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## The Hinterland at Sea

*Esther Peeren*

In *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Seawater*, Melody Jue turns to the ocean to model what she calls a “milieu-specific analysis,” which “acknowledges that specific thought forms emerge in relation to different environments” (2020, 3). What thought forms and questions arise depends on the material and imaginative conditions of a particular milieu, on the histories of these conditions, and on the perspective or embodied experience the milieu is encountered through. The latter is summarized as the “for whom?” (Jue 2020, 3), to which, in a posthuman vein, a “for what?” should be added. If Jue’s milieu-specific analysis of the ocean exposes and redresses the terrestrial bias in how humans have thought media and mediation, what biases does a milieu-specific analysis of the hinterland bring to light?

Answering this question requires a determination of what kind of a milieu the hinterland is. I take the position that the hinterland is distinguished not by any particular physical or social geography, but is, rather, a milieu *brought into being by* and *put in the service of* an evolving global capitalist-colonialist economy. As laid out in the introduction to this

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volume, capitalism-colonialism organizes the hinterland as a functional space, with its limitless appetite for extraction stretching the hinterland's scope beyond any "natural" borders or urban-rural-wilderness distinctions. Thinking the hinterland in this way exposes two biases: that of opposing urban and rural/wilderness so starkly that the city becomes the seat of global capitalism while the rural/wilderness appears untouched by it, and that of assuming that all hinterlands are landbound.

Both these biases are challenged by Ben Smith's 2019 novel *Doggerland*, which is set on a deteriorating windfarm in the North Sea maintained by two men—Jem and Greil, known as "the boy" and "the old man"—in a dystopian future in which the world economy is monopolized by "the Company." In addition to placing the hinterland *at sea* in a material sense and designating this sea as a ruralized space, *Doggerland* identifies the hinterland as a milieu that leaves its human inhabitants, reduced to necessary but interchangeable labor, affectively *at sea*—at a loss, adrift, exposed. By having the two men nonetheless "imagine a livable provisional life" (Berlant 2016, 395) within this *at-sea-ness*, the novel, I contend, highlights how the hinterland is not fully defined by its assigned capitalist-colonialist function: there are fissures in its extractivist net, however small and provisional.

In addition, Smith's narrative supplements the "for whom?" of the men's immersion in this hinterland milieu with the "for what?" of its main substance: water. This water, remembering the North Sea's prehistory as a land mass dubbed Doggerland,<sup>1</sup> encounters the capitalist-colonialist hinterland as a mere "interruption to continuous flow, an obstacle to be overcome, an imbalance to be rectified" (Smith 2019, 54). Invoking water's endurance through deep time allows the novel to summon a beyond-the-hinterland that is also a beyond-the-human. Still, in glossing over the way the North Sea's centuries-long function as a hinterland has materially changed its composition, in potentially irreversible ways, *Doggerland's* vision of natural resilience risks underplaying the hinterland's destructive force.

\* \* \*

<sup>1</sup>In *North Sea Archaeologies*, Robert Van de Noort notes that "Bryony Coles (1998) renamed the North Sea basin 'Doggerland', drawing attention to the continued terrestrial life, and potential for human activity, on the former land surface of the North Sea before it was flooded in the Neolithic" (2011, 13).

With respect to what kind of a milieu the hinterland is, Phil A. Neel's *Hinterland: America's New Landscape of Class and Conflict* insists that

the hinterland is often a heavily industrialized space—a space for factory farms, for massive logistics complexes, for power generation, and for the extraction of resources from forests, deserts, and seas. It is not an exclusively “rural” space, and it is by no means truly secondary to global production. (2018, 17)

Here, Neel makes clear that the hinterland need not be terrestrial, but can also be aquatic. Moreover, the hinterland is specifically identified as spanning rural and urban areas, belying the long tradition of thinking them as separate, oppositely valued realms: the city tainted by capitalism and globalization, and the country characterized by “a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue” or, alternatively, “backwardness, ignorance, limitation” (Williams 2011, 1). Although today's hinterlands are spatially removed from the business districts of the megacities imposing themselves as the shiny centers of the global economy, they may be, as Neel shows, near or far, and may straddle urban, suburban, rural, and wilderness spaces. The present and past capitalist-colonialist infrastructures that these hinterlands harbor or are haunted by are often inconspicuous and sometimes hidden, but are or were nonetheless crucial to keeping the global economy moving.

