

# Thinking with Sharks: Racial Terror, Species Extinction and the Other Anthropocene Fault Lines

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Bone soldered by coral to bone,  
mosaics  
mantled by the benediction of the shark's shadow,  
  
that was the Ark of the Covenant.

(Derek Walcott, 'The Sea is History')

**W**HEN I SEE THE INCREASINGLY UBIQUITOUS IMAGES OF FINNED SHARKS DISCARDED on reefs, or of coral heads bleached into skeletal states of zombification, these lines by Derek Walcott echo in my mind.<sup>1</sup> The echo is of course discordant. Walcott's requiem is for the hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of African captives cast overboard during the Middle Passage into New World slavery, many of whom were consumed by sharks. Far from

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<sup>1</sup> I first floated thinking with sharks as a way of reading a present marked simultaneously by racial terror and species extinction at a workshop on 'The Climate of Race' (University of Witwatersrand, 2016). I am grateful to the organisers—Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe of Wits and Robert Bernasconi and Nancy Tuana of Penn State University—along with the other participants, for setting this paper in motion. I am grateful also to the conveners of the symposium on 'Uncanny Objects in the Anthropocene' (University of Tasmania, 2017), who are also the editors of this special section, as well as to the other participants, for helping to give it shape.

incidental to the slave trade, sharks, moreover, appear to have ‘functioned as an integral part of a system of terror utilized by the slave ship captain’ to transform captive humans into racialised commodities (Rediker 285): slavers would deliberately throw dead, ailing or recalcitrant Africans overboard and actively courted shark retinues in order to present survivors with an object lesson in the spectacle of their fellows being degraded to the status of meat. The ‘submarine’ history of the New World to which Walcott alludes is and should be a source of incalculable grief. My purpose is not to set the remains of consumed humans and those of finned sharks side by side in order to perform the ‘dreaded comparison’ (cf. Spiegel). Instead of thinking *about* sharks as a comparable species, I propose thinking *with* them as what Donna Haraway terms a ‘companion species’ (Haraway) in order to trace both the threads of transspecies entanglement and the intraspecies fractures that compose and capture disposable life in the interminable regime of racial capitalism.<sup>2</sup> Working away at this snarl, this essay attends to the haunting afterlife of racial terror, which unsettles the universalising framing of an epoch that is said to return humanistic enquiry to ‘species thinking’ by virtue of ‘the human’s’ demonstrated ability to effect mass extinction on others (see Chakrabarty).

Walcott’s poem is a fitting epitaph for an epoch in which the distinction between human and natural history is understood to have ‘collapsed’ (Chakrabarty 208).<sup>3</sup> Yet what it records is the ongoing struggle of many humans to have their history—and their humanity—recognised. His speaker is responding to an interrogatory addressee, who demands evidence of Caribbean culture in the form of ‘monuments’, ‘battles’, ‘martyrs’ and ‘tribal memory’. The rejoinder is that these civilisational indexes have been ‘locked... up’ in the ‘gray vault’ of the ocean where they lie shrouded beneath the shadow of the shark. Thus: ‘the sea is History’. The human-natural history of the ‘submarine’ world is, however, now also haunted by the devastation of sharks. Jan Zalasiewicz and Mark Williams estimate that this keystone species, which has maintained the marine food chain for 400 million years and survived four mass extinction events, is showing population declines of 90 percent to 99 percent, particularly in the north-west Atlantic, with some shark species currently facing a ‘real risk of extinction’ (164).

Thinking with sharks compels attention to the despoliation of black lives and black lands by racial capitalism as well as to how this despoliation has ensnared sharks in an injurious net of cultural inscription. It brings to the fore the uneven distribution of vulnerability and grievability between and within species by surfacing the human-and-natural histories in which sharks were used to cast the majority of the human population beyond the pale of life-that-matters by reducing

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<sup>2</sup> See Appleby and Pennycook for a resonant account of ‘swimming with sharks’.

