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FIGURE 1. Christoph Büchel, *Barca Nostra* (2019). Photograph by the author.



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# The Black Aquatic

**RINALDO WALCOTT**

The sea is History.
—Walcott, *Collected Poems*

Water is the first thing in my imagination. . . . All beginning in water, all ending in water. Turquoise, aquamarine, deep green, deep blue, ink navy, blue-black cerulean water.
—Brand, *Map*

I still remember watching *Nightline* in 1987. It was the night that, in the context of elaborating on why there were no Black managers in major league baseball, Al Campanis made the analogy that there were no professional Black swimmers because Black people lacked buoyancy. All these years later, the claim has stayed with me. Campanis's statement erupted into a public-sphere debate concerned with segregated swimming pools and leisure clubs in the United States and lack of swimming pools in black communities. In the aftermath of his claims, Campanis's career suffered. What has always stayed with me was not the debate about access to pools and leisure clubs but the manner in which, in these comments, Black people became divorced from water—seas, oceans, lakes, rivers, and creeks. Coming from an island in the Caribbean region, the divorce stuck me as an untenable one. Of course I knew many people who lived near the sea who did not swim, but even with that knowledge, the divorce from bodies of water was never a categorical one. Indeed, as far as the sea and ocean were concerned, reverence and fear,

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and sometimes both simultaneously, characterized our relationship to bodies of water, especially the sea. If Campanis's claim held no water, as the historical and social critique of it at that time determined, what nonetheless remained was Black people's relationship to bodies of water and something called swimming. What was puzzling for me was an understanding, then more intuitive and now more firmly certain, of Black peoples' intimate relationship to bodies of water both natural and artificial. "The sea ain't got no back door," a popular statement of caution, was a kind of introduction to both revering and fearing these powerful bodies of water.

What I am calling the black aquatic is the ambiguous and ambivalent relationship that Black people hold to bodies of water. It is a relationship that is not simply held by Black people but one that, as the above example indicates, is also assumed by others to be actually constitutive of black subjectivity. I am not interested in either disproving or confirming such ambiguity and ambivalence; rather, I am exploring a side of the black aquatic broadly defined—Black peoples' lived relation in and to bodies of water—as both self-constitutively historical and contemporary. The question of the sea, the ocean, the river, the lake, or the creek might be distinct from the question of the swimming pool, but in my way of thinking they conjoin for Black people. The black aquatic pursues the relationship Black people have to bodies of water as foundationally formative of blackness, and it seeks to provide an aesthetic narratology and hauntology of contemporary claims of black subjectivity. Therefore, if the sea has been death, it has also been birth. The black aquatic names the claim that blackness itself is birthed in salt water—the Atlantic Ocean as a first instance—and then later becomes a kind of saline embodiment of early modern and late modern new life forms or Black selves.

## IF THE SEA HAS BEEN DEATH, IT HAS ALSO BEEN BIRTH

The aquatic and the saline, then, are not just metaphors for Black people's emergence as a category of persons in the Americas and beyond; the aquatic is a kind of foundational birth claim for blackness and thus Black diasporic people. Of course, human birth is itself experienced through waters—where we apply the language of amniotic fluid and water breaking. Yet the birth of blackness that I am grappling with here, while related, is radically different. Indeed, the kind of relation between the two births is, as Christina Sharpe has noted in her discussion of Cradle to Grave (C2G), an anti–gun violence program at Temple University Hospital, "a reminder that to be Black is to be continually produced by the wait toward death; that the cradle and the grave double as far as Black flesh is concerned."[1] That cautionary "The sea ain't got no back door" is a reminder that the sea is cradle of both life and death. Indeed, this claim indexes the Door of No Return and thus gives birth to black-



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ness in the Americas; but it also simultaneously marks the sea and the ocean as sites of black death and the birth of the very foundation of capitalism and post-Enlightenment global life. The relation to notice here is that the blackness birthed by the aquatic is the very same blackness that produces premature death for Black people in a global structure and relations where Black people are fungible as far as concerns the structure of governance, capital, and social regulation that emerged from that moment. If you will, Sharpe's analysis requires us to think the liquidation of Black life too.

