theories and methodologies

Heavy Waters: Waste and Atlantic Modernity

ELIZABETH DELOUGHREY

We cannot think of a time that is oceanless
Or of an ocean not littered with wastage
—T. S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages"

A POEM THAT RENDERS THE SEA AS PEDAGOGICAL HISTORY, LORNA GOODISON'S "ARCTIC, ANTARCTIC, ATLANTIC, PACIFIC, INDIAN OCEAN" depicts Caribbean schoolchildren learning "the world's waters rolled into a chant." After shivering through the "cold" Arctic and Antarctic, the class "suffered [a] sea change" in the destabilizing Atlantic, abandoning the terrestrial stability of their benches to enter an ocean in which only their voices orient them in time and space as they "call out across / the currents of hot air." In fathoming what Derek Walcott has called "the sea [as] history," their "small bodies" are "borrowed / by the long drowned" (Goodison). While colonial narratives of maritime expansion have long depicted the ocean as blank space to be traversed, these students enter Atlantic stasis, a place occupied by the wasted lives of Middle Passage modernity. This Atlantic is not *aqua nullius*, circumscribed and mapped by the student oceanographer, but rather a place where the haunting of the past overtakes the present subject. Édouard Glissant has described the Atlantic as a "beginning" for modernity, a space "whose time is marked by . . . balls and chains gone green" (*Poetics* 6): a sign of submarine history and its material decay. Thus, Atlantic modernity becomes legible through the sign of heavy water, an oceanic stasis that signals the dissolution of wasted lives. After the poem's irruptive consonance of the "bodies borrowed," the vowels lengthen to mimic a "long drowned" history of the Atlantic, and the narrative is transformed. Reminding us that the Middle Passage "abyss is a tautology" that haunts ocean modernity (Glissant, *Poetics* 6), the poem traps the students (and readers) in the violent corporeal history of the Atlantic. Instead of moving on to the next ocean of the lesson, the class repeats the word "Atlantic, as if wooden pegs / were forced between our lips; Atlantic, as teacher's / strap whipped the rows on." Only in the last two lines of the poem do

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we catch a glimpse of other oceans, trapped as we are in "learn[ing] this lesson: / Arctic, Antarctic, Atlantic, Pacific and then Indian."

Goodison's poem foregrounds the process of naming global space (*A* is for Atlantic) and our epistemological limits in recording the immensity of ocean history, which, paradoxically, is depicted in the condensed chronotope of the belly of a slave ship.[1] This tension between the infinity of the sea's horizon and the contained "hydrarchy" of the ship (Linebaugh and Rediker 143) is a constitutive trope of what I have elsewhere called the "transoceanic imaginary" (1–44). The poem suggests that rehearsing the list of the world's oceans, as they have been partitioned and mapped through European expansion, does not lead to geographic mastery over space. These "melancholic transatlantic crossings" require a different epistemology of the ocean (Glissant, *Poetics* 6). Constricted by the violence of Atlantic history, trapped in an abyss that invokes the "tortured sense of time" of the postplantation Americas (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 144), the students cannot fathom a world ocean, one that, in nature, flows into the "Pacific and then Indian" oceans.

In learning what Gaston Bachelard has described as the "metapoetics of . . . heavy water" (11, 56), Goodison's students never emerge from the violence of the Atlantic to reach a "pacific" space. Here I adopt Bachelard to describe how Atlantic inscriptions rupture the naturalizing flow of history, foregrounding a now-time that registers violence against the wasted lives of modernity in the past and the present. As Zygmunt Bauman argues, modernity is constituted by the boundaries erected between the normative and the disposable, resulting in an enormous surveillance industry dedicated to policing the borders between citizens and refugees. He characterizes our "liquid modernity" as "a civilization of excess, redundancy, waste and waste disposal" (97), one that produces human refugees as "the waste products of globalization" (66). As I'll explain, this concept of patrolling heavy waters is vital to interpreting historical and contemporary representations of Atlantic modernity waste, understood as a material residue of the past as well as the lost lives of transoceanic subjects.

