

*Book Review*

Shefer, T., Bozalek, V. and Romano, N. (Eds.). 2024 *Hydrofeminist Thinking with Oceans: Political and Scholarly Possibilities*. London: Routledge.

ISBN: 9781032408996

A traditional book review might not tell us a whole lot because *Hydrofeminist Thinking with Oceans: Political and Scholarly Possibilities* contains within it an Afterward by Meghan Judge which thinks with all the chapters. Although it is more than that, it covers the ground that a book review would typically traverse. In this review, I follow the wet pathways of some of the thematic preoccupations. These address questions of form, feminism, race, and perhaps, the things that linger in the depths and do not surface.

I have spent the two years since the 2023 publication of *Hydrofeminist Thinking with Oceans: Political and Scholarly Possibilities*, studying the text. Since I have favourite chapters and I use black study to frame my readings, my studies of the text have been uneven. The book is a planetary disturbance of scholarly ontologies of oceans, human, and more-than-human entanglements, and littoral environmentalism. Its strength is the diversity of its collective voice. It is appropriate that this is an edited volume that brings diverse voices of oceanic scholars invested in rooting themselves and their cosmologies to the ocean. In the thirteen-chapter volume, we have multiple stakes in the ocean. The kaleidoscopic perspectives include stories of collective swims and emersion in the cold Atlantic waters of Cape Town, ancestral rootedness and invocations of the ocean, walking and wading methodologies of wandering forlorn shorelines in the ruins of colonial traces and other formations of extraction, thinking with kelp forests and precarious human settlements, ecomedia through photography, the personhood of ancestors in lawfare, art against oceanic extractive industries, elderly black women's stakes in the ocean, the poetics of water, surfacing black women's voices evacuated from oceanic scholarship, and pondering the masculine cultures of surfing.

Much of what I outline above is done with a deep scholarly and aesthetic sensitivity. Afterall, the vast beauty and terror of the sea call for the poetic. The ocean demands the poetic because poetry is movement in a cadence which is closest to the rhythms and moods of the sea. The poetry by Toni Giselle Stuart contained in this volume rises to the ocean. But the poetic is present throughout the volume. Sometimes it is a sounding that roars with the ocean, a rush of water, and at other moments, it is a trickle. For instance, its frequential registers carry in the essays of Zayaan Khan, Adrienne van Eeden-Wharton, Cheri Hugo, Joanne Peers, Dylan McGarry, and Aaniyah Martin. Sometimes, a simple archival entry opens imaginaries and new worlds — 'Seeds



washed down coast from East Africa. Used as charms by herbalists.' In surfacing the Indian Ocean sea bean, Kristy Stone connects histories and waters across time and space.

Writing in different contexts, Derek Walcott, Judith Wright, Koleka Putuma, and Gabeba Baderoon exemplify this kind of writing, which is often laden with racialised pathos, since the sea figures so prominently in our freighted histories. The ocean is a hefty archive of sedimented geologies of death and life. Genealogies of cultural studies and literary studies from the Caribbean and Indian Ocean have insisted on the poetic rendering of oceans, even when they told difficult histories of enslavement and deracination.

However, in addition to unfurling the racialised dimensions of the ocean, this text is most attuned to gendered registers. As a conceptual frame, *Hydrofeminist Thinking with Oceans* is registered in both the name of the volume and the constellation of authors as a feminist orientation to waters. Each of the chapters, either overtly or by virtue of the subjectivity of the authors, or the identities of participants (as is the case with McGarry's contributions) assumes a feminist or gendered scripting of the sea. The oceanic form adopted by the writers refuses staid methodological limitations that work against agility and which discipline voices that are at their best when loosed.

As Astrida Neimanis and the editors tell us, this is a wet volume. The book begins with a foreword by a scholarly voice that inspired the text and its central conceptual pivot of hydrofeminism. Neimanis's work is the north star of this book. The authors take up her conceptualisation of the watery world. It would be difficult not to; she is a generous interlocutor who writes with incisive turns of phrase. Her foreword kicks off by pointing to the problems of the universal 'we' often contained in feminist scholarship. She asks us to parse out those who wave from those who drown. As a guiding ethic, Neimanis centres the question of what water teaches us. The authors all rise to this challenge from their different positionalities and scholarly political orientations. The editors take this up in a clear and generous genealogy flowing from Neimanis. In addition to giving an outline of the chapters, the introduction is an adept literature review of contemporary scholarship both globally and locally. It will be a useful reference to humanities students of the ocean. Dylan McGarry's contributions are important for shifting the geography of the text from its Western Cape bias to think with the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. In chapter 2, McGarry thinks with the landmark 2021 legal case where the law took claims of ancestral voice seriously in determining decisions on extractive forms of development. But the chapter does a lot more including providing grounded examples of the bi-directional enrichment of oceanic knowledges when both 'scientific' and indigenous knowledges are applied. The multivocality of the dead, living, various artforms, and more-than-human, is an accomplished contribution to this volume.