<sup>3</sup> As Handley notes, in a fine reading of the poem and of Walcott’s oeuvre: ‘Walcott’s poetry consistently searches for the merger between human and natural history’ (17).

their status to meat. Finally, it nudges me towards an embrace of the condition of what Val Plumwood describes as ‘being prey’. Reconciling ourselves to this condition might paradoxically permit enlivening apprehensions of the dehumanising and more-than-human nature of these times while fostering what Christina Sharpe terms ‘wake work’—a mode of standing watch over and working away at the ‘ongoing disaster’ set in motion by the slave ships that traversed the Atlantic and which reverberates through the extractive planetary industries to which they gave rise.<sup>4</sup>

I proceed by way of commentary on a series of objects into which sharks surface: Damien Hirst’s tank-art installation *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991); Winslow Homer’s painting *The Gulf Stream* (1899); and a sequence of things presented in the novel *Shark* (1999) by the Indigenous Australian writer Bruce Pascoe. I read these objects—and the works in which they are presented—variously against and along the grain in order to register the uncanny effects that they in turn deflect, convey and redirect. That the Anthropocene is an uncanny time has been much remarked upon (see *inter alia* Ghosh, Morton and Purdy): the ‘creeping horror’ this eponymous epoch elicits is generated by the return of strangely familiar vulnerabilities that human mastery had sought to ward off but which, in so doing, rendered the very planet *unheimlich* in the terms elaborated by Sigmund Freud’s classic study. Uncanniness is in turn amplified by another act of repression effected in the naming of the Anthropocene after the human, which disavows ‘the ongoing disaster’ wrought by racial capitalism. The discordant echoes of thinking with sharks resound across these fault lines.

### **Uncanny Object 1: ‘The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living’<sup>5</sup>**

I like ideas of trying to understand the world by taking things out of the world. You kill things to look at them.

(Damien Hirst, *I Want to Spend the Rest of my Life... 285*)

The keynote entry of Damien Hirst’s ‘Natural History’ series was manufactured at the dawn of the whirling decade of unchecked capitalist freedoms that preceded the proposal for the declaration of the Anthropocene epoch. Comprising a vitrified tiger shark floating in formaldehyde, the work trades on the frisson of fear that the

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<sup>4</sup> See Achille Mbembe’s account of the ‘becoming black of the world’, which identifies the Atlantic as ‘the locus of a new planetary consciousness’ and maintains that ‘[i]t would be a mistake to believe that we have left behind the regime that began with the slave trade and flourished in plantation and extraction colonies’.

<sup>5</sup> Available at: <http://www.damienhirst.com/the-physical-impossibility-of->

shark is expected to evoke in order to confront an intended viewer with the mortality that has, in fact, been inflicted on it. As Hirst elsewhere states, with characteristic banality: 'You kill things to look at them'. This scopic mastery was, however, frustrated when his installation literally collapsed in upon itself. The conservation practices that—on the surface of things—are sent up by the work had apparently failed to penetrate: the deathly-yet-preserving formaldehyde in which the shark was suspended did not permeate its inner organs, and it began to decompose into an increasingly murky solution.

Funded by Charles Saatchi and first shown in his inaugural Young British Artists exhibition in 1992, *The Physical Impossibility* had catapulted Hirst into an extraordinarily lucrative notoriety and led to his nomination for the prestigious Turner Prize. It was sold in 2006 for an undisclosed sum that has in the popular imagination come to settle at the figure of US\$12 million—by far the biggest price tag that any living artist had ever successfully attached to a work (Thompson). After this record-breaking sale, Hirst decided to replace the spoiling shark with another. It was procured again from the Queensland shark hunter Vic Hislop, who apparently fulfilled the commission for three tiger sharks plus a great white and threw in another for good measure. With a replacement shark, now properly preserved, installed in the tank, *The Physical Impossibility* was displayed in the Austrian exhibition 'Re-Object' before crossing the Atlantic to take up a residence in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art (Thompson 1-2, 61).

Hirst's extortionate pickled shark ostensibly challenges exceptionalism by encouraging human viewers to reflect on their own object nature. Its conceit is that the presentation of a competing apex predator would summon these viewers into what Gilles Deleuze, regarding Francis Bacon (whom Hirst has claimed as an influence), identifies as the *zone of indiscernibility or undecidability* between man and animal' that is meat (21). But can I really apprehend my status as prey before a thing that has been taken out of the world so that I might look at it? Am I alternatively compelled to admit my consuming nature before the mirror of a creature killed by human hand? I think not. The act of recognition that Hirst's installation mounts is actually one of misrecognition. What becomes obscured in it is precisely the implication that the species it has taken out of the world is being decimated through the very trade in luxury goods that this exorbitant artwork epitomises.