Lorna Goodison's poem condenses many of the ideas circulating in Caribbean cultural production that imagine the Atlantic as a cathected space of history and a "sea [of] slavery" (D'Aguiar 3). What David Scott terms the "conscripted modernity" of transatlantic slaves is distinct from the cosmopolitanism associated with transoceanic travelers who represent the ocean as *aqua nullius*, a space of transit in which the sea is barely present, subsumed by the telos of masculine conquest and adventure. Since the ocean is in perpetual movement and cannot be easily localized, representations of heavy water problematize movement and render space into place as a way to memorialize histories of violence and to rupture notions of progress. These narratives merge the human subject of the past and the present, establishing an intimacy Bachelard associates with the dissolving qualities of the ocean (6) and a process in which one might salvage the metaphysical waste of human history. Goodison represents fathoming the violence of Atlantic history as leading, not to a liberating mobility, but to the cessation of movement across space, an immersion in the heavy waters of history.

When the sea is rendered as slavery, violence and mourning are symbolized by spatial stasis. Aquatic stasis reflects temporal depth and death; in fact, water is an element "which remembers the dead" (Bachelard 56). Moreover, human depth "finds its image in the density of water" (12). Goodison's poem invokes the Sargasso Sea, famously inscribed by Jean Rhys as an oceanic morass, an aporia between British and Caribbean ways of knowing and epistemologies of space. This is like the depiction of Middle Passage stasis in John Hearne's novel *The Sure Salvation*, where time is distorted, "tricked, frozen by violence" as a

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slave ship, trapped in the Sargasso, remains for much of the novel at the "still centre of a huge stillness: pasted to the middle of a galvanized plate that was the sea" (47, 7). While maritime literature generally depicts movement across ocean space as a trope to generate narrative time, most representations of Atlantic slavery—from Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* to Hearne's *Sure Salvation*—decouple space from time. Narratives of ocean stasis provide a vital critique of progressive models of capitalist time in which the movement of eighteenth-century ships on Atlantic slave routes created the measurement of longitude and, by extension, the homogenization of global time. Representations of transoceanic slavery offer an alternative modernity to counter the naturalized mobility associated with masculine fraternities working at sea and with nineteenth-century maritime novels, which largely overlooked the greatest demographic body of transatlantic migrants: African slaves (DeLoughrey 51–95).

Elsewhere I've written about the rise of ocean studies and the ways in which the recent turn to the sea—a route away from the territorialism of the nation-state—overlooks how the world's oceans have become militarized by the state. While the exemplary works of Paul Gilroy, Antonio Benítez-Rojo, and Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker have all made vital contributions to helping us fathom the ways in which Atlantic shipboard communities might transcend the ethnic boundaries of the nation-state, these "webbed networks" (Gilroy 29) need to be understood alongside the national and military claims on the world's oceans so that we might complicate natural metaphors of liquid circulation and think more critically in terms of a modern ocean that Christopher Connery has aptly described as "capital's myth element" (289).

Heavy Metals, Militarized Seas

In assessing the new direction of an Atlantic studies "research matrix," William Boelhower explains that "the sea leaves no traces, and has no place names, towns or dwelling places; it cannot be possessed; it requires specific languages to be understood; and, above all, it has been traditionally considered the space of freedom par excellence" (92). As I've argued in *Routes and Roots*, the rise of the nineteenth-century American maritime novel coincided with a naturalizing discourse of fluid, transoceanic routes precisely when the United States became a global naval power. Similarly, our current efforts to explore the fluid, transnational networks of the sea are constituted by an unprecedented era of global ocean governance and militarization. Turning to the production of the heavy waters of ocean waste as a by-product of state surveillance allows us to see that the sea does not merely facilitate modernity but is constituted by it. After the militarization of the oceans in World War II, the United States president, Harry Truman, violated the freedom-of-the-seas doctrine by extending the littoral state to two hundred miles out to sea and then annexed Micronesia, an area as large as the North Atlantic. All told, this new ocean territorialism tripled the size of the United States (Natl. Research Council 1) and generated a global "scramble for the oceans" (Pardo ii). In 1982 the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea catalyzed the most radical remapping of the globe in modern history, expanding all coastal nations through an Exclusive Economic Zone of two hundred nautical miles. Roughly thirty-eight million square nautical miles of the global sea were enclosed by the state, a privatization of thirty-five percent of the world's ocean (Van Dyke, Zaelke, and Hewison; Pardo [fig. 1]).