In *Architecture of Territory—Hinterland: Singapore, Johor, Riau*, Milica Topalović and her co-authors assert that “today, it is often thought that cities rely decreasingly on surrounding territories for supply and subsistence. Instead, they seem emancipated from the constraints of geography, operating in a global web of dependencies” (2013, 17). By meticulously mapping the cross-border hinterland sustaining Singapore with food, oil, building materials, and labor, they challenge this assumption, while also showing the extendedness and variety of this “local” hinterland, which includes rural and urban areas, as well as the waterway of the Strait of Singapore. The multiple, layered functions the Strait fulfills as a hinterland materially at sea—it is a space of shipping, a leisure zone, an anchorage space, a fishing territory, a space of border management, a space of piracy, a space of submarine infrastructure, and an aquatic living space for nomadic tribes—lead it to be labeled an “urban territory” (Topalović et al. 2013, 42). Yet, given that none of these functions are exclusively urban and that some—like fishing and nomadism—are more readily associated

with the non-urban, the Straight could just as well be identified as a rural territory. Similarly, the claim that the “world’s ocean system is urbanized by trade, extraction and production” (Couling 2016, 283) might be reformulated as a ruralization when we take into account that “trade, extraction and production” also take place in countrysides.

Taking the hinterland to sea challenges not only classic transport geography’s conceptualization of oceans, seas, and rivers as featureless maritime expanses between land-bound hinter- and forelands (Weigend 1956), but also the lingering association of the urban with the industrial and the rural with the wholesome working or enjoying of the land. The idea that industry is quintessentially urban pervades Nancy Couling and Carola Hein’s edited volume *The Urbanisation of the Sea: From Concepts and Analysis to Design* (2020). In the preface, for example, seeing wind turbine foundations being transported across the North Sea leads Philip Steinberg to state that “if urbanization is defined as an intensified transformation of nature, and thereby a transformation of place, then the transportation of these steel scaffolds and their placement on the sea bed will turn the sea into a space of social relations, an *industrial* site, an arena of logistics and production” (Couling and Hein 2020, 1; emphasis in original). This perspective ignores that the rural has long been a site of resource and labor extraction, industrial production and transportation, as well as energy generation. Especially in the age of factory farms, the rural surely qualifies as party to “an intensified transformation of nature.” Far from reaffirming rural-urban dichotomies, therefore, the hinterland—whether on land or at sea—makes visible rural-urban continuities, emphasizing how both realms are and have been instrumental to the (re)shaping of world and earth by capitalism-colonialism.

\* \* \*

In *Doggerland*, notably, the high-tech space of the windfarm is encountered by “the boy” as evoking rurality: “The fields stretched around him—row after row of turbines, like strange crops. From a distance, they all looked identical, but up close each tower was marked with dark blooms and scabs of rust” (3). The windfarm appears like a farm; not just any farm, but an industrial one featuring large-scale monoculture. This brings the rural and industry together in an image that, despite the strangeness of the crops, is legible, familiar even. The windfarm is not a perversion of or

departure from the rural hinterland as it operates to brace capitalism-colonialism, but an extension of it out to sea.

