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Queer(y)ing Oceans

Surprises of Grief in Critically-Creative Co-Research at the
Eco-Queer Nexus

ABSTRACT

This article describes how grief surfaced unexpectedly in a creative research collaboration in which nine co-researchers sought to queer(y) culturally dominant representations of oceans. Using workshop-based methods of queer writing and sketching in response to ocean-themed prompts, our initial aim was to trouble Western cultural conceptions of masculinity and femininity, human and beyond-human, among other reductive dichotomies. We planned to queerly reimagine dominant mythologies of mermaids, selkies, sirens, and other sea-beings. However, when we analysed our creative samples, we observed that, in addition to anticipated themes, our creative work brimmed with unconscious and conscious evocations of grief. This article braids creative writing and sketches with discussion of how we encountered grief through reflection on death, loss, rejection, marginalisation, abjection, and melancholia. Pondering how and why we had not anticipated grief – a theme arguably obvious in any queer and/or ecological project – propels our inquiries via theories of queer failure, queer time, and queer feminist biophilosophy towards a renewed appreciation of our initial eco-queer focus. We thus articulate what we made of grief and how it informs our ongoing critically creative work at the eco-queer nexus.

Keywords: Queer writing, creative writing-based research, mythologies, the ocean, melancholia

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THE DISCUSSIONS OF queer grief in this article emerge from a collaborative research project in which we used creative methods to queer(y) – to question and to queer – Western cultural discourses representing oceans. We are nine critically creative researchers with interests interconnecting at the eco-queer nexus, and our usage of *queer* is informed by the works of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993, xii) and Sara Edenheim (2020), indicating transformative movements of becoming. To queer (verb) is to flow and overflow: to muddy once-clear boundaries, to trouble shallow surfaces, to “provoke experimental thinking and alternative approaches” (Boyce, Engebretsen & Posocco 2017, 844), although we recognise queer’s open, ever-changing multiplicities (Boyce, Engebretsen & Posocco 2017). By queer(y)ing oceans we sought, as our main aim, to trouble cultural discourses that insidiously reinstate heteronormativity and anthropocentrism. This aim was informed by eco-queer scholarship revealing systemic links between queer oppression, ecological devastation, and neoliberal greed (Radomska 2020; Lönnngren 2020). Later, as we recognised themes of grief in our work, we turned also to queer death theory (Radomska 2020, 123) and José Esteban Muñoz’s work on melancholia (1999).

Although we are ourselves non-Indigenous – and cognisant of the problematic privileges as well as limitations this status bears – we were also informed by, and respectfully learn from, Indigenous scholarship confronting “the destruction of more-than-human beings through forms of violence such as colonization, extractive capitalism, and global patterns of racism” (Hernández et al. 2020, 2). Some of us live with invisible and visible disabilities, and we perceive a strong need for queer work together with people with disabilities, for we endure interconnected modes of erasure, discrimination and other neoliberal violences (Goodley 2017, 52–53). We focused on oceans because rising sea levels and coastal degradation majorly threaten the invaded *Kaurna Country* (land of the Kaurna People – Adelaide, South Australia) where we reside. The ocean is “essential to tackling climate change” yet overwhelmingly “neglected in global climate talks” (Bache 2021, n.p.).

Queer-eco scholarship demonstrates the value of queer methodologies and methods for broaching ecological problems (Radomska 2020; Lönngren 2020). Our primary methodology was queer writing, which “foregrounds the performativity of subjectivities” in ways that show how dominant “categories or norms,” particularly “binary terms,” are “produced in/by discourse” and therefore renegotiable via creatively critical practices that “resist, transcend and trouble” the status quo (Baker & Thompson 2015, 9). We were inspired by the work of the Creatures Collective, a group of radical researchers who “think, write, and create together while respecting the differences among us” (Hernández et al. 2020, 7), and by the idea that “bringing creative and personalised writing into academic scholarship” troubles dominant academic writing conventions, thereby unsettling Western cultural dominance while generating “platforms for affective world-making, ethico-political practices and undoings of power” (Vargas, Marambio & Lykke 2020, 188).

In late 2020, we ran two half-day workshops. Workshop one involved short prompts in response to which we either wrote or sketched, then shared and discussed the creative work in relation to relevant critical scholarship (primarily readings cited in this article). Prompts included: “What colour is the ocean?”; “What does the ocean taste, sound, feel, look, and smell like?”; “If the ocean were a person, who would they be?”; and “What gender is the sea?” These prompts deliberately evoked anthropocentrism and binary gender – problems we wanted to critique. For workshop two, each of us researched oceanic mythologies and shared our learning with the group, then rewrote mythologies employing queer writing strategies. Following the workshops, we continued creative making, sharing, and reflection via email and at meetings of our monthly reading group, thereby gradually drafting and shaping this collaborative article.

To analyse our creative work, we incorporated methods of poetic inquiry (Prendergast, Leggo & Sameshima 2009; Prendergast 2015). In poetic inquiry, researchers may solicit poems from research participants – much like gathering interview data – or may themselves produce poetry to use as creative data. The poems are analysed for themes and

patterns in word choices, metaphors, and tropes reflective of conscious and unconscious responses to the topic of inquiry. This is distinct from the ways in which literary critics analyse poetry for features such as form and prosody, and bears distinctly different aims: whereas literary critics typically generate knowledge *about* creative practice, poetic inquiry generates knowledge *through* creative practice about other sites of interest – in our case, that of queer(y)ing oceans.

