Julieta Aranda and Eben Kirksey

Toward a Glossary of the Oceanic Undead: A(mphibious) through F(utures)

A, a

AMPHIBIOUS, adjective:
Moving between air and water.

Literal amphibians, like frogs and salamanders, can choose among modes of existence. Generally, amphibian species can sun themselves on a rock, dive deep in muddy waters, or even burrow underground.

May 15, 1989. A single Golden Toad, *Bufo pereglines*, was spotted by a scientist in the elfin cloud forest of Costa Rica. A little later on, a Costa Rican naturalist named Eladio Cruz saw more Golden Toads as he studied the dull edge of extinction. Within five years, the Golden Toad was officially declared extinct. Several hypotheses emerged to explain the disappearance of this charismatic animal in a protected forest: global warming, the drift of pesticides, collection for the pet trade. Then, dead frogs began piling up in puddles in Australia and lakes in California. Another idea emerged in 1999 to explain the wave of death sweeping through amphibian populations: a pandemic disease, a kind of chytrid fungus, was driving hundreds of amphibian species extinct.

B, b

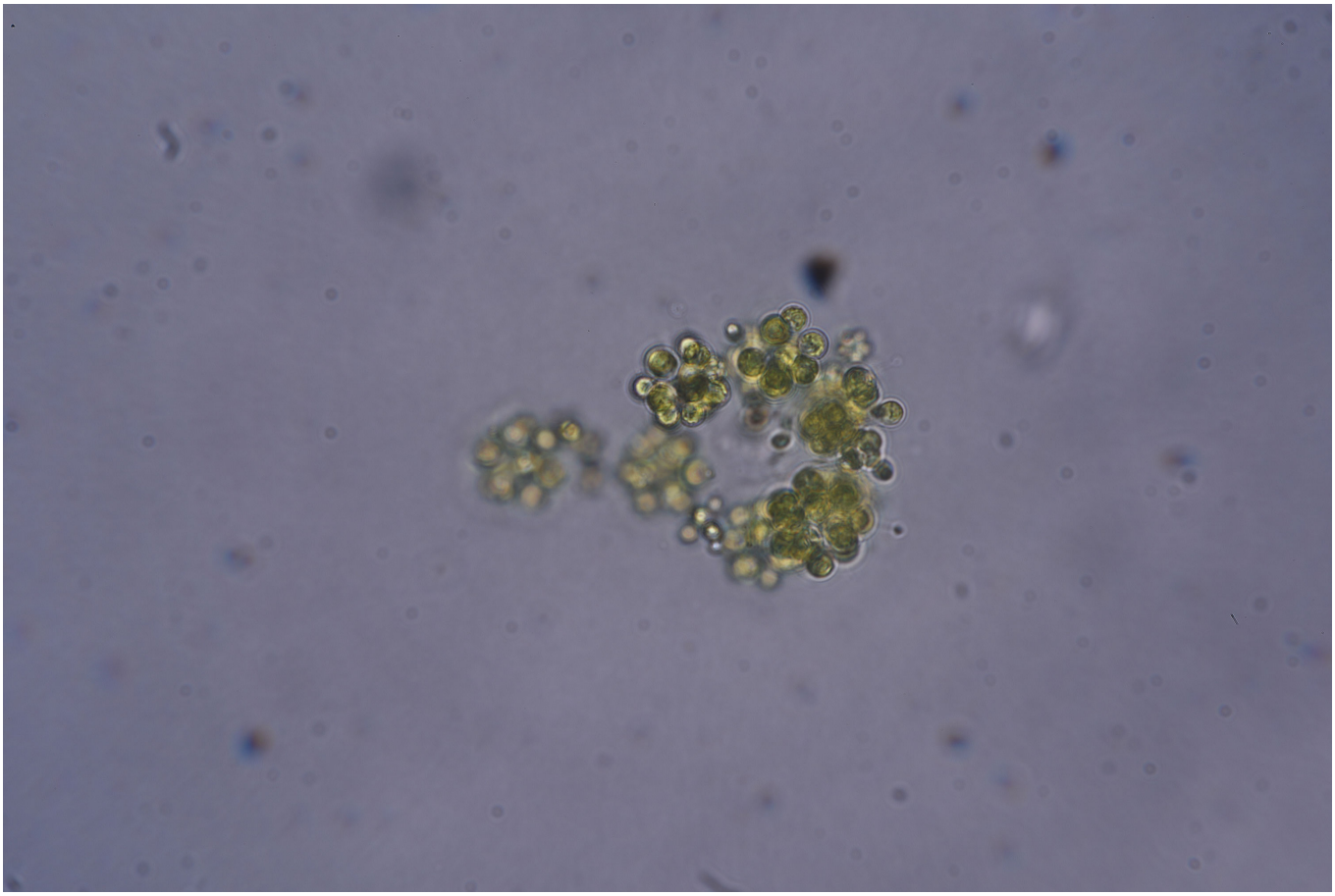
BOATS / BODIES / BIOPOLITICS, adjective (plural); adjective (plural); noun (plural):

