



**black undertow**

HUGO KA CANHAM

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and Christina Sharpe

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**black undertow**   hugo ka canham

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For you and your queer wanderings.  
For those who nurture ancestral olive trees in this ugly time.  
For those gone.  
And those whose rituals remember.

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## QUEER

is a method of breathing in water  
silences steeped in history  
is memory borne in crashing waves  
surging energies of elsewhere  
is a black circle of specters  
sucked in breath  
coursing with pleasure  
is the buzzing quiet of corals  
ancient sand of flaking bone  
an undertow buzzing in low frequencies  
is a loneliness that roams the African shoreline  
an incantation  
a watchful breathing

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Santu Mofokeng, *Replacing Sand Washed Away by Floods and Wave Action.*

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## black undertow

The clouds cast a moving shadow over the water. The glint of something black bobs on metallic green water. Movement below the surface. A whale hangs vertically, its lower body poised above the watery depths. It is dragged in the queer current of the undertow. It lifts itself away from the energies of that current. The current arrives at the distant shoreline and water surges where the Mtentu River estuary plays with the sea. Saltwater rubs against fresh water. At the estuary, the giant trevally fish pause their circling. And then, they resume their ritual. A dizzying green, silver, and brown whirl. There is a buzz in the water. The hydroacoustics throb through the overhang which casts itinerant shadows over the brown estuary. In the depths of the sprawling ocean, the remains of two million Africans who died at sea in the long slave trade are carried in the buzz that sounds the black undertow.

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## introduction

In the silver moonlight, the women draw sweetness from each other. At Port St. Johns, long after dark on New Year's Day, when the tide turns, it gathers bodily fluids—black ecstasy strewn on the brown sand—into the water's wetness. The pounding water rubs rock, flings sand, froths in the air, tosses sea things, whips sharks, vomits tangled plastic bags, and in the tenth octave, makes its incompressible buzz. I am inhabited by salty things, wrestled like a rag doll, and spat out on the sand. Wataa. A juddering buzz is emitted by the black undertow. In the calm of dawn, spent sea things—seaweed and bluebottles are entangled with black, red, and white healer's robes, and tree branches. In the silver sand, specters shimmer with ancient desires. Here on the black shoals of the Wild Coast, black desire rests in a queer temporal bind of time always now—a cacophonous present constituted of pasts and futures.

We are called to the black waters where we enact and give form to our raging which is also our loving. I watch water with a fervor. Its languid black breathing is a beckoning. This summoning to the water is a queer impulse because I cannot swim. As a long-distance runner of many years, I run without thinking about my breathing. But I cannot breathe in water. Attempts at swimming are interrupted by the need to stop. I nearly drowned in the Indian Ocean on two occasions. Once, the lifeguards came to my rescue, but it was my friend Anele who saved me. Another time at Mbotyi, the seafloor gave way under me to an open portal, but my threshing feet found a footing. And now, wandering the coral-strewn shoreline, heaving with water beings, the sonic buzz of queer water things, water's ripple and unknowable depths save me. Reeds take me to the river that threads my home village. Where ferns hold morning dew in their clenched tendrils. This text is a summoning to the water. A dance and a weeping on the sandy shoreline. A watching and a breathing below and above the black surface. To watch water is to breathe more slowly.

The water is sacred. It contains ancestral remains now turned water beings, enables devotional rituals, and facilitates pilgrimages. Compulsive returns. It

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is where we meet with water deities and ancestors. It moves in the direction of the winds and alters our breathing. In water, we are more-than-human. Water clans are nurtured and defined by and in relation to the water. Water gives rippling form and texture to errant blackness. On its choppy surface, blackness is queerly mobile and impossible to pin down. Opacity thrives in the water. To think with these mobile dimensions of water requires us to wet our typically land-bound conceptions of life and death. By wetting our conceptual tools and immersing given archives in the water, this text brings African, Black, and Queer studies to the water and blurs their boundaries.<sup>1</sup>

The queer itineraries of this text are bound up with my body moving through spaces saturated in difficult histories. My body performs the work of profane and sacred ritual. Rites of wading in the water. Here, the divine is an infection of ancestral spirits and an enchanted witness that exceeds human and land-bound rationalities. A break from teleological temporalities and a leap into infected temporal zones. A fevered walking with things that break in the sonicscapes of forlorn and disoriented enslaved Africans whose continued existence can only be intuited through water rituals. My procedures for encountering the sacred are ritual rites that inundate my head with buzzing water while moving—walking and sometimes running—through consecrated littoral zones of death and life. Moving as I do among the ancestrally infected spiritualists I encounter at Mozambican and South African beaches, I too am infected and infectious. On this desecrated shoreline, we queerly commune with the dead and move against the profane order of things that requires forgetting. I—we—are infected by water, sandy accretions, the dead, corals, and water beings. My ritual wandering disturbs the water and excavates purportedly settled histories.

To write this book, I traveled—often flying to each country—and stayed, often returning for varying lengths of time, in coastal Mozambique, Kenya, Tanzania, Mauritius, and Namibia. I live in South Africa and have trodden its shorelines since birth. The fluidity of my method is queer for its emphasis on the instability of knowledge, meanings, power relations, and place.<sup>2</sup> My investments in the undertow are relational since I stay with the relations between water beings, corals, fishy things, forts, hauntings of those killed in water, and those who live with the ghosts. African subjectivities are especially queer since they resist boundedness and maintain porosity with the more-than-human. Whales, barnacles, sand, wind. For me, queer methods move against internal coherence and total ownership by those designated as queer in an exclusively sexual register. Reading queer from Africa, my intention is to refract a different meaning with every mention of the term. Perhaps

to theorize queer off its perch and into the undertow of life here. My method is a destabilizing mobile methodology akin to the disorienting waves that might also be characterized as shoreline wanderings while infected by feelings and sacred energies.<sup>3</sup>

All along this shoreline is a sonic buzzing of the water, the worlds it contains, its memories and traces of things endured. This buzzing is the black undertow of slaving and genocidal histories that refuse forgetting. Through my undisciplined wanderings, I sought to queerly read the water and its shorelines for these traces in ways that apprehend history through epiphenomenal temporality or time always now.<sup>4</sup> All the sites of my walking and running—body sometimes submerged in water and at other times, feet leaving fleeting traces on the sea sand—have experienced enslavement and varying forms of genocidal terror. With movements approximating those of water, my project was to think with the question of how water and its sands remember. To read the water, I take the elemental as a form of evidence in conjunction with what is submerged in its depths, what surfaces, and how the black littoral are constantly in relation to it.

The method is a littoral wandering through a watery constellation—things and beings in the water, and materials and beings on the liquid shoals. Being on sand, in water, looking at and inhabiting rocky coral structures on the shoreline—coral and stone forts, macuti structures, and watery beings like people of the water. It is being in memorial sites such as fort museums, talking to people at these sites, and returning through archives, literature, and specters that strain at memory. Reading coral to dredge submerged histories and bodies “within a planetary history.”<sup>5</sup> Like Caio Simões De Araújo’s work in Southern Mozambique, I invest in the materiality of the shoreline, “its multiple temporalities, fractal nature, amphibian quality, as a space that is neither fully terrestrial or oceanic.”<sup>6</sup> To read shoreline materiality, the text wanders errantly about with a sense of sacred motivation.<sup>7</sup> In geologic, liquid, and ritual temporalities. Queerly summoning and releasing atmospheric rage. Neo Sinxolo Musangi writes against the non-methods to which black and feminist ways of knowing are often consigned.<sup>8</sup> Like them, I lean on these knowledges but extend them to the realms of the more-than-human, black planetary to include corals, macuti, sand, water ritual, and abantu bamanzi.

Toyin Falola’s concept of ritual archives is central to my thoughts on ritual here.<sup>9</sup> He understands these as unbounded in scale and scope; encompassing ancestors, the natural and the supernatural, dance, and the touchings between earth-based and spiritual realms. In addition to the traditional elements of archives, he observes that ritual archives bear metaphorical and

mystical dimensions with physical and invisible properties that exercise power over the world. *Black Undertow* attends to the workings of black sociality as ritual archives by engaging the ephemeral and spectral—that which is just out of reach and consequently unappropriable by whiteness.<sup>10</sup>

What emerges when we stick to this coastline? “If we turn to the water, what do we see?”<sup>11</sup> What enraging yet submerged histories tug at our feet? Citing Gaston Bachelard, Elizabeth DeLoughrey writes that “water is an element that remembers the dead.”<sup>12</sup> Like so many scholars of Black Studies, for DeLoughrey, the Atlantic looms large. So large, I suggest that it blocks out the surge and histories of other world oceans. *Black Undertow* is an experiment in thinking the Indian Ocean and African South Atlantic in black—from the vantage point of African life here, in relation to, but freed of the stranglehold and the heft of the Atlantic. What would a heat map of African east and south coast slavery look like here, since these coastlines have tended to be read differently to West African shores that are more legible to Atlantic Black Studies?<sup>13</sup>