One poetic inquiry technique that proved particularly useful for our purposes was that of the “surrender and catch found poem” (Prendergast 2015). This technique is similar to cut-up poetry and centos, in which words and lines from multiple poems or other sources are brought together to form a new poem. In our project, we all created poems combining lines from the creative data overall. Comparing and discussing the similarities and differences between our creations helped us to recognise themes and connections across our work beyond those that appeared immediately obvious. For instance, discussing why we all gravitated towards particular lines or combinations of lines helped us identify topics of common significance, as well as linkages between things we might not otherwise have perceived as connected.

The following poem, “Whirlpooling”, is a surrender and catch found poem made by bringing together all the other surrender and catch found poems we made – a process of distillation that foregrounds the key themes our inquiries generated.

Whirlpooling

Made of saltwater, blood, and ink,
plucked pebbles and bone white shells,
the reflection of the ocean
is the reflection of us all, caught
in songs of the moon, leaping back
and forth, between this world
and that, this way and... *the wild*,
the wild is what scares us
most, yet draws us in:

*breath—sweat—panic—
softness—tightness—letting
go—*

In the darkness, in the margins,
it's too quiet; we're invisible, hemmed
by hymns too heavy to swim with,
no womb ripe for disappointment or joy
Yet the moon insists on calling – no
control, it takes over, the other side
overwhelming: succumb: broken: the wild,
the wild draws us in:

*longing
embracing
enclosing
moving
dazzling
swirling
forming*

We always return to the sea.

“Whirlpooling” brims with suggestions of grief and themes related to grief. For instance, “blood” and “saltwater” evoke life, loss, harm, threat, and regret – frequent (though not exclusive) grief triggers. Blood sustains life: escaping the body, blood commonly signifies injury. Unstoppered bleeding causes death, and often, tears of saltwater grieving. Fluid bodily responses to pains physical and emotional also include paroxysms of “*breath—sweat—panic ... letting / go*.” “[B]one white shells” – inferably sun-bleached, empty of the beings they once homed – connect death and loss with time, memory, and forgetting. “[L]eaping back / and forth, between this world / and that” mimics ways grieved subjects and objects, presently absent in one’s dominant reality, retain presence via differently real “non/living” modes of memory, imagination, and affect (Radomska 2020).

Grief accompanies many forms of loss and subjugation beyond death

(Ahmed 2010, 141) – like being “in the margins,” “invisible,” and “broken”. “[N]o womb ripe for disappointment or joy” resonates with the marginalisation of the queer sinthomosexual (Edelman 2004) who resists repronormative pressures towards breeding, becoming “deemed worthless, meaningless, dead” by a dominant “Futurist” culture (Edenheim 2020, 119). “[N]o womb” also reminds us that present and future im/possibilities are no less grievable than those past or passed: in queer time (Halberstam 2005), past, passed, possible, and impossible are always-already-still present, ongoing, and intertwined (Shildrick 2020, 170). “[W]e always return to the sea” evokes nostalgia: painful (*algos*) returns (*nostos*), for instance as in the story of the seafaring Ulysses, who longed to return home and finally did, but discovered it vastly changed from the one he had departed, making true return impossible after all (Sedikides et al. 2008, 304).

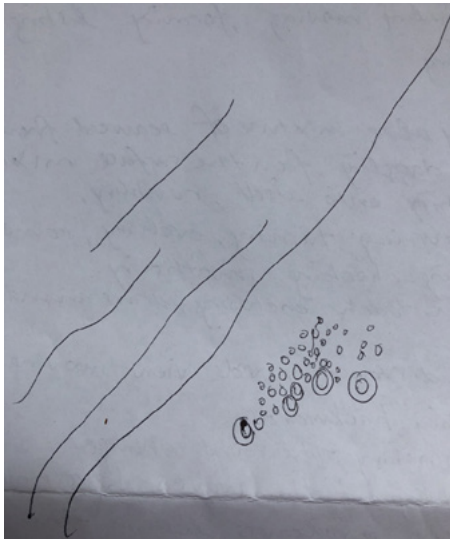
In the sections that follow, we present more excerpts of our creative work, arranged in groups and orders relevant to the connections between pieces. There are three sections of creative work, interwoven with two discussion sections in which we tease out the meanings of patterns we recognised across our writings. The discussion sections are directly based on verbal and written dialogues from our face-to-face workshops and email exchanges. Discussion section one unpacks how we came to grief – which, as noted at the outset, was not an original aim or focus of our inquiry, the initial objective of which was to queer(y) oceans. We had anticipated confronting Western culture’s symbolic gendering of water as feminine in opposition to the masculine sun (Cixous 1997, 148) – a dichotomy entangled with and in neoliberal heteronormativity and anthropocentrism (Baker & Thompson, 2015). As discussion section one relays, our expectations were met, exceeded, and subverted, which critically brought us to grief via abjection and melancholia – then, through and beyond grief, towards renewed appreciation of eco-queer interrelations. Discussion section two ponders why we had not anticipated grief as always-already-still present – as grief seems, in retrospect, something that should have been obvious in any project involving queer lived experiences and/or the ocean. Drawing on concepts of failure as a

creative act, queer time, queer death theory, and mutual aid, the article thus moves towards a “wake” (our version of a conclusion) in which we reflect on how our learning through this project can inform responses to challenges of the Anthropocene – meanwhile emphasising the necessarily never-complete nature of our work, and signalling unfolding directions.