The uncanny effect with which Hirst flirts is thus determinedly warded off by the work itself. What it sells instead is a comforting shoring up of boundaries: rather than marking their collapse into one another, the fissure between human and natural histories is deepened through this staged doubling of predator/prey in which the killed-to-be-looked-at party is itself—by the time of its display in 'Re-Object'—a substitute, as if to underline its disposability. As Freud points out in

his study of ‘The “Uncanny”’, doubling is the means by which the subject seeks its own ‘preservation against extinction’ (235). Hence, the ‘physical impossibility of death’ for the human viewer is secured through the expendable nature of the shark.

My response to Hirst is of course something of a cheap shot at an easy target, but I evoke *The Physical Impossibility* here because, as Luke White observes in his astute analysis, the way in which it employs the shark to associate ‘an aesthetic of terrible nature with the capitalist sublime’ is so balefully indicative of its times. And it is here that the uncanny effect of the work lies: this late twentieth-century braid is a strangely familiar reprising of that which characterised the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. What thus returns unbidden in Hirst’s ‘Natural History’ tank art is the calculated despoliation of the planet, and more particularly that of the various peoples and territories rendered subject to the mercantile and imperial regimes of extraction that were the advance guard in the making-uninhabitable of the world.

Encapsulated in this unsettling effect is the life and afterlife of the indigenous Khoisan woman, Sarah Bartmann, who was in 1810 shipped out from the slave-holding Cape Colony in what is now South Africa to be exhibited in freak shows under the stage name ‘Hottentot Venus’. Rather than the more typical features of oddity, Bartmann’s denigrating display—some two miles from the location of the gallery where *The Physical Impossibility* was later launched—presented her to metropolitan audiences as a ‘perfect specimen’ of her race. When she later crossed the channel from Piccadilly to Paris, she passed from spectacle to scientific artefact. Following her early death in 1816, her remains were dissected by Georges Cuvier, who made a plaster cast of her body and preserved her genitals and brain in formaldehyde before penning a report that inscribed her as the iconic figure of African womanhood in metropolitan fantasies: as fundamentally primitive and lascivious, and as bordering on the animalistic. Her bottled remains were subsequently displayed in the Museum of Natural History in support of Cuvier’s theory of biologically distinct—and varyingly developed—races and which bolstered imperial constructions of African peoples, and African lands, as inviting penetration and plunder.<sup>6</sup>

Hirst’s dead shark—which is similarly manipulated into a pose of ferocity in order to authorise the retaliatory violence that has already consigned it to a vitrine of formaldehyde—recalls the injurious embrace of species science and scientific

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<sup>6</sup> Later transferred to the Museum of Mankind, Bartmann’s remains were eventually sequestered in its basement during the metropolitan repression of imperial histories in the 1970s; when campaigns for their return to South African soil began in the mid 1990s, Museum officials initially denied their existence. Bartmann’s remains were finally returned to South Africa for burial in 2002 (see Samuelson).

racisms in ways that should give us pause in proclaiming that the division between natural and human histories has now crumbled in what are, for many, iteratively—rather than newly—catastrophic times. Nicholas Mirzoeff, who provocatively asks what it means to say ‘#blacklivesmatter in the context of the Anthropocene’, notes pointedly that Cuvier’s stratigraphic enquiries and his climacteric establishment of the fact of species extinction immediately preceded and informed his theory of race. ‘Stratigraphy’, he concludes, ‘was shaped by the doubled desire to mark the historic eras of the Earth’s history *and* to trace a systemic boundary between races as a means of containing and displacing abolition and revolution’.

The uncanny nature of Hirst’s ‘re-object’ reverberates also in its production in his art ‘factory’ and in its trans-Atlantic passage to the New York Metropolitan Museum, which follows in reverse the final leg of the triangular trade along which the luxury goods produced by slave labour and procured with profits from the sale of persons were conveyed for metropolitan consumption. The ships that traversed the Middle Passage with plantation-bound Africans stowed in the hold functioned, as Marcus Rediker puts it, as a ‘factory that manufactured two related products: labor power and “race”’ (286). It seems that, like Hirst, they also manufactured sharks. It is telling that the monstrous figure called ‘shark’ comes into existence entangled in the objectified, animalised and socially-dead subject of what was variously termed the trade in ‘black gold’ or ‘human flesh’. Introduced in 1569 to name what contemporary English audiences knew as the more benign ‘dog fish’ or declared a ‘marueilous straunge Fishe’, the word ‘shark’ is thought to be an adaptation of ‘xoc’ (pronounced ‘choke’) that slavers picked up from the Indigenous peoples of the Caribbean before subjecting them to genocide to clear the ground for sugar-cane plantations (Rediker 286). The cultural re-inscription that is taking entire species of sharks out of the world—and of which Hirst’s installation forms part—is thus knotted into the enslavement and genocide of African and Caribbean persons.

