

**Diving into the Slave Wreck: The *São José Paquete d’Africa* and Yvette Christiansë’s *Imprendehora***

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## Abstract

The first slave wreck to be definitively identified is the *São José-Paquete de Africa*, a slave ship from Mozambique Island wrecked off the coast of Cape Town. This paper takes that wreck as case study and context for the southern slave geographies and elongated histories addressed also in Yvette Christiansë's *Imprendehora*. Both memorialize the 'long middle passage'—between east Africa and South America across the Southern Hemisphere, and well into the nineteenth century—in different ways. But similarly they highlight archival gaps, embodiment, and the submarine. Drawing on Toni Morrison's 'literary archaeology', this paper poses a meeting between literary and maritime archaeology, and explores the methodological possibilities of submersion.

Keywords: slave shipwreck, long middle passage, Yvette Christiansë, maritime archaeology, literary archaeology, submarine,

'the drowned face always staring  
toward the sun'<sup>1</sup>

## Finding the first slave shipwreck

The first slave shipwreck ever to be definitively identified is the *São José-Paquete de Africa*, a slave ship from Mozambique Island that was wrecked just off the coast of Cape Town on its way to the late-burgeoning slave markets in Brazil—even while the date for official abolition was fast approaching. It was wrecked in 1794 and its discovery announced in 2015. A book which commemorates the discovery counts the intervening years in its title: *From No Return: The 221-Year Journey of the Slave Ship São José* (2016). Its opening pages assert that 'perhaps the single greatest symbol of the trade is the ships that carried captive Africans across the Atlantic, with those who survived the journey never to return' (Boshoff et al. 2016, 4). Shipwrecks have long

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<sup>1</sup> Adrienne Rich, 'Diving into the Wreck'

been a source of narrative symbolic power, as outlined for instance in Hans Blumenberg's *Shipwreck with Spectator*, which makes a link between shipwreck narratives and modernity itself (Blumenberg 1997). A local instance of this symbolic power is the persistence of shipwreck motifs in South African literature, as Michael Titlestad and Mike Kissack have shown (Titlestad and Kissack 2007; 2005). This paper is interested in the case of the *slave* shipwreck, in its historical (archaeological and archival) and literary forms. In particular the case of the *São José*, the elongated slave histories and geographies it points to—well into the nineteenth century and the Indian Ocean as described below—and its oblique, literary treatment in the collection *Imprendehora* by poet Yvette Christiansë.

This archaeological shipwreck and the literary work memorialize in different ways what historian Patrick Harries (2016) calls the long middle passage—from Europe to east Africa around the Cape and then back across the south Atlantic—as well as the prolonged history of slavery through the nineteenth century. The *São José's* itinerary—from Mozambique Island to Brazil, foundered at the Cape's deadly inflection point—links the Indian Ocean and Atlantic slave trades via that longer route, which in turn extended the lifespan of the trade by many deadly decades (Harries 2016, 410). Christiansë's volume traces a similar geography, from Mozambique to St. Helena, and portrays the forgotten afterlives of slavery, particularly the fate of the 'liberated Africans' and indentured laborers whose suffering survived its changing shape. In addition to slavery's prolongation, what both suggest is a southern view—a southern-hemispheric set of itineraries and connections that contends with the largely northern bias of slave histories (see Hofmeyr 2017) and configure what Meg Samuelson and I have called the 'oceanic south' (2019). Moreover, from this positioning at the bottom of the globe, they also point to below the surface of the sea. The identifying artifacts of the

*São José* were recovered from a hostile submarine environment through the work of maritime archaeologists and other volunteer divers, a process which highlights the embodied experience of submersion and its impacts on perspective. In Christiansë's volume the sea surface acts as symbolic limit, and submersion represents both violence and freedom.

Addressing slave shipwrecks in this way places the literary and the archaeological in conversation, via the submarine. Toni Morrison, in 'The Site of Memory', describes her literary heritage as the substantial corpus of autobiographical slaves narratives from the nineteenth century, and her literary motivation as 'trying to fill the blanks that the slave narratives left' (Morrison 1995, 91). Gaining access to the unwritten—such as the interior life of the enslaved—requires, she writes, 'a kind of literary archaeology: On the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply' (Morrison 1995, 92). In addressing the doubly submerged experience of southern hemispheric slavery—both literally under the sea, and historically overlooked in favour of northern narratives—the Slave Wrecks project and Christiansë's poetry acknowledge the 'vast silence' in the historical record and attempt to go 'beyond the archive', using the techniques of maritime archaeology and immersive imaginative reconstruction respectively (Boshoff et al. 2016, 8).

