally transformed to reflect the dual elements of oil and water, symbolizing the intersection of Blackness with fluid

and ancestral human-aquatic connections. Seen in (fig. 3.1) the walls of the University gallery Sala Terrena were painted matte black, with the color flowing from the floor to a reasonable height on the walls, creating a visual break between oil and water. The floor was entirely carpeted in black, interwoven with textile fibers. There were short curatorial texts across the walls of the space with curated books on commissioned designed metallic shelves in the space as well.

In (fig 3.2), a screenshot of a 3D mock-up of the exhibition design illustrates the arrangement and positioning of the individual artworks. This mock-up was created to strategically plan the exhibition, for a comprehensive preview of how the space would function and appear in the exhibition. The exhibition's display deviated from conventional wall-mounted arrangements, with artworks presented at varying heights and through different mediums. This approach reflected a wave-like pattern, to encourage different approaches and experiences.

At the entrance, the artist Brathwaite-Shirley's visual and immersive video game installation *Pirating Blackness* (2021) was projected on the wall with a bench and a table with three brightly red buttons and three headphones for audio. Surrounding the video game and the bench, a paper pattern on the floor, onto the bench and the walls at partial height, designed by the artist illuminated this corner. The game invited viewers to engage at the entrance. On the right side along the entrance door, the artist Biabiany's video essay *Musa* (2020) was set up against the wall on a large digital screen with its audio on low to echo in the background of the space. She also had her book publication *ritmo volcán* (2022) displayed. The artist Sodipo's video essay *And the Seas Bring Forth New Lands* (2019) was mounted on a large screen, similar to Biabiany's video essay, opposite to her work. Sodipo's work came with a pair of headphones for the audio and was accompanied by the artist's book publication *Celeste* (2021) on a specially designed metallic bookshelf. Along the hallway to Sodipo's video essay, the artist Moropa's *Selekana le Modimo wa Noka (Selekana and the Goddess River)* (2023) commissioned works, a glass cased collage and digital film on a mini Ipad were displayed horizontally on a singular black table in tandem to each other. At the middle of the entrance, the artist Asamoah's *The Day After Tomorrow* (2021) photo montages of three photographs were presented horizontally at different heights, encased in glass and accompanied by the artist's book publication with the same title, on the designed metallic bookshelf. Next to Asamoah's photomontages, Ozophé Collective's video essay *Row* (2017) work was projected horizontally onto a flat table which was lower in height compared to Moropa's horizontal display and Asamoah's photo manages, whilst Rezaire's video essay *Deep Down Tidal* (2017) was splashed largely across the wall using a projector, opposite to Brathwaite-Shirley's video game, as they sat facing each other.

Aside from this spatial arrangement, the exhibition was also populated with short concise curated texts prepared by the curators, al-



Figure 3.3: Curated books on Black art and history on metallic shelves, alongside short curatorial text within the exhibition space, highlighting the emphasis of the research of the exhibition inspired by the scholar Édouard Glissant. Photography by © Maria Belova



Figure 3.4: Curated books on Black art and history on metallic shelves, alongside short curatorial text within the exhibition space, which exemplifies the transatlantic slave journey. Photograph by © Maria Belova

lowing the viewers to navigate the exhibition as a breathing space of layered meanings. For instance, in both (fig. 3.3 and 3.4), a few books in Black art and history are shown on the designed metallic shelves, which were spread across the exhibition space. Seen beneath the metallic shelves are short bursts of curatorial texts which unfurl insights into the exhibition for the viewer to pause and read between books and the short curatorial texts. For instance, in (fig. 3.3), the short curatorial text points to the meaning of the term “undulating” and what this means for the exhibition to guide the viewers:

*“Undulating”, which means to fluctuate or waver, emphasizes the ethos of our research. This ethos resonates with French philosopher Edouard Glissant’s ‘refusal to accept the logic of linear sequences as the only productive logic.’ In our planetary existence, oil and water are two pristine yet geologically charged resources most demanded for resource extractivism during our geographical wanderings across the ocean.*

(Curatorial text)

In (fig. 3.4), the legacies of the transatlantic slave journey weave a historical point of reference for the viewers:

*“The legacy of transatlantic slave journeys manifests vividly in the extraction of oil and water, driven by colonial logic and capitalist intentions. Our work offers a chance to insert our experiences into the discourse on systemic failures, highlighting liquid separations and unities in acts of submerged unlearning.”*

(Curatorial text)

The exhibition collaborated with the University library to commission a curated selection of books on Black art and history. Initially comprising only five titles within the library’s collection, this collaboration significantly expanded the repository, adding over forty five volumes. This initiative not only enriched the library’s holdings but also facilitated broader public access to these critical resources, facilitating even further this constellation of academia, the public, theory and practice across the University.

### 3.5 *Undulating Currents: An Analysis*

I have so far examined our exhibition through some interrelated lenses from space and material to display and representation. About ocean thematics in exhibition-making, *Curating the Sea* (2020) makes a point that curating as a key methodology is pertinent in ocean-focused exhibitions across museums and biennales. The authors highlight the “insufficiency of exhibitions... only that presents a scientific approach to ecological crisis”, emphasizing how curatorial practices can “diversify the monolithic Anthropocene ocean” and “deviate from dominant Western models of representation and epistemology in exhibitions and museums.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly acknowledging these gaps that curating can serve as an intervention for the ocean, there were three motives to our exhibition, firstly, critical inquiry into

<sup>30</sup> Syperek and Wade, *Curating the Sea*, n. 83.

Black history of transatlantic slave trade, secondly, Black in identity politics and thirdly, relations between Black lives and the ocean.

It is difficult to determine what comes first—the concepts or the selection of artists. In my view, however, the selection of artists shapes the concepts and overall direction of an exhibition. Pakathi and I explored these concepts together, sharing common concerns such as addressing the gap in representation of both local and diaspora Black artists in Vienna and their relationship to the ocean. This guided our research in selecting artists whose works would be both relevant and captivating within the exhibition space in Vienna. Given Pakathi's strong interest in digital artworks and overall consideration of technical installation of these works in the space, we took this into account when selecting artists for the exhibition. I found digital artworks, with their unique aesthetics of the ocean, particularly relevant. The exhibition leaned more toward this medium because I was also personally interested in disrupting the ontologies of the sea—challenging how we experience and exist within it. The ocean, as a vast and largely unknown entity, is often understood remotely. Aside from coastal communities who live in close proximity to it or those who experience it through tourism, much of our knowledge of the ocean comes through mediated representations—whether through writings, paintings, audio, photographs, moving images, scientific databases, or other imageries. Typically, mediated representations of the ocean—shaped by science, colonial history, legal apparatus or even tourism—have established far more perceptions of it rather than cultural ones. These perspectives present an extractive or data-driven view that is both of a distant view that differs significantly from what art and cultural imaginaries can perhaps offer to counter. But digital mediums, as mediated by artists, can give us a fresh perspective and a deeper glimpse with critical social commentary, provoking us to sense and feel the ocean differently. Artists using digital means can disrupt these ontological tensions.

For instance, a few years ago, I first encountered the artist John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea* (2015), a 48-minute, three-channel video installation that seamlessly weaves together past and present, evoking oceanic imaginaries through cinematic aesthetics and digital montage.<sup>31</sup> The work reflects on how histories are constructed, how they become entangled within the ocean's vast marine architecture, and how human influence continues to impact marine life and the environment. Yet, despite these, Akomfrah brings these elements together in a visually and narratively compelling way. Akomfrah also references historical Black figures such as Stuart Hall and Olaudah Equiano, and slavery images at seas, which ties Black memories to the ocean, invoking its waters as a witness to history. This stands as a testament to Akomfrah's masterful approach to archiving imagery—his ability to layer and reassemble fragments of history—whilst simultaneously weaving a powerful, immersive form of storytelling. It is difficult to tear one's eyes away from this visual work given the repository of information. I highlight Akomfrah's approach to vi-

<sup>31</sup> John Akomfrah, *Vertigo Sea* (2015). Three-channel video installation. Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, "Water After All" exhibition, December 14, 2019–June 14, 2020. Accessed February 15, 2025. (cf. [link](#))

sual storytelling and filmmaking because he is an artist whose work intervenes in standard filmmaking practices whilst also disrupting Western, colonial ways of understanding the ocean and Black history. Akomfrah disrupts standard filmmaking practices by weaving triptychs of storytelling which direct the gaze in between each of these digital surfaces, offering multiple view points to the viewer.

It is also crucial for me to highlight the direction taken by The Otolith Group in both curatorial and artistic practice, as they blur the boundaries between these roles. The group, formed by interdisciplinary artists Anjalika Sagar and Kodwo Eshun, works across performance, installation, publications, video, photography, and other mediums, disrupting conventional artistic and curatorial frameworks.<sup>32</sup> *A Sphere of Water Orbiting a Star* (2023) exhibition was co-commissioned by Galway Arts Centre (Galway, Ireland) and Hangar Artistic Research Centre (Lisbon, Portugal), curated by Margarida Mendes. I take particular notice of this exhibition because it exemplifies The Otolith Group's *Hydra Decapita* (2010), a 31-minute film installation that explores the mythic space of Drexciya—a speculative underwater civilization imagined as the home of the descendants of African pregnant women thrown overboard during the transatlantic slave trade.<sup>33</sup> The concept of Drexciya originates from the Detroit electro duo Drexciya, formed by James Stinson and Gerald Donald, who introduced this mythic space in their 1992 album *Deep Sea Dweller*.<sup>34</sup> Through sonic experimentation, Drexciya imagined the sounds of this submerged civilization, weaving together histories of slavery, trade, capitalism, and speculative futures. This technique of using sound as a means to invoke an alternative, submerged history—is rather inviting.

In *Hydra Decapita*, drawing from the sonic waves of Drexciya's album and translating them into visual aesthetics, The Otolith Group brings the injustices and violence of slavery to life. Referencing the history of painting—particularly the modern British painter J.M.W. Turner's *The Slave Ship* (1840)—the work revisits the brutal history of the transatlantic slave trade. Turner's painting depicted a slave ship *The Zong* en route from Africa to Europe and America, where enslaved people were thrown overboard. The slave ship and cargo were owned by British traders who claimed insurance compensation. This real historical event, which took place at the end of 17th to early 18th century, sparked controversy as it led to the legal remuneration of the perpetrators rather than justice for the victims in a legal court case. *Hydra Decapita* poetically captured these horrific accounts, immersing the viewer in the waters of the sea. As the film unfolds, glimpses of the dark seas shimmer in light that appear on the screen, accompanied by poetic texts that serve as haunting reminders of the past.

Complementing this was the exhibition space itself, which was transformed into an immersive environment. Liquid blue surfaces simulated water, creating the sensation of being underwater, whilst a staircase functioned as the deck of a ship. This spatial design also

<sup>32</sup> The Otolith Group, accessed February 20, 2025, (cf. [link](#))

<sup>33</sup> The Otolith Group, "Hydra Decapita," The Otolith Group, accessed February 20, 2025, (cf. [link](#))

<sup>34</sup> Marcus Barnes, "Mysteries of the Deep: How Drexciya Reimagined Slavery to Create an Afrofuturist Utopia," *Mixmag*, October 28, 2020. Accessed February 8 2025 (cf. [link](#))

overlapped with another film installation, *A Sphere of Water Orbiting a Star* (2023, 35 minutes).<sup>35</sup> This work further expanded its depth by incorporating unreleased conversations between artist Eshun and musician Donald, adding another layer of reflection on what shared past meant for them and it trails into the future, through sonic imagination. Eshun calls Donald's lyrical and sonic take as "sonic fiction". One viewer's reflection on the exhibition stood out to me—mentioning Donald's perspective on origin stories and how anyone can recreate and imagine another dimension. This, I believe, is a vital provocation within the exhibition space: it distills the mechanics of necro-economics, disrupts hegemonic narratives of historical authority, and envisions alternative futures through an Afrocentric lens.<sup>36</sup>

I also take particular note of artist Ayesha Hameed's *Black Atlantis: the Plantationocene* (2017/2020, 22:49 mins) which is a documentation of live audio visual essay, as it is described, about returning to Turner's painting, thinking about storms as an entry point from the painting, as both metaphor and site, which is a witness to the throwing of slaves overboard the ship.<sup>37</sup> But also, she draws from the mythic space of Drexciya which invokes sonic, visual and cognitive senses, to construct stories that are both mythical and fictional, whilst acknowledging its histories. She describes it as, "A key aspect of the Drexciya myth is its temporal proposition: to see time and history as equally in flux as the lapping ocean, to see the afterlife of the middle passage in a futuristic scenario".<sup>38</sup>

Hameed's work is also reminiscent of contemporary migration, where migrants crossing from Sub-Saharan Africa to the European Union face acts of violence—both within the sea itself and through the ways these tragedies are mediated through images, as Hameed writes. She also ties this to the deep ends of the sea, invoking how hydrothermal vents and microorganisms, cetaceans sustain life beneath the sea. The sea becomes a witness to the repetition of violence, forced displacement and casting these entanglements, as migrants in the Mediterranean endure conditions that echo the perverse violence of the transatlantic slave trade and also how biodiversity within the seas are affected by human activities. Hameed constructs a more expansive archive by weaving together performative lectures, images, video, sound, narratives, and storytelling, vividly drawing us into these complex fictions of historical and contemporary intersections.

The ability of these artists and curators to tie together these loose ends through aesthetic sensibilities requires a weaving of techniques—whether through image, sound, fiction, history, performative lectures, or storytelling and so on. The aim here is also to reconsider the digital surface—through video essays or moving images—as a means of reshaping how the ocean is mediated. Rather than encourage what we are "conditioned" to know, these artistic mediations open up possibilities for what we *could* know. When engaging with their work, these are acts of seeing and sensing, feeling the spatial expanse as well as temporal experience. These approaches

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ayesha Hamed, 'Black Atlantis: The Plantationocene, commissioned by L'internationale Online, accessed on February 25, 2025 (cf. link)

<sup>37</sup> Ayesha Hameed, "Black Atlantis," in *We Travel the Space Ways: Black Imagination, Fragments and Diffractions*, ed. Henriette Gunkel and Kara Lynch (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2019).

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*, 4.

reflect how the ocean is a complex biological process and ecoservices system itself, affirming that it is a layered and entangled space.

So, rather than standing in the shadows of these works, the artists presented in our exhibition engage in dialogue with the artistic practices and visions of the artists I mentioned, they similarly seek to explore the trauma and tragedy embedded in this history, from their own positionalities and aesthetic interventions. Some artists engage with digital media, whilst others combine digital techniques with collage, and some others even incorporate photography and site specific art, which are explained in each of the following chapters. The diverse mediums used to mediate the ocean significantly expand our understanding of it, opening new ways of sensing, imagining, and relating to the ocean. Thus, *Undulating Currents* does not claim to introduce something entirely new; rather, it positions itself as part of a larger, ongoing conversation in contemporary art discourse.

### 3.6 *The Hybrid Ocean*

As seen in the wider discussion of these above artistic works, furthermore, the question about what being Black means is a labyrinth. Looking at the history of the transatlantic slave trade, colonial regimes reduced people from Africa to the color of their skin, treating them Black and, in many cases, as non-being—stripping them of their humanity and treating them instead as goods or commodities for profit. This history of exploitation is embedded in Black collective memory, a subject extensively explored by scholars, curators, artists, and thinkers.

For this study, I find it useful to think with Glissant and his concept of *relation* which I will elaborate on further. As indicated by the artists discussed earlier, the ocean is a witness to human crimes, necro-economics, political ideologies, and exploitation taking center stage—erasing the perspectives and lived experiences of the victims. Understanding violent crimes and injustice from the victims' point of view is difficult, largely due to the absence of archives, their testimonies and being overshadowed by colonial narratives, which have systematically submerged alternative ways of knowing and understanding the transatlantic slave trade. Western colonial and capitalist networks have also impacted much of art and culture, history, bolstering ways of seeing and knowing that exclude or negate other epistemologies. On the slave ships, human beings were reduced to mere cargo and containerized in the act of being commodified. This history is hauntingly mirrored in contemporary cargo ships and migratory flows traversing the oceans even today—a maritime architecture of global networks rooted in extractive economies and capitalist circulation.

The exhibition engaged with these intersections, drawing inspiration from Glissant's *relation*, which he described as a form of "shared knowledge". In Glissant's world, *relation* entails a departure from Western epistemologies, embracing forms of knowing that emerge

from the entanglement of bodies, movements, languages, cultures, and materials. It rejects the structures of legitimation, division, segregation, and exclusion imposed by colonial regimes on Black people. Instead, *relation* fosters a more reciprocal and egalitarian mode of engagement—both among humans and with the environment. Glissant’s vision of “shared knowledge” thus encourages an experience of totality that simultaneously acknowledges and values difference.

His perspective, from his islander roots and his articulation of archipelagic thinking through his writings and poetics, informed the conceptual depth of the exhibition. Formally and aesthetically, the exhibition sought to evoke a wet and liquid condition, creating an environment where viewers could experience a sense of being afloat and undulating. The color black was chosen not for reasons of representation, on the other hand, to provide a neutrality between oil and water, which seldom mixes and remains separate from each other, in terms of their molecular design. The black-painted walls and black carpeting were designed to dissolve inflexible spatial orientations, immersing visitors in a sensorial experience that resonated with the fluidity of oceanic movement. This deliberate choice sought to challenge a land-centric, flattened perspective. By evoking liquidity and circulation, the exhibition reflected on the idea that wetness is never uniform; it is always in motion, without fixed origins or endpoints.

Islands, cast as small, isolated, and precarious, are anything but—they are worlds within worlds, spaces of entanglement. This island or archipelagic-thinking has also been embraced in several other perspectives in curatorial approaches or artistic interventions, which I briefly mention here. DeLoughrey critiques how islands are reduced to “spaces of museums or laboratories of tourism,” which privilege colonial and extractive narratives.<sup>39</sup> The exhibition *Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago* (2017), curated by Tatiana Flores at the Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach California (US) showcased around 80 contemporary artists from Latin America, the Caribbean, and its diaspora.<sup>40</sup> A subsequent article built on this, focusing on artists such as Tony Capellán, Jean-Ulrick Désert, María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Nadia Huggins, and David Gumbs, exploring how their work expands oceanic ontologies through “tidalectic representability”, diffraction, submergence which offered gendered oceanic intimacy—has new ways to think through the materiality of the sea. Further, the Caribbean is also enriched through *Curating the Caribbean* (2012), where Cuban curator José Manuel Noceda Fernández analyzed the asymmetrical cultural processes of expanded island cultures.<sup>41</sup> The exhibition *Embodied Islands: a Caribbean Photographic Exhibition* (2016) focused on Caribbean photography, including works by Trinidad and Tobago artist Nadia Huggins.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, Yina Jiménez Suriel and Pablo Guardiola’s *One Month After Being Known in That Island* (2020) reflected on the Treaty of Basel, exploring creolite and the Caribbean’s historical-political entanglements.<sup>43</sup>

Whilst some of the exhibitions provide some island or archipelago

<sup>39</sup> Tatiana Flores, curator, *Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago*, Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach, CA, September 16, 2017–February 25, 2018. Accessed February 24, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth DeLoughrey, “Island Writing, Creole Cultures,” in *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature*, ed. Ato Quayson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 802–832.

<sup>41</sup> José Manuel Noceda Fernández, “How to Install Art as a Caribbeanist,” in *Curating the Caribbean*, ed. Axel Lapp, David A. Bailey, Alissandra Cummins, and Allison Thompson (Berlin: The Green Box, 2012), 97–112.

<sup>42</sup> *Embodied Islands: A Caribbean Photographic Exhibition*, curated by Fabienne Viala, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK, 2016, accessed February 24, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>43</sup> Yina Jiménez Suriel and Pablo Guardiola, curators, *One Month After Being Known in That Island*, exhibition, Kulturstiftung Basel H. Geiger, Basel, Switzerland, August 27–November 15, 2020. Accessed February 24, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

thinking, in terms of my exhibition's approach, there is also a strong consideration of what knowledge constitutes in itself, echoing some island or archipelago thinking. Rather than presenting knowledge as hierarchical or linear, the exhibition emphasized its constant motion in dialogue and circulation—an understanding aligned with Glissant's *relation*. It sought to demonstrate that knowledge emerges from multiple sources and modes of experience. In doing so, the exhibition enacted Glissant's broader interpretation of "shared knowledge", inviting viewers to engage with alternative ways of knowing that are circular, fluid, relational, and ever-evolving.

On Islands, the late Samoan/Tongan writer Hau'ofa reminded us that *Oceania* is not a scattering of tiny lands lost in an immense sea, but a vast, pulsating expanse of kinship and movement, where histories do not end at shorelines but flow outward, carried by currents of memory and migration.<sup>44</sup> His vision thwarted the shrinking of islands into margins, instead revealing their boundlessness, their reach, their insistence on relation. I wish to note that the title of this study "Ocean in Us" is inspired by Hau'ofa's phrasing to indicate islands as empowering entities. Furthermore, Hau'ofa echoes with Glissant's archipelagic thought, where islands are not fragmented or alone, but part of an intricate web of crossings and echoes, where histories collide and reassemble, where identities are never fixed but always becoming.<sup>45</sup> Both Hau'ofa and Glissant see islands not as peripheries, but as sites of world-making, where resistance is woven into the very fabric of waves, languages, and stories that refuse to be contained. On the other hand, Brathwaite's *tidalectics* expanded this conversation by a way of thinking with the ocean's movement, rejecting linear Western narratives in favor of cyclical rhythms of memory and migration.<sup>46</sup>

In the Caribbean, creolization, a direct consequence of colonial disruption, resulted in the mixing of languages, cultures, and social structures—what DeLoughrey describes as processes of "breakage and re-assembly".<sup>47</sup> She further critiques how colonial expansion justified itself by minimizing the ocean's importance, treating migration and ancestral seafaring traditions invisible. This erasure stripped the ocean of its agency in historical narratives, whilst Indigenous traditions, by contrast, offer "enriching oceanic imaginaries", often feminizing the natural world and framing the ocean as a "shared central ocean space of spatial and historical complexity."<sup>48</sup> I find it particularly significant to mention Glissant's *Creolité* which highlights the entanglements of language, identity, and ecology in the Caribbean.<sup>49</sup> His notion of *relation* is understanding islands as dynamic, interconnected spaces shaped by histories of colonization and cultural mixing.<sup>50</sup> This resonates with Hau'ofa's rejection of the colonial framing of Pacific islands as small and insignificant, advocating instead for a vision of "world enlargement" where islands and oceans constitute a unified and expansive region.<sup>51</sup> Whilst recognizing *Négritude*, as articulated by earlier works of Aimé Césaire and Fanon<sup>52</sup>, Glissant critiqued its essentialist framing of identity.

<sup>44</sup> Hau'ofa, *Our Sea of Islands*, 148-161, n. 48.

<sup>45</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 31-33.

<sup>46</sup> Deloughrey, *Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene*, 32-44, n. 42.

<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth DeLoughrey, "Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures" (University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 2-3.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Supra* at 167.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Supra* at 166.

<sup>52</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, in *The Négritude Movement*, ed. Léopold Sédar Senghor (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1939).

Essentialist identity is the idea that a person or group has a fixed, unchanging essence that defines who they are.<sup>53</sup> In its place, he advanced Créolité, an intricate and fluid alternative that stressed the multiplicities and entanglements inherent in Caribbean identities.

Drawing inspiration from scholars Deleuze and Guattari, Glissant reconceived identity as an ever-evolving, multidirectional, and interconnected phenomenon, dismantling colonial binaries.<sup>54</sup> He reimagined Caribbeanness as a constellation of cultural, linguistic, and historical convergences, positioning the Caribbean as a fertile site that challenges colonial paradigms whilst advancing nuanced global discourses on hybrid forms of relations. For Glissant, the ocean is also a space of abyss—that bore witness to the deaths of enslaved people who were overthrown and drowned in its waters. This abyss is not only a site of mourning but also a space of the unknown, a condition of not knowing—of never being certain when, or if, land would appear again across the horizon. It is this forced movement, this rupture from homeland without knowledge of what lies ahead, that mirrors the bottomless sea itself.<sup>55</sup> The depths of the ocean, vast and immeasurable, become a different kind of knowledge to defy full comprehension. I also think of Spivak's invocation of *planetarity* as distinct from the global—a way of thinking that counters the networks of globalization, which persistently draw divisions imposing borders and enact extractivist logics across the ocean in an attempt to map and own. In this sense, Glissant's abyss rings with Spivak's *planetarity*; both motion toward an epistemology of the unknown, an insistence on relationality rather than domination. In my view, the abyss, much like *planetarity*, unsettles the colonial impulse to categorize and control. Further, it is a space where knowledge remains in flux, where opacity (or not fully knowing) is a form of resistance, and where the ocean itself embodies a refusal to be fully mapped or claimed.

This is what the exhibition sought to achieve by undulating between ways of knowing and not knowing—holding space for the tension between dominant global neoliberal frameworks and other ways of knowing that emerge through artistic interventions, as Black epistemology. In the exhibition, it was exemplified in mediating forms of knowledge—whether through curated books, wall texts that guided viewers through the space, the artworks themselves, or the immersive qualities of the environment. In particular, most of the artworks were off the walls, presented in horizontal styles, which also contributed to the ways of experiences and encounters. Knowledge, in this context, remains fluid and permeable, open to multiple encounters and subjectivities. Moreover, the exhibition sought to bring together various contemporary Black artists whose practices intersect with queer, ecofeminist, and Indigenous perspectives, placing them in dialogue with one another. This as a form of knowledge-making, as encountering aesthetic sensibilities through artistic practices deepens the ways we experience and understand the world—an understanding that is itself a form of knowledge.

<sup>53</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Le discours antillais* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981), 283.

<sup>54</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 31-33, n. 45.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, n. 45.

What I am also alluding to here is that the way we come to know and understand Black identity is not universal. It is multiplicitous, multivocal, and thrives in the embrace of both *créolité* and the *Black Atlantic*, existing in fluid, ever-unfolding relations. If Wynter posited that to be non-Black is to be non-human, challenging the Western constructs of being, then scholars like Glissant take this also further by emphasizing that Blackness is not only a state of being but also a way of knowing—that is inherently fluid and relational which embraces hybrid relations. In this sense, *relation* becomes central to his thought, asserting that the world can only be truly understood through multiple, intersecting ways of knowing.

This is how I have also come to interpret what it means to be Black—as something shaped through cultural narratives of Island or archipelago thinking of knowing, being. These elements create a kind of mixing, a continuous process of entanglement, echoed by Gilroy.<sup>56</sup> In Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*, he emphasizes on movement of how exchange creates hybrid maps of histories and cultures across geographies. Rather than viewing Black identity through nations' imposition of what identity should mean, he argued that it is constituted through crossings—both literal, in terms of oceanic journeys, and metaphorical, in terms of artistic and cultural exchanges. The *Atlantic*, in Gilroy's concept, emerges as a transnational, fluid space, where Blackness is constantly reshaped through diasporic movement.<sup>57</sup> Gilroy explored the complexities of Black diasporic identity through the metaphor of the sailing ship, which serves as a "chronotope"—a concept introduced by the 18th century philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, who referred to the interconnected relationship between time and space within a literary work.<sup>58</sup> It represented how these elements are intrinsically linked and structured within a text.<sup>59</sup> The ship, in Gilroy's interpretation, symbolized both the transnational movements of Black people across the Atlantic and the historical trauma of the Middle Passage.<sup>60</sup> It represented a microcosm of cultural and political exchange, capturing the circulation of cultural artifacts and political activism that widened ideas between Europe, Africa, the Americas, and the Caribbean.<sup>61</sup> As for our exhibition, far from coming up with a main curatorial text, we decided to place short curatorial text as navigational points that leaned into this diasporic movement which viewers could also engage with. It was kind of an invitation to learn with each other, just as we are in the same boat, sailing together.

I find it important to also consider Saidiya Hartman's "afterlife of slavery".<sup>62</sup> Whilst Glissant and Gilroy provide articulation for understanding the transatlantic slave trade and its epistemologies—Hartman shifted the focus toward its consequences in the present. She urged us to recognize that history is not confined to the past but is an ongoing process, continually negotiated, and confronted in contemporary social, economic, and political realities. She wrote about how racial violence continues to unfold which sets up structural inequalities, and the ways in which Black communities continue to

<sup>56</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 4-17 (see Prologue, n. 47).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* examines the profound disconnection and alienation experienced by descendants of enslaved Africans. Through a journey to Ghana, Hartman reflects on the impossibility of recovering a coherent ancestral past, confronting the erasure and fragmentation left by the transatlantic slave trade. She contends that the Middle Passage and slavery have created a "second exile," shaping the cultural and emotional realities of the African diaspora. See Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

navigate the legacies of enslavement. Hartman's relationship is also about processing and mourning death, and reckoning with loss the violence that still shapes Black life. However, Stephen M. Best takes this idea in a different direction, questioning how mourning the Middle Passage contributes to collective memory but also asking: What kind of political interventions can emerge from this grief? How do we move beyond remembrance to actively recover from the persistent traumas of racial violence?<sup>63</sup>

On similar lines, Sharpe's concept of *the wake* extends this discussion, framing Black mourning as an ongoing process that is not about closure or reconciliation but about living with the continuous presence of loss.<sup>64</sup> She draws from the wake of a vessel—the trace left behind in the water—to illustrate how the “afterlife of slavery” is something still being lived through, still being dealt with. Echoing Best, she argues that mourning is not an act of finality, not something that can be resolved or forgotten, but a necessary mode of reckoning with the structures of anti-Black violence that lingers across time. It is about remaining aware of these histories, their lingering effects, and the ways in which they impact the present. This was also a key consideration in the exhibition, reflected in the multiple reading sessions of Black authors and poets. These sessions created a sense of intimacy, bringing the texts to life through real-time conversations whilst simultaneously contextualizing the artworks. This programmatic vision was an extension of its concept—a way of remembering, of stitching together histories, politics, cultures, and languages in a way that acknowledged their continual encounters and reverberations. In my view, this approach underscored how learning is not only about accumulation but also about immersion—about engaging with knowledge in ways that are shared and reflected upon. The act of reading together, of voicing, unlearning and listening, transformed these moments into spaces of reflection and dialogue, allowing history to be encountered as something active in the present.

I also take inspiration from these discussions, as for the exhibition, they are evocative forces that reconfigure space and time within the exhibition. Here, these histories are felt—through the mediation of the space itself, curated poetic texts that act as navigators, through books that inhabit the space, and through the artworks themselves. This creates a layered temporality intersecting with the spatial that moves between the visibility of transatlantic slavery as a capitalist system and the invisibility that sought to erase the very being and experiences of enslaved passengers and their labor. These histories remain entangled with the present, where global neoliberal politics continue to enact violence on Black communities, severing their organic and relational entanglements with the ocean. The surveillance of Black bodies occurs even today, extending colonial logics that once policed movement across the Atlantic and global conditions continues to displace migrants and workers in contemporary crossings across the ocean. At the same time, extractive industries impose an-

<sup>63</sup> Stephen M. Best, *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 1-26.

<sup>64</sup> Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (see Prologue, n. 52).

other burden—this time on the ocean itself—placing its biodiversity and ecology in peril under the weight of climate change. These interconnections are not easy to fully grasp, and we should instead demand a recognition of their entangled, multidimensional nature. I have so far demonstrated that through curatorial choices, the exhibition created an environment where these complexities could be experienced, where the fluidity of the sea was mirrored in the interplay between artworks, texts, and the embodied experience of the space itself.

*Undulating Currents* received an overwhelming response, with spontaneous visits and countless engagements through curatorial tours. Whilst I know the exhibition intimately from an insider's perspective, it also led me to a particularly meaningful encounter with a viewer—a Master's student at the University of Applied Arts Vienna, in the Department of Transarts—who was eager to share her reflections on the exhibition. I have included her reflection in this thesis as it offers a valuable perspective on the exhibition's impact. However, I also wish to highlight some of her comments here, as they provide insight into how the exhibition was experienced and engaged with by its viewers.

"As I entered the exhibition space, I was immediately struck by the simple appearing yet profound design, particularly the horizontal division of the room. This left a lasting impression on me; in my memory, it feels as if it pulled me right into the depths of the exhibition's concept. I found the way the various artistic positions and the accompanying literature were arranged within the space to be very thoughtful and refined. This design enabled me to emotionally immerse myself in the artistic works."<sup>65</sup>

This viewer also extended her experience beyond the exhibition space, bringing it into an academic context. As part of a course at the University of Vienna titled *Reading for Water: From Hydrocolonialism to Mami Wata*, led by Elisabeth Knittelfelder, she engaged with *Undulating Currents* in a scholarly context which was shared with her peers. As a student of this course, she presented her reflections on the exhibition, she adds,

"This course, alongside the insights I've gained from it, the impressions left by the artistic works in the exhibition, and the exhibition's overarching concept, has enhanced my sensitivity toward water—what it means to me and what it can signify (for whom)".<sup>66</sup>

On the note of viewers becoming part of the artworks and exhibition itself, for me, it was particularly interesting to witness how viewers engaged with the exhibition—not only experiencing it in the moment but also taking it further, thinking through its themes, and learning from it in ways that extended beyond the space itself. Seeing these interactions unfold gave me fresh perspectives on how knowledge circulates across the mediums of academia with exhibition and art-making.

<sup>65</sup> Personal Interview with Verena Frauenlob. December 2024. Appendix 1.1.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

### 3.7 *Diversity and Inclusion*

Here, I address the lack of representation of Black artists, art workers and cultural producers in Vienna. Through my study, my position is that curating must be used as a tool for cultural equity. It has the power to center narratives from Global South artists and support art workers, cultural producers who face structural inequalities. Their full participation in exhibition-making is essential and to build a truly diverse and inclusive field of knowledge. I believe that some corrective measures are needed to address this lack of representation through cultural policies at institutional level. As such, whilst some institutions have internal diversity and inclusion policies, it is not about listing them here. Some cultural policies I propose is to support artists of marginalised positions whether indigenous, disabled, queer, female, and so on, is needed to be met with targeted funding from privileged art institutions which supports and encourages them to make art, to provide fellowships and residences with mentoring, space and the time to help develop their projects, to have curatorial committees with diverse curators, to increase pay rolls with robust contracts for artists as well as art workers and to offer more rural and remote locals and community art support with access to funding from already established art institutions, etc.

Whilst these are some of the measures within art institutions that are already being implemented, my fundamental concern is that it may just ultimately be surface level and subject to changes depending on the politics of national positions, state-funding and private entities. In the rush to produce ambitious and blockbuster exhibitions, art institutions lose sight of who they are truly serving and who the art is for. Whilst such shows may boost visibility for artists within the art market, they rarely have any lasting stability for the lesser known artists and art workers who support such institutions. This reflects an unwavering tension by neoliberal conditions that romanticize that self-reliance and care is needed, that to be more entrepreneurial and independent to carry out artistic projects is encouraged, all the whilst distracting us from the structural systems that created and continue to replicate this precarity in the first place.

Reflecting on an interview I had with the artist Asamoah, I found that his approach to photography provided an intimate and nuanced way to navigate this discussion within my study. His artistic sensibilities, embedded in his images, have a depth of closeness that allows for a different kind of engagement with these issues.<sup>67</sup> Asamoah shared how, for one of his projects, he interviewed his father, who walked for two weeks across the Sahara Desert in hopes of migrating to Europe.<sup>68</sup> Another of his works traces his Ghanaian ancestry, mapping connections with coastal communities in Ghana. The way he engages with both the desert and sea salt water as mediums of displacement reflects a diasporic imagination that brings these histories and lived experiences to light. This intimacy, captured in his photographs, functions as an exercise for the viewer—including my-

<sup>67</sup> As a note, I will only be engaging with Asamoah's work within a small ambit, however, I acknowledge his contribution to *Undulating Currents* and his interview for this study.

<sup>68</sup> Personal interview with artist Eric Asamoah. 2024. Appendix 1.2.

self.

The legacies of colonialism and the long history of subjugation of Black people, which have relegated and dehumanized them, continue to show contemporary systemic inequalities. These structures are not only present in politics and the economy but are also embedded in cultural institutions, affecting how art is valued and circulated. As mentioned earlier, art and culture are not separate from market forces; they are contingent upon economic structures that dictate visibility and access. Institutions find themselves caught in the crossfire of these complexities—negotiating diversity and inclusion of systemic inequalities within a framework that remains shaped by colonial and capitalist legacies. Similar positions are such as of the Sāmoan artist and curator Léuli Eshrāghi engaged with Indigenous knowledge and planetary boundaries, as seen in *Reclaim the Earth* (2022) and the *TarraWarra Biennale* (2023), alongside the publication *Indigenous Aesthetics and Knowledges for the Great Ocean Renaissance* (2023).<sup>69</sup> Through these projects, Eshrāghi critiques the ongoing environmental destruction of the Great Ocean (Pacific) whilst advocating for Indigenous-led approaches to care and restoration. Their curatorial work is part of a broader effort to increase Indigenous representation among cultural producers and to support sustainable futures grounded in Indigenous knowledge. At the heart of this approach is the recognition of Indigenous agency as essential to shaping more just and balanced planetary relations. On a similar principle for this study, recognizing these tensions is crucial, not just in addressing representation but also in critically examining how, similarly for Black artistic practices, are they engaged with and positioned within these art institutional landscapes.

Numbers can be one thing but they do not provide a full picture. Pakathi from their experience as an artist, as well as the artists I interviewed for this study, and cultural producers have noticed such tensions as well. In a conversation with Pakathi, they highlighted the challenges of quantifying representation, noting:

“There is insufficient access to comprehensive data documenting the representation of African and diaspora art in Vienna, which itself reflects a systemic issue. This data insufficiency creates a circular problem: the lack of data makes it harder to prove underrepresentation, which in turn makes it harder to advocate for better data collection and monitoring.”

Pakathi’s critique shows a broader issue in cultural institutions: the politics of data production and visibility. The absence of systematic documentation of Black local and diaspora artists not only obfuscates the scale of underrepresentation but also replicates epistemic violence by rendering their contributions invisible. This aligns with the Spivak’s concept of “epistemic silencing,” where the marginalized are excluded from systems of knowledge production.<sup>70</sup> Spivak has critiqued both colonial and postcolonial conditions for perpetuating this silencing.<sup>71</sup> She has emphasized that attempts to “give voice” to marginalized people, even when well-intentioned,

<sup>69</sup> Léuli Eshrāghi, *Reclaim the Earth*, group exhibition, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, April 15–September 4, 2022. Accessed February 8 2025 (cf. [link](#)) Also Léuli Eshrāghi, curator, *ua usiusi fa’ava’asavili* (The Canoe Obeys the Wind), 9th TarraWarra Biennial, TarraWarra Museum of Art, Wurundjeri Country (Melbourne), April 1–July 16, 2023. Accessed February 24, 2025 (cf. [link](#)) Refer also to Léuli Eshrāghi, “Indigenous Aesthetics and Knowledges for the Great Ocean Renaissance,” in *Writing Relations, Making Futurities*, ed. Léuli Eshrāghi (Montreal: Momus Emerging Critics Residency, 2023).

<sup>70</sup> Gayatri Spivak’s concept of *epistemic silencing* arises from her seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, in which she critiques how dominant discourses, particularly those shaped by colonialism and Western intellectual frameworks, render marginalized groups voiceless. Spivak argues that the subaltern—those excluded from structures of power—are not only oppressed materially but are also systematically excluded from knowledge production and representation. This exclusion creates a profound *epistemic silencing*, where their experiences, perspectives, and agency are erased or misrepresented within dominant narratives. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*

can prompt their exclusion by speaking on their behalf instead of allowing them to express their own agency.<sup>72</sup> For Spivak, this silencing is tied to power relations within global capitalism which infer from imperial histories and the continuing dominance of Eurocentric epistemologies.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

Spivak's concept is particularly relevant in curatorial and artistic practices that engage with histories of marginalization. I argue that a careful and reflective approach should be maintained which critiques existing hierarchies but also actively avoids reproducing them. In curatorial contexts, "epistemic silencing" reminds us of the importance of creating spaces where marginalized voices can emerge authentically, on their own terms, without being co-opted by dominant economic driven agendas or reduced to tokenistic gestures. But it is also about recognizing what tensions are at play.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

Tayla Mayree, a cultural producer and guide to *Turning the Page: Representations of Blackness* at Belvedere Museum<sup>74</sup>, observed institutional efforts to rectify these imbalances but acknowledged their limitations.<sup>75</sup> While hesitant to quantify representation, she stated that initiatives to include Black local and diaspora artists often fall into problematic patterns:

<sup>74</sup> "Im Fokus: Turning the Page. Representations of Blackness." Belvedere Museum Vienna. Attended the tour Summer 2024.

