Doctoral theses at NTNU, 2024:15

Celina Stifjell

She-Monsters and Sea Changes:

Imagining Submersion in Speculative Feminist Fiction

Doctoral thesis

NTNU
Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Thesis for the Degree of
Philosophiae Doctor
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Art and Media Studies

NTNU
Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

Celina Stifjell

She-Monsters and Sea Changes:

Imagining Submersion in Speculative Feminist Fiction

Thesis for the Degree of Philosophiae Doctor

Trondheim, January 2024

Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Art and Media Studies

NTNU
Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

NTNU
Norwegian University of Science and Technology

Thesis for the Degree of Philosophiae Doctor

Faculty of Humanities
Department of Art and Media Studies

ISBN 978-82-326-7632-3 (printed ver.)
ISBN 978-82-326-7631-6 (electronic ver.)
ISSN 1503-8181 (printed ver.)
ISSN 2703-8084 (online ver.)

Doctoral theses at NTNU, 2024:15

Printed by NTNU Grafisk senter

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement: “an act or a statement expressing thanks to someone; something that is given to someone as thanks” (OED). But also: “an act of accepting that something exists or is true, or that something is there.” To begin, I need to acknowledge the ambivalence that comes up in writing these acknowledgements after four long and often lonely years of research and writing. Completing this PhD has been for me both a dream and a nightmare, and I am not the person I was when I started.

When I wrote the first proposal for my project in 2019, I was twenty-four and not in a very good place. I still launched myself from a draining MA degree straight into academia, ignoring all words of warning and wisdom on the way. Barely six months into the PhD, the whole world shut down—and so did I. What started as a series of inexplicable neck and shoulder injuries ended finally in a stage of burnout where it became almost impossible to think or move. I kept working, even when my body and mind did not, until I was forced to take sick leave the summer of 2021. I did not return to work full-time until the spring semester of 2023. Most, if not all, of this dissertation was written while in recovery from burnout.

If my list of acknowledgements is to start anywhere, it therefore has to be with the many physical therapists, psychologists, and doctors who saw what was happening and recognised the PhD as one of many symptoms of chronic overachievement. I don’t know where I would be without their help. Probably still at home, staring at the bathroom ceiling.

I also want to thank my supervisor Julia Leyda who has been unwavering in her support since our first meeting and who believed in this project throughout, even when I didn’t. In addition to reminding me of the fun and creative parts of cultural studies research, she has been a constant champion of mental health and realistic expectations. I could never have finished this work without her, and I feel extremely lucky to have had her as my supervisor.

Many thanks also to my secondary supervisors: Hanna Musiol, who has been my teacher and mentor since my BA; and to Stacy Alaimo, who responded so generously to my request for supervision and whose insight radically transformed how I engaged with each of the texts we discussed. Many thanks also to Alexis Shotwell for her incredibly incisive and insightful feedback on the final draft of this project. I was unable to follow all of her many excellent suggestions, so any remaining emissions or mistakes are my own.

Thanks to NTNU Oceans and the HAVANSVAR Blue Humanities Pilot Programme on Responsible Ocean Research for funding this project and to the NTNU Environmental Humanities Research Group for making that collaboration possible. Thanks to the Norwegian Researcher School in Environmental Humanities for amazing courses and moments of community along the way. Thanks to all my fellow PhD students at the Department of Art and Media Studies for the breakfasts, lunches, and coffee breaks during the last year, and the PhD students at the Department of Language and Literature for the writing sessions, stretching breaks, and bouldering sessions.

Finally, thank you to all my amazing friends: the ones who were there at the beginning, the ones who came in at the end, the ones who left and came back again, and the few that stayed through it all. Thanks especially to my climbing group who made the afternoons the last year of this PhD such a joy, and to my capoeira friends who literally and figuratively turned my worldview on its head. Endless thanks to Amund Stensrud Normann, and to his family, for taking care of me, making me feel at home, and giving me a much-needed place to rest.

I have lost track of how many times I've been told that a good PhD is a finished PhD because it only marks the beginning of an academic career. For me, I see it as an end. I have learned so much and I have valued the time to explore, but I'm ready to move on to other projects and to (hopefully) happier, healthier ways of life. This project belongs to a younger version of me, so I dedicate it to her in acknowledgement of everything it took to get here. Thank you.

Abstract

This dissertation combines interdisciplinary theories from the blue humanities and monster studies to explore how anglophone North American works of feminist speculative fiction use the figuration of the "she-monster" to cultivate more mutual and material relationships with oceans in the Anthropocene. It builds on DeLoughrey's term "submersion stories" (2015) to argue that new feminist posthuman ocean imaginaries are emerging in response to the distance and mastery of the masculinist alien ocean narrative that dominates Western science fiction. Using monster methodologies inspired by cultural studies (Hellstrand et al. 2018), I contextualise and analyse a diverse selection of feminist speculative texts across genres and media which feature marginalised characters rejecting anthropocentrism, forming coalitional alliances, and transforming into monsters through close encounters with oceanic otherness. These texts' embrace of difference, I argue, represents a "sea change" in Western conceptions of the human grounded in the "master model" dichotomy of nature/culture (Plumwood 1993), requiring readers/viewers to imagine possibilities for more "response-able" relationships to more-than-human worlds (Haraway 2007). The three chapters focus on Joan Slonczewski's ecofeminist utopian novel *A Door into Ocean* (1986), Guillermo del Toro's romantic Hollywood creature feature *The Shape of Water* (2017), and a collection of transmedial Afrofuturist mermaid stories including Rivers Solomon's novella *The Deep* (2019) and Nnedi Okorafor's novel *Lagoon* (2014) as submersion stories that successfully keep alive a utopian impulse of transformation in resistance to the current dystopian trend in mainstream popular culture.

Sammendrag

Denne avhandlingen kombinerer teori fra havhumaniora og monsterstudier for å utforske hvordan engelskspråklige nordamerikanske verk innenfor feministisk science fiction bruker kvinnelige sjømonstre («she-monsters») som en figurasjon for å dyrke frem mer gjensidige og materielle forhold til havet i en antropocen tidsalder. Den bygger på DeLoughrey's begrep om nedsenkelsesfortellinger («submersion stories») (2015) i det den argumenterer for at nye feministiske posthumanistiske forestillinger om havet er i ferd med å tre frem som en respons til vestlig science fiction sitt tidligere maskulinistiske bilde av havet som et romvesen kjennetegnet av kontroll og avstand. Ved hjelp av monstermetodologier inspirert av tverrfaglige kulturstudier (Hellstrand et al. 2018), kontekstualiserer og analyserer jeg et mangfold av feministiske science fiction-fortellinger på tvers av ulike medier og sjangre hvor de marginaliserte hovedpersonene avviser antroposentrisk etikk, bygger koalisjonsallianser, og forvandler seg til sjømonstre i nærkontakt med havets annerledeshet. Måten disse tekstene omfavner annerledeshet, hevder jeg, viser til et havskifte («sea change») i vestlige oppfatninger av mennesket bunnet i et dualistisk syn på natur og kultur (Plumwood 1993), noe som gjør at lesere/tilskuere blir nødt til å se for seg muligheter for mer responsdyktige («response-able») forhold til mer-enn-menneskelige verdener (Haraway 2007). De tre hovedkapitlene fokuserer på Joan Slonczewskis økofeministiske utopiske roman *A Door into Ocean* (1986), Guillermo del Toros romantiske Hollywood monsterfilm *The Shape of Water* (2017), og et utvalg av afrofuturistiske transmediafortellinger om havfruer, inkludert Rivers Solomons kortroman *The Deep* (2019) og Nnedi Okorafor's roman *Lagoon* (2014), som eksempler på nedsenkelsesfortellinger som bevarer en følelse av håp og endring i motstand til samtidens dystopiske populærkultur.

Contents

Introduction: She-Monsters and Sea Changes 9
Monstrous Ocean: Metaphor and Materiality at Sea 15
Theories of the Monstrous: Intersectional Feminist Posthumanism 24
Promises of Monsters: Imagining Unfathomable Futures 34
Monstrous Methodologies 43
Chapter Overview 46
Chapter One: Sharing as Survival in *A Door into Ocean* 51
Ecofeminism and Essentialism 55
Sharing as Contagion 63
Sharing Submersion 71
Sharing Utopia 78
Conclusion 83
Chapter Two: Monstrous Affects and Alliances in *The Shape of Water* 87
Affects of the Monstrous 92
Desire for the Monstrous 99
Alliance of the Voiceless 108
Abjection of the Normative 116
Will-full Futures 121
Conclusion 129
Chapter Three: Flight and Transformation in Afrofuturist Mermaid Stories 133
Contexts for Transformation 138
Healing and Survival as Resistance 153
Transformation in the Present 162
Conclusion 175
Coda: #water 179
Submersion as Escape and Transformation 183
Speculating on Submersive Futures 185
Works Cited 189

Introduction: She-Monsters and Sea Changes

In the Anthropocene, these worlds are increasingly spaces of transformation, becoming more oceanic, more submarine, more multispecies, and perhaps unfathomable.

—Elizabeth DeLoughrey, "Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene" (42)

The monster is a question: what kind of world do you want to live in?

—Mark Bould, quoted in Donna McCormack, "Monster Talk: A Virtual Roundtable" (250)

This project is about buoyancy and submersion in response to a changing environment characterised, among other things, by rising sea levels and other threatening encroachments of seemingly stable boundaries: global warming, biodiversity loss, soil erosion, ocean acidification, chemical pollution, and changing water cycles. As Elizabeth DeLoughrey notes above, the future is becoming increasingly oceanic and even unfathomable as the planet faces the mounting consequences of capitalist-colonialist resource extraction and overconsumption. A key question in what is now popularly called the Anthropocene is what kind of world "we" want to inhabit in the future and how that "we" is constituted through boundary-making practises that produce humans and monsters along uneven and unjust lines of species, gender, race, class, and more. These lines, in turn, are negotiated through popular cultural texts which raise questions of their own about which worlds are deemed desirable or not by the dominant culture. Using a cultural studies lens and examining diverse speculative feminist texts from the US, my project explores how stories about what I call she-monsters and sea changes playfully imagine the ocean as a site of hope and future transformation in opposition to mainstream narratives about catastrophe.

Following DeLoughrey's work on Pacific and Caribbean Ocean literatures, I refer to the texts I read as "submersion stories" ("Ordinary Futures" 364). Submersion is theorised by DeLoughrey and other feminists working in the blue humanities—including Stacy Alaimo,[1]

[1] In Alaimo's work, submersion is a recognition of entanglements between human bodies and their environments: "new materialist theories should not divide human corporeality from a wider material world, but should instead submerse the human within the material flows, exchanges, and interactions of substances, habitats, places, and environments" ("New Materialisms" 281). See also the chapter "Your Shell on Acid" in *Exposed.*

Melody Jue,[2] and Astrida Neimanis[3]—as an ethical, ontological, and epistemological orientation toward the unfathomable future of the planet, based on adaptation and response-ability to nonhuman species and environments. Response-ability, a term used widely across new materialist and materialist feminist theory, refers to the ability to respond ethically to "significant others" that are bound in vulnerable entanglements and material interdependencies to the self (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 89). Placing ethics at the centre of ontologies and epistemologies, "responsibility is a relationship crafted in intra-action through which entities, subjects and objects, come into being" (71; see Barad, *Meeting the Universe*).[4] Works on submersion recognise that human bodies are porous—enmeshed with their environments—and thus both vulnerable and complicit in differential ways to the ongoing changes to our material world (Alaimo, *Exposed* 1). Contrary to Western ideals of transcendence and mastery, such recognition allows for "submerged perspectives" located in situated experiences of capitalist-colonialist destruction, beyond both the universalising discourses of the Anthropocene and the boundaries dictated by the nation state (see Gómez-Barris 1-4).

Submersion *stories*, DeLoughrey writes, are narratives of transformative encounters between humans and oceanic otherness, "depicting female characters that have merged with an oceanic realm" in a way that raises "vital questions about how to represent a subject who has such porous boundaries with other species that the concept of (human) species itself is put into question" ("Ordinary Futures" 364-365). Further, the non-anthropocentric quality of these stories "suggests an encounter with deep planetary time that renders an interspecies relationship" into one of return rather than decline, in "counter narrative to … the individualistic terms of apocalyptic fiction" that proliferate in the dominant popular culture of the US and Western Europe (366). Examining feminist counternarratives originating within that same Western popular cultural context, I argue along with DeLoughrey that "*submersion*

[2] In her work on ocean media, Jue uses the term "oceanic immersion" to refer to her "methodology of *conceptual displacement"* and the "amphibious perspective" adopted through "[her] own practise of scuba diving" (*Wild Blue Media* 4-5).

[3] In *Bodies of Water,* Neimanis describes immersion as a phenomenological orientation toward ocean knowledges: "We humans can only be fully immersed in water as a temporary gesture—just as other species will never stand at the water's edge, contemplating its depths ... Our different embodied orientations to water tell us something about our varying capacities to *know* water. For me, this also underlines questions of incursion, hubris, and humility, as something water can teach us about difference, and knowledge" (142)

[4] Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* radically rethinks materiality by drawing on the philosophy of Niels Bohr, in combination with feminist and queer theories of performativity, to construct a theory of "agential realism" in which matter has agency, relations precede objects, and discourse and materiality are mutually entangled. Her work is foundational to new materialist thought on nonhuman agency, ontology, and ethics, but a thorough exploration lies beyond the scope of this dissertation.

may produce alternative knowledges and ontologies" grounded in the ocean's fluidity and in so doing "[bring] about ethical transformations" in the relationship between humans and oceanic others ("Submarine Futures" 37, 42, emphasis in original). DeLoughrey's concept moors these transformative encounters with alterity within Caribbean and Indigenous Pacific relationships with land, water, and more-than-human kin and to histories of colonialism and decolonial resistance that produce alternative "sea ontologies" (36).[5] This dissertation argues that such stories of submersion can also be found in narratives that arise from a US popular cultural context, but still represent the ocean not simply as an alienating site of apocalypse but as a subversive space of response-ability, transformation, and hope. I find that, as an analytic, submersion reveals connections in unexpected places: from Joan Slonczewski's feminist ecotopian novel *A Door into Ocean* (1986), to Guillermo del Toro's Hollywood monster romance *The Shape of Water* (2017), and to transmedial Afrofuturist mermaid tales like Bola Ogun's short film *The Water Phoenix* (2018), Rivers Solomon's novella *The Deep* (2019), and Nnedi Okorafor's novel *Lagoon* (2014). Though widely different, all of these texts feature she-monsters, sea changes, and submersion—merging with an oceanic realm—as the key to imagining worlds based on more response-able ethics.

The title of my project requires some explanation. In *The Tempest,* Shakespeare's play about shipwreck, islands, and monsters, the spirit Ariel uses the phrase "sea change" to refer to the apparent drowning and metamorphosis Alonso, the King of Naples, undergoes at the bottom of the sea in the first act. Cast from his ship, Alonso's "bones" and "eyes" turn to "coral" and "pearls" and "Nothing of him that doth fade / But doth suffer a sea-change / Into something rich and strange" (1140).[6] This incredibly rich passage permeates imaginaries of water in Anglophone film and fiction, and it speaks powerfully to the material transformations that occur in the encounter between human and more-than-human "bodies of water" as their boundaries begin to blur (Neimanis 1).[7] In more common contemporary usage, a sea change refers to "an alteration or metamorphosis, *a radical change*" (*OED*, my

[5] Specifically, DeLoughrey theorises submersion through a reading of Māori poet Keri Hulme's experimental short-story and poetry collection *Stonefish*.

[6] Alonso's sea change sparks unexpected associations across centuries to the eerie more-than-human figures of Jason deCaires Taylor's Molinere Underwater Sculpture Park, located off the coast of Grenada: a multispecies memorial site to Middle Passage and to the haunting historical-material presence of human bones on the sea floor and dissolved into the water cycle. Consisting of human figures cast in concrete designed to encourage coral reef growth, the monstrous appearance of these statues alerts scuba-diving (or online) visitors to the unfathomable quality of more-than-human temporalities and spaces (DeLoughrey, "Submarine Futures" 36). DeLoughrey writes about this in "Submarine Futures" as part of her theorising on submersion and sea ontologies.

[7] The most obvious example here is T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, but also films like *Prospero's Books* (1991).

emphasis). The Anthropocene is a sea change in both senses of the word: material metamorphosis and societal transformation. In this moment of sea change, I posit subversive and hopeful new imaginaries are needed to inspire a radical change in current ways of thinking, being, and feeling as human beings in relation to oceanic otherness, leading us away from our dystopian reality of capitalist-colonialist extractivism towards something "rich and strange." The current crisis could be a global shipwreck, as it is in Steve Mentz's *Shipwreck Modernity*, however, with the right interventions, it could also be what Donna Haraway calls a "boundary event," in which case "our job is to make the Anthropocene as short/thin as possible and to cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can replenish refuge" (*Staying with the Trouble* 100).

The mounting sense of uncertainty, vulnerability, and risk that comes with the experience of sea change casts the humanist subject adrift in unfathomable waters and possibilities for the future.[8] A popular fun-fact states that we know more about the surface of the moon than the bottom of the ocean;[9] this is true to the extent that oceanic spaces and species remain largely unmapped by modern science, despite imaginaries of blank surface space and the enormous resources mobilised to explore ocean depths in the name of capitalist extractivism (Hessler 24-25). In a much deeper sense, the Anthropocene oceans, in their refusal to be known (or fathomed), spark an "epistemological and ontological crisis" that disrupts Western ideas of static matter and linear progress and radically dislocates the humanist subject from its position as disembodied, transcendent knower (46, 62).[10] Alaimo describes this unmooring from mastery in terms of "Anthropocene dissolves" (*Exposed* 161), while Neimanis theorises an epistemology of "unknowability" brought on by our bodies' situatedness as *part of* the global hydrosphere (146-147). Both, like DeLoughrey, stress humanity's oceanic evolutionary origins and the speculative but possible "submarine futures" heralded by the unfathomability of Anthropocene temporalities and material entanglements (DeLoughrey, "Submarine Futures"). Becoming submerged and experiencing a sea change, as Alonso does in *The Tempest*—or as Jason deCaires Taylor's famous Molinere underwater statues do in their slow metamorphosis from human figures to multispecies reefs (see

[8] Note that I deliberately avoid referring to hyperobjects or anything of the kind here, as I find object oriented ontologies incongruous with feminist perspectives and politics of citation. See Alaimo's commentary in the conclusion of *Exposed* for a more detailed discussion of this topic.
[9] See, e.g., the *Blue Planet II* episode "The Deep."
[10] My definition of the unfathomable here could also be linked to the sublime, which Hessler notes marks a sense of "withering away" of human agency in encounters with the ocean and other forces of nature during eighteenth- and nineteenth century Romanticism (*Prospecting Ocean* 80-81). However, the sublime presupposes a distance from the subject that is incommensurate with the Anthropocene. See also Salmose on the apocalyptic sublime.

DeLoughrey, "Submarine Futures" 36-38)—can thus be felt as a deeply uncanny return to the oceanic past as much as a radical transformation (37).

This turn toward the uncanny brings us to the other half of my title (as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes in his classic theses on monster culture, "The monster always escapes" but it also "always return[s]" (39, 52), much like the flow of ever-changing sea levels and water bodies). My argument develops the role of the she-monster as a figuration of sea change in submersive encounters with Anthropocene oceans. Embodying the fluid and the unfathomable, the monster is an encounter with alterity within the vulnerable self which leads to mutual transformation (Schildrick, *Embodying the Monster* 1). According to Mark Bould in the epigraph, monsters are also questions of worlding, and specifically about what kinds of future worlds we would like to create through our encounters with that otherness. This gives monsters a transformative function, a hopeful potentiality best described in terms of the abovementioned sea change or, in Haraway's terms, as "the promises of monsters" ("Promises of Monsters"). Monsters are also one of Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt's speculative figurations for response-able Anthropocene coexistence in the environmental humanities survival guide *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*. They write, "Monsters are useful figures with which to think the Anthropocene" since they represent both "the wonders of symbiosis *and* the threats of ecological disruption" (M2). In this way, they give lively articulation to new materialist principles like "trans-corporeality" (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*) "intra-action" (Barad, *Meeting the Universe*) and "vibrant matter" (Bennett) in contrast to imaginaries that would render the ocean empty, unchangeable, or distant from human worlds. In other words, in the texts I read, she-monsters lead to sea changes that produce alternate ontologies and more ethical means of response.

Both the problem and potential of thinking with the monstrous as a catalyst for transformation lies in pinning down what, exactly, the monster is. Sea monsters have long tenure as signs of wonder and warning in Western mythology and on pre-Enlightenment maps, such as Olaus Magnus' sixteenth-century *Carta Marina* which shows a Scandinavian coast spectacularly inhabited by krakens, sea worms, and shipwrecking whales (cf. Hessler, *Prospecting Ocean* 65-66).[11] These are not the figures I theorise as she-monsters, though they share some kinship, especially if we turn to female sea monsters like Scylla and Charybdis,

[11] As part of her work on ocean extractivism in *Prospecting Ocean,* Hessler uses Magnus' map to show how Western visual representations of the sea have developed from a pre-Enlightenment emphasis on "spiritual, totemic, and mythological depth" to today's "abstract, blank spaces of geometrical projection succumbed to a universalizing regime of study and visualisation" (66).

Grendel's mother, and even Sycorax, who all dwell in the unfathomable, beyond the limits of patriarchal control.[12] As Charlotte Runcie explains in her semi-autobiographical exploration of (Western) women's relationships to the sea in *Salt on Your Tongue*, although monsters tend to be beyond fathoming, "[s]ome of the most ferocious mythological sea creatures … are more specifically described. They do have a sex, and that sex is female" (Runcie 59).[13] Editors Cristina Bacchilega and Marie Alohalani Brown make a similar point when they note in the introduction to the cross-cultural *Penguin Book of Mermaids* that female water beings are considered monstrous both because of their transgressive femininity and their connection to the subversive element of water (xii-xiii).[14] Indeed, associations between femininity, water, and danger in Western cultural traditions are well-documented, especially in feminist psychoanalytic critique; DeLoughrey summarises nicely, "the material of the ocean is usually gendered: as the origins of earthly life, *mer* or mother, or as the presumably chaotic agency of feminized 'fluidity' and nature" (DeLoughrey, "Submarine Futures" 38).[15] Although the gendering of oceans functions as an important context, in this cultural studies project I am more interested in she-monsters as contact zones between human and more-than-human worlds and as mediators of ever-shifting forms of identity and embodiment. In the texts I read in these chapters, she-monsters are women (and queer others) who "will-fully" (Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* 7) embrace the monstrous and abandon the human world in order to become submersed in the ocean as harbingers of a future sea change.

My aim in evoking these she-monsters is to propose the monstrous ocean as a more mutual and material alternative to the dominant Western science fictional and popular scientific trope of the alien ocean, which portrays the sea as distant and other to human experiences. Stefan Helmerich's anthropological study of microbial sea life—arguably a

[12] See Katherine McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds* and *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* for explorations of Sycorax as the gendered and racialised "absented presence" in Shakespeare's play.
[13] Runcie does not distinguish between gender and sex, but the statement is still useful in the way it connects femininity to water and the monstrous.
[14] In their collection, "mermaids" are figures beyond national boundaries and normative categories and their collection covers a range of merbeings from Oannes the Babylonian fish-man and Homer's birdlike sirens, to Irish/Scottish selkies, Hawai'ian Mo'o, Japanese *ningyo,* and the pan-African deity Mami Wata. This is a contrast to Western representations of *femme-fatale* mermaids weaponizing their transgressive femininity to lure men to their watery deaths. Consider for example Heinrich Heine's poem "Die Lorelei," about an alluring mermaid who wields her beauty and her song to lure sailors to their deaths on the River Rhine (Bacchilega and Brown xi).
[15] In addition, see Neimanis on Irigaray in chapter two of *Bodies of Water*: "For Irigaray, feminine bodies are fluid, both figuratively in their non subsumability into a masculine paradigm, and literally in their genital mucosity, their placental interchanges, and the amniotic flows. This leakiness is what makes woman always a woman-to-come" (78). Also, briefly, on Cixou's comparison between the feminine and the sea (195f15). Or the unique 1970s treatise *Male Fantasies* by German writer and academic Klaus Theweleit, who explains the rise of fascism as the result of a subconscious fear of femininity and particularly the "liquidity" of women's bodies, which act as "a swamp, a flood, a morass, ready to envelop and drown" (Rizvic).

foundational work for the blue humanities—bears the title *Alien Ocean,* and his introductory assertion that "the ocean is strange" is often cited to indicate the challenges that come with studying an environment that is in some ways truly alien to human experience (Helmreich ix). I argue that she-monsters are a necessary intervention because, as Stacy Alaimo points out, for most humans the ocean is knowable only via technological, narrative, or aesthetic representation, making feeling responsibility for the seas "even for environmentalists, an ethical-political stretch" ("Feminist Science Studies" 192).[16] Unfortunately, as I explore in more depth in the following section, the dominant tendency in Western culture has been to represent the ocean as an alien world, either a sublime and "perfect specimen for aesthetic contemplation" or a site for "unabashed masculinist narratives of exploration, discovery, and conquest" which serve to justify the limitless exploitation of ocean resources (193). Beyond its effects on sea life, the trope of the alien ocean also ties into colonialist beliefs in the myth of *aqua nullius* (and *terra nullius*). Contrary to the title of Derek Walcott's poem which states that "The sea is history," this has the effect of rendering the ocean free from history, culture, and other forms of human influence, which in turn creates the impression that the ocean is a place where "pure, untouched otherness" can be encountered and claimed "without any of threat of nagging guilt, anxiety, or responsibility that may accompany the contemplation of places clearly marked by histories of colonialism, climate injustice, or environmental devastation" (Alaimo, "Feminist Science Studies" 194). My dissertation responds to the challenge to subvert the dominant narrative in order to arrive at an ocean imaginary based on closeness rather than distance and an ethics based on response-ability rather than mastery. This sea change, I argue, is the work done by submersion stories which imagine the ocean as a site of feminist liberation and posthuman transformation through the figuration of she-monsters. In what follows, I develop this alternative figuration by exploring what I see as three key facets of the monstrous ocean.

Monstrous Ocean: Metaphor and Materiality at Sea

In a dystopian capitalist-colonialist present marked by extractivist overfishing, deep sea mining, industrial trawling, oil spills, plastic and chemical pollution, melting ice caps, and rising sea levels and acidity, it comes as no surprise that the oceans are becoming increasingly monstrous. The planet's oceans currently make up 71% of the planet's surface

[16] The exception of course being "ocean users" such as swimmers, surfers, and sailors both Indigenous and not, who know the oceans intimately through physical immersion (Hessler, *Prospecting Ocean* 24).

and over 90% of its habitable biome—numbers that will likely change as the seas simultaneously rise and empty. Popular non-fiction accounts like Richard Ellis' *The Empty Ocean* (2003), Callum Roberts' *The Unnatural History of the Sea* (2007), Sylvia Earle's *The World Is Blue: How Our Fate and the Ocean's Are One* (2009), and Brian Fagan's *The Attacking Ocean: The Past, Present, and Future of Rising Sea Levels* (2013) all document the historical decline of the seas, while also looking ahead to decidedly unfathomable futures shaped by short-sighted extractivism. The current overwhelming flourishing of resilient jellyfish in the worlds' warming oceans is only one example of the monstrous future we are currently making by failing to care response-ably for the seas (Tsing et al. M1). At the time of this writing in early 2023, news headlines report unexpected accelerations in sea level rise and resulting flooding,[17] an "unprecedented rise in plastic pollution,"[18] and an unstoppable "sea monster" of sargassum overtaking the Atlantic.[19] A high seas treaty has finally been agreed on by the UN to protect one third of the oceans by 2030.[20] It is high time for such an intervention; by the current rate of depletion, one influential study projects a collapse of all major seafood fisheries by the year 2050, a frightening forecast that leads palaeontologist Jeremy Jackson to suggest evolution is reversing in a way that recreates Precambrian oceans in the present, with all the attendant consequences this has for human and more-than-human embodiment and futurity (in Davis 236).

In an article describing the rise of the blue humanities, John R. Gillis outlines the representational history of the oceans in Western literature.[21] Beginning with the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century "cultural turn to the sea," he describes how perceptions of the oceans have shifted through history from utilitarian to aesthetic in concurrence with scientific discovery, culminating in today's conflicting mixture of

[17] See e.g., this *The Guardian* article from February 2023: "Rising seas threaten 'mass exodus on a biblical scale', UN chief warns."
[18] *The Guardian* article from March 2023: "More than 170tn plastic particles afloat in oceans, say scientists."
[19] *The Guardian* article from March 2023: "The creeping threat of the Great Atlantic Sargassum Belt."
[20] See e.g., *The Guardian* article from March 2023: "High seas treaty: historic deal to protect international waters finally reached at UN."
[21] The environmental humanities developed during the last decade as an effort toward "rethinking the ontological exceptionality of the human" from a position of Western knowledges attentive to (though not always in conversation with) Indigenous knowledges (Rose et al. 2). The blue humanities, or critical ocean studies, is emerging more recently as a field interested in studying the importance of oceans to otherwise "green" environmental discourses. Åsberg and Radomska's short genealogical definition is useful: "Often inspired by the theoretical concepts from feminist STS, BH involves a turn to the political ontologies of the sea, their implications for multispecies temporalities and aesthetics, human communities and more-than-human ethics in the Anthropocene. Influences on the rise of this research are the pioneering biomarine writings of Rachel Carson. Yet, its feminist and decolonial ambitions are more evident in influences like Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) or Anna Tsing's (2015) and Donna Haraway's (2016) multispecies works. In effect, it draws on a range of geographical, historical and cultural works for the understanding of the oceans as a force rather than a place to be managed" (Åsberg and Radomska 5).

extractivist and environmentalist modes (n.p.). *20.000 Leagues Under the Sea*'s Captain Nemo and his rhapsodizing soliloquy about the inexhaustible sea captures a nineteenth-century belief that, although consistently challenged in the present turn to blue-green environmentalism, still holds water in the dominant capitalist cultural imaginary: "The sea is everything … the vast reservoir of Nature" (56)—impermeable and unchangeable, unfathomable and therefore alien.[22] This "extractive view," to borrow from Macarena Gómez-Barris, persists even as it becomes increasingly clear that the oceans are under serious threat (5). As Alaimo points out, "Even Rachel Carson believed, at least until 1950 when *The Sea around Us* was first published, that the immense seas were immune from anthropogenic harms" ("Adequate Imaginaries" 311). In today's late capitalist world marked by resource depletion and a growing human population, the oceans' "vast reservoir" of empty, but still easily categorizable and extractable, capital-N "Cheap Nature" (Moore, *Capitalism*) is expected to feed the masses, drive technological development, and ensure the sustainability of an inherently unsustainable blue-green capitalism, as demonstrated by the intensification of fisheries and ongoing initiatives in deep sea mining that take place simultaneously with conservation efforts. This turns one of the planet's most vulnerable and essential ecosystems into a "new frontier for resource extraction and economic expansion … a promising site of endless, and highly profitable, economic production" (Johnson and Braverman 2). All the while, untold quantities of plastics, toxic chemicals, and other waste are dumped into the sea at locations deemed "distant" enough (from where?) not to cause harm (to whom?), while trawling, deep sea mining, and offshore oil drilling lay waste to the seabed. Despite the blue turn, then, the oceans remain at an alienated distance. I therefore argue that new hopeful imaginaries based on submersion are still needed to create a sea change in the West's exploitative and alienated relationship to the ocean.

In this project, I therefore propose the monstrous ocean as a new speculative feminist posthuman alternative to the dominant Western narrative of the "alien ocean." As mentioned above, for most people the ocean is a highly mediated environment that is encountered primarily through technological, narrative, and aesthetic representations which shape our relationship to the sea. Alaimo's work focuses on how visual representations of deep sea creatures as "aliens" create the impression of separation rather than entanglement and thus perpetuate models of technological mastery and extraction— precluding adequate levels of

[22] This view goes back earlier still; in 1609, Hugo Grotius wrote in his influential treatise *Mare Liberum*: "For it is manifest that if many hunt on the land or fish in a river, the forest will soon be without game and the river without fishes, which is not so in the sea" (qtd. In Hessler, *Prospecting Ocean* 81).

care and concern. Her corpus includes popular scientific representations such as James Cameron's documentary *Aliens of the Deep* and books and web pages published by the Census of Marine Life and World Register of Marine Species (see "Feminist Science Studies"). To her examples of alienating depictions, I could add Jacques Cousteau's immensely popular speculative documentaries *The Silent World* (1956) and *World Without Sun* (1964), which showcase what was at the time the latest in underwater technologies—from pioneering scuba equipment to sea floor habitats—all the while excitedly pointing toward Man's future dominion over the dark and unfathomable oceans. *The Silent World* is perhaps best known for being the first film to show footage of the ocean floor in colour, but it is memorable for its many scenes of atrocious environmental damage and animal abuse, as Cousteau and his team of adventurers heedlessly massacre sharks and throw dynamite at coral reefs in the name of science. By comparison, the later *World Without Sun* seems almost restrained, despite its otherworldly premise and execution; in the film, Cousteau follows a team of "oceanauts" as they attempt to spend a month in the Conshelf (Continental Shelf) II Station, 10 metres below the surface of the sea. This spectacular stunt is figured through Cousteau's own grandiose narration in science fictional terms as "an historic adventure" of "conquest" into the planet's final frontier, with the explicit aim to "systematically exploit the resources of the ocean" (*World Without Sun).* Adding to the absurdity, the oceanauts' submarine is designed to resemble a "diving saucer," while the all-male crew, including Cousteau himself, swim around wearing skin-tight silver diving suits taken straight out of 1960s science fiction cinema. These films and their emphasis on discovery exemplify how the ocean is portrayed as an "inner space" parallel to the "outer space" beyond planet earth (Bryld and Lykke 24f6).

In addition to these "realist" tales of discovery, there is no shortage of science *fictional* texts that also demonstrate how the problematic trope of the "alien ocean" has contributed to shaping dominant popular cultural imaginaries in the West. Consider, for instance, Hollywood sf movies like *Sphere* (1998) and *The Abyss* (1989), both of which portray encounters with unfathomable otherworldly beings taking place at the bottom of the sea, or novels like Frank Schätzing's epic international bestseller *The Swarm* (2004), an eco-thriller which shows a vengeful deep sea intelligence called the *yrr* waging war on humans for their crimes against the ocean. Preceding these, in the early twentieth century, H.P. Lovecraft (cultishly famous as the White supremacist and misogynist father of weird fiction) created an extensive mythos of deep sea horror populated by "tentacular monsters and

abyssal terrors" (Deckard and Oloff 4). Based on his own xeno- and ecophobia[23]—not unrelated fears—his early stories like "Dagon" (1917) and "The Temple" (1920) develop the lore of an ancient race of humanoid sea dwellers whose primordial civilization worships a fish-god and who in the later story "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" (1936) interbreed with humans in a thinly veiled allusion to fears of racial miscegenation and species degeneration (see chapter two of this dissertation). The perhaps more famous and massively influential "The Call of Cthulhu" (1928) "crystallizes these earlier visions into the monstrous figure of the ancient god Cthulhu, an oceanic hybrid … who is prophesied to return and wreak a terrible wrath upon human civilization in the contemporary era" aided by his worshippers "in the supposedly primitive religions of Afro-diasporic cultures" (4). In addition to the misanthropic and unfathomable nonhuman agency common to ecohorror (see Tidwell and Soles), Lovecraft's work thus exemplifies an inseparable fear of the ocean and of racial/gender alterity. This supports Helmreich's observation that "[t]he alien of the alien ocean is sometimes figured as a primitive other, marked as such through the trope of darkness, a figure that suggests an absence of enlightenment and calls up the fearsome and fascinating dark bodies of racialised discourse" (76)—as well as, Neimanis adds, "the maternal abyss, the feminine Other" (144). None of these stories encourage response-ability in encounters with alterity. Rather, they emphasise colonial and technoscientific mastery, or a loss thereof, as the defining mode of human encounter with an oceanic other that remains, ultimately, beyond our reach.

The popularity of alien-like sea creatures aside, Western sf narratives also have an equally common tendency to portray the ocean as a blank stage for acts of human heroism, devoid of history, materiality, or systems of power. In *The Novel and the Sea,* Margaret Cohen shows how masculinist adventure fiction has been the dominant genre of seafaring narrative in the West starting with the Odyssey and *Robinson Crusoe,* to works by James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, and Joseph Conrad, permeating North American and Western European literary traditions all the way up to the latest frontier fantasies of the sf genre. Common to these narratives is the male hero protagonist asserting dominance and control over his environment (or native humans and nonhumans) via the mastery of *techne,* relying on state-of-the-art technology to explore distant frontiers while at the same time confirming cultural and national values and identities (Cohen M. 3). More recent popular

[23] Ecophobia is defined by Simon C. Estok as "an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia and racism and sexism" (qtd. in Tidwell and Soles 4).

historical films like *Kon-Tiki* (2012) and *In the Heart of the Sea* (2015) show that the romance of adventure sea fiction is far from dead even though the last "blank spaces" on the map have long been filled in. This emphasis on mastery and exploration is part of what DeLoughrey refers to as the "unmarked masculinity" of the ocean as historical and literary space in the Western imagination ("Submarine Futures" 33)—a complement to the racialised and feminised depths. In more recent times, more people, including women, have gained access to the role of hero, but the narrative remains the same. In Alaimo's words, "the ocean is cast as the last wilderness on earth, with one difference now, anyone, male, female, black, or white, is welcome to join the expedition, as long as they embrace the pure spirit of exploration" (Alaimo, "Feminist Science Studies" 195). Meanwhile, the exploration narrative's inherently anthropocentric and colonialist underpinnings usually go unexamined, except perhaps in "petrogothic" and other "new weird" fictions that highlight the limits of human agency and control in encounters with oceanic otherness.[24]

The final scene from Polish sf writer Stanisław Lem's novel *Solaris* (1961) illustrates how becoming submersed reveals the seemingly alien ocean as monstrous. Written in Eastern Europe during the Cold War (and best known in the West as a tragic Hollywood romance starring George Clooney), *Solaris* is an admittedly incongruous place to begin a project on contemporary North American feminist speculative fictions. Yet, there is something deeply compelling in the way Lem's story has crossed national, cultural, and medial boundaries to intervene in Western imaginaries of mastery and transcendence over oceanic otherness. Set in the far future, Lem's novel explores what occurs during first contact between a group of male European scientists and a planet-wide sentient ocean that refuses all their attempts at mastery. Throughout the text, psychologist-protagonist Kris Kelvin fails repeatedly to maintain control of his own selfhood, let alone the feminised alien ocean that has disturbingly taken on the form of his deceased wife (see Jue, "Churning").[25] Indeed, having conducted all of their research from a station orbiting the planet—literally an Archimedean standpoint that keeps the scientists separated from the sea (Haraway, "Situated Knowledges" 581)—Kelvin and the

[24] China Miéville's short story "Covethite," for one brings petroculture to strange and terrifying life as humanity is confronted with the agency of "revenant junk oil riggs that rise from the [North Sea] and return to the shore to breed" (Ritson n.p.). Meanwhile, Rita Indiana's "new oceanic weird" novel *Tentacle* turns Lovecraftian ocean horror on its head with a trans protagonist and a complicated time-travel narrative that aims to prevent a world-ending chemical spill from taking place in the Caribbean (Deckard and Oloff 86).

[25] Central to the novel's plot and its gender politics is the protagonist Kris Kelvin's interactions with the ocean's material simulacra of his wife, who retains no memory of her traumatic suicide or her identity as an alien construct.; replicated by the ocean, she becomes an uncannily monstrous being who, as Melody Jue argues in her reading, ties together a feminised ocean with a masculinist desire to penetrate in the quest for knowledge ("Churning" 227).

other scientists are subjected to a radical role reversal when the ocean begins conducting its own line of research into the human psyche by extracting their most repressed and traumatic memories. Kelvin's first-person narration gives expression to a sense of human vulnerability in the encounter with an unfathomable nonhuman agency: the ocean "entered into me … sifted through my entire memory and found its most painful atom … it had broken through the double hermetic plating, the thick armouring of the Station, had found my body inside it, and had made off with its plunder" (Lem n.p.). The emphasis on bodily intrusion and extraction in this passage—"entering," breaking," and even "sifting"—and the reversal of the usual subject/object roles—the (feminised) ocean probes while the (male) scientist remains passive—turns Western scientific ideals of mastery and distance on their head.

Yet, it is only during the novel's final scene that Kelvin descends to the planet itself, relinquishing his view from above for a submersed position that will allow him to acquaint himself with the ocean on more mutual and material terms. Alighting on one of Solaris' transient surface structures, Kelvin bends to submerge his hand in the viscous black waves of the alien sea, a response-able act that is rewarded when the ocean itself returns the gesture by enveloping the human hand like a glove. Read through Barad's "agential realism," this is a touch that reveals the other within the self, because "all touching entails an infinite alterity, so that touching the other is touching all others, including the 'self,' and touching the 'self' entails touching the strangers within" ("On Touching" 214). Apart from the monstrous implications for humanist conceptions of embodiment and subjectivity, this encounter with the unfathomable suggests the possibility of an ethics based on response-ability rather than mastery. Indeed, when the ocean pulls back at last, Kelvin does not pursue it or subject it to force. Instead, he settles down for a long and uncertain wait, having suffered a sea change that leaves him no longer quite separate or securely human: "becoming one with this fluid unseeing colossus, as if—without the slightest effort, without words, without a single thought—I was forgiving it for everything" (Lem, n.p.). This effortless and embodied melding with the ocean does not bring on understanding; it does not explain the events that have taken place on the station or solve the mystery that is the alien ocean. It does not restore the scientist to an elevated position of knowledge and control over an externalised other. However, this moment demonstrates a dwelling in the unfathomable, an acceptance of the limits of scientific mastery and the mutual exchange that is knowing. Throughout this project on she-monsters, I seek out similar scenes of sea change and response-able encounter as they appear in submersion stories that subvert the dominant trope of the alien ocean.

Inspired by her work on submersion stories, I agree with DeLoughrey when she argues that "new oceanic imaginaries [are] emerging in the wake of the knowledge of anthropogenic climate change and sea-level rise" ("Submarine Futures" 32). Despite the existence of rare examples like *Solaris,* her use of the word "new" accurately describes a recent intervention in Western imaginaries; however, it is important to note that the knowledges she references are already integral to most Indigenous worldviews.[26] Her transnational work on submersion shows how people in the Caribbean and Pacific have long been aware of the ocean as a site of history, material agency, and multispecies kinship prior to and in resistance to European colonialism, as a "space of origins and of destiny" for the formation of cultures and of humanity as a whole ("Ordinary Futures" 353-354). These more response-able imaginaries of "sea ontologies" emerge across diverse cultural and geographic contexts. Examples originating in the African diaspora include Barbadian poet Kamau Braithwaite's notion of "tidalectics," Édouard Glissant's "poetics of relation," and Paul Gilroy's "Black Atlantic," which account for the ocean's role both as a site of cultural transformation and as an unmarked gravesite for the history of Middle Passage. Likewise, in her formulation of "seascape epistemologies," Kanaka Maoli (Indigenous Hawai'ian) scholar Karin Amimoto Ingersoll explains how the ocean acts both as "an instrument of migration" and "a source of food, medicine, and shelter—as well as spiritual right and responsibility," in addition to "the pathway that brought our colonizers to us" (6). These and other "situated knowledges" of the ocean as relational and alive with agency are capable of "splashing alternatives onto the Western-dominant and linear mind-set that has led the world toward realities of mass industrialization and cultural and individual assimilation" (15). While learning from these other more response-able ways of knowing the sea is crucial, it is equally important that "listening" does not devolve into co-opting and end up, as Zoe Todd cautions, "perpetuating the exploitation of Indigenous peoples" ("An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn" 16).

Having developed in the wake of these Indigenous knowledges, the recent ontological turn in the blue and environmental humanities and the current emergence of new submersion imaginaries therefore act as necessary interventions in a Western dichotomous worldview

[26] Throughout this dissertation, I capitalise "Indigenous" to emphasise the term's rooting in historical and political contexts rather than naturalised biological ones. I likewise follow the US media convention since 2020's Black Lives Matter protests to capitalise "Black" and "White." See Kwame Anthony Appiah for *The Atlantic:* "Conventions of capitalization can help signal that races aren't natural categories, to be discovered in the world, but products of social forces. Giving *black* a big *B* could signal that it's not a generic term for some feature of humanity but a name for a particular human-made entity." See also Nell Irvin Painter in *The Washington Post* for similar arguments about "Whiteness."

that is, to put it frankly, deadly on a planetary scale in its estrangement from the natural world.[27] Contrary to Indigenous sea ontologies, Western ontologies traditionally posit a separation between human and more-than-human worlds that, among other things, renders the ocean into an alien realm. Moreover, those who fail to maintain adequate distance from this realm of materiality, embodiment, and necessity are considered less-than-human by association—hence the gendering (and often racialisation) of most she-monsters. Feminist science studies and ecofeminist critiques reveal that this logic stems from Enlightenment ideals of human subjectivity rooted in rationalism and transcendence from nature. Val Plumwood's work is especially useful when it comes to understanding the connection between the exploitation of nonhuman nature and the oppression of women in Western cultures. In her foundational book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature,* she outlines how Enlightenment conceptions of the human were and continue to be constructed through the radical exclusion of "Nature," which:

> as the excluded and devalued contrast of reason, includes the emotions, the body, the passions, animality, the primitive or uncivilised, the nonhuman world, matter, physicality and sense experience, as well as the sphere of irrationality, of faith and of madness. In other words, nature includes everything that reason excludes. (19)

Her work goes on to show how the Western "master model" of human rationalism operates through processes of radical exclusion, homogenisation, backgrounding, instrumentalisation, and finally assimilation in order to justify the oppression and exploitation of women, racialised others, and more-than-human nature as others to humanist Man (*Environmental Culture* 101-106). This dichotomy accounts for the difference between Indigenous understandings of the ocean as origin, kin, and destiny, and capitalist-colonialist imaginaries of the ocean as alien other. It also explains the need for she-monsters as an intervention that helps us imagine more response-able relationships to the sea based on an ecofeminist emphasis on mutualism and materiality as keys to planetary survival.

Indeed, the master model of Western dichotomous thinking is subverted in the "new imaginaries" of North American feminist submersion stories, to which this dissertation is a

[27] Examples of the ontological turn include Peter Steinberg's critical geographies based on "wet ontology" and "ocean ontology" (Steinberg and Peters 248; Steinberg 156); DeLoughrey's reworking of his concepts through Caribbean aesthetics and Elizabeth A. Povinelli's concept of "geontologies" in her work on multispecies and postcolonial "sea ontologies" ("Ordinary Futures" 35); and Astrida Neimanis' feminist posthuman phenomenology formulated through engagement with hydrofeminism in *Bodies of Water*.

contribution. Here, the ocean is never a blank surface for human exploits but rather a space made up of more-than-human "life forms and forms of life" (Helmreich 6) that merge monstrously with each other through submersion. While Hester Blum's reminder that "the sea is not a metaphor" has been crucial for the material direction of blue humanities research (670), metaphors of fluidity still play a role in shaping these new imaginaries of the sea. The stories I read here combine attentiveness to the historical and material reality of the oceans with playful speculation based on cultural water imaginaries of metamorphosis, flow, and freedom (see Chen et al.). This is most clear in chapter three, where Afrofuturist mermaid tales reimagine the trope of the "alien ocean" and reclaim the ocean as a site of liberatory transformation despite the traumatic history of Middle Passage. With this in mind, and borrowing from Melody Jue, it can be useful to think of the oceans in these texts as sites of "speculative immersion" wherein habituated categories and concepts from our world become strange and open to transformation (*Wild Blue Media* xii). For she-monsters, submersion thus serves as an escape route from an oppressive anthropocentric, colonialist, and heteropatriarchal reality but also as a potential opening to "sea ontologies" which decentre human agency and temporalities and explore what it means to inhabit vulnerable and situated bodies in Anthropocene oceans (DeLoughrey, "Submarine Futures" 36). This is a humble positionality that precludes the master model's disembodied "god trick" ideal of "seeing everything from nowhere" (Haraway, "Situated Knowledges" 581). Instead, it speaks to a feminist relationality that is response-able in its encounter with unfathomable difference (Neimanis 25). This site of encounter is what I refer to throughout this dissertation as the monstrous ocean in resistance to masculinist and colonialist tropes of alienation.

Theories of the Monstrous: Intersectional Feminist Posthumanism

In Haraway's well-known formulation, "Monsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations" (*A Manifesto for Cyborgs* 38), from ancient maps and myths to modern genre fiction. Monsters are familiar strangers to most of us, yet they themselves remain notoriously impossible to define. From Scylla and Charybdis to King Kong, Dracula, and Frankenstein's creature, they are figures of myth, fantasy, horror, and science fiction that signify and embody a culture's fears and desires (Cohen J. 149). This project is not about those monsters, though they all make their occasional appearances. Nor is it about the monster as a symbol of human atrocities (as it is in Christina Sharpe's study of slavery in *Monstrous Intimacies*), nor an anthropomorphic and vengeful nature (as in many recent cli-fi and ecohorror narratives), nor faceless corporations/governments or pandemic

viruses (albeit such a project would be timely: Weinstock, "Invisible Monsters"). It is not about the racial anxieties of mainstream sf cinema (Nama, *Black Space*), nor about the "abject" or the "monstrous-feminine" of the horror genre (Kristeva; Creed). It is not even about the resilient jellyfish or the sargasso weeds currently proliferating in Anthropocene oceans (Tsing et al. M1). Rather, I advocate for the monstrous as a concept "with a deeply disruptive force" that blurs the boundaries between dominant epistemological, ontological, and ethical categories by being at once too close, too much, and too other "to the binary itself" (Shildrick, *Embodying* 1, 35). As Margrit Shildrick points out in the introduction to her foundational monster studies book *Embodying the Monster,* what makes the monster so "deeply disturbing" to Western ways of defining human embodiment and subjectivity is the fact that it is "neither wholly self nor wholly other" and thus inhabits an "indeterminate status" that is deeply disruptive to the dichotomous systems that separate nature from culture and generate categories like the alien (Shildrick 2). In a similar vein, Patricia MacCormack gives an evocative anti-definition of the monster that accurately describes my own use of the monstrous in this project: "I use this term not to describe a thing but more to name a catalyst toward an encounter … The monster can simultaneously refer to anything that refuses being *the human* and that which makes the person who encounters it posthuman" ("Posthuman Teratology" 523)—for instance the transformative encounter that leads to sea change at the end of *Solaris*. In other words, I am less interested in what the monster *is* than in what the monster *does* as a category of unstable sameness and difference when it comes to disrupting Western dichotomies in favour of more vulnerable and transformative possibilities—especially in a time like the Anthropocene.

As a field of knowledge, monster studies (or teratology) is as unfathomable as its namesake and has a history stretching back to the "earliest records of western history:" from "ancient Greek myth," to "imperialist and colonial encounters," to "so-called freak shows," and "the enduring tradition of horror stories and films," as well as the more modern medicalised "study" of monstrous births and abnormal psychology (Shildrick, *Embodying* 9). In this dissertation, however, I pursue a very specific trajectory in posthuman feminist teratology that draws on the work of scholars like Haraway, Shildrick, and Rosi Braidotti in highlighting embodiment, positionality, and difference as central to questions of ethical transformation.[28] One of the foundational texts here is Haraway's essay "The Promises of

[28] Here, I borrow and combine terms from two different articles by MacCormack on "posthuman teratology" and "feminist teratology:" see, respectively, "Posthuman Teratology" and "Perversion." Posthuman feminist

Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others," where she explores the boundaries of what counts as "nature" in Western cultures by drawing on feminist theorist and film-maker Trinh T. Minh-ha's concept of the "inappropriate/d other:" "someone whom you cannot appropriate, and … someone who is inappropriate. Not quite other, not quite the same" (Minh-ha and Grzinic n.p.). Much like Trinh's term, Haraway's use of the monster in this context refers to anyone who stands in opposition to the dominant culture's conception of the normatively human, be they people of colour, simians, cyborgs, or women (see Shildrick, *Embodying* 123). In other words, posthuman feminist monster studies locates a subversive potential in the "inappropriate/dness" of certain subjectivities and bodies that can be used to challenge the Western master model and offer more promising ethical and ontological alternatives.

In this project, I engage this subversive potential through the feminist figuration of she-monsters, these women (and queer others) who flee from the human world to "merge with oceanic realms" and inspire sea changes (DeLoughrey, "Ordinary Futures" 365). As in the examples DeLoughrey draws from, it is important to my argument that these transformations are not purely speculative but grounded in lived experiences of difference, hence my use of the feminist term figuration. In contrast to the disembodied alien, figurations are "embodied concepts" arising from positions of historically and materially grounded reality (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 4-5; Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* 1). To use Braidotti's original formulation, they are "politically informed account[s] of an alternative subjectivity" and a "style of thought that evokes or expresses ways out of the phallocentric vision of the subject" (1). In the blue humanities, Neimanis' phenomenological work on "bodies of water" is exemplary for what figurations can do as thinking tools when it comes to redefining ethics, epistemologies, and ontologies outside the narrow boundaries of Western thought. According to her definition, figurations act as "keys for imagining and living otherwise," or as "imaginative 'interventions'" to make "radical change possible" and to "[enable] our own becoming-other" (5). Other important examples of figurations familiar to the environmental humanities include Haraway's "cyborgs," "companion species," and "chthonic ones" (see "A

---

teratology contrasts with certain other directions of monster studies interested only in signification. Consider e.g., influential definitions of the monstrous such as: "Monsters are textual, representationally substantiated by the medium in which they are rendered … [they] embody (and are embodied by) signification" (Koenig-Woodyard 5); or Cohen's: "The monstrous body is pure culture. It exists only to be read" (38). I am also thinking of recent studies of sea monsters and mermaids in popular culture that primarily provide psychoanalytic perspectives rooted in human sexual difference. See e.g., Philip Hayward's *Making a Splash: Mermaids (and Mer-Men) in 20th and 21st Century Audiovisual Media* and John Hackett and Seán Harrington's edited collection *Beasts of the Deep: Sea Creatures and Popular Culture.*

Manifesto for Cyborgs;" *Companion Species; Staying with the Trouble*). My aim with she-monsters in this project is to think through the transformative encounters with oceanic otherness that take place in feminist North American submersion stories.

Important to my point is the distinction between this feminist posthuman work on figurations and more "uncritical/popular transhumanist fantasies of disembodied transcendence" (Herbrechter n.p.). The latter includes "techno-transcenden[t]" imaginaries of cryogenic freezing and digital mind uploading meant to free the human subject from the limitations of materiality and embodiment (Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 1).[29] These images, so widespread in Western popular culture and science, take the masculinist fantasy of technological advancement and total mastery over the sphere of nonhuman nature to its extreme. Cary Wolfe explains that transhumanism "derives directly from ideals of human perfectibility, rationality, and agency inherited from Renaissance humanism and the Enlightenment" (xiii), essentially reinforcing what Plumwood calls the "master model." This is not what I mean when I reference feminist posthumanism as a response-able alternative to the dominant culture's alienating distance from the sphere of nature.[30] Rather, I take up Cecilia Åsberg and Rosi Braidotti's suggestion in using the "feminist posthumanities" to refer to a diverse body of work being done at the intersections of feminist and more-than-human theories (see *A Companion to the Feminist Posthumanities*). Braidotti puts it concisely in *The Posthuman*: feminist posthuman theory is a "term to explore ways of engaging affirmatively with the present" and "a generative tool to help us re-think … the basic tenets of our interaction with both human and non-human agents on a planetary scale" (3-4).

Contrary to popular transhumanist fantasies and alien ocean images, feminist posthuman monster studies emphasises rather than rejects materiality, embodiment, and vulnerability as sites of response-able ethical and ontological encounter. Drawn from feminist theory and closely aligned with later insights from environmental humanities theory, Shildrick's foundational work on the monstrous body highlights vulnerability as intrinsic to all forms of embodiment, where "the encounter with the strange is not a discrete event but a constant condition of becoming" similar to new materialist theories such as Barad's agential realism, Haraway's sympoiesis, or Alaimo's trans-corporeality (*Embodying* 1). In a similar

[29] Think e.g., of dystopian horror games set on research stations at the bottom of the sea such as *Bioshock* and *Soma.* These likewise draw their sense of horror and fascination from this fantasy of disembodied selfhood.
[30] Nor do I seek to contest Haraway's riff off Latour in *When Species Meet:* "We have never been human" (n.p.), nor her rejection of posthumanism in *Staying with the Trouble:* "We are compost, not posthuman; we inhabit the humusities, not the humanities. Philosophically and materially, I am a compostist, not a posthumanist" (*Staying with the Trouble* 97). The term is useful, however.

vein, the research collective known as the "Monster Network" outline their vision of a feminist monster studies by recognising that the monstrous "does not simply disrupt, undermine and shift, but also reveals its own constitutive role in embodiment, where bodily integrity means living with others in the self, as well as with others in what we might call outside the self" (Hellstrand et al. 145). In other words, unlike the alien or the transcendent transhuman, the monstrous body is very much a part of its environment and of other bodies in that environment, with all the vulnerability and promise of transformation this brings. Think again of Kris Kelvin's encounter with the seemingly alien ocean or of Hulme's characters becoming submerged in the sea as part of a profoundly "ordinary" return to humanity's oceanic origins.

The incongruous examples I use above raise an important point. Namely, it is key to recognise that although the monstrous body's vulnerability is universal, it is not equal across categories of difference. As Judith Butler argues in her theorisation of the conditions that make for a grievable life and for a more liveable world in *Undoing Gender*: "there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe" (24), to which new materialism adds the conditions of more-than-human physical vulnerability that urgently require attention in the Anthropocene. Feminist and posthuman theories acknowledge this in a way the dominant capitalist-colonialist culture and its alien imaginaries rarely manages, primarily by defining their ethics through engagements with specifically situated experiences of vulnerable embodiment. Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality, for one, acts as an environmental justice intervention in ideals of purity and transcendence by emphasising the way toxicity moves unequally across bodies distinguished by sex, race, class, ability, and more. As a concept akin to the monstrous, "trans-corporeality entails a rather disconcerting sense of being immersed within incalculable, interconnected material agencies that erode even our most sophisticated modes of understanding" (*Bodily Natures* 17). Other environmental justice concepts like Rob Nixon's "slow violence" likewise attest to the unequal distribution of risk and care as well as to the ongoing atrocities of capitalist-colonialist extractivism across the globe during the Anthropocene.[31]

At work here is the process of radical othering and exclusion from the ethical-ontological sphere of the human known across feminist posthuman monster studies as

[31] It is important to acknowledge that these processes take place in the present as well as the past. Zoe Todd writes: "The dispossession wrought by centuries of stop-start chaotic colonial invasion and imposition of European laws and languages is ongoing. It did not end with repatriation of constitutions or independence from colonial rule. Europe is still implicated in colonial exploitation, whether it likes it or not" (18).

"monstering." Drawing on Haraway's work on "inappropriate/dness" and Foucault's work on abnormality and discipline, the "Monster Network" define monstering as the dominant culture's "mechanics of making monsters" through "fictional representations, storytelling practices, and our everyday lived realities" which serve as "technologies … for disciplining, categorising and governing" otherness (Hellstrand et al. 149). Monstering is not to be taken in the Frankensteinian sense, although Frankenstein's creature is subject to monstering after his creation, as Susan Stryker shows in her essay on trans rage.[32] Other works in monster studies such as Shildrick's *Embodying the Monster* and Halberstam's *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* explore in depth how monstrousness is produced culturally and historically as a category of otherness and exclusion through race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and animality. Key to my critique of ethics grounded in anthropocentrism, monstering plays a major role in policing the boundaries of the human and in perpetuating "histories of oppression that continue today" across multiple categories of difference that I explore here and in the chapters that follow (Hellstrand et al. 155).