This paper explores first the maritime archaeology of the slave wreck *São José*, and then the literary archaeology of enslaved experience in *Imprendehora*—addressing, in Morrison's words, 'the actual and [then] the possible' (Morrison 1995, 97). In doing so, it explores the methodological possibilities of oceanic submersion. While historians use creative methods to work around historical and archival silences, reading against the grain for instance, another method is to read for, or under, water. In doing so I follow

recent work in the oceanic humanities, particularly Melody Jue's method of submerging concepts—in her case, interface, inscription, database; here, archive and memory—in order to 'see how our understanding of them necessarily shifts under the ocean' (Jue 2020, 5; see also DeLoughrey 2017a; Sharpe 2016) and what Isabel Hofmeyr calls 'going below the waterline' in linking imperial to hydrological histories and imaginaries (Hofmeyr 2019a; 2019b).

### ***The São José Paquete d'Africa***

By the early twenty-first century no slave shipwrecks had ever been discovered. This is a qualified statement, of course, as many were well known and regularly dived. Slave wrecks are identified, grimly, by solid iron blocks about half a metre in length which were used by slave ship captains from the late eighteenth century as ballast to balance the lighter weight of human cargo: bodies, no matter how tightly packed, are yet much lighter than sugar (Boshoff et al. 2016, 45–46). The discovery was more a matter of definitive identification, linking up the archival—textual, historical—record with the maritime-archaeological, the writing with the wreck.

This kind of archaeological identification is surprisingly difficult, as other than the iron ballast there is usually very little left on the shipwreck site, ships having been violently broken up in the storm which caused the wreck in the first place, and then subject to the daily ravages of the submarine environment. As the researchers describe, 'archaeology on such sites is like trying to piece together a puzzle in which half the pieces have gone missing, while some of those that remain have been thrown into a blender' (Boshoff et al. 2016, 48). The case for identifying a ship necessarily has to be circumstantial, matching the archival record to the artifacts of the wreck in timeframe, materials, location, and so on. The find of the *São José* was the result of a long search

by the Slave Wrecks Project, a multi-institutional collaboration in maritime archaeology, which ‘literally and figuratively seeks to retrieve, resurface, and restore to memory that which has been lost and considered unknowable’ (Boshoff et al. 2016, 102). In the case of the *São José*, the discovery was the result of a find in the Cape archives, by collaborator Jaco Boshoff of South Africa’s Iziko Museums, of a shipwreck record that matched a wreck previously misidentified by an amateur treasure hunter. The matching artifacts included timbers made of an extremely rare hardwood only found near Mozambique Island (*Dalbergia Melanoxylon*) and ‘the concretions whose X-rays reveal the ghostly echo of what once was a shackle’ (Boshoff et al. 2016, 48).

The shipwreck, long-sought symbol of the Atlantic slave trade, thus turned out to have originated in the Indian Ocean, on the Island of Mozambique. The *São José* was one of the earliest ships—arguably the earliest—bringing east Africans into the trans-Atlantic slave trade, a joining up of Indian Ocean and Atlantic trades that played a major role in prolonging the overall trade (Boshoff et al. 2016, 35, 40; see also Christopher, Pybus, and Rediker 2007). By 1794 the trade from West Africa had exported many millions of slaves via the Atlantic middle passage, and increased competition among suppliers began ratcheting up prices. The longer route between Indian Ocean suppliers and South American markets—almost double the length of time at sea and characterized by a proportional increase in misery and mortality—became comparatively cost-effective, and treaties which outlawed trading in the northern hemisphere paradoxically secured its development south of the equator (Harries 2016, 423; Boshoff et al. 2016, 31). While previously illegal, in 1793 the Portuguese crown decreed that slaves could be exported from Mozambique, and the first ship from Mozambique Island reached Rio de Janeiro in 1795 (Boshoff et al. 2016, 30). The *São*

*José* had left a year earlier; between its experimental and truncated voyage in 1794 and the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, nearly half a million East Africans are estimated to have been transported from Mozambique to Brazil (Boshoff et al. 2016, 31), with some four hundred slave ships rounding the Cape in the first quarter of the nineteenth century (Harries 2016, 426).

