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Submerged Bodies

The Tidalectics of Representability and the Sea in Caribbean Art

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Dedicated to Tony Capellán (1955–2017) and Kamau Brathwaite (1930–2020)

Dès la plus lointaine enfance (From the very beginning)
la mer te met en accord cosmique (the sea puts you in cosmic harmony)
avec les êtres, les lieux, les plantes, (with all beings, all places)
les animaux, les pierres, les pluies (all plants and animals, rocks and rain)
et les fables enchantées du monde (and all of the world's enchanting stories).

—René Depestre, “Mère caraïbe” (Caribbean Mother), translated by Anita Sagátégui

Abstract Recent scholarship in the blue humanities, or critical ocean studies, has turned to the mutable relationship between human bodies and the ocean, shifting from depictions of a seascape across which human bodies attain agency to considering the experience and representability of sea ontologies, wet matter, and transcorporeal engagements with the more-than-human world. This work generally focuses on a universalized ocean (as nonhuman nature) rather than a geographically and culturally specific place (as history). The authors' work turns the visual focus from the surface to the depths, engaging with the Caribbean Sea and contemporary artists who depict a gendered oceanic intimacy and aesthetics of diffraction and submergence. Building upon the 2017 exhibition *Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago*, curated by Tatiana Flores, this article expands the conversation from the archipelagic to the submarine, engaging “tidalectic” representations of underwater bodies through ontologies and aesthetics of diffraction. The authors consider the work of artists Tony Capellán, Jean-Ulrick Désert, María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Nadia Huggins, and David Gumbs.

Keywords Caribbean, oceanic humanities, visual studies, tidalectics, multispecies, seawater, feminism

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The environmental humanities—with its interdisciplinary, multispecies, feminist, and materialist currents—has generated a lively new body of work concerned with theorizing the ocean, not as blank space or *aqua nullius* for human agents to cross but rather as a viscous, ontological, and deeply material place, a dynamic force, and an unfathomable more-than-human world. This spatial turn has been given various names such as the blue humanities, the oceanic humanities, and critical ocean studies¹ and ranges across disciplines such as anthropology, geography, literature, and feminist and queer studies. The majority of the maritime scholarship of the last century has focused on the mobility of (male) transoceanic agents across often feminized fluid space. Twenty-first-century work has been turning to the sea itself, sounding the depths of “blue-green capitalism” (Helmreich), “wet ontologies” (Steinberg and Peters), “sea ontologies” (DeLoughrey), and the “aqueous posthumanism” (Alaimo) of the “more-than-human hydrocommons” (Neimanis).² In these circles at least, the ocean is no longer “the forgotten space”—to borrow from Allan Sekula—of global capitalism and modernity. It has become less of an inert backdrop to cross over, and more a figure and a material to fathom, to sound, and to descend beneath.

There is now a rich maritime grammar developing across the disciplines as scholars examine the ocean as a space of transnational capital and shipping, of plastic waste and regimes of disposability, as a visible marker of climate change, and as an agent in sea level rise and in environmental crises ranging from tsunamis and hurricanes to coral bleaching and ocean acidification. In fact, while we were writing this article, scientists announced that the oceans have warmed 40 percent more than predicted by a United Nations report as recently as 2014 and that 2018 registered the hottest average ocean temperatures on record (as did each of the last ten years).³ More recently, Hurricane Dorian ravaged Grand Bahama and the Abaco Islands, an unprecedented catastrophe that is becoming an all too common occurrence in the region. Thus the oceanic turn has much to do with the Anthropocene crisis of the world ocean and is interwoven with narratives of extinction, apocalypse, alterity, and precarity.

The ocean is often represented as a nonhuman, nonhabitable place that nevertheless is domesticated, militarized, touristed, exoticized, and rendered anthropomorphic. Turning to charismatic megafauna such as cetaceans (Bryld and Lykke; Huggan), the phenomenology and materiality of submerged bodies (Alaimo; Neimanis), the haptic “fingeryeyes” of nonhuman others (Hayward), and even the viscosity and materiality of seawater (Jue; Mallon Andrews),⁴ this body of work argues specifically for a kind of submergence under the sea as an ethical engagement with our nonhuman others. As Stacy Alaimo has written,

1. Gillis, “The Blue Humanities”; Mentz, *Shipwreck Modernity*; DeLoughrey, “Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene.”

2. Steinberg and Peters, “Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces.”

3. Cheng et al., “2018 Continues Record Global Ocean Warming.”

4. Bryld and Lykke, *Cosmodolphins*; Alaimo, *Exposed*; Jue, “Proteus and the Digital”; Hayward, “Fingeryeyes”; Mallon Andrews, “Crosscurrents of Health.”

Submersing ourselves, descending rather than transcending, is essential lest our tendencies toward Human exceptionalism prevent us from recognizing that, like our hermaphroditic, aquatic evolutionary ancestor, we dwell within and as part of a dynamic, intra-active, emergent, material world that demands new forms of ethical thought and practice.⁵

Although the perpetual circulation of seawater means that the ocean itself cannot become a localized place, we seek to place this critical literature in conversation with Caribbean visual art, particularly because it helps localize and contextualize the ways in which bodies of water are marked by material and cultural histories as well as by human and nonhuman bodies.⁶ We bring these conversations in relation to Caribbean poet/historian Kamau Brathwaite's theory of "tidalectics," an analytical method based on what he describes as "the movement of the water backwards and forwards as a kind of cyclic . . . motion, rather than linear."⁷ Importantly Brathwaite's theory foregrounds not only the diverse temporalities of oceanic space but also what he calls the "submerged mothers" that must be recuperated in regional history.

This (sub)oceanic turn was anticipated in the art of the Caribbean by Tony Capellán, whose sculptural work almost exclusively originated with objects, mostly plastic, that washed ashore in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. With these objects, Capellán would construct installations that invoked the sea, its ecosystems, and the people that encountered it. In that sense he always depicted a deeply humanized ocean, constituted by plastic waste. For instance, the installation *Mar invadido* (2015, fig. 1) visualizes a seascape of gradient blues from the detritus of the ocean and from the flooded tenements along the Ozama River. Installed on the floor, the accumulation of so many plastic objects overwhelms the viewer with their presence and materiality, works that since the 1990s, mark the advent of the Plasticene well before the term *Anthropocene* had even been coined.⁸ Although the image they created was of the surface of the sea, what was most impactful was the realization that this human-produced debris permeates the world ocean, its estuaries, and even our bodies. Thus waste, which is supposed to be flushed away and rendered invisible to the bourgeois consumers of art, is suddenly invading museum space. Immersion in this piece becomes invasion, an excess of the waste of capitalist consumption that challenges any notion of the sea as wilderness or space of pure nature, just as it contests gallery space as pure culture.

5. Alaimo, "New Materialisms, Old Humanisms," 283. Astrida Neimanis builds on this in her argument that "our watery relations within (or more accurately: as) a more-than-human hydrocommons thus present a challenge to anthropocentrism, and the privileging of the human as the sole or primary site of embodiment." Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 2.

6. This oceanic analysis and engagement with tidalectics is argued in DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots*.

7. Mackey, "An Interview with Edward Kamau Brathwaite," 44; Brathwaite, "Submerged Mothers," 48–49. Recent work has returned to his theory; see Hessler, *Tidalectics*.

8. His first work with plastics, collected from the mouth of the Ozama River in Santo Domingo, began in the mid-1990s. The term *Anthropocene* was first published in Crutzen and Stoermer, "The 'Anthropocene.'" See also Zalasiewicz, *The Earth after Us*. On the Plasticene, see Reed, "Dawn of the Plasticene Age." Capellán's work is explored in more depth in DeLoughrey's *Allegories of the Anthropocene*.



Figure 1. Tony Capellán, *Mar invadido*, 2015, detail. Found objects from the Caribbean Sea, 360 × 228 in. Installation view at Pérez Art Museum Miami. Photo by Oriol Tarridas. Courtesy of Pérez Art Museum Miami.

Inspired by Capellán, our inquiry departed from considering the challenge of representing the ocean per se to considering the animacy and materiality of its depths. This is vital in a context such as the Caribbean, where the tourist industry dominates with a visual imaginary of seascapes where turquoise waters and white sands appear interchangeable because they are purposely depicted as blank canvases. In submerging, we recognize that the sea is for many a site of historical (and contemporary) trauma and drives much artistic work recuperating the trace of lost bodies of history.⁹

We became interested in those artists who visualized a different kind of ontological relationship between the human body—particularly one that is racialized, sexed, and gendered—and the sea. This emerged as a topic of discussion between the two of us around the 2017 exhibition *Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago* at the Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA) in Long Beach, California.¹⁰ Curated by Tatiana Flores, the exhibition was part of the Getty Foundation’s Pacific

9. Thus, representational art foregrounding the human body is by far the most common theme taken by up contemporary artists in the Caribbean in spite of the challenge posed by the environmental humanities to reconsider the anthropocentrism of both epistemology and figuration. There are complex reasons for this, not the least of which is tied to the long colonial history, continued in the tourist industry, of misrepresenting the region. See Cozier, “Notes on Wrestling with the Image.”

