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Newns, L. (2023) Necropolitical Ecologies: Creative Articulations of Nature's Death-Work in the Borderzone. Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies, 26 (1). pp. 36-51. ISSN 1469-929X

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*https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2023.2190919*

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**Necropolitical Ecologies: Creative Articulations of Nature's Death-Work in the Borderzone**

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**Abstract**

In recent years, the increased incidence of migrant deaths along borders has transformed these zones into necropolitical spaces in which migrant lives are expendable in the pursuit of border "security." At the borders of Europe, policies of "minimal assistance" leave migrants vulnerable to death by exposure due to the unpredictable currents of the Mediterranean, as occurred in the tragic case of the "Left-to-Die Boat" in 2011. In such instances, migrants are transformed into Agamben's *homo sacer*; they are at once hyper-visible to the surveillant eyes of the law and are yet abandoned, "exposed," in the "state of exception." What is unique in the case of migrants who die at sea is how states and supra-states like the EU co-opt nature into carrying out their death-work in borderzones, producing what I call "necropolitical ecologies." Armin Greder's graphic narrative *Mediterranean* (2017) and Caroline Bergvall's multi-disciplinary work of poetry *Drift* (2014) both elegise migrant deaths in the Mediterranean while demonstrating the sea's presence as "vibrant matter" in the story of irregular migration. They each deploy unique formal strategies to represent the complex human/extra-human entanglements of this death seascape. While Greder's wordless visuals "excavate" the bodies that nature conceals from our eyes, Bergvall maximises the aural qualities of language to covey the "drifting" effects of the water itself. As ecocritical texts, both works are engaged in a wider project of critiquing the colonial and capitalist exploitation of the non-human world. Through their portrayals of the necropolitical ecology of the

Mediterranean, they suggest continuities between the violence transmitted to migrants in borderzones and that perpetuated on the natural environment around the world.

**Keywords**

Migrants, Mediterranean, necropolitical ecology, Caroline Bergvall, Armin Greder

The issue of migrant[1] deaths at sea has been a subject of great scrutiny for many years now by politicians, non-governmental organisations and the media through a spectrum of approaches. While largely a failure to facilitate safe routes for legitimate claims to asylum, it has become a beacon of political posturing around migration control, in which "deterrence" is a goal that covers a multitude of sins. Within the matrix of discourses surrounding migrant drownings, there is an easily overlooked part to the story, which is the sea itself: the natural elements that actually carry out the death-work in borderzones like the Mediterranean. Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani, forensic investigators into one infamous case dubbed the "Left-to-Die Boat," draw attention to the complex interplay of human and non-human forces that bring about such tragedies:

> Most migrants' deaths across the Mediterranean frontier have not only occurred *at* sea, but *through* the sea, which has been turned into a deadly liquid as a result of the EU's exclusionary policies which precaritize their crossings. The sea's "geopower" has become embedded in a form of killing operating without state actors directly touching migrants' bodies, in which violence is rather inflicted in a mediated way, through water […]. (2020, 95–96)

One way we might look more closely at the sea's presence in such events is as a "state of exception," a space in which human law is wilfully withdrawn for those humans who move through it in unsanctioned ways. In addition, recent work at the intersection of Material Ecocriticism and Ocean Studies offers a number of tools through which to further elucidate the sea's role as, if not quite agent, then "actant" in these deadly occurrences. As Jane Bennett asks in *Vibrant Matter*, "how would political responses to public problems change were we to take seriously the vitality of (nonhuman) bodies?" (2010, viii). As Bennet's

[1] This term is of course imperfect, especially given its hysterical use by the tabloid media in recent years. However, it remains the most capacious and least freighted with legal definitions when compared to "refugee" or "asylum seeker," for example.

question here suggests, an attention to the material work of the sea should not signal a turning away from the human complicities driving such migrant deaths, but that it provides another layer of understanding to the complex forces – both human and nonhuman – that bring about these needless and largely anonymous deaths beneath the waves.