State privatization of the seas is nearly synonymous with militarization. This new territorialism reflects not just control over the ocean surface but also submarine and air space claims that protect the passage of nuclear submarines, sea-launched missiles, and maritime surveillance systems undergirded by thirty thousand miles of submarine cables

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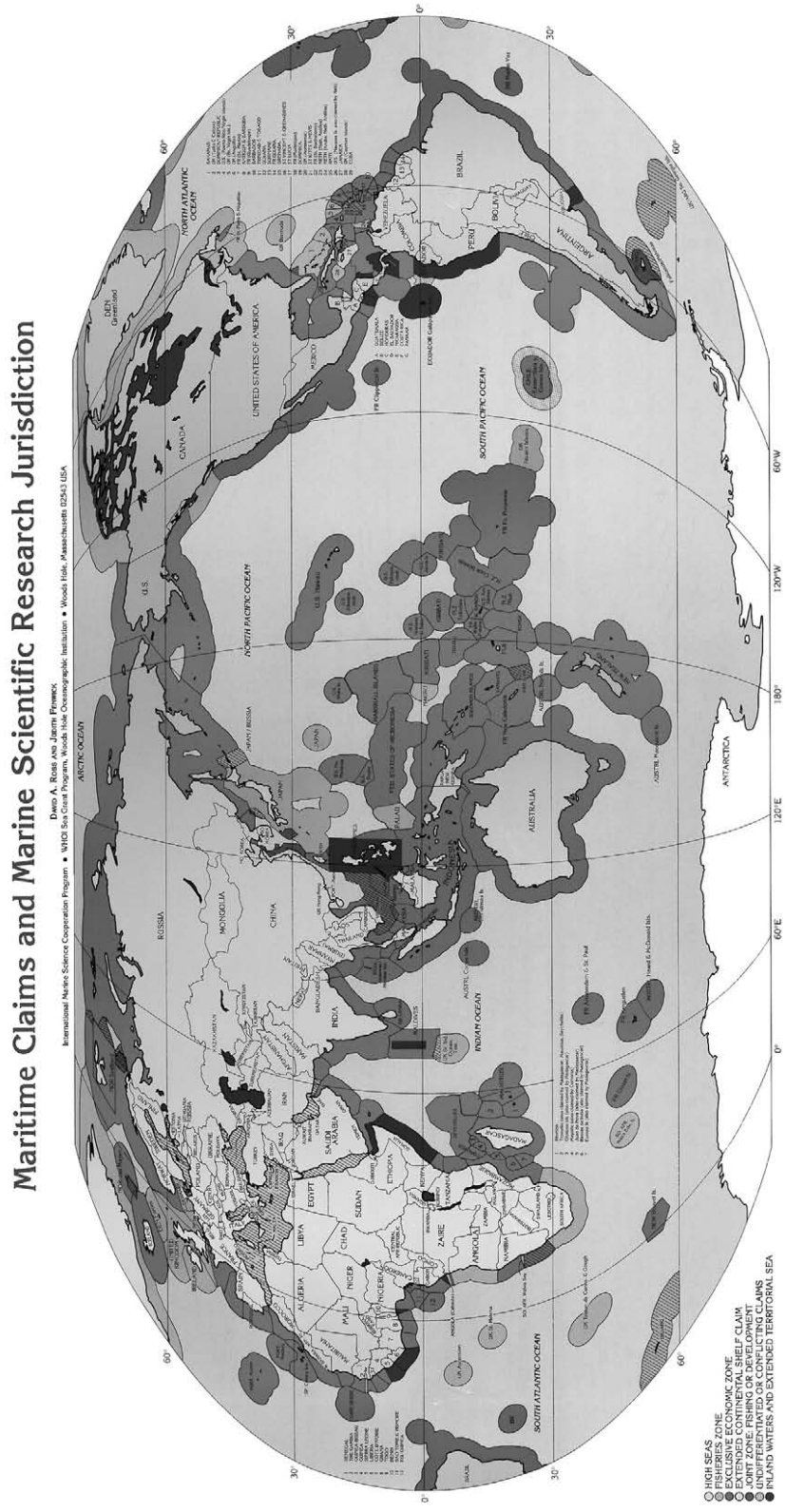