The rural-like hinterland of the North Sea appears in Smith's novel as a *logistics space* harboring a late capitalist supply line that Deborah Cowen, in *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade*, identifies as a "resurfacing" of the military and colonial supply line's "geography of transnational flow" and "imperial force" (2014, 9).<sup>2</sup> As the "dark blooms and scabs of rust" spotted on the turbines announce, however, this logistics space is faltering. The windfarm no longer holds out the promise of global capitalism safeguarding a sustainable future captured in the "pictures of the farm on clear bright days with words like 'future', 'stability' and 'security' printed on them" found by "the boy" on a series of publicity posters in one of the last-built, most advanced turbines, which was never put into operation (Smith 2019, 151). Instead of heralding a future of endless renewal, in its dilapidated state, running only a little over half-capacity, the windfarm signals global capitalism's impending death.<sup>3</sup> The cargo ships that "used to travel in great convoys" have become rare sights: "there were hardly any left now, maybe just one or two a year, still traveling along the shipping lanes, like the last of their species still following the old migratory routes" (162). The industrial farms recalled by the spatial layout of the windfarm are also gone. Food is grown in "vats" and then canned, with the supply chain that is supposed to get the cans to the places where there are still people characterized by inefficiency and breakdowns (171). The "boy" and "old man" frequently go hungry, while the aluminum cans from which they eat may be "icon[s] of modern civilization and industrial distribution," but also foster the bacteria that causes botulism (Swanson et al. 2017, M9). The system of global capitalism, then, is both poisoning and poisoned, unlikely to be able to sustain itself and its required labor force for much longer.

<sup>2</sup>Despite placing military and colonial supply lines in rural spaces, *The Deadly Life of Logistics* displays an urban bias. Not only does Cowen tie contemporary logistics to the urban when she writes that "logistics logics ... constitute a complex spatiality at once national, urban, imperial and mobile," but she devotes an entire chapter to "the *urban* revolution in logistics" (2014, 20; emphasis in original) without recognizing that rural space, too, is dominantly "conceived for the singular purpose of securing the management and movement of globally bound *stuff*" (2014, 12, 171).

<sup>3</sup>The fact that the novel is set on a windfarm and not an oil rig counters techno-optimism by highlighting how all extraction in the capitalist-colonialist hinterland, including that of so-called "green" energy, has human and environmental costs.

Notwithstanding the pervasive sense that the world made by global capitalism is on the brink of collapse, the infrastructures of the hinterland at sea continue to exert palpable violence, not least on the marine ecosystem. No fish or birds remain. The only sea life that appears in the novel is a shoal of jellyfish “the boy” sees passing by. Although initially, on the basis of their translucent appearance and the abundance of plastic waste in the sea, he thinks “they looked like plastic bags,” upon closer inspection their movements enthrall him: “it was amazing how easily they moved, using the currents, flexing, tilting, as though being driven on by some underwater breeze” (177, 178). “The boy” admires the jellyfish’s ability to move freely through what for him is a milieu of confinement—“none were catching on the turbines as they passed”—and takes inspiration from their swelling and concaving to build a sail for the boat he plans to escape in (177). The invertebrates’ graceful appearance momentarily lifts the atmosphere of inscrutability produced by the hinterland at sea’s desolate, uniform grayness and allows “the boy” to think beyond battery-generated propulsion. This exemplifies how jellyfish, as sea creatures that “hover at the limits of human visual perception,” have moved people to find themselves “unmoored, cut loose from an established order of things, ... floating somewhere as yet unmapped” (Alaimo 2013, 143, 151).

But jellyfish are more than aesthetic objects, metaphors or “metonyms of the vast, unthinkable, pelagic expanses” (Alaimo 2013, 159). They are co-creators of the materiality of the hinterland at sea. On the one hand, jellyfish are “infamous for their direct negative effects on human enterprise ... they interfere with tourism by stinging swimmers, fishing by clogging nets, aquaculture by killing fish in net-pens and power plants by clogging cooling-water intake screens” (Purcell et al. 2007, 153). This makes them bodies that constitute “a source of insecurity for the supply chain” of global capitalism (Cowen 2014, 126, 78). On the other hand, jellyfish, often called “cockroaches of the sea” (Alaimo 2013, 141), are considered an invasive species. They have become “monsters” as a result of “modern human shipping, overfishing, pollution and global warming” (Swanson et al. 2017, M1–M2). The proliferation of offshore windfarms and oil and gas rigs has played a particularly important role in this, since such structures provide jellyfish polyps with ideal breeding grounds (Vodopivec et al. 2021). The resulting “jellyfish blooms” are considered harbingers of environmental degradation: “the structure of pelagic ecosystems can change rapidly from one that is dominated by fish (that keep jellyfish in check through competition or predation) to a less desirable

gelatinous state, with lasting ecological, economic and social consequences” (Richardson et al. 2009, 312).

