

Between Opposite Shores

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Abstract

This commentary is a geopoetic exploration of grief, change, and loss that merges the personal and the planetary to hold space and make room for each other. We use the pronoun “I” in an estranged manner: as simultaneously multiple and only very loosely in the singular. This expanded “I” is in reference to the deep entanglements we are as eco-social beings, beings that are fundamentally “more than one” and that escape linear regimes of logic and temporality. Our experimental spirit is initiated by a visit to Lamu Island in Kenya, a long-term port of call in the Indian Ocean trade network, and is an elegy to a friend, Elleni Centime Zeleke (1972–2024), who was in Lamu with Hameed. It is also an ode to the melancholia felt in a changing, degenerating, warming assemblage of planetary ocean space in which we are all implicated and connected. The artists consider the memorial, its tempos, and interstitials as forces generative for shared and expanded spaces of mourning, love, and trepidation in the wake of *unpayable debts* (Da Silva 2022).

Keywords

climate change; Indian Ocean; Kenya; Lamu; memory and mourning; oceanic acidity; planetary body; poetics

1. Lamu, 19 March 2024, Moderate Rain: +33.8°/+28.8° (Night), 6.3 mph SE; 29.8 inHg, 69%, 6:20 am/6:27 pm

In our contribution to *Ocean and Society*, we propose a poetic-form-as-method to attend to the urgencies of grief that diffract the personal and political (Hanisch, 1970) of our oceanic polycrises. Through non-scalar notions of “planetary bodies” and “the elemental,” we approach “planetaryity” (Spivak, 2003) as an urgent site of loss, allowing us as academics and artists to make evident that the challenges of our contemporary moment are so dire that they occasionally escape articulation through more traditionally academic regimens of syntax and grammar (Toth, 2020).

Here, we are attempting to perform and process a kind of witnessing and weathering (Sharpe, 2016). There are elements of what we examine that are tangible and comprehensible, but the crux of what they mean to us does not reside in those objects. The objects multiply and fracture into textures. The division between figure and ground is dissolved. We ask: how do I remember? Where the “I” makes inextricable a specifically entangled, multi-scalar planetary body that incorporates molecules, vascular being(s), and atmospheres of various states.

What elements constitute our taking stock, and is there a discreteness that divides them from one another? The metaphor of water is weaker than its materiality. The ocean is both salt and sand, hydrogen and oxygen, toxin and detritus. We stay with its materials. Writing here is a process of abiogenesis. But it is also an act of entering into the ethereal within matter and marking a time and place made more alive by figures who may not be anymore.

These potential ruptures attest to our belief that felt, somatic, and “non-conceptual” modes of address are generative in engaging communities from diverse fields of knowledge. We are all participants who—though unequally—are affected by epigenetic imperial economic driving forces of biodiversity and climate collapse. We therefore consider the potentials of perpendicularity and polyphony at the heart of poetic statements as routes for our “interscalar vehicles” (Hecht, 2018). We experiment with specific but multiple meanings, readings, and proximities that speak to the fuzzy benthic zones of being, where deep entanglements of shared distress (and their instigators), in a world devoid of justice, can meet and amplify. Through this, we hope to offer alternatives through invoking poets such as Glissant (1969) and Moten (2018), who invite us “to consent not to be a single being.”

2. Lamu, 21 March 2024, Heavy Rain in Places: +33.8°/+ 28.8° (Night), 7.4 mph SE; 29.8 inHg, 71%, 06:20 am/06:26 pm

Lamu and lament. Sorrow and joy. Tezeta is loss and longing. Lamu is white. The mud holds the merchants’ feet. The sedimentation goes deep. The singing. The donkey wrapped in flowers. The hovering of Babylon. Let’s keep going! Let’s jump into the sea that is rushing to its end in the ocean.

I spent the day looking at your pictures of Lamu. The dhow you said that was going so fast that it felt like you were flying. You are a message in a dream. A bouquet of flowers. Like the phoenix who flies with his father: “And in the immensity of the mechanism in which he is caught, the immense fragility of his own flying...these ceaselessly passing shadows carried backward by the very motion that devours them, his motion, his action” (Carson, 2009). You are your own angel of history in shadows. I want to think with you.

I look at your pictures in Zanzibar: “Low tide madness. The ocean will soon be back and that boat will float” (15 January 2020). The bleached white sand. The boat is adrift without water. Figures in the distance. The green of the sea far away and the heavy blue of rain above. The sand-like bones.