FIG. 1

Maritime claims of various kinds by coastal countries and their dependencies and territories, as of 1992. The map primarily shows the Exclusive Economic Zone. Reproduction of D. A. Ross and J. Fenwick, *Maritime Claims and Marine Scientific Research Jurisdiction* (*Woods Hole Sea Grant*; Woods Hole Oceanographic Inst. Sea Grant Program, 1992; Web; 3 Mar. 2010).

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(Wang, "Military Uses"). While the "high seas" are legally designated a "global commons," the United States has effectively monopolized them through missile test "warning zones" that restrict free passage (Van Dyke). So while the new Atlantic studies might claim that the sea cannot be possessed, since the end of World War II the number of military vessels at sea has doubled; by the 1980s over a thousand nuclear-powered vessels patrolled the world's oceans (Davis and Van Dyke 467).

To understand the extent to which the ocean signifies modernity, we might turn to the close relations between surveillance, militarization, and waste. The militarization of the sea has made it into a basin for waste. Hundreds of thousands of barrels of radioactive materials have been dumped in the ocean, particularly in the northeastern Atlantic (Bewers and Garrett 106). By the time the 1993 London Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping was ratified, there were forty-seven radioactive waste sites in the northern Atlantic and Pacific oceans, spaces of metallic modernity with large amounts of tritium, plutonium, and uranium. The London Convention ceased legal ocean dumping, but current nuclear waste buildup has renewed a call to resume the practice (Davis and Van Dyke 467). In fact, radioactive waste dumping in Somali waters, documented by the United Nations Environment Programme, spurred the recent actions by Somali pirates against transnational shipping (Abdullahi).

The Latin *vastus* signifies the ocean as well as waste. Over twenty-three naval nuclear reactors and fifty nuclear weapons rest on the ocean floor—this is merely what has been reported (Johnston et al. 36). While the sea is understood as external to human experience, we carry its waste in our bodies: radioactive and other munition and industrial waste dumping has contributed to the increasing presence of heavy metals in marine mammals and human beings (Wang, "Arctic Region"), configuring our bodies as participants in metallic modernity (fig. 2).

In positioning the sea as history, maritime studies focuses on how human beings are formed by the ocean rather than how the ocean might be formed by human history. The Atlantic has been described metaphorically as the crucible of modernity, yet in material terms this history is registered by the heavy metal waste in its waters. In fact, the rise of modernity was reflected in its maritime



FIG. 2

Dumping sites used for the disposal of low-level radioactive waste, from Dominique P. Calmet, "Ocean Disposal of Radioactive Waste: Status Report" (*IAEA Bulletin* 31.4 [1989]: 47–50; print).

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waste; with the sixteenth-century emergence of European industrialism, heavy metal pollution began to spread across the Atlantic. The amount of metal released in the atmosphere quadrupled in the twentieth century, and the Atlantic remains the most polluted of oceans (Johnston et al. 11). These heavy waters of metallic modernity are a sign of what Bauman refers to as "the waste of order-building" in the age of globalization (9).