10. *Relational Undercurrents* was on view at MOLAA from September 16, 2017, to March 3, 2018. A version of the exhibition traveled to several venues along the East Coast of the United States, ending its run in September 2019.

Standard Time: LA/LA initiative, which funded a series of exhibitions of Latin American and Latinx art throughout Southern California in 2017. This archipelagic approach challenged the continental bias that tends to frame the discourse on Latin America, while also arguing against the narrative of fragmentation and heterogeneity that characterizes much critical commentary on the Caribbean. The exhibition sought to locate spaces of continuity and thematics of correspondence in the art of the Caribbean and, as such, was organized around four themes: Conceptual Mappings, Perpetual Horizons, Landscape Ecologies, and Representational Acts.¹¹

While *Relational Undercurrents* was framed in terms of archipelagoes and was building upon a vital body of work in island studies and archipelagic thinking,¹² we noticed that engagement with the ocean abounded in different media, including video, sculpture, painting, and photography. This tendency in art is not surprising, given that Caribbean literature and cultural practices have long engaged with a materialist sea as both dystopian origin and aquatopian future. Thus, the ocean is a space of origins of the transatlantic Middle Passage or in crossing Kala Pani (black waters), rendering, to paraphrase Derek Walcott, the sea as history. To Brathwaite, Caribbean “unity is submarine” and offers a more holistic mapping than the balkanization caused by different European colonial empires, leading Cuban author Antonio Benítez-Rojo to envision “peoples of the sea.”¹³ These oceanic imaginaries of unification must also be placed in dialogue with the way migration crises position the Caribbean Sea as space of loss and fragmentation for Cuban and Dominican *balseros* and Haitian *botpippel*. Caribbean, African, and Indian diaspora work has a long established intellectual genealogy engaging the histories of transoceanic terror, while blue humanities scholarship—thus far—has not really engaged with how the oceanic also produces racialized bodies and state violence.¹⁴ Our work builds upon postcolonial and Caribbean studies scholarship and brings it in closer connection to eco-materialist and environmental humanities work to raise questions about the ways in which human bodies merge with more-than-human nature. In other words, we are arguing for a tidalectic method that engages a wide range of experiences and representations of the submerged body at multiple scales, recognizing that the ocean can be understood as simultaneously planetary as well as deeply local. This is in keeping with work on the Anthropocene that understands the ocean, like the planet, as

11. See Flores and Stephens, *Relational Undercurrents*.

12. Rutgers University’s Center for Cultural Analysis held a yearlong seminar on archipelagoes in 2015–16, codirected by Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel and Michelle A. Stephens. See cca.rutgers.edu/annual-seminar/past-seminars/308-archipelagoes (accessed on March 23, 2019).

13. To Benítez-Rojo, “the culture of the Caribbean . . . is not terrestrial but aquatic . . . [it] is the natural and indispensable realm of marine currents, of waves, of folds and double folds, of fluidity and sinuosity.” Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, 11. This aquatic discourse is explored in DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots*.

14. We note here a difference between the blue humanities as it is inscribed by literary scholars who focus on Euro-American texts versus a more interdisciplinary body of work in critical ocean studies.

a site of intimate phenomenological encounter (ontology) as well as an incommensurate “planetarity.”¹⁵

In the pages that follow, we shift the focus from the surface to the depths of the Caribbean Sea, engaging with some of the artists from the exhibition who depict an aesthetics of immersion, diffraction, and submergence. Our engagement with the concept of submersion and diffraction brings together both the universalist metaphors of fluidity and flow that characterize the blue humanities and critical ocean studies, while calling attention to the critical disjunctures and tensions that distinguish a Caribbean experience of the sea that arises from traumatic histories of crossing, state violence against migrants at sea, and the alienation of local people from their coasts due to the tourist industry. In that sense we are thinking through the ways in which Caribbean artists are representing not just the immersion of universalized bodies at sea, but racialized and gendered bodies at sea. Thus a current of our work follows Christina Sharpe’s examination of how bodies navigate space in the wake of slavery and state regimes of racialized terror.¹⁶

We invoke the term *submersion* in our title as a complex, ontological, and historical concept that is explored by these artists’ different uses of visual media, engaging traditional formats as well as light, sound, and performance.¹⁷ The artworks we examine here engage with the ocean in multiple ways—recognizing it as a site of trauma but also as a positively coded space of play, of the maternal and alterity, and a site for the dissolution of the gendered self into nonhuman nature. In some cases the water itself, diffracted by light, becomes the visual subject, or the rising bubbles of breath underneath the sea become the marker of the presence of the human body underwater. These are coastal rather than deep-sea waters, pierced by light and movement, which provide unstable and often diffracted visions of the underwater world. This, we note, is quite different from Caribbean representational practices on land, which seem more tethered to anthropocentric depictions of a racialized and gendered body rooted in a national

15. Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*. Chakrabarty troubles the universalist narratives of the Anthropocene and makes a compelling claim for a different, species-based universalism that is not ontological; see Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History.” DeLoughrey’s *Allegories of the Anthropocene* builds upon this to argue for the necessity of allegory to telescope between scales.

16. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*. In fact, this point is powerfully made by the Cuban performance artist Carlos Martiel in *Mediterraneo* (2017), which was featured at the 57th Venice Biennale. There he submerged himself, naked, into a clear glass box that began filling up with Mediterranean water that threatened to drown him as an embodied performance of the thousands of African and Syrian refugees lost at sea while migrating to Europe in search of asylum in recent years (www.carlosmartiel.net/mediterraneo/).

17. In fact, many of the oceanic representations in *Relational Undercurrents* called forth movement and depicted turbulent, dark waters as opposed to the placid azure seascapes of the tropics familiar in tourist imagery. From the perspective of a sea-crossing refugee, submersion is not perceived as a desirable encounter with a nonhuman other. Indeed, because of their political circumstances, Cuban artists in particular frame the sea as barrier rather than a place of merger, which is evident in the works of artists such as Yoan Capote, who depicts an impenetrable ocean made out of fishhooks in reference both to closed borders, the Iron Curtain, and the danger of migrants crossing the water. See, for example, www.yoan-capote.com/en/artworks/painting/isla-el-ocaso.

human subject.¹⁸ So one could say that the medium of seawater, made more accessible by GoPro and other digital technologies, is changing the visual grammar of Caribbean art. In the works we discuss here, this opens the possibility of a kind of intimacy with the Caribbean Sea that is at once part of a world ocean even as it remains a historically experienced place.

This telescoping between a regional or local sea and a broader oceanic imaginary is vital for theorizing the representability of seawater. While much of the work in the blue humanities speaks of a shared oceanic experience, the artists engaged here draw from that tradition as well as a specifically historical vision. In this sense they highlight the ontological importance of site-specific art even as they invoke a universal or maternal ocean origin. Given the diversity of the artists discussed here, we embrace Brathwaite's tidalectic approach that acknowledges both the universal and the particular and recognizes the multiplicity of knowledges and experiences without producing an easy synthesis. We dive deeper into Brathwaite's metaphor to consider its constitutive parts, which include submersion, movement, and diffraction itself, which characterizes wave motion.

Tidalectic Diffractions

We define tidalectics as a kind of submarine immersion and oceanic intimacy that is constituted by an entangled ontology of diffraction.¹⁹ Building upon the work of Donna Haraway and others, we engage a diffracted ethics of the visual logics of oceanic representation that bring the artist, the artwork, and the viewer into relation.²⁰ Knowledge making, as many have argued, is often based on a visual logic—to see and to perceive connect visibility with epistemology. In an attempt to move beyond the simple representational logic of *reflection* (which entails a mirroring between subject and object), these scholars called attention to a different, less transparent approach to meaning making that incorporates alterity and the limits of knowledge. To Haraway, “Diffraction, the production of difference patterns, might be a more useful metaphor” than reflection or reflexivity.²¹ This is because it is about the bending of a line of sight, the way an object in the water, when viewed from above or below, is distorted. Literally and metaphorically, it is a turning “away from a straight line or regular path.”²² “Diffraction patterns record the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference. [They are] about heterogeneous history, not about originals.”²³ To Karen Barad, “Diffraction may serve as a productive model for thinking about nonrepresentationalist methodological

18. See the subsection “Representational Acts” in Tatiana Flores, “Inscribing into Consciousness.”

19. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 89. See also her article “Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart,” in *Parallax* 20, no. 3 (2014): 168–87.