Within Black Studies, East and Southern African slavery is largely unmapped and as new generative literature on the Indian Ocean suggests, perhaps this ocean is unmappable.<sup>14</sup> Its multiple itineraries and flows make authoritative mapping undesirable. There is no dominant history here. However, there is providence in this unmapping. As Tao Leigh Goffe tells us, “To welcome not knowing allows one to be receptive to other forms of knowledge.”<sup>15</sup> But there are pitfalls to forms of knowing that do not attend to relationality. For instance, even as East and Southern Africans remember their histories through creative and scholarly production, *world* history generally unsees East and Southern African slavery.<sup>16</sup> And yet, this hesitance opens new avenues and horizons of attending. How might we read this coast in ways that are coeval and divergent from the West African shoreline? When we read without heat and fury, what is illuminated in the buzz always there at the edges of the frayed African margins? What emerges when we understand through the long temporality of corals as both delicate seabed animals and below and above water concretized ancient rock? What do the enduring structures of macuti tell us?<sup>17</sup> And what of the river beings of coastal Southern Africa? Dear Science, how is black life tempered, bent, and refracted through these queer theoretical formations?<sup>18</sup>

Thinking about slave histories in the South African Cape, Gabeba Badroon observes that the figures of enslaved people elude recognition, even when in direct view. They operate as picturesque figures that attract a brief

glance before the gaze is turned to more substantive matters.<sup>19</sup> In this conception, the function of the picturesque is to aestheticize and anesthetize. She suggests that to “accede to the picturesque discourse is to overlook the brutality of slavery and accept the portrayal of slaves as complicit with the system that dehumanized them.”<sup>20</sup> To look past the picturesque is to insist on the terror that underwrites the natural beauty of the Indian Ocean and African South Atlantic shorelines—to surface horror from the edges of public visibility. Following Baderoon, *Black Undertow* unmasks the violence of this shoreline to render the ugly imprints of enslavement, genocide, and colonial apartheid visible in ways that illuminate the present.

This manuscript is written at a dawdle and matches the tempo and sonic register of the water at early dawn. It is queer to write black in slow prose. To avoid the cacophony of the climax. There is a generativity to stretching things out. In refusing arrival and embracing failure upfront. In staying in it. What is illuminated in the drag? This is the method of this text. The buzz of oceanic water is an errant formation that serves as the method of the text. Grounded in the tradition of Black Studies, its fidelity is to movement rather than to discipline—a studious attempt to fail at disciplinarity and intellectual tradition. After all, black life is a failure at respectability. I invite us to be unsettled while wandering through the ruins of the raging waters of black life. *Black Undertow* is motion and adrift like oceanic waters. Scalding, breathing underwater, gathering like fog, a rising chant, slipping and reaching for queer freedom that is never quite realized.

This is a queer book on black coastal life. Black buzzing frequencies without thunder. Black as African water. It is a queer story. This is to say, it is a black story. The story is told through rocky coral, spectral water beings, and sand as a theoretical formation for working with traces of slavery and things endured.<sup>21</sup> The book is a deluge of water as ritual and black livingness in coastal Africa. *Life*. A sitting wracked by slaving and genocidal memories. *Death*. A haunting watchfulness at the water’s edge. *Wake*. A joyful jig on the sand. *Survivance*. It is about the subterranean energy that shoots through life here. This black undertow is material, symbolic, geological. It is a sensorial queer formation—feel it in the water. A throbbing buzz. It is coral rock, a mournful island song, white robes blowing in the littoral wind, a shimmer of water, bone flaking, freighted sand, haunting wind, barnacles and shells, an itch. It is histories that nurture black feeling and knowing. Scenes of queer quiet on desert sand that insist on other affects that exist alongside, and with, sadness. Of black ritual gathering, solidarity, loneliness, pleasure, and breathing on the



Santu Mofokeng, *Evangelists Crossing Stream*.

seashore, ears heavy and buzzing with water. Perhaps the sociality of black gathering in the clearing.<sup>22</sup> Of breathing together in shared breath.<sup>23</sup>

Thinking with port cities on the Swahili coast, Sandy Prita Meier reads coral stone architecture over a two-hundred-year period to surface the relations to modern empire and how artifacts as built structures inflect personhood and community.<sup>24</sup> My canvas is at once more modest and ambitious. While architecture is loosely within my ambit of interest, my investments are more capacious. Rocky corals are of geologic and symbolic significance for thinking with the ocean, water, multispecies relations, life and death anchored in slave histories, genocide, and collisions between the vast temporalities of a coastline which includes and exceeds the Swahili coast. A movement to and from Kenya and Namibia and all the waterways in-between. Even as I consult these, I am in search of something more ephemeral than that contained in formal archives—perhaps contained in the ebb and flow of the ocean, things washed up on the shore, beings and materials that breathe in water, hieroglyphs of the rocky corals, frenzied worship, otherworldly ritual, and mournful wading in the space where waters break, rub and touch sand, stone, and flesh. Since it exists in the planetary sphere—between ocean, land, sand, rock, coral, people, ritual, movement—this story is difficult to surface.

## Queer Diffusion

The text invests in queer registers in a dual form of refusal—the antiquated fugitive implication of those who don’t fit into normative registers of being. Here, queer works as a blurring. A register that operates as a lingering dull feeling of unaccounted affect. It is the quiet throbbing that hovers and homes with many of us who are found wanting by modernity, its respectable modes of being, and who live with the residues of slavery and genocide. This project presses on expansive formations of queer. Queer is liquid—as the deep blue and slate gray of the Indian Ocean. It is beautiful like a coral reef in the depths of the ocean and is as inscrutable as concretized corals, now rock in Mombasa and Ilha de Moçambique. I tug at queer from its margins, pulling its frayed edges in the hope of deforming and upending its centers. I take my lead from Keguro Macharia, who theorizes queer as gesturing to the “creative ways that the sexual can be used to imagine and create worlds” while cognizant of the idea that black and queer are not always kind playmates.<sup>25</sup> But I do not want to abandon the utility and worldmaking potentialities of queerness.

Eve Sedgwick is instructive here—Queer involves “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning [that occur] when constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically.”<sup>26</sup> José Esteban Muñoz stretches this buoyancy to imagine queer utopic futures characterized by revolutionary hope for new ways of being and relating.<sup>27</sup> But I shoal the utopic futurity of queerness by hitching it to blackness. Since blackness is freighted with history, it distorts futurity. Black tethers queer to ongoing pasts so that black queer is always about the future and the past—black freedom. Yet, Sedgwick and Muñoz are productive for my own insistence on the creative potentialities, relation, and refusals to signify monolithically. I press on the concept’s liquid dimensions. Ambivalences are central to shaking queer from its white moorings to make meaning of Macharia’s sense of the violent ejection from the social. Making a case for diasporic frottage, Macharia contends, “Starting from the diaspora requires rethinking not only the historical and theoretical utility of identity categories such as gay, lesbian, and bisexual, but also, arguably more foundational categories such as normative and non-normative, human and nonhuman.”<sup>28</sup> To think with the complexity of African life, I too seek something more buoyant than the given. To attend to floating dimensions of queer, I look obliquely at the concept by thinking of queer practices that do not announce themselves.

To prod at African conceptions of queer, it is productive to stay with Macharia, who invests in both the sexual contours and more expansive or promiscuous possibilities of the concept. The openness of this frame allows Africans to smuggle those eradicated from existence into our geohistories. Reflecting on earlier instantiations, particularly those articulated by Sedgwick, Macharia inflects queer as an invitation, adventure, pedagogy, pleasure, and as capacious rather than as border. He draws our attention to the queer distortion that came with white, hetero, capitalist co-optation in the service of marketing and consumption cultures at the turn of the century. We might call this queer disappointment since the term's openness and invitation was distorted by racial capitalist co-optation in ways that lesbian, for example, has not. "The promise of neoliberal queerness . . . is that queers are useful to heteronormativity (the overall message of *Queer Eye*); excellent for capitalism (as the pioneers of urban gentrification on one scale and the best marketers for beauty products on another scale); host the best parties (what, after all, is *Pride* if not the best party for straight people?); and, most importantly, are no longer marked by or tied to HIV/AIDS (read this as "family friendly")."<sup>29</sup>

This insightful tracking of the evolution of the concept resonates with the world's metropolitan centers. Perhaps the African margins have been spared from parts of this distortion. If we bracket the co-optation, what might the concept illuminate for Africans who are the world's abject other? Those of us rendered queer by default since we fail at modernity. Thinking with Natal in colonial South Africa, T. J. Tallie assists us to register African particularities of queerness—how settler normativity can produce a doubleness of indigenous queerness through practices such as polygamy, which is both normative and queer.<sup>30</sup> By taking us through a range of indigenous African practices that fail at colonial respectability, Tallie stretches the potential of queer theorizations beyond the given lexicon.

Macharia provides another opening by referring us to the frequencies of relation. Referring to a piece of writing that responded to my work, *Riotous Deathscapes*, he articulates how queer signifies for him. "Queer always names a relation and, often, multiple relations: surveillance and discipline and punishment in one instance, primarily from the state and its institutions; pleasure that helps us work across difference, what Audre Lorde terms the erotic; hauntings from ghostly presences of those we have lost and keep losing, to HIV/AIDS, to quotidian violence, to erasures by and silences from those we love. The queer I have found most useful has never been about identity or identification; it has always been about the multiple relations one is embedded in and navigates across different scales."<sup>31</sup> Since the liberating

dividend of queer is relation, *Black Undertow* invests in our multiple relations across different temporal, material, and elemental scales to those killed in our slaving and genocidal histories. How does queer relation assist us to connect to these immolated pasts? Each chapter of this text grapples with this question.