By speaking about the ocean, invoking some of the bodies that inhabit it, we invoke: the disappeared, the decaying, the poisoned, the waterlogged, the bodies that float back to the surface and haunt us.

May 10, 1816. Ruha Benjamin recalls the Middle Passage, somewhere between the Door of No Return and the New World:

> Mostly there was silence. And the murmurs of those who are trying to make sense of where we are. In several dialects I understood the words “aliens,” “catastrophe,” “abduction,” and “jump.” All of us packed so tightly. Lying on my back I cannot bend my knees without bumping the slab of wood holding the person above me. Finally, it’s time to go above deck for the afternoon meal. But most of my companions refuse to eat the daily ration of horse beans … Just then I felt the chain around my ankle yank, and caught the eye of the Mende woman on the end of the line. In seconds, we all made it overboard, and hovering over the restless sea, I look back at the alien ship. One last time before we flew away.

September 6, 2001. Wellem Korwam, a thirty-two-year-old black man, is cut into seven pieces and dumped into the sea. The large plastic bag holding his body bulges with gas and floats in the



The chytrids fungus viewed under a microscope. Photo: Eben Kirksey.

A Seasprite helicopter performs a recce flight over grounded ship Rena. Photo: New Zealand Defence Force from Wellington, New Zealand / CC BY 2.0

water near a palm-fringed beach in West Papua. Whitish-green eyes stare unfocused at the man with the camera. His mouth gapes open in a distorted yawn. A jumble of seven different body parts are in the bag: two legs, two arms, his head and torso, and two pieces of the body's trunk. Memories surface from another moment in time, when 157 indigenous people were dumped off a ship in nearby waters. Thirty-two bodies washed ashore on the beautiful beaches of Biak Island.

Strange fruit. A cargo boat glides across the water's surface, smooth as a mirror. The ship ferries fresh exotic dreams, mostly grown in developing countries. Lychee and rambutan from Indonesia, Brazilian limes, dragon fruit from Vietnam, papayas, passion fruits, pineapples, and bananas all glow below decks with the sun-kissed allure of the Global South. Logistics experts from each country of origin must adhere to strict requirements to ensure that the pallets inside the reefer containers arrive at their destinations without malarial mosquitoes, or traces of corruption, hunger, and civil war to ruin the fruit. New flavors satisfy increasing demands. No compromises can be accepted when it comes to hygiene. Temperatures must be controlled.