20. Hayward, “Fingeryeyes,” 181.

21. Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium*, 34.

22. Hayward, “Sensational Jellyfish,” 182.

23. Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium*, 273.



Figure 2. Jean-Ulrick Désert, *The Waters of Kiskeya/Quisqueya*, 2017. Mixed media on vellum, 108 × 72 in. Photo by Luis Zavala. Courtesy of the artist.

approaches.”²⁴ Nonrepresentationalist methods are ways to consider the world from within rather than “reflecting on the world from outside.”²⁵ Importantly, they also insist on a kind of participation-engagement that recognizes that practices matter. This provides a kind of tidalectic immersion that demands accountability and praxis rather than distanced, neutral observation.

The possibilities of engaging a tidalectic method and diffractive ethics became apparent in our discussion of one of the works created especially for the exhibition, Jean-Ulrick Désert’s *The Waters of Kiskeya/Quisqueya* (2017, fig. 2), a hand-painted map of the Caribbean spread over nine folios of calfskin vellum measuring six feet high by nine feet across. This is a cartography that brings into simultaneous vision multiple diffracted views. Kiskeya, also known as Quisqueya, is the Taíno name for the island of Hispaniola, which today comprises Haiti (the artist’s home country) and the Dominican Republic. The piece recalls an early modern *mappa mundi* because of its leather support with gold leaf accents, Latin inscription, finely painted surface, and detailed renderings of landmasses, flora, and fauna. Its naturalist rendering of the ocean includes sea creatures—real and fantastic—such as a kraken (giant octopus) submerging an eighteenth-century ship as well as detailed, often taxonomic illustrations of fish and

24. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 88.

25. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 88.

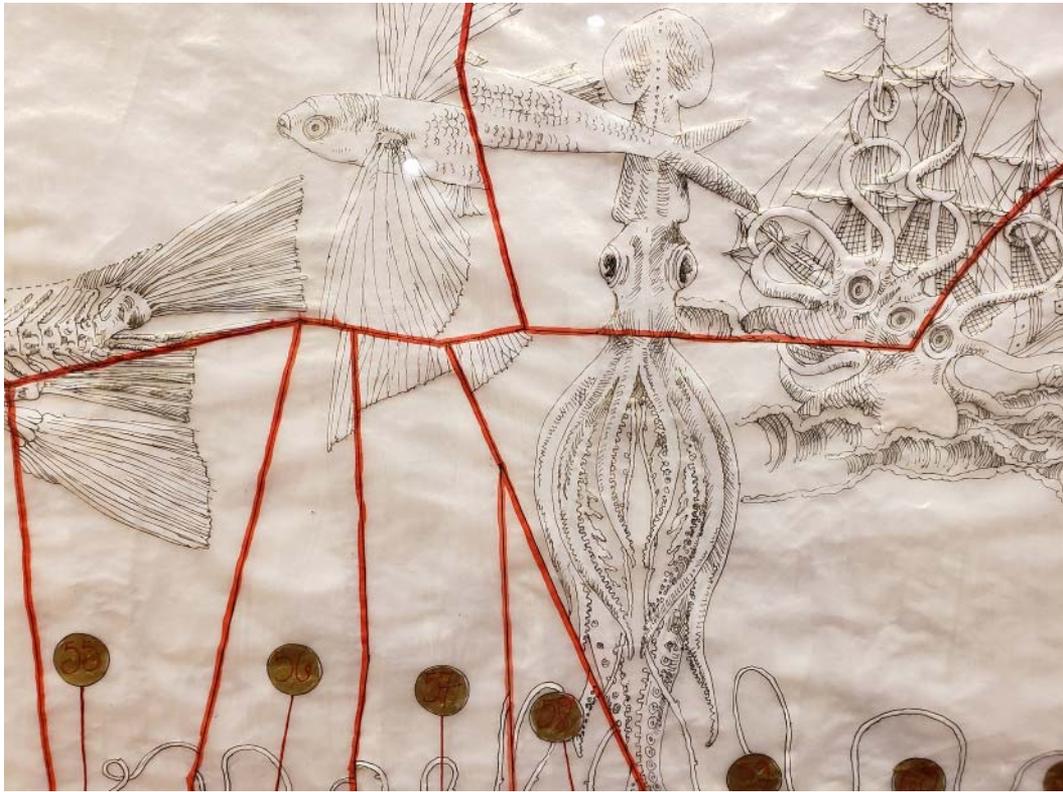


Figure 3. Jean-Ulrick Désert, *The Waters of Kiskéya/Quisqueya*, 2017, detail.

birds derived from a colonial archive that drew much of its knowledge from the encounter with the so-called new world (fig. 3).²⁶ The animated submarine representations are significant here because with the advent of a transatlantic empire, European cartographies of the ocean began to empty the space of life and replace it with the grid lines of longitude and latitude.²⁷ Désert's Caribbean Sea is teeming—on the surface and below—with nonhuman life.

This work must be seen in relation to the threat of an Anthropocene ocean that is rising and the history of representing the Atlantic as a space of wonder and terror. The artist, a Haitian-American residing in Berlin, conceived of the map while in a residency in Venice, Italy, where he was surrounded by increasingly rising waters and had access to medieval illuminated manuscripts and early modern maps of both Venice and the Atlantic world, whose study informed the conceptualization and execution of the piece.²⁸ Unlike the blue seas in the maps he consulted, *The Waters of Kiskeya/Quisqueya*

26. Some of the sketches are drawn from early naturalist renderings of the Bermuda “sea serpent” (oarfish), and one ship is reproduced from the work of French naturalist Pierre Denys de Montfort. For the history of ecology and empire, see Antonelli Gerbi, *Nature in the New World*, and Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism*.

27. See Philip E. Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean*, 107.

28. E-mail correspondence with the artist, November 14, 2016.

depicts an opalescent, white Caribbean Sea with flora, fauna, and marine vessels sketched or xenographed onto the surface. The islands and continental territories are lightly outlined in green, and the only blue water that appears is in the upper right representation of the Atlantic Ocean and in the lower left corner of the Pacific. As such, it disorients the contemporary viewer because the sea is not the placid backdrop to land. Instead, it represents a terraqueous view that brings land and sea into tidalectic relation. Moreover, the artist employs multiple scales and time frames so that the viewer takes in both early modern imagery alongside images of contemporary tourist ships as well as an aerial view alongside the submarine. The whiteness of his Caribbean Sea is not a blank page but one that captures and reflects light; its iridescence partakes in the “unsettled, reflective, and bright surfaces” that Krista Thompson pinpoints as characteristic of African diasporic practices.²⁹

Rather than employing what Haraway calls the “god trick” of the aerial view that constituted colonial Caribbean mapping,³⁰ *The Waters of Kiskeya/Quisqueya* demands that the viewer take in multiple, often diffracted perspectives at once. There are three horizontal spatial registers: the undersea, the land and sea surface, and the air. In the depths Désert represents black-and-white sketches of coral and fish, many of them rendered taxonomically. A seaplane, birds, and a fish fly in the air. A cruise ship and yacht on the water replace the caravels of the past, signaling the condition of neocolonialism, but historical vessels are also referenced, including a sunken galleon. Unlike contemporary maps of the ocean, which, as Stefan Helmreich points out, render places like Google Ocean as bereft of all sea life,³¹ this one includes drawings of multiple life-forms, including flying fish, enormous deep-sea oarfish, tiger sharks, squid, octopuses, nautilus, and various types of coral.