In *Black Undertow*, queer is not trapped in the individual but is imbuing, infesting, and saturating landscape, waterscape, and temporality. Geological. Queer, adrift like fog. While queer is often domesticated within the bounds of the homestead, in this work, I invest in a form of queer outdoors, hovering at the shoreline and skulking about ancient fortresses.<sup>32</sup> Uncontainable but everywhere. Ephemeral. It asks, if we cannot grasp queer in one hand, what does it look, sound, and feel like? What are the liberating dividends of this inability to contain and discipline queer energies and imaginaries of the world? For scholars invested in clean categories, to imagine it as an atmospheric sensation and as pervasive is to potentially surrender control to queer unruliness and unknowing. For those like me who live in this unsettled atmosphere—the queers, the black lovers, descendants of enslaved people, those on the run from gender—this surrender provides shelter. A fugitive breathing place. Perhaps the discomfort and familiarity of something resembling home. It is a gnawing knowing. *Black Undertow* sits with the queer buzz.

By orienting itself to these unsettling sensations, this book claims a distinctively black queer and African frame. It sits in the funk without seeking escape. This tarrying in the debris parses the potentialities of being consigned to this position in an infested landscape where waters quiver with feeling. While there are obvious connections in this text, Queer African Studies distinguishes itself from Queer Studies through its unboundedness, its elemental and more-than-human continuities with the human, its relational possibilities which exceed bounded categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, its affinity to African Feminism and Postcolonial Studies, its mournful insistence on histories of black dispossession, and the ability to find pleasure and hide in plain sight. Since the things that render Africans queer are unappropriable, recognition by state human rights and donor rituals is important but not defining. African queer life is more than. As Macharia warns, the privileging of sex acts in defining queer African lives occludes how these bodies become imbued with political significance.<sup>33</sup> So, certainly sex, but also, more than sex. Always more than any demarcation.

To love oneself in this African context is a queer affect. It is to scream into the wind, to rattle the bars of enclosure, to bleed out in red puddles of exertions of mattering on the sea sand. A tenacious clinging to hope, ocean debris,

and water deities and beings. To love is a mournful return to the water. It resists orders of being. An irritating buzz and black blur shaped and colored like black windswept water of unknowable depths. The sound of the undertow is the buzz. The sonic attributes of histories submerged in the water and refusing comprehension. Writing about trans femme noise, Eva Pensis's formulation of noise as a diffusion of sexuality is important to this project. She observes that when sound is incorrectly produced, it is noise. "Where songs sing, noise swarms, buzzes, rattles, and distorts. Noise's incomprehensibility is precisely what makes it potent."<sup>34</sup> Noise buzzes in the register of queer sonics. It is legible to those who share the conditions of the buzz, whose roots are centuries deep in slaving and genocidal pasts, and those estranged from normative frequencies. The buzz is incomprehensible to the ears of modernity. It is black queer noise. A water ritual whose soundtrack is the gray noise of the ocean. To blur black, to graft it onto queer affects and littoral noise is to turn toward more illegible forms or genres of blackness often evacuated from scholarly analysis and political life. To read queer in this way is to conceive of it as an affect that sticks to queerly black bodies, the coral reef, water beings, specters, and to the waters that bind blackness across space. In this text, I pause on these queer formations of waters that have known death.

Referring to Saidiya Hartman's conception of blackness as diffusion of antiblack terror, Fred Moten contends that diffusion "is a pouring forth, a holding or spreading out, or a running over that never runs out and is never over; a disbursal more than a dispersal; a funding that is not so much founding as continual finding of that which is never lost in being lost. It is the terrible preparation of a table for a feast of burial and ascension."<sup>35</sup> These double registers—never lost in being lost, running over without running out—are crucial for the movements, rubbings, irritations, queering, and diffusions between black life and death across scales and socialities of relation which include and exceed enslavement, genocide, and livingness in Africa. In the ruins of catastrophe and in blue-black African waters are queer energy kernels from which newness sprouts. We tap into the transgressive potentialities of queer to upset histories and orders of knowledge that unsee us. We think with queer energies that remain in the water and are never quite spent, thus continuing to move the world.

Queer energy variously pours forth, trickles, radiates, conjoins, disrupts, separates, sutures, disperses, diffuses, refuses, summons, journeys, troubles, circles, razes, buzzes, assembles, braids, knits, and pulses. Through its blur, it bears the networked energies of outcast formations. It is a reckoning with despair, terror, and intense creativity and fortitude that attaches to black

and queer bents. The traces of things endured on this ocean attach to time binds in the debris of the battles that characterize racial capitalism. They pulse through the waste matter of what Elizabeth Freeman has termed *failed revolutions* that form queer time binds.<sup>36</sup> In this context, it is battles waged against the enslaver, génocidaire colonial imperialist, apartheid bureaucrat, patriarch, homophobe, police, and racial capitalist of the long neoliberal season. Victories that are simultaneously failed insurrections. Sometimes, queer energies are like a hot ember passed down the tunnels of time. Queer as ember. At other times, it might spark from discarded ruins purportedly forgotten on the threshing floor of our many battlefields in far-flung wastelands.

*Black Undertow* puzzles through and outlines a preliminary mapping, a theorizing of things endured by the long shorelines of East and Southern Africa. Queer disorder as a low-intensity blur is always present in the momentum toward freedom. Through surfacing black history in a queer key, this book is a reading of black freedom in the African world. But we are invested in tracing the obscure—often concealed by nationalist struggles. By treading the African shoreline, the book follows the indecipherable buzz and low intensities of queer enactments such as ritual conjuring and cleansing. The queer key insists on oblique readings that approach from multiple routes and repeated failures of exposition that never arrive at final meanings. A queer key that is errant and rhizomatic.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps it is an exercise of frustrating repetition through a series of rewinds that blot out the event, often refusing to dwell on it, and leaving us with worn beginnings. A riot of footprints on the sand that hide the spoor, making it untraceable to those invested in black queer capture and muting our love. We suggest that queer diffuses terror—a running out that never runs out and is never over but is an edging toward something resembling freedom. A geological excavation.

While *Riotous Deathscapes* theorizes the visual through *ukwakumkanya* to think with various ways of apprehending African life, *Black Undertow* extends this through the sonics of water. As another way of attending askance, to think with sound is an additional way of refusing mastery and full knowing. It is to approximate, intuit, and to work with feelings aroused by sound that conveys an ancestral knowing. To buzz queerly is to verbalize at the sonic frequency of the continuous murmur of the ocean. Paired with corals and water beings, the buzz enables emergent, marginal, fragile, undecided, and binary-defying expressions of black accounting. Envision the sonic inundation of a swarm of bees. The buzz of bees contains meanings that we intuit with ritual.

Behold the buzzing noise of African voices emerging from the ocean in riotous chorus building in intensity, coming from the distance in undecipher-

able code, overtaking the sonic atmosphere and destabilizing order, perhaps casting fear. To buzz is to be barely legible or to refuse legibility. It draws the listener in. It breaks rhythm and compels pause. In the pause, the break, we might recalibrate by letting go of established ways of listening and we may attend more closely. A buzz is a slurring sound in a queer key. To avoid acoustical deadness and to feel the vibration of the water is to feel more than.<sup>38</sup> More than is socially sanctioned and more than human only because African blackness is always on the run from the human and in planetary forms of intimate relation.

This book meditates on the theoretical possibilities offered by the buzz for thinking queer enactments by African people. We are compelled to pause and lean in, to decipher black queer livingness when life is under threat. *Black Undertow* uses the queer formation of the buzz to consider what is performed and communicated as black people live with despicable histories and oceanic witnesses. The utility of theorizing through the buzz is that it elides legible registers of queer theorizations that often do not resonate with African rhythms of life. Western queer theory estranges those of us who live in the shadows of empire. If the buzz is collective voice—in chorus, in the black mob formed against genocidal terror—it is also a black undertow, a sanctuary and space to be held in collective breath. Moten once more: “To be held in the mob’s embrace, is the wound and blessing of their shared, accursed sensorium, is to be made unaware of one’s own invisibility—to feel, to feel more, to feel more than, to feel more than I feel, I feel.”<sup>39</sup> In the buzz then, we create a home for queer being. A buzzing in a lower octave hidden in the folds and concretion of corals. In the frenzy below the ancestral portal of the black surface.