In *Doggerland*, the jellyfish are perceived as “massing in the water like drops of oil, until it seemed like there were more of them than there was water” and as “mak[ing] the water look dense, almost like the jelly in the tins” (178, 177). This links them to oil spill disasters and to the bland, potentially botulism-ridden food the two protagonists have to survive on. The connection to “the jelly,” moreover, evokes the gelatinization that spells disaster for the sea’s ecosystem. As *figures*—“vast, clear globes, like planets, with pale stems, or legs, or something trailing down from them” (177)—the jellyfish give “the boy” the idea for the sailboat that suggests a possible escape from the hinterland at sea to a planetary sphere outside the world of capitalism-colonialism. But as *material life forms*, like the plastic bags he initially mistakes them for, they mark capitalism-colonialism’s ruinous impact on the planet.<sup>4</sup>

The two protagonists, in turn, exemplify the violent ways in which the logistics technologies of global trade “work to calibrate the worker’s body to the ‘body’ of the lively system” (Cowen 2014, 113). Their movements are regulated by the functional spaces of the rig on which they live and the computerized maintenance system, which tells them which turbines need repair. The windfarm is the “lively system” that needs to be kept alive at all costs, including that of the men’s lives and identities: “They would go for months without using each other’s names, so that, when they did, the words seemed random and unfixed, as if they could belong to anything—a tool or piece of machinery, or something that had just drifted through the farm” (Smith 2019, 13). Who the men are does not matter in this hinterland at sea; even their nicknames—“the boy” and “the old man”—do not acknowledge their actual features, but only serve to confirm there are two of them: “of course, the boy was not really a boy, any more than the old man was all that old; but names are relative, and out in the grey some kind of distinction was necessary” (2).

For “the boy,” who was brought to the rig to work out his father’s contract with “the Company” after the latter disappeared (presumably having drowned as he tried to leave the windfarm), and for “the old man,” who feels he cannot leave because he has a son who would need to replace him if he absconded, the windfarm spatially confines them to a literal

<sup>4</sup>This impact extends to the earth’s atmosphere, outer space, and other planets, through the waste generated by communication satellites and space exploration (Parks 2013).



*mi-lieu*—a middle of a place—without any sense of an outside: “wherever you were in the farm, it always felt like you were in the exact centre, like you could go on for ever and never find an edge against which to take a bearing” (30). Temporally, too, there is no exterior. Without a reliable way of telling time, they cannot be sure how long they have been on the farm, and even “the boy” barely remembers life on land: “sometimes, he tried to think back to his life before the farm—even that first boat ride over, the last moments onshore—but his memories were hazy and indistinct, the way the turbines, in squally weather, would churn up so much spray that all edges and outlines disappeared” (16). Thus, the hinterland at sea is encountered as a desolate milieu without end or escape in which the men’s bodies are no more than tools to keep the turbine blades turning.