Creative samples section one

The samples in this section and other creative sections are excerpts from longer works. “[...]” indicates where a section has been cut.

CS 1.1 Image by Lyndal Hordacre Kobayashi: Bacteria grouped together, small bubbles of air encrusted on the rim of the coffee cup.



CS 1.2 Excerpt from colours response by Toni Walsh

The ocean is the colour of grief,
of longing and brief sojourns;
of sand and ash and slick weed
glistening oleaginously in tangled heaps.

The ocean is the colour of strife,
of dark-blooded life, and
frothing wavelets lapping sickly,
gathering thickly, crashing down.

CS 1.3 Excerpt from colours response by Lyndal Hordacre Kobayashi

Purple, a greeny blue mixture of seaweed from the deep, light dazzling
from the surface, mixing mid wave, crashing into itself, rumbling, white
frothing, how do you even say that word? [...] churning, turning, evolving,
round and round, gurgling, chocking smothering.
Embracing, warm touch, enclosing, arms around holding
.And pulling out, distancing wide view, moving backwards, walking
backwards, keeping a distance from the emotions, don't want to touch
them now while I'm writing, move far away, not the time or place for
grief, numb, not feeling, it's a good cover.

CS 1.4 Colours response by Amelia Walker

The ocean is red, red as siren blazing, footsteps falling – fast fast – hands,
chest, pounding – breath, breath – never enough, the flags, the lights,
the holding on, the colours eyes turn later.
The ocean is brown, brown as bones. Except bones aren't brown. Except
also, they are. What seems hard is soft, the fixed always fluid and flowing,
like rust, like rot, like arms of weed wrapped gently round a cage no
longer locked inside a chest.

CS 1.5 “Seatee” by Toni Walsh

When I was a little girl, I saw the sea as female – some great feminine
power that I called “Seatee.” I don't know where this came from, but for

an afternoon I believed that maybe she cared about us – my sister, my cousin and I, these half-wild half-grown creatures sliding in and out of the surf, squawking as loud and as brash as gulls.

CS 1.6 “Paddling” by Heather McGinn

Voice of an angel living in the form of a devil. I feel like I stole it. It is surely some other girl’s voice. Where is the angel with the voice of the devil? Where is my true voice? It is surely lost at sea. I mute myself. Read the horizon. Call to the waves with eyes made of flint and bile, begging to be washed. Clean. Bleached coral-white as sand and fit to be tread upon, submissive. To be eroded into beach-scape, quiet, submissive, worthy of the feet of men.

Yet the moon insists on calling. She hints at the harmony we two could create. She tugs. Loosens my hair in the night. Blesses my skin with beams of silver. Gifts me with a too-early blood. For all of my attempts to transform are fruitless. I am queer through and through. I will be cautious and try not to attract attention. Relegate my strangeness to scribbles and songs. A voice barely contained by church walls, disguised as an act of worship. The dangerous sensuality hemmed in by hymns. Nobody must know.

Discussion section one: Coming to grief

Setting forth to queer(y) oceans, we focused not on grief but on troubling Western cultural binaries of male/female gender and human/beyond-human being. Initial anticipations led us to grief via twists and turns of abjection and melancholia. Our troubling of binaries sprang from queer reworkings of Hélène Cixous’s (1997) feminist critique of Western writing as trapped in patriarchal binary thought in ways that reinscribe oppressive scenarios of privilege/subjugation (Baker & Thompson 2015, 7). According to Cixous (1997, 148) a culturally constructed masculine/feminine split prevails in reciprocity with related dichotomies: femininity becomes associated with watery dissolution, the moon, nature, bodies, emotions, silence, the unseen, passivity, and subjugation; masculinity

becomes firmness, the sun, culture, the mind, rationality, sound, action, and privilege. Although Cixous focused on femininity's suppression via patriarchalism, her critique also reveals how binary thought reinscribes heteronormativity and cisnormativity by foreclosing expressions of gender and heterosexuality exceeding coupled male/female constraints (Baker & Thompson 2015, 7). The feminine/masculine dichotomy's reciprocities with body/mind, nature/culture, speechlessness/speech, and beyond-human/human furthermore reinscribe anthropocentrism by o/Othering beyond-human animals, plants, landscapes, and waterways. o/Othering reduces empathy, normalising human violences against beyond-human entities via hunting, farming, mining, and pollution as processes of "extractive capitalism" (Hernández et al. 2020, 2).