A final twist: William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, which was first produced a half century after a ‘marueilous straunge Fishe’ became a ‘shark’, and which presents one of the enduring cultural scripts for the interpretation and re-interpretation of racial colonisation along with a proto-anthropocenic storm, features a scene in which Caliban—the islander whom Prospero has taken as slave—is declared ‘A strange fish!’ The character who thus describes him proceeds to speculate: ‘Were I in England now—as once I was—and had but this fish painted, not a holiday fool but would give a piece of silver: there would this monster make a man’ (Shakespeare 2.ii). Such was the dreadful fate of Sarah Bartmann. It was shared, more recently, by two tiger sharks, which made of Hirst that to which Shakespeare’s Trinculo aspired.

## Uncanny Object 2: 'The Gulf Stream'<sup>7</sup>

... Achille! My main man, my nigger!

circled by his chain-sawing sharks; the ropes in his neck  
turned his head towards Africa in *The Gulf Stream*,  
which luffed him there, forever, between our island

and the coast of Guinea, fixed in the tribal dream,  
in the light that entered another Homer's hand,  
its breeze lifting the canvas from the museum.

(Derek Walcott, *Omeros*, Bk 4, Ch 36)

In his monumental translation of Homer's Mediterranean epics to the New World archipelago, Walcott pauses at midpoint to parse a work produced by 'another Homer's hand': *The Gulf Stream*. This painting was the first by a living American artist to be displayed in the museum to which Hirst's second dead shark was dispatched some hundred years later. It features a lone black sailor on the deck of a small vessel with a snapped mast that lists precariously before an approaching waterspout. The boat is moreover 'circled by... chain-sawing sharks' and stalks of sugarcane unfurl from its tomb-like hatch. The funereal composition thrusts the subject of *The Gulf Stream* into the future anterior tense, forecasting a disaster that will have happened: the sailor will have been cast into choppy waters already flecked with an anticipatory red. Far from heralding salvation, a ship passing along the horizon underlines the desperate situation of the black subject: even if aware of the wrecked craft and willing to turn off course to recover it, the full-rigged ship of state would likely not hazard the storm on his behalf (see Small).

*The Gulf Stream* was long celebrated as a universal statement about the human condition in 'the face of a remote deity and overwhelming nature' (Wood 16-17). At around the time when Hirst began pickling his first shark in order to issue a similar proclamation, new interpretations attentive to the racial subject of Homer's composition began to emerge, including that of Walcott's speaker. Observing that 'no other American painting is at once so familiar and so little understood', these revisionist responses recast it as a 'symbolic tableau of the Black Atlantic world' (Wood; see also Boime). The 'black Atlantic' is the triangular cultural formation first theorised by Paul Gilroy in his eponymous study, which

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<sup>7</sup> Available at:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Gulf\\_Stream\\_\(painting\)#/media/File:Winslow\\_Homer\\_-\\_The\\_Gulf\\_Stream\\_-\\_Metropolitan\\_Museum\\_of\\_Art.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gulf_Stream_(painting)#/media/File:Winslow_Homer_-_The_Gulf_Stream_-_Metropolitan_Museum_of_Art.jpg).

demonstrates the constitutive nature of Atlantic slavery in the forging of capitalist modernity. In a recent intervention that seeks to ‘link orders of domination among human beings to their various exploitative and extractive relationships with nature’, Gilroy recalls his prior aim as being ‘to unearth the perennially overlooked history and historicity of peoples repeatedly judged closer to nature so that they might more readily be exploited’ or who were ‘excluded from the category of human altogether so that their lives might be disposed of with impunity’ (“Where Every Breeze Speaks” 8, 9). He does so in order to redirect the current universalising turn—that would again repress these histories—towards reflection ‘on how the concept of the Anthropocene might function differently if the history of racial orders and concepts could be taken fully into account’ (“Where Every Breeze Speaks” 12). It is my contention—informed by Marcus Wood’s pioneering study of the painting—that *The Gulf Stream* enables this accounting.