In this context, invoking the she-monster as a figuration for posthuman feminist transformation is a project that runs the risk of being read as complicit rather than critical unless close attention is paid to lived experiences of exclusion and oppression from the dominant culture. As Shildrick cautions, "Valorising the monster has to happen in context with the negative histories of the term, the way monstrousness has been used to destroy or persecute those considered monstrous, the way the monster has functioned as a figure to externalize in order to protect the self and the social order" (3). The reality of the situation is that for those who already inhabit these precarious and dehumanised positions, a turn toward the monstrous might be less desirable than continuing the struggle for human (i.e., ethical) recognition: "To be oppressed you must first become intelligible. To find that you are fundamentally unintelligible … is to find that you have not yet achieved access to the human, to find yourself speaking only and always as if you were human, but with the sense that you are not" (Butler J., *Undoing Gender* 30).[33] My argument for reclaiming the she-monster as a

[32] See "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamonix: Performing Transgender Rage."
[33] Butler writes at length on the point of human recognition: "It is the inhuman, the beyond the human, the less than human, the border that secures the human in its ostensible reality. To be called a copy, to be called unreal, is one way in which one can be oppressed, but consider that it is more fundamental than that. To be oppressed means that you already exist as a subject of some kind, you are there as the visible and oppressed other for the master subject, as a possible or potential subject, but to be unreal is something else again. To be oppressed you must first become intelligible. To find that you are fundamentally unintelligible (indeed, that the laws of culture and of language find you to be an impossibility) is to find that you have not yet achieved access to the human, to find yourself speaking only and always as if you were human, but with the sense that you are not, to find that

figuration for submersion does not seek to contest this ongoing struggle but rather to look beyond it for more transformative possibilities of resistance against the master model. As Butler suggests, a more liveable world might in fact emerge from reorienting the struggle for human recognition into one that instead aims to transform the "human" category that serves as the basis for ethics. She asks, "What might it mean … to be willing, in the name of the human, to allow the human to become something other than what it is traditionally assumed to be?" (*Undoing Gender* 35). What might it mean to embrace the monstrous as an ethical "encounter with the vulnerable self" (Shildrick), as Kris Kelvin does at the end of *Solaris*?

Critiques of the human as an historically situated, gendered, raced, and classed category emerging from Western humanism are already foundational to postcolonial theory. Achille Mbembe, Aimé Césaire, Franz Fanon, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Edward Said, and Sylvia Wynter have all made arguments that show how the White, male European identity that became the Enlightenment ideal was constituted through colonial encounters wherein the racialization and animalisation of cultural others served to justify domination and exploitation.[34] Drawing on Fanon, Cajetan Iheka summarises: "In its animalization of the colonized subject, colonial discourse enabled the colonist to disavow any relation or connection to the colonized. The colonized was linked to animals positioned in a debased state" (*Naturalizing Africa* 9). In postcolonial theory, racialisation has traditionally been seen as an effect of animalisation (Jackson 22). However, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's recent ground-breaking work on Black posthumanity in *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* shows how, to the contrary, "the discourse on 'the animal' is formed through enslavement and the colonial encounter encompassing both human and nonhuman forms of life" (23). This reversal is important because it makes human difference central rather than incidental to critiques of the Western nature/culture dichotomy. Indeed, if the human is a category grounded in exclusionary practises designed to justify exploitation, any attempt at its recovery as a basis for ethics becomes inherently suspect. Instead, we might wonder, as Jackson does: "Considering that much of the world does not adhere to a worldview guided by human–animal binarism nor is legible within these terms … what other modes of relating, epistemologies of being, and ethical possibilities exist beyond the horizon of 'the human' and

your language is hollow, that no recognition is forthcoming because the norms by which recognition takes place are not in your favor" (*Undoing Gender* 30).

[34] This is of course a generalisation that glosses over the specificity of each of these critics' arguments. My aim is simply to point to the similarities in, for instance, Fanon's and Césaire's deconstructions of the colonizer/colonized relationship, Mbembe's notion of Africa as the West's "absolute Other," Said's Orientalism, Spivak's subaltern, and Wynter's "Man 2."

'the animal?'" (Jackson 33). This is one of the key questions posed by my dissertation's examination of she-monsters and submersion stories.

Similar critiques of the humanist subject have arisen out of disability studies, as well as queer and crip theories that seek to contest discourses of normativity and inclusion (see McRuer). Because these fields have historically been concerned with the cultural construction of seemingly "natural" categories, they have been central in revealing how the human "operates not just descriptively but also prescriptively and proscriptively" as an oppressive standard of normativity that excludes human and nonhuman difference (Giffney and Hird 7). Insight from these fields show that, more than a mere species, "the human" functions as an unattainable and almost god-like ideal from whose "clean and proper" body all signs of vulnerability, dependency, fluidity and connections to "nature" must be eliminated or else displaced onto the monstrous other (Shildrick 48, 71). "Nature" itself is a particularly overladen concept in this context. Signifying both the monstrous realm of feminised fluidity *and* an unchanging biological essence, it has paradoxically been used to simultaneously *dehumanise and denaturalise* human sexual and bodily variation, so that queerness and disability appear as "unnatural" categories that are somehow "closer to nature" than humanist Man (see Seymour, *Strange Natures* 3-6).[35] There is little logic to be found in these discourses, and certainly no foundation in the so-called natural world. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's foundational "Genealogy of Freak Discourse" gives a discerning overview of how Western perceptions of bodily variation have changed over time to produce the "privileged state of disembodiment" associated with the modern humanist subject in opposition to "the multivalent figure of the freak" ("From Wonder to Error" 96)—or, as I argue here, the monster. In the end, she points out that, since these categories are historically and culturally contingent, "what we assume to be a freak of nature was instead a freak of culture" (96). In contrast, terms like queer and crip emphasise the fluidity and permeability of categories, bodies, and identities, essentially reclaiming "nature" as a site of transformation in resistance to the normative. This creates a world of dissolving boundaries and unfathomable possibilities, where interdependency and flux are in fact the norm rather than a deviation. As in Jackson's critique of racialised humanity, the answer to Dana Luciano and Mel Chen's provocative question "Has the queer ever been human?"—to which we might add "Has the

[35] The absence of logic in this construction is a common topic of discussion in both disability and queer studies perspectives on nature and animality. See, e.g., Nicole Seymour's *Strange Natures*; Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson's *Queer Ecologies;* Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird's *Queering the Non/Human;* and Sunaura Taylor's *Beasts of Burden.*

crip ever been human?"—is thus monstrously both yes and no, giving rise to other possibilities of resistance and transformation (188).

Aligned with decolonial, queer/crip, and intersectional feminist theorists, I argue that the she-monsters in submersion stories open up a space beyond the horizon of anthropocentrism Jackson and others describe by modelling more response-able encounters where difference forms the basis for encounter rather than distance. Indeed, in all the submersion stories I read, diverse monstered subjects ally with each other across species and identity lines to resist domination. As with posthumanism and its transhumanist opposite, it is useful here to make a distinction between the neoliberal or "whitestream feminism" that currently dominates most popular discourses, and a more radical decolonial feminism that aims for transformation rather than integration into the dominant culture (Tuck et al. 10).[36] As Eve Tuck, Maile Arvin, and Angie Morrill note in their call for a decolonisation of mainstream feminism and broader recognition of Indigenous feminist traditions, "inclusion confers a preeminent hierarchy, and inclusion is central to hierarchical power" (17). Instead, their article argues for the value of a plurality of feminisms allied with other causes in the struggle against settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy. In this, they share an affinity with other women of colour feminisms that recognise intersectionality as the key to complex analyses of power and oppression and to struggles for liberation, including Black feminism, womanism, and Chicana feminism.[37] Recognising the convergence between feminist and environmentalist struggle, Audre Lorde writes: "The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference. The old definitions have not served us, nor the earth that supports us" (*Sister Outsider* 115-116).[38] Similar arguments have been made in the context of affinity ecofeminism, notably in Greta Gaard's essay "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism," which builds on Lorde's work, and the "queer ecologies" and "queer inhumanisms" of scholars like

[36] See also Francoise Vergès' *A Decolonial Feminism.* Whitestream feminism, as Vergès argues, has betrayed its original cause and become a resource for neoliberalism through its "heartless desire to integrate into the capitalist world" in order to gain "an equal share of the privileges granted to white men by white supremacy" (4, 12).

[37] In a North American context, the fact that Black women have suffered under the "double jeopardy" (Beal) of possessing neither the privileges of Whiteness nor of maleness has led Black feminists to formulate theories of intersectionality that allow for much more complex analyses of power along lines of gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability (cf. Combahee River Collective; Davies; Crenshaw; hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody*; Lorde, *Sister Outsider*). In the words of the Combahee River Collective in their well-known 1977 statement, "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression." See also Alice Walker on womanism in *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens* and the collection *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga.

[38] From the essay "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference."

Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, Bruce Erickson, Dana Luciano, and Mel Chen. Despite the risks of perpetuating the dominant culture's monstering processes, I therefore argue that the intersectional coalitions of she-monsters that emerge in the chapters that follow help cut across anthropocentric ethics grounded in alienating conceptions of both human and more-than-human difference.

One other possible objection against invoking the monstrous as figuration is that it risks essentialising or appropriating difference in the name of transformation. This is especially the case when we consider that homogenisation is one of the key processes that take place in the dominant culture's devaluation of the realm of nature and the feminine (Plumwood, *Feminism* 53-55). The strategic essentialism (see Spivak et al.) needed in order to argue from a position of solidarity has been rightfully critiqued for erasing important differences within affinity groups, for instance by ignoring the diverse experiences of queer women and women of colour within mainstream feminism. I address this issue at length as part of chapter one's discussion of essentialist ecofeminist utopias. For now, I am interested in the potential of difference as a transformative force and a basis for political resistance in submersion stories. In this, I concur with Braidotti, who responds well to possible critiques of her use of the migrant as a feminist figuration in *Nomadic Subjects:* "One speaks as a woman in order to empower women" while at the same time acknowledging this category as multiple and contradictory (4). Further, "Drawing a flow of connections need not be an act of appropriation. On the contrary; it marks transitions between communicating states of experiences" (5). And with Lorde: "it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences" (108). Coalitions are themselves monstrous in nature and the goal must be to join a common struggle while also recognising and respecting difference—a point made by each text I examine in the chapters that follow.

A similar issue with figurations and appropriation comes up in the context of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism. Namely, if the monster is the nonhuman other and the nonhuman other is unfathomable, is it possible to think with the monster without reducing it to the selfsame? Or is thinking with she-monsters simply another method of thinking with the human? These are common concerns across the field of animal studies, where "the problem of the animal other" often serves as "a privileged site for exploring the philosophical challenges of difference and otherness more generally," particularly when it comes to the irreducible difference of the other's experience (Wolfe, *Animal Rites* 3).[39] Patricia

[39] This is an issue of phenomenology. See Thomas Nagel's foundational article "What is it Like to Be a Bat?"

MacCormack, author of the infamous *Ahuman Manifesto,* offers one possible solution in working with speculative monster figurations such as vampires and werewolves, which contrary to the animal other, "cannot be co-opted, as they exist only as demands for relations of othering" and "can only be encountered by becoming with them" ("Posthuman Teratology" 533-534). This seems unsatisfactory, however, if figurations are meant to be embodied concepts with material and historical grounding in lived experiences. Instead, in my work on she-monsters, I find it preferable to accept that some degree of anthropocentrism is an unavoidable part of inhabiting a human point of view (Plumwood, *Environmental Culture* 57). As MacCormack notes: "The radical and uncomfortable issue is that we exist within purely human discourse … and to attempt to operate outside these is itself a human project" ("Posthuman Teratology" 530). With this in mind, I take the risk of engaging in some "strategic anthropomorphism" as long as it serves to blur rather than solidify the boundary between self and other, human and nonhuman (Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa* 14).[40] My she-monster figuration therefore invokes nonhuman sea creatures, the fantastical figure of the mermaid, *and* marginalised women and others who identify with the monster's ambiguous relationship to the Western ideal of the transcendent human.

Promises of Monsters: Imagining Unfathomable Futures

Etymologically, "monster" comes from the Latin "*monsterum," "monstrare*," "*monere*": that which teaches, reveals, or warns (Cohen J. 38). The endless repetition of this set of meanings across the field of monster studies has, as China Miéville would have it, long lost its use value.[41] However, in the context of my project's aim to examine moments of embodied and ethical transformation in feminist submersion stories, I find this litany serves as a helpful reminder of the role she-monsters play as portents of a future sea change that will soon make the world radically different from the one we currently inhabit or imagine in the present. As feminist figurations, she-monsters offer "the promise that what we think, live, feel, know and experience is not certain, and that the direction in which we think we are headed is not inevitable. On the contrary, [they show] the unpredictability of categories, bodies, narratives

[40] It can be useful here to take a cue from Plumwood in distinguishing between weak and strong anthropomorphism when it comes to engaging with animal others. The latter engenders a colonising mindset, reducing the other to an inferior version of the selfsame and making similarity rather than difference the basis for ethics. The former, however, avoids these assimilating tactics by recognising the other's worth without seeking to erase differences (*Environmental Culture* 56-61).

[41] In his own set of theses on the monstrous, Miéville writes: "It is pointed out, regularly and endlessly, that the word 'monster' shares roots with '*monstrum*,' '*monstrare*,' '*monere*'—'that which teaches,' 'to show,' 'to warn.' This is true but no longer of any help at all, if it ever was." See, e.g., Hellstrand et al. 147 and Shildrick, *Embodying* 12 for specific (and helpful!) uses of this etymology.

and lives" (Hellstrand et al. 145). In other words, she-monsters promise futures of sea change based on hope and transformation—albeit, as I argue here, ambiguously.

We need the promises of monsters now more than ever. Immersed in an apocalyptic news landscape reporting war, famine, pestilence, and genocide, it is increasingly hard to stay buoyant and hold on to hope for a transformed world. According to a much-cited *New York Times* article by historian Jill Lepore, Western and especially US culture currently inhabits a "golden age of dystopian fiction" characterised by apocalyptic imaginaries and a trend toward "radical pessimism" (n.p.). Things have only become worse since Lepore wrote in 2017, at the beginning of the Trump era, BLM protests, the Covid-19 pandemic, ongoing attacks on women's and LGBTQ+ rights, and increasingly pessimistic IPCC reports.[42] The rise in radical pessimism she notes is evident in the exploding popularity of climate fiction, an incredibly diverse and increasingly plausible genre dedicated to the depiction of climate crisis, global warming, and other "assault[s] on the everyday" (LeMenager, "Climate Change" 221).[43] Think, for instance, of popular films and series like *Interstellar* (2014), *Snowpiercer* (2020-2023), and *Don't Look Up* (2020) and of novels like Claire Vaye Watkins' *Gold Fame Citrus* (2015), Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* (2020), and Jenny Offill's *The Weather* (2020). Different as they are, these works together represent an effort to articulate a present landscape of increasingly fraught affects, characterised by climate grief, anxiety, and even a form of "pretraumatic stress disorder" (see Kaplan), which ultimately amounts to an overwhelming uncertainty about the future of the world as we know it.[44]

Since apocalypses by definition are as much about revelations as endings, it comes as no surprise that dystopian narratives expose a world grappling with the faultlines of its own cultural foundations.[45] Ongoing discussions of geological strata notwithstanding, the "popular Anthropocene" is characterised by a radical break with the supposedly stable present (Moore, "Popular Anthropocene"). In this break, the idea of "endless expansion"

[42] As I am revising this text, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change just released its Sixth Assessment Report advising immediate action: see *The Guardian* article from late March 2023: "Scientists deliver 'final warning' on climate crisis: act now or it's too late."
[43] Stephanie LeMenager broadly defines cli-fi as a genre for the Anthropocene, one that "marks another way of living in the world—a world remade profoundly by climate change" ("Climate Change" 222).
[44] There is a growing academic and popular interest in this topic. See e.g., E. Ann Kaplan's *Climate Trauma. Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction* and Panu Pihkala's article for the BBC on climate grief. At this point, terms like "Ecological grief" and "Eco-anxiety" have their own Wikipedia pages.
[45] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* on "apocalypse:" "The 'revelation' of the future granted to St. John in the isle of Patmos. The book of the New Testament in which this is recorded;" "By extension: Any revelation or disclosure;" and "More generally: a disaster resulting in drastic, irreversible damage to human society or the environment, esp. on a global scale; a cataclysm."

underpinning global capitalism no longer holds water—if indeed it ever did (Moore, "Popular Anthropocene" 195). Moore's and Haraway's concept of the Capitalocene ("an ugly word for an ugly system," coined separately but simultaneously) makes for a powerful counternarrative to the Anthropocene's "easy story" of universalized human agency and loss (Moore, *Capitalism* 170, 273f13; see Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*). It also reveals a world-historical system which dates back at least to the sixteenth-century Columbian "exchange," and which remains driven by enclosure, colonization, enslavement, and the generation of "Cheap Nature" at the expense of life (Moore, *Capitalism* 173). Building on their work and on Black feminist theory, Kathryn Yusoff refers to this current system as the "racial Capitalocene" to highlight the way "imperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialisms have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence" (xiii).[46]

The truth is that the Anthropocene only represents a radical break for a small part of the world's human population, specifically the one that benefits from the master model's devaluation of feminised and racialised nature. Contrary to cli-fi's depictions of climate crisis as an "assault on the everyday," submersion stories describe highly disruptive events such as sea level rise as parts of a "profoundly ordinary future" according to a cyclical understanding of time and past and present experiences of surviving colonialism (DeLoughrey, "Ordinary Futures" 353). This perspective is not to be taken as an argument in favour of climate change denialism (e.g., "the earth's climate has always changed"). Rather, it is a recognition that for disenfranchised populations, the world has already ended multiple times in the past and is still ending in the present. Potawatomi scholar Kyle Powys Whyte argues that Indigenous people in the Americas and elsewhere already inhabit their "ancestors' dystopia," a landscape characterised by deep alienation and loss where the only option is to try to conserve and survive with what remains ("Our Ancestors' Dystopia Now" 206). In a similar vein, Black cultural critic Kodwo Eshun writes that "Afrodiasporic subjects live the estrangement that science-fiction writers envision" ("Further Considerations" 298). From this perspective, it is the White male heroes of movies like *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *World War Z* (2013), "fighting extinction on a continent that already witnessed a vicious effort by settler colonists to eliminate native populations," who are out of touch with the times (Gergan et al. 92).[47] To quote the catchy opening soundtrack of Black jazz musician Sun Ra's 1974

[46] Kathryn Yusoff's *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* consolidates geology with postcolonial and Black feminist critique to argue that class, race, and gender subjugation is built into the foundations of the world we currently inhabit—a truth that is also grotesquely reimagined in N.K. Jemisin's "Broken Earth" trilogy. See also Vergès' "Racial Capitalocene."

[47] See also Whyte's "Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene" and Salmose.

Afrofuturist film *Space is the Place,* "It's after the end of the world, don't you know that yet?" (qtd. in Steinskog).[48]

Academic debates surrounding the appropriate naming of the current epoch show a rising consciousness of these power inequalities but also give evidence of a theoretical landscape more oriented around historical causes and consequences rather than hopeful futures. Grand narratives, as well as the smaller ones found in cli-fi, are effective when it comes to spelling out the details of the ongoing disaster. However, the "radical pessimism" they exhibit offer few tools for living with it outside of clinging to the past or dreading what might come in the future. In this way, they provide "stories to die by" rather than "stories to live by" (LeMenager, "Climate Change" 226). As Fredric Jameson shows, the problem with a "futures industry" dominated by these linear narratives of growth and collapse is that it leaves us with an almost universal belief in the late capitalist dictum that there is "no alternative" to the current system (*Archaeologies* xii).[49] This belief in turn forecloses imaginations and futures in a way that cultivates feelings of hopelessness and helplessness in the face of disaster. The title of Haraway's polemic essay "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene" speaks volumes to the value of system critique, but it is her suggestion of a Chthulucene alternative for imagining "an elsewhere and elsewhen that was, still is, and might yet be" that opens the door to more transformative worldmaking possibilities in the present (*Staying with the Trouble* 51).

These elsewheres and elsewhens, I argue, are not to be found in dystopian climate fiction, nor in mainstream sf narratives about alien oceans, but rather in submersion stories featuring she-monsters that respond to a changing environment by transforming themselves and their worlds. As Kaplan so eloquently puts it, "while male fantasies dwell on nostalgia and melancholy, female authors seek ways to envision moving on" (149). Although gender is far from the only relevant unit of analysis here, as my discussion above shows, it is clear that the key to imagining "stories to live by" lies in locating difference as a site of sea change (LeMenager, "Climate Change" 226). Octavia E. Butler's critically dystopian novel *Parable of the Sower,* and its sequel *Parable of the Talents,* gets it right in positing transformation as the guiding principle of collaborative worldmaking. As the main tenet of the trilogy's fictive Earthseed religion states, "The only lasting truth is Change" (Butler O., *Parable of the Sower*

[48] Or hip-hop group Public Enemy's line "Armageddon been in effect" from the track "Countdown to Armageddon," on *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (1993).
[49] He writes: "What is crippling is not the presence of an enemy but rather the universal belief not only that this tendency is irreversible, but that the historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socioeconomic system is conceivable, let alone practically available" (xii).

3), and the only way to survive is to embrace that change by discovering new ways to live in response-ability with others. In this project, I base my arguments on the assumption that submersion stories, as a mode of feminist speculation, provide a space outside the boundaries of our present reality and outside the culture of radical pessimism where it is possible to "alter the world by embracing the alien" (Barr 47)[50]—much like the descent of Lem's protagonist at the end of *Solaris.*

Speculation, at least in the context of US popular culture, is closely linked to the genre of sf, which in turn brings associations to pervasive narratives of colonialism and tropes related to time travel, spaceships, and little green men.[51] However, Sheryl Vint recently defines the genre much more broadly as one offering "a vision of the world made otherwise and the possibilities that might flow from such change," a description that acknowledges the central role (and multiple interventions) by women and people of colour during the development of the genre even as it arose out of Eurocentric and masculinist fantasies of exploration (*Science Fiction,* 4).[52] Science fiction is, as Darko Suvin famously writes, the genre of "cognitive estrangement" (in Vint, *Science Fiction* 10-11).[53] Much like Jue describes the ocean, the genre itself is therefore a "wild milieu" suitable for testing the limitations of current ways of knowing, being, becoming, and relating (xi). This means that despite the "constitutive relationship between colonialism and sf," there are subversive opportunities in working with speculation as a vehicle for sea change (Vint, *Science Fiction* 60). Recent anthologies of non-Western, BIPOC, and postcolonial futurisms are a testament to sf's past, present, and future as a forum for radical critique and worldmaking in resistance to the

[50] Although I choose to use the more general term speculation, I draw here on Marleen Barr's theorisation of "feminist fabulation … an umbrella term for describing overlapping genres. The term includes feminist speculative fiction and feminist mainstream works (which may or may not routinely be categorized as postmodern literature) authored by both women and men" (10).
[51] See e.g., Golden Age "hard" sf by influential writers like Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Philip K. Dick, and Robert Heinlein (Vint 174), and beware that in casual conversation most men will assume this is the sf you are researching unless you specify otherwise.
[52] I am thinking here of sf authors like Margaret Cavendish, Mary Shelley, Martin R. Delany, W.E.B. Du Bois, Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delany, and many others.
[53] Originally in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (1979). However, Vint provides a very neat summary: "Suvin argues that the best sf aligns with a transformative project of social critique and suggests that the cognitive dimension of sf's estrangement, which he correlates with science, ensures that its imaginative visions remain tethered to a practical possibility in the material world. For him, sf is thus politically enabling and oriented toward real-world change, in contrast to works of fantasy, which he dismisses as mystifications" (*Science Fiction* 10-11).

dominant culture.[54] Nalo Hopkinson puts it well in the introduction to *So Long Been Dreaming*, where she defends her own and other writers of colour's reclamation of a genre often associated more with control than critique by riffing on Lorde: "In my hands, massa's tools don't dismantle massa's house—and in fact, I don't want to destroy it so much as I want to undertake massive renovations—they build me a house of my own" (8).[55]

Speculation is also closely linked to the European literary genre of utopian fiction. Like sf, utopia acts as an outlet for the counterfactual imagination as it expresses a desire for alternate ways of worlding the past, present, and future. Named after Thomas More's play on words in his 1516 work of satire *Utopia* (from the Latin "*eutopia"/"outopia"*—the "good place" or "no place": Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* 2), the term usually brings to mind images of a perfect society located in a space or time beyond our present-day reality. As a case in point, aside from More, the genre traditionally includes classics like Plato's *The Republic,* Francis Bacon's *New Atlantic,* and William Morris' *News from Nowhere.* Similar to the sf genre, however, utopia carries a reputation linked to real-world manifestations of exclusion, violence, and oppression, as it has historically been used to justify imperialism, genocide, and the rise of totalitarian regimes (see Levitas, "For Utopia"). It is with good reason that the cautionary saying "someone's utopia is always someone else's dystopia" has become a cliché in any discussions of the term.[56] As Vint puts it, "every model of a perfect future (for some) will be a nightmare of erasure for others" (*Science Fiction,* 35), as it was in the conquest and colonisation of so-called "New Worlds" during the European "Age of Exploration." Islands, in particular, have long served as utopian spaces in European colonial discourses and literatures (see DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots* 9), parallel to the way the ocean continues to function as "*aqua nullius*" or a utopian non-space for the cultivation of blue-green capitalism. With this in mind, the gap between utopian and dystopian imaginaries is not as vast as it first appears.

These are important caveats to keep in mind when working with speculative fictions. However, similar to sf's ambiguous origins and subversive possibilities, the inherent dangers

[54] Anthologies like *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* and *The Reincarnated Giant: An Anthology of Twenty-First-Century Chinese Science Fiction* both demonstrate how the tropes of science fiction can be subverted and decolonised to aid in reimagining the identities and futures of marginalised groups. Further, anthologies like the ground-breaking *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, its sequel *Dark Matter: Reading the Bones,* and the more recent *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* point to the rising relevance and proliferation of Afrofuturist writing that both adapts and subverts the genre of speculative fiction.

[55] See Lorde's essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" in *Sister Outsider*.

[56] It is also an impetus behind short stories like Le Guin's "Those who Walk Away from Omelas" and N.K. Jemisin's response "The Ones Who Stay and Fight."

of ideological appropriation outlined above should not lead to a dismissal of the utopian imagination altogether. In this project, I am not interested in utopia as a literary genre of perfect societies, but I do engage with utopia as a critical impulse towards transformation expressed through submersion stories. The idea of a utopian impulse arises from the extensive work of Ernst Bloch in his three-volume *The Principle of Hope* and creates the foundation for more recent work in utopian studies.[57] Rather than an abstract vision of perfection, utopia here emerges as a concrete affect that is "anticipatory and transformative," focused on changing the future but still specifically located in the here and now of the present (Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* 89). Informed by Ruth Levitas' work on Bloch, I find it useful to distinguish between the "wish-full" utopias of perfect societies mentioned above and a more "will-full" utopianism oriented toward the "education of desire and transformation of the world" beyond the boundaries of an alienating reality (7). Further, inspired by Sarah Ahmed's feminist work on "willful subjects," I see *willfulness* as an expression of monstrous promises: "what we do when we are judged as being not, as not meeting the criteria for being human, for instance … not being white, not being male, not being straight, not being able-bodied. Not being in coming up against being can transform being" (15). In the submersion stories I read throughout this project, I argue that this willful/will-full transformative impulse is expressed as characters embrace the monstrous and its promises by rejecting the human world and instead merging with the ocean.

That is not to say that transformation is assured in any of these stories. Most of them in fact take place in what for their protagonists constitute profoundly dystopian or apocalyptic settings where the desire for utopia is expressed mainly through political struggle.[58] The perhaps most well-known example of utopia as critique comes out of José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia,* where he theorises queerness as a thing that is "not yet here" but rather a future "horizon imbued with potentiality … beyond the quagmire of the present" (1). An important insight from his work which informs my argument is that the transformative

[57] Jameson summarises Bloch's three-volume argument neatly: "Bloch posits a Utopian impulse governing everything future-oriented in life and culture; and encompassing everything from games to patent medicines, from myths to mass entertainment, from iconography to technology, from architecture to eros, from tourism to jokes and the unconscious" (*Archaeologies* 2). Ruth Levitas adds that the utopian impulse acts as "a social construct which arises not from a 'natural' impulse subject to social mediation, but as a socially constructed response to an *equally* socially constructed gap between the needs and wants generated by a particular society and the satisfactions available to and distributed by it" (*The Concept of Utopia* 181-182).

[58] This makes the texts I engage with more similar to Tom Moylan's concept of the "critical dystopia" than traditional utopias. Like the critical dystopia, submersion stories "give voice and space to … dispossessed and denied subjects" and "consequently inscribe a space for a new form of political opposition, one fundamentally based in difference and multiplicity … that can talk back in a larger though diverse collective voice and not only critique the present system but also begin to find ways to transform it" (*Scraps* 189-190).

impulse of will-full utopias is "relational to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualized or potential" in its capacity to change to the world (3). Examples of such potential struggles abound in countercultural North American sf across lines of class, gender, and race. Critically dystopian feminist novels like Butler's "Earthseed" novels, as well as Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time,* and Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, show their protagonists struggling against oppressive heteropatriarchal societies to create better futures for themselves and their allies—but never truly arriving at that horizon. Instead, the conclusions of these texts leave readers with a sense of ongoing social struggle that extends far beyond the novels' last pages, into a present world that is equally in need of intervention. This sense of noncompletion is also pervasive across early African American sf as far back as Martin R. Delany's *Blake; or the Huts of America* (1859), which imagines a successful slave revolt taking place in Cuba but ends abruptly the evening before that revolution is carried out (see Bould, "Revolutionary African American SF"). Alex Zamalin's insight in the introduction to *Black Utopia* is relevant across the board when it comes to thinking about utopia as a will-full impulse toward transformation*:* "That black utopia was often left unelaborated was less a failure of imagination and more a defense of keeping alive a horizon, which would exist as unfulfilled possibility" (14). With some notable exceptions*,* the submersion stories I read here end in similar gestures toward horizons of *future* possibility rather than the creation of perfect worlds in the present moment.[59] In line with radical and decolonial feminist theory, these are temporalities of social change that acknowledge "revolution as daily work" (Vergès, *A Decolonial Feminism* 5), and "not a one-time event" (Lorde 136).

What these orientations toward the future have in common is a sense of hope, a final fraught term that is key to my project's engagement with speculation, although it is often linked to naïveté or escapism in the current dystopian climate. Indeed, it may seem pointless to put stock in hope when the predicted future of the planet and its oceans is so dismal. However, Teresa Shewry's ecocritical literary study *Hope at Sea: Possible Ecologies in Oceanic Literature* demonstrates that there is still room for hope as a critical perspective in the blue humanities. Here, Shewry reads a wide variety of literary Pacific Ocean texts to

[59] A caveat with thinking transformation as potentiality—which I discuss in each chapter but never manage to finally address throughout this project—is the risk of slipping into purely wish-full utopianism. Levitas notes, "In situations where there is no hope of changing the social and material circumstances, the function of utopia is purely compensatory" (Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* 192), i.e., an escapist flight from reality. In this case, the utopian impulse may lose its subversive potential beyond individual transformation, "involving the wish to break out of the world or change one's place within it, rather than to change the world itself" (85).

explore how hope emerges as a defiant response to world-shattering social and environmental injustice. Contrary to popular understandings of hope as escapist, Shewry uses these texts to argue that hope arising from dystopian conditions functions as "a mode of facing rather than of mollifying or forgetting environmental loss" (4). And, linking her definition to key concepts in the environmental humanities like risk and endurance,[60] she develops a critical notion of hope that is attentive to the past, present, and future as sites of both possibility and loss across species lines: "a relationship to the future that involves attunement to environmental change and more specifically to the ocean, nonhuman beings such as sharks, people, and deep, irreversible loss" (2). From this type of hope-as-survival might come a wider sense of response-ability that leads to sea change and to the more promising futures portended by she-monsters.

The workings of critical hope and possibility are given conveniently literal illustration in China Miéville's *The Scar,* a weird fiction novel that draws on sea adventure classics and popular ideas about anarchist pirate utopias as it subverts wish-full notions of utopia.[61] The narrative takes place on the floating ship-city of Armada, adrift on the unmapped and ungovernable seas of the dystopian Bas-Lag universe. It follows the city's motley crew of more-than-human citizens (including surgically and magically modified humans and sentient cactus- and insect-like beings) as they navigate the political turmoil resulting from their quest to discover and control the legendary site known as the Scar, a physical tear in the reality of the world "[t]eeming with the ways things weren't and aren't but could be" (Miéville 748).[62] In the tradition of adventure fiction heroes, Armada's de facto leaders seek to harness the Scar in order to consolidate their mastery of the seas. However, as Armada approaches the Scar toward the end of the novel, their control is lost, and reality becomes increasingly fractured as multiple possible futures—including the demise of the entire city—begin to play out simultaneously. Instead of ending the novel with the expedition's unambiguous success or failure, Miéville allows the image of extinction to linger as one of many possibilities as the novel instead concludes with a revolt by Armada's citizens against their leaders. Appropriately, this multispecies people's revolution is led by one of the novel's protagonists,

[60] See Povinelli's *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* and "Part 2: Planet at Risk" in Heise's *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global.*
[61] Think of the mythical and revolutionary republic Libertatia in Charles Johnson's 1726 *General History of the Pyrates* (Simon)—or titles of more recent popularity like Ubisoft's game *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* and Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise.
[62] I see a strong connection between the potentiality located in the Scar and the abrupt, fragmentary ending of Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) once the characters reach the Antarctic, i.e., unmapped waters full of infinite possibility.

Tanner Sack: a "Remade" slave who is liberated (or "fRemade") through the course of the narrative as he begins to embrace the amphibious modifications originally made to his body as "punishment for some crime," including tentacles grafted onto his chest (23). As he becomes submersed in Armada's multispecies community and the strange waters of the Swollen Sea, he transforms himself "into a kind of manfish" to represent his newfound physical and political freedom (552). He then helps ensure the city's survival so that it may continue to serve as a symbol of liberation for others who remain oppressed across the Bas-Lag world.[63] In her reading, Vint argues that this conclusion "does not mark the end of the novel or the process of social struggle but instead leaves the horizon open to new possibilities, preserving the framework of utopia in which people continue to struggle, collectively and individually, to realise their own vision of the good life" ("Possible Fictions" 284). Like the submersion stories I read in the coming chapters, Miéville's will-full utopia keeps open both the future and the ocean as horizons of possibility beyond our present ability to imagine.

Monstrous Methodologies

As is already apparent from the examples I discuss above, this project draws on diverse, incongruous, and sometimes problematic texts that in different ways serve as sources of cultural transformation. In the following chapters, this becomes even more obvious as I argue for the subversive potential of separatist feminist utopias, Hollywood monster movies, and even Disney princesses. Reading broadly across these texts and contexts, I make use of a cultural studies methodology which maintains a critical view of the power structures that tend to shape more orderly bodies of texts. Among other things, this means recognising popular culture as a "powerful site for intervention, challenge, and change" and cultural criticism as "a vital location for the exchange of knowledge, or the formation of new epistemologies" (hooks, *Outlaw Culture* 4, 6). Yet it also means risking not being taken seriously during a time when the stakes are in fact *very serious*. Inspired by Nicole Seymour, I hold that "irreverence" is exactly what environmentalism and ecocriticism require in the Anthropocene lest the golden age of dystopian fiction and radical pessimism be allowed to continue unchallenged (*Bad Environmentalism*).

[63] The western-inspired sequel *Iron Council* ends similarly with a group of revolutionaries literally frozen in time as a monument to their doomed political struggle right outside the boundaries of the totalitarian city state New Crobuzon.

By focusing on the "low" (Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*), and employing a "reparative reading approach" in combination with a more common paranoid one (Sedgwick), my aim is not to make light of serious and often life-threatening topics, nor is it to relinquish critique.[64] Rather, inspired by Ingvil Hellstrand, Line Henriksen, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, and Donna McCormack of the "Monster Network," I aim to contribute to the ongoing formulation and exploration across monster studies of "monster methodologies:" a "rethinking of methodology" that takes responsibility for "staying with the in-between" by eschewing orderliness and embracing the trouble generated by disordered bodies ("Promises of Monsters" 153)—whether it be bodies of knowledge, of texts, of more-than-human assemblages, or of water.[65] Monster methodologies are in line with my project's aims to explore submersive and subversive ways of thinking about ontologies, epistemologies, and ethics in feminist speculative fictions that resist the "master story" of the human. The "Monster Network" writes: "The monster, after all, is a hybrid, an unstable assemblage of categories that were never intended to be fused" and whose very existence poses a threat to the "*orderly* and *regular* body" implied by disciplinary knowledges and methodologies (153, emphasis in original). As methodology, I find that the monster promises more open-ended possibilities for textual comparison.

Throughout the chapters in this dissertation, I grapple implicitly but consistently with one of the central questions of cultural studies, namely the relationship between cultural critique and the sphere of politics and ethics. As Levitas cautions in her work on utopia, culture is *a* but not *the* "key arena for political struggle" and in order to create better worlds "[d]esire must be transformed into hope, the wish for change into the will for change and the belief that there is an agency available to execute it" (*The Concept of Utopia* 174). In other words, lest that hope becomes purely compensatory and escapist, transformation needs to

[64] Halberstam notes that: "Low theory tries to locate all the in-between spaces that save us from being snared by the hooks of hegemony … it also makes its peace with the possibility that alternatives dwell in the murky waters of a counterintuitive, often impossible dark and negative realm of critique and refusal" (Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure* 2). Reparative reading, as defined by Sedgwick in opposition to paranoid reading in *Touching Feeling,* "undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks" as it searches out the positive aspects of imperfect texts (150). As Danika Ellis argues for *Book Riot,* this strategy may be more dangerous and more necessary than ever in today's purity-obsessed, cancel-culturing media climate—of course in healthy combination with critique: "Reparative reading doesn't mean denying systems of oppression. It seeks pleasure *because* it recognizes that the environment is hostile and will not provide that pleasure itself."

[65] The plural in "methodologies" is important to note because the idea of monstrous methodologies is to go against the myth of universal knowledge or stable embodiment, identity, and positionality: monster methodologies "rather than being an attempt at creating a methodology that will make sense in a study of the monster, might be understood as an attempt at thinking otherwise about the interconnections between the production of knowledge, the disciplining and creation of bodies and subjectivities, and the lives that are at stake whenever one attempts to draw a distinguishing line between the inside and the outside, self and other, hero and monster" (Hellstrand et al. 154).

take place in the real world as well as through speculative imaginaries. With that said, in the current culture of radical pessimism, critical hope acts a necessary and even subversive insistence on survival and other possibilities of worlding for monstered subjects. Judith Butler puts it well in the introduction to *Gender Trouble:* "One might wonder, what use 'opening up possibilities' finally is, but no one who has understood what it is to live in the social world as what is 'impossible,' illegible, unrealizable, unreal, and illegitimate is likely to pose that question" (viii). Subversive imaginaries may not change the world directly, but they help shift the boundaries of an oppressive reality to make the present bearable and change conceivable.

An important insight from feminist science studies to keep in mind when doing this work is that imagination, like knowledge, is never transcendent, universal, or embodied; rather, it is situated in the lived experience of the ones that imagine (Haraway, "Situated Knowledges"). As Marcel Stoetzler and Nira Yuval-Davis show, the "situated imagination" is produced differently, individually and collectively, according to cultural and social positioning for both transformative and reactionary purposes (324). One premise for my argument is that "the view from the margin"—in this case the perspectives of feminist speculative fiction which privileges monstered or inappropriate/d points of view—produces imaginaries that are other to those of the dominant culture (319). This makes these countercultural imaginaries submersed—in the sense of being deeply linked to personal experience—and potentially, though not necessarily, subversive in the sense of imagining worlds that are other to the one we currently inhabit in the Anthropocene. This belief in the subversive promises of monsters is not meant to make generalisations based on identity politics but rather to acknowledge that transformative possibilities are more often located in specific social movements invested in struggle against the hegemonic centre. In order to imagine a future world of response-able ethics, we need as many partial and contradictory imaginaries as possible (Haraway, "Situated Knowledges" 580)—even, or perhaps especially, if these lead to narratives that end in ongoing struggle.

Related to these "politics of location" (Rich), my own positionality vis-à-vis the material I read is that of an "implicated stranger" (Bryld and Lykke 27), a Norwegian investigating North American popular texts from a position that is simultaneously entangled with and peripheral to the global reach of that culture. Indeed, like Mette Bryld and Nina Lykke in *Cosmodolphins*, I conduct this project from the position of a "small Scandinavian country" that on a global scale is simultaneously geographically and culturally marginal and economically and politically powerful (27). With this in mind, I have to acknowledge that

Norway is an oil state, and that state funds paid for this PhD, as well as the generous health care support I received while completing it. Norway is also a colonial state that, at the moment of writing in early 2023, continues to disregard the rights of its Indigenous population in direct violation of UN decrees in its pursuit of a "greener" and more "sustainable" future.[66] Situated here rather than in the US, the experiences and struggles that I discuss throughout the following chapters are often not my own, though I am inevitably implicated in them through circumstances of global connection and identity including nationality and species. As Alexis Shotwell argues in *Against Purity*, innocence is not an option in the Anthropocene. However, entanglements in complicated systemic problems should be the starting point for transformative work (5).

Cohen's monster theses state that "[t]he monster polices the borders of the possible," and "[t]o step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself" ("Monster Culture" 45). I have sought to appease patrols and remain response-able by practising a feminist politics of citation (Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* 15). However, I am aware that there are gaps in both my disciplinary and personal knowledge and that I sometimes fail to circumnavigate these. In this project, I take the risk of "stepping outside" because monster studies and blue humanities research requires thinking beyond dichotomous separations and because I believe in the "queer arts of failure" as a method of discovering new alternatives beyond conventional archives, methods, knowledges, and conventions of success (Halberstam). Aligned with Donna Haraway and other worldmakers of more hopeful elsewheres and elsewhens, I also believe that response-ability across boundaries is a necessary part of "learning to live and die well with each other" and to cultivating multispecies ethics in the Anthropocene (*Staying with the Trouble* 1). I therefore offer the chapters that follow as an exploratory and experimental exercise in failure, with the hope that with enough help the monster might yet manage to fulfil its promises.

Chapter Overview

This dissertation consists of three main chapters, in addition to this introduction and a short coda. Each chapter analyses a different speculative feminist text (or in chapter three, several texts) where submersion plays a key role in transforming both the monstered protagonist's body and the dystopian world she (or in chapter one, he) inhabits—thus providing hope of a

[66] See the Norwegian National Human Rights Institution webpage for an overview in English about the current windfarm travesty at Fosen.

future sea change. I argue throughout that these characters' embrace of the monstrous and its promises expresses a will-full utopian impulse that gives hope for more response-able ethics and futures. Each text that I analyse comes out of US popular culture and shares an intersectional feminist politics and a vision of posthuman futurity at sea. However, beyond this they are all very different in terms of medium, genre, cultural context, and the social struggles they emerge from. The first chapter focuses on a somewhat controversial ecofeminist utopian novel, the second on a debatably queer Hollywood monster movie, and the third on transmedial Afrofuturist mermaid stories ranging from Disney to independent Black filmmakers and writers. In the coda, I discuss a Sámi experimental short film. Because each text is so unique, every chapter draws on its own theoretical framework to supplement and support the one outlined in the introduction, including ecofeminism, queer/crip theory, and Black feminism. Of course, in line with the monstrous methodologies of this project, there is conceptual and theoretical slippage between chapters.

In chapter one, I begin with a reading of Joan Slonczewski's ecofeminist utopian novel *A Door into Ocean* (1986). The novel is about an ocean planet inhabited by amphibious female "Sharers" who are fully entangled with their environment and engaged in non-violent resistance against an intergalactic empire known as the Patriarchy. Aware of the novel's mixed reception and its associations with gender essentialism, I provide a genealogy of the feminist utopian genre, ecofeminist theory, and the nature/culture dichotomy that haunts them both as I argue for a reparative reading of the text. In fact, the simplistic "war of the sexes" plot is complicated by the presence of human characters navigating multiple axes of power and identity as they encounter the alien Sharers and experience submersion on the ocean planet. For instance, where the White feminist noblewoman Berenice struggles to overcome her heteropatriarchal conditioning, the racialised and working-class male protagonist Spinel successfully integrates with the planet's ecology and culture as he opens his body to submersion and engages in a queer, multispecies relationship with one of the originally male-hating Sharers. Focusing on character analyses, the novel's surprisingly conservative ending, and its 1980s political context, I argue that *A Door into Ocean* uses submersion to portray possibilities for a decolonial feminism and response-able ethics that gives hope of a future sea change even during the most dystopian times.

Chapter two takes a deep dive into Guillermo del Toro's genre-blending romantic fantasy film *The Shape of Water* (2017), about a mute cleaner who falls in love with a captive amphibious creature at a military research facility during the height of the Cold War in the early 1960s. Starting from a comparison with the film's source text *Creature from the Black*

Lagoon (1954), I discuss how del Toro draws on different genres like the creature feature, the fairy tale, and the melodrama in order to subvert the racialised affects usually associated with the monstrous, effectively making difference desirable and normality abject. Zooming in on the film's feminist politics and multispecies ethics, I also discuss how the Amphibian Man acts as a symbol of a more response-able world and how he becomes a rallying point for the alliance of monstered queer, crip, and Black subjects who conspire to rescue him from the facility. Next focusing on the protagonist Elisa's own amphibious origins and eventual return to the sea, I argue that the film's ambiguous ending portrays submersion both as an act of escapism and as an expression of a will-full desire to change the world for nonhuman and nonnormative subjects. Ultimately, *The Shape of Water* holds open a space for imagining queer/crip futurities free from the constraints of an oppressive heteropatriarchal society while also commenting on the utopian function of Hollywood as a source of both hegemonic and liberatory narratives.

Chapter three differs from the previous chapters in that it draws connections between multiple works across different media. Here, I discuss the current boom in Black mermaids on screen and in literature in context with the ambiguous role of oceans in the African diaspora and with Afrofuturism's celebratory relationship to the alien. Black feminist theory and posthumanism are my guides as I examine how different mermaid stories seek to imagine liberatory futures in the ongoing aftermath of Middle Passage and in resistance to the dominant culture's oppressive call to become human as a starting point for ethics. I begin by comparing the racist discourses surrounding Disney's upcoming live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid* (2023) with Bola Ogun's independent Black mermaid short film *The Water Phoenix* (2017). Together, these examples provide an entrance into debates surrounding the assimilationist politics of colourblind representation (i.e., becoming "part of your world") versus more radically transformative images. In search of the latter, I turn first to a reading of Rivers Solomon's hip-hop inspired novella *The Deep,* one of many recent Black mermaid texts which grapple with the ongoing effects of the transatlantic slave trade by imagining underwater societies arising from its wake against an oppressive surface world. Next, I read Nnedi Okorafor's Africanfuturist novel *Lagoon,* about a Nigerian city's transformative encounter with aquatic shape-shifting aliens and the multispecies revolution that ensues. I argue that contrary to mainstream texts, these Afrofuturist stories present submersion as a liberatory possibility for Black women and their more-than-human allies as they struggle to survive and thrive in the racial Capitalocene.

Finally, in the short Coda chapter, I (re)turn to the North Sea and to the topics discussed in this introduction via a reading of Sámi artist Sissel M. Bergh's experimental short documentary/visual sound poem *#tjaetsie (water)*, which explores the relationship between traditional and modern ways of knowing the ocean by speculatively submersing viewers in waters fraught with history and materiality. As Bergh's film follows the sea goddess Guri Kunna into the depths, we are invited to identify with issues that lie beyond local and global scales and beyond the boundaries of the human, suggesting a wider scope for future research on submersion stories.

According to Steve Mentz, "The ecological future is for swimmers, not sailors" *(Shipwreck Modernity* 180). With that in mind, the time has come to dive in and tell different stories about what it means to live with and through disaster as more-than-human beings who are just now coming to recognise our place submersed in a monstrous and unfathomable ocean.

Chapter One: Sharing as Survival in *A Door into Ocean*

We are sharers, not owners. We are not prosperous. None of us is rich. None of us is powerful … if it is the future you seek, then I tell you that you must come to it with empty hands … You cannot buy the Revolution. You cannot make the Revolution. You can only be the Revolution. It is in your spirit, or it is nowhere.

—Ursula Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (248).

I can't do a thing about my hyperempathy … I feel what I see others feeling or what I believe they feel ... I'm supposed to share pleasure and *pain, but there isn't much pleasure around these days.*

—Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (12).

More Sharing … Share on, until the ocean overflows.

—Joan Slonczewski, *A Door into Ocean* (344).

Sharing is more than just a way of dividing resources or distributing information in a digitised capitalist economy. In feminist science fiction, sharing emerges as a subversive survival strategy for facing unfathomable futures with others who are inescapably connected to the self— despite lines of social and species difference and across trans-corporeal boundaries. In Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) sharing acts as a social imperative for the anarchist settlers of the arid desert planet Anarres. Sharing here is synonymous with surviving harsh conditions with scarce resources, and with keeping alive a revolutionary impulse in resistance to the capitalist patriarchy of Anarres' twin planet Urras. In Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) sharing is the main symptom of a pathological condition called "hyperempathy" which causes sufferers to believe they are experiencing the pain and pleasure of others. It is a dangerous (dis)ability that carries the potential of both individual vulnerability and collective survival, as evidenced by hyperempath protagonist Lauren Oya Olamina's success in founding a utopian religious community focused on principles of mutualism and adaptation. Sharing is also the ethical, ontological, and epistemological basis for the world of Joan Slonczewski's less well-known ecofeminist utopian novel *A Door into Ocean* (1986). Going so far as to name themselves "Sharers," the all-female humanoid amphibious inhabitants of the novel's ocean planet Shora live in anarchist collectives and serve as the steward-protectors of the planet's ecosystems. In

addition, they use sharing as a nonviolent method of resistance as they successfully struggle against capitalist-colonialist invasion throughout the narrative. Indeed, even their bodies are shared with a multitude of "companion species" (Haraway, *Companion Species Manifesto*), making them what I in this dissertation refer to as she-monsters and figurations of sea change.

All three novels belong to the tradition of feminist utopian fiction, albeit ambiguously, as the subtitle of Le Guin's novel indicates.[1] The genre itself has become increasingly controversial in light of Indigenous, decolonial, POC, and queer feminisms' critiques of gender essentialism—not to mention the fraught history of the utopian concept itself and the current overwhelming popularity of dystopian fiction discussed in the introduction. *A Door into Ocean* has an especially troubled reception history; where Le Guin's and Butler's novels are celebrated for their hopeful visions of resilient societies, Slonczewski's novel has often been dismissed due to the more overtly gendered nature of its imaginary world and its apparent use of "earth mother" (see Plumwood, *Feminism* 36) and "ecological Indian" stereotypes (see Sturgeon 57). In this chapter, I argue for a more reparative reading of *A Door into Ocean*, one that pays attention to the intersectional nuances of Slonczewski's feminist utopia and acknowledges the novel's contribution as a submersion story—especially with reference to the ethics and ontologies of sharing outlined above, but also considering the novel's ongoing relevance to the present moment in US politics. In short, building on the theoretical framework of feminist posthuman monster studies laid out in the introduction, I seek to read *A Door into Ocean* as a precursor to more recent transformative submersion stories despite its reputation for essentialism.

Like Le Guin's more popular *The Dispossessed*, Slonczewski's novel takes place on twin planets with conflicting ideologies, the plot centring around the cultural clash between an ecofeminist utopian society and a world more similar to our own—which bell hooks might refer to as a "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (*Outlaw Culture* 197). In *A Door into Ocean,* the latter of these planets is Valedon, a caste-based society divided by class, race, and sex, and ruled by a transhuman machine intelligence aptly named the "Patriarch." The other planet is Shora, the "Ocean Moon," a world covered entirely by water and inhabited by the all-female and egalitarian Sharers, who are remarkable for having so far managed to escape the notice of the intergalactic and omniscient Patriarchal empire. Shora is a classic feminist

[1] I say this because all three novels in fact ultimately problematise the concept of utopia; Le Guin's novel is explicitly subtitled "an ambiguous utopia" and explores the challenges of maintaining a truly egalitarian society without a constant cycle of revolution; Butler's novel does raise feminist issues but may be more aptly described as critically dystopian, or perhaps Afrofuturist; neither is Slonczewski's novel as straightforwardly utopian as it first seems—as I argue throughout this chapter.

utopia in the sense that it functions as an "elsewhere and elsewhen" (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* 51) free of masculinist conflict, injustice, and domination; indeed, for more than ten millennia within the novel's timeline, Shora has been a place of ecological balance and an "undomesticated ground" for feminist liberation and self-realisation (Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*). Even the descriptions of Shora in terms of "moon" and "Mother Ocean" evoke stereotypically essentialist symbols of femininity grounded in a cyclical but static conception of nature. Change only happens when first the Valans, then the Patriarch himself, discover the wealth of resources available on Shora: from exotic fish and fabrics, and a vast seafloor of untapped mineral deposits, to the galaxy's most sophisticated knowledge of weaponizable life sciences. The ensuing scramble for control illustrates perfectly what happens "when a predator culture meets a prey culture" (Somby) and serves as a parallel to the ongoing real-world colonisation of Indigenous lands and waters.[2] Similar to other "hard" science fiction novels, *A Door into Ocean* uses utilitarian prose in order to pack as much worldbuilding and plot as possible into 400 incredibly dense pages. This makes for a somewhat laborious reading experience, yet the narration remains fluid by frequently shifting perspective and following several characters on both sides of the conflict. It mainly focuses on the Valan protagonist Spinel as he travels to Shora and becomes entangled in, and transformed by, his involvement in the Sharers' struggle for survival against his own people and culture.

So far, *A Door into Ocean*'s plot treads familiar ecotopian ground, especially when it comes to using the protagonist's defamiliarization to critique an alienating capitalist-colonialist society in favour of a return to a more "natural" or even "native" state of being.[3] In fact, Slonczewski's novel bears more than a passing resemblance to James Cameron's epic sf blockbuster *Avatar* (2009), a film that has been equally praised and criticized for its representations of Indigenous groups and anti-colonial environmentalist struggle.[4] However, unlike most mainstream ecotopias, *A Door into Ocean* rejects the common White saviour narrative. Instead, the novel depicts a resistance movement based on actual decolonial struggles, emphasising the importance of multispecies kinships, intersectional alliances, and local leadership. This means that neither dark-skinned, working-class Spinel, nor his White

[2] This is a phrase used by Sámi professor of law Ánde Somby to describe the Norwegian government's predation on Sámi lands and culture.
[3] *Ecotopia* is the title of Ernest Callenbach's 1975 green-movement inspired novel about an alternative future society in the American Northwest. "Ecotopia" is now commonly used within ecocriticism and utopian studies to describe any explicitly environmentalist utopia.
[4] See Joni Adamson's article "Indigenous Literatures" for a discussion of the film's mixed reception by Indigenous audiences.

feminist foil Lady Berenice, are allowed to speak for the Sharers.[5] Instead, these characters are invited to inhabit Shora on the Sharers' terms, by accepting Sharer values and kinships, and choosing submersion over domination. The fact that Spinel makes this choice more easily than Berenice suggests there are greater commonalities to be found across decolonial justice movements than between BIPOC and White feminisms—and that the novel's politics are in fact far less essentialist than they originally seem. The fallout to *A Door into Ocean*'s cultural struggle is also not as predictable as one might think; having established the Shoran utopia in the first half of the narrative, Slonczewski spends the rest of the novel exploring how the conflict between the two planets develops when the Sharers refuse to compromise the nonviolent foundations of their culture and try to share knowledge with the Patriarchy. By resisting domination and victimisation, and by modelling adaptation and endurance, the Sharers demonstrate a form of response-able ethics that is neither essentialist nor static; in fact, by the end of the novel, Shora has become transformed while it is the "Stone Moon" Valedon that refuses to change. Only the last few pages of the text carry some ambivalence, as the newly liberated Sharers reject the call for a wider sea change across the Patriarchal galaxy and instead choose to maintain their isolationist utopia and focus on their own survival.

Based on my own reading of the novel's characters and worldbuilding—as well as a study guide where Slonczewski discusses the political climate that shaped the novel's cautious ending—I argue that *A Door into Ocean* deserves a reparative reading as a North American submersion story ahead of its time. This chapter begins with a more detailed discussion of the essentialism debate in ecofeminist theory as it relates to the novel, its reception, and its place within the feminist utopian tradition. I use this theoretical context to explore how the novel in fact subverts essentialist stereotypes and critiques "whitestream feminism" (Arvin et al. 17) by making the plot's resistance movement hinge on an intersectional alliance formed in resistance to capitalist-colonialist domination. Next, I explore how *A Door into Ocean*'s concept of sharing subverts stable notions of ontology and ethics, suggesting more response-able ways of being human—and driving the text's main conflict when pitted against the Patriarchy's master model. The Sharers' symbiotic relationships with the "breathmicrobes" is particularly interesting here as a symbol of material agency, racial contamination, bodily vulnerability, and monstrous transformation. Through close analyses of the Valan protagonists' contrasting experiences with encountering

[5] See Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

the microbes, I find that Shora's ocean environment offers a chance at liberation and transformation, but only to those willing to let go of their humanity and welcome submersion. Where the White-skinned noblewoman Berenice struggles to give up mastery, the disenfranchised male protagonist Spinel embraces the monstrous and even queers dichotomous categories of species, race, gender, and sexuality in a way that subverts the feminist utopia and its essentialist ideals. I finally turn to a reading of the novel's ambiguous ending, the result of a complicated publication history during the 1980s Cold War era. Based on a framework of will-full utopianism, and in context with the revolutionary ending Slonczewski was unable to publish, I argue that *A Door into Ocean* keeps open a horizon of present struggle and future sea change that extends beyond the pages of the text and resonates with other countercultural utopias then and now.

Ecofeminism and Essentialism

Essentialism has been a fraught question within feminist critical theory and activism at least since the inception of Western second wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, and for much longer within Indigenous and decolonial feminisms. A quick genealogy of feminist thought shows that the idea of a singular female identity or experience has been challenged on several fronts since then.[6] In the US, Black feminist theorists, including Kimberlé Crenshaw, bell hooks, and the Combahee River Collective, introduced the concept of intersectionality in the 1980 and 1990s to highlight the interconnection of gender, race, class and other identity markers in structuring systems of oppression and privilege, clearly differentiating the experiences of, say, working-class Black women and middle-class White women.[7] Meanwhile, lesbian feminists emphasized the role of sexual orientation in shaping women's experiences, with writers like Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Gloria Anzaldúa speaking out against the heterosexist bias of the women's movement.[8] These fractures in the idea of a

[6] See, e.g., Arvin et al.'s article, which "rejects the Eurocentric, Global North–hegemonic notion of first, second, and third waves of feminism and acknowledges that Indigenous women have been at the forefront of struggles against domination long before the nineteenth century, especially in the face of empire … The experiences and intellectual contributions of Indigenous women are not on the margins; we have been an invisible presence in the center, hidden by the gendered logics of settler colonialism for over 500 years" (14).

[7] In her foundational essay "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" (1991), Crenshaw points out contemporary feminist and antiracist movements' failure to address intersections of patriarchy and racism, causing marginalisation and violence to women of colour. At that time, hooks had already been writing about the overlapping roles of gender, race and class in systems of oppression for close to a decade, starting with *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981). See also Angela Y. Davis' *Women, Race, Class* (1983).

[8] See, for instance, Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980), where she addresses the erasure of lesbian experiences under compulsory heterosexuality. Further, Lorde and Anzaldúa both work at

universal (and assumed White, straight, and middle-class) Woman continued to grow until they culminated in the development of what is today known in the West as third wave feminism. In many ways, the publishing of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), which consolidated and developed theories of gender performativity, marks a complete divorce between mainstream feminist theory and gender essentialism as sex and gender came to be seen as distinct categories.[9]

One could argue that there were, and still are, ample grounds for such a divorce. Not only does gender essentialism discount intersectionality—and with it, the experiences of queer women and women of colour—and conflate biological sex with socially constructed gender roles—essentially enforcing heterosexist and trans-exclusionary binaries of male and female—but it also aligns "women" with the problematic realm of "nature" (if such categories can still be said to exist) through the biological essentialism of this division. As discussed in the introduction, ecofeminists have shown how the natural world has traditionally been feminised and racialised within Western cultures at least since the eighteenth century, when the Enlightenment and its turn to humanism cast Man as the supreme wielder of reason over feminised others (Merchant; Plumwood, *Feminism*).[10] As others to European humanist Man, women, people of colour, animals, and "nature" itself are associated with the irrational, the embodied, and the nonhuman. Rather than try to elevate the cultural position of nature and risk strengthening the association with this sphere of embodiment and abjection, Western feminism has cut all ties to the natural world, and, in Stacy Alaimo's evocative words, made a "flight from this troublesome terrain" (*Undomesticated Ground* 3).[11]

---

the intersection of POC and queer feminisms. See especially Lorde's "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" in *Sister Outisder* (1984) and Anzaldúa's and Cherrié Moraga's anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981).