I look inwards to “abiogenesis,” the theory that traces how what we call “life” itself originated from so-called “non-living” materials. Eroded silt and bubbled clay have progenitive, proto-cellular, and constellated force (see Figure 1).

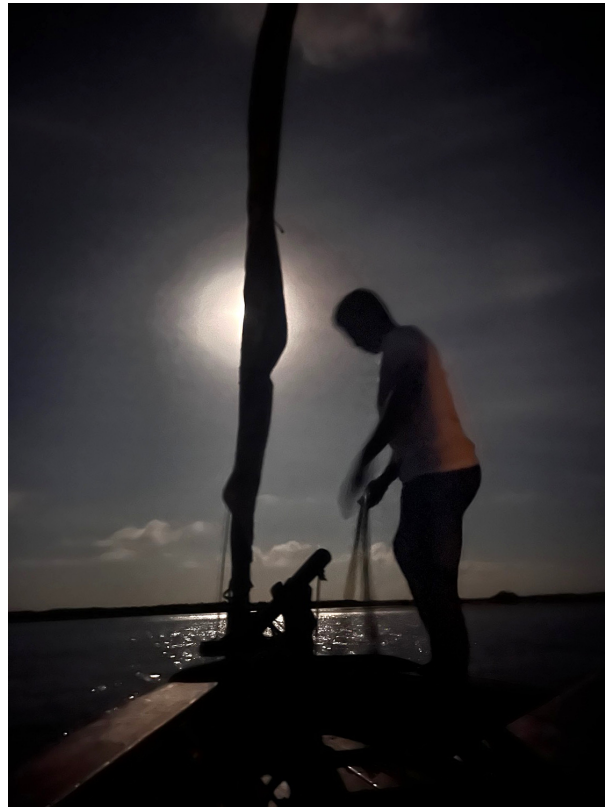


Figure 1. Lamu, February 2024. Note: Photograph by Ayesha Hameed.

**3. Lamu, 23 March 2024, Thunderstorm With Rain: +33.8°/+30° (Night), 7.8 mph S;
29.7 inHg; 72%, 6:19 am/6:26 pm**

- a. Acidity rises sharply—unbalancing /
- b. Knock-on effects are infinite and / unknowable
- c. Ocean sequestering / broken culprit
(Pickard-Whitehead, 2025; see also NOAA, 2019).
- d. Saturated military / industrial effluent
- e. Marine scientists warn and warn and/
- f. Warnings go as ever unheard
(Atlantic and Oceanographic and Meteorological Laboratory, 2023)
- g. as they had last year, and years before
(Greenfield, 2024).
- h. Wrapped in horizons of wind and spray
crescents weathering like the blues.
- i. An encompassing composition
in infinite shoreline
- j. ceding in granular drift.
Salt collecting tribute
distantly now.
Protracted rhythms

of such presence:

a gifting net

without signature.

Only a flowing may be

k. woven in reeds of tidal reverie

-sky-bodies-bones- In jazz

stone-bodies-bones blowing

cliffside polished by embouchure flows

behind an improvised burst

ecstatic with ruin—

for no pattern in return.

l. A lip a tongue a coastline

smile in perpetual drift.

m. The salt removed

buzzing in the hollow

n. without being ruled

or measured

o. ashore.

Longing is then, lack is here. The spirits all around. Your words. Tezeta as music and memory. The refrain. Music and memory. I wait for the sea to come back to the endless sand. Your sea:

[Entitative]

In the interstices

you/we/us

Oceans as plural belonging.

Your eye/tender and cool/takes these pictures. The sea returns and you/surf the afternoon

The sand is bleached like bones. The sea is in the music in the sea. They recede. Spirits come out to play. Their lack a promise in waiting. You are flying on your dhow. Bones dance past and future.

The water is a refrain. Taraab and Tezeta. Horn music. The peninsula's acoustics. Loss there, longing here. Taraab's lament. Bi kidude's scratchy voice, her ngona percussing body. The oud, the qanoun, the violin. The vibraphone and the krar. The blues.

a soft zone without borders

Between crustacean/conglomerate/nuclear. Fallout and microplastic inhibitors endo-disrupting.

Between vascular bodies and their periodic uptake. Wasting away the flows.

Between taking everything imagined and unimagined from you.

From all who are Ocean: we hold up a mirror

*

Remember?

How could they foresee such an acronym?

AMOC Slowing down. (Watts, 2024)

Atlantic meridional overturning circulation. A mouthful

A generator assemblage of global atmospheric and marine currents. Heavy glacial fresh

Water melts in the North. Salinity drops. Will the whole stream collapse? We wait.