<sup>75</sup> Personal Interview with the cultural producer Tayla Mayree by email. 2024.

"[Efforts] to include representation of contemporary Black local and diaspora artists should be more inclusive and are still far from an ideal scenario. They often fall into tropes of popular trends that exoticize well-known artists whilst sidelining emerging voices."<sup>76</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

Mayree revealed an incessant tension in representation: the simultaneous tokenization of celebrated Black artists and the marginalization of lesser-known talents. Mayree also addressed the colonial lens through which Blackness is often consumed, noting how it is frequently "reduced as the Other—dehumanized and misrepresented."<sup>77</sup> This reflects Hall's earlier observations on the production of cultural identities, where representational systems rooted in colonial histories continue to reproduce power imbalances as well.<sup>78</sup> Pakathi, also reflects from their perspective, this time from the position of an artist, further articulated the structural barriers within Vienna's cultural landscape:

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222–237.

"African and diaspora art are significantly underrepresented in Vienna's cultural landscape. Whilst there have been some recent efforts to address this imbalance, systemic changes are needed at both institutional and policy levels to create meaningful representation and support for African and diaspora artists."<sup>79</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Personal Interview with Pakathi by conversations during our exhibition and by email. 2024.

Pakathi's reflections emphasize that superficial gestures of inclusion are insufficient; substantive institutional reform is required to dismantle systemic exclusions and foster equitable representation. These insights reflect the value of anecdotal accounts in contexts where quantitative data is absent or insufficient. There is a potential risk of tokenizing and branding Black local and diaspora artists within the art world, and using their representation as a form of cultural commodification rather than addressing deeper issues of systemic inequality.

On the other hand, the art historian, diving into handling of archives and what their potential could mean, Noit Banai critiques this phenomenon of “silencing” of marginalized voices in her work, suggesting that whilst the archive can both embody violence and offer hope, the selective nature of these narratives excludes marginalized voices, reducing complex histories to superficial, palatable stories.<sup>80</sup> Banai emphasizes the need to embrace openness and interconnection, proposing archival practices that contends exploitation and acknowledge the intrinsic value of diverse histories and ecosystems.<sup>81</sup> By rejecting narratives steeped in scarcity and control, these practices aim to cultivate empathetic relationships that toggle between untold histories of marginalized voices and the broader planetary environment, ultimately fostering a more just and interconnected future.<sup>82</sup> Such narratives, whilst subjective, provide critical entry points into understanding the lived realities of Black local and diaspora artists navigating Vienna’s art world.

Moreover, the reliance on data alone to evaluate representation risks depoliticizing the structural discrimination that artists experience. In my view, whilst statistics might offer a veneer of neutrality, they cannot capture the nuanced realities of systemic racism or the invisibilized barriers embedded within institutional practices. As cultural theorist Sara Ahmed argues, institutional commitments to diversity could serve as “non-performative,” symbolic gestures that fail to translate into substantive change.<sup>83</sup> Ultimately, these dialogues reveal the urgency of transforming both representational politics and institutional practices to foster inclusive cultural landscapes. The experiences of curators, artists, and cultural producers not only illuminate existing gaps but also challenge art institutions to confront and dismantle the colonial logics that persist in their frameworks.

Although the discussions I have brought to light do not fully encompass many facets of these issues, I acknowledge the perspectives shared by the artists in this study. Some have pointed to the persistence of tokenism, like the artist Asamoah, whilst others have highlighted the ongoing gaps that remain in efforts to rectify the underrepresentation of Black communities in the art world, as pointed out by artists Giallo and Pakathi.<sup>84</sup> Ultimately, the artists are less confrontational on this matter, instead complicating what can be known about systemic inequalities affecting Black diasporic and local artists and art workers. At the same time, their practices may serve as subtle yet potent forms of exposure, revealing these injustices through affective and aesthetic means.

Whilst I take note of these positions, from my position, in today’s increasingly unstable global climate—marked by rising nationalism and state-imposed austerity—cuts to public funding are severely impacting academics, artists, art workers, and cultural producers, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. I believe this crisis is not limited to just one nation; it extends to international institutions dependent on the global circulation of ideas, artworks and exhibitions that are moving across borders and that rely on both

<sup>80</sup> Noit Banai, “Untold Narratives,” impulse text for *Curated by 2024*, e-flux, accessed November 18, 2024, (cf. [link](#))

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> In her essay “The Nonperformativity of Antiracism,” Sara Ahmed critiques institutional commitments to diversity and antiracism as often being “non-performative,” where symbolic gestures fail to translate into meaningful structural change. She argues that such declarations serve more to maintain institutional reputations than to address systemic inequities. Ahmed highlights how the language of diversity can mask inaction, perpetuating rather than dismantling entrenched power imbalances. See Sara Ahmed, “The Nonperformativity of Antiracism,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 7, no. 1 (2006): 104–126, accessed February 8 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>84</sup> These have been highlighted in the interviews with artists in all the appendices to this thesis.

state-funding and private capital. Whilst I do not champion globalisation, I remain critically aware of its contradictions: it claims to promote neutrality and connectivity, yet enforces a neoliberal agenda that privileges profit over care, equity, and sustainability. The current dismantling of cultural infrastructures exposes just how fragile and exclusionary this model has always been and I am cautious that there may not be a solution anytime soon.

I also wish to bring Black epistemology into this discussion, as it frames how I approach these issues. I see this way of knowing not only through the lens of Black artists that I extensively discuss in this study but also as a means of acknowledging the broader gaps in representation that contribute to epistemic gaps—particularly in understanding the connections between Black communities and their aquatic relations. The absence or marginalization of Black artists in institutional spaces does more than exclude individual voices; it also limits the ways in which cultural memories with ecological entanglements affect how we come to inherit histories or rather the past which I believe need to be articulated and understood. So, in my view, when people from marginalized communities are excluded from cultural infrastructures, their cultural imaginaries are also pushed aside or being suppressed. This not only weakens our ability to challenge unjust systems, but also severs deeper connections to ecological relations, ways of knowing, and worldviews that are urgently needed in the face of ongoing planetary crises. Finally, I wish to return to Asamoah's work by emphasizing that the act of learning—through sensing and understanding our environments and to be able to critically call out on them—can be a powerful exercise. So it is not just in addressing representation but in encouraging paradigm shifts in the very structures through which art and knowledge are engaged with and valued, whether this be through theory or also in practice.

### 3.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored how curating as research became a way to think about knowledge as fluid which is always in circulation, and something that can be experienced in tangible, spatial ways through the exhibition. *Undulating Currents* was about creating a space where knowledge could circulate—where the exhibition itself became a mediator, transforming its surroundings to evoke oceanic movement and allowing artworks to carry their own temporalities, which I will further unpack in the following chapters. For me, this exhibition was also about addressing the underrepresentation of Black artists: all of which I frame as Black epistemology. It was an attempt to reflect how the relationships between the ocean and Black lives run deep—through collective Black memory but in the present, in contemporary politics, in the ways Black communities continue to reflect on their positions from these ultimate violent streaks of underrepresentation. Thus, Black ways of knowing and being are constantly unfolding. I

do not claim that this exhibition alone can resolve these gaps, but I do believe it contributed to an ongoing conversation—Like the ocean, these ways of knowing refuse to be contained; they remain in motion, shifting, evolving, and offering new ways of seeing and understanding the world.

## **Part II**

# **Chapter Two**



# 4

## *Translocating: Ocean as forgotten space*

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### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter extends from the transatlantic slave journey introduced in *Undulating Currents*, specifically through artist Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley’s video game *Pirating Blackness* (2021) and Eburn Sodipo’s video essay *And The Seas Bring Forth New Lands* (2019) and book publication *Celeste* (2021). The context is building on Christina Sharpe’s critique of Allan Sekula’s *The Forgotten Space* (2010), particularly her notion of “the forgotten space of the forgotten space,” the chapter engages with the presence of Black trans lives within histories of maritime displacement. Whilst Sekula’s film is about the material and economic circuits of global shipping, Sharpe’s intervention reflects on the erasure of Black lives in these circulations. In response, this chapter proposes an expansion of this critique to include the erasure of Black trans histories, positioning contemporary artistic practices as sites for recuperation and re-imagination. Through digital remembering and text-based works, artists Brathwaite-Shirley and Sodipo articulate modes of world-building that counter the exclusions of dominant historiographies. In doing so, I contextualise their work with Alaimo’s *transcorporeality*—the entanglement of matter through bodies and environments across temporal and spatial boundaries.<sup>1</sup> I propose that their artistic strategies materialize this transcorporeal logic, revealing how Black trans existence has been shaped by, and continues to reconfigure, the violent legacies of the transatlantic crossing. In this chapter, I connect contemporary art with material feminisms and trans perspectives to show how *Undulating Currents* becomes a space for re-mapping histories—where

<sup>1</sup> Alaimo, *Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature*, 237–264 (see Prologue, n. 55).

politics of how or rather who remembers and the tools to reimagine these spatial come together. Through curatorial modalities of these artists, I explore how art can serve as a method of both acknowledging and actively reanimating the “forgotten spaces” of the past.



Figure 4.1: Allan Sekula, *Middle Passage*, Chapter 3, *Fish Story*, 1994. © Allan Sekula, Photo by the Estate of Allan Sekula

## 4.2 *Trans-crossing*

I draw from the artists Brathwaite-Shirley and Sodipo’s interpretations of the term *trans* and what it means to them. In my interviews with both artists, they carried the term in ways that expanded my own understanding of its multiplicity. Sodipo defines *trans* as a rejection of the gendered trajectory imposed at birth, emphasizing self-determination and autonomy over one’s own body and identity.<sup>2</sup> Brathwaite-Shirley, on the other hand, offers a more fluid and evolving perspective, describing how her understanding of *transness* shifted over time:

“Initially, when I came to understand the term *trans*. . . it felt different in relation to Blackness, but for me, it was a way of understanding myself. I had always been living as a *trans* person without having the words for it. At the time, I understood *trans* as a term for freedom—a separation from gender, a way of expressing yourself that doesn’t conform to normalness or to what is expected of an ‘everyday person.’ But now, the more I think about it, the more I realize how *trans* is also constrained by language. It doesn’t fully encapsulate everything—it’s more of a way to give an idea of something rather than define it completely. I have drifted away from thinking of *transness* as encompassing everything, and now my understanding is that. . . it is about being unrestricted.”<sup>3</sup>

I consider their views because they show how these perspectives influence their artworks, as well as how we, as viewers, can engage with their art. At the same time, I am addressing a broader idea—*queer ecologies*—especially as it applies to *queering the ocean*. In essence, *queer ecologies* challenge dominant heteronormative perspectives regarding gender, sex and the natural world.<sup>4</sup> They urge us to embrace the inherent interconnectedness of nature by dismantling

<sup>2</sup> Personal Interview with artist Eburn Sodipo. 2024. Appendix. 2.2.

<sup>3</sup> Personal Interview with Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley. 2024. Appendix. 2.1.

<sup>4</sup> Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, eds., *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

binaries such as human versus non-human and, by extension, nature versus culture.<sup>5</sup> To locate absence and abjection, Sharpe uses the analogy of the asterisk to specifically expand on the term TransAtlantic\*, playing with the asterisk (\*) to signify multiplicity of fluidity and excess. She describes,

“TransAtlantic as a “s/place, condition, or process that appears alongside and in relation to the *Black Atlantic* but also in excess of its currents.”<sup>6</sup>

Through this, Sharpe suggests that the asterisk allows for multiple meanings of trans—encompassing translation, transgender, transatlantic, transgressions, transformation, transfixed, and so on. Sharpe draws on Omise’eke Tinsley’s seminal work on the Queer Atlantic, quoting Tinsley’s assertion that “the *Black Atlantic* has always been the queer Atlantic.”<sup>7</sup> This provocation reorients Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic*, highlighting how Black flesh has always been in excess, and how the New World itself is queered through forced movement and hybrid ways. Specifically, I want to extend this idea to queering the ocean. In my view, this means moving away from seeing the ocean as a flat and land-centric space—as I have mentioned earlier—and instead embracing its fluid terrain. This includes acknowledging the dynamic nature of its currents, waves, and tides, as well as the multi-species communities like cetaceans and intricate marine architectures like coral reefs that thrive interconnectedly beneath the surface. In this light, queerness is not merely about identity or sexuality; it represents a broader challenge to conventional norms and binaries of nature and culture. The ocean, with its diverse marine life and intricate underwater landscapes, operates on principles of multiplicity and interconnection. It cannot be categorized as either entirely natural or entirely cultural, embodying a kind of resistance to the traditional, binary ways of thinking.

To illustrate this thinking, I draw from an essay structured as a letter exchange between Sharpe and the poet Alexis Pauline Gumbs. In her letter to Sharpe, Gumbs writes,

“And in *Undrowned* I write about the intimacy of Atlantic Gray Whales—creatures that became extinct shortly after the era of the transatlantic theft complex—and how the bones of those who did not survive, who were thrown or who jumped, became part of the sediment that gray whales filter into the basis of an underwater ecosystem.”<sup>8</sup>

In my view, Gumbs beautifully captures the intricate connection to marine life. This heritage is not about tangible artifacts in the sea but rather about the cultural ties—especially those linked to underwater marine life—that become part of the marine architecture. Gumbs actively queers the ocean by breaking down the binaries between the natural world, the non-human, and the human. She writes,

“... non-anthropomorphic understanding of the ocean can flow, and has flown creatively and spiritually in part from the fact that humans and marine mammals need not be understood as separate beings. They can co-exist in the same bodies, the same psyche, the same

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, 30 (see Prologue, n. 52).

<sup>7</sup> Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 2-3 (2008): 191-215.

<sup>8</sup> Alexis Pauline Gumbs and Christina Sharpe, “On Water, Salt, Whales and the Black Atlantics,” *The Funambulist* (blog), May 25, 2022, accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

breath.”<sup>9</sup>

She ties this reimagining to the cultural narratives of the transatlantic slave journey, unrestricting marine architecture as merely a domain dominated by global networks of capital and trade—which have historically led to environmental degradation. This approach transforms how we understand and experience the ocean. Thinkers like Sharpe, Gumbs, and Tinsely—representing Black, feminist, and queer perspectives—have significantly influenced how we come to know, understand, and relate to the ocean.

Drawing from the artists’ interpretations of what it means to be trans, their work not only embraces but also deepens the inherent queerness of the ocean. Sodipo argues that this approach dismantles heteronormative norms, whilst Brathwaite-Shirley emphasizes that it fosters an unrestrictive way of experiencing and being. I believe that this approach is inherently hybrid. The hybrid nature of this approach means that it is open to intersections—between past and present, between different cultural experiences, and between various forms of ecological and social life. It suggests that the ocean, and nature in general, is about constant negotiation where multiple truths coexist.

Queering the ocean in my view can be applied through Alaimo’s *transcorporeality*, where I draw from her notion that bodies—whether this is corporeal, digital artworks, or even the ocean—are isolated, self-contained units. Alaimo’s notion of bodies in this context extends far beyond the conventional idea of a corporeal body. She envisions bodies as any material entities—ranging from microorganisms to the digital, or even macro such as cities and natural elements like the ocean—that are in constant interaction with one another.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, Alaimo states that bodies are porous or permeable.<sup>11</sup> Thus, *transcorporeality* critiques Cartesian notions of a bounded, autonomous self by arguing that bodies function as ever-evolving nexuses of material relations, constantly interacting and influencing one another. I believe that this opens up new analytical ways for understanding how in art terms, consequently, by recognizing bodies as integral parts of a broader, interconnected ecological network, *transcorporeality* provides a critical lens through which to examine the impacts on bodily autonomy and subject formation, whilst also deepening our understanding of how these interrelations are experienced by the viewer.

I bring queer notions of the ocean together with the concept of *transcorporeality* because I assert that there are complex ways of knowing the ocean that challenge dominant ontologies, which reduce the sea to a resource for extraction and exploitation on a global scale. Traditional paradigms tend to ignore the multifaceted impacts of environmental degradation—through plastic waste, noise pollution or even oil spills on multispecies life and the marginalized communities whose livelihoods depend on the ocean and its biodiversity. Through *transcorporeality*, we are encouraged to see the human body as inseparable from the ocean and its environment. Demon-

<sup>10</sup> Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, 3 (n. 109).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

strating these insights through art, and particularly through artists' lenses, provides critical insight, added layers of meaning, and a more nuanced way of experiencing the ocean. Moreover, this mediation is crucial for the viewer's subjective interpretation of the artworks. By curating the exhibition in a way that connects the artists' notions of trans—encompassing both the human body and its cultural dimensions—with their digital works, the viewer is invited to engage in a dynamic dialogue with the piece. This curatorial strategy not only shows the complex interplay between embodied identity and digital expression but also invites how these interactions influence the viewer's experience of the ocean as a fluid, queer space. In doing so, it highlights the importance of mediation, through curating, in facilitating a richer understanding of *transcorporeality* and queer ecologies, demonstrating that the viewer's engagement is an integral part of the overall narrative. These threads of analysis are tied closely in the work of Brathwaite-Shirley and Sodipo.



Figure 4.2: *Pirating Blackness* (2021), BlackTransSea.com, Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley. *Undulating Currents: A Group Show* at Sala Terrena, University Gallery, Heiligenkreuzhof, University of Applied Arts Vienna (2023)

### 4.3 *The digital interactive Ocean*

Berlin-based international animator and artist Brathwaite-Shirley seamlessly blends media, technology with cultural critique across various forms including sound, animation, video games, and performance. Through innovative digital storytelling, she animates the trans Black experience, creating narratives that traverse the present and histories of the forgotten. As a new media artist, Brathwaite-Shirley draws on techniques in digital real-estate, coding, aesthetics of video gaming, and participatory process to engage viewers. The focus here is on Brathwaite-Shirley's video game *Pirating Blackness* (2021), which was showcased as part of the *Undulating Currents* exhibition.

Near the entrance, the game was projected on a large screen against a white wall. In front of the screen, a bench equipped with



Figure 4.3: *Pirating Blackness* (2021), image credits © Danielle Brathewaite-Shirley

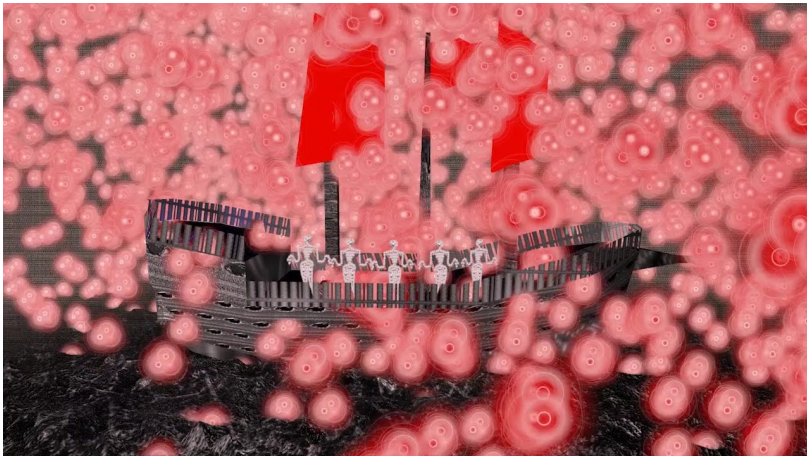


Figure 4.4: *Pirating Blackness* (2021), image credits © Danielle Brathewaite-Shirley

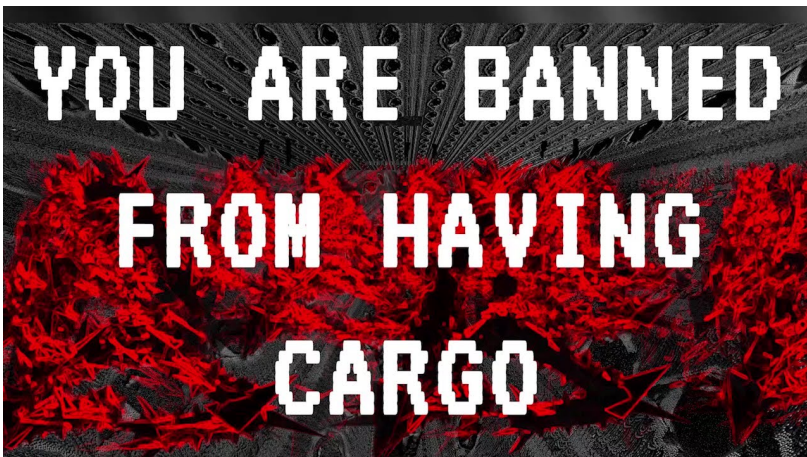


Figure 4.5: *Pirating Blackness* (2021), image credits © Danielle Brathewaite-Shirley

three bright red buttons and headphones invites viewers to participate (fig. 4.2). Paper designs on the floor and bench create an immersive environment, using gray-white hues and fleeting figures in them that pay tribute to undocumented trans Black individuals lost at sea during the transatlantic slave trade. Participants sit on the bench and use the three red buttons to navigate the game (fig. 4.3). As they interact, they are taken on a quest-like journey that mixes some forms of reality with the virtual setup. This setup encourages players to engage with alternative narratives about the ocean, prompting them to make ethical and moral decisions along the way. As a curatorial approach, this video game was selected for the exhibition as visitors are immediately drawn into an immersive and engaging space (fig. 4.2). Also, the installation aligns with the exhibition's theme by delicately placing the importance of trans people from the transatlantic journeys. The artist uniquely resurrects these histories by combining textual prompts, ambiguous and disabled characters, slave ship and ocean imagery, and voice overs as audio elements. This integration of media creates a participatory experience that sets this installation apart from the other works in our exhibition.

Brathwaite-Shirley began creating video games due to her background in science, which sparked her interest in coding.<sup>12</sup> She explained that her artistic process is like keeping a 3D diary—facing a blank canvas, whether physical or digital, and allowing whatever emerges from within to come out.<sup>13</sup> Inspired by the act of world building, she gradually expanded her practice into building entire worlds. Initially, she focused on animations and games, but she soon started exploring interactivity, considering how viewers might make choices—whether satirical or humorous—to draw them deeper into her work. This evolution led her to a commissioned video game, which culminated in the “Black Trans Archive”, a project she has since dedicated herself to exclusively. From my perspective, the strength of her video game lies in how it comes alive through active viewer participation. For Brathwaite-Shirley, the viewer is the primary medium, and the artwork is dynamically activated by who is playing in relation to their own identity and the choices they make.

The artist explained that the aesthetics of the video game draw inspiration from old PS1 and Nintendo 64 titles, reminiscent of 1990s digital aesthetics, characterized by low resolution and textured effects created when files are compressed and crunched down.<sup>14</sup> She also considered the limitations of the internet, particularly the optimization challenges involved in processing and buffering a video game online.<sup>15</sup> It is at this intersection—between retro gaming influences and digital constraints—that the distinctive aesthetic of her video games emerges. The artist is committed to making her work both accessible and collaborative, she states. By ensuring her work is open access online and creating immersive, participatory experiences in exhibition spaces, she fosters an environment where diverse narratives and experiences can converge, encouraging a shared dialogue and collaborative engagement with history and identity.

<sup>12</sup> Personal interview with artist Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley. 2024. Appendix. 2.1

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, interview by Shama Khanna, *Feminist Review* 129, no. 1 (November 2021): 75-84, accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

The artist emphasizes that the aesthetics of her video game—especially when exhibited in a gallery setting—challenge conventional ideas of what art should be.<sup>16</sup> She points out that whilst some artworks are defined and valued by market forces, video games occupy a more ambiguous space.<sup>17</sup> She argues that video games have predominantly been built by white male creators who project their own narratives onto the medium, resulting in content that is tone-deaf to the experiences and perspectives of marginalized communities. This ambiguity is further compounded by the underrepresentation of trans Black people in the art world, which makes it even more crucial for her to push these boundaries, she adds. In my view, by embracing video game creation as a form of artistic expression, she not only redefines her own practice but also challenges and expands the broader notion of what art is and could be. I am reminded of Hito Steyerl who argues that media art forms—such as video essays, poor quality images, or distorted visuals—are less susceptible to commercialization and consumption in the art world.<sup>18</sup>

Brathwaite-Shirley's creative journey was also triggered by a chance encounter with the artist Sodipo, whose eye in a picture captured Brathwaite-Shirley and since she was familiar with Sodipo's work around the ocean, she began to think about it more and to create stories which sparked her curiosity about reimagining some stories around the slave trade.<sup>19</sup> She began to ponder how Black people might have been seen as pirates of the sea—what that identity would feel like, look like, and mean in terms of escaping the confines of slavery. This line of inquiry gradually evolved into an alternative historical narrative, that specifically considers the experiences of trans Black individuals—imagining, for instance, a scenario where the ship never reached the shores. As she explained, "I thought from the perspective of the ocean," emphasizing a vision where "the ocean remembered its history for once."<sup>20</sup> This concept eventually transformed into a peculiar time-traveling for Brathwaite-Shirley in which her video game invites contemporary participants to re-examine their own ancestral past, challenging them to erase or insert elements of their history, particularly in relation to ancestral ties and all the whilst questioning colonial influence.

There are three key points I want to raise here. First, the artist speaks about "Black Trans Archives", so it is important to critically underpin the wider yet brief debates around archives in contemporary art—especially how they have been used to challenge erasure and reclaim history of certain cultures and racialised, gendered bodies.<sup>21</sup> Second, the work uses video game media and aesthetics, which raises questions about how these digital forms are treated into contemporary art, and how they deal with issues like consumption within capitalism and popular culture. Third, the work addresses Black identity and the transatlantic slave journey, offering a response to colonialism and its ongoing impacts. These are crucial for understanding the depth of the artist's practice.

The archive has long been understood as a system of official

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. The artist further explains in the interview that this notion is perhaps changing as galleries and overall the art world is getting into NFTs (Non-fungible tokens) and these also have a tendency to exclude trans black communities.

<sup>18</sup> Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *e-flux journal* 10 (November 2009), accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Griselda Pollock, "Trouble in the Archives," in *Griselda Pollock Essays: Looking Back to the Future. Essays on Art, Life and Death* (London: G+B Arts International, 2001), 31. See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988) and Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

records used to classify and to exclude. Colonial and state power structures perpetuated traditional archives such as police records, slave documents, war letters and diaries, and more that have historically been curated and maintained by institutions of authority like state governments, colonial administrations, museums, and academic bodies—largely dominated by white, Eurocentric and the patriarchal gaze. Postcolonial scholars such as Pollock, Spivak, and Ann Laura Stoler have challenged the presumed neutrality of such archives, interrogating the structural reasons why non-Western communities, enslaved peoples, and women have been systematically excluded from official historical records.<sup>22</sup> They called for both (feminist and queer) theoretical and aesthetic interventions to confront these exclusions.<sup>23</sup> Further, Hartman has argued that Black lives appear in the archives only through the lens of violence, as fragments from slave registers or ethnographic records—what she calls “the violence of the archive.”<sup>24</sup> Black bodies in such messy archives were really just numbers or commodities, often objectified and dehumanized. Archives this way were a violent form of omission. It reflects on the power structures that decide which stories are told and which are silenced. Jacques Derrida, in *Archive Fever*, explains that the word archive comes from the Greek word *arkhē*, which means both “beginning” and “authority.” The *arkhōn* were the rulers or magistrates in ancient Greece who had the power to decide what was recorded, stored, and remembered. They controlled the archive, and therefore, controlled history itself. So, when we talk about archives, we are not just talking about where information is stored, it is about *who* gets to decide as well.

In the aftermath of slavery, Sharpe, through her concept of *wake work*, emphasizes the need to reckon with how the afterlives of slavery continue to shape the present—how racial violence lives on for Black communities.<sup>25</sup> She takes an example of the artist Sekula, who through his extensive research and filmmaking, has critically examined the invisible structures of power exploitation of human labor at sea. Developed by the U.S. military in the 1950s and standardized by the 1970s, cargo container ships have become the backbone of global trade, now facilitating 90% of the world’s production and consumption across nations.<sup>26</sup> In *The Forgotten Space* (2010, video essay, 112 minutes), Sekula and philosopher Noël Burch use these massively enclosed and heavily stacked vessels as a lens to examine the hidden dynamics of maritime labor and capitalism (fig. 4.1). Sharpe critiques the tools of narration and image-making employed in the film, arguing that they fail to capture the violence and negation of Black people—pointing to a larger issue of misrepresentation in visual culture, particularly regarding the transatlantic slave trade. Whilst Sekula’s film interrogates global trade networks of maritime labor, Sharpe argues that it overlooks the centrality of the Middle Passage, a route that historically bound the ocean to the exploitation of Black bodies. She extends this critique to Sekula’s earlier work, *Fish Story* (1989–1995), which she contends tokenizes the Middle Pas-

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> On queer archives, see Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) and Charles E. Morris III, “Archival Queer,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 26, no. 2 (June 2008): 2–3, accessed February 22, 2025, (cf. [link](#))

<sup>25</sup> Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness Being and Being*, n. 52.

<sup>26</sup> Marc Levinson, “The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger” (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

sage for global commerce, where the ocean is territorialized through unruly market forces and the precarious labor of the Other.<sup>27</sup> By exposing this massive oversight in *The Forgotten Space* and *Fish Story*, Sharpe highlights a critical structural failure in how Black lives are represented in visual media. She argues that,

“... it is not violence that occurs between subjects at the level of conflict; it is gratuitous violence that occurs at the level of a structure that constitutes the Black as the constitutive outside.”<sup>28</sup>

This assertion becomes evident in her analysis of a particular scene from *The Forgotten Space*, in which a Black woman, Aereile Jackson, described in the film as a “former mother”, is depicted clutching a doll. Sharpe argues that this representation is misplaced and out of context. For Sharpe, the presence of the “former mother” in the film makes time stand still—her interview is incoherent, out of context, and positioned as an abjection. This omission, for Sharpe, is indicative of a broader structural erasure. The filmmakers, she argues, make no attempt to address the legacy of the slave ship—the “coffin of labor-power”, as she describes it—within the contemporary globalized system of capital circulation.<sup>29</sup> Rather, this history is subsumed beneath the surface, reduced to yet another “forgotten space”. This is what Sharpe identifies as the “forgotten spaces of the forgotten space”, that articulates how the histories of Black labor remain excluded from dominant modes of representation and knowledge production, particularly within the realm of maritime imagery and oceanic ontology.

In response to such erasures, counter-archives emerge as critical alternatives. These archives challenge institutional authority by employing speculative and participatory methods to reclaim silenced histories. Artists and scholars use imaginative practices—such as speculative storytelling, digital platforms, etc. Sharpe’s critique aligns with counter-archival practices by emphasizing the need for creative interventions that center Black experiences and histories. By exposing structural failures in films like *The Forgotten Space*, even if they were another artist’s work and not official records, she underscores the importance of rethinking archival methodologies to confront systemic violence and reclaim Black subjectivity. Such digital mediums have long expanded the possibilities for counter-archival practices, offering tools for visibility and self-representation, particularly for communities historically excluded from formal records. Yet scholars caution against assuming digital mediums as inherently liberatory.<sup>30</sup> It is important to critically engage with Sekula’s film, which, whilst grounded in the representation of maritime labor and its estrangement from the sea, nonetheless reveals a notable absence: the near invisibility of Black figures within this seascape of global trade. This absence reflects the erasure of Black communities in archival practices, a gap that digital mediums alone do not resolve. In this context, it is worth considering how this issue resonates—or diverges—with the work of Brathwaite-Shirley, whose open-access video game invites users to actively contribute responses, thereby

<sup>27</sup> Allan Sekula, “Fish Story” (Rotterdam: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 1995).

<sup>28</sup> Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, 5 (see preface, n. 52).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Scholars have noted the complex dual nature of digital technologies, which can serve both liberatory and oppressive functions. Whilst they have empowered social movements and enabled greater participation in cultural production, they are equally embedded in surveillance capitalism and state-driven control systems. In contemporary art, this duality manifests in the way digital platforms simultaneously enable visibility and perpetuate systems of commodification and exclusion. For example, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016). Also, Nicholas Thoburn, “Weathervane: Art and Surveillance,” *Third Text* 30, no. 1–2 (2016): 1–14.

empowering the archive as participatory and evolving. I argue that in the artist's work, these tensions are especially visible and the work interrogates or destabilizes the structure of the archive itself. Whilst her practice does reflect a counter-archive, it clearly uses queer and speculative strategies to center Black trans histories and the memory of the transatlantic slave trade. Through the use of video game aesthetics, she invites viewers to actively participate in the work. Her approach not only disrupts the structure of the archive but also challenges dominant ideas of authorship and speculates on what exactly does constitute historical truth.

However, there are contradictions worth exploring here. Brathwaite-Shirley has reflected on how video games can resist the commercial logic of the art world, yet digital technologies themselves are embedded in systems of surveillance by the hands of state-cooperative industries. Thus, my second point is about the use of video game mediums themselves. As the artist mentions, they sit outside the usual boundaries of "high" and "low" art. They are hard to commercialize, their very form challenges how we consume art. Derrida's reflections in *Archive Fever* further speak to this. He claims the archive is never neutral—it is governed by the *arkhē*, the authority that decides what is kept, and by *technē*, the technology that enables that keeping.<sup>31</sup> In this sense, archives are both tools of power and shaped by the mechanisms of their recording. The artist's use of video game medium directly intervenes in this logic. A digital, interactive medium resists the archive's demand for visibility on its own terms and builds speculative futures in the absence of historical recognition, through the artist's work. The artist uses this tactic deliberately, and by showing such work across galleries to museums, it opens up important debates about value, accessibility, and how art engages with capitalism. My position is that the artist's approach is both inventive and critical—using digital tools to challenge "archival histories" and commercial expectations, whilst inviting us to think differently about how cultural transmission of trans Black identity through art can be. However, McKittrick states that the digital space emphasizes how Black life has long been subject to systems of monitoring and spatial control<sup>32</sup>, and as such, Kishonna Gray points to the digital representation and their political stakes for Black gendered people in gaming cultures.<sup>33</sup> I argue that digital spaces can continue this by making Blackness hyper-visible in some ways, whilst still structurally excluded or commodified in others. In other words, simply moving to digital platforms does not automatically create freedom, it can just extend the reach of old systems in new forms.

My third point is that the artist's use of the medium of video game resonates with Sharpe's critique of the erasure of the other histories, including those of trans Black identities. The artist incorporates potent symbols into the game—such as a slave ship, depictions of humans as cargo, and a playable character with whom the participant interacts to navigate the ocean (fig. 4.4). For example, the game is

<sup>31</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 2–3.

<sup>32</sup> Katherine McKittrick, "Mathematics Black Life," in *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 58–60.

<sup>33</sup> Kishonna L. Gray, "Black Gamers' Resistance," in *Race and Media*, ed. Lori Kido Lopez and Benjamin Stokes (New York: NYU Press, 2022), 241–258.

guided by a character who appears disfigured and disabled—a detail that immediately caught my attention. This portrayal speaks not only to personal, embodied experiences but also to broader politico-economic and cultural dynamics. It embodies a deep-seated trauma and a resistance against the “containerization” of identity—a process analogous to shipping cargos in standardized containers, where diverse histories and experiences are reduced to uniform, commodified units. It means to embrace a differently abled body and identities. The game uses text prompts that ask questions and provide options, with each choice advancing the participant to the next level (fig. 4.5). In this way, the artist is, perhaps intentionally or even unintentionally, engaging with the politics of global maritime trade and the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade. The immersive experience—where elements of marine architecture, cargo, containers, and the historical plight of enslaved individuals converge, directly implicates the participant in the narrative, making the experience complex and personal rather than purely speculative.

I argue that *Pirating Blackness* offers an embodied experience that draws on Alaimo’s *transcorporeality*, wherein trans life reconfigures traditional binaries—whether of gender, sexuality, or nature—opening up a realm of freedom and unbounded possibility. For me *transcorporeality* is demonstrated in this artwork because there is interactivity between the human and digital space, making temporalities of histories intertwine through the space of the ocean. In doing so, the game challenges the logic of global capitalist networks by presenting a trans and queer perspective that subverts dominant narratives about the ocean. Its digital surface not only animates alternative narratives through the video game but also interrogates the ethics and politics embedded in both digital art and maritime architecture along with its cultural heritage of transatlantic slave journey. By prioritizing accessibility and active viewer participation, the work reclaims these narratives and encourages audiences to reconsider how historical legacies—such as those stemming from the transatlantic slave trade—continue to shape contemporary understandings of the ocean and its cultural landscape.

However, in my view, there remains an unresolved tension in the artist’s work. Whilst the use of this digital medium—especially video game aesthetics—has an inventive way to reimagine Black trans histories, the work does not fully critique the digital domain itself. The artist has acknowledged that gaming culture is dominated by white, cis-heteronormative male perspectives and design conventions, and she actively works to disrupt this through her choice of aesthetics. Yet, the work still seems to operate within that same digital frame, without fully interrogating its embedded politics—how digital infrastructures reproduce the very systems of surveillance and exclusion of Black trans people they seek to resist. A central concern arises around the ephemeral nature of the video game, which, whilst powerful in its real-time and participatory format, raises questions about the longevity and afterlife of the interactions it facilitates. The work

admirably prioritizes open access and centres the agency of Black trans lives, yet its counter-archival logic appears to hinge on the immediacy of viewer response—posing a critical tension between the momentary exchange and the long-term preservation of collective memory. It remains unclear to what extent the artist conceptualizes this participatory act as something durational, or whether the traces of viewer input are themselves stored, protected, or revisited as part of the archive? If the counter-archive is to challenge dominant historiographies, its ability to retain and transmit memory—not only to represent but to remember—is essential. Here, the stakes exceed representability; they lie in the politics of archival continuity and duration. Brathwaite-Shirley not only opens a space for viewers to respond, but also bears the curatorial and ethical responsibility of how those responses are situated within a growing, collective memory. The question then becomes not only who is represented, but whose memory are we storing, protecting and also for whom.

Furthermore, this also calls into question the role of counter-archives in imagining futures, not only as acts of remembrance or recovery, but as speculative that shape what is possible to know and inherit. In this context, Brathwaite-Shirley's archive is a living, mutable interface with futurity, co-authored by those who engage it. If the viewers' responses are integral to the work's counter-archival ethos, what becomes of these contributions over time? Are they preserved as part of a growing, communal memory, or do they dissolve with the game's circulation and technological obsolescence?

Moreover, I remain cautious about how the work at times leans into overly abstracted or symbolic representations of Black trans identity. Whilst abstraction can be a powerful strategy for evasion or dreaming otherwise, it can also risk some form of ambiguity, especially when the embodied realities of Black trans life could be reduced to primarily through aesthetics and metaphor. This becomes particularly evident when engaging with the game's interface itself. In this sense, the work raises important questions about visibility and representation, but also about archival duration and protection, and it may still fall short in addressing how digital forms themselves can obscure the very lives they aim to amplify.

However, in my view, Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* enables the creation of diverse positions from viewership and participatory processes of inclusion both locally and within the diaspora. It serves as a rich source of hybrid, rather than containerized, narratives—offering multiple expressions of political will and agency. The artist casts and repurposes these dynamics, bridging the human and non-human in a way that challenges conventional, homogenized modes of cultural representation as well. I also wish to comment on the unique approach to Brathwaite-Shirley's work. Through the interactive video game, both parties participate in world-building, collaboratively re-membering and re-constructing trans Black lives. This co-constructed form transforms historical recollection into an active, mutual endeavor, enriching the narrative with diverse perspectives and embodied experi-

ences. In my view, this approach also shifts the burden of remembering onto the viewers, rather than leaving it solely to the artist. This dynamic suggests that the responsibility for preserving and reconstructing erased histories is shared, even though it is marginalized communities who have been compelled to fill in these historical gaps. Radically, it challenges the notion that it should be the burden of those whose histories have been erased to remember or rectify the omissions of dominant narratives.

