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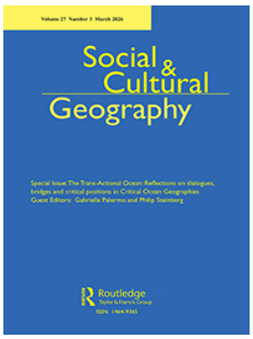

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On the drag of the ship(ped)

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ABSTRACT

The black studies corpus is replete with references, images, and allegories of varying forms of aquatic voids and natatorial fugitivity. Ranging from Brathwaite's 'tidalectics' to Bennett's 'hydropoetics', and extending further into the curatorial project 'Shipping and the Shipped' by the Freethought Collective and, Moten and Harney's 'Fantasy in the Hold', watery theorizations of blackness, as both structure and fluid identity, position blackness as a paraontological mode of being that is literally connected to (and produced by) oceans, seas, estuaries, swamps, and more. The ship, for Moten and Harney, constitutes a fugitive enterprise, a means for finding the so-called 'submerged sociality of the shipped'. Our concern is how the paraontology of blackness works *through* desire, but never reducible to it, in order to drag the reality of black struggle down to the level of non-black life, a fictional aquatic commons where all races live together. Juxtaposing 'Shipping and the Shipped' and performance artist Carlos Martiel's 'Mediterraneo (Mediterranean)' installation, underscores the blindness of black natatorial fugitivity by refocusing on blackness as antagonism and its function as, an absented-omnipresent prop for resolving the ethical dilemmas of modern society as a vital sociogenic source of existential community building.

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Le navire ou de la traînée du transport(é)

RÉSUMÉ

Le corpus des études noires regorge de références, d'images et d'allégories de formes variées du vide aquatique et de la fugitivité natatoire. Des « tidalectics » (dialectiques marémotrices) de Brathwaite aux « hydropoetiques » de Bennett et au-delà au sein du projet de conservateur « Shipping and the Shipped » (Expédition et l'expédié) de la Freethought Collective et de « Fantasy in the Hold » de Moten et Harney, des théorisations aqueuses de la négritude, comme identité à la fois structurelle et fluide, positionnent la négritude comme une façon d'être paraontologique qui est littéralement connectée aux océans, mers, estuaires, marais, etc. (étant aussi produite par ceux-ci). Le navire, chez Moten et Harney, constitue une entreprise fugitive : un moyen de trouver la

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soi-disant « socialité submergée de l'expédié » (Harney, 2016). Notre problématique s'appuie sur la manière dont la paraontologie de négritude fonctionne à travers le désir, n'étant pourtant jamais réductible au désir en elle-même, afin de mettre la réalité de la lutte des personnes noires au même niveau d'une vie non noire, dans des communs aquatiques fictifs où les personnes de toute origine vivent ensemble. Juxtaposer « Expédition et l'expédié » et l'installation « Mediterraneo » (Méditerranée) de l'artiste de scène Carlos Martiel souligne l'aveuglement de la fugitivité natatoire noire en déplaçant le centre d'attention sur la négritude comme antagonisme et sa fonction comme un accessoire omniprésent mais effacé dans la résolution des dilemmes éthiques de la société moderne en tant que source sociogénique essentielle de la construction des communautés existentielles.

Sobre el Arrastre del (em)Barco(ado)

RESUMEN

El corpus de estudios sobre la comunidad negra está repleto de referencias, imágenes y alegorías de diversas formas de vacíos acuáticos y fugitividad natatoria. Desde la 'tidaléctica" de Brathwaite hasta la "hidro poética" de Bennett, y extendiéndose aún más hacia el proyecto curatorial "Shipping and the Shipped" del Freethought Collective y "Fantasy in the Hold" de Moten y Harney, las teorizaciones acuáticas de la negritud, como estructura e identidad fluida, la posicionan como un modo de ser para ontológico que está literalmente conectado a (y producido por) océanos, mares, estuarios, pantanos y más. El barco, para Moten y Harney, constituye una empresa fugitiva, un medio para encontrar la llamada "sociabilidad sumergida de lo embarcado' (Harney, 2016, s.f.). Nos preocupa cómo la para ontología de la negritud opera a través del deseo, pero nunca reducible a él, para arrastrar la realidad de la lucha negra al nivel de la vida no negra, un espacio acuático común ficticio donde todas las razas conviven. Al yuxtaponer 'Shipping and the Shipped' y la instalación 'Mediterráneo' del artista de performance Carlos Martiel, se subraya la ceguera de la fugitividad natatoria negra al reenfocarse en la negritud como antagonismo y su función como un apoyo ausente-omnipresente para resolver los dilemas éticos de la sociedad moderna, como fuente sociogénica vital para la construcción de comunidades existenciales.

Introduction

In his famous poem 'The Sea as History', Derek Walcott evokes an artistic mimesis that has the potential to confound social and cultural geography. Walcott asks, 'Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs? Where is your tribal memory? Sirs, in that gray vault. The sea' (1978). As this essay considers, the sea is an especially redolent leitmotif on which to explore the disjunctive and iconoclastic presence of blackness amid modern knowledge disciplines. In 2017, Afro-Cuban performance artist Carlos Martiel created an installation titled *Mediterráneo*, where he turned Walcott's poetics into a contemporary confrontation with the sea's abyss by locking himself inside a greenish-grey vault. In turn, we will see through Martiel that the sea is used metaphorically to signify the modern

world's central organizing metaphor itself: blackness. Drawing inspiration from Walcott's insights about the ravages of the past, Édouard Glissant writes, 'the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of and, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green' (1997: 6). In other words, the oceanic crypt to which millions of Africans were transported continues to symbolize the 'balls and chains' of life lived under a black sign and the void in humanity's schema.