Thinking with this image of a black man ‘circled by... chain-sawing sharks’ takes us to the point of articulation between the subject of race and the planetary condition that has been framed by the name of the *Anthropos*. The sugarcane and the lunging sharks that project their subject’s vulnerability to naturalised catastrophe are respectively metonymic of the New World plantations and the passage into slavery (see Wood 81). They reference the simultaneous conscription of ‘nature’ and of the black human subject by racial capitalism. As Haraway observes, in testing out the ‘Plantationocene’ as an alternative to ‘Anthropocene’ and companion to ‘Capitalocene’: ‘slave agriculture, not coal’ might be taken as a ‘key transition’ into the current planetary condition in order to register the epochal import of the relocation of ‘plants, animals, microbes, people’ for the purposes of ‘extraction’. The spectacles of racial terror in which sharks participated were instrumental to this system.

Europeans appear to have initially feared sharks more than their African and Amerindian counterparts in the Atlantic triangle, who enjoyed long-established relationships with sharks (Rediker). But the traders who docked at these shores soon enlisted sharks to distinguish themselves from those they sought to produce as commodified labour power. In the process, they rearranged the nature of shark-human interaction around the region. The Dutch merchant William Bosman records these altering relations in 1705, noting of sharks that:

These fish do no manner of damage on the whole Gold Coast; but at *Fida* and *Ardra*, where the Slave Trade is managed, they are extraordinarily ravenous, and in my Opinion fiercer than the most voracious Animal in the World...

When dead Slaves are thrown over-board, I have sometimes, not without horror, seen the dismal Rapaciousness of these Animals; four



or five of them together shoot to the bottom under the Ship to tear the dead Corps to pieces...

[W]hen our ships depart from those places, they sometimes follow them for three Weeks of a Month, waiting for more Slaves to be thrown over-board. (Bosman 281-82)

In a recent proposal for the memorialisation of the Atlantic slave trade, US Congressman Donald Payne claims even that ‘the migratory patterns of sharks’ altered to trace the passage of ‘the largest forced [human] migration in the history of the world’ (see also Wood 76-77).<sup>8</sup> Rediker is more cautious about maintaining this outcome, but is confident that the ‘historical record provides abundant evidence that sharks actually swarmed around the slave ships’ (287) and presents further examples of sources that describe individual sharks following slavers over extended distances. Sharks were also on the scene of the catastrophe that was orchestrated on the *Zong* in 1781. Running low on supplies, slavers threw 132 living captives overboard in the interests of what turned out to be a successful insurance claim against jettisoned *cargo* (the last ten refused their status as such by electing to jump) (Wolfe). This infamous but not exceptional case inspired the painting by J. M. W. Turner, *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On* (1840), which has since become known, simply, as *The Slave Ship*. The consuming appetites of the European trade in African life can be recognised in the hideous white sea-creatures writhing in the foreground of the composition.

Turner’s memorial to the *Zong* dead was acquired by the Museum of Art in Boston, Winslow Homer’s hometown, in the year that *The Gulf Stream* was completed. When the speaker in Walcott’s *Omeros* visits this museum, he sees instead Homer’s *Gulf Stream* (although it actually hangs in New York), and recognises his Caribbean Achilles in the figure ‘on the white sun-splintered deck / of the hot hull’. Emphasising the constitutive terror of the sharks, Walcott’s description of the black subject in the painting draws out also the ‘ropes in his neck’, thus recalling that Homer’s painting was produced in the period in which the aperture that abolition had briefly opened was being slammed shut by Jim Crow laws. Blackness was being refabricated through new regimes of terror that sought to extend the subjections of slavery: eighty-seven African-Americans were lynched in the year in which *The Gulf Stream* was completed alone (Boime 37). As W. E. B. Du Bois bemoans at the turn of the century, America’s growing prosperity rested on its failure to regard black life as ‘more than meat’ (94). This complaint continues to resound. Having observed a ‘man’ being made ‘nigger’ in the shark-circled tableau

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<sup>8</sup> *Congressional Record*, V. 153, PT. 8, 30 April to 9 May 2007.

before him, Walcott's speaker steps out of the gallery only to find that 'cabs, like the fall, were a matter of colour, / and several passed, empty'.