#### 4.4 A Collaborative Imagining

*Pirating Blackness* video game was also shown in earlier iterations: *Surface Tension*, a group exhibition, ICA Central (Institute of Contemporary Art), San Diego, California (2022)<sup>34</sup> and *Spirits, Jinns & Avatars: On Magic in the Digital Age*, HAU Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin (2023)<sup>35</sup>. There have been numerous iterations of this work as well. Particularly, *Surface Tension* was at a fairly new art institution, whilst *Spirits, Jinns & Avatars* was a large-scale festival. Both scales of the exhibitions differ and influence how individual artworks are presented and perceived. I relied primarily on two reviews of each of the exhibitions to inform my analysis. In the group show of six artists, *Surface Tension*, artists such as Marina Zurkow, Charles Atlas, Ulu Braun, among others, the exhibition aimed to explore how we interact with the ocean on its surface whilst also inviting a deeper introspection—examining the, “ocean from a global perspective rather than solely within a local ecosystem”—as the curatorial text says. One reviewer from *Hyperallergic* described this show as both a success and limited by the fact that some artists did not engage enough with the theme.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, the reviewer praised Brathwaite-Shirley’s artwork, which featured the video game on a projection on the wall accompanied by a seating area with three bright red buttons and paper-patterned graphics on the floor and walls. This setup proved effective for navigating the game and provided an intimate, engaging experience for participants, the reviewer recalled.

Whereas in another exhibition, *Spirits, Jinns & Avatars: On Magic in the Digital Age* by a reviewer for *Arts of the Working Class* newspaper, the festival featured Nadezhda Bey, Ariel Efraim Ashbel and friends, Karin Ferrari and some others, ranging in experimental media from VR installation to dance, to interactive bar karaoke, etc.<sup>37</sup> This festival explored magic and spirituality through digital media. The reviewer mentions it invited viewers to consider what kinds of political action might emerge from the fusion of magic and spirituality with the digital, whilst also challenging us to reimagine and recover those elements through artistic expression.<sup>38</sup> In this review, Brathwaite-Shirley’s video game is described in detail: a wooden sailboat was installed as a seat for the viewer, positioned before a projected screen on the wall. As per the review, this setup invites the viewer to “sail” on a journey alongside the video game, playing on the metaphor of being in the same boat or not. This emphasized an

<sup>34</sup> *Surface Tension*, Institute of Contemporary Art San Diego (ICA Central), March 25–June 26, 2022, accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>35</sup> *Spirits, Jinns & Avatars: On Magic in the Digital Age*, HAU Hebbel am Ufer, March 2–12, 2023, accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Rooklidge, “The Ocean, a Backdrop Against Which Exploitation and Pleasure Unfold,” *Hyperallergic*, June 15, 2022, accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>37</sup> Kari Leigh Rosenfeld, “History, Vitality, and Glitches: Spirits, Jinns & Avatars: On Magic in the Digital Age at HAU. Review,” *Arts of the Working Class*, April 6, 2023, accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

immersive experience, encouraging participants to actively engage in the narrative as if they were embarking on a shared voyage, as per the review. The reviewer did not provide an in-depth analysis, aside from the game empowering the viewer with agency, transforming them from passiveness into active shapers of the narrative.

Here, I wonder what happens to the life of the video game beyond its interactivity. If we consider the video game as an artwork and if the game ceases to function, its translation into an exhibition context risks reducing a participatory, living counter-archive into a static artifact. This raises critical questions about how then would art institutions' present and circulate this digital work beyond its technological lifespan without erasing its activist and communal intent in them? How does one curate a work that was designed to be participatory and open-ended once it can no longer be played? Does it become an archive of itself—a document of past interactivity, frozen in screen captures, recorded gameplay, or user responses? And if so, what is lost in this translation from live engagement to its other forms of display? Here, the critique is not only about the durability of digital forms, but about how art institutions mediate and circulate counter-archives beyond their digital life.

Learning expansively from such a curatorial perspective, drawing from my own exhibition as well as reviews of the other shows, Brathwaite-Shirley's work is expansive and interactive. In terms of their display at each of the exhibitions, the video game set up was quite alike. Her installations invite active viewer participation, creating immersive experiences that not only captivate but also provoke discomfort. The work is accessible and engaging, yet it challenges participants to confront difficult histories. In particular, it compels those with ancestral ties to colonizers to grapple with feelings of guilt and even the erasure of their own histories. This dual impact—being both likeable and unsettling—opens up critical dialogues around personal and collective memory, pushing viewers to reconsider the narratives of history and their own place within them.

#### 4.5 *And the Seas Bring Forth New Lands*

The London based artist Sodipo's *And The Seas Bring Forth New Lands* (2019, 9 min.) essay offers an alternative perspective on trans knowing and being, envisioning "futures for black trans" through art informed by black feminist thought. Her practice employs techniques like collage and fabulation across diverse mediums—including sound, text, performance, installation, video, and sculpture. In *Undulating Currents*, viewers experienced her 9 minute video *And the Seas Bring Forth New Lands* (2019) displayed on a large HD screen with headphones to engage with its digital moving images (fig. 4.6), alongside the short essay publication *Celeste* (2021), presented as a handbook that invites deeper exploration of her work (fig. 4.9).

Particularly, the video was chosen for our exhibition because the

artist explores the intersections of gender and race by drawing on Black trans feminist experience and the vibrant culture of Black pop clubs from the 70s and 80s, as well as themes of Black segregation, trans fashion, and protest movements (fig. 4.6 to 4.8). Through this work, Sodipo frames the Black trans feminine body as vast and dynamic, much like the waters, and the seas of the Atlantic. Using collage storytelling, and critical fabulation as techniques<sup>39</sup>, she weaves digital spaces and events into an assemblage that reflects her personal quest to rethink what it means to be Black whilst taking the viewer on a collective journey to experience it together. Throughout, viewers encounter striking visuals such as glitter and glamor, calm and also destroyed landscapes, a jazz musician, and the bold parading of Black models on a runway, etc. It also interweaves media footage featuring interviews with local Black families facing loss of their homes from environmental degradation and some iconic scenes from pop culture films relating to death and the coffin. Her aesthetics are similar to how viewers come across social media, she identifies, “My films, being quite visually active, with multiple images flitting across the screen, images that are very familiar with audiences also receive a lot of attention, no doubt due to the fact that the manner in which they move across the screen is reminiscent of Instagram reels, tiktoks and the like: short clips full of action.”<sup>40</sup>

In my view, the video engages with both historical and contemporary challenges of marginalized communities, drawing on the experiences of Black people and their systemic violence. By considering Hartmann’s “afterlife of slavery,” Sodipo conveys how Black people, through cultural narratives tied to water and the ocean, continue to face violence in their daily lives whether privately in homes and in public spaces.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, the piece critiques mainstream narratives which place limits on how we consume images, and to challenge this by ultimately bringing the passivity of water and the ocean to the forefront as potent symbols of vulnerability. The artist clarifies how her approach shaped the video and explained the techniques she used to create it.<sup>42</sup> Sodipo draws on Wynter’s proposition of Black knowing and being to explore how we encounter and interpret images.<sup>43</sup> Sodipo emphasizes, “white supremacist-capitalist-cis-hetero patriarchal structures we’re currently enmeshed in, provided strategies for imaging worlds otherwise, as well as strategies to guard ones energy and wellbeing. They allow me to see who to speak to and for; to ask and try to answer what histories are possible; instruct me on how to care for bodies, in the real world, in text, and even in imagination.”<sup>44</sup>

The artist’s collage and fabulation are essential techniques in her art-making process. Using collage, she reassembles disparate images and fragments them, whilst fabulation allows her to imagine alternative futures and articulate untold stories. According to Sodipo, collage is about “fracturing” and “fragmenting” history, whilst fabulation involves infusing the act of dreaming one’s fantasies through the act of imagination.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Sodipo is influenced by the

<sup>39</sup> Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 26, no. 2 (June 2008): 1–14.

<sup>40</sup> *Supra* at 208.

<sup>41</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 6–7.

<sup>42</sup> *Supra* at 208.

<sup>43</sup> Wynter, *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom*, n-71.

<sup>44</sup> *Supra* at 208.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

human body, particularly trans femme and the capacity to experience the erotic, desire, pain, and violence. Recognizing that Black bodies have historically been subjected to dehumanizing violence, she seeks to reveal moments of eroticism and desire that challenge and reframe these oppressive treatments. She stated, “Normative depictions of sexuality and the body must be done away with, so this is in part what my work aims to do.”<sup>46</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

Since Sodipo’s work is centered around fabulation, Hartman’s archive arises from the epistemological and affective slippages between fact and fiction—slippages that are not incidental but constitutive of how Black bodies have historically been exhibited as intelligible within systems of racialized representation. The archive, in this sense, is actually an instrument of power and the logics of coloniality, animated by the gaze that dehumanizes, and is complicit in the visual regimes that have long positioned Black bodies as less than human. Hartman’s critical intervention, therefore, is about the ethical relation to the past—through storytelling, through the affective labour of imagining lives otherwise occluded, and through a refusal to capitulate to the violent silences of the record. In particular, her notion of the archive becomes a site of re-humanization, where gestures of narrative intimacy work against the imposed erasures. This methodology fills gaps in traditional records by integrating storytelling and mythmaking from personal experiences thereby constructing multiple realities to recall the “afterlife of slavery.”

Grounded in what Hartman describes as “the speculation of the inaccessible,” critical fabulation points to the incompleteness of archives, such as Derrida suggests, is about operating not despite the archive, but through it.<sup>47</sup> Sodipo’s video essay takes a more poetic and subjective approach, in the hallmarks of subjectivity and fragmentation. Whilst she also engages with images of the ocean and its waves, environmental degradation, mining sites, and protest cultures, she personalizes these global issues by infusing them with cultural associations drawn from Black collective memory. Her use of collage and fabulation creates an archive that is largely about reimagining and even speculatively. Sodipo’s work provides an intimate, embodied exploration of identity and the lived experiences of Black people, particularly from the lens of trans femme. In my view, it entangles in the broader question raised by Derrida that all archives, including those produced through digital or technologically advanced artistic media, are never complete.<sup>48</sup> Underscoring, as per Derrida, that the archive is where memory and forgetting are inseparable, whether mediated through poetic fabulation, the archival gesture remains fraught with distortion and absence. Even as contemporary artists employ increasingly hybrid, and technological modes of archiving—aiming to revive lost histories, offer new contextual layers, or sustain cultural memory—the archive persists as a space of negotiation rather than resolution.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, n. 234.

Therefore, I find grappling with certain aspects of Sodipo’s video essay. Whilst it is evident that the work emerges from a Black trans

femme perspective and incorporates techniques of fabulation, there remains, for me, a gap between the position the work claims and what is materially and effectively conveyed. Though I understand the artist's aim to disrupt binaries such as the nature/culture divide and to challenge fixed identities through fluid and experimental visual languages, I find that the work's political and personal stakes do not fully translate. The imagery, with its vibrant, swelling presence and references to Black pop culture, begins to feel visually overstated yet conceptually underdeveloped. The logic of the image inflation on screen—meant perhaps to signify embodiment or in the act of rupturing, it feels, at times, detached from a grounded articulation of Black trans femme experience. Whilst the work clearly embraces fluidity as a mode of resistance, this positionality does not come across strongly in the unfolding of the video essay. Despite the use of digital tools to construct a layered and immersive environment, the artist's position, whether literal or conceptual, remains somewhat obscured. This is not to deny the value of abstraction or opacity as critical strategies. In a context where visibility and recognition for Black trans femmes remains urgent and politically charged, this detachment raises questions about the intended audience, and about how the work navigates the balance between poetic form and representational clarity.

Just as Brathwaite-Shirley (and only to some degree), in navigating speculative digital space, I expected a sharper interrogation of the digital media themselves—particularly given how digital media can both enable and constrain queer and trans representation. The work appears to utilize these tools aesthetically, yet stops short of critically engaging with the politics embedded in the medium itself. Sodipo's video essay adopts the visual and temporal aesthetics of social media—fast-paced, and attention-grabbing but also fragmented, presumably as a critique of contemporary modes of consumption, particularly in relation to Blackness and trans femininity. Whilst this may serve as a commentary on the commodification and disposability of Black identity in digital culture, it falls short. In my view, this strategy becomes counterproductive; the format mirrors a mode of fleeting engagement. If the work intends to function as a counter-archive, especially within the conceptual lineage of critical fabulation, then the question of *how* it holds attention becomes crucial. Critical fabulation, as articulated by Hartman, is not merely about representing what has been lost or obscured, but about crafting imaginative forms that demand deep, sustained engagement.

Further, drawing from Tina Campt's "listening to images", as a practice of attunement, the piece might have benefited from a slower, more contemplative rhythm—that insists the viewer dwell with, rather than glance at, and marinate in it with the complexity of Black trans femme existence.<sup>49</sup> Campt reminds us that counter-visibility requires not just looking, but feeling with time and with acts of deep witnessing—a durational practice that counters the violence of hypervisibility with care and sustained practice.<sup>50</sup> The

<sup>49</sup> Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017)

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

archival potential of the piece lies not in reflecting the tempo of digital culture, but rather in holding space for contemplation, care and evoking memory. In this sense, the video essay, though likeable in form, lacks a reflective stance on its own infrastructure and its implications for archiving or representing Black trans femme subjectivity. Ultimately, the work opens important conceptual ways but, for me, remains too caught with the unclarity of the artist's own position to fully communicate the weight of its political concerns. The speculative frame offers possibility, but without a more grounded or critically positioned narrative, the impact of that possibility feels incomplete.

My concern with this work lies in its invocation of critical fabulation for counter-archiving, without fully enacting the archival resistance it claims to mobilize. What remains unclear is how this piece functions as a counter-archive. Does it preserve memory? Does it build a communal or speculative archive that resists dominant historiographies? These questions are left unresolved. Whilst the artist does engage with elements of Black pop culture, environmental degradation and mass media interviews of victims, referencing its visual language and digital aesthetics, the work feels limited in articulating what new dimension it brings to this conversation. The incorporation of familiar tropes and stylistic references feels more reflective than transformative, leaving a critical gap in how the piece positions itself as a counter-archival intervention. If the goal is to reframe or expand the archive through critical fabulation, what is being added or reimagined here? Without clearly showing what is at stake or what new possibilities it offers, the piece risks repeating familiar visual themes without meaningfully changing or challenging them.

However, in the artist's book *Celeste* (2021), there is a different feel to it. MacLeod posits that water is frequently commodified and naturalized within economic discourse, where it is seen as an inherent resource subsumed into broader market logic and co-opted by it.<sup>51</sup> In Sodipo's water and the ocean, themes of creativity and histories converse, particularly within the context of the artist's book *Celeste* (2021). Through poetic text and imagery, Sodipo shows how the trans feminine body interacts and perceives the ocean as a metaphorical lens through which trans feminine experience can be expressed. With the ocean as a reflective space, she situates the trans feminine body in the act of seeing through water's surface. What stands out in her mediation of the body within this context is how Sodipo uses the water as a portal not just for bodily experience or physicality, but as a site of knowing and coming into being. For the viewer, this layered presentation has significant implications.

Applying Alaimo's *transcorporeality* to Sodipo's video and publication reveals a complex interrelationship between the human body and the non-human environment—particularly water and the ocean. Alaimo's theory challenges traditional notions that isolate the human body from its material surroundings, proposing instead that our corporeal existence is always in dynamic interaction with the

<sup>51</sup> MacLeod, *Water and the Material Imagination*, n. 114.

environment. Sodipo's trans femininity is the focal point, around which the moving images and flowing texts articulate a broader discourse on memory and the dynamics of representation. Moreover, by knowing through trans feminine body, Sodipo disrupts normative representations of identity and reclaims narratives that have long been marginalized. The viewer is thus encouraged to re-examine their understandings of desire and trauma. In this way, the aesthetics of her work challenge traditional representations by bringing to the fore an embodied, transcorporeal experience—where the distinctions between human and non-human dissolve, and where Blackness emerges as a central force around which narratives of both beauty and trauma are rearticulated. Thus, whilst the video essay was unconvincing for me, the accompanying book offered a more critical and grounded approach to positioning the artist and her practice.

The artist has recently shown *And the Seas Bring Forth New Lands* video essay as part other exhibitions such *The Impasse of Blackness: Interrogating the Possibility of Resolution*, The Block Museum of Art, Evanston, Illinois, US (2021), and *Where the restless Ocean pounds* (2021) at MAC Birmingham - Hexagon Theatre, UK, among others. Sodipo's expansive artistic practice across collage, sculpture, sound, installation and performance is so fertile that the documentation of this particular video essay—featured in various iterations over time—remains lost in comparison. This absence of comprehensive archival records, even within the artist's own bio, complicates efforts to trace all the venues and contexts in which the work has been presented, thereby posing challenges for a detailed curatorial analysis. From a curatorial perspective, the context in which Sodipo's work is exhibited can dramatically shape its interpretation and impact. Different exhibition settings—whether in a private gallery, public museum, or alternative space—provide distinct contexts of narratives that can either constrain or expand the meanings of her work. These varying contexts can alter the way viewers understand the relationship between the trans feminine body, water, and the broader history of slave journey.

Nevertheless, analyzing Sodipo's video essay across these varied contexts reveals how its meaning shifts depending on the curatorial context. In *The Impasse of Blackness: Interrogating the Possibility of Resolution* at The Block Museum of Art (2021, Evanston, Illinois, US), the exhibition is more political.<sup>52</sup> Some of the artists and filmmakers in the exhibition were Ngozi Onwurah and the collective Languid Hands (Imani Robinson and Rabz Lansiquot).<sup>53</sup> Here, the work is positioned within a discourse that emphasizes the centrality of blackness and interrogates systemic violence and racism. The museum in an academic setting, Northwestern University, had a critical engagement around racial politics, urging viewers to consider how the work challenged established representations of Black identity. The fragmented archival presence of the video essay in this context showed its political potency by highlighting the gaps in conventional histories and encouraging an active, reflective response regarding the

<sup>52</sup> "The Impasse of Blackness: Interrogating the Possibility of Resolution," Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, May 9-16, 2021, accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

legacy of Blackness.

Conversely, in the film festival presentation *Where the Restless Ocean Pounds* at MAC Birmingham - Hexagon Theatre (2021, UK), the focus shifts toward the diasporic experience and its intricate relationship with the ocean.<sup>54</sup> The artists featured were Cairo Clarke, Raisa Kabir, alongside Sodipo. In this setting, the video essay was appreciated as an experimental media film that underscores themes of migration and diasporic memory. Here, the open-ended, fragmented nature of the work invited viewers to construct personal interpretations of how the marine environment symbolizes both the pain of displacement from migration. Thus, the museum exhibition emphasized the political imperatives of Blackness and the necessity of challenging hegemonic historical narratives, and the film festival context foregrounded the sensory and experiential dimensions of diaspora through its engagement with the ocean. However, it lacks the iterative or dialogic structures that might allow it to function as a living counter-archive— that gathers, stores, or distributes knowledge through community interaction or sustained engagement. Ultimately, the work is speculative toward archival resistance but does not clearly articulate or embody the mechanisms through which such a counter-archive might be constructed or sustained.

<sup>54</sup> *Where the Restless Ocean Pounds* at MAC Birmingham - Hexagon Theatre (2021, UK), accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

#### 4.6 Conclusion

Both Brathwaite-Shirley's and Sodipo's works invoke the legacy of the transatlantic slave journeys through a distinctly trans lens that disrupts traditional narratives of Black identity and their relations with the ocean. Their art employs immersive storytelling and interactive participation through a deliberate blending of desire with discomfort to create an embodied experience. These works invite viewers to engage actively—navigating a complex terrain where personal and collective narratives intersect, and where uncertainty and speculation are central to the encounter. In drawing from their identities, these artists contribute broadly to *Black Atlantic* by shifting the ocean's perception from a flat, disconnected expanse to a dynamic, embodied space. Here, water is a medium through which histories are remembered. This approach aligns with the idea that Black trans bodies are not an abject force or to be forgotten, but are inscribed with rich, multisensory histories. In conclusion, what I find most important in both artists' work is how they each engage with the archive—using speculation and fabulation to imagine what has been lost or erased. However, I feel that both artists remain uncritical about the digital tools and mediums they use, and also about the politics of identity-based representation. For me, their positions as artists are not always clearly expressed. That said, both works do powerfully challenge the divide between nature and culture, especially through how they work with ideas of the ocean. They use the histories of the transatlantic slave trade and water as a way to guide their approach to Black history, with the ocean as a method of imag-

ining and remembering. Even with some of these shortcomings, I find their work is a massive contribution. There is a strong sense of embodied experience, and their visual languages give viewers something to feel and reflect on. Whilst their critical positions might not always be clear, their use of memory and water in space and aesthetics allows the work to open up important conversations about Black history and identity.



Figure 4.6: *And the Seas Bring Forth New Lands* (2019, video, 9 min), Eburn Sodipo. *Undulating Currents: A Group Show* at Sala Terrena, University Gallery, Heiligenkreuzhof, University of Applied Arts Vienna (2023). Image credits © Maria Belova



Figure 4.7: *And the Seas Bring Forth New Lands* (2019, video, 9 min), Eburn Sodipo. *Undulating Currents: A Group Show* at Sala Terrana, University Gallery, Heiligenkreuzhof, University of Applied Arts Vienna (2023). Film still, screenshot © Mekhala Dave



Figure 4.8: *And the Seas Bring Forth New Lands* (2019, video, 9 min), Eburn Sodipo. *Undulating Currents: A Group Show* at Sala Terrana, University Gallery, Heiligenkreuzhof, University of Applied Arts Vienna (2023). Film still, screenshot © Mekhala Dave

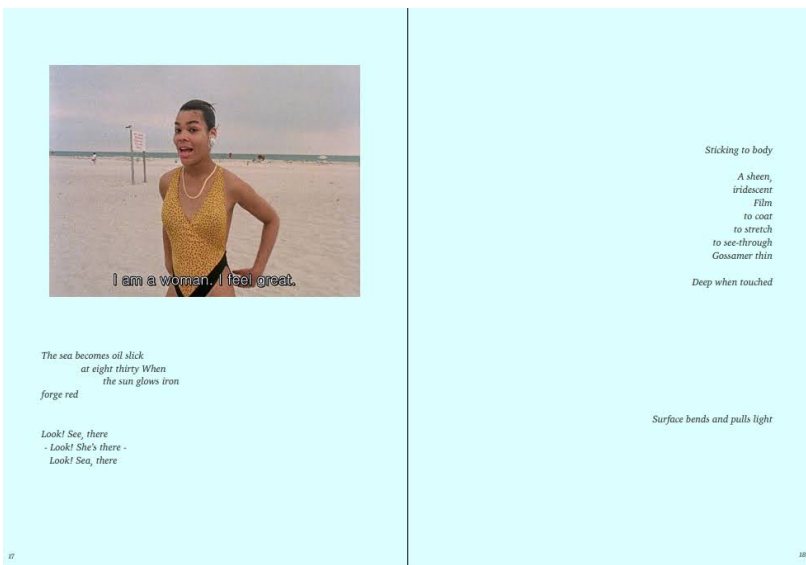


Figure 4.9: *Celeste* (2021), Commissioned by Ray Camara as part of 'rage and desire' for CCA Annex. Supported by Film Hub Scotland, part of the BFI's Film Audience Network, and funded by Screen Scotland and Lottery funding from the BFI



Figure 4.10: *Celeste* (2021), Commissioned by Ray Camara as part of 'rage and desire' for CCA Annex. Supported by Film Hub Scotland, part of the BFI's Film Audience Network, and funded by Screen Scotland and Lottery funding from the BFI

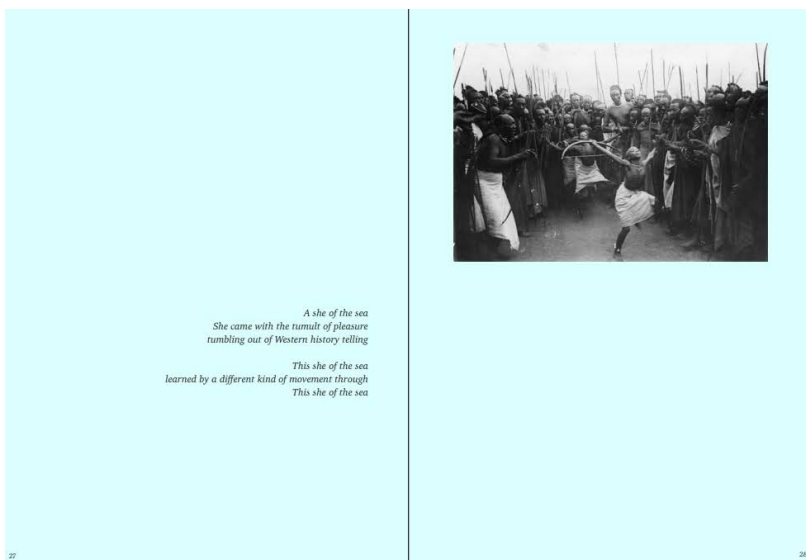


Figure 4.11: *Celeste* (2021), Commissioned by Ray Camara as part of 'rage and desire' for CCA Annex. Supported by Film Hub Scotland, part of the BFI's Film Audience Network, and funded by Screen Scotland and Lottery funding from the BFI

## **Part III**

# **Chapter Three**



# 5

## *Relational Flows: Feminist Care, Labor and Negotiations*

### Contents

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### 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I look at the work of Ava Binta Giallo, Tshepiso Moropa, Tabita Rezaire, and Minia Biabiany. These artists use island and water-based perspectives to explore relations between humans and non-humans, thus, human-ocean relations. In *Undulating Currents*, Giallo's sculptural work *Water's Skin* (2023) with a clay rope from ceiling to floor and beside it, soil with ceramics, glass and rocks on the floor, explored the material and symbolic qualities of water. Rezaire's largely projected video essay *Deep Down Tidal* (2017) revisits the history of the transatlantic slave trade by drawing connections between submerged internet cables and colonial trade routes. Moropa's *Selekana le Modimo wa Noka (Selekana and the Goddess River)* (2023), combining collage and short film on mini iPad next to one another on a horizontal table, connected ancestral Setswana traditions with vernacular and folklore storytelling, and Biabiany's *Musa* (2020), a video essay on a digital screen with looming audio in the exhibition on creolité, highlights how foreign pesticides have impacted local banana plantations and how island communities of Guadeloupe have responded to these environmental harms. A key focus is on human labor that is invisible such as care work. I connect these ideas to

material feminisms, which looks at how through matter bodies and environments are linked.

In this chapter, I also reflect on my curatorial choices. I explore how bringing these artists together in *Undulating Currents* creates new dialogues between their practices, and I expand this by looking at other exhibitions they have been part of. This helps me think about how curating can be a way to support feminist and ecological thinking in art. For the method, I was in conversation with nearly all artists, except for the artist Rezaire.<sup>1</sup>

## 5.2 *Entangled Labors: Care and Precarity*

This chapter is guided by feminist thinking, with a focus on how labor—particularly female and Black labor—is expressed and valued in contemporary art. I aim to show how feminist strategies shape artistic practices, especially in relation to care, domestic work, and other forms of labor that often take place in private or everyday spaces. These forms of labor have historically been overlooked, both in society and in the art world. Whilst many artists have worked with feminist ideas, what stands out in the practices of these artists' is how they also center Black forms of labor. They are inextricably linked, these are not just represented in the content of their work, but also it shows up in how their practices relate to larger economic and social systems that have long made such labor invisible. Contemporary art has often prioritized white, male artists in terms of visibility and recognition.

Thus, there has been considerable debate within the field of contemporary art regarding the lack of representation and visibility of women artists. Early feminist scholars such as Pollock, Linda Nochlin, Lucy Lippard, and some others have long pointed out that only a small number of women artists are widely recognized within art history.<sup>2</sup> From a Marxist perspective, art-making and its production itself are considered “unproductive labor,” similar to domestic labor performed in care work, which does not generate direct capital gains.<sup>3</sup> This type of labor is viewed as part of social reproduction, a term began to be used by feminist theorists around the 1970s-1980s, originating among Italian Marxist feminists and postcolonial feminists which is encompassing domestic tasks, relations with family, caregiving, and reproductive abilities.<sup>4</sup> When applied to artistic labor, this notion shows how art, whilst not entirely autonomous from economic forces of production and consumption, is reluctant to be fully quantified in terms of economic value. What I find even more urgent is the marginalization of Black artists—particularly those who are gendered, queer, and working outside the norms of Western epistemologies. These artists continue to receive fewer opportunities compared to their white, male counterparts. There is a blatant disregard for racialized and gendered people, particularly women and queer, who are subjected to patriarchal systems that enforced exploitative working conditions whilst devaluing their labor and con-

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, Tabita Rezaire was unavailable for interviews. Whilst this absence shaped the scope of the research and its conclusions, it also offered an opportunity to concentrate on the practices of the other artists, with whom direct dialogues were possible. This focus allowed for an in-depth exploration of their work, which has received comparatively less scholarly attention within the broader contemporary art discourse, enriching this chapter and the larger aspect of this research.

<sup>2</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015) and Lucy R. Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Leopoldina Fortunati, “Immaterial Labor and Its Machinization,” *ephemera: theory & politics in organization* 7, no. 1 (2007): 139-157.

<sup>4</sup> Marina Vishmidt, “The Aesthetic Subject and the Politics of Speculative Labor,” in *The Routledge Companion to Art and Politics*, ed. Randy Martin (London: Routledge, 2015).

tributions.<sup>5</sup> The legacy of these extractive systems reverberates in the contemporary art world, where structural inequalities continue to marginalize racialized and gendered artists, creating barriers to their participation and sustainability within the art economy.<sup>6</sup> It also reveals how these artists actively confront the neoliberal structures but often also are too shy or not so outspoken as I have so far gathered across my interviews with the artists. They do not give out a full picture on how the art world continues to negate issues that severely impact their representation of the artworks itself. It is important to note that whilst the artworks and artists themselves do gain recognition, there is a risk in how the art world selectively includes only those artists who meet certain institutional or market-driven thresholds. This exclusion not only limits opportunities but also restricts access to alternative epistemologies—especially those grounded in non-Western, Indigenous, or ancestral relationships to the natural world.

In particular, the artists I focus in this chapter demonstrate this with water, it could be a metaphor or drawn from their ancestral learnings<sup>7</sup>, or even rooted in cultural ties to their lands. The ways in which they work with water differ, and these differences shape how both they and their audiences relate to the natural world. It also shifts the discourse around climate change and its impact, away from the hawk eyes of neoliberal forces of state-industrial cooperation that exploit nature, rather than protect it. For instance, in the artist Rezaire's practices and oeuvre, she clearly draws on ideas of social reproduction and cosmic connectivity. Her artistic approach is in a feminist understanding of creation not in an essentialist sense of "female energy," but rather as a conscious advocacy for the womb as a site of knowledge where she pushes for creation as spiritual and ecological. Rezaire's practice proposes a holistic worldview in which healing regeneration is tied to care-based and sacred practices. Whereas for Biabiany's practice, she leans into her Creole roots and island ways of thinking. She is acutely aware of the political tensions between Guadeloupe and France, and how the ongoing legacy of colonialism has taken shape to her identity and her artistic approach. Her work through banana plantations and pesticides, reflects a strong sense of Island community, which she sees as central to local forms of resistance against these colonial pressures. Whereas Moropa, drawing on Setswana folklore and storytelling in her collage practice, places the importance of such cultural perspectives in image-making, whilst also addressing the broader erasure of Black communities of Bantu origin within South Africa's archival records. Giallo's work engages the metaphorical and symbolic porousness of water to explore how it moves across space and time through her site specific work, inviting us more into affective modes of encounter.

Whilst there are many layers to each of their practices, which I explore further in this chapter, what I want to emphasize here is that these artistic positions should be understood as epistemologies in their own right. They offer valuable ways of knowing and relating

<sup>5</sup> Louise A. Tilly, "Women, Women's History, and the Industrial Revolution," *Social Research* 61, no. 1 (1994): 115.

<sup>6</sup> I have substantiated this argument throughout this research, drawing on interviews conducted with the artists. For detailed references, please consult the appendix of this work. Additionally, although not a comprehensive list, I provide contextual insights into the dynamics within the US, UK, and Europe through the following articles. Maria Marchenko and Hendrik Sonnabend, "Artists' Labour Market and Gender: Evidence from German Visual Artists," WU Vienna University of Economics and Business, Department of Economics Working Paper No. 307 (2020): 1, accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#)) See Niama Safia Sandy, "Black Artists and Gallerists on What a More Inclusive Art World Would Look Like," *Artsy*, July 22, 2020, accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#)) See also Liv Little, "Brown Girls in the Art World," *BRICKS Magazine*, March 15, 2018, accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>7</sup> Ancestral word can be a big term, I use this term specifically from the lens of each artist's ancestry relating to their African roots and also the way in which they reflect on them in their artistic practices.

to the ocean through water logic and island perspectives, and deserve greater recognition in curatorial discourse as well. By creating more opportunities for artists from Moropa to Giallo, Biabiany and Rezaire to be in dialogue with one another in exhibition spaces, it also can impact how audiences diversely engage with their work. Such exchanges not only enrich the viewing experience but also allow contemporary art discourse to expand incorporating more of such feminist strategies and decolonial critique to bring out more and diverse epistemic interventions around ontologies of the ocean which are necessary to this study. Fundamentally, I argue that these artists make visible forms of care that are invisible—both in the neoliberal exploitation of natural resources and, by extension, in the contemporary art world. Through their practices, care emerges as a method—attending to space, time and community in ways for reciprocal and embodied forms of labour. Whilst these strategies are framed as resistance—drawing on Black feminist traditions of healing, emotional labor—they also risk being appropriated within institutional contexts that extract value from such narratives, exposing the uneasy balance between radical intent and systemic co-optation.

Here, I draw on Dimitrakaki's critique to suggest that contemporary art discourse must become more self-aware—recognizing its own contradictions—and take an active role in addressing them.<sup>8</sup> Dimitrakaki states that capitalism can be a labyrinth in which it functions as an economic system and a social relation, and continues to assert its hegemony through mechanisms like state violence, global systems that decide whose lives matter, and by turning human bodies and nature into things that can be bought and sold.<sup>9</sup> As she observes, "the commodification of everything is now acceptable," demonstrating how the logic of (self-)commodification infiltrates the social imaginary, particularly in the compartmentalization and valorization of reproductive systems, including the uterus.<sup>10</sup> Despite feminism's historical links with Marxist views, Dimitrakaki critiques the absence of a unified Marxist feminist methodology in fields like art history and cultural theory, arguing that this gap has constrained how art and culture connect with social movements and confront capital's "hard and soft power over cultural life."<sup>11</sup> She emphasizes that feminism and Marxism are evolving critical tools that must adapt to the shifting realities of capitalism. As she writes, "Understanding contemporary capitalism as opposed to that of the 1970s or the late 19th century is a complex, collective study," that requires focus on strategy, especially under what she identifies as "the new spirit of capitalism," where the flexibility of labor is co-opted as a desirable condition.<sup>12</sup> This has also been discussed by the late Maria Vishmidt's earlier reflections on social reproduction which placed a nuanced critique and expansion of contemporary social reproduction theory, which I find relevant to draw into discussion here.<sup>13</sup> She stated how this theory builds upon the foundational work of crucial thinkers like feminist scholars Lise Vogel and Silvia Federici whilst attempting to address the critiques of second-wave feminism and

<sup>8</sup> Angela Dimitrakaki, "Feminism and Marxism: Questions on the Field of Struggle," ΚΡΙΣΗ - Εξαμηνιαία Επιστημονική Επιθεώρηση / ΚΡΙΣΙ - Biannual Scientific Review 13, no. 1 (2023): 9.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Here, Dimitrakaki builds on Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics and Michel Foucault's notion of biopower to argue that sovereign power dictates the life and death of individuals. This perspective provides a critical framework for analyzing systems of oppression, violence, and structural inequality. It reveals how specific populations, particularly those marginalized along gendered and racialized lines, are dehumanized and rendered expendable within political, economic, and social systems.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 4-13.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 4-13.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Marina Vishmidt, "The Aesthetic Subject and the Politics of Speculative Labor," in *The Routledge Companion to Art and Politics*, ed. Randy Martin (London: Routledge, 2015), 143.

called for a unified theory.<sup>14</sup> Vishmidt pointed out that contemporary social reproduction theory aspires toward a “more materialist form of intersectionality,” which situates gender, racialization, and other forms of subordination within a totalizing understanding of capitalist social relations.<sup>15</sup>

As such, Dimitrakaki also draws parallels between historical feminist campaigns, such as *Wages for Housework*, and contemporary calls for basic income, reflecting on how post-Covid capitalism has amplified precarity through a global “cost of living crisis” and escalating anti-strike and anti-protest legislation.<sup>16</sup> She highlights the alarming rise in labor repression, noting, “Countries violating the right to strike increased from 63% of countries in 2014 to 87% in 2023,” underscoring the erosion of labor rights under neoliberal governance<sup>17</sup>. What Dimitrakaki is saying is that the issue of labor—which is framed as a matter of workers’ rights (which can also be extended to care or social work)—must also be understood in relation to artists’ rights, especially for artists who are non-White and non-European. I am not stating that care or social work is the same as an artists’ from marginalized backgrounds and their work but they are similarly treated in terms of their labor itself being invisible. In the context of the neoliberal art world, there is a tendency to tokenize or aestheticize decolonial and feminist practices, celebrating their visual or political appeal without addressing the structural conditions that shape their production. This is particularly problematic because it overlooks the cultural labor these artists perform—labor that includes preserving ancestral knowledge, navigating identity politics, working across languages and geographies, and often educating institutions and audiences through their work. It involves invisible effort: negotiating with institutions, translating cultural experiences for Western audiences, and producing work under precarious or under-resourced conditions. When this labor is unacknowledged, the art world replicates the very colonial and capitalist logics it claims to critique.

In another article, Vishmidt echoed Dimitrakaki’s concerns, Vishmidt examined how artistic production has been increasingly absorbed into the capitalist system.<sup>18</sup> She discussed how art has been integrated into the industrialized circuits of markets, fairs, biennials, urban branding, education, and social services, and how these processes bring art under capital’s control.<sup>19</sup> Vishmidt explained that this reflects a larger trend where art is annexed by ‘culture,’ and ‘culture’ is further absorbed into the economy.<sup>20</sup> She described this as the “seizure” of previously untouched areas of personal and social life by capitalist processes of profit-making.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, she noted how cultural consumption plays a role in the socialization of capital, turning cultural practices into commodities and tools for generating and circulating profit.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, when artists engage with feminist ideologies of care work, it is a direct and critical response to the neoliberal art world’s failure to acknowledge the value of such labor. Through their artistic practices, the framing of care

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Supra at 268.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 6

<sup>18</sup> Marina. Vishmidt and Zoe Sutherland, “Social Reproduction: New Questions for the Gender, Affect, and Substance of Value,” in *The New Feminist Literary Studies*, ed. Jennifer Cooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 143.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

becomes a political act: it resists the commodification and erasure of emotional, communal, and other embodied forms of labor that the art system can either ignore or at times even glorify without improving the structural conditions of such artists. In this way, care work is used to challenge the extractive logic of contemporary cultural production. Since patriarchal structures<sup>23</sup> further exacerbate these inequalities, as hidden or invisible labor—particularly in private or domestic spaces—it limits equal opportunities for many artists to create their work.<sup>24</sup> With this in mind, I understand the practices of artists like Giallo, Moropa, Rezaire, and Biabiany as engaged in such labor. When they draw on care, spirituality, ancestral knowledge, or community as central elements of their work, they are not only engaging with these themes aesthetically—they are using resistance to the structural exclusions of the neoliberal art world. Even when not explicitly framed in political terms, the political stakes of their practices are, to me, clearly present. This is precisely why I have chosen to focus on them in this thesis and through my curatorial work in *Undulating Currents*.