April 18th, 2015, in the middle of the night. In international waters between Libya and the Italian island of Lampedusa, a nameless wooden boat issues a distress signal, invoking the International Law of the Sea. The boat, a former fishing trawler, carries upwards of 1,1000 migrants who are trying to reach Europe. Alerted by the Italian Coast Guard, *The King Jacob* (a Portuguese container ship that is 147 meters long) comes to the rescue. The two boats collide. This collision happens on more than one plane simultaneously. Up until a few minutes before the encounter, the boats were navigating parallel oceans. Only one of those oceans – the one through which goods are transported – is considered fully visible. The other ocean, the one that is ferrying black and brown bodies towards Fortress Europe, is more clandestine and much more cruel. Opportunists with faulty navigation instruments traffic in people amidst shifting legislation, greed, and the flow of capital.

After the collision of both boats and both oceans, hundreds of bodies began to sink into the Mediterranean. Restless on the seabed, some 370 meters below, they joined the subhuman sea state with other decomposing evidence of European necropolitics.

June 30, 2016. One last image: a nameless wooden boat arrives in the Port of Augusta, Sicily. It had been hoisted to the surface, at a cost of 9.5 million euros. The boat was given a name, *Barca Nostra* ("Our Boat," but who are "we"?). It was shown as a ready-made at the 2019 Venice Biennale. One person's death goes into circulation as another person's work of art.

C, c

CIRCULATION, noun:

To read a rubber duck.

Plastic flotsam and jetsam has been moving across the seas for nearly one hundred years, navigating ocean currents, converging into the Pacific Vortex. An undead plastic bag speaks through Werner Herzog about its journey. In a soliloquy, alone on a beach, the bag says: "No one needs me here anymore, not even my maker." After a perilous voyage, after swimming with jellyfish past monstrous leviathans, the bag sings: "And I was born again / I learned to use the currents of the water as I had used the currents of the wind / I made it to the vortex. I was with my own kind. We covered an area the size of a small continent. We were free and happy. I loved going in circles. In circles. In circles."

Pick up a piece of sun-bleached plastic from the shore, and test it for legibility. Peel the brittle flakes with your fingernail as if you were scraping a palimpsest, uncovering layers of meaning. Hydrocarbons of a dinosaur, you say. They are undead plankton, I counter – the "weaponized fossil kin" of Zoe Todd. Look again then, squint your eyes just right. You hold a timepiece. Diamonds last forever.