The Swiss-Australian illustrator Armin Greder and the French-Norwegian poet Caroline Bergvall have each responded to the tragedies of migrant deaths at sea through creative means. Greder's graphic narrative *The Mediterranean* (2017) and Bergvall's multi-disciplinary poetry cycle *Drift* (2014) elegise those killed in the process of crossing water and in both texts the sea is foregrounded as a material and narrative force. These works deploy a range of innovative formal strategies to covey the complex human/non-human entanglements of this death seascape. While Greder's wordless visuals "excavate" the bodies that nature conceals from our eyes, Bergvall maximises the aural qualities of language to convey the "drifting" effects of the water itself. These texts also call our attention to the colonial and capitalist practices that exploit human and non-human alike. Through their portrayals of the necropolitical ecology of the Mediterranean, they suggest continuities between the violence transmitted via the sea to migrants in borderzones and that perpetuated on the non-human world across the globe.

**The Sea as State of Exception**

In Heller and Pezzani's reading of the case of the "Left to Die Boat," the violence of the state is transmitted to migrants via water as the mediating force. The sea's "geopower," as they put it, is mobilized by state and supra-state actors in a way that allows them to abdicate responsibility for these and other similar deaths. The case of the "Left-to-Die Boat" especially throws these dynamics into relief because of the extraordinary circumstances under

which the migrants on board met their untimely end.[2] The boat left the Libyan coast in the early hours of 27 March, 2011 amid the NATO-led naval arms blockade of Muammar Gaddafi's regime. The small rubber vessel carrying 72 people on board was bound for the Italian island of Lampedusa and thus crossed directly through this most heavily trafficked area of the Mediterranean. About fifteen hours into the journey, the driver sent out a distress signal via a contact in Rome. They were approached by an aircraft, which took an aerial photograph of the boat but did not provide any assistance. The satellite company of the phone they carried on board then located the vessel about halfway between Tripoli and Lampedusa. A distress signal was then sent out to all vessels in the area, to be repeated every four hours over the next ten days. Other parties like Malta and the NATO command in Naples were also informed. A helicopter arrived, took pictures but did not provide any assistance. At this point the migrants were running out of fuel and did not have any food or water. They encountered a fishing boat and asked for help, but it quickly turned away. The same helicopter reappeared and lowered eight bottles of water and a small packet of biscuits but then departed again. Using a combination of satellite imagery, sea and wind data and survivor testimony, researchers determined the position of the vessel when it ran out of fuel on 28 March, around 30 hours after their initial departure. The migrants then experienced bad weather and very high waves and lost their sense of direction. At this point, people started to die. They drifted for another 5-6 days in these conditions, were encountered by a military ship, and again were photographed but offered no assistance. After 14 days, they eventually drifted back to the Libyan coast, and by that time nearly all on board had perished.

[2] Details of these events have been assembled from the report on the "Left-to-Die Boat" (Heller and Pezzani 2012) in combination with the associated film and digital materials found at https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-left-to-die-boat.

Throughout this ordeal, multiple surveillance technologies were used to assess the vessel's threat level in accordance with the NATO blockade. The migrants' boat would have likely been tracked for much its ill-fated crossing, yet this did nothing to ameliorate the plight of those on board. Instead, they were left to die from exposure and dehydration. Heller and Pezzani were driven by the question of how it was possible that 63 people drifted to their deaths in what they describe in their film as "the most surveilled waters on earth". One explanation provided by the researchers is NATO's policy of "minimal assistance," which involves keeping migrants alive just long enough for them to reach Maltese or Italian waters (hence the water lowered by the helicopter). Yet, even when the vessel reached the edge of both country's territorial waters, neither chose to intervene. Frontex, the EU's border monitoring agency, was also aware of the vessel, yet also chose not to intervene because it never officially entered its zone of remit. As for the fishing boats that encountered the migrant vessel, they were likely deterred from helping by fear that they would be accused of human trafficking, as previous cases suggest.[3]

As Heller and Pezzani's research reveals, the migrants in the vessel did not perish because their whereabouts or condition were unknown or because there was insufficient capability to assist them, but as a result of a multi-layered wilful withdrawal of basic human protections. The migrants aboard the "Left-to-Die Boat" and many others like it enter what Giorgio Agamben describes as a "state of exception," a space-time that is simultaneously outside and inside the juridico-political order. It is a state in which sovereign power is not absent, but rather legislates for its own removal. The Mediterranean Sea is an "outside" in the sense that

