

Wrack Writing (Selections)

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How does one write -- about bodies, sensations, the more-than-human world -- in the midst of, and in response to, the mounting devastation that settler colonial capitalism continues to wreak on lands, waters, and relationships? Adorno's (diversely interpreted) statement that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (Adorno 1983, 34) resonates strongly at the current moment: what does it mean to write, and especially to write *beautifully*, in conditions that are permeated with colonial violence and capitalist devastation? How do we, as feminist writers, imagine our words as witnessing, or even as politicizing, these violences? How can feminist lyrical writing sharpen our longing for justice rather than serve as an alibi for continued dispossession and commodification (including the commodification of our writing in the neoliberal university)? Are there practices of writing self-consciously "in the wrack zone" that might help us develop new forms, processes, and conversations to inspire and narrate reflection and resistance?

The two selections offered here were part of an experimental roundtable performance that showcased the process and products of a collaborative writing retreat, held on Galiano Island, BC, immediately prior to the 2018 Meeting of the Canadian Association for Literature, Environment and Culture in Canada (ALECC), in Victoria, BC. The group, including participants from both Canada and Australia (two different versions of settler colonial capitalism, separated by an ocean), convened on Galiano for four days of *wrack writing*. Moving between structure and spontaneity, the workshop involved an experimental process in which, rather than working on our "own" writing, we attempted to write away from authorship, thus disturbing the idea of writing as something that belongs to its writer. This ethos of collaboration (or perhaps complicity) extended to the non-human world as well. Intensely site-specific, our writing sessions were accompanied by walking, swimming, listening, smelling, finding new rhythms and movements in response to our surroundings, as an attempt at "collective thinking," as Isabelle Stengers suggests, "in the presence of" others where those others are different humans and but other species and beings too (Stengers 2004). As the name suggests, this experiment also aspired to contemplate *wrack*—the zone of detritus that marks the shifting boundary between land and ocean — as something other than a commons. Littered with washed up remnants of other worlds and strewn with scraps and pieces of things that never quite made it beyond this one, wrack for us was less deliberate. Wrack is what happens as the outcome of disasters fast and slow, violence, chance, or even just carelessness. Hovering in the transitional space of this ecotone, we wrote both *about*, and *as*, wrack.

Selection 1: Instructions for Arrival

Prologue:

When you arrive in the wrack zone you might feel a bit disoriented. You might be a bit dishevelled. You turn with each arriving wave, bruised by the other wrack that jostles, not always gently, around you. Barnacle shells have sliced your skin. You have bits of unknown wrack tangled in your hair.

You arrive in the wrack with memories of displacement, new and old, and losses. Your severed attachments writhe around you in the seaweed. I'm afraid that I have to tell you that you are a mess.

Instructions for Arrival:

1. Find your feet. See, perhaps, if there are living seaweeds you could stroke with your toes. Your hands, too, can make steadying contact.

We never expected to arrive anywhere via the sea. Born on land in the age of airplane flight, the last resort for travelling anywhere was the sea. And yet at some point all the planes fell out of the sky and we survivors (life vest, whistle, flashlight) joined the driftwood; it was with the wood that we first found our feet in the wrack zone.

2. It's ok if you don't, or can't find your feet. Balance gets harder with aging (even barefoot) and we also need to tend and care for our imbalances.

3. But first, notice who else is there. Ask yourself: "Who are my wrack kin?" Who is floating around you and who has been deposited further along the shore? You could begin by making a list (microplastics, barnacles, clematis, GE chickens, spindly plantation forest trees, dead fish, living seals, tomatoes....) but this is the only the beginning. The word 'kin' is only a beginning.

The abundance of wood announced itself too loudly: FIRE, and then, HOUSE. Or, in other words: FOOD and SHELTER. Although this was A new world (and it was THE new world to us) our references for survival were tied in annoying ways to what we'd left. The fire needs to be surrounded by rocks, the house needs to be on land. Are these conventions, or material practicalities borne of context? I didn't want the fire to escape and I couldn't fathom any more time adrift at sea: the discomfort was unbearable. So wood and fire became my kin, and fish, oysters, and seaweed my food – kin of a kind but in ways wracked by violence, too.

4. Learn ways to begin to divest of the first person singular when you are wanting (“we” are all in this together, even if ‘we’ are always in the altogether in all different ways), and to inhabit it fiercely when you are called upon to account. The ‘we’ cannot be your alibi.

5. Eat well.

6. Cultivate erotics.

7. Cultivate gardens, which means cultivating forms of liveliness that you have not yet been able to imagine. While there may be violence in acts of radical cultivation (composting has its deadly elements and some beings enjoy the experience of espaliering, pruning, caging, being cooped up), violences and takings-care are not opposite directions. Part of the difficult work lies in figuring out, collectively, how to trace a future through both the eros and Thanatos of living together.

8. Pattern new choreographies of relationships even when the steps are often embodied echoes of trauma and loss. Start by feeling through the pain to the carapace of your new kin. Let them teach you new rhythms – for sleeping and listening and fucking and poetry. And raging and raging. And breathing. And, still.

Dear Piddock:

Sorry we weren't here to meet you. Thanks for choosing our shoreline to stay, make yourself at home. Here's just a few things to make your stay in the wrack zone more enjoyable.

1. Keep your feet moving – your meals will be more enjoyable that way.

2. Watch out for the barnacle! He is persistent and needy.

3. If things get a bit murky we've left plenty of straws, so you can just breathe and feed at your leisure.

4. Know that you are not alone. Don't mean to rude but there's others in the wrack that need considerations. We're also all in this altogether, right.