According to Cixous, Western thought primarily genders the ocean as feminine, the sun as masculine (1997, 148). We sought to trouble this split but quickly discovered its insidious pervasiveness. Attempting to personify a nonbinary ocean in first person without stating a gender, Cannell confessed, "still I imagined a woman as I wrote" (CCRWC 2020), and McGinn relayed how writing "revealed to me I had always thought of the sea and of mermaids as being distinctly feminine" (CCRWC 2020). Analysing our creative samples, unconscious gendering became even more apparent via *nachträglichkeit* – a Freudian concept adapted in creative writing research to indicate the "deferred action" through which "discoveries" in creative writing research mostly "occur after the fact" (Hecq 2015, 8). Reading for themes across our samples, we observed feminine-coded tropes of metaphor, imagery, and allusion. These were not, however, always immediately obvious. For instance, in the colours prompt responses, oceans were most frequently described as blue, followed by green – itself partly blue – then white, then red. Purple, brown, black, and grey received one mention each (CS 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 3.4). Calling oceans blue initially seemed, to us, banally obvious. But through dialogue, we recognised blue's reductive misrepresentation of oceans: water is simultaneously colourless and potentially all hues. Oceans appear blue only to some human eyes, only when reflecting clear daytime skies. Why were black and grey oceans – colours of night

and storms – so rare? Blue’s dominance seems unconsciously driven by masculinity’s Western privilege, represented via sunlit oceans as passive mirrors reflecting but one among many possible skies.

Also notable in the colours prompt responses are associations of blue with calm and passivity, green with natural growth, and white with absence – which is culturally bound with femininity, nature, and submission (Cixous 1997, 148). Connections of the ocean and nature also arose through red’s recurrence as the next most common colour. Notably, purple combines red with blue, and brown’s hues may appear “like rust, like rot” (CS 1.4), which suggests red literally via rust and implicitly via r alliteration. Our turns to red could be partly attributable to sunrise and sunset oceans. Blood in the water also seems likely. As “Whirlpooling” and our introduction foregrounded, blood was itself among the most common motifs arising across our writing overall. Examples include “too-early blood” (CS 1.6), implying menstruation; “out damned spot” (CS 2.3), alluding to Lady Macbeth’s bloodied hands; linkage of “the colour of strife” with “dark-blooded life” (CS 1.2); and depiction of “ink splats” as “full stops bleeding into the page” (CS 1.7).

The “ink splats” connected with “snails roaming,” “waves,” “tides,” “rhythms,” and “monthly cycles.” Again implying menstruation, cycles and moons formed additional motifs significant across our samples (CS 1.6, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4). For instance, Telford described cyclic “songs of the moon... alien, deadly, life-giving and nurturing” (CS 2.2). Juxtaposing deadly/nurturing signals a binary within the binary: the nurturing or angelic feminine versus the monstrous feminine (Creed 1993, 7), which was strongly observable across our samples (CS 1.5, 1.6, 2.3, 2.6, 3.1). Overall, we most frequently evoked monstrous rather than nurturing femininities, for instance by associating oceans with fear, danger, and succumbing (CS 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 2.4, 2.5, 2.7) to “the wild” (CS 1.4) – to “a terrain of alternative formulations that resist the orderly impulses of modernity,” for these dangerous creatures of the ocean threaten to upend the conquering boats of white cis-het male sailors, traders, and colonists, thereby symbolically articulating “anticolonial, anticapitalist, and radical queer interests” (Halberstam 2020, x).

We frequently identified with monstrous femininity, pitching sirens and sea monsters as misunderstood, punished or tamed by heteronormativity (CS 1.6, 2.2). Monstrous feminine power arose through tropes about voice, with punishment signified via silence (CS 1.6, 2.2), as in mainstream mythologies about sirens' dangerous voices. In Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* – purportedly penned following a queer romantic rejection (Greenhill 2018) – the mermaid trades speech for human legs, a sacrifice readable as symbolising “the love that dare not speak its name” (Lord Alfred Douglas in Dröschel 2007). Examples of voice/lessness in our writings include Chilvers's reimagining of mythological Greek sea monsters Scylla and Charybdis as queer lovers punished by homophobic gods, wherein a dying Scylla laments, “[i]n my last moments I want to express my love to Charybdis, but I cannot reach her” (CS 3.2); Cannell's *The Descendants* (3.1) fanfiction featuring Uma (daughter of Ursula, Disney's Sea Witch) unable to express queer desire towards Mal (daughter of Disney's Maleficent); McGinn's prose poem about having the “[v]oice of an angel living in the form of a devil... Where is my true voice? It is surely lost at sea. I mute myself” (CS 1.6); and Walker's challenge to human assumptions that selkies always return to the sea: “[t]hey say we always go because until we leave, we're invisible” (CS 3.3).

Connections between voicelessness, misrepresentation, and erasure recurred prolifically across our samples. Altogether, our tropes of the bodily (blood, tears, sweat, breath, cycles), the monstrous, silence, and invisibility are understandable in terms of abjection – being expelled, denied, cast out – as cisheteronormativity marginalises the queer and anthropocentrism o/Others the beyond-human (Creed 1993, 7). The dominant cultural association of oceans with the maternal encourages cissexist conceptions of femininity as biological, which marginalises childfree women. Biologically oriented gendering likewise denies feminine qualities in men, nonbinary people and gender-fluid people, as well as female masculinities among other alternative masculinities. Biological reproduction-oriented gender models furthermore exclude both childfree people and families wherein par-

ent-child relations are non-biological (e.g., families of choice). These modes of marginalisation intersect with power relations of privilege/oppression inherent across systemic racism, classism, ableism, ageism, and much more, including human/beyond-human relations. The gender-linked human/beyond-human split in turn sustains “extractive capitalism” (Hernández et al. 2020, 2), which, as our samples reflect, gains force via Western discursive tropes insidiously pitching nature as simultaneously inferior to and threatening to human culture – a wild force to be tamed and claimed with violent disregard (Halberstam 2020, 3–4).