[9] This is a broad-stroke genealogy of the history of late 20th century feminist thought focused on US contributions. It does not include, say, French, Nordic, or postcolonial feminist contributions, or today's more recent turn to fourth wave feminism, trans issues, or internet activism. However, a more nuanced history of the movement would reach beyond the scope of this chapter.

[10] Carolyn Merchant first made this argument based on a comprehensive history of the Scientific Revolution and the beginnings of the modern scientific worldview in *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1990). Val Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* makes many of the same points with an emphasis on contemporary environmental philosophy and political ecology. See also *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (1993), edited by Greta Gaard.

[11] Greta Gaard recounts this flight succinctly: "Focusing on the celebration of goddess spirituality and the critique of patriarchy advanced in cultural ecofeminism, poststructuralist and other third-wave feminisms portrayed all ecofeminisms as an exclusively essentialist equation of women with nature, discrediting ecofeminism's diversity of arguments and standpoints to such an extent that, by 2010, it was nearly impossible to find a single essay, much less a section, devoted to issues of feminism and ecology (and certainly not ecofeminism), species, or nature in most introductory anthologies used in women's studies, gender studies, or queer studies" ("Ecofeminism Revisited" 32).

The question is whether this feminist flight from nature has been an issue of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Alaimo's work shows how nature can function as a liberatory space for feminist expression, rather than an oppressive one, as long as we work to "challenge the conception of nature as a ground of fixed essences, rigid sexual difference, and already apparent norms, values, and prohibitions" (*Undomesticated Ground* 17). In a similar vein, Greta Gaard has argued persuasively and persistently for the value of an ecofeminist critique grounded by queer, intersectional, and materialist perspectives since the 1990s, when ecofeminism was abandoned in favour of less controversial theories of ecology and gender (see "Ecofeminism Revisited").[12] In these cases, the apparent connection between women and nature is used strategically in order to highlight potential alliances *against* masculinist master models of the human severed from materiality. Indeed, despite having later disavowed the term, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak made the point in the 1980s that essentialism can be of strategic value to marginalised social movements as a way of finding common ground to form coalitions, subvert systemic dominance, and achieve shared goals of social justice (see Spivak et al.). This is a point that is taken up by Lorde in "The Master's Tools" when she describes the liberatory power to be found in the differences, rather than the similarities, between women.[13] In a sense, essentialism, when used strategically, has the potential to be far more subversive than a White feminist approach grounded in Western humanism suggests.

In Slonczewski's novel, I argue that essentialism plays a strategic role in casting the ocean as a liberatory space for the formation of a feminist posthuman alliance that is intersectional and multispecies*,* including human and non-human difference, and capable of resisting patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist domination. I am not, however, the first to make this argument, though few have discussed intersectionality in relation to the text. In an oft-ignored study guide, published in 2001 in the depths of her personal blog, Slonczewski explains how her novel deliberately uses essentialist gendered dichotomies to subvert static notions of gender and nature. "In literary terms," she writes, "*A Door into Ocean* sets up a series of interlinked polarities or binary oppositions, all of which relate to traditional notions of female/male. Each of these oppositions is deconstructed or resolved through the course of

[12] Among other terms, she highlights Alaimo and Susan Hekman's efforts to reinsert materialism into feminist theory in the collection *Material Feminisms* (2007)*,* in many ways a precursor to the environmental humanities' emphasis on more-than-human worlds as a grounds for transformation.

[13] I am thinking of this quote in particular: "As women, we have been taught either to ignore our differences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist" (Lorde 111).

the story" ("Study Guide"). In the study guide, Slonczewski includes a table that demonstrates how the novel deconstructs not only the gender binary but also implicitly gendered dichotomies that rely on a rejection of materiality, such as culture/nature and life/nonlife. For instance, the Sharers' belief that stone is the antithesis to life is challenged when they share knowledge with Valan scientists who teach them about the origins of organic life in inorganic matter. Likewise, in their encounters with the Sharers, the novel's Valan characters are forced to rethink their hierarchical notion of humanity which places the literally disembodied Patriarch on top in a way that fully cements the Cartesian mind-body split. The most obvious example of subversion is the way the novel's male protagonist leaves behind the heteropatriarchal society of his home planet in order to join the previously all-female Sharers. As I discuss later in this chapter, Spinel has to undergo a radical transformation via submersion as he tries to integrate with the Sharers and become a she-monster despite being a "malefreak" (Slonczewski 80). For now, it is enough to note that, contrary to first appearances, Slonczewski is deliberately using the motif of the separatist feminist utopia in order to critique its exclusionary practises—as well as those of the patriarchy—in favour of the more fluid and materially grounded forms of becoming found in sharing.

Unfortunately, despite Slonczewski's careful deconstruction of dichotomies, the novel maintains a reputation for perpetuating rather than challenging essentialist stereotypes. Based on reviews, the novel's critique of essentialism in fact seems to have been lost on many readers. As of early 2023, the most "liked" review of *A Door into Ocean* on the popular user-based book review website Goodreads is titled "I Loathe This Book with an Ungodly Passion." Despite widespread disagreement in the comments section, the review gives the novel one out of five stars and describes it as "offensively gender-reductive" and "lazy broad-brush ecofeminism."[14] Along the same lines, Mette Bryld and Nina Lykke refer to *A Door into Ocean* in *Cosmodolphins* as a particularly problematic example of a text that attributes an "apparently specific capability of women, 'primitive' people, and marine mammals to be at one with the luringly exotic qualities of watery space" (167). Some feminist book blogs provide more nuanced readings, but still disparage *A Door into Ocean*'s supposed gender

[14] Admittedly, the novel has also received many five-star reviews and currently holds a total rating of 3.98 out of 5 stars—which is low but not abysmal compared to *Parable of the Sower's* 4.18 rating and *The Dispossessed*'s 4.20 rating (as of early 2021). The reason this particular review struck me is that it dates back to 2010, yet still remains at the top of the page as the first comment to meet anyone potentially interested in reading the book for themselves.

essentialism while celebrating its contribution to environmentalist debates.[15] Other examples are not difficult to find either online or by casually mentioning the book to feminist scholars.[16] One reason for this reputation could be that many readers simply fail to make it through the (admittedly slow-paced and exposition-heavy) first half of the novel and experience for themselves the subversion that takes place in the action-packed latter half; or perhaps the book is judged solely based on the blurb, which tends to stress the all-female aspect of the utopia.[17]

Based on the above reviews, it appears that instead of being read on its own terms, *A Door into Ocean* has been grouped together with other separatist feminist utopias. It follows that the novel has been left behind in the wake of feminist theory's flight from the troublesome terrain of second-wave feminism. Indeed, at first glance, Slonczewski's novel fits neatly within the tradition of 1970s lesbian separatist utopias such as Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* (1975), James Tiptree, Jr. (or Alice Sheldon)'s *Houston, Houston, Do You Read?* (1976), and Sally Miller Gearheart's *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hillwomen* (1979), which all imagine peaceful, egalitarian "womyn's lands" free of patriarchal influence (Kasai 1939).[18] As a contrast to novels by Le Guin and Butler, Gearheart's thematic short-story collection is perhaps most emblematic of what readers are likely to associate with the plot of Slonczewski's novel: an ecofeminist polemic that depicts women as innocent earth mothers forever on the run from a male-dominated society of patriarchal sexual violence and control. One the one hand, one can argue that these works are necessary because it is difficult to imagine the world as anything other than dystopian for women as long as men are allowed to retain any modicum of power or presence; as Kirsten Kasai puts it, "Because patriarchy

[15] See reviews by Jo Walton for *Tor* and Adri Joy on the feminist book blog "nerds of a feather, flock together."
[16] Some of my supervisors were originally critical of my choice to work with the novel. I also presented this chapter at an environmental humanities conference and the only comment I received was whether I had considered taking a psychoanalytic approach to the text.
[17] The back of my 2000 Orb paperback edition reads: "This novel concerns the Sharers of Shora, a nation of women on a distant moon in the far future who are pacifists, highly advanced in biological sciences, and who reproduce by parthogenesis (there are no males)." The same wording seems to be in use on Goodreads and on the webpages of major book retailers.
[18] The US feminist utopian tradition of Gearhart and others can be traced back to works such as Christine de Pizan's imagining of an all-female city in *Cittá Delle Donne* (1405); to Roquia Sakhawat Hussain's satirical short-story "Sultana's Dream" (1905), which imagines an alternate society where women rule while men are kept in captivity; and to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's (eugenically White) *Herland* (1915). See Kasai for more detailed genealogies of the feminist utopian genre. Kasai also includes in her genealogy real-life feminist utopian societies in the form of women's collectives. I would add that William Marston's *Wonder Woman,* introduced in *All-Star Comics* in 1941 and repopularised by Marvel Comics' 2017 and 2020 feature films, is another important figure of the genre perhaps more familiar to mainstream audiences. For more on this perspective, see Jill Lepore's "The Last Amazon" for an engaging look at Wonder Woman's origins in feminist utopian fiction, the women's rights movement, and in Marston's own unconventional polyamorous family structure.

oppresses and marginalizes women, the natural impulse in envisioning alternative futures is to imagine its opposite in narratives that commonly exclude, eradicate, desexualize, or segregate men rather than portray harmonious cohabitation and social collaboration" (1389). (Why else would running away with a sea monster be such a popular fantasy, as I discuss in chapter two?) Still, from the perspective of third or even fourth wave feminism, a utopia based on the exclusion rather than inclusion of differences is simply not viable as a way of imagining the future (the current resurgence of attacks on women's rights, coincident with attacks on trans and Black bodies, under patriarchy in the US and elsewhere notwithstanding). One problem is the way separatism reverses rather than abolishes essentialist gendered hierarchies of oppression, demonising men and perpetuating harmful stereotypes about masculine dominance and (sexual) violence. Another is the way the absolute separation of the genders creates a false sense of unity among all women, while actually reproducing "whitestream" feminism (Tuck et al. 17) in a way that excludes women of colour and working-class women, erases the experiences of trans-women and gender nonconforming persons, and reinforces the devaluation of materialism, the body, and the nonhuman world.

Though it has not fully redeemed the novel's reputation, some of the critique against *A Door into Ocean*'s apparent essentialism has been addressed in recent scholarly readings. Eric C. Otto, for one, argues that, unlike most actually separatist ecofeminist utopias, the ecological society imagined in Slonczewski's novel thrives not on the basis of its sexist exclusion but rather because of its cultural emphasis on values that have traditionally been dismissed as feminine (n.p.). As he points out, this indicates the novel's political orientation is more in keeping with "affinity ecofeminism" than cultural ecofeminism (n.p.).[19] The novel's point, according to his reading, is not that women are more ecologically "attuned" than men, but that, due to their subordinated status, women and nonhuman nature share an affinity as natural allies against capitalist extractivist practises (n.p.), creating the grounds for a strategic and ultimately transformative use of essentialism. Likewise, in concert with Slonczewski's intentions with the novel, Christy Tidwell writes that: "At first glance, *A Door into Ocean*, with its utopian, all-female world, seems to rely upon the same kind of separatism present in many other feminist science fiction novels … but instead [it] uses the

[19] Cultural ecofeminism is the term most often used to describe the essentialist branch of ecofeminism in contrast to more poststructuralist and third wave forms which are sometimes described as socialist or affinity ecofeminism. See Gaard's "Ecofeminism Revisited," as well as Elizabeth Carlassare's "Socialist and Cultural Ecofeminism: Allies in Resistance."

conceit of the separatist all-female world to break down gender binaries" (57). This no doubt signals a positive development in the novel's reception. Yet it is conspicuous that none of the conversations currently taking place around Slonczewski's novel address or even acknowledge central questions about the way categories like race and class intersect with gender to disrupt dichotomous thinking and create broader alliances. Likewise, the many otherwise brilliant posthuman and animal studies critiques of the novel that are currently emerging focus exclusively on multispecies ethics while remaining silent on issues of social justice.[20] The novel's obvious ongoing relevance, combined with the last decades' developments in intersectional and ecological feminist theory, makes this a strange omission.[21]

My argument therefore emphasises how *A Door into Ocean* differs from other separatist ecofeminist utopias in the way it subverts stereotypes common to the genre and disrupts static notions of nature. Most importantly, Slonczewski's novel avoids replicating the homogenising and essentialising trinity of "Woman-Native-Nature" (Bryld and Lykke 4). Instead, through the use of careful worldbuilding and nuanced characterisation, the novel stages a critique of the role this trinity plays both in patriarchal capitalist-colonialist discourses and in certain environmentalist narratives which rely on dehumanising character tropes like the "earth mother" and the "ecological Indian," as well as the "white saviour."[22] In the introduction to this chapter, I briefly referenced James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009); this film is as good an example as any of a mainstream ecotopian narrative that uses these stereotypes to further its environmentalist message, often to the detriment of the groups portrayed.[23] Much like Slonczewski's novel, Cameron's film is about a group of blue-skinned,

[20] See, for instance, Sherryl Vint's "Animal Studies in the Era of Biopower" and Chris Pak's "'Then Came Pantropy:' Grotesque Bodies, Multispecies Flourishing, and Human-Animal Relationships in Joan Slonczewski's *A Door into Ocean*," both of them published in *Science Fiction Studies* within the last decade. See also the collection *Posthuman Biopolitics: The Science Fiction of Joan Slonczewski* (2020), edited by Bruce Clark.

[21] Admittedly, neither utopia nor affinity politics are in high regard at the moment, but it still seems like it should be worth noting that Slonczewski's novel engages with intersectionality to a much greater degree than other White-authored texts from the same period. Compare, for instance, the generalising all-women rhetoric of first and second wave White feminists to the broad and inclusive coalitional alliances imagined by Gaard, Lorde, and Anzaldúa.

[22] See Gergan et al., Salmose, and Seymour and Pierrot for takes on masculinism and White saviourism within mainstream apocalyptic cli-fi narratives. See Vergès's *A Decolonial Feminism* for a discussion of White saviourism within mainstream feminism (28-29).

[23] This point is contentious. In "Indigenous Literatures, Multinaturalism, and *Avatar*: The Emergence of Indigenous Cosmopolitics," Joni Adamson notes, with reference to Nixon's concept of slow violence, how the film was positively received by some Indigenous groups for bringing the attention and support of global mainstream audiences to local environmental struggles that often go ignored in the media. At the same time, Kyle Powys Whyte notes how the film's inclusion of the White saviour protagonist victimises, and discounts the capabilities of, Indigenous grassroots environmental movements ("Indigenous Science Fiction").

ecologically attuned aliens resisting capitalist-colonialist invasion with the help of a human defector. Yet, where Cameron's Na'vi are represented as "noble savages" at one with nature, Slonczewski's Sharers are eventually revealed to be the most technologically advanced society in the novel's universe, drawing on their knowledge of "feminist science" to merge with the environment and maintain the planet's ecological balance (see Tidwell). This leaves them with a legacy of highly advanced biotechnology and persistent survival, characteristics rarely afforded mainstream representations of Indigenous peoples, who are often seen as relics of a bygone age (Adamson, "Indigenous Literatures" 149). Additionally, where Cameron's film revolves around its White male protagonist, his romance with the exoticized native woman Neytiri, and his role in leading the Na'vi in an action-packed military victory over the human invaders,[24] Slonczewski's novel is a carrier-bag text full of multiple conflicting perspectives (Le Guin, "Carrier Bag"), where victory is achieved through collective action and nonviolent resistance. Neither of the Valan protagonists are allowed to play the hero, regardless of skin colour or gender, and the resistance movement is instead lead by the Sharer Merwen, a character that Slonczewski deliberately based on successful (male) decolonial and Civil Rights leaders such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King.[25] The result is that, instead of perpetuating essentialist representations of gender, race, and nature, *A Door into Ocean* uses Shora as a dynamic material grounds for the formation of an alliance between decolonial, environmentalist, and intersectional feminist struggles for justice that work to transform stable boundaries and categories. In this, the novel resonates powerfully with Greta Gaard's assertion that: "It is time to build our common liberation on more concrete coalitions" that include both human and nonhuman allies ("Queer Ecofeminism" 132).[26] In other words, it is time to read *A Door into Ocean* as a story about submersion and she-monsters.

[24] In his reading, Whyte writes, "the protagonist who emerges is an alien, non-Na'vi white male who is able to pass for Na'vi and have a sexual relationship with a Na'vi gendered female character who becomes defined in terms of this romantic relationship" (Whyte, "Indigenous Science Fiction" 231).
[25] Interestingly, in the study guide, Slonczewski notes that her original intention was for Merwen to die at the end of the novel to further evoke the tragic fates of these leaders, but she ultimately decided against it because she realized a female character's death was more likely to signify sacrifice or punishment than resistance. This makes me wonder at the implications of the Sharers being based solely on male resistance leaders.
[26] This is the concluding line of Gaard's foundational "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism," published in 1997 as ecofeminism was being discredited due to widespread charges of essentialism. The piece feels like a final effort to reignite the movement by introducing intersectional perspectives.

Sharing as Contagion

My discussion above shows that, beyond the initial impression of gender essentialism, *A Door into Ocean*'s feminist utopia is far from static. In fact, the novel highlights nature and materiality itself as transformative and monstrous; based on her knowledge as a microbiologist, Slonczewski imagines a society on Shora where everything is deeply connected and constantly transforming in a way that confounds dichotomous ways of seeing the world. She notes: "Symbiosis is always ambiguous. At what moment is one using or being used? The point is not to 'dominantly' control, but to respond interactively. If you don't respond, the symbiosis falls apart" ("An Interview" 14). Based on these principles of symbiosis, sharing emerges within *A Door into Ocean*'s universe as a response-able ethics and ontology that encapsulates every aspect of life on Shora, from the Sharers' bodies to their culture. For instance, in the Sharers' language every action is "shared," so that actions are always intra-actions and all matter carries agency (Barad, *Meeting the Universe*). This gives rise to neologisms like "learnsharing" and "lovesharing" when translated into Valan or English—and to exchanges like this one between Merwen and Spinel:

> "Do you say 'hitsharing,' too? If I hit a rock with a chisel, does the rock hit me?"
> "I would think so. Don't you feel it in your arm?" (…)
> "Or if I swim in the sea, does the sea swim in me?"
> "Does it not?" (36-37)

From this (almost Socratic) dialogue, it is clear that the very grammatical structure of the Sharers' language makes it impossible for them to conceive of any action as unilateral. Indeed, the conversation foreshadows the inevitable breakdown in negotiations between the Sharers and Valans later in the novel; the Valan military's communication through "deathsharing" and commands is as incomprehensible to the Sharers as the Sharers' insistence on "sharing" knowledge and understanding is to the Valans. Yet, the exchange also emphasises the way that the Sharers afford agency to more-than-human matter—rocks hit, and the ocean swims—in a way that deprivileges the human as the sole being with the capacity to act. This is a principle in line with most Indigenous worldviews and has also been articulated more recently within Western traditions of thought through the new materialist and feminist materialist work of scholars like Jane Bennett, Karen Barad, and Stacy Alaimo and Susan J. Hekman. This emphasis on response-ability, I argue, challenges Valedon and the

real Western world's masculinist models of mastery and instead makes space for sea ontologies and opportunities for sea change.

As a mutual and materially based ontology, sharing estranges the novel's Valan characters (as well as readers) from terrestrial models of mastery. Instead, the text's emphasis on symbiosis invites speculative submersion in alternate ways of being and thinking in relation to the more-than-human world (Jue, *Wild Blue Media* 9). Placing themselves at the centre of what they call the "web of life," the Sharers envision themselves as "protectors of Shora" and see it as their purpose to maintain the planet's ecological balance through advanced bioengineering and population control (Slonczewski 61)—a task they have successfully achieved in isolation for ten millennia prior to contact with the Patriarchy. The role of protector is taken up by each Sharer as soon as she enters adulthood; once she has proven herself capable of response-ability, self-reflection, and discipline, she is allowed to join one of the planet's democratic Gatherings and take on a "self-name" that symbolises her commitment to overcoming her own hubris, such as "Merwen the Impatient" or "Usha the Inconsiderate (7). The complete duties of a protector include an adherence to the Sharers' strict code of nonviolence, protection of the ecological balance at the cost of individual lives and desires, and, centrally, respect for symbiotic relationships with other species with a view toward deep time. The strangeness of this entanglement is made both deeply familiar and alien through the constant shifts between the Valan protagonist Spinel's perspective and those of the Sharers themselves. When Spinel arrives on Shora during the expository first half of the text, he is shocked to learn that, despite their technological prowess, the Sharers go about naked and reside on living rafts in wall-less houses of woven seasilk (53-54), which they have to rebuild following every storm (96). They also maintain close relationships with numerous companion species both friendly and not; for instance, they refuse to use pesticides to "clear out" parasites and predators around the raft; instead, they carefully manage Shora's population of deadly "fleshborers" while pursuing coexistence (69); they also harness and care for enormous cephaglobinids called "starworms" that live beneath the rafts and steer them through currents while they "sing" news to other rafts (64); and they regularly endure the migratory season of the planet's apex predators, the "seaswallowers" which destroy entire rafts but are necessary to prevent overpopulation. Indeed, though their passing is brutal, "Without seaswallowers … the entire life web would collapse, and Sharers would starve" (Pak 367)—which is exactly what happens when Valan colonizers use pesticides to clear out the predators. Their apparent lack of mastery makes the Sharers' lives vulnerable and precarious to the constant transformations of the ocean, but it is also what allows them to

coexist with "significant otherness" on mutual terms (Haraway, *Companion Species*). As Tidwell so beautifully puts it in in her reading of the text: "Sharers do not attempt to conquer the world but to live with it" (53-54).

Sharing, then, describes the way the Sharers are deeply entangled with the planet's environment through their ways of knowing as well as being, with symbiosis erasing bodily boundaries and traditional divides between ethics, ontology, and epistemology (Alaimo, "States of Suspension" 476). The results are somewhat monstrous to human eyes; descendants of humans in our own real-world present, the Sharers' most visible adaptations to Shora's ocean environment include the evolution of hairlessness, inner eyelids, webbed fingers and toes, and deep purple skin. These features may facilitate underwater existence, but they also make the Sharers appear decidedly alien to the more traditionally human-looking Valans. What makes the Sharers especially discomforting to a culture based on mastery—even more so than the deadly presence of seaswallowers and fleshborers—is the fact of their shared *embodiment* with other species, the trans-corporeal way that Sharers allow other species to move across the boundaries of their bodies. As I discuss below, none of these symbiotic relationships is as intimately close—or as troubling—as the one they share with the "breathmicrobes:" miniscule bacteria that inhabit the pores of the Sharers' skin, turning it purple and allowing them to store extra oxygen within their cells for long dives underwater (Slonczewski 142). For the Sharers, this relationship is a practicality, a lesson in the permeability of borders and an act of adaptive "pantropy" that allows them to survive on an oceanic planet without resorting to extensive terraforming or other techniques of planetary mastery (Pak 122).[27] This way of being without boundaries forms the basis for the Sharers' sea ontology, and in fact places response-ability at the centre of what it means to be human. The Sharers' de facto leader Merwen explains to Spinel: "A lesser creature sees its rival on the water and jumps in to fight it. A human sees herself and knows that the sea names her. But a *self-namer* sees every human that ever was or will be, and every form of life there is" (61, emphasis in original). This definition leaves out not only non-human companion species,

[27] As Chris Pak notes: "The opposition between terraforming and pantropy turns on a philosophical choice between adapting the other or adapting the self" (123). In science fiction, terraforming is a common term that describes the (as of yet, hypothetical) process of adapting a planet's atmosphere, temperature, and ecology to suit human habitation. Pantropy serves as the science fictional opposite of terraforming, allowing the Sharers to "offer an alternative conception of habitation centred on responsiveness to other lives" rather than a remaking of the other to suit the self (122). Yet some terraforming must have taken place on Shora for the novel's ecology and biology to make sense. As Slonczewski herself notes in her study guide, Spinel's capacity to subsist on Shoran food indicates that the Primes—the Sharers' and Valans' common ancestors—must have at least partially colonised Shora by replacing its native species of flora and fauna. This issue is explored in more detail in the novel's sequels, *Daughter of Elysium* and *The Children Star*.

but also Sharer children—considered beloved "little beast[s]" until they learn to respond (161)—and, centrally for the novel's plot, the "death-sharing" Valans.[28]

The Sharers' maintenance of an anthropocentric hierarchy reads as humanist compared to Slonczewski's later posthuman work.[29] However, their role as protectors resonates with what Arvin, Tuck, and Morill describe as an Indigenous concept of sovereignty based on response-ability rather than mastery over land and water (16). There is also no question that the Sharers' stewardship of their planet is a vast improvement over the Valans' "settler ontology" of mastery and instrumentalist extractivism (King 54).[30] As a contrast to Shora's oceanic fluidity, the "Stone Moon" Valedon is a rigid society obsessed with minerals and wealth. Like most real-world capitalist societies, Valedon defines humanness along classed, raced, and gendered lines, with men taking precedence over women, and the White-skinned Iridians ruling over the planet's conquered and colonised provinces. At the bottom of Valan society are casteless youths like the protagonist Spinel, dark-skinned, dispossessed, and unable to enter the world as independent adults without a trade to define their worth in the capitalist social structure. Near the top of the hierarchy—but constantly reminded of the precarity of their social status—are Iridian women like the other protagonist Berenice and Sardish men like her fiancé Realgar, whose modicum of power derives from their service and obedience to the planet's totalitarian High Protector.[31] At the very top is the Patriarch of Torr himself, as well as his many envoys, an endless legion of android bodies hosting an ageless and almost omniscient machine-intelligence that rules or destroys the galaxy's inhabited planets at his whim. The fact that the Patriarch, a literal manifestation of the disembodied transhuman, is worshiped as a god, speaks volumes to the Valans' devaluation of materiality and their belief in transcendence and reason as the defining traits of the human. The emphasis on mastery and instrumentalism is equally obvious in the Valans' relationship to nonhuman nature; Valedon has been thoroughly terraformed to suit human habitation, the only "wilderness" that remains is maintained purely

[28] The Sharers' emphasis on language and reason in the praxis of becoming human has some unfortunately ableist implications, especially since their society also claims to have eliminated disability through bioengineering. It effectively excludes anyone incapable of verbal communication or full personal autonomy for humanness. According to a recent interview, Slonczewski appears to personally maintain this stance: "The answer I've found [to who counts as human] is that, whatever can speak for itself and say, 'I am.' That is, whatever defends its own identity. The question turns out to be circular; a logical consequence of the Turing test is that whatever entity can convince us that it's human, in effect is" ("An Interview" 7).

[29] See *The Posthuman Biopolitics of Joan Slonczewski* for examples.

[30] I take this term from Tiffany Lethabo King's *Black Shoals.* She, in turn, takes it from Frank Wilderson's *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms.*

[31] The Sards appear to be a colonised, but White-skinned people renowned for their military acumen, though the novel remains muddled on the finer points of Valedon's history and society as the main focus is on Shora.

for recreational hunting, and the indigenous anthropoid species that originally inhabited the planet, now derogatorily referred to as "trolls" (18), has been subject to absolute genocide. To the colonising Valans with their "extractive view" (Gómez-Barris 5), Shora is thus neither "Mother Ocean" nor "web of life," but rather a fresh frontier of "cheap nature" open to primitive accumulation (Moore, *Capitalism* 16-17): "Seasilk and minerals—that was what Shora meant" (Slonczewski 29).[32] They are also more than willing to disrupt millennia of cultural and ecological harmony on Shora by introducing things like pesticides, motorboats, and steel designed to better master the ocean environment.[33]

When Valdeon invades Shora to secure the planet's resources, the two cultures clash in a way that both highlights and disrupts their conflicting ideas of what it means to be human. Ironically, for each of the two cultures, what humanises members of their own society actually works to dehumanise members of the other, confirming the post-colonial, posthuman, and monster studies observation that humanisation works through processes of exclusion (cf. Haraway; Jackson; Shildrick). To the Sharers, the Valans are monstrous figures, not only because their population still contains primitive "malefreaks" (Slonczewski 56), but because they as a people, whether male or female, think and behave in a way that is incongruous with a definition of the human based on self-naming and response-ability. The fact that Sharers and Valans share the same DNA creates an undeniable claim to kinship that is made monstrous by the "sickness" that characterises Valan culture—their widespread use of violence and disregard for the planet's ecological balance. Where some of the Sharers believe they have a responsibility to "share healing" with their unfortunate Valan "little sisters" who are suffering from a contagious but curable disease, others see the Valans as a dangerous invasive species that needs to be wiped from the planet (80). One of the more militantly separatist Sharers (or "Doorclosers") puts it this way: "Valans don't live as humans; as lesser sharers, they have no place in the balance of life … So now let's get rid of them" (78). The use of sickness or pathology to describe the master model's alienation from the sphere of nature defamiliarizes readers from the everyday violence of the real-world

[32] Everything and everyone in the Patriarchy is defined by their instrumental value within the capitalist system and all relations are transactional and precarious. As a case in point, Spinel is practically "sold off" to the Sharers by his destitute family in exchange for a bale of valuable Shoran seasilk, while Spinel's father playfully "pays" his mother for intercourse.

[33] The emphasis on technology as a disruptive intrusion into the natural world may again be read as essentialist. However, in this context I see it less as an essentialist ecofeminist critique of technology *per se* and more as a postcolonial critique of structures of neocolonial dependency brought about through the erosion of local or national self-sufficiency. In the novel, see for example Lystra's argument with the Valan trader about supply and demand and the rising cost of the steel cables her raft has come to rely on in lieu of the more traditional but deadly hunting of shockwraiths for tentacles (71).

Capitalocene.[34] In the end, the only thing that prevents the launch of a full biochemical genocide of the Valans is the impossibility of reaching a consensus in this taxonomical debate, which no matter the fallout will radically transform Sharer definitions of their own humanity for all time.

Meanwhile, the Sharers' lack of hierarchy and borders is equally monstrous to the Valans' definition of the human based on race, gender, class, and ideals of bodily containment and material transcendence. Because the Sharers have no men, no hierarchy, and no visible infrastructure, and because their (incredibly advanced) biotechnology is designed to support rather than to master the environment, the Valans dismiss the Sharers as uncivilized "native witch-women" unable or unwilling to accept the arrival of "modernity" (300-301). And, as with all natives, witches, and other subjects associated with the undomesticated realm of nature, this means the Sharers need to be brought to order rather than met with response-ability. The Valans' animalisation of the Sharers is evident in the Valan characters' repeated insistence on the Sharers' nonhuman status, culminating in the military leader General Realgar's assertion, mid-genocide, that "They're inhuman … They are wild things. I would not begin to understand them, even if I cared to" (299). With this judgement, the Sharers are not only placed within colonial discourses as subhuman savages, but fully animalised as "wild" and therefore outside the Valans' sphere of human ontologies, ethics, and even epistemologies (i.e., the Sharers are unfathomable and therefore nonhuman). In colonial ontologies, fictions of race and gender play a central role in the exclusionary process of animalisation. As Deckha Maneesha so succinctly puts it, "The idea of a food chain at the apex of which sits Man, as superior to and main predator over all beings … is integral to constituting human identity for Western subjects" (538). On Valedon, this tendency toward mastery is compounded by the fact that human existence in fleshy bodies is already precarious beneath the transhuman Patriarch; under his reign of terror, the Valans' ability to prove themselves transcendent through the successful subjugation of the planet's dissident, feminised "Ocean Moon" becomes a condition for their own continued existence as humans worthy of ethical consideration. The stakes of survival are raised further when the Valans discover that the Sharers possess knowledge of "forbidden sciences" (e.g., biology) associated with the body (Slonczewski 208), which could wipe out all of Valedon's population, and even pose an egalitarian alternative to the Patriarch's masculinist monopoly

[34] In fact, Octavia Butler uses the exact same strange-making technique in the *Lilith's Brood* trilogy, where the alien Oankali pathologize the human tendency to think hierarchically while at the same time celebrating their "talent" for cancer or unlimited cell growth.

on technoscience (Tidwell 52). The result is that the Valans' originally mercantile, and at least partially paternalistic mission to "bring Patriarchal Law to Shora" (206), devolves into a crazed Vietnam-like military campaign to either master or destroy an unfathomable and uncivilizable other—no matter the cost.

Based on the Valans' own precarious status as humans under the Patriarchy, it is clear that their violent colonisation of Shora stems as much from their fear of bodily vulnerability as it does from greed. The Sharers' unfathomability alone—their refusal to be mastered, understood, or contained through the logics of Valedon's colonising power—renders them dangerously "subversive" in the eyes of the Valan military command (Slonczewski 31). In addition, as the Valan occupation drags on, the Sharers' symbiosis with the breathmicrobes is turned into a racialised sign of contagion and lack of control to justify the use of increasingly violent tactics. The harmless microbes, it turns out, are "contagious" to anyone who visits Shora; regardless of sex, race, or social status, anyone who spends a prolonged period of time on the Ocean Moon ends up with the Sharers' dark purple skin and their pantropic capacity for underwater existence. During the first stage of the invasion, the Valans keep this "contagion" at bay with the help of the "Apurpure drug" (107), an antibiotic strain with a commercial name that evokes both the Sharers' purpure colouring and White supremacist notions of bodily and racial purity. As Adilifu Nama argues throughout *Black Space, Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film,* speculative narratives of contagion often serve as thinly veiled White-supremacist allegories of racial contamination. Even outside the boundaries of sf narratives, Mel Chen's work on lead toxicity in *Animacies* reveals how discourses of contagion become entangled in those of White racial purity and futurity (125-129). In Slonczewski's novel, one group of separatist "doorclosers" clued into the Valans' anxiety over contagion eventually release a carefully engineered drug-resistant strain of the microbes in the hopes of scaring the invaders away. Soon, the Valan military leaders and their families are all becoming "infected" and turning irreversibly purple, turning the racialised colonial hierarchy on its head and disrupting definitions of the human grounded in containment.[35]

One of the characters affected by this loss of identity and control is the novel's antagonist Realgar, a Valan general belonging to the colonised Sardish people. Deeply traumatised by a previous military campaign based on the Vietnam war, Realgar is ruthless in his quest to eliminate all traces of vulnerability in himself by controlling Shora and

[35] This "Purple Plague" (Slonczewski 299) can also be read as a thinly veiled analogy to the Red Menace.

embodying the Patriarchy's human ideals of transcendence.[36] However, in encountering the breathmicrobes, he not only fails to gain control over the Sharers and their companion species. In the process, he also loses control of his own body and sense of self as they are made unfathomable and monstrous to him. First, the breathmicrobes "take" his fiancé Berenice from him—by rendering her dark-skinned and other—then "take" his children "hostage"—threatening the racial purity of the future—and finally "violate" his own body by turning his skin an unrecognisable alien purple (Slonczewski 285-286). Each step in this line of events results in an escalation of violence against the Sharers. When Realgar is confronted with the Sharer Merwen's relentless insistence on their common humanity near the end of the novel, he lashes out in a shocking display of violence, because, as he later explains, "I saw my face in the mirror at the time when it most resembled yours" (377). Shildrick explains: "In seeking confirmation of our own secure subjecthood in what we are not, what we see mirrored in the monster are the leaks and flows, the vulnerabilities in our own embodied being" (*Embodying the Monster* 4). In other words, the visible evidence of Realgar's own "leakiness" revealed by the breathmicrobes forces a confrontation with the other within the self and leads to a form of involuntary submersion and dissolution of human identity. Indeed, in his concluding point-of-view chapter, Realgar retreats from Shora "powerless" and "insignificant," his hard-won identity and status made to "dissolve here on a slippery bit of ocean between seaweed and seafoam" (Slonczewski 395). Slonczewski's suddenly fluid and susurrating prose in this passage evokes not only a loss of individual boundaries, but also a sense of deep time that renders the future unfathomable to a human point of view. Her use of the word "dissolve," in particular, brings to mind Alaimo's work on trans-corporeality, where she notes that "dwelling in the dissolve" can lead to a deeper sense of immersion in material entanglements and a recognition of vulnerable self (*Exposed* 2). Though it comes with the risk of harm, and may provoke denial, this sense of permeability may also inspire an alternative ethics of posthuman entanglement and co-constitution. Indeed, seeing his own purple reflection superimposed on the ocean below in the spaceship window—the very symbol of transhumanist transcendence—Realgar knows that his encounter with the ocean has irrevocably expelled him from his position of mastery and made even his own self

[36] Though it does not justify his actions in the novel, it is worth noting that Realgar probably suffers from PTSD. There are scattered references throughout the text to his fear and paranoia over Azurite guerrilla "terrorists" back on Valedon, who might seek revenge on him by targeting his fiancée or children; his experiences with using torture to subdue them; and his repeated flashbacks to the Azurite campaign: e.g., "But they're just naked women, Ral, not Azurite guerrillas" and "Sharers are in fact like Azurite women. They do conceal weapons" (253, 255).

unknowable: “Somehow, he would never see a glass again, or look into the eyes of a cornered bear, without knowing that the wildest thing he ever hunted still swam beyond his grasp” (395). In this way, Slonczewski’s novel portrays the damage done by systems of domination not only to monstered others but also to those in power who consider themselves beyond the reach of vulnerable encounter.

Sharing Submersion

I have so far argued against *A Door into Ocean*’s reputation for essentialism to show how the novel presents sharing as a sea ontology with the capacity to transform fixed ontological boundaries and, borrowing from Alaimo, to show that “the ‘human’ is always already part of an active, often unpredictable, material world” constituted through trans-corporeal and response-able relationships (*Bodily Natures* 16-17). Realgar’s descent from mastery to dissolve echoes the experience of Kris Kelvin on the shore of Solaris described in the introduction; faced with the otherness within, he is unable to merge with Shora and returns to the elevated position of the spaceship to escape his own leaky and vulnerable body. By contrast, the novel’s other inappropriate/d Valan characters, Realgar’s noblewoman fiancé Berenice and the commoner Spinel, both undergo much more radical changes—though not in equal degrees. Indeed, transformation is not equally available to all of the novel’s characters, a fact made apparent through the text’s narration from multiple third-person limited points-of-view, which offer diverse and often contradictory perspectives on what it means to inhabit a human body in submersion from different positionalities—from the Sharers’ embrace of trans-corporeal entanglement to the Valan characters’ anxieties over contagion and dissolve. As I argue in what follows, the breathmicrobe symbiosis affects and transforms the novel’s two Valan protagonists differently depending on their positionality and their openness to becoming she-monsters. What they both share, however, is an experience of submersion—of merging with the oceanic and becoming monstrous—that makes returning to Valedon’s more stable terrestrial society impossible.

Aside from Realgar, the first among the novel’s characters to experience submersion is the Iridan noblewoman Lady Berenice of Hyalite. A member of Valedon’s dominant ethnic group, fiancée to a general, and daughter of the first pioneering traders to settle on Shora, Berenice has achieved the highest status available to a woman on Valedon. However, she was raised on Shora and spent her childhood among the Sharers, learning their ways of thinking and experiencing a level of personal freedom rarely available under the Patriarchy. Now approaching her future as General Realgar’s wife while working as a Patriarchal delegate on

Shora, she is torn between, on the one hand, her wish to "understand" the Sharers and share their way of life, and, on the other, the cultural expectation that she will return to Iridis to "find a noble husband and enjoy our wealth" and "never ha[ve] to touch the sea" again (Slonczewski 98). Although the narration is coloured by her perspective, and sometimes sympathetic, the novel maintains a critical stance towards Berenice's duplicitous thoughts and actions. While on Shora, she fully integrates with the Sharers—going about bald, purple-skinned, and naked—and willingly partakes in (light) physical labour for the maintenance of the community. Yet, upon returning to Valedon, she always dresses in the latest high-end fashions (made of seasilk extracted from Shora), regrowing her blonde hair, and allowing her physical needs to be attended by robot "servos." Most significantly, she takes the Apurpure drug to rid herself of the breathmicrobe symbiosis, fully aware that her actions symbolically reinforce the association between the Sharers' purple skin and racialised contagion (58). Ignoring her family's role as colonisers, she sees herself as "both victim and perpetrator" in Valedon's conflict with Shora (31), a White saviour come to rescue the "ignorant natives of the Ocean Moon"—a phrase that is tellingly only used from her and Realgar's points of view—by bringing them under Patriarchal "protection" (148). Torn between conflicting roles, she appears as a caricature of liberal White womanhood, unaware of her own privilege and status as oppressor, ready to perform allyship when it suits her self-image, but quick to abscond when her own safety or comfort is threatened.[37] At the end of the novel, her bombing of a Valan military base—carried out contrary to the Sharers' nonviolent mission—justifies an escalation of the invasion, and though she ultimately abandons her Whiteness and accepts the breathmicrobe symbiosis, she ends the novel as an exile on Shora, shunned by both sides.

Berenice's actions prove that, even within the novel's ecofeminist utopia, "Women do not necessarily treat other women as sisters or the earth as a mother; women are capable of conflict, of domination and even, in the right circumstances, of violence" (Plumwood,

[37] Whyte writes: "Perhaps it is all part of allies' ancestral fantasies that their descendants would have the privilege of unlimited individual and collective agency to exploit Indigenous peoples and the privilege of claiming moral high ground as saviors … It allows allies to claim themselves as the protagonists for Indigenous peoples, no different from the protagonists in *Avatar*" ("Indigenous Science Fiction" 238). For a recent and specific example on the topic of White allyship, see Mann and Baker's NPR interview with Black Lives Matter protest leaders. Notably, helpful things do *not* include acting as a spokesperson for the silenced group, endangering protestors by provoking their oppressors, or acting like a tourist who is "an ally one day and just white the next."

Feminism 9).[38] Even so, the novel takes care to represent Berenice as a problematic but ultimately sympathetic character who struggles and fails to free herself from her patriarchal conditioning and from a role that confines her to motherhood and to an (as it develops) abusive arranged marriage. Coming from just below the peaks of a Patriarchal society where hierarchical domination serves as the only basis for ethical consideration, it is perhaps unsurprising that neither Berenice nor Realgar are able to fully let go of the master story. For them, the submersion offered through sharing is not a method of adaptation but rather a monstering "catfish transformation" that threatens their already precarious status as self-contained, transcendent subjects (Slonczewski 251). By contrast, the novel's main protagonist Spinel—a dark-skinned, caste-less "commoner" from one of Valedon's colonised provinces—is much more successful at learning sharing because he arrives on Shora already occupying a precarious position within the Valan hierarchy of humanness. Arriving at a hybrid Valan/Sharer identity and dissolving the rigid categories of the Patriarchy, he even becomes a kind of she-monster capable of inspiring transformation. Though rarely noted by critics, the novel leaves little doubt as to the fact that Spinel's submersion is made possible by his marginalised status on Valedon. Despite his status as "malefreak," his experience of intersecting forms of oppression enables an affinity with the Sharers that is unavailable even to some of the novel's female characters, further illustrating *A Door into Ocean*'s nuanced take on ecofeminism. Berenice reflects bitterly, "It was one thing to leave Chrysoport [Spinel's impoverished hometown], but Nisi had left a highstreet of Iridis to return to this battered world" (306). Not only does Spinel become a protector and join the Sharers' democratic Gatherings to stand in solidarity against the Patriarchal invaders, but he also becomes the first outsider to successfully learn whitetrance,[39] become a "lovesharer," and, as the ending implies, to produce hybrid Sharer-Valan children. As Tidwell points out, "Nor is

[38] As many critics have argued, Berenice is not alone in making this statement within the text. For example, the Valan invasion force contains many female soldiers whose gender is irrelevant to their allegiances, and the novel's most overtly brutal character is the female officer Jade, an expert in interrogation, torture, and mind-control who delights in exterminating the Sharers. As Tidwell points out, even among the Sharers, the potential for violence is only tempered by substantial self-control (61); among them there is an outspoken militant faction that wishes to exterminate the Valans, and we also learn of the existence of individual cases among the Sharers of "death-hastening;" for one, the Sharer Virien could not be "cured" from her delight in killing, and so she was exiled from the community to her probable death (159).

[39] Becoming a protector among the Sharers involves a commitment to learning "white-trance," a death-like (and deadly) state of dissociation the Sharers use to master their emotions and express agency during times of suffering, such as when peaceful protest is met with violence. Judith Butler writes: "The practice of 'going limp' before political power is, on the one hand, a passive posture, and is thought to belong to the tradition of passive resistance; at the same time, it is a deliberate way of exposing the body to police power, of entering the field of violence, and of exercising an adamant and embodied form of political agency. It requires suffering, yes, but for the purposes of transforming both oneself and social reality" (*The Force of Nonviolence,* n.p.).

Spinel's transformation incidental to the book's trajectory; instead, it is the ultimate illustration of the power of the Shoran utopia, which is that ideas about nonviolence, environmentalism, and interconnectedness are transmissible" (58)—regardless of gender identity or sex.

This is not to say that Spinel's transformation comes easily or without conflict. Although his position within the Patriarchy is *near* the bottom of the social hierarchy, Spinel still has stakes in maintaining and protecting its logics by virtue of his internalised male chauvinism. Eric C. Otto summarises the challenges in his analysis of the novel: like many visitors to feminist utopia, Spinel's transformation requires him to confront "his compulsory defense of the heterosexual family unit, his hierarchical logic, and his unwillingness to experience difference" (Otto n.p.)—at the risk of absolute alienation from his own cultural background and family. Watching Spinel transform throughout the novel is both rewarding and at times deeply frustrating. Eighteen years old at the beginning of the narrative, he is a man-child prone to demanding, disrespectful, and downright sexually violent behaviour towards the novel's female characters (e.g., expecting care, rescue, and special treatment from the Sharers while disdaining their culture and bullying their children; or begging Berenice for help, then fantasising about "[tearing] off her highborn clothes" and "[beating] her to a pulp" when she scorns him: Slonczewski 99). This behaviour is only made worse by Slonczewski's extensive use of free indirect discourse, which forces readers to experience Shora filtered through Spinel's perspective of unchecked sexism and xenophobia, as he at turns both objectifies and animalises the Sharers (e.g., appraising his future "lovesharer" Lystra's body and face one moment, then characterising her as "monstrous" the next: 62-63). Spinel's almost perverted fascination with the Sharers' alien femininity manifests as culturally paranoid images of the Sharers as "hordes of purple fish creatures invading Valedon" (15), and also leads him to speculate in sensationalist terms about the invasion and contamination of his own body once he arrives on Shora: "Would he turn into a fish and be trapped there forever?" (34).[40] The revelation that Sharers and Valans both evolved from fish and are still in fact genetically "[c]lose enough to interbreed" is for him a source of horror rather than kinship and he staunchly believes that "[i]f you're a catfish, it doesn't matter how hard you try [to be human]" (24). After all, the Sharers' status as animals is the monstrous border that constitutes his own tenuous humanity on Valedon. In the end however, he agrees

[40] In this case, Spinel (his own skin colour notwithstanding) seems to demonstrate what Andrew Baldwin calls "white affect" in his fear of an alien invasion of migrants.

to come to Shora and learn sharing, lured by the prospect of an "attractive adventure" on an all-female planet where he (wrongly) assumes his maleness will be in high demand (16).

The subversion of Spinel's chauvinistic behaviours and beliefs only serves to make his transformation into she-monster more compelling. Despite his prejudices, Spinel does, in fact, throughout the course of the novel choose to "turn into a fish" and become "trapped" on Shora "forever," unlike many other utopian travellers who eventually return home after having learned all the alternate society has to offer. The most dramatic part of Spinel's transformation comes at the end of the novel's second part following an identity crisis that foreshadows the developing conflict between Shora and Valedon's concepts of humanness. At this point, Spinel has already been "shar[ing] learning" (Slonczewski 7) with the Sharers and slowly adapting to life on Shora by going naked, participating in work, eating seaweed, and swimming in the sea. However, his actual submersion and transformation into Sharer comes as a turning point within the text, experienced as a moment of peak horror for Spinel himself. The scene opens with an expository passage where we learn that Spinel has become fully acclimated to his new life on Shora and that his once olive skin has become tanned "nearly black" from exposure to the sun (97). This change does not bother him as it does little to change his already dismal status in Valedon's racial hierarchy—that is, until he also notices "a touch of lavender, faint but unmistakable" on the palms of his hands, evidence of the breathmicrobe symbiosis that "infects" any human visitors to Shora (97). The implications of this transformation are as monstrous as they were for Realgar, and the narrative tone shifts suddenly to one of horror: "To Spinel, at that instant, it meant one thing: he was metamorphosing into a moon-creature" (97). Spinel's initial reaction is abjection in defence of his own humanity and selfhood; he first tries to scratch his own skin off, then physically pushes away the concerned Sharers who "[reach] out to him with livid limbs and flippers," transformed into "grotesque signs of what he would become" (97). The reference to the grotesque here reveals the monstrousness inherent to submersion; indeed, Spinel seeks comfort in the only land-like space on the ocean planet, deep within the raft that the Sharers inhabit, and sits there "squeez[ing] himself all over as if by sheer force of will he could keep himself from becoming a monster" and keep his bodily boundaries intact (97).

In his reading of this scene, Pak argues that "Spinel's descent into the raft's life-generating depths is a confrontation with the grotesque body of the self that is experienced as other" (130). And that, "His struggle involves a re-categorization of the boundaries between self and other, a transformative crisis that results in his accepting and responding to the multispecies community of the Sharer raft" (130). In other words, Spinel's trans-corporeal

encounter with the breathmicrobes figures within the text as a renegotiation of selfhood and a turn toward the monstrous. Following from the scene above, Spinel's initial attempts at abjection are interrupted by a confrontation with Berenice that exposes the power structures of the Patriarchy and reveals the more liberatory possibilities presented by sharing. As the only other "human" on the raft, Berenice is the one who comes to talk Spinel through his transformation. However, their difference in social status soon becomes painfully clear, as does the contrast between their experiences of submersion. Describing her own transformation as a painful exchange of status for freedom, Berenice derides Spinel for rejecting a change that would cost him nothing but would free him from his abjected status on Valedon where he is "dirt in the street" (98)—the exact opposite of the fluid creature he eventually becomes once freed from the social structures of his home planet. She then leaves him with a dose of Apurpure, expecting him to purge his body of the microbes and return to Valedon in disgrace. Spinel, however, is deeply affected by the exchange and, echoing Berenice's words to him on the previous page, he recognises that, "On the 'Stone Moon,' his life meant nothing … Here, though, he could prove himself as good as anyone" (99). "Here," meaning on the "Ocean Moon" where hierarchies are as fluid as bodily boundaries and where becoming she-monster is "an opportunity to escape the dominant reality of exclusionary binary identities" and to inhabit "forms of concorporeality in which self and other are no longer distinct" (Shildrick, "Visual Rhetorics" 174).

Spinel's willingness to accept submersion and become "purple by choice" (Slonczewski 289) serves as Merwen's first test in her experiment to see if Valans can act with response-ability and become human by Sharer standards. Importantly, his success in negotiating a hybrid identity as Valan and Sharer also provides the novel with a sense of hope in the possibilities of the feminist utopia to enact transformation and share its values widely. When Spinel emerges from the depths of the raft and presents himself in front of the Sharers again, he does so as *both a Sharer and a man,* a change signalled by him speaking the Sharer tongue for the first time in a "low voice that did not sound like his own" (99). In the next chapter, the prose takes a vividly poetic turn as his colour deepens, "palms to amethyst and legs to coal," and he becomes fully submersed in "this place that was inexorably becoming a part of him" (100). Unlike Berenice, who is unable to navigate hybridity without losing herself and betraying both sides, Spinel manages to successfully integrate with the Sharers while both maintaining and transforming his identity as a Valan—essentially redefining what

it means for him to be human and demonstrating that, in fact, as bell hooks has it, "feminism is for everybody."[41]

In the days following his transformation, Spinel takes an increasing interest not only in Shora's culture and ecology, but also in Merwen's butch and aggressively Valan-hating daughter Lystra. The relationship that develops between the two is the final piece in the novel's rejection of essentialism, queering species, gender, and sexuality in a way that thoroughly destabilises Western conceptions of nature as a fixed and stable realm. From their first encounter, Spinel's heteropatriarchal conception of relationships and sexuality clash with Lystra's lesbian separatism. However, Spinel's dedication to becoming a Sharer earns him Lystra's respect, and the two begin to pursue a relationship that, despite its apparent heterosexuality, can only be read as queer in the way that it ends up "generating other possibilities" of identity and desire within the text (Luciano and Chen, "Has the Queer Ever Been Human" 187). One scene in particular illustrates how their relationship subverts stable notions of nature; as their sexual relationships develops, Spinel is infuriated by Lystra's refusal to "do it the normal way," interpreting her reasonable refusal to "get an operation or something" to overcome their biological incompatibility as an attack on his masculinity from a "race of man-haters" (163).[42] This apparent rejection is enough to send him scurrying back to Valedon, where he finds himself even more frustrated by the "fragile and frivolous" women produced by the Patriarchy (180-181). He is surprised to find that he prefers Lystra's wrestler's physique and assertiveness to traditional femininity and by the time he returns to Shora he is ready to engage with her on more mutual terms. The queer sexuality shared by Spinel and Lystra acts as a contrast to Berenice and Realgar's inability to conceptualise their relationship outside of heteropatriarchal terms, gesturing to other possibilities of sexuality imagined and embodied outside the binaries imposed by settler colonialism (see Tuck et al. 18). The fact that the supposedly heterosexual parts are incompatible also raises evolutionary questions, suggesting a postnaturalist future of interspecies reproduction facilitated by bioengineering and a more fluid conception of the material world. To borrow Alaimo's words, the novel's "openness to material agencies, including those of evolutionary forces,

[41] This is the title of hooks' primer on intersectional feminism *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000).

[42] Slonczewski's own understanding of this scene differs somewhat from my own: "In order to develop a relationship with Lystra, Spinel ultimately has to become reconciled to her own Sharer ways of lovemaking, giving up the need to 'put it inside.' This choice is symbolic of the challenge men (and women) face in renouncing violence for nonviolent discipline. It is not however intended as a negative judgement on traditional heterosexual intimacy, as is clear in the subsequent books of the Elysium universe" ("Study Guide").

entails an openness not only to the deviants that result but also to the wider sense that the world is ever-emergent" (*Bodily Natures* 143).

Sharing Utopia

I argue above that *A Door into Ocean* subverts the essentialism associated with ecofeminist utopias by turning Shora's ocean into a utopian space for submersion, transformation, and queer relationality. However, my reading of these subversive themes is complicated by the novel's ending, which has Lystra and Spinel abandon their struggle against the Patriarchy for the sake of their future children. More so than any impression of essentialism, this sudden turn toward reproductive futurity raises questions about *A Door into Ocean*'s politics and its utopian promises. Indeed, the Sharers are able to successfully resist the Valan invasion without compromising their nonviolent ethics; however, as Berenice's and Realgar's refusals of submersion demonstrate, they fail to "share learning" with their Valan kin, who continue to suffer under the violence and domination of the Patriarchy. This ending comes as something of a surprise when the preceding 400 pages of the novel have been building toward a conclusion of interplanetary, perhaps even intergalactic, revolution against the Patriarch's rule. Even Realgar, the novel's embodiment of master subjectivity, expresses revolutionary zeal when he, in the last few pages of the novel, challenges his superiors with the notion that, "If every planet in the Patriarchy refused to be ruled, *we would all be free*" (Slonczewski 393, emphasis in original). How and why, then, does the novel's conclusion take such an abrupt turn from the transgressive to the regressive?

To begin to understand the novel's ending, we first need to consider how *A Door into Ocean* was inspired by 1970s and earlier movements for social and environmental change. The Sharers are able to successfully turn back the Valan invasion based on a model of nonviolent resistance inspired by the Civil Rights and Indian independence movements, as well as grassroots feminist, environmental, and decolonial struggles for justice, making Slonczewski's novel, in her own words, a "virtual textbook of the methods of nonviolence" (Slonczewski, "Study Guide").[43] Persuasive critiques of peaceful protest notwithstanding,[44]

[43] In the study guide, Slonczewski notes that the Sharers rely on methods such as "disobedience/non-cooperation, physical and mental discipline, resistance by women and children, appeal to a shared religious tradition, succession of leadership" ("Study Guide"). This list is based on Gene Sharpe's *The Politics of Nonviolent Action.* She adds that, "All the incidents of this book are based on actual historical events in which nonviolent methods were used."

[44] Consider for example Frantz Fanon's defence of violent resistance in *The Wretched of the Earth,* or Arundhati Roy's defense of guerrilla warfare: "I don't condemn [violence] any more … Can the hungry go on a hunger strike? Non-violence is a piece of theatre. You need an audience. What can you do when you have no audience? People have the right to resist annihilation" (qtd. in Moss).

within the feminist speculative universe of Slonczewski's text, the Sharers' use of these nonviolent resistance methods are shown to be highly effective at subverting the Patriarchy's control. Not only do the Sharers survive with the planet's ecosystems intact, but they also manage to drive the Valans away in a humiliating retreat, without ever compromising the ethical values of sharing that are so vital to their way of life. The precise details surrounding the Sharers' victory are as complicated as the rest of the plot,[45] but the key point to note is that the Sharers persist because they manage to mobilise their own vulnerability in a way that exposes and undermines the Patriarchy's insistence on individual boundedness as the foundation for ethics—"a dismantling that would undo its very form of power" (Butler J., "Rethinking Vulnerability" 23-24).[46] The Sharers' insistence on meeting their oppressors with response-ability is evident throughout the novel, but the clearest example is when Merwen and Lystra—both weakened from prolonged imprisonment and torture—risk their lives to rescue their Valan captors from a seaswallower attack provoked by the Valan military's disruption of Shora's ecosystems (Slonczewski 388-389). The Sharers' selfless commitment to their oppressors' survival might be read as problematic in context with the widespread victimisation that tends to characterise representations of Indigenous people (Adamson, "Indigenous Literatures"), were it not for the fact that the Sharers' non-violent methods are actually shown to work as a method of survival. Even here, what matters is to keep sharing—even to the point of death—"until the ocean overflows" (344-345) because response-able action is the only way to resist the Patriarchy's logics of domination.

The Sharers' commitment to the ethics of sharing, demonstrated so clearly in the novel's last chapters, makes it all the more incongruous that *A Door into Ocean* seems to end with regression rather than a sea change. In the last few pages of the text, we return to Spinel's perspective as he prepares to board the last Valan ship that will leave Shora before the two planets cease all contact. His plan is not to return to his family on Valedon, as it has been so many times before when he has struggled to adapt to Shora. Rather, he dreams of travelling the galaxy and spreading knowledge of how to resist the Patriarchy by becoming a "troublesharer" (399), a term that fittingly evokes Donna Haraway's much later teaching of "staying with the trouble" (*Staying with the Trouble*). However, only a page later, he has been

[45] Their victory involves the Sharers' intimate knowledge and clever use of their planet's ecology, growing public outrage on Valedon concerning civilian casualties and outrageous military expenses (an obvious reference to the previous decade's Vietnam war), as well as Patriarchal intervention in the interest of protecting and later exploiting Sharer sciences.

[46] In "Rethinking Vulnerability," Judith Butler writes that "political resistance relies fundamentally on the mobilization of vulnerability, which means that vulnerability can be a way of being exposed and agentic at the same time" (Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability" 24). See also Koivunen et al.

persuaded to instead settle on Shora and contribute to the regeneration of Shora's population by having children with Lystra. This twist seems to come out of nowhere, the novel's emphasis on "sharing learning" refuted by the old salt of a ferry captain's protest that only "[a] fool shares gold with strangers," and, besides, "[t]he whole universe'll blow up, anyhow, in another hundred billion years; you plan to solve that one too?" (Slonczewski 401).[47] Spinel's insistence that "[y]ou got to start somewhere" (401) carries little weight when the "somewhere" that is Valedon is described as an "ocean of despair" where it is impossible for anyone to share learning (399)—as evidenced by Spinel's previous efforts. With this, the pursuit of individual happiness and heteronormative futurity represented by the child wins out over sharing trouble with kin (see Edelman; Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*). In the novel's concluding lines, Spinel and Lystra let the last ship sail as they literally swim off into the horizon and receive a saccharine welcome from a mother ocean newly restored to static stability: "a friendly fanwing dipped and soared overhead like a hand beckoning, Come, lovesharer, come home" (403). At the same time, the novel's urging that "the door is still open" (402) to anyone willing to visit Shora and share learning is especially bittersweet. It appears to leave the reader, stranded in the real world, with the burden of transformation just refused as hopeless by the novel's characters.