Vishmidt also has cautioned: She is reluctant to fully embrace the idea of labor as inherently positive or empowering, even when it includes reproductive or care work.<sup>25</sup> Whilst she acknowledged that labor creates not just economic value but society itself, she warns that treating reproductive labor as politically valuable simply because it is devalued can obscure important distinctions, such as whether it is socially validated by wages.<sup>26</sup> She argues that by valorizing labor associated with reproduction—such as caregiving, nurturing, and other domestic work—just because it is historically undervalued, there is a risk of affirming these activities without questioning the oppressive systems that exploit them. In doing so, reproductive labor can be romanticized as inherently good or empowering, whilst its role within capitalism’s exploitative structures goes unchallenged. She was also critical of how “care” has been reduced to consumerist ideas like self-care, which she sees as masking deeper exploitation and structural violence under capitalism.<sup>27</sup>

These narratives, she argued, can disguise the deeper inequalities and systemic violence at play, where care work remains undervalued and disproportionately assigned to women and marginalized groups. Rather than challenging capitalism’s extraction of value from these forms of labor, such narratives risk normalizing or even celebrating them which is inherently exploitative. Thus, Vishmidt cautioned against romanticizing labor and care within a system that remains fundamentally destructive and exploitative.<sup>28</sup> I also take Vishmidt’s caution against over-feminization of labor, particularly in how care is framed. In line with this, I argue that care should not be idealized as a virtuous, selfless act, but rather understood as a form of reciprocal relation—a dynamic of give and take that resists individualist and neoliberal notions of self-reliance. This is especially important within the context of contemporary art and art institutions, where care is too often externalized as the responsibility of

<sup>23</sup> Supra at 268. Dimitrakaki provides an insightful overview of patriarchy, framing it as a system of power relations rooted in gender hierarchies that sustain and perpetuate social, political, and economic inequalities. Drawing loosely from her analysis, patriarchy can be understood as a structural framework that privileges masculinity and systematically marginalizes femininity and other gender identities. It intersects with other systems of oppression, such as capitalism and colonialism, to shape societal dynamics, control resources, and regulate labor—both material and immaterial. Patriarchy operates across cultural and historical contexts, reinforcing gendered divisions of power and sustaining mechanisms of domination and exploitation.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Supra at 273.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

racialized and gendered artists.

It is problematic that such artists are frequently expected to perform the labor of educating others about decoloniality and racial, systemic injustice, simply because their practices engage with these themes. The burden placed on them is not only pedagogical but also emotional and structural within a system that continues to marginalize their work whilst extracting from their narratives. This is particularly evident in the practices of artists like Giallo who faces tokenism and structural inequity in Austria, Biabiany, working from Guadeloupe; Tshepiso Moropa, based in South Africa; and Rezaire, who all locate their work in either working with their bodies, and also digitally across geographies tied to the Global South and their ancestral knowledge. These artists are not just responding to localised socio-political conditions, but also to the uneven global consequences of climate collapse from postcolonial societies. Their work should not be framed as a service to the art world's need for "inclusion" or "diversity," but rather as autonomous artistic and political positions that deserve to be supported without being instrumentalized.

### 5.3 *Revisiting Material Feminisms*

For artists with feminist strategies of care, material feminisms offer a frame as it is essential for interpreting the work of the artists in this chapter. By applying the lens of material feminisms, we can better understand how this theory helps illuminate the invisible processes behind the work of relations and material conditions that influence how these artworks come into being. I believe it is important to see matter as something active and meaningful. For many gendered and racialised artists, the materials they use are connected to personal and political histories. Paying attention to this helps us understand their work as addressing local folklore, rituals or communal practices, and textures of the body or spaces that people and things move through, which is closely connected to care and labour. This also helps when curating the artists' positions because it helps create space for these deeper layers to be felt in how their work is presented to the viewers. It also allows us to recognize the agency of non-human forces—like water, or islands, within decolonial practices for human-ocean relations.

Material feminisms, particularly as explored by feminist theorists and scholars, invokes an understanding—though fragmented—that all things are influenced by matter and the material world we inhabit. Whilst the contributions within this field are diverse from the 1990s, leading to various nuances and interpretations, there remains a shared understanding among scholars that matter possesses vitality.<sup>29</sup> It is important to clarify what we mean by matter. Although I have not found a simple definition for it, a useful insight is, "new materialist theory grapples with the existence of things and their agency in the material world, beyond human perception."<sup>30</sup> In recent years, growing interest in the US and Europe, *Material Feminisms*

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Cornelia Möser, "Materialism, Matter, Matrix, and Mater: Contesting Notions in Feminist and Gender Studies," in *Materialism and Politics*, ed. by Bernardo Bianchi, Emilie Filion-Donato, Marlon Miguel, and yşe Yuva, *Cultural Inquiry* 20 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2021), 203. Accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

by Alaimo and Hekman (2008) has been serving as a central point of reference.<sup>31</sup>

This framing helps us to consider the power of matter—not as a passive substrate but as an active, restless agent shaping our lives and theories. It is this massive materiality that demands attention, as it is about the entangled relationships between human and non-human forces and the natural world. Thus, matter—its agency, its role in shaping human and non-human relations, and its entanglement with socio-political structures—requires not only a theoretical shift but also a re-evaluation of our daily to everyday practices in how we live our lives. Furthermore, in *Material Feminisms*, there is a concerted effort to reframe the relationship between nature and the body. The editors critique the limitations of postmodern feminism’s understanding of materiality whilst acknowledging its indebtedness to the linguistic turn.<sup>32</sup> This turn—centered on the role of language in shaping our relations to the world—prompted valuable insights but overlooked the material and embodied dimensions of existence.<sup>33</sup> Alaimo and Hekman propose an expansive perspective, arguing that theories of materiality are central to the evolution of feminist thought. Their methodology is crossdisciplinary, addressing historical trajectories in which feminist theories distanced themselves from nature.<sup>34</sup> This retreat sought to sever the long association between women and the “natural world”—an association that undergirded essentialist and misogynistic paradigms.<sup>35</sup> However, Alaimo and Hekman caution that such distancing risks reasserting the very binaries feminism aims to dismantle:

“The more feminist theories distance themselves from ‘nature,’ the more that very ‘nature’ is implicitly or explicitly reconfirmed as the treacherous quicksand of misogyny”<sup>36</sup>. To counteract this, they advocate for a reconceptualization of nature—as agentic and relational<sup>37</sup>. Nature, they argue, interacts with human and nonhuman worlds in tangible, consequential ways. Alaimo reinforces this point: “Rather than perpetuate the nature/culture dualism, which imagines nature to be the inert ground for the exploits of Man, we must reconceptualize nature itself. Nature can no longer be imagined as a pliable resource for industrial production or social construction. Nature is agentic—it acts, and those actions have consequences for both the human and nonhuman world”.<sup>38</sup>

This insistence on a shared, dynamic world—where nature and bodies interact—marks a vital intervention. It amplifies concerns surrounding marginalized women and racialized groups, positioning their experiences within larger ecological and material entanglements. Alaimo’s vision of *transcorporeality*, wherein human bodies are porous and interwoven with environmental forces, aligns with this broader imperative to confront the systemic exclusions perpetuated by dualistic thinking.

Thus, with Alaimo and Heckman, there is a clear erasing of nature/culture binaries, I argue. This is pivotal to how I frame my broader argument: that cultural narratives are inseparable from the

<sup>31</sup> Alaimo and Hekman, *Material Feminisms* (see Introduction, n. 108). Accessed February 25, 2024 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Alaimo and Hekman, “Introduction: Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory,” in *Material Feminisms*, ed. by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 1. Accessed February 8 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Alaimo, *Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature*, 2. (see Prologue, n. 55) Accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

ontology of the ocean. It is therefore important to incorporate it to forming human–ocean relations, rather than relying solely on legal systems and scientific, data-driven approaches both of which are dictated by a distant, terrestrial bias. Secondly, this also applies to my curatorial approach, where the positions of Black artists in this chapter clearly demonstrate the entanglement of nature and culture, drawing from their practices in water and island perspectives. To deepen these arguments, Lauren B. Wagner’s viscosity is helpful for further knowing matter and materiality.<sup>39</sup> As explained by Wagner, the term viscosity, in Newtonian physics, refers to a fluid’s resistance to movement—where oil, for example, sticks together and flows slowly, whilst water flows more freely.<sup>40</sup>

This understanding also aligns with Nancy Tuana’s concept of viscous porosity, where she examines hurricanes as political and material phenomena, from climate crises.<sup>41</sup> Tuana dismantles the notion of natural disasters as isolated events, revealing instead the continuity between atmospheric systems and human bodies.<sup>42</sup> This means that there is a constant exchange between our physical forms and the environment, where both material (like water or air) and symbolic (like cultural meanings) elements affect more marginalised, racial communities by “seeing through the eyes of a Category Four hurricane”<sup>43</sup>. I argue that the concepts of viscosity and porosity help to frame for the artists in this chapter, whose positions range from histories of violence—from the transatlantic slave trade to contemporary submerged cable infrastructures that continue harm on ocean ecology, to how monocultural plantation systems on islands have impacted women’s reproductive health in Guadeloupe, and how ancestral Setswana folklores in South Africa offer alternative, counter-archival understandings of water, challenging erasures in archival process and overall, water, in this context, becomes both material and metaphor, a connective thread through which these divergent yet entangled positions can be understood, through their curatorial positioning with my exhibition itself.

#### 5.4 For women, then, poetry is not a luxury<sup>44</sup>

Rezaire’s video essay *Deep Down Tidal* (2017) (HD video, 19 minutes) was part of *Undulating Currents* (2023) (fig. 5.1). In *Undulating Currents*, the video essay was projected onto the far end of an expansive white wall, running on a continuous loop. A bench was positioned before the projection, accompanied by pairs of headphones for audio. The iterations of this video essay is well documented by the artist’s studio, it travelled from its first iteration from Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg (fig. 5.4) to over 50+ cities including some recently in Fortaleza, Lausanne, Glasgow, Seoul, and others. These have been shown ranging across museums, film festivals, biennales, alternative off spaces or commercial galleries. It is evident that the reception of this video essay has been widely received and has gained steady popularity over the years.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Lauren B. Wagner, “Viscosity,” in *New Materialism Almanac* (Open Humanities Press, 2018), accessed February 8 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Nancy Tuana, “Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina,” in *Material Feminisms*, ed. by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 188–213.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>44</sup> Invoking Audre Lorde’s powerful 1977 work, *Poetry Is Not a Luxury*, serves as a powerful touchstone for this chapter. Her evocative voice holds space for the themes explored here, aligning with the remarkable practices and thought-provoking ideas presented by the artists under discussion. Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” in *Chrysalis: A Magazine of Female Culture* (1977), accessed December 18, 2024, (cf. [link](#))

<sup>45</sup> Her studio presented me with the iterations of her videos in an email exchange. 2024.



Figure 5.1: This view of *Deep Down Tidal* (2017), 19 minute HD video by the artist Tabita Rezaire is projected onto a blank white wall with two curatorial texts beneath the projection at the far end of the gallery. There is a bench and pairs of headphones provided at *Undulating Currents: A Group Show*, Sala Terrena of University Gallery Heiligenkreuzhof, Vienna. November - December 2023. Photograph by © Brooklyn J. Pakathi

In *Deep Down Tidal*, I argue that Rezaire subverts dominant ocean ontologies, from terrestrial and extractive bias. Firstly, her video essay disrupts these by flooding the screen with oceanic imagery—its waves and underwater water-worlds, using these also layered with Black cultural references, including pop culture icons and African mythic healer-dancers. With African water deities and underwater mythologies, she retrieves the sea as sacred. Secondly, Rezaire critiques the colonial conquest of the ocean by exposing how past and present forms of extraction are entangled. She draws a clear parallel between the transatlantic slave trade and today’s submerged fiber-optic cables, both of which map colonial infrastructures onto the ocean floor. Her work exposes how the sourcing and maintenance of digital networks are entangled with histories of violence of enslaved people and environmental degradation. In one powerful still (fig. 5.3), the phrase “Cables are spaces where labor, knowledge, and capital are sunk into sea” appears, making visible how the internet’s global infrastructure is materially sustained by the ocean. Through maps of slave trade routes overlaid with images of fiber-optic networks, shipping vessels, and the seabed, she reveals how the same routes once used to traffic enslaved bodies now serve to transmit data and capital—suggesting that the ocean continues to be exploited. Therefore, Rezaire’s strategy is explicitly decolonial. Rezaire builds on these ideas to explore “decolonial healing” and “spiritual technologies”, drawing on the work of the thinker and scholar Quijano.<sup>46</sup>

I argue Rezaire’s work as decolonial because she exposes the colonial routes of Black bodies within maritime space, whilst also linking these histories to present-day environmental harm to the sea. This critique is carried out through digital means—specifically the video essay—which uses internet aesthetics to suggest that the internet itself can become a space for decolonisation. I see this as closely aligned with material feminist approaches, which reject binary divi-

<sup>46</sup> Tabita Rezaire, “Decolonial Healing: In Defense of Spiritual Technologies,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Media and Migration*, eds. K. Smets et al. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2019), 29.



Figure 5.2: The book *Womb Consciousness* (2023) by the artist Tabita Rezaire on a metallic shelf in the exhibition *Undulating Currents: A Group Show*, Sala Terrena of University Gallery Heiligenkreuzhof, Vienna. November - December 2023. Image credits © Brooklyn J. Pakathi



Figure 5.3: *Deep Down Tidal* (2017), 19 minute HD video by the artist Tabita Rezaire. Stills as screenshot © Mekhala Dave



Figure 5.4: *Deep Down Tidal* (2017), video essay by the artist Tabita Rezaire is installed on a wide HD curved screen with two sculptures on the floor before the wide screen at the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg (2017). Image credits © Tabita Rezaire and Goodman Gallery

sions, that the past harm of Black slaves is an ongoing extraction and degradation of the ocean. This temporality is sticky and fluid, carried through water as a connecting thread between past and present, culture and nature. One of the unique aspects of Rezaire's work is how she connects digital technology with ancestral African spiritual and sacred traditions. Through her video, she fills this gap by showing that ancestral knowledge can inform how we relate to digital systems, suggesting that these technologies can hold spiritual and cultural meaning, not just technical function.

Through her wider practice beyond *Deep Down Tidal*, it is clear that Rezaire is engaging with feminist ideas of care across her other video installations such as *Peaceful Warrior* (2015) in HD video, iPad, amethyst geode<sup>47</sup> or *Sugar Walls Teardom* (2016) with gynaecological chair, mechanical arm and HD video<sup>48</sup> and among others. Her book publication *Womb Consciousness* (2022) (fig. 5.2) as well. In these projects, she critiques the Western medical and scientific treatment of the female body, history of gynaecology where enslaved women were subject to scientific experiments and sexual abuse in the 19th century, or that as she draws from ancient Egyptian Kemetic yoga based on spiritual practices of that time to focus on notions of healing.<sup>49</sup> Such projects arguably show Rezaire's central practice is of care as a reciprocal relation—between Black communities and their ancestral knowledge to the natural world. This echoes her concept of *womb ecology*.<sup>50</sup> The womb is not limited to its biological role as a reproductive organ, it's rather a creation for all life forms. For Rezaire, childbirth is not solely a corporeal event but also a spiritual and cosmic phenomenon that defies easy articulation yet remains in the physical reality of birthing bodies.<sup>51</sup> She situates the labor of carrying and delivering life as both a material and metaphysical process—a form of female labor that has long been undervalued and considered to be cryptic and invisible within patriarchal and colonial systems. She describes the microbiome as “the mother's direct bacteriological terrain” and frames it as a crucial gift of inheritance.<sup>52</sup> This terrain, as she describes, connects the body's internal ecology to wider systems of ecology, including digestion, cognition, and even environmental interactions.

I see strengths in Rezaire's practices of care but also limitations. Although not in *Deep Down Tidal*, Rezaire often uses her body in her other video essays I mentioned above, and at first glance, it may seem like a form of self-portraiture. However, she has challenged this idea that her body is not used to represent herself, but rather as a medium to transmit knowledge.<sup>53</sup> This way, she shifts focus away from individual expression and toward a relational way of working. This approach supports her wider critique of extractive and colonial systems of knowledge, where she incorporates African ancestral knowledge. Whilst the use of the artist's body as a medium is not new in contemporary art, seen in the artist's Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas Series* (1973-1980) in Iowa, US and Mexico, described as ‘mini oceans,’ artist Heidi Bucher's *Bodyshells* (1972), wearable sculptural

<sup>47</sup> Tabita Rezaire, *Peaceful Warrior*, 2015, HD video, iPad, amethyst geode, Goodman Gallery, accessed February 28, 2025, (cf. [link](#))

<sup>48</sup> Tabita Rezaire, *Sugar Walls Teardom*, 2016, Gynaecological chair, mechanical arm and HD video, Goodman Gallery, accessed February 28, 2025, (cf. [link](#))

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Tabita Rezaire, interview by Keely Shinnars, “Fighting for Love: An Interview of New Media Artist, Young Polemicist and Kemetic Yogi Tabita Rezaire,” *Autre*, March 20, 2017, (cf. [link](#))

fragments, which exemplify early connections to the ocean and artist Agnes Denes's *Wheatfield—A Confrontation* (1982) to land—Rezaire's approach carries a distinctiveness.<sup>54</sup> Whilst Rezaire has distanced her appearances within her works from the genre of self-portraiture, I would argue otherwise. Although Rezaire does not intervene directly into nature itself, it is a deliberate act as she incorporates her body within the digital medium as a way to respond to the historical omission and misrepresentation of Black people—especially Black women and queer individuals—in visual and technological culture. Her presence in the work, then, is not only about transmitting knowledge, as she has framed it, I argue that it performs a necessary form of care by directly confronting the systemic erasures and distortions that have long shaped the portrayal of Black bodies. By placing herself within these digital spaces, it feels more personal and a political way too. The artist has, at times, acknowledged the toll her work takes on her, describing the condition of her body as harsh—a recognition that she has been carrying the weight of how capitalism and colonialism have marked and interfered with the terrain of her skin.<sup>55</sup> This admission reveals the embodied strain of making work that grapples with such systemic violence.

Yet, as Vishmidt has spoken about acts of self-care, particularly when performed by racialised and gendered artists can become a slippery slope. It is precisely this contradiction that Rezaire's work confronts. I argue that it should not fall on artists like Rezaire to carry this burden alone. Her work makes visible the conditions of that burden—the overexposure and the feminisation of care. Dimitrakaki and others argue that when artists, especially feminised or racialised, create works centered on care, it endangers on becoming so aestheticised that it detaches from its political and material roots.<sup>56</sup> Further, Dimitrakaki has argued, the global art economy has the capacity to absorb feminist and anti-colonial gestures as cultural capital. Care, in this form, should not place the onus on Rezaire to explicitly name or perform the excess of Black flesh, because that excess is already hypervisible, already overdetermined by the histories of racial violence and spectacle. But by shifting how it is mediated. Her use of the digital, as a space of transmission and spiritual alignment, allows her to refract the body, to displace its readability as either purely symbolic or representational. In doing so, she troubles the terms through which care and flesh are expected to operate in the visual field. In this way, the excess of Black flesh is not something she is required to *pinpoint*, perform to resolve something. Rezaire's aesthetic strategies thus underscore what Sharpe has described as the tension between visibility and *wake work*, to inhabit the space of representation without being consumed by it.

Therefore, when exhibited in global art spaces, it risks being decontextualized and framed through a Western gaze that commodifies such aesthetic strategies of care. In this sense, the radical potential of care in her work can be aestheticized or even romanticized especially when institutions present it as a spectacle of "otherness" or spiritu-

<sup>54</sup> Supra at 102.

<sup>55</sup> Laura Cocciolillo, "The Skin as Interface: Three Women Artists and the Digital Touch," art-frame, February 7, 2025, accessed on February 14 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>56</sup> Supra at 268.

ality without knowing its political or cultural depth. Furthermore, whilst her references to African cosmologies position her within a transhistorical Black imaginary, there is a danger that this assemblage flattens the specificities of these traditions, turning them into aesthetic symbols rather than lived, situated knowledge. The question remains: Can care still be a meaningful act if it's shown and circulated through the same systems it's trying to challenge?

Thus, in Marxist terms, surplus value is the profit made by capitalists from the unpaid labor of workers. When applied to the art world, it is how artworks and the identities or experiences they represent generate profit or institutional capital beyond their material form. And yet, it is impossible to overlook the critical insights Rezaire does to subvert terrestrial biases within dominant ontologies of the sea. Her work effectively exposes extractivism across temporal scales—from the histories of the transatlantic slave trade to the contemporary exploitation of data infrastructures on the ocean floor. However, I argue that her practice also risks becoming a surplus value, where Black female and queer bodies and histories are not only represented but recirculated within the global art economy. In this context, her critique can be absorbed by art systems that capitalize on the aesthetic of resistance without truly enacting structural change, caught in such contradictory crossfires.

### 5.5 *Water's Skin*

Giallo's *Water's Skin*, first conceived as her diploma project in the summer of 2023<sup>57</sup>, it became a pivotal work in the exhibition *Undulating Currents*. As a recent graduate, Giallo's practice is a site-specific installation. Located in a far corner of the gallery, *Water's Skin* in (fig. 5.5), the installation is composed of two fragmented shapes of scattered sand on a black carpeted floor, flanked by two large rocks placed centrally. A ceramic form occupies the front left of the space, whilst a luminous, uneven glass sculpture is positioned toward the back. In (fig. 5.6), a clay rope is suspended tautly between the ceiling and the floor, bridging the architectural elements of the room with a raw, tactile presence. The installation itself was realized through a collaborative curatorial effort, guided by instructions from the artist, who was engaged in another field project at the time. Our curatorial team carefully poured the sand into fragmented shapes and positioned the sculptural components to preserve the intended balance and cohesion of the work. The clay rope was affixed with nails driven into the ceiling and floor, creating a deliberate tension that mirrored the fragility and resilience of the materials used. Accompanying the installation, Giallo's publication, *Water's Skin*, seen in (fig. 5.7), was displayed alongside other books. Just as a comparison to Giallo's work in *Undulating Currents*, one can also contrast her site-specific of similar materials in her diploma project at the University premises and how it connects to her site-specific approach. The materials she uses whilst appearing similar across her works changes depending

<sup>57</sup> Ava Binta Giallo, "Water's Skin," *Die Angewandte*, accessed December 18, 2024, (cf. [link](#))



Figure 5.5: *Water's Skin* (2023) by the artist Ava Binta Giallo at the far end of the gallery in the exhibition *Undulating Currents: A Group Show*, Sala Terrena of University Gallery Heiligenkreuzhof, Vienna. November - December 2023. Image credits © Brooklyn J. Pakathi



Figure 5.6: *Water's Skin* (2023) by the artist Ava Binta Giallo at the far end of the gallery in the exhibition *Undulating Currents: A Group Show*, Sala Terrena of University Gallery Heiligenkreuzhof, Vienna. November - December 2023. Image credits © Brooklyn J. Pakathi



Figure 5.7: *Water's Skin* (2023), a book publication by the artist Ava Binta Giallo. Image credits © Ava Binta Giallo

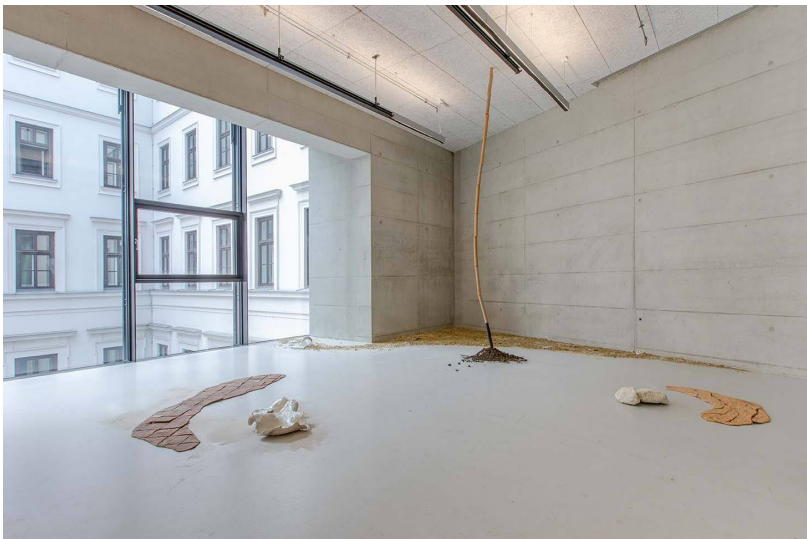


Figure 5.8: *Water's Skin* (2023) by artist Ava Binta Giallo at University Gallery, Vordere Zollamstraße 7, Vienna. Image credits © Ava Binta Giallo & Werkstätte digitale Fotografie der Universität für angewandte Kunst Wien

on the space they inhabit. As seen in (fig. 5.8), the installation shifts to meet the demands of the space, with the clay rope, sand, soil glass and ceramics, adapting in ways that feel both organic and deliberate.

Giallo's site-specific is contexted through *One Place at a Time*.<sup>58</sup> Miwon Kwon's rethinking of site-specificity encourages us to see the "site" not just as a physical place but as a larger set of conditions of institutions from economic systems to power dynamics that inform the work.<sup>59</sup> This expanded idea means that the location of the artwork is no longer just the gallery or landscape but also the forces and contexts that surround and define it. Kwon notes that this shift leads to works that resist conventional ideas of visual appeal or permanence. Thus, site-specific art might take the form of temporary installations that emphasize ideas and experiences.<sup>60</sup> Site-specific works engage with the social and political environments in which they are situated. This rejects traditional aesthetic norms, prioritizing critical inquiry and conceptual depth over visual or material permanence; for instance, such works might function as provocations—informing, exposing, or challenging the systems that shape how we perceive and interact with art.<sup>61</sup> By adopting strategies like temporality, performance, or even acts of collaboration, these works invite audiences to consider their role not as passive observers but as participants in a broader conversation about space and meaning.<sup>62</sup>

Site-specific art, in this sense, is no longer about anchoring a piece to a place but about creating a process, an encounter, or a dialogue that cannot be replicated elsewhere.<sup>63</sup> The site becomes a dynamic field of tension where histories and material realities intersect. Kwon's ideas also highlight the inherently unstable and impermanent nature of site-specific art. This impermanence is not a limitation but a strength, allowing such works to resist commodification and the demands of the art market.<sup>64</sup> By focusing on process over objecthood, site-specific art opens up new possibilities for understanding art as a verb—a set of actions and interactions—rather than a fixed noun.<sup>65</sup> This shift transforms the artwork from something static and collectible into something ephemeral and thought-provoking, an event that exists in the moment and lingers in memory.<sup>66</sup> Reflecting on these ideas, it challenges us to think beyond the boundaries of the gallery or museum and to consider how art engages with the systems and structures that shape our world.<sup>67</sup>

In this way, Kwon pushes me to reconsider the role of the curator as well. Curating site-specific art is facilitating relationships—between the site and the audience. It requires an attentiveness to the specificities of context and an openness to the unpredictable dynamics that emerge when art intersects with the world around it. This approach transforms the act of curating into a collaborative and critical practice, that embraces the complexity and impermanence of the site as an integral part of the work itself.

Further, I find it interesting that even as I touched the materials in the exhibition space of *Undulating Currents* whilst installing it, they seemed to pulse beneath my fingertips, as if alive with their

<sup>58</sup> Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002)

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 11-33.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 11-33.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 11-24.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 11-24.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

own agency. This tactile experience echoed what Giallo had shared with me—that her work possesses an intuitive quality. This intuition is not only hers as an artist but also something the materials themselves seem to hold, guiding the viewer—or in this case, the toucher—through a sensory dialogue. Touch, as I came to realize, is deeply human, and in this context, it becomes something else. It creates a reciprocal interaction between the human and the material, where each leaves a mark on the other, shaping and being shaped in turn. What stood out to me most were the signs of touch within the materials—the wrinkles, folds, and imperfections that showed moments of contact, possibly from Giallo or others during the making of the work. These marks reveal an intimate connection between human and material, shaped by labor. In reflecting on this, Alaimo asserts that materials are “variously, material-semiotic, inter-corporeal, performative, agential, even literate”.<sup>68</sup> Materials, like humans, are entangled with their natural and constructed environments, and their inability to be fully mastered becomes a form of meaning-making. For me, this process reflects feminist practices, where the effort and physical act of creating are given importance. Touch is active; it takes intention and energy, leaving behind traces that show the presence of both the maker and the material. This interaction turns the material into something more—evidence of the labor and care that shaped it.

These moments of chance and process reflect Alaimo’s *transcorporeality*, where human and non-human forces come together, influencing one another.<sup>69</sup> For example, working with natural materials, like clay, means doing things by hand—mixing, kneading. In my experience with it, these actions create a strong connection to the material. The repeated movements of kneading and molding create a rhythm, like having a closeness with the material. Giallo’s approach to making reflects something similar. In her work, the materials she uses—like sand, soil, rocks and clay—become active in the process. She collaborates with them, allowing their natural qualities to shape the outcome. Both processes emphasize patience and an intimate connection that feels personal. In this way, the marks in Giallo’s work embody a feminist approach to labor and care, connecting her practice to important discussions about connection and the ethical relations between people and the materials they work with. Alaimo’s *transcorporeality* emerges here in a nuanced way. In this case, the interactions between human and material—their mutual shaping and the traces they leave—echo Alaimo’s emphasis on the intertwining of human and non-human agencies.

Giallo explained that whilst water is an important part of her work, either directly or indirectly, it’s not the sole focus. Her practice, she shared, centres on “all life-giving sources,” including “water for sure, or the ocean, or the soil, or the womb—on all birthing people, women, the land, the sky, the wind—everything that holds us, that nurtures us.”<sup>70</sup> For her, it is about creating a practice that feels alive, describing it as “a fertile practice that nurtures in some way.”<sup>71</sup> Giallo also reflected on how she chooses materials that can be part of

<sup>68</sup> Alaimo, *Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature* (n. 55). Also see Jenni Sorkin, “Material Engagements: Craft and Feminist Futures,” *Bomb Magazine*, June 28, 2019, accessed on February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Refer to my personal interview with Ava Binta Giallo. 2024. Appendix 3.1.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

natural cycles, she states, “There is the choice of material in deciding how the material can be influential, like having small material cycles that allow each material to be transformed in the cycle of things, to be composted, or transitioned into something else,” she explained<sup>72</sup>. Although much of her work honors invisible connections and realms, she emphasized that “it’s really this collaboration with the material realm that speaks to me the most.”<sup>73</sup> Water, for Giallo, becomes both a carrier of memory and a permeable boundary, capable of unsettling fixed geographies and identities which aligns with Janine MacLeod’s critique of how water, under capitalism, is stripped of its relationality and treated as a commodified resource.<sup>74</sup> In contrast, Giallo’s work resists such reduction, treating water as an active force.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> MacLeod, *Water and the Material Imagination*, n. 114.

There appears to be a certain reluctance on Giallo’s part to frame her own work as explicitly political. Yet, to me, it is precisely that. Site-specificity is a deliberate confrontation with the materials itself. In working with elements like soil, clay, rocks, and glass—materials that hold or suggest the presence of water—she evokes water’s essence without making it overt. Water, here, becomes a method, it seeps into the work through form, process, and conceptual weight, opposing containment whilst never fully visible. Labor in Giallo’s work makes me think about the politics of making art, especially in site-specific practices. Her focus on process, materials, and care pushes back against the commodification of art on how art is created and valued. Kwon’s idea of de-aestheticization connects here, as it relates to feminist works that prioritize labor and process over polished, market-ready pieces. It is clear to me that Giallo’s work performs a kind of anti-capitalist intervention, in slowness and an insistence on opacity. For me, though, Giallo’s work is not so much about the debate between aesthetics and de-aestheticization—it is how she brings together material and immaterial worlds. Therefore, in this way, her work speaks back to systems that seek to reduce both land and water to profit, and does so by letting water’s porous nature subtly shape the work itself.

She further explores in her accompanying book publication, *Water’s Skin* (2023) (fig. 5.7). In this text, she draws links between natural cycles and her concept of “surface phenomena, with the capacity to carry the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface.”<sup>75</sup> She expands this idea across various surfaces, from human skin and the earth to all natural and human-made environments, even screens. Her installation mirrors this concept by creating a (meta)physical landscape of layered clay, sand, organically-shaped ceramic tiles, water vessels, and sculptures, forming pathways and infrastructures throughout the space.<sup>76</sup> As Giallo describes, “Think of water as a living, liquid archive, linked to the sea, the river, to every single water drop, to flowing tears, aquatic sounds, to all bodies of water, to all the waters we contain.”<sup>77</sup> Here, for Giallo, water embodies ancestral wisdom, a convergence of ancestry and spirituality that informs her thinking and practice. As she writes in her book:

<sup>75</sup> Supra at 320. *Water’s Skin* is a self-published book by Giallo.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

*Water's Skin* speaks of inscriptions, markings and overwritings, and thus also of time, memory and remembrance, from palimpsest to Wunderblock, to water as an archive, storage medium and our oldest ancestor. Just as the artworks carry images and are storage media of their working process, the history of what they are and how they became that. These surfaces are like landscapes: bodies that contain their own archive."<sup>78</sup>

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*

Indeed, water is a basic human right. It is essential to life, yet across the world, access to clean and safe water is increasingly restricted—denied to communities due to structural inequalities, war, climate collapse, and the profit-driven logics of privatization. Giallo herself may not politicize her practice, I argue that it is political. I see her work as entangled in these urgent realities. Though subtle, her site-specific installations cannot exist in isolation—they are circulated in wider political and economic dynamics. As Kwon suggests, site-specificity inevitably participates in the conditions of its context. Giallo's work, too, is exposed to the social, ecological, and capitalist forces to the very environments it responds to: For me, this is precisely why her use of water—though mediated through materials like clay, soil, rocks and glass—should be read as a political act. Her reluctance to aestheticize water aligns with a resistance to its commodification, echoing MacLeod's critique of how capitalism reduces water to a liquid asset, stripped of relational and communal meaning.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>79</sup> *Supra* at 334.

And yet, Giallo's work could benefit from adopting a more confrontational stance. If site-specific practice carries the potential to confront commodification, then it also holds radical capacity to engage directly with pressing issues such as water injustice and environmental inequality. Giallo's work shows us toward this possibility but stops short of fully embracing it. This raises the question of what her work ultimately seeks to convey, beyond the connection with ancestral ties or sensorial connections to water? Even if opacity is employed as a strategy to sidestep direct critique, in today's context of ecological urgency, such avoidance can feel limiting. Her chosen materials—clay, soil, rocks and water—are not neutral, but entangled with histories of land and water grabbing, displacement, extraction, and ecological degradation, and so on. To work with these elements without acknowledging their political and environmental implications is flattening their meaning and missing an opportunity to fully situate the work within broader systems of power. This reluctance also weakens the context of Alaimo's *transcorporeality*, which is an understanding of the body as materially entangled with nonhuman forces. Without engaging with the structural conditions that shape how water is governed and commodified, which is a political aspect, the work does not fully embody the relational ethics that *transcorporeality* demands. As such, it falls short of articulating a truly interconnected human–nonhuman relationship. Moreover, to avoid these critical dimensions within a site-specific practice, especially when shown in art institutions that themselves participate in global sys-

tems of circulation, it is undermining the very site-specificity the work claims. It bypasses the opportunity to confront how these spaces are complicit in the broader political and ecological conditions the work could be engaging with more directly.

However, in the context of *Undulating Currents*, her artwork stood out for its earthy, site-specific qualities, which made it fundamentally different from the other digital works in the show. Furthermore, Gillo's work playfully reminds me of islands, aligning with Glissant's ideas: viewers could walk around her installation, observing the suspended rope and experiencing how it interacted with the space.<sup>80</sup> The enclosures of sand spread across the floor and the suspended rope emphasized the scale and volume between the floor and ceiling, whilst the ceramics, rocks, and glass acted as nodes and networks, forming a kind of navigational frame. Her work invited a slower, more reflective encounter. Her work also subtly redirects how we think about the spatial—it grounds the viewer in an awareness of their own presence and movement. This is not just about occupying space but transforming it, making the viewer consider how materials and bodies interact with and shape the environments they inhabit.



<sup>80</sup> Craig Santos Perez, "Transterritorial Currents and the Imperial Terripelago," *American Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (2015): 619–624, (cf. [link](#))

Figure 5.9: *ritmo volcán* (2022), book publication by artist Minia Biabiany, resting on a metallic shelf in the exhibition *Undulating Currents: A Group Show*, Sala Terrena of University Gallery Heiligenkreuzhof, Vienna. November–December 2023. Image credits © Brooklyn J. Pakathi

### 5.6 Flowers and leaves. The quiet power in small details

Guadeloupe artist Biabiany's *Musa* (2020) was shown in *Undulating Currents*. In (fig. 5.10), *musa* (2020) is a 13-minute HD video, presented in a continuous loop. Positioned on a large screen near the entrance, its audio echoing throughout the space. The narrator's voice moved gently, enveloping the viewers in the space. *Musa* (*Musa paradisiaca*) in meaning is a banana flower used for uterine healing.<sup>81</sup> In her video, Biabiany grapples with tensions between France and Guadeloupe that are ongoing from the colonial times, which affect her practice. France occupied Guadeloupe in 1635.<sup>82</sup> The island became a French colony following violent colonization

<sup>81</sup> Guillaume Désanges, *Musa Nuit*, exhibition, La Verrière, Brussels, April 25 – July 4, 2020, in *Matters of Concern | Matières à panser*, press kit (page 3), accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>82</sup> Refer to Dabor Resiere et al., "Chlordecone (Kepone) Poisoning in the French Territories in the Americas," *The Lancet* 401, no. 10380 (March 18, 2023): 916, accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#)). For effects of chlordecone on marine environment, see Jacques A. Bertrand et al., "Chlordecone in the Marine Environment Around the French West Indies: From Measurement to Pollution Management Decisions," ICES-CM 2010 / F07 (Nantes: IFREMER, 2010), accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#)). Also for a decolonial emphasis, see Malcom Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*, trans. Anthony Paul Smith (Cambridge: Polity, 2022).



Figure 5.10: *Musa* (2020), 13 minute HD video by artist Minia Biabiany, at the entrance of the gallery of the exhibition *Undulating Currents: A Group Show*, Sala Terrena of University Gallery Heiligenkreuzhof, Vienna. November - December 2023. Photograph by © Brooklyn J. Pakathi)



Figure 5.11: *Musa* (2020), 13 minute HD video by artist Minia Biabiany, a video still image. Image credits © Minia Biabiany

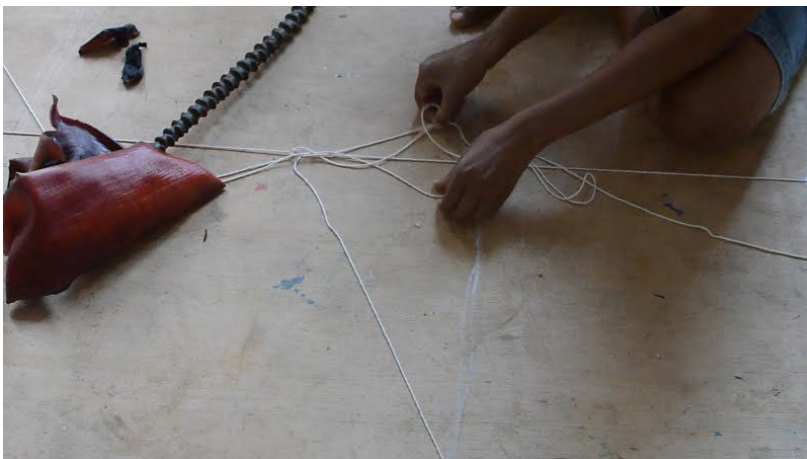


Figure 5.12: *Musa* (2020), 13 minute HD video by artist Minia Biabiany, a video still image. Image credits © Minia Biabiany



Figure 5.13: *Toli toli* (2018), installation and video projection by artist Minia Biabiany at 10th Berlin Biennale *We don't need another hero*, Berlin, 2018. This project was realized with the support of the Xth Berlin Biennale and Horizon Biennial Award. Image credits © Tim Ohler



Figure 5.14: *Musa Nuit* (2020), installation and video projection by artist Minia Biabiany. A solo show, *La Verrière*, Fondation d'entreprise Hermès, Brussels, 2020. Image credits © Isabelle Arthui

and the displacement of Indigenous peoples.<sup>83</sup> It was integrated into France's colonial empire, where it became a critical site for plantation economies, particularly in sugar production, relying heavily on enslaved Africans forcibly brought to work under brutal conditions.<sup>84</sup> This colonial legacy continues to affect the cultural, social, and economic dynamics of Guadeloupe even today, influencing contemporary conversations around decoloniality and Creolite identity of local people.<sup>85</sup> Resistance movements and the effects of assimilation from the 1970s until contemporary times—political, cultural, ecological, and psychological—are central to her exploration of her own identity.<sup>86</sup> These themes, which are both personal and political, appear through her practice. For example, in *musa*, she wondered about the female body and sexuality, particularly exploring questions about female desire and pleasure: How it connects to her maternal lineage—her mother and ancestors, something that remains hidden.<sup>87</sup> At the same time, her work ties these personal themes to a larger political narrative. She connects this to the devastating impact of chlordecone, a pesticide introduced by France used heavily on crops like crop monocultures of banana plantations in Guadeloupe and Martinique (1972-1993).<sup>88</sup> Whilst it was meant to stop banana weevil infestations, it contaminated much of the land and waterways, causing damage to women's sexual and reproductive health.<sup>89</sup> This ecological and bodily harm echoes in her work, where materials like water and banana leaves reflect these layered tensions.