Within the annals of black studies, the oceanic and the maritime have consistently served as metaphors with which to theorize blackness both as a structure and as fluid identity. The black studies corpus is replete with references, images, and allegories of varying forms of aquatic voids and natatorial fugitivity. Illustrative of the latter is the curatorial project 'Shipping and the Shipped' by a cadre of scholars and artists calling itself the Freethought Collective, comprised of Denise Ferreira da Silva, Stefano Harney, Ranjit Kandalgaonkar, Fred Moten, Arjuna Neuman, Wu Tsang, and Hypatia Vourloumis. This project, along with Moten and Harney's essay 'Fantasy in the Hold', examines global transports, lawlessness, and fugitive lives through an exhibit of sculpture, photographs, drawings, text, and film. The Collective is indicative of an emergent discourse that grapples with the tensions between race and geography in the oceanic. This discourse serves as an affective-sensuous and agentic platform for new social modes of organization and being. In this discourse, the ship constitutes a fugitive enterprise, a means for finding the so-called 'submerged sociality of the shipped' (Harney, 2016). Similar arguments are present in Kamau Brathwaite's (1973) 'tidalectics' (which is taken up in contemporary black geography) and in Joshua Bennett's (2018) 'hydropoetics', all of which extend the idea of blackness as a paraontological mode of being that is literally connected to (and produced by) oceans, seas, estuaries, swamps, and more. In other words, scholars have turned to what Bennett calls 'the freedom of the open water (2020: 173–74)' in order to revisit the fluidity of subjectivities. Notwithstanding the popularity of such discursive formations, within and outside geography, our concern is how the paraontology of blackness works through a desire to drag the reality of black struggle down to the level of non-black life, a fictional aquatic commons where all races live together. We juxtapose Freethought Collective's 'Shipping and the Shipped' with Martiel's installation *Mediterráneo* (Mediterranean). We believe that *Mediterráneo*, which features an hourglass shaped clepsydra, seawater from the Mediterranean, and Martiel himself, allows us to aesthetically mark a temporal abyss that might foster a radical witness to black suffering and death in the Mediterranean Basin. As such, we explore how Martiel's understanding of the oceanic is not a material device to access scenes or events of death, but rather a means by which to work *from* death as a structural position in which society itself is reconfigured in all its violent banality. Exploring Martiel's counterpoint to the discourse on black natatorial fugitivity provides an opportunity to refocus on blackness as antagonism, as the phobic object that is omnipresent in its absence, as the prop for resolving the ethical dilemmas of modern society, and as the vital sociogenic source of existential community building.

Martiel's exhibit can be read as a visual exploration of the constraints of western geography despite its oceanic turn. *Mediterráneo* disrupts the geographic gaze organized under the field of critical ocean studies, its interest in black studies notwithstanding. Martiel's installation raises questions pertinent to the field. How does critical ocean

studies, as a field within cultural geography, reconcile with racial slavery? How does its engagement with black studies unfold? How does it incorporate (or not) the migrant as political and cultural subject? How does it reconcile slavery's indefinite origin with its obvious but enigmatic impact on the present? How does the field consider the connection or disconnect between writing about culture and the social, on the one hand, and on the other, the crafting of a political identity in waiting for those transported to their premature death in the Mediterranean Basin? How do such aspirational manoeuvres participate in the politics of culture, while leaving the culture of politics undisturbed? What are the implications of using paraontology as a manoeuvre to reconcile with ontology?

In his review of cultural geography, Ben Anderson asks an important question that enjoins our aims in this article. Anderson writes, 'how might a changed cultural politics help us diagnose the modes and forms of power that characterize the contemporary' (2017, 501)? The burgeoning subfield of critical ocean studies constitutes a shift in cultural politics to affect the representational-referential systems with which we grasp the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean Basin with the aim to deconstruct and thereby end their symbolic (and physical) violence. We make a distinction, however, between the politics of culture and the culture of politics. In the former, struggles over how to represent social problems, identities, and processes take place within the established boundaries of the Western knowledge system. The formation and reproduction of power in the modern era, in other words, is not fundamentally called into question. By contrast, the latter seeks to identify and destabilize the culture established across multiple centuries of slaveholding and colonial control and within which power goes largely unnoticed. Modern power has a culture, in other words, that implicitly establishes the parameters for critical thought so that critiques of the social order tend to unfold within proscribed bounds. In terms of the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean, for instance, the humanitarian position advocates for more humane and inclusive border policies and thus advances a politics of culture in which migrant experiences achieve legible representation as lives that matter. While such policy changes are much needed, an interrogation of the culture of politics would further explore the relations between inside and outside, life and death, the human and the non-human, and that which cannot be represented within the prevailing order.

While the 'politics of experience' is important, it does not address the problem of how the paradigm in which we apprehend and contest reality is constituted in the first place. This article, therefore, extends our ongoing efforts, curated in several other venues, to shift away from the politics of culture to a focus on the culture of politics in order to investigate how the slaveholding and imperial cultures that have structured the modern world delimit our conceptual imagination, lay down rules and norms that demand our obeisance, and what it might take to flaunt this cultural order (Saucier & Woods, 2024)? We draw upon the tradition of black study, first, and the black studies corpus, second, in order to advance this agenda. The tradition of black study arises from black people contesting the slaveholding and colonial order of the modern era. This tradition becomes institutionalized as black studies in the academy beginning in the late 1960s. Since institutionalizing social movements everywhere shares the common goal of quarantining the demand they pose to the social order, black studies in the academy bears the same problems found in other disciplines. The tradition of black study, however, has been geared towards elucidating and rupturing the Western paradigm installed through

slaveholding (Wynter, 2006). Given the ways in which antiblack violence continues to serve as the base of the post-emancipation modern world, black study remains the key touchstone for critiquing how this paradigm endures despite its extensive reformations across the generations.