Blackness begins in the context of liquidity—the coffle and the slave ship are its founding. From historical examples like the ships *Amistad* and *Zong*, we see how liquidity marks the birth of black possibility and/or new potentialities that come into being. Liquidity, too, has its opposite: liquidation. For Black people, liquidation might be a synonym for death. During the time of this writing the world is in a pandemic; the tourist economies of the Caribbean region and the 100 percent decline in cruise ships arriving there highlight the liquidity of people and economies in which the historical implications of the ship meet the contemporary livability of Black peoples' lives. Caribbean nation-state economies face a liquidity problem that, in this moment, immediately exceeds contemporary calls for reparations for slavery. Tourism's role in the post–sugar plantation economy, as the new leisure plantation of service and pleasure, firmly identifies the pleasure economy of the black aquatic as something well beyond buoyancy and swimming. The liquidity of Black life is not only its "trans-shipped culture," as Sylvia Wynter has termed it, but also the manner in which that culture now becomes its existence.[2] Liquidity's centrality to capital and its accumulations is founded on, in, and through the black body figured as capital's impulse to ownership, authority, and surveillance. Black buoyancy and liquidity, both historical and contemporary—which is to say Black life—when taken together, calculate black personhood as "wasted life," as Zygmunt Bauman has termed it.[3] A report of a cruise ship line's telling its wealthy Western vacationers that they were headed to the Dominican Republic when they were actually headed to Labadee in earthquake-destroyed Haiti highlights the problem of liquidity. The company decided it was much better to lie and dissemble than to lose profits from the trip. Vacationing in the midst of Black death is a relation of the black aquatic.[4] Black liquidity begins in the hold of the ship.

Liquidity and liquidation, or profit and loss, have a corollary in the aesthetic—that aesthetic is blackness and its "catastrophe." as Kamau Brathwaite has named it.[5] If we take seriously Wynter's argument that the aesthetic is meant to do something and that the something is political, I turn to the black aquatic to think the repeating sea of Black life. Brathwaite marks the repetitive motion of Black life as tidalectics, both refusing the European orienting dialectics and simultaneously grounding the repetition in the Caribbean landscape and seascape.[6] Tides and waves both bring in and take out elements from the shore to the sea, but, importantly, tides and waves leave elements be-



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FIGURE 2.
Barry Jenkins, *Moonlight* (2016). Frame grab.

hind as well, resulting in new and different formations. Four recent pieces of art sit at the forefront of the problematic of the black aquatic I am exploring here.

Barry Jenkins's film *Moonlight* (2016, fig. 2); *Fons Americanus* (2019, fig. 3), by Kara Walker; *Barca Nostra* (2019), by artist Christoph Büchel (figs. 1 and 4); and Kent Monkman's two paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Welcoming the New Comers* and *Resurgence of the People* (both 2019), constitute the ambiguous and ambivalent relation that I am calling the black aquatic. In each of these four works, the black aquatic makes its presence felt differently. The familiarity of teaching Chiron (Alex R. Hibbert) how to swim in *Moonlight*, for those of us who have experienced learning to swim in such fashion, was ordinary and not unexpected. That the image emerged as central to an understanding of the sensorium of the film surprised some of us. Büchel's *Barca Nostra* (*Our Boat*) spectacle at the 2019 Venice Biennale is a "work" I had to see, and one over which I have come to disagree with Büchel's critics, whose arguments prestaged encounters with the work by calling it *vile*. The work brought a certain intimacy to the dreadfulness of contemporary trans-shipped cultures of "the Black Mediterranean" in a manner such that whiteness could both be scandalized by the ship as art and look the other way from the ship as European failed policy on migration.[7] Walker's *Fons Americanus*



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FIGURE 3. Kara Walker, *Fons Americanus* (2019). Photograph by the author.

at the Tate Modern, in my view, does not succeed at moving beyond the now easily recognizable tropes of Atlantic rhetorics to provide a decidedly different view of enslavement that might be adequately monumental in ways that still require the reference of the master; and Monkman's *Welcoming the New Comers* and *Resurgence of the People* paintings at the Met's Great Hall utterly fail to imagine Black people beyond the category of help or helplessness. All four of these works mark and index the ambivalent and ambiguous depths of the black aquatic and its aesthetic imperatives. Taken together, they provide an account of the black aquatic as relational even when the relational in its representation remains unachieved or dissatisfying. The aesthetic stakes of each of these works evade what Édouard Glissant and Wynter might both articulate as a certain ethical intention. The black aquatic requires what Wynter calls "a deciphering practice,"[8] in which a conscious rewriting of the human and a challenge of the "cultural Imaginary of our present order"[9] are central to what aesthetics can and might do.