Unconscious iterations of Western cultural binaries in our samples prompted us to uncomfortably recognise our deep stuckness in the very terms we sought to resist. Recognising these insidious tendencies let us confront and think beyond feminine oceans by pondering potential masculine, nonbinary and gender-fluid possibilities. Discussing Poseidon and Ulysses, we noted that masculine figures typically are not themselves *of* the sea, but rule it, sail it, and/or make their means towards ends of commerce, warfare, or human conquering of the elements (CS 3.1). In search of masculine merfolk, we found this nineteenth-century account:

He [the merman] is no beauty... has no claim to be considered even respectable. They are said to be drunkards, and have green hair, red eyes, and noses distinguished for a peculiar kind of growth termed in ships’ forecastles ‘grog-blossoms’ [...] the merman is so disgracefully ugly, and so depravedly and ironically human-like withal, that no spectacle is more shocking. (Russell 1887, 49)

While dangerous voice discourses explicitly silence feminine mermaids and sirens, masculine merfolk seem abjected all but beyond thinkability. Is this because they are “depravedly and ironically human-like,” and thus a mirror of things dominant cisheteronormativity wishes not to recognise in itself? For whatever reasons, the Western cultural imaginary recoils, so horrified it silences the very silencing of oceanic mas-

culinities – that is to say, there is little written about them, and little questioning of why this is the case. Similarly, nonbinary sea beings typically surface only fleetingly in monstrous forms like those of the Kraken and the Loch Ness Monster. It seems abjection itself bears recognised and suppressed, ultra-object forms.

Striving to represent gender-ambiguous and queer oceans in terms beyond fear, Telford depicted an ocean “orchestra” (CS 2.2). Asking, “Who is the conductor?” and wondering whether it might be the fish or whales, Telford’s prose poem calls out the neoliberal anthropocentrism inherent in gendering beyond-human entities. By relying on human subjectivity as the reference point for contemplating anything beyond-human, gendering oceans implies oceans only matter as relevant to human concerns. Gendering oceans is also complicit with violent cissexist assignation of gender without consent, and related cissexist assumptions of normative gender as predicating legible appearance and participation in social dialogues. These assumptions about what constitutes legible gender are reflected and reinstated in the abjection of masculine, nonbinary, and gender-fluid oceanic beings noted earlier. Even their silencing is silenced: they are doubly denied to placate “the insecurity of man” via Poseidon’s trident as a “Freudian triple erection that crashes, smashes and destroys” (CS 3.1). Double denial is, in psychoanalytic terms, a melancholic failure of mourning. Mourning is the process through which one works through grief, and melancholia describes situations in which grieving subjects cannot mourn because their grief is unrecognised and/or suppressed into the subconscious, where it eats away at being, causing distressing emotions the subject feels unable to name, understand, or resolve (Butler 1997, 173; Muñoz 1999, 57–76; Ahmed 2010, 141).

In coming to mourning and melancholia, we came to grief, for both mourning and melancholia are responses to grief, whether for lost life or other losses. In discussion section two, we will further explain how we came, through grief, to reconsider our inquiries from the start – and before it.

Creative samples section two

CS 2.1 Colours prompt response by Lyndal Hordacre Kobayashi

Purple, a greeny blue mixture of seaweed from the deep, light dazzling from the surface, mixing mid wave, crashing into itself, rumbling, white frothing, how do you even say that word? [...] churning, turning, evolving, round and round, gurgling, choking smothering.

Embracing, warm touch, enclosing, arms around holding.

And pulling out, distancing wide view, moving backwards, walking backwards, keeping a distance from the emotions, don't want to touch them now while I'm writing, move far away, not the time or place for grief, numb, not feeling, it's a good cover.

CS 2.2 "The Ocean as Orchestra" by Simon-Peter Telford

The ocean is an orchestra. Chimes and plucked harps, deep bass and smashing cymbals. Who is the conductor? Are we? The ocean is what it is for me, but what of the fish, what of the intelligent whales that swim with new instruments, the clanging radar of submarines, the muted tones of microplastics? The ocean is a being caught in the songs of the moon, and of the earth - it is another world, and yet it is our world. It is alien, deadly, life-giving and nurturing.

CS 2.3 "Drowning" by Heather McGinn

... They punish me for my otherness. I am deemed non-woman. I am incorrect. They drowned me and now I am exiled. Away, away, away. Out, damned spot. Forever tainted. I taste the word with a salted tongue. Raped. Strange girls get raped. This is what you get for spilling outside of the mould. You can choose – whore or mother. They plant an embryo and cast me overboard. I can surrender to being womb and cut out my tongue, they say, or I can sacrifice my womb and sink.

I choose to sink. The embryo breaks away, and then comes the blood, the blood, the blood.

