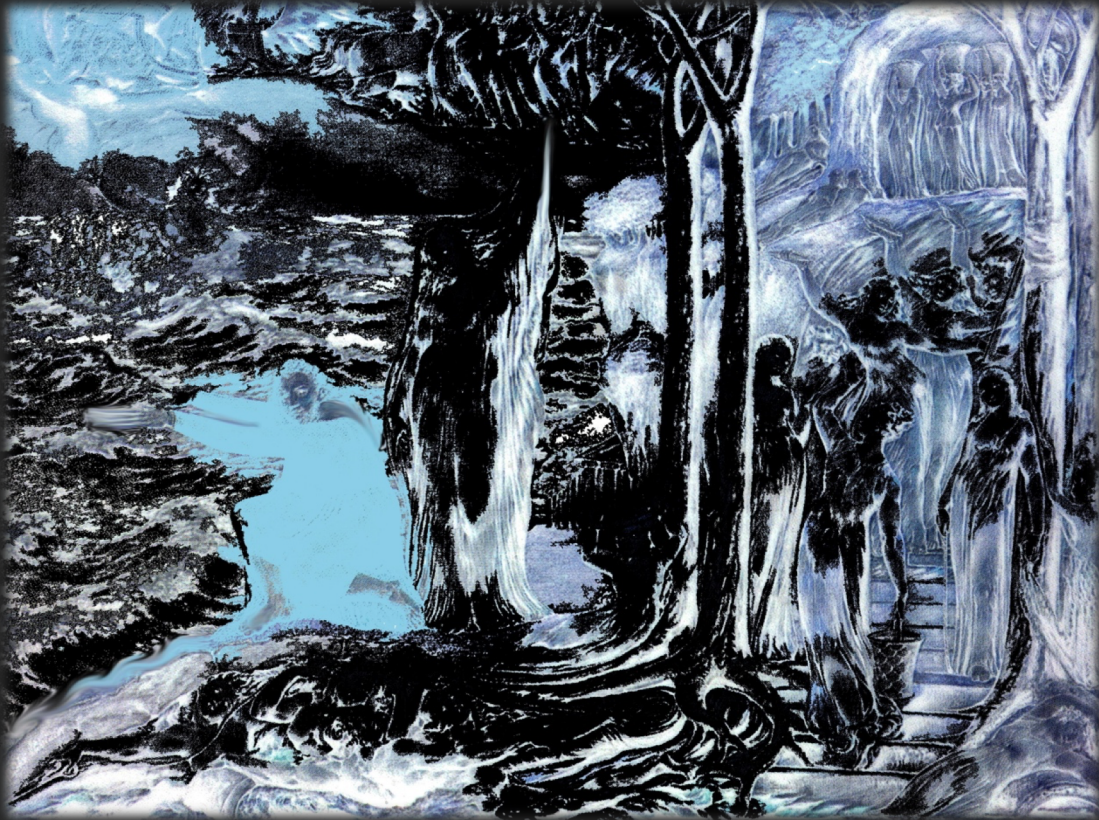


ALIENOCENE – THEORY/FICTION

\_\_\_\_BENEATH THE PAVING STONES,  
THE WAKE\_\_\_\_



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*The wake: “the keeping watch with the dead, the path of a ship, the consequence of something, in the line of flight and/or sight, awakening, and consciousness” (Sharpe, 2016)*

Somewhere between the sea and the sky we started to lose the story’s thread. The military-industrial complex grew another limb: the space-weather complex. Sometimes we saw the satellites but they always saw us. Among all the terrible and mundane things they measured was the surface of the sea. We saw the trade winds, we saw El Niño, we saw countless eddies knitting the surface into patterns we could not decipher. How could we hear the currents with the constant wash of all that noise?

The currents slowed and sped and slowed again. The wind blew away the top layers of ocean water and the searing blue rose from below. The water conducted heat and electricity and sound. Radioactivity fell from the sky and rushed from the shore, found buoyancy and traveled across ocean basins. The strata of water shifted over time and fresh water flowed off the mountains toward the blue.

The satellites couldn’t see below the waves so we sent the robots. We thought they were our emissaries but the robots lived their own lives down below. The currents turned them and tumbled them. Information leaked out and the numbers grew fuzzy with the bodies of tiny beings.

All the while the water was changing in ways we had never foreseen and could not foretell. All the real-time monitoring could not prepare us for the threat of the ocean, for the promise it had sealed with the steam engines, the atom bombs, the factory owners at once yesterday and so long ago.