The *São José*, of course, did not make it. There were five hundred and twelve enslaved persons on board, according to the records; at least half died in the shipwreck and the rest were rescued only to be re-sold at the Cape. A dark irony is that this particular wreck lies on the seafloor about twenty metres off the rocks at one of Cape Town's most popular and acclaimed blue-rated beaches, Clifton Third, where enormous cliff-hanging mansions are owned mostly by a wealthy expatriate elite. The tragic event of the wreck and its voyage has been memorialized in a variety of ways, including exhibitions held at the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington DC in 2016 and the Slave Lodge in Cape Town in 2018; the book *From No Return* which is richly illustrated and includes a variety of essays on the archaeological process and historical context; and a memorial service held on the beach in early June 2015 which included Mozambican descendants of the drowned. A commemorative poem by Cape Town-based poet Diana Ferrus was commissioned for the event and is included at the end of the book. A reading of this poem provides a way in to the links between the South African beach and Mozambican island, as well as, returning to Morrison, between archaeology and poetry.

Ferrus, when first commissioned by the Slave Wrecks Project, describes her unusual difficulty with the assignment. On reading the story—five hundred slaves, two hundred drowned, midway on a diabolical journey from the Indian to the Atlantic Ocean—her first thought was: 'Is dit dan nie ek nie?' [But is that not me?] This is a

specific, genealogical recognition, as Ferrus is descended from the Februarie family, on the sides of both her grandmothers, who were known as ‘Masbiekers’, slaves from Mozambique. While the brief was to write a poem in English, the personal significance of the story — particularly the marine archeological artifacts with names like ‘voetboeie’ and ‘kettings’ — meant that the poem came out first in Afrikaans.<sup>2</sup>

The poem was read publicly first while the Mozambican soil was deposited at the wreck site. The first stanza reads:

My naam is Februarie.  
Ek is verkoop –  
my borste, privaatdele, my oë,  
my brein  
is nog nie myne –  
soos die *São José*  
loop ek opgekap,  
word ek telkens gesink deur ’n ander storm –  
geen Jesus wat op die water loop vir my

[My name is February.  
I was sold —  
My chest, private parts, my eyes,  
My brain  
Are no longer mine —  
Like the *São José*  
I walk broken up,  
Sunk by another storm —  
No Jesus walks on the water for me.]

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<sup>2</sup> I’ve therefore used the Afrikaans version here, with my own translations, alongside the English version as a substantively different poem. The latter was written at the last minute, pouring out of the author ‘like water off the mountain after a rainstorm’ [‘toe stroom die Engelse woorde uit soon water afstroom van die berg ná ’n reënbuie’].



The poem repeats the phrase 'My naam is Februarie' at the beginning of each stanza, identifying the speaker with the drowned or sold slave, genealogical identity with historical time. The repeated claim rests uneasily against the recognition, in the third stanza, of the loss of the speaker's 'regte naam' (real or right name), a practice of re- or misnaming that is elaborated in Christiansë's 'Ship's Register', discussed below. The slave ship in the poem is both the instrument and symbol of the slave trade, but also paradoxically the body of the enslaved person. Its breaking-up by storm and rock mirrors the splitting up of enslaved persons into saleable body parts, as well as the divided language and identity of their surviving descendants.

Metaphors of sinking and surfacing ('sunk by another storm', 'walking on water') recur through the poem, as in the next stanza where the speaker still somehow longs for the ship's hold, where, and because, her ancestors remain submerged:

My naam is Februarie  
Ek soek nog die stang van die stuur  
want onderwater lê die familie,  
die kind aan ma se rokspant,  
die ma aan pa se hand,  
hoe diep lê hulle, aan watter kant?

[My name is Februarie  
I still seek the stench of the hold  
Because underwater the family lies,  
child on ma's hem,  
ma on pa's hand,  
How deep are they, on which side?]

Even the safe-on-land contemporary speaker is submerged, under a different and claustrophobic sky ('onder 'n ander lug gekraam') and, plumbing her own depths, finds them filled with shame ('en diep gevul met skaam').