Although the windfarm—like the global capitalist-colonialist system it was designed to sustain—is far beyond the stage of showing mere “glitches,” as any system will, the imperative to repair it in a way that would secure its reproduction remains strong (Berlant 2016). “The boy” at first seeks to fulfil this imperative, telling himself that “he was here to do the job. He just needed to focus on doing the job” (Smith 2019, 36). Despite the lack of proper tools and spare parts, he keeps “trying to shore things up”—blind to the impossibility of this, especially on the open sea (40). However, doubt starts to creep in as it becomes ever-more obvious that repair-as-reproduction is not feasible—“a whole day of work might add a percentage to the [windfarm’s] output, only for another thing to break and bring it back down again” (45)—and “the boy” begins to question his dutifulness: “He’d known it was going to be a difficult job, as soon as he’d opened the casing and seen what a state it was in ... But because he’d started he had to finish. Why did he always have to finish?” (72). Eventually, realizing that the hinterland at sea’s capacity to exhaust and expose him is infinite and the type of repair it demands not viable, “the boy” relinquishes his need to complete the tasks he is given. He resolves to leave the windfarm, but his plan is thwarted when he has to trade the sailboat he has painstakingly built, inspired by the jellyfish, to the supply boat pilot in order to obtain medicines for “the old man,” who has fallen ill.

At the end of the novel, “the boy” appears to be right back where he started, checking a fishing line that has never hooked any fish and looking ahead to yet another day when

he and the old man would start early, pick an area and go and check all the turbines themselves. There would be gearboxes to grease, blade controls to reset and rewire. ... The farm had over six thousand turbines, which meant they could get round them all in three to four hundred days. (242)

There has, however, indeed been a move beyond repair-as-reproduction. Jem's choice to give up his only means of escape in order to care for Greil and all the ways Greil has been caring for Jem since his arrival at the rig indicate how, faced with a "broken infrastructure," they have succeeded in making repair "non-productive" by "generating a form from within brokenness" (Berlant 2016, 393).<sup>5</sup>

The tentative, fragile mode of care Jem and Greil share does not undo the way the hinterland at sea has reduced them to "broken-looking people sifting through the rubble of economies ... long dead" (Neel 2018, 9). It does, however, allow them to find something sustaining in the rubble. The elusiveness of this "form from within brokenness" is stressed by the fact that Jem only identifies it after the fact when remembering actions he had thought of as annoying on Greil's part:

He thought again about the late supply and the bets the old man had made to let him win the tins [of food]. He thought about the cable the old man had cut [to keep him busy with repair-work and allow him to win another bet], and how he would always find the boy the most intricate of jobs to occupy his time. ... How he had set off those flares that long winter when the boy couldn't stand the gloom over the farm any more. How, for those first years, he'd made sure that the boy was so exhausted that he couldn't lie awake at night, couldn't dwell, couldn't think. (183)

The belated recognition that Greil has been "keeping him going" (183) with these acts of care, which were effective precisely because they did not appear caring at the time but resonated with the harsh regimes of the hinterland at sea to which he had to adjust in order to survive, inspires Jem's own act of care for Greil. Although trading the sailboat for the medicines means Jem will most likely remain stuck on the windfarm for the rest of his life, it also opens up a new way for him to relate to the hinterland at sea—as a space where lives are not just exposed and abandoned but can be cared for under a logic of *ceding not to but for another* that counters the logic of

<sup>5</sup> My use of the characters' names from this point on is in acknowledgment of their ability to eke out a life as non-interchangeable individuals within the hinterland at sea.

productivity and resilience governing the logistics spaces of global capitalism. This new relation to the hinterland at sea not only removes some of its opacity—showing it for the extractive capitalist-colonialist milieu it is—but also keeps alive a spark of hope that there may yet be some way out: “The water was murky ... but [Jem] could see some way. Who knew what he might find? After all, this was once a whole country, a whole continent” (243).