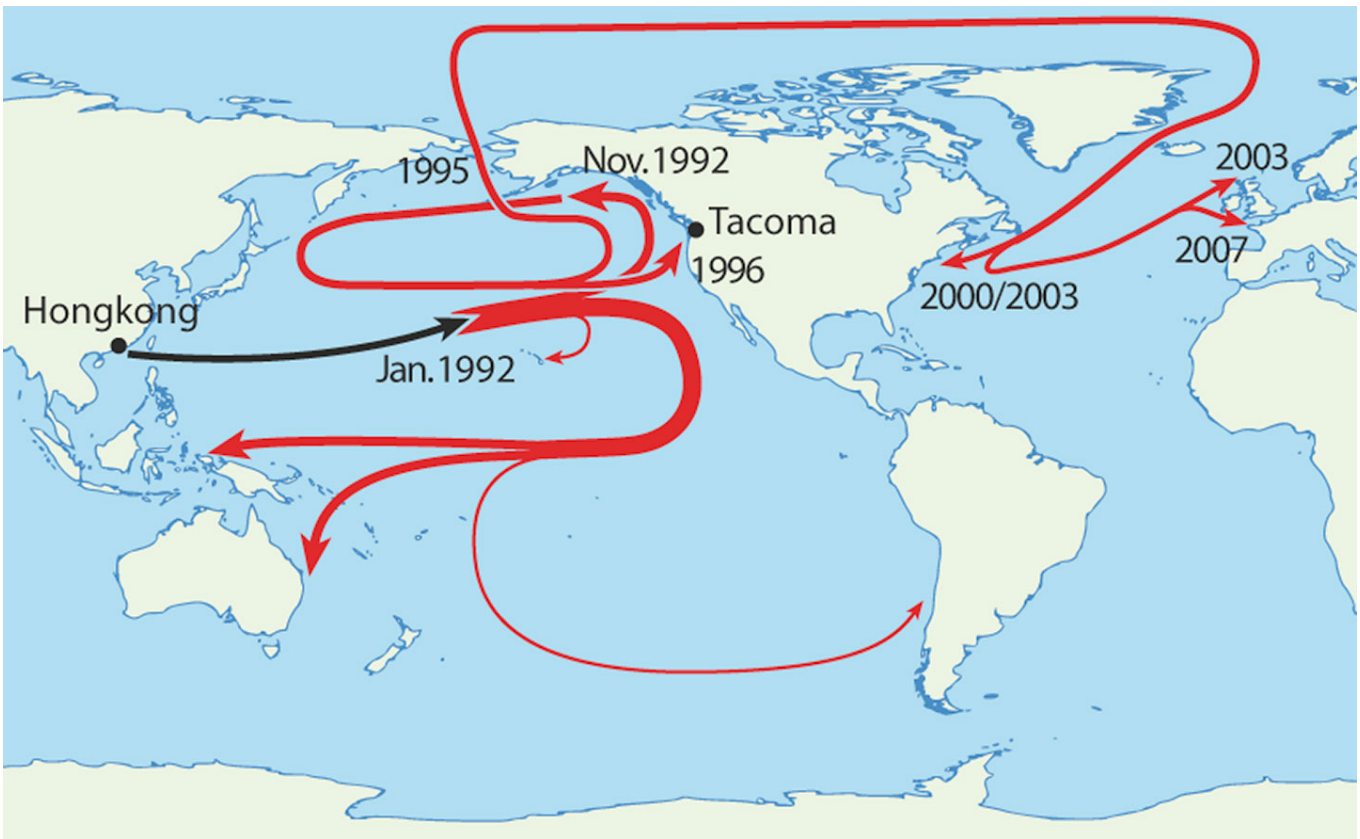
January 10, 1992. A cargo ship travelling from Hong Kong to Washington State lost a dozen cargo containers when they were washed overboard during a storm in the North Pacific Ocean. Bathtub toys – some 28,800 red beavers, blue turtles, green frogs, and yellow ducks – began travelling on oceanic currents. The ducks were actually plastic, not rubber. The initial landfall was in Alaska. Some of the plastic animals bobbed back east to Japan, Indonesia, Australia. Some got stuck in Artic ice; others eventually washed ashore in Europe. Bleached by sun and seawater, the ducks and beavers have faded to white, but the turtles and frogs remain bright blue and green, some thirty years later.

White ducks continue to tumble in the Pacific Vortex, completing a circuit every three years. Theirs are plastic bodies that cannot be put to rest. Imagine if they could be liberated from this undead dance, this endless circulation. "I spun around so fast that I was free," says Herzog, as the bag tumbles away from the vortex, in search of its maker. "Like a fool, I still have hope I will meet her again. And if I do, I will tell her just one thing: I wish that you had created me so that I could die."

D, d

DOUBLE DEATH, compound noun:

Life is becoming nonlife on a planetary scale.



Different routes taken by the friendly floatees initially lost in the Pacific Ocean in 1992. Photo: Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 3.0

Fire on the drilling rig *Deepwater Horizon* as viewed from the offshore supply vessel *Laney Chouest.* Photo: Sallad997 (Richard Sullivan)/CC BY-SA 3.0

Ecological communities – associations of predators and prey, omnivorous scavengers, parasites and hosts – normally depend on ongoing intergenerational cycles of life and death. The food web is premised on reciprocity among species. Life usually offers an intergenerational gift with death.

October 19, 2019. "Ohhhhh, a whale fall!" croons a man – a researcher taking part in a remote-control submarine expedition, with the Monterey Bay Aquarium. "YESSS!" hisses a woman with joy. "That is phenomenal," says another man. "Oh my god there are so many," says the woman, as fifteen giant purple octopi come into view around a partially decayed whale skeleton, upwards of five meters long. The video is streaming live on YouTube. "This is a baleen whale and you can see the baleen," says another woman. "Somebody tell Twitter," someone says. "Twitter is with us." "Oh my goodness," a man says. "Look at them." "Wooooow." "Talk about the dinner bell ringing, right." "Do we have any bone-eating worms?"