The poem's imaginative engagement with the underwater realm fits with what is a theme throughout *From No Return* (2016), the embodied experience of submersion. Marine archaeologists Jaco Boshoff and Steve Lubkeman recount the impact of the act of diving the site on their understanding of the historical event of the shipwreck: 'it is the site itself that has often insisted on inscribing its most visceral insights through the rigors and risks it imposes on each of us in the research team, as we attempt to work on it under water' (Boshoff et al. 2016, 53). The researchers describe in detail the submarine site's physical characteristics and their impact on the divers' bodies:

Exposed to the prevailing southeasterly winds, a back reef creates a swell break whose surge is amplified by the site's relative shallowness and proximity to the beach. Even in moderate weather, skilled divers find themselves swinging back and forth in a sweeping and erratic pendulum motion... We have all bled on this site. (Boshoff et al. 2016, 53).

The divers' bodies are buffeted by the current like any other oceanic material, such that they are often forced to surface in order to find their bearings. The surge and drift, the constant swirl of sand, the disorienting lack of visibility—these, they continue, are not merely occupational hazards but perspectival and imaginative aids:

Years of contending with these challenges have impressed upon us that our dive tanks and computers, our fins and our masks, render us at best only marginally less helpless than those who found themselves on the distressed and disintegrating *São José* on that December eve so long ago. (Boshoff et al. 2016, 53)

Despite the technological accoutrement of modern diving, the embodied submarine experience of the archaeologists and volunteer divers provides them with a kind of visceral analogue, connecting their experience to that of the *São José*.

In addition to the practicalities of maritime archaeology, these reflections demonstrate the ways in which the embodied experience of scuba diving acts,

generatively, as a 'disorientation device' (Jue 2020, 5). This is significant because, as the archaeologists note, the physical work of diving the slave wreck and resurfacing its artifacts is matched by an imaginative effort of reconstruction. As Boshoff and Lubkemann describe, 'sometimes our efforts at translation are partial at best, since we inevitably encounter chasms that prove much harder to span' (Boshoff et al. 2016, 61). This against even more considerable odds of erasure than those Morrison describes in relation to the North American slave experience. Unlike the American slave narratives, there are no known self-authorized records by the enslaved in this later period and along these Southern routes. Nigel Worden, writing on the 'Cape Slaves in the Paper Empire of the VOC', notes that 'judicial records are constructed stories which reveal as much by their silences as by the details inked on the page' (Worden 2014, 33). Yvette Christiansë, delving into the same records as Jaco Boshoff at the Cape Archives, finds them empty of slave narratives, which, following Toni Morrison, prompts her to ask: 'Where are the slave narratives in South Africa? They don't exist, but one has to read to see how else a slave might be heard, or intimated; how a thinking mind might be guessed at' (de Waal 2009).

Both maritime and literary archaeology are given impetus by the widely recognised constructedness and gaps of historical paper archives (for instance Mbembe 2002; Mangcu 2011; Worden 2014). In addition to oral narrations and memory, embodied experience and imaginative reconstruction are tools aimed at surfacing submerged pasts. In his 'Introduction' to *From No Return*, Paul Gardullo sets out the significance of the artefacts from *São José* in symbolic terms. He suggests that these objects 'reclaim the human scale and provides a tangible reference for us' to grapple with slavery and its legacies (Boshoff et al. 2016, 4). He and the other authors are cognizant of the many gaps in the archival and archaeological record of the slave

shipwreck, but what these fail to reveal about the experience of the enslaved, they assert, ‘we can still imagine with some certainty’ (Boshoff et al. 2016, 55). This imaginative effort is what is central to Yvette Christiansë’s poetic response to the same haunting gaps, particularly in relation to histories of slavery at the Cape, in southern seas, and after Abolition.

### **Yvette Christiansë’s *Imprendehora***

Christiansë’s work has long explored the distance between official and genealogical histories; just as Ferrus’s grandmother was a Februarie, Christiansë’s grandmother was born on the island of St. Helena as the grandchild of freed slaves (Baderoon 94). Her collections of poetry, *Castaway* and *Imprendehora*, and a novel about slavery at the Cape, *Unconfessed*, draw on research into the archives of the Cape Colony, providing a layered, allusive and complicating view. This alternative, literary archaeology of slavery and its southern itineraries can be read as an example of what Morrison calls ‘truth invention’ or ‘re-membering’—imaginative acts that ‘yield up a kind of truth’ (Morrison 1995, 92). By examining images of submersion and oceanic transcorporeality in her writing, I place re-membering—a well-recognised aspect of Christiansë’s work (Samuelson 2008; Olausson 2012; Christiansë 2013)—alongside what Morrison describes as water’s capacity to remember (Morrison 1995, 99).