CS 2.4 Untitled by Jenn Ngo

Ocean waves fall onto themselves in a never-ending cycle. The ocean creates its own symphony [...] The crescendo rising and falling with each wave. The sound that echoes surrounds her entirely. It washes over her, swallows her [...] drowns her. It is almost overwhelming the way it takes over all her senses, and yet she can't help but continue to succumb [...] She takes a breath, closes her eyes and lets herself be taken.

CS 2.5 "The Beach Is Rough" by Chloe Cannell

You taste it through your nose first; the saltiest boogies. You imagine that's what caviar is, but with a jelly texture getting stuck in your teeth. Your nose stings from the rush of water and runs up your head. The sun belts down on you, your head assault from both sides. You spit out the sensation. [...] You see the next wave coming. It's smaller than the first, you know it won't topple you, it may even be fun. You jump as it comes like Grandma taught you. You grasp at the moment of flying. You know Grandma just did the jumps for safety not fun because she didn't want you to be on the news that night as the kid that drowned. You know you're too weary of this kind of fun to be the ocean's next victim.

CS 2.6 "The Ocean Personified" by Aden Burg

Umi is her name, she is a strange woman to say the very least. She is the young woman who looks after an array of mismatched orphans, and yet she seamlessly maintains the balance between these children. [...] She appears as a being of pure kindness, with soft life coursing throughout her. But be not deceived, for she also holds immense power. She will crush all those who threaten her, for within her being is a strength that cannot be called cruelty, yet nor can it be called kindness. Perhaps it is simply a part of her being.

Discussion section two: Queer grief, queer time and failure as creative

Grief surprised us. We were not planning to research it. But there it was, surging forth again, again, like one of those waves one turns to

face only in the moment of crashing – tumbling, being swept up, pulled under.

The recognition of grief in our writings reminded us of a famous image that is simultaneously two images – two women, one younger, one older (Donaldson 2017). They are thinkably the same woman at different moments, haunted by memory or anticipation, and the image is used to demonstrate the power of perspective, as well as the fact that there is often much more to things than what we presume to see at first glance. Whichever profile an onlooker first spies typically dominates until the other is pointed out or sought (Donaldson 2017). Discovering the previously eclipsed figure changes one's experience of the image not only as present, but in the recalled past and imagined future – remade with awareness of what was always-already-still there but un/seen.

Our coming to grief was like seeing the hidden image. It drove us back to our inquiry's beginnings. Grief tropes became suddenly obvious across our creative samples (see our introduction's discussion of "Whirlpooling"). It was even mentioned explicitly (CS 1.2, 3.5). How had we failed to notice?

Actually, one member of our collective *had* noticed grief but quickly stuffed it down, deeming workshops "not the time or place for grief" (CS 1.3). This referred to a parent's recent death. As a knowing suppression of grief to focus on tasks at hand, it represents a single denial of grief, as opposed to melancholic double denial in classic psychoanalytic terms. The other eight of us were not knowingly grieving recent deaths – although we had, like most people, experienced grave losses across 2020 due to COVID-19 and were likely repressing these without realising – melancholically denying our grief denial.

Retrospectively, grief should have been obvious from the moment we linked oceans with queer-eco concerns. Many cultures link oceans with nostalgia and grieving (Sedikides et al. 2008, 304; Quinn 2014, 74), and "necropolitics" – a "biopolitical" suite of "mechanisms" sustaining Western neoliberalism by "letting certain populations die" – critically interconnects queer and ecological concerns (Radomska, Mehrabi & Lykke 2020, 85). Our grief was thus bound with failure, which we likewise

realised as always-already-still present from the start. Queer failure had manifested through accounts of failed love (CS 3.1, 3.2, 3.3), being heard (CS 1.6, 2.2, 3.2, 3.3), and transgressing normative demands (CS 2.3, 3.1, 3.2). Anthropocene grief manifested through pollution, climate change, and extinction (CS 2.3, 3.1, 3.4).

With failure suddenly evident everywhere, we were grateful for queer theory. Contrary to neoliberal discourses wherein failure means humiliation, pain, and disempowerment and seems redeemable only as a road to success, queer reconfigurations of failure enable us to “escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour” and “poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life” (Halberstam 2011, 3). For us, queer failure creatively propelled us into thinking about queer time, via which we progressed towards reading and reflection on queer and anticolonial scholarship regarding kinship.

Queer time (Halberstam 2005) addresses symbolic violences Western heteronormative time enacts on queer lives. Heteronormative time privileges hierarchical progression through milestones of birth, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, marriage, reproduction, labour, consumption, ageing, and death. Heteronormative time is reinforced through beginning-middle-end narratives steeped in “futurist” paradigms championing capitalist production and reproduction (Edenheim 2020). Queer work on time is informed by Indigenous scholarship that critiques Western linear time’s implications in “extractive capitalism” and ongoing colonial violences (Hernández et al. 2020, 2). Also pertinent is *crip time*, a term some people living with disabilities use to articulate their needs “for cancellations and postponements and for things to move outside of strict deadlines” (Cormick in Reich 2021). Performance artist and activist Hanna Cormick notably uses the mermaid to raise invisible disability, particularly how “illness and fragility are made in our society and the way that invisibility aids and abets oppression and injustice” (Reich 2021).