Hercules, the submarine, hovers over the skeleton. The camera zooms in on the whale's protruding ribs, which are covered with brown fuzz. A woman confirms that the fuzz is a forest of "bone-eating snot flower worms," also known as genus *Osedax*. "These are worms that have symbiotic associations with bacteria," the woman continues. "They have no more gut themselves, instead they have these rootlets that burrow into the bone and then the bacteria are able to metabolize the fats and oils that are in the bone itself." Octopi, eels, and ghostly white fish take a break from their meal to peer back at the bright lights. "Think of how many calories are in a whale," says a man. "Episodic falls of food are a ... *bonanza*, I think is the word."

Sea burials for humans were once commonplace. From Bronze Age Crete, to the Pacific Islands of the early twentieth century, many people have marked the passage of ancestors into the oceanic underworld with rites of dignity, grace, and ecological reciprocity. Then the moderns arrived with colonial hygiene. Enlightened people began pretending that they were outside intergenerational cycles of death and life. But foundational errors in modern ontologies and epistemologies are becoming apparent again as life becomes nonlife on a planetary scale.

Processes that uncouple life and death, diminishing death's capacity to turn dying back toward the living, produce "double death." This idea of double death emerged on land, in the context of white settler colonialism in the Northern Territories of Australia. Ranchers and conservationists trying to kill "invasive species" in Australia often use poison, as Deborah Bird Rose describes in her 2011 book *Wild Dog Dreaming*. One of the main targets of Australia's widespread chemical campaign is the dingo, a companion species of Aboriginal Australians.

Humans share basic biology with the dingo. If you were to eat one of the poison baits used in this campaign – a compound known as 1080 – you would experience nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, sweating, confusion, agitation, followed by cardiac abnormalities, seizures, and unconsciousness. You would become progressively impaired over a few hours. Eventually you would fall into a coma and die. Carcasses of animals killed by 1080 continue to kill others in the afterlife. Double death reverberates through ecosystems as living creatures feed on poisoned carrion for sustenance. As the poison moves through generations and across species lines, life becomes nonlife. 1080 poison is just one industrial product among many others that are producing double death on a planetary scale.

Our oceans are full of double death. The seas are awash with fungicides, insecticides, and broad-spectrum biocides that were developed for commercial agricultural production. DDT, the broad-spectrum insecticide that is now infamous for its accumulation in the food web, still lingers in the waters, as Rachel Carson predicted in 1962. Poisons disperse in plumes, well beyond their intended targets. Petroleum by-products, paints, solvents, glues, battery acid, and binding agents are accumulating in landfills, seeping into waterways. As industrial chemicals react with each other, they become beside themselves with dissolution and glee. Plastics spinning in the Pacific Vortex generate double death as birds, marine mammals, turtles, and fish try to eat them.

If life and nonlife usually exist in a dynamic relationship – with gifts of energy and matter across time – processes of double death are scaling up. They are starting to embrace and endanger planetary ecologies. Elizabeth Povinelli describes geological forces that show a planetary trend of becoming-nonliving. "Life and Nonlife breathe in and breathe out. And if Nonlife spawned Life, a current mode of Life may be returning the favor." Plantation economies, capital flows, and global war are producing a massive thanatological becoming. Forms of nonlife are overcoming the living.