The tradition of black study and the institutionalization of black studies in the Western academy, together, is a multi-dimensional struggle to interpret the meaning of black existence during an epoch based on construing and treating people racialized as black as non-human objects fungible for all manner of human desire, consumption, accumulation, and profit. A robust critique of Western ontology has come into view as a result. Recent developments in this vein include the creative formulation of 'paraontology', presented as a way out of the dead-end for black people posed by Western philosophical treatments of what it means to exist as human. More to the point, perhaps, is that because all the disciplines of Western thought are mute with respect to blackness, while at the same time, wholly parasitic on the disavowed persistence of blackness within the Western cultural imagination, black thought has had to look for ways of modifying the terms of philosophical inquiry. 'paraontology', then, recognizes a parallel philosophical discourse in black, wherein the forms of existence that are exorbitant for traditional formulations of philosophy because of the pre-emptive discursive regime of antiblackness precluding such meditation on the problem of *being* a problem, in W. E. B. Du Bois' abiding coinage, can be thought through as ontohistorical predicaments in their own right (N. Chandler, 2022, p. 224). As we will consider in due course, the paraontology approach appeals to the geography subfield engaged with the oceanic, presenting us with the occasion to explore its explanatory limitations.

We test out these ideas and the problems of critical-creative practice they represent through an interpretation of Martiel's exhibit. *Mediterráneo* sinks into an affective aquatic imaginary in which we may glimpse the synchronic bond between the living and the dead. Martiel's work breaks the rules of the affective mapping of *being* together, with implications for both the oceanic studies field and the interventions in the migrant crisis. We argue for reading *Mediterráneo*, and the larger situation in the Mediterranean Basin, in terms of the symbolics of social death and the ritual drowning that it normalizes. This symbolism calls for radical reinvention of the world slaveholding and imperialism has made, not a renewal of old forms through vogueish discourse.

Watery operations

To push back on Western colonialism's artificial distinction between what happens on land and at sea, cultural geographers have begun to mobilize oceanic metaphors and spatial dynamics to reinterpret the forces of relation comprising the social world. Broadly speaking, this turn to 'ocean or saltwater ontologies' permits geographers and others interested in emphasizing what Hester Blum has called oceans' 'capacious possibilities for new relational forms' (Blum, 2015, p. 26; Lobo & Parsons, 2023, p. 129). This conception of relationality, inclusive of interspecies relations, aims to challenge the prosaic fixity and desubjectivizing conditions of terrestrial life by drawing upon the sea's material and metaphorical potential: oceans as spaces of and for alternative relational configurations, or what Astrida Neimanis has called the 'hydrocommons' and what Michele Lobo and Meg Parsons term 'saltwater co-belonging' (Lobo &

Parsons, 2023; Neimanis, 2009). Central to contemporary cultural geography's turn to oceanic thinking is a fascination with how the sea signifies an existential ambiguity, and accordingly, with the ways in which its vast and infinite expanse offers possibilities for reimagining interpretation and action on some of our most pressing humanitarian problems. More specifically, geographers working within this subfield consider how the oceanscape might serve as a methodological tool for framing and confronting anthropocentric crises. Ocean theorists such as Stacy Alaimo, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Stefan Helmreich, Astrida Neimanis, and Philip Steinberg, for example, gesture towards an oceanic ontology of embodiment and becoming as key to contesting the ontological and epistemological violence underwriting the modern world and to thinking outside the concepts that drive both the terra and aqueous formations of cultural and social geography in general (Alaimo, 2018; DeLoughrey, 2017; Helmreich, 2015; Neimanis, 2013; Steinberg & Peters, 2015). For example, Steinberg and Peters' 'wet ontologies' invite us to challenge the material fixity of stable ontologies. This conceptualization intervenes on conventional framings of the sea as an apolitical void by proposing instead that we consider the spatiotemporal and political potentialities of 'a world of fluidities where place is forever-in-formation' (Steinberg & Peters, 2015, p. 261). Black study, of course, has been here long before. Derek Walcott (1978) and Édouard Glissant (1997) theorized with the ocean decades ago as a way to articulate how black existence does not fit within modernity's normative conceptions of the subject. Writing from the polyglot, fluid, and profoundly interstitial oceanic space of the Caribbean, with its deep histories of radical rebellion to and accommodation with plantation slavery and colonialism, both Walcott and Glissant used the ocean to explore how blackness at once eludes the police function of the modern order of knowledge and signifies an unreconciled trauma that continues to shape the present. Walcott and Glissant's poetic engagement with the psychic and cultural problems history presents for today corresponds to the historical record of fugitive communication networks that have long characterized the African Diaspora in the Americas (c.f. Scott, 2020).

The recent shift of emphasis among geographers to the ocean as a performative site of becoming thus betrays the Western academy's longstanding commitment to ignorance about the realities of power and black movement. Geography's belated consideration of the alternative possibilities for conceptualizing corporeality, agency, resistance, and the radical instability of ontology re-visits well-trod terrain within the annals of black study for understanding modern subjectivity. In this sense, oceanic studies do not offer a fundamentally new way of drawing the map, but rather appear as an updated version of geography's original colonial orientation of extending customary modes of mapping to what it believes are new spaces. This approach strikes the black studies scholar as all too reminiscent of imperial cartography into the 'heart of darkness' (Conrad, 1899\2010). Oceanic studies treat the sea as the scene of production that draws upon the human capacity to create and perform. Viewed as a material and social entity, the ocean can advance the study of those whose lives are explicitly connected with and determined by it, including sailors, migrants, and slaves, with potential insights for matters of kinship, rights, sovereignty, and belonging. Again, this approach has utility but black study formulated it as such many generations ago without geography paying any heed which in turn leaves two immediate impressions for black studies scholars. First, that there are no

new ideas, just institutional pressures to reinvent the wheel; and second, the field's stated affinity for black voices is suspect.