While transatlantic Renaissance cartography sought to render foreign spaces as transparent and accessible to European viewers, Désert’s map plays with these concepts of the bird’s-eye view of legibility, demonstrating the ways in which cartography itself is caught up with spectral laws of light that often result in diffracted imagery. This works at many layers: first, the surface of the piece, covered in mother-of-pearl pigment on animal-skin vellum reflects light back at the viewer and thus participates in its visual consumption (and even resists representation by the camera). Second, the fact that many of the images are drawn with refracted lines between them gives the viewer a sense that we are seeing this map partially underwater. This demands a kind of metaphorical immersion on the part of the viewer, to submerge in order to have an ontological entanglement with the history of representing the Caribbean. Désert’s work suggests that visually representing the Caribbean Sea is bound up with the interplay

29. Thompson, *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 9.

30. Haraway, “Situated Knowledges,” 582.

31. Helmreich, “From Spaceship Earth to Google Ocean,” 1226.

of oceanic waves and waves of light that enable perception. According to Barad, both types of waves result in diffraction patterns that from the perspective of physics and metaphor are “the fundamental constituents that make up the world” (72). In other words, the ocean’s movement, and our perception of it through light, are determined by waves of diffraction.³²

Feminist theorist Astrida Neimanis has argued that “water extends embodiment in time—body, to body, to body. Water in this sense is facilitative and directed towards the becoming of other bodies.”³³ But the bodies in this piece are diffracted and fragmented—the red lines that crisscross the sea represent the borders of each country’s exclusive economic zone and are drawn in bloodred, as Désert describes.³⁴ In a genre that prioritizes order and the aerial gaze with claims to objectivity and neutrality, the employment of a diffractive aesthetics disrupts the authority of the map. As he notes, “The seas are fractured and like broken glass [or] broken mirrors, there are refractions and distortions.”³⁵ Accordingly, the bodies of the fish that are drawn between these maritime borders are diffracted (see fig. 2). Diffraction is a trope that characterizes much of the critical discourse on the Caribbean about the violent “irruption into modernity,” in the words of Édouard Glissant, created by colonization, diaspora, slavery, and indenture. The minimal use of vibrant color in the cartography of a tropical region known for its tourist exoticization is deliberate. The sea that falls into the region separated by borders is rendered pearlescent white instead of blue; the bloodred lines that partition the sea suggest the violence of state territorialism, of the history of mapping and of the mastering aerial view, and of the ongoing fractures over how to determine exclusive economic zone borders in a region that shares a common sea.

Maternal Seas

Earlier we mentioned the tidalectic imperative to recuperate what Brathwaite refers to as submerged mothers, which he engages as a poetic model of history, who cross the seas, “coming from one continent/continuum, touching another, and then receding . . . from the island(s) into the perhaps creative chaos of the future.”³⁶ In a similar vein, Désert’s

32. *The Waters of Kiskeya/Quisqueya* problematizes both representation and immersion, even as it engages the ocean as visual and material archive. The artist created this oversized map for a region deemed marginal to world history because the large dimensions permit “the viewer to enter into it” (e-mail correspondence with the artist, September 16, 2017), but in so doing, the whole becomes difficult to discern. The loss of awareness of the totality accounts for the narratives of fragmentation and heterogeneity that have characterized critical discourse on the region. National histories immersed in their particularities have hindered the formation of a strong sense of regional consciousness and solidarity. Thus, visualizing the part and the whole through a tidalectic aesthetics of diffraction is tied to specific representational histories of European colonialism and its enduring legacies.

33. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 3.

34. E-mail correspondence with the artist, September 16, 2017.

35. E-mail correspondence with the artist, September 16, 2017.

36. Brathwaite (1999: 34). *ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey*, Staten Island, NY: We Press.

(re)mapping of the Caribbean feminizes space, evident in the enigmatic legend within the cartouche that reads “Tabula Nova Insulae e Maria de Caribaeum” (New Map of the Islands and Mary of the Caribbean). The name Maria replaces *mare* (sea), playing with the semantic syllogism between *mer*, *mère*, and *Maria*, which genders oceanic space as both maternal and sacred. This is latent in the name of the map itself when we consider that the Taíno name Kiskeya feminizes the earth as a motherland. This is also apparent in the opalescence of the vellum, which might be understood in French philosopher Gaston Bachelard’s terms as *milky water*, reflecting “enveloping matter . . . that takes air, water, sky, and earth and unites them (into) a cosmic image.”³⁷ Thus the opalescence of the vellum map suggests an animated “becoming of other bodies,” a generative trope of the maternal.

As cartography, the map brings together Western scientific and naturalist inscriptions of the creatures of the air and sea—a history and knowledge system that was made possible by the colonization of the Caribbean—with sacred/religious representations of the maternal. This gendering of land and sea is visible particularly in the representation of sacred maternal figures from African and European traditions, such as the syncretic images of the Virgin Mary and Yemayá. In the very center panel, which forms a focal point of the map (fig. 4), the artist represents the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic by visually quoting a well-known image by the early Renaissance painter Giotto that depicts the kiss between St. Joachim and St. Anna, signifying when their daughter, the Virgin Mary, is immaculately conceived.³⁸ This is a complex and diffractive rendering of maternal seas and virginal reproduction that submerges African, European, and Indigenous legends into the bodies of nonhuman others.

For instance, on the right center panel, Désert depicts the Virgin of Charity (la Virgen de la Caridad), Cuba’s patron saint (fig. 5). His image is drawn from the famous fifteen-inch statue that according to legend was found bobbing in the sea in 1610. The Virgin in the map carries the Christ child in her left arm, as in the original icon, and her head is illuminated by a halo. Désert omits the crucifix in her right hand, most likely to suggest the syncretic connection to the Taíno mother goddess Atabey, whose iconography shares the downward rather than the upward crescent associated with the European Virgin. Most strikingly, the artist omits the sphere and crescent supporting the Virgin of Charity and replaces them with two large tentacles that emerge from the bottom of the Virgin’s dress. They are the attributes of Mélusine, a water spirit from European myth typically depicted as half human and half sea creature. Désert describes her as a hybrid mermaid, and her tentacles suggest to him “a large vaginal force.”³⁹ The fantasy of women’s sexless reproduction invoked by the Virgin Mother is complicated by the nonhuman, perhaps monstrous emergence of a tentacled, explorative, grasping vagina. This makes an interesting parallel to the Christian story of immaculate conception

37. Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, 120.

38. This is from his cycle of frescoes on the “Life of the Virgin” at the Arena Chapel in Padua (ca. 1305).

39. E-mail correspondence with the artist, January 16, 2019.

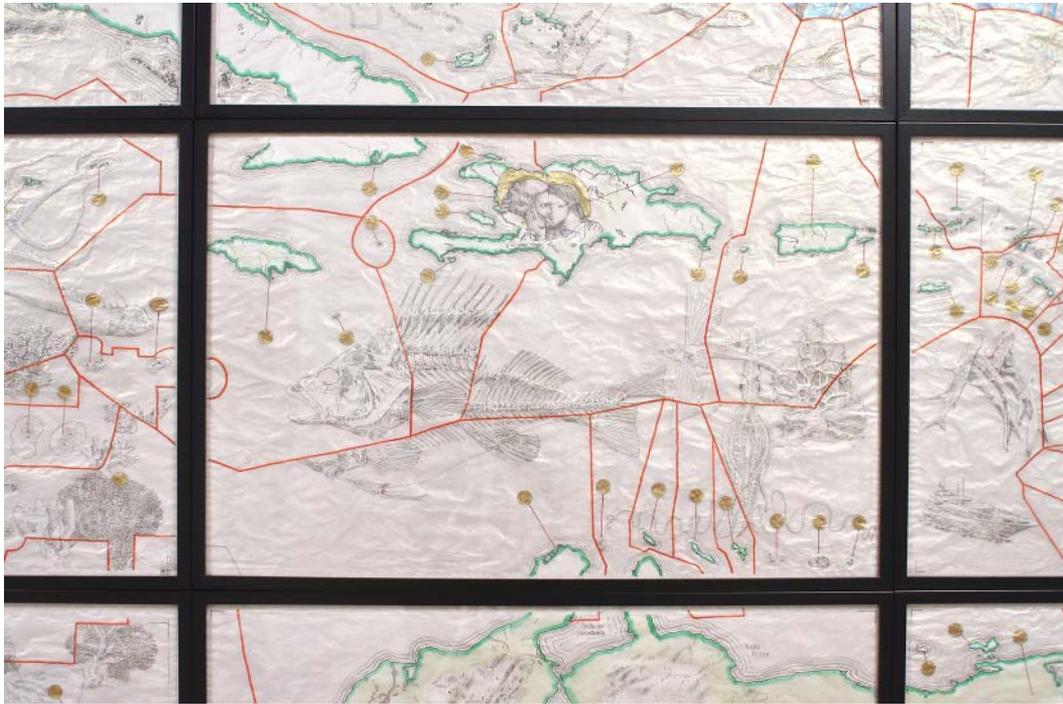


Figure 4. Jean-Ulrick Désert, *The Waters of Kiskéya/Quisqueya*, 2017, detail. Photo by Luis Zavala.

when we consider that octopus reproduction is apparently characterized by a lack of ardor and that the female takes total responsibility for the offspring, without further assistance by the inseminating male.⁴⁰ In Désert's case he invigorates women's agency, not by turning away from nonhuman nature but by embracing it as history (origin) and space (the sea).