[3] Heller and Pezzani point to two cases, one in 2004 and one in 2007, in which shipmasters have been arrested and criminally charged with facilitating illegal immigration after having rescued migrants in distress at sea and disembarking them in Italy (25). In fact, the UK has just passed a law (Nationality and Borders Act 2022) that makes it illegal for private vessels to assist migrant boats in the English Channel, while decriminalising migrant deaths caused by border agents.

it is physically beyond the borders of any one state, yet remains emmeshed in interlocking and in some cases overlapping jurisdictions, Search and Rescue Regions (SSRs) and, at this time, the multi-state NATO blockade. It is this simultaneous inside and outside that enables a vessel like the "Left-to-Die Boat" to be tracked, photographed and communicated with by several state and non-state actors and yet provides the cover absolving any one entity from legal accountability for the deaths. Even the so-called "law of the sea," the obligation of all ships to assist vessels in distress when informed of them – something which would have provided the moral and juridical[4] basis for rescue in waters where no state was present – was disrupted by the threat of legal action against ordinary citizens who may otherwise have helped. By essentially legislating for the withdrawal of lifesaving aid, the state and supra-state actors patrolling the Mediterranean transformed the people on board into "bare lives"; they are not "seen" by the law even as they are quite literally caught in the eye of its surveillant lens. In addition, their deaths are also not "seen" as, in Heller and Pezzani's words, the "crime of non-assistance has […] remained invisible to the law."

Crucially, as Agamben argues, the state of exception is not an accident or result of negligence but a strategic deployment of biopower. Towards the end of *Homo Sacer,* he points to a fundamental division at the heart of the word "people" in Western politics: it represents both the de jure political subject and "a fragmentary multiplicity of needy and excluded bodies" – a fracture that the biopolitical state must continually work to eradicate by assimilating the excluded into the body politic or by excising it completely. Achille Mbembe (2003) expands on these ideas in his work on the necropolitical by emphasising the utility of this dual sense of peoplehood in colonial projects past and present. It is through the colonial process that the

[4] This principal was enshrined in international law through the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS convention) and the 1974 International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS convention).

entire world comes to be subsumed into a biopolitical paradigm that simultaneously extends and delimits the right to life. For Mbembe, “necropower,” or the power to “let die” in Foucault’s (2004) original formulation, is the sovereign’s “capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not” (2003, 27, emphasis in original). It is only once a certain group is rendered disposable, or “bare life” in Agamben’s terms, that their deaths become sanctionable within the juridico-political order. In the case of irregular migrants crossing bodies of water like the Mediterranean, their disposability is determined racially, as a continuation of colonial structures of exclusion, and kinetically, as an effect of the “illegal” way they move through maritime space. Following the closing down of virtually all safe routes to claim asylum, deadly risks are now deployed against certain (excluded) humans as necropolitical border strategy.

For Agamben, the state of exception is not determined by the application of law but rather “abandonment”:

> He who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather *abandoned* by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable. (1998, 23, emphasis in original)

In Agamben’s prime example of the state of exception, the concentration camp, Jews and others deemed unfit to be included in the *Volk* of the German nation were abandoned to the violence of guards, doctors and administrators. With the withdrawal of basic legal protections came exposure to the basest of human impulses, leading to systematic experimentation, exploitation and, ultimately, extermination. However, in the case of those abandoned on the “Left-to-Die Boat” and many others like it, no human actors actually touch the bodies of migrants. Rather, “exposure” in this case is to the natural elements of salt water, wind and

cold. How might this non-human presence in the killing of irregular migrants prompt a reassessment of the biopolitical framework? To this end, we might bring in Jason Moore's (2015) concept of "world-ecology," which reframes all history as a dialectical interchange between human and non-human natures: "humans making environments and environments making humans" (36). Much of modern history, however, has been a process of "making" nature work for humans to produce value, whether through extraction of raw materials or as a sink for the waste of consumer capitalism.