We are under these regimes by mid-century (Ditlevsen & Ditlevsen, 2023).

We know it can't be the same. But this isn't the collapse we're after.

*

The dunes and the sand. The sand beneath the sea.

The sand as bones from the future and past. Slowly.

Desert curved blur. Spirits and magnetism.

Sea major refrain. Gone and to come.

Submerged echoes swelling.

Repeating low on opposite shores.

(See Figures 2, 3, 4, and 5)



Figure 2. Lamu, February 2024. Note: Photograph by Ayesha Hameed.



Figure 3. Lamu, February 2024. Note: Photograph by Ayesha Hameed.



Figure 4. Lamu, February 2024. Note: Photograph by Ayesha Hameed.

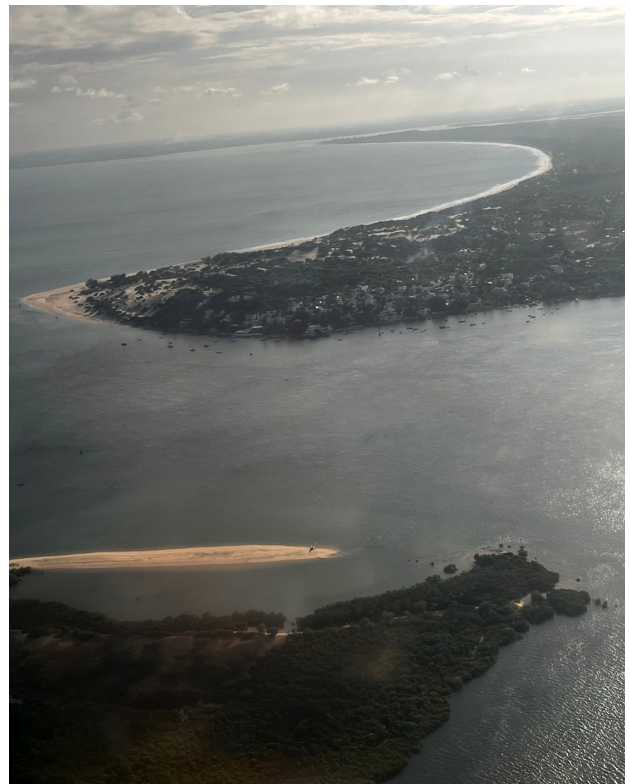


Figure 5. Lamu, February 2024. Note: Photograph by Ayesha Hameed.

4. Lamu, 25 March 2024, Moderate Rain: +32.7°/+27.2° (Night), 7.2mph S; 29.8inHg, 72%; 6:19 am/6:25 pm

You ask: *Is water what they mean when they say "home"?*

We sit in currents emptying into the ocean.

At night, they were so fast that we drifted downhill with sand.

Your cousins in the dunes. The dunes on the aquifers.

Milk is moonlight, the sun an eye. The clouds are veils. They look at us and we are in a bathtub.

Tepid. The orb—the light—the bulb in the sky. The currents fast. They promise speed.

We want to stay forever. We are happy in the flood. Your eyes open. We are in silhouette.

Your body holds its movement.

A mode that cannot be heard in repetition.

Along a ridge and many rifts. A gesture.

Your body holds the tunes. The house—the doors—flung open. Full of you.

It is moonlight. Let it go.

*

The sea is full of you. It dances.

The tunes in your bones in your bones dancing.

White sand. Currents swift. The ocean is like being in love.

In love with itself.

The ocean is waiting at the bottom of the hill.

(See Figure 6)



Figure 6. Lamu, February 2024. Note: Photograph by Ayesha Hameed.

What about the spaces between the clicks?

A poet sits in the back of the room at a conference on aquatic mammalian communication.

As figures and frequencies take centre stage—charts and graphs and amplitudes—

The poet, with raised hand and clear intention, asks, “but what about the space between the clicks?”

Previously unconsidered, the field is transformed indefinitely. Accounting for the encoded silences:

“Inter-click intervals” take on message and meaning.

The marine scientist sends 274 audio files, all less than half a second long. These empty remnants bubbling sonic in our ears’ cilia. Cyphers of intelligence we cannot know, but collect, for the listening, for the unknowing, to perceive in the outsides of pattern, to renew (Sattar, 2022).

What about the spaces between the clicks?

5. Lamu, 27 March 2024, Heavy Rain in Places: +32.7°/+28.8° (Night), 6.9mph SE, 29.8 inHg, 69%, 6:18 am/6:24 pm

What you meant by *home*. A planetary body...