These submerged mothers reflect the sea (*mer/mère*) and the hybrid creatures of the Caribbean. For instance, on the direct opposite side of the map from the Virgin of Charity is a drawing of a woman wearing a long, flowing gown and a crown emerging from the waves with an octopus seeming to swim out of her sleeves (fig. 6). She represents the transplanted Yoruba deity of the ocean, the orisha (spirit in human form) Yemayá (also Yemoja) who is worshipped throughout the Caribbean and Brazil, calling attention to a regional imaginary that exists alongside the colonial and national maps. As a maternal, caretaking figure, Yemayá is also associated with the Virgin Mary and suggests not just a syncretic culture but a creolized sea. She is also widely represented as a mermaid, bringing together the female form with its nonhuman others in the submarine world. Earlier we mentioned that scholarship on diffraction emphasizes entanglement, intra-action, and a move away from representational homologies toward complexity and even paradox.⁴¹ Yet Désert shows how the process of mapmaking itself

40. Schweid, *Octopus*, 23.

41. See Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 88.



Figure 5. Jean-Ulrick Désert, *The Waters of Kiskéya/Quisqueya*, 2017, detail.



Figure 6. Jean-Ulrick Désert, *The Waters of Kiskéya/Quisqueya*, 2017, detail.

leads to diffractions in representation and in vision. The feminized triumvirate of mer, mère, and Maria make this possible. This is particularly evident in the fantastic hybrid octopus/Virgin Mary, who the artist describes as a “feminine nature spirit force.”⁴² It seems that these supernatural maternal figures “came from the sea and inhabit the marine, fluvial, and vaginal tides” in a far more active and agential way than imagined by Benítez-Rojo.⁴³

Désert represents not the *vagina dentata* or devouring vagina of lore that functioned as a barrier and threat to male penetration but rather an outright appropriation of the phallus, albeit rendered as tentacle. Octopus tentacles, which are extremely powerful and function as the animal’s sense organs, have long represented the phallus in many cultures.⁴⁴ In fact, the third arm of the male octopus (the hectocotylus) carries the spermatophore and operates as the inseminating penis. Désert’s drawing of the Virgin Octopus with phallic tentacles gives the viewer a visual play on “octopussy,” which would be challenging to those who see the Virgin as receptacle rather than as agent. The merger between Virgin Mary and giant octopus would seem to support Neimanis’s

42. E-mail correspondence with the artist, January 16, 2019.

43. Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, 15.

44. Schweid, *Octopus*, xx.



Figure 7. Jean-Ulrick Désert, *The Waters of Kiskéya/Quisqueya*, 2017, detail.

view that “watery embodiment . . . presents a challenge to three humanist understandings of corporeality: discrete individualism, anthropocentrism, and phallogocentrism.”⁴⁵

Neimanis’s claims about the dissolution of the subject in water might also be placed in a conversation with the themes of immersion into a maternal sea that are inscribed in the most vibrant—and textual—element of *The Waters of Kiskeya/Quisqueya*: the brightly painted rainbow that emanates from the bottom central panel (fig. 7). Forcing the viewer to read sideways and in three of the major languages of the region (French, Spanish, and English), the handwritten text of the rainbow contains quotations from the Caribbean’s major writers concerning transoceanic migration. The maternal seas that are evident in the visual iconography of the map are represented in the textual inscriptions, rendered in a rainbow that is itself a diffraction of light and water. One quotation is taken from a poem by the Haitian author René Depestre that serves as the epigraph to this article. Titled “Mère Caraïbe” (Caribbean Mother), the title is a pun on *Mer Caraïbe*, or Caribbean Sea, reminiscent of Désert’s map of “Maria de Caribaeum.”

Translated from French to English, Depestre writes that the sea teaches the child an “accord cosmique” (cosmic agreement) with “the beings, the places, the plants, the

45. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 3.

animals, the stones, the rains and the magic fables of the world.” This highlights a different kind of epistemic order than the ones depicted in colonial maps even as it speaks to the power of poetry and art to reinvigorate this contract between the human and nonhuman world. The play between *mère* and *mer* genders the poem and the spiritual realm of the art, seen in the (re)generative figure of the octopus/Virgin Mary and in the fluidity and flow of waters.

Building upon the French feminist work of Luce Irigaray, who has long theorized—and played with—metaphors of feminine fluidity, Neimanis has argued for an “ontology of amniotics”⁴⁶ that takes into account the gestational materialities of metaphors such as *mère/mer*, which are deepened in Depestre’s poem in his description of the “first uterus” that embodies an “amniotic past.”⁴⁷ This is a point we will return to below when we discuss the influence of Bachelard, who claimed, “Nature is an . . . immensely enlarged, eternal mother, projected into infinity.”⁴⁸ Building on the work of Bachelard and his feminist critics, Helmreich has argued that

seeing the sea as a feminine force and flux has a storied history in the crosscurrents of Judeo-Christian thought, Enlightenment philosophy, and natural scientific epistemology. The ocean has been motherly amnion, fluid matrix, seductive siren, and unruly tide, with these castings opposing such heteromale principles as monogenetic procreative power, ordering rationality, self-securing independence, and dominion over the biophysical world.⁴⁹

Certainly Désert’s work participates in this gendered corporeal history, while calling attention to its representational traditions and complexities. Importantly, Alaimo has warned against falling into universalist metaphors of fluidity that collapse boundaries between the human and (mother) ocean: “such origin stories . . . revel in a prelapsarian innocence, as they skip over a wide swath of human history in which humans slaughtered ocean creatures and destroyed ocean ecologies.”⁵⁰

Yet visually and in its textual references *The Waters of Kiskeya/Quisqueya* suggests that one can draw upon universalizing maternal amniotics as well as represent the ongoing slaughter of Caribbean species. This is the perspective made possible by a tidalectic, diffractive vision. While the artist uses a “milky sea” as his canvas, the fact that it is an animal skin calls attention to the violence of both history and representation. This violence of maternal seas is visually signified by the largest image on the map, an enormous fish skeleton that serves as a central focal point (see fig. 3). In this sense the

46. Neimanis explains, “An onto-logic is a common way of being that is expressed across a difference of beings. As opposed to the way in which ‘ontology’ might be traditionally understood, an onto-logic does not propose to solve the question of ‘Being,’ nor does it purport to reveal or describe all of being’s facets or potential expressions” (96).

47. Depestre, *Anthologie Personnelle*, 15.

48. Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, 115. He is quoting Marie Bonaparte.

49. Helmreich, “The Genders of Waves,” 29.

50. Alaimo, “Oceanic Origins, Plastic Activism, and New Materialism at Sea,” 192.

colorless renderings of coral and a white sea may also suggest colonial as well as Anthropocene extinctions. While early modern mapping emphasized the wonder of new world flora and fauna, Désert's more-than-human Caribbean Sea is also populated with signs that the artist terms *death and decay and contamination*⁵¹—oil rigs, an enormous cruise ship wreathed in chains that invokes the history of slavery, and animal skeletons.⁵²

Désert's inspiration from early modern maps figures the ocean as archive and space of both the wonder and the violence of Caribbean modernity. In fact, as historian Richard Grove has detailed, the concept of species extinction itself arose from the colonization of the Caribbean islands; more fauna have disappeared from the region in the last century than from any other place on earth.⁵³ Extinction is an important theme of *The Waters of Kiskeya/Quisqueya*, and the harkening back to Indigenous presence referenced by the name of the piece signals the human as well as nonhuman devastation of colonialism and modernity. As the artist explains, "The seas also contain death in many ways, death from the oil platforms," referenced in the lower right corner, that recall the regularly recurring oil spills in the region, the most disastrous being the 2010 Deepwater Horizon incident in the Gulf of Mexico. This is not a maternal sea of "prelapsarian innocence," because that is not a possibility in a region saturated by colonial and neocolonial violence. Just as Depestre writes of an amniotic ocean that can simultaneously regenerate new possibilities out of histories of brutal colonialism, Désert's mixed-media work brings together multiple narratives or visual planes; a tidalectic engagement with maternal, originary ocean and the Caribbean's cartographic representation.

Intimacies of Submersion

Feminist theorists of submersion suggest that the element of liquid itself enables bodies to be merged with other bodies. But claiming the ocean as origin and merging within does not necessarily suspend or unmoor the history of racialized and gendered bodies. We explore this tidalectic by turning to the medium of photography, a form that would seem to provide a certain representative realism but which is diffracted by the work of two female artists who use self-portraiture as a kind of unmooring of gendered binaries. They partake in a Caribbean feminist conversation, as noted by Annalee Davis, Joscelyn Gardner, Erica Moiah James, and Jerry Philogene, in terms of how "the body can become a marker within a set of critical frameworks, which at its core yields emancipatory spaces."⁵⁴ In María Magdalena Campos-Pons's composite photograph *Elevata* (2002), we

51. E-mail correspondence with the artist, January 16, 2019.

52. This may also suggest coral bleaching, a theme taken up by one of the other artists in the exhibition, Lynn Parotti. See www.parotti.com/.