However, one example of contemporary scholarship that factors in the conceptual abyss created by generations of ignoring black study is *The World as Abyss: The Caribbean and Critical Thought in the Anthropocene* (2023) by Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler. Staying true to Glissant's notion of abyss (Glissant, 1997; See also Drabinski, 2019), Pugh and Chandler maintain that the abyss is figurative rather than determinant and that any form of a new world needs to emerge from the black abyss so as not to capitulate to modernist thought and reason (Pugh & Chandler, 2023, pp. 2–3). As they explicitly state, 'this is not about revealing another reality … but experiencing modern reality as the ongoing work of violence and artifice' (Pugh & Chandler, 2023, p. 83). The abyss is not a heuristic method for reformation, nor is it a decolonial gesture or a performative act of overcoming all that is veiled. They suggest that rather than work from a 'world-additive' position any critical thought worth its name should work from a 'world-subtractive' position which is predicated on ending all relations to the anthropocene (2023: 11). Similarly, as Pugh clarifies elsewhere, the difference between relational and abyssal modes of thought is that the former attempts to 're-make the subject of modernity' through oceans and seas, while the latter sees modernity's ontological coordinates as 'an (all too dangerous) fantasy' (2022, 311). Modernity, therefore, is not out of joint, but working as it should and as such the problems of the Mediterranean and elsewhere are not the result of political inertia. The goal for any abyssal project, therefore, is to escape the dialectics of Western history and reason, work beyond negation, and make plain the world as it is paradigmatically structured.

The shipwreck

The curatorial project 'Shipping and the Shipped' by the Freethought Collective, along with Moten and Harney's essay 'Fantasy in the Hold', examines the oceanic as an affective-sensuous and agentic platform for new social modes of organization and being. Harney and Moten explain, "To have been shipped is to have been moved by others, with others. It is to feel at home with the homeless, at ease with the fugitive, at peace with the pursued, at rest with the ones who consent not to be one (2013: 97). For Moten and Harney, then, the ship constitutes a fugitive enterprise, a means for locating what they call the 'submerged sociality of the shipped' (2016, n.p.) As such, the notion of the shipped intersects with critical ocean discourse. It is unsurprising, then, that Moten, Harney, and other writers from the Freethought Collective are increasingly finding their way into the work of ocean theorists where they are favourably cited in support of antiracist claims.[1] In other words, the shipped has become a poetic metaphor for reinterpreting the historical process, as if the erasure of history is the sole problem. The shipped are invoked as a way to resituate the present by way of re-remembering of the past that attempts to undo the linear historiography from which cultural geography is bound. Cultural geography has begun to lean on aesthetics to bring forward a complex subject misrecognized by normative cultural geographies. The shipped are thus meant to stand in for this complexity, to mark a sense of being that occupies different geographic spaces, a geo-phenomenological account of otherwise.

Specifically, Harney and Moten enjoin ocean theorists in critiquing the idea that humans are fixed, bounded, and self-possessed beings. Rather, those shipped on the watery confluence of the ocean become something through movement and mobility, regardless of temporality. In this framework, the shipped achieve a form of aquatic commutation that belies a grounded community. Being is marked by dislocation and movement and not the grammar of racial capital. For Harney and Moten, relational ontology fails to capture the totality of the shipped and their different phenomenological experiences framed by the 'oceanic feeling' of being unbound. The shipped, in other words, are the rearticulation of kinship, understood to be a new political community in waiting (c.f. Fackler & Schultermandl, 2023). For Freethought Collective, the shipped is not a state of being, but a form of sociality, requiring one to blur the boundaries of self, risking one's own sense of self-determination and autonomy only to rediscover themselves in the 'consent not to be a single being' (Moten, 2017).

Yet in order not to flatten the aquatic imagination of belonging differently together, where Freethought Collective differs from many ocean theorists is always with respect to blackness.[2] At the same time, they also suggest that blackness and black people are categorically different social entities (Moten, 2008, 1741). Moten makes clear that blackness is 'the aboriginal displacement of ontology' (2013, p. 739), that blackness *qua* nothingness is absolute, and therefore not defined through 'relational ontology' (2013: 750). To make this distinction, Freethought Collective utilize the paraontological, a plane of refusal that can be illustrated through an examination of the transformative nature and entangled possibilities of oceans. The paraontological disposition of the shipped, in this instance, bucks ontology and resists social death. Understood this way, the paraontological is a parallel system of existence and being in the world, a critical fabulation of historical and temporal gaps which presents a new horizon that transcends the geographic and cartographic present – a new social ecology incompatible with normative geographic, social, cultural, and historical mappings of the modern world. In a simple, yet evocative formulation, Moten might suggest the paraontological is 'mysticism in the flesh' (Moten, 2013) developed in 'the hold of the ship' (Harney & Moten, 2013).

Paraontology reveals a position of being alongside ontology rather than existing outside of it – which indicates a position of being *in* the world, rather than being outside of it – what Freethought Collective describes as an apositionality (Moten, 2013). Despite a calling into question of ontology, paraontological relationality is, nonetheless, intimately in dialogue with ontology, relying on semiotics of Human subjecthood: interiority, sentient capacity, capacity for refusal – all of which require corporeal coherence or a possession of a body as opposed to flesh. At its core, paraontology is a reiteration of European subjectivity that claims its own kind of interiority; a kind of 'radical' refurbishing of European interiority. Following Calvin Warren, 'Does not the trace of the other (ontology) inevitably infuse itself into the sphere that purportedly excludes it (paraontology) – as its illegitimate foundation? Is the "para" here an actuality or a yearning for reprieve' (2017, 227).