### Afro-Coral Witnessing—A Queer Geological Formation

This book is about life, because while water is used to annihilate black life, it is alive with a force that, unlike most elements, is undeniably mobile. This moves against what McKittrick contends is geography’s tendency to preconceptualize black geography as dead and dying and moving toward extinction.<sup>40</sup> Because we must begin with black livingness. For this, we must lean on the speculative and spectral since these are modes of black archiving. Thinking with fossils, Kathryn Yusoff suggests that “the existence of fossil objects that have meaning relies on a whole speculative armature of world making that conjures their presence through incomplete material residues. Fossils, then, are understood as empirical knots of time that are without

corresponding experience, which operate at the level of classification and speculative fabulation.”<sup>41</sup> In my wanderings along the long shorelines of East and Southern Africa, in an errant search of a theoretical anchor—something material and symbolic to ground lives and histories rendered invisible—the geologic formations of rock, corals, sand, and water beings grabbed my attention as planetary witnesses of deep history. Thinking with corals on this shoreline may be likened to queer time binds.<sup>42</sup>

Rocky reefs or hard corals are not a common feature of the South African coastline. It was only on my walks treading the East African shoreline that I witnessed their prevalence as geologic rock forms whose skeletal hulk hugs the shoreline. On a black littoral geography with things to hide and which refuses commemoration, my search for slave pasts found vague traces. This required other forms of attending, which drew my attention to abundant geological forms that have borne witness in long time. Corals are a material reality in the seascape, but they are also a powerful metaphor and methodology for this project.<sup>43</sup> McKittrick reminds us that “metaphors are not just metaphoric, though. They are concretized. This means—if we believe the stories we tell and share—that the metaphoric devices we use to think through black life are signaling practices of liberation (tangible, theoretical, imaginary) that are otherwise-possible and already here (and over there).”<sup>44</sup> For this project, corals are a metaphor of this kind. Delicate underwater animal growths of astounding beauty and aliveness but also concreted formations that have witnessed brutality in geologic temporality.<sup>45</sup> Their appearance represents an alive deadness. A watching. A living fossil.<sup>46</sup> Taking coral seriously heeds Achille Mbembe’s call for us to reanimate things and beings that appear lifeless.<sup>47</sup>

Reanimating materiality is to stake a claim on the planetary, which is often denied to Africans. This is also a racial reckoning. Yusoff observes that “while the Anthropocene is a new geologic time interval that pries open a speculative dimension to planetary thought and material relations, it also requires that the histories of matter and their subjective-racial formations not be forgotten.”<sup>48</sup> Thinking with the materiality of corals that stick stubbornly to the East African shore compels us to slow down from the planetary flight toward the post-racial. Rocky corals and coral reefs oblige us to think backward.<sup>49</sup> They are paleo-archives that doggedly insistent on the geologies of race. Of slavery and genocidal hauntings. A raging in Morrisonian temporality of time always now.<sup>50</sup> Yusoff surfaces the valiance of matter—“the temporal inscription of matter makes political claims on the past and present.”<sup>51</sup>

As benthic and pelagic, corals make claims on us to reckon with the suppressed traces of slavery on coastlines abandoned by history. *Black Undertow*

works with coral rock as a queer theoretical formation and a kind of geologic undercommons that Yusoff articulates as a geologic kitchen-sink realism—raced, sexed, gendered, and shot through by economic relations. Édouard Glissant is an important model for thinking of corals as representing archipelagos of thought and imbuing material forms with black sociality. Corals enable the assemblage of a theoretical formulation of the book. They point us to the oceanic life and deaths of coral growth and their concretion and surfacing below and above water. Their creation of the East African shoreline, hulking presence as seabed coral mounds, their protrusions, pebbling, bleaching, and dispersals give form to the text. Corals are central too, to the fortifications that hint at slavery and colonial time through fortifications that dot the African shoreline.

This text suggests that corals above water are forms of suppressed things rendered conscious. Scars of things endured—in their harvesting to build slave warehouses and colonial forts, and an endurance through watching and witnessing the arrivals and departures of slave vessels. Hard rocky reefs know violence and might be imagined as barometers of sedimented memory. I work with corals as historical texts and testimony. Following Prita Meier, I suggest that corals “trouble the boundaries between the physical, mental, and cultural . . .” and help us to historicize human and more-than-human entanglements as memory aids and co-witnessing.<sup>52</sup> From Edward Casey, we learn that it is instructive to trace the sensuous self-presentation of materials beyond their mere accumulation. To take the hardy form of corals seriously is to attend to these qualities and layers of meaning.<sup>53</sup>

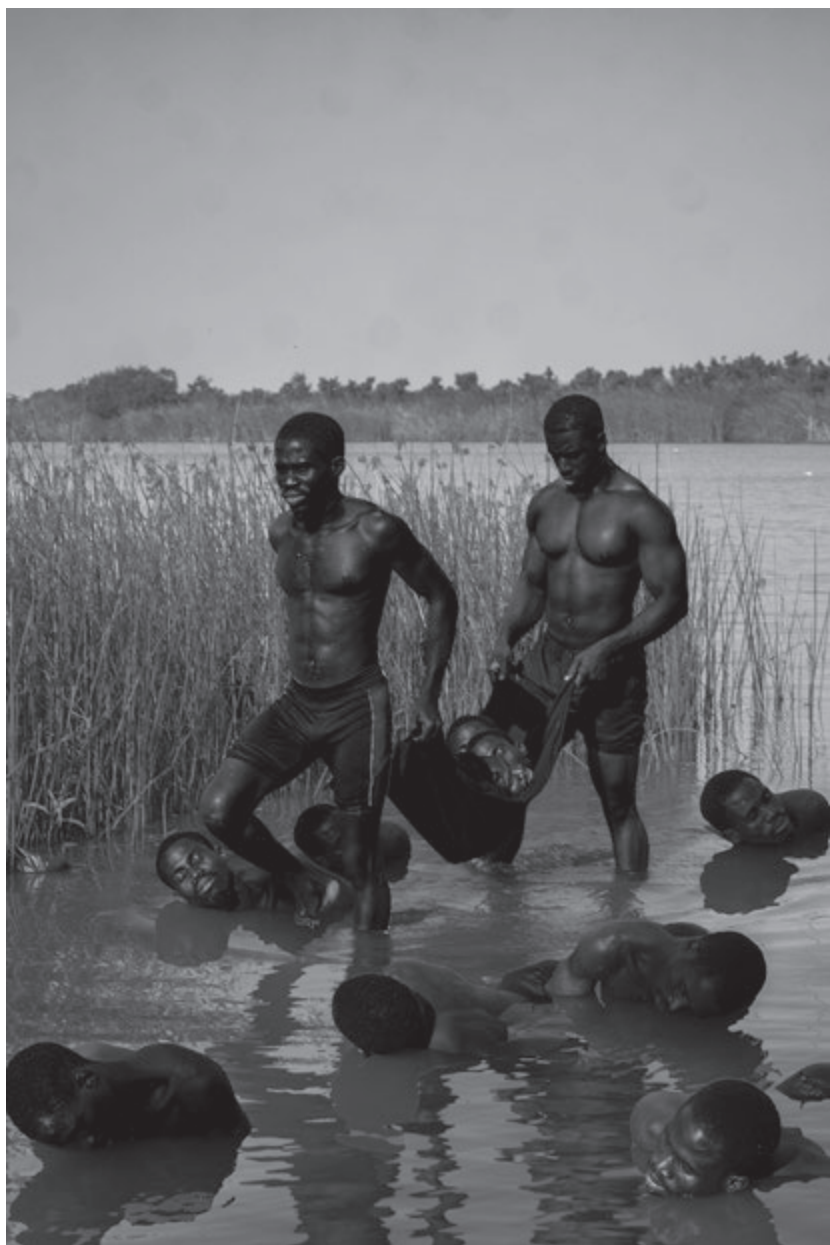
Is the roughness of hard corals the concretized memory of welts and bruises? Is the coral bleaching and loss of color the wearing of surfaces that bear the unbearable? Perhaps it is Anne Elias’s melancholic sign of a decaying planet.<sup>54</sup> How do we read these texts as offering us other ways of seeing?<sup>55</sup> Corals as black archives. While corals are read as historicizing humans in this text, together with new materialists, corals are understood to have a life of their own.<sup>56</sup> Corals are actively engaged in relational networks with humans and other species.<sup>57</sup> They offer us a theoretical formation to think with the aims of this project. The low-frequency buzz through which queer energies are theorized here might be imagined as the wind breaking on hard rocky corals and as offering us a shoal—a space for slowing down the raging coast so we might parse out their operation on quieter frequencies.<sup>58</sup> As method, the physical properties of corals allow for material analysis from walking over them, looking at, touching them, and attending to their folded

histories. Corals allow us to take metaphoric and spectral leaps through imaginaries that transport us into the benthic depths. They offer a queer method of attending. A rendering of unconscious depths. But also, a refusal of psychoanalytic hubris when it unsees black queerness and the generativity of the compulsive returns enacted in this text.