Queer lives frequently exceed heteronormative time’s linear constraints (Halberstam 2005). For example, gender transition can involve adulthood recurrence of purportedly adolescent experiences. Instead of

one sustained life partner, queer desires may flow polyamorously and/or through multiple short-term passions. Duration and exclusivity do not define significance, as the queer selkie attests (CS 3.3). Queer reproduction may temporally and/or otherwise exceed repronormative breeding. This includes nonbreeding (Edenheim 2020) and making “kin not babies!” (Haraway 2016, 102) – that is, forging non-blood families of choice via “mutual aid”: “systems of care and generosity that address harm and foster wellbeing” (Spade 2020, 2). Resisting repronormativity was a common theme for us (CS 1.6, 2.2, 3.3), alongside erasure – a symbolic death futurism imposes on lives wherein creativity might mean making art, writing, making connections, and more. Heteronormative erasure of queer lives reciprocally negates pasts, presents, and futures, for “no history, no story, equals death in a society that is only capable to see life in intelligible, temporal narratives” (Edenheim 2020, 12). Consequently, queer subjects may melancholically mourn ourselves and our foreclosed desires: both present and future can seem already passed. Mourning queer friends, lovers, and (non/biological) ancestors is complicated because heteronormativity makes queer lives less or ungrievable. Queer Death Theory therefore troubles the “life/death binary” to “live well with the dead” as “non/living” spectres present as un/felt absences (Shildrick 2020, 171).

Queer melancholia pushes beyond conventional psychoanalysis, which pathologises melancholia as failure to mourn and move on. Queer melancholia radically “work[s] on the weakness in heterosexual subjectivation,” unsettling the “mutual exclusion by which heterosexism proceeds” (Butler 1997, 148). As Sara Ahmed shows, “melancholic migrants” and/as queers “attend to bad feelings” without seeking “to overcome them,” thereby making “wanted and unwanted feelings” an “ethical resource” (2010, 216). In José Esteban Muñoz’s account, melancholia is “for blacks, queers, or any queers of colour” deeply necessary to “(re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names – and in our name” (1999, 74). In Queer Death Theory, “queerfeminist biophilosophy” similarly retheorises “non/living” relations, disrupting “normative and human-exceptionalist” con-

ceptions of death (Radomska 2020, 123). Queer Death Theory emphasises “relations, processes, and transformations,” with recognition that “environmental crises” are at “unliveable” degrees, precipitating “death of individuals and species extinction,” thereby connecting queer rethinking of life/death with remaking human/beyond-human relations (Radomska 2020, 123). Queering life/death and human/beyond-human means going beyond biologically oriented heteronormative family models to queerly refocus on kinship with non-blood human and beyond-human relations. As Indigenous scholarship signals, urgent need exists “to tend to ongoing reciprocal relationships between humans and more-than-humans,” for instance through “thinking about and thinking with fish” as “nonhuman persons” (Todd 2017, 104, 106).

Contemplating Queer Death Theory’s biophilosophical turns helped us recall and revive our focus on queer(y)ing oceans as a critique of heteronormativity’s links with anthropocentrism and neoliberal greed. This happened as we contemplated novelist Jonathan Franzen’s challenging article, “What if We Stopped Pretending [That Ecological Devastation Remains Avoidable]?” (Franzen 2019). Having reached a point where “the scientific evidence verges on irrefutable” that those younger than sixty will witness “radical destabilization of life on Earth” via “massive crop failures, apocalyptic fires, imploding economies, epic flooding [and] hundreds of millions of refugees fleeing regions made uninhabitable,” to stop pretending is to “accept that disaster is coming,” and rethink “what it means to have hope” (Franzen 2019). Queer theory can inform the challenges Franzen describes, for, as already relayed, queers are well versed in creative failure and reclaiming desire within a present where we are deemed futureless (Edenheim 2020, 121). Queer time’s complexly multidirectional flows of memory, imagination, and im/possibilities offer radical ways of staying with the trouble we are in (Halberstam 2005; Haraway 2016).

Queer theory’s strong emphasis on “relations, processes, and transformations” (Radomska 2020, 123) – in other words, kinship via mutual aid – can also support “other kinds of action” crucial in the Anthropocene, including “[p]reparing for fires and floods and refugees”

and strengthening community support networks to overcome existing social divides of o/Othering, discrimination, and privilege/exploitation: “any movement toward a more just and civil society can now be considered a meaningful climate action” (Franzen 2020). Informed by Indigenous knowledges, and in allyship with disability activism, queer kinship can vitally inform processes of connecting across and beyond Western heteronormative and colonial assumptions about biological race and blood relations. While Franzen’s recommendations seem focused on human relationships, queerfeminist biophilosophy (Radomska 2020), informed by Indigenous scholarship (Todd 2017), reveals ways in which mutual aid can and should extend to beyond-human kin and kind. Disability activism contributes to surpassing the human/beyond-human dichotomy by reminding us that human bodies, too, suffer harm from “petrochemicals and pollutants” and “dangerously extractivist” capitalist demands to treat human bodies “like the fossil fuel industry treats the planet” – as “a resource” to be “exhausted” (Cormick in Reich 2021). Ironically, humans might not survive the Anthropocene. But it is possible some beyond-human entities will. By queerly overcoming the human/beyond-human split together with that of life/death, we can discover joy in hoping for their ongoing survival. The thoughts and actions we undertake now might enrich their continued being with us as non/living presences absently passing into their future past.