Borders, too, form an integral part of the capitalist world-system as migration controls work to maintain the global economic disparities that international corporations rely on to maximise profits. While we typically view the free flow of labour as a tool of capitalism, and indeed this is the basis of the EU's borderless Schengen Area, this principle still operates selectively in a global marketplace in which long-distance supply chains are the norm. As Timothy Dunn has shown in relation to the "maquiladora" system along the US border in Mexico, wealthy countries have a vested interest in keeping manufacturing labourers "in their place" where wages are low and labour rights are limited (Dunn 1996, 159).[5] More recently, John Urry has argued that this "offshoring" of (certain) work has produced a global division of labour (2014), which simultaneously serves to keep nationalist concerns at bay. To speak of a necropolitical ecology is to consider how more-than-human nature is brought into the service of such border maintenance. However, is the sea a purely passive object forced to carry out the death-work of humans in the state of exception, or might we view it as an active participant in the necropolitics of borders? As we move towards less anthropocentric ways of seeing, what might be gained by regarding a body of water as a central character in a story of human migration?

[5] This contrasts with service jobs or others where proximity to the client base is required, and for which free movement of labour is favoured. This is why I suggest that this principle is deployed selectively.

## The Sea as Vibrant Matter

Oceans and seas have held a secondary, if not absent, position in human semiotic history when compared to terrestrial spaces. Steinberg and Peters (2015, 248–49) catalogue dismissals of the sea's relevance in Western philosophical thinking. They recount how the Nazi political theorist Carl Schmitt, in his infamous *Nomos of the Earth*, delineated land as the space of society, while denigrating the sea as a space that "has no character" and cannot be imprinted on. In a similar vein, Claude Levi-Strauss described it as having an "oppressive monotony" and "flatness" with nothing to stimulate the human imagination. For Roland Barthes, the sea was a "non-signifying field [that] bears no message". In advocating for what they call "wet ontologies," Steinberg and Peters aim to reanimate the sea's socio-cultural significance and deploy its material and phenomenological qualities as tools for new kinds of geographic and geopolitical thinking. Such approaches form part of a wider scholarly turn to water as a material and historical site. Variously termed Maritime Studies, Ocean Studies or Blue Ecology (among others), this work looks to seas "not just as bodies to be crossed but as subjects in themselves" (Mentz 2009, 997).

To speak of the sea as a "subject" is to enter a re-alignment of humanist ontologies towards more object-oriented approaches. This is not an attempt to impose human forms of intentionality on the non-human world but rather a recognition that "humans share this horizon with countless other actors, whose agency—regardless of being endowed with degrees of intentionality—forms the fabric of events and causal chains" (Iovino and Oppermann 2012, 451), or what Jane Bennett refers to as "distributive agency" (2010, ix). Instead of speaking of "actors," which would imply intentionality, Bennett prefers Bruno Latour's term "actant" to represent "that which has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient

coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events" (2010, viii). Within this thinking, "every existing thing and occurrence [is] bequeathed with the possibility of carrying meanings and with a historical (namely, narrative) dimension" (Iovino and Oppermann 2012, 451). It is this *narrative* potentiality that is of the greatest relevance to the literary critic and which creative work offers a means to convey. As Iovino and Opperman put it in their introduction to *Material Ecocriticism*, we need to attend to the ways matter is also "storied" (2014, 2). The "matter" that matters for this article is the sea's unique properties that participate in, or potentially disrupt, the necropolitics of contemporary border policing. How does the sea's depth, liquidity, currents, weather and the non-human life it supports play a part in the narrative unfolding of migrant deaths? I look now to Greder's and Bergvall's texts for how they elucidate the distributive agency for these deaths across human and non-human actants.

**Armin Greder's *The Mediterranean***

*The Mediterranean* is a virtually wordless picture book depicting the causal chains – made up of human and non-human – that bring about hazardous migrations and deaths through the sea. It responds, in part, to an older instance of migrant drownings, on 26 December 1996, documented in Giovanni Marie Bello's *The Ghosts of Portopalo*. However, its title and jacket image – a seascape in which water takes up two-thirds of the page – places this non-human element at the forefront of the narrative. Greder's simple, almost monochromatic drawings offer a sober visual language that contrasts more conventional graphic narratives of irregular migrations, such as Eoin Colfer and Andrew Donkin's *Illegal* (2018). While the absence of written text might suggest accessibility to a younger audience, its unflinching depiction of death announces that this is not a children's book. The first of Greder's full-width panels is an image of a drowned body suspended in water, an unusual choice for narratives of migrant

journeys, which tend to offer more hopeful trajectories. This opening panel is preceded by the only text in the book:

After he had finished drowning,
his body sank slowly
to the bottom,
where the fish
were waiting.