Eugene Thacker argues that philosophers should abandon fundamental questions like "what is life?" and "what is not life?" Instead,

Thacker is interested in "the question of the life that becomes not-life, an other-than-life, a becoming-nonliving." Writing in an allied spirit of animist exuberance in *Vibrant Matter*, the classic book on "thing power," Jane Bennett makes an argument for flattening ontologies. Bennett (echoing John Frow) suggests that differences between things like a dead rat, oak pollen, a plastic glove, and a bottle cap need "to be flattened, read horizontally as a juxtaposition rather than vertically as a hierarchy of being." Bennett insists that "everything is, in a sense, alive." Instead of sharing this enthusiasm "about the liveliness of 'matter itself,'" we are haunted by the oceanic undead.

Life is becoming not-life and other-than-life, in ongoing chains of destruction within precarious human and multispecies worlds. Exposing and reconfiguring this new form of death is critical to planetary survival.

E, e

EXTRACTION, noun:

Conjuring the dead is black magic. And this is the magic of modernity. Speed is a parlor trick, a sleight of hand. Really bad vibes.

January 10, 1901. The first gusher erupts with Texas black gold. Undead sea life trapped beneath a cap of salt deposited during the Jurassic erupts into the sky for nine days. Pent up, packed away, undisturbed, inside the earth for millions of years the undead are destructive and generative. Unimaginable pressure. The Spindletop gusher blew out existing extraction technologies with a flood of oil that dwarfed the production rate of all previous wells in the United States combined. New technologies, modes of production, forms of capital, and practices of mobility emerged from this flow of fossil fuel.

Exhuming dead plants and animals from the ground – channelling them into pipelines and machinic assemblages – produced new, emergent worlds. Death-energy accumulated across millennia began to animate new, post-human beings and things – making them move faster, and faster still. A precipice of time emerged with coal-powered steam engines and railroads. This was the beginning of modern speed. For a while, nobody bothered to read the small print. But of course, there was a catch: as life became fast, death came faster. Moving at hyper-speed only accelerates collective death. Now we ship chytrid fungus zoospores and coronavirus particles through global supply chains and transportation infrastructures like never before. At the same time, the undead become free carbon, wheeling around in the atmosphere – liberated from their geological beds. The greenhouse effect is runaway.

April 20, 2010, approximately 9:50 p.m. A BP oil rig worker is rushing the job. On the ocean floor below, under nearly one mile of water, he is drilling deep – past 18,360 feet, pushing up against the limits of human agency and action. His name is not important. Even though so many things had already gone wrong with what he called "the well from hell," the companies that summoned him to the job – British Petroleum, Transocean, Halliburton – were prodding him forward. Another veteran oil-field worker who worked the same well recalled, "Safety didn't get you promoted. They wanted speed." The well was slapping back at the rig workers, with hazardous gas belches called "kicks." The Deepwater Horizon team was forty-three days behind schedule, and management was demanding that they throw caution to the wind. Then, as Carl Safina reports: "A sudden influx of gas into the well. Rushing up the pipe … Explosion. Fireball."

Oil flooded into the Gulf of Mexico for months. Pelicans, turtles, and even hermit crabs became new iconic abject figures. Undead animals covered in a sheen of crude oil. They were barely able to live; unable to quickly die. Obama fined BP $20 billion USD. Clean-up crews and conservation workers were busy along the Gulf Coast. But the event could not be undone. The magic of petrochemical capitalism revealed its limits. "The law says that for every animal that BP is liable for killing, they have to replace," says Scott Eustis of the Gulf Restoration Network. But the law has limits too. Eustis says: "Dolphins can't be conjured out of the air."