This burden is compounded by the knowledge that Slonczewski originally intended a more subversive ending and that real-world politics dictated the novel's conclusion. In her obscure study guide for *A Door into Ocean,* Slonczewski explains that concluding the novel with the Sharers' return to isolationism was a strategic necessity to ensure publication in the highly hostile and paranoid political climate that characterised 1980s Cold War America. She notes: "In the original outline, it ended with Spinel and Lystra going off to Valedon to continue the subversive project begun on Shora and ultimately liberating Valedon from the tyranny of their machine masters" ("Study Guide"). However, in the wake of the Vietnam war, no publishing house would touch a novel that openly celebrated nonviolent resistance, guerrilla tactics, and the spreading of revolution; after the original manuscript was rejected Slonczewski changed the ending to make it less overtly revolutionary, with her characters "decid[ing] to stay on Shora, leaving the Valans to figure out their own liberation" ("Study Guide"). *A Door into Ocean*'s sequel, *Daughter of Elysium* (1993), set millennia into the

[47] The role played by the ferry captain Dak—the sole survivor of a planet destroyed by the Patriarch, whose temporal perspective is dilated by his near-continuous light speed space travel—is best understood in terms of the "old salt" character type common to naval narratives. Since the old salt is commonly viewed as a sage imbued with unique experiential knowledge and insight into human tragedy, his profound influence on Spinel's decision here makes sense within the genre.

future where Shora has become a refuge for fugitive simian slaves and sentient machines oppressed by the Patriarchy, partly takes up the project of liberation. Yet Slonczewski still expresses regret over the decision, musing that *A Door into Ocean,* a novel originally intended as a "window into a hopeful future," instead became "a look back at our dark past; and a reminder that the struggle to defend our planet goes on" ("Study Guide"). As Kasai points out, the decline in feminist utopian fiction after the 1970s is explained by the fact that, "in the context of a 1980s America dominated by Reagan-Bush conservative politics and highlighted … by the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment, feminist writers found it more and more difficult to see better times ahead" (1385). The same might be said of the present moment in US politics.[48]

Dystopian times make for will-full utopias, as explored in the introduction. Considering *A Door into Ocean*'s Cold War publication history, the novel's ending has to be read reparatively as a struggle toward a horizon of transformative possibility that is not yet "here and now" (Muñoz 1), but infinitively deferred beyond the conclusion of the text itself. If this seems like a refusal of responsibility for the present, consider that Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) and Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) also end in deferred revolutions. Le Guin's protagonist Shevek returns from "utopia" to his home planet to begin the liberation work again, well aware of his own people's lack of support for the cause. However, the novel ends before his space shuttle even lands, prompting Laurence Davis to argue that *The Dispossessed* succeeds in "representing utopia not as a timeless and unattainable state of perfection, but as a time-sensitive, revolutionary critical perspective that can expand the opportunities for free human choice and meaningful action by helping to break open the horizon of historical possibility" (Davis, "Introduction" x).[49] A similar development takes place in Butler's unfinished "Earthseed" trilogy.[50] These are ambiguous and will-full utopias, texts that effectively "[challenge] us to reevaluate our present from the perspective of the promises of, and aspirations to, emancipation that have not yet been realized" (Davis, "The Dynamic and Revolutionary Utopia" 24-25). These texts may or may not work as doors, but as windows they provide a view of the unfathomable future and its

[48] I wrote this sentence in 2021, unaware of how true it would ring two years later. For a history of the Equal Rights Amendment in the US, which was supposed to guarantee equal legal rights regardless of gender, see Lyons et al.

[49] For more on the will-full utopian potential in Le Guin's text, see Davis' reading in the introduction and chapter 10 of *New Utopian Politics of Ursula Le Guin.*

[50] Neither *Parable of the Sower* nor its sequel *Parable of the Talents* (1998) ever see the Earthseed community safely established. The intended third novel of the trilogy *Parable of the Trickster,* which was supposed to realise this goal, was never finished, and so the Earthseed revolution is left hanging much like the one in Le Guin's novel.

possibilities of transformation, while still keeping us moored in the present. Moreover, they remind readers that the struggle against domination is ongoing and that the stakes are high and often fraught with violence.

In other words, as with the utopian ship-city Armada in China Miéville's *The Scar,* it is not a failure when Shora turns back from the edge of annihilation in order to persist as a symbol of liberation in an otherwise dystopian world.[51] Whether or not Spinel decides to stay and share Shora's seemingly static utopia or leave and share trouble at home, the potential for a sea change remains within Shora's horizon of possibility, as well as within Spinel's decision to remake himself (to use Miéville's term) as a she-monster and a Sharer. Moreover, the novel's revised ending avoids the more recent cli-fi trope of turning toward Indigenous knowledges for the key to saving settler societies.[52] To this point, Spinel and Lystra's decision to opt for reproductive futurity needs to be read in context with the novel's explicit identification of the Patriarchy as a colonising power that rules through the destruction of entire planets and cultures. Under settler colonialism, "no future" (Edelman) is more synonymous with genocide than resistance and actually counter to survival, while the presence of the "native child" is what serves to undo the futurity of White supremacy by its very existence (Tuck et al. 24). As Tuck, Arvin, and Morill point out, "refusing to participate in the reproduction of society by declining to reproduce the Child is a mode of radical activism that is only possible, desirable, and otherwise 'thinkable' for certain economically privileged white queers" (24). Even with Spinel's desire to liberate Valedon forestalled, the fact that the Sharers survive the Patriarchal invasion positions Shora as a beacon of hope for those still stranded on the shores of dystopia, whether on Valedon or in the 1980s or 2020s real world. As Judith Butler points out, "Sometimes continuing to exist in the vexation of social relations is the ultimate defeat of violent power" (*The Force of Nonviolence* n.p.). By retreating instead of risking a deadly confrontation with the Patriarch, the Sharers are able to survive the apocalypse of colonisation (see Whyte, "Our Ancestors's Dystopia")—and

[51] Another point to consider is that Slonczewski expressly did not wish the novel to end with a violent revolutionary act, like for instance Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest* (1972); she writes that, "*Forest* started out as my favorite of Le Guin's books, but in the end was an intense disappointment. Le Guin's forest-dwellers start out as unconditional pacifists, with inborn mechanisms of self-discipline similar to those of the Sharers; but in the end, in order to throw off their oppressors, they, too must give up their pacifism and their own humanity" ("Study Guide"). Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) comes to mind as another feminist utopia that ultimately sees violence as a necessary step on the path to a peaceful society (see Afnan).
[52] See Seymour and Pierrot on the appropriation of Indigenous knowledges and absence of Indigenous peoples in mainstream cli-fi narratives such as *New York 2140* and *Snowpiercer.* Whyte also notes that "Indigenous peoples are sometimes treated as the last people living in Holocene conditions" and placed within a cultural narrative that suggests "there is a chance for the right allies to save these remaining Indigenous peoples and to learn from them about how the rest of humanity can save itself" (Whyte, "Indigenous Science Fiction" 236).

Slonczewski's novel is able to be published—ensuring that the door remains open to the precarious hope of eventually sharing a different future, even if it means sharing "until the ocean overflows."

Conclusion

At a surface glance, *A Door into Ocean* is an isolationist ecofeminist utopia grounded in essentialist ideas about women and nature; it has been received critically and popularly as such. In this chapter, I have read the novel reparatively, against the currents of its reputation, to uncover elements of subversion, submersion, monstrousness, and unfathomability, arguing that Slonczewski's text in fact transgresses and transforms the dominant culture's ontological, ethical, and political boundaries through its concept of sharing. I began by giving a brief genealogy of the essentialism debate within ecofeminist theory in relation to feminist utopian fiction, emphasising the way that queer feminisms and feminisms of colour have complicated the straight, White, middle-class figure of woman and her "flight" from the abject realm of nature (Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground* 1). Although this escape has been motivated by a desire to become human, the result has been a further devaluation of the material world. Therefore, I argue that Slonczewski's novel employs essentialism strategically in order to find common and undomesticated ground for an intersectional coalition against heteropatriarchal domination and its devaluation of feminised nature; and that the novel uses this coalition as a device to subvert the dichotomous thinking of the Western "master model" (Plumwood, *Feminism*).

Next, I turned to the novel's concept of sharing. Sharing, in Slonczewski's feminist speculative novel—as well as those of Le Guin and Butler—refers to a multifaceted submersive ontology based on trans-corporeality and response-ability that unmoors the human from a stable position of mastery. Open to alterity and to material agencies, and based on mutualism and adaptation rather than control, sharing offers an alternative conception of the human that estranges readers from the Patriarchy's—and our own Western culture's—ideals of transcendence and domination. This contrast between sharing and mastery provides the main conflict of Slonczewski's novel, as Sharers and Valans both perceive each other as monstrous despite their mutual kinship. In particular, the Valans deem the Sharers' trans-corporeal relationship with the breathmicrobes a sign of animalised and racialised contagion according to their model of individualistic subjectivity. I therefore argued that the Valan military's failure to contain the microbes' spread reveal the faultlines in the vulnerable identity of the master subject, embodied in the text in the character Realgar.

Noting his violent rejection of submersion—his unwillingness to merge with Shora's oceanic realm—I next turned to character analyses of the novel's Valan protagonists Berenice and Spinel and their contrasting experiences of transformation. I found that where highborn Berenice is unable to escape her heteropatriarchal conditioning or go beyond the logics of whitestream feminism, disenfranchised Spinel joins the Sharers on equal terms and embraces the monstrous identity offered by submersion. Through his relationship with the Sharer Lystra, he even ends up queering essentialist notions of species, gender, and sexuality, while offering a vision of postnatural, posthuman futurity. Although, in the end, Spinel resolves to stay on Shora rather than "sharing trouble" with the Patriarchy, I have argued that the novel's ending needs to be read in context with *A Door into Ocean*'s publication history and the political climate of the 1980s. Like most countercultural utopian texts, Slonczewski's novel carries a hope that is will-full and anticipatory, promising readers that transformation exists beyond the horizon of the present as long as we are willing to continue the struggle against domination. Indeed, the Sharers' survival ensures that a door into ocean is left open for readers trapped in the dystopian present.

Before entering that door, I would like to share a few caveats about Slonczewski's text. The first of these reservations concerns the novel's anthropocentric ethics; although the Sharers' response-able stewardship over their planet is no doubt preferable to the Patriarchy's model of mastery, it seems strange that a novel written by an author associated with feminist posthumanism would have its ecofeminist utopia maintain an ethical-ontological hierarchy where *humanness* is the determining factor in deciding the right to live—as is the case in the Sharers' debate over the Valans' status and in their taxonomy of other species as "lesser Sharers." Thinking ahead to the next chapter's crip perspectives, we might ask what implications this emphasis on language and rationality holds in a utopian society that claims to have eliminated disability. In her brief reading of the novel, Alaimo concludes that *A Door into Ocean*'s representation of feminist environmentalism and science "still place[s] mind over matter, since material substance is transformed through conscious control" (*Bodily Natures* 148). Unlike Slonczewski's later novels—which are populated by a series of Haraway-esque sentient simians, cyborgs, and microbes—the main concern of *A Door into Ocean* has more to do with human differences than encounters with radical alterity. The secondary status of Shora's nonhuman species is only ever challenged by the novel's

decidedly ambiguous portrayal of vegetarian feminism through the character Merwen.[53] This emphasis on human ethics is compounded by the novel's ultimate displacement of hope onto the figure of the human child (see Sheldon); though Spinel and Lystra's children signal the coming of a hybrid and posthuman future, the insistence on reproduction still muddles the novel's emphasis on multispecies kinship. Of course, as I have already argued, the ending of Slonczewski's novel needs to be read in context with the 1980s turn to conservatism in the US. Yet it appears subdued compared to the subversive energy in the more recent submersion stories I read in the chapters that follow.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that while feminist utopias are for everybody, feminist utopian fiction is not. Outside of readers with a special interest in the genre or the feminist movement, the novel's density, especially its frequent emphasis on exposition over plot and didacticism over lyricism, is unlikely to appeal to a broad readership, unlike—once more—some of the other texts I examine in coming chapters. Still, with its critique of capitalist colonialism, its insight into decolonial and feminist resistance movements, its nuanced discussion of intersectionality, and its concept of sharing as a model for response-able ethics, *A Door into Ocean* has much to offer as a story about submersion and possible sea change, despite its misbegotten reputation.

[53]On the one hand, it is Merwen's insistence on extending the sphere of nonviolent ethics across cultural and species boundaries that ensures "victory" over the Valans and hope for the future of Shora; on the other hand, her vegetarianism is consistently viewed as "an affectation, or at least eccentric" even by the other Sharers who maintain that humanness is the only grounds for inclusion within the sphere of nonviolent ethics (Slonczewski 236). For context, see Gaard's "Vegetarian Ecofeminism: A Review Essay." She writes: "In the late 1960s and early 1970s many countercultural activists became vegetarians in the context of the Vietnam War protests, choosing a peaceful diet as a complement to their public stance of nonviolence … Along with cultural feminism, the lesbian feminism of the 1970s also saw meat-eating as a form of patriarchal domination, and many lesbian-feminists became vegetarians … Lesbian utopian novels regularly depicted the peaceful, separatist utopia as vegetarian" (124-126). See also Plumwood's critique of feminist vegetarianism in *Environmental Culture*.

Chapter Two: Monstrous Affects and Alliances in *The Shape of Water*

We love our monsters because through them we indulge our desire for other worlds.

—Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, *The Monster Theory Reader* (20)

Monsters are evangelical creatures for me. When I was a kid, monsters made me feel that I could fit somewhere, even if it was ... an imaginary place where the grotesque and the abnormal were celebrated and accepted.

—Guillermo del Toro, quoted in Keegan, "How Guillermo Del Toro Crafted the Perfect Monster-Romance for the Trump Era"

In submersion stories, she-monsters open doors to alternate worlds free from heteropatriarchal and anthropocentric domination. In this sense, as Weinstock points out, they "indulge our desire for other worlds" and serve an important utopian function in an otherwise dystopian reality. This was the argument of my previous chapter about Joan Slonczewski's ecofeminist utopian novel *A Door into Ocean,* in which "sharing" forms the basis for a sea change oriented toward trans-corporeality, response-ability, and decolonial resistance. I could argue further that, by celebrating nonnormative embodiment and desires, Slonczewski's text expands the liberatory potential of the she-monster figuration by helping readers imagine liveable futures for feminist and queer alliances. This is something it shares with the multiple award-winning Hollywood film *The Shape of Water* (2017), a romantic creature feature which arose out of director Guillermo del Toro's love and affinity for the monstrous. Revolving around the interspecies romance between a disabled woman and an amphibian creature, the film touches upon the role of difference and desire in creating more liveable worlds for monstered subjects, while raising additional questions about the role discourses of normativity play in submersion stories. In this chapter, I examine how del Toro's film subverts the negative affects usually associated with the monstrous and argue that contrary to paranoid readings of the film's ending, *The Shape of Water* imagines hopeful "queer/crip" (McRuer) futurities emerging from the submersion of she-monsters.[1]

[1] See, for instance, Mark Bould's characterisation of the film as surprisingly radical yet at the same time "so polite and seemly it was nominated for thirteen Oscars" (qtd. in McCormack, "Monster Talk" 256); or the podcast episode "How Subversive is *The Shape of Water*?" created by The University of Oslo's Biopolitics of Disability, Illness, and Animality (BIODIAL) research group.

In a roundtable on changes in contemporary monster studies, Margrit Shildrick claims that Western culture is currently "experiencing peak monster" (in McCormack, "Monster Talk" 254). Even with no doubt as to the hardening of negative attitudes toward otherness, widespread commodification of the monstrous in contemporary popular culture attests to a greater acceptance aimed at ontological and social transgression. Vivian Sobchack, for one, argues that the late twentieth century has seen a change in which "the majority of aliens in the new SF film are represented as our friends, playmates, brothers, and lovers" rather than our enemies (293). These cultural developments, of course, pertain not only to aliens or to nonhuman creatures of the deep, but to the human subjects who fall victim to an oppressive dominant culture's tendency to monster difference along lines of gender, sexuality, race, ability, and other markers of identity (Shildrick, *Embodying* 28). The increasing celebration of the monstrous is apparent from the current popularity of film franchises like Marvel Comics' *X-Men* (2000-) and Warner Bros' most recent revamp of *Godzilla* (2014-), though it can also be found in earlier pre-Code Hollywood classics like Universal Pictures' *Frankenstein* (1931) or the eminently controversial *Freaks* (1932).[2] These productions all point to a rising will to speak out against injustice and "[give] voice to the monster" (Weinstock, "Genealogy" 28)—a sentiment that is shared widely with queer ecological studies, the feminist posthumanities, and other areas of study dedicated to questioning the boundaries of the normatively human.

It is in this context of simultaneous "peak" humanisation *and* monstering of the other that Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* (2017) has international audiences cheering for the romance between a mute working-class woman and an aquatic creature taken straight out of a 1950's horror movie. Set in Baltimore during the height of the Cold War in the early 1960s, *The Shape of* Water's plot begins when protagonist Elisa Esposito (Sally Hawkins) falls in love with an Amphibian Man (Doug Jones) held captive in the mysterious military facility where she works as a cleaner. Her friends and allies, a gay man, a Black woman, and a Russian spy, then help her free the creature and transport him to the bathtub in her apartment, where the romance between the two characters develops as they wait for the rainy season to come so the creature can swim back to the ocean. In the meantime, it becomes increasingly clear that Elisa's own affinity for water—her origins as a foundling discovered

[2] Prior to the enforcement of Hollywood's Motion Picture Production Code censorship guidelines from 1934, Hollywood films were much more likely to include controversial content such as sexual innuendo, homosexuality, and interracial relationships. Tod Browning's *Freaks* was particularly controversial (often described as "grotesque") for its sympathetic portrayal of humans with birth defects and its casting of real disabled actors in the roles.

on a riverbank, her aquatic sexual fantasies, and the vestiges of gills on her neck—has her destined for submersion and a decidedly ambiguous ending as she escapes off to sea with the creature. The film was nominated for 13 Oscars, of which it won four, including Best Picture, and it presents the interesting question of how a film with a relatively low budget which centres on such a transgressive relationship could still achieve mainstream success within a commercial medium usually dedicated to closure and happy endings (Weik von Mossner 158).[3]

The answer might lie in reading del Toro's film as an ecofeminist and posthuman text expressing a widespread discontentment with the dystopian present. *The Shape of Water* stands out as a countercultural Hollywood movie, but I argue here that it belongs to a much broader trend in feminist cultural expressions where women disillusioned with heteropatriarchal domination turn toward the monstrous as a form of escapism and critique. Aside from del Toro's film, recent examples of this trend include Melissa Broder's novel *The Pisces* (2018) and Rachel Ingalls' *Mrs. Caliban* (1982; reissued in 2017), both love stories revolving around the relationship between a female protagonist and a sea creature.[4] In an interesting piece tellingly subtitled "When a mythical creature is more appealing than a literal man," Kristin Iversen considers the rise in merman romance stories and suggests that this increasingly common plot represents freedom from the norms of a heteropatriarchal society where women are expected to yield to the wishes of men rather than explore their own desires. As a reviewer of Broder's novel quips, "People don't have sex with sea creatures unless the world has failed them" (Tolentino). With this context in mind, del Toro's monster romance makes sense as an ecofeminist fantasy of more response-able ethics and hopeful futures for women and other monstered subjects alienated by the masculinist Capitalocene.

Another part of the answer might lie in reading the mermaid/she-monster as a figuration for queer and crip futurity. Crip is a term that was popularised by Robert McRuer to refer to a more fluid conception of ability and embodiment parallel to the concept of queerness, both of them subversive categories of identity that refuse conformity in favour of "imagining bodies and desires otherwise" (32). In becoming a she-monster at the end of the film, I argue Elisa takes part in a "crip art of survival" evident in diverse performances of crip mermaiding that reimagine narratives about gender, impairment, and the environment

[3] In an interview, del Toro explains that he chose to work with the comparatively low budget of $20 million in an effort to resist pressures to make the narrative "safer and more broadly appealing" (qtd. in Rottenberg).
[4] Incidentally, feminist sci-fi author James Tiptree Jr. (Alice Sheldon) has written a short story called "The Women Men Don't See" (1973), "about two women who prefer to leave the planet with alien anthropologists rather than continue to be diminished by pervasive sexism" (Vint, Science Fiction 69).

(Barounis 190). Cynthia Barounis' analysis of the media coverage surrounding the story of Nadya Vessey, the middle-aged Australian double amputee and competitive swimmer who became a mermaid using beautifully designed but entirely unnecessary prosthetics, is instructive here. Barounis' article shows how Vessey's subtly ironic performance perpetually undermines the reporters' attempts to cast her as a pitiful victim of her disability; instead of submitting to the mermaid's compulsion to become "part of your world," she is seen at the end of the feature waving sardonically at the land-locked camera while she swims out into the open sea. Overlaying the mournful soundtrack imposed on the footage, she can be heard shouting, indistinctly but unmistakably, "Goodbye, cruel world!" (qtd. in Barounis 198), as she will-fully refuses to participate in the dominant narrative. Other examples range from Sue Austin's scuba diving wheelchair to Bette Midler's irreverent performance of Gloria Gaynor's legendary queer anthem "I Will Survive" as her wheelchair-bound mermaid persona Delores DeLago, and finally to Hanna Cormick's powerful performance of "The Mermaid," whose immunological condition, wheelchair, and breathing mask bring attention to toxic environments (see Winchester).[5] I see Elisa's submersion at the end of del Toro's film as a similar expression of will towards crip transformation and survival.

Building on my previous chapter, I argue that the ocean in these texts and performances represents a liberatory space for feminist, queer, and crip (Kafer) subjects in need of sea change. As Nicole Starosielski points out, cinema has a long tradition of casting underwater environments as "subversive spaces where it is possible to challenge and reorient existing social conventions" (144). Drawing on her work, Brandi Bushman and Jeremy Chow use *The Shape of Water* to theorise water as a liberatory space for queer/crip desires and multispecies kinships. Their concept of "hydro-eroticism" captures the liveliness of water as an environment capable of "enact[ing] metamorphosis and transformation" in contrast to the rigid restrictions of nonaquatic spaces (101). Importantly, they note that Elisa and the Amphibian Man's aquatic romance is the only successful relationship in the film and that it serves as a pointed contrast to the terrestrial environments in the film where "intimacy is staunched, foreclosed, or impossible" (108)—from the profound loneliness of Elisa's friends Giles and Zelda to the abusive marriage of the film's antagonist Colonel Strickland. In del

[5] Sue Austin uses her scuba-diving underwater wheelchair to challenge assumptions about disability, transforming the device from an object associated with limitation to "a vehicle for transformation … creating new ways of seeing, being, and knowing." During her spectacular performances of her mermaid persona Delores DeLago during the 1970s, Bette Midler would whisk around stage in a wheelchair, most memorably during an irreverent performance of Gloria Gaynor's legendary "I Will Survive"— an anthem that has later come to signal both female empowerment and queer resilience (see *Pitchfork*).

Toro's film, then, land is the site of violence, conformity, and isolation. Water, meanwhile, serves as a medium for possibility, connection, and transformation where conventional forms of embodiment give way and "disabled or nonhuman bodies—not identical categories—can be validated and engage in pleasure underwater" (109). This validation of nonnormative and nonhuman desire is what Audre Lorde refers to more generally as the "erotic," a transformative feminine power which "lessens the threat of … difference" and brings "change within our world … in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society" (*Sister Outsider* 46, 49). The transformative power of the erotic is the foundation for the intersectional multispecies coalition Greta Gaard envisions in "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism," and, as I argue, for the alliance of monstered characters at the centre of del Toro's film.

Like the she-monster herself, *The Shape of Water* defies easy categorisation, mixing disparate genres and temporalities to tell a story that complicates convention and expectation. As one reviewer notes, "it's the kind of mythic, sensuous fairy-tale that can only come from the mind of Guillermo del Toro" (Bailey), an auteur vision by a director known for his love of all things monstrous. Though it includes elements of fairy tale, melodrama, Golden Age Hollywood musical, and Cold War spy thriller, above all *The Shape of Water* is del Toro's reimagining of the classic 1950's creature-feature *Creature from the Black Lagoon.*[6] Equally, *The Shape of Water*'s Amphibian Man is a sympathetic reinterpretation of its predecessor's iconic Gill-Man, meticulously designed to inspire fascination rather than revulsion (Bien-Khan), and ultimately destined to fulfil del Toro's fantasy of seeing a successful monster romance play out on screen (Keegan). Yet, despite *The Shape of Water*'s fairy tale ending, the diverging conventions and temporalities of the film's many genres create uncertainty as to what happens after Elisa and the Amphibian Man escape into the murky unknown of their underwater happily-ever-after. As fairy tale and melodrama, past and present, mythic and linear time, collide, we are left wondering as to the possibilities for transformation and even survival for she-monsters in a Cold War world that echoes the cruel realities of the present. In particular, the promise of everlasting happiness underwater rubs uneasily against the implication that a hopeful and desirable queer/crip futurity (Kafer 45) can only be imagined in the otherwordly realm of the sea or on the screens of cinema. Even more so than *A Door into Ocean,* del Toro's film is utopian in the will-full sense, keeping open a horizon for the

[6] There are many other possible influences for del Toro's film. For one, the Soviet sf romance film *Tsjelovek-amfibija* ("Amphibian Man") from 1962 has a similar plot to *The Shape of Water,* featuring the doomed love affair between a human woman and a fish-man.

possible realisation of the desire for another world but leaving audiences with a sense of ongoing struggle for transformation.

Although never explicitly environmentalist or ecofeminist in the same way as Slonczewski's novel, *The Shape of Water* offers a critique of the "master model" and the "culture-wide blindspots associated with anthropocentrism" that Val Plumwood warns against in her work (*Environmental Culture* 3). This makes del Toro's film relevant for thinking about how many kinds of nonhuman and nonnormative difference are encountered in the Anthropocene via submersion. In what follows, I argue that *The Shape of Water* subverts the affects of the monster from disgust to desire in order to imagine a monstrous alliance uniting against the human for the formation of a more response-able world. I begin by examining the negative affects of the monster and the Hollywood creature feature genre as expressed through *The Shape of Water*'s source text, *Creature from the Black Lagoon.* My goal here is to identify the feelings of disgust usually associated with the monstrous to better understand how these affects are subverted in del Toro's reinterpretation of the Amphibian Man as a figuration for queer and feminist utopian desire. Next, I discuss how this reversal of affects allows the Amphibian Man to become a unifying symbol for the film's intersectional "alliance of the voiceless" ("A Fairy Tale for Troubled Times"), while the film's master subject antagonist Colonel Strickland is turned into an abject representative of normative societal values. Finally, reading *The Shape of Water*'s ending scene of submersion and transformation, I weigh the potential dehumanisation of a plot that likens disability to animality against the will-full utopian possibilities that come from desiring outside the norm and beyond the boundaries of the human. Despite mixed receptions of the film's feminist message, I find that *The Shape of Water* holds promises for a sea change approaching just beyond the horizon of the human.

Affects of the Monstrous

The Shape of Water is del Toro's reimagining of Universal Pictures' *Creature from the Black Lagoon,* directed by Jack Arnold and released in black-and-white 3D in 1954 to immediate box office success and lasting popular cultural impact.[7] The plot goes something like this: Deep within the unexplored regions of the Brazilian Amazon jungle, a team of American biologists, led by ichthyologist Dr. David Reed (Richard Carlson), are on a quest of

[7] Worldwide, the film reached a box office of $195.3 million. The cultural impact of the film has its own Wikipedia page.

potentially revolutionary scientific discovery. On board a tramp steamer called the *Rita,* they are headed towards the mysterious Black Lagoon, where they hope to uncover fossilised evidence of a being they believe might prove a direct link between (modern) terrestrial and (primitive) aquatic life. It is the height of the Cold War, and their discovery could somehow be the key to victory in the US's scientific and military space race against the Soviet Union. Little do the scientists know that they will encounter much more than they bargained for, as their fossil turns out to have a living counterpart in a terrifying man-like amphibian creature—a man-fish without a suit[8]—which begins to hunt the crew as they pass ever deeper into the jungle and his territory. Soon, the apparently expendable Brazilian crewmen are all gone, and only the White scientists remain struggling for survival. Among them is Reed's beautiful girlfriend and assistant, Kay Lawrence (Julie Adams), who has become the object of the abject creature's sexual fascination. What follows is a battle between civilisation and nature, as the only thing more threatening than the creature's repeated attempts to abduct Kay is its disturbing implications for the evolutionary history (and future) of Man.

Despite its obvious racism, sexism, and not-so-special effects, *Creature from the Black Lagoon* is still widely considered to be one of horror cinema's most iconic creature features, and the Gill-Man retains his status among the Universal Classic Monsters alongside *Dracula* (1931) and *Frankenstein* (1931). However, where Universal's version of Frankenstein's monster is portrayed with a sympathetic understanding that remains true to the tone of Mary Shelley's novel, *Creature from the Black Lagoon'*s man-fish instead plays into the racist sexual subtexts of RKO Radio Pictures' *King Kong* (1933). Indeed, *Creature from the Black Lagoon'*s iconic promotional posters—featuring a swimsuit-clad Kay Lawrence struggling in the arms of the creature—evoke images of RKO's giant ape carrying an unconscious Ann Darrow (Fay Wray) to the top of the Empire State Building, or even the Black rapist and White victim in the notorious White supremacist epic *Birth of a Nation* (1915).[9] In these films, the contrast between the actresses' exaggerated performances of vulnerable White femininity and the dark, animalistic, and clearly racialised figures of their assailants not only suggest a transgression of the line that divides Man from Animal, but also evoke a deep-seated cultural fear of miscegenation and degeneration into animality

[8] The film's underwater scenes utilise the Aqua-lung invented by Jacques Cousteau and introduced to the US in 1952. Apparently, Cousteau's goal with the equipment was to be able to become something of a "man-fish" under the water (see "Jacques-Yves Cousteau and Emile Gagnan: Aqua-Lung")

[9] The film is known for pioneering camera and editing techniques such as close-ups and crosscutting. It is also known for its extensive use of blackface, for its scenes featuring Black men as sexual predators, and for its portrayal of Ku Klux Klan members as America's saviours (Nama 43).

(Starosielski 159). As Thomas Wartenberg explains in his reading of *King Kong*, it is not just the White woman's abduction and terror that condemns the encounter as transgressive; rather, "it is the very unnaturalness of such an erotic union that is horrifying," and the woman's inevitable rescue at the end of the film is doubly welcome because it "puts an end to the prospect of an unimaginable sexual transgression" (11).

The texts I mention above are not outliers, but merely examples of a much wider cultural trend toward racism in sf media, especially during the Cold War but also prior to it. Aside from the comparisons I have already made, there is a conspicuous similarity between the Gill-Man and White supremacist author H.P. Lovecraft's hybrid fish-people in "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" (1936). Published in 1936, Lovecraft's sensationalist horror novella further illustrates the racialised terrors evoked by the sexually transgressive encounter between the human and the abjected nonhuman creature. In addition, the story explicitly ties this national fear of race and species transgression to the sea, as the author responsible for inventing the deep-sea monstrosity Cthulhu imagines a coastal New England village where the population has degenerated from generations of interbreeding with archaic horrors from the deep. As the narrator describes the villagers, he "[is] horrified by the bestial abnormality of their faces and the dog-like sub-humanness of their crouching gait. One man moved in a positively simian way" ("The Shadow Over Innsmouth"). Here, abject animality, in the form of the bestial, the dog-like, the sub-human, and the simian, is clearly tied to the notion of a mixed ancestry and to a racialised conception of the human-nonhuman dichotomy (Jackson 3). Indeed, the novella's crowning moment of horror comes when the narrator discovers evidence of his own monstrous ancestry and begins a process of physical degeneration that the story hints will end with an eternal life spent in the inescapable "black abyss" of the ocean.

Lovecraft, with his many aquatic racialised nightmare visions, is often credited as one of the founders of the sf genre, along with writers like Edgar Allan Poe, Mary Shelley, and Jules Verne. Indeed, his ongoing legacy is impossible to escape, turning American sf into a site of constant struggle and contestation for writers and filmmakers of colour.[10] Listing both *Creature of the Black Lagoon* and its sequels among his main examples, Patrick Gonder notes an increase in the post-World War II era of horror-inspired sf films that display intense

[10] Lovecraft's racism and hatred of women is notorious. The HBO series *Lovecraft Country* (2020), based on the novel by Matt Ruff, and N.K. Jemisin's novel *The City We Became* both update Lovecraft's mythos to comment on the way its racial politics have influenced the development of the sf genre. Jemisin comments that, "[Lovecraft's] view of non-white peoples as monstrous informed the way he wrote about monsters" (qtd. in Remnick and Jemisin)—and thus the way subsequent sf writers have written about monsters as well.

anxieties concerning miscegenation, devolution, and the tenuous status of civilisation, partly due to the threat of nuclear war and partly due to the perceived threat of desegregation to White hetero-masculine supremacy (n.p.; see also Sobchack 47). Such a reading of the genre is supported by more recent work on race in sf. Adilfu Nama writes that with "race [being] the ultimate science fiction … [a]n anxiety surrounding interracial sexuality rests at the center of several SF films, along with draconian notions of racial purity and genetic contamination" (42-43). Likewise, Isiah Lavender III notes that, "White people harbor the fear that if they engage in social contact with blacks, they will be contaminated. Consequently, when race and contagion are placed together with otherhood in sf, they function as metaphor and metonym simultaneously" (120). Here, Lavender's point about contagion perfectly recalls the Valans' anxieties about breathmicrobe symbiosis in *A Door into Ocean.*

Despite (or perhaps because of) its attachment to these problematic racial politics of the horror genre*, Creature from the Black Lagoon* inspired two sequels and several decades' worth of (mostly cancelled) remakes. Among these arrested versions was del Toro's original reimagining of the story from the creature's point of view, a concept that was summarily rejected by Universal in 2002. Where del Toro wanted to write a version that culminated in a romance between the creature and Adams' character, the studio must have sensed that even 50 years later this plot would be too racially and sexually transgressive for audiences to accept. After all, the creature evokes a fear that is related to both mankind's animality and to anxieties over racial contamination—dangerous topics to approach in a commercial medium, especially considering the way sf and horror creatures have long played a role as on-screen targets for the expression of nationalist and racist xenophobia. Nevertheless, even as del Toro abandoned the idea of a rewrite, there is no mistaking *Creature from the Black Lagoon's* influence as the main inspiration behind *The Shape of Water*. Therefore, I believe a closer look at Universal's classic and its place within the racist subtexts of sf and horror cinema can explain how and why *The Shape of Water* goes about transforming and subverting the negative affects that tend to stick to the featured creature's on-screen body. This line of inquiry, in turn, opens up for a discussion of the film's affective and ethical messages when it comes to encountering alterity more response-ably.

One of the key question that arise from *Creature from the Black Lagoon,* even 70 years after its release, is how we as the audience are made to feel as we encounter the racialised nonhuman body on screen. When it comes to examining feeling, my project follows queer and feminist theorists such as Sarah Ahmed and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in emphasising the value of affects to cultural studies. It also adopts their understanding of

affect in theoretical rather than cognitive terms, as a "slippery" concept that can be used interchangeably with terms like feelings and emotions to discuss connections between the "ideas, values, and objects" that constitute a society (Ahmed, "Happy Objects"). Affect, then, is not restricted to the individual body, but is relational, "attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects" (Sedgwick 19).[11] Affect also influences how we respond to the other, constituting the boundaries of the self and maintaining the "social relations of power [that make] social transformation difficult" (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 12). The example Ahmed uses to illustrate her argument ties her concept of otherness explicitly to racialised bodies, as she carefully unpacks the racial politics of Britain's national(ist) narratives (1-2). Without giving a full history of the term, it is therefore apparent how affect theory can help in understanding how the on-screen presence of *Creature from the Black Lagoon*'s Gill-Man directs the audience to feel a certain way in response to his racialised alterity, essentially creating a sense of "awayness" rather than "towardness" (8). Indeed, if we accept Ahmed's claim that affect functions as "a cultural politics of world making" (12)—as well as Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock's claim that the monster expresses our desire for other worlds—it becomes important to ask what kind of world is made in a film that teaches audiences to fear rather than accept (or even embrace) differences of many kinds.

An example might be in order, to better illustrate how *Creature from the Black Lagoon* affectively "polices the borders" between the (White) human characters and the (implicitly Black) nonhuman sea monster (Cohen, "Monster Culture" 45). In one of the film's most memorable scenes, the Gill-Man manages to climb on board the *Rita* to kidnap Kay while the few surviving men are busy clearing a blockade that prevents the expedition from fleeing the lagoon. It is bad enough that this aquatic creature demonstrates its boundary-breaking amphibiousness by appearing suddenly on the ship's deck, a White human space that should be safe from the wilderness of the jungle and the water. What makes it worse is that the creature is now finally revealed in an unprecedented daylight close-up. Up to this point in the film, the creature is seen either in darkness, from afar, or in extreme close-ups that feature only a claw. Now, as the film's startlingly menacing theme music plays, he

[11] I owe this understanding of affect theory first and foremost to Nicole Seymour's *Bad Environmentalism.*

Figure 1. Horror and abjection as racialised creature and White woman encounter each other on land. Stills from Creature from the Black Lagoon.

shambles straight towards the camera, mask-like face and staring eyes overtaking the screen as he continues straight past the audience's point of view. The horror of this moment is palpable, the landscape that figures as background throughout the film—replete with howls, screams, and tittering—suddenly becoming foreground as both Kay and the audience are forced to stare directly into the lifeless eyes of the creature (see Figure 1). Indeed, the camera then cuts to a close-up of actress Julie Adams, whose contrastingly expressive human face twists into a horrified scream as she spots the approaching creature off-screen. Before anyone can react, the creature grabs her in his claws and dives off the side of the boat. They are followed by the camera which tracks their rapid descent and submersion in a distant wide

shot that drowns the figures in the overwhelming space of the murky water, obviously symbolic of primitive degeneration and an uncontained and threatening sexual nature.

This scene is of interest because of how clearly it instructs the audience's affective response to the creature and its environs. Indeed, the music, acting, and camera all conspire to render this moment of interspecies (or interracial) contact one of overwhelming horror, similar to Spinel's first encounter with the breathmicrobes in *A Door into Ocean*. Because the relationship between woman and monster lies at the heart of del Toro's reinterpretation of the film, it is especially interesting to note how Julie Adams' scream of terror models the audience's response to the creature in terms of an unambiguous rejection—or "awayness." Her performance is clearly one of White feminine helplessness typical to horror cinema, echoing the aforementioned Fay Wray's performance in *King Kong* and evoking the tired trope of "the white virginal woman at the mercy of the primal sexual allure of the black man" (Gonder n.p.). As Gonder notes, this is a trope that in turn validates White male aggression against people of colour, in this case dramatized by the iterative hunting, poisoning, and shooting that ultimately leads to the creature's defeat and return to the primitive depths of the lagoon (n.p.).[12] In addition to these gendered and sexual politics of the creature, it is interesting to consider how Adams' performance of horror provides an affective model for disgust in response to the creature's intrusive appearance on the boat—an intrusion that signals transgression of both human/animal and White/non-White binaries.

According to both Ahmed and Sianne Ngai, negative affects play a key part in maintaining these binary hierarchies. In Ngai's work, disgust in particular constitutes the "ugly feeling par excellence" (*Ugly Feelings* 334), an emotion whose main function is to reject and exclude its object from the self and from the social order, establishing and perpetuating racism, misogyny, and other hierarchies of oppression (23). Contrary to desire, disgust maintains the subject-object boundary and with it the borders between the proper self and "'contaminating' others" whose difference might pose a threat (338). Most importantly for my purposes here, she notes that disgust serves to "block sympathetic identification" in a way that renders the other unavailable to ethical response and instead available for instrumentalisation, oppression, and violence (340). In this sense, disgust is also closely tied to Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject, that which is neither subject nor object, at once

[12] This driving away of the creature takes place in sequel after sequel; "The monster always escapes" but it also "always return[s]" (Cohen, "Monster Theses" 39, 52). Gonder notes of *Creature*'s sequel, *Revenge of the Creature* (1955): "Taken together, the narrative of the two films resembles *King Kong*; an expedition encounters a primitive, dangerous monster who is taken back to civilization, only to escape, terrorize the local populace, and be killed through the use of modern weapons."

repulsive and attractive, in a way that "disturbs identity, system, order" and so has to be cast off in order to protect the integrity of the self (97). It follows that, as a transgressive, disgusting, and often racialised object, the horror creature must be abjected not only from the self but from the social order in its entirety in order to protect the nationalist status quo. Indeed, within the context of the horror film, to experience disgust, as Kay Lawrence does in response to her kidnapper, is to work toward the maintenance of the "self's clean and proper body" against an undesirable monstrous intruder (Creed 13).

Desire for the Monstrous

Stories such as *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, predicated on the disgust and horror of the other, and prevalent across sf literature and film, must be why Vivian Sobchack, writing in 1987, claims that: "Our sympathy is never evoked by an SF Creature; it remains, always, a thing" (*Screening Space* 32). Yet, as previously mentioned, much has happened since then, and in an updated version of her book Sobchack notes a late twentieth-century shift in sf toward more widespread sympathising with the monster. Indeed, she notes that many contemporary sf films "do not represent alien-ness as inherently hostile and Other" but instead "embraces alien Others as 'more human than human'" (293). Likewise, Weinstock notes the emergence of a post-Foucauldian "[u]nderstanding of monsters as disenfranchised victims of an oppressive dominant culture" deserving of sympathy rather than scorn ("Genealogy" 28). As such, it seems creature features like *Creature from the Black Lagoon* belong to a previous era marked by fear of a concretised other, expressing an anxiety over nuclear war and uncontained racialised sexuality specific to the Cold War era (Sobchack 47). By contrast, contemporary monsters tend to be much more elusive and expressive of current global concerns, taking the form of faceless corporations, vengeful nature, and incurable viruses rather than racialised or animalistic others (see Weinstock, "Invisible Monsters").

In this context, it is interesting to examine how *The Shape of Water*'s representation of the monstrous as desirable differs from the abjection, disgust, and boundary-policing evidenced by *Creature from the Black Lagoon.* As a starting point, I should note that del Toro is a director renowned for his love of all things monstrous. I do this not in pursuit of an auteur reading, but rather because del Toro's affective relationship to the monstrous serves as an interesting case study into the role *Creature from the Black Lagoon* continues to play within the popular imagination and as an intertext for *The Shape of Water*'s romanticised reimagining of the Gill-Man. As a pastiche on the classic creature feature—mixed in with a handful of other Hollywood genres, including the melodrama—there is no question that *The*

Shape of Water is unique.[13] Even in a contemporary era where the monstrous is increasingly tolerated, few mainstream films have taken the step from acceptance to actual desire.[14] There are grounds to consider whether such a thing as a Hollywood monster romance could only emerge from the imagination of the director behind popular monster films such as the *Hellboy* franchise (2004-2008)*, Pacific Rim* (2013), and the twisted fairy tale fantasy of *Pan's Labyrinth* (2007). As a writer and director, del Toro has clearly demonstrated his fascination with encounters where human and nonhuman worlds intersect and blur to form new and unexpected coalitions that exceed the limits of reality. Moreover, in interviews, he has explicitly linked his sense of affinity with monsters to his experiences of alienation as a Mexican immigrant in the US (see Rottenberg). Whether or not mainstream audiences share his sense of identification with the Gill-Man is hard to say, but it seems unlikely.[15] Without delving too far into a discussion about auteur cinema or reception studies, I would like to briefly consider the role del Toro's unique experience of watching *Creature from the Black Lagoon* played in the development of *The Shape of Water* as an interesting case study of how personal and collective affects confront and contest one another in the processes of cinematic spectatorship.

As previously mentioned, del Toro wrote *The Shape of Water* in response to his childhood fantasy of seeing a romance play out in *Creature from the Black Lagoon* between Julie Adams' character and the Gill-Man. What is interesting here is that, instead of the creature feature's expected affects of horror and disgust, del Toro describes experiencing a lasting sense of longing, or perhaps utopian desire, after watching the film. In one interview, he describes the experience as follows: "There was something unassailable in that movie that I could not express. I got overwhelmed with beauty … I felt a longing in my heart that I could not name. I kept thinking I hope they end up together and they didn't. So this is me correcting the cinematic mistake" (qtd. in Keegan). These feelings of longing, hope, and disappointment (all hallmarks of utopian desire) mark a contrast to the fear and disgust typically evoked by

[13] According to Richard Dyer, pastiche is a deliberate imitation of previous works that critiques without parody and that, contrary to claims that pastiche precludes affect, allows for the "possibility of feeling historically" (*Pastiche,* 4) and for connecting to past and present affective frameworks or structures of feeling (180).
[14] See the chapters on "Depths of Desire" in Hackett and Harrington's *Beasts of the Deep* for some decidedly *non-mainstream* representations of desire for sea monsters.
[15] As anecdotal evidence, consider for example Elizabeth Jane Garrels' admission that: "I purposely never saw *Creature from the Black Lagoon* until December of 2017, in preparation for del Toro's *Shape*, advertised as a loose and friendly remake of *Creature*. At age 71, I loved Jack Arnold's film, but even now could not identify with del Toro's childhood fantasy that the Creature should end up with the girl. For me, it was still a film about the predation of women" (14-15). For what it's worth, I agree with Garrels, and so do the creators of the true crime docuseries *I'll be Gone in the Dark,* who continuously use footage of the Gill-Man as an analogy for the killer's predation of women.

Figure 2. Unexpected affinity between woman and monster with the water as medium. Still from Creature from the Black Lagoon.

the creature's appearance on screen; in fact, what del Toro describes is an emotional experience more common to that of the so-called "woman's film" or melodrama. These are genres that encourage empathy and identification with its tales about star-crossed lovers and doomed romances (Hayward S. 222), or, more broadly, an affective mode of cinema which "seeks dramatic revelation of moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos and action" (Williams, "Melodrama Revised" 42). We might wonder, then, how del Toro came to sympathise, and even identify, with the creature through a "melodramatic pathos" (47), and how these emotions came to be carried over into the portrayal of *The Shape of Water'*s Amphibian Man.

One scene in particular inspired del Toro's sense of unassailable hope and longing for a world where the monstrous is accepted and even desired. As is common for works that operate within the "force-field of melodrama," where individual desire comes up against social restraint (Cunningham 192, 197), this scene of momentary connection comes at the midpoint of *Creature from the Black Lagoon*; it takes place before the Gill-Man is defeated, as the creature swims in the lagoon beneath an unaware Kay Lawrence (see Figure 2). The male scientists have all gathered below deck after a scuba-diving survey of the lagoon to discuss a recent find of geological samples. Excluded from the debate, Kay is left alone on deck with nothing to do but lounge in her iconic white swimsuit. To pass the time, she decides to venture out for a solo swim in the murky waters of the lagoon, sans the heavy man-fish diving suits of her colleagues. As her body cuts gracefully through the water, her

white skin and clothing serve as a contrast to the dark backdrop of the water and surrounding jungle. She smiles in evident pleasure as she swims, but below, the submerged camera alerts viewers to the voyeuristic gaze of the creature waiting below. As the audience shares the perspective of the Gill-Man, the tension in the score—a bombastic brass section—warns us about his predatory intentions as he begins to approach Adams. Yet, something odd happens in this scene, as instead of attacking, the creature simply follows Adams, mirroring her movements beneath the surface of the water. In distant full-body shots that capture the mystical ambiance of the lagoon's water, we see the two swimming together as an elegant contrast to the encumbered movements of the scuba diving scientists in the previous scene. Here, it appears that woman and monster, both representatives of the marginal space between the civilised and the primitive (Gonder n.p.), share a momentary affinity with each other and with the water that becomes a medium for their brief and impermissible connection, a place where submersion allows "our most habitual concepts and categories" to dissolve (Jue, *Wild Blue Media* xii).

And make no mistake, the moment is fleeting; as Kay becomes aware of the creature's presence, the scene turns into a predictable chase that ends with her safely back on deck, trembling in the arms of her fiancé. Likewise, the film ends on the same heteronormative image, after Kay has been rescued, the creature driven away with bullets, and the social order safely re-established. Although the film's ending is unambiguous—Kay's return to her fiancé prompting us to imagine a future that is safely and reproductively heteronormative—there is indeed something wistful in this scene that might account for del Toro's impression of a forbidden romance. Especially in light of feminist and ecocritical perspectives on horror cinema, the formula that drives the plot toward the inevitable elimination of difference is clearly apparent. Starosielski concludes her own brief reading of the film by asserting that the preservation of the social order requires that the film ends "with the containment of the undersea monster (and therefore potential social conflict)" (159). In *The Monstrous Feminine,* Barbara Creed also notes that the eventual expulsion of the monster is inevitable to horror cinema because the genre confronts the liminal only in order to "eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between the human and non-human" (221). Stacy Alaimo similarly finds that mainstream monster films featuring animals inevitably build toward the "triumphant expulsion" of nonhuman nature from human societies ("Discomforting Creatures" 280). This expulsion plot justifies the exclusion and persecution of both nonhuman and racialised others; further, it reinforces the culture-nature dichotomy that maintains the master model and renders difference monstrous in the first place.

However, this is not to say that identification with nonhuman or nonnormative others is fully out of the question, despite the film's seemingly foreclosed conclusion. Just as with *Creature from the Black Lagoon*'s almost wistful swimming scene, Alaimo points out that many monster films feature surprisingly ambivalent scenes around the "muddled middles" of their narratives (293). For example, Peter Benchley's *Jaws* (1975) features several moments where the submerged camera adopts the point of view of the monstrous shark, guiding viewers to contemplate, if only for one moment, a disquietingly nonhuman and aqueous view of the world. In these underwater scenes, the strict corporeal boundaries that separate humans from their environments "seem to dissolve" so that "the viewer may experience a pleasurable sensation of identification with these creatures" (294). Likewise, in the melodrama, tensions tend to rise to a point at the narrative's midpoint in order to prompt identification with the victimised heroes and inspire hope and desire for a happy ending (Williams, "Melodrama Revised" 66). Thinking back to del Toro's description of watching *Creature from the Black Lagoon* as an alienated child, his experience resonates with these non-anthropocentric identifications and melancholy longings for transgressive connections. Even as the film ends with the Gill-Man driven away, del Toro seems to have successfully identified the one moment in the film where the borders between human and nonhuman cease to matter and where it becomes possible to imagine "some sort of resistance to the desire to demarcate, discipline, and eradicate monstrous natures" (Alaimo, "Discomforting Creatures" 294). In *The Shape of Water,* del Toro extends this moment of muddled identification with the monster, transforming *Creature from the Black Lagoon*'s ambivalent midpoint into the basis for a romantic narrative.

At the same time, del Toro's experience of utopian desire for the monstrous is held out as a possibility even for mainstream audiences. Of course, this movement from disgust toward desire requires some manoeuvring on the part of the film's narrative and visual composition. Especially when it comes to the design of *The Shape of Water*'s Amphibian Man, extensive care has been taken to ensure that the creature's on-screen presence registers as appealing rather than repulsive. As a contrast to the Gill-Man's rubber-suited shambling, character actor Doug Jones' portrayal of the Amphibian Man appears fluid and positively sensuous. It helps that the prosthetic foam-latex suit he is wearing has been carefully designed for the purpose. Reportedly, it took three years to complete the costume, with monster sculptors and special effects experts working tirelessly to perfect del Toro's exacting vision of amphibious desirability (Bien-Khan). The design was likely based partly on Milicent Patrick's (long uncredited) design of the Gill-Man, and partly on the amphibious

humanoid Abe Sapien from del Toro's own *Hellboy* films (also played by Doug Jones). However, unlike these characters' static features, the Amphibian Man's face is capable of expressing the range of feelings necessary for him to serve as "the emotional center of the movie" (Bien-Khan). In an entertainingly detailed account of the process, the design team recalls the painstaking attention del Toro paid to the creature's face and derrière, the goal being to make Doug Jones appear on screen as the "*David* of amphibian men" or, if you will, the "George Clooney of fish-men" (del Toro, qtd. in Bien-Khan). In order for the romance to be believable, del Toro notes that the creature had to strike the perfect balance between human and monstrous, conventionally handsome and inhumanly strange, "without winding up in an uncanny valley or making him look unrelatable" (qtd. in Bien-Khan).[16] Based on accounts of the design process, it becomes clear that the monster's simultaneous difference and desirability is key to the film's ethical and affective project.

Without making any unfounded claims about viewers' emotional experiences, it seems reasonable to say that it is the creature's carefully designed physicality that makes the story resonate. Where most viewers would be hard pressed to sympathise, let alone identify, with the Gill-Man, the Amphibian Man is made available for a more positive affective response, not least through the film's adoption of Elisa's point of view. Like the creature, Elisa herself is figured in terms of both her difference and desirability. For one thing, her part was written specifically for Sally Hawkins, who is known for her skill at portraying outsiders and misfits with heartfelt empathy. This is important because Elisa is clearly an outsider herself, an isolated and eccentric woman who dreams of underwater worlds beyond the humdrum of her everyday existence. From the beginning of the film, we learn about her affinity with water as she is introduced sleeping inches above her sofa within her submerged apartment. As the camera tracks through the green and blue tinted interior, filled with floating furniture and schools of fish, the narrator introduces her as "the princess without voice," evoking disability discourses of innocent powerlessness and passivity (Nocella 141). Moments later, however, her alarm rings to propel her into a pre-work evening routine that includes masturbating in the bathtub to the rigour of an egg-timer. We also see Elisa inspecting her own reflection in the mirror, sensuously brushing her fingers against the scars on her neck that will later transform (back) into gills, hinting at her own aquatic origins and

[16] In the feature by Bien-Khan, the other designers relate: "Del Toro came and gave edits throughout, always preoccupied with making the fish-man more handsome. 'Guillermo was very keen on making the creature have a nice butt,' Hill says, adding that del Toro carried a picture of the creature's rump around for weeks to get input from friends and family."

destiny (see Figure 3). This immersive dream sequence establishes an unmistakable connection throughout the film between water and nonnormative desire, as Elisa's preference for underwater environments is revealed as both a fanciful and physical yearning for an alternative world linked to freedom and sensuality—what Lorde might refer to as the erotic (*Sister Outsider* 43). Water, in this case, is a space of uncontained sexuality in a positive rather than negative sense, enabling human and nonhuman intimacies and facilitating the construction of "physical, consensual, and unifying bonds" between otherwise isolated and oppressed characters (Bushman and Chow 111).

Figure 3. Elisa dreaming of other worlds and possibilities amidst the aquatic environs of her apartment. Still from The Shape of Water.

The film's opening sequence alerts us to the gap between Elisa's monotonous working-class existence and the romantic fantasy realms that she inhabits in her dreams, in the cinema below her apartment, and via the television screen of her neighbour Giles. This gap between the everyday and the fantastic, introduced from the very beginning of the film, is key because it instructs audiences in the unusual characteristics of Elisa's desire. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson notes that, "Cultural stereotypes imagine disabled women as asexual, unfit to reproduce, overly dependent, unattractive—as generally removed from the sphere of true womanhood and feminine beauty" ("Integrating Disability" 17). *The Shape of Water* contests this stereotype by representing Elisa as a character with an impairment trapped in an oppressive and disabling environment (Kafer 7). As the narrative progresses through her focalisation, the audience is invited into a world that is wholly unsatisfactory except through occasional breakthroughs of whimsical fantasy or utopian longing—on her way to work, Elisa is shown tapdancing down the hallway, smiling secretively to herself, and stopping in the street to window shop and dream about a glamorous pair of shoes. By the time the Amphibian Man is presented, the audience knows enough to see him not in terms of an abject monster but rather as an object of Elisa's aquatic desires and a potential liberation from an isolated, monotonous, and downright oppressive existence on land. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes in his seminal theses on monsters that a desire for the monstrous has the potential to "evoke potent escapist fantasies" and "a temporary egress from constraint" ("Monster Culture" 149). With his observations in mind, it is obvious both from Sally Hawkins' performance and from the camera's affinity with her perspective, that the Amphibian Man's difference and his relation to the aqueous world is exactly what renders him desirable as an escape from the dystopian heteropatriarchal reality.

Hawkins' performance as Elisa is also key to the film's success in subverting the affects of the monstrous, as del Toro himself points out. In an interview about his casting decision, he states, "If I create a great creature and she looks at it like a man in a rubber suit, the film dies. If she looks at it like a creature, it lives. She had such a massive crush on the creature—for real. Sally, not the character" (qtd. in Daly).[17] Moreover, the importance of Elisa's unique affective response is illustrated again and again throughout the film. As Sabine Sielke puts it, "Meeting the amphibian man … with reverence not fear, the protagonist Elisa displays an affect that anxiety-driven cultures, during the 1950s and now, seem to have lost"

[17] As it happens, Hawkins also claims that she was in the middle of writing a story about mermaids when she got the role and that she fell instantly in love with both the script and the creature (Suskind).

(3). For instance, the first time Elisa comes face to face with the Amphibian Man it is through the thick glass of a transport tank as he is brought into the lab. Behind the backs of the male scientists and security staff, Elisa leans in close to the tank to cautiously touch the tank's window. The awe on Hawkins' face in this scene, an expression of open-mouthed fascination, remains even as the creature erupts violently against the tank and she is hustled out of the lab. This expression persists as she continues to seek out the creature throughout the following scenes with quiet determination, interspersed with repeated iterations of her morning routine. By now, the Amphibian Man has been moved to a larger tank, and the ever-moving camera—

Figure 4. Elisa seduces the Amphibian Man with the help of eggs and water—the film's two main symbols of intimacy and care—in the underlit lab at Occam. Stills from The Shape of Water.

emulating the flow of water—tracks Elisa's movements across the dimly lit lab as she approaches, zooming in on the point of contact where her hand and her gaze meet those of the creature through the deep blue glass. After that, the creature is moved to a larger pool and Elisa is able to make her dimly-lit and clandestine visits without any physical barriers. The first time the creature rises from the water to meet her, the camera follows the emergence of his shoulders and torso in a way that is positively sensuous, especially accompanied by the swelling music that offsets the creature's guttural growls and the threatening low angle (see Figure 4). Whether or not this should be read as some kind of reversal of the male gaze (cf. Mulvey)—particularly in light of del Toro's obsession with making the creature look attractive—is beside the point. The contrast to the Gill-Man's uncanny close-up is clear, and so are Elisa's intentions; the next time she returns, her awe has been replaced by a sly smile, and she brings both music and food to share as she begins teaching the creature sign language in a montage accompanied by Glenn Miller's sentimentally romantic "I Know Why (And So Do You)." The eggs from the opening sequences, repeatedly shown boiling in water or traded back and forth between the creature's and Elisa's hands, here becomes a potent symbol of both interspecies care and intimacy. By the time their relationship becomes explicitly sexual towards the end of the film, the romance has been built up to the extent that this interspecies encounter—consummated in Elisa's flooded bathroom and foreshadowed by the increasing presence of vibrant red in her choice of shoes, hairbands, and dresses—appears not as a transgressive act but rather as a fulfilment of Elisa's aquatic, escapist fantasies and as a triumph of the erotic's power to lessen the threat of difference and create a basis for transformation.