The four pieces of art that I gesture to here work as a kind of conference of black aquatic images. In each of the works water is central, but each of them also limits the possibilities of what their watery or saline embodiment might signify aesthetically. Indeed, Walker's *Fons* reproduces tropes of a victimized womanhood that at once is monumental and fails to undo it: its reworking, or not, of the wet nurse with nipples spouting water does not replace the trope with a once degraded image. As a monumental trope, the



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wet nurse on plinth reads more like strip club performativity than renarration. Similarly, Monkman's watery representations in *Welcome* and *Resurgence* continue to hold Black people in servile positions either helping others or being helped. For me, these representations drown aesthetically because they are incapable of offering us any hint of black saline embodiment. Similarly, I would suggest that the baptismal image, which is simultaneously also one of learning to swim, in *Moonlight* fails in its gesture as a jump toward some kind of birth, ushering in a new subjectivity for Chiron. I am suggesting that *Barca Nostra* offers us a more ambivalent potential for an ethical engagement with saline embodiment because its notorious spectacle is a confrontation with both our now and our past simultaneously.

Return to the Campanis controversy in 1987—the response to it was located in a specific kind of ethnocriticism, or what Wynter would call, in her articulation of a deciphering practice, an "ethno-literary trap." The black aquatic, though, is an attempt to leap beyond ethnocriticism to "identify not what texts and their signifying practices can be interpreted to *mean* but what they can be deciphered to *do*, and it also seeks to evaluate the 'illocutionary force' and procedures with which they do what they *do*."[10] I make the claim that *Barca Nostra* as spectacle does more than the three other works alongside which I have briefly read it here. All four works, positioned by their proximity to capital, return blackness to its watery birth. *Barca Nostra* nonetheless stands out

**THE BLACK AQUATIC NAMES THE CLAIM THAT BLACKNESS ITSELF IS BIRTHED IN SALT WATER**

as a spectacle for which the only option available is one of (non)relation. The representative dynamics of the remaining three speak toward a certain and too-easy unity of thought, one in which black subjection is representationally spectacularized as abnormal or a surprise. *Barca Nostra*'s spectacle undoes relation only to return us to it as "ravaged by the transporters, but relation is interred in the suffering of the transported."[11] The rejection of *Barca Nostra* as vile by art critics while white performance artists and tourists took photos and posed in front of "our boat" is the relation of nonrelation that highlights the brutality of the art's arrival. This is an arrival that is not radically different from Carnival Cruise Lines' (non)arrival in the Caribbean pre- and post-pandemic. Even though the cargoes are different, the tidalectics of catastrophe have made them mutually constitutive: this is the black aquatic in praxis. Ships from Africa to Lampedusa, from the wealthy West to the Caribbean region are the same ships but with different cargoes, animating the relations' birth at the time of the black aquatic's inauguration: the relations of capital and service,



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FIGURE 4. Detail view, Christoph Büchel, *Barca Nostra* (2019). Photograph by the author.



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the relation of racial hierarchy and subordination, the global relations of white supremacy and black subjection all remain intact.