The second panel then confirms this grisly fact: a contorted body on the sea floor surrounded by fish that are apparently feeding on its extremities. These panels are then followed by the image of a fisherman's net capturing what appear to be the same fish, which are then sold at market and served up on a platter in a restaurant. The closure readers are forced to make here is a disturbing one: that we are also in a sense potentially feasting on the bodies of dead migrants.

In the book's afterword, the journalist Alessandro Leogrande speaks of the "heap of bodies" that exists just on the edge of Europe but is shielded from our eyes. For Leogrande, Greder "unflinchingly retrieves from the sea all the connections between that heap of bodies and us". The symbolism here is indeed multivalent, as Greder calls attention to the shared complicities in the death and disposal of human victims of necropolitical border policies. Dining together on the caught fish are a suited white man and a black man with military epaulettes, who stand for the collusion between foreign financial interest and neocolonial power-structures. In the pages that follow, we see the fruit of this partnership, a trade for weapons that are then used in the violence which causes people to flee their homes and cross the Mediterranean in the first place. The same white man appears as a ghostly presence behind the military figure as he instructs his troops, suggesting another layer of command. We then get images of burning

villages, people fleeing and would-be migrants meeting with what we assume is a smuggler before embarking on the fateful vessel that starts Greder's narrative cycle over again. According to Duckels and Jaques, "These complex, challenging depictions of causation imply that there is no neat source behind the migrant crisis and hence no simple answer, providing readers with cues to understand it as a complex and interconnected social reality" (2019, 144). Nevertheless, the victims of the violence themselves are depicted as a largely undifferentiated mass of humanity – as a solid silhouette on the back of a departing truck or merging and undifferentiated faces crammed on a ship's deck. Such imagery does not do much to interrogate the routine dehumanisation of irregular migrants that reinforces their position as "bare lives". What it does do, however, is emphasise the systemic "food chains" that Europeans participate in and benefit from that ultimately lead to deadly sea crossings. The fact the narrative can end only in death, as fated by the book's opening, conveys the cyclical nature of this story and forecloses the possibility of readers' absolution through hopeful images of refugees arriving to a better life in Europe.

However, we might return to the images of bodies and fish to consider other processes that intersect the cycle of greed, corruption and violence that occupies most of the visual narrative. Greder's opening suggests forms of complicity that move through both human and non-human actants along with the flesh of drowned migrant bodies. The single block of text framing the book's visual narrative already hints at unconventional agencies. The first line, "After he had finished drowning," "establishes the fact of the death while retaining the agency of the dead man as though he is still living" (Duckels and Jaques 2019, 144). Then, that the fish are "waiting" implies if not intentionality then a form of habituality: because of the frequency of these human-made tragedies they have come to expect the human flesh that is now part of their regular diet. In this way, we are shown how the work of the sea's

nonhuman life participates in concealing these deaths from our eyes through its biological processes of ingestion and digestion. Even the water offers a convenient means of covering up the crimes committed in the name of border "security" by hiding the evidence beneath its depths. This death-work, by extension, also contributes to the dehumanisation of those who embark on such crossings by precluding the possibility of identifying the dead and conducting proper mourning rites. At the same time, the appearance of human-fed fish on our plates implies a refusal to allow the bodies to stay fully buried, as that which is repressed literally returns to us through the food we eat.

These cycles of ingestion, digestion and decomposition recall Stacy Alaimo's concept of "trans-corporeality" (2010; 2012) between human and non-human matter. Such interchanges call attention to the "permeability" of the human, "dissolving [the] stable outlines" (Alaimo 2012, 477) that we have drawn between us and nature. Alaimo thinks specifically about the human waste that clogs up the seas, ending up in the bodies of animals and eventually us. This polluting matter becomes "surreally malevolent" as it perpetuates ongoing horrors that are largely unknown to those who actually use and discard it (Alaimo 2012, 487). While the nonhuman "actants" that Alaimo identifies – plastic and other toxic matter – become so because they enter spaces they are not supposed to due to human overconsumption and improper disposal, those that engage in death-work in the Mediterranean borderzone (in this case, Greder's fish) are already there but become "activated" through necropolitical decision-making. Still, Greder suggests that these two processes are connected by also alluding to how our unsustainable practices of consumption perpetuate violence beyond our purview. Industrialised over-fishing in the Mediterranean and elsewhere, for example, has disrupted the livelihoods of small-scale fishermen all along the sea's coasts, generating the need for people to risk their lives and seek a living elsewhere. This connection is suggested in the

cryptic dedication at the book's end: "For Nunziatina, because if she had continued to eat fish, this story might never have existed," which seems to advocate for the ethics of vegetarianism.