In chapter 3, against the backdrop of vast dislocation from the ocean, Aaniyah Martin relies on slow scholarship to stimulate reparative care practices of the ocean. For her scholarly practice, this entails methodologies of walking, swimming, and collaboratively mending a hydro-rug – all practices for collectively repairing and recreating a hydrocommons. In chapter 4, Karen Graaff takes up the exclusionary practices that are often part of surfacing cultures. She offers alternatives

such as the creation of safe spaces, playfulness as community-building, and alternative gear and styles. Gendered exclusions are foregrounded. At chapter's end, I wondered what it would mean to think about historically grounded and intersecting forms of exclusions that my eyes are often confronted with when I cast them at the water of many beaches across the country. Delphi Carstens and Mer Maggie Roberts take up more-than-human aesthetics through the octopus as pedagogical practice in chapter 5. Through dwelling on single species, they surface interspecies possibilities and offer a close reading of each tentacle and its becoming octopus meditations (BOM) dimensions. These dimensions consist of eight online meditation videos. This multimedia method is possibly the most technical chapter of the text, and the non-technically trained reader must be fully alert to keep up.


Chapter 6 is an art to which I have repeatedly returned. In this chapter, Adrienne van Eeden-Wharton performs an affecting, haunting, and beautifully wrought practice of walking and wading. This method and conceptual exercise surface the devastation of the Anthropocene in isolated areas of the Western Cape. On these walks and wadings, we encounter multiple species which illuminate the slow wearing to which the littoral is subjected. In chapter 7, Kristi Stone provides an ethnography which enlivens the Indian Ocean sea bean to tell histories that radiate outwards from the bean. The story of the sea bean provides what she, after Anna Tsing, calls a 'rush of stories' waiting to be told. The sea bean vibrates patiently in the archive, or it moves down the coast on land and rushing waters. It bears the heft of history while simultaneously claiming place in the ongoing future. Zayaan Khan's 'Life and death in an ancient sea' makes up chapter 8. While grounded in the Western Cape's deathly histories, this chapter takes up concerns which echo across the black world where enslavement caused fundamental fractures. Hers is a suture of the ancestral and the living through traversing deep time. Like some of the other scholars of colour in this volume, Khan leans into the personal to refract the political. Through looking in the face of oceanic ways of dying, the chapter provides ways of living. In chapter 9, Joanne Peers presses deeper into the haunted qualities of the ocean. Like Khan, she knits her own biography and lineage into the deeply fractured histories of the Western Cape. The poetic and visual are important methods for Peers's accounting and insistent voice. She wades in 'the places of oral memories of her mother and strangers to keep' afloat. I too, am borne on this tether.

In chapter 10, the editors – Tamara Shefer, Vivienne Bozalek and Nike Romano – take us into a sociality of their writing and dreaming practice of slow oceanic scholarship. This is a generative watery methodology that draws from deep relation and provides another model of feminist reading, writing and being in playful and thoughtful relation. Barry Lewis, an architect writer, conjoins the ocean and land in chapter 11 by plumbing the ocean's kelp for metaphoric resonances for precarious human settlements. The kelp forest teaches us something about the zinc forest which characterises landscapes of precarity. He offers, 'the city is not a tree, it is a forest. Never singular or isolated, but always multiple and entangled.' This is both an affecting and thoughtful contribution to thinking with the ocean. In chapter 12, Buhle Francis and McGarry engage the narratives of Xhosa women elders and point to the disconnect between their role as

custodians of the local ocean and their omission from ocean governance. The political work of threading black older women's voices into this volume cannot be understated. This chapter is a necessary contribution. Cheri Hugo closes the volume with chapter 13 through an affecting photo essay that fuses poetry, photographs and the interpretative voice. As a scholar negotiating her own place in the academy, the chapter is a pedagogical intervention that brings the full force of creative registers to the ocean.

Reading this book and revisiting some chapters in the last two years has enabled the writing of my own new work on oceanic histories. For my own reading practice, a companion text to this book has been the *Kronos 51* special issue, *Archiving and Imaging the Environment*, published in 2025. I sometimes reference both works, but I do not account for the material that seeps into my consciousness and which, although it might not be directly represented, is formative for the pulse and rhyme of my work. Perhaps, this review is the space to acknowledge that which is often difficult to record in given registers of scholarly acknowledgement.

Reviewed by

Hugo ka Canham 

University of South Africa