At the crux of paraontology is a refusal and de-centring of ontological world-making through the conception of an undifferentiated sociality rooted in what da Silva describes as 'an elementary *entanglement*' rather than a sociality that is grounded in difference and 'unresolvable *estrangement*' (Da Silva, 2016, p. 65). For da Silva, "[. . .] the social reflects The Entangled World" such that '[. . .] sociality becomes neither the

cause nor effect of relations involving separate existants, but the uncertain condition under which everything that exists is a singular expression of each and every actual-virtual other existant' (Da Silva, 2016, p. 65) – a togetherness that, for Harney (2016), has always already been in existence. This sort of posturing of an undifferentiated sociality – as echoed in Freethought Collective's paraontological relationality and shared sociality – is comforting for ocean theorists because the relationship between black social death and transoceanic subjectivity is one of perceived mutuality. It therefore seems less parasitic knowing that there is a 'communal bond' rather than a violent dependency on black social and physical death. Moten's assertion of a 'speaking commodity' further buoys ocean theory's desire for and investment in what DeLoughrey (2017, p. 94) describes as a more 'active participatory engagement' with the sea rather than interacting with a vast, empty, and passive space. This desire for more active participation with a more 'responsive' sea reveals that any paraontological mode of decentring the Human, especially as a major theme in discourses of empire and racial capitalism, for example, is really nothing more than an act of transliteration that 'dialectically convert[s] any inherited doctrine into a new version of itself so as to place it in the service of the struggle of liberation' (Arnall, 2019, p. 11). Rather than exceed the dialectical reason of the humanist notion of an intersubjective world, ocean theorists generally reinforce dialectical humanism, to imagine their own futurity, a self-affirmed liberation from white supremacy. Although ocean theorists are fixated on the sea's capacity to rupture human metaphysics, there is still a failure to acknowledge how such theorizations of the sea – borrowed largely from Afro-Caribbean writers – emerge from and were signified by the violent history of oceanic terror. For ocean theorists, the sea's cannibalistic capacity to destroy human metaphysical coherence – a quality of the oceanic that was weaponized to render blackness as non-being – is a fascinating playground for onto-epistemological exploration.

Even further, through an appropriation of Glissant's trans-relational opening, ocean theorists claim a denouncement of a Western dialectic. However, the onto-epistemological project of ocean theory is, nonetheless, predicated on the Humanist sentiments of unfolding, becoming, and self-making – which opens a chasm or, at least, a space of intervention for questioning whether it is possible for oceanic theory to step outside of or remove itself from the violence of western dialectics when the project itself is grounded in a Humanist form of self-affirmation, rather than work through what Fanon would call the 'zone of non-being' (Fanon, 1967, p. 12) which animates Western dialectics. In short, by engaging with the sea they avoid the violence of Western dialectics yet still lean on a desire for human progress.

Based on Fanon's insights, the paraontological constitution of the shipped is nothing more than 'a phase in the dialectic of recognition' in which relational and non-relational forms of thinking work in tandem (Fanon, 2008, p. 111). That is to say, non-relationality requires modes of thinking that presuppose relation. Put simply, Freethought Collective's fidelity to paraontological relationality reinforces an antiblack Hegelian dialectic between subject and black objecthood in which blackness is positioned as a speaking object alongside speaking subjects. Ironically, Moten and his colleagues mobilize the shipped to stepover blackness to recuperate a false universalism in the name of the shipped. That they do this in the name of blackness, or rather, by asserting that the universal is one of the proper names of blackness, only makes it more difficult to see what they are doing. In

this way, the relationality of paraontology serves up a kind of natatorial mysticism which takes refuge in the oceanic. Despite the poetic pleasures of the discourse, Paulo Virilio's observation still holds true: 'when you invent the ship, you also invent the shipwreck' (Virilio, 1999, p. 89). In other words, despite their new form of aqueous sociality, the shipped are bound to run aground.

The corpsed subject of the Mediterranean

To counter the drag of being shipped, we turn our attention to Carlos Martiel's *Mediterráneo* installation at the 57th Venice Biennale Cuban Pavilion. At first blush, *Mediterráneo* seems to fit seamlessly within the curatorial project 'Shipping and the Shipped' by the Freethought Collective in that it seems committed to 'develop[ing] new capacities, affordances and *sensitivities* to others and the world around us . . . ' (D. Chandler & Pugh, 2022, emphasis added). In his artistic career, Martiel often deploys racialized and embodied immersive practices, grounding his performances in alternative space making practices. *Mediterráneo* invites its viewers to consider how art might bear witness to the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean. With a transparent glass tank divided equally-the top filled with seawater taken from the nearby Venice lagoon and the bottom occupied by a naked and kneeling Martiel-water slowly floods into the lower part of the glass vault occupied by Martiel. For over 30 minutes, Martiel's body is arrested by the audience's gaze, creating a dramatic re-enactment of migrant deaths in the Mediterranean. Only after being fully submerged, do his assistants detach and remove the top box ending the performance. Marked by a violent stillness, *Mediterráneo* may generate among its spectators a sensory impression which registers within both humanistic and abyssal projects. Martiel's work, therefore, suggests that the various modes of becoming, relationality, boundary porosity, and new materialisms are stylized alternate faces of the same coin and suggestive of a dialectical engagement with notions of aquatic racial entanglement. In addition to the direct reference to the migration crisis, Martiel's exhibit references the black geography of the Mediterranean (see Carastathis, 2022; DiMaio, 2021; Torino, 2023). *Mediterráneo* serves as a beacon for political information and an oblique critique of law and justice, of border policy, and of the larger political economy that compels people to embark on the perilous long-distance journeys taken by black Africans in the first place. It bears witness to the border policies that kill, while at the same time, it is a sensory performance that meditates on being present but not included.

We do not read *Mediterráneo* as anchored in relational or paraontological formulations, however, but rather as a form of negative freedom that bucks the 'oceanic feeling' within geography and critical ocean studies more specifically. Like what we have witnessed in other artistic exhibits, *Mediterráneo* symbolizes the absolute accumulation of blackness (Saucier & Woods, 2024). As such, Martiel's performance of *Mediterráneo* corpses itself in order not to be reduced to an existential phenomenological encounter with Western humanism's relational discourse. To read *Mediterráneo* relationally or paraontologically would be a redirection of sorts, a gnomonic projection within the antiracist humanitarian moment. And like the gnomon on a sundial, Martiel's work casts a shadow on the watery formulations of ocean theorists. The shadow is a radical interrogation of black

positionality. Rather than a performance of redress, loss, or recovery, then, we see *Mediterráneo* as calling forth the creative powers of invention. As Marriott puts it, Martiel has created 'the figure for a kind of radical untimeliness that entails a leap, and this leap cannot be anticipated, nor can it be prepared for, nor can it be traced back to a prior historical moment to be interrogated as such' (2018: 238).