Through its sequence of images, *The Mediterranean* integrates the natural cycles of the sea with human cycles of violence. Though not without its flaws, Greder's wordless text opens up an interchange between the human and nonhuman systems that contribute to the "heap of bodies" at the bottom of the sea. It points to the death-work nature carries out so that Europeans may feel absolved from the killings committed in their name, but also suggests a wider connection between the exploitation of the non-human environment and the exploitation of humans that are then disposed of in the sea's depths. The next section moves to a very different kind of text by Caroline Bergvall to explore how it conveys the "vibrancy" of nonhuman matter in the context of human migration.

**Caroline Bergvall's *Drift***

Where Greder's wordless images convey the "unspeakability" of such tragedies at sea, Bergvall deploys a combination of text, visuals and voice (in its performed version), yet her work is still very much interested in the limitations of language. Though complex and generically-fluid, *Drift* consists primarily of loose translations of Old English and Old Norse verse, in particular the anonymous 10th-century Anglo-Saxon poem *The Seafarer*, which recounts the hardships of life at sea.[6] Bergvall also includes excerpts from Heller and Pezzani's report on the case of the "Left-to-Die Boat," connecting the ancient story of seafaring with the current refugee crisis in the Mediterranean. The stark facts of the report are

[6] Along with other well-known works like *Beowulf* and *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer* is one of the most important surviving compositions of Anglo-Saxon literature. There is therefore a wealth of scholarship on it by experts in this field. For some helpful entry points, see Amodio (2014), Fell (1991) and Orton (2002). See also Ezra Pound's influential 1911 (partial) translation of the poem.

refracted in the poetry that surrounds it, and they are brought into conversation through the drifting medium of the sea.

Despite its attention to language, the printed version of *Drift* opens with wordlessness, as a series of horizontal line drawings akin to rules on a page, of varying length and linearity. One critic reads these as a “mimesis of poetry” that “imitates poetic form but, devoid of language, it refuses poetic content” (Muren 2014, 276). This absence, as Muren suggests, evokes the unrepresentability of deaths at sea. However, we might also see in these lines a series of seascapes: one calm and linear and another rough with the “noise” of irregular pen strokes or ink blots. In the performed version of the poem, the sea exerts its presence throughout as an undulating blue mass of words used as a backdrop, giving the feeling that Bergvall is speaking from underwater. This intertwining of the sea and poetry, in which the sea’s currents stand in for language or are made up of language, provides a framework for the aesthetic entanglement of the human and non-human in the pages that follow.

Gilmour further illuminates the connection between water and words in *Drift*, arguing that:

> Bergvall seems to suggest that we think of language in terms of an oceanographic drift map – a matter of tracking intersecting currents, of following objects as they move – and that we do so in relation to Europe’s historical relationship to the sea, from the Vikings, through colonialism and empire, to the undocumented labour of Chinese cockle-pickers dying on the English shore. (2020, 239).

This sense of aqueous language is especially pronounced in the sequence entitled “Hafville,” a word that comes from the Old Norse “hafvilla,” the state of being lost at sea. As the text becomes increasingly disorienting, the “hafvilla” experienced by the poems’ protagonist is

paralleled by the reader's own sense of being lost in the text. In one section, the speaker recounts his experience as if in the form of survivor testimony:

> Most of those on board completely lost their reckoning. The crew had no idea in which direction they were steering. A thick fog which did not lift for days. The ship was driven off course to land. They were tossed about at sea for a long time and failed to reach their destination. We embarked and sailed but a fog so thick covered us that we could scarcely see the poop or the prow of the boat […] (36)

However, with each repetition of the passage, the letters seem to drift free of their wordly moorings and some are "lost," as if engulfed by the fog and the waves:

> Mo stof those onboard completely l ost l ost l ost their reckoning Th ec rew had no idea in which direction they were ststeering A thick fo g which d i d n ot l ift for days The s hip was driven off course tol and They were ossted about astea for a long time and f iled tor each their destination We mbarkt and sailed but a fog so th but a fog so th but a fog so th th th thik k ovevered us that we could scarcely see the poop or the prow of the boa t […]" (37).