What I have found missing from critiques of this work is what and how the Black viewer might feel and think, what they might grapple with on encountering "our boat." Let me spend a bit more time on *Barca Nostra* as an intervention into the black aquatic. The money spent to get it to Venice,[12] the manner in which capital circulates in the art world, the disappearance of Black life, or the spectacularization of Black life as producing white wealth in the art world and beyond all play a role in making sense of *Barca Nostra* and its reception. First, the ship is a rather small boat for the cargo of seven hundred to a thousand human souls that it was carrying, not unlike the slave ships of the Middle Passage era. Second, we know that these types of ships often place Black Africans below the deck or in the hold for transportation across the strait. Third, these enterprises of smuggling are also based in the profit-and-loss regime of capital, and questions of liquidity and liquidation are fundamental to their operations. For me, as Black viewer invested in making sense of global black subjugation, *Barca Nostra* spectacularly highlighted the liquidity of Black life and the loss of Black life simultaneously—its liquidation. *Barca Nostra* asks us to reckon with the history of the *Amistad* and the *Zong* as not behind us: in *Barca Nostra* the present and past meet, the Middle Passage is firmly globalized. I have yet to find a critique of the work that conclusively ties it to these kinds of concerns. Indeed, the performance artist Tsedaye Makonnen's site-specific performance and interview is one of the only pieces that I have seen engage the power of this work and tie it to Europe's history of anti-blackness. Makonnen's intervention bears witness to the pull factors for Africans who board such ships, the conditions aboard them, and the profit-and-loss consequences of these actions as constituting a continuity of colonial histories and ongoing coloniality.[13] To do so, one would have to read against the grain of both the work and art-world capitalism, because such a reading implicates contemporary art-world profits as also founded in the historical trade in human flesh.

## LIQUIDITY, TOO, HAS ITS OPPOSITE: LIQUIDATION

The hole ripped into the stern of the *Barca Nostra* allows viewers a look inside the ship as it exposes all that made the ship and its voyage possible. I am therefore suggesting that *Barca Nostra* allows Black subjects (like myself) to bear witness to our dead in the contemporary era in a way that we were not able to do in the era of transatlantic slavery. This bearing of witness, while both ambiguous and ambivalent, nonetheless brings with it the potential for an ethics of the black aquatic to emerge. It is just such a possibility that one might seek to activate and achieve if we are to move toward a planetary resolution where a



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possibility for full life/lives becomes conceivable as a necessary reinvention of the planet.

Finally, *Barca Nostra* allows us to deal with, acknowledge, and come to terms with *the catastrophic tidalectics* of Black life. Returning to these two terms that Brathwaite has made central to his thinking, *Barca Nostra*'s spectacularly disturbing presence at the heart of art-world capitalism and its laissez-faire attitude to Black life and death does something more than remind us of horror and inequality. Read within the context of the black aquatic, *Barca Nostra* opens up the conversation about how the original catastrophe continues to shape our present. The ships leaving the African coast are in tidalectic relation to the world across the strait that has impoverished theirs and hoarded the resources for life in Europe. The leaving, then, is not unlike the waves of the sea on which Brathwaite based tidalectics—the wave crashing on the shore both takes and leaves something behind, and indeed it leaves change, too, along with future possible change. The four works discussed here raise the specter of how blackness refuses to be divorced from its watery birth. More specifically, a black aquatic reading of *Barca Nostra* sees what has been taken, what is left behind; it now awaits what might change. The black aquatic can serve as what Frantz Fanon, in an attempt to both grapple with history and move beyond it, calls on us to engage—a leap that might introduce "invention into existence."[14]

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### Notes

**1** Sharpe, *Wake*, 88.

**2** Wynter, "Columbus," 153.

**3** Bauman, *Wasted Lives*.

**4** Booth, "Cruise Ships Still Find a Haitian Berth."

**5** Brathwaite, *Middle Passages*.

**6** Brathwaite, *ConVERSations*.

**7** Kraus, "Why I Can't Stop Thinking"; Pes and Rea, "'Absolutely Vile'"; Tondo, "I Have Seen the Tragedy."

**8** Wynter, "Rethinking 'Aesthetics,'" 240.

**9** Wynter, "Rethinking 'Aesthetics,'" 258.

**10** Wynter, "Rethinking 'Aesthetics,'" 267.

**11** Glissant, *Poetic Intention*, 182.

**12** Reportedly, between €9 to €33 million (and possibly as much as €58 million) was spent getting the ship to Venice for the exhibition. See Stock, "Privileged, Violent Stunt."

**13** Makonnen, *When Drowning Is the Best Option*.

**14** Fanon, *Black Skin*, 229.

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