Walcott's reference to 'chain-sawing sharks' is a complicated one. It rebounds back to the opening sequences of *Omeros* in which Achille and other Caribbean fisherman 'cut down them trees' with the 'shark' like teeth of their saws in order to make their canoes. The trees are rendered as ancient gods of the forest, such that the scene is again elegiac. The wounding of the trees is being recounted to tourists, and the fishermen display their own suppurating wounds—which manifest their shackled histories—for further coins. The sequence demonstrates how, to quote Deborah Denowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, 'many of us (us humans, and the non-humans we have enslaved or colonized) are victims or culprits "all at once"' while being situated within larger force-fields that reverberate from the plantation to the global tourist market. Far from having been bleached out under the 'white sun' of the Anthropocene, race continues to matter today in, *inter alia*, the unevenly distributed vulnerability to anthropogenic climate change that recent extreme weather events in that region have revealed. As Sharpe observes of the condition that she describes as being 'in the wake': 'antiblackness is pervasive as climate'.

The sharks that followed 'in the wake' of the slave ships appear to have been willing operatives in the manufacturing of chattel out of black lives. But they are in turn entangled in this carnage in intricately damaging ways: the service into which they were recruited was world-destroying for the African captives who succumbed to and survived the middle passage; and, it has enhanced sharks' own prospects of extinction. The Anthropocene/Capitalocene/Plantationocene fueled by the labour that was forcibly extorted from enslaved Africans has propelled destructive commercial fishing practices, degraded marine habitats and stimulated tastes for luxury goods. At the same time, the extractive nature of the Atlantic trade under-developed the African continent and exposed it to subsequent predatory capital. The aftermath of slavery, and the revised human-shark relations that the trade fomented, have placed shark populations along the West African coast under particularly acute pressure as this 'fisherman's gold' becomes subject to a deadly new rush. The implications for both human and nonhuman food security on this shore are severe (see 'Shark Finning Empties West African Sea'). The shark and human populations of the 'black Atlantic' are thus ruinously knotted into this emergent epoch and subject to the disproportionate emergencies that it metes out.

### Uncanny Object 3: A Biscuit Box of Finger Bones, a Well of Sleeping Sharks or a Carved Stick

Of course they were black and of course they were killed. [...] They lived. (Pascoe, *Shark*)

Centred on a small fishing town in coastal south-eastern Australia, the proliferating plotlines of Bruce Pascoe's *Shark* extend from the Bass Straits to Thursday Island and Papua New Guinea, reaching across the region from which Hirst's sharks were procured. The novel opens with a brief introduction to a 'well-established community' before issuing the stark statement that 'Of course they were black and of course they were killed'. Between this opening testimony and the closing assertion that '[t]hey lived', *Shark* traces the modes of endurance of a people who have survived 'an attempt at elimination' while responding to conservation lobbies and reaching towards the return of Country.

The introduction informs readers that the town Tired Sailor was previously a place called 'Weeaprounah which in their language meant: good fishing plenty yam milky tits fat baby warm dog sunny place sit down carve stick'. But its bounty was appropriated by the white people who appeared 'like ghosts' bringing 'cows, boats, guns, shovels and influenza'. In the narrative present, Rooster Clark lives by the swamp on the outskirts of the town after having previously fled the scene of his people's massacre by going out on the shark boats before landing up in Tired Sailor. Newly-arrived in town is the black boy Reuben with his white fisherman father, Lester, and his mother, Maree, who had conceived him with a Thursday Islander. When Maree's Koori father, Fox, returns to Australia to live with them, his own blackness offers the boy an alibi in the white town.

The first uncanny object is presented when the granddaughter of one of Tired Sailor's founding settlers withdraws a biscuit box from a hole in the wall. It contains remnants of Indigenous material culture along with the finger bones of a child that her ancestor had 'tied... as bait to the bottom of a craypot and sent ... into the deep still kicking and waving his arms'. Though seeking to unsettle the deliberate forgetting of racial terror in the town, and in the nation of which it is a synecdoche, the novel does not wish to dwell on these remains, and its Indigenous characters call for them to be cast into the sea. This thing 'that ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light' (Freud 225) is, after all, only too familiar to them, and continues to negate their presence. Says Rooster: 'Tryin' to hatch old biscuit tins isn't gunna fix anythin'. Few decent laws might. Bit of land might. Believin' we're still alive might' (Pascoe, *Shark*). Displacing the biscuit tin, the novel offers another figure for memorialising loss: sharks sleeping in a reef well.