Here, Jem recognizes what Greil has long known: that the lost continent of Doggerland lurking beneath the maritime hinterland entrapping them can be a source of hope since it provides this seemingly infinite milieu with a temporal and spatial boundary. If the North Sea was once a land containing “riverbeds, forests, open plains. Villages, fire-pits ...” (14) of which traces remain on and under the seabed, it could be transformed again. Using nets, Greil trawls for remnants of the flooded plains and their people. When Jem still believes that the windfarm can be shored up through diligent repair, he dismisses the finds as “fragments of things that could never be fixed, never be put back together again” (51); the supply boat pilot is at first eager to trade with Greil, but loses interest when he finds “there’s no market for any of it” (221). For Greil, though, the sifted fragments provide a way to overlay the hinterland territory with another land not yet/no longer claimed by capitalism-colonialism. Keeping “his head buried in the mud and silt and clay of the seabed” (127) is not about avoiding reality or recovering Doggerland as it was (only fragments can be found), but about refusing the hinterland’s attempts to reduce him to a tool for repair. Similarly, his collection of plastic fragments from the sea, sorted in glass containers by color, not only removes a pollutant from the sea, but transforms it into an aesthetic object that cuts through the deadening grayness of the hinterland at sea. In this way, Smith’s novel envisions a way for those made to feel *at sea* in global capitalism’s hinterlands to repurpose the “sifting through the rubble” that Neel considers the mark of their abandonment as a form of (self-)care.

Importantly, the novel does not stop at exploring the “for whom?” of the human experience of the milieu of the hinterland at sea. It adds the “for what?” of this hinterland’s main substance, water. As Astrida Neimanis has argued, water “connects the human scale to other scales of life, both unfathomable and imperceptible” (2012, 99). In *Doggerland*, seven short intermezzos, identified as taking place from “c. 20,000 Before Present” to “Year Zero” (the present of Greil and Jem’s story), trace water’s ebbs and flows across the timescale of geological or deep time. On this scale, the

logistics hinterland at sea is a mere blip, to be overcome by the “work” of water, described as that “of leveling, of pressing at edges, of constantly seeking a return to an even surface, a steady state” not of “solidity” but of “continuous flow” (Smith 2019, 244–245). For the water coursing through the windfarm, each turbine has palpable edges that can be worn down. Water’s erosive work, executed in minimal increments over vast stretches of time, is the antithesis of the “just-in-time” flows of global capitalism’s logistics spaces (Cowen 2014, 6). Water, *Doggerland* suggests, persists *before* and *after* the hinterland at sea—*before* and *after* humanity: “It is a simple history—of water returned to ice, returning to water. And barely noticeable, somewhere in the middle of this cycle, plants and animals and people made this place their home” (54).

While it is tempting to accept this deep time narrative as the “simple history” it is presented as, its reliance on the treacherous trope of “nature” as a perennial force transcending human history identifies it as a “romantic vision of watery repair” (Neimanis 2017, 15). The claim that the infrastructures of capitalism-colonialism and the waste they have laid to lives, lands, and seas are “barely worth mentioning in the lifetime of water” (245) cannot withstand scrutiny. Not only does the Anthropocene mark (a distinct part of) humankind’s emergence as a geological force affecting the elemental constitution of earth and its atmosphere, but the water of the North Sea of *Doggerland*’s “Year Zero” is not the water of 20,000 years before. In addition to capitalism-colonialism turning water into what Jamie Linton has called “modern” or “global water”—“an exchangeable and instrumentalizable resource” in much the same way as Jem and Greil (Neimanis 2017, 4)—the water of the North Sea has been polluted with oil and manmade chemicals like polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), while its very composition has been changed by eutrophication due to the increased presence of nutrients like phosphorus and nitrogen (Ministry of the Environment, Norway 1999; Salomons et al. 1988). Some of the damage done is thought to be irreversible, meaning that there is no “simple history” of water persisting unaffected by the hinterland at sea.

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My milieu-specific analysis of *Doggerland*’s hinterland at sea as foregrounding not only the “for whom?” of Jem and Greil but also the “for what?” of water has shown that forms of life and care that interrupt the hinterland’s function as a logistics space of capitalism-colonialism may be

sustained there—precariously, laboriously, and sometimes at the cost of other lives or substances. At the same time, it may no longer be possible to undo the destructive effects of the enlisting of a particular land or water mass as a hinterland on its people, other lifeforms, and material composition, even if the capitalist-colonialist system were to collapse tomorrow. For this, by now, the hinterland runs too deep.

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