Coral reefs are the result of a geologic process of concretion. Killian Quigley defines this process as naming both “a substance that forms on certain immersed surfaces *and* the phenomenon of that substance’s formation . . . how concretion—from the Latin *concrēscere* for ‘to grow together’—marks and reworks imperial (and other) presences at the seabed.”<sup>59</sup> In this reading of concretion as growing together, we find room for planetary imaginaries and surfacing submerged histories. Reading imperial histories from oceanic depths of Australian waters, Quigley observes:

Communities of coralline algae made their homes upon some of the nautical detritus. In dying, the algae left their calcium carbonate exoskeletons behind, creating a layer to serve as the basis of more algal life, and so of more exoskeletal layers. Thus growing, a concretion might eventually “merge” with “adjacent objects.” It might even wind up as the sort of “large mass” suitable for the “secondary growth” of still “other life,” from seaweeds to soft corals, as well as for the fortuitous settling of inanimate “debris.” As for the substrates that become inhabited and remade, concretion sometimes causes the corrosion and dispersal of artifacts to actually slow down, as though acting to “protect” that which it envelops. In the same manner, in other words, that a drowned thing is overlaid by marine organisms, coalesces with what it adjoins, and gets covered by sundry unliving stuff, it may be maintained with a kind of obfuscatory care.<sup>60</sup>

This is a generative way of thinking about processes of concretion that are present in the formation of coral reefs. It is this capacity for “obfuscatory care” for preservation that attracts me to rocky corals as silent but active witnesses of things endured on African shores that have known violence and survival. Attending to the black undertow of the shorelines as the text does, it reads the sedimented traces. Corals are therefore more than just memory; they have queerly absorbed marine objects, animal and human bones, shackles, and grown together with despicable things done on and in the water. As archives of slavery and genocide, corals absorb skeletons for posterity. As living and dead things, corals carry souls and can be said to give life to the



Nana Frimpong, *Cancel Culture*.

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dead disposed of in oceans. As haunted subterranean animal life, corals are raging materials whose ghostly geologies index other cartographies. Yusoff observes that “the rock gives forms to other temporal possibilities. Unearthing recalls buried bones and sun.”<sup>61</sup>

Since slave histories in the Indian Ocean are generally out of view of Black Studies, to fold this ocean into blackness, I work off the sonic register of the buzz to accompany theorization through Afro-corals. Shells and conchs conjoin with coral reefs. They emit incomprehensible noise. To buzz is to insist on the sonic register of things sidelined but present. To sound out what is silenced. Mounting a case for sonic thought, Christoph Cox urges us to “allow the object to speak, put it on equal footing with philosophical thinking, permit it to generate concepts rather than solely to be subject to them.”<sup>62</sup> Thinking with Jayna Brown, I suggest that buzz is created out of the necessity for deferring insanity—for livingness.<sup>63</sup> In this text, I contend that on the African continent, we live alongside slave histories writ large in ways that relegate these traces to the margins. They are present only as a vague buzz. Perhaps the buzz might be read as continuous with the hum that Faith Smith, in relation to law, conceives as “the *hum* of law and a building up (by wearing down) of the capacity to endure its violence; a *humdrum* that is repetitive, unrelenting, probably unremarked. Hum is also a ‘modality of quiet,’ an ‘undervalued lower range of quotidian audibility’ that enlists us to attend to its very banality.”<sup>64</sup> The traces of terror are similarly subdued but are nevertheless unrelentingly present.

If corals articulated in registers audible to the human, what would they say? Since they are animal life, might we lend them the noise of bees? Bees moaning in the ocean. The beehive resonates with the theoretical formation of the buzz. It is an intricate collective breathing. Affective. As sonic as it is visual. One often hears the beehive at a low consistent frequency before they see it. There is a raging energy that gives the sonic its meaning. The buzzing of bees is continuous with the ocean’s buzz. It is also the sound of African ritual since bees function as ancestral messengers. In some African cultures, traditional beer is brewed to appease ancestors when a hive settles at an ancestral home.<sup>65</sup> When placed under duress by threat, the hive may erupt into a dangerous swarm. The ocean can swarm and devastate. Corals allow us to tune into the lower octave of the buzz and the long *durée* of submerged ancestors and water beings languishing and thriving in the water. For bees, corals, the ocean, and African queers, memory is a survival instinct coded and nursed over centuries. Black queerness is personhood under pressure. A collective breathing. The book dwells in the lower frequencies of the buzz to theorize this less studied queer register.

## The Undertow of Abantu Bamanzi—Water Beings

As hard corals become less pronounced in the colder waters of the Southern African shoreline of South Africa and Namibia, they give way to abantu bomlambo and abantu baselwandle. Theoretically, they play a role like that of the corals of East Africa. These water beings are a prominent motif in the San and Xhosa cosmologies of the Eastern Cape. Of course, these entanglements and planetary porosity between worlds might be characterized as broadly African. Malidoma Patrice Somé tells us that for the Dagara people of Burkina Faso, distinctions between the natural and supernatural do not exist—“the living converse with the ancestral spirits, and those with proper knowledge routinely travel to other worlds.”<sup>66</sup>

*Black Undertow* is carried by these watery beings and an ethic of littoral porosity as a theoretical formation that fuses coral materialities with the spectral, ritual, and blurring of the human and more-than-human. I term these beings abantu bamanzi or water beings to loosen the place of the river to include its oceanic instantiations and flows since abantu bamanzi reside in rivers and oceans. To locate this work, I engage local scholarship on the fecundity of ancestral water beings before pausing on Malidoma Patrice Somé’s autobiographical account of his initiation as a water shaman. This serves as an imaginative and ritual entry point into the underwater world that *Black Undertow* engages. It is an invitation to an underwater imaginary, a zone of encounter and relation where the ability to breathe underwater is granted like it is to dolphins, corals, and kelp.

Writing about the Kowie River in the Eastern Cape, Jacklyn Cock observes that “rivers like the Kowie with their deep pools also provided access to ancestors, the Abantu Bomlambo (People of the River), elusive water divinities who have the power to shape the lives of their descendants.”<sup>67</sup> These deep pools are spaces for accessing abantu bamanzi who are said to live beneath water with their crops and cattle. For their calling to be sanctioned and to be cleansed, diviner initiates visit abantu bamanzi. Hirst writes that diviners cultivate close relations to abantu bamanzi who are described as part human and part fish.<sup>68</sup> Across the coastline and its network of rivers, people offer gifts and offerings—reed baskets containing items like pumpkin seeds, sorghum, tobacco, and white beads—to these ancestral beings that reside beneath the water.<sup>69</sup>

In an anthropological account of the process of becoming a healer, Robert J. Thornton describes it as a period of training understood as being underwater in the river for a sustained period.<sup>70</sup> Watery flows are a powerful

motif for healing and movement between worlds. The energetic properties of flowing water transport ancestral knowledges between those who reside underwater and healer initiates training underwater. Submergence in the water—*emzini wasemlanjeni*—exposes healers and those in search of healing to energetic flows at the confluence of multiple worlds and destabilizing temporalities of here and there. Thornton observes that “the constant allusions to water, blood, foam, rain, rivers and the ocean are references to the master trope of water as flow and pressure of becoming and being a healer.”<sup>71</sup> However, beyond formal initiation into healing, moving water has potency that extends to ritual cleansing, spirituality, memory, ceremony, encounters, relation, and ancestral temporalities. It symbolizes transformation from one state to another. It is these potentialities that *Black Undertow* presses on.

Somé teaches us that water is a portal to the underworld. Similarly, Khadija Abdalla Bajaber’s novel, *The House of Rust*, which this text also draws from, describes movement between water worlds in Mombasa as undertows of different times represented by ancient sea animals.<sup>72</sup> The undersea heaves with an undertow of spirits and material formations that cannot be vanquished by death. In his account of his initiation, Somé details his travels from an earthly presence to one beneath the water. In relation to his descent to the world below the water, he contemplates the possibility of being unable to return—“I wondered what it would be like never to die, but also never to live—to be a ghost trapped in a crack between the worlds, severed from both with no hope of any help . . . Then I remembered the horror stories my father had told me of children who went to initiation and never came back and the abject terror of shamans who saw them in their divination water or shells, crying for help.”<sup>73</sup> His resolve is tested when one of the initiates of his cohort falls into the cracks between the worlds that they must travel as part of the journey below the water. The boy is trapped for eternity. Perhaps to be heard weeping by the shamans who traverse the portals.

I stay with Somé a little longer so that we might approximate what it means to move between liquid worlds. In preparation for going beneath the water, an elder instructs the initiates: “This water has been here since time immemorial. It protects the doorway to the ancestors. Only the sick are brought here, for healing. This water is the roof of the world you are going to visit for a while. You will jump into the pool one after the other. There is no bottom as there is in the village river, instead there is a world.”<sup>74</sup> Having gone below the water, Somé loses a sense of his physical self and is aware of himself only at the level of his conscience. And because there is no need for water beings to breathe underwater, he discovered that he did not have

to hold his breath. “I could hear the sounds of breathing all around me, the sound of my own breath and the breath of something else, and I became convinced that somebody was breathing for both me and himself.”<sup>75</sup> In this movement between worlds, are what Falola describes as forces “that breathe and are breathless.” Somé is inhabited by these forces which unlock the ritual archive. In this invocation of the entire cosmos, he suspects that this other being that nursed him like a mother below water was a dolphin and at other moments, perhaps a woman-fish with braided hair.