Elsewhere I've explored how the transoceanic imagination has depicted the sea in the blood, rendering the immensity of the ocean as an internal (blood) "vessel" to naturalize human migration and to merge human bodies into the environment. Yet if we are "people of the sea" because we carry the ocean in our saline blood (Benítez-Rojo), then the sea is humanized by the way it absorbs our waste. The humanization of the sea is expressed by Caribbean inscriptions of wasted lives in the Middle Passage and by the "balls and chains gone green" that mark ocean history. This grammar of heavy waters, brought in relation to the metallic waste of the Atlantic, reveals the sea to be not so exterior to our terrestrial modernity and reconfigures the concept of waste as a constitutive material residue of history that might be imaginatively salvaged.

Waste and Salvage

Caribbean writers have long been concerned with the heavy waters of ocean modernity and have rendered waste in terms of pollution as well as the wasted lives of slaves and refugees. For instance, the Jamaican writer Andrew Salkey resolves global nuclearization in his short story "Holocaust Anancy" by having his trickster-protagonist hide American stockpiles of plutonium at the bottom of the sea. The story foregrounds the history of maritime irradiation and nuclear waste dumping as a legacy of the conflation of the oceanic *vastus* with waste (see Hamblin). Since the production of waste depends on a surveillance system to police its boundaries, other writers, such as Ana Lydia Vega and Edwidge Danticat, have depicted heavy waters in the steel ships of the United States military that interdict Caribbean migrants. They configure lost bodies at sea as a symbolic legacy of the Middle Passage, a by-product of American maritime expansion and a constitutive part of Atlantic history.[2] In his prose-poem collection *Dreamstories*, the Barbadian writer Kamau Brathwaite inscribes American military expansion into the Caribbean Sea under the aegis of the war on drugs. Here the sea is not fluid but rather patrolled by the United States Coast Guard and cordoned by an enormous seawall that maintains boundaries between desirable and disposable subjects ("Salvages").[3] By placing refugee and fugitive bodies at sea, these authors demonstrate how waste is a constitutive by-product of modernity and national border making. The state surveys the *vastus*, producing boundaries that reduce human beings to national refuse. This practice of border making in fluid space has been historically and narratively reproduced in maritime novels that depict a tension between the fluidity of the sea and the hydrarchy of the ship.[4]

Like Danticat's story "Children of the Sea," Brathwaite's prose poem "Dream Haiti" depicts a collapse of the space and time separating the contemporary interdiction of Haitian refugees at sea and the long history of patrolling African bodies in the Middle Passage. Since the 1981 interdiction agreement between Ronald Reagan and Jean-Claude Duvalier, an agreement that violates international law and the refugee-interception provisions established by the Law of the Sea (Ives 108–09), the United States has intercepted thousands of Haitian refugees at sea and forcibly returned them. Writing in what he terms "seametrics" (qtd. in Cynthia James 758), Brathwaite fathoms the depths of the sea to explore "recent personal + historical . . . cultural & environmental disasters" ("Halter-

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ing"). He inscribes a disorienting sea, a space of heavy waters patrolled by the metal ships of the United States Coast Guard and symbolically ordered by the poet.