5. Feel free to cultivate erotics – but remember #2.

6. It's a dynamic neighbourhood and everyone here just goes with the flow. The seagulls and shore dwellers used to cause some damage but they're gone, we're all so many new though – so no wonder you need a break.

9. Above all, do not fall into despair when you look around for your friends in the wrack zone and find they have not arrived with you. Some may be strewn further along the shore. Others

are submerged, or bashed to bits, or carried off by the tide to circle endlessly in the Pacific with a billion iterations of plastic. Don't despair. I repeat: DO NOT DESPAIR!

If you find yourself sliding in that direction, look around for a large block of Styrofoam, the kind they once used for providing homes for barnacles and tubeworms underneath docks. They are here in the wrack zone in ample supply. Throw an arm over it. If you can find the strength, haul yourself up. Look around for a broad, flat piece of wood and paddle yourself out to the kelp beds, lash yourself in place. Now the current won't carry you, the surf won't crush you. You rise and settle in the quiet movement of the swell. It's always possible to find a new kind of existence. You can live well on the things that wash up.

The sky is still beautiful, and the caustic, rubbish-laden waves bring you things you can learn from, and make into something new.

In other words: Open. In spite of the danger and the hopeless and the boredom and the broke, open.

Open.

Selection 2: Refugia

1. You wanted the sea to hold you. You lay down in the wrack, slow blooming, your body turning with the feral rhythms of the logs. Almost revolution. Floating, falling, you were carried by manganese dreams. Things move more slowly here. Surely, you thought. Surely, the seabed will be refugium from the violences snagging on your terrestrial flesh.

#clearcut #metoo #jobless #hose-ban #fakenews #plasticstraw #suckerpunch #taxbreak #missingmurdered #dudebro #pipeline #freespeech #blackgold #incel #antifa

Surely, you'll find solace at the bottom of the sea.

2. Let me tell you about seabed communities of mineral and heat, the nodule and vent lives humming faintly with creatures who phosphoresce. Ghostly crabs, tiny shrimp and needle-toothed fish, feathered polychaetes, burrowing bivalves and flatworms and slow-moving echinoderms - creatures accustomed to slow flows and the deep thrum of the seafloor below. In the misheard quiet and peace of blackness, life goes on as usual, in search of survival and kinship.

3. What of the seabed imagined as frontier kin quarry? Where your, their, our, my feral movements from one extractive zone to the next empties the waves of their solace and, in unequal exchange, plastic bits of the wreckage are tossed to the shore.

Deep ridges of clumped kelp and bruised wood map the high tide mark, entangled with wrappers, lids and sun-bleached shards of orange plastic.

Straddle the clumps (where shorebirds should be) and peck at another ring seal, pacing forward two, three, four: a can, a white fork, and with each recount pockets fill with more: fourteen, fifteen... another wrapper, a bullet case.

It is such a beautiful day. A sky brushed with horsetails augurs different days ahead.

4. It is as if, for some at least, nature had become the convenient resort they had worked toward over time.

Refugia as inaccessible middle-class home ownership.

I am told that it is not good to romanticise the past. And wherever I take refuge in imaginings of a good future, I seem to collide with the word 'unlikely' in various sharp and deflating ways. I don't want to strive for land ownership.

So here is this homeless desire for refuge, time travelling, submersible, ready for anything. Give me a barnacle shell to keep me safe.

Back to the horsetails and how they brush the blue sky and how there are butterflies. Are there possible refugia around us that we have overlooked.

5. Of course there are refugia around us, overlooked, undervalued, poorly cared for, crudely catalogued, and solace at the bottom of the sea is relying on us to find them, and cultivate them to make conditions elsewhere more favourable.

I was brought up on the lie of self-discovery, and of possibility, and of 'the world is your oyster'. Maybe the latter is true if the world is a slimy, stinky, snot-like creature (sorry oysters) that only seem like accessible delicacies to the mega rich.

This promise isn't true but it is hard to fathom as a lie. How to imagine ourselves in this wrack? When self is predicated on a journey into the unknown, uncharted wilds of adulthood, what do we do when what we find is the wrack zone?

The seabed promises this still. This journey. These uncharted waters.

The promise of the seabed is that it remains a frontier, a new world, a wild west, an Oregon Trail, a penal colony, where this self can enlarge.

And through that make new selves.

6. I don't think touching is without violence. I do think it's a wrack practice – having been forcibly thrown together in proximities we neither choose nor expected, the least we can do is admit to each other: I need a hug right now.

To hold and be held. Refugia praxis, pared down to its barest articulation. To feel the touch of others as we float on the rafts (made from all of those beach logs) into a world that will otherwise drown us both literally and figuratively. An anemone who tests out the taste of my

fingertips. A hummingbird who finds my red-flowered shirts pretty darned sexy and nearly takes off my ear to get closer to it. A clematis who responds to my gentle tactile coaxings with bright purple flowers. A tiny red spider for whom my left foot is terrain.

References

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Author bio

We're bivalve clams: uncanny wrack zone homemakers. We're known for rubbing and rotating against rocks, water-eaten logs and other hard places. We burrow, slowly. The Piddock Clam Collective includes Jennifer Mae Hamilton (jennifer.hamilton@une.edu.au), Janine MacLeod (janine.c.macleod@gmail.com), Emily McGiffin (e.mcgiffin@ucl.ac.uk), Astrida Neimanis (astrida.neimanis@ubc.ca), Susan Reid (sureid24@gmail.com) and Catriona Sandilands (essandi@yorku.ca).