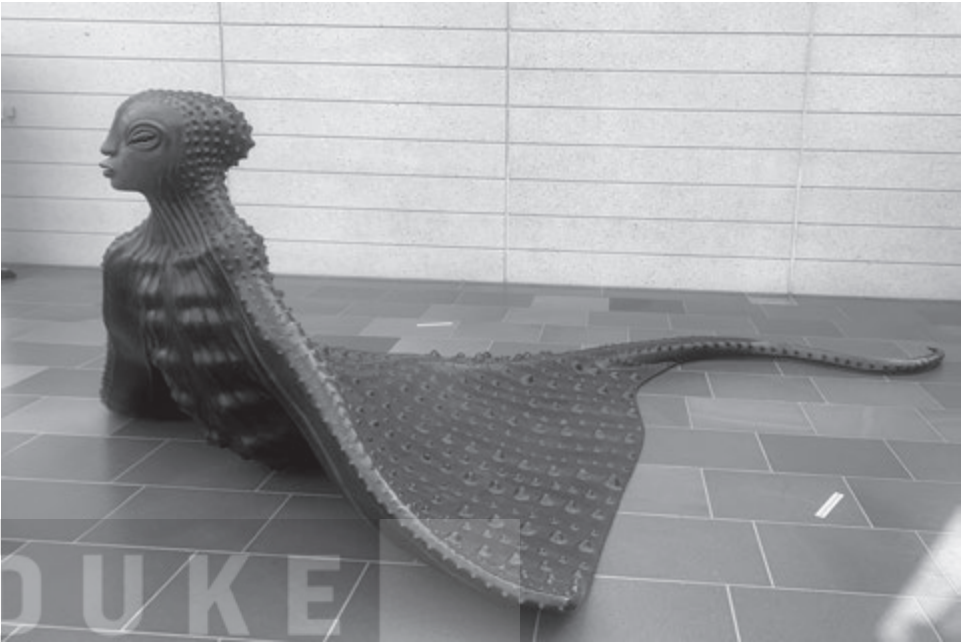
Imaginaries of water beings infuse African worldmaking. Kenyan sculptor Wangechi Mutu’s artworks, in the images below, capture the human and more-than-human forms in whose lineage we might place Somé’s vivid narrations of traveling through black underwater portals.<sup>76</sup> Through artworks we enter alternative worlds of queer undertows that reshape social and imaginative boundaries. Artworks queerly expand imagination by taking us into the water and making “alternative existences sensorially perceptible and possible to imagine.”<sup>77</sup> Since much of African ritual and spirituality is a conjuring, art might be characterized as operating in a similar register.

Holding Somé, Bajaber, and Mutu’s worlding liquid portals in mind, I return to the Southern African shoreline in a move that sutures the rationalities of these worlds to each other. In the case against oceanic exploration for oil along the Eastern Cape, villagers argued that these explorations would disturb their ancestors that reside in the ocean.<sup>78</sup> I imagine that like Somé’s co-initiate and Khadija Abdalla Bajaber’s undersea imaginaries of Mombasa, the colonialists would be caught between worlds and linger in the water like dead corals. Shipwrecks bearing enslaved people often sank off the east and west coast shoreline of South Africa. All these—material and spiritual ancestors of the ocean—are a form of witnessing from the water. Through ritual archives—art, spiritual, and traditional initiations and healing, they remain in vibrant sociality with the water and coastal communities. Like the corals from the warmer waters of Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique, water beings provide alternative forms of reading traces of things endured. But also, temporalities before whiteness.

If through concretion, Afro-corals offer us a theoretical lens for reading the enmeshed histories of the ocean, black movement, and slavery in East Africa, abantu bamanzi point to how the planetary watery beings of the Southern African shoreline illuminate these complex relations to water and black death that haunts this coast. The ritual archive drawn on here, “encodes memory” in several ways and in various forms.<sup>79</sup> In doing this work, I heed Falola’s observation that “ritual archives store most of our indigenous



Wangechi Mutu, *Water Woman*. 2017, Bronze, 91.4 × 165.1 × 177.8 cm, edition of 3.  
Source: Gladstone Gallery, New York.



Wangechi Mutu, *Mamaray*. Photo by author.

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production, memories, legacies, and even the histories of our lives and ancestors. Ritual archives lead us into the reinvention of the cosmos that we inhabit.”<sup>80</sup> Abantu bamanzi and Afro-corals enable this recreation of a cosmos where hauntings are active presences.

### Queer African Blackness

The littoral imaginaries sketched out above have a bearing on continental blackness.

Because Africans have other tethers—clan, continent, more-than-human relations, and sometimes unbroken lineages—our blackness registers more loosely. *I define this as a mobile and fluid small b.* But when drawn too sharply, the binaries of Africa and her diasporas are false. The slave trade displaced large numbers of Africans within the continent. Coastal Africa is populated by peoples brought to the coast to service the trade and to conduct slave labor on coastal and island plantations and homesteads of African enslavers. Therefore, to attribute displacement to diasporic Africans only is to unsee internal deracination. This text tarries in these spaces of littoral displacement. It reads these spaces as a black undertow of something always pushing beneath the surface. An unsettled presence. Here, black signals the conditions that birth people compelled to make new meaning of who they are. Undertow operates as a register of refusal, moving in disguised but deadly opposition just below the surface. Undertow buzzes as background noise that is nevertheless always present and calling on the living to reckon with our deadly African pasts.

Beyond South Africa and Namibia, as race, blackness registers faintly on the African continent.<sup>81</sup> It is an unsettled category of being whose substance is partially learned from diasporic black people in the Americas and Europe. Africa teaches us that black is not a pre-existing index of being but that it is fashioned and magnified in the presence of whiteness. Its queer inability to stick is a reminder that whiteness is not the origin story, and that African agency might be defined outside of European enlightenment and modernity. Therefore, even as Jemima Pierre’s foundational work has taught us that racialization is a global phenomenon that operates in Africa too, sticking closely to the black littoral of the East and Southern African shorelines illuminates its various shades, contingencies, and complexities.<sup>82</sup> On the shorelines and islands of this coast where ancient movement enabled by Indian oceanic crosscurrents led to relations between here and elsewhere, heterogeneity and indeterminacy are common. In these contexts, identity

does not hold as securely as it does inland. It ebbs and flows with the monsoon winds.

We might see blackness here as queerly unsettled. As a product of the roiling ocean that eschews essences in favor of crosscurrents always on the move. Blackness here is carried and dispersed by trade winds, watery exchange, curiosity, and the stench of slavery and indenture always a blur in the background. The buzz of elsewhere and the insistence of here. A grafting. It is constituted in the crucible and the coastal dance of Waswahili. Pain and pleasure. Agency and surrender. People coming together in a space-time that unsettles colonial spatial temporalities.<sup>83</sup> Perhaps a form of concretion that mimics coral growth, human-fish, water divinities, and ancestors that breathe underwater. In the making and unmaking effects and affects of the tidalectics of the water rubbing between continents, islands, rocks, water beings, and shoals, categories lose their form and dissolve in the motion. In the place of stability, we have an undertow constituted of diffusion and queer formations that require several takes.

What did Arab settlement in Mombasa as early as the eighth century mean for the people of this coast? How does admiral Zheng He, Chinese eunuch and voyager to East Africa between 1405 and 1433, unsettle worlds as he moves between Southeast Asia and the shores of East Africa?<sup>84</sup> What is the meaning of the century's long presence of enslaved East Africans in the Persian Gulf—Iran, Oman, and Yemen? A presence deeper than the travel of Islam.<sup>85</sup> And how might we take seriously the ways that blackness operated in the period of East African enslavement in the Indian Ocean region? Remark on the racism that structured slavery in Iran, Beeta Baghoolizadeh observes that the racial visibility of blackness meant that in that country, blackness “overlapped with geographies of enslavement, where Iranians built their homes and cities based on this forced visibility.”<sup>86</sup> Racist attitudes in the region inflect the development of the Waswahili identity at the confluence of these disparate Indian Ocean shorelines. And yet, enslavement in this region had a different texture to that of the Atlantic trade. It had multiple entry and exit points, its practice varied, and conditions of work and familial sociality are contested. I suggest that even as racial hierarchy marked this encounter, this historical and relational variability produces a differently textured blackness to that of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Arab-led enslavement has continuities and variations to European forms of slavery.<sup>87</sup>

To capture the relational variability of being on this shoreline, this text uses the lowercase b for black. Here, black exceeds description. It is work. It is pleasure and mourning. A tributary. Astride and rarely ever just one thing.

In its movement across space and time, the lowercase b builds solidarities, it rubs against others and surrenders itself to being remade in relation. Since it is founded in heartache, it sees brutality and builds bonds created in solidarity. This is the black of contradictions that evades an arrival at final truths. Here, blackness plays outside of the glare of whiteness so prominent in Global North diasporas. It is a clearing where we speak Kiswahili and dance in ritual rhythm. In this black clearing, since there is no audience, there is no need for translation. This form of Indian Ocean blackness does slightly different work to that of the Black of North America whose movement is generally, though not always, in the presence of white supremacy.

Coastal East Africans have forged a Swahili creole identity that brings together the here and there of the coastline. Here a queer blackness is constituted by local communities made up of coastal people who inhabited this coast for centuries; those who came to the coast over land through patterns of overland migration; Omani and Iranian Arab traders, settlers, and enslavers who came by dhow; and enslaved people from across East, Central, and Southern Africa. Indian merchants and indentured laborers, and European colonialists. Identities as unmoored and itinerant as the monsoon winds. However, notwithstanding these ambiguities, racialization has bedeviled Swahiliness since the politics of skin color variations order social relations and local class hierarchies. Swahiliness is complicated territory that I only skirt here. As I do with Mpondo personhood in *Riotous Deathscapes*, the Waswahili blackness to which I point is that which recognizes its African rootedness and attends to relation forged on the archipelagos of the African shore.