"Dream Haiti" depicts a protean narrator who symbolizes both maritime fluidity and the border making of state surveillance. He's adrift at sea, and waves are crashing against the "wet metal slides of [his] nerves" (95). His body morphs into a boat, and he glides across a metallic—and militarized—Atlantic horizon that is "still / like a sword or a razorblade of light" (96). In a blurring of past and present, self and other, human being and steel ship, he describes his "feet clanging restlessly up & down the studded / metal stairs of our soft muted agony" (97) as he moves between submarine depths, where Haitian refugees are drowning, and the deck of a Coast Guard "Gutter," a wordplay that April Shemak observes renders the ship a collector of human waste. The poet-mariner is "on the Atlantic with ion" (97), a play on the word *iron* (as in those "balls and chains gone green") and perhaps a reference to the Institute of Navigation (ION).[5] *Ion* also invokes a Platonic dialogue that debates whether the poet who performs the role of a military general is transformed, a conflation of narrator and agent of the state upheld by the speaker's insistence that he "was suppose to be a poet not a coast guard / cutter" (97). This text merges the perspective of drowning with the witnessing (and documenting) of others' drowning, suggesting that the poet is complicit in recuperating and ordering the waste of oceanic modernity even as he repeatedly insists "we was all artists . . . & not soldiers or sailors" (101). Brathwaite problematizes the line between witness and spectacle, destabilizing the boundary making that Mary Douglas and Bauman pinpoint as integral to producing the concept of (human) waste. In doing so, Brathwaite destabilizes the border between the disposable and the enduring, between wasted lives and their surveillance. The vessel he shares with soldiers and poets is a "ship in his head" as much as a figure of Atlantic militarization (110).

To reconfigure the borders between policing subjects and their others, the human beings positioned as national waste, Brathwaite turns to the recuperative power of Caribbean art. At sea the passengers/refugees witness a large metal object moving past them, described as a "triangle made out / of tinnin" (tin) like "the work of Murat . . . or Marshall" (102). Murat Brierre is a Haitian sculptor known for his recycling of oil-drum lids, transforming the waste of metallic modernity into art, while "Marshall" suggests the steel-hulled patrols of the military at sea.[6] This metallic apparition, like "the Atlantic with ion," suggests the ongoing triangulation of the Middle Passage trade in the wasted bodies of modernity. The object's association with modern universal time, made possible by the longitude-inducing trajectories of the Middle Passage, is underscored in its movement, "tick / tockin . . . from the top of / the clock of his hair," which is likened to a pendulum (103–04). Like the students in Goodison's representation of a stagnant Atlantic, the passengers of Brathwaite's ship are "not goin anywhere" (96), suggesting an ontological shift in the experience of natural and modern time and space and a collapse between the patrolling of African bodies in the Middle Passage and the interdiction by the United States of Haitian refugees at sea.

Brathwaite's shape-shifting protagonist is traveling on a ship named *Salvages*, a reference to the salvaging of waste as well as to the possibility of "sure salvation," to invoke the titular ship of Hearne's novel. Brathwaite's ship smells of "gun-metal" (101), and in the course of the poem it is depicted by the trappings of an order-making modernity, such as railings, stations, and stanchions. In this merger between human beings and their constructed borders, Brathwaite notes that these metallic figures of confinement are "made of the same material as our fingers and . . . hands" (107). In

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a dream sequence that invokes the oceanic poems of Derek Walcott and T. S. Eliot, the protagonist is led through the "Iron Market" of Port-au-Prince, a reference to the slave trade and to the element associated with Ogun, the vodou *lwa* of metal and metalworking. Having already conflated the rule of two "Iron Ladies," in Britain (Margaret Thatcher) and the Caribbean (Eugenia Charles [Nzengou-Tayo 182]), Brathwaite's poem suggests the symbolic exchange and refashioning of metal into politics, art, and history as constitutive of transatlantic modernity. This salvaging is visible in the invocation of Ogun, a figure of the iron revolution of West Africa, and of African trajectories of metallic modernity. Iron, as Candice Goucher has argued, is a symbol of "terrible ambivalence," associated with the forging of West African culture, enslavement, and resistance. Ironworking made the ships of Atlantic modernity possible. In the form of blacksmiths "Ogun was onboard transoceanic voyages," reflecting material culture as much as cultural memory, foregrounding the ways in which technologies like iron smelting are tied to ritual and other cultural expressions. Thus, "questioning the memory of iron in Atlantic crossings may also simultaneously release the ghosts of Atlantic history" (Goucher). To Brathwaite, Ogun traveled across the Middle Passage to become a "word/smith, creator, ancestor," a figure vital to understanding and rerooting the transoceanic limb(o), one who is "capable of re-foundation of the broken limb" ("Gods" 42).[7] Thus, the references in "Dream Haiti" to dismembered heads, feet, and arms and even Captain Ahab's stub foreground the author's role in salvaging the partitioned and wasted bodies of Atlantic modernity (99).[8]