Fox had returned to Australia as an 'illegal immigrant' after having spent decades fighting in Papua New Guinea and is thus place-less in the eyes of the state; more pointedly, he is an adoptee and a child of the Stolen Generations and does not know his own Country. While still alive, he anticipates that 'he'd eventually be put below soil that didn't know him well enough to hold him close'. When he drowns after being swept overboard during a storm in the Bass Straits on an Orange Roughy run with his son-in-law, his recovered body is held for identification purposes. It is understood by Rooster that, even once interred, he will continue 'flappin' aroun' lookin' for some place to be'. Fox's restless condition is interpreted with reference to Torres Strait Islanders' understanding of sharks: 'some of the Torres people believe that the sharks are spirits wandering about, never resting. Sharks always gotta be swimming see, to get the water moving past its gills'.

To assuage Rueben's grief—and his now exacerbated isolation in a white world—Rooster arranges for him to observe a group of white pointers resting in an offshore reef well as a stream of water washes through their gills. The encounter with the sharks is intended to serve as a requiem for the dead Koori man: 'The Torres mobs reckon the sharks are the spirits controlling the world, the spirits of dead people. Well, here they are at rest. A peaceful shark'. But, to Rooster's shame, he has to depend on the book knowledge of a white intercessor to stage this memorial, having lost the language and songs with which 'to sing to his people's land—and sea'. The efficacy of the encounter between Reuben and the sharks is moreover cast into doubt when Rooster questions whether 'these southern sharks understand that TI talk'. Rueben had himself experienced Thursday Islanders' relations with sharks when visiting his uncles: 'They all sang out to them and did a dance. My oldest uncle said that the sharks were the spirits and we had to sing to them, keep them happy so they'd stay in their world'. Resounding through the novel is the ambiguity of this encounter: is it an appeal to sharks to stay in *their* distinct world and not intrude on the human sphere; or, is it one that implores sharks to *stay* in their shared world in the face of threatened extinction?

That sharks have an uncanny presence in the world the characters now inhabit is suggested soon after when one appears in Rueben's dream:

It was coming for his kidney fat. The tapering snout and slit eyes searched for him. Those hard-recessed eyes gleamed as cold and bright as a stainless steel kidney bowl. There was no malice, no compassion, a shark was a shark and sought only flesh.

His flesh. [...] The Great White was searching him out, thrilling to the indications of his vital signs. Blood, electricity, warmth. (Pascoe, *Shark*)

The emphasis again on *white* sharks—along with Rueben’s waking description of it having been ‘like a ghost’—suggests an allegory of colonial invasion. Rueben’s terror certainly echoes that of the child tied as bait in a craypot, as well as that of African captives in the Atlantic Middle Passage. But the dream also recalls an earlier episode when Fox took Rueben fishing, and taught him ‘about how a black man eats his food. How you’ve got to love your prey, sing to it, thank it for its death and then sing to its brothers and sisters, sing up their continuing life in the river’.

Singing with sharks, Pascoe’s novel refuses the species exceptionalism that would deny the human-as-prey while respecting the relations between predators and prey that ensure the continuation of life across species. The intergenerational persistence that such multispecies entanglements nest is set in contrast to practices of preservation that further alienate the land from its Indigenous custodians and expose it to ongoing extraction under new regimes of capital. Pascoe’s subsequent nonfictional intervention, *Dark Emu*, critiques the ways in which Indigenous Australians are constituted as ‘poachers’ when ‘closed marketing boards’ operating ‘like cartels’ successfully lobby for the imposition of quota systems in order to monopolise profit when what *Shark* explicitly portrays as ‘blackfellas’ tucker’ undergoes an inflation of value due to growing Asian markets. In the novel, Rooster repeatedly rails against conservation practices that enrich the local townsmen and feed external appetites. But *Shark* takes care to distinguish between the rights Rooster claims to fish in his ancestral lake, on the one hand, and, on the other, commercial trawlers’ exploitation of the deep-water Orange Roughy which, due to its late maturity, shares some of the vulnerability of sharks. One of the novel’s plotlines thus endorses Maree’s efforts to have quotas imposed on the trawlers endangering the reproduction of this species.