Even as it recognizes its deep relations to the Arab world, this blackness does not aspire to Arab roots and hierarchies of value and being. Like the language, Kiswahili, this identity is constituted of currents and syncretic grafting on East African shoals. It is a language based on African Bantu grammatical structures incorporating Arabic words which, across time, loaned words from other local languages of the enslaved and free, those who visited and settled—the languages of the Persian Gulf, Portuguese, Indian, and even English.<sup>88</sup> Singling out Kiswahili, the most widely spoken language of the region, is not a valorization of this identity. Rather, it allows me to press on the queer dimensions of how being is made in place and relation when people move with water and relinquish rhizomatic roots.<sup>89</sup> Without diminishing the problematics of Waswahili—including that which is historically given up in becoming Waswahili and Arabic hierarchies forged in enslavement practices—I pause on its possibilities for holding a networked sense of being in

the world. This text wades into these waters to think Black Studies, African Queer Studies, and African Studies from these warm water shorelines.

*Black Undertow* suggests that place, racialization, and queerness brush up, undo, and remake each other in the undertow. It is a reconstitution of disciplinarity founded on silos that imagine African Studies, Black Studies, Queer African Studies, and Queer Studies as necessarily disparate. Instead, the text offers that African Studies is always already black and queer. Black Studies in Africa is African and queer. Queer African Studies is insistently African and black. They make each other, and when read as co-constituting, are closer to explicating local life, history, poetics, and theory. This intervention works against homophobic strands in African Studies and settled and enclosed forms of Black Studies. Since Black Studies in the North American diaspora come into being because of the inability of disciplines to hold black life, this impetus enriches African Studies that unsee racialization—how we are made black in Africa. It is an onto-epistemic grafting, blurring, and queering in the service of explicating life rather than shoring up discipline. Perhaps a generous Swahiliness. Therefore, because enslavement and colonial apartheid were always about race, power, and subjugation, they were about blackness. Blackness made on the African continent, remade in the diaspora, and refracted off here and there. And blackness as a commitment to freedom. As I suggest throughout this text, to blur is a queer practice since it moves away from normativity, essence, and rootedness, and surrenders to possibilities found in pleasure, experimentation, and reinterpretation of purportedly settled concepts. To graft in this way is also a question of form. Bringing the poetics of Black Studies and Queer Studies to largely staid forms of African Studies enlivens how we write about Africa. In this queering, we surface the lyrical and rhythmic buzz always in the undertow of African life.

I end with a note of the citational practice adopted by the text. Since *Black Undertow* invests in the blur, layers, and grafting, it is not a separatist project that refuses diasporic scholarship. It is an African text that attends to how we live here but also how we become in relation. African scholars such as Gabeba Baderoon, Keguro Macharia, Neo Sinxolo Musangi, Isabel Hofmeyr, Khadija Abdalla Bajaber, Dilip Menon, Herman Ogoti Kiriamia, Yvette Christiansë, and Malidoma Patrice Somé are read in relation to diasporic Caribbean and Northern scholars such as Kathryn Yusoff, Saidiya Hartman, Irus Braverman, Tiffany Lethabo King, Fred Moten, Beeta Baghoolizadeh, Killian Quigley, Christina Sharpe, and Édouard Glissant. I draw from scholars working in Ocean, Black, African, African Queer, Slave History, Environmental Humanities, and Queer studies. This promiscuous reading practice

attunes to traces, echoes, layers, and refractions across geographies in the service of elucidating the black undertow rather than discipline, contradiction, gaps, or intensification. To theorize African lifeworlds can and should be done by privileging African scholarship. However, I offer that our theory might be richer when underpinned by a spirit of citational generosity that prioritizes relation and rubbings. In the spirit of the mobile waters of this text, the citational frame blurs and whorls. While readers are urged to rely on their own readerly agency in reading this text, in moments of pause, it might assist to recall that meaning is illuminated in layers rather than genealogies, and the mobility of ideas rather than fidelity to geography.

### A Queer Itinerary of *Black Undertow*

Across the text, we tarry on the East and Southern African shorelines. In search of black strangeness—queer, black sociality, the text moves, rubs, and lingers in Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, South Africa, Namibia, and the Mauritian and Chagos Islands on the Indian Ocean. Even though the geographies and temporalities of this text are mobile and liquid, the chapters unfold by geography, beginning with East Africa and moving toward Southern Africa.

In chapter 1, *Afro-Coral Walls*, by treading the shoreline and oceanic lengths of Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique, we read traces of slavery off the water, Afro-coral slave forts of the coastline, and specters of the dead to tether the present to the raging embers of the haunting past. This shoreline, which looks to the Indian Ocean, illuminates versions of blackness and mobility that defy normative histories of enslavement. We see how Africans live with pasts that stick to the Afro-coral dotting this shore. In this chapter, we queerly turn fortresses against their colonial foundations to read them as scripts that surface the queer imaginaries of murdered ancestors. Queer is stripped of its whimsical futurity and is blackened to bear the weight of history. Here, queer is a method of reading diverse materials like Afro-corals, literature, archives, the water's sonic break, and being in relation.

Chapter 2, *Queer Waters*, takes us further into the aquatic registers of the text by lingering on the queer sociality of black coral waters in Mozambique, the Chagossian archipelagos, and rubbings with the black diaspora waters of Mauritius and Brazil. It knits these waters to the queer dimensions contained in the opacity of water rituals that make worlds unbound from settler temporalities. Nostalgic longings for relation and freedom in the fashion of queer utopias. Here we read memory practices as ritual, repetition, diaspora, and

as a queer summoning of ancestors who disappeared in the black waters. It suggests that black queer longings are always simultaneously about the past and future. Importantly, this chapter unpacks the relational dimensions of queer—a central feature of queer African theorization. It illuminates black study as ritual.

Located along the waterways between Ilha de Moçambique and Cape Town, chapter 3, *Filicidal Specters*, explores the mournful raging of two women who engaged in filicide as queer enactments of freedom. We read Zinhle Maditla's 2018 case of filicide in relation to that of the enslaved Sila van den Kaap in the early 1800s as fictionalized in Yvette Christiansë's novel *Unconfessed*. The chapter worries filicide and reads it as an instance of queer failure in the register of the buzz. The Indian Ocean allows us to unmoor the women from the hardness of slavery and to queerly imagine freedom in enchanted waters occupied by water beings. We contemplate the futures made possible by imagining the spectral haunting of women riding whales and recreating themselves through corals. Here we commit to a queer blurring of black women and oceanic inhabitants, which give life to the black undertow.

In chapter 4, *Ritual Gathering*, we theorize black gathering by excavating a leper colony in the emaMpondweni Wild Coast Ocean of South Africa to trace the geological sedimentation and inundation of affects in the trail of racial capitalism. We read the water, local accounts of ancestral waters, water beings, and enact black water rituals to think with this place. The queerscape of resistance to extractive economies enables us to wage against those seeking to destroy our ancestral oceans. This chapter does ritual work. It lingers in sulphureous caves and witnesses water rituals that queerly push back at the pathologies of modernity.

Through *Aquatic Graves*, chapter 5 takes us to the sands of the Indian and South Atlantic oceans of Cape Town in South Africa, and Lüderitz and Swakopmund in Namibia. Here, we think with the overrepresentation of black people in genocidal death. Through staying on the sands and waters of Cape Town, Lüderitz, and Swakopmund, the chapter facilitates an engagement with the mournfully queer registers of black memory. This gives us a measure of the genocidal ruins and hauntings that Africans live with. By dredging genocidal waters where African bodies were disposed, we think with the hauntings of their bones by enmeshing them with corals and sand and imaging them as water beings in portals beneath the water. On the sandy shores, we enact cleansing rituals from genocide in the south Atlantic Ocean which queerly rubs against the Namib desert and Clifton beach in Cape Town.

Finally, by way of conclusion, *Queer Openings* looks back at the text through queer fragments that buzz with the undertow. This mobile, ritual closure eulogizes Africans lost at sea while simultaneously illuminating the ongoingness of African life being beyond death. After the turbulence of high tide, the bobbing waters illuminate a ritual archive of all the things we have endured and what is to come. To read this liquid archive, *Black Undertow* suggests a theoretical openness to ritual and the ancestral buzz contained in the undertow.