The buildings are bleached, the road muddy. We find our way by the goat tied to a stake. The kids handstand around. We wind the roads until you can smell the sea. We keep turning left like Ariadne. We trail our hands on coral white. The hands. Our feet in the sand. The way to the clinic is the way to the sea. The surf is white. The sand is ice. Our home is white and draped in scarlet. You sleep on the roof, right under the moon. It is so

hot. Shutters of mangroves. The coral and the tree. The white and the moon. The brown and the white of the labyrinth. The scarlet. The sand. Our eyes and teeth gleam the moon's orb.

Underwater worlds. The pearl divers shake the mud. The Naham is in song. You are there. Walking the seabed. Your delicate arches mark the mud. The mud is fluffy with oysters. Your lungs are full of water. The sea is full of air. Amphibious. The divers pull the rope and the boat cascades to the mud. The ma'alem singing. The diver's guttural reply. The whites of your eyes. Phew phew.

Fluxes in schools and swarms of bodies. Dance to smiling noise. Surfaces spawn worms and pleasures flagellate. Mussels, falling in bliss. A mineral is home again, a bone again, a cliffside again, elemental bodies charged in deep benthos.

(Another round).

- a. Abyssal polymetallic nodules may produce
- b. "dark oxygen"
(Sweetman et al., 2024; see also Oxford, 2024).
- c. The engineers' desire
for obsolescent ideologies
- d. premised on supremacist economies of 'growth'.
- e. These nodules hold nuclei of past supernova
upending historical stance (Knie, 2004).
- f. They test for Deep Sea
Mining in the Clarion-Clipperton Zone
(Alberts, 2022).
- g. Pause in Norway, but
expand globally.
- h. Explain away extraction/catastrophe as transition
call it "green."
- i. Play the same colonial exploitation
pattern like clockwork.
tic-tic-tic-tic.
—
- j. Unfathomable disrupted abysses
(Jones et al. 2025)
to make 'a billion electric vehicles'
(The Metals Company, n.d.)
- k. They give up nothing, no compromise.
- l. A few keep comfortable and we
continue to sink
in flood
- m. A reckoning shapes the horizon.
(Müller et al. 2023)

The pearl divers' voices are guttural with prayer. Their rope is slack. At sea for a season. The Naham sing as they whoop, inhale and dive into the mud. *Phew phew*, you say. The water inside pushing, pushing at your lungs. There is no space. The curtains are white. The lattice is brown. The ascites. The paracentesis. Organs that stop. The water within. The struggle to breathe.

* You bring the cicadas' corpse shells to the table. Arrange them in a line. They sing and then die. Golden husk. No more than that. By the thousands. For a season*

(See Figure 7)



Figure 7. Lamu, February 2024. Note: Photograph by Ayesha Hameed.

6. Lamu, 29 March 2024, Moderate Rain: +32.2°/+28.8° (Night), 7.4 mph E, 29.8 inHg, 60%, 6:18 am/6:23 pm

Edi picks us up from the airport in a dhow. We were going to come back. The sun was beating down on us from the airport to our boat. You in your bucket hat to protect your skull. We are on the plane. We hold hands. The sea was warm and getting faster. Swahili is a swirl of currents. Cocktails at the bar. The always-empty beach. The Somalis at bay.

The 300-year-old baobab. You took a picture. The light into the ruined shrine. The room on the side for the women. Together we stood underneath arches for your picture. You are waiting in the lagoon with Abdul. Went swimming in your kaftan. The sun dries it immediately. Come! You say. I jump in. We float, but the current pulls us under the walkway. We billow (see Figure 8).



Figure 8. Lamu, February 2024. Note: Photograph by Ayesha Hameed.

The mangroves are full of fireflies. It is dusk.

A small boy climbs the mast of our dhow and takes a picture. No coal, says the sail. The fish is freshly grilled. The chicken is full of sauce. We are in the full moon on the sea. Your pictures shuttle.

- a. *You and a goat.*
- b. *The sky pink and cotton.*
- c. *Your window looking at the summer rain.*
- d. *The tree in your yard is a beacon.*
- e. *The dog who led you home in the storm.*
- f. *The monkey and the chicken bones*
- g. *crunching in the rain. The rain.*
- h. *The solitude.*
- i. *Your sister who braids my hair.*
- j. *We are sisters.*
- k. *We cried on the phone*
- l. *when the doctor told you about time.*
- m. *The last look over our shoulders from the plane.*

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors

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