As it nears its conclusion, the narrative shifts to a Treaty march in which Melbourne is described as being awash in ‘a sea of black’ with ‘Koori people claiming their land, calling for the future of their culture, the future of their kids’. As Rooster’s son, Rocky, takes his place in the ‘Three Hundred Year War’, the focus returns to the lake on the outskirts of Tired Sailor. Rooster follows a ‘fissured pathway between the reeds’ that leads him into the deep time of Gundj Country. On the third day, he returns with a carved throwing stick and a magpie goose in each hand. Like the words with which to speak to his people’s land and sea, the throwing stick is an object once known but since forgotten. It has returned to him not as frightening spectre, but as a mode of survival. The geese, too, have returned after having disappeared from southern Australia following the draining of the wetlands.<sup>9</sup> Their prior disappearance is a reminder that, as Tony Birch puts it, ‘[f]or Indigenous people, the impact of climate change is not a future event. It has occurred in the past, and it is occurring now’ (Birch); as for native peoples

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<sup>9</sup> See: <http://birdlife.org.au/bird-profile/magpie-goose>.

elsewhere subject to colonialism and racial capitalism, *'the end of the world already happened'* (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro). And yet, like the geese, Rooster has survived, and has carried into 'a world in which they no longer belonged, because it could not belong to them' (ibid.), the enlivening relations of predator and prey that the shark intimates. Such relations, proposes *Shark*, may enable the persistence of other worlds in *this* world.

### **'Wake Work': 'Being Prey' and Enduring Catastrophes**

And then there were the sharks that always traveled in the wake of slave ships.

(Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*)

Slavery, colonialism and other extensions of racial capitalism continue to run a dragnet through black life as well as through the submarine realm in which human and natural histories are soldered together. In responding to and seeking ways out of this 'ongoing disaster', Sharpe proposes 'wake work' as a multimodal method for registering the afterlife of slavery, for keeping watch with the dead by enacting rituals of grief, and for stimulating consciousness and vigilance. In this essay, I have asked whether and how this wake work might also embrace sharks. This is a question about what it means for the *Anthropos* to grieve the loss of a potential predator, but it is also a more pointed one about what it means to grieve animal accomplices in the dehumanizing enterprises of racial capitalism. I take some tentative steps towards this fault line with some guidance from Haraway. 'Grief', she proposes, 'is a path to understanding entangled shared living and dying; human beings must grieve with, because we are in and of this fabric of undoing. Without sustained remembrance, we cannot learn to live with ghosts and so cannot think'.

Thinking, singing and grieving with sharks means coming to terms with the condition of what Plumwood experienced as 'being prey'. Like the crocodile that held her in a death grip before releasing her, the shark is 'a predator of humans from the distant past'. An encounter with such predators is, she notes, an experience avoided by most people in the 'over-privileged world' where the conceit of the self-as-predator is used to 'intensify and reinforce illusions of superiority and apartness' and to ward off the recognition that, like other 'living things', humans are 'made of meat'. As Plumwood understood, and as the works considered in this essay variously make apparent, some humans have been made only too keenly aware of sharing this condition with other living things, while others have repressed it through retaliatory violence or by projecting their vulnerability onto their human and nonhuman fellows. This act of repression

through violent projection has long rendered the earth unhomely to many and is now returning in the *unheimlich* forms of the Anthropocene.

Rather than appealing to the human exceptionalism implicated in the ruination of planetary life, this essay has sought to attend to fractures in the category of the *Anthropos*. It has done so by thinking with sharks as uncanny figures and as creatures that are themselves being unhomed in these times of acidifying and warming oceans. Thinking with sharks brings human histories of slavery and settler colonialism to the surface of an epoch that threatens to divert and dilute intra-human struggles for the conditions of life. At the same time, it enables soundings of the ‘subtle and submarine’ realm in which such human histories are ‘soldered’ to natural histories of coral bleaching and species extinction. Hazarding a rapprochement with sharks compels recognition of the inequitable allocation of planetary goods and harms in the making of this present while summoning into an imperilled future the modes of persistence that predated upon peoples—and sharks—have evolved through enduring catastrophes.

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