To fully appreciate the importance of reading Martiel's performance art in terms of what Marriott sees as an untimely 'leap' and what Fanon saw as an imperative to reintroduce invention into existence, we need to briefly revisit the history of negritude. The shadow cast over the humanism-in-black of the Freethought Collective, over the cultural geography discipline and its critical oceanic studies subfield, over Martiel's audience at the Biennale, and over the antiracist humanitarians engaged in the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean is reminiscent of the folly of negritude. Informed by the Harlem Renaissance, first articulated in Aimé Césaire's 1939 *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land,* 2001), and elaborated by Leon Damas and Leopold Sedar Senghor, negritude conjured an affirmative black cultural identity apart from the negations of white supremacy. Emerging on the cusp of the African and Caribbean independence movements, negritude made an impact on the colonized's self-conception and has continued to influence a narrowly conceived African culture.

As a result of its important position in the political and cultural events of his time, negritude served as a primary point of reference for Fanon's development of decolonized thought. Fanon argued that negritude's failing lay with its inevitable capture by that which it sought to throw off, the psychic grip of colonial thought.

> The Negro, never so much a Negro as since he has been dominated by the whites, when he decides to prove that he has a culture and to behave like a cultured person, comes to realize that history points out a well-defined path to him: he must demonstrate that a Negro culture exists. (1963: 211–12)

Negritude took colonialism's 'racialization of thought' at face value, and then in a remedial manoeuvre, sought to remedy the void of racial blackness by imbuing it with positive cultural attributes (Fanon, 1963, p. 212) 'The concept of negritude was the emotional if not the logical antithesis of that insult which the white man flung at humanity' (Fanon, 1963, p. 212). The problem, as Fanon explains, is that this response to the antiblack structure of humanity fails to 'take account of the formation of the historical character of men' (Fanon, 1963, p. 216). Cultural resistance based on 'race', the primary technology of white supremacy, will preserve this structure, not eradicate it.

Fanon's critique of negritude is essential for fully grasping the destructive-creative praxis of decolonized thinking central to remaking the antiblack world. For Fanon, 'race' is anti-creative and therefore incapable of the destruction that slaveholding culture warrants. 'I should constantly remind myself', writes Fanon, 'that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence' (1967, p. 229). As David Marriott explains, then, Fanon rejects negritude not because it is in search of something unrecoverable (an accusation often directed at negritude and at Senghor in particular),[3] but rather due to its failure to comprehend that

> it is loss itself which must be preserved and thereby disavowed, so that the schisms and losses of the colonial present can be deemed secondary or inauthentic with respect to what is deemed properly, and essentially, black … Fanon's political point is to show why black

> nativism has to rely on a figure – of a loss that can never be lost as such – for which no historical or literal sign can be substituted. The mythical symbolism of negritude is, in other words, not simply the sign of a racial imaginary substituting for a sovereignty desired but which is nowhere to be found; it also makes us see how blackness is itself a lost object that is always, in a sense, a figurative substitute for the political struggles of the present. (2018a: 68)

Fanon's objective – which we should now regard as the essence of decolonized thought – is to clear the ground for a praxis of invention where he is 'not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny' (Fanon, 1967, p. 229). 'Race', no matter how it is envisioned, gets in the way of this invention. Or as Marriott puts it, the problem is not simply 'that of racialism, but the substitution of a genuinely creative negation – what [Fanon] calls "invention" – for a negation whose rhetoric is intimately related to a blackness valorised solely in white terms' (Marriott, 2018a, p. 68).

Following the gauntlet laid down by Fanon, we find that the humanism-in-black of the Freethought Collective, the oceanic theorists, and the antiracist humanitarians engaged with the situation in the Mediterranean Basin from a variety of fields including geography submit, knowingly and unknowingly, to the same basic racial logic of negritude. It is structure-positive thinking, rather than what the Mediterranean crisis calls for, structure-destructive thought. Just as we would not dismiss the aesthetic flourish of negritude, we do not demean the undertakings of black geography and antiracist humanitarianism to make plain the complex cultural lives of black people on the move. Rather, we are engaged in critique in order to separate the problem at hand in the extant circumstances (migration in the Mediterranean Basin, antiblackness in the world writ large) from 'any metaphysical or dogmatic origin, so that any risk of being carried away by the fictitious or merely pleasing' is reigned in and properly exposed as paradigmatic and structure-positive (Marriott, 2018a, p. 61). Much like negritude sought to recoup racial blackness in the service of dignity and sovereignty, but ended up giving the structure of humanity a new lease on the future by emptying its program of 'invention'. Critical Ocean Studies, inclusive of black geography, do not leave off with the old concepts so much as they simply push them offshore a bit, only to rework the same conceptual terrain in the supposedly new space of the sea.[4]

Martiel practices a unique form of invention in *Mediterráneo*. His work calls for structure-destructive thought, rather than structure-positive thinking, by creating an opening in the present by which a different future might be conceived or constructed. Martiel is enacting a speculative rather than dialectical materiality. In fact, one can argue that there is a certain disdain for Western dialectics within his performance in that he performs 'the immense infinity' of death's silence (Marriott, 2021, p. 217). At the same time, Martiel's performance confronts 'the restless impossibility' of death serving to instigate affirmative action on the refugee crisis and the yawning chasm of humanity it represents (Marriott, 2021, p. 217). Artistic and political interventions in the Mediterranean migrant crisis tend to work from the premise that proper exposure of the horrible reality of death at sea will promote the humanist ideals of rights and a more openly pluralist Mediterranean Basin, but Martiel works against the humanism ascribed to him in both normative and para-ontological forms. He does this by playing with the spectre of death central to humanism's imagined community. *Mediterráneo* practices death by suggesting a 'being that corpses itself', that 'feeds on its own phantom', and presages its own 'return as a kind of darkness' tied directly to the geography of social death (Marriott, 2017, p. 11). Marriott