As Gabeba Baderoon, Meg Samuelson and Isabel Hofmeyr have described, southern African and South Atlantic histories of slavery were for some time nearly absent in South African writing, as well as from global imaginaries of slavery which remain largely focused on the northern Middle Passage (Baderoon 2009; Hofmeyr 2017; Samuelson 2008; 2014). The South Atlantic, in Hofmeyr’s words, is a site of narrative erasure, a lesser known arena: “‘South’ in more ways than one’ (2017, 81).

The one exception she notes is Christiansë's *Imprendehora*, which, set largely on the south Atlantic island of St. Helena, exemplifies this South Atlantic view. But the volume articulates explicitly between the two linked-but-different oceanic histories of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean, its two major sections called 'Atlantic' and 'Indian'. The collection's other setting, suggested by the sub-heading 'Katembe', a slave port near Maputo in Mozambique, connects the collection closely to the southern geographies of the *São José*. In addition, as I will describe further below, these southern oceanic geographies, what the ocean connects at the surface, are interweaved with reminders of the ocean's depths.

As noted, *Imprendehora* is divided into two sections, 'Atlantic' and 'Indian', although the former Atlantic section is much longer and itself divided into three subsections: 'I. Scraps', 'II. Winds' and 'III. Rust'. Like 'My Naam is Februarie', it is laced through with images of the broken-up body, the freed slaves represented as 'scraps' — also the title of the first subsection — stranded on what Hofmeyr describes as a 'scrap island' (Hofmeyr). The collection proceeds by a logic of misspellings, one signal among many of the collection's resistance to closure or coherence. The title of the volume is a misspelling of the Spanish word for 'enterprise' or 'entrepreneur', the recorded name of a slave ship that was caught after the British abolition of slavery in 1807 and delivered to the South Atlantic island of St. Helena. In the final section, 'Indian', names are phonetically spelled out and sometimes followed by question marks denoting uncertainty: 'Mother's name Neammhoo? Neammorhoo?' (83) or replaced by obvious substitutes, like the 'Februarie' of the Ferrus poem. The reproduced archival errors and leaps highlight gaps in the archival, and therefore historical, record—similar to those which motivated the Slave Wrecks project to search for archaeological artefacts beneath the waves. This piecemeal incompleteness is reflected by the title 'Scraps',

which, together with the other two subtitles ‘Winds’ and ‘Rust’, outlines some of the especially contingent aspects of oceanic trajectories — trade winds and shipwrecks, or what Samuelson describes as ‘might-have-been-otherwise factors that have directed movements across the oceans’ (Samuelson 2014, 30).

Echoing Morrison, Christiansë writes of her motivation in writing the earlier volume *Castaway*, that ‘[it] began with what is by now a familiar gesture for writers and theorists of anti- and postcoloniality—namely, an argument with history. This argument was staged in personal terms in that I had wanted to bring to the fore a voice for which there is no discursive place in any formal history’ (quoted in Samuelson 2014, 30). Similarly, *Imprendehora* is driven by an embodying, individualising ethic which is perhaps best exemplified by the final poem of the collection, the sole, long poem in the ‘Indian’ section. The poem is called ‘Ship’s Register’, structured around the entries in a ship’s logbook, from 343 to 372. The dry bureaucratic entries alternate with the imagined internal voices of the ‘liberated slaves’, indented stanzas whose disjointed shape suggest the shock and disorientation of the indentured speakers. One reads,

350 Female Serahine. Age 7. Stature 3-7

Mother’s name Conthalla

If I close my eyes  
this number will not land  
on my forehead, on my eyelids. (84)

These sections are often obscure, even gnomic, with the effect of both individualisation and opacity: humanising the long, cold lists of names, yet refusing a too-confident ventriloquizing of their lost voices.

Archival engagement is thus interwoven with the overall impetus to imagine the unimaginable experience of enslavement and its aftermaths. Another example is the first

poem with its darkly ironic title, 'Abundance'. The poem is preceded by an epigraph from the 'St. Helena Register, 1851':

*'Seven slaves in a fit of despair one day last week seized a boat belonging to Capt. Goodwin and put off to sea, and not having been heard of since we supposed are drowned.'*

The poem which follows is short and tightly formed, with an ecclesiastical rhythm:

Two to hold the water still,  
Two to leap, two to climb,  
One to put his face to sea.