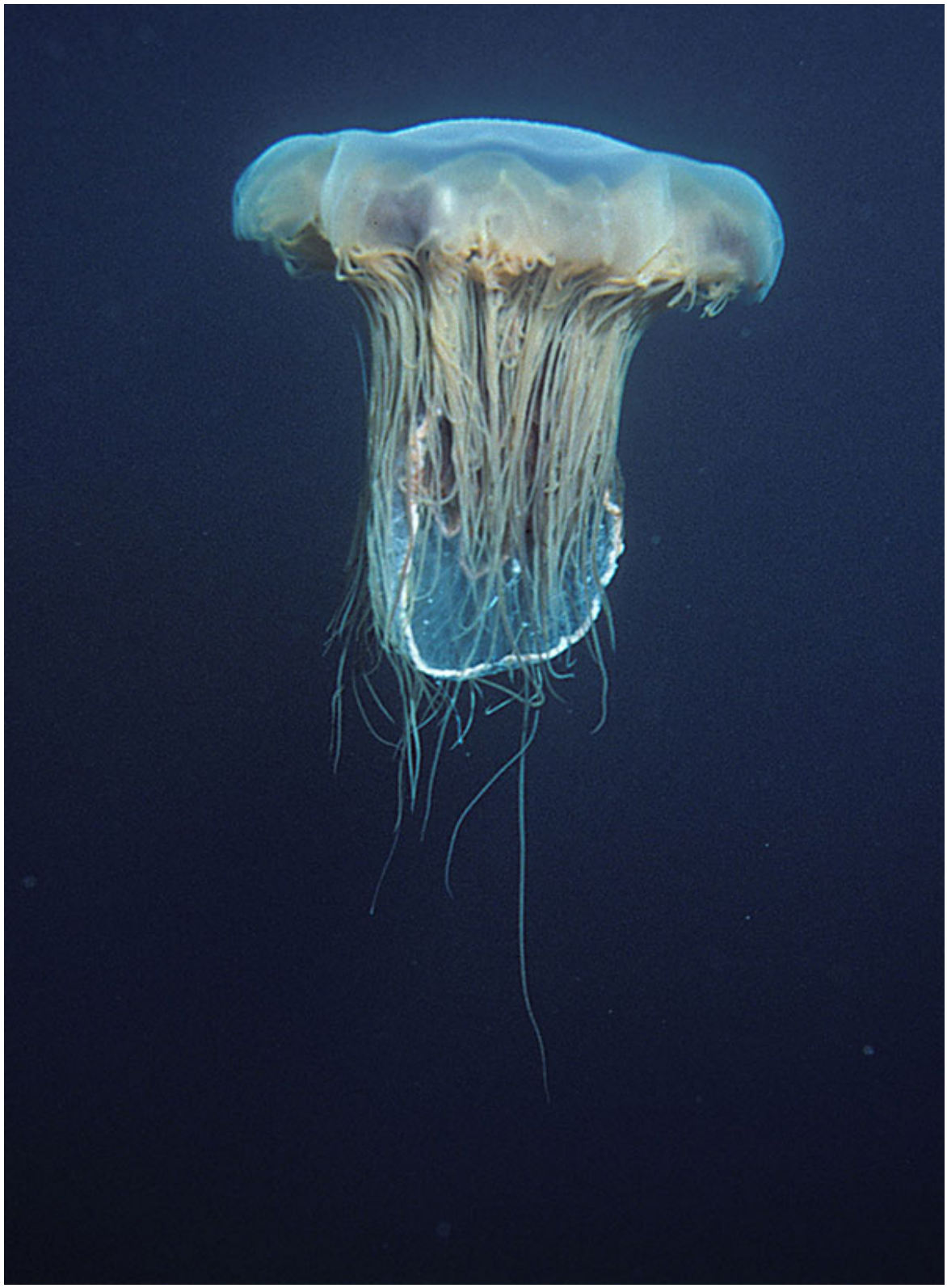
F, f

(POSSIBLE) FUTURES, plural noun (modified with adjective):

The future? There is no way to predict how any of this will be read over time.

One present that we know is southern, equatorial. Suspended time is held together with bobby pins and chewing gum. Pandemic glitches and workarounds are nothing new in worlds that exist in a patchwork of imperfect infrastructure.

