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Drawing Reflection: “Ultramarine”

“Ultramarine” is a water- and mixed media drawing that was created in response to water scholar Astrida Neimanis’ question: “might art be a form of care?” (“Care for the Stranded”). Drawing on queer, Black, and Indigenous thought, “Ultramarine” is an exploration of drawing as care. My primary text for the piece is Christina Sharpe’s essay, “Chapter One: The Wake.” Her call to engage in “wake work” (13), or “imagining new ways to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery’s afterlives, to survive (and more) the afterlife of property” (18) led my theoretical and emotional approach. Thinking and drawing like water, “Ultramarine” explores how drawing can help us to be in deep, loving relationship with water and all the beings, stories, and memories it holds. Drawing to remember the unremembered is an act of anti-colonial feminist resistance, an act of care. Water remembers.

“Ultramarine” engages in wake work by working with water in a material and metaphorical way. It depicts a funeral wake on top of a boat’s wake to signify mourning for the enslaved Africans who died in the Middle Passage and whose bodies are still present in the ocean (19). The figures carrying the coffin in the funeral wake are abstract, anonymous. As they come closer, they are more fully rendered, culminating in the main figure, Frank Ocean. Sharpe writes, “[I]ike Hartman I include the personal here, ‘to tell a story capable of engaging and countering the violence of abstraction’” (Hartman in Sharpe 8). I chose to draw Ocean because of his song “Swim Good,” which is about his desire to escape anti-Black violence by swimming. Using

water media to draw Ocean resulted in drips, imprecisions, and value shifts that allowed the materiality of water to guide the formation of the figure. A literal body of water.

Black feminist marine writer Alexis Pauline Gumbs does wake work in her book, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, by thinking through her relations to water kin. She names great blue whales as relatives and admires their ability to send calls through the ocean. She writes,

“M. Nourbese Philip taught me that water holds sound, that it can reverberate on and on and keep calling us. And so maybe the calls of the great blue whales who filled the whole ocean (before twentieth-century commercial ventures killed 95 percent of them) are still blessing our water selves now. Are still in residence, as Christina Sharpe reminds us.”

(Gumbs)

Drawing on Philip and Sharpe, Gumbs reaches into the past through water. In the spirit of honouring marine mammals and the pasts they carry, I drew the mammal figure in the top right corner, diving into the wake.

Cleo Wölfle-Hazard’s book, *Underflows: Queer Trans Ecologies and River Justice* also influenced “Ultramarine.” The first things I drew were images derived from hir writings on salmon, beavers, and memory as well as the scientific diagrams of rivers; the rest of the composition formed in response to them. In chapter 3, “The Watershed Body: Queer Trans Moves in Beaver Collaboration,” Wölfle-Hazard argues that the memories people carry about beavers can be read as queer ephemera. Ze cites José Esteban Muñoz’s account of seeing Black genderqueer dancer Kevin Aviance’s performance and hir own experiences with beavers to make this connection: “For me, Muñoz’s narrative of Aviance’s performance brought back memories of fabulous drag performers in clubs and warehouses and also of seeing beavers or their traces in

the field on various tangled riverbanks” (131). Memory is central here. Memories of drag and beavers and their traces constitute a kind of queer ephemeral evidence of the “flamboyant excess” and “selfless abundance” (125) of queer performers and beavers. I represent the extravagance of water and the knowledge it carries with the splattering of blue acrylic ink underneath the beaver figure.

Astrida Neimanis’ chapter “Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water” and their talk, “Care for the Stranded” provided a crucial theoretical basis for “Ultramarine,” too. The dotted line and oval shapes in the yellow mammal figure were inspired by their account of watching a necropsy of a porpoise (“Care for the Stranded”), while the image of flooding in “Hydrofeminism” is a continued thread from Wölfle-Hazard’s work on beavers. Like Sharpe, Neimanis is attentive to the memories water and water beings hold. “Just as the deep oceans harbour particulate records of former geological eras, water retains our more anthropomorphic secrets, even when we would rather forget. Our distant and more immediate pasts are returned to us in both trickles and floods” (98). The necropsy shows us that water beings carry traces of their lives in their bodies in the form of particles and other ephemeral evidence. The marks inside the mammal’s body are representations of these kinds of “trickles and floods” (98) of the past, of memory. The radical abundance of a flood is an offering of remembrance in the wake.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s lecture, “A Short History of the Blockade: Giant Beavers, Diplomacy, and Regeneration in Nishnaabewin,” and her article, “Looking After Gdoo-Naaganinaa: Precolonial Nishnaabeg Diplomatic and Treaty Relationships” guided the representation of fish and beavers in “Ultramarine.” Simpson asks us to imagine “A beaver dam, a blockade: Life giving. Generative. Affirmative. A world-building place, governed by deep relationality” (“A Short History” 15). In her account of precolonial Nishnaabeg international

relations, Simpson shares that twice each year, “the fish nations and the fish clans gathered to talk, to tend to their treaty relationships, and to renew life” (“Looking after Gdoo-Naaganinaa” 33). To flood is to give life. To flood is to remember. As an offering of Beaver’s brilliance, I drew Beaver in the process of building a dam, sharing life.

Remembering is wake work. In “Ultramarine,” I am using water-based art as a form of care and memory and asking myself, ‘where have you drawn what flows out of you?’” (Irigaray in Neimanis 102). These queer, trans, Black, and Indigenous lessons of water and memory are crucial in this moment. In this time of overwhelming violence against Palestinians, how can we attend to the deaths of all the beings, land, sky, and water that live in Palestine? How might drawing care for all the life that was and is? I do not have all the answers, but the brilliant authors, artists, and makers who informed “Ultramarine” have given me some tools. Becoming a body of water, swimming, storytelling, sharing, remembering. I’ll leave the last words to Simpson: “This is about the kind of worlds we collectively want to live it (sic). Indigenous Worlds. Black Worlds. Beaver Worlds. Anti-Colonial Worlds” (57).

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