The case of Guadeloupe exemplifies this: The introduction of globally banned pesticides during French colonial rule has led to long-term environmental harm, disproportionately affecting women and children. Such instances expose how colonial power structures persist through ecological violence and systemic inequality, as scholars like Hau'ofa, Glissant and Tawia and others have argued, that islands are not tropical paradises for careless commodification and production of tourism economies. Such images reduce islands to poor, consumable spaces of simple and "exotic" locations, which in fact, they are not. But beyond being reduced to tourist imagery, islands are also seen as strategic territories, for claiming marine zones and resources. Instead, these scholars show us how islands can be empowering spaces. Writing in the 1990s in postcolonial times, Hau'ofa, for instance, challenged the colonial portrayal of Pacific islands as small and isolated, as he presented them as interconnected in his notion of a "sea of islands."<sup>90</sup>

Similarly, for the Caribbean, as such, Guadeloupe is a French overseas territory, but has not been treated with the same care or regard as mainland France. This reveals how the colonial mindset continues: Distant, "exotic" places are treated as expendable, completely unprotected. Biabiany brings these tensions to light in *Musa* through motifs of local resistance from the Island—specifically the flowers and leaves of banana plantations. These are not romanticized or exoticized, but rather regarded in their complexity. Her voiceover weaves through the video, both contextual grounding and poetic metaphor, which

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Kristen Stromberg Childers, "Liberation Choices," in *Seeking Imperialism's Embrace: National Identity, Decolonization, and Assimilation in the French Caribbean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016; online edn, Oxford Academic, October 20, 2016), accessed February 8 2025 (cf. [link](#)), accessed December 19, 2024.

<sup>87</sup> Refer to my personal interview with Minia Biabiany. 2024. Appendix 3.2.

<sup>88</sup> See Juli Simond, Giada Santana, and Chris Knapp, "The Antilles: Paradise France Poisoned by Chlordecone Pesticide," *Atmos*, March 25, 2024, accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Hau'ofa, *Our Sea of Islands*, n. 48.

together create an aesthetics of resistance. It invites the viewer to engage not just with the imagery, but with the layered histories and emotions in the land itself. In (fig. 5.11), a still from the video in which a glass container has deep red petalled banana flowers with the words “my uterus was a hull for four centuries” of *Musa*’s local knowledge and cultural practices, such as the culinary eating of banana flowers and relates it to the past of slave trade journey.

Taking her Creole roots as a starting point, Biabiany’s use of language in *Musa* moves fluidly across French, Creole, and English, creating a layered sonic landscape where the global and the vernacular coexist and overlap. This linguistic interplay mirrors the fractured histories of colonization and the ongoing negotiation of identity in postcolonial contexts. It is noted that Biabiany’s forms expand into questions of identity, gender, standardization, and stereotyping, whilst challenging political structures and the nature/culture divide.<sup>91</sup> Biabiany’s use of organic materials and sensory experiences consider the shaping of women’s identity beyond their reproductive function, thus, showing us how women’s identities are not separate from the cultural narratives of land and the sea. It echoes Alaimo’s *transcorporeality*, where the body is always in exchange with the world around it. Furthermore, I argue that it also recalls Spivak’s *planetarity*, where she suggests that rather than mapping the world through systems of Western knowledge and control as the global does, we must instead learn to dwell with what we do not fully understand. If powerful nations claim islands as territorial extensions used to expand control over oceanic zones and resources then this is not just a matter of geography, but of power and territorial claim. In contrast, for Spivak, the metaphor of the planet stands in for radical otherness, something beyond full comprehension, something not to be possessed. I argue that Biabiany is demystifying the island by introducing the viewer to its richness—not through exotic imagery, but through its vernacular languages and deep plant cultures, embracing it with women’s labor role as well. In this way, Biabiany’s shifting language becomes a Spivak’s invocation to engage with alterity, to move toward the unknown not as a problem to solve, but as a space for ethical relation.

Further, Biabiany does this through “weaving” as both a literal and visual method. In *Musa*, we see her physically pulling and threading through banana plant leaves—plants that have been affected by pesticide use. Furthermore, in (fig. 5.12), in the video still, a person is seen kneeling on the floor whilst working with threads and banana leaves. This action becomes a tactile way of connecting to the land and its history. She also weaves together different images in the video: shots of damaged banana monocultures, glimpses of contaminated water, women’s navels, yarns of threads being tugged at and scenes of cooking, etc. They reflect everyday life and food traditions in Guadeloupe, showing how environmental harm and colonial legacies are connected to the body and local cultures. Through these layered images, Biabiany opposes the distant, detached gaze

<sup>91</sup> Supra at 341.

and instead invites us into a more intimate and local understanding of place.

In this way, I argue that Biabiany's work is also a political and decolonial act. She infuses care and labor. The act of weaving, working with damaged banana leaves, and connecting with land through food and touch through the female womb/body of her mother and sister are all ways she reclaims agency and repairs the harm caused by colonial histories. Importantly, Biabiany's work also speaks to women's connection to space and locality. She brings this into dialogue with her ancestral and maternal lineage, suggesting that care is passed down through women's embodied knowledge. There is also a clear presence of women's desire and sensuality in her work—the touch, the textures all hint at a kind of intimate pleasure that refuses objectification of women. These moments show how sexuality and desire can be forms of knowledge and strength, especially for women whose histories have been suppressed, and also, where women have been affected by disease and illness in their reproductive system from the pesticides which contaminated local crops.

Her work does not rely on spectacle, she stays close to the material—working with soil, leaves, damaged banana plants, and fragments of everyday life. Her work operates from a position of opacity—what Glissant describes as the right to remain partially unknowable with the use of vernacular languages. Glissant argues especially those from colonized or marginalized cultures—have the right not to be fully understood on someone else's terms. Similarly, Biabiany references embraces this right to opacity where her approach to translation is not about making everything understandable for an outside viewer—it is about exposing how languages like French Creole inscribes histories of colonization and assimilation for local communities.

But what also feels somewhat absent is a more outward-facing engagement with collective or activist dimensions that are central to many Caribbean and island-based struggles. *Musa* stops short of imagining or depicting community-based resistance or solidarity that have long defined the region's histories of survival and political assertion. It also limits how far the work goes in addressing systemic structures or linking to wider struggle. The focus remains intimate, which is valuable. For both within the Caribbean and across its diasporas, in a context where colonial legacies and environmental precarity demand collective responses, one might ask: how could this intimacy begin to open outward, forging connections with shared histories of resistance and the urgent need for political articulation beyond the self?

At the same time, there remains a limit to my understanding of how Biabiany's work, whilst rooted in a Caribbean positionality and clearly resisting extractive tendencies, resonates within the communities from which it emerges. Her practice seems to speak more to global audiences, unveiling layered colonial histories and ecological memory through the vernaculars in ways that are necessary. Yet, I

struggle to see how this work contribute meaningfully to those on the islands themselves? What kinds of impact or engagement does it foster locally? These are critical to this sort of work, especially crucial in the context to position local women's labor and open reflections on the complexities of cultural transmission, that how might this visibility through her video essay and the shifting terrain of who this art is ultimately for. This, for me, is also an ultimate act of care—to ask not only what the artist reveals, but for whom. This is not to diminish its value, but to hold space for questions about how art made from a place can also speak *to* it, especially in contexts where cultural survival is intertwined with communal forms of knowing and resisting.

I wish to reflect on other Biabiany's installations beyond *Undulating Currents*, which carry a monumental quality, also in dialogue with her video essays. These works evoke a sense of scale, not only in their physical presence but in the multiple meanings they unfold. I want to draw particular attention to her installations in (fig. 5.13) *toli toli* (2018), exhibited at the 10th Berlin Biennale *We Don't Need Another Hero*, in which seen here is a bamboo weaving installation with overlapping geometric patterns, shadows, and a projected video backdrop. In (fig. 5.14), *musa nuit* (2020), her solo exhibition at La Verrière in Brussels, shows a geometric wooden frame installation with suspended strings, minimal elements, and an open, airy gallery space. These two works expand the frame of her practice for me, especially in how they use space, storytelling and scale, creating installations that actively engage with the viewer. Biabiany spoke of prioritizing the gaze and choreography in her work, inviting viewers into an intimate encounter with her installations, where video and space intertwine.<sup>92</sup> She describes her work as a body, a system, or a space where elements revolve around one another:

"Working with details, you want to get close and give the impression that materials are fragile, so you pay attention to the body in a different way than you would if you felt there was no risk to the objects," she shared.<sup>93</sup>

This intentional fragility encourages care, shifting how viewers perceive space and materials. Can gaze and choreography be anything other than this intricate play with the viewer that the artist so deliberately envisions? In my view, this play unfolds within a charged space where desire and interpretation collide. The way the artist engages with gaze and choreography strongly reminds me of Hau'ofa's perspective on islands—symbols of connection and empowerment.<sup>94</sup> This echoes with archipelagic thinking, as discussed by Glissant, where islands are understood as being in constant motion. This idea is especially present in Biabiany's work, where she subverts the gaze of the viewer through her large-scale installations, guiding them into a physical and sensory experience. Rather than passively observing, viewers must weave their way through the installations, tracing their own paths and navigating space in an embodied manner. This contrasts with the colonial subjugation that has

<sup>92</sup> Supra at 347.

<sup>93</sup> Eva Heisler, "Minia Biabiany, Weaving Silences," *Asymptote Journal*, accessed December 19, 2024, (cf. [link](#))

<sup>94</sup> Hau'ofa, *Our Sea of Islands*, n.48.

historically denied islanders autonomy and self-determination over their land, just as the case of Guadeloupe's history with France. Biabiany's work challenges these imposed narratives by inviting movement and engagement with space on one's own terms. In doing so, her installation confronts the colonial gaze, an experience where spatial agency is reclaimed. This engagement with movement and spatial awareness is also a testament to labor, particularly in how Biabiany's understanding of islands as knowledge and ecology informs her artistic practice.

### 5.7 Setswana: *The ties that connect ancestors*

Moropa's practice is new and emerging, and it has not yet been previously contextualised through scholarly analysis. Moropa, trained in linguistics, psychology, and research, is from South Africa and works in the vibrant community of Johannesburg. In *Undulating Currents*, her artworks *Selekana le Modimo wa Noka* (*Selekana and the Goddess River*) (2023) was specially commissioned for the exhibition, seen in (fig. 5.15), is an oval-shaped artwork placed on a black surface, 35 cm x 35 cm. The artwork itself appears to be a collage, depicting two figures with superimposed photographic faces and stylized, historical dress. One figure wears a flowing white gown, whilst the other is in a blue dress, with what looks like a fan or parasol behind her head. The background of the artwork consists of an earthy-toned, textured field. The juxtaposition of archival imagery and modern assembly gives the piece a layered, storytelling quality, suggesting themes of identity or memory. In (fig. 5.16), it shows the display setup for this artwork which is also in the form of yet another artwork, a short film of this collage on an Ipad small screen (3:45 minutes, HD). The collage is encased in a clear glass frame and the short film as a screen beside it, is positioned on a flat, black rectangular table. A pair of headphones is attached to the table, indicating the accompanying audio element to the digital piece. The surrounding area is dimly lit, focusing attention on the work. The setup suggests an intimate, reflective experience for the viewer, combining visual and auditory components to engage multiple senses.

In this piece, Moropa tells the story of a little girl and a river goddess, drawn from folklore traditions and spoken in her vernacular, Setswana. The story flows tracing the bond between the little girl and the river goddess. The little girl, living in a village by the river, helps an old woman by bringing her water from a village well who asks the little girl for water. In return, the old woman reveals herself as a river goddess and gifts the girl jewels as a gesture of gratitude for her compassion. Moropa shared that the costumes of the little girl and the river goddess draw from Dutch traditions of the 17th and 18th centuries, a time when South Africa was under Dutch rule.<sup>95</sup> The jewels echo the weight of colonial extractivism, reminding us of the looting and exploitation of land, sea and people during this era.<sup>96</sup> South Africa, a crucial stop in Dutch trade

<sup>95</sup> Refer to Henry Cust, "The Dutch in South Africa," *The North American Review* 170, no. 519 (1900): 198–211, accessed on February 18, 2025 (cf. [link](#)) See also Rik van Welie, "Slave Trading and Slavery in the Dutch Colonial Empire: A Global Comparison," *NWIG: New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 82, no. 1/2 (2008): 47–96, (cf. [link](#))

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

routes, became a space of stolen resources and exploitation of people.<sup>97</sup> Through this story, Moropa speaks to the tension between colonizer and colonized. She adds, “Colonization disrupted cultural continuity, displacing languages, traditions, and identities whilst imposing narratives of erasure. This is particularly evident in African archival practices, where histories were either destroyed or misrepresented.”<sup>98</sup>

Moropa uses the language Setswana—spoken in Botswana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. With its roots in the Bantu linguistic family, Setswana is a language of centuries of knowledge and cultural exchange.<sup>99</sup> For Moropa, using vernacular in her work is a way of reclaiming it, treating it as a source of cultural heritage and belonging to one’s lands. She brings together archival imagery, collage, languages and digital techniques, unmasking history into contemporary contexts. Through these temporal layers, she brings forgotten histories to light and reimagines cultural identities, turning her work into a form of storytelling.

*Selekana le Modimo wa Noka* has taken her to exhibitions from South Africa to the USA, and to Europe with her debut in *Undulating Currents*. This marks an important moment, connecting her art with new audiences. Her first solo exhibition, *Tshepiso Moropa: The Night Recital* (2023) (fig. 5.17), held at Eclectica Contemporary in Cape Town, explored themes of Black identities in the context of South Africa.<sup>100</sup> Opening just a month before *Undulating Currents*, it provides an interesting comparison to how her work was displayed in our exhibition. In *The Night Recital*, her pieces were presented vertically, emphasizing a more confrontational and straight-forward view. For *Undulating Currents*, we took a different approach, laying her works flat and horizontal. This allowed her art to evoke the flow of water and nonlinearity to situate it more into water politics. The deep black tones surrounding her work also stood out, inviting viewers to focus on the figures as subjects. Our curatorial choice gave her work a sense of openness, inviting a sense and opportunity to study the work in an archival way.

On the mention of archives and often its loss, misrepresentation: What stays with me is the simplicity of the story and how Moropa uses digital techniques to animate it, making it so accessible yet temporally layered. In my observation, Moropa reflects on how the stillness of collage and the fluidity of moving images shape her storytelling, giving a temporal glimpse into her creative process. She describes collages as layered and meditative, where textures and meanings come together in stillness. Moving images, on the other hand, unfold over time, creating rhythms and emotions that draw the viewer into different narratives. Both mediums, she explains, offer unique ways to explore and express her stories. This is how she engages with layers of temporality, directing the gaze of the view between the stillness of the collage and the animation from the digital work.

Whilst working in a library, Moropa encountered archival pho-

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Refer to my personal interview with Tshepiso Moropa. 2024. Appendix 3.3.

<sup>99</sup> Herman M. Batibo, “The Origin and Evolution of Setswana Culture: A Linguistic Account,” *Botswana Notes and Records* 48 (2016): 134–49, accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>100</sup> “The Night Recital: A Solo Presentation by Tshepiso Moropa,” *Eclectica Contemporary*, Cape Town, 2023. Accessed December 19, 2024, (cf. [link](#))

tographs of South African portraiture, a discovery that sparked her curiosity with the gaps and silences in these historical images.<sup>101</sup> She observed that whilst some figures were accompanied by narratives, others remained unnamed, their stories unrecorded or erased. This absence became a site of artistic intervention, prompting Moropa to imagine and construct new narratives for these figures.<sup>102</sup> Ariella Azoulay has observed that “the archive is envisaged as acting by itself, of its own accord” critiques how institutional archives are seen as neutral repositories, masking the violence of what they exclude.<sup>103</sup> On archives, Enwezor also considered the photography and film medium as mechanical, producing images from mechanical processes, through a camera, and the mode to make an image, create statements within the image, itself an act of archival system.<sup>104</sup> He further argues that this insistence of the image as an archive enters the world of commodity because of the surplus value (or excess of) the image holds.<sup>105</sup> What he means by this is that, the production, circulation and consumption of this image, and apart from its reproducibility, also is about it being shaped by a political and economic process through institutional interventions on archives.

I believe Moropa’s approach sits on these very lines raised by Azoulay and Enwezor. For Moropa, her particular interest in family archival portraiture led her to explore the possibilities of integrating Setswana folklore into these images, recontextualizing them through a process of visual storytelling and cultural preservation. Through collage, she revitalizes archival portraiture, offering an alternative historiography that embraces multiplicity and reimagination. Moropa’s practice is the assertion of agency through the depiction of Black female bodies, which she provides with an intensified presence and a deliberate sense of definition. I interpret that set against stark, near-void backdrops, these figures command attention, disrupting the visual field and compelling the viewer’s gaze to rest upon them. This compositional strategy operates as a form of reclamation to reposition Black bodies, particularly women and children, not as peripheral subjects but as central protagonists in a visual narrative that has historically sought to diminish or erase them, in my view.

Water and the river goddess hold powerful metaphors here. As Moropa stated,

“I see water and natural elements as metaphors for memory and continuity. Whilst my work is not materially rooted in natural elements, conceptually, water represents the flow of stories and connections across generations. By using archival imagery and digital techniques, I practice anti-extractivism by reimagining existing materials rather than depleting resources, echoing sustainable and respectful practices in art-making.”<sup>106</sup>

Moropa’s artistic practice unfolds within an ongoing dialogue with Black women artists in South Africa who have interrogated the afterlives of colonial violence through photography, archival portraiture and often incorporate themselves in self-portrait practices. Al-

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, in an email exchange between the artist and me. 2024.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ariella Azoulay, “Archive Fever,” *Political Concepts*, accessed February 11, 2025, (cf. [link](#))

<sup>104</sup> Okwui Enwezor, “Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Photography” (Göttingen: Steidl; New York: International Center of Photography, 2008).

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

though this is not an anomaly within contemporary South African art, her work remains crucial in the contestation of historical erasure and racialized misrepresentation. In a landscape still shaped by the legacies of apartheid, artists such as Lebohang Kganye and Ayana V. Jackson have earlier reworked photographic archives to subvert their colonial and ethnographic framings<sup>107</sup>. Yet, where Kganye and Jackson engage through spectral layering and performative self-portraiture, Moropa's intervention takes a different trajectory that speculatively reconstructs the archive by language, folklore, from Black genealogies as sites of agency. What defines Moropa's practice is a decisive act of filling these voids—an insistence on presence where history has imposed silence. Her approach moves beyond visibility; it is a radical agency, resisting the conditions under which Black bodies have historically been inscribed within the archival system.

With Setswana folklore, it further complicates the relationship between history and invention. By integrating oral storytelling traditions into the photographic archive, she destabilizes it as a fixed historical artifact. Rather, she positions history as an evolving, relational process that is continuously reconstituted through memory and language, serving as a cultural transmission. This move is particularly significant in a post-apartheid South African context, where the colonial archive remains a dominant structure through which history is accessed, despite its exclusions and distortions. Hal Foster who contended that the artistic intervention with archives is not a novel phenomenon but rather a continuation of existing practices, describing it as “an idiosyncratic probing into particular figures, objects, and events in modern art, philosophy, and history.”<sup>108</sup> He argues that rather than radically transforming the archive, artists working within this mode largely operate within its existing structures, identifying gaps and omissions only to reconstruct narratives around them.<sup>109</sup>

But in Moropa's work, it challenges this epistemological framework by privileging indigenous knowledge systems and speculative storytelling, making space for the histories that the archive does not typically hold. The displacement of South African Bantu-speaking indigenous communities through colonial rule and apartheid-era violence has led to a rupture in their relationship with land and water, severing access to natural resources and accelerating the erosion of traditional ecological knowledge because such communities are actively abandoning it.<sup>110</sup> Since independence in 1994, this decline has persisted, as access restrictions and systemic marginalization continue to displace indigenous epistemologies, making them increasingly absent from contemporary environmental discourse, as per this article's findings. On the other hand water, in many indigenous worldviews, is a spiritual and ancestral entity.<sup>111</sup> For example, the article finds that among the San (/Xam) and other similar indigenous communities, and this varies as per indigenous communities beliefs, that water is conceptualized as living, possessing healing properties and divine presence. In the article, some other indigenous

<sup>107</sup> I contextualize these artists to show that other artists have also dabbled in similar aesthetics as Moropa and to deepen this discourse in contemporary art. Lebohang Kganye is a South African contemporary visual artist explores with her ancestry in the context of South African history and apartheid, see her bio in Lebohang Kganye, accessed March 1, 2025, (cf. [link](#)) Ayana V. Jackson is an American artist and photographer who is well known to present her work about Africa and African diaspora, where she explores myths of African bodies and re-stages them, often as self-portraiture, in colonial archive imagery, see in Ayana V. Jackson, accessed March 1, 2025, (cf. [link](#))

<sup>108</sup> Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 3.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Penny S. Bernard, “Ecological Implications of Water Spirit Beliefs in Southern Africa: The Need to Protect Knowledge, Nature, and Resource Rights,” in *Science and Stewardship to Protect and Sustain Wilderness Values: Seventh World Wilderness Congress Symposium*, comps. Alan Watson and Janet Sproull, Proc. RMRS-P-27 (Ogden, UT: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station, 2003), 148-154.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

communities believe myths of water spirits, mer-beings, and deities are believed to be dwelling beneath rivers, seas, waterfalls, and pools which are integral to indigenous cosmologies, and this strongly reflects a relational ontology, in my view. Where these indigenous communities belong, the land is arid, dry and oftentimes where water remains scarce or inaccessible, its presence is linked not only to survival but also to fertility, the article adds.

Moropa has stated that her practice does not explicitly engage directly with nature or natural elements in particular but only as metaphors. I would argue otherwise that her work nonetheless operates within a broader discourse on the politics of land, on questions indigenous belonging and displacement. Whilst contemporary Black women artists in South Africa engage with archival subjects through distinct artistic methods, Moropa's approach—embedding Setswana language and folklore into the gaps of family portraiture—acts as a direct counterpoint to dominant historical narratives. In this way, her practice closely aligns with Haraway's critique of the nature/culture divide, dismantling colonial structures that have long severed Black communities from land, water, and traditional ecological knowledge. Racial taxonomy has historically functioned as a tool to misrepresent, and erase Black bodies which dehumanize them, but it has also dictated how their relationships to land and traditional ecological knowledge have been understood—or more often, deliberately broken. As highlighted in the discussion on Bantu-speaking communities, colonial and apartheid rule imposed access restrictions on land, leading to a sharp decline in traditional ecological knowledge and reinforcing the idea that such knowledge was no longer relevant.<sup>112</sup> I believe Moropa's work actively speaks to this, not only restoring these lost connections but also rejecting the binary thinking that has long positioned nature and culture as separate entities. The wetness in her work—the invocation of the river deity as a healer and the intimate connection between the child and water—directly engages with the gaps in contemporary art history well. In my view, in Moropa's work, the presence of the Black female deity alongside young girls challenges the way both Black women's bodies and water have been controlled and exploited. Just as water has been privatized, restricted, and even treated as a resource for profit, Black women's bodies have historically been viewed as laboring, disposable, or exoticized under racial capitalism.

Through this lens, Moropa's water is not just about recuperating eroded knowledge systems but about insisting on their continued presence. Her work resists the colonial archive's impulse to categorize indigenous epistemologies as separate from history, instead presenting them as coextensive with, and even constitutive of, the broader historical field. This, I believe, echoes from "Water does not ask us to confirm either the irreducibility of alterity or material connection" from Neimanis.<sup>113</sup> It means that Moropa is layering the divine and the human, the ancestral and the contemporary, where she reveals the ways in which these narratives have always overlapped.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Neimanis, *We Are All at Sea: Practice, Ethics, and Poetics of Hydrocommons*, n. 121.

In my view, what emerges is not only speculation but a recognition of how these histories, like water, have always flowed together—moving through bodies, shaping landscapes, and countering despite the structural forces that have sought to contain them.

### 5.8 Conclusion

As I engage with the practices of Rezaire, Moropa, Giallo, and Biabiany, their ability to invoke ancestral histories whilst remaining in the urgencies of the present feels both grounding and expansive. It is as though they are building pathways that refuse the linearity we so often inherit, especially as evidenced in Western productions of knowledge, instead creating connections that are circular and embodied. In their works, materials are alive—something to be nurtured and transformed into carriers of meaning. Across the works of each of these, there are clear and compelling engagements with island and oceanic ontologies. Each artist draws from the material and historical dimensions of water—particularly in relation to the transatlantic slave trade and of colonialism. The sea, in their practices, becomes a method of sensing and countering, offering a fluid and expansive way of understanding Black and diasporic experience. However, when it comes to questions of care, labor, which form feminist strategies, this picture becomes less defined. These concerns are present, but not consistently tackled with. At times, their works reflect a tension—caught between critiquing systems of inequality and being situated within an art world that continues to reproduce those very structures. Although their practices incorporate care and resistance, they do not always explicitly confront the politics of labor or the uneven economies of visibility and value within contemporary art. As such, their engagements with feminist and decolonial praxis feel more implicit, raising questions about the limits and contradictions of critical work within institutional frameworks.



Figure 5.15: *Selekana le Modimo wa Noka* (*Selekana and the Goddess River*) (2023), a commissioned collage by artist Tshepiso Moropa in the exhibition *Undulating Currents: A Group Show*, Sala Terrena of University Gallery Heiligenkreuzhof, Vienna. November - December 2023. Image credits © Brooklyn J. Pakathi



Figure 5.16: *Selekana le Modimo wa Noka (Selekana and the Goddess River)* (2023), a commissioned collage and a digital video essay on loop on a mini iPad by artist Tshepiso Moropa is seen placed on a horizontal display in the exhibition *Undulating Currents: A Group Show*, Sala Terrena of University Gallery Heiligenkreuzhof, Vienna. November - December 2023. Image credits © Brooklyn J. Pakathi



Figure 5.17: *Tshepiso Moropa: The Night Recital* (2023), a solo exhibition at the Eclectica Contemporary, Cape Town. Image credits © Eclectica Contemporary

## **Part IV**

# **Chapter Four**



## 6

# *Between Oil and Water: The Commons in Ozhopé Collective in Lake Malawi*

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### 6.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter examines the art practice of the Malawian Ozhopé Collective, whose artwork titled *Row* (2017) was featured for the first time in Vienna as part of *Undulating Currents* (2023). Founded in 2017, the collective comprises artist members Ella Banda and Massa Lemu, alongside photo/videographer Tavwana Chirwa and writer Emmanuel Ngwira. According to their website, Ozhopé is dedicated to “collaboratively producing art that inspires conversations and invites people to critically reflect on issues affecting their everyday lives.”<sup>1</sup> The name “Ozhopé” finds its roots in the Yao term “wosopé,” meaning “all of them,” a phrase spoken by a young boy observing the artists at work.<sup>2</sup> This term evolved into “Ozhopé,” encapsulating the collective ethos that drives their collaborative practice.<sup>3</sup> This chapter’s focus on the Collective is grounded in personal interview with founding member Massa Lemu, a methodology that

<sup>1</sup> Ozhopé Collective, “About,” accessed January 9th 2025, (cf. [link](#))

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

has an intimate and nuanced understanding of the collective's art-making processes. Lemu's dual practice as an artist and academic provides a lens through which to explore the collective's practices, particularly in relation to the broader sociopolitical and ecological landscape of Malawi, including the fraught potential of oil drilling in Lake Malawi.

Lemu's academic career, characterized by a rigorous exploration of theory and its intersection with artistic praxis, has been instrumental in interrogating the role of collectives within African modern and contemporary art. His reflections invite this chapter to dive not only into the Collective's collaborative approach but also into his individual artistic endeavors, situating these within Malawi's ecology and politics. This multifaceted perspective enhances the chapter's ability to contextualize Collective's work within the intersecting narratives of collectivity and cultural production. In addition to the personal interview conducted with Lemu, this chapter incorporates his academic writings, which offer a deeper analytical perspective on the collective's work. To complement this, my own critical reflections are interwoven, aside from the artist-author's point of view, adding yet another dimension to the analysis and enriching of the Collective's practices.

This chapter further engages with the commons, a concept I argue which is intricately woven into Collective's artistic praxis and philosophy. Through their site-specific and participatory collaborations with fisherfolk communities in Malawi, the Collective situates the public sphere as a critical locus for creating art that is both collective and responsive. I ground their work in this framework, in which the Collective interrogates the ecological and political crises that threaten the region, a discourse that is seen through the lens of material feminisms.<sup>4</sup> The collective is known for their incorporation of performativity, chance encounters, bricolage, play, humor, and elements of magic within their practice. In this chapter, I contend that by engaging with such material conditions from oil to water, dugout canoe to shore, politics to ecology and the narratives of fisherfolk communities, the collective activates agency within the intricate interplay between human and non-human relations.

Through the concept of the commons, as explored through this study of the collective, can be reimagined as a model for stewardship that invites us to envision alternative ways of caring for and sustaining shared resources and relationships. Against this, Collective's work becomes an urgent artistic intervention, engaging with these contested geographies and the communities—their practice not only critiques these extractive processes but also seeks to reimagine modes of collective stewardship and shared responsibility within the precarious landscape of Lake Malawi.

<sup>4</sup>I have foregrounded material feminisms quite extensively in this thesis, so I will revisit it here only through the theorist Jane Bennett's writings on *thing-power*, agency, and assemblages, which I find particularly pertinent in this study of this chapter, compared with other theorists I have encountered in this study.

## 6.2 *Lake Malawi: Background and context*

Malawi is a landlocked nation in the southern-east region of Africa. Lake Malawi, a southernmost freshwater African lake, runs between Malawi, Tanzania and Mozambique. Known for its rich biodiversity, it provides food sources for the local communities. Due to climate change, overfishing, deforestation, water pollution, and land grabs, the lake has been facing significant threat, risking the biodiversity of the lake as well as the marginalized communities that depend on it.<sup>5</sup> At the heart of these crises is the Malawi government's granting of licenses to various companies for oil exploration across six blocks in the country, a decision with ecological and geopolitical ramifications.<sup>6</sup> The issue is further complicated by an ongoing dispute between Malawi and Tanzania over the northern part of Lake Malawi, an area speculated to contain significant oil and gas reserves. This is also a colonial inheritance. Malawi asserts that the boundary lies along the lake's shoreline, as delineated in Article 1(2) of the 1890 Anglo-German Treaty, thereby claiming ownership of the entire lake.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, Tanzania argues that the boundary follows the median line of the lake, a principle based on customary international law, as outlined by the IBRU Center for Border Research (2017).<sup>8</sup> This dispute, reignited in 2012 with intensified interest in oil exploration, remains unresolved.<sup>9</sup> In 2018, proposed mediation talks had yet to take place.<sup>10</sup> As of 2024, the lake remains in dispute as a critical resource for fishing, navigation and ventures like oil drilling, hydrocarbon exploration etc.<sup>11</sup>

The politics of Africa, and Malawi in particular, can be critically understood through the lens of Mbembe's postcolony.<sup>12</sup> Mbembe characterizes the postcolony as a space where colonial logics lingers, shaping power dynamics, identities, and socio-economic structures long after formal independence.<sup>13</sup> In this, the region is seen through external narratives—frequently mediated by Western narratives, images and media—as “lesser in value, poor quality, or little importance.”<sup>14</sup> Such portrayals perpetuate a western-centric, colonial gaze that diminishes the agency and self-determination of the region, framing it instead as a site of subjugation and control. Colonial impacts have left legacies of violence, on people and its ecologies that continue to define Malawi's socio-political landscape. Mbembe and other scholars have been vocal in their critique, emphasizing the scarcity and inadequacy of existing archives and representations: not only to missing documentation but also to an insufficient engagement with alternative and informal ways of archiving about the region.<sup>15</sup> In the postcolonial condition, these narratives are exacerbated by the rise of neoliberal policies that intensify violence, extractivist practices and environmental degradation.

During the 1980s, the structural adjustment programs championed by institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank facilitated African nations' access to international loans, ostensibly to promote economic development.<sup>16</sup> How-

<sup>5</sup> Refer to my personal interview with Massa Lemu. 2024. Appendix. 4.1.

<sup>6</sup> Lemu and Emmanuel Ngwira, *Row: a thinkivist art intervention*, 43 (n. 74).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Tanzania and Malawi Are on the Brink of a Diplomatic Standoff," *Lansing Institute for Global Affairs*, April 17, 2024, accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>12</sup> Refer Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 1 (n. 7).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, "Writing the World from an African Metropolis," *Public Culture* 16, no. 3 (2004): 347-372.

<sup>16</sup> Howard Stein and Machiko Nissanke, "Structural Adjustment and the African Crisis: A Theoretical Appraisal," *Eastern Economic Journal* 25, no. 4 (1999): 399-420. See Miatta Jeannette Massaley, "Structural Adjustment in Sub-Saharan Africa" (Honors thesis, Pennsylvania State University, 2010), 1-10. See also "Transformative Policy Pathways: Lessons from Feminist Economics Programming for the IMF," Bretton Woods Project, October 11, 2023, accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

ever, these programs imposed conditions that prioritized market liberalization, free trade, privatization, and the reduction of public sector roles.<sup>17</sup> Whilst these measures generated limited economic growth, they prompted inequalities, leaving significant portions of the population without access to economic wealth and benefits<sup>18</sup>. For Mbembe, such neoliberal interventions can be viewed as a continuation of colonial extraction, recast under the guise of global capitalism.<sup>19</sup> This process reflects what Mbembe identifies as the post-colony's relationship with excess and violence, wherein power manifests not only through structural domination but also through everyday performances of authority.<sup>20</sup> Mbembe's "aesthetics of vulgarity" and the "intimacy of power" further elucidates how these systems of extraction are experienced, contested, and sometimes internalized within the daily lives of local populations.<sup>21</sup>

For instance, this dispute between Malawi and Tanzania exemplifies how the spectacles of political and economic systems—such as the Malawian government's granting of licenses for rare earth mineral extraction and oil drilling to foreign corporations—contribute to the commodification of natural resources. At the same time, these practices reveal the vulnerabilities of local communities and ecosystems within a grotesque system that, on one hand, heralds economic progress but, on the other, deepens social inequalities and environmental degradation. This penetration of systemic structures into everyday life impacts local communities and their access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and agricultural support.<sup>22</sup> It further undermines their ability to secure basic living conditions, including clean water, air, and an abundance of resources—foundational elements for their well-being. For fishing communities, in particular, this intrusion disrupts their reliance on natural food sources and sustainable ecosystems, which are vital for their survival and livelihoods. Such policies underscores the region's precarious position within global networks of capital, where landscapes and communities are commodified, nature and people subject to optimization for external gain.<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, how do we begin to disrupt such systems to envision them as spaces of abundance and thriving? This question shows the importance of practices like those of Lemu and the Ozhopé Collective, whose works provide a vital lens for unraveling the complexities of such systems.

### 6.3 *In Focus: Massa Lemu's Artistic and Theoretical Reflections*

This investigation into the local realities of Malawi is far from simple, and it is only through the narratives of those rooted in the land that such complexities can be fully grasped. In his doctoral research years, Lemu studied art collectives, particularly those based in the African region, such as Gugulective and iQhiya in South Africa and Groupe Amos in the Democratic Republic of Congo.<sup>24</sup> He studied

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (n. 7).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Kathomi Gatwiri, Josephine Amboko, and Daniel Okolla, "The Implications of Neoliberalism on African Economies, Health Outcomes and Wellbeing: A Conceptual Argument," *Social Theory & Health* 18, no. 1 (2020): 86-101, (cf. [link](#)), accessed February 25, 2025.

<sup>23</sup> *Supra* at 378.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

these collectives in the broader socio-political context of global neoliberalism and post-industrial capitalism, comparing their practices to earlier African collectivist movements.<sup>25</sup> Lemu was struck by how neoliberalism manifested uniquely in Africa, influencing the conditions under which these collectives were formed and operated, especially when compared to their counterparts in other parts of the world.<sup>26</sup> Through his research, he observed that these collectives employed aesthetics that transcended the production of conventional art objects. Rather, their practices aimed to empower subjectivities, emphasizing “immaterial” forms of expression such as performance, temporary installations, textual interventions, and book readings. These approaches reflected a deliberate shift away from commodified art-making toward a focus on relational practices. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of thinkers such as Foucault, Fanon, Mbembe, and Enwezor, Hardt and Negri, and other workerist and autonomist thinkers, Lemu argued that these collectives functioned as biopolitical entities. From a resistance and decolonial standpoint, their practices actively engaged with the management of life and subjectivity under neoliberal conditions, he asserts. To articulate this, Lemu coined the term “biopolitical collectivism”.<sup>27</sup>

#### 6.4 *Biopolitical Life*

To situate Lemu’s usage of the term biopolitical collectivism, it is useful to first understand the concept of biopower, as developed by Michel Foucault. Foucault uses biopower to describe how modern states exercise control over populations by regulating life itself, in subtle ways, extending beyond traditional sovereign power.<sup>28</sup> This control is not simply about the right to take life but involves managing and fostering life in specific ways. Foucault expands this concept through biopolitics, which refers to the regulation and control of individuals’ bodily autonomy and collective life through political mechanisms.<sup>29</sup> He describes it as, “For the first time in history, the biological is undoubtedly reflected in the political [...] we should speak of “biopolitics” to designate what makes life and its mechanisms fall into the realm of explicit calculations, and makes the power-knowledge an agent of transformation of human life [...]”<sup>30</sup>

Biopolitics operates in two key ways: by disciplining individual bodies (through institutions such as schools, workplaces, hospitals, and prisons) and by managing populations (through policies on health, fertility, data collection and border controls).<sup>31</sup> Foucault’s analysis also highlights specific examples of biopolitical governance, particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries in Western societies. These included practices such as managing diseases and pandemics, controlling fertility and reproduction rates, and regulating agricultural outputs. These techniques were implemented as technologies of knowledge, enabling states to collect data, establish norms, and maintain security and productivity. Postcolonial critiques, such as

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. Before delving into these discussions, I wish to acknowledge that Lemu’s research journey, with its comparative analysis of various art collectives, has significantly given me context to his approach. However, in this chapter, my focus remains on analyzing Ozhopé’s work within the specific framework of Malawian politics and ecology. Analyzing the collective itself is a substantial undertaking. Attempting a comparative analysis alongside other collectives risks diluting the focus and depth of my reading of Ozhopé. Therefore, I will limit myself to teasing out insights directly relevant to the Collective’s practice, aligning with the central themes of this chapter.