Julieta: The southern future is an impossible place where the real lived pain of people is obscured by foreign anecdotes and holiday photographs. This is a time-register that I have never been able to leave, no matter how far away from it I travel. Even if geographical dislocation allows me to live in two, three, or four time zones at once, equatorial time seems to be the only temporality and futurity that really counts. And some days, when I try to imagine the world that lies ahead, I end up feeling as if there is no point to that thought exercise, because I am already extinct. This has nothing to do with reproduction. It is about looking toward ready-made futures, and always getting a bleak picture



Lion's mane jellyfish, or hair jelly, *Cyanea capillata*, the largest know jellyfish in Newfoundland, Canada. Photo: Derek Keats / CC BY 2.0.

in return: there is nothing there that looks like me. Is the future a space of possibility, or is it a resource to be deployed and exhausted?

Perhaps a big part of the problem is that the colonial project of the West ran out of space. It must have been easier when the maps had blank spots, and unknowns upon which to project totalizing ambitions. Without any planetary territory left to claim, and with outer space being both expensive and hostile to life, the colonization of time probably appeared like a viable alternative. The dreams of capital started to extend beyond the present, turning time into something to spend, where all wishes could be anticipated by algorithms.

At this point of algorithmic wish fulfilment, the majority of projections of futurity currently in circulation reveal themselves to be glaringly insufficient. This year, 2020, has shown us the modest limits of human techno-scientific power, and the ease with which future projections can be dismantled. Yes, we can get another Amazon delivery tomorrow – a temporary palliative – but is that really the future?

So let's try again. But instead of letting Jeff Bezos colonize time itself, let's revisit the idea of "oceanic feeling." In 1927, Romain Rolland – a prominent French art historian, Orientalist, and mystic – penned a critical letter to Sigmund Freud about the latter's book *The Future of an Illusion*. An intuitive feeling of contact with immense (often religious) forces exists in millions of people, according to Rolland, "without perceptible boundaries," like the ocean. According to Freud, this is "a sensation of 'eternity'... something limitless, unbounded – as it were, 'oceanic.'" One might harbour this oceanic feeling "even if one rejects every belief and every illusion" of established religious traditions. Freud sneers at oceanic feeling as "an early stage in ego-feeling"; he denigrates it as "limitless narcissism." Sidestepping this dispute between an Orientalist and a psychoanalyst – each with their own ego-feelings – we reach instead toward the wonder of eternity and the boundlessness of the ocean. Oceanic feelings open into multiple temporalities, with simultaneous and (possibly) conflicting narratives.

Oceans are acidifying and getting hot. But an apocalyptic story line does not capture the complexity of the moment. Worlds are ending, even as new forms of flourishing become possible. Jellyfish populations are exploding with exuberance, even as coral reefs are bleaching. While leaning into oceanic feelings, we must remember the ongoing cascades of death, and the cruelty of optimism.

Some dreams are cruel because they are "*im*possible, sheer fantasy," in the words of Lauren Berlant, "or *too* possible, and toxic." Global climate change is outpacing all attempted solutions. The distributed enterprises filling the ocean with plastic seem unstoppable, at least in the short term. But even if we are powerless to prevent certain futures, or even transform our present circumstances, a dystopian perspective is nothing but a trap. Dystopia is not generative. It produces passive resignation to the unavoidable – resigning the future to fate.

Eben: Born in the homogenous empty time of Regan and Bush, when capitalism gunned down democracy. This is a time that I learned to leave – finding glimmers of hope at the intersection of social and multispecies worlds. In times of extinction and extraction, it is time to own up to the ways that our own modes of existence are entangled with the dead and the dying. Tactical opportunities lie ahead. We can expose and derail the predictable functioning of power. Careful articulation work is needed to establish and sustain new life-support systems. We can dismantle the assemblages generating double death, and discover new possibilities of love and life.

We escape the monolithic (and insufficient) depictions of calamity and dystopia by way of modest thinking. It is time to address the things that we want a future for, individually, carefully, thoughtfully, and most importantly, with imagination. Not the Future with a capital F, but the many futures: contradictory, complex, interwoven.

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