The ship *Salvages*—and the poem—attempts to recover the drowning and wasted bodies of Haitian refugees, but Brathwaite breaks from the Romantic narrative of salvation and redemption that David Scott has noted of early postcolonial historicism (134), particularly C. L. R. James's initial history of the Haitian revolutionary Toussaint-Louverture. Instead, Brathwaite's dream voyage focuses on Toussaint's containment in Napoléon's jail, highlighting how the border making of liquid modernity expands to the land. Brathwaite depicts "the glacial seas of the / Jura" mountains, where Toussaint perished (109), and the ways in which the sea becomes a "dark blue dungeon" without a place to "dream ourselves out of / its convent" (108). Although the Coast Guard cutter textually dominates the poem (in font size alone), we discover that no one in fact is trying to save, or salvage, the refugees. In a poem largely concerned with eyewitnessing, the refugees move out of visual range, and the author parodies the possibilities of salvaging the relationship through either black liberation discourse or literary recuperation. Thus, the poet laments that the refugees do not see "that we were their brothers & fellow writers bound to us / by all kinds of ties & the content of their / character" (110). In this last shift from the loss of an amorphous, dismembered body of Haitian refugees (who symbolize the wasted humanity of the Middle Passage), we see that the tragedy lies in a failure of vision and of control by the writer, who is both a participant and a witness.

Brathwaite concludes that this history is "over & over & over again while we stood on the / soft hard deck of the Coast Guard / 'Impeccable' / watching them poem" (111). The narrator and we the audience are not watching them drown but rather watching them "poem" (Nzengou-Tayo 184) from the deck of a United States military ship called the *Impeccable* (Brathwaite, "Dream Haiti" 49). The *Impeccable* is a space cleansed of pollution and waste, the very concepts the poet seeks to salvage from these heavy waters and metallic seas. Brathwaite's "Dream Haiti" helps us think more critically about oceanic modernity and waste and the ongoing interdiction of bodies at sea. The heavy waters of the Atlantic—rendered legible by the collapse of space-time

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in which the ocean is humanized by the bodies of the past and present—allow us to consider waste as a constitutive process and product of the violence of Atlantic modernity.

Notes

1. The slave ship is further discussed in Sundquist; Gilroy; Baucom; DeLoughrey; and Rediker.

2. Vega and Danticat are discussed in DeLoughrey (38–40, 270–71).

3. Brathwaite explains the irony of the dual announcement of Emancipation Day and the "'Shiprider' agreement . . . under which US security ('anti-drug') forces are given permission . . . to intervene & interdict in Caribbean waters & on Caribbean territory in the 'war' on drugs—another contradictory neo-colonial 'mask'" (*ConVERSations* 49).

4. On the rise of hygienic modernity and its associated effluvia, see Corbin. On boundary surveillance and the discourse of purity and pollution, see Douglas.

5. Brathwaite's figurative metallurgy is complex; in *Sun Poem* the sea is "a giant of i:ron / a rasta of water with rumbelling muscles and turrible turrible hair" (42).

6. I thank LeGrace Benson and Judith Bettelheim for their helpful discussions about Brierre's work.

7. To Brathwaite, Ogun is an artisan tied to the railroad and to modernity; see his commentary in *Barabajan Poems* 172–73.

8. On limbo as an African transatlantic experience and cultural expression, see Harris. Brathwaite's reference to Ahab here is not merely a trope on the dismembered transoceanic subject or the poet-mariner Ishmael but also a likely reference to C. L. R. James's argument about the complicity of the poet-witness (Ishmael) in a totalitarian project associated with Captain Ahab.

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