53. Grove, *Green Imperialism*; Watts, *The West Indies*.

54. Davis et al., "Introduction," 35. Their article chronicles a vital feminist history of Caribbean art and includes some of the works of Nadia Huggins discussed here.



Figure 8. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Elevata*, 2002. 16 Polacolor #6 24 × 20 Polaroid prints, 96 × 80 in.

see a view of the blue of the ocean as abstracted cosmic space, where the artist's body, pictured from the back, hangs suspended as her long braids traverse the depths, tracing a path across a pictorial expanse that would otherwise be completely unfathomable (fig. 8). Campos-Pons, a Black Cuban artist who moved to the United States in the early 1990s, temporally condenses the traumatic voyage of the Middle Passage of the ancestors as well as more recent experiences of Caribbean migration northward. The artwork is composed of a grid of sixteen individually framed large-scale Polaroids that engulf the viewer, for whom the act of looking is akin to a kind of submergence. Like Désert's

map, the component pieces create the whole, but the compositional fragmentation inherently evokes diffraction, suggesting interrupted trajectories and histories without resolution.

Interestingly, Campos-Pons's images were not created underwater; rather, the blue depths are represented by photographs of gestural watercolors superimposed with sculptural spherical elements resembling planets. This itself calls attention to the ways in which the ocean's vastness reflects a universal space as much as it is firmly and tidalectically located in Caribbean bodies. The name *Elevata*, suggesting ascension, belies the downward orientation of the artist's head and braids. Her implied descending movement, as though diving headfirst into the water, brings to mind the Middle Passage and migrants who have drowned in the ocean. Like many Caribbean works that invoke deliverance from the historical trauma of submergence, such as Jamaican John Hearne's novel *The Sure Salvation* (1981), Campos-Pons's title implies salvation or regeneration. The artist genders the oceanic body as a female figure, as though the braids were in the process of becoming roots from which the body is to grow and flourish. In fact the long intertwined braids suggest the exploring tentacles of the octopus that we've seen in *The Waters of Kiskeya/Quisqueya*, a shared gendering of subject and place that merges the human with more-than-human others.

In a similar vein, the Vincentian photographer Nadia Huggins visualizes the underwater world as a generative place, queering the Caribbean Sea by destabilizing masculine and feminine binaries. Her photography series *Circa No Future* (2014), which depicts local boys swimming near a rock in Indian Bay, establishes "a link between an under-explored aspect of Caribbean adolescent masculinity and the freedom of bodies in the ocean."⁵⁵ For Huggins the ocean is a place of intimacy and play where, as Angeli-que V. Nixon points out, gender binaries are troubled and made fluid.⁵⁶ This is a vital move in the context of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, which, although they have been challenged, to date have colonial-era antisodomy laws that render homosexuality illegal. Thus we can read this collapse of gendered and sexed bodies in relation to M. Jaqui Alexander's important claim that "not just anybody can be a citizen" in national contexts that proscribe heteropatriarchy.⁵⁷

The ocean then becomes a space in which one can challenge the land-based binaries of heteropatriarchy as well as the relationship between artist and subject. Importantly, in these underwater and half-submerged photographs, Huggins positions herself as one of the swimmers. She describes purposely not using a camera with sophisticated

55. See www.nadiahuggins.com/Circa-no-future. Within the region, the island of St. Vincent is not heavily visited. Most visitors move on to the luxury resorts on Bequia, which ensures that the local community has access to the sea for recreation and results in a different aesthetic of submergence than in more oft-visited islands.

56. Nixon, "Troubling Queer Caribbeanness."

57. Alexander, "Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen," 6.

technology but instead an unobtrusive point-and-shoot so as not to create distance between herself and the boys she photographs. The relationship with them is built over time, and that sense of intimacy pervades the series as a whole. In some she is so close so as to make the viewer feel like part of the inner circle, submerging our distance and creating a tidalectic immersion that insists, drawing again from Barad, that we engage from within rather than “reflecting on the world from outside.”⁵⁸

In a conversation with one of the authors, Huggins explained that the first time she swam toward the boys they assumed that she was also a boy so they behaved in a manner that was wholly free of constraint.⁵⁹ When they noticed that she was female, they began posturing. Indeed, in a dramatic view (fig. 9) captured from below, a boy poses in midair, one hand on his head with a bent elbow, the other arm stretched outward, and his legs rotated and knees bent in the form of a *plié*. His pose is feminized, aligning with the artist’s observations that the boys are a lot less guarded in the ocean than they would be on land.⁶⁰ Other images capture bubbles generated as the bodies hit the ocean, fragments of the boys’ bodies, and scenes of them swimming around the rock. In the words of the artist, “It’s a place so far removed from everything else going on in shore that they feel comfortable and safe with each other there, and . . . nobody’s judging them.”⁶¹

Huggins probes the underwater world for unmapped aspects of Caribbean masculinity and invokes Brathwaite’s embrace of submerged mothers. On the one hand, the title of the series, *Circa No Future*, which refers to a text printed on one of the boys’ T-shirts, hints at the challenges that face young Caribbean men; on the other, her work suggests that the element of water allows for a kind of merger with nonhuman others that is rendered as maternal and comforting rather than maternal and terrifying. As Huggins explains,

The ocean itself takes on a personality—that of the embracing mother providing a safe space for being—which is both archetypal and poignant. I am as much a subject as the boys for whom I provide solace. The boys become submerged in a moment of innocent unawareness. They emerge having proven themselves. The relationship between myself and the subject is also explored within this paradigm. The subjects are aware of me while posturing, but lose this cognizance when they sink into the water.⁶²

This suggests the ways in which, despite themselves, the boys’ performance of masculinity is dissolved in oceanic water. Huggins is particularly interested in capturing their vulnerability as the body hits the water, and many of the photographs focus on the

58. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 88.

59. Conversation with the artist, January 12, 2019. See also a similar conversation in Nixon, “Troubling Queer Caribbeanness.”

60. Conversation with the artist, January 12, 2019.

61. Conversation with the artist, January 12, 2019.

62. See www.nadiahuggins.com/Circa-no-future.



Figure 9. Nadia Huggins, Untitled from the series *Circa No Future*. Digital photograph, variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 10. Nadia Huggins, Untitled from the series *Circa No Future*. Digital photograph, variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.

moment of submersion, as the body is surrounded by bubbles that in some cases obscure the boys' features and in others frames them (fig. 10).⁶³

Although the sea through Huggins's lens is nurturing, a sense of uncertainty does pervade the images. Several of them are cropped at the neck, so that the boys appear decapitated. In one, where a swimmer's body is mostly submerged but his head peeks out, the artist captures the effect of diffraction (fig. 11). The elongated torso underwater contrasts with the disproportionately smaller head peeking out against the rocks, a bodily diffraction we have seen in Désert's map and perhaps a contribution to an ongoing conversation in Caribbean studies about masculinity in crisis. As noted by Haraway, diffraction "does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the effects of differences appear."⁶⁴ An abstract amorphous plane that runs through the center of the

63. The representation of Caribbean male subjects at play in the sea has a long history, as Krista Thompson has documented, and must be seen in relation to the visual culture of the tropics. In the early twentieth century, the British-born photographer John Ernest Williamson developed an underwater photography device in the Bahamas that was the first to record the more-than-human world beneath the Caribbean Sea. Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics*, 159. Unlike the voyeurs in the photosphere, watching from behind glass, as though they were in an aquarium, Huggins positions herself as one of the swimmers.

64. Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse*, 300, quoted in Hayward, "Sensational Jellyfish," 162.



Figure 11. Nadia Huggins, Untitled from the series *Circa No Future*. Digital photograph, variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.

photograph compounds the “effect of difference.” Separating the water from the air, it makes tangible a threshold that we could not otherwise discern. Within it, the solid rock and the human body both disappear and are replaced with a grayish-blue blur that spreads horizontally from edge to edge of the composition—the water that, given sea level rise, may one day immerse us all. This rising of the Anthropocene ocean gives us a new angle from which to interpret the title *Circa No Future*.