The 'two-two' repetitions suggest an early hopefulness, invoking the Biblical rescue story of Noah, but that immediately shifts to 'One, one' in the following stanzas suggesting breaking-up, drowning and farewell. The short voyage is described as a series of gestures — waving, holding, crying, turning, treading, singing — pointing to the collection's investment in embodiment, extending to the final lines where the figures sink beneath the surface of the sea, whether in attempted escape or suicide.

This opening poem of submersion-as-resistance points to the wider condition of living as 'Liberated Africans'. The relentless march of days for those who choose to live out their stranded lives is signaled by the repeated references to horizons, which 'bracket empty days', acknowledging the hopelessness of escape. Captured as slaves, 'rescued' only to be abandoned or indentured, they live washed-up lives halfway through the long Middle Passage with no hope of return. The second poem's title, 'The Lives We Lose', suggests the present imperfect of this condition—not the finality of lives lost to slavery or death, but ongoing living as a perpetual losing (Christiansë 2009, 16). Those who die on arrival, claims the speaker of 'Caught', express in this way 'our strongest refusal', while those who 'live days then die' must instead 'refuse, even rage,

against the horizon'. It is this unbearable, purgatorial island life that the 'Scraps' section describes. As in the poem 'We Are Not Sure':

They call our days liberation,  
our feet know otherwise  
this ground hurts (Christiansö 2009, 25)

Here and throughout, the embodied experiences of 'liberated' individuals is deployed as a grounding against the abstractions and euphemisms of slave-imperial, even abolitionist, rhetoric.

This is part of a recuperated history of slave resistance that is encoded in the symbol of the slave wreck itself. As Boshoff and Lubkemann recount, researching archival records of slave wrecks demonstrates how many slave ships sank as a result of rebellions on board (Boshoff et al. 2016, 64). Slave wrecks can be seen as the consequence and legacy of resistance, a physical record of the continuous insurgency that, for instance, Marcus Rediker in *Outlaws of the Atlantic* describes (2014, 127). Those insurgencies that ended in as form of submersive suicide can be seen as an act of what Joshua Bennett calls 'stealing oneself away' (2018, 108). The deadly mass resistance demonstrated by the archaeological fact of slave wrecks is a corollary to the individual resistance intimately portrayed in *Imprendehora*, as described above.

The emphasis on the body and senses is therefore bound up with a resistance to historical erasure and slavery's apologists. It also incorporates a collection-wide engagement with the island and the ocean itself, its waters, winds and scouring salt. There is in the collection a transcorporeal energy—to use the feminist-ecological term developed by oceanic literary theorist Stacey Alaimo (Alaimo 2010)—which manifests in a distinctive metaphoric slippage . When newcomers 'arrive' on the island—an ironically bland verb—the already-there are bodily aware of their cries:



Each day, the newly arrived.  
In their cries, we hear our own bodies. (17)

There is a porousness here, between one freed slave and another—not so much of identity as of corporeal, embodied experience. A similar slippage is evident in the latter stanzas of ‘Abundance’, but expanded, so that meaning drifts between human and animal, ship and sea, animate and inanimate:

Oars, oarlocks.  
The length of waves.  
How stern the water.

One man calls, wind to shore.  
One man waves, a crane’s wing. (15)

The water is stern—nautically backward, as well as anthropomorphised in a grim human expression. That anthropomorphic logic moves in the other direction too: one man’s call is absorbed into, or becomes, the wind; another’s arm forms an oceanic wave, as well as a bird’s wing. This transcorporeality is everywhere present in the collection. In ‘Unspeakable’, the experience of shipboard rape is obliquely addressed through a series transferred epithets. The rapist’s curses ‘cut a swathe across the ocean’, breaking through the surface to reveal a submarine world of fish and rock. Here, it is the glinting of fish scales that causes weeping; it is the ship that groans under assault, while the speaker is the one tossed upon the waves; it is she who has become ‘the fact of the horizon’, the wide spread of ocean space. The poem’s perspective finally sinks beneath the waves, deploying shipwreck imagery, as the speaker’s teeth become ‘a reef/plaguing the nuisance of hulls’ (32).