<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979*, edited by Michel Senellart, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1–22, accessed on January 8th 2025 (cf. [link](#)) See also an explanation of biopolitics, racism and climate change in Diego Andreucci and Christos Zografos, “Between Improvement and Sacrifice: Othering and the (Bio)Political Ecology of Climate Change,” *Political Geography* 92 (January 2022): 102512, accessed January 9th 2025, (cf. [link](#))

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité I. La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 142–143.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

those by Edward Said, have connected biopolitics to colonial contexts, arguing that it was used by colonizers to exercise political, economic, and cultural control over colonized populations.<sup>32</sup> This reduced colonized people as subaltern and oppressed, their lives constrained by the interests of the colonizer.<sup>33</sup> There are various interpretations of these concepts, but in the context of Malawi and Africa, neoliberalism is seen that ostensibly blurs the boundaries between the private and public domains, embedding the state within the logic of the market.<sup>34</sup> Under neoliberalism, individuals are subsumed into market-driven forms, subject to its laws and policies, even as they are granted autonomy. This extends neoliberalism's reach into nearly every aspect of social life, particularly within the political economy. However, this landscape of biopolitics, as Foucault suggests, also creates spaces for resistance and expressions of freedom, revealing the inherent tensions within such systems of control.<sup>35</sup>

Scholars Hardt and Negri's analysis of biopolitics, their theories provide a robust foundation for understanding how systems of control can be subverted and reimagined. Moreover, Lemu has drawn from their perspectives to inform and underpin his interpretation of biopolitical collectivism, integrating their ideas into his broader conceptualization of collective practices in art and resistance.<sup>36</sup> Hardt and Negri's analysis focuses on power relations within global networks whilst also exploring forms of resistance.<sup>37</sup> They introduce the concept of *Empire*, which they attribute to a new form of sovereignty characterized by decentralization (power distributed across multiple actors, such as global institutions and corporations, rather than concentrated in a single authority), deterritorialization (power untethered from specific geographic boundaries, operating through global networks), and globalization (the integration of political, economic, and cultural systems worldwide).<sup>38</sup>

I interpret that this aligns with their description of power operating through a networked system of governance that includes global institutions and other non-state actors—an example of which, in the context of Malawi, is the influence of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and its structural adjustment programs. The term *Empire* is multifaceted, but Hardt and Negri primarily define it through two key dimensions: immaterial labor and biopolitical production. Immaterial labor encompasses cognitive and intellectual work as well as affective energies, such as feelings and emotions.<sup>39</sup> Biopolitical production, therefore, extends through both the consciousness and the physical bodies of populations, shaping their social and economic realities.<sup>40</sup>

Simultaneously, Hardt and Negri are keen to explore forms of resistance, expanding on the concept of the term *Multitude*.<sup>41</sup> Although their articulation of the *multitude* is somewhat undefined, they provide a theoretical underpinning that emphasizes its emancipatory and revolutionary potential.<sup>42</sup> For them, the *multitude* emerges both because of and in resistance to *Empire*—the global systems of power

<sup>32</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 25.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Alexander J. Means, "Biopolitics," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 53, no. 14 (2021): 1443-1454, accessed February 8 2025 (cf. link)

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Supra* at 378.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, "Preface: Life in Common," in *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

<sup>38</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), xvii.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>41</sup> *Supra* at 410.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

that exploit and govern life. Unlike the notion of “the people,” which implies a homogenous and unified collective, the *multitude* is inherently diverse, encompassing individuals and groups with multiple identities and subjectivities. These individuals organize themselves in varied and fluid ways, adapting their forms of resistance to specific political, economic, or social contexts. Hardt and Negri describe the *multitude* as producing “the seeds and practices of democracy... based on social communication across a plane of constituted social equals organized in relation to the interests produced because of and in reaction to political order.”<sup>43</sup>

The *multitude's* resistance materializes in the form of protest movements, temporary coalitions, and strategic alliances that are decentralized and adaptive, reflecting its ability to mobilize across boundaries.<sup>44</sup> Examples include grassroots uprisings, labor strikes, public protests and anti-globalization movements, where individuals and collectives come together to challenge exploitation and injustice. Through networks of solidarity and collaboration, the *multitude* builds alternative forms of governance and community that operate outside the dominant logics of capitalism and state control.<sup>45</sup> These practices are grounded in cooperation and communication, which Hardt and Negri argue lay the foundation for alternative, emancipatory modes of organization and production.

### 6.5 *Collectives: Mutu umodzi siusenza denga (one head cannot carry the roof)*

Lemu does not provide a standardized definition of biopolitical collectivism, but through his analysis of the Gugulective and Ozhopé collectives, some clarifications begin to emerge. According to Lemu, most scholars and interpreters tend to focus on the negative aspects of biopolitics—its role in control and regulation. However, he is more interested in exploring its positive dimension: resistance. For Lemu, this resistance is in the empowerment of life itself, highlighting the potential for collectives to create new forms of agency and autonomy.<sup>46</sup> In this sense, I draw on my understanding of Hardt and Negri's *multitude* and consider the role of collectives in art. This perspective prompts fundamental questions: What are collectives? How do they come into being? What drives their practices? Starting with these inquiries helps to clarify Lemu's approach to the intersection of art and collectives, offering valuable insights into their significance and function. There is no universally accepted definition of collectives, but they can generally be understood as groups of individuals who come together around a shared goal or purpose.<sup>47</sup> In contemporary art, some notable examples include Black Audio Film Collective, Guerrilla Girls, Raqs Media Collective and Ruangrupa, among others. For Lemu, the concept of a collective is straightforward: “a collective is simply a group of different people who share social or political ideals who come together in their various capacities on a mission to realize those ideas.”<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Ben Dorfman, “Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri - Multitude - War and Democracy in the Age of Empire,” *Left History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Historical Inquiry and Debate* 12, no. 1 (2007).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Supra* at 410.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

He elaborates from a Malawian proverb and perspective:

“*Mutu umodzi siusenza denga* is a Malawian proverb which means one head cannot carry the roof. Which means that you need a group to be able to carry out certain tasks.”<sup>49</sup>

Lemu has explored the practice of Gugulective, a collective based in Cape Town, South Africa.<sup>50</sup> Established in 2006 in response to the socio-political conditions of post-apartheid South Africa, Gugulective derives its name from a combination of the isiXhosa word for pride, ‘gugu,’ and ‘lective’ from the word ‘collective,’ translating to “our collective pride.” The group consists of artists, thinkers, locals and curators who repurposed a shebeen called Kwa-Malmli—a local informal drinking venue in the township of Gugulethu—as their primary space for creative activities. With limited access to formal art infrastructures such as museums, galleries, studios, or art schools, the collective turned to collaborative projects within the shebeen to address these gaps. According to Lemu, Gugulective operated as a loose formation, convening whenever the need for a project arose. Their activities were tied to the social and economic realities of Gugulethu, activating the public sphere through practices that emphasized community, and the collective imagination of alternative possibilities.

Such alternative possibilities held significant importance for the Black community in South Africa, particularly given the oppressive measures of the Apartheid regime. After the Suppression of Communism Act was passed in 1950, the ability for Black people to congregate was effectively outlawed. The shebeen, however, offered a critical exception to this restriction.<sup>51</sup> Historically, shebeens provided a space for Black South Africans to gather and socialize, often becoming vital hubs for community life.<sup>52</sup> These establishments were frequently run by Black women who relied on selling alcohol as a means to sustain their families. More than just informal drinking venues, shebeens, along with churches, served as safe spaces for intellectuals, politicians, and ordinary citizens to mobilize, exchange ideas, and organize resistance. Their homely and informal atmosphere fostered a sense of community and solidarity. Gugulective drew from this history, incorporating the ethos of the shebeen into their collective vision, using it as a model for creating spaces where creativity, dialogue, and communal sharing could thrive.

A work by Gugulective titled *Ityala Aliboli* (meaning “debt doesn’t rot”) (2010) critiques the socio-economic realities faced by South Africa after the end of Apartheid in the 1990s. Although the regime officially ended, the promise of economic liberation quickly faltered. Like Malawi, South Africa found itself burdened by deep debts and widespread poverty, further marginalizing the Black community. In this work, the collective reimaged South African banknotes by superimposing their images—standing in a queue—over the image of Jan van Riebeeck, the Dutch colonial founder of Cape Town. This act served as a symbolic intervention, challenging the colonial legacies within the nation’s economic structures. Another work titled *Ind-*

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Massa Lemu, “Gugulective as Biopolitical Collectivism,” *Third Text* 31, no. 2-3 (2017): 253-263. As a note, the following will be a discussion from his article between pages 253-261.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 253-255.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 253-255.

*aba Ludabi* (an isiXhosa expression meaning “the issue is the war”) (2010), draws upon the visual language of public flyers distributed by traditional healers or witchdoctors offering remedies for ailments. The collective appropriated this format, replacing the usual messages for healing with political statements such as “White supremacy is a creator of our catastrophic lives” or “Does your body feel like its in Apartheid?” for public distribution.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 256-257.

Further, Gugulective’s work is marked by a distinctive aesthetic where seriousness, play, humor, and satire intersect, yet at its core, their practice remains engaged with what Lemu describes as the “biopolitics of life.” As Lemu highlights, their response to the material context is not merely recognized in their work but actively repurposed and reinterpreted to create it—making their entire approach an act of resistance. Reflecting on their methods, on *Indaba Ludabi*, Lemu states, “Thus, by borrowing from the traditional healer’s language and publicity techniques, Gugulective draws from the multitude’s biopolitical struggles within and against capitalist biopower.”<sup>54</sup> This approach underscores their ability to navigate and critique the socio-political realities of their environment, transforming everyday forms into tools of resistance. Drawing on Mbembe’s perspective on the subject, Gugulective centres their work on the lived experiences of individuals, framing these experiences as catalysts for political agency.<sup>55</sup> For Mbembe, a subject is one who mobilizes the senses—seeing, hearing, feeling, and touching—as part of their engagement with the world.<sup>56</sup> Although some of their works transition into documentary forms that later appear in gallery exhibitions, their practice remains fluid, process-oriented, and constantly fluctuating.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 256-257.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 261.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 261-262.

Gugulective embodies such resistance by leveraging immaterial labor—such as real-time performativity in public spaces and materials derived from the conditions of everyday life—to create transformative forces of art. These practices challenge systems of control whilst fostering collective agency. Lemu situates this space of aesthetics as biopolitical collectivism, where art becomes a means of engaging with and resisting the socio-political and economic realities of its context. By analyzing Gugulective, Lemu was able to reflect on and apply similar ideas to his own collective, Ozhopé. In our conversation, he mentioned that his exploration of biopolitical collectivism through theoretical frameworks and analysis revealed its potential relevance to Ozhopé. This realization eventually led him to analyze Ozhopé as well, offering a unique perspective on his own collective through the lens of biopolitical collectivism.

### 6.6 *Ozhopé Collective’s Row: An analysis from artist-author perspective*

Ozhopé was formed in 2016, their practice emerged in response to the ongoing dispute between Malawi and Tanzania over possession of the lake and the reignited interest in oil exploration within its wa-



Figure 6.1: Members of Ozhopé arrived at Mchemba village in Mangochi to start work on the *Row* project with the fishing community on the shores of Lake Malawi. Image credits © Ozhopé Collective

ters. The *Row* (2017) project was funded by Virginia Commonwealth University. *Row* is thematically focused on various issues surrounding Lake Malawi, with a primary concern being the potential impacts of oil drilling. This controversial activity has been widely criticized by locals, journalists, academics, and activists for its likely harm to the lake's environment and the detrimental effects it would have on local fishing communities who rely on its resources.<sup>57</sup> *Row* is fundamentally about anti-extractivism, *Row* (fig. 6.1) is a project that "features sculpture, photography, and performance, created by the Ozhopé Collective in collaboration with fishing communities along the lakeshore."<sup>58</sup> *Row* was created to address both aesthetic and cultural perspectives, aiming to contribute a critical voice to the ongoing debates surrounding corruption at the level of governance. The project highlights the lack of transparency in the handling of deals and contracts, particularly evident in other mining prospects of uranium within the country.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> *Supra* at 378.

*Row* as a project is a single, ongoing initiative with each iteration marked by a distinct numbering to signify its different phases. The first iteration took place in 2017 in the southern region of Lake Malawi, specifically in Mchemba Village within the Mangochi District (fig. 6.2). This phase primarily focused on the surface of the dugout canoe as a site of artistic research, with the lake itself playing a lesser role in the art. The second iteration occurred in 2018 in the central region, at Senga Bay in Salima. In this phase, the lake became more prominently featured as part of the ecosystem explored in the work. The third iteration, conducted in 2023, moved further north to Ngala Village in Nkhotakota. This phase integrated the canoe, the community, and the lake more holistically into the project. Further, *Row* resulted in the creation of four artworks: *Wake* (2017) (fig. 6.3), *Row* (2017) (fig. 6.4), *Loud Mouth* (2018) (fig. 6.5), and *Catch* (2018) (fig. 6.6). The collective places greater emphasis on the politics of the environment rather than on the process of creating the artworks



Figure 6.2: Members of the Ozhopé Collective working on the dugout canoe with the local fishing community by Lake Malawi at Mchemba village in Mangochi, Malawi, 2017. Image credits © Ozhopé Collective



Figure 6.3: Artwork titled *Wake* (2017). Dugout canoe, plastic plates and cork strings. Image credits © Ozhopé Collective

themselves. This is particularly intriguing, as it shifts the focus from conventional artistic production to the broader conceptual and political context that the work engages with. Further, the artist has pointed out that the collective deliberately refrains from narrowly defining the project as socially engaged, site-specific, sculptural, or as a collection of photographs and videos.<sup>59</sup>

*Row* is a highly context-driven intervention. The intervention itself can only be fully appreciated in real time by those who were present during its execution. For others, it is accessible only through subsequent documentation, such as photographs and videos. This creates a more complex understanding of the work's artistic production, as it emphasizes the site-specific and performative aspects of the project and also its documented outputs later on. However, these performative and site-based elements, whilst central to the work, can be further clarified and expanded upon through curatorial interpretation, which provides an opportunity to situate and contextualize the project more comprehensively.<sup>60</sup>

In terms of its conceptual leverage, the artist has proposed "racial capitalocene," defined as "racialized environmental politics," where he has highlighted how marginalized groups, particularly in the Global South, bear the brunt of environmental destruction fueled by capitalist and colonial systems.<sup>61</sup> Lemu engages with Wynter's reconceptualization of the human to critique the colonialist episteme that reserves humanness for people of European origin, relegating others, particularly Africans, to the status of non-human.<sup>62</sup> This also sheds light on gender imbalances in extractivism as women, particularly in patriarchal systems, are excluded from decision-making processes but are among the most affected by environmental degradation. The artist has pointed to the example of Mwabulambo, Karonga, Malawi, where coal mining by the Eland Mining Company contaminated rivers and wells and destroyed water pipes.<sup>63</sup> This forced women and girls, who are primarily responsible for fetching water, to travel long distances for clean drinking water, exposing them to dangers and depriving them of education, income opportunities, and rest.<sup>64</sup> Women and children, often the last to migrate during crises, also face increased health risks from environmental disasters like oil spills, further exacerbating their vulnerability.<sup>65</sup> This not only exposes them to risks but also limits their opportunities for safety, education, income generation, and rest.<sup>66</sup> Thus, patriarchal systems where men dominate decision-making, women are frequently excluded from political and socio-economic discussions, leaving them particularly vulnerable.

In the event of an oil spill in Lake Malawi, women—who serve as primary caregivers and rely on the lake for domestic needs—would face the greatest hardships, including increased responsibilities and health risks.<sup>67</sup> Thus, racial capitalocene exposes the harm inflicted by profit-driven, neoliberal multinational corporations, supported by corrupt postcolonial elites. These forces perpetuate the exploitation and marginalization of Black communities, as evident in regions such

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> I will steer clear of engaging in scholarly debates surrounding site-specific and socially engaged art, as my analysis prioritizes the collective's approach to creating and representing their work. This focus aligns with and supports my broader arguments drawn from material feminisms which touches upon the concept of the commons, as well.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 44-45

<sup>62</sup> Massa Lemu, "Creativity of Practice as Re-existence: Mowoso, iQhiya and Ozhopé," *FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism*, no. 17 (2020), accessed January 9th 2025 (cf. [link](#)) See also Sylvia Wynter, "1492: A New World View," in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View*, ed. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 6-57

<sup>63</sup> Lemu and Ngwira, *Row: a thinkivist art intervention*, 44 (n. 74).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

as Cabinda, Angola; the Niger Delta, Nigeria; and Kayelekela and Mwabulambo in Karonga, Malawi.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, according to the artist, *Row* focuses on “propositions rather than solutions,” aligning with Kayla Anderson’s description of “thinkivist as opposed to activist” art, which “depicts ‘movements of mind’ rather than calls to action”.<sup>69</sup> This approach encourages radical imaginings, inviting audiences to rethink development, political and social structures, and humanity’s relationship to the environment. Thus, in considering these positions, the artist frames these communal practices through his concept of “biopolitical collectivism,” which he defines as socially engaged African art that moves away from the individualist production of commodified objects toward empowering collective subjectivities.<sup>70</sup> Drawing on Hardt and Negri’s Foucauldian theorization of biopolitics as life-affirming practices resisting capitalist biopower, Lemu situates *Row* within a tradition of collectivist African art exemplified by groups such as Gugulective and iQhiya in South Africa and Huit Facettes in Senegal. These practices critique global capitalism whilst centering life-politics and communal art-making. Within this, Ozhopé adopts biopolitical collectivism to foster communities that prioritize collaborative creativity and collective thinking with a powerful counterpoint to dispossession and environmental degradation.

### 6.7 From Collectives to the Commons: A Shifting Focus

I believe the commons, though not novel, deserves renewed vitality within contemporary art discourse, particularly when examined through the lens of *Row* and the practice of Ozhopé. Here, the commons extend beyond their traditional definitions of shared resources or governance structures and emerge as a framework that encompasses aesthetics and catalytic potential, contributing richly to contemporary artistic and curatorial practices. The commons, in its general sense, refers to the shared and equitable accessibility of natural resources, where ownership and responsibility are distributed among all members of a community.<sup>71</sup> In its traditional sense, the commons originated in England, referring to shared lands where communities collectively held specific rights and responsibilities.<sup>72</sup> Over time, however, the concept has undergone some changes, particularly in contemporary discourse where theorists expanded its meaning beyond physical resources to encompass shared practices of governance and cooperation. Hardt and Negri, in their trilogy of books following *Empire* and *multitude*, further develop the concept of the commons as a central framework for understanding collective forms of life.<sup>73</sup> They explain how neoliberal governments have worked to privatize the commons, turning things like cultural products, information, ideas, and even animal and plant species into private property. They argue, along with many others, that this privatization must be resisted. However, they mention, most people assume that the only alternative to private ownership is public own-

<sup>68</sup> *ibid*, 44.

<sup>69</sup> Kayla Anderson, “Ethics, Ecology, and the Future: Art and Design Face the Anthropocene,” *Leonardo* 48, no. 4 (2015): 338–347.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 50–52.

<sup>71</sup> Álvaro Carvajal Castro, “Early Medieval Commons? Or How the History of Early Medieval Europe Could Benefit from a Necessary Conversation,” *International Journal of the Commons* 15, no. 1 (2021): 338–353.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>73</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), vii–xiv.

ership, controlled by governments. This assumption ignores the importance and potential of the commons, treating it as if it no longer exists. They describe the commons as,

“First of all, the common wealth of the material world—the air, the water, the fruits of the soil, and all nature’s bounty—which in classic European political texts is often claimed to be the inheritance of humanity as a whole, to be shared together.”<sup>74</sup>

Additionally, they emphasize “those results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production, such as knowledge, languages, codes, information, affects, and so forth.”<sup>75</sup> For this analysis, however, I approach the concept of immateriality as encompassing knowledge, emotions, communication, and language—intangible yet shared and inherited elements within communities in a society. In indigenous traditions and cultures, for example, oral transmissions and storytelling practices are passed down through generations, reflecting knowledge that is grounded in lived experiences and connected to the local environment. In the realm of contemporary art, I see this notion of immateriality reflected in socially engaged art practices that prioritize dialogues, performative, collaboration and participation.<sup>76</sup> I also consider forms of labor, such as the reproductive labor of women—caregiving, domestic work, and nurturing—as part of this. These overlooked and undervalued forms of work, whilst invisible in many contexts, hold cultural and social importance as immaterial labor.

This understanding is furthered through a feminist lens, particularly in discussions of reproductive labor. Silvia Federici reimagines the commons as spaces that reclaim and give value to reproductive work—labor associated with caregiving, domestic sustenance, and the fundamental maintenance of life.<sup>77</sup> For example, Federici particularly notes that in Africa, where women produce 80% of the food consumed, their resistance manifests in actions such as reclaiming public lands for subsistence farming. In the 1990s, as food prices rose in many African cities, women appropriated urban plots—planting crops like corn, beans, and cassava along roadsides, in parks, and near railways.<sup>78</sup> These examples lead me to reflect on how women’s reproductive labor is central to the concept of the commons in Africa. I align with David Bollier’s view that the discourse of the commons is particularly relevant and I argue that it is key to understanding Ozhopé’s practice. Bollier states that the commons provide a framework for making moral and political claims that are ignored or suppressed by conventional policy discourse.<sup>79</sup> He further states that by adopting the concepts and logic of the commons, individuals and communities can recognize their shared affinities and collective goals, forming a new cohort of commoners.

Elsewhere, the commons is increasingly applied to spaces with shared or overlapping governance, such as the polar regions, international waters of the ocean, and outer space.<sup>80</sup> These areas, though inherently interconnected, exist beyond clear jurisdictional authority, leading to contested governance of their resources and ecosystems.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, viii.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, viii.

<sup>76</sup> See Grant Kester, a leading scholar in socially engaged art, who examines the ways socially engaged art fosters dialogue, strengthens relationships, and opens spaces for collective action and reflection. He emphasizes a shift from the traditional view of art as a finished product crafted by the artist for an audience to a more dynamic understanding of art as a collaborative and reciprocal process of creative labor in Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). Also see Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>77</sup> Federici emphasizes how these forms of labor, exploited and invisibilized within capitalist structures, are essential to the commons as spaces of collective resistance and solidarity. She challenges the patriarchal systems that undervalue such labor and reframes the commons as transformative spaces—where care and collective power actively confront and resist the dual forces of capitalism and patriarchy. Federici underscores the critical role of women in resisting exploitation and safeguarding communal ways of life throughout history. During the early phase of capitalist development, women opposed land enclosures in England and the “New World,” defending communal cultures targeted by colonial powers. Federici connects these acts of resistance to systemic violence, noting the witch hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries as one of history’s most brutal campaigns against women. Silvia Federici, “Feminism and the Politics of the Commons,” in *Former West: Art and the Contemporary After 1989*, ed. Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 380-384.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 384.

<sup>79</sup> David Bollier, “Commoning as a Transformative Social Paradigm,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Transformative Global Studies*, ed. S. A. Hamed Housseini et al. (London: Routledge, 2020), accessed February 8 2025 (cf. [link](#)) Also refer to Johannes Euler, “Conceptualizing the Commons: Moving Beyond the Goods-based Definition by Introducing the Social Practices of Commoning as Vital Determinant,” *Ecological Economics* 143 (January 2018): 10-16, accessed February 25, 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>80</sup> Guy Standing, *The Blue Commons: Rescuing the Economy of the Sea* (London: Penguin Books, 2022), 103-144.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

Lake Malawi serves as a pertinent example of these complexities. Shared by Malawi, Tanzania, and Mozambique, the lake has long been a site of disputes over territorial boundaries and resource access, raising critical questions about how such interconnected ecologies might be conceived and governed.<sup>82</sup> Whilst legal frameworks aim to delineate jurisdiction over specific portions of the lake, these disputes expose gray areas where boundaries remain unclear, and competing claims create challenges for equitable management.<sup>83</sup> My view is that these ambiguities underscore the need to rethink governance frameworks for ecosystems like Lake Malawi, moving beyond rigid national boundaries toward a more collaborative, shared responsibility for managing interconnected spaces and resources.

As I narrow it to these theories, in contemporary art, whilst the commons and collectives may appear similar and difficult to distinguish, some key dissimilarities emerge upon closer examination. The commons broadly emphasizes shared resources based on equitable participation and access, extending beyond humans to include non-human elements and ecosystems. In contrast, collectives typically center around a specific shared vision or purpose, driven by deliberate collaboration among individuals united by common goals. These distinctions suggest that whilst both concepts involve collaboration and shared efforts, the commons operates in a more open and inclusive sense, addressing broader relational dynamics, whereas collectives tend to function as more focused, goal-oriented entities. This difference allows for unique possibilities in how resources and agency are distributed and enacted within each framework.

The commons, when extended to contemporary art, reveals a paradox, from my point of view. Artworks are considered as objects of exchange, inscribed with monetary value and bound to the logic of commodification. Yet, amidst this, some artists and collectives challenge these constraints (as seen in Gugulective and Ozhopé's practices). Through collaborative and participatory work, Hardt and Negri's vision of the commons resonates here, where the material and immaterial intertwine—natural resources meet intangible cooperation, and shared labor fosters a sense of collective care. In my view, Federici's insights also align by recognizing how gender and race are integral to the commons, reflecting the vested interests of such marginalized groups in preserving and sustaining such communal practices. Applied to contemporary art, the commons takes shape through public spaces as sites of production and social labor, through collaborative communication. As exemplified in Ozhopé's *Row*, the commons in art prioritizes the voices of those with the most at stake—fishing communities, children and women of Malawi—who assert their self-determination and representation. In this context, in my view, the creation and presentation of artworks become acts of maintaining and reimagining the commons, challenging systems of exclusion and extraction.

With the commons, this creates a system of co-creation, where au-

<sup>82</sup> Lemu and Ngwira, *Row: a thinkivist art intervention*, n. 74.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

thorship also becomes a collective and intricate process rather than the sole responsibility of an individual or the artist. By positioning the artwork itself as a co-creation, the commons aligns with *Row*. What is particularly relevant here is how *Row* highlights the sharing of resources and the relationships that emerge from these interactions. I also interpret that the commons extends beyond human experience to include the non-human, considering embodied and active agencies within the broader ecosystem. This allows for a decentralized and rhizomatic understanding of relationships, where human and non-human entities are relational and each holds potential agency. In this way, the commons in *Row* prompts us to think about how art, community, and environment intersect in ways that are fluid and inclusive of shared existence. To examine *Row* through the commons, I focus on three key criteria: site, authorship, and material conditions. These elements are essential in understanding how the commons operates within the project, whether in terms of its socio-political and economic dimensions or the physical materials and artworks it engages with.



Figure 6.4: *Row* (2017). A person in a suit with a paddle on the shores of Lake Malawi, shot in four frames. Location at Mchemba village in Mangochi, Malawi. Image credits © Ozhopé Collective

## 6.8 A Commons: Site, Authorship and Material Context in *Row*

I demonstrate commons through three artworks, one of which is *Row* (2017) (which shares the same title as the main project title), an on-site performance in Mchemba village, Mangochi, Malawi, performed by a member of the collective. This is the first iteration of the *Row* project (Fig. 6.4). In this work, the performer, dressed in a gray suit, holds a paddle and makes repetitive whipping gestures in the water. The video documentation of the performance shows the figure emphasizing two key Chichewa words: *eya* (meaning “yes”) and *ayi* (meaning “no”).<sup>84</sup> These gestures symbolize the opposing

<sup>84</sup> *ibid*, 47.







Figure 6.5: *Loud Mouth* (2018). A person in a suit and mask, inside of the dugout canoe, at the shores of Lake Malawi. Location at the Senga Bay, Salima district of Malawi. Image credits © Ozhopé Collective



Figure 6.6: *Catch* (2018). A group of young children in vintage Russian military gas mask on the shores of Lake Malawi. Location Senga Bay, Salima district of Malawi. Image credits © Ozhopé Collective

stances of Malawi and Tanzania in their dispute over the ownership of Lake Malawi, turning the act into a commentary on the absurdity of the conflict.<sup>85</sup> Lemu interprets this performance as a critique of what he calls the “patois bourgeoisie,” or the postcolonial African elites who, in his words, act as local agents of neocolonialism, colluding with Western multinational corporations to exploit African resources.<sup>86</sup> The second iteration is the artwork *Loud Mouth* (2018) which takes place at the shores of Lake Malawi at the Senga Bay, Salima district of Malawi (Fig. 6.5). In this artwork, a performer dressed in a suit and wearing a large mask is positioned inside the body of a canoe, performing a dance inspired by the *Gule Wamkulu* tradition.<sup>87</sup> This performance is a bricolage that weaves together elements of *Gule Wamkulu*, fishing practices of the region.<sup>88</sup>

In *Row* (2017) (fig. 6.4) and *Loud Mouth* (2018) (fig. 6.5), the depiction of authorities clad in suits becomes emblematic of a power structure weighed down by greed and control, embodying a stark disjunction between governance and communal stewardship. The ludicrous of the conflict lies not only in its overt entanglement with territorial demarcations but also in the very nature of these disputes over Lake Malawi—a shared commons rendered contentious through artificially imposed boundaries. These lines, inscribed upon the water’s expanse, attempt to delineate ownership in a way that undermines the interconnectedness of the lake’s ecology and the communities that depend on it. This tension is exacerbated by the looming prospect of oil drilling, a specter that transforms the lake into a site of extractive potential rather than one of sustenance and shared heritage. This highlights the role of decision-makers, often local chiefs and heads, who become entangled in neoliberal diplomacies and cross-border disputes. In cases like this, their positions are frequently influenced by global forces and external pressures, implicating them in decisions that prioritize extractive interests over the well-being of the communities they represent.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Refer to M. Lemu, “Laughing at the Patois Bourgeoisie,” Autonomous Agency, July 4, 2018, accessed February 8 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*, 49. *Gule Wamkulu*, a ceremonial dance in the Chewa ethnic group, is traditionally performed during significant events such as the installation of new chiefs, weddings, and funerals.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, 49.

In the artwork *Catch* (2018) (Fig. 6.6), which took place in Senga Bay, Salima district, Malawi, children from the area became an integral part of the performance. The scene is a post-apocalyptic world, where children, adorned in vintage Russian military masks acquired for the performance, interact with a dugout canoe, an object that feels alien to them.<sup>89</sup> In the performance, the children surround the canoe, wrestling with each other as they attempt to steer it.<sup>90</sup> I perceive that this artwork serves as a poignant commentary on the dual disappearance unfolding in the region. Alongside the physical decline of the dugout canoe, driven by ecological degradation and changing economic practices, there is also a symbolic loss—the disappearance of storytelling and traditions associated with the canoe. The children’s unfamiliarity with the dugout canoe reflects how a post-apocalyptic world shaped by environmental destruction and cultural disconnection robs younger generations of their local inheritance. The dystopia of this reality is brought to the forefront, underscoring the impact of ecological and cultural erosion on both people and their shared heritage. The children, as inheritors of the lake’s ecology and stewards of its future, embody the intergenerational stakes of its preservation. Yet, decisions such as oil drilling fracture this trajectory, undermining their rights to both the present and the future by stripping them of their consent and robbing them of their capacity to shape their destiny. The Collective’s inclusion of children as co-authors in their work poignantly shows the ethical dimensions of shared heritage. This approach not only situates children as integral to the narrative of the lake but also challenges paradigms of ownership and governance. This act of inclusion becomes a radical statement about the commons, recasting it as a relational and multigenerational space where ecological and cultural heritage is negotiated and protected against the extractive logics of neoliberalism.

*Row* is not the first Malawian art project to feature the canoe as a central motif, as paintings, photographic images, and sculptural objects incorporating canoes have a long tradition in Malawian art.<sup>91</sup> *Row* emphasizes the materiality and transformation of the canoe over time. Due to prolonged exposure to the elements and repeated repairs, the canoe’s surface becomes layered with materials such as paint, tar, felt, metal, nails, and plastic.<sup>92</sup> These materials, used to hold the decaying wood together, seem to replace the original structure, turning the canoe into an archive of cultural and material evolutions.<sup>93</sup> Layers on the canoe—such as USAID oil tin cans, Mozambique-imported vegetable oil jelly cans, tar from burnt tires, and reused felt from colonial-era blankets—reflect the politics of humanitarian aid, cross-border trade, asymmetrical globalization, and the local culture of resourcefulness.<sup>94</sup> Personal inscriptions, such as names, proverbs, and sayings, further add textual and symbolic depth to the canoe, transforming it into a complex artifact that holds personal and collective histories<sup>95</sup>. Whilst these layers bring beauty and vibrancy to the canoe, *Row* avoids fetishizing it.<sup>96</sup>

Centered on the dugout canoe, the project emphasizes not only its

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>92</sup> Lemu and Ngwira, *Row: a thinkivist art intervention*, 41-42 (n. 74).

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 41-42.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 41-42.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 41-42.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 51.

slow disappearance but also the processes of its repair. In my view, authorship in *Row* dissolves from being an individual endeavor into a collective practice, breaking down barriers between humans and non-humans. I argue it is essential to dismantle the binaries of nature and culture. By rejecting this separation, we observe how nature and culture continuously shape and inform one another in fluid and intricate ways. I reflect from Haraway who extends her idea of kinship by rejecting rigid boundaries and emphasizing the “becoming-with” of all beings.<sup>97</sup> In the context of climate change and ecological destruction, she highlights the connections between humans and non-humans, showing how meanings, materials, and their relationships emerge together.<sup>98</sup> I privilege the dugout canoe as a vivid example of this interplay. The dugout canoe transcends its function as a practical tool to become a “living artifact” or “life-object” (as Lemu calls it) of shared heritage and collective care. As it is repaired, and eventually left to disintegrate on the shore (something intentional by the members once the artwork is made and later documented)<sup>99</sup>, it symbolizes impermanence—a direct confrontation of how resources, on one hand, defy commodification, and on the other, are recast back into nature to deteriorate and take on a new form of life. This process allows for it to in the “becoming-with” all beings, an integral part of the surrounding ecology and overall cycle of biopolitical life.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Supra at 378.

Further, the dugout canoe can be read through the lens of Jane Bennett’s concept of *thing-power*, where she explores the idea that objects themselves possess an intrinsic vitality and agency.<sup>100</sup> Bennett describes *thing-power* as the ability of an object to persist and exert influence within a network of relationships, noting how it “commands attention, exudes a kind of dignity, provokes poetry, and inspires fear.”<sup>101</sup> She observes ordinary items—like tree pollen pods, a dead rat, plastic glove or bottle cap—not as passive or discarded but as charged with energy, connected to a broader assemblage of life. This assemblage frames objects and humans as interdependent, neither overshadowing the other. Bennett argues that objects are not brought to life through human attention but possess an inherent liveliness that we, as observers, engage with.

<sup>100</sup> Jane Bennett, “The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter,” *Political Theory* 32, no. 3 (June 2004): 347-372, accessed February 8 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 350.

What Bennett reveals is the intricate negotiation between subject and object. Traditionally, humans are viewed as subjects—observers who grant liveliness to the objects around them upon our gaze and observation. However, Bennett challenges this anthropocentric perspective, complicating the boundaries between subject and object. Bennett argues that objects possess the capacity to “animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle,” influencing our network of relationships in meaningful ways.<sup>102</sup> Importantly, Bennett does not limit this vitality to a fixed biological or physical state; rather, she frames it as part of ongoing processes and transformations—a state of flux. Bennett explains agency as something shared among both human and nonhuman things, which she calls distributed agency. She says, “When humans act they do not exercise exclusively human powers, but express and engage a variety of other actants, including

<sup>102</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 6.

food, micro-organisms, minerals, artefacts, sounds, bio- and other technologies."<sup>103</sup> In this view, the distinction between subject and object dissolves entirely.

To interpret the dugout canoe from the artworks from the collective through Bennett's *thing-power*, the canoe is reframed as more than just a cultural artifact, recognizing it as a vessel of knowledge and transformation with its own vitality. Frequently, objects like the canoe are exoticized through Western-centric lens, to symbols of cultural identity. Yet Bennett's *thing-power* reveals the physical, magical, material, and immaterial dimensions of such objects. These layers of texture represent histories and meanings that cannot be fully accessed or reduced to simple narratives. The canoe, then, carries a significance, standing as a repository of stories and processes that connect materiality with cultural and ecological contexts. I argue further that the canoe does not need to be perceived merely as an artifact within the creation of this art or the collective's practice. It is far more embedded within the circularity of the ecology and politics in which it already exists. Thus, the canoe stands on its own, possessing agency through its intrinsic vitality—whether as buoyant wood that serves as a vessel, an artwork, or as it rests abandoned on the shores much after the artwork has been created. The textured surfaces, such as paint, tar, nails, or oil, plastic gradually dissolve back into the lake's ecology. This ongoing motion reveals that the canoe is in a state of constant transformation, shaped by human interference or/and left to nature's course.

If we take Bennett's view of human and non-human relations influencing one another, it invites a rethinking of political life and community dynamics as well. Bennett's *thing-power* invites us to imagine a political and communal life where the boundaries between human and non-human are blurred, fostering a politics of coexistence. I reflect that this extends to an idea of a commons "assemblage", where decision-making about shared resources must include the "resources" themselves—not merely as tools for human utility, but as active agents shaping the world. Here, Bennett describes assemblages: "Assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts."<sup>104</sup> Her description of assemblages are dense. She explains that assemblages are made up of different bodies that come together, interact, and form something larger than their parts.<sup>105</sup> She further notes they come into being and eventually break apart, existing only in specific times and places.<sup>106</sup> Whilst the individual parts might have a limited lifespan, the assemblage itself can go beyond those limits, always changing and adapting.<sup>107</sup> The effects of these assemblages are often unexpected and not pre-planned, showing how agency is unpredictable and relational.<sup>108</sup> If we take Bennett's view of human and non-human relations influencing one another, then what are the implications for biopolitical life and for communities? Applied to the dugout canoe and Lemu's ideas, we see this transferred in Ozhopé practice.

Bennett's idea of assemblages and agency for human and non-

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 6. Also refer to Bennett's description of "an actant is a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events" on page viii.

<sup>104</sup> Supra at 475, 23.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

human relations is further explored in the collective's participation in the La Becque Residency (Switzerland), in their artwork titled *A Thousand Ways to Look at the Dugout Canoe* (2023) (fig. 6.7). The collective adapted their practice to a new context by finding and revitalizing an old boat from Lake Geneva. The boat became a sculptural reimagining of a dugout canoe, reflecting the specific ecological and historical narratives of the site. Unlike the lively communal interactions with fisherfolk in Malawi, the residency's quieter environment revealed a more solitary relationship to the lake. I observe how the collective's work was also influenced by learning about the local trauma of Lake Geneva's past, when it was polluted with untreated wastewater.<sup>109</sup> This history moved them to weave the story of ecological harm and recovery into their practice, using local materials like an abandoned boat on the shore, along with metal, tools, wood, and fishing nets.

<sup>109</sup> Supra at 378.

The collective's intervention concluded with the creation of scrolls that echoed the storytelling and aesthetic traditions of Malawi's fisherfolk. (Fig. 6.8) These scrolls invited new stories, connections, and perspectives, mapping narratives across geographies. I argue that this approach reframes the commons as a collaborative, evolving process of memory and adaptation. What makes the commons truly evolve, however, are the alliances they foster—alliances shaped by the interactions of communities and ecologies. These alliances act as a way of mapping across geographies, mirroring the transnational operations of neoliberalism but repurposed to resist its extractive logics. In this sense, the artifacts of these alliances—what I perceive as scrolls that tell layered stories—come together as powerful acts of resistance, telling of the narratives of place and relations.

They engaged the local community during their process. By sharing their work and making it accessible, they wove Malawian traditions and cultures into their practice, carrying stories and energy from there into this residency. This allowed for new and diverse encounters between the collective, the public, and the local context, enriching the dialogue and extending the reach of their work. In doing so, the collective also sought to create new works along the way, such as the scrolls and the repurposing of the abandoned boat. This demonstrates that their practice is an ongoing process, constantly reflecting on concerns in new ways and imagining and realizing artworks that respond to these reflections. More importantly, the alliances they foster and nurture are vital for connecting to local realities whilst simultaneously drawing global attention to these issues across diverse artistic and public spheres. Thus, in this way, I see the notion of alliances aligning with my understanding of the commons. It resides in the shared imagination and vision of the collective, to sustainably practice their art-making, to reimagine and adapt their methods whilst generating new ideas that continue to address the issues at hand.