Alliance of the Voiceless

I have argued so far that *The Shape of Water* presents a celebratory attitude toward the monstrous, based on desire and kinship rather than abjection and disgust. Further, if the Amphibian Man is the emotional centre of del Toro's film, Elisa is the relatable protagonist whose desire for the monstrous compels viewers to experience positive affects for the creature. This focalising technique creates a sense of identification that Alexa Weik von Mossner in her study of ecocinema refers to as "situational" or "strategic" empathy (81). Through narrative strategies such as focalisation, strategic empathy may "align the reader either with the experiences of the victim of injustice or with an outsider who comes to care for the victim" (Weik von Mossner 81). In this case, Elisa's perspective creates an opening that makes it possible both for audiences and other characters in the film to feel for the

nonhuman creature suffering in captivity. This human focalisation is necessary due to the limitations of narrative empathy and not least due to the deep-seated "familiarity bias" that directs cinema audiences to feel most readily with those similar or familiar to themselves (81). As Weik von Mossner points out, because the separation between human and animal is so deeply ingrained in Western culture, and because a nonhuman perspective is inherently impossible for us to access, some level of human mediation is necessary when telling compelling stories about the feelings of other species (113)—especially when it comes to alien and monstrous sea creatures. Moreover, Plumwood points out that *not* attributing "human" characteristics such as agency, subjectivity, and intentionality to other species reinforces a false sense of discontinuity and separation between the human and nonhuman (*Environmental Culture* 57).

In del Toro's film, such focalisation fosters the potential for responding across species boundaries. The concern here is that the positive affects inspired by the Amphibian Man become possible only through a human perspective, and only because the Amphibian Man is more man than creature. For all of Doug Jones' skill as a character actor specialising in nonhuman monsters, and for all the commendations of his convincingly animalistic portrayal of the creature, he is still unmistakably recognisable as a human man wearing a latex suit. Perhaps comparable to how *Solaris'* inscrutable ocean communicates through human simulacra, del Toro's timeless Amazonian river-god materialises into the concrete form of the feature creature through both Elisa's and the audience's gaze. In the process, something is lost. As Margrit Shildrick puts it in a discussion of how the monster's body becomes contained by its presence on screen, "In every case of visualisation, all elements of unruliness, excess and leakiness are carefully confined to the single moment of display, ordered into a recognisable narrative" ("Visual Rhetorics" 167). In other words, the unfathomable is reduced to spectacle. And there is reason to wonder whether anthropomorphic strategies, though effective in inspiring empathy, work to maintain an ethical hierarchy that privileges species closer to the human over those that are radically different. Indeed, we could say that any form of anthropomorphism entails a level of anthropocentrism, as the human remains the standard against which nonhuman (and by implication inferior) species are measured (Plumwood, *Environmental Culture* 59). We have already seen how these humanist ethics are maintained even in Joan Slonczewski's feminist posthuman fiction. What would it take to extend response-ability across this line, to the less humanoid forms of creatures like corals and jellyfish (Alaimo, "Jellyfish Science")? Would it

even be possible to treat a mediated encounter with the monster as "an invitation to a sensuous opening on to alterity" rather than a mere call to order (172)?

The Shape of Water does not answer these or other questions related to animal ethics. Instead, the film's attention to human difference supersedes its exploration of nonhuman alterity as the human characters "project feelings of social isolation onto the Amphibian as a screen for their own experiences of marginalization" (Mitchell and Snyder 153). This argument may sound harsh, especially considering Joni Adamson's compelling reading of the film as an argument for Indigenous cosmologies and the rights of nature in Latin America (see "People of the Water"). However, based on behind-the-scenes material, del Toro's stated intention with the Amphibian Man is clearly rooted more in the projection of struggles for social justice; in his words, "The creature and how you react to it tells more about you than who the creature is" ("A Fairy Tale for Troubled Times").[18] In other words, the specificity of the creature's monstrous body is overtaken by its symbolic meaning for the film's human characters, who are all subject to monstering due to some aspect of their identity, whether queer, disabled, Black, or female. According to del Toro, the diversity of the film's human protagonists should not be taken as an investment in identity politics. Instead, he wants audiences to think of the characters as one "single character" representing something he calls the "alliance of the voiceless" ("A Fairy Tale for Troubled Times"), an intersectional affinity group made up of "inappropriate/d others" (Haraway, "Promises of Monsters") united around their sense of kinship with the Amphibian Man and their subversive efforts to rescue him from the US military research facility.

This dedication to the "voiceless" is in many ways a noble goal for a Hollywood blockbuster, but there is a concern that it runs the risk of conflating disability with animality. As noted in the introduction, nonnormative bodies have historically served as the constitutive outside to Western humanity alongside racialised ones, leading to "an urgent need among dehumanized populations (including disabled people) to challenge animalization" (Taylor 18). In del Toro's film, the use of "voicelessness" as an analogy that refers to both animal and disability oppression is particularly challenging. While accounting for the intersections between animal and disability studies, Anthony J. Nocella notes that "'[v]oice for the voiceless' is a saying that has been used repeatedly by disability rights activists, environmentalists, and animal advocates" (141), despite the implications of powerlessness

[18] "A Fairy Tale for Troubled Times" is a series of behind-the-scenes material available on the DVD version of *The Shape of Water.*

and erasure of self-advocacy inherent to the notion of "speaking for." In the specific case of deafness/muteness, Sunaura Taylor traces the tradition of linking "voicelessness" to a lack of agency all the way back to Arisotle's claim that an inability to speak meant a lack of intelligence and therefore humanity, a precursor to more recent dismissals of sign language as "primitive" and animal-like (29). Elisa's affinity and identification with the Amphibian Man in del Toro's film might be seen as perpetuating these discourses—and indeed it has, as I discuss later in this chapter. However, in line with the feminist posthuman monster theory outlined in the introduction, I read it more as a recognition of intersecting systems of oppression in the monstering of human and nonhuman difference by the dominant culture. Quoting Arundhati Roy, Sunaura Taylor reminds us "There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless.' There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard" (qtd. in Taylor 32). With this in mind, I would still argue that an *alliance* of the voiceless, founded on self-advocacy, has power because it provides agency to those who would usually be considered dumb, passive, inert, weak, and vulnerable and because it provides affinity across distinct struggles for liberation. The aim, again, is not to become human but to "acknowledge our own animality" (and vulnerability) in a way that "challenge[s] the devaluing of animals" (and, at the same time, the primacy of the transcendent humanist subject) (Taylor 18).

There are, in other words, advantages to the Amphibian Man's monstrous excess of meaning as a representative for the "voiceless." As a boundary-breaking being that evokes animality, but both lacks and exceeds conventional markers related to race and ability (though not gender and sexuality), he has the capacity to transcend the human/nature dichotomy and evoke a more inclusive multispecies ethics of response-ability. Indeed, as the Amphibian Man becomes the film's universal symbol of marginalisation, the audience is asked to consider how the oppression of nonhuman and nonnormative difference coincides and intersects in an anthropocentric and heteropatriarchal society. According to del Toro, the Amphibian Man embodies what he calls an "ancient force among us" currently being killed by "the race to the future" ("A Fairy Tale for Troubled Times"). This "ancient force" is, as Adamson argues, connected to Indigenous beliefs about Amazon river gods. However, in del Toro's film it is also situated more broadly as an expression of the nonrational, affective, and feminine force Lorde describes as the erotic, which has been "vilified, abused and devalued within western society" (*Sister Outsider* 43). The Amphibian Man is part human, part animal, part deity, and therefore wholly dislocated from the evolutionary narrative, challenging "our sense of time and space, history and memory … pav[ing] inroads to fundamental processes of modernity as well as to modes of resistance against modernization and globalization" (Sielke

7-8). He is connected instead to an aqueous realm that exists almost out of time (elsewhere and elsewhen) as a reminder of affinities and struggles for survival that cross species and identity lines—from the water-stained interior of Elisa's apartment to the submerged bottom of the Baltimore canal. In this sense, he answers Gaard's call for a coalitional queer ecofeminism centred around the erotic (132);[19] indeed, del Toro's film makes a strong case for the ethical consideration of nonhuman natures as a prerequisite for human forms of justice, hinting that if we, as audiences, are able to respond emotionally to an anthropomorphic fish-man, we should also be able to feel for humans who are in some way radically different from ourselves or for creatures that live deep within the depths.

Because dehumanisation takes place along lines of gender, race, sexuality, and ability, in addition to animality, the plot to save the Amphibian Man—carried out in true spy thriller fashion—becomes a dramatic analogy for the disenfranchised characters' drive to enact sea change through engagement with the erotic in the dystopian world they inhabit. As previously discussed, del Toro claims that *The Shape of Water* took form in response to his desire for a world where the monstrous is celebrated; more specifically, he wanted to write a story about what it would mean to consciously choose "love" for the monster in a world where everyday cultural and political attitudes to difference tend to gravitate towards "hate" ("Fairy Tale for Troubled Times"). This perhaps explains why the film is set during the height of the Cold War, at a moment in history when dualistic power structures and fear of alterity were at an all-time high—providing a clear affective context for the melodramatic mode's dramatization of social problems (Williams, "Melodrama Revised" 53). Indeed, despite its fantastic elements and quirky aesthetics, clearly borrowed (or possibly stolen) from the films of director Jean-Pierre Jeunet,[20] *The Shape of Water*'s plot remains anchored in a muddled but recognisable version of historical reality—one marked by widespread xenophobia directed at anyone who might serve to undermine US national values, be they Soviet agents, communist sympathisers, or merely queer or African American citizens. Through the narrative's clever use of anachronism, del Toro's combined monster romance and spy thriller takes place against a newscast backdrop of escalating global and national political tension. This means that Elisa's efforts to rescue the Amphibian Man coincides with the leadup to the Cuban

[19] As Gaard writes, "[f]rom a queer ecofeminist perspective … it becomes clear that liberating women requires liberating nature, the erotic, and queers" (122).
[20] See Sharf. Jeunet has apparently accused del Toro of plagiarising a scene featuring two characters tap-dancing while seated on a sofa from his post-apocalyptic comedy film *Delicatessen* (1991). Considering *The Shape of Water*'s use of pastiche, this—and the numerous other allegations of plagiarism—seems to be missing the point of the film's deliberate imitation of previous works' affective frameworks.

Missile Crisis during October 1962 *and* with the Birmingham civil rights riot of May 1963 (Garrels)—events that happened "a long time ago, it seems," according to the narrator, "In the last days of a fair prince's reign." The prince, it seems clear, is John F. Kennedy, a notable supporter of the Civil Rights movement and nuclear disarmament, whose assassination ended an era of US national optimism. This historical framing, and *The Shape of Water*'s clear political stance on the side of diversity and acceptance, might also explain why so many reviewers have read the film as an allegory for contemporary developments taking place in US (and European) politics, especially when it comes to the rise of the alt-right movement.[21]

This period in US history may have been a utopia of consumerism and success for some, but del Toro's film focuses on the nonnormative subjects marginalised by the mainstream culture. Normativity, linked to static notions of the "natural," refers to the related processes wherein epistemologies, ontologies, and ethics conspire to produce an ideal self that exists in a hierarchical relation to all others; in Western cultures, this means that "a universalised (white, male, Western) subject" is constructed "as the normative self" (Hellstrand et al. 151). In relation, all difference is construed as monstrous and therefore threatening and in need of containment for the protection of the social order and the normative category itself (Shildrick 71). Apart from the Amphibian Man and the mute Elisa, the unlikely victim-heroes (cf. Williams, "Melodrama Revised" 66) of del Toro's Cold War story are a gay man, a Black woman, and an undercover Russian spy—characters that have often been made to represent an existential threat to the integrity of the United States during times of external and internal national paranoia. These characters are all stereotypes, however (mostly) not in a derogatory limiting sense. Instead, they seem to provide a clear affective context for the film's staging of a struggle for social justice, offering the kind of imaginaries that Lauren Berlant argues "can have profound effects ... on the ways people perceive their

[21] For instance, one reviewer writes: "the film mirrors the America we live in today, a country whose government propagates and legislates fear of the other—fear of blacks, of gays, fear of the Russians, fear of science, of nature, and fear of anything that does not tidily fit into the White Anglo Saxon Protestant (WASP) tidy vision of American success" (Nicolini). In talking about the background for his film, del Toro himself draws a direct line between contemporary appeals to "Make America Great Again" and an idealised vision of the early 1960s, marked by rampant consumerism as much as unequal rights: "when America talks about "Make America Great Again," it's talking about 1962, the end of Camelot, the peak of the promise of the future, jet-fin cars, super fast kitchens, television, everything that if you're white, Anglo-Saxon, heterosexual, you're good. But if you're anything else, you're not so good. Then when Kennedy is shot and Vietnam escalates, and the disillusionment of that dream occurs, I don't think that has healed. We're living in a time where the one percent has created a narrative in which they are not to blame. Who is to blame is them, quote unquote, the others, Mexicans, the minorities. What the creation of that other does, it exonerates from responsibility. It directs hatred in a super streamlined way" (qtd. in Keegan).

own social value and the social value of 'Others'" (*The Queen of Washington* 2). One of these characters, Zelda (Octavia Spencer), is Elisa's only companion at work, a Black woman who is equally isolated by her lack of "voice:" orphaned, involuntarily childless, trapped in a loveless marriage, and regularly harassed in the workplace. Her experience of multiple overlapping forms of oppression illustrates the importance of an intersectional perspective (see Crenshaw); however, Zelda's struggles fade into the film's background along with the Civil Rights movement as an issue present but never openly discussed, an allusion to injustice more than its own distinctive battle.

Instead, the film spends more time focusing on Elisa's neighbour and only other friend Giles (Richard Jenkins), a struggling gay advertisement artist who is liberated and transformed by his encounter with the Amphibian Man. As a character, Giles is initially preoccupied with visions of normative success, his endless paintings of heteronormative ad campaigns broken up only by Hollywood escapism and his doomed, one-sided love affair with a homophobic diner worker. His tragic isolation, alongside that of Zelda, serves as a reminder that the film is set in a time prior to the Civil Rights Act and the decriminalisation of same-sex sexual activity, and that "an alternative value system of acceptance" is sorely needed (Mitchell and Snyder 154). However, Giles initially rejects Elisa when she begs him to help her save the Amphibian Man, dismissing the creature as "a freak"—inadvertently (or not) repeating back a term that has often been used to animalise both queerness and disability (Shildrick, *Embodying* 22)—and "not even human." He also consistently refuses to watch any of the background news coverage of the Civil Rights movement, urging Elisa to change the channel back to the safety of classic Hollywood—as always, a convenient vehicle for escapism as well as ideological critique. It is only as the film's plot progresses and Giles is shunned both by his employer and love interest that he begins to awaken to a vision of nonnormative and caring futurity best described in terms of what Jack Halberstam calls "the queer art of failure" (1). Like Elisa, Giles is fundamentally transformed, both physically and affectively, by his encounter with the Amphibian Man and the "ancient force" he represents; he regains his hair and health via the Amphibian Man's restorative healing power, begins to paint purely for pleasure, and relinquishes his conventional ideals of success in favour of creativity, resistance, and response-ability. With this, he becomes part of the subversive "alliance of the voiceless" and its commitment to resisting capitalist and militarist heteropatriarchal control—he even drives the escape van when Elisa frees the creature.

Through the stereotypically tragic characterisations that precede the formation of this alliance—the downtrodden Black woman, the isolated mute woman, the struggling gay

artist—the film paints a picture of an unjust and disconnected society that contrasts with idealised cliches about the period's blissful middle-class domesticity. This serves to situate *The Shape of Water*'s fantastical plot within a brutally realist (albeit stylised) 1960s America where people are punished for being different or for desiring outside the norm. It also orders the film's unruly, genre-bending plot into the affective structures of the melodrama, directing audiences to experience empathy for clichéd and victimised characters and their tragic fates within a seemingly unchangeable society (S. Hayward). Indeed, at times the claustrophobic and dimly lit mise-en-scène of the characters' homes and workplaces appear to trap the viewer in a world of "forbidden longings" doomed to perpetual unfulfillment (S. Hayward 236). Yet, as I have argued, where *The Shape of Water* initially seems to reveal and revel in the isolated existence of its stereotyped characters, the Amphibian Man's presence within the narrative attests to the more hopeful possibility of resisting and even changing oppressive societal forces beyond the individualised transformation of melodrama (cf. Williams, "Melodrama Revised 74). As he destabilises conventional narratives and affective paradigms, del Toro's fish-man, and his association with water, signals not only the eruption of the fantastic into the rational world. He also indicates possibilities of working fluidly across multiple lines of oppression against an unjust society, effectively demonstrating how engagement with the erotic "lessens the threat of … difference" (Lorde 46). Following Lorde, and attentive to the role water plays as a medium for connection in del Toro's film, Chow and Bushman note: "hydro-eroticism makes possible forms of queer intimacy and reunion that other terrestrial locations and forms of knowledge inhibit" (111). Thus, as the disparate characters come together to enact the film's unlikely rescue mission and release the creature back into the ocean, they end up surpassing the social and political imaginaries that confine them to their tragic fates on land.

In the end, the Amphibian Man's function within the film is to inspire sympathy for its monstered human characters, as much as or even more so than the actual nonhuman monster. The strategy is effective, but it runs the risk of becoming problematic when these categories dissolve into each other. Aside from the potentially problematic emphasis on voicelessness, the Amphibian Man is repeatedly shown chained, beaten, and brutally tortured with an electric cattle prod by the film's antagonist. As Elisabeth Jane Garrels points out, these images evoke a disturbing connection to histories of slavery and forced migration in the Americas, especially in light of the Amphibian Man's South American origins (19). This "dreaded comparison" (Marjorie Spiegel, in Weik von Mossner et al. 375) does a disservice both to social justice and environmentalist causes. Critics have already raised questions about

the way the film's oversimplified portrayal of diverse positionalities "threatens to override the particularity of their individual identity-based disenfranchisements" (Mitchell and Snyder 155). For Black audiences in particular—marginalised even by the narrative of the film as background examples of oppression—comparisons between slavery and the Amphibian Man's torture might appear to reinforce rather than challenge the equation of Blackness with animality undergirding Western conceptions of the human (Plumwood 53; Jackson 14). Inversely, from an animal studies perspective, the emphasis on human histories of suffering seems to reduce the animal body to a symbol and thus prevent any true ethical and affective engagement with the nonhuman (Weik van Mossner et al. 377). As Weik van Mossner, W.P. Małecki, and Malgorzata Dobrowolska explain, "for most readers, the perspective of a human being is by default more important than the perspective of a non-human being, and the suffering of humans more important than the suffering of animals" (370-371).[22] We might therefore question whether *The Shape of Water*'s creation of a hydro-erotic alliance between its nonnormative and nonhuman characters truly affects a sense of "towardness" in response to the monstrous body, or if it only seeks to inspire a greater acceptance for its diverse disenfranchised human characters (by all means, a no less worthy—and no less challenging—mission).

Abjection of the Normative

At the same time as it uses its characters' desire for the monster to establish an alliance of the voiceless, *The Shape of Water* repurposes monstrous abjection to deliver a scathing critique of the normative human ideals that cause monstering in the first place. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the portrayal of the story's antagonist: Occam's ruthlessly sadistic head of security, Colonel Richard Strickland (Michael Shannon), a master subject disturbingly similar to *A Door into Ocean's* General Realgar. Where the Amphibian Man serves as a utopian symbol for society's voiceless monsters—its queer, racialised, and disabled subjects—there is no question that Strickland functions as his foil and as a representation of seemingly ideal embodiment, a veritable "spectacle of able-bodied heteronormativity" (McRuer 3). Yet beneath the surface of perfection, Strickland represents a different idea of the monster altogether, one more in line with Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock's conception of contemporary monstrosity as a danger deceptively decoupled from physical appearance ("Invisible

[22] For instance, they find that in Alice Walker's essay "Am I Blue?" the author's efforts to draw a parallel between the suffering of farm animals and the experiences of African American women fall short because concern for the latter supersedes concern of the former.

Monsters" 373); embodying the normative ideal of America (straight, White, male, able-bodied, and middle-class), Strickland would conventionally play the role of the action-film hero, whose mission is to tame or slay the monster by the story's end (think of *Creature From the Black Lagoon*'s David Reed or police chief Martin Brody in *Jaws*). Yet, in *The Shape of Water*'s subversive narrative, he is a villain akin to the normatively embodied but corrupt antagonists of Todd Browning's *Freaks,* and Giles' opening narration identifies him unambiguously as "the monster who tried to destroy it all."

And, indeed, destruction and domination is precisely what Strickland engages in throughout the film, from his initial capturing and torturing of the Amphibian Man straight through to his regular harassment of the film's female characters at work and at home. Michael Shannon plays the character with convincing malice, looming over the other characters while lit from below in a way that casts haunting shadows across his pale and scowling face (see Figure 5). As a testament to the film's production during the #MeToo era, he is first introduced aggressively urinating in front of Zelda and Elisa as they clean the men's room at the research facility, the blood-stained cattle-prod he always carries resting menacingly on the sink behind him. Later, he is seen sadistically silencing his wife in bed, while we learn that he fetishizes Elisa's muteness as a sign of powerlessness. A personification of toxic heteromasculinity, he is truly an exemplar of a "predatory, misogynist, racist," who sees himself as a hero yet is driven by hatred and fear of all things different (Wilde et al. 1529).[23] This type of characterisation is of course why some critics have described the film as somewhat heavy-handed in its feminist message. However, Strickland's character serves a function that is almost as important as the Amphibian Man's for the film's subversion of the human-monster boundary. By offering a common enemy, Strickland unites the disparate characters of the film into their alliance, which, in the novelisation of the film, even includes Strickland's abused wife, Elaine, who rebels against her husband in order to seek work as a secretary and ends up forming a close connection to Giles as they both navigate the straight, male corporate world as outsiders. Indeed, as Gaard points out, coalitional social movements are built not on perfect unity but on the pursuit of a shared desire for liberation ("Toward a Queer Ecofeminism" 132).

At the same time, Strickland's own corporeality is monstered throughout the film as a means to shift the boundaries of the monstrous and subvert the notion of normality—again,

[23] More colourful descriptions of the character proliferate online. I especially enjoy Kim Nicolini's version: "Dick's 'strict land' is one cluster fuck of white privilege, Christian hypocrisy, global power, racism, sexism, xenophobia, and self-righteousness."

Figure 5. Eerie use of lighting and camera angles underscores Strickland's domineering personality and status as the film's monster. Stills from The Shape of Water.

much like *A Door into Ocean*'s Realgar. At the most basic level, Strickland's over-the-top performance of toxic masculinity imparts the film with a feminist message about the harm caused by a strict adherence to traditional gender roles, as his behaviour causes damage both to himself and to the people he tries to dominate through violence. More profoundly, Strickland's physical degeneration throughout the film, and his association with abject bodily fluids like blood, pus, and urine, reveals the monstrousness inherent to all forms of embodiment, including the normative ideal. As Barbara Creed explains in the introduction to *The Monstrous-Feminine*, drawing on Kristeva's work on the abject, "Images of blood, vomit, pus, shit, etc., are central to our culturally/socially constructed notions of the horrific" and thus constitute a threat to the "self's clean and proper body" (13). Strickland might consider himself as Man made in God's image; as he explains to Zelda, with reference to the Amphibian Man being worshipped as a deity in the Amazon: "We're created in the Lord's image. You don't think that's what the Lord looks like, do you? … He looks like a human,

like me. Or even you. Maybe a little more like me, I guess." However, even his White, male, cisgendered body has the capacity to become abject, as evidenced by his leaking and slowly decomposing fingers. Unsuccessfully reattached following a struggle with the Amphibian Man at the beginning of the film, Strickland's left pinkie and ring fingers soon begin to bleed, bloat, and blacken. In an exaggerated performance of masculine self-sufficiency, Strickland refuses to seek medical attention and so the stinking, gangrenous fingers become the film's abject object as they are literally rejected by his own body and by every other character in the film. For Strickland, the leaking fingers are used as another tool to assert control over women; while having sex with his wife, he smears blood across her face and covers her mouth when she protests. Later, while interrogating Zelda about her role in the creature's escape, he tears off his own fingers in an unsuccessful attempt at intimidation. As many feminist theorists argue, containment and separation are the strategies that produce and secure normality (see Butler J., *Undoing Gender* 31-32; Shildrick, *Embodying* 30). By breaching the boundaries of the self-contained body, Strickland's fingers point to a critical failure within the boundaries of the human ideal and the dystopian surface world of US society.

Indeed, this breach occurs not only on the individual level of Strickland's body but extends to a much more significant abjection of the ideals and ethics of the 1960s US society he represents. Just as the film transforms the horror film creature from an object of disgust to one of utopian desire, Strickland's oozing fingers transform their owner's embodiment from a desirable ideal to an abject failure. As Creed points out, the abjection of bodily wastes serves to "fill the subject—both the protagonist in the text and the spectator in the cinema—with disgust and loathing" (13). Recalling the earlier discussion of the cultural functions of abjection and disgust, Ahmed explains that disgust "is clearly dependent upon contact; it involves a relationship of touch and proximity between the surfaces of bodies and objects" (85). At the same time, Ngai argues that what makes the disgusting object "abhorrent is precisely its outrageous claim for desirability" (*Ugly Feelings* 335). It follows that every object associated with Strickland's character, while initially presented as desirable, make a similar transition into becoming objects of disgust. This applies to the wedding ring that originally belongs on Strickland's severed finger, the symbol of a marriage that is soon revealed to be superficial and abusive. It applies also to the brand-new teal Cadillac Coupe DeVille Strickland buys himself midway through the film, swayed by the salesman's claim that "four out of five successful men in America drive a Cadillac." As Strickland strokes the side of the gleaming car with his putrefying fingers, this masculinist and quintessentially American symbol of consumerism, techno-scientific progress, and stultifying normative

success becomes the rotten centre of a culture that would rather treat a newly discovered sentient lifeform as a military "asset" than attempt to meet it with response-ability, prioritising resource extraction over multispecies survival even during a time of mass extinctions. Indeed, it is especially in contrast with Strickland's vision of progress that the Amphibian Man comes to represent the possibility of a more caring world based on an engagement with the erotic. In juxtaposition to the fluid times and spaces associated with the Amphibian Man, and to Giles' queer arts of failure, Strickland's ideal of right-wing nationalist perfection is rigidly ideological and teleological, set on maintaining the status quo and securing progress at all costs. Strickland's home and family life resemble nothing so much as Giles' most disingenuous paintings, complete with blindingly superficial smiles and artificial brand-name desserts. Even Giles' contrived Jell-O slogan—"The future is here!"—resonates perfectly with Strickland's obsessive belief in national progress.

By rescuing the Amphibian Man from vivisection in the name of national military progress, Elisa and her alliance of monstered subjects end up forming a coalitional movement that resists Strickland's diseased value system and instead replaces it with more healthy forms of worldmaking. Indeed, the rescue mission converts Elisa and Giles' unassailable longing for connections forbidden by the dominant culture into direct and spectacular action. In this way, the film uses the monster figure to critique the normative human ideal and offer alternate modes of futurity and coalitional movement based on acceptance across diverse lines of difference; to quote Lorde: the film's celebration of alterity "give[s] us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama" (*Sister Outsider* 49). Indeed, far from monstering the nonnormative, the film points to the necessity of the monstrous as a timely intervention against the "straight time" and oppressively nationalist future represented by Strickland (Muñoz 25). As if to emphasise the transnational stakes of this intervention, Elisa's group of friends receive help from a Soviet spy (Michael Stuhlbarg) working undercover as a scientist at Occam. While his primary goal is to gather intelligence for his government, this seditious but compassionate spy's commitment to the ethics of science overrides his loyalty to his Soviet handlers, and in the end he is willing to risk his life to ensure that the Amphibian Man survives. With the involvement of diverse characters in the alliance, the film seems to present us with a model for the kind of transnational multispecies response-ability that Ursula Heise calls eco-cosmopolitanism (61) and Rosi Braidotti calls species egalitarianism ("Four Theses" 32). Even if anthropocentric concerns end up overriding any empathy experienced toward the nonhuman, the film demonstrates the promises and possibilities of accepting

response-ability for those other to ourselves, and for cooperating across the lines that divide us toward a more fluid conception of kinship.

Will-full Futures

Throughout this chapter, I have read *The Shape of Water* as an affective intervention into perceptions of otherness and as a call for more response-able ethics by means of intersectional and interspecies coalition. I have also argued that the film abjects normality in favour of a desire for the monstrous, which in turn expresses a desire for other worlds. Moreover, the film provides an opportunity to queer questions of futurity and embodiment in relation to water—in particular during the final scene where Elisa experiences submersion and merges with an aquatic realm to become a she-monster. In the previous chapter, I explored the will-full feminist utopia of Joan Slonczewski's' *A Door Into Ocean,* arguing that the novel presents an imaginary of hopeful but ongoing struggle for a liveable future through its engagement with ecofeminism and post-colonialism. Here, I would like to expand the utopian framework presented in Slonczewski's novel by considering the queer and posthuman possibilities offered by the aquatic environment of *The Shape of Water.* Specifically, it is my contention that Elisa's transformation and escape with the creature offers a future imaginary based on queer/crip desires, showing audiences "how to get 'elsewhere,' to other ways of being that might be more just and sustainable" (Kafer 2)—contrary to some critics' claims that the film's interspecies romance ends up perpetuating the dehumanisation of nonnormative ability.

Since its cinematic release in 2017, *The Shape of Water* has been associated with one particular image from the film's final scene. This still has been used extensively for promotional materials and covers as it highlights both the film's unconventional take on the monstrous and its fairy tale aesthetics (see Figure 6). Most will be familiar with the image, whether or not they have watched the film; it shows Elisa and the Amphibian Man locked in a passionate embrace underwater, their figures outlined by the creature's glowing

Figure 6. Escape into death or fairy tale transformation? Elisa and the Amphibian Man at the end of del Toro's film. Still from The Shape of Water.

bioluminescence against the murky blue background. Flashes of red advertise the film's romantic and transgressive plot, in Elisa's flowing crimson dress and in the high-heeled shoe that suggestively slips off her foot to drift into the dark waters below. This lost shoe evokes the classical Hollywood cliché of romantic surrender (Garrels 25),[24] but also something of *The Wizard of Oz'*s (1939) ruby slippers, or the mermaid's loss of legs upon re-entering the sea. It begs the question: does this scene evoke a homecoming or some kind of departure, wish-full escapism of a will-full transformation? What is not visible within the frame of this still is the trail of blood left in the water by the sinking couple, or the congregation of police and abandoned allies left standing on the pier above. Nor the fact that, "Aqueous entanglement offers both a queer erotic potential and, often in the same moment, the foreclosure of that potentiality" (Chow and Bushman 97). Although framed as the fulfilment of a fairy tale romance, Elisa and the Amphibian Man's descent is really the result of the film's final chase and battle, an escape into an unknown future that can be read in different and contradictory ways. In light of queer/crip theories of embodiment, desire, and futurity, it becomes pertinent to ask whether this ending perpetuates narratives of segregation or curative intervention, or if it perhaps points to more fluid and promising possibilities.

Let me begin with a closer reading of *The Shape of Water*'s submersion scene, which is clearly inspired by the cinematic affects of the melodrama more than the creature feature. The scene takes place amidst the driving rain at the edge of one of Baltimore's canals, as

[24] Garrels' explains: "losing, or kicking off, a shoe is also a classical Hollywood cliché with clear sexual connotations. Under the Hays Code, an erotic scene about to become more sexual often closed with one or both of the lovers dropping a shoe, which was to be understood as the beginning of the strip that the audience was not allowed to see. The woman lost her shoe as she surrendered to love" (25).

Elisa bids an anguished farewell to the Amphibian Man who is about swim back into the ocean. The melodrama of this moment is doubly underscored by the swelling, sorrowful music, as Elisa signs furiously for the creature to return to the water and leave her behind, confirming the lack of a possible future for their transgressive relationship. The creature, however, refuses to go, resulting in a stalemate that is abruptly broken by the intrusion of Strickland—and with him, the norms of the heteropatriarchal dominant culture—into the otherwise romantic scene. As the score turns abruptly threatening, Strickland looms into the scene, his face lit from below to make him resemble Boris Karloff's unsympathetic performance of Frankenstein's monster in *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). Seeking to restore the boundaries of the proper by enforcing his ideal of masculine control, Strickland shoots and kills both monster and woman. His victory, however, is short lived; as thunder rolls in the background, the creature rises again as all horror creatures do, especially those with god-like powers. Contrary to genre convention, a low angle is used here not to represent threat, but to portray the Amphibian Man as a kind of superhero, rising slowly into view as he brushes off the bullet wounds in his chest, before abruptly transitioning back to animality and ripping into Strickland's throat. With Elisa still seemingly dead, the Amphibian Man carries her off into the canal in a scene that subverts the kidnapping scene from *Creature from the Black Lagoon*. As the pair sinks, the camera follows to show Elisa drifting lifelessly amidst a cloud of blood with light streaming ethereally from above. A piano and violin play the film's wistful and whimsical main theme as the Amphibian Man embraces Elisa's body in an effort to heal her. As he carefully brushes his claw across the scars on her neck, they do not disappear. Instead, they transform into gills, and Elisa gasps as she draws the first breath of her new submerged existence as a she-monster. Meanwhile, Giles, left behind above amidst converging police cars, narrates the couple's everlasting happiness while the screen fades to black:

> If I told you about her, what would I say? That they lived happily ever after? I believe they did. That they were in love. That they remained in love. I'm sure that's true. But when I think of her—of Elisa—the only thing that comes to mind is a poem, whispered by someone in love, hundreds of years ago: 'Unable to perceive the shape of you, I find you all around me. Your presence fills my eyes with your love. It humbles my heart, for you are everywhere.'

The film's closing poem references fairy tale endings, utopian longing, and, most importantly, water as an element that is malleable, ubiquitous, and now permeated by Elisa's love for the Amphibian Man and the alternate world he represents. This gives the impression that the two will share a hopeful future free from the domination of the heteropatriarchal society on shore.

The audience, however, might feel far less certain of Elisa's fate, as we are left with multiple unanswered questions: Are the creature's powers enough to heal her, or does she die from her wounds? Is Elisa transformed into an amphibious being herself, or do her scars indicate that this was always her true form? Can she really live out her days in this underwater realm, accompanied only by a monster? And finally, is this underwater realm part of the film's universe, or only a figment of Giles' or Elisa's wish-full imagination? Indeed, by ending on such an ambiguous note, the film leaves its own stance on queer/crip possibilities of survival open to interpretation. For all that it celebrates the monstrous and different, *The Shape of Water* has therefore been construed by a number of critics as contributing to the dehumanisation of nonnormatively embodied people within mainstream cinema. This is not surprising considering Hollywood's history of presenting disability as a pitiful spectacle of abnormality; as Michael T. Hayes and Rhonda S. Black put it, on-screen disability is ordered "into a network of paternalistic power relations that confines those with disabilities and articulates confinement as a social obligation" (n.p.); or, as Martin F. Norden puts it, mainstream cinema often "enhances the disabled characters' isolation and 'Otherness' by reducing them to objectifications of pity, fear, scorn, etc.—in short, objects of spectacle—as a means of pandering to the needs of the able-bodied majority" (1). With these critiques in mind, Elisa's escape from the human world might not seem so hopeful after all.

Indeed, even decades after these critical works were published, confinement and pity seem to remain the dominant narratives of disability, especially when it comes to women. Apart from Randa Haines' *Children of a Lesser God* (1986), *The Shape of Water* is still one of very few notable films to present an independent and sexually active disabled woman on screen. The main problem with *The Shape of Water* is that, where *Children of a Lesser God* (1986) casts deaf actress Marlee Matlin to play the deaf heroine, Sally Hawkins does not share Elisa's impairment. As many critics have pointed out, this is evident in Hawkins' limited mastery of American Sign Language—and in the film's memorable inclusion of a

musical number where Elisa suddenly bursts into song (Wilde et al.).[25] Beyond this, as discussed previously, many have taken issue with the parallel the film draws between Elisa's nonnormative functioning and the Amphibian Man's nonhuman embodiment. For instance, when Elisa appeals to Giles for her kinship with the creature, she signs: "I move my mouth like him. I make no sound like him. What does that make me?" in a way that implies she too is nonhuman. Coupled with the fact that Elisa becomes romantically entangled with a literal creature, many critics have taken this as a judgement against disability rather than a critique of the way disability is perceived by normative society. In an enraged review of the film for the sf magazine *Tor,* Elsa Sjunneson-Henry writes that, "*The Shape of Water* made me feel less human." For all the film's proclamations about universal love and acceptance, it seems unable to move beyond Hollywood's equation of disability with abject abnormality; in Sjunneson-Henry's words: "Of course society would rather imagine a disabled woman living under water with the only creature that has ever loved her, rather than imagining her above the waves, being loved and desired by the other humans in her life."

Such a reading of *The Shape of Water* is more than reasonable considering Hollywood's history of staging disability through what Norden calls "the cinema of isolation," estranging disabled characters from able-bodied human society both narratively and symbolically (1). Indeed, it makes sense that critics would read the film as another tragedy of impairment; after all, Elisa is not only ultimately banished from human society, but the scars that seem to explain her mutism are even healed by the creature's touch, implying a stereotypically curative Hollywood narrative about disability (Kafer 29). Furthermore, *The Shape of Water* is a self-declared melodrama and monster film, both genres predicated on the containment and repression of transgressive bodies and desires. As Susan Hayward puts it, the melodrama "dreams of the unobtainable—emotions, including hope, rise only to be dashed, and for this reason the melodrama is ultimately masochistic" (218). Indeed, when forces of transgressive attraction and societal repression meet, tragedy always looms as a possible conclusion more likely than social change (Wartenberg 7). Thus, even with the underwater scene and Giles' hopeful speculation, there is no way to watch *The Shape of Water's* conclusive dive into the canal without wondering about the possibilities of these characters' futures. Elisa and the creature seem to remain hovering indefinitely on the edge between life and death, forever beyond the reach of their human allies.

[25] Impairment-matching in film is a complicated subject, but since Hawkins is in fact lip-synching to a recording by acclaimed soprano singer Renée Fleming, her non-muteness in this case seems a moot point.

While I find such a reading dramatically compelling, it leaves little hope for imagining futures based on the transformative embodiment and ethics of submersion. Indeed, if Elisa dies, disappears, or magically recovers from her disability, del Toro's message of universal acceptance and celebratory difference might appear decidedly less buoyant. At the very least, the film would prove itself subject to the dystopian constraints of Cold War and contemporary political reality, much in the same way as Joan Slonczewski's *A Door into Ocean*. For such a reading to work, I would have to ignore how the film, prior to the ending, subverts the affects of the monstrous and presents the figure of the creature as a hydro-erotic symbol of desirable difference and more-than-human ethical response-ability (Bushman and Chow). Furthermore, I would have to overlook the fact that the film is framed by a fairy tale narrative that, from the very beginning, alerts audiences to the subversive and transformative capacities of desire and water. With the understanding that full inclusion and recognition within the human remain an unachieved goal for many who have been deemed monsters by the dominant culture, I am not going to argue against Sjunneson-Henry's reading. What I would like to do is to present a more reparative reading in line with the rejection of the human as a universal ideal which takes place in submersion stories.

Counter to critiques of *The Shape of Water*'s dehumanisation of disability, Elisa's mutism is in fact never presented as a problem by the film's narrative—unlike Matlin's character's muteness in *Children of a Lesser God.* Quite the contrary, as argued previously, del Toro's film denounces the oppressively normative society that persecutes Elisa and every other nonnormative character in the story. Indeed, as part of the film's celebration of monstrousness and difference, disability appears more in terms of natural human variation than individual and pathological abnormality, with the result that what McRuer calls "compulsory able-bodiedness" is revealed as performative along the same lines as compulsory heterosexuality (2). At the same time, Elisa's character appears less like a reiteration of Hollywood's pitiful take on disability than as a new representation of queer/crip sensibility.[26] Indeed, I would argue Elisa is in fact resisting both compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory heterosexuality by escaping with the creature, eliding the curative narrative

[26] Alison Wilde, Gill Crenshaw, and Alison Sheldon have already written a piece in support of the film's positive contributions to mainstream representations of disability. Regarding Elisa, they write that: "The main reason we love this film is because it depicts a disabled woman who has agency and whose actions change her life and those of the people closest to her. We all agreed that Elisa Esposito (Sally Hawkins) confounds preconceptions and shows leadership and determination. This is a strong woman who knows what she wants and what is right" (1529). When it comes to Elisa's relationship with the Amphibian Man, they conclude that: "Rather than demeaning them both, her choice of love for a being defined entirely by his difference, adds to the beauty of the story and sends a strong message about the validity of disabled people's relationships" (1531).

and avoiding the "[move] away from disability to a picture-perfect (heterosexual, able-bodied) Hollywood ending" critiqued by McRuer (25). By reading Elisa's mutism as crip and her desire for the creature as queer, it becomes possible to understand del Toro's film as engaging in a reimagining of the future according to a utopian "politics of crip futurity" (Kafer 3), one that celebrates nonnormative embodiment while seeking political change rather than medical intervention or segregation (6). For one thing, where *Children of a Lesser God*'s "hero" insists that Matlin's character learns to speak, the Amphibian Man never tries to "cure" Elisa's disability (though it is implied he has the power to do so); instead, the two are shown to engage in more tactile and affective modes of communication that transcend language and open up for more response-able ways of relating across ontological borders. In this sense, queer and crip identities function as the film's site of resistance and hope against the compulsory normativity of the human.

As such, del Toro's film does not engage in the usual isolation of queer/crip and monstered subjects so much as it seeks to imagine alternatives to an oppressive society that forbids nonnormative bodies and desires. In fact, the film uses its transgressive romance as a vehicle for social critique, undermining the societal assumptions that oppose the unlikely couple's union (Wartenberg 3). In this sense, *The Shape of Water* reads less like a tragic melodrama and more like a fairy tale for adults that uses the fantastic to explore disenfranchised characters' struggles against an oppressive society.[27] Whether wittingly or not, *The Shape of Water*'s ending almost perfectly replicates the conclusion to Ron Howard's romantic comedy *Splash* (1984), an iconic mermaid film second only to Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989). While this mostly family-friendly (barring some nudity) rom-com might seem like an unpromising place to look for queer social critique, I believe the film shares *The Shape of Water*'s hydro-erotic subversion of normative desire, embodiment, and futurity. Indeed, whereas water serves as a site for encounters and connections across species throughout the film, culture, as Susan Felleman points out, is represented as "ridiculous and oppressive … particularly in figures of male authority" (126). *Splash* features a then-

[27] Think, for instance, of Louise O'Neill's feminist retelling of H.C. Andersen's classic fairy-tale "The Little Mermaid" in *The Surface Breaks*; set in equally patriarchal terrestrial and underwater kingdoms, the narrative's solution lies in the mermaid's transformation into rusalka, a vengeful water sprite that preys upon men with her community of fallen sisters. Or, alternately, think of Yumiko Kurahashi's retelling, where the story ends with the merging of mermaid and prince, both of them transforming into a hybrid of species, sex, and gender (in Bacchilega and Brown). Likewise, several reimagined fairy-tales that deal with transgressive romance have increasingly abandoned the idea that both partners need to become fully human in order for the relationship to succeed; Robin McKinley's rewriting of *Beauty and the Beast* in the romance novel *Rose Daughter* (1997) has the beast remain bestial, while Dreamworks' *Shrek* (2001) has its human princess transform into an ogre with true love's kiss.

unknown Tom Hanks as an average New York businessman, Allen, who unwittingly falls in love with a mermaid who once rescued him from drowning as a child. Just like del Toro's film*, Splash* ends with its human-nonhuman couple cornered at the end of a pier by government agents. With the amphibious half of the pair running out of time on land, the human faces a choice between remaining in the surface world or pursuing their partner into an unknown underwater realm. In both cases, the human makes a last-minute decision to leave what they know behind, instead becoming submerged and adapting to an aqueous existence. The main difference is that where *The Shape of Water*'s ending takes place under a deluge of rain and darkness, *Splash* features only blue skies and sun—in keeping with the more light-hearted and comedic plot. Eschewing the mermaid's conventional self-sacrifice (Anicca 379), *Splash'*s Madison (Darryl Hannah) persuades Allen to give up his longstanding dreams of normative success (throughout the film he dreams, above all, of a prosperous career and a nuclear family) in favour of a fugitive future of "queer failure" in the unfathomable depths (Halberstam 1). As the couple swims away, hand in hand, toward an underwater kingdom on the horizon, Allen happily discards his suit jacket and with it his ties to the human (and capitalist) world. Thus, despite the Disneyfied boy-meets-girl plot, *Splash* seems to offer a window into a world of alternative desires for crip embodiment and futurity similar to *A Shape of Water*.

In both films, the fairy tale romance is shown to engage in a form of critique as it shows how "the lovers triumph over adversity" and achieve a fuller sense of possibility and realization than their world initially allows (Wartenberg 7-8). Thus, when Elisa transforms at the end of del Toro's film, she seems to be following in the footsteps of other fairy tale heroines willing to defy societal expectations to realise her desires. In offering aquatic environments as an escape from societal restraints, *The Shape of Water* and *Splash* both engage in a utopian project of queering/cripping the future and imagining alternative ways of being outside the here and now of the present (Kafer 28). Significantly, they never offer assimilation or becoming human as a solution to the conflict between social conventions and the protagonists' nonnormative desires and bodies. Instead, they seem to engage in a reimagining of the future that instead depends on a rejection of rigid categories, boundaries, and narratives made possible through submersion. In *The Shape of Water*, the she-monster or mermaid thus emerges as a "figure of an empowered crip-feminist identity" in line with the subversive and will-full performances of crip mermaiding outlined in the introduction to this chapter (Anicca 382).

Will-fullness, as explored in the dissertation introduction, is a prerequisite to seeking utopian transformation, in contrast to the mere wish-full escapism of individual change (Levitas, "Educated Hope" 15). To be willful, according to Ahmed, is also to seek happiness outside the boundaries of the prescribed; it is a "failure to comply with those whose authority is given" and a "persistence in the face of having been brought down" (*Willful Subjects,* 1-2). Combining these definitions, the will-fullness expressed through Elisa's transformation at the end of *The Shape of Water* reads less like the last resort of a woman excluded by normative society than a tenacious and deliberate refusal to be confined by conventional narratives. Willfulness is also "perverted" in the sense that it opposes the acceptable (4), and as such it leads us full circle back to the monster and its capacity to transform the boundaries of bodies and worlds. Indeed, according to Patricia MacCormack's posthuman feminist teratology, to willingly become a monster, as Elisa does, is to embrace a subversive identity position in order to challenge established ideas regarding normalcy and perversion, embodiment and desire ("Perversion" n.p.). The process, she warns, is fraught with the risk of perpetuating the monstering of difference, but it also holds the potential to dissolve dichotomous and hierarchical categories. In this sense, becoming she-monster is worth the risk, as it can serve as "an ethical tactic towards transformation as much as it is a subversive one" (n.p.), offering the hope that difference can serve as a foundation rather than obstacle to response-able ethics.

Conclusion

I began this chapter with an epigraph from Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock claiming that "We love our monsters because through them we indulge our desire for other worlds" (*The Monster Theory Reader* 20). Combining his reading of monsters as expressions of utopian desire with director Guillermo del Toro's self-professed love for all things monstrous, I turned to the romantic fantasy monster film *The Shape of Water* to examine its depiction of submersion. Placing del Toro's film within a contemporary trend of sympathising with the monstrous, I argued that the film subverts the negative affects typically associated with monsters in order to inspire more positive affects like hope and desire, which in turn may lead to new alliances and ethical transformation. With this argument in mind, I first examined the classic creature feature *Creature from the Black Lagoon* which inspired del Toro to create *The Shape of Water.* Drawing on feminist affect theory, I discussed the feelings of disgust that "stick" to the monstrous body on screen and create a sense of "awayness" for most viewers (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 12), and I noted the racialisation of these boundary-making affects within the horror genre. I then looked at del Toro's own subversive reading of *Creature from the*

Black Lagoon in terms of utopian longing and examined how his identification with the monster became the basis for *The Shape of Water*'s celebration of difference. Here, I especially focused on how the Amphibian Man's design and Sally Hawkins' performance combine to make the interspecies romantic relationship believable and on how water functions within the film as a medium for transgressive desires.

Shifting focus from affects to ethics, I next examined how del Toro's Amphibian Man becomes the basis for the film's intersectional alliance of marginalised human characters. Affected but also troubled by *The Shape of Water*'s use of strategic anthropomorphism in its portrayal of the nonhuman creature, I wondered whether concern for identity politics superseded the film's investment in more-than-human and response-able ethics, and whether the use of "voicelessness" as metaphor might conflate disability with animality. The answer I found was ambiguous, as the Amphibian Man acts both as a mirror for the projection of the human characters' experiences of oppression and as the embodiment of an "ancient force" ("A Fairy Tale for Troubled Times") that might be best read in terms of the transformative feminine power Audre Lorde calls "the erotic" (*Sister Outsider* 46). In this sense, the Amphibian Man serves as a call for a queer ecofeminist coalition capable of reclaiming "nature" from the dominant culture's practises of domination (Gaard, "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism" 122). This reading is supported by the fact that the film's antagonist Colonel Strickland—the embodiment of White toxic heteromasculinity—acts as the Amphibian Man's foil and is made abject through his association with bodily fluids and conventional markers of success.

The crowning moment of the film's celebration of difference comes when Elisa chooses submersion and an unfathomable future by becoming a she-monster and joining the Amphibian Man. Like Spinel's decision to become a Sharer in *A Door into Ocean*, or Allen's choice to spend the rest of his life underwater in *Splash*, Elisa's submersion is also a choice of alternative kinships and desires—though we are perhaps less used to thinking about disabled women's choices in these terms. As Taylor notes, "resistance takes many forms, some of which may be hard to recognize from an able-bodied human perspective" (Taylor 34). Indeed, to renounce normativity is much harder for those who have been deemed monsters than those whose human status has never been subject to doubt. Where Allen's choice is made after a brief consideration of whether underwater existence is worth missing out on family holidays, Elisa's decision marks the difference between life and death for her and for the "ancient force of life" represented by the Amphibian Man ("A Fairy Tale for Troubled Times"). Even *A Door into Ocean*'s Spinel has the choice to return to his family

Figure 7. Giles and Zelda linking arms as they watch Elisa's descent, perhaps hinting at the alliance's continuation. Still from The Shape of Water.

(and does so midway through the story), though in the end he decides to remain with Lystra and the other Sharers on Shora. Here, submersion is an act toward greater freedom and connection. By contrast, I have argued that *The Shape of Water* uses submersion to position the ocean as a place of both violence and healing, home and someplace else, both connecting Elisa and the creature to each other and separating them from their human allies above (see Chow and Bushman 110). Indeed, in merging with the aquatic environment, Elisa not only escapes the constraints of a rigid terrestrial society but she also will-fully exceeds the limitations that society places on the possibilities and desires of queer and crip subjects.

On the surface, Elisa's submersion seems to achieve little more than escapism; Strickland may be dead and the transgressive romance fulfilled, but heteropatriarchal society will persist and Giles and Zelda are left as isolated and voiceless as before, perhaps even more so, having lost their only friend. This might give reason to question the film's will-full utopian project and instead read *The Shape of Water* as a wish-full iteration of melodrama's tendency toward individual happiness and change over societal transformation (Williams, "Melodrama Revised" 74). Yet *The Shape of Water* concludes on a hopeful note that indicates Elisa's embrace of the monstrous has reverberated beyond her own individual actions. Right before the camera follows her into the depths, we see Giles link arms with Zelda, who has just arrived with the police, their bodies outlined in black as they look out across the water and the rain at their vanished friends (see Figure 7). These characters have only met briefly before and have little in common, but they seem to know instinctively that

they have taken part in an act of subversive transformation that is not yet complete. As in Slonczewski's novel, this noncompletion is key, as it alerts audiences to the work that still remains to be done in the real world. By retaining a measure of critical realism, *The Shape of Water* attests to the utopian function of Hollywood film (Dyer, "Entertainment" 20), revealing the gap between the world we have and the one we could have, inspiring hope and desire for change.[28] As the credits roll, we might join Giles in speculating about the happiness of this ending and its prospects for transforming the world we inhabit, imagining a future that "approaches like a crashing wave of potentiality" (Muñoz 185).

[28] Dyer refers to Hollywood's utopian function in terms of its capacity to both reproduce and contest patriarchal-capitalist ideology; while Hollywood films rarely present alternate utopian worlds à la Thomas More, they do present a utopian mode of feeling through the hope for those different worlds, whatever they may look like: "It presents, head-on as it were, what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized" ("Entertainment" 20).

Chapter Three: Flight and Transformation in Afrofuturist Mermaid Stories

"Hurray I awake from yesterday / Alive but the war is here to stay / So my love Catherina and me / Decide to take our last walk through the noise to the sea / Not to die but to be reborn / Away from the lands so battered and torn / Forever forever"

—Jimi Hendrix, "1983... (A Merman I Should Turn to Be)"

"If the sea has been death, it has also been birth."

—Rinaldo Walcott, "The Black Aquatic" (65)

In his 1968 Afrofuturist song "1983… (A Merman I Should Turn to Be)," Jimi Hendrix famously imagines returning to the sea and transforming into a merman as a way of escaping from an oppressive world of violence and war. On the surface, with its drifting tape loops and dreamlike vocals, Hendrix's apocalyptic seascape bears the marks of the 1960s with their psychedelic rock and anti-war movement. However, the song is also carried by a deeper current of ambiguous "black aquatic" imaginaries that, despite the trauma of Middle Passage, locate the ocean as a site of new beginnings and unfathomable futures (Walcott, R. 65). In a recent paper, Renaldo Walcott coins the "black aquatic" as a capacious term to describe this "ambiguous and ambivalent relationship that Black people hold to bodies of water" and the impact of that relationship on Black identities, genealogies, histories, and futures since Middle Passage (65). Similar imagery and themes feature throughout sonic Afrofuturism, from 1970s Parliament-Funkadelic's *Motor Booty Affair* and Lee Scratch Perry's *Black Ark* studio, to 1990s Detroit electronica duo Drexciya and their vast discography detailing a Black militant underwater society formed by the descendants of enslaved women drowned during Middle Passage (Eshun, "Fear of a Wet Planet").[1] Throughout these works, Black mermaids feature as figures of submersion and transformation beyond the human world, hinting at unfathomable futures for Black and more-than-human life.

More recent feminist Afrofuturist works continue to tell stories about Black mermaids as a way to address the history and "afterlives" of slavery across the diaspora (Sharpe 5),

[1] Consisting of the enigmatic James Stinson and Gerald Donald, Drexciya was a Detroit-based electronica duo that operated for a decade between 1992 and 2002, releasing an extensive discography based on "bubbly electronic sounds and sustained currents of noise" (Jue, "Intimate Objectivity" 177).

through diverse media and genres.[2] Octavia Butler's speculative feminist classic *Wild Seed* (1980) has its shapeshifting protagonist Anyanwu escape from the deck of a slave ship by jumping overboard and transforming herself into a dolphin, while Nalo Hopkinson's *The New Moon's Arms* (2007) reimagines the desperate flight of enslaved people overboard during Middle Passage as a "transformative moment" of voluntary metamorphosis into "free-ranging merpeople" (Wisker n.p.). Similar themes emerge in Alexis Pauline Gumbs' experimental and challenging poetry collection *M Archive: After the End of the World* and her short-story "Bluebellow," in Monique Roffey's magical realist novel *The Mermaid of Black Conch* (2020), as well as more popular forms of YA fantasy literature like Zetta Elliott's novella *Mother of the Sea* (2017) and Natasha Bowen's novel *Skin of the Sea* (2021).[3] Artistic short films dealing with the consequences of slavery like Nilja Mu'min's *Deluge* (2012) and Gabrielle Tesfaye's *The Water Will Carry Us Home* (2018) also centre around encounters with Black mermaids, while Lisbon Okorafor's *Ten-Cent Daisy* (2021), subtitled "a lost mermaid tale," has recently appeared as the first feature-length film featuring a Black mermaid as its protagonist, prior to Disney's upcoming *The Little Mermaid* (2023).[4] These works use Black mermaids as figurations to explore the ambiguities of the "black aquatic" as

[2] Often directly inspired by the texts I mention above. In her short story, "2043… (A Merman I Should Turn to Be)," Nisi Shawl pays homage to Hendrix's imagery while dealing more explicitly with questions of Black justice and reparations. In her story, African Americans are given their "40 acres and a mule" underwater off the coast of the United States. Yet they are still hunted via helicopter by White supremacists, sparking tensions in the Black mer community between separatists and integrationists.

[3] Gumbs' short-story "BlueBellow" is about a middle-class Black woman who makes a reverse passage across the Atlantic from the Caribbean to Britain and becomes haunted by mermaid survivors of Middle Passage. *M Archive* includes a section dedicated to oceans that interweaves historical references to Middle Passage with speculative images of humanity's whale-like descendants thriving in post-apocalyptic oceans. Zetta Elliott's novella *Mother of the Sea* tells the story of a young girls' transatlantic crossing which ends with the Orisha Yemoja laying claim to the ship and all its passengers to bring them back "home" (46). Natasha Bowen's YA fantasy novel *Skin of the Sea* (2021) is set in 1400s West Africa during the beginnings of the slave trade and features a Mami Wata protagonist (illustrated on the novel's beautiful book cover) who is tasked by Yemoja with guiding lost souls drowned at sea back to the Yoruba god Oludumare.

[4] Nilja Mu'min's short film *Deluge* is a magical realist story set in New Orleans that "explores African American's [sic] relationships to water, informed by such traumas as The Middle Passage, the BP Oil spill, and Hurricane Katrina" through the eyes of its 14-year-old protagonist Tiana who becomes a witness to the mass drowning of her friends ("nilja mu'min's deluge"). Ethiopian/Jamaican American artist Gabrielle Tesfaye's *The Water Will Carry Us Home* rewrites the history of Middle Passage by imagining that pregnant Black women thrown overboard from slave ships ended up giving birth beneath the waves: "the unimaginable happens when mermaids, who dwell in these waters, save their spirits" (Tesfaye, "film and animation"). *Ten-Cent Daisy* focuses on three sisters who flee to Berkely, California from their home in a small West Indies fishing village following the rape of the youngest, the mysterious Daisy, who was discovered as a child on the shore of the sea and adopted into the family (see Yvonne).

a site of death and rebirth, while also participating in a long tradition of Black diasporic narratives of escape and transformation from slavery.[5]

In this chapter, I read a selection of feminist Afrofuturist mermaid stories from the US that imagine submersion as a process of hope and healing based on the transformative potential of the "black aquatic." As Walcott's concept indicates, Black diasporic cultural production sees the ocean as a place of hybridity, ambiguity, and new possibilities despite the foundational trauma of slavery haunting the Atlantic—or perhaps because of it. According to a recent children's book title from the *1619 Project,* dedicated to examining the afterlives of slavery in the present United States, Black culture was "born on the water," untethered from land, home, and language and forced to recreate itself in the struggle for survival and resistance.[6] These origins have been mapped widely across the African diaspora; Paul Gilroy, Édouard Glissant, and Kamau Braithwaite all argue for the generative power of oceanic crossings from opposite sides of the Atlantic.[7] Reaching back earlier than their theories of the diaspora, Ytasha Womack traces an oceanic African mythology all the way back to the ancient Dogon people of West Africa, whose cosmology posits that amphibious beings descended to earth in an ark from the Sirius system thousands of years ago in order to share "the wisdom of the stars" ("The African Cosmos" 84). She connects this lore to that of the Orishas, Yoruba deities, including the river goddess Oshun, now widely worshiped across the Americas; and to the pan-African figure of Mami Wata (or "Mother Water"), a half-human half-fish/snake deity whose colonial origins are as oceanic and ambiguous as her form and whose very existence troubles Western ontologies (86).[8] The result is an Atlantic Ocean that

[5] Beyond the speculative works mentioned here, stories of escape and transformation are widespread across Black diasporic myth and literature, in slave narratives by Olaudah Equiano, Harriet Jacobs, and Frederick Douglass, and neo-slave narratives as diverse as Toni Morrion's *Beloved,* Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada,* and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad.*

[6] The *1619 Project* is a journalistic initiative developed by Nikole Hannah-Jones alongside writers from *The New York Times* and *The New York Times Magazine* to investigate the afterlives of slavery in the present United States on the 400-year anniversary of the first enslaved Africans' arrival in Virginia. *Born on the Water* is the title of the *1619 Project*'s recent lyrical picture book for children, written by Nikole Hannah-Jones and Renée Watson and illustrated by Nikkolas Smith, illustrating histories of slavery and Black resistance from 1619 to the present.