*“I mean wake work to be a mode of inhabiting and rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives” (Sharpe, 2016: 18)*

*What would an ecological working of the wake look like? Wake work, after Sharpe, is one way to contend with (both inhabit and rupture) some of the contemporary disjunctures of global ecological change and environmental justice. A recent body of work maintains that racialized violence and ecological catastrophe must be thought as one process. If the current crisis of ecological reproduction is more accurately called the Capitalocene, Vergès reminds us that capitalism is inextricably the result of chattel slavery: “Racialized chattel were the capital that made capitalism” (2017: 80). This is to say, an ecological reading of the wake is not ecology added to the wake, or vice versa; it simply draws attention to an element of wake work that is always present.*

The satellites couldn't see and the robots were lost but down there was everything. The bones beneath the sea sighed and tumbled. The green chains were unmoving. The dead timbers grew loud with life. Larvae, polyps, coral, fish. Stone and bone, metal and scales and flesh.

Some wrecks spoke of battles, of metals flung slow and fast across vast spaces. What wasn't metal drifted and settled and slowly released toxic fragments into the deep ocean wells. Other ships told of bodies, of the beginning of capitalism, of the brutalities that made its engines run, and ultimately of its limits. The limits and the bloodiness of its purchases, of what it took and what it took to get there.

But all the blood was gone and the bones were gone, or at least no one could find them and how do you mourn with all that time and nothing to hold on to? Maybe we

could have found them if we tried, after all. But the body is an abstraction as soon as it's gone. Without the bodies the ancestors became rumors. If we couldn't account for what had been done, could we learn to tell the story in a different way?

*Sharpe asks, "How do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing?" (2016: 20). At the same time, Sharpe avows that wake work cannot be reduced to an act of mourning. It is also about seeing, practicing, and celebrating forms of survival and ways to be otherwise in the active ongoingness of violence and oppression.*

Time accumulated in other forms. The falling bodies had spread to the other seas now. The repetition of lost time did not so much drown out the social as force it into other forms. The relations became monstrous.

The cod could tell the story and the salmon could add a few lines and so could the tuna. It used to be all about too many boats, all the brutal nets, but these new changes were more profound.

The promise and threat of new geological era turned our attention to the rock, but it wasn't just the lithosphere that mattered. The fish heard through the vibrations of tiny stones of bone cupped in the wet dishes of their ears. The stones grew new layers each year, like the rings of a tree. With these otoliths floating on internal seas, the fish were listening, but without enough life the reefs were quiet. The fish drifted through the silent seas, not knowing where to stop, where to stay.

The stones inside the ears inside the fish inside the reefs were almost too small and too many to think about. Unless you were in the middle of all that noise. Then silver slip bodies of the fish slivered the bottom

of the boat, like water, like the name of a beloved like salt in the throat.

*Why work the wake from, with, or through the ocean? Of course, there is no reason to be literal here – there are plenty of ways to do wake work without proximity to water. Yet the ocean can provoke us to think differently about time, about embodiment, about materiality – to “renew the ways that violence is narrated” beyond even the notions of slow violence that have so captivated environmental humanities (Vergès, 2017: 98). And of course, it bears mentioning that racialized capitalism both depends upon and fundamentally transforms the ocean; the ocean refuses to be a metaphor. The ocean is thus materially “an ever-present, ever-reformulating record of the unimaginable” (Tinsley, 2008: 193-194).*

The seas were turning acid by degrees and the fish started to make bad choices. Then, after 420 million years, the oil drillers came for the coelacanths. They turned their ancient faces away from the machines and looked toward Antarctica, where the ice shelf was cracking. The ships passed by, shaped like nothing else in the sea, and still the fish opened their horrible mouths with no words inside.

The plastic was an epidemic. Plastic nodules like salt, like stars, like a million tiny pills, the stuff to make a world. Drifting on the dunes, falling through the water, mutable but always present. Plastic like an ache in the bone. Before the plastic was the oil. Before the oil were the smallest lives.

The whales bore their dead and their voices echoed across the seas, tunneling through the waters, making passageways where sound could fly ever faster. When the whales died their bodies became rain, detritus drifting

down yet never reaching the ocean floor. Taken inside other bodies that did not know the taste of grief.

*How to bring scientific knowledge into the practice of wake work, without denying the violences in which the scientific endeavor, broadly conceived, has so often participated? Working the ecological wake must do more than bring different forms of knowledge and intellectual traditions into conversation. Nor can it simply test the limits of science to speak the language of loss (though it can do this too). In recognition of the power asymmetries between different ways of knowing, the ecological wake provokes and practices renewed forms of relation and sensing, mutated expressions, transgressive intuitions, opaque geo-biographies, citations and situations with difference.*

*These tricky (re)productions continue along with the disaster.*

### coda

We could not see the currents. We could not hold the bodies in our hands. We could not hear. We could not count. We could not read the rocks. We could not register the radiation. We could not stop making plastic. We could not eat anything else. We could not know what we knew. We could not think with all that noise.

Who were we? We were never complete.

We thought that maybe we could swim.

We each swam for the shore and now there is an ocean between us.

### References

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