Two pages later the passage becomes almost unrecognisable, eventually descending into the single letter "t" from the end of "boat," which is repeated for another two and a half pages. In the spoken word version, Bergvall performs the breaks in words like sounds dropping out in a garbled radio transmission,[7] as if the atmosphere itself is coming between speaker and listener, breaking down all possibility of communication. The effect is also suggestive of someone straining for words, perhaps even straining for breath, as they succumb to the waves. Visually, undulating "t's" appear behind Bergvall like the agitated surface of the sea,

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[7] A recording of this section can be accessed here: http://www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/XCP.php.

but they might equally be read as crosses floating in water to mark the graves of the many thousands who have perished there (McMurtry 2018).

While we should exhibit caution when making comparisons between readerly disorientation and drift through a text and the literal drift of migrants at sea, Bergvall's linguistic and aural innovations here work to convey the presence of the nonhuman in the unfolding of human signification. As readers, we experience the sea acting on the text, asserting its agency on this narrative of movement across water. The failures of communication here operate on multiple levels. Firstly, we might think of the numerous distress calls sent out by those on board the "Left-to-Die Boat" which went unheeded even as their situation turned from dire to deadly. In this case, it is precisely the sea's drift that provides the cover for non-response as the boat floats unknowingly in and out of multiple jurisdictions. We might also think more broadly about the voices of migrants, which continue to be ignored in journalistic accounts of tragedies at sea, or the strictures of asylum regulations which require seekers to produce testimony that conforms to narrow expectations of what constitutes threat. The sea, and the Mediterranean specifically, figures as a barrier for communication in this sense too, given its symbolic freight as the dividing line between "North" and "South," Europe and its "others" (Iovino 2017). It is, to speak in biopolitical terms, a border across which the human is perceived as merely *zoē*, bare life. Bergvall's ancient seafarer asserts his reduced status as he signs off each stanza with "anon am I," merging with today's migrant mariners as he laments "no man to steer / the failing structure […] floating in my coffin I have lost all my papers" (Bergvall 2014, 48). The repetition of "Oneman gone thats all theyll say" invokes the reduction of people to mere statistics reported in the media, as the speaker assumes a new name (Oneman) defined only by the increase in the death count. While Greder's

unindividualized figures offer little to counter the dehumanization of migrants, Bergvall's seafarer speaks back to his own anonymity from beneath the waves.

Furthermore, while Greder uses the skin colour of his figures to mobilise the "implicit bias of the implied reader to understand the Global South as both wholly homogenous and totally inhospitable" (Duckels and Jaques 2019, 142), Bergvall's drifting poetics resist any easy divisions of space. Like Greder's *Mediterranean*, her text draws connections between irregular migrants at sea and Europe's colonial past and present. There are a number of references to European colonial exploration, that other great seafaring tradition, which resulted in the dividing up of the world into "North" and "South," "West" and "East," "us" and "them". In the section "North," the cardinal point becomes a verb, "northing," that perpetual movement of migrant travel. However, the disorienting language of the text also frequently causes a disorientation of Eurocentric geography. The mariners are "Going north like getting to china westward way crossing the / atlantic" (31). Here, "hafvilla" seems to take hold of the colonial navigators as they go "Back down to the isle of madeira thinking it be faroe" (30), mistaking African Atlantic latitudes for Europe's North Sea. Furthermore, to say that "the west sea is the north sea east of iceland all men are / easterners" (31) is a recognition that all directions are arbitrary on a globe and wholly dependent on one's point of reference. As Gilmour articulates, "In its construction *Drift* implies a remapping of Europe, linguistically, historically, and materially, by shifting the focus from fixed borders to sea routes." (2020, 239). In other words, Bergvall mobilises water's unique properties to evade the neat lines of territorial borders and confound the seemingly fixed colonial vision of the world. As Steinberg and Peters aptly assert, "the ocean is a space of […] *drifting*, in which vertical forces are translated into horizontal motions that often supersede both legal logics and human intentions" (2015, 259, emphasis in original).