[7] Barbadian poet Kamau Braithwaite's concept of tidalectics describes an oceanic worldview based on hybridity, fragmentation, and flow, "refusing the European orienting dialectics and simultaneously grounding the repetition in the Caribbean landscape and seascape" (Walcott R. 66). Glissant's "poetics of relation" arise from Middle Passage, giving survivors a "knowledge of the Whole" accessible only to those who have encountered otherness through their experience of errantry and rhizomatic (up)rooting (8-11). Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* draws on W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness to theorise Black cultures and identities throughout the diaspora as hybrid, transnational, transient, and modern in their alienating rootlessness, a counterculture to White Western colonial societies.

[8] Mami Wata is a culturally hybrid figure inspired by African Indigenous freshwater spirits, mermaid myths brought by European colonisers, and by the lore of Christian and Muslim saints across the Black diaspora;

functions not only as a gravesite, but also an origin and a conduit for transnational cultural transformation—"both a burial ground and the space of a new beginning" (Mayer 561).

This diverse theoretical and mythological seascape serves as inspiration for more recent Black speculative engagements with the ocean as a site of alienation and, as Womack argues, constitutes an important background for Afrofuturism ("The African Cosmos" 80). In the broadest possible sense of the word, Afrofuturism refers to a transmedial and transnational pan-African speculative movement that works toward reimaging the future of Black people across the diaspora by remixing narratives of the past (cf. Anderson and Jones; Lavender, *Afrofuturism Rising*; Lavender and Yaszek).[9] Key to this denomination is the understanding that Black diasporic experience is speculative in and of itself, involving alien encounters and abductions by European colonisers and slavers as well as the experience of *becoming* the alien other via processes of racialisation, animalisation, and dehumanisation (Lavender, *Race* 8). Toni Morrison, for one, famously argues that enslaved Africans were the first moderns in their experience of alienation during their capture and abuse under slavery (in Eshun, "Further Considerations" 288), while Hortense Spillers similarly claims that Black people in the present United States "inhabit all the times and spaces and places of the alien" ("Shades of Intimacy"). Following this metaphor to its logical conclusion, Kodwo Eshun asserts that, "Black existence and science fiction are one and the same" ("Further

according to Nettrice Gaskins, this means she embodies a form of double consciousness that exists both by virtue of and contrary to Western epistemologies (Gaskins, "Mami Wata Remixed" 196). In an introduction to an exhibit featuring Mami Wata and other African water spirits, Henry John Drewal notes, "her very name is in pidgin English, a language developed to lubricate trade" in an increasingly global capitalist world (60). Aside from her fish/snake forms, it is also not unheard of for her to appear in the form of a beautiful woman or femme fatale, "in high heels, dressed to the nines and wearing stylish sunglasses" (Bacchilega and Brown 274), as she does in one of her many incarnations in Okorafor's *Lagoon*, discussed at the end of this chapter.

[9] The term "Afrofuturism" was originally coined in 1994 by the White cultural critic Mark Dery in an article called "Black to the Future" which focused on African American engagements with sf and technoculture. Here, Dery somewhat narrowly defined Afrofuturism as: "Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (180). Since then, the definition has been reclaimed and reworked by Black critics to describe a movement that deals as much in the ethico-political futurities of global Blackness as in technoscientific ones situated only in the United States (Lavender, *Afrofuturism Rising* 7-8). The fluidity of the genre, both in terms of transmediality and transnationalism, has also led to expansions of Dery's original definition into Afrofuturism 2.0 (and perhaps even 3.0), a development that "reflects [the movement's] current growth as an emerging global Pan African creative phenomenon" (Anderson and Jones, *Afrofuturism 2.0* ix-x). More recently, the term has been expanded to include longer genealogies: "Afrofuturism is a historical phenomenon that emerges in parallel with its sister genre, science fiction, at the dawn of modernity, specifically in the period of American chattel slavery, in response to the singular risks and possibilities afforded by industrial capitalism" (Lavender, *Afrofuturism Rising* 2); Ytasha Womack's *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, one of the first anthologies on the subject, includes non-diasporic African writers, though without explicitly offering a more capacious definition. Despite these developments, many writers working with Black futurism still resist the term and prefer other designations. See, e.g., Okorafor's coining of and preference for the term "Africanfuturism," discussed later in this chapter.

Considerations" 298). This understanding of alienation, as well as myths such as the Dogon and Mami Wata, has led many Black artists and writers such as the ones above to lay claim to the alien ocean as a site for radical transformation rather than mastery and distance.

Importantly, the mermaid she-monsters in the works I analyse here are less interested in becoming part of the human world than they are in causing a sea change by embracing the monstrous otherness within the self and merging with more-than-human worlds. As in previous chapters, I explore submersion as a process of cultural and material transformation that resists a particular categorisation of "the human," opening up more spacious ontologies and ethics not grounded in the Western master model's ideals of posthuman transcendence or liberal inclusion. This is in line with Sakiyyah Iman Jackson's argument that the abjection of the nonhuman other has historically not led to an elevation of Blackness; nor has the "humanisation" of racialised subjects meant a reprieve from violence but rather its intensification and justification (18).[10] Afrofuturist mermaid figures, from the pan-African water goddess Mami Wata to the aquatic alien-elders of *Lagoon*, instead dissolve the boundaries of the human by embodying both the familiar and the strange, the alien and the monstrous, the past and the future in a way that models response-ability rather than domination. When Audre Lorde writes in *Sister Outsider* that "we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 31), she seems to perfectly capture the precarity of Black people's lives as a result of the ongoing effects of slavery in the United States and elsewhere.[11] However, the qualifying "Not as human beings" also hints at possibilities of survival that lie *outside and beyond* the world as we currently know it, in the realm of she-monsters and sea changes.

To demonstrate the diversity of the vast (and rapidly expanding) archive of Afrofuturist mermaid stories emerging in the US, my analysis focuses on few select texts that all deal with the process of submersion and the question of becoming she-monster in different ways across diverse media. I first discuss the controversy surrounding Disney's upcoming *The Little Mermaid* (2023) remake—featuring Black actress Halle Bailey as the titular

[10] She makes this argument based on a similar point made by Saidiya Hartman in *Scenes of Subjection* regarding the criminalisation and abjection of slave humanity: "suppose that the recognition of humanity held out the promise not of liberating the flesh or redeeming one's suffering but rather of intensifying it? Or what if this acknowledgment was little more than a pretext for punishment, dissimulation of the violence of chattel slavery and the sanction given it by the law and the state, and an instantiation of racial hierarchy? What if the endowments of man—conscience, sentiment, and reason—rather than assuring liberty or negating slavery acted to yoke slavery and freedom? Or what if the heart, the soul, and the mind were simply the inroads of discipline rather than that which confirmed the crime of slavery. (Hartman, *Scenes* 5)

[11] See also Lorde's poem "Litany for Survival," which concludes: "So it is better to speak / remembering / we were never meant to survive."

mermaid—as a case study into the possibilities and limitations of inclusion within Western humanism as a means of liberation and transformation for Black people living in what Christina Sharpe calls "the wake" (1). Then, I turn to a reading of Bola Ogun's independent mermaid short film *The Water Phoenix* (2017) to discuss the more promising transformative possibilities in Black women's subversion of Western conceptions of the human. This discussion ends with the caveat that, even in submersion, Ogun's Black mermaid is unable to fully escape the demands of the (White) human world, as evidenced by Ogun's investment in "universal" themes and her reluctance to be known as a creator of "black movies" (Ogun, "Enough with the Black Movies"). Seeking transformation beyond assimilation, I turn to Rivers Solomon's Drexciya-inspired novella *The Deep* (2019) and its reimagination of an underwater utopia founded by the descendants of enslaved African women thrown overboard during Middle Passage. *The Deep*'s monstrous mermaids heal the traumas of the past by subverting dichotomous thinking for more fluid conceptions of community, species, gender, and temporality; but even Solomon's hopeful neo-slave narrative ends with an escape into the ocean and a wish-full abandonment of the dystopian present. The chapter therefore concludes with a reading of Nnedi Okorafor's Africanfuturist novel *Lagoon* (2014) which imagines the city of Lagos transforming into a post-colonialist, post-capitalist, and posthuman utopia with the aid of a multispecies alliance of aquatic aliens, Mami Wata-superheroes, and local sea monsters. It seems fitting to end with *Lagoon,* both because this reading is where my project began and because Okorafor's novel is unique in imagining sea change beyond the horizon of the present into an unfathomable future.

Contexts for Transformation

In September 2022, Walt Disney Studios released the first cinematic teaser trailer for its long-anticipated live-action remake of the 1980s cartoon classic *The Little Mermaid* (1989). Imbued with Disney's characteristic sense of wonder and magic, the trailer features beautiful, sweeping underwater shots of sunken ships, colourful fish, and coral reefs. What garnered the most attention, however, was the reveal of the little mermaid herself. Twirling in and out of frame throughout the trailer, visible only as a shimmering purple-blue fish's tail, Ariel (Halle Bailey) finally appears in close-up at the end of the short teaser: a young Black girl with long, floating locs and large brown eyes gazing earnestly up at some point beyond the camera, towards the distant surface of the sea. Her high, clear voice, strikingly similar to Jodi Benson's performance in the original cartoon, rises to the chorus of the film's iconic theme song as the mermaid expresses her desire to become human and walk freely on land: "Out of

Figure 1. Halle Bailey as the little mermaid who dreams of becoming human in Disney's upcoming live-action remake. Still from Walt Disney Studios, "The Little Mermaid: Official Trailer" on YouTube.

the sea / Wish I could be / Part of that world" ("The Little Mermaid: Official Teaser Trailer"). In the official trailer, released in March 2023, Bailey continues to embody the widespread girlhood fantasy of mermaidhood as she dances and sings effortlessly through fantastical underwater seascapes filled with pink soap bubbles and singing crabs. As in the original tale, however, Ariel is willing to sacrifice her underwater world of wonder for some time in the sun. After she rescues her White prince Eric from a violent shipwreck at sea, she sells her voice to the sea witch Ursula in exchange for a pair of legs. After all, as Ursula tells her, gleefully, "You can't live in that world unless you become a human yourself" ("The Little Mermaid: Official Trailer").

At the time of writing in spring 2023, the full feature film has yet to be released and there is no saying how Ariel's adventure will end—whether she marries Eric as in the previous Disneyfied version or if she dissolves into seafoam as in H.C. Andersen's original fairy tale of queer unrequited love. Either way, the uproar caused by the trailer's release raises concern over her possibilities for truly becoming human and "living in that world" on land. While the reception by Black viewers, and particularly young Black girls, has been nothing short of ecstatic,[12] Disney's decision to cast Black actress and R&B singer Halle Bailey as Ariel has sparked both racist commentary and serious debates about the merits of colourblind representation as a means of cultural transformation for marginalised people. The predictable White supremacist comments that accused Disney of pandering to the social justice/political correctness agenda are too ubiquitous and tiresome to reproduce here—a quick search for the hashtag *#NotMyAriel* on Twitter reveals more than enough, as do the

[12] Video footage of young Black girls and their families reacting ecstatically to the release of Disney's trailer is a testament to this. See the *New York Times* article: "A New Ariel Inspires Joy for Young Black Girls: 'She Looks Like Me.'"

millions of "dislikes" that had to be removed from YouTube only days after the first trailer's release.[13] Never mind, as Monique Roffey, author of the Caribbean mermaid novel *The Mermaid of Black Conch* (2020) points out, that Disney's "original" Americanised version of Andersen's fairy tale is already a corruption of the source material; nor that, based on African mythology and storytelling traditions, "Mermaids have always been Black" (Baptiste). The racist discourse surrounding the film is little more than a repetition of the maelstrom of hate that followed the casting of the character Rue in the *Hunger Games* movie adaptation in 2012—where the character, wilfully unnoticed by her most devoted fans, was Black even according to the original text.[14]

The backlash against Bailey's casting may not seem immediately relevant to this chapter's argument about Black alienation and transformation. Yet, by highlighting the pervasive hostility that continues to block Black inclusion into Western conceptions of the human, it provides a powerful illustration of the "total climate" of anti-Blackness permeating the US in what Christina Sharpe calls "the wake" of transatlantic slavery (Sharpe 21). Drawing upon the multiple meanings of the wake—"the track left on the water's surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming or moved, in water … the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow" (3), as well as "the line of recoil of (a gun)" (8), and a wake held over the bodies of the dead (10)—Sharpe's work as a whole insists on the ongoing "afterlives of slavery" as they continue to rupture the lives of Black people in the present (5). Far from a mere play on words, her concept finds purchase in the "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" that mark Black life in the present United States (Hartman qtd. in Sharpe 6), and in the literal curtailment of Black "aspiration" by toxification and police (113). Though race in unlikely to play any part within the narrative of Disney's film, I would argue that Ariel's struggle to find a place on land takes place within a popular cultural and political context that is similarly hostile to the aspiration(s) of Black women. Even if Bailey's Ariel makes it to land and attains her fairy tale ending, there is no guarantee that the air will remain free outside the fantasy realm of the film—not when, to borrow Sharpe's words,

[13] The exact numbers are difficult to retrieve at this point, but one webpage claims to have used a browser extension to recover the 2.4 million dislikes (a 5:1 ratio of dislikes to likes) that YouTube removed. See Ruimy.
[14] I am referring to the film franchise based on the wildly successful 2008-2010 dystopian YA novel series *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins. Unnoticed by many fans of the books, the character Rue, played by Black actress Amandla Stenberg in the film, was in fact described as Black in the original text, albeit not explicitly. This did not stop racist fans from picturing Rue as a "little blond innocent girl" or critiquing the casting decision for blocking empathy and identification with the character (dismissively referred to by one commenter as "some black girl") during her iconic death scene. See Anna Holmes' "White Until Proven Black: Imagining Race in *Hunger Games*" in *The New Yorker.*

"antiblackness [is] the ground on which we stand, the ground from which we to attempt to speak" (7).

If we look to Black studies critiques of Western humanism, the problem with Ariel's dream of becoming human are immediately apparent. As noted in the introduction to this dissertation, many postcolonial theorists have shown that Enlightenment conceptions of the human were created through colonial encounters that sparked mutually reinforcing discourses of racialisation and animalisation used to justify exploitation (Jackson 12). Elaborating on these theories, Afropessimist critics see Blackness as a category that proceeds from and functions as an ontological category both in opposition to and constitutive of Enlightenment discourses of human rights and subjectivity (see Hartman and Wilderson, "Position of the Unthought").[15] "Black being," Sharpe notes, "appears in the space of the asterisked human as the insurance for, as that which underwrites, white circulation as the human" (Sharpe 110). In its most extreme form, this form of Afropessimist thought states that it is not possible for Black people to become human, because such a being would rupture Western societies' racialised and gendered definition of Man (see Wilderson*, Afropessimism*).[16] Black women, in particular, have long suffered under the "double jeopardy" of being neither White nor male within a system that uses those categories to define hierarchies of humanness (Beal).[17] As Alexander Weheliye's synthesis of the Black feminist thought of Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter shows,[18] seeking to become human in this context means aspiring for inclusion within a category that is already hierarchically organised through racialised and gendered assemblages that render certain bodies into "not-quite-humans" and "nonhumans" which

[15] In the US context, Afropessimism was first coined by Saidiya Hartman in conversation with Frank B. Wilderson III (see "Position of the Unthought"). However, it has since taken on its own life in critical discussions of Black ontologies and futures in relation to the work of scholars like Fred Moten, Jared Sexton, Christina Sharpe, Hortense Spillers, Achille Mbembe, and Sylvia Wynter. There are important nuances in the way each of these theorists define and discuss Afropessimism and Blackness, but for the purposes of this chapter, I limit myself to a short general definition that emphasises commonalities in the theorisation of Blackness as ontological and constitutive of Whiteness and the human.

[16] See Greg Tate's critique of Wilderson's *Afropessimism* in *The Nation.* Wilderson argument is that "the essential essence of the white/black relation is that of the master/slave—regardless of its historical or geographic specificity. And masters and slaves, even today, are never allies" (190), meaning all subordinated subjects (whether women, the working class, non-black POC, etc.) function as masters in relation to Blacks, who remain slaves/objects to this day. This effectively makes affinity politics an impossibility.

[17] In the US, this has historically resulted in a marginal position within both the (White) women's rights movement and the (masculinist) civil rights movement, as demonstrated by critical historical examinations like bell hooks' *Ain't I A Woman?* and Angela Davis' *Women, Race and Class.* The specifically gendered and racialised experiences of Black women under slavery have also been made clear, though often ignored, throughout the centuries by first-person accounts like Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Mary Prince's *History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave* (1831).

[18] While certainly relevant to this chapter and my project as a whole, Wynter's theories on the human are too complex to address here. See McKittrick's *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis.*

serve as limit cases for ethical consideration (24-25). In this case, inclusion does not necessarily lead to liberation; quite the contrary, it could cause the intensification of violence (Hartman, *Scenes* 5). As with the nonnormatively embodied Elisa from *The Shape of Water* with her sewn-shut gills, entrance to this world and its hierarchies cannot be gained without giving something up—in Ariel's case a voice and her freedom to move through the waves of the water.

Where *The Little Mermaid* shows Ariel bartering with the sea witch and paying the price, much of Black cultural production instead seeks alternate ways of being in order to radically unsettle Western conceptions of what it means to be human (Jackson 1). This could be one way of performing what Sharpe calls "wake work," an analytic that offers "particular ways of re/seeing, re/inhabiting, and re/imagining the world" based on experience in and of the wake (22). Following her emphasis on transformation, I argue that Bailey's Black Ariel and her struggle to become human takes place as much against the backdrop of real-world anti-Black politics as it does Disney's realm of magic and underwater castles. Indeed, her aspirations must be read in context with the ongoing struggle for Black women—from Phyllis Wheatley to Harriet Jacobs and Sojourner Truth—to remake themselves as human in resistance to the West's master narrative of White male subjectivity (McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* xxv). As Katherine McKittrick argues in her work on Black women's geographies, Black women across the African diaspora occupy what Wynter calls the "demonic grounds," the monstrous site of "absented presence" occupied by *The Tempest*'s Sycorax—a character who never actually appears or speaks in the play because her racialised, gendered form is, in Audre Lorde's words, "too alien to comprehend" (qtd. in McKittrick xxv). This marginal space of radical exclusion, McKittrick notes, marks a site of silence but also resistance, from which dominant geographies, narratives, and conceptions of the human might be subject to "re-presentation" (xxv-xxvi). In other words, the site of the monstrous marked by Black "non-being" could provide opportunities for a sea change if navigated carefully (Sharpe 18).

Unfortunately, there is grounds to believe that Disney's film will engage less in radical "re-presentation" than the far more widespread practise of colourblind *representation*. Though it may seem rash to analyse the film prior to its release, precedent suggests that *The Little Mermaid* will elide real-world issues of racism entirely and thus inadvertently end up reproducing them on screen. Indeed, reviews by Black critics suggest that Disney's casting decision, while well-intended and culturally significant, is missing the point entirely by merely pandering to a woke (and mostly White) audience. One reviewer notes that while "Bailey's casting in a role typically given to white actresses is a milestone whose long-term

cultural impact could be seismic … The emphasis on colorblind casting over investment in original Black characters and stories only assists in the continuous sidelining of significant creative expressions of Black history and culture, which risk being entirely forgotten" (Obenson). Despite the online activist adage that "representation matters," he may be right. As a case in point, consider that prior to *The Little Mermaid,* the only Black Disney princess to date was New Orleanian Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), who spends the majority of her one and a half hours on screen as a frog trekking through a swamp (after being cursed by a racist stereotype of a Voodoo wizard), and the rest "working hard" to achieve the American Dream (with a little bit of help from her wealthy White best friend). In addition to its blatant racism, the film—based on a European fairy tale—reinscribes stereotypes of the resilient and hardworking Black woman *and* perpetuates the historical and ongoing animalisation of Black people in the US—even if it does end "happily" with a return to humanity and marriage to a racially ambiguous prince (Ghelawat). As bell hooks writes, "endurance is not to be confused with transformation" (*Ain't I a Woman* 6).

Films like *The Princess and the Frog,* with its glaring cultural insensitivities, are the product of a mainstream media culture that values colourblind representation over narrative transformation as the dominant form of social justice work. Contrary to the subversive works of Black women explored by McKittrick, and to Sharpe's suggestion of "re-presentation," colourblind casting, Kristen Warner explains, is the commonplace practise in which "normative, universalized character types who are synonymous with White mainstream values displace the racial and ethnic cultural specificity of the actors portraying them" (*Cultural Politics* 2). Warner further theorises this process of erasure through the concept of "plastic representation," a process wherein race becomes a purely visual signifier rather than a cultural one ("Plastic Representation"). In practise, this erasure retains Whiteness as the unspoken status quo of the dominant culture, while making inclusion a liberal prerogative hinging on the non-White individual's capacity to assimilate into Whiteness (*Cultural Politics* 5). As a boundary-making practise, colourblind representation effectively works to keep Black characters and stories permanently relegated to what Isiah Lavender III fittingly terms the "blackground" of sf narratives (*Race* 6).[19] This is true no matter how many Black Ariels Disney casts, especially when little consideration is taken for the way a song like "part

[19] Isiah Lavender III coins the term "blackground" to critique the self-congratulatory way in which mainstream US sf film, literature, and television makes progressive "colour-blind" character and casting decisions while leaving intact "the embedded perceptions of race and racism—intended or not—in Western sf writing and criticism" (*Race* 6).

of your world" sounds when sung by a Black mermaid longing for a White prince while wondering, "What would I give / To live where you are? / What would I pay / To stay here beside you?" (*The Little Mermaid*). These errors in judgement would be bad enough from any media and entertainment creator; from Disney's multi-million-dollar princess franchise, marketed specifically to young girls of all races at a crucial stage of identity formation, it is particularly toxic and perhaps even deadly.[20] It is hard not to link this issue to Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and its still-relevant portrayal of the tragic consequences of a colourist society on the lives and self-perception of African American girls. Set right after the Great Depression, the novel follows the story of the impoverished and abused African American girl Pecola Breedlove who, obsessed with child star Shirley Temple, is driven to madness by the double consciousness of internalised racism.[21] Throughout the novel, she dreams of having blue eyes as a signifier of Whiteness and beauty—synonymous concepts in a colourist society where even Black communities equate darker skin with ugliness and unlovability.[22] This widespread tendency toward "misogynoir" (see Anyangwe)[23] continues on into the present as part of the wake, perpetuating internalised racism and sexism and placing serious limitations on Black women's access to freedom and self-expression.

This is the cultural context into which the new *Little Mermaid* apparently seeks to intervene, and there is no doubt that a Black mermaid movie from Disney will make some cultural impact, even if it is a question of colourblind casting within an otherwise White narrative. Notwithstanding his scepticism, even the reviewer cited above concludes that, "A

[20] For reference, as of early 2023 the Disney Princesses currently place fifth on Wikipedia's list of the world's highest-grossing media franchises, beating the Marvel Cinematic Universe by several billion dollars. A mass of research attests to the impact of the Disney princesses in forming young girls' perceptions of body image, gender roles, and even racial identity. To take one example, in an article examining the effects of the franchise's effects on children of colour's self-perception, prior to the release of *The Princess and the Frog,* Dorothy L. Hurley notes that "The problem of pervasive, internalized privileging of Whiteness has been intensified by the Disney representation of fairy tale princesses which consistently reinforces an ideology of White supremacy" (223).

[21] Double consciousness describes the internal conflict experienced by colonised groups who are drawn between seeing themselves through their own and their oppressors' eyes. The concept was first coined by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* to describe African American experiences of alienation resulting from being American and Black. Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* explores the concept further.

[22]Like the Disney Princesses, Temple gave rise to her own line of merchandise targeted at young girls, a fact that features prominently in Morrison's novel as Pecola drinks excessive amounts of milk (another symbol of Whiteness) out of a Shirley Temple cup in her efforts to erase her own Blackness (Roye 215). The novel was also partly inspired by psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark's infamous "doll test," in which they sought to prove the effects of segregation on young African American children by having them choose between White and Black dolls (almost invariably, they chose White).

[23] Coined by Black feminist critic Moya Bailey, "Misogynoir" describes "the particular brand of hatred directed at black women in American visual and popular culture" (qtd. in Anyangwe).

black Ariel will influence and inspire countless young girls all over the world, despite any criticism Bailey's casting has drawn (and may continue to stir up)" (Obsenson). Bailey herself has also indicated awareness of the watershed moment her casting represents, tweeting in response to widespread hate messaging, "I am beginning to understand this film is something so much bigger than me" (qtd. in Roffey). Even so, true cultural transformation would entail more subversive change at the level of storytelling—especially when it comes to paying attention to whose stories are told, who is doing the telling, and for whom. In *Black Looks,* hooks demonstrates how the dehumanising alienation of the self that is inflicted on Black women by White supremacist media is a trauma that can be healed only by affirming and celebrating Blackness, in her words by practising "self-love as a revolutionary intervention that undermines practises of domination" (20). Beyond Disney and other mainstream entertainment companies' colourblind casting practises and bids for inclusion, this entails Black women themselves "creat[ing] a context for transformation" that breaks with hegemonic ways of seeing and, in this way, "[m]aking a space for the transgressive image" (4). To find such works that promise transformation by speaking from the "demonic grounds" (McKittrick), we need to look toward the creations of Black women themselves as they struggle to overcome misogynoir, find voice, and reclaim the monstrous rather than striving to become "human."

One such film is Nigerian-American director, writer, and actress Bola Ogun's independent short film *The Water Phoenix* (2017), one among many emerging Black mermaid films and stories that present a counternarrative to Ariel's quest to become human. With an eleven-minute screen time and somewhat cliché plot, the film still manages to tell a deeply affecting story that is both poignant and buoyant, centred as much around character development and intersectional feminism as it is around special effects. The protagonist Anya, played by Ogun herself, is a mermaid trapped in a Seaworld-esque aquarium and research facility, where she is forced to wear a collar that compels her to smile and perform as a spectacle for human visitors. Her needs—both physical and emotional—are seen to by her White human caretaker and lover Jack, a marine biologist who has promised to free her but constantly reneges on that promise. There is little dialogue in the film, but the toxicity of the relationship is obvious from the long silences and from the resentment in Ogun's eyes whenever the two meet. As is standard for feminist fairy tale retellings, the turning point comes when Anya finally lets go of her "Prince Charming" fantasy and uses her own powers (and a stolen gun) to escape the facility and "get back home to her first love, the sea" (Ogun, "The Water Phoenix"). Keeping in mind *The Water Phoenix'*s status as an independent,

crowd-funded film, it is an astonishingly impressive piece of sf cinema, with high-quality acting, costumes, cinematography, and mise-en-scène that truly captures the feeling of a mainstream, big-budget film while also claiming a space for Black women's stories.

When Ogun created her film, Disney had yet to announce its upcoming *Little Mermaid* remake and there were no Black mermaids to be seen on US television or cinema screens.[24] In a blog post addressing the dearth of nuanced Black female characters in Hollywood movies, Ogun marvels at her own project: "A black mermaid. I've never seen one on film, and I had no idea I would be the one to bring her to existence" (Ogun, "Enough"). The auteur-like emphasis on individual creation is not an exaggeration. As a testament to her ambition and desires for the project, Ogun herself served as both writer, director, executive producer, and lead actress in the film—even learning how to swim and dive in an unwieldy and heavy prosthetic tail to perform in the underwater scenes as a mermaid and investing her own savings into completing the project when the crowdfunding campaign fell short.[25] Even though the film reached a limited audience compared to mainstream Hollywood films, it seems to have made a significant impact on its creator and its viewers.[26] The response in the YouTube comments section, where the film is available for free, is a testament to the powerful affects involved in popular cultural representation.[27] Seemingly aware of her

[24] Nilja Mu'min's *Deluge* from 2014 is an exception and the only Black mermaid listed in Philip Hayward's extensive index at the end of *Making a Splash: Mermaids (and Mer-Men) in 20th and 21st Century Audiovisual Media* (2017).

[25] On her YouTube channel, Ogun speaks about the extensive training she had to undergo in order to learn how to swim with the tail while also holding her breath for the duration of all the underwater shots. A commenter on YouTube writes, "It literally feels like you are dragging a parachute underwater all while trying to avoid drowning...and your eyes are stinging...your legs are cramping...you are exhausted...oh and you have to look pretty. Totally worth it though!" ("The Water Phoenix"). As additional testament to Ogun's ambition, she worked with Robert Short, the mermaid consultant on the legendary mermaid movie *Splash,* and Mermaid Linden, one of the most successful performers in the US mermaiding community, to ensure that the mermaid scenes look professional (Ogun, "Mermaid Google+ Hangout"). Although *The Water Phoenix* was partially crowdfunded, Ogun also admits in a behind-the-scenes video to having maxed out credit cards, taken out loans, and invested most of her own savings into completing the project (Ogun, "TWP"). The Indigoego funding campaign is still up and only seems to have reached 66% of its goal (most of it provided by a few very dedicated fans).

[26] At the moment of writing in August 2022, *The Water Phoenix* has reached 1,076,392 views on YouTube and 7,221 views on Vimeo, where it is available for free. Prior to this, the film was an official selection for multiple film festivals during the year of its first release—including LA Shorts Fest and the SCI-FI-LONDON film festival. The decision to make the film available for free is another argument for Ogun's wish to both provide representation and reach as wide an audience as possible.

[27] One YouTube commenter writes: "We honestly need more black mermaids like her because she's really beautiful." Another user writes: "A younger me really needed this, because I wanted so desperately to be a professional mermaid, but I thought I couldn't cause I was black and I never ever saw dark skinned mermaids in movies like 'Aquamarine' and 'Splash.'" Finally, speaking to the current cultural emphasis on representation, a third user writes, "I also am really excited to see a Mermaid of darker skin tone again, we need more awesome representation from people like you out there!" ("The Water Phoenix").

Figure 1. Bogun as Black mermaid intervening in sf cinema through the politics of representation. Still from The Water Phoenix.

audience, Ogun even includes in the film a mise-en-abyme in the form of a young Black girl spectator—dressed up princess-like in pink tank top, colourful jewellery, and afro-puffs—who habitually comes to the aquarium to marvel at Anya the mermaid. In one iconic scene, the two touch hands through the glass of the mermaid's tank, with Ogun smiling conspiratorially to the viewer over the girl's shoulder, fully aware of the impact of her performance (see Figure 2).

Taking into consideration her personal (financial) investment in *The Water Phoenix* and the obvious racial politics of the film's narrative, it could come as a surprise that Ogun resists identification as a Black storyteller. In a blog post about her work, written under the descriptively provocative title "Enough with the 'Black Movies' Bring on the Black Mermaids," Ogun explains her refusal to consider herself a creator of "black movies" with their associated compulsion toward social realism and suffering. Citing her experiences of being repeatedly typecast into stereotypical roles as a Black woman in Hollywood, she states "I love seeing movies with black people in them, but I'm not interested in making 'black movies.' There's a difference. I want to see representations of women like me in movies where it's not about having a black experience, but about having a human experience (or a mermaid one). I'm a black director/writer/actress who will play a mermaid in a movie, but it won't be a 'Black mermaid movie' (Ogun "Enough"). Ogun's comments here make for an interesting counterpoint to the critique Disney is receiving precisely for failing to create a "Black mermaid movie" based on specifically Black characters, histories, and experiences.

Contrary to the subversive feminist plot of her film, Ogun's appeal to universal "human experience" (as a contrast to Black experiences!) likewise speaks to a desire to become part of a world (to riff off Disney) of mainstream cinema where race functions only as a plastic signifier and freedom is attainable though inclusion (Warner x). With that said, I do not think Ogun should be faulted for taking a cautious approach to race or for wanting to create a Black mermaid film that appeals to mainstream audiences—first of all because it would be ludicrous to suggest that an independent Black filmmaker holds the same responsibility as Disney and its multi-billion-dollar, overwhelmingly White princess franchise when it comes to dealing with questions of race and representation.[28]

More relevant to my argument, Ogun's careful negotiation of intersecting systems of oppression within mainstream popular culture needs to be understood as an intervention in Western conceptions of the human emerging from its constitutive outside—an inherently risky project for the one undertaking it. In order to elide what Sharpe (following Wynter) calls Black humans' "narratively condemned status" (13), Ogun's Black mermaid needs to walk a fine line between appealing to universal (White) human experience without sacrificing the specificity of Black women's oppression and struggles. Navigating a land-space defined by her very absence, Ogun, much like Bailey's Black Ariel, is therefore engaged in an ongoing "collective project of cultural revision [that] challenges the African-American woman writer [or filmmaker] to produce a narrative of self that authenticates black women's oppressive history but offers a model for transcending that history's limitations" (Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* 103). Her impossible task is thus to "render oppression without reinscribing it: to build a figure of black female selfhood on the narrow space between victimization and assimilation" (104)—without the support of Disney's massive Hollywood budget and production team and within a climate of pervasive anti-Blackness. This is again what Sharpe refers to as "wake work," and it is indeed different from the Black stories of mainstream popular culture, in large part due to Disney and other hegemonic entertainment companies' failure in representing Black women as anything other than

[28] This is an especially important point considering how many mainstream "Black movies" targeted toward White audiences have recently come under scrutiny for creating exploitative White-gaze "trauma porn" rather than imagining new possibilities for Black life. See Frazer-Carroll's discussion of the historical drama/sf series *The Underground Railroad*; also consider Hartman's critique of representations of Black suffering in the introduction to *Scenes of Subjection*.

helpless victims or angry Sapphires powerless to change their environments (Gaines 106-107).[29]

Building on the above interpretation, I think Ogun deserves more credit that she gives herself in her disavowal of Black stories and experiences. Despite her own stated intentions with the film and her rejection of fans' efforts to read deeper themes into the text, the restoration of femininity, Blackness, and animality in fact play key roles in the narrative leading up to the mermaid's escape from captivity. Consider, for example, that Anya is a sea creature confined to a research facility obviously similar to SeaWorld and the like, ordered into spectacle and display for human knowledge and entertainment, much like *The Shape of Water*'s Amphibian Man or Tilikum the Orca from the controversial animal-rights documentary *Blackfish* (2013).[30] Or consider the connotations of her slave collar, which explicitly links Anya's imprisonment and dehumanisation at the facility to slave and neo-slave narratives by writers like Olaudah Equiano and Toni Morrison.[31] These themes are obvious even to casual commenters on YouTube, a fact Ogun acknowledges though she denies any intentionality and instead frames her project as a purely (liberal) feminist one.[32] However, contrary to Ogun's disavowal of themes related to race, I would argue that she is not so much abandoning Blackness as she is transforming the so-called universal human from within by "disrupt[ing] the human-animal distinction and its persistent raciality" (Jackson 1). To this point, it is important that Anya's escape relies on neither the mermaid's humanisation nor the abandonment of her animal form, confirmations of humanist subjectivity that would only result in an intensification of oppression (Jackson 18). Following Jackson, I instead argue that *The Water Phoenix* seeks to radically transform Western conceptions of the human, "articulat[ing] being (human) in a manner that neither relies on animal abjection nor reestablishes liberal humanism as the authority on being (human)" (2). Thus, Ogun's film

[29] The Jim Crow Museum at Ferris State University has done a detailed write-up of the "Sapphire" caricature and its more recent incarnation in the "Angry Black Woman" in US television history, both stereotypes arising from the intersection of racism and misogyny in both Black and White audiences, especially when Black women attempt to critique the existing power structure. This stereotype persists to this day as the dominant form of portrayal of Black women. They note, "The Sapphire Caricature is a harsh portrayal of African American women, but it is more than that; it is a social control mechanism that is employed to punish black women who violate the societal norms that encourage them to be passive, servile, non-threatening, and unseen."

[30] SeaWorld has come under close scrutiny for its mistreatment of marine animals; both David Kirby's book *Death at SeaWorld* (2012) and the documentary *Blackfish* (2013) have exposed the deadly and tragic consequences of keeping marine mammals in captivity.

[31] Both Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* and Morrison's *Beloved* make references to iron muzzles worn as punishment by disobedient slaves.

[32] In response to a comment on YouTube, she writes, "When I made this film I knew those themes would be seen by others. My intentions we more along the line of preconceived notion of a woman 'needing' a man to safe [sic]" ("The Water Phoenix")—a yearning for empowerment and emancipation that is apparently linked to gender but not necessarily to race and the struggle to be recognised as human.

avoids its own creator's bid for "assimilation into the category of 'universal humanity,'" which—as Jackson warns, and the racist backlash against Disney's *Little Mermaid* so painfully demonstrates—"should not be equated with black freedom" (27).

Considering the undeniable presence in Ogun's film of themes related to race and animality, it comes as no surprise when Anya, much like the other she-monsters in this project, flees from the heteropatriarchal world of technoscience, instead heading for the queerer possibilities of the ocean. However, unlike White romance heroines like *Splash*'s Madison or *The Shape of Water*'s Elisa, Anya clearly needs neither fairy tale kisses nor magical castles to guide her. Instead, accompanied only by her love for the water itself, she ventures into the ocean alone after making the difficult decision to leave behind the abusive partner and environment that threaten to make her story another spectacle of Black suffering and suffocation. The affective impact of Anya's decision to free herself through submersion is obvious from this final scene's composition. From the thriller-like crescendos and claustrophobic over-exposed dark interiors of the lab where Anya was held captive, the film cuts to an expansive view of a dreamlike, high key-lit beach where the only sound is the lapping of waves and mellow ambient music. The whole scene conveys a sense of freedom, hope, and calm connected to the ocean and the natural world, even as the scene opens with an anguished Jack—held at gunpoint—driving Anya to the edge of the beach. Here, the two take a silent, bittersweet farewell. Subverting the tropes of popular mermaid films like *Splash*, Jack does not abandon his humanity to join Anya in the sea (nor is he invited to), and Anya never considers abandoning the sea to remain part of the human world. Instead, Jack is left sitting passively in the driver's seat, as Anya—her tail transformed into a pair of legs—steps out of the car and boldly strides away across the pale sand to the rolling white waves, never looking back to meet Jack's pleading gaze. From a bird's eye view, we see her discard her bleak hospital scrubs and her stolen gun—both symbols of the world of masculinist technoscience and militarism she is leaving behind—on the beach before walking out into the waves and finally throwing away her bra, as if gesturing both to the misogynist myth of feminist bra burning and the widespread images of White-skinned mermaids in seashell bras. The contrast between her dark skin and the washed-out pale surface world dissolves at last as the film cuts to an underwater scene of dark water and colourful fish and corals where Anya finally looks at home. Here, unlike in the aquarium, she swims with an unearthly grace and freedom, hands reaching out toward the open space of the sea. Like the titular phoenix—scales coming alive from dull metal to glittering pink and gold—she then rises up in front of the camera, smiling widely and genuinely for the first time in the film as she is reborn. The

last thing we see is her swimming off into the murky depths, half-way turning to the camera to grin and beckon, as if inviting her human audience to follow her into the unfathomable depths.

Though there is no contesting the joy radiating from Ogun's performance during this final scene of submersion, the film's ending, much like the final ambiguous scene from *The Shape of Water*, could leave viewers with questions about the heroine's fate as a fugitive from the human world. Indeed, Anya the mermaid seems to not so much be changing the condition of Black women in the world as she is fleeing from it by entering a world that is "free" because she is the only one that inhabits it (so far as the film shows). However, taking into account the assimilationist politics Ogun is navigating with her film, I instead suggest reading *The Water Phoenix* as a Black feminist text that creates a "context for transformation" by intervening in established narratives (hooks, *Black Looks* 4). Indeed, if Anya is the titular "water phoenix," I would argue that her transformation at the end of the film connotes rebirth as much as it does death. To this point, there is a striking visual and thematic resemblance between Anya the mermaid, with her flowing hair and glimmering tail, and Beyoncé in the opening track "Hold Up" of her visual album *Lemonade* (2016), a break-up album exploring the impact of generational trauma and internalised racism in Black women's lives (Gaines 103).[33] The video features Beyoncé dressed up as the Yoruba water goddess Oshun in a yellow silk dress, stepping onto the streets in a deluge of water as she begins to gather other women to her cause while gleefully wielding a baseball bat against cars and shop windows (105).[34] In another track called "Love Drought," she leads her entourage, dressed in white robes, in a sombre procession into the sea out towards the sunset. In part a homage to Julie Dash's groundbreaking "black pastroral" film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), Beyoncé's album is inspired by the myths and stories of enslaved people who threw themselves into the sea at Igbo landing rather than face captivity, and who grew wings to fly back to Africa (Gaines 112). This is a popular motif in Black cultural expression that also

[33] Relevant to the previous discussion of Disney's Ariel, hooks cautions that Beyoncé's album is a commodity intended to attract mainstream (i.e., White) audiences through its display of Black female bodies, a practise that "is certainly not radical or revolutionary" ("Beyoncé's *Lemonade*" n.p.); however, having pointed this out, hooks concedes that the album does intervene in the manner and intent of Black women's representation, posing a challenge to "the ongoing present-day devaluation and dehumanization of the black female body" in a way that "shifts the gaze of white mainstream culture," albeit without disrupting it (n.p.). The same could be said of Ogun's film, although *The Water Phoenix* is nowhere near as commodified or sexualized as *Lemonade.*

[34] The album has been widely celebrated and critically discussed for its portrayals of Black femininity; Zeffie Gaines calls the album "a revolutionary act of self-care … a rebuttal of all the ways in which American society tells black women they are unworthy and unlovable" (103). Beyoncé's more recent 2020 visual album *Black is King*, a companion to her 2019 *The Lion King* for the animated Disney movie of the same name, goes even further in exploring Black diasporic experiences and Afrofuturist aesthetics and mythologies.

informs Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* with its opening scene of imaginary flight.[35] Ogun's film, whether deliberately or not, draws on this narrative, claiming imaginative and mythical space for Black women (and mermaids) within Black cultural traditions and mainstream popular culture and insisting on survival as a form of Black feminist resistance (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 31). As I have shown in previous chapters, escapist imaginaries have a purpose in inspiring hope for transformation in the future, and this compensatory function should not be too easily dismissed.

In a way similar to texts like *Lemonade* and *Daughters of the Dust, The Water Phoenix* recovers femininity, Blackness, and the nonhuman world from Western representations by showing Black women "returning to nature rather than being lost in it" (Gaines 112).[36] This argument is not to be read as an essentialist reduction to biology; rather, as in other submersion stories, becoming she-monster is a way to reclaim the ocean and the more-than-human world as a posthuman feminist space where transformation is possible. As I argue above, it is important that Anya's escape relies on neither the mermaid's humanisation nor the abjection of her animal form, confirmations of humanist subjectivity that would only result in an intensification of oppression. Rather, the point of submersion in *The Water Phoenix*—regardless of Ogun's stated intentions—is to highlight the failure of the human as an ethical, ontological, and epistemological category with claims to universal coverage, and to instead "[establish] new oppositional demands that recast human normalcy through the politics/poetics of black femininity" (McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* 134). In keeping with Walcott's theory of the "black aquatic," Anya's submersion thus reads ambiguously as both an escape into the unfathomable future and a "return [of] Blackness to its watery birth" (65). This turn toward pasts and futures beyond the present opens up opportunities for "rewriting the human" and its limiting conception of ethics by instead dwelling in the inherent uncertainty of watery spaces (68). As she swims into the unfathomable unknown, Anya joins the other protagonists from previous submersion stories in keeping alive an impulse of hope by suggesting that freedom is available somewhere, just not on the anti-Black surface world. Offering the hope of sea change, texts like Ogun's film are therefore examples of how "Afrofuturism … circumvents what both white colonialism

[35] Igbo Landing refers to a mass suicide in 1831 by captive Igbo people who drowned themselves rather than face slavery. The event was later mythologised and turned into a symbol of resistance in African American folklore, especially through stories that claimed the captives walked on water or grew wings to fly back home to Africa. See articles by Allison and Hallock.

[36] Gaines makes this argument while pointing out *Lemonade*'s many visual references *Daughters of the Dust*.

and Afropessimism see as an ontological dead-end" (Marquis 399) by turning toward submersion and she-monsters as more hopeful possibilities for Black futurity.

Healing and Survival as Resistance

So far, I have discussed the merits of assimilationist colourblind representation in contrast to more transformative interventions into the Western concept of the human with reference to Disney's *The Little Mermaid* and Bola Ogun's *The Water Phoenix.* Now, I turn toward Afrofuturist mermaid stories that more explicitly explore the kinship between survivors of the transatlantic slave trade, their more-than-human descendants, sea creatures, and the ocean itself and in this way "return blackness to its watery birth" (Walcott R. 69). According to Hortense Spillers' influential essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," "Those African persons in 'Middle Passage' were literally suspended in the 'oceanic;'" "culturally 'unmade'" and heading into the "unknown," they never found their way back on land (72). Likewise, Canadian poet Dionne Brand writes about the Middle Passage as a "door of no return" that forever separates the Black diaspora from its origins on the other side of the ocean, while Glissant evocatively imagines Africa and the Americas linked by "underwater signposts" made by the "scarcely corroded balls and chains" of enslaved humans thrown overboard in transit from the "womb abyss" of the ship (6).[37] These are just a few examples of the ruptured and suspended temporalities of the "black aquatic" (Walcott R.) that inform the growing body of Afrofuturist imaginaries of the ocean referenced in the introduction to this chapter. These stories featuring Black mermaids go beyond representation and escapism; instead, they imagine returning "to the constitutive trauma of slavery in the light of science fiction" as a way of transforming the future and healing the past of alienation (Eshun, "Further Considerations" 299).

One such Black mermaid story is Rivers Solomon's genre- and gender-bending novella *The Deep* (2019), inspired by and co-written with the experimental hip-hop group clipping., consisting of Daveed Diggs, William Hutson, and Jonathan Snipes.[38] The group's

[37] See also Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route,* a personal account of the loss of history, identity, and belonging she herself experienced as a direct result of her ancestors' enslavement; returning across the Atlantic along the route of diaspora to her ancestors' homeland Ghana, she is unable to discover either kinship or connection.

[38] The question of *The Deep*'s authorship is even more complex than what I explore here. In an afterword to the novella, clipping. explain that part of their project is to reject the primacy of individual authorship: "The three of us wrote 'The Deep' together. (Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd)" (160). To further complicate things, "The Deep" was written for an episode of the Chicago Public Radio programme *This American Life* called "We Are in the Future," which clipping. credit as partners in the song's creation (Liptak).

reinterpretation of Drexciyan mythology[39] in their Hugo Award nominated 2017 single of the same name (likened by the group to a "game of artistic Telephone:" Solomon et al. 157) forms the basis for the narrative: deep in the Atlantic Ocean, there is a Black utopia formed by the water-breathing descendants of pregnant African women thrown overboard during Middle Passage.[40] Drexciya's original mythos is itself inspired by African mythologies of water, and it is healing in the sense that it "provides listeners with a vehicle to liberate African diasporic people who have survived the Middle Passage in such a way that explicates the shared experience of slavery" (Gaskins, "Deep Sea Dwellers" 71-72). Yet the militarism of the story is made apparent both in the duo's alienating "aquatic assault programming" and in the accompanying imagery of the Drexciyan wave-jumpers, amphibious warriors evocative of the more masculinist, and separatist, sides of the Black Power movement ("Fear of a Wet Planet" n.p.).[41] Parts of this masculinist imagery are carried over into clipping.'s version, where the Drexciyan war on the surface is reimagined as an apocalyptic environmentalist battle against oil drilling, rising sea temperatures, and underwater bomb testing. The story is narrated by a monstrous chorus of overlapping voices—rapping and chanting the history of the depths against a backdrop of beating tempo and mood changes (see Liptak):

> Our mothers were pregnant African women / Thrown overboard while crossing the Atlantic Ocean on slave ships / We were born breathing water as we did in the womb / We built our home on the sea floor / Unaware of the two-legged surface dwellers / Until their world came to destroy ours / With cannons, they searched for oil beneath our cities / Their greed and recklessness forced our uprising / Tonight, we remember. ("The Deep").

The group also suggests that Solomon's reinterpretation of the story retrospectively changes it, making Solomon as much a co-author of the song as they were of the novella.

[39] The Drexciyan mythology is never narrated through words but rather "secreted deep in track subtitles, impressed in the vinyl, hidden notions you have to dive for" (Eshun, "Fear of a Wet Planet"), and therefore open to the listener's interpretation. The cover of Drexciya's 1994 EP *Aquatic Invasion* depicts the wave-jumper commandoes, one of them with webbed feet, the other with a merman's tail, leaping out of the Atlantic to fight off approaching helicopters; the liner notes of their first compilation album*, The Quest* (1997), features a map that charts the geography of the Black diaspora both future and past—from slavery and migration north to an imagined return "home" to Africa (Gaskins, "Deep Sea Dwellers" 70).

[40] NourbeSe Philip's book-length poem *Zong!* takes the notorious Zong massacre of 1781, in which 130 enslaved Africans were drowned as part of an insurance scam and tears apart its prosaic case report to create a poetic anti-narrative that speaks chiefly through fragmented language and the haunting silences on the page.

[41] Perhaps unsurprisingly. As DeLoughrey notes, Drexciya was directly inspired by Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* and "in that current of scholarship the ocean has been represented as a passive and often feminized backdrop to an active (hetero)masculinity and has not been engaged as material in and of itself" ("Kinship" 2).

The countdown and distorted tidal wave of noise that herald the end of the track and of the surface world bring on a sense of alienation that precludes response-ability. Eshun describes the alienating affects of Drexciya's music well: "To listen is to be shut out of their inhuman world. You want in to that world but all your senses tell you that you won't survive it" ("Fear of a Wet Planet" n.p.).

While isolationism is an understandable response to inhabiting an anti-Black world, in this context it reinforces the tropes of Afropessimism in a way that precludes response-ability and transformation. Solomon therefore remixes[42] the story in a way that more aligns it with a "poetics of relation" arising from "[e]xperience of the abyss" (Glissant 7-8; see DeLoughrey, "Kinship"),[43] shifting the emphasis from mastery to transformation and response-ability. Solomon's version of the mythos, the first water-breathing Drexciyans do not grow up in isolation after being "born from the dead" (Solomon et al. 42) but are rescued and raised by "the second mothers" the whales (32). Gathering into a community of survivors, they rename themselves the "wajinru"—the "chorus of the deep" (10)—both to reflect the way their voices and bodies connect across distance and species through vibrations in the water, and to commemorate their endless repetition of the trauma that first brought them together in relation. These water beings are not the beautiful mermaids of Disney's or Ogun's films, nor is their society a peaceful ecofeminist utopia akin to Shora in the first half of Slonczewski's *A Door into Ocean*. With their scales, fins, fangs, and tails, their bulging eyes and coal black skin, the wajinru have forsaken their human forms and instead evolved into creatures of the deep that deem themselves "the ocean's apex predators" alongside sharks (130). Evoking an animality akin to that of *The Shape of Water*'s Amphibian Man, they hunt and eat creatures farther down the food chain, and they create storms to sink slave ships crossing the surface above. The wajinru have also evolved into sexual dimorphism, though they maintain male and female gender identities. Subject to the "dehumanising ungendering," of slavery (Spillers 72), the wajinru have truly "claim[ed] the monstrosity" that Spillers evokes as a Black feminist practise of resistance against the ongoing history of Middle Passage (80).[44]

[42] Remix in this context refers to the widespread practise of bricolage in Afrofuturist cultural production: using whatever is at hand, including "massa's tools," to create countercultural narratives and histories that blur the line between folkloric and speculative modes (Samatar 182-183). This "philosophy of remix" is rooted in sonic work but extends across all media and genres of Afrofuturism, creating a context for transformation where the past and the future are constantly open to revision (179).

[43] DeLoughrey's article on *The Deep* was published while I was revising this chapter and makes many of the same points. I find her use of Glissant especially useful in deepening my understanding of the text.

[44] In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Spillers describes the dehumanisation of slavery as a process of enfleshment, wherein Black bodies were subject to massification and fungibility,

Like Drexciya's mythos, *The Deep* is based on the idea that the trauma of transatlantic slavery has never been resolved but continues to haunt Black life in the present in a way that demands response. However, unlike Drexciya's war on the surface world, Solomon's fluid and constantly shifting text instead emphasises healing through the rupture of the human and the formation of interspecies communities as the key to more hopeful futures. For the wajinru, living in "the wake" is a constant struggle for survival (Sharpe 1); when the novella begins, they have long since abandoned their human identities and the deep sea cities of Drexciya's imaginary. Yet, despite their successful adaptation to the environment of the deep, the surface world continues to haunt them in various ways. Most viscerally, "surface-dwellers" continue to use the ocean ruthlessly as a conduit for slave trade and a nuclear testing site; they have also hunted many of the wajinru's companion species to extinction, including "salmon … the mighty hammerhead, monk seals, various sea turtles, fin whales, and so many others;" now their relentless search for oil is threatening to end the wajinru as well (Solomon et al. 139). Here, the trauma of Middle Passage is tied to aspects of "black ecology," which links race to unequal environmental exposure in the present (Hare).[45] Similar themes are explored powerfully in Nilja Mu'min's mermaid short film *Deluge* (2012) and in her poem "Daughters of the Deluge" about the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010; the opening line "Black mermaids face disaster" could just as easily describe the wajinru's struggle for survival in *The Deep* (Mu'min, "Daughters").

The main issue explored in Solomon's novella, however, is not the impact of environmental racism but rather how the history, memory, and trauma of Middle Passage follow in the wake of the present. In her foundational work of transnational Black feminism *Pedagogies of Crossing,* the Caribbean theorist M. Jacqui Alexander describes the ocean deep as "a site of trauma and forgetting; a site of traumatized memory" in the African diasporic imagination (27). As a community, the wajinru are brough together not only by the "traumatized memory" of their foremothers' dehumanisation and drowning, but also by the rituals of remembering and forgetting that they have developed in an effort to live with the unliveable. Most of the wajinru have no memories of the past. The only one who truly remembers is the historian, a single person who is forced to abandon their sense of self in

essentially unmaking them as individual gendered subjects, and therefore humans, in the eyes of Western societies.

[45] Hare defines "black ecology" as follows: "The legitimacy of the concept of black ecology accrues from the fact that: (1) the black and white environments not only differ in degree but in nature as well; (2) the causes and solutions to ecological problems are fundamentally different in the suburbs and ghetto (both of which human ecologists regard as 'natural [or ecological] areas;' and (3) the solutions set forth for the 'ecological crisis' are reformist and evasive of the social and political revolution which black environmental correction demands" (2).

order to carry the History and become a living monument to the wajinru's origins as enslaved humans (note that in the text the "History" is always capitalised, while "historian" is not). The rest of the community only comes together to re-experience the memory of their trauma and to re-moor themselves to their collective identity once a year during the "Remembrance" ceremony (Solomon et al. 19). We see the beginnings of this tradition in one of the novella's retrospective chapters, where the wajinru's founder Zoti Aleyu ("strange fish": 48) takes on the History themselves and decides unilaterally that the others should "[f]ocus on what we have together. Here. Now" (63). However, to quote Sharpe, "In the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present" (9). The decision to forget reverberates throughout the timeline of the novella as the narration switches from Zoti Aleyu's first-person collective pronouns to Yetu's more distant and isolated third-person singular perspective. Connection is missing between the yearly Remembrance ceremonies and the wajinru are haunted by a sense that "[w]ithout answers, there is only a hole, a hole where a history should be that takes the shape of an endless longing" (Solomon et al. 8). As the novella's present-day historian notes while observing her community's desperate desire to reexperience their ancestors' traumatic memories, "[f]orgetting was not the same as healing" (28).

Even knowing this, the historian herself wants nothing more than to forget and reunite with the others in the community. *The Deep* is written from a multitude (or chorus) of ambiguous perspectives, shifting between first person and third, singular and plural, past and present, in a way that, to borrow from Alexis Pauline Gumbs in her meditations on Black feminist kinship with sea animals, "undo[es] a definition of the human … tangled in separation and domination" and instead emphasises constant transformation (*Undrowned* 9). This aspect of Solomon's text is clearly influenced by *clipping.*'s song. As the group themselves explain in an afterword to Solomon's novella, the song's catchy refrain "y'all remember" is an invitation to dive into the mythology of Drexciya "as a kind of ceremonial performance of remembering" based on a communal repetition that includes the listener in a collaborate process of worldmaking (Solomon et al. 161-162). Yet the main focus of the narrative is the current historian Yetu, a female-identified and most likely neurodiverse young wajinru whose tendency toward isolation, hypersensitivity to stimuli, emotional dysregulation, and repeated suicide attempts make it impossible for her to fulfil her role as historian. At the same time, her role and even her name—"meaning in Kiswahili 'ours' or 'us'"—entangles her fate with that of the other wajinru (Nies 93). *The Deep*'s main present-day plot follows Yetu's decision to abandon her community in the middle of the yearly

Remembrance, leaving the wajinru to grapple with their ancestors' memories while Yetu herself escapes to the surface where she hopes to find freedom from the past. In addition, abandoning the wajinru is clearly an act of survival; from the beginning of the text, while recovering from her latest suicide attempt, Yetu describes her experience of carrying the History as being made to serve as "a vessel for the ancestors' memories" (Solomon et al. 4). As time goes on, she has become "less and less able to distinguish rememberings from the present" (4) and feels as though she is "becoming an ancestor herself" as her identity is hollowed out to make space for the collective past (7).

At one point, Yetu even claims that her "Her body [is] full of other bodies" (28). The almost physical presence that the History takes on in Solomon's novella brings to mind the embodied generational trauma that haunts the protagonists of novels like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* (1998), and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979)—narratives with female Black protagonists forced to carry the weight of their own or their ancestors' memories of slavery into the present. These texts are all speculative neo-slave narratives that seek to rewrite history by breaking with the conventions of narrative form as well as conventional boundaries between realism and the fantastic (see Dubey).[46] Moreover, contrary to traditional slave narratives, whose goal were to convince White readers of the enslaved person's humanity, neo-slave narratives aim to deconstruct the humanist subject via fragmentary narrative techniques like the ones Solomon uses in *The Deep* (Vint, "Only by Experience" 241). More than anything, however, there is a monstrousness to the History that inevitably brings to mind the abjected figure of Beloved in Morrison's novel; Solomon's persistent use of the word "remembrance" likewise resonates with Morrison's concept of "rememory," which in the novel stands for repressed memories whose absence bubble up from the deep to haunt the present as a physical presence. In *Beloved,* the protagonist Sethe has escaped from slavery but remains haunted by the monstrous Beloved, "a strange woman who is presented as both Sethe's murdered daughter … and the collective memory of those who died during the middle passage" (243). For Sethe, the past can only be overcome through "a personal healing of the rift between mind and body" caused by her enslavement, which in turn means letting go of the humanist myth of a disembodied selfhood and, by the end of the novel, returning to a community of others shaped by the same dehumanising

[46] The term "neo-slave narrative" was first coined by Bernard Bell and reconceptualised by Ashraf H. A. Rushdy. Their definitions have both been expanded, and Vint defines neo-slave narratives simply as "an African-American genre that investigates the history of slavery and reworks the nineteenth-century slave narrative tradition" ("Only by Experience" 241).

experience (242). In *The Deep,* the wajinru's repression of the History has "split their minds in half, threatened their own bodies" (Solomon et al. 37) and divided their community into a dichotomy of "[h]istorian and her subjects" (148). What the community needs in order to move on is to reconnect with and integrate the foundational trauma of slavery that caused both their births and their ancestors' deaths—a collective process of healing that is encompassed in the collective pronoun and powerful chorus of clipping.'s song: "y'all remember."