uses 'corpsing' as a way of understanding Fanon's notion of invention in a variety of artistic and political practices. Corpsing is 'the knowledge and loss of the rules determining the subject' (Marriott, 2018b, p. 325). For the subject of blackness, whose appearance in the world is always presumed to be under the sign of death, corpsing is a life lived metaphorically: the black being is a metaphor for life lived beyond the very grammar by which human beings become legible as subjects. Corpsing plays with the rules of the subject by pointing to what social life would be were it not for the historical problem that the subject of right in law is antagonized from its own persona. Corpsing is the life of social death. For Marriott, corpsing is social death's lived dimension because of the precarity of performance. It is certain that the corpsed subject – the subject of social death, the anti-subject of humanism, those who embody life's refusal – will experience on many levels the way that their blackness is seen as the loss of subjectivity. It is equally certain, however, that some such corpsed subjects will perceive that being and right have no place in the narrative of their realities.

As the lived performance of social death, corpsing confounds any attempt to impute normative human subjectivity. *Mediterráneo* plays with this loss of the rules overseeing the human subject by foregoing the decadence of social life for 'a freedom attained through self-murder' (Marriott, 2018b, p. 213 and 204). While Moten's consent to not being a single being requires him to assume a political standing in the schema of human society, Martiel does not take such standing for granted. Instead, he consents to the being-in-loss of blackness – and as a result throws into question the very notion of black geography: can blackness constitute spatial coordinates if it cannot form a body that demands recognition as such? Are there black spaces in the here and now, or only as shadows of what once was but is now irreparably lost? His is a symbolic presentation freighted with this humanist shadow in that it enacts the erasure of a 'being [that] is nowhere . . . ' (Marriott, 2018b, p. 215). *Mediterráneo* thus embraces the psychic function that the African plays within the discursive terrain of the western dialectical imaginary – which is to say, it embraces blackness as it is, as a 'mortgaged claim on the living' (Marriott, 2016, p. 36). Martiel illustrates that blackness occupies the relative position of the pathological object, which can be possessed, used, traded, and killed, but which cannot possess itself. *Mediterráneo* trades the capacious identity of the shipped imagined by black geography for the opaque violent banality that structures social life in the world that racial slavery has made. In corpsing his prescribed role as a voice from behind the veil, Martiel provides a 'death of a death' (Marriott, 2016, p. 34).

Mediterráneo creates an aporetic tension, rather than a dialectical anxiety predicated on recognition, a tension that creates a different logical stance on the relation between power and race. Blackness in *Mediterráneo*, then, is a scripted disorder in which its off-script performance is always more dangerous than the deathly terms tasked to it. This is because Martiel works with an unidentifiable (because unfixed), unresolved (because its demands are insatiable), and unspecified (because aporetic, profoundly) sense of what blackness *is* (Marriott, 2018b, p. 224). This is a performance of disorder, a disorderly performance where no one can escape or grasp the symbolic pain and its actual enjoyment in time and space because Martiel flaunts the fact that he is utterly powerless to oppose or undo this fungible dynamic, unfolding simultaneously in the gallery at the Biennale and in the galley at sea. In this sense, Martiel's performance fails to register as an ending, as deaths customarily are, but instead stands for the regenerative violence that

sutures civil society; it has replaced the superstructural conflicts of border policy with the structural relation that is blackness. On the surface, *Mediterráneo* appears to be a commentary on borders that puts the dramatic failures of democracy right in the observer's face, encouraging a state of democratic anomie. In the depths, however, lies a more decadent violence wherein Martiel's imagined corpse can sustain only social death 'as its own most extravagant expenditure' (Marriott, 2017, p. 7).

Whereas critical ocean studies and paraontology emphasize a dialectical sociality, Martiel's exhibit stands outside the sphere of a dialectic. Although Moten would prefer to see it as a 'passionate utterance and response', right and being are denied in the case of the socially dead (Moten, 2003, p. 21). Contrary to the sentiments of refusal and liveability within paraontology and geography's oceanic fold, the exhibit is not an appeal for lives to matter; rather, it is an affirmation of social death and non-being. As a form of corpsing, Martiel's exhibit, presents the limit of dialectic possibility, and consequently, the limits of embodiment, interiority, and ontology. For ocean theorists, the watery medium of black social death also indicates the way into the unconscious and its investment in the symbolically dead. Martiel's exhibit brings this point to the table by eliciting pleasure. Underscoring the ways in which civil society's libidinal ties to (anti)blackness become objective value, Marriott states, 'so much about social death has to do with how rules of life are connected to the symbolically dead' (2016: 34). Ocean theory's exploration of the abyss is about transforming the affective ties to watery black nothingness into an episteme. Trans-relational openings notwithstanding, for example, bear the representational burden of black social death, and as such, it cannot bury the material reality of the black body. From the abyss, Glissant's 'balls and chains' re-emerge, indicating so much more than simply border policy (1997).

By reflecting the world as it is, a world made in their image, *Mediterráneo* elicits anxiety in its audience. Reading Martiel's installation as an affective mapping of how being alternately papers over, screens out, and organizes meaning about the anxiety of one's own social death, the Mediterranean becomes a cultural imaginary, where the subject re-establishes coherence and avoids its inevitable unbecoming – and the symbolic reinvention that would swiftly follow. We suggest instead that Martiel's installation compels a more transformative reading of the shipped as less about blackness per se, and more of a self-sustaining image of the audience itself, for the subject of civil society 'does not know what they look like; their self-image . . . cannot as such be relied upon' (Hook, 2020, p. 620). This reading of Martiel and the crisis in the Mediterranean and in the world suggests that intervening relational heuristics work from an abyssal anxiety, a move that obscures rather than illuminates our understanding of humanity's schema. In short, Martiel is creating 'the effect of being plunged into an abyssal opening beyond both race and humanism' (Marriott, 2021, p. 190). There is no attempt to separate blackness from its wretchedness, bucking a moralism often embedded in the cultural geography of humanism and the poesis of the shipped. Rather than reinforcing race, we see *Mediterráneo* as a momentary leap from drowning.