In the same section, the seafarer finds himself in that holy grail of exploration, the Northwest Passage, vainly sought as a shorter trading route between Europe and Asia. Echoing the deadly failures of bygone explorers, the seafarer encounters the "captain / froz n at his desk still writing in his log" and asks "wheres north from here"? (32). The Northwest Passage represents the limits of the colonial redrawing of the world, as water – here in the form of ice – interferes with the grand designs of capital accumulation. However, later, in the section "Song," we are brought through another passage and into the present day:

> Keeps a safe percentage ice melts in / deer bay raising speculations about the increased / trades benefits of the north east passage Keeps / a safe percentage merchant vessels cross the / icefree north coasts between europe and asia / it's a shortcut on a planetary scale (47)

This "shortcut on a planetary scale" is now potentially possible due to the melting of polar ice caused by anthropogenic global warming. The opening up of the arctic is now leading to new territorial contests and several countries' attempts to draw lines of ownership in the sea. The reference to planetary climate change also connects to a number of other environmentalist moments in the text. In "Song," the seafarer on his travels sails through many waterborne pollutants, including "redtides of nonpoint source," "knolls of wild plastic" and "flaming scrap swamps" (54). The accretion of environmental hazards then moves towards animal victims as "glued birdwings" and "exploding whales," and eventually "human shiploads hostage of the outbounds / abandoned skiffs that are anchors of the mind" (54). Here, Bergvall also evokes transcorporeality, in which the pollutants humans dump in oceans and seas move up the food chain to eventually rest inside us. However, the references to "human shiploads" and "abandoned skiffs" specifically traces a line between the capitalist exploitation of the nonhuman world and the migrant bodies on the edge of Europe that are

“anchors of the mind”. Indeed, it is in part the effects of climate change and other anthropogenic environmental impacts that force many people to leave their homes and seek a life elsewhere. Through the text’s drifting across multiple spaces and times, Bergvall calls attention to how our era of joint climate and migrant “crisis” are merely reverberations of the cycles of environmental and human exploitation enacted at the height of European colonialism.

## Conclusion

In the film Heller and Pezzani produced to accompany their reporting on the “Left-to-Die Boat,” they describe the sea as an “unwitting killer” but also a “witness” that can be “interrogated” by an oceanographer. Where Heller and Pezzani used wind and current data together with satellite imagery to ascertain the “liquid traces” of the boat, Greder and Bergvall accomplish this “interrogation” through aesthetic means. Greder’s visual imagining of what happens beneath the surface of the waves after migrants drown inserts a nonhuman presence into the cycles of violence that abandon migrants to the sea’s depts. His unflinching depiction of death and refusal to allow a hopeful way out of the narrative cycle “excavates” the bodies to our view so that they are no longer hidden by the waves. Bergvall for her part employs the tools of language to convey the sea’s presence acting on the humans who move through the space. The sea’s death-work is here expressed through the breakdown of human language.

Though Greder and Bergvall tackle this topic in very different ways, they are both approaching it from outside as white, middle-class speakers of European languages. Nevertheless, with varying degrees of success, their works try to emphasise the “causal chains” that Europeans participate in that implicate us in that “heap of bodies” at the edge of

Europe. In particular, they suggest continuities between the violence transmitted to migrants using the medium of the sea and that perpetuated on the non-human environment around the world. Greder, for example, alludes to how industrialised fishing has destroyed livelihoods and generated migration, and Bergvall suggests malevolent waste has a role to play as well. In addition to these causative links, however, their works are suggestive of wider dynamics in the way human violence operates through nonhuman matter. Heller and Pezzani's concept of "liquid violence" draws attention to the way violence is displaced from its source by passing through the medium of water onto the bodies of migrants. This offers a model for thinking about how violence is displaced across larger scales of space and time and mediated through non-human actants onto the bodies of other humans in what we have come to term "climate change". This, too, is a form of necropolitical ecology. While the sea as "vibrant matter" executes the work of death in borderzones, it also carries the pollutants that make people sick and rises to flood homes and fields. At the same time, Bergvall seems to suggest ways the sea resists its mobilisation as violent border keeper, confounding the human boundaries drawn upon it through the work of its drifting currents. Acknowledging these non-human links in the narrative chains of human movement can only serve to broaden our picture and better understand the multi-valent consequences of our actions around the world.

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