When Yetu makes her decision to flee, Solomon's lyrical prose describes how "the rememberings becom[e] more distant with each upward meter gained" as though the trauma dwells in the "abyss" she leaves in her "wake" (40). The choice of words here evokes both Glissant's "womb abyss" and Sharpe's "wake" as powerful descriptors of the pasts' ongoing rupture of the present and foreclosure of the future. However, Yetu's flight to the surface does not free her from the trauma (indeed, if the previous chapters' submersion stories have taught us anything, it is that freedom is not to be found in the human world), though it does bring her the knowledge she needs to heal the split in the wajinru's community and memory. Yetu spends much of the novella physically weakened and stranded in a shallow tidal pool. Here, she is cared for by a taciturn human fisherwoman called Oori, whose own unresolved trauma forces the two into a mutual confrontation with the ongoing impacts of slavery on Black culture, memory, and kinship connections on both sides of the "door of no return" (Brand). Oori is the last survivor of the island-dwelling Oshunben people (located on "a small island in the backward C-shaped cradle of the African continent": Solomon et al. 152) and is also a keeper of memories (92). However, in contrast to Yetu, she, like many in the African diaspora, struggles not with rememory but rather with an *absence* of memory of a homeland and a culture that no longer exist. Everything else has been wiped out, first by colonialism and the slave trade, and later by the war of retribution the wajinru waged on the surface world in the past. The tragedy of this loss reverberates into the novella's present when the abandoned and distraught wajinru, caught up in the Remembrance, release a storm that destroys the last remaining gravesites of the Oshunben. Contrary to Drexciya and clipping.'s wars on the human world (and to Ogun's and Beyoncé's wielding of guns and baseball bats), Solomon's text is attentive to the ways that past trauma begets more trauma by splitting communities and perpetuating structures of violence and forgetting in the present. This is one of the points in the story where Solomon's reinterpretation seems to have had an effect on the original text. Having reflected on their own version and on Solomon's remix, clipping.

themselves point out that, "Drexciya's militant uprising … becomes an ambivalent act of both justice and extreme violence, perpetuating further trauma" (Solomon et al. 161). By contrast, Solomon's *The Deep* instead focuses on the relationship between Yetu and Oori as a way of restoring the connection between surface and sea, past and present, and in that way practising what Sharpe calls "care in the wake" (5).

To perform "wake work," as Solomon's novella does in its emphasis on healing, is to offer "particular ways of re/seeing, re/inhabiting, and re/imagining the world" without resorting to defeatism or escapism (21). Yetu's relationship to Oori is key because it leads both characters towards a deeper understanding of the past and allows them to transform the way they enter into the future. For Oori, reconciliation comes in the form of discovering that the Oshunben language and culture survive in the depths, passed on to the wajinru through another queer and interspecies encounter, narrated in a retrospective chapter, between one of her own enslaved ancestors and the founder of the wajinru Zoti Aleyu (Solomon et al. 47-49). On her end, Yetu is forced to confront one of the greatest horrors of the History, namely that the wajinru originated as abjected humans, "descendants of the people not on the top of the ship, but on the bottom, thrown overboard, deemed too much a drain of resources to stay on the journey to their destination" (58). This is the recognition that initially drove Zoti Aleyu to create the historian in an effort to protect the community from the truth. However, through her integration of the past and her relationship with Oori, Yetu comes to see that the wajinru's enslaved ancestors were more than abjected bodies. They were themselves human individuals who experienced love and community across boundaries and despite inhuman conditions, often in queer forms that "mark[ed] disruption to the violence of normative order" by insisting on "loving [their] own kind when [their] kind was supposed to cease to exist" (Tinsley 199). This orientation toward what Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley calls the "black queer Atlantic" does not restore the wajinru to a deified humanity, but it allows for new connections and "crosscurrents" to develop across boundaries that never should have been drawn in the first place (212). As DeLoughrey notes, "here the deep becomes transformed from a figure of death … into one of queer erotic life" ("Kinship" 8).

Returning to the depths to find the other wajinru still lost in rememory, Yetu reinvents the Remembrance ceremony in a way that heals the split between past and present and restores the wajinru to what they were originally meant to be: "one, together" (148). In a sense, this last Remembrance ceremony becomes a wake for the dead, an opportunity to both grieve and celebrate the past so as to move on from it (Sharpe 21). Taking on the role of the mothers her people lost when they were reborn as wajinru, she "guides the community

through their pain by acknowledging it in a way it never had been for her" and by showing them memories of the past that contain care as well as suffering (Solomon et al. 148). Where Yetu was isolated as historian and forced to bear the trauma of generations alone, the others are given the reassurance that they were never abandoned because "[i]t was the ocean who was their first amaba [mother]" who saved them from drowning and gave them a chance at life (149). By the end of the novella the community has come to recognize that the only way to live with the History is to "bear it all together" and so begin the proper work of healing (148).

Through its reckoning with rememory, *The Deep* shows that in order to achieve a transformed world, "the past must not be repressed or denied but acknowledged and incorporated into our collective understanding of reality" (Vint, "Only by Experience" 255). Moreover, as in works by Slonczewski and del Toro read in previous chapters, queer encounters between characters from different worlds create opportunities for submersion and sea change. Having guided her community through their reconciliation with the past, Yetu goes to reunite with Oori, who has just returned from bearing witness to the wreckage of her people's gravesite. Almost repeating the Remembrance ritual from the previous scene, they mourn the loss together and, with nothing left to tether her to the surface world, Oori makes a wish to the ocean that she might join the wajinru in creating a new future in the deep. The ocean, the novella explains, "was where life began. It was where the life of the wajinru began, and reaching backward, the life of the two-legs, too" (Solomon et al. 154), and so Yetu is able to share the memories of amniotic breathing that allowed her ancestors to survive their underwater births. Oori does not take on the monstrous form of the wajinru, but according to the narration from Yetu's perspective, "like Yetu, she could breathe both on land and in the sea. She was a completely new thing" (155). With this hopeful conclusion, the novel seems to suggest that Oori's submersion and her new hybrid form will lead to a future that is finally free from the traumas of the past. It might even lead to what Gumbs, calling for a planetary ethics of survival, calls "undrowning" (7).

Yet, as Yetu and Oori venture together "downward into the dark, into this world of beauty" (155), back to the "abyss" (Glissant), Solomon's choice of words ("downward" and "dark") belies the novella's suggestion of buoyancy and instead hints at fugitivity. Like the colourful underwater realm of *The Water Phoenix,* the novella's deep is a "world of beauty," and the concluding lines assert that, "This time, the two-legs venturing into the depths had not been abandoned to the sea, but invited into it" (Solomon et al. 155). Even so, Oori's willing submersion in the ocean serves as a disturbing echo of the women who were thrown

overboard or "abandoned" in the past during Middle Passage and her descent "downward into the dark" could be read as an end as much as it does a new beginning. There is also no mention of "sharing trouble" with the surface world (see Slonczewski 399), which we can imagine will continue hunting, drilling, dumping, and bombing unperturbed. This makes the future of Oori, Yetu, and the newly reunited wajinru decidedly precarious, or at least beyond our fathoming as readers. As the Afropessimist critic Jared Sexton points out, "Fugitivity is not freedom, or not yet" (n.p.), as more radical societal change is still needed in the struggle for Black emancipation.[47] In her work, Sharpe raises the impossible but crucial question of how to mourn or memorialise what is still ongoing (20). In the end, *The Deep* appears to elide this question by leaving the present in its wake, avoiding the "confrontation with both our now and our past simultaneously" that Walcott deems necessary (69) as it seeks to move beyond the past into a new future. Yet, much like the works previously examined in this dissertation, the novella keeps alive a horizon of possibility by imagining another world where it is possible for she-monsters to survive and perhaps even thrive. In this way, it creates "a small path through the wake" for its protagonists and its readers (Sharpe 4).

Transformation in the Present

The diverse narratives about Black mermaids discussed above reveal both the limits and possibilities of representation when it comes to challenging domination and creating cultural transformation—whether through sf film, hip hop remixes, or lyrical prose. This chapter concludes with a reading of Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor's Africanfuturist alien invasion story *Lagoon* (2014), a novel that imagines a feminist posthuman future grounded in a non-Western worldview and facilitated by the submersion of its alien and she-monster protagonists. Unlike the previous works I examined, Okorafor's novel is set in the Global South. Specifically, Okorafor imagines a global revolution beginning in Lagos, Nigeria, a major African port city with a complicated colonial history; built partly on a collection of islands, the city functions as a contact zone both between land and sea and between the continents of the African diaspora. *Lagoon*'s origins are themselves equally fluid; Okorafor is a second-generation Nigerian-American whose work draws on both American pop culture genres—especially sf and superhero comics—and African strands of magical realism in the

[47] There is clearly potential in reading Black mermaids' escape into the ocean through the concept of fugitivity as theorised by Fred Moten and others in Black studies. However, to engage fully with this concept would require a deep dive into Afropessimist theory and ontologies of Blackness that lies far beyond the scope of this chapter.

tradition of Ben Okri and others (Okorafor, "Organic Fantasy"). As part of her work, she famously rejects the label "Afrofuturism" as US-centric, and instead coins the term "Africanfuturism" to describe a distinctive movement that works against the habitual centering of the West even in Black cultural expressions (Okorafor, "Africanfuturism Defined").[48] Even so, Okorafor's style could just as easily be compared to other Nigerian diasporic sf writers like Akwaeke Emezi, Tade Thomposon, and Tochi Onyebuchi, who also emphasise cultural hybridity and transformative encounters as part of their work. These crosscurrents of style and culture complicate any reading of *Lagoon* as American sf, but they also create opportunities for subversion. Indeed, there are similarities between *Lagoon*'s structure and background and the figure of Mami Wata, a mermaid-like deity who appears throughout Okorafor's novel and whose origins are ambiguously tied to both African and European mythologies as well as capitalist-colonialist expansion across the Americas (Gaskins, "Mami Wata Remixed" 196). Although it fits uneasily within my US corpus, the transformative potential in *Lagoon* lies precisely in this Mami Wata-like ability to trouble Western narratives of singular origins and unambiguous identities.

Written in three acts, *Lagoon*'s plot explores what happens when shape-shifting aliens suddenly arrive as "guests" in the city' lagoon and decide that they "wish to become citizens" of a new Lagos (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 111). The first act "Welcome" describes first contact between the aliens and the city, the second "Awakening" describes the ensuing revolution, while the final act "Symbiosis" shows humans, aliens, and others coming together politically and trans-corporeally to form a posthuman society of monsters. Like *A Door into Ocean,* the narrative structure is a "carrier-bag" made up of multiple criss-crossing perspectives (Le Guin, "Carrier-Bag"), as the city's human and nonhuman inhabitants—including an ecoterrorist swordfish, a sentient piece of road, and a mermaid superhero—respond to the revolutionary changes brought on by the aliens' arrival. "[S]eemingly lighthearted but strikingly vehement," Okorafor's narrative and aesthetic choices are perhaps best described as "zany," especially in the way the novel's short, staccato chapters create the sensation of an

[48] Okorafor has publicly rejected the labelling of her work as Afrofuturism, mainly because the movement has been primarily centred around the US (despite recent attempts to expand the scope of the concept) but also because of its purported Afropessimist connotations. Instead, she advocates for the term Africanfuturism to describe a genre of science fiction "directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view," which "does not privilege or center the West" and mostly "skews optimistic" about the future of Black people across the diaspora (Okorafor, "Africanfuturism Defined"). She is not alone in this critique. Though widely used in academia, many authors of speculative fiction across the Black diaspora have rejected the term. Nalo Hopkinson for one states that: "'Afrofuturism' as a notion is way useful, but it doesn't cover the landscape. It comes out of an African American experience. It doesn't completely contain or reflect those of us whose root context isn't American" (qtd. in Lavender and Yaszek, "Author Roundtable").

uncontrollable and "incessant flow or stream of activity" (Ngai, *Our Aesthetic* 7, 9). Throughout, Okorafor uses Afrofuturist techniques of remixing similar to clipping.'s and Solomon's, blending elements of US pop-culture like superhero comics and hip-hop with Mami Wata and Orisha lore to imagine what the future might look like in the absence of Western colonialism and its oppression of Indigenous African beliefs. The result of this remix is a flourishing African ocean "teeming with aliens and monsters" (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 6), which by the conclusion of the story serves as the foundation for a more-than-human community seeking global revolution. As Melody Jue puts it in her reading of the text, "*Lagoon* participates in a long genealogy of Afrofuturist speculations that figure the ocean as both a means of cultural survival and a catalyst for future evolution, a familiar alterity" ("Intimate Objectivity" 177).

Enabled by the ocean, encounters with alterity play a major role throughout the novel and are situated as sites of transformation and resistance already in *Lagoon*'s humorous preface. Here, an unnamed narrator reminds us that the very name "Lagos" is a vestige of the Portuguese settlers who "first landed on Lagos Island in the year 1472" and "could not come up with a more creative name" than the Portuguese word for "lagoon," nor "think to ask one of the natives for suggestions" (Okorafor, *Lagoon* n.p.). This passage serves multiple purposes in establishing the book's decolonising tone and postcolonial setting. First, it prefaces Okorafor's friendly alien invasion story with a reminder to readers that Lagos has previously experienced, and remains affected by, a much more violent form of oceanic contact in the form of European colonialism and ongoing global neo-imperialism. Secondly, the preface shows how Okorafor relies on irony to resist this history and rewrite Nigeria's national narrative, an affective technique Nicole Seymour might describe as queering Western binaries and allowing for more creative and hopeful engagements with the future (*Bad Environmentalism* 5). This kind of corrective narrative is an established theme in many African countries' national literatures, and it is one of the things that allows Okorafor's novel to "[assert] a break from colonially inherited meanings of Blackness and … [present] the possibility of a future that is neither a violent revolution nor a repetition of the past" (Marquis 404).[49] This historical reclamation project is especially important considering the way Africa is commonly portrayed in the global imaginary even today as a continent essentially without a future; not only are positive portrayals exceedingly rare but, as Eshun puts it, "Africa is

[49] For one, the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is known for actively resisting the colonial perspective of much African literature at the time by returning to a pre-colonial past in search of a distinctly African voice.

always the zone of the absolute dystopia" ("Further Considerations" 72).[50] As a case in point, *Lagoon* was written as a deliberate critique of the White South African director Neill Blomkamp's sf movie *District 9* (2009), which casts Nigerians as stereotypical villains and other Black Africans as "mere setting," while presenting its disenfranchised aliens as an Afropessimist allegory for xenophobia and the afterlives of apartheid (Okorafor, "My Response"; see Marquis). By contrast, *Lagoon*—with its Mami Wata aliens—intervenes in essentialist and dystopian representations by offering "positive and utopian portrayals of African people and their futures" from a perspective that is African and dedicated to decolonisation rather than centred on the Global North (Ncube 71).

Beyond changing the way African countries are represented as more or less "developed" (or human) according to Western standards, *Lagoon*'s decolonising project lies in promoting alternative futures based on traditional African ontologies that do not privilege Western "Man" above other forms of being. If we return for a moment to *Lagoon*'s preface, the narrator's tongue-in-cheek recounting of Lagos' colonial history does more than establish the novel's oceanic setting. The passage quoted above also demonstrates how *Lagoon* engages in what Eshun might call an Afrofuturist "cultural project of rediscovery" by focalising more-than-human beings whose presence has been oppressed by colonialism and its ongoing effects on the continent ("Further Considerations" 287). Although it is not revealed until much later in the text, the preface's speaker is Udide Okwanka, also known as the "story weaver," an Igbo trickster god who takes the form of a giant spider (222). Acting as the novel's intradiegetic first-person narrator and secret orchestrator, she "lives beneath the city, feeling its vibrations, seeing everything, spinning its web" (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 228-229). As the story begins, Udide Okwanka acts mainly as an observer. However, following in the traditions of African literature and cosmologies, Okorafor turns this more-than-human being into one of the main actants of the story by hinting that the aliens' arrival and the city's subsequent transformation is part of the great spider's storytelling web. Speaking of Lagos' development, the spider comments, "It's been a beautiful thing to watch. My designs grow complicated" (n.p.). This revelation of more-than-human agency and perspective breaks with dominant representations of the African continent rooted in understandings of nature as static,

[50] With this, he is referring to the way most Western media consistently positions the African continent as the site of bad news and developmental failure, essentially depriving its inhabitants of hopeful futurities while imposing narratives and policies based on paternalistic and neo-colonial pity. DeLoughrey et al. explain: "Narratives of African countries as sites of crime, violence, and lack of civilisation enable and justify capitalist-neocolonialist 'development' and resource extraction" (226). See also Achille Mbembe's account of global discourses about Africa in *On the Postcolony.*

unchangeable, and silent. It also has the effect of deprivileging Western humanism as the dominant worldview and system of worldmaking and bringing attention to other possibilities of storytelling.

Udide Okwanka's agency in the story is in fact key because it has the radical effect of shifting the narrative of first contact from one of alien invasion (common to Western sf) to one of native collaboration (more widespread in Afrofuturism). This shift involves the extraterrestrial visitors taking a radically different role from the Europeans who came before them; though both arrive by sea, the aliens are not exploitative invaders but rather guests who have been invited by local deities to help the city free itself from its colonial legacy and restore Indigenous ways of knowing (see Jue, "Intimate Objectivity;" Marquis). This mixing of familiarity and alterity has monstrous results; one of the novel's main characters explains that the aliens are "Elders … [n]ot the Elders who were [the] ancestors, but Elders from the stars" (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 160). Meanwhile, another main character claims that the aliens "*are* technology" because of their ability to transform matter at will (29). Based on this and other similar instances in the text, Jue argues that the aliens exhibit a duality as elders and *novum* which "troubles the prescriptive distinction between genres" in Western and African literatures and manifests a "politics of the possible" where Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies may lead the way into a future free from present-day problems caused by anthropocentrism ("Intimate Objectivity" 174).[51] This reading is supported by the fact that the aliens' arrival in the novel is the event that ends up reawakening many of the city's local gods, including Mami Wata and the Yoruba trickster god Papa Legba, from centuries of slumber. It also helps that the aliens blend in almost seamlessly with Lagos' environment by transforming themselves into "deeply familiar" forms such as coral reefs and Mami Wata-like figures (174). The first alien ambassador even takes on the Yoruba name Ayodele ("joy comes home") to stress her desire to integrate and bring positive change to the city and to indicate that the aliens' arrival figure as a form of return. The alien visitors thus appear both as radical others and familiar kin, a technological *novum* in the shape of an African deity which arrives to guide Lagos through its revolutionary transformation. Their status as aliens and elders makes them similar to the Dogons' visitors from Sirius who came to share their

[51] As Jue points out, the distinction in Western genre fiction between folklore and sf has a parallel in much of African literature's compulsion toward realism as a means of legitimation ("Intimate Objectivity" 173-174). That being said, writers like Ben Okri and Kumkum Sangari set a precedent for using myth and Indigenous cosmologies to "catch the full richness of reality" prior to Okorafor and other Africanfuturist writers (Okri qtd. in Jue, "Intimate Objectivity" 174).

knowledge of the cosmos (Womack 84), as well as to other monstrous but advanced water beings like *The Shape of Water'*s Amphibian Man and *A Door into Ocean*'s Sharers.

Aside from Udide Okwanka, *Lagoon*'s narrative unfolds from the perspective of multiple more-than-human narrators. This has the effect of shifting the focus away from the human heroes and highlighting the multiple agencies—above and below water—whose entangled relationships make up the city. Dedicating *Lagoon* to "the diverse and dynamic people of Lagos, Nigeria—animals, plant and spirit" (*Lagoon* n.p.), Okorafor begins the novel with a short prologue describing the aliens' arrival in Lagos Lagoon from the perspective of a pipeline-sabotaging swordfish whose goal is to put an end to the Nigerian oil industry by driving away the humans. Titled "MOOM!"—in onomatopoetic reference to the reverberations of the alien's coral-like ship landing in water—the chapter describes how the aliens negotiate their coexistence with "the people of the water" before ever making contact with humans (252). We encounter the swordfish *in medias res*, as she is gathering speed to puncture an oil pipeline laid down by the "burrowing and building creatures from the land" who "brought the noise and made the world bleed black ooze that left poison rainbows on the water's surface" (3). In these passages, Okorafor's poetic prose and the alliteration on "b" turns the swordfish's anger into a tangible pulse moving through the water and off the page. As the target of that anger, human readers are alienated from our habituated anthropocentric perspective and made to see ourselves as the invaders of a realm inhabited by other species whose interests conflict with our own—whether or not we are actually complicit in the burrowing and building in question. When the aliens arrive, their first action is to rejuvenate the ocean and make it "clean" in accordance with the sea creatures' wishes, which unfortunately also makes it "toxic for modern, civilized, meat-eating, clean-water-drinking human beings" (248). Next, they transform the lagoon's inhabitants into powerful sea monsters capable of fending off human intruders. The swordfish, for one, is made into a completely new thing: she grows to three times her size and is granted golden, armour-thick skin and a ridge of spiked cartilage reminiscent of "some ancestral creature from the deepest ocean caves of old" (6). Gesturing back to these primordial waters and to unfathomable futures, by the end of this scene, "the ocean water just outside Lagos… is more alive than it has been in centuries and it is teeming with aliens and monsters" who are prepared to protect the ocean from human exploitation (6).

While this transformation and rejuvenation of Lagos' ocean does disrupt capitalist-colonialist extractivism, at first glance it also appears to reinforce the trope of the alien ocean by creating a space that is categorically hostile (even "toxic") to human beings. Indeed, much

like Drexciya's wave-jumpers, or the genocidal alien yrr of Peter Schätzing's revenge-of-the-ocean novel *The Swarm* (2006), the metamorphosed sea creatures spend the rest of the novel violently fending off any humans that dare approach the water. This hostility seems to suggest an ahuman, rather than a feminist posthuman, future, but could also be read in terms of capitalist-colonialist critique. By beginning the novel with the pipeline-sabotaging swordfish, Okorafor places *Lagoon* alongside "petrofiction" (LeMenager, *Living Oil*) novels like Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* that deal with the atrocious effects of oil on contemporary Nigerian society and environments.[52] At the same time, *Lagoon* expands the traditional scope of the petrofiction genre by emphasising how these environmental tragedies affect often-ignored nonhuman "life forms in the environment, including plants, animals, and forests but also the abiotic components of the ecosystem including soil and water" (Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa* 1). With Cajetan Iheka's critique of anthropocentric environmentalism in mind, I read the sea monsters' aggression less in terms of an insistence on their ultimate alterity than a decolonising intervention and an invitation to consider the more response-able possibilities brough about by the aliens' arrival. This distinction comes through in the aliens' emphasis on transformation through coexistence later in the novel when they announce, "We are change! … We come to bring you together and refuel your future" (112-113). With this, Okorafor is referencing both the utopian Earthseed religion of Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (the main tenet of which reads "God is change"),[53] and creating a pun "on fuel (petroleum) and refuel (to refill or rejuvenate)" (Jue, "Intimate Objectivity" 172-173). This allows her to present the novel's alien *novum* as an intervention against Nigeria's capitalist-colonialist economy, which is responsible for allowing the land and waters to be poisoned to a degree that requires a radical response even from the ocean itself. At the same time, the novel resists what DeLoughrey et al. in the introduction to *Postcolonial Ecologies* refer to as the petroleum economy's "colonisation of dreams" by "challeng[ing] the fairy tale of oil" with visions of an alternate future for Lagos (232).

This reading seems especially plausible if we consider the way in which *Lagoon*'s three human protagonists are positioned as defenders of more-than-human life and water

[52] Petrofiction is a term that was originally coined by Amitav Ghosh in a review of Abdul Rahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* in 1992. It has later been developed and popularized by Stephanie LeMenager in her book *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century.* On land, the environmental and human rights atrocities caused by crude oil extraction in the Niger Delta and especially Ogoniland is a well-known fact from the poetic and activist work of Ken Saro-Wiwa, documentaries like *Sweet Crude*, and novels like Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*.
[53] "Consider: Whether you're a human being, an insect, a microbe, or a stone, this verse is true. / *All that you touch / You Change. / All that you Change / Changes you. / The only lasting truth / Is Change. / God / Is Change*" (Butler, O. *Parable of the Sower* 79).

alongside the sea monsters and aliens. Immediately following the swordfish prologue, the novel's first chapter is set on the popular Bar Beach, known for its wild waters and rip currents, and described in the text as a place where "[t]he ocean mixed with the land and the wealthy with the poor" (7). It is in this contact zone that the three humans chosen by Udide Okwanka as defenders of the city meet, seemingly by chance, before being swept into the ocean and introduced to the aliens (an encounter they are later unable to remember). These three are Adaora the marine biologist, Agu the soldier, and Anthony the Ghanaian rapper, each of them in possession of unique powers that link them both to mutant superheroes like *X-Men* and Marvel's *Inhumans,* and to the Orishas, including Ogun and Shango (Marquis 406). These powers do not originate with the aliens, but they are awakened by them in a way that hints toward the protagonists' pre-existing affinity with traditional beliefs which are now being freed from the "confines of colonially inherited ontology" through their encounter with alterity (406). This affinity with more-than-human beings connects Adaora, Agu, and Anthony to the transformed sea monsters and to newly reawakened deities like Udide Okwanka and Mami Wata—to the future and the past of the city. Moreover, because their Orisha superhero powers manifest in response to acts of violence against children and women, it is not a stretch to interpret them as the novel's feminist response against "patriarchal aggression" and its reactionary efforts to curtail radical change (Jue, "Intimate Objectivity" 181). For example, as a child Anthony projects a sonic boom to defend his mother from his fathers' relatives' accusations of witchcraft and threats of violence; Agu similarly uses his super-strength to defend first an outcast boy and later a woman his commanding officer intends to rape. In other words, like the swordfish from the prologue, *Lagoon*'s human protagonists come together with the aliens in the contact zone of the ocean to begin a process of submersion that ends up creating both ontological and ethical transformation.

Most interesting by far of these three is Adaora, "an incarnation of Mami Wata" whose powers and identity, we learn, have been suppressed by patriarchal and colonial forces throughout her life (Marquis 406). As a case in point, her ability to create a defensive force field manifests at the beginning of the novel when her formerly loving husband Chris suddenly begins beating her for disobeying his authority and acting like a "marine witch" (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 17).[54] Chris, we learn, is a recent but devout convert to Pentecostal

[54] On the subject of marine witches, Drewal explains, "Within the last twenty to thirty years … Mami Wata's engagement with modernity, morality, Christianity, and Islam has led to dramatic transformations in the ways

Christianity, whose newfound faith (brought on by a near-death experience) clashes with his wife's work as a scientist and with her predilection for the subversive element of water—dangerous because it was "the very substance that made up 70 per cent of an adult's body and 75 per cent of a child's" (17). His wild accusations are given credence by the fact that Adaora was in fact born with webbed fingers and toes and with legs "joined together by flesh" like a mermaid's tail (257). These are deformities that once would have meant death ("if it were the old days, they would have thrown me in the bush": 257) but in this case were immediately concealed through surgical "correction;" similar to *The Shape of Water*'s Elisa with her sewn-shut gills, Adaora lost part of herself in the struggle to become normatively human. Nothing, however, could ever "cure" Adaora's unfathomable connection to the sea. As she describes it, she was born able to swim "like a fish" and chose marine biology to feel close to the water (257). Combined, her embodied and scientific knowledges of the water place her in direct opposition to a fundamentalist worldview that rejects the science and Indigenous knowledges represented by the aliens; this unique epistemological positioning is also what allows Adaora to approach alterity with what Jue calls "intimate objectivity," a praxis of "open curiosity" similar to Kris Kelvin's final encounter with the alien ocean in *Solaris*. This is a way of knowing that does not seek to categorise or control the other, but instead allows Adaora to encounter the alien ambassador Ayodele—another Mami Wata figure—with response-ability and work towards a common goal of rejuvenating both sea and city (Jue, "Intimate Objectivity" 175).[55]

Adaora's affinity with the aquatic and the monstrous is highlighted by the fact that, towards the end of the novel, she experiences a moment of submersion that briefly restores her to her "true" she-monster form. While escorting the president of Nigeria to a subaquatic

---

she is depicted and understood. For some, her dangerous and seductive attributes align her with the forces of Satan. Mami has thus become a primary target of a widespread and growing religious movement led by evangelical (Pentecostal) Christians and fundamentalist Muslims who seek to denigrate and demonize indigenous African faiths" (Drewal 72). Moreover, accusations of witchcraft and the practise of "witch-slapping" are common in African Pentecostal / Evangelical Christian circles, as demonstrated in Okorafor's novel. Okorafor notes, "Witch-slapping is just one symptom of the strong strain of Christian fundamentalism running through Nigeria's veins. Such things can be found all over the world, you say? True. However, what worries me about the particular strain that's been running through Nigeria in recent years is not that it's teaching people extreme and bizarre forms of Christianity. It is that it's teaching Nigerians to hate their own indigenous traditions, spiritualities, and religions. It's one thing to move past what was there before, it happens. People evolve, change, move on (and sometimes they return to the old ways or create hybrid new ones). However, it's another thing entirely to move past what was before because of a nasty form of hatred of one's self in the guise of religion, brought or imported by outsiders and foisted upon people who are simply looking for God" ("insight").

[55] Other Mami Wata figures are also present in the novel. For example, amidst the chaos of the aliens' arrival, the character Father Oke—the corrupt preacher manipulating Adaora's husband—encounters a beautiful and apparently wealthy woman who makes him see the error of his ways before luring him into the ocean, never to be seen again (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 232-235).

meeting with the aliens (another zany plot-point), Adaora is thrown overboard into the now toxic and sea monster-infested lagoon. Yet instead of drowning or being poisoned by the water, she is transformed by the aliens in the same way as the sea creatures who wished to become monsters—and in the same way as Spinel, Elisa, Anya, and Oori upon escaping into the sea. Once more, Adaora's legs fuse into a tail, this time "the body of a giant metallic blue fish" which Adaora identifies as a swordfish (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 251), perhaps suggesting kinship with the oil-line saboteur from the novel's prologue. In addition, she grows gills on the sides of her neck and the ability to not only breathe but shape the now ultra-clean water that is supposedly harmful to humans; she adapts so well to the water that she is able to keep pace with Ayodele in dolphin form. While this experience initially brings back feelings of shame from Chris' accusations of witchcraft and her childhood "deformities," she makes a conscious decision to embrace the positive sides of her powers with the Tuareg mantra, repeated throughout the book, "*Aman Iman* … water is life" (250), which also hearkens back to the novel's epigraph: "The cure for anything is salt water—sweat, tears, or the sea" (n.p.). With this embrace of the monstrous, she is finally able to accept her full identity and to admit to herself "I am a marine witch" (280)—"a form," Jue observes, "it turns out, she has desired all along" ("Intimate Objectivity" 182). In the end, this is what empowers Adaora—much like Anya in *The Water Phoenix*—to leave her abusive relationship and return to her true love for the sea, focusing all her attention on studying the new creatures that inhabit it.

Adaora and the swordfish are not the only characters in *Lagoon* to undergo submersive transformations. One of the things that makes *Lagoon* radically different from stories about the inscrutable alien ocean (e.g., *Solaris*), and similar to submersion stories from previously examined texts, is that the aliens are themselves changed by their encounter with the city and its human and nonhuman inhabitants. Although Ayodele informs the humans that "some of my people have already mixed with them [sea creatures]" (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 240), the novel's main emphasis is on the merging of humans and aliens to create a completely new form of monstrous being. As the main alien character, Ayodele is at the centre of this transformation. Her initial goodwill toward humans, embodied in her decision to take on the "deeply familiar" form of Mami Wata (Jue, "Intimate Objectivity" 174), is repeatedly challenged throughout the novel as she is confronted with human atrocities and violence.[56]

[56] For example, early in the text, she witnesses a group of soldiers and Pentecostal Christians bashing a local LGBTQ+ group that has come out of hiding to celebrate her arrival as a harbinger of diversity by putting on an impromptu pride parade. The event is given little attention in the text—we never learn what happens to the victims of the bashing—but the scene works to signal Ayodele's vulnerability (she is shot during the conflict),

Ayodele's development as a character culminates in a scene where she puts herself at risk to save a group of frightened soldiers from the enraged sea creatures now attacking Lagos' coast. In return, the soldiers brutally beat her to death once they recognise her alien nature. This violent scene is rendered in excruciating detail, but the most striking thing about it is that Ayodele does nothing to defend herself, although she has already shown herself to be capable of exercising macabre acts of revenge. Instead, she quietly accepts her apparent martyr's death with a tranquillity reminiscent to *A Door into Ocean*'s Merwen and her resolute commitment to nonviolent resistance and compassion for the enemy; or even more relevantly, to the protagonist of the Kenyan sf short film *Pumzi* (2009) who sacrifices her body to give nurturance to a growing tree in the post-apocalyptic wasteland. Indeed, as soon becomes clear, Ayodele is not dying but merely transforming for the sake of the city's future, allowing her body to disperse into a white mist that trans-corporally spreads her awareness and influence through all of Lagos's inhabitants as it is inhaled—a change evidenced by a sudden citywide craving for Ayodele's favourite food, raw garden eggs (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 269). Ayodele uses her last words to explain the transformation that is happening, "We are a collective. Every part of us, every tiny universe within us is conscious. I am we, I am me … Your people need help on the outside but also within …. I will go within … You'll all be a bit … alien" (268). By the time she is done fulfilling her role as ambassador, there is not a single "human" left untouched in Nigeria (and parts of Ghana), and any illusion of borders between self and other (and nations) have fully dissolved.

The merging of human and alien cells that concludes Okorafor's novel is astonishingly similar to the ending of Tade Thompson's novel *Rosewater,* another diasporic Nigerian first contact sf novel which concludes with the unsettling revelation that human DNA has been slowly replaced from within by an extraterrestrial biodome that seeks to colonise Earth for its own nefarious purposes. However, where Thompson's novel frames its alien invasion as a disturbing end to the Western concept of the human, *Lagoon* instead takes a more positive stance toward the monstrous as it points toward the possibility of peaceful symbiosis and cultural transformation. Reading Ayodele's dispersal as a kind of epistemological awakening, Jue likens Ayodele's sacrifice to a "coral reproduction event that spawns alien particles into the fluid atmosphere in order to sow the seeds of open-mindedness

her mercy (she heals Adaora's daughter who is also hit), and her capacity to retaliate (she implodes the soldiers and transforms their remains into a plantain tree). This seems to foreshadow her own gruesome assault and subsequent metamorphosis at the novel's end while simultaneously allying the aliens with queerness. As Ncube points out, "This attack can be read as an assault on all forms of being that challenge normativity" (75), including aliens and marine witches.

and acceptance of difference in the broader public" ("Intimate Objectivity" 183). The novel's most explicit example of this change is the way alien influence causes Nigeria's president (a previously dying and disillusioned Marxist) to begin the work of transforming Lagos into a more-than-human utopia based on the aliens' shared ideals. In a nation-wide speech announcing his and the aliens' plans for a new Nigeria, he resolves to free the country from its neo-colonial legacy by immediately shutting down the petroleum industry in favour of more sustainable land and water use. In addition, he promises an end to "decades of corruption and internal strife" and encourages citizens to build bridges regardless of "race, tribe, or … alien blood" as they prepare themselves for the return of both new and formerly extinct creatures to the city (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 279). In this way, the novel suggests that a sea change can happen without violent revolution or apocalyptic destruction, as long as people are made aware of alternatives to the current system and willing to accept cultural change (Marquis 411). *Lagoon*'s ending, then, is "the depiction of what an epistemic shift would look like if we could see it" (416), unfolding in speculative (and spectacular) fashion through the guidance of alien elders.

Thinking back to Eshun's description of Africa as the site of absolute dystopia, and to Thompson's ominous take on alien colonisation, *Lagoon* presents more hopeful possibilities for futures beyond anthropocentrism, capitalism, and colonialism. With that said, the novel also cautions against uncritical hopefulness even as it celebrates submersion. A short epilogue, included only in some versions of the text, suggests that Lagos' transformation is possible only because of the novel's setting in a Black majority country and that a similar transformation would be utterly unthinkable on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean where the dominant climate is anti-Blackness (Sharpe 21).[57] After the events in Lagos, *Lagoon* takes us to a college campus in Chicago, where three Black sophomore students are avidly watching video footage of the "X-Men shit" taking place "in Africa" on their phones and debating whether or not any of it is real (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 295). After some humorous back and forth, they decide to believe the news, reasoning that no one would bother to fake such realistic special effects and then ruin the story's plausibility by making the heroes "[r]eal *Africans … in* Africa" (296). This wry meta-commentary from Okorafor speaks not only to the politics of representation in US sf media explored previously in this chapter, but also serves as a reminder of the situated nature of the imagination (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis); instead of

[57] In this paragraph I refer specifically to the 2014 Hodder & Stoughton Kindle version of the novel, as my (also 2014 Hodder & Stoughton) pocket edition is missing the scene. I have not investigated the publication history of the text sufficiently to say anything about the significance of the scene's inclusion/omission.

celebrating or eagerly awaiting a wider revolution as the aliens spread their influence, the students simply return to their books, content that "it's all happening over there" where it will never affect them (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 296-297). As Marquis points out, this ending indicates that *Lagoon*'s Africanfuturist utopia is only imaginable in a society where White supremacy is not the norm (418), a reading that resonates with *The Water Phoenix* and *The Deep*'s fugitive need to reach into the depths of the ocean to imagine some kind of hope for Black futurity in "the wake" (Sharpe).

Even so, *Lagoon*'s ending is left open to infinite possibilities for more widespread sea change. Before the last epilogue—which, again, is only included in some editions of the text—Okorafor leaves readers with multiple endings that, rather than closing down the narrative, have the effect of opening it up to horizons far beyond the scope of the novel's pages, the borders of Nigeria, and a human perspective. As Judith Rahn puts it in her reading, Okorafor "is reluctant to bring her novel to a conclusion, thus adding ending after ending, to give a voice to the manifold subjectivities she evokes over the course of the narrative" (88). First, the novel revisits the perspective of the monstrous swordfish, who is leaving Lagos content that her work in driving away the "dry creatures" that once inhabited the city is complete (after all, there are no "humans" left in Lagos: Okorafor, *Lagoon* 290). Meditating on the magical significance of the number three, on beginnings, middles, and ends, she takes a turn south through the light as if heading toward more troubled waters in need of her intervention, virtually becoming the "troublesharer" denied by the ending of *A Door into Ocean* (Slonczewski 399). As the chapter closes, she "swims out to sea, to see what she can see" (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 290), the homophonous repetition suggesting a link between awareness and perception and the ocean's capacity for endless possibilities to arise. The play on "sea/see," Rahn points out, continues into the following epilogue and creates an even broader horizon of possible meanings (88). Here, Udide Okwanka finally identifies herself as the "unseen" orchestrator of the novel's events, even as she prepares to take a more active role in the story (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 291)—in other words, to become "*seen*" and connected through her now vibrant *sea* and *city*. Taking great pride in the web she has spun throughout Lagos, Udide Okwanka teases the reader by refusing to provide answers to the many loose threads left by the narrative. Instead, she resolves to enter the story herself, determined to defend her city from those "*in other parts of the world*" who would see its transformative potential as "*a cancer*" and seek to "*burn it away before it spreads*" (293, italics in original). Like the swordfish heading out to sea, she announces "*I will leave my web. / I become part of the story. / I will join my people*" (291), promising more-than-human solidarity in the global

struggle against colonialism, capitalism, anti-Blackness, and other forms of domination. This way, "Okorafor imagines that a resurgent global South might use its own colonial history as a template for shaping new and better futures for all—Westerner and African, white and black, and alien and human alike" (Winter). The story ends here, with strands still unwoven, and with a radical promise of hope based on the fact that history is active and resistant to closure.

Conclusion

According to Sharpe, to perform "wake work" is a way of reimagining the pasts, presents, and futures of Black life outside and beyond Western humanist ethics and ontologies (18). The purpose of this work is to "continue to imagine new ways to live in the wake of slavery … a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lived and in/imaginable lives" (18). I began this chapter by suggesting that Afrofuturist underwater utopias and mermaid imaginaries—in the sonic tradition of Drexciya and of Jimi Hendrix's "1983"—point to the many ambiguities of what Rinaldo Walcott calls the "black aquatic" as a site of Black trauma and (re)birth (65). Linking this tradition to recent Black mermaid stories and to Afrofuturist critiques of the human, I then argued that narratives by Ogun, Solomon, and Okorafor use submersion to embrace the monstrous, resist domination, and reimagine Black futures based on hope and healing. As in wake work, the goal here is not to find inclusion in the Western master model's conception of the human, but rather to discover ways of surviving and thriving beyond it. My first case study of Disney's controversial Black *The Little Mermaid* remake illustrated the limits of inclusion as a means of cultural transformation when nothing is done to change the overarching narrative of assimilation into Western humanism. This discussion also highlighted the need for a "context for transformation" and more "transgressive image[s]" that break with the dominant culture's dehumanisation of Black women (hooks, *Black Looks* 4), laying the groundwork for the rest of the chapter's discussion of more subversive stories of submersion. My first case study among these was Bola Ogun's independent feminist short film *The Water Phoenix,* which I read in the context of its positive reception and its intervention in mainstream sf cinema, but also with an eye to its own colourblind narrative. Curious about Ogun's self-professed reluctance to create a "black movie" (Ogun, "Enough"), I delved into a close reading of the film that sought to highlight both the liberatory and escapist potential in the Black mermaid's flight from captivity and phoenix-like rebirth at sea. Drawing on Afropessimist theory and critiques of Beyoncé's *Lemonade,* I concluded that *The Water Phoenix*'s final submersion scene confounds Ogun's own colourblind intentions with the film by imagining the ocean and the

more-than-human world as an emancipatory site for Black women caught in "the wake" (Sharpe). At the same time—as with previous chapters' submersion stories and other Black narratives of flight—there are undercurrents of death in the mermaid's escape that hints at fugitivity and an ongoing struggle for survival.

The ambiguous conclusion to Ogun's film is perfectly in line with the other will-fully utopian submersion stories I read in this project, including *A Door into Ocean*'s careful retreat to isolationism and *The Shape of Water*'s flight into the ocean. As Anya the Black mermaid swims smiling toward the horizon, her escape is meant to inspire viewers' desire for a different world where Black women, and by extension any monstered subject, can live free from domination and exploitation ("Combahee"). Such a world is partly realised in Rivers Solomon's hip hop inspired novella *The Deep,* the second case study I turned to. Here, my aim was to examine how Solomon, as one of many Black feminist writers and filmmakers rewriting the history of Middle Passage, uses the mermaid as a figuration to imagine Black futures based on a restored relationship to the sea. I began this section of the chapter by comparing Solomon's underwater utopia to Drexciya and clipping.'s wars on the surface world to highlight *The Deep*'s emphasis on healing through response-ability and more-than-human kinships. Similar to Morrison's *Beloved* and other neo-slave narratives by Black women, *The Deep* places community, remembrance, and connection at the centre of recovery, making the past the key to a more hopeful future and recognising that "[h]ealing work is the antidote to oppression" (Alexander 311). Further, by acknowledging the ocean as a site of trauma and of sea change, Solomon's novella imagines submersion giving rise to the "completely new thing" that comes from embracing the monstrous and ending the separation of surface and underwater worlds (Solomon et al. 155).

As buoyant as *The Deep*'s conclusion is, I found that the novella's emphasis on futurity makes the ending more individually escapist than societally transformative, leaving an impression almost as ambiguous as that of *The Water Phoenix.* In the last part of this chapter, I therefore made a deeper dive into Nnedi Okorafor's wacky Africanfuturist novel *Lagoon,* a submersion story that draws on the transformative potential of the monstrous to imagine what it would take to end capitalist-colonialist domination over nonhumans and marginalised humans in the present. Unlike the previous US diasporic works ending in escape, *Lagoon* locates an Africanfuturist utopia in the present by taking readers to a lively and more-than-human Lagos populated by aliens, sea monsters, and Indigenous deities. Subverting Western narratives of alien invasion, Okorafor depicts her extraterrestrials as guests and guide figures eager to reawaken traditional ontologies and epistemologies and help

the city reach its full post-colonial, post-capitalist, post-petroleum, and posthuman potential—all of it starting and ending with a sentient swordfish set on revolution. Further, by allying the aliens with sea creatures and superhuman Orishas in their mission to transform the city, Okorafor indicates that encounters with alterity, facilitated by the contact zone of the ocean, may have the potential to subvert current power structures and create more monstrous possibilities for the future. Although the novel remains ambivalent about the possibilities of transformation outside the Global South, its recurrent epilogues also speak against a foreclosure of the future and seem to indicate that anything is possible so long as the struggle continues and trouble is shared. In this way, *Lagoon* encourages us to look in unexpected places for narratives of submersion, to unmoor ourselves from our particular traditions and head south to "see what [we] can see" beyond the horizon of here and now (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 290).

As submersion stories, these Black feminist mermaid imaginaries both resonate with and eclipse the works explored in previous chapters. Much like *The Water Phoenix, A Door into Ocean* and *The Shape of Water* imagine marginalised characters escaping from repressive terrestrial social orders by rejecting the human and merging with the ocean. This turn toward the monstrous gives the protagonists Spinel and Elisa freedom to explore more response-able ways of being, however they are plots that end in deferred revolutions rather than true social transformation. While there is value in imagining escape as a grounds for hope and survival, something more is needed to spark a true sea change beyond the transformation of individual she-monsters. Further, while they emphasise response-ability based on sharing and the alliance of the voiceless, Slonczewski and del Toro's works primarily use the she-monster as a figuration for *human* social justice concerns while nonhuman species remain a secondary concern. By contrast, *The Deep* and *Lagoon,* albeit radically different in terms of aesthetics, both position multispecies ethics as central to their critique of the human as a gendered and racialised invention of Western humanism. *Lagoon* also speculates about what submersion might look like in the present, essentially breaking with the African American utopian tradition's hesitancy to imagine transformation beyond the present moment of revolution or flight. In the end, the feminist Afrofuturist works examined in this chapter attend to the ocean as a site of metaphoric meanings, material entanglements, and specifically situated histories and imaginaries by rooting them in the "black aquatic" and the ambiguous relationship between Blackness and the sea (Walcott R.).

Coda: #water

Fish, with the eye that never closes, / I want to follow you / To the wide, wide waters.
—Linda Hogan, "At the Water," *Rounding the Human Corners*

Figure 1. The coastal goddess Guri Kunna showing the way towards submersion. Still from #tjaetsie.

A misty landscape of rugged rocks and washing waves beneath a dim grey sky: a middle-aged woman with wild brown hair and a furrowed face dressed in a long black dress stares out at sea while the camera tracks her appearances and disappearances through the coastal landscape. Interspersed with her silent vigil, the screen shows footage of aquafarming, trawlers, seafloor ROVs, and other technologies of ocean mastery, but also the life hidden beneath the black surface of the water: iridescent species of jellyfish, squid, and fish, and a seafloor carpet of snakestars. No human voice or narrative structure guides the viewer through these scenes, only a jarring soundscape of underwater rushing and screeching noises that blends seamlessly with the melancholy notes of a fiddle. The woman's journey culminates on a rocky beach where the borders between sand and water are fully indistinguishable; she walks into the ocean, hair and dress billowing as she submerges. Up to her neck in icy water, she stares directly into the camera, unsmiling and unblinking as the screeching noise reaches a crescendo. Her eyes begin to bulge grotesquely. Suddenly, woman and camera plunge into the ocean while the woman's face continues to distort. As we watch, she transforms into a wide-eyed fish that turns slowly on the screen, lingering for just a

moment before darting away offscreen, disappearing into the unfathomable depths. "I want to follow you / To the wide, wide waters," Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan writes in the collection *Rounding the Human Corners*, evoking the same desire for slipping into more-than-human worlds.

The scene I describe above comes from the Sámi artist Sissel Mutale Bergh's experimental documentary/visual sound poem *#tjaetsie* (*water*).[1] The woman turned fish is the local ocean deity Guri Kunna (or *Gorrijh gujne*, "the spawning lady"), a goddess, witch, or sorceress (depending on the source) who watches over the coast of Trøndelag in the middle of Norway. (This is where I am writing from: The Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim / Tråante).[2] The film forms part of Bergh's project to collect and make visible traces of Sámi presence in the area through a series called *knowhowknow* in which she explores the relationship between traditional and modern ways of knowing in relation to the more-than-human world. The title of the film is "*hashtag water*" in the critically endangered South Sámi language.[3] Ilona Hongisto noted in her introduction to the screening where I first saw the film that the hashtag links themes and topics in online environments; like water itself, it draws connections across time, space, and meaning. Placing it in front of the South Sámi word for water is thus a way of asking where and what water connects.[4] Bringing into play a contrast between Indigenous languages and cosmologies and modern information technologies, it sparks local and global connections of planetary flow. In what follows, I take Bergh's visual sound poem as an opportunity to reflect on both the rewards and risks of submersion storytelling and to speculate on its possible futures beyond the works I have explored in this dissertation.

I first encountered *#tjaetsie* at a public screening at an event dedicated to vanishing natures during my first month as a blue humanities PhD fellow. I had been hired as part of my university's pilot programme in blue humanities research (appropriately titled "HAVANSVAR" or "ocean responsibility") to examine representations of oceans in film and fiction through a feminist and decolonial lens. The project description also called for local perspectives, and I was feeling lost knowing that my project would be on feminist science

[1] Many thanks to Bergh for giving me access to her film online so I could write this analysis four years after watching the film at a screening.
[2] Tråante is the South Sámi name of the city, which lies in the middle of the traditional South Sámi area.
[3] As one of three major Sámi language groups affected by the government's assimilationist Norwegianisation policy between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, South Sámi is critically endangered according to UNESCO; a Norwegian governmental report from 2016 estimates that 270 people speak the language well while an additional 340 are able to understand it. See NOU 2016.
[4] I paraphrase from notes generously provided by Hongisto after the presentation.

fiction, a genre that is distinctly alien to Norway's realist traditions in film and fiction.[5] I was already tracing themes of submersion through the wildly different texts of Slonczewski, del Toro, and Okorafor—looking for those moments of radical physical and social transformation—when I saw the woman on screen change. Up until that moment, I was alienated by the poetics of the film: the sickening motion of the handheld camera, the disorienting cutting through labs, decks, deeps, and times, and the overwhelming soundscape. But in that scene of submersion, the woman plunging into the ocean brought the theory home, connecting my distant American archive to the more familiar North Sea, creating a transnational stream. Despite my doubts about the scope of my idea, I wanted to follow to see where she would go. In this, *#tjaetsie* acted for me as an invitation to speculative submersion (Jue, *Wild Blue Media*): to relinquish distance and mastery for more vulnerable encounters with alterity.

In contrast to the American works of feminist sf I discussed in the previous chapters, *#tjaetsie* comes out of a mostly realist, albeit mythological, context. Yet based on how the film mixes temporalities and knowledge systems, it could be argued that Bergh's film engages in the "slipstream" thinking of Indigenous futurisms (Dillon 3).[6] Indeed, in *#tjaetsie,* Indigenous sea ontologies are shown surviving alongside modern technologies in defiance of colonial dichotomies and temporalities that would render them obsolete (DeLoughrey, "Submarine Futures"). Bergh's film thus "reminds us that these indigenous engagements with water respond to a context that is very much now, even as it also holds deep pasts" (Neimanis 174). For instance, the soundtrack by composer Maja Solveig Kjeldstrup Ratkje at first appears alienating in its apparent artificiality. However, it is based on recordings made from 200 metres below the surface of the ocean, a feat made possible by the mixing of unfathomable more-than-human worlds with advanced sampling equipment designed for scientific mastery of the sea. This juxtaposition troubles the borders between the so-called natural and the technologically mediated in a way that renders the film itself monstrous,

[5] Norwegian sf has long been connected primarily to the scholarly, editorial, and creative collaborative work of Jon Bing and Tor Åge Bringsverd ("B & B") during the 1960s and 1970s. Often more lyrical and experimental than its US counterpart, the genre has received limited mainstream attention (unless realist but speculative cli-fi bestsellers like Maja Lunde's "Climate Quartet" count). *En strek gjennom tyngdekraften* ("*A Line Through Gravity*"), an anthology of new Norwegian sf edited by Maria Dorothea Schrattenholz, Frøydis Sollid Simonsen, and Joanna Rzadkowskawas, was published in 2022 and signals a possible revitalization of the genre.

[6] As noted in his keynote during the SFRA (Science Fiction Research Association) 2022 "Futures from the Margins" conference in Oslo, the Sámi author Sigbjørn Skåden has adopted the term Indigenous futurisms to refer to his recent turn toward the speculative in his Norwegian-language novel *Fugl* ("Bird") (2019), a poetic intergenerational portrait of a group of human colonists that fail to gain mastery over a distant and inhospitable planet after being forced to abandon a dying Earth. I follow his lead in adopting the term in a Norwegian/Sámi context.

along with the environment it represents. Adding to the trouble, various sea creatures appear throughout Bergh's film in close-ups that defy taxonomical identification even as they inspire affective *identification* (Gumbs, *Undrowned* 8); for example, as the camera dips beneath the water in the film's opening shot, we see the blurry outline of some species of octopus moving away through the black water, obscured by clouds of ink; other creatures follow, similarly darting or pulling away out of view as the camera disturbs them. Based on Alaimo's work on popular scientific representations of deep sea creatures, we might speculate about the modes of response called for by these highly aestheticized mediated encounters with oceanic others that refuse to be known ("Feminist Science Studies" 200).

As much as I was affected by Guri Kunna's submersion, and by the appearance of my unfamiliar neighbours on screen, these images did not shock me in the same way as *#tjaetsie*'s final scene, with its insistence on response-ability across species. After the woman-turned-fish escapes out of view, the film cuts directly to the deck of a trawler revealed through dim and fragmented close-ups of crew and equipment. Amidst an inhuman chorus of distorted screams, a fishing net packed with the night's catch is hauled up out of the water by a crane. As the camera moves closer, we see the slick pink, white, and grey bodies of fish—possibly haddock, but difficult to identify—struggling against each other in a tangled, dying mass. Their mouths and eyes gape toward the audience, separated only by the net, the screen, and the tenuous border between species. Whatever our feelings on the fishing industry, those of us watching are forced to keep vigil as the camera zooms in on one particular fish that continues to gasp for water, trapped with its already dead kin in a hostile alien environment. Its mouth keeps opening and closing convulsively and its wide eye continues to stare blankly as the screen fades to black—never closing.

#tjaetsie's final drowning scene blurs the boundaries between species and defamiliarizes human perspectives. Unlike in previous works I have examined, violence against the nonhuman is here placed front and centre, connected to human suffering but not reducible to it. Is it anthropomorphism to identify with the fish suffering on screen? Or is it simply a way to recognise sameness in difference in a way that demands response? The myth that fish feel no pain has been debunked but continues to shape practises and attitudes in the fishing industry and beyond.[7] The fact that it still holds credence illustrates the danger of an anthropocentric worldview that attributes certain qualities only to humans and makes those qualities the basis for ethics. What other worlds are possible? If the film's plunge into water

[7] Surprisingly recently; see this *The Guardian* article from 2018: "Are we wrong to assume fish can't feel pain?"

invites audiences into unfathomable futures based on speculative submersion, its ascent to the surface insists that we also face the deadly consequences of extractivism in the here and now of the present: for those caught in the web of capitalism and colonialism, there is no easy escape. Still, we keep following the fish, hoping for a sea change.

Submersion as Escape and Transformation

I began this dissertation with the suggestion, borrowed from DeLoughrey, that new oceanic imaginaries are emerging in response to the Anthropocene's rising sea levels and other blurring boundaries ("Ordinary Futures"). Inspired by her readings of Pacific and Caribbean Ocean literatures, I referred to these narratives as "submersion stories" and argued that their emphasis on femininity, monstrousness, and hope subverts the dominant US popular culture's false dichotomy of stability or apocalyptic futurity. *#tjaetsie* is a work of submersion storytelling. Beyond its emphasis on she-monsters, sea ontologies, and response-able ethics—and despite its diverging national and generic context—Bergh's film is characteristic of my archive in multiple ways. Like the stories DeLoughrey describes, *#tjaetsie* "depict[s] a female [character] that ha[s] merged with an oceanic realm" in "counter narrative to … the individualistic terms of apocalyptic fiction," thus raising "vital questions about how to represent a subject who has such porous boundaries with other species that the concept of (human) species itself is put into question" ("Ordinary Futures" 364-366). The film presents this blurring of boundaries as part of an ordinary but still unfathomable future that is a repetition of humanity's oceanic origins. In this, it resists the foreclosure of the future and suggests other possibilities of survival predicated on adaptation, transformation, and sea change.

In this dissertation, I have explored how works of American speculative feminist fiction tell stories of submersion from perspectives entangled in but also resistant to the dominant culture. Using the figuration of she-monsters, I have seen how these stories contest the porous boundaries of the human and use the resulting ambiguity to imagine processes of societal and bodily transformation taking place in encounters with oceanic otherness. But I have also seen how my texts struggle to imagine sea change. Like *#tjaetsie,* the submersion stories in my archive depict characters fleeing into oceanic realms; unlike *#tjaetsie,* most of them—with the notable exception of *Lagoon*—find no way of reckoning with the dystopian present back on land. I have grappled with this tension between wish-full and will-full utopian modes throughout this project. For example, *A Door into Ocean* explores the transformative potential of feminist posthuman sharing across bodily, social, and planetary

boundaries, but shies away from imagining a revolution against the Patriarchy. *The Shape of Water* subverts the affects of the monstrous from disgust to desire to create an alliance of the voiceless, but still leaves audiences uncertain about the possibilities of happy queer/crip endings. *The Water Phoenix* and *The Deep* reclaim the ocean and the future as sites of Black feminist healing but are unable to offer more than a temporary refuge from the ongoing violence of the wake. *Lagoon* and *#tjaetsie,* however, reckon with the violence of ocean extractivism in specific locales while also speculating about other possibilities arising from submersion here and now. Their she-monster characters do not disappear into oceanic worlds. Instead, they return to the ongoing struggle of transformation from more-than-human points of view.

Like knowledges, imaginaries are situated, embodied, and subject to constant struggle (Yuval-Davis and Stoetzler); what, then, does imagining submersion mean for differently situated bodies subject to monstering by virtue of gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, and more? The texts in my archive, including *#tjaetsie*, stand as a testament to the risks and rewards that come from embracing the monstrous, a figuration that signifies emancipation and desire but also exclusion and abjection. *A Door into Ocean* uses the breathmicrobes to explore how different characters experience the dissolve of their human identities in contrasting ways depending on their race, class, and gender. *The Shape of Water* imagines a coalition of queer, crip, and racialised subjects rising against the human as a way to render the normative abject and the non-normative desirable. Afrofuturist mermaid stories reject the demand for assimilation into Western humanity and instead embrace the monstrous by troubling boundaries of gender, race, sexuality, and species. Yet, as the scenes of escape that conclude these texts reveal, she-monsters risk further alienation or even annihilation in the process of transformation. It is important to remember that monstering nature and reclaiming the monstrous are not innocent pursuits for "inappropriate/d others" and their allies (Haraway, "Promises of Monsters"). But, for the sake of Anthropocene survival, the promises of monsters cannot be dismissed on the grounds of risk.

This brings us to the point that all my texts in some way reject anthropocentrism along with its ethics grounded in the devaluation of differences both human and not. The works in my archive use the she-monster as a figuration to reject the master model and its instrumentalisation of nonhumans, women, and racial others, subverting dominant forms of ethics in favour of cultivating response-able encounters with alterity: recognising the other in the self and the self in the other and the mutual constitution of all things (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*). Struggling toward this shift is crucial work, I have argued, in a time when

economic concerns and neoliberalist discourses of "green growth" continue to take precedence over survival. Newer concepts like the racial Capitalocene (Vergès, "Racial Capitalocene") show that struggles for social and environmental justice need to be intersectional and coalitional, united in a common recognition of belonging to and constituting the more-than-human world. Representatives of master subjectivity in my texts all learn this the hard way as they themselves are made to dissolve: from Kris Kelvin's crumbling sense of control on Solaris to Colonel Strickland's physical decline and General Realgar seeing his own vulnerability reflected in the eyes of the Sharers. In the Anthropocene, there are no heroes, only monsters (Tsing et al.); no sailors, only swimmers (Mentz, *Shipwreck Modernity*). Imagining submersion reminds us that, "We are all bodies of water" (Neimanis 1).

There is a fundamental difference between mainstream cli-fi narratives and what I have termed submersion stories. While, broadly speaking, both seek to address concerns about the fate of the planet and the place of the human in the Anthropocene, they do not share the same politics, ethics, or affects. Popular narratives of Anthropocene futures tend to operate in dystopian or apocalyptic modes, portending societal decline or species extinction, paradoxically celebrating human agency while also mourning its loss. Hope, if it exists, lies in the hands of a few select heroes, usually White, male, straight, and capable of mastering his surroundings with the help of technology. By contrast, submersion stories are utopian, though not in the wish-full sense of denialism. Though many of the stories I read end in escape, they model a form of will-full and critical hope that attunes audiences to past losses and present struggles without foreclosing the future (Shewry, *Hope at Sea*). They generate conflicting meanings, promising the (im)possible but leaving their audiences with the responsibility for the realisation of those possibilities: to struggle for transformation in the real world towards horizons we can only imagine. In this sense, submersion stories are themselves unfathomable and monstrous, though I have also argued that they offer hope in substituting the apocalypse for a sea change.