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## notes

### INTRODUCTION

- 1 Hofmeyr and Jappie, "Archiving Environmental Change," 12–20. Thinking with Melody Jue, 2020, Hofmeyr and Jappie point to archives immersed in the ocean.
- 2 Browne and Nash explicate queer methods in *Queer Methods and Methodologies*, 1–316.
- 3 For more on mobile methodologies, see Sostaita, *Sanctuary Everywhere*.
- 4 Wright's concept of epiphenomenal temporality is articulated in her *Physics of Blackness*.
- 5 Collett, "Building on the Strata of the Dead," 431.
- 6 De Araújo, "Watery Eyes," *Kronos*, 51, 95.
- 7 Betsy Wing observes that "*Errance* for Glissant, while not aimed like an arrow's trajectory, nor circular and repetitive like the nomad's, is not idle roaming, but includes a sense of sacred motivation. *Trans*." I liken my own treading to this sense of sacred motivation. Wing, Translators Introduction to *Poetics of Relation*, ix–xx, 211n.
- 8 Musangi, "Homing with My Mother," 401–14.
- 9 Falola, "Ritual Archives," 443–97.
- 10 In *The Long Emancipation*, Walcott describes this as that which is not interdictable because it cannot be entrapped.
- 11 Baderoon, "African Oceans," 91.
- 12 DeLoughrey, "Heavy Waters," 704.
- 13 Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*, and Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*, are foundational diasporic examples of this work.
- 14 Of course, in this millennium, Indian Ocean Studies have produced important scholarship which has pointed to the complex movements of this ocean which defy any singular reading. Influential texts on these coasts include Kiriama's *The Legacy of Slavery in Coastal Kenya*; Baderoon's *Regarding Muslims*; Hofmeyr's prolific scholarship exemplified by *Dockside Reading*; Meier's *Swahili Port Cities*; Lavery's *Writing Ocean Worlds*; Steiner's *Convivial Worlds*; Menon, Zaidi, Malhotra, and Jappie's *Ocean as Method*; and Shefer, Bozalek, and Romano's *Hydrofeminist Thinking with Oceans*.
- 15 Goffe, "Unmapping the Caribbean," *Archipelagos*, n.p.
- 16 By this, I mean that unlike the active interest and investment of the African American diaspora in West Africa from which many of them were sold, East and Southern Africa have many diasporas in the Indian Ocean and South America.

These diasporas have relatively less global cultural capital and have invested much less in scholarship on enslavement.

- 17 Macuti are a form of thatching for houses made from coastal trees like palms.
- 18 I ask in the tradition of Katherine McKittrick in her book, *Dear Science*.
- 19 Baderoon, *Regarding Muslims*, 3.
- 20 Baderoon, *Regarding Muslims*, 40.
- 21 Braverman, "Corals in the City," 96–112. Braverman categorizes stony corals as scleractinian—"symbiotic animals who build a hard skeleton and belong to the phylum Cnidaria."
- 22 Cervenak, *Black Gathering*. Cervenak's ode to black gathering is an important inspiration to my own conceptualization of this practice. And then of course, Morrison's conception of the "clearing" in *Beloved* is an important influence.
- 23 For the social and political possibilities of breathing, I work with Sharpe's *Ordinary Notes*, 392.
- 24 Meier, *Swahili Port Cities*.
- 25 Macharia, *Frottage*, 5.
- 26 Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," 8.
- 27 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.
- 28 Macharia, *Frottage*, 4.
- 29 Macharia, "Queer Invitations."
- 30 Tallie, *Queering Colonial Natal*.
- 31 Macharia, "Dear Hugo," 3.
- 32 Ellapen's *Indenture Aesthetics* is an important recent contribution to African Queer Studies. Although it thinks with the social histories of indenture labor in the outdoors—coal towns and sugarcane plantations—it finds its queer femininity within the bounds of the household.
- 33 Macharia, "Archive and Method," 140–46.
- 34 Pensis, "Dissonance," 52.
- 35 Moten, *Black and Blur*, xi.
- 36 Freeman, *Time Binds*.
- 37 For an exposition of errantry, see Glissant, *Poetics*.
- 38 This riffs off Moten, *Black and Blur*.
- 39 Moten, *Black and Blur*, viii.
- 40 McKittrick, *Dear Science*.
- 41 Yusoff, "Geologic Realism," 9.
- 42 Freeman gives an account of queer time binds in *Time Binds*.
- 43 King, *Black Shoals*, 40. King's *Black Shoals* has similarly used the shoal as method and metaphor to "throw normative theories, methods, reading practices, aesthetics, and associations off course."
- 44 McKittrick, *Dear Science*, 12.
- 45 Vandersmissen contends in "Experiments," 51–72, that Jean-André Peyssonnel is generally credited for demonstrating coral's animal nature.
- 46 Povinelli, *Geontologies*. Critiques how for liberal recognition, the figure of the indigene has been represented as a living fossil.

- 47 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 181.
- 48 Yusoff, "Geologic Realism," 2.
- 49 In an online conversation, Kaylee Smit helped me to distinguish between coral reefs, which are plentiful in tropical oceans, and rocky reefs, which are more commonly found in colder waters. On coral reefs in warm waters, corals produce the rock on which they grow through their secretions of calcium carbonate. These are known as hard corals. In colder waters on the southern seas, soft corals thrive on existing rock formations in the ocean.
- 50 Morrison makes this simple yet groundbreaking revelation in her novel *Beloved*, 325.
- 51 Yusoff, "Geologic Realism," 2.
- 52 Meier, *Swahili Port Cities*, 5.
- 53 Casey, "Between Geography," 683.
- 54 Elias makes this suggestion in *Coral Empire*.
- 55 To read slave histories, scholars such as Baderoon have turned to fiction, art, oral histories, and food. To think with the colonial foreshore, Hofmeyr reads the archives of the customs house in *Dockside Reading*.
- 56 Examples of scholars engaged in the heterogenous "new materialist" turn are Jane Bennett, Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad, Elizabeth Grotz, Graham Harman, and Bruno Latour. *Critical Theory and New Materialisms* edited by Hartmut Rosa, Christoph Henning, and Arthur Bueno (2021), is a useful text for an explication of new materialisms.
- 57 Meier, *Swahili Port Cities*.
- 58 Tiffany Lethabo King's *The Black Shoals*, is a productive source for thinking with the theoretical possibilities of shoals and practices of shoaling.
- 59 Quigley, "Concretion," 517.
- 60 Quigley, "Concretion," 519.
- 61 Yusoff, *Geologic Life*, 9.
- 62 Cox, "Sonic Thought," 99.
- 63 Brown, "Buzz and Rumble," 125–46.
- 64 Smith, *Strolling in the Ruins*, 2; Camp, "Black Visuality," 4. Here, Smith works with Tina Camp's formulation of a "modality of quiet."
- 65 Thanks to Thoko Sipungu for confirming this to me.
- 66 Somé, *Of Water*.
- 67 Cock, *Writing the Ancestral River*, 3.
- 68 Hirst, "Healer's Art."
- 69 Cock, *Writing the Ancestral River*; Hirst, "Healer's Art."
- 70 Thornton, *Healing the Exposed Being*.
- 71 Thornton, *Healing the Exposed Being*, 74.
- 72 Bajaber, *House of Rust*, 272.
- 73 Somé, *Of Water*, 235.
- 74 Somé, *Of Water*, 254.
- 75 Somé, *Of Water*, 243.
- 76 All images © Wangechi Mutu, courtesy of Phaidon. <https://www.thisiscolossal.com/2023/01/wangechi-mutu-book/>.

- 77 Fendler et al., *Of Worlds and Artworks*, 4.
- 78 High Court Case Sustaining the Wild Coast NPC and Others 3491/2021. This case is engaged more fully in chapter 4 of this book.
- 79 Falola, "Ritual Archives," 474.
- 80 Falola, "Ritual Archives," 474.
- 81 These are countries with large white settler communities who continue to wield enormous economic and social power.
- 82 Pierre, *Predicament of Blackness*.
- 83 Noxolo, "Quantum Black," productively thinks with spatial temporalities that loosen colonial space time in the Caribbean.
- 84 For this, see Menon, "Walking on Water."
- 85 For the history of East African enslavement in Iran see Baghoolizadeh's *The Color Black*, i–230. See also <https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2016/jan/14/african-slavery-in-qajar-iran-in-photos#:~:text=The%20African%20slave%20trade,and%20evolved%2C%20through%20many%20centuries>.
- 86 Baghoolizadeh, *Color Black*, 29.
- 87 A reader reminds me that the desire for Arabness in some parts of the Swahili coast is partially informed by a distancing from blackness. Although not without problems, desiring Arabness is not the same as a desire for whiteness as a global superstructure.
- 88 Rolinger, "Originary Syncretism."
- 89 See Glissant for his thesis on errantry that forsakes rhizomatic rootedness—*Poetics of Relation*.

## 1. AFRO-CORAL WALLS

Epigraph: Gurnah, *By the Sea*, 35.

- 1 Morrison, "Site of Memory," 83–102.
- 2 Kiriama, "Landscapes of Slavery," 192–206; Taylor and Altenburg, "Cultural Landscapes," 267–82.
- 3 Wideman, "Door of No Return," 3.
- 4 Wideman, "Door of No Return," 3.
- 5 Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*.
- 6 Recent scholars to make this point include Becker et al., "Researching the Aftermath," 131–56; Kiriama, "Chami, Felix Arkard," 1–2.
- 7 Baghoolizadeh, *Color Black*.
- 8 Alpers and Hopper, "Speaking for Themselves," 60–89.
- 9 Rigby, British Consular Court, Zanzibar, 24 July 1860, ZNA, AA3/11. Cited in Alpers and Hopper, "Speaking for Themselves," 60–89.
- 10 Gereza is the Swahili word for church. It points to the Portuguese church built at the current site of the fort. The name signals a cultural prehistory of the fort.
- 11 Power et al., "Excavations at the Old Fort," 275–91.
- 12 In her *The Color Black: Enslavement and Erasure in Iran*, Baghoolizadeh details East African presence in Iran's period of enslavement.