The third sub-section of the ‘Scraps’, ‘Rust’, is spoken by Fernão, a Portuguese colonist-turned-resistance fighter, who was incarcerated on the island in the sixteenth

century and lives there for decades alone, an originary, Crusoe-like figure who points to even longer histories. He, like many other characters in the volume, embraces an immediate, everyday mode of survival. In his case, this is constituted by a fascinated gardening as well as a constant watching of the sea. In ‘Fernão Sees New Signs’, he addresses this nature-focus in directly transcorporeal terms, beginning with a statement of subject matter:

Trees, water, birds and  
green things on the ground —  
all is surface, all is shape (64)

The poem then describes a second-order imaginative exercise—the poet imagines the gardener imagining a gull, and, through the gull’s eyes, diving beneath the ocean surface.

Who would know how  
A gull, dashing down  
Into the wall of a wave,  
Has seen, not what swims  
Beneath the membrane, but  
the way back, up, out  
Of the water’s sealing grasp? (64)

The perspective first dives downwards beneath the waves, but then looks upwards to the reflective surface above, suggesting the gull’s ability to see through the ocean from below. Just as the maritime archaeologists focus on the embodied experience of diving the slave wreck with the perspectival shift it affords, the poem describes a gaze from the submarine.

This ecological-transcorporeal emphasis of ‘To the Waves’ is turned to a reminder of the human waste — humans *as* waste — that slavery caused and continued.

The poem is a series of images of the enslaved thrown overboard, killed or drowned, overfilling the ocean with the excess destruction. The speaker begs the ocean not to leave her floating, like a fish or an empty barrel.

The waves took what they could —  
a woman, the soles of her feet singing,  
a man, the whites of his eyes on fire,  
  
a girl who said nothing, who, face up,  
folded waves around herself. The whole sea  
sighing, turning like a sleeper who had missed her.

The sea here is an accomplice in the final, tragic act of resistance, a guarantor of welcome and privacy in loss. But, the final stanza notes, there is a limit to what the sea can do to hide this destruction:

There, eyes, she said, you see?  
You see how it is?  
What little room there is now. (33)

There is too little room in the crowded sea for more deaths, although the ‘whole sea’ is infused molecularly with their remembrance.

### **Conclusion: The language of water**

The submarine perspectives offered by the *Sao Jose* and *Imprehendehora* allude to the canonical feminist poem ‘Diving into the Wreck’ by Adrienne Rich, quoted in the epigraph to this paper. Rich’s poem is often read as an allegory for the (re)discovery of women’s histories which have been forgotten or suppressed. However, just as in Derek Walcott’s similarly canonical ‘The Sea is History’, the poem is also a materially accurate account of the embodied experience and technologies of diving and the vibrant

details of undersea ecology. Astrida Neimanis (2019) has recently deployed Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake* in a novel reading of Rich's poem, as itself submerging an ecological as well as a racial past. The shipwreck and submarine world of Rich's poem, in this reading, are infused with 'the atoms of those people who were thrown overboard [and] are out there in the ocean even today' (Sharpe 2016, 96). In other words, the water remembers (Neimanis 2019, 499).

This final point is a reminder that what Elizabeth Deloughrey (2017b) calls the 'submarine futures of the Anthropocene' are inextricably linked to its submerged pasts. The sea, overfull of human tragedy is already a site of ecological wreck—what Neimanis calls the 'wrecked ocean' (Neimanis 2019, 499). If, as she suggests following Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, the experience of the colonised and enslaved is 'a preview of what it is like to live under the conditions of the Anthropocene,' then the diving of slave wrecks in both archaeological and poetic terms is important for understanding our future as well as our past.

Morrison too writes that, 'All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was' (Morrison 1995, 99). The maritime archaeological work of the Slave Wrecks project sees its work as 'bringing what is submerged above the horizon line, back into memory for all to see' (Boshoff et al. 2016, 13). Similarly, Christiansë's poetic project in *Imprendehora* is an act of imaginative recovery, however reflexive and provisional, resurfacing what Morrison describes as 'emotional memory' linked to the memory of water. One of the Fernão poems describes speaking two languages, one 'dressed/in syllables of government', the other 'the language of water,/of grains of salt blown up from the ocean' (66-67). The poem describes growing away from the one and into the other, from the language which allows 'squabbles between possession/and longing' to the other which 'occupies the lower/ranges of confidence'.

These approaches to southern slavery and its shipwrecks, focused less on grand narratives than on survival, submersion, the lower ranges of confidence, suggest a language of water.

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