Speculating on Submersive Futures

The larger goal of this project has been to identify submersion stories as a new feminist ocean imaginary and an alternative to the masculinist tradition of sea fiction. In that spirit, my aim has been to follow the currents determined by my archive, not to navigate a streamlined course or provide a definitive map of unexplored waters—except perhaps to issue warning to future swimmers that "Here be monsters." My aim has also not been to proscribe exactly

what a submersion story is. Though my texts all originate in a post-1970s US context of peak dystopian popular culture and politics, and though they all deal with submersion in similar ways, the works in my archive are too diverse and too unique to indicate the emergence of a shift in cultural imaginaries of the ocean. In their diverging media, genres, and socio-political contexts, they offer only glimpses of alternate possibility as they seek to speculate in, around, through, and with more dominant modes of imagining. What they do have in common is the desire to subvert and transform through submersion and feminist speculation. No doubt there are many other works, from other media, genres, and (trans)national contexts, arising from other social and environmental struggles, that share this desire. I believe more such texts will continue to appear as the future grows increasingly oceanic.

My project might in many ways be considered a failure, at least in the sense that my concepts are fuzzy, my archive is incomplete, and my conclusions uncertain. But I would like to consider it a queer form of failure, where the goal has never been to reach a certain destination but rather to cross borders and be open to the unexpected, unpredictable, and unfathomable connections that arise along the way (see Halberstam, *Queer Arts of Failure*). Put another way, I have sought to inflect this blue humanities cultural studies project with a monstrous methodology and in so doing cause disturbances across diverse bodies of water, knowledge, texts, and more. Attentive to the way different positionalities and identities emerge in my archive, I have looked beyond disciplinary boundaries to draw on diverse theories of difference, domination, and resistance in relation to the figures of the she-monster and the human. My aim in doing so has not been to erase indelible differences between distinct struggles, nor to perpetuate the monstering of marginalised subjects; and it has certainly not been to claim mastery over any of the many identity-based theoretical fields I reference throughout: ecofeminism, Indigenous feminisms, decolonial feminisms, Black feminism, queer theory, crip theory, Black studies. Deeper dives could and should be done into each of the texts I read in a project focused more on immersion than synergy (yes, I do recognise the irony here). However, I also hope that future work in the blue humanities will continue in the spirit of the monstrous, recognising the value fuzziness can have when it comes to sparking new connections, affinities, and encounters in a time when the future is at sea.

One question lingers unanswered and likely unanswerable at the end of this project: What is ultimately the value of seeking cultural transformation in the midst of a crisis that demands urgent action? As cultural studies scholars, I believe many of us like to think that the work we do matters in changing perceptions, affects, and imaginaries and that these

changes will lead to the transformation that is needed to ensure planetary and species survival in the Anthropocene. At the same time, we are forced to recognise that power often lies outside the cultural sphere and that sea changes rarely occur without political action. Can new ocean imaginaries shift ways of thinking, being, relating, and responding to alterity to a degree that ruptures anthropocentric worldviews and causes societal transformation—as it does in *Lagoon*? Perhaps it is possible, but I believe more in the utopian function of the works in my archive as horizons for present struggle. Like the ship-city of China Miéville's *The Scar,* submersion stories show us the possible worlds that "weren't and aren't but could be" (Miéville 748). In so doing, they cut through the present moment's currents of radical pessimism and remind us that all is not yet lost—not yet. A crisis could lead to a sea change. Perhaps, then, the most important question raised by she-monsters is not the exact shape of the transformation to come, but rather this: "*what kind of world do you want to live in?*"

Works Cited

20.000 Leagues Under the Sea. Directed by Richard Fleischer, Walt Disney Productions, 1954.

"50 Songs That Define the Last 50 Years of LGBTQ Pride." *Pitchfork*, n.d., https://pitchfork.com/features/lists-and-guides/50-songs-that-define-the-last-50-years-of-lgbtq-pride/?page=2.

"Acknowledgement." *Oxford English Dictionary*, May 2023, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/1614.

"A Door into Ocean." *Goodreads*, https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/121606.A_Door_Into_Ocean. Accessed 18 May 2021.

"A Fairy Tale for Troubled Times." *The Shape of Water,* directed by Guillermo del Toro, Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2017.

"About the Wind Farms on Fosen and the Supreme Court Judgment." *Norwegian National Human Rights Institution*, 7 March 2023, https://www.nhri.no/en/2023/about-the-wind-farms-on-fosen-and-the-supreme-court-judgment/.

Adamson, Joni. "Indigenous Literatures, Multinaturalism, and *Avatar*: The Emergence of Indigenous Cosmopolitics." *American Literary History*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2012, pp. 143–62, https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajr053.

---. 'People of The Water: *El Río*, *The Shape of Water*, and the Rights of Nature." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 27, no 3, 2020, pp. 596–612, https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isaa062.

Afnan, Elham. "Chaos and Utopia: Social Transformations in *Woman on the Edge of Time*." *Extrapolation*, vol. 37, no. 4, 1996.

Ahmed, Sara. "Happy Objects." *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 29-51, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822393047-001.

---. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2nd ed., Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

---. *Willful Subjects*. Duke University Press, 2014.

---. *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press, 2017.

Alaimo, Stacy. *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space*. Cornell University Press, 2000.

---. “Discomforting Creatures: Monstrous Natures in Recent Films.” *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, University Press of Virginia, 2001, pp. 279–97.

---. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana University Press, 2010.

---. “New Materialisms, Old Humanisms, or, Following the Submersible.” *NORA: Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, vol. 19, no. 4, Dec. 2011, pp. 280–84, https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2011.618812.

---. “States of Suspension: Trans-Corporeality at Sea.” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2012, pp. 476–93.

---. “Jellyfish Science, Jellyfish Aesthetics: Posthuman Reconfigurations of the Sensible.” *Thinking with Water*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013, pp. 139–65.

---. “Feminist Science Studies: Aesthetics and Entanglement in the Deep Sea.” *Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 188–204.

---. *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

---. “Adequate Imaginaries for Anthropocene Seas.” *Blue Legalities: The Life and Laws of the Sea*, edited by Irus Braverman and Elizabeth R. Johnson, Duke University Press, 2019, pp. 311-325.

Alaimo, Stacy, and Susan J. Hekman, editors. *Material Feminisms*. Indiana University Press, 2008.

Alexander, M. Jacqui. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. Duke University Press, 2005.

Allison, Sophia Nahli. “Revisiting the Legend of Flying Africans.” *The New Yorker*, 7 March 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/revisiting-the-legend-of-flying-africans.

Amphibian Man. Directed by Vladimir Chebotaryov and Gennadi Kazansky, BijouFlix Releasing / National Telefilm Associates, 1962.

Anderson, Reynaldo, and Charles E. Jones. *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*. Lexington Books, 2016.

Anicca, Skye. “Cripping the Mermaid: A Borderlands Approach to Feminist Disability Studies in Valerie Martin’s ‘Sea Lovers.’” *Journal of Narrative Theory*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2017, pp. 379–402, https://doi.org/10.1353/jnt.2017.0017.

Anyangwe, Eliza. “Misogynoir: Where Racism and Sexism Meet.” *The Guardian*, 5 October 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/oct/05/what-is-misogynoir.

“Apocalypse.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, March 2023, https://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/9229.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. “The Case for Capitalizing the B in Black.” *The Atlantic*, 18 June 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/time-to-capitalize-blackand-white/613159/.

“Are We Wrong to Assume Fish Can’t Feel Pain?” *The Guardian*, 30 October 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/oct/30/are-we-wrong-to-assume-fish-cant-feel-pain.

Åsberg, Cecilia, and Rosi Braidotti, editors. *A Feminist Companion to the Posthumanities*. Springer, 2018.

Austin, Sue. “Deep Sea Diving ... in a Wheelchair.” TEDxWomen Talk, 2012, https://www.ted.com/talks/sue_austin_deep_sea_diving_in_a_wheelchair.

Avatar. Directed by James Cameron, 20th Century Fox, 2009.

Bacchilega, Cristina, and Marie Alohalani Brown, editors. *The Penguin Book of Mermaids*. Penguin Books, 2019.

Bailey, Pippa. “Film Review: *The Shape of Water*.” *The Daily Mail*, 23 January 2018, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/you/article-5301783/Film-review-Shape-Water.html.

Baldwin, Andrew. “Premediation and White Affect: Climate Change and Migration in Critical Perspective.” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2015, pp. 78–90.

Baptiste, Tracey. “Opinion: Mermaids Have Always Been Black.” *The New York Times*, 10 July 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/10/opinion/black-little-mermaid.html.

Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke University Press, 2007.

---. “Queer Causation and the Ethics of Mattering.” *Queering the Non/Human*, edited by Myra J. Hird and Noreen Giffney, Routledge, 2008, pp. 311–38.

---. “On Touching—the Inhuman That Therefore I Am.” *Differences*, vol. 23, no. 3, December 2012, pp. 206–23, https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-1892943.

Barounis, Cynthia. “Special Affects: Mermaids, Prosthetics, and the Disabling of Feminine Futurity.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 1/2, 2016, pp. 188–204.

Barr, Marleen S. *Feminist Fabulation: Space/Postmodern Fiction*. University of Iowa Press, 1992.

Beal, Frances M. "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female." *Meridians*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2008, pp. 166–76.

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press, 2010.

Berlant, Lauren. *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*. Duke University Press, 1997.

"Bette Midler Art or Bust Delores DeLago I (We) Will Survive!" *YouTube,* uploaded by RAS61, 20 July 2008, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_vdlhsvI1M&ab_channel=RAS61.

"Beyoncé—Hold Up (Video)." *YouTube*, uploaded by Beyoncé, 4 September 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PeonBmeFR8o&ab_channel=Beyonc%C3%A9VEVO.

"Beyoncé—Love Drought." *YouTube*, uploaded by Beyoncé, 13 February 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUyQSKe75L4&ab_channel=Beyonc%C3%A9VEVO.

Bien-Khan, Joseph. "Making an Emotionally Appealing Fish-Man for *The Shape of Water*." *The Wire*, 12 September 2017, https://www.wired.com/story/shape-of-water-fish-man-design/.

Birth of a Nation. Directed by D.W. Griffith, Epoch Producing Co., 1915.

Blue Planet II. Narrated by David Attenborough, BBC One, 2017.

Blum, Hester. "The Prospect of Oceanic Studies." *PMLA*, vol. 125, no. 3, 2010, pp. 670–77.

Bould, Mark. "Revolutionary African-American sf before Black Power sf." *Extrapolation*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2010.

Bowen, Natasha. *Skin of the Sea*. Random House, 2021.

Bradstreet, Tom Z., et al., hosts. "How Subversive is *The Shape of Water*?" *Biopolitics of Disability, Illness, and Animality (BIODIAL),* 10 October 2018, https://www.hf.uio.no/ilos/english/research/projects/biopolitics-of-disability-illness-and-animal/the-biodial-blog/how-subversive-is-the-shape-of-water-an-interdisci.html. Accessed 19 March 2021.

Braidotti, Rosi. "Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism." *Anthropocene Feminism*, University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

---. *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. 2nd ed., Columbia University Press, 2011.

---. *The Posthuman*. Polity Press, 2013.

Brand, Dionne. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Doubleday Canada, 2012.

Braverman, Irus, and Elizabeth R. Johnson. "Blue Legalities: Governing More-Than-Human Oceans." *Blue Legalities: The Life and Laws of the Sea*, Duke University Press, 2020, pp. 1–24.

Broder, Melissa. *The Pisces*. Hogarth, 2018.

"Brown v. Board: The Significance of the 'Doll Test.'" *NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund*, https://www.naacpldf.org/brown-vs-board/significance-doll-test/. Accessed 2 May 2022.

Bryld, Mette, and Nina Lykke. *Cosmodolphins: Feminist Cultural Studies of Technology, Animals, and the Sacred*. Zed Books, 2000.

Bushman, Brandi, and Jeremy Chow. "Hydro-Eroticism." *English Language Notes*, vol. 57, no. 1, 2019, pp. 96–115, https://doi.org/10.1215/00138282-7309710.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 2006.

---. *Undoing Gender*. Routledge, 2004.

---. *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind*. Verso, 2020.

Butler, Octavia E. *Wild Seed*. Warner Books, 1999.

---. *Lilith's Brood*. Grand Central Publishing, 2000.

---. *Parable of the Sower*. Open Road Media Sci-Fi & Fantasy, 2012.

---. *Parable of the Talents*. Open Road Media Sci-Fi & Fantasy, 2012.

Callenbach, Ernest. *Ecotopia: A Novel*. Bantam, 2009.

Carlassare, Elizabeth. "Socialist and Cultural Ecofeminism: Allies in Resistance." *Ethics and the Environment*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2000, pp. 89–106.

Carrington, Damian. "Rising Seas Threaten 'Mass Exodus on a Biblical Scale,' UN Chief Warns." *The Guardian*, 14 February 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/feb/14/rising-seas-threaten-mass-exodus-on-a-biblical-scale-un-chief-warns.

Carrington, Damian, and Helena Horten. "More than 170tn Plastic Particles Afloat in Oceans, Say Scientists." *The Guardian,* 8 March 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/mar/08/plastic-particles-oceans-marine-pollution-production.

Carson, Rachel. *The Sea Around Us*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

Césaire, Aimé. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Monthly Review Press, 2000.

Chen, Cecilia, et al. “Introduction: Toward a Hydrological Turn.” *Thinking with Water*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013.

Chen, Mel Y. “Lead’s Racial Matters.” *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory*, edited by Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara, University of Nebraska Press, 2017, pp. 94–140.

Children of a Lesser God. Directed by Randa Haines, Paramount Pictures, 1986.

Chris Pak. “‘Then Came Pantropy:’ Grotesque Bodies, Multispecies Flourishing, and Human-Animal Relationships in Joan Slonczewski’s *A Door Into* Ocean.” *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2017, pp. 122–36, https://doi.org/10.5621/sciefictstud.44.1.0122.

Clarke, Bruce. *Posthuman Biopolitics: The Science Fiction of Joan Slonczewski*. Springer International Publishing AG, 2020.

clipping. *The Deep*. Spotify, 2018. https://open.spotify.com/track/7roZOFtrpGYjcLLFZc2bp4?si=575ff017aeb545e3.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. “Monster Culture (Seven Theses).” *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, University of Minnesota Press, 2020, pp. 37–56.

Cohen, Margaret. *The Novel and the Sea*. Princeton University Press, 2010.

Creature From the Black Lagoon. Directed by Jack Arnold, Universal Pictures, 1954.

Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 1993.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241–99, https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039.

“Cultural Impact of Creature from the Black Lagoon.” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, 27 February 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_impact_of_Creature_from_the_Black_Lagoon.

Cunningham, Stuart. “The Force-Field of Melodrama.” *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Robert Stam and Toby Miller, vol. 1, Wiley-Blackwell, 2000, pp. 191–206.

Daly, Rhian. “Richard Ayoade’s *Submarine* Got Sally Hawkins Her Part in *The Shape Of Water*.” *NME*, 26 February 2018, https://www.nme.com/news/richard-ayoades-submarine-got-sally-hawkins-part-shape-water-2249271.

Davis, Angela Y. *Women, Race & Class*. Vintage Books, 1983.

Davis, Heather. “Toxic Progeny: The Plastisphere and Other Queer Futures.” *PhiloSOPHIA: A Journal of Continental Feminism*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2015, pp. 231–50.

Davis, Laurence. "Introduction." *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed*, edited by Peter Stillman and Laurence Davis, The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2005, pp. ix–xxvii.

---. "The Dynamic and Revolutionary Utopia of Ursula K. Le Guin." *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's: The Dispossessed*, edited by Peter Stillman and Laurence Davis, The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2005, pp. 3–36.

Deckha, Maneesha. "Toward a Postcolonial, Posthumanist Feminist Theory: Centralizing Race and Culture in Feminist Work on Nonhuman Animals." *Hypatia*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2012, pp. 527–45, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2012.01290.x.

DeLoughrey, Elizabeth, Jill Didur, and Anthony Carrigan. "Introduction: A Postcolonial Environmental Humanities." *Global Ecologies and Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches*, edited by Byron Caminero-Santangelo, Routledge, 2015, pp. 1–32.

DeLoughrey, Elizabeth. *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*. University of Hawaii Press, 2007.

---. "Ordinary Futures: Interspecies Worldings in the Anthropocene." *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities*, Routledge, 2015, pp. 352–72.

---. "Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene." *Comparative Literature*, vol. 69, no. 1, 2017, pp. 32–44.

---. "Kinship in the Abyss: Submerging with *The Deep*." *Atlantic Studies*, June 2022, pp. 1–13, https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2022.2080462.

del Toro, Guillermo, and Daniel Kraus. *The Shape of Water*. Feiwel and Friends, 2018.

Deluge. Directed by Nijla Mumin, 2013. Vimeo, https://vimeo.com/65992824.

Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, Duke University Press, 1994, pp. 179-222.

Dillon, Grace L., editor. *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*. The University of Arizona Press, 2012.

"Disney Updates Content Warning for Racism in Classic Films." *BBC News*, 16 October 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54566087.

Don't Look Up. Directed by Adam McKay, Netflix, 2021.

Dracula. Directed by Tod Browning, Universal Pictures, 1931.

Drewal, Henry John. "Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas." *African Arts*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2008, pp. 60–83.

Dubey, Madhu. “Neo-Slave Narratives.” *A Companion to African American Literature*, John Wiley & Sons, 2010, pp. 332–46.

Dyer, Richard. “Entertainment and Utopia.” *Only Entertainment*, 2nd ed., Routledge, 2002.

---. *Pastiche*. Routledge, 2007.

Earle, Sylvia A. *The World Is Blue: How Our Fate and the Ocean’s Are One*. National Geographic, 2009.

Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Duke University Press, 2004.

Eliot, T. S. “The Waste Land.” *Poetry Foundation*, 2020, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47311/the-waste-land.

Elliott, Zetta. *Mother of the Sea*. Rosetta Press, 2017.

Ellis, Danika. “The Danger—and Necessity—of Paranoid Reading.” *Book Riot*, 14 October 2021, https://bookriot.com/paranoid-reading/.

Ellis, Richard. *The Empty Ocean: Plundering the World’s Marine Life*. Island Press / Shearwater Books, 2003.

Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African, Written by Himself*. Norton, 2001.

Erickson, Bruce, and Catriona Sandilands, editors. *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*. Indiana University Press, 2010.

Eshun, Kodwo. “Drexciya—Fear of a Wet Planet.” *The Wire: Adventures in Sound and Music*, no. 167, January 1998, https://www.are.na/block/1504716.

---. “Further Considerations of Afrofuturism.” *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2003, pp. 287–302, https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2003.0021.

Fagan, Brian M. *The Attacking Ocean: The Past, Present, and Future of Rising Sea Levels*. Bloomsbury Press, 2013.

Fanon, Franz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Grove Press, 1967.

---. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, 1963.

Felleman, Susan. “Fluid Fantasies: *Splash* and *Children of a Lesser God*.” *Camera Obscura*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1989, pp. 108–33, https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-7-1_19-108.

“Film & Animation.” *Gabrielle ፍሬወይኒ Tesfaye*, n.d. http://www.gabrielletesfaye.com/animaition. Accessed 1 April 2022.

Frankenstein. Directed by James Whale, Universal Pictures, 1931.

Frazer-Carroll, Micha. “*The Underground Railroad*, ‘Trauma Porn and the Black Gaze.” *The New Statesman*, 10 June 2021,

https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/film/2021/06/underground-railroad-trauma-porn-and-black-gaze.

Freaks. Directed by Tod Browning, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1932.

Gaard, Greta. *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*. Temple University Press, 1993.

---. "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism." *Hypatia*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1997, pp. 114–37, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1997.tb00174.x.

---. "Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-Placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism." *Feminist Formations*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2001, pp. 26–53, https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2011.0017.

---. "Vegetarian Ecofeminism: A Review Essay." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2002, pp. 117–46, https://doi.org/10.1353/fro.2003.0006.

---. "Indigenous Women, Feminism, and the Environmental Humanities." *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, vol. 1, February 2015, https://doi.org/10.5250/resilience.1.3.007.

Gaines, Zeffie. "A Black Girl's Song: Misogynoir, Love, and Beyoncé's *Lemonade*." *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, vol. 16, no. 2, April 2018, https://doi.org/10.31390/taboo.16.2.09.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature, Twentieth Anniversary Edition*. Columbia University Press, 2017.

---. "A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity." *Classic Readings on Monster Theory*, edited by Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Hensel, Arc Humanities Press, 2020, pp. 90–98.

Garrels, Elizabth Jane. "Guillermo Del Toro's *The Shape of Water* (2017): Trump Era Update of Cold War *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954) and Civil War Reckoning *El Laberinto Del Fauno* (2006)." *Periphērica: Journal of Social, Cultural, and Literary History*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2019, pp. 11–35.

Gaskins, Nettrice. "Deep Sea Dwellers: Drexciya and the Sonic Third Space." *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures*, vol. 10, no. 2, October 2016, https://doi.org/10.21463/shima.10.2.08.

Gaskins, Nettrice R. "Mami Wata Remixed: The Mermaid in Contemporary African-American Culture." *Scaled for Success: The Internationalisation of the Mermaid*, Indiana University Press, 2018, pp. 195–208.

Gearhart, Sally Miller. *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hillwomen*. Spinsters Ink Books, 2002.

Gehlawat, Ajay. "The Strange Case of *The Princess and the Frog*: Passing and the Elision of Race." *Journal of African American Studies*, vol. 14, no. 4, Dec. 2010, pp. 417–31, http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s12111-010-9126-1.

Gergan, Mabel, Sara Smith, and Pavithra Vasudevan. "Earth beyond Repair: Race and Apocalypse in Collective Imagination." *Environment and Planning. D, Society & Space*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2020, pp. 91–110, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775818756079.

Gillis, John R. "The Blue Humanities." *Humanities*, vol. 34, no. 3, June 2013, https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2013/mayjune/feature/the-blue-humanities.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard University Press, 1993.

Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Godzilla. Directed by Gareth Edwards, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2014.

Gómez-Barris, Macarena. *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives*. Duke University Press, 2017.

Gonder, Patrick. "Race, Gender and Terror: The Primitive in 1950s Horror Films." *Genders*, no. 40, 2004, https://www.colorado.edu/gendersarchive1998-2013/2004/12/01/race-gender-and-terror-primitive-1950s-horror-films.

Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. "BlueBellow." *Strange Horizons*, 16 January 2017, http://strangehorizons.com/fiction/bluebellow/.

---. *M Archive: After the End of the World*. Duke University Press, 2018.

---. *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*. AK Press, 2020.

Habila, Helon. *Oil on Water*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2011.

Hackett, Jon, and Seán Harrington, editors. *Beasts of the Deep: Sea Creatures and Popular Culture*. John Libbey Publishing, 2018.

Halberstam, Judith. *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. Duke University Press, 1995.

---. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke University Press, 2011.

Hallock, Thomas. "How a Mass Suicide by Slaves Caused the Legend of the Flying African to Take Off." *The Conversation*, 18 February 2021, http://theconversation.com/how-a-mass-suicide-by-slaves-caused-the-legend-of-the-flying-african-to-take-off-153422.

Hannah-Jones, Nikole, et al. *Born on the Water*. Kokila, 2021.

Haraway, Donna. “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1989, pp. 575–99.

---. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Taylor & Francis Group, 1990.

---. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. Prickly Paradigm, 2003.

---. “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s.” *The Haraway Reader*, Routledge, 2004, p. 7-45.

---. “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others.” *The Haraway Reader*, Routledge, 2004, pp. 63–124.

---. *When Species Meet*. University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

---. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.

Hare, Nathan. “Black Ecology.” *The Black Scholar*, vol. 1, no. 6, 1970, pp. 2–8.

Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

---. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

Hartman, Saidiya V., and Frank B. Wilderson. “The Position of the Unthought.” *Qui Parle*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2003, pp. 183–201.

Harvey, Fiona. “Scientists Deliver ‘Final Warning’ on Climate Crisis: Act Now or It’s Too Late.” *The Guardian*, 20 March 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/mar/20/ipcc-climate-crisis-report-delivers-final-warning-on-15c.

Hayes, Michael, and Rhonda Black. “Troubling Signs: Disability, Hollywood Movies and the Construction of a Discourse of Pity.” *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2, April 2003, https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v23i2.419.

Hayward, Philip. *Making a Splash: Mermaids (and Mer-Men) in 20th and 21st Century Audiovisual Media*. John Libbey Publishing, 2017.

Hayward, Susan. *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*. 4th ed., Routledge, 2013.

Heise, Ursula K. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

Hellstrand, Ingvil, Line Henriksen, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, and Donna McCormack. “Promises, Monsters and Methodologies: The Ethics, Politics and Poetics of the

Monstrous." *Somatechnics*, vol. 8, no. 2, Sept. 2018, pp. 143–62, https://doi.org/10.3366/soma.2018.0247.

Helmreich, Stefan. *Alien Ocean: Anthropological Voyages in Microbial Seas*. University of California Press, 2009.

Hendrix, Jimi. "1983... (A Merman I Should Turn to Be)." Spotify, 1968. https://open.spotify.com/track/5uDpwSGjljhIgDB1ZYdp9c?si=41684e3e81b44d3d.

Herbrechter, Stefan. "Critical Posthumanism." *Critical Posthumanism Network*, 17 November 2017, https://criticalposthumanism.net/critical-posthumanism/.

Hessler, Stefanie. *Prospecting Ocean*. The MIT Press, 2019.

Hessler, Stefanie, editor. *Tidalectics: Imagining an Oceanic Worldview through Art and Science*. TBA21, 2018.

Hird, Myra J., and Noreen Giffney. *Queering the Non/Human*. Routledge, 2008.

Hogan, Linda. *Rounding the Human Corners*. Coffee House Press, 2008.

Holmes, Anna. "White Until Proven Black: Imagining Race in *Hunger Games*." *The New Yorker*, 30 March 2012, http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/white-until-proven-black-imagining-race-in-hunger-games.

Hongisto, Ilona. "*#tjaetsie / knowhowknow* (2017)." Hvor skal humla suse? Tverrfaglig fagdag om forsvinnende natur, 5 September 2019, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim. Lecture.

hooks, bell. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. South End Press, 1981.

---. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. South End Press, 1992.

---. *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representation*. Routledge, 1994.

---. *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. 2nd. ed., Routledge, 2015.

---. "Beyoncé's *Lemonade* Is Capitalist Money-Making at Its Best." *The Guardian*, 11 May 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/may/11/capitalism-of-beyonce-lemonade-album.

Hopkinson, Nalo. *The New Moon's Arms*. Grand Central Publishing, 2007.

Hurley, Dorothy L. "Seeing White: Children of Color and the Disney Fairy Tale Princess." *The Journal of Negro Education*, vol. 74, no. 3, 2005, pp. 221–32.

Iheka, Cajetan. *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

I'll Be Gone in the Dark. Directed by Liz Garbus et al., HBO, 2020.

In the Heart of the Sea. Directed by Ron Howard, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2015.

Imarisha, Walidah and adrienne maree brown, editors. *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*. AK Press, 2015.

Ingalls, Rachel. *Mrs. Caliban*. New Directions, 2017.

Ingersoll, Karin Amimoto. *Waves of Knowing: A Seascape Epistemology*. Duke University Press, 2016.

Interstellar. Directed by Christopher Nolan, Paramount Pictures, 2014.

Iversen, Kristin. "Mermen and Robots and The Future of Sex." *Nylon*, 4 May 2018, https://www.nylon.com/articles/merman-sex-robots.

Jackson, Zakiyyah Iman. *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*. New York University Press, 2021.

Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

"Jacques-Yves Cousteau and Emile Gagnan: Aqua-Lung." *Lemelson-MIT*, n.d., https://lemelson.mit.edu/resources/jacques-yves-cousteau-and-emile-gagnan.

Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. Verso, 2005.

Jaws. Directed by Steven Spielberg, Universal Pictures, 1975.

Jemisin, N. K. *The Fifth Season*. Orbit, 2015.

Joy, Adri. "Feminist Futures: *A Door Into Ocean*." *Nerds of a Feather, Flock Together*, 26 November 2018, http://www.nerds-feather.com/2018/11/feminist-futures-door-into-ocean.html.

Jue, Melody. "Churning Up the Depths: Nonhuman Ecologies of Metaphor in *Solaris* and 'Oceanic.'" *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction*, edited by Gerry Canavan and Kim Stanley Robinson, Wesleyan University Press, 2014, pp. 226–42.

---. "Intimate Objectivity: On Nnedi Okorafor's Oceanic Afrofuturism." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 1/2, 2017, pp. 171–88.

---. *Wild Blue Media: Thinking through Seawater*. Duke University Press, 2020.

Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Indiana University Press, 2013.

Kaplan, E. Ann. *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction*. Rutgers University Press, 2015.

Kasai, Kirsten Imani. "Writing a Better Ending: How Feminist Utopian Literature Subverts Patriarchy." *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, vol. 77, no. 5, November 2018, pp. 1377–406, https://doi.org/10.1111/ajes.12257.

Keegan, Rebecca. "How Guillermo Del Toro Crafted the Perfect Monster-Romance For the Trump Era." *Vanity Fair*, 4 September 2017, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/09/guillermo-del-toro-shape-of-water.

King Kong. Directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, Radio Pictures, 1933.

King, Tiffany Lethabo. *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*. Duke University Press, 2019.

Koenig-Woodyard, Chris, Shalini Nanayakkara, Yashvi Khatri. "Introduction: Monster Studies." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, March 2018, https://doi.org/10.3138/utq.87.1.1.

Koivunen, Anu, Katariina Kyrölä, and Ingrid Ryberg, editors. *The Power of Vulnerability: Mobilizing Affect in Feminist, Queer and Anti-Racist Media Cultures*. Manchester University Press, 2018.

Kon-Tiki. Directed by Joachim Rønning and Espen Sandberg, Nordisk Film, 2012.

Kristeva, Julia. "Approaching Abjection." *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, University of Minnesota Press, 2020, pp. 95–107.

Lavender, Isiah III, and Lisa Yaszek. "Author Roundtable on Afrofuturism." *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century*, Ohio State University Press, 2020.

---, editors. *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century*. Ohio State University Press, 2020.

Lavender, Isiah III. *Race in American Science Fiction*. Indiana University Press, 2011.

---. *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement*. The Ohio State University Press, 2019.

Le Guin, Ursula. "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction." *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places*, Gollancz, 1989, pp. 165–70.

---. *The Dispossessed*. SF Masterworks, 2002.

---. *The Word for World Is Forest*. Tor Books, 2010.

Lem, Stanisław. *Solaris*. Harcourt, 2002.

LeMenager, Stephanie. *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*. Oxford University Press, 2014, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199899425.001.0001.

---. "Climate Change and the Struggle for Genre." *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times*, edited by Tobias Menley and Jesse Oak Taylor, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017.

Lepore, Jill. “A Golden Age for Dystopian Fiction.” *The New Yorker*, 29 May 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/06/05/a-golden-age-for-dystopian-fiction.

---. “The Last Amazon: Wonder Woman Returns.” *The New Yorker*, 22 September 2014, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/22/last-amazon.

Levitas, Ruth. *The Concept of Utopia*. Philip Allan, 1990.

---. “Educated Hope: Ernst Bloch on Abstract and Concrete Utopia.” *Utopian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1990, pp. 13–26.

---. “For Utopia: The (Limits of the) Utopian Function in Late Capitalist Society.” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, vol. 3, no. 2–3, June 2000, pp. 25–43, https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230008403311.

Liptak, Andrew. “How Rivers Solomon Turned Award-Winning Afrofuturist Song ‘The Deep’ into a Book.” *The Verge*, 31 January 2019, https://www.theverge.com/2019/1/31/18204092/rivers-solomon-the-deep-clipping-afrofuturism-novel-cover-interview.

“List of Highest-Grossing Media Franchises.” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, 23 March 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_highest-grossing_media_franchises.

Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider*. Penguin Books, 2007.

---. “A Litany for Survival.” *Poetry Foundation*, 7 April 2022, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147275/a-litany-for-survival.

Lovecraft Country. Warner Bros. Television Distribution, 2020.

Lovecraft, Howard Phillips. “The Shadow over Innsmouth.” *The H.P. Lovecraft Archive*, 20 August 2009, https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/soi.aspx.

Luciano, Dana, and Mel Y. Chen. “Has the Queer Ever Been Human?” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2–3, June 2015, pp. 183–207, https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2843215.

Lyons, Patrick J., et al. “Why the Equal Rights Amendment Is Back.” *The New York Times*, 15 January 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/15/us/what-is-equal-rights-amendment.html.

MacCormack, Patricia. “Perversion: Transgressive Sexuality and Becoming-Monster.” *Thirdspace: A Journal of Feminist Theory & Culture*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2004, https://journals.sfu.ca/thirdspace/index.php/journal/article/view/maccormack.

---. “Posthuman Teratology.” *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, University of Minnesota Press, 2020, pp. 522–43.

---. *The Ahuman Manifesto: Activism for the End of the Anthropocene*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.

Mann, Brian, and Elizabeth Baker. "Black Protest Leaders to White Allies: 'It's Our Turn To Lead Our Own Fight.'" *NPR*, 22 September 2020, https://www.npr.org/2020/09/22/913094440/black-protest-leaders-to-white-allies-it-s-our-turn-to-lead-our-own-fight.

Marquis, Moira. "The Alien Within: Divergent Futures in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* and Neill Blomkamp's *District 9*." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2020, pp. 398–425, https://doi.org/10.1353/sfs.2020.0027.

Mayer, Ruth. "'Africa as an Alien Future:' The Middle Passage, Afrofuturism, and Postcolonial Waterworlds." *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2000, pp. 555–66.

Mbembe, Achille. *Necropolitics*. Duke University Press, 2019.

---. *On the Postcolony*. University of California Press, 2001.

McCormack, Donna. "Monster Talk: A Virtual Roundtable with Mark Bould, Liv Bugge, Surekha Davies, Margrit Shildrick and Jeffrey Weinstock." *Somatechnics*, vol. 8, no. 2, Sept. 2018, pp. 248–68, https://doi.org/10.3366/soma.2018.0254.

McKinley, Robin. *Rose Daughter*. Open Road Media Sci-Fi & Fantasy, 2014.

McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

---. *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*. Duke University Press, 2015.

McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. NYU Press, 2006.

McVeigh, Karen. "High Seas Treaty: Historic Deal to Protect International Waters Finally Reached at UN." *The Guardian*, 5 March 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/mar/05/high-seas-treaty-agreement-to-protect-international-waters-finally-reached-at-un.

Mehan, Uppinder, and Nalo Hopkinson, editors. *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction & Fantasy*. Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004.

Mentz, Steve. *Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization*. University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. Harper & Row, 1989.

"Mermaid Google+ Hangout with Bola Ogun (The Water Phoenix), Mermaid Kariel and Mermaid Linden." *YouTube,* uploaded by Bola Ogun, 2 March 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8s7-faDxtNA.

Miéville, China. *The Scar*. Del Rey, 2002.

---. *Iron Council*. Del Rey, 2004.

---. "Theses on Monsters." *Conjunctions*, no. 59, Fall 2012, http://www.conjunctions.com/print/article/china-mieville-c59.

Minh-Ha, Trinh T., and Marina Grzinic. "Shifting The Borders of The Other: An Interview with Trinh T. Minh-Ha." *Telepolis*, 12 August 1998, https://www.heise.de/tp/features/Shifting-The-Borders-of-The-Other-3441351.html.

Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. "Room for (Materiality's) Maneuver: Reading the Oppositional in Guillermo Del Toro's *The Shape of Water*." *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, vol. 58, no. 4, 2019, pp. 150–56, https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2019.0045.

Moore, Jason W. *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. Verso Books, 2015.

---. "Confronting the Popular Anthropocene: Toward an Ecology of Hope." *New Geographies*, vol. 09, 2017, pp. 186–91.

Moraga, Cherríe, and Gloria Anzaldúa, editors. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. 2nd ed., Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Random House, 2004.

---. *The Bluest Eye*. Vintage International, 2007.

Moss, Stephen. "Arundhati Roy: 'They Are Trying to Keep Me Destabilised. Anybody Who Says Anything is in Danger.'" *The Guardian*, 5 June 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/05/arundhati-roy-keep-destabilised-danger.

Moylan, Tom. *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*. Routledge, 2018.

Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Routledge, 2003.

Mu'min, Nilja. "Daughters of the Deluge." *Poets for Living Waters*, 8 October 2010, https://poetsgulfcoast.wordpress.com/2010/10/08/daughters-of-the-deluge-by-nijla-baseema-mu%e2%80%99min/.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. NYU Press, 2009.

Nagel, Thomas. “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 83, no. 4, October 1974, https://doi.org/10.2307/2183914.

Nama, Adilifu. *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film*. University of Texas Press, 2008.

Ncube, Gibson. “‘Human Beings Have a Hard Time Relating to That Which Does Not Resemble Them:’ Queering Normativity in Nnedi Okorafor’s *Lagoon*.” *Scrutiny2*, vol. 25, no. 2, May 2020, pp. 69–81, https://doi.org/10.1080/18125441.2020.1826568.

Neimanis, Astrida. *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.

Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. Harvard University Press, 2009.

---. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Harvard University Press, 2012.

Nicolini, Kim. “Surf ‘N Turf: Love and Acceptance in Guillermo Del Toro’s *The Shape of Water*.’” *Counterpunch*, 5 January 2018, https://www.counterpunch.org/2018/01/05/surf-n-turf-love-and-acceptance-in-guillermo-del-toros-the-shape-of-water/.

Nies, Betsy. “Mer-Beings among Us: Three Contemporary Novels.” *Wasafiri*, vol. 36, no. 2, April 2021, pp. 93–96, https://doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2021.1879518.

“Nijla Mu’min’s ‘Deluge’ / Magical Realism, Post-b.p. Oil Spill New Orleans, & Black Mermaids.” *Live from Planet Earth,* n.d., https://www.livefromplanetearth.org/2012/05/nijla-mumins-deluge-magical-realism.html.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2013.

Nocella, Anthony J. II. “Defining Eco-Ability: Social Justice and the Intersectionality of Disability, Nonhuman Animals, and Ecology.” *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory*, edited by Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara, University of Nebraska Press, 2017, pp. 141–67.

Norden, Martin F. *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies*. Rutgers University Press, 1994.

“NOU 2016: 18 Hjertespråket—Forslag Til Lovverk, Tiltak Og Ordninger for Samiske Språk.” *Regjeringen*, https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/nou-2016-18/id2515222/sec6?q=kunnskapsgrunnlag#VED1-3.

Obenson, Tambay. “*The Little Mermaid*: A Milestone in Colorblind Casting, But Black Fairy Tales Need Representation Too.” *IndieWire*, 8 July 2019,

https://www.indiewire.com/2019/07/little-mermaid-colorblind-casting-black-fairy-tales-1202155988/.

Offill, Jenny. *Weather: A Novel*. Knopf, 2020.

Ogun, Bola. "Enough with the 'Black Movies,' Bring on the Black Mermaids." *Women and Hollywood*, 26 February 2015, https://womenandhollywood.com/guest-post-enough-with-the-black-movies-bring-on-the-black-mermaids-6204ff7c4561/.

Okorafor, Nnedi. "Organic Fantasy." *African Identities*, vol. 7, no. 2, May 2009, pp. 275–86, https://doi.org/10.1080/14725840902808967.

---. "My Response to District 419…I Mean District 9. ;-)." *Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog: The Adventures of Writer Nnedi Okorafor and Her Daughter Anyaugo Okorafor*, 23 August 2009, http://nnedi.blogspot.com/2009/08/my-response-to-district-419i-mean.html.

---. *Lagoon*. Hodder & Stoughton, 2014.

---. "Africanfuturism Defined." *Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog: The Adventures of Writer Nnedi Okorafor and Her Daughter Anyaugo Okorafor*, 19 October 2019, http://nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html.

O'Neill, Louise. *The Surface Breaks: A Reimagining of The Little Mermaid*. Scholastic Fiction, 2018.

Otto, Eric C. "Ecofeminist Theories of Liberation in the Science Fiction of Sally Miller Gearhart, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Joan Slonczewski." *Feminist Ecocriticism, Environment, Women, and Literature*, edited by Douglas A. Vakoch, Lexington Books, 2012.

Painter, Nell Irvin. "Opinion: Why 'White' Should Be Capitalized, Too." *Washington Post*, 22 July 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/07/22/why-white-should-be-capitalized/.

Perry, Phyllis Alesia. *Stigmata*. Hyperion, 1998.

Philip, Marlene Nourbese. *Zong!* Wesleyan University Press, 2008.

Piercy, Marge. *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Ballantine Books, 2010.

Pihkala, Panu. "Climate Grief: How We Mourn a Changing Planet." *BBC*, 3 April 2020, https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200402-climate-grief-mourning-loss-due-to-climate-change.

Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, 1993.

---. *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. Routledge, 2002.

Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket and Related Tales*. Oxford World Classics, 2008.

Povinelli, Elizabeth. *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism*. Duke University Press, 2011.

Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession*, 1991, pp. 33–40.

Price, Rachel. "Afterword: The Last Universal Commons." *Comparative Literature*, vol. 69, no. 1, 2017, pp. 45–53.

Pumzi. Directed by Wanuri Kahiu, Focus Features, 2010.

Radomska, Marietta, and Cecilia Åsberg. "Fathoming Postnatural Oceans: Towards a Low Trophic Theory in the Practices of Feminist Posthumanities." *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, vol. 5, no. 3, September 2022, pp. 1428–45, https://doi.org/10.1177/25148486211028542.

Rahn, Judith. "(Re-)Negotiating Black Posthumanism—The Precarity of Race in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*." *Anglistik*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2019, pp. 83–97, https://doi.org/10.33675/ANGL/2019/2/10.

Remnick, David, and N. K. Jemisin. "N.K. Jemisin on H.P. Lovecraft." *The New Yorker Radio Hour,* 31 January 2020, https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/tnyradiohour/articles/n-k-jemisin-h-p-lovecraft-pod.

Rich, Adrienne. "Notes Toward a Politics of Location." *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985*, Norton, 1986, pp. 210–31.

---. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2003, pp. 11–48, https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2003.0079.

Ritson, Katie. "Under the North Sea: 'Petrospectral' Futures." *The Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands: Literary and Historical Imaginaries*, Routledge, 2018.

Rizvic, Seila. "Thick As a Rain of Blows: Klaus Theweleit and the Psychology of Fascism." *The Awl*, 10 August 2017, https://www.theawl.com/2017/08/thick-as-a-rain-of-blows/.

Roberts, Callum. *The Unnatural History of the Sea*. Island Press / Shearwater Books, 2007.

Robinson, Kim Stanley. *The Ministry for the Future*. Orbit, 2020.

Roffey, Monique. "#Notmymermaid: The Disney Row Is Ridiculous—Who Knows What Mermaids Look Like?" *The Guardian*, 16 March 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/mar/16/disney-notmymermaid-row-ridiculous.

Rose, Deborah Bird, Thom van Dooren, Matthew Chrulew, Stuart Cooke, Matthew Kearnes, and Emily O'Gorman. "Thinking Through the Environment, Unsettling the Humanities." *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 1, no. 1, May 2012, pp. 1–5, https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3609940.

Rottenberg, Josh. "Q&A: Guillermo Del Toro's Highly Personal Monster Film *The Shape of Water* Speaks to 'What I Feel as an Immigrant.'" *Los Angeles Times*, 5 September 2017, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-guillermo-del-toro-telluride-20170905-htmlstory.html.

Roye, Susmita. 'Toni Morrison's Disrupted Girls and Their Disturbed Girlhoods: *The Bluest Eye* and *A Mercy*." *Callaloo*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2012, pp. 212–27.

Ruimy, Jordan. "Disney's *Little Mermaid* Trailer Has 2.4 Million Dislikes on YouTube." *World of Reel*, 17 September 2022, https://www.worldofreel.com/blog/2022/9/p413j881yv3kxi65qrlw0sr2tblh6i.

Runcie, Charlotte. *Salt on Your Tongue: Women and the Sea*. Canongate, 2019.

Russ, Joanna. *The Female Man*. SF Masterworks, 2010.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Vintage Books, 1979.

Salmose, Niklas. "The Apocalyptic Sublime: Anthropocene Representation and Environmental Agency in Hollywood Action-Adventure Cli-Fi Films." *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 51, no. 6, 2018, pp. 1415–33, https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12742.

Samatar, Sofia. "Toward a Planetary History of Afrofuturism." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2017, pp. 175–91, https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafrilite.48.4.12.

Schätzing, Frank. *The Swarm*. Translated by Sally-Ann Spencer, Regan Books, 2006.

"Sea-Change." *Oxford English Dictionary*, March 2023, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/174071?redirectedFrom=sea+change#eid23888739.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Duke University Press, 2003.

Sexton, Jared. "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word." *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 29, 2016, https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/029.e02.

Seymour, Nicole. *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination*. University of Illinois Press, 2013.

---. *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age*. University of Minnesota Press, 2018.

Seymour, Nicole, and Briggetta Pierrot. “Contemporary Cli-Fi and Indigenous Futurisms.” *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2020, pp. 92–113.

Shakespeare, William. “The Tempest.” *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, Wordsworth Editions, 1996, pp. 1135–59.

Sharae, Deckard, and Kerstin Oloff. “‘The One Who Comes from the Sea:’ Marine Crisis and the New Oceanic Weird in Rita Indiana’s *La Mucama de Omicunlé* (2015).” *Humanities*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2020, https://doi.org/doi.org/10.3390/h9030086.

Sharf, Zack. “Jean-Pierre Jeunet Accuses Guillermo Del Toro of Copying *Delicatessen* Dance Scene in *The Shape of Water*.” *IndieWire*, 6 February 2018, https://www.indiewire.com/2018/02/jean-pierre-jeunet-accuses-guillermo-del-toro-stealing-scene-delicatessen-shape-water-1201925725/.

Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press, 2016.

Sharpe, Christina Elizabeth. *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*. Duke University Press, 2010.

Shawl, Nisi. “2043 ... (A Merman I Should Turn to Be).” *Amazon Original Stories*, 2021.

Sheldon, Rebekah. *The Child to Come: Life after the Human Catastrophe*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

Shewry, Teresa. *Hope at Sea: Possible Ecologies in Oceanic Literature*. University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

Shildrick, Margrit. *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*. SAGE Publications, 2001.

---. “Visual Rhetorics and the Seductions of the Monstrous: Some Precautionary Observations.” *Somatechnics*, vol. 8, no. 2, September 2018, pp. 163–77, https://doi.org/10.3366/soma.2018.0248.

Shotwell, Alexis. *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

Shrek. Directed by Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson, DreamWorks Pictures, 2001.

Sielke, Sabine. “Retro Aesthetics, Affect, and Nostalgia Effects in Recent US-American Cinema: The Cases of *La La Land* (2016) and *The Shape of Water* (2017).” *Arts*, vol. 8, July 2019, https://doi.org/10.3390/arts8030087.

Simon, Ed. “Return to Pirate Island.” *JSTOR Daily*, 4 August 2021, https://daily.jstor.org/return-to-pirate-island/.

Simonsen, Frøydis Sollid, Maria Dorothea Schrattenholz and Joanna Rzadkowskawas, editors. *En strek gjennom tyngdekraften: antologi*. Solum Bokvennen, 2022.

"Sissel M. Bergh." *Biennale of Sydney*, 2023, https://www.biennaleofsydney.art/participants/sissel-m-bergh/.

Sjunneson-Henry, Elsa. "I Belong Where the People Are: Disability and *The Shape of Water*." *Tor*, January 2016, https://www.tor.com/2018/01/16/i-belong-where-the-people-are-disability-and-the-shape-of-water/.

Skåden, Sigbjørn. *Fugl*. Cappelen Damm, 2022.

Slonczewski, Joan. *A Door into Ocean*. Orb Books, 2000.

---. "A Door into Ocean: Study Guide." *Joan L. Slonczewski,* 4 January 2001, https://biology.kenyon.edu/slonc/books/adoor_art/adoor_study.htm.

---. *Daughter of Elysium*. Phoenix Pick, 2009.

---. "An Interview with Joan Slonczewski." *Posthuman Biopolitics: The Science Fiction of Joan Slonczewski*, edited by Bruce Clarke, Springer International Publishing AG, 2020, pp. 1–16.

Snowpiercer. Directed by Bong Joon-ho, TNT, 2020.

Sobchack, Vivian. *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*. 2nd ed., Rutgers University Press, 1987.

Solaris. Directed by Steven Soderbergh, 20th Century Fox, 2002.

Solomon, Rivers, Daveed Diggs, William Hutson, and Jonathan Snipes. *The Deep*. Gallery / Saga Press, 2019.

Somby, Ánde. *When a Predator Culture Meets a Prey Culture*. Indigenous Knowledge—the Practice of Sustainable Existence, 5-6 May 2016, Kunsthall Trondheim. Lecture.

Song, Mingwei, and Theodore Huters, editors. *The Reincarnated Giant: An Anthology of Twenty-First-Century Chinese Science Fiction*. Columbia University Press, 2018.

Sphere. Directed by Barry Levinson, Warner Bros, 1998.

Spillers, Hortense. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1987, pp. 65–81, https://doi.org/10.2307/464747.

---. "Shades of Intimacy: Women in the Time of Revolution." *Barnard Centre for Research on Women,* n.d., https://bcrw.barnard.edu/videos/hortense-spillers-shades-of-intimacy-women-in-the-time-of-revolution/.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, Sara Danius and Stefan Jonsson. "An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak." *Boundary 2*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1993, pp. 24–50, https://doi.org/10.2307/303357.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Macmillan Education, 1988, pp. 271–313.

Splash. Directed by Ron Howard, Buena Vista, 1984.

Starosielski, Nicole. "Beyond Fluidity: A Cultural History of Cinema Under Water." *Ecocinema, Theory and Practise*, edited by Stephen Rust et al., Routledge, 2013.

Steinberg, Philip E. "Of Other Seas: Metaphors and Materialities in Maritime Regions." *Atlantic Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2013, pp. 156–69.

Steinberg, Philip E., and Kimberley Peters. "Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume through Oceanic Thinking." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 33, 2015, pp. 247–64.

Steinskog, Erik. "Om afrofuturisme og utopier." *Friktion Magasin*, 15 December 2016, https://friktionmagasin.dk/om-afrofuturisme-og-utopier-4015ba879ad.

Stoetzler, Marcel, and Nira Yuval-Davis. "Standpoint Theory, Situated Knowledge and the Situated Imagination." *Feminist Theory*, vol. 3, no. 3, December 2002, pp. 315–33, https://doi.org/10.1177/146470002762492024.

Stryker, Susan. "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage." *GLQ*, vol. 1, 1994, pp. 237–54.

Sturgeon, Noel. *Environmentalism in Popular Culture: Gender, Race, Sexuality, and the Politics of the Natural*. University of Arizona Press, 2009.

Suskind, Alex. "*The Shape of Water*: Sally Hawkins on the Art of Romancing a Fish-Man." *Rolling Stone*, 1 December 2017, https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-features/the-shape-of-water-sally-hawkins-on-the-art-of-romancing-a-fish-man-202783/.

Tate, Greg. "Afropessimism and Its Discontents." *The Nation,* 17 September 2021, https://www.thenation.com/article/society/afropessimism-wilderson-critical-race/.

Taylor, Sunaura. *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation*. The New Press, 2016.

Ten-Cent Daisy. Directed by Lisbon Okorafor, Ohaoma Productions, 2021.

"The 1619 Project." *The New York Times*, 14 August 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html.

The Abyss. Directed by James Cameron, 20th Century Fox, 1989.

The Bride of Frankenstein. Directed by James Whale, Universal Pictures, 1935.

"The Combahee River Collective Statement." *Black Past*, n.d., https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/.

"The Creeping Threat of the Great Atlantic Sargassum Belt." *The Guardian*, 7 March 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/mar/07/great-atlantic-sargassum-belt-seaweed-visible-from-space.

The Little Mermaid. Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker, Walt Disney Pictures, 1989.

"The Little Mermaid: Official Teaser Trailer." *YouTube*, uploaded by Walt Disney Studios, 10 September 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0-wPm99PF9U&ab_channel=WaltDisneyStudios.

"The Little Mermaid: Official Trailer." *YouTube*, uploaded by Walt Disney Studios, 13 March 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpGo2_d3oYE&ab_channel=WaltDisneyStudios.

"The Little Mermaid." *IMDb: Internet Movie Database*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5971474/?ref_=vp_close. Accessed 27 March 2023.

The Princess and the Frog. Directed by John Musker and Ron Clements, Walt Disney Studios, 2009.

"The Sapphire Caricature—Anti-Black Imagery." *Ferris State University: Jim Crow Museum*, n.d., https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/antiblack/sapphire.htm. Accessed 26 May 2022.

The Shape of Water. Directed by Guillermo del Toro, Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2017.

The Silent World. Directed by Jacques Cousteau and Louis Malle, Columbia Pictures, 1956.

The World Without Sun. Directed by Jacques Cousteau, Columbia Pictures, 1964.

"The Water Phoenix." *Indiegogo*, https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/the-water-phoenix. Accessed 23 March 2023.

"The Water Phoenix—Mermaid Short Film." *YouTube,* uploaded by Bola Ogun, 11 April 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmBXjZ_7IQQ.

The Water Will Carry Us Home. Directed by Gabrielle Tesfaye, 2018.

Thomas, Sheree R., editor. *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*. Aspect/Warner Books, 2000.

---. *Dark Matter: Reading the Bones*. Aspect/Warner Books, 2004.

Thompson, Tade. *Rosewater*. Orbit, 2017.

Tidwell, Christy. "*A Door into Ocean* as a Model for Feminist Science." *Posthuman Biopolitics: The Science Fiction of Joan Slonczewski*, edited by Bruce Clarke, Springer International Publishing AG, 2020, pp. 47–64.

Tidwell, Christy, and Carter Soles. "Introduction: Ecohorror in the Anthropocene." *Fear and Nature: Ecohorror Studies in the Anthropocene*, Penn State University Press, 2021, pp. 1–20.

Tinsley, Omise'eke Natasha. "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2–3, June 2008, pp. 191–215, https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2007-030.

Tiptree, James. *Houston, Houston, Do You Read?* Doubleday Books, 1996.

"#tjaetsie (water) knowhowknow." *Vimeo,* uploaded by Sissel M. Bergh, 2017, https://vimeo.com/236227855.

Todd, Zoe. "An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn: Ontology Is Just Another Word for Colonialism." *Journal of Historical Sociology*, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 4–22.

Tolentino, Jia. "Melissa Broder's *The Pisces* Completes an Unofficial Pop-Culture Trilogy of Human-Meets-Fish Love Stories." *The New Yorker*, 8 May 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/melissa-broders-the-pisces-completes-an-unofficial-pop-culture-trilogy-of-human-meets-fish-love-stories.

Tsing, Anna, Heather Anne Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt, editors. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Tuck, Eve, Maile Arvin, and Angie Morrill. "Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy." *Feminist Formations*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2013, pp. 8–34.

Tumin, Remy. "A New Ariel Inspires Joy for Young Black Girls: 'She Looks Like Me.'" *The New York Times*, 14 September 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/14/arts/little-mermaid-trailer-halle-bailey.html.

"TWP Backers Update Video." *YouTube,* uploaded by Bola Ogun, 22 January 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTsN29Pj7y0.

Vergès, Françoise. "Racial Capitalocene." *Futures of Black Radicalism*, edited by Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin, Verso, 2017.

---. *A Decolonial Feminism*. Translated by Ashley J Bohrer, Pluto Press, 2021.

Verne, Jules. *20.000 Leagues Under the Sea*. Signet Classics, 2010.

Vint, Sherryl. "'Only by Experience:' Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo-Slave Narratives." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2007, pp. 241–61.

---. “Possible Fictions: Blochian Hope in *The Scar*.” *Extrapolation*, vol. 50, June 2009, pp. 276–92, https://doi.org/10.3828/extr.2009.50.2.8.

---. “Animal Studies in the Era of Biopower.” *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2010, pp. 444–55.

---. *Science Fiction*. The MIT Press, 2021.

Walcott, Derek. “The Sea Is History.” *Poets*, 2007, https://poets.org/poem/sea-history.

Walcott, Rinaldo. “The Black Aquatic.” *Liquid Blackness*, vol. 5, no. 1, Apr. 2021, pp. 63–73, https://doi.org/10.1215/26923874-8932585.

Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Women’s Press, 1984.

Walton, Jo. “Self-Naming and Death-Hastening: Joan Slonczewski’s *A Door Into Ocean*.” *Tor*, 20 September 2009, https://www.tor.com/2009/09/20/self-naming-and-death-hastening-joan-slonczewskis-a-door-into-ocean/.

Warner, Kristen. *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting*. Routledge, 2015.

---. “Plastic Representation.” *Film Quarterly*, 4 December 2017, https://filmquarterly.org/2017/12/04/in-the-time-of-plastic-representation/.

Wartenberg, Thomas E. *Unlikely Couples: Movie Romance as Social Criticism*. Routledge, 2018.

Watkins, Claire Vaye. *Gold Fame Citrus.* Riverhead Books, 2016.

Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Duke University Press, 2014.

Weik von Mossner, Alexa. *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative*. The Ohio State University Press, 2017.

Weik von Mossner, Alexa, Małgorzata Dobrowolska, and W.P. Małecki. “Narrating Human and Animal Oppression: Strategic Empathy and Intersectionalism in Alice Walker’s ‘Am I Blue?’” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2020, pp. 365–84, https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isaa023.

Weinstock, Jeffrey Andrew. “A Genealogy of Monster Theory.” *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, University of Minnesota Press, 2020, pp. 1–36.

---. “Invisible Monsters: Vision, Horror, and Contemporary Culture.” *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, University of Minnesota Press, 2020, pp. 358–73.

Whyte, Kyle Powys. “Our Ancestors’ Dystopia Now: Indigenous Conservation and the Anthropocene.” *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, edited by Ursula Heise, Routledge, 2016, pp. 206–15.

---. “Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises.” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, vol. 1, no. 1–2, Mar. 2018, pp. 224–42, https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848618777621.

Wilde, Alison, Gill Crawshaw, and Alison Sheldon. “Talking about *The Shape of Water*: Three Women Dip Their Toes In.” *Disability & Society*, vol. 33, no. 9, 2018, pp. 1528–32, https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2018.1488406.

Wilderson, Frank B. III. *Afropessimism*. Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020.

Williams, Linda. “Melodrama Revised.” *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*, edited by Nick Browne, University of California Press, 1998, pp. 42–88.

Winchester, Bree. ‘Disabled Artist Hanna Cormick Debuts ‘The Mermaid’ at Art Not Apart’. *The Canberra Times*, 24 April 2018, https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6021863/disabled-artist-hanna-cormick-debuts-the-mermaid-at-art-not-apart/. Accessed 25 May 2023.

Winter, Jerome. “Global Afrofuturist Ecologies.” *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Isiah Lavender III and Lisa Yaszek, Ohio State University Press, 2010.

Wisker, Gina. “Middle Age, Mer People, and the Middle Passage: Nalo Hopkinson’s Afrofuturist Journeying in *The New Moon’s Arms*.” *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Isiah Lavender III and Lisa Yaszek, Ohio State University Press, 2020.

Wolfe, Cary. *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*. University of Chicago Press, 2003.

---. *What Is Posthumanism?* University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

Womack, Ytasha L. “The African Cosmos for Modern Mermaids (Mermen).” *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, Lawrence Hill Books, 2013, pp. 79–96.

X-Men. Directed by Bryan Singer, 20th Century Fox, 2000.

Yusoff, Kathryn. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. University Of Minnesota Press, 2018.

Yvonne, Stacey. “ABFF 2021 Review: *Ten-Cent Daisy* Has a Lot of Potential.” *Black Girl Nerds*, 16 November 2021, https://blackgirlnerds.com/abff-2021-review-ten-cent-daisy-has-a-lot-of-potential/.

Zamalin, Alex. *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism*. Columbia University Press, 2019.

ISBN 978-82-326-7632-3 (printed ver.)
ISBN 978-82-326-7631-6 (electronic ver.)
ISSN 1503-8181 (printed ver.)
ISSN 2703-8084 (online ver.)

NTNU

Norwegian University of
Science and Technology