Refraction, as Eva Hayward observes, “shares the same etymology as *refractory* . . . stubborn.”⁶⁵ It “defines behaviors and materials that are obstinate, unresponsive, and resistant. Evoking these terms simultaneously refocuses matter’s stubborn, even blunt, capacity for demarcating thresholds.”⁶⁶ In Huggins’s photograph the blunt matter is the rock blocking the possibility of forward motion and looming ominously along the vertical plane, visible underneath the water and walling the space above. The swimmer’s legs adjust to its imposing presence, but its dense materiality renders him all the more vulnerable. Algae on the rock demonstrate how marine life-forms adapt to their environment, but the boy is at the mercy of the elements. A strong wind or a high tide would imperil his life. He exemplifies the conflict between matter and light described by Hayward:

Light reveals its physical status as radiant substance at the surface boundary of other objects . . . matter owes a debt to its own means of revelation, light . . . object and light do not conflate but meet, “intra-act,” in the sharing of the world. Refracted light, then, makes literal sense through grounded encounter, making sense sensible.⁶⁷

The statement about light becoming physical could be taken as a metaphor for the medium of photography itself. Thus the boy becomes the vehicle for this phenomenon to occur. Much like the camera capturing the light impressions of that moment in time and in that particular space that make the image possible, so the boy’s submerged back refracts the light, which forms delicate and irregular patterns, akin to lace, that describe the undulations of the sea’s surface on his skin. Their contingent existence contrasts with the fractures and undulations on the rock’s face, indexes of long-ago terrestrial movements and bygone encounters between earth and water. The rock embodies obdurate and opaque matter, but the boy, mostly composed of water himself, is an unknowing participant in this encounter of forces infinitely greater than him, as he comes dangerously close to the rock. Thus water, light, and earth intra-act tidalectically, but Huggins compels us to view the boy not as an Anthropocenic agent but as subject to conditions beyond his control.

65. Hayward, “Sensational Jellyfish,” 175.

66. Hayward, “Sensational Jellyfish,” 175.

67. Hayward, “Sensational Jellyfish,” 175.

Genderqueering Transformations

While the series *Circa No Future* calls attention to the gender fluidity of the photographer and her young subjects, the series of self-portraits in *Transformations* (2015), also by Huggins, reconfigures the ocean as a dissolving space of union between human and nonhuman. The images represent uncanny sea ontologies, where different figures of life are juxtaposed to create a multispecies being.⁶⁸ Huggins appears in the diptychs that show fragments of her upper body (on the left) merging with a more-than-human other (on the right). In eight of the eleven photographs of the series, her face becomes continuous with sea creatures such as coral, urchins, and plants. In one of these (fig. 12), the bright blue of the water, pierced by rays of sunshine on the left, is not as much reflected as diffracted in the spines of the sea urchin positioned as an extension of her face on the right. This destabilization of ontology is evident in Huggins's commentary of her experience underwater:

In the sea, as a woman who identifies as other, my body becomes displaced from my everyday experiences. Gender, race, and class are dissolved because there are no social and political constructs to restrain and dictate my identity. These constructs have no place or value in that environment. This idea creates the foundation for these portraits.⁶⁹

Huggins echoes some of the language of Romaine Rolland, writing to Freud, of an "oceanic feeling," in which one dissolves the self into a placental state.⁷⁰ But Huggins's work does not regress to one species' embryonic origin—her work is more interesting because it retains the organic structures of the shape of her shoulders and bare head as they merge into a multispecies being. Moreover, as Nixon has demonstrated in her examination of this series, Huggins troubles gender binaries and demonstrates a "genderqueerness that is uniquely Caribbean."⁷¹ Huggins's emphasis on the transformation of her own face reminds us of the work of Deborah Bird Rose, who, in an article on "embodied knots of multispecies time," writes of a "generational time" of multispecies sequences. In the transformation of Huggins's face into creatures such as coral with life spans of centuries, we see the extension of this generational time and "we discern not [the] 'face,' but 'interface.'"⁷²

Huggins's praxis is to create a visual legacy of submarine extinctions, rendering an Anthropocene ocean into a localized, ontologically experienced place. She relates that the series originated when she started witnessing "the deterioration of coral reefs that were once alive" in her local waters.⁷³ She sought "to investigate the changes occurring

68. See DeLoughrey, "Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene."

69. See www.nadiahuggins.com/Transformations-1.

70. Freud, *Civilization and Discontents*.

71. Nixon, "Troubling Queer Caribbeanness," 110.

72. Rose, "Multispecies Knots of Ethical Time."

73. See <https://www.nadiahuggins.com/Transformations-1>.

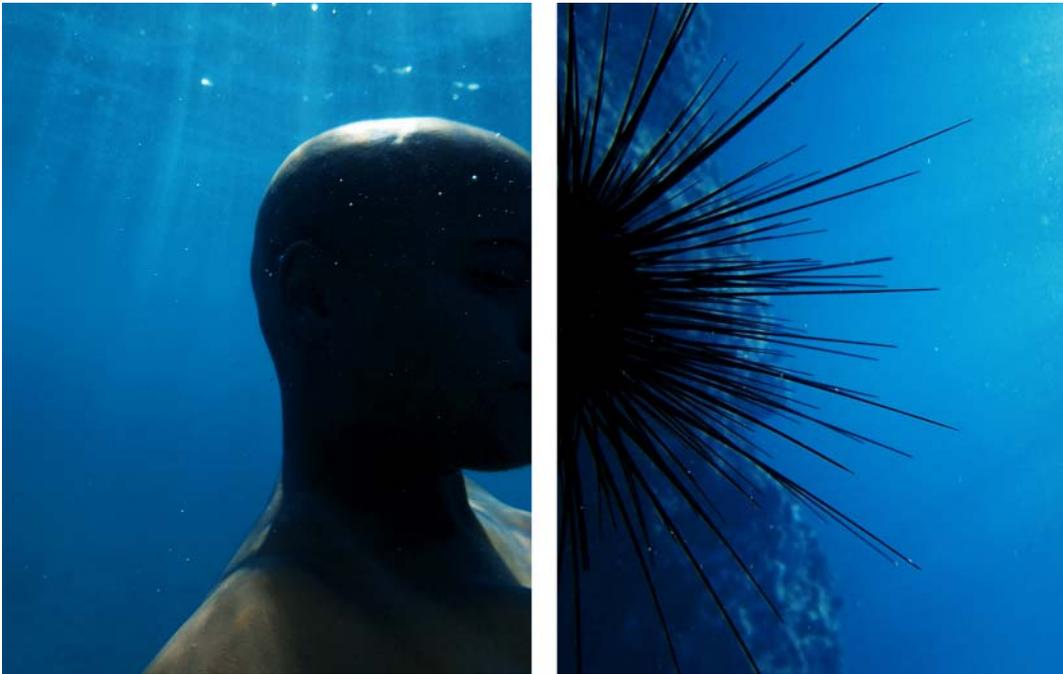


Figure 12. Nadia Huggins, *Fighting the Currents*, from the *Transformations* series, 2015. Digital photographs, variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.

both within and without . . . [herself], as well as how our own actions affect our immediate environment over time.”⁷⁴ The diptychs form multispecies assemblages that include fragments of the artist’s body on the left merging with various life-forms on the right, including different types of coral, hydrozoans, and sea sponges. She photographs these from multiple vantage points and at various degrees of magnification or distance and rotates the photograph of the marine life-form so as to be perpendicular to the one of her body, compounding the effect of diffraction. The process involves close observation and recalls the words of Hayward, that “there is an embedded conceptual tension in refraction between lucidity and degradation, acting as a condition of possibility for focused visions, yet refracted light is always bent or broken. The implication of this fracturing is that the object envisioned is always troubled.”⁷⁵

The predominance of the color blue in *Transformations*, like the photographs of Campos-Pons, suggests a kind of immersive aesthetic and a recapturing of the tropical seas rendered so vividly in tourist representations of the region and explored in depth by Thompson.⁷⁶ This bodily experience of color is something Michael Taussig has described as a type of consciousness in itself:

74. See <https://www.nadiahuggins.com/Transformations-1>.

75. Hayward, “Sensational Jellyfish,” 192n10.

76. See Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics*.

As our bodies change in a dangerous world now subject to global warming, color sense like heat sense detaches the senses from the complacent view of the body as a fortress with peepholes and antennae, sensing externalities, and instead encourages us to take a world-centered and not a self-centered view of viewing such that the self becomes part of that which is seen, not a sovereign transcendent. To thus see ourselves in the midst of the world is to enter into ourselves as image, to exchange standing above the fray, the God position, for some quite other position that is not really a position at all but something more like swimming, more like nomads adrift in the sea, mother of all metaphor, that sea I call *the bodily unconscious*.⁷⁷

This color sense, as Taussig has it, is the bright blue color of seawater illuminated by tropical light. In this way Huggins is reconfiguring an immersive representation of the tropics that challenges tourist stereotypes of azure, empty seas. In the portrait where she merges into a coral (fig. 13), Huggins's peach-toned bald round head blends almost seamlessly into the golden grooved creature. Here it is tonal and formal resemblance that establishes kinship. The manifold tiny bubbles around Huggins's head, evidence of her breath, starkly contrast the razor-sharp lines of the coral, but it is the blues and yellows in addition to the rounded forms that tie the images together.