Creative samples section three

CS 3.1 Untitled by Simon-Peter Telford

The reflection of the ocean is the reflection of us all. The ocean is a fickle mistress, the reflection of the insecurity of man and his need for security from the one he loves. Poseidon and his trident, the Freudian triple erection that crashes, smashes and destroys [...] The water bearer of Aquarius, the beautiful nurturer and provider of sustenance [...] The ocean is all these genders and none at all [...] What else can we do but see our own reflection in the waters? The waters that we strip bare of their complexity as we strip ourselves of complexity.

CS 3.2 “The End of Scylla” by Morgan Chilvers

In my last moments I want to express my love to Charybdis, but I cannot reach her. She refuses to reach me and that is dreadfully hard for me to stomach. Hercules is here; he will cut my heads and parade them around the city to bring justice to his father. Zeus sent Hercules; he is killing me to get back at Charybdis. He knows that she has an infatuation with me, yet she will not stop attacking the ships that sail past her side of the trench.

[...] I will never be the same, so I must die to be reborn. Because to live without you is disastrous, a life full of longing and addiction that I cannot heal from. That I cannot get over. Beautifully tragic. To die, just to be with you again.

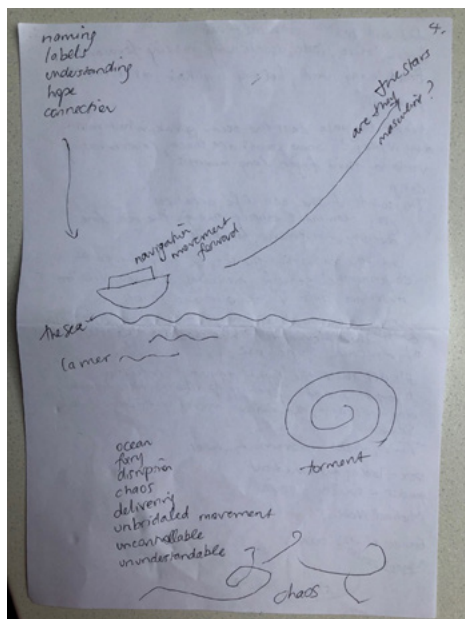
CS 3.3 “Selkie” by Amelia Walker

We always return to the sea. So the legend says. So those of us who are not us say. They say it because it’s what they see [...] because until we leave, we’re invisible. We are them, in their eyes. Only by leaving do we become the ones who leave, become selkie.

CS 3.4 Excerpt from colours response by Simon-Peter Telford

The ocean is the colour of fear,
the colour of the unknown depths,
that beckons forth,
The black of the abyss and the light of the sun.
[...]
It is the wild,
and the wild is what,
scares us most,
yet draws us in.
No wonder we treat the ocean with hate,
with sadness,
with reverence,
with awe.

CS 3.5 Image by Lyndal Hordacre Kobayashi: Reflection of, on, and in workshop dialogues



Wake (conclusion)

This article's opening described grief coming upon us like a freak wave we turned to recognise only as it crashed – though the undertows that formed it were always-already-still stirring, unconsciously felt while imperceived. After waves come wakes. Wakes also follow funerals, where mourning may involve both putting to rest and awakening. Academic conventions normatively compel articles to end with conclusions. In discussion section two, we observed how queer theory can inform responses to the Anthropocene through creative failure and queer temporalities, wherein desires flow beyond linear futurity towards kinship surpassing normative divides within human societies and beyond them. As emphasised throughout this article, applying queer theory to prob-

lems of the Anthropocene crucially demands listening to and learning from Indigenous knowledges and Indigenous scholarship that has long critiqued problems of Western colonial time, anthropocentrism, and profit-focused extractive capitalist violences. We also believe work at the queer-eco nexus should proceed in allyship with disability activism and scholarship in the field of Disability Studies in ways that crucially articulate our shared concerns while sustaining respect for differences (Goodley 2017, 52–53).

However, grief is a “wild thing,” so it seems most queerly beneficial to “keep telling this incomplete story of silence, dead-ends, and recapitulations without ever finishing it, making it knowable, or taming it” (Halberstam 2020, 55). Instead of finished conclusions, all our remarks stand as gestures towards how and where we are still going by beginning again, again. Like the Creatures Collective, we are less concerned with conventional findings and more engaged in our desires to “share with you the process” of our collectively navigating “constant (re)interpretation of stories, experiences, reflections and imaginings” (Hernández et al. 2020, 2). We thus part with a question that guides our ongoing queer(y)ing:

If academia is the land, we as queers (and femmes) are the ocean and the creatures within-connected but disconnected, vast, powerful, largely unexplored, mythologised and maligned, nourishing, feared – and deep. Do we dare dive in? (McGinn, post-workshop reflection)

THE CRITICALLY CREATIVE READING AND WRITING COLLECTIVE (CCRWC) is a collective of early career researchers based at the University of South Australia, on Kaurna Country. We share an interest in creative research methods and topics including writing, visual art, performance, and gaming. Contributors to this article include Chloe Cannell, Heather McGinn, Toni Walsh, Simon-Peter Telford, Lyncdal Hordacre Kobayashi, Aden Burg, Morgan Chilvers, Jenn Ngo, and Amelia Walker.

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