Conclusion

Reconceptualizing the ocean, or any other geography for that matter, will not overturn the antiblack structure of humanity. Nor will it ensure safe passage for African migrants, or

ameliorate the gratuitous violence faced by black people the world over, or make people divest from the structure of slaveholding. Black Africans will need to pursue their own destructive-creative action to reclaim heterogeneous African societies for human beings and the particular ecosystems that sustain whole, sovereign, and decolonized living. And people elsewhere will need to take equally destructive-creative action to find new psychic, material, and cultural resources for growing new heterodox societies based in reciprocal human and ecological relations. Only then will coercive and dangerous migrations become less likely; and perhaps, as well, then the bourgeois liberal monohumanist conception of humankind forced upon the world by Western culture will have been replaced by a more sustainable story (Wynter, 2003). Until such time, critical thought should prepare itself so that we are ready.

Cultural geography's oceanic studies and its affinity with critical approaches to antiblackness and racial capital's global accumulation regime (such as the Freethought Collective discussed herein) are elucidating a crucial truth about the modern world. Since social death and the particular species of precarity to which it refers (blackness, which is the same as and different from all other positions of vulnerability to capital and empire) is a function of a purely symbolic structure installed by racial slavery, nothing can be grasped, countered, or destroyed without doing so in a symbolic way. This work needs to be more than simply a heuristic and aspirational representation of the global colour line and its basis in antiblack violence, however; it needs to become an analytic capable of explicating and explaining the cryptographic ontology haunting the world. Such an analytic necessitates studying a different story of modern society, a narrative that tells the one story that 'simultaneously cannot be told, must be told, and will never be told', as M. NourbeSe Philip describes the slave trade (Philip, 2008, p. 206). Only by revisiting through the sociogenic lens of racial slavery all that we thought we knew about the world, can we see the paradigm of slaveholding culture for what it is. With critical distance to this paradigm, through a historically informed reading of the antiblack structure of humanity that racial slavery established, it becomes possible to lay bare the unethical alignment between the problem in the Mediterranean and its critics, also the problem. This article is a modest gesture at this kind of critical method of black study *pace* the productivist approaches of the oceanic and blue humanities, posthumanism, and contemporary black geography. We see Martiel working against the humanism that might be ascribed to him in both normative and paraontological forms. By playing with the spectre of death central to humanism's imagined community, Martiel consents to the being-in-loss of blackness – and as a result throws into question the very notion of black geography: can blackness constitute spatial coordinates if it cannot form a body that demands recognition as such? Are there black spaces in the here and now, or only as shadows of what once was but is now irreparably lost?

Through this critical method, the metaphors produced by black artists such as Martiel intensify our grasp of the depth and fetch of the problem that is roiling the planet's diverse beauty into a lethal monohumanist cultural hierarchy. Martiel's performance of a fatal way of being alive, to borrow from Fanon and Marriott again, places stress on the problem which black death in the Mediterranean poses for us today. As with the Middle Passage before it, survivors in the Mediterranean today are unable to reclaim the bodies of their fellow travellers and loved ones – and are even prevented by border authorities to travel to attend the few ceremonies held to honour the dead. Martiel's installation

reminds us that this situation is a corpsing of the death rites of humanism. But the dead themselves never speak in the terms ascribed to them. Across the Basin black migrants are not being killed by callous immigration policies because they attempt unauthorized journeys across international borders. They are succumbing to one of the litany of forms that gratuitous violence takes in the antiblack world. Black migrants, moreover, are not released from death's threshold by academics playing word games about fluid oceanic subjectivities. Attacking the structure of gratuitous violence and its parasitism is the one thing that slaveholding culture cannot tolerate.

The failures in thought drag down both analytic efforts to grasp what is happening and humanistic efforts to stop it from happening. We believe this moment provides an opportunity to refocus on the blindness that plagues both black geographies and antiracist abolitionism in the Mediterranean: blackness as antagonism, the phobic object that is omnipresent in its absence, a prop for resolving the ethical dilemmas of modern society, and the vital sociogenic source of existential community building. The structure of humanity does not fully come into view simply by making black lived experience central to the analysis. Blackness does not name specific human beings; rather, it identifies a parasitical anti-relation of dominance between different structural positions. One cannot think about social death disconnected from social life, about migrant crossings without the decadent corruption of Europe and its underdevelopment of Africa. Unfortunately, the doxa within the academy, and within antiracist humanitarianism and abolitionism as well, treats antiblackness as primarily a problem of consciousness that can be overcome by actions that 'grant humanity', conceive of oneself as 'more than one being', or that make empirical analogies between the past and the present, or by poetic innovations within humanism's discursive field without disturbing the paradigm governing how we think in any fundamental way. Therefore it is incumbent upon us to resist imitation and encourage invention.

Notes

1. Perhaps one of the more popular texts in this vein is Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Although we would apply a similar critique to Sharpe's work as we do with the Freethought Collective, the virtual canonization of *In the Wake* requires more extensive critical treatment than we have the space for here.
2. It would seem, for example, that oceanic scholars allied with Black Atlantic Studies, Black Pacific Studies, Black Mediterranean Studies rectify this problem, yet such work ends up carrying out the paradigmatic function of the Western academy by deploying the politics of representation to undermine the study of race as an after-effect of violence. For an acute critique of Black Mediterranean studies see Saucier and Woods (2024).
3. For example, see Leopold Sedar Senghor, *Liberté V*, *le dialogue des cultures* (Paris: Seuil, 1993).
4. For more on black geography see Hawthorne (2024).

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