Interestingly, Huggins adopts a kind of diffractive ethics that eschews the unmarked observer and instead positions herself in relation to her subjects, considering her impact on their behavior and their interface. Showing the merger of her face into a sea urchin or hydrozoan, Huggins suggests that "what often appear as separate entities (or separate sets of concerns) are actually constitutive."⁷⁸ This marks diffraction in her work as both visual aesthetic (light illuminates the two subjects) as well as praxis: "They exist in a state of ongoing, differential becoming."⁷⁹ Haraway "urges us to consider how experience is made through enduring and different histories of encounter with these interchanges interfering with one another, producing altered and indefinite arrangements of knowledge, perception, and experience."⁸⁰

Indeed, Huggins underscores that these are threatened life-forms that have already undergone alterations that inform the process of representation. While she establishes a diffracted visual merger between self and other, she knows herself to be an unwitting agent of their deterioration. She leaves a blank space between the two photographs which "represents the transient moment where I am regaining buoyancy and separating from the underwater environment to resurface. . . . It is in this moment that the viewer makes the decision if both worlds are to separate or merge."⁸¹ This void is the space where refraction is most evident in this series. Huggins's practice is interestingly

77. Taussig, "What Color Is the Sacred?" 31.

78. Hayward, "Sensational Jellyfish," 182.

79. Hayward, "Sensational Jellyfish," 182.

80. Hayward, "Sensational Jellyfish," 182.

81. See www.nadiahuggins.com/Transformations-1.



Figure 13. Nadia Huggins, *Fighting the Currents*, from the *Transformations* series, 2015. Digital photographs, variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.

similar to Hayward's description of the process of observation between the human and the marine life-form: "the magnified objects' being-seen-ness is enfolded into the contiguity that composes the refractive apparatus. Magnification, through refraction, is a constitutive process; observation and the modalities of observation are actively enmeshed."⁸² Following Haraway, Barad refers to this phenomenon as "agential intra-acting," in other words, "phenomena are the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting components."⁸³ Through these diptychs, constituted by inseparable elements, Huggins reveals that what is happening below the surface is deeply relevant to those "oblivious" people (i.e. most of us) who "experience the sea at eye level with the horizon."⁸⁴ Bringing this submerged vision to art galleries or to online forums enables a kind of submersive, genderqueer aesthetics that insists on the transformation of bodies and knowledges.

Visualizing the Undersea

Huggins's photographs, highlight the transparency of underwater tropical light, the azure blue that represents to Taussig a "bodily unconscious," an amniotic, prehuman place of fantastic bodily mergers with a m/other. But in these still images, which recall the work of Jason deCaires Taylor, the medium of seawater itself is not visible (fig. 14).

82. Hayward, "Sensational Jellyfish," 192n10.

83. Quoted in Hayward, "Sensational Jellyfish," 192n10.

84. See www.nadahuggins.com/Transformations-1.



Figure 14. Jason deCaires Taylor, *Vicissitudes*, 2006, detail. pH neutral cement, stainless steel, aggregates, 26 life-size figures. © 2006, courtesy of the artist. Location: Grenada, West Indies.

In fact, these underwater photographs adopt a terrestrial vision in that one looks through air to visually apprehend an object. But as any snorkeler knows, seawater is anything but transparent—it is filled with minerals including salt and sand, and it absorbs high-frequency colors such as red and yellow so that lower frequency colors such as blue and green predominate. Water is thus an agent in our perception. And so are our eyes. The human perception underwater is limited because our eyes refract light differently beneath the surface than above, and seawater is actively absorbing and refracting the light spectrum. Thus Huggins (and Taylor) produce highly visible objects in the water with the tropical blue light of Caribbean water serving as a luminous palette. This kind of visibility would not be possible in deeper or more turbulent waters, raising the question as to how submarine light becomes anthropocentrized for consumption by a human audience.

This question about the submarine visibility of Black bodies is an interesting one to place in conversation with Thompson's argument that African diaspora practices often emphasize hypervisibility (bling, shine) to counter the violence of social and historical erasure. She pinpoints the "right to consume as a crucial aspect of contemporary belonging" in this artistic corpus.⁸⁵ But her study does not encompass art about human relations with nonhuman kin. The suspended, still bodies in Huggins's photographs, both human and nonhuman, claim a certain kind of visibility under the sea that renders seawater itself as powerful backdrop but not necessarily voluminous participant. In this conclusion of our essay, we turn to the new media artist David Gumbs, whose video *Water and Dreams* (2014) evokes an opaque, sonorous, and constantly moving Caribbean Sea that renders the submerged body almost invisible within. The piece takes a tidalectic approach to reflect both the amniotic as well as specifically localized Caribbean practice of representation.

Water and Dreams is a short digital video that presents a series of clips of seawater superimposed with moving images of aboveground nature such as grass and flowering trees in a stream-of-consciousness manner (fig. 15). The images—captured primarily in St. Martin, the artist's home island, and Martinique, where he currently lives⁸⁶—unfold against a soundtrack suggesting breaking waves, bird calls, and insect chirps intermingled with atonal electronic sounds, including a droning buzz, bell tinkles, and high-pitched frequencies. As the title suggests, the video elicits a state of reverie drawn specifically from the artist's engagement with Bachelard's foundational text *Water and Dreams*. The viewer has the impression of being underwater, where sights or sounds are constantly fluctuating and cannot be fixed. Moving from still photography to video media, we encounter an ocean that is sonorous, shifting, and amorphous.

The fleeting images nearly hide a brown body whose skin is painted with white abstract patterns that match the shifting of light. This body becomes visible for seconds

85. Thompson, *Shine*, 30.

86. Conversation with artist, January 20, 2019.



Figure 15. David Gumbs, still from *Water and Dreams*, 2014. Digital video, 6:14 min. Courtesy of the artist.

here and there and only after repeated viewings. This suggests a kind of “visual fugitivity,” or retreat from visual consumption by the viewer that Thompson locates in diasporic practices. Or in Vanessa Agard-Jones’s terms, “The body (is) something to be read as both palimpsest and as a thing in becoming.”⁸⁷ While our previous artists used forms of realism to represent submerged bodies, this video emphasizes abstraction as the primary visual and aural element. Representation takes a back seat to sensation and affect here, evoking not only the lessons of the Impressionists, for whom light became the primary compositional element, but recent work in sea ontologies and materialism. Clearly drawing from a French modernist pictorial tradition, Gumbs’s use of light also correlates to Thompson’s observations that light in Africa diasporic practice “generates distinct aesthetic, synaesthetic, physiological, and phenomenological effects, creating or denying types of viewership.”⁸⁸ Although Thompson’s primary example is the Jamaican dance hall, her remarks resonate with Gumbs’s tidalectic techniques: “Video light and some of the other photographic practices inhabit the representational edge of hypervisibility and invisibility, optical saturation and blindness, presence and absence, blackness and white light. They produce a form of excess, a visual superfluity, that points precisely to the limits of vision or what lies beyond photographic and visual capture.”⁸⁹ With the moving images and sound fragments woven together in the video, and through his practice more broadly, Gumbs seeks to envelop the viewer in sensation constituted by opacity, evoking a tactile sense of oceanic submergence.

87. Agard-Jones, “Bodies in the System,” 187.

88. Thompson, *Shine*, 14.

89. Thompson, *Shine*. 14

Writing about diffraction as methodology, Barad explains that she “aim[s] to disrupt the widespread reliance on metaphors like reflection that produce “homologies and analogies between separate entities.” In contrast, turning to diffraction “attends to specific material entanglements.”⁹⁰ In a similar spirit, Gumbs refuses to allow water to reflect—using the medium of film it never stops moving—and instead underscores its diffractive qualities. Entangled with aboveground nature, the moving images and sounds of *Water and Dreams* signal the complexity of life itself, articulating a world that cannot be understood by representationalism. The only way for the viewer to make sense of the images is by experiencing them through sight and sound. This brings us back to Barad’s argument that “we too are part of the world’s differential becoming.”⁹¹ This tidalectic *becoming* necessarily shifts representational practices across multiple media—as we have discussed here, painting, photography, and film. Given the relative dearth of environmental engagement in Caribbean Studies writ large, it remains to be seen how the influence of a new generation of visual artists, imagining multiple representations of submergence, will encourage, as Alaimo has envisioned, new forms of ethical thought and practice.⁹²

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90. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 88.

91. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 88.

92. Stacy Alaimo, “New Materialisms, Old Humanisms,” 283.

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