As fish is central to Malawian diet, in (fig. 6.9), this act of sharing—of both nourishment and space—transcends its surface simplicity,



Figure 6.7: A Thousand Ways to see the Dugout Canoe at Lake Geneva. La Becque Residency (Switzerland). 2023. Image credits © Ozhopé Collective



Figure 6.8: Ozhopé scrolls: A Thousand Ways to see the Dugout Canoe at Lake Geneva. La Becque Residency (Switzerland). 2023. Image credits © Ozhopé Collective



Figure 6.9: Members of the collective sharing *nsima* and roast fish. 2018. Image credits © Ozhopé Collective

embodying conviviality. It is not merely symbolic sustenance but an intellectual exchange, a moment of shared reflection where ideas and cultural practices intertwine and are collectively sustained. This image and the thought evokes the idea of the commons, capturing a moment of harmony and sharing as individuals collectively share a meal after a hard day's work. This harmony, I believe, also translates into resistance to the pervasive images and narratives of ecological degradation that dominate depictions of contemporary Malawi. The public sphere, a composition of daily activities and interactions within the ever-changing tides of Lake Malawi, becomes the site where life itself unfolds. I see the collective's work to be site-specific art, in my interpretation, the concept of site holds a distinct and specific force rather than a generalized meaning.<sup>110</sup> However, this site is increasingly subject to invisible regulations and ownership under the stark realities of neoliberal policies, leaving communities and the public at large vulnerable to exploitation. Thus, I argue that it is strongly site-specific in the treatment of Ozhopé's *Row*. In their practice, resistance at the site emerges as a response to this encroachment, addressing not just the physical disappearance of resources but the erosion of ethics and human sensitivities shaped by lived experiences and subjectivities. This prompts a critical question: when it comes to resources for human use, who has the power to decide? Who gets a share, and how is it demanded, distributed, and sustained in a way that is fair and equitable? In my view, the act of sharing a plate of fish in the image is a poignant commentary on larger questions about resource distribution, particularly fisheries or fossil fuels like oil, or rare earth minerals and their potential to sustain as "commons goods". How do local communities, who are intricately connected to these resources, gain a genuine stake in their own local wealth? If these communities remain excluded from decision-making processes—especially when transparency is increasingly undermined—how can they truly benefit? How can they achieve the harmony and nourishment embodied in that shared plate of fish that the lake and ecology so provides them?

Ozhopé's practices address these pressing questions—though not entirely resolving them. They have not seen a significant shift in power dynamics or decision-making as a result of their interventions.<sup>111</sup> However, responses of local people have been far more meaningful. Some individuals reacted with curiosity, others with indifference, and still others with a deeper level of engagement.<sup>112</sup> Those involved in the *Row* project—both people and landscape—form a unique set of relationships that are integral to the artwork itself. The participants, the physical materials, and the surrounding environment were privy to the project in real-time, whilst we, as observers, rely on its latter documentation. Even so, at the heart of *Row* lies its collaborative and participatory nature, which draws on the intricate relations between human and non-human entities.

<sup>110</sup> I build on my earlier discussion of site-specific art in the previous chapter, drawing from Miwon Kwon's analysis, refer to Kwon, *One Place After Another*, n. 318.

<sup>111</sup> *Supra* at 378.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

## 6.9 Curating as Commoning

Aside from artistic production, what is the role of curating, here? Can it potentially represent a commons, in this case? Or can curating be considered as commoning? I explore how Ozhopé curates their work and empowers both their artworks and subjects in their artworks. From my analysis of the La Becque residency (Switzerland), Onassis AiR residency (Greece) and *Undulating Currents*, these three contexts have valuable insights into their curatorial strategies. In (fig. 6.10, 6.11, 6.12) suggests that each context reflects distinct curatorial approaches, shaped by the spatiality of the exhibition and the specific objectives of the collective. Rather than concentrating solely on the presentation and display of the artworks within these spaces, my focus shifts toward the question of representation: how does the collective seek to construct and hold its image for viewership? What forms of representation are prioritized, and how do these align with their curatorial vision? These questions underpin my analysis, aiming to understand the ways in which the collective navigates the relationship between their work, their representation, and their engagement with viewership.

Ozhopé, at La Becque (Switzerland) and Onassis Residencies (Greece), as well as through its inclusion in *Undulating Currents*, has presented its work across diverse contexts, each marked by distinct curatorial approaches. At La Becque, the work engaged the shores of Lake Geneva in its site-specific form, connected to the surrounding environment (fig. 6.7). Transitioning indoors, the scrolls were mounted on gallery walls, whilst the boat occupied a central position (fig. 6.10). At the Onassis Residency, the scrolls, entwined with fishnets, were displayed horizontally on tables, accompanied by a screening of *Row* (2017) as a backdrop (fig. 6.12). The horizontal display, with scrolls laid flat, evokes a research-driven or archival approach, offering an engagement with the materials. With the co-curator Pakathi for *Undulating Currents* (2023), from the outset, the collective was actively involved in shaping the curatorial direction.

From curating the collective's work in our exhibition, I observed a genuine interest from the collective in contributing to these curatorial discussions. During our conversations, it became clear that incorporating a research presentation on Ozhopé's art-making and research process within the exhibition could have offered viewers valuable insight into their practice. However, due to budget constraints, we opted for a more minimal approach, focusing on presenting *Row* in a pared-down yet impactful way. With *Undulating Currents*, the horizontal arrangement intentionally simulates the fluidity of water, reinforcing the thematic ties to movement, as well as, reinforcing an archival-like display (fig. 6.11). This also addresses a gap in my earlier reference to Mbembe's critique of the thinness of archives.<sup>113</sup> The lack of representation, stemming from insufficient archival material about the region and local contexts, underscores the necessity of conducting and enabling field research. For curating, this becomes

<sup>113</sup> Supra at 388.

particularly significant, as it allows for the incorporation of nuanced, contextually rich narratives and provides deeper, more equitable representations. Thus, each curatorial choice amplifies specific dimensions of the work, inviting nuanced reflections shaped by the unique spatial and conceptual frameworks of each setting.

Concerning representation, further, Dorothee Richter highlights the need to distinguish between “curating as representational” and curating as commoning.<sup>114</sup> She argues that curating based on the commons requires shared decision-making and equitable distribution of cultural capital and authorship. For Richter, the exhibition space—or even the institution itself—must become “(temporarily) appropriated by a commoner community,” facilitating ongoing discussions and negotiations.<sup>115</sup> Exemplary collectives such as Ruan-grupa from Indonesia and Raqs Media Collective from India, both of which embody the interplay between curating and the commons.

In the case of Ozhopé, I do not situate them as curators in the traditional sense, nor do I frame their practice as one actively seeking curatorial roles within institutional or formalized spaces. But Ozhopé operates as a relatively self-sustained entity, that is still in its formative stages as a collective yet demonstrating a deliberate and evolving engagement with curatorial direction. This is particularly evident in the residencies they participated in, where their interest in shaping representation and fostering critical dialogues is apparent. The residencies allowed the collective to explore different ways of creating assemblages and representations, which sprang from their project *Row*. In the context of the Onassis Residency (Greece), the collective explored an approach to working with the ocean that emphasized relational affinities between distant waters. Noting parallels between Lake Malawi and the Mediterranean, they investigated the lived realities of local fisherfolk communities, uncovering shared struggles shaped by pollution, environmental degradation, and precarious livelihoods. Through site-specific research, they gathered material traces of these conditions, incorporating found objects such as fishing nets into their artistic practice. This culminated in the creation of scrolls—artifacts that not only materialized these dialogues but also forged alliances between these distinct yet interconnected aquatic geographies. By drawing such parallels, the collective underscored how these challenges, though embedded in local contexts, resonate as part of a broader global condition.

Ultimately, I argue that this work would benefit from a more defined curatorial direction that critically engages with questions of authorship and representation, whilst placing greater emphasis on the collective’s position toward shared responsibility. Such an approach could also more fully incorporate the role of non-human actors, acknowledging their agency and involvement. Therefore, I propose that human and non-human entities become co-authors, I also notice that for the collective, the focus is not on how the work was made but on the shared co-authorship and representation in the artworks between the collective and the communities involved. By not provid-

<sup>114</sup> Dorothee Richter, “The Curatorial Commons: A Paradigm Shift,” *On Curating*, no. 54 (2023), accessed February 8 2025 (cf. [link](#))

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

ing these outright details, the collective ensures that the control over representation stays with the communities and the collective itself, allowing them to shape how their image and artwork are viewed by outsiders. This approach creates a negotiation between the site, the representational aspect of the work, and the empowerment of the communities who contribute to it. By centering co-authorship and shared agency, the work avoids extractive forms of representation, such as those I outlined, instead encouraging a dialogue built on empowerment and self-representation. Because we, as observers—or even through the archiving of behind-the-scenes processes—cannot discern who contributed what, or the specific roles played by the members, the community, or even the nonhuman entities themselves, our focus shifts to the centrality of the outcome. This reliance on the shared and co-authorship in creating the work allows us to engage more comfortably with the collective nature of the process, rather than isolating individual contributions. This approach also dismantles the traditional hierarchies between curator, curating, artist, and artistic intervention, effectively collapsing these categories as well. This is well demonstrated in the residencies in which the collective participated, which allowed them to curate and contextualise their artworks within an exhibition space or the local surrounding area as site-specific work.

But within this alliance are also the dugout canoe and the lake itself, which, I argue, hold an intrinsic control over their representation within the image. It is not solely the human collective or communities that shape this representation; rather, the non-human entities actively influence its composition and meaning. For example, the scrolls emerge as a force of these relations, imbibing the technique and aesthetics of Malawian fishing communities and ecologies that have shaped them. These elements co-author and shape the artwork, creating a collaborative interplay. When I asked Lemu whether he considered non-humans as co-authors in the artistic process, he reflected:

“Not really. Though we recognize the potency that the objects we use have, and the meanings that they possess, we have not really seriously considered them as co-authors in the artistic process. We have recognized how the lake as a space, and time, shape the work. But we have not really counted them as co-authors.”<sup>116</sup>

This response reveals the evolving nature of the collective’s engagement with the non-human world, where objects and landscapes are acknowledged as influential and integral, even if not fully perceived as co-authors. It opens up further questions about the roles and agency of non-human entities in collaborative and participatory practices, urging us to rethink authorship and relationships within the broader framework of the commons. Thus, it somewhat triggers the notion of the commons, a form of world-building that is collectively sustained. As reflected in Lemu’s Malawian proverb, “Mutu umodzi siusenza denga” (one head cannot carry the roof), this shared effort distributes responsibility and agency across all par-

<sup>116</sup> Refer to my personal interview with Massa Lemu. 2024. Appendix 4.1.

ticipants.

### 6.10 *Re-imagining the Commons*

Reflected in this chapter, one begins to see how an artist's practice, conceptually and experimentally, influences and shapes the collective he is a part of, whilst being equally shaped by the collective itself. In considering the commons through the lens of contemporary art, and taking Ozhopé as a study, we can identify sustainable practices of communing and sharing that prioritize non-hierarchical dialogues. These practices encourage speculative, collective thinking toward alternative, imaginable futures. Contemporary art holds potential for human and non-human relations, showing new ways to reimagine coexistence and shared agency. This study also contributes to addressing a significant research gap in contemporary art by reflecting on the commons, combining with Bennett's *thing-power* as I have sought to do. Moreover, it is worthwhile to recognize the formative efforts of Ozhopé, as their practices emerge as vital seeds for reimagining sustainable and collaborative futures in contemporary art. Such endeavors show the evolving possibilities of art as a space for experimenting with the commons and fostering alternative paradigms.

Ozhopé's practice to some extent feels like a collective imagining of futures where equity and sustainability are not ideals but lived realities. Their work, woven through on-site collaboration and participation, appears in the presence of non-human entities, elevating them with agency and inviting us to see the world anew. By claiming space both in the public sphere and within the walls of art institutions, they provide a diverse field of vision of what it means to dream together, and to build a world that might hold all of us with care. However, I argue that their work could benefit from a more curatorial inquiry that draws greater emphasis on non-human agency, such as the presence of the lake and the dugout canoe itself which complicate notions of authorship and representation in exhibition spaces. Additionally, dedicating more space to their local experiences and research could better articulate how their practice speaks back to the specificities of place, especially after being circulated within global art contexts.



Figure 6.10: A Thousand Ways to see the Dugout Canoe, La Becque Residency, Switzerland (2023). Image credits © Ozhopé Collective



Figure 6.11: Row (2017) by Ozhopé Collective in *Undulating Currents: A Group Show*, Sala Terrena of University Gallery Heiligenkreuzhof, Vienna. November - December 2023. Photograph by © Brooklyn J. Pakathi



Figure 6.12: A Thousand Ways to see the Dugout Canoe at Onassis AiR Residency in Greece (2024). Image courtesy © Ozhopé Collective



## 7

### *Conclusion*

*Undulating Currents* functioned as an effective method for my research and as a critical tool to my findings on ocean relations. Through my curatorial practice, I relied on research which provided me with deeper and wider encounters with Black history and artistic practice, allowing me to witness firsthand how Black artists have been working at the intersections of queer, ecofeminist, and Indigenous knowledge to navigate the ocean. These intersections revealed that artistic practice was immersed in theoretical dialogues that bridged different ways of knowing and being, in personal positionality whilst simultaneously reflecting a broader collective vision. Beyond the act of curating, this experience also influenced my understanding of exhibitions from the perspective of an observer as well. It made me also realise the ways in which an exhibition unfolds—an evolving space of engagement and participation where interpretations and reflections of the themes at hand. They illuminated how an exhibition does not simply present knowledge but has the potential to connect underlying threads of theory, activate new ways of aesthetic strategies and expand on established narratives, which generates unexpected encounters with the viewers.

Thus, I find that curating can operate as a rigorous form of research, that allows for aesthetic as well as political concerns with eco-sensitive practices for the ocean to unfold within the space with public interactivity. It is a multimodal public tool which is not just about exhibiting artworks; it is about creating a structure through which knowledge is co-produced and is relational. Therefore, curating enables knowledge production that feels far more complete for this research. *Undulating Currents* also ultimately offered a curatorial terrain shaped by water and island-based logics—which turned the spatial structures of the gallery space into something far more immersive—this was a direct challenge to land-based knowledge that prioritizes land over sea, and to the regulatory and visual regimes that fragment and exploit oceanic space under the guise of such order which I essentially set out to critique in my research. The exhibition confronted the fragmentation of the ocean into governable zones, instead embracing the sea’s fluid, relational ontology—what Steinberg calls a “wet ontology.”<sup>1</sup> This allowed the space to become simulated just as the ocean, drawing viewers to experience feeling

<sup>1</sup> Philip E. Steinberg and Kimberley Peters, “Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume through Oceanic Thinking,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 33, no. 2 (2015): 248.

immersed and submerged with the thematics of the exhibition and the artworks. Ultimately, the exhibition rejects fixity that is reflected in all of the artists' artworks and in navigating the space itself. This research is also a critique of the structural hierarchies that persist in the art world which is how Black epistemology came to be framed for this thesis that elevates the knowledge and aesthetic techniques that Black artists within the exhibition are currently engaging with.

For the artists, Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley and Eburn Sodipo, the ocean is embodied, transforming it from economic and capitalist logic of maritime infrastructures, where they reflect with water and fluid ways of Black trans-led interventions. Their works address the erasure of Black trans histories, invoking Sharpe's notion of *the wake* to reclaim spaces marked by the ongoing violence on Black life.<sup>2</sup> By positioning the viewer within their perspectives, the artists create a space where trauma coexists with humor and playfulness. These strategies are deliberate acts of resistance that both reveal the weight of historical violence and illuminate the richness of Black trans experience. In doing so, their work expands on how we engage with ecological and human precarity, encouraging viewers to move beyond passive observation toward a more complex and embodied understanding.

<sup>2</sup> Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, n. 52.

Yet, based on my observations, the artists do not clearly take a critical stance on the digital mediums they use with respect to reclaiming of Black trans identities—even though those very tools are shaped by the same political systems their work seeks to challenge in the global art market. Therefore, in the context of broader debates around archives and counter-archives in contemporary art, this lack of reflection on the digital medium creates a gap. Whilst their work aims to build counter-archives for Black trans identities, it does not fully address how digital tools themselves can reinforce the same structures of control and erasure. For me, this remains a key weakness in their contributions. However, the nature of their works, in my view, is crucial not only for confronting erased Black trans histories but also for exposing how the afterlives of the Atlantic slave trade persist into the present, particularly under neoliberal conditions. Importantly, they reveal that these histories are not distant or disconnected—the violence of slavery and the exploitative logics of contemporary capitalism exist in close temporal and structural proximity to each other. The artists compel us to reckon with this continuity, leading us into the depths of historical memory whilst simultaneously illuminating its presence in the now. Their works are impactful precisely because it refuses to separate past from present, insisting instead on their entanglement.

Practices of artists Tabita Rezaire, Tshpiso Moropa, Ava Binta Giallo, and Minia Biabiany are rooted in island and water-based strategies that engage in non-linear narratives which counter colonial and Western knowledge systems. Drawing on ancestral traditions from South and East Africa and the Caribbean, their work enacts a form of care where it expands from feminist leanings, as it emerges through

their ecological sensibilities and the way the artists' relate to materials as living and responsive entities. Their practices embody care as a political and aesthetic method where the materials are bonded with. In their practices, it also suggests that through honoring the feminine cultures, the human body and also tied to labor politics, in its relations with the sea, it carries the scars of colonial legacies and migration whilst also embodying the force of life and creativity. Their works feel cyclical and replenishing, as a way of thinking-with ecology surrounding them, resulting in forms of knowledge that are capable of reimagining ethical relation on multiple scales: from the poetic and towards the planetary. However, their practices often exist in friction. Key moments that remain: Some of their work engages with the legacy of self-portraiture through digital tools, particularly in relation to Black women and queer identities, but do not address these representations fully within the global art economy. It is also unclear how their practices give back to the island communities or African ancestral traditions of resistance they seek to represent or uplift in their work. Additionally, in some other work, whilst their work moves toward the non-human and ecological themes these elements are engaged in, there is a noticeable reluctance in their work to present these gestures as part of a broader political will. These remain open critical issues that complicate the impact and positioning of their work in contemporary art.

But invoking Spivak, the planet is not something we can fully control, unlike the globe, which is a map of networks, and the planet is something we still do not fully understand, and this mystery and humility is important.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, thinking planetarily reminds us that we exist alongside other people, other species, and the environment itself, and that our relationships should be based on mutual respect. Instead of seeing the world as something we can organize and manage, *planetarity* invites us to recognize the unknown and the other, beyond human limits. It is a way of thinking that moves beyond just human concerns, considering the interconnectedness of all things. Therefore, Spivak's *planetarity* may be applied to these artists whose works encourage us to approach the world not with ownership or entitlement, but with curiosity as well as responsibility. As water is also a symptom of global capital and very much in the veins of this planet, Astrida Neimanis makes a striking point that sobers me about such artistic practices. I believe that water carries traces of others, shaping us in ways we may never fully grasp. It dissolves boundaries, reminding me that difference and connection are not opposites, but currents in motion. Neimanis, drawing from Spivak, reminds me that water is intimate yet vast, personal yet planetary—binding us to ecologies and responsibilities that stretch beyond the individual. Neimanis also mentions a hydrocommons, in which she alerts us:

"We are both sharing in an aqueous hydrocommons that connect us in really material ways, but we are differentiated through and as and by water as well."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 71-102.

<sup>4</sup> Neimanis, *We Are All at Sea: Practice, Ethics, and Poetics of Hydrocommons*, n. 121.

Therefore, hydrocommons can be a way beyond the binaries of self and the other. The practices of these artists are as I observe in thinking *planetarity* is as much about care and ethics and that we can open possibilities for ways of being to cultivate forms of responsibility and collective flourishing.

Thus, this idea of collectivity is something I observe in Malawi's Ozhopé Collective, where artistic practice moves beyond individual expression to embrace a collective form of imagining oceanic relations. Whilst individual artistic agency has in itself nuanced perspectives on the ocean, collective expression introduces another dimension—it is shaped by shared struggles of social entanglements and acts of solidarity. What does this mean in practice? I believe that through socially engaged and politically rooted artistic interventions: the collective, working in collaboration with Malawi's local fisherfolk communities, actively critiques and resists systemic violence—violence that manifests through neoliberal conditions in Malawi, where the state and industries operate in tandem to exploit natural resources, dictating their use and access. For the fisherfolk communities who depend on Lake Malawi for their livelihoods, especially women and children, this system of control creates deep vulnerabilities.

Yet, rather than positioning these communities solely as subjects of precarity, Ozhopé Collective's work highlights their agency—an agency embedded in cultural knowledge, vernacular practices, ancestral ties, and local material engagements. This suggests that resistance is not only political but also situated within the ways these communities interact with their environment, drawing from long-standing relationships with the lake and its ecological rhythms. Their agency emerges as an assemblage, in this sense, Ozhopé Collective's practice activated in recognising the terms of engagement, challenging exploitative systems, and amplifying alternative modes of living with and through oil and water. However, as artist Massa Lemu has noted, there is an inherent unknowability regarding the impact of the work and how it circulates among broader audiences. Whilst its reach suggests a certain influence, it could greatly benefit from a more robust curatorial intervention and supportive structures that critically situates and amplifies the research and narratives it gathers along the way. Such an approach could strengthen its connection to broader collective imaginaries, extending its relevance beyond Malawi whilst also ensuring that the work returns to and circulates meaningfully within its local context, where its presence could foster dialogue and reflection, leading to its further impact.

Finally, I have demonstrated how artists use their practices to de-center humans: they reclaim space, time, corporeal body, and voice, reflecting on the urgency of our contemporary moment and offering new ways of thinking about our relations with the ocean, thus, enabling human-ocean relations. In this way, I find that human and nonhuman relations are emerging but not entirely there yet. If one considers extractive practices to involve the removal of re-

sources from nature in ways that disrupt human and non-human relationships, with little to no regard for sustainability—whether for marginalized communities in the present, future generations, or even for the non-human entities themselves, then the counter would be to shift away from such extractivism is in the reviving of cultural connections that have been severed or suppressed. This thesis identifies the cultural absence of ocean epistemologies in dominant disciplines—especially law, science and geography which seem to influence national and international policies of the ocean—fields that still privilege control and management over relational and situated ways of knowing. That absence of cultural narratives for the ocean has been a driving force behind this work. This is where I see the artists I examined in this thesis and contemporary art playing a crucial role, to critically examine a space for ethical consideration, for imagining and facilitating alternative ways of relating to the environment, where reciprocal relations become central to our relations of the ocean. However, I remain cautious that I do not wish to flatten or unacknowledge so many other perspectives which I have not included in my study. I believe in alliances across natural worlds and us, and this is where I am curious to learn if a global commons model in creating a common ethics towards relations and responsibility to each other and to our environment mean anything at all for the blue economy, and whether contemporary art is showing signs to reflect this direction of a deeper study. Whilst there may be no complete answers and I remain cautious of its implementation, I am, however, indebted to the vibrant perspectives that bring this into focus and my own process of learning-with and making kin through it all.

I propose, perhaps, in water's fluidity, in its refusal to be contained, there is a lesson, a way forward, a way out in regard to ocean stewardship. In conclusion, thus, as this thesis navigates the works of the Black artists I examine, I consider their practices as forming a Black epistemology—that reconceptualizes ocean relations through their practices. Through this, I believe the thesis contributes to the field of blue humanities, apart from art history and curating. In doing so, it contributes to shaping ocean futures and reimagining ocean stewardship as a practice of relationality and decolonial possibility. Overall, this thesis is a proposition to rethink value: to consider how curatorial and artistic practices can propel paradigm shift away from extractive economies and toward epistemologies grounded in ethical and cultural responsibility. This attention to situated knowledge and relational exchange is ultimately what holds the potential for a true commons practice.



# Appendix A

## Appendix 1

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#### A.1 Appendix 1.1

December, 2024.

**A conversation in person, followed by email exchange with a viewer, Verena Frauenlob’s feedback for *Undulating Currents: A Group Show (2023)*, Sala Terrena of the University Gallery, University of Applied Arts Vienna.**

I am Verena Frauenlob, a master’s student at the University of Applied Arts Vienna, in the department of TransArts. During the winter semester 2023/24, I attended a course by Eva Kernbauer titled Anthropocene Temporalities. As part of this course, we visited the exhibition *Undulating Currents*. Mekhala provided us with a compelling guided tour through the space, offering deep insights into the theme, the artists, their works and the curatorial approach.

As I entered the exhibition space, I was immediately struck by the simple appearing yet profound design, particularly the horizontal division of the room. This left a lasting impression on me; in my memory, it feels as if it pulled me right into the depths of the exhibition’s concept. I found the way the various artistic positions and the accompanying literature were arranged within the space to be very thoughtful and refined. This design enabled me to emotionally immerse myself in the artistic works. Since engaging more deeply with the exhibition, my understanding has evolved.

At the time of my visit, I felt deeply moved. The works seemed to engage with a collective trauma in diverse ways—a trauma I couldn’t fully grasp then, but I am more aware of now. After visiting *Undulating Currents*, I felt motivated to delve further into this topic. Looking back, I realize this motivation has influenced me to read more about colonialism, explore art that incorporates decolonial practices, and even resume my own artistic work with water. The exhibition inspired and stimulated me in a state of openness. Through further

engagement with *Undulating Currents*, I've also become aware of the complexities within the different perspectives presented. Revisiting the exhibition, after spending the past year deepening my understanding of colonial structures and their connection to ecological crises, was incredibly valuable to me.

Currently, I am working on a binaural sound piece. Technically, the focus of this work lies in the audible differences between sounds above and below water. Thematically, both in my studies and personal life, I explore various approaches to water. Among other activities, I am attending a course by Elisabeth Knittelfelder at the University of Vienna titled *Reading for Water: From Hydrocolonialism to Mami Wata*. With Mekhala's permission, I gave a presentation on *Undulating Currents* in this course. The participants were impressed and moved by the artistic works. It was enjoyable for them to see modern art in various media that fit so well thematically into our course topic, as we primarily focus on literature, audio plays, and theater. This course, alongside the insights I've gained from it, the impressions left by the artistic works in the exhibition, and the exhibition's overarching concept, has enhanced my sensitivity toward water—what it means to me and what it can signify (for whom). I believe that engaging with *Undulating Currents* has helped me approach my own work on water with care and authenticity.

I was deeply impressed by the variety of media (photography, video games, sculptures, etc.) represented in the exhibition. Despite their sensitivity, the works exuded a certain playfulness, which I believe is their strength. *Undulating Currents* continues to resonate within me and has strengthened my interest in the broader context it inhabits. Its subtle, sensitive, and playful intensity was inspiring and impactful.

## A.2 Appendix 1.2

### December 2024

An interview between Mekhala Dave and the artist Eric Asamoah, by phone conversation and subsequently by email. Asamoah's *The Day After Tomorrow* (2021), photomontages and book publication were part of *Undulating Currents: A Group Show* (2023), Sala Terrena of the University Gallery, University of Applied Arts Vienna.

M: Can you elaborate on your artistic practice, what drew you into making art and why do you use photography as a form?

E: My intention didn't stem from the desire to create art in the traditional sense; rather, it was about utilizing photography as a vehicle to explore my own identity, the collective worldview, and my perceptions of the environment around me. Through this journey, I aimed to blend the visual with the internal intellectual, ultimately leading to a form of expression that emerges as art almost incidentally.

M: What modes or materials, other than photography, do you use in your work, if at all? Are there modes of making your work, such as storytelling, prose or poetry?

E: Photography is my primary medium for communication in my work, yet I often explore a variety of approaches within this field. I sometimes find myself embracing a filmmaker's mindset, viewing images not merely as static pictures but as potentially moving images that invite the viewer to be encouraged by imagination and envision a continued narrative, if personal or collective. Throughout this process, I have come to recognize—and continue to recognize—that my body of work embodies the idea of bridging the gap between reality and imagination. My aim is to create imagery that reflects reality whilst capturing subjects in imaginative states, deliberately omitting mundane elements and focusing on natural landscapes like the sea or desert to craft a realistic yet abstract interaction between the subject and its natural environment. Lately, I've been experimenting with text to enhance my works—often incorporating fragments from personal journal entries or thoughts and phrases that arise during the creative process. This integration not only succinctly captures the essence of the images but also provokes extended questions, inviting the observer to engage in a lyrical dialogue with the artwork.

M: Are there any earthy materials, such as water, earth or soil, or ocean, that speak to you in your work?

E: Yes, I'm focused on capturing the beauty of natural environments, where I often use them as a metaphor to explore the concept of time. In this analogy, the land or desert represents the past—territories that you have already traversed and experienced, filled with memories and stories of your journey. On the other hand, the beach itself symbolizes the present moment, where you stand amidst the shifting sands and ebbing tides, continuously facing the vast expanse of the ocean, which represents the future, full of possibilities and the unknown yet to come. Through my lens, I aim to illustrate this intricate relationship between time and place, highlighting how our surroundings reflect our past experiences, present realities, and future aspirations. Each photograph serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness of these three temporal states, inviting viewers to reflect on their own journeys through time and space, whilst I stay true to my notions of realism and imagination.

M: Can you tell us a little about masculine fragility and vulnerability, in belonging or not belonging, as these themes seem to resonate in your work?

E: My exploration of masculinity transcends the individual and delves into a subject I consider deeply sensitive. What does it truly mean to be masculine? This is a question I wrestle with as a man each day, reflecting our collective human experience. My aim is to honor my identity as a male, embracing my truth and, simply said, sharing my love with those around me. Through my lens, I seek to spark conversations about reimagining masculinity to include a broader emotional spectrum and foster a stronger sense of belonging for all. The men depicted in my images echo my personal journey, but when viewed more broadly, they represent the diverse paths of many navigating the complexities of life.

M: In your work, you often collaborate with your ancestral communities. Can you tell us where your beginnings were, a brief personal history of yours and also how you relate to your ancestral wisdom, which communities are they from?

E: Growing up alongside my older brother as a first-generation Austrian has given me a unique perspective on the duality of Western culture and my ancestral roots in Ghana. By navigating both worlds, I've gained a richer understanding of not only cultural differences but also the broader spectrum of human experiences and ideologies. This duality allows me to appreciate both sides of the coin, enabling me to embark on a journey not just physically, but mentally and emotionally through the complexities and ideas of my diasporic background. It encourages me to look beyond the surface and recognize the deeper connections that bind us all.

M: Are there any stories or references which you can point out from your publications where ancestral wisdom have been invoked?

E: In my work, I strive to weave my personal experiences into a more universal narrative. Projects like "Beyond The Sky And Sea" were inspired by my father's journey, where he walked for two weeks across the Sahara Desert in hopes of migrating to Europe. This led me to photograph in the desert, reenacting a scene that reflects on the desert as a metaphorical state of mind, intertwining my father's personal story with a broader perspective. My subsequent projects continue this theme, blending personal narratives with a connection to the land. For instance, "The Day After Tomorrow," my first body of work, pays homage to coming of age in relation to the sea, beach, and land, serving as a metaphorical timeline. Seawater is revered as a powerful spiritual force, which informs this work. Rather than utilizing my origins or places as patriotic symbols, I envision them as markers that map my history and the stories I want to tell through my visual artistry.

M: Would you characterize your work to be participatory, between the people you photograph and you as the image-maker, or the artist?

E: The intentions of an imagemaker can differ widely, but in my approach, I prioritize a flat hierarchy where the subject and I exist on the same level. I don't impose expectations on my subjects to provide anything specific, and I believe this mutual understanding fosters respect for the act of image-making. As I continue to photograph, I strive to recognize a subtle presence that often lingers in the frame, something not visible to the eye but felt on an emotional level. I view this interaction as a union that forms when people come together to create impressions. To me, photographs hold a unique capacity to convey truth, even if it's only a partial truth. They evoke emotions, particularly when revisited after time has passed. Looking at images of myself as a child now that I am an adult reveals not just how I appeared but also brings forth feelings I may have experienced during that time. Photography serves as a compelling tool for reflection and connection.

M: How do you draw a connection of space in your work, between images, exhibition space and territorial - between two sovereign nations?

E: I've been adopting elements of a filmmaker's approach in my exhibition curation. The exhibition is much like a film, considering aspects such as scene selection, pacing, transitions, pauses, sound, continuity, font used for the title. All of these elements work together to convey a narrative, as a film serves as a vehicle for storytelling, immersing the audience in a specific atmosphere. The script represents the core body of work, akin to the role of an image in photography. Now, in a photo exhibition, it's essential to expand the viewer's engagement beyond just observing the images. It's about how the works are distributed, projected, and presented within the space—creating and communicating an experience that resonates throughout the room and beyond.

M: As a person of color, do you feel Black local and diaspora artists are well represented in Vienna or Austria? Is there also a danger of being tokenized or branded by art institutions in Vienna or Austria?

E: I believe that people of colour artists in Austria are often recognized and included when they overachieve exceptional success or are encouraged to take a seat at the table based on potential and expectations to generate gain and margins. This dynamic limits genuine exploration and expression for these artists in Europe and the Western world, as it prioritizes external validation over authentic artistic journeys.



# Appendix B

## Appendix 2

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#### B.1 Appendix 2.1

##### January 2025

An interview between Mekhala Dave and the artist Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley. Her work *Pirating Blackness* (2020) was presented in *Undulating Currents: A Group Show* (2023), Sala Terrena of the University Gallery, University of Applied Arts Vienna. This conversation focuses on Brathwaite-Shirley’s artistic input towards the work.

M: Can you describe your practice, how did you start making art?

D: So, initially in the beginning, I was really interested in physics, particularly the mathematical side of physics. When it came to art, it was quite similar in my approach, not that it was methodical, but it felt like a language to express something. A way of explaining something I could not quite put into words. When I initially started making art after school, it was alot about figuring how to just communicate to people, I wanted to some how communicate these feelings directly into people, so they can feel that and embody that. I slowly started to pivot and turned to archiving. There was a Black trans group who were performers, dancers, and they were doing amazing things all the time, so I got to constantly see them in an actual space, doing actual work and being paid for that work. So I got to archive them, so I would take photos of them, pictures of their hair and I had to make these short abstract music videos as an ode to them. And that is how I began to animate, to make films.

M: How much of your personal self influences your art-making?

D: My process is like a diary. So its one of those where I stand in front of a blank canvas everyday and the canvas can be digital, it can be physical, it can be a card, it can by anything. I let whats inside come out. Sometimes I can be intentional behind that. Recently, I was doing drawings based on hate, so it was not the hate I had, it was trying to understand what was in my brain about hate, and

I thought what would convey hate. It very much works like that. Its like a direct diary, everything that happens in my life kind of somehow finds its way in, although, me not necessarily wanting to. I use my work to understand whats going around me and to figure it out directly. To also get someone else to be in that position and maybe have another option that I didn't have The personal self really stands as a large element within the work. Also, others as well, as most of the stuff like archiving people. I would also ask people and their personal selves to be part of the work too. So half the work is archiving and the other half is expanding on that individual former archive, and building the world around, and what has been placed within.

M: What do you understand by the terms "trans", "blackness", how do you define it?

D: My feelings around these terms have changed. Initially when I first came to understand these terms, it's different for blackness, but for trans, for me it was a way of understanding myself. I was living as a trans person without knowing what the words were. I had never heard of trans fem, what was called by someone, who was also trans. For me, at the time, I understood it as a sense of freedom, a separation from gender and a way of expressing yourself that doesn't quite conform to normalness, I guess or the everyday person. Also it means you are going to get stared at - at least for me. But now the more I think about it, I think about how it is stuck in a particular type of language, you know, it doesn't actually encapsulate everything. It does give an idea of it and its a good way to give an idea of something, although, I am a trans person, I think I have drifted away from thinking of transness as everything and understanding that sometimes these words don't allow us to look deeper into who that person is and what nuance they can have. I'm trying to use descriptors in my work that aren't necessarily about the identity but allowing you to make a judgement about who they are, and you may think oh, they are trans and it's a different language, you may think there's another word you can use for them. For me, I'm not trying to pigeon hole things. When I show work to some countries, there's a whole different language of transness and I don't have the words they use, but they use a whole different language to convey a similar thing or a different way of approaching it, they have even more genders and more understanding than what I do. To me I would define transness as choosing your body and being unrestricted to that but I would also say that it also needs a wider array of language.

With Blackness, this is a bit self explanatory for me, to be part of the Black community or diaspora. But I am a very visual person so when I see blackness I see the nodes, I feel the warmth and just looking in the eyes, the instant recognition of something, the understanding of something. A micro aggression, the pride you get when you see one of your people achieve something.

M: How did you get into making games? What kind of games?

D: I began by doing it by myself. I had this engine in a 3D soft-

were called Blender. I had a game engine attached to it. I would use that to tinker around with. I didn't know what I was doing, I didn't know how to code. It was very difficult and a complete failure, the very first game that I ever made. So the best way I got into it was making animations and films with game aspects, so you could pick and choose options so that it was actually playable. It allowed me to think about what I want, what kind of choices I want people to have, sometimes to make it funny or dark, I could draw people in. From that, I got my first opportunity with the Science Gallery London to make a game which was *Black Trans Archives* and from that moment, it was the only thing I wanted to do. It was because people couldn't be passive. I am someone who really does not enjoy passive experience of art. I really like engagement. The audience is more than anything the main medium. A game allows the audience to begin, middle and end the work. What happens technically in the space is determined by who is choosing what, and what their identity is, what they are and how they feel, and if they are happy or sad. All of that gets wrapped up in the shows and all of that becomes a part of the experience. If you go in a group of friends, your group of friends will affect everything everyone else, that is very important. That's the games I make.

M: How did you begin to develop *Pirating Blackness* (2020)? Can you explain this, theme, concept, technical, formal and aesthetics wise?

D: I began developing this work actually from another picture, it was from the artist Eburn Sodipo. I took a picture of her eye and that was the first thing I had, and from that, I started to build a world. I didn't have a concept at the time. I just had this one picture of her eye. And because it was Eburn, whose work often circles around the ocean, an ocean came to mind and a ship came to mind. I didn't have a story from that point, but I had this ocean all made from Eburn's eye and I began to write a story just off that image. I thought about pirates who were black people, how would that feel like, what would the time period feel like, how would they escape slavery that existed then. From that it kind of began to form this alternative to history, this idea that you could have a test, where the user or the gamer could be given experience of feeling and experience: an experience of understanding and storytelling. When you look at techniques of games, there are so many, some of them great, or terrible, or some of them have so many stories, just impossible to get to. Some of them are defined by difficulty or by way of frustration, or by simplicity. For me, technology comes into this and allows people to experience stories in a deeper way and understanding what would you have done in this moment and how you can empathise or judge yourself depending on what you did.

M: Can you elaborate on virtual reality, world-building, decolonization in your work?

D: It starts with reality, it starts with talking to people and hearing about them. I want to tell story of people's soul, that's the way I want

to archive and to feel my way around. I want to archive an essence of them, like a smell or perfume, their existence. You have an idea how they smell but you have no idea how they look. I start with a voice note, it could be just a note, and I use a foundation to build the environment. Not just the character, I will build the grass out of their hair, the sky out of their face, the trees out of their lips, the ocean out of their eyes. So that their body can stand on it. From this a kind of an essence and I begin to write a story that encapsulates or can hold that presence. Sometimes there is a story that exists already. And I write a part of an extra chapter to help that person become part of that world and other times there's nothing. So the people I talk to, I write more and more about them to become a huge part of a story.

In terms of decolonization, the work I show is intrinsically decolonial. I think more and more it feels like a buzz word, I don't think decolonization captures anything, particularly within the works. You can bunch a different things but I could boil it down to something more accessible which is that the work is for the people I am part of, which is black and queer people. I make it with and alongside with them, some of them have died in the work. All of them are still alive, though. It is about remembering those around me and giving us more than just an archive of how we died, or more than an archive of our identity, naturally, giving us stories and interesting worlds to exist in, and futures. I am more inspired by sci-fi than real fiction.

M: How does transatlantic slave journey influence your game? How do you present this inheritance, lineage in your work?

D: I was reading about pirates, it said that each pirate ship had their own code which was separate from the world's code. Essentially you could have a ship where who were enslaved or free, and they were equal within the ship. It had their own kind of land, law of the ocean, law of the ship. I am not sure if any of those exist but I was looking at trans pirates basically. It gave me an idea of having a ship that was by black trans people, for black trans people that would go around saving people. And on that ship no one could be a slave, could be turned into one. It brought about a lot of thoughts around slave trade and what would happen if people went into ships that enslaved black people, you know, they didn't reach the shores, they were swallowed by the ocean. It would give black people a longer lineage of the ocean of how they would fish in it, how they use it with spirituality, and all kind of such stuff, rather than slave trade which is what usually comes up. It's for me I was trying to give it alternative history, alternative way of looking at it. Being with the ocean or thinking a story with the ocean that isn't based on suffering or pain, or looking for America.

I think it's presented through the choices here, within the game, it's about the choices you make through your ancestors, those that carried people across the seas and those were carried across the seas. Now, in the present, it's a simple answer for some people, and some people assume they didn't have answers to people being carried across the seas. It's complicating the narrative, sometimes

the narrative is just that white people were those that enslaved black people. In fact, there were a lot of different groups of people who enslaved other groups of people in Africa, who were also other slaves. I wanted people to think about their own heritage in that way. In thinking about their own lineage and what kind of history have they inherited via their family.

M: What expectations do you have for your viewers when engaging with the game?

D: I don't think of any expectations, I plan a journey for people who would go through the game, in terms of considering their emotions. So when a choice is difficult, it is clear what it is and it is not about making you know physically making choices but the moral quandary - would this be the right or the wrong decision? How may I affect someone? I am doomed, I may put someone in peril, or something. For me, I am thinking about much more an emotional experience that takes place in terms of the audience so they leave with the responsibility with what they've seen, rather than thinking about the beauty of the game. Beauty is not end of the game. A choice experience within the game is not it as well, it is about the game being reflective, meditative after you've played them. That's the core for me in building these games, to give some sort of moment of reflection and something you haven't thought about previously.

## B.2 Appendix 2.2

### January 2025

An interview between Mekhala Dave and the artist Ebun Sodipo. Her work *And the Seas Bring Forth New Lands* (2019) was presented in *Undulating Currents: A Group Show* (2023), Sala Terrena of the University Gallery, University of Applied Arts Vienna. This conversation focuses on Sodipo's artistic input towards the work.

M: Can you tell me about your practice, your work has been described as being guided by Black feminist study, can you elaborate on this?

E: My work is deeply indebted to writers like Saidiya Hartman who, through *Scenes of Subjection* 1997, make me think critically about desire (in its erotic and non-erotic dimensions if such a distinction can be made), the methods in which bodies and will are appropriated and abrogated, how imagination shapes the world through construction of legal structures. This last point is also built upon the work of Sylvia Wynter, whose world shattering work informs the future I want to build, it enables me to break down epistemes and stories we have been handed in the present, as well as calling me to ask what story do images rely on to make sense, what hierarchies are present within the story we tell presently. She also makes it known that revolutions in ways of knowing are very possible, that worlds can be ended and new ones begun. There are many writers I can speak of but they essentially allow me to see out of the white supremacist-capitalist-cis-hetero patriarchal structures

we're currently enmeshed in, provided strategies for imaging worlds otherwise, as well as strategies to guard ones energy and wellbeing. They allow me to see who to speak to and for; to ask and try to answer what histories are possible; instruct me on how to care for bodies, in the real world, in text, and even in imagination.

M: Your work is transdisciplinary, using collage, fabulation, video and sculpture, why are these methods important to you and do you incorporate them in your work?

E: Collage for me mirrors the fracturing and fragmentation of history that many marginalized people, really anyone beyond European white men has experienced. It captures the methods we use to make a world for ourselves (symbolic and real): we pull fragments of history together to form a story that isn't dehumanizing. Lastly, particularly when I work with images, collage is the main way we come to consciousness, especially in an image ridden world. It is the main method of working for me and I practice it across multiple mediums. Fabulation asks me to imagine what was lost, what can never be found again, and sometimes, worlds that could never be. Fabulation allows me to remind people that certain bodies and desires existed in the past, in places and spaces you would otherwise think. It allows me to resist a cis-hetero washing of human history and the future, and also bring to the fore the violent methods cis-heteropatriarchy uses to create the world, i.e. the violence directed against visibly queer people and bodies, a violence that causes everyone else to hide themselves away, to remain in the dark.

M: I am interested in how you think of fabulation, in particular. Can you illustrate how it is a method towards concepts, aesthetics and representations in your work?

E: The word fabulation calls to mind dreaming, fantasy, and through these adjacent concepts, pleasure. How do I make sure different works give pleasure as opposed to pain, how do works allow people to carry on their own dreaming? As with dreaming, fabulation requires a particular state to occur: you must be elsewhere besides the 'real'. How does one get there? Can I transform the physical space to aid/cause such movement? What about sound and other senses? Perhaps asking the audience to do the work of stitching a narrative together can get them there, to follow the work of Kara Keeling in *The Witch's Flight*. How do we play with recognisable objects to displace the mind? If we are writing, how do we sustain a dreaminess for the reader? How do we arrange words and images? How do we cause breaches that must be filled with something the reader must imagine? If we perform how do we direct the mind and the viewer's body? How does the body of the performer create fantasy? Perhaps through creating sensual images that lull the mind to a particular feeling or state? Can the voice itself send someone to the dreaming world?

M: Your practice is often about desire, sexuality and the body, can you elaborate on this?

E. It is in part a response to the distortion of trans people, where

we are seen by most cis-people as primarily sexual beings/objects, particularly black trans women. My work tries to right this negative distortion. Part of righting it requires putting forward something closer to reality. I also am aware that many overrepresent violence and trauma when imagining trans people, so writing and thinking about desire and sexuality allows a different image of transwomen's interior lives to be seen. I think of us deeply in love, deeply wanted and desired. The body of course is where most of the desire takes place, or is enacted upon so I must speak about it.

In another way, the body is what tells us where we want to go, a lot of us follow its wants and leanings. It is an effect of violent extractive and exploitative systems that many humans must bury their desire, or only act upon them in the dark. My work, especially when dealing with fabulation and otherwise imagining, must be able to show this as well as show alternatives that are present with us. To continue living in this world, to even approach thriving requires a practice of self love that hegemonic systems have beaten out of your ancestors and that we have no access to so we must create new ones (whilst also being critical of how they are enmeshed within systems of domination). Normative depictions of sexuality and the body must be done away with so this is in part what my work aims to do.

M: What emphasis do you place on nonhuman materials, like water? What do the seas or ocean mean to you?

E: I'm not sure I put emphasis on these materials as nonhuman material because across my work non-human materials must be activated by humans. Humans travel across oceans and seas, humans lay beneath the ocean, humans are entranced by the ocean waves, humans hide beneath orange trees. For me these materials hold no agency on their own but perhaps, at best, must share agency with humans. I think this is because I'm invested in writing how humans are responsible for what we have made and are making. The water, the sea and oceans in particular are spaces of creativity for me, and are spiritually charged. Throughout my work, their surfaces enable us to enter into meditative states that can take us through time, they can function as portals in this way. They are objects of beauty and terror, a duality that is familiar to black people (and perhaps other marginalized people) igniting ancestral memories on different levels: genetic memories of a life before land, and of the last 500 years. They also lend themselves to metaphors

M: In your work, there are intimate moments between images, body and camera, how do you present these beside textual and poetic writings as well?

E: I'm not quite sure what you mean here. Apologies if I don't quite answer the question. I often put images in relation to text, allowing the text/poem to affect the reading, the affect as well of the image. At times the image itself forms a text in the mind if the image is a widely shared one with its particular context known to most viewers.

In my work desire plays a large role, whether that's a desire for a kind of body, a desire for lost memories, a desire that cannot be completely known, so these intimacies allow me to speak about these different valences. There are also particular languages or codes with which particular bodies are present. I'm interested in these too.

M: How do you define the term "trans" and "transfemininity"? How much of your interpretation of this is part of your work?

E. Interpretation is not an explicit part of my work: I'm not interested in translating for non-speakers. I have been more interested in translation and what is lost as I am trying to reconstruct/fabulate parts of a 16th century enslaved woman's life. As she lived in Lisbon I'm having to translate the court trial in which I found her into English as well Portuguese articles where she is mentioned. On top of this layer of translation, she also didn't speak much Portuguese so a translator is appointed to her in the court trial. So the verbal language loses information with each layer of translation. Trans for me means one who has rejected the gendered trajectory set for them at birth. Transfemininity means femininity practiced by a trans person, one who intended to be a man.

M: Can you also describe your work at other exhibitions?

E: My work takes many forms, as you've highlighted. At times it's on walls, Mylar backed collages in black Perspex frames, where the images are pulled from the activity of black users of social media (Tumblr in particular). These works receive a lot of attention and praise. I think this is in part due to the fact that the Mylar is incredibly eye-catching, its surface glimmering and pulling a viewer in (it is thought that we are drawn to shining surfaces because they remind us of the surface of water and so we are drawn to them in an attempt to quench a deep instinctual and virtual thirst). My films, being quite visually active, with multiple images flitting across the screen, images that are very familiar with audiences also receive a lot of attention, no doubt due to the fact that the manner in which they move across the screen is reminiscent of Instagram reels, tik-toks and the like: short clips full of action. My performances usually take place outside of the art gallery, a theatre for example. These performances are less visually stimulating and much more minimal, engaging with slowness, vocal play, song and monologue. In many performances I make use of the reflective and distorting surface of Mylar. In these performances I draw upon hegemonic storytelling traditions but subvert them to my own end, to tell new stories that have never been heard. These performances are also well received and spark new conversations.

M: Which scholars, concepts or material have most inspired you or influenced your work?

E: Saidiya Hartman, Sylvia Wynter, Christina Sharpe, Tina Campt, Karen and Barbara Fields, Audre Lorde, Jared Sexton, Sin Wai Kin, Juliana Huxtable, Elaine Mitchener, Imani Mason Jordan.

# Appendix C

## Appendix 3

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#### C.1 Appendix 3.1

##### November 2024

An email and signal messenger exchange with the artist Ava Binta Giallo for *Water's Skin* (2023), art installation and book publication, presented at *Undulating Currents: A Group Show* (2023), Sala Terrena of the University Gallery, University of Applied Arts Vienna.

M: In which exhibition did you first show *Water's Skin*? It feels that your work is site-specific when we did the installation together for *Undulating Currents*. I recall that we had a conversation about the materials, how they could be presented in the space and you initially prepared a visual mapping exercise where you drew on a large white paper how the materials will eventually look like and be presented in the space. Can you elaborate more about this site-specific work?

A: *Water's Skin* was first shown at the venue Vordere Zol-lamtsstraße at the University of Applied Arts Vienna (also known as "Die Angewandte") at Die Angewandte Festival in 2023. Most of my works are very site-specific. I react to spatial conditions and try to create a spatial composition that for me is very playful and humorous, and commenting on spatial conditions or gaps or holes or dimensions, or also standard norms, or patterns that repeat — I like to play with space. There is this huge wall which is strongly, and mainly made by sand and then you have the sand back inside the space. The vertical sculpture is also with different sized elements in front of the walls which are very defined and with repetitive elements. There are many moments of communication in between the materials and also the spatial settings which I really like.

M: That is quite fascinating that you react to spatial conditions. What are the reasons for your choice of these specific materials and how do you site-specifically contextualise them?

A: The choice of materials very much comes from my practice in

the last few years from the materials that I usually work with. I consider them as “beings” that I collaborated with in the last few years so we know each other — we can collaborate well. I loved to work, for example, with soil, sand, but also rock, clay and stones. Materials like soil and sand especially give a water-like this quality – for sure Water is even more radical because you cannot see it – but its about the fact that you cannot contain it, so it spreads in the space as *traces*, which is such a huge aspect of my work. I love to work with elements that actually force a spectator to leave its own *traces* even though they maybe don’t touch the defined areas of it. Even through walking in the (exhibition) space – vibration, movement, winds, losing hairs, dust. The soil and also the sand give a strong feeling of an awareness that each and of us leave *traces* – within that very defined exhibition space.

M: Your installation, which is organic with earthy materials and accompanied with the book publication, how do you engage with them? Can you expand on how you talk about surfaces in your texts within the book publication?

A: The notebook is very much a collection of notes over my last 5-7 years of practice and my questions and investigations about space, paintings, sculpture, installations, materials, the surface, etc. The surface the layer that meets the outside and the inside. In that sense, it is kind of the translator, the one that makes the connection — the bridge. And that’s why the surface is so important to me and in thinking about the surface it is always pointing towards the deeper reality within and also what the surface allows to touch or to enter, or to not enter. The notebook is made in this very fragmentary but also open layout as it should give enough space to enter and to reflect on what it is. I think it is so beautiful in the physical dimension about being a book, being a surface itself and also carrying so much within each of these dimensions and materials. Even when I think about recycled paper, I don’t know who or what it was before, or what it is about to become – now its being in another form, what this formation is for now.

M: We spoke about territories when we were together mapping your art installation within the exhibition. I recall that we briefly spoke about how the sand nestling on the ground looks like territories. Could your work also be interpreted in the context of boundaries, or territories? Do you think it may or could apply to the ocean?

A: I think a lot about territories but I don’t feel I can verbalise it properly yet, especially with water and the ocean, but also in a general way – they (territories) are moving and changing body, entities and beings that are so huge and can’t be defined in certain ways. In maybe a biological and scientific sense it may be defined, but I feel that waters and the ocean are endless. I think everything is so fleeting that nothing may be contained, and I could not define it yet, I don’t want to: nothing I could not come close to anything that is accurate enough. We can ponder as to what is even air, no?

M: Your practice feels very feminist, in the sense that you explore

relations between humans and non-humans entanglements. As you feel so connected to water, are there connections to the ocean in your practice? Can you elaborate on this?

A: I can say that my practice in general is quite centering surrounding all life giving sources. So, there's a strong focus on water for sure, or the ocean, or the soil, or the womb — on all birthing people, women, the land, the sky, the wind - everything that holds us — that nurtures us. And I am very interested in establishing a practice for me that is about "aliveness", which is a fertile practice that nurtures in some way but also simultaneously, what does that mean? I think on one hand, there is the choice of material in deciding how the material can be influential, like having small material cycles, that allow each material to be transformed in the cycle of things, to be composted, or transitioned into something else. This is one thing. But on the other hand, there are also the subjects themselves, even though it's mostly and mainly honoring the invisible realm in exploring this, it's really this collaboration with the material realm — that speaks to me. So in that sense it's not necessarily about entering into water or the ocean but all life giving sources. So very much about this, yeah.

M: In your experience as an artist in Vienna, how do you feel about opportunities or rather discrimination, if there are any in Vienna, for Black local and diaspora artists?

A: I think the level of discrimination, white violence and racism is very high in Vienna. And the rest of Austria is also very difficult from the experiences I have had. I would promote every artist of color or any other group which is marginalized to have layers of protection to really do the work they are doing or we are doing as the level of violence is quite high even in places where they are talking about subjects of decolonisation. It's still quite intense, from my experience.

M. Do you think that Black local and diaspora artists are adequately represented in Vienna?

A: No.

M: As an artist based in Vienna, can you elaborate on some positive and negative experiences for your art? Do you feel there is underrepresentation of Black local and diaspora artists in Vienna?

A: About the representation or rather underrepresentation which I feel is the case in Vienna in that sense that for me personally, I will just speak about my experience. I don't feel there's so much interest in my way of making art or storytelling and I feel it's very difficult to enter circles of established institutions but also gallery spaces. I think it was mostly the case that external curators invited me then into these houses or into these institutions rather than there was an interest within the spaces themselves. I feel they have quite strict programs. So, there's not so much space I feel for black and brown people and stories of the diaspora. This is how I feel in Vienna. And the good thing about Vienna and the art scene in Vienna is that there are fundings and people really value art. So this is good, definitely.

## C.2 Appendix 3.3

### November 2024

An email exchange between Mekhala Dave and the artist Tshepiso Moropa. Her work *'Selekana le Modimo wa Noka (Selekana and the Goddess River)* (2023) was presented in *Undulating Currents: A Group Show* (2023), Sala Terrena of the University Gallery, University of Applied Arts Vienna.

M: Your work was commissioned for the exhibition *Undulating Currents*, perhaps the first time in Europe. Can you describe your work, and what is your oeuvre? What inspires your work?

T: My work focuses on reimagining African archival imagery, often centered around themes of womanhood, motherhood and collective memory. Inspired by folklore, ancestral wisdom and lived experiences, I use collages to weave narratives that honour the resilience and beauty of African identities. This exhibition is indeed among my earliest opportunities in Europe, showcasing pieces that celebrate the interconnectedness of history, culture and personal storytelling. The central inspiration stems from a desire to reclaim erased histories and present them in a form that feels tactile and emotionally resonant.

M: What themes did you touch upon in your work? What techniques, from storytelling in the vernacular and ancestral wisdom, and how do you imbibe them in your work given your own education and experiences?

T: My work explores themes such as identity, memory and the transmission of cultural knowledge. Drawing from African folklore, particularly focusing on my home language SeTswana, I integrate storytelling into my collages by using archival imagery and layering elements that symbolize ancestral wisdom. My education in the arts and personal experiences of growing up in South Africa, allow me to bridge past and present, creating works that resonate with a shared cultural consciousness whilst remaining deeply personal.

M: What do you understand about colonization? How do you locate tensions of colonization between nations and identities, particularly in the erasures of African identities (perhaps specifically a local community from your ancestral history)?

T: Colonization disrupted cultural continuity, displacing languages, traditions and identities whilst imposing narratives of erasure. This is particularly evident in African archival practices, where histories were either destroyed or misrepresented. My ancestral history, linked to SeTswana culture, inspires me to counter these erasures by reviving stories that embody communal strength and heritage. My art reclaims these lost narratives, creating a dialogue about resilience and resistance.

M: Do you see similarities or differences in both of your works in the form of their techniques and presentation, moving images and still collage images?

T: The stillness of collage and the fluidity of moving images both allow for storytelling but operate differently. Collages provide lay-

ered, meditative moments, whilst moving images create dynamic narratives that unfold over time. Both approaches allow me to experiment with texture, rhythm and mood, but the choice between them depends on the story I aim to tell. Each form complements the other, enriching the viewer's experience.

M: How do materials, from earthy elements such as water or rivers (perhaps the ocean?), overlap with other uses of materials (perhaps the materials you use in your art), if they do and if you consider it to be anti-extractive in practice as well?

T: I see water and natural elements as metaphors for memory and continuity. Whilst my work isn't materially rooted in natural elements, conceptually, water represents the flow of stories and connections across generations. By using archival imagery and digital techniques, I practice anti-extractivism by reimagining existing materials rather than depleting resources, echoing sustainable and respectful practices in art-making.

M: As an artist from South Africa, how do you present your work in South Africa (or digital platform), and what was your solo exhibition?

T: In South Africa, my work is presented through galleries, art festivals, and digital platforms, often focusing on accessible storytelling. My solo exhibition, *The Night Recital*, was an exploration of SeTswana proverbs and their connection to themes of motherhood and bravery. The collages featured African archival imagery, celebrating black women and their roles as carriers of wisdom.



# Appendix D

## Appendix 4

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#### D.1 Appendix 4.1

##### December 2024

An interview between Mekhala Dave and the artist, scholar and activist Massa Lemu of the Ozophé Collective by email and Zoom meeting. The collective's work 'Row' (2017) was presented in *Undulating Currents: A Group Show* (2023), Sala Terrena of the University Gallery, University of Applied Arts Vienna. This conversation focuses on Lemu's artistic and scholarly career which catalyses Ozophé Collective's context of collaborative, activist and participatory framework of operating art process and making with local communities of Malawi.

M: Can you describe how you got into making art? Where did you get your inspiration from and where did you practice?

M.L: As far as I can remember, I was always involved in some form of creative expression. As a child, I liked to draw a lot. I drew everywhere: in the sand, in my school notebooks, in my parents' books and the walls of our home, and even on my siblings' dry skin. I also grew up making my own toys using clay or wire. However, I had an uncle who used to paint. Though he was not a professional artist himself, I remember that the few times I watched my uncle draw or paint fired my artistic passion and cemented the ambition to become an artist. For my secondary education, I was lucky to be selected to a school that offered art. Thereafter, I got my bachelors degree in Education, majoring in art and minoring in literature at Chancellor College of University of Malawi.

M: Can you tell us about your artistic practice - what mediums do you work with?

M.L: I started out as a painter using mainly water based paints, though I painted with oils once in a whilst. I used to paint a lot of stylized, abstract, and surrealist paintings featuring psychological, cultural, or political topics. I experimented with all sorts of

painting styles which I was exposed to during my bachelors degree studies (and immediately after) especially in modern art of Africa and that of the west. The names of artists that loomed large during this time of my career included Kay Chiromo, Valente Marangatana, Twin Seven Seven, Tayo Adenaike, Obiora Udechukwu, Ibrahim El Salahi, Wosene Kosrof, among others. After my first degree in 2003 I was employed as a junior lecturer in the Fine and Performing Arts department (as it used to be called then) at University of Malawi and this gave me the opportunity to continue to deepen my knowledge of modern and contemporary art. I started to read heavily about contemporary art and to experiment with some of its forms. Samson Kambalu, who had briefly taught at the university whilst I was still a student, had made a conceptualist work titled "Holy Balls" which has reverberated on my consciousness long after it was shown. Because of this interest and the different influences, even though I enrolled for a Masters in Painting when I went to Savannah College of Art and Design in 2007, my practice had already taken the direction of the experimental and the conceptual.

M: You also did your PhD, what was the topic and does your artistic practice and scholarly work intersect?

M.L: The Fine and Performing Arts department at University of Malawi used to be small. As a lecturer one was expected to teach both studio and art history classes. This made me develop a kind of art historical/theoretical research practice besides my studio production. I wanted to be able to write about art in Malawi and to publish critical texts after my masters degree studies. I need to mention that during this time I also dabbled in poetry writing inspired by my studies in literature. However, I think my interests in writing and my art started to converge with my conceptualism. Immediately after my masters degree studies I was accepted into the Critical Studies Fellowship in the Core Program at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston in 2010 to further develop my critical writing capabilities and to spend some time to read theory. After the Core Program, which was a two year stint, it seemed that reading theory had taken over my artistic practice and that's all I wanted to do. Though I should mention that it was in Houston that I did my first major conceptualist work in the form of a performance with cardboard signs in the city streets titled "[Passages for the undocumented](#)". Text in all its poetic glory was fully integrated in my practice in this work. It was also in Houston where I had my first gallery exhibition of the experimental work with a project titled "[Precariot](#)". "Precariot" which played with the words "Precariat" and "Patriot". also included text in the exhibition in the form of stamps which played with the word "Inspected".

But as I mentioned, text took over after the fellowship and all I wanted was to read and write. A phd was the logical conclusion. I went to Stellenbosch University to study collectivism in modern and contemporary African art, itself a kind of logical conclusion of long critical reflection of my practice in the context of the history of

African art. The title of my PhD is “The biopolitics of Gugulective against neoliberal capitalism”- what a bold title!

M: You came up with the concept of “biopolitical collectivism”, what does it mean and how does it apply in your artistic practice?

M.L: I came up with the term during my doctoral studies to distinguish between the practice of such collectives as Gugulective or iQhiya of South Africa and Groupe Amos of DRC from other African collectivist practices (or that came before), to show that these new collectives operated in a different socio-political context (that of global neoliberalism and post-industrial capitalism- even in Africa! It was really eye opening to learn about how neoliberalism manifests variously in different countries on the continent such as in South Africa or the DRC) and took a different aesthetic approach- that rather than produce objects as the most valuable final product of the artistic process, these collective sought to empower subjectivities in their aesthetics. This was done through immaterial practices such as performance, temporary installations and textual interventions, and book readings. Inspired by Fanon, Mbembe, Enwezor and others, and of course by Foucault’s writings, and that of Hardt and Negri and other workerist/autonomist thinkers, I thought that the collectives were biopolitical from a resistance and decolonial point of view.

M: You are part of the Ozophé Collective - When did it start, who are part of the collective and how did it come together?

M.L: Ozhopé started in 2016 towards the end of my doctoral studies. After my doctoral studies, inundated with all that reading and writing, I wanted to make work again. And my artistic impulse was driven by the biopolitical and the collectivist political and aesthetic attitudes I had imbibed. It only made sense. So I invited a few friends who were sympathetic and who had always been close to the work and its conversations to join me in the journey. Emmanuel Ngwira, a friend and former colleague at University of Malawi is a writer who followed my practice closely. Paul Chimbwanya was a former student of mine at University of Malawi who was brave enough to be interested in the experimental. Ella Banda who joined us later was also a former student of mine who was also courageous enough to venture in that terrain ( I say this because there is no contemporary Art in Malawi per se, so one does it at the risk of being branded Crazy). And Tavwana Chirwa a photo/videographer.

M: What is your idea of a “collective”? What is the aim and goal of Ozophé? Do you have similar collectives in Africa (or else where) that you are inspired by (from the past or in contemporary times), what sets Ozophé apart from those collectives?

M.L: For me, a collective is simply a group of different people who share social or political ideals who come together in their various capacities on a mission to realize those ideas. “Mutu umodzi siusenza denga” is a Malawian proverb which means one head cannot carry the roof. Which means that you need a group to be able to carry out certain tasks. Biopolitical tasks are such kinds of tasks. Biopo-

litical collectivism is not hostile to difference. Whilst the individual contributes to the collective, the collective should not obliterate the individual, but rather empower them. In this way a biopolitical collectivism would be different from the forms of collectivism that erase difference. For Ozhopé, our “main concern is to collaboratively produce art that inspires conversations and invites people to critical thinking around issues that affect people’s quotidian existence”. We make aesthetic interventions both in (Malawian) art and in everyday life. Our main project has been an ongoing intervention on Lake Malawi titled “Row” to play with the word in reference to the act of rowing a boat, and to quarrel. Some of the collectives that inspire us include the old Laboratoire Agit Art of Senegal, Gugulective and iQhiya of South Africa, and The Nest of Kenya. Historically, we are also inspired by the theater work of Ngugi and friends who took their art to the Kenyan people outside the normal art/academic institutional setting.

M: How does Ozophé operate and sustain? In terms of funding, support from art or other institutions? Labor and precarity of the collective / artists?

M.L: We regard our work as operating more on the academic rather than the commercial side. So our major projects are sustained by grants from academic and cultural institutions. The members of the collective have their own creative practices and other forms of sustenance so we do not get an income from Ozhopé. We also actually contribute our own funds and resources into the operations of the collective, such as in transportation, equipment, and in maintaining our website. Residencies, such as at La Becque and at Onassis recently, have also given us the much needed time and resources to make work.

M: Much of the works are anti extractive, criticising the capitalist and politics of Malawi’s neoliberal policies, how do you reflect these in Ozophé’s works?

M.L: Anti-extractivism is a challenge in our art especially when we consider how that should reflect in the work. Our work has been critical of the extractivist attitudes and practices on Lake Malawi in connection to overfishing and to the specter of oil drilling. We have criticized the actions of politicians and business persons, and speculated on the post-apocalyptic future of the lake in our performances, videos, and installations. The challenge has been to do so without perpetrating the extractivism in our own work by minimizing the kinds of objects and material/immaterial resources we bring out of the communities we work with. What we end up taking out of the communities such as images should be used for the benefit of the ecosystem.

M: In the *Row* series, why are each named 1, 2 and 3, what is their difference? Also, which are the local communities and how did you approach them for collaboration? How is consent taken from the local communities for the works?

M.L: The Row project is essentially one project. The numbering

simply marks the different iterations of the project. The first one was conducted in 2017 in the southern part of the Lake in Mangochi District at Mchemba Village. The first iteration focused more on the surface of the dugout canoe as an area of artistic research. The lake featured less in the art. The second one was done in 2018 in the central part, in Salima at Senga Bay. This iteration featured the lake more as part of the ecosystem. The third one was done in 2023 further up in the center towards the north, in Nkhotakota in Ngala village. This iteration integrated the canoe, the community, and the lake more in the work. We hope that more iterations will go farther in the north to engage communities there. A member of the collective usually visits the area weeks before the days of the project to introduce the group and its plans. The member is then introduced to the leaders of the community who give permission. When we arrive, we already know who to contact, and who to work with.

M: You use words such as performance, participatory and collaboration, how do they weave in creating the works? How do you tell their differences in their terminologies? How do you inscribe and weave texts as part of these works?

M.L: Those words are shorthand for describing the aesthetics of Row. Even though they are insufficient and do not capture successfully what the project involves, they nevertheless describe aspects and elements of work. For instance, performance describes a series of poetic actions that may feature spontaneous dance or paddling that carry some metaphorical meaning. This can happen in response to a situation or another artwork on the lake. Participatory and collaboration describe the way the work is made, in that multiple actors are involved at different stages to create the work and its meaning together. Whilst these are terms borrowed from the language of Socially Engaged art, they are crucially also ways in which Malawians conduct everyday business. Performance pervades the Malawian social reality, condensing at ceremonies and events such as funerals and weddings. Also, though the individualist lifestyle seems to take over, especially in the urban areas, due to capitalism, the communalist spirit is still alive and well. But there are also other terms that describe aspects of the work such as play, humor, the absurd, the beautiful, magic, etc. These terms also have political valence in socially engaged art. In regards to text, it has featured in the work in a number of ways: as found on the dugout canoe, or written by us on the canoe to respond to the found text, and as part of performance. We have also written texts in the form of journal articles to reflect on the work and to extend its meanings in academic circles. In a (Malawian) context where advanced critical discourse is almost non-existent, our journal articles have made possible the kinds of conversations such as we are having today. It would be great to make the work and sit back and enjoy the conversation but we do not have that privilege so we have to also go out and write our own story.

M: Who all become the authors? Do materials themselves count as co authors in the work, apart from the local communities and artists

/ performers?

M.L: Not really. Though we recognize the potency that the objects we use have, and the meanings that they possess, we have not really seriously considered them as co-authors in the artistic process. We have recognized how the lake as a space, and time, shape the work. But we have not really counted them as co-authors.

M: You use the material dugout canoe, can you tell us why is this important in the context of the works? What is the significance of dugout canoe in the fabric of Malawi's traditions and cultures, to the fisherfolk communities? To the collective?

M.L: In the context of Row, the dugout canoe acts as an anchor and as a vessel for all the issues that the project engages. It is a simple but powerful sculptural object loaded with aesthetic and political meaning. Even though it does not get the same level of attention, it stands there together with the mask as a potent object with aesthetic, cultural, spiritual, magical, and economic significance. In Ozhopé we see it as a disappearing object as the trees that are used in its creation get more scarce, so we seek to celebrate it before it goes. But the main focus of our work is the ecosystem and the communities in which it is found. We call the canoe a "life-object" because of its importance in the economy of the fishing communities. It has sustained livelihoods around the lake and beyond for ages. Fish is central in the Malawian diet, so we have directly benefited from the canoe. Whilst they are safer than the dugout canoe, the bigger and more profitable boats that have overtaken it will soon wipe out the fish species and consequently the larger ecosystem.

M: Considering the biodiversity knowledge of fisherfolk of their surrounding ecologies, what were some of the learning experiences or stories you may have heard from them?

M.L. The fishers possess vast situated knowledge of their ecosystem, so we learned so much. We learned about fish species that we would never have known about away from the lake, even though our diets consist of a wide variety of fish. We were exposed to the different types of canoes for different fishing. We were also exposed to the processes of mending the canoes. There is also the magical element which inspires our work. Magic pervades the thinking and practices of the fishers. For example, some fishers are believed to turn into crocodiles at night whilst fishing to stay longer underwater. So showed us scars from victorious battles against crocodiles. Our research is therefore not complete without a serious consideration of the place of magic in the ecosystem.

M: Where have you shown these works? As part of which institution / exhibition / city / country? Do they become site-specific when they are framed as installation?

M.L: The physical work is mostly site-specific and therefore limited to the context of the lake. But we have shown photos and videos in other spaces such as at University of Malawi, at a market in Zomba in Malawi, and in other countries in Africa and Europe. We have also shown work at the artists' residencies that we have been to.

M: How much of curatorial direction do you have to set up these (site-specific) installations? What were some of the reactions to them that you may have noticed? What were your thoughts about the viewership or encounters by viewers to your work?

M.L: Though some members of the fishing communities have contributed ideas and made suggestions in the course of working on the shore, Ozhopé holds the curatorial direction of the work. The reactions from the communities have ranged from amazement to wonder, or from puzzlement to sheer indifference. However, the success of the work is mainly registered in the joy that emanates from the experience of working together and sharing. The relationships fosters are part of the aesthetic meaning-making process. There is always expression of gratitude to us from the communities for visiting, and we are always invited to return.

M: Are the (site specific) installations also shared with the local communities, do you know what their reaction was like to this?

M.L: We prefer the reactions of the fishers to those of the (jaded) artworld viewers who have already seen it all (this is not to say that the artworld viewership is not valuable in the meaning making of our work). The conversations are lively and more sincere on the shore where people are free to ask questions and express honest opinions. Though the people are mostly accustomed to contemporary art practice, we believe that, in terms of encounter and personal experience with the work, our art is not completely alien to the communities as we use objects and materials (such as the canoe) and processes (collaboration) that belong to these communities.

M: Can you possibly measure the impact of these works, if at all? By impact, do you consider it to be a widely interpreted impact, if so, can you share what kinds of impacts? Both local and the global?

M.L: We do not think it is possible to measure the impact of the work in quantitative terms. However, we believe that the work is having a positive impact in its contribution to changing the nature of Malawian art, as it challenges and expands the horizon of artistic production in the country (even though other artists are yet to join us in experimentation); we also believe that it is making a political intervention in its contribution to conversations around the lake ecosystem and extractivism. At least, so far, the work has been featured in the local newspapers multiple times. In terms of the global, except with TBA21, we have mainly invited ourselves into the forums in which we have participated, so generally the real impact of our work is yet to be seen.

M: At any point did you feel the Malawi government or industries that you are critiquing with this work, press upon you any censorship of the work? Or on the other hand, changed the course of their exploitative practice? Or encouraged more measures to protect the local ecologies? Or N/A?

M.L: No. Not yet. The government doesn't seem to be threatened by our actions. The subversive potential of the work has not yet registered. But we are also not that deluded into believing we possess

that power. However, we believe that our work will be impactful in the context of others' work. Our work would be meaningful only together with the work of environmentalists, critical geographers, biologists, musicians, and other artists and activists.

M: How much of your own artistic practice is similar / different to Ozophé's? Do you see any parallels?

M.L: I think my work is not as expansive in terms of ideas and scale as Ozhopé work is, though the work may carry similar concerns. Even though it also is political, my work is inward looking and personal whilst Ozhopé work is communal and socially engaged. As I mentioned before, "One head cannot carry the roof" meaning due to scale and scope, Ozhopé work can only be done through collectivist production. Biopolitical collectivism is akin to Umunthu in its subject-centeredness. In Umunthu we say it takes a village to raise a child, and that's not a one-man task. My work does not push the biopolitical as much as Ozhopé, in terms of its centering of relationships and relationality, and in terms of the immateriality of the work (impermanence, temporality, etc).

M: How difficult is it to be an artistic collective in Malawi, what are some of the challenges you face and also opportunities that you may find that can elevate the collective?

M.L: I have not worked in a collective in the west so I cannot compare, but it seems like it is easier to work as a collective in Malawi because of the existence of a communalist spirit in the society. Life in Malawi is also flexible and relatively easy-going so it is easier to gather together and do something. I wonder how much it takes to bring individuals together in the individualist west where time and space are parcelled and rationed out. For instance, it is easier to walk on to the shores of Lake Malawi and find people who are hanging out who are eager to join you in your endeavors. Our experience on Lake Geneva and on the Mediterranean were different. In terms of the collective itself, problems usually involve the kind of motivation and commitment that individuals bring to the work. Sometimes some individuals may be unmotivated and lack enthusiasm towards the work due to different reasons. This affects the morale of the group and consequently the quality of the work. Since the collective is not a source of income, some individuals might not invest much of their creative energies to the collective and this impacts the work in general.

M: Finally, what is your idea of ocean stewardship? Or stewardship in general? Do you feel that art has the power to contribute to governance of ecological / ocean / water bodies protection?

M.L: For us stewardship has to do with care, and this comes from an understanding that the destruction of the ocean or nature in general only results in our own destruction. Caring for the oceans is caring for ourselves (and our future generations). Our understanding of art is that it imagines and creates a better life/a better world. Dead oceans and destroyed ecosystems are not a better world.

(continued on Zoom meeting)

M: How did you come to coin the term biopolitical collectivism?

M.L: Perhaps, it might be, it is a matter of grasping the thinking around the concept in terms of what I briefly call life politics, but not so different from what people like Foucault and others are thinking. But specifically reflecting on the context of the work. I am using the term to define. But I like to emphasize that, people look at biopolitics from a negative perspective. Biopolitics is a machine that is managing or controlling life, the politics of managing bodies, or profiting from bodies, determining who is to live. But from the other side necropolitics is determining who is to live, who is to die, right? But I think the positive aspect of biopolitics, is looking from the perspective of resistance, which is not emphasized. You do not hear much of it. I think you have to read it deeper and perhaps even beyond Foucault, to start to get to those conversations. And I think Hardt and Negri have theorised the perspective of biopolitics as resistance. That is what I am interested in. Realising that resistance happens within biopolitics. And the resistance itself would take the characteristics of biopolitics, you know, if that makes sense. If it is resistance within biopolitics then it takes that nature, it takes those characteristics of immaterial production, you know, subjectivities working to empower subjectivities, the managed and the empowerment of life rather than promotion of life, or promotion of death, and so on. That is what inspired biopolitics collectivism. But biopolitics collectivism would not be too far away from the concept of multitude. Multitude creating in commons. It could be a fragment of the multitude. If you think about three or four people from diverse backgrounds coming together, it would be a chunk from the multitude. This is also shaped by Malawian thinking of *muntu*, - you are working with others to look after your environment, you share, you empower others.

M:

The way I have been thinking about your work, especially, the texts I read of yours, Row: Thinkivist, more closely. I felt that the work you have, there are 4 artworks you produced which are the early works of the collective and I was thinking about how can you guide me to how was the process like in creating the artworks, also in a consecutive way, because I do not understand the order of it entirely, so there is *Catch, Row, Loud Mouth*, and so on, but how did you approach each of the artwork in terms of collecting the community, who were the performers who performed on site, there is also a few more things, I am about too curious to find out, what do you understand from concepts like socially engaged art, site specific art.

ML

You know, in our work, we are not really writing about the work itself. Perhaps our point of view, or my point of view may be in my article, which I wrote with Emmanuel. There is more dwelling on specific artworks, in the sense, specific instances, where it is spontaneous, performance, an object because Emmanuel can remove himself from the practice in that way, especially at that time, that he could, he was not engaged in the work itself, he was on the side as

a writer, looking at what is going on. For me, I look back at the things I have written and understanding the work, it is more about writing about the context within which the work is produced, you know as I said in one of the responses that it is that urge to write, we know where the conversations are coming from, a context, are not as advanced, so there is that urge to place the work within certain context or certain conversations but we have not really, it is hard to dwell about writing about the work in the sense of how somebody else looking at the work would then respond to it. They deconstruct or breakdown aspects of the work the processes and even though we can outline that, how we arrive in the village and talk to the people, how we are laid to the specific materials, how people join us, how others are just watching on the side lines, even though we outline that, we are not really getting into as a critique who is arriving, and looking from the outside, who is breaking down, responding to things. There is a certain kind of relationship, we might not have. The chunk of my writing, my concepts around the work, biopolitical collectivism is the kind of politics, the work is operating in. how the neoliberal politics have shaped, how it has fuelled corruption in Malawi. How are people acquiring lands around the lake, how trees are being cut down. Those are the kinds of the things that you find the writing dwelling much on, but to talk about formal properties of the work, I do not think we have reached there yet. That we will go deeper in that direction. But to say that, there is work that *Row* has as a project, and then there are specific instances in the project, which we sometimes title, and sometimes we don't. So for the sake of the conversation, you refer to *Catch* for example. *Catch* was a brief performance in the water. With kids playing with the dugout canoe. But it was a performance. And the second iteration of *Row* in 2020. *Loud Mouth* was an installation performance where you know somebody gets in the dugout canoe and shouting things, that is also the second iteration of *Row* in 2018. So *catch*, *loud mouth*, are part of 2018 second *Row* iterations.

