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Childhood, Inter-species Kinship and the Oceanic Weird in Khadija Abdalla Bajaber's *The House of Rust*

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Abstract

This article reads Khadija Abdalla Bajaber's novel *The House of Rust* (2021) as an example of the oceanic weird that reimagines inter-species kinship via the child. Bringing the blue humanities and childhood studies into dialogue, it explores how the oceanic weird "submerges" gendered and racialised discourses of childhood forged in the Anthropocene in the temporal and spatial dynamics of the ocean. Childhood in flux enables new forms of ecological care and kinship to emerge. The article explores the potential of inter-species kinship to address the traumas of colonialism and climate crisis and to counter posthuman critiques that situate the child as an avatar of the human destruction of the planet. It argues that Bajaber's novel facilitates a confrontation with the unfathomable nature of ecological crisis that is relevant beyond the Indian Ocean region, articulating the global importance of reconceptualising childhood and children's agency in fighting for climate justice.

Keywords

childhood – blue humanities – ecoweird – oceanic weird – kinship – Indian ocean literature

This article examines how Khadija Abdalla Bajaber's novel uses the stylistic strategies of the oceanic weird to construct a childhood that disrupts gendered

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and racialised hierarchies and enables inter-species kinship in the face of ecological crisis. This kinship is distinctive because it positions the child as an actor in "kin-making"[1] rather than as a passive innocent or, at the other extreme, as an avatar of the capitalist status-quo and human planetary destruction.[2] As "speculative fabulation," the imaginative work that posthumanist critic Donna Haraway sees as essential to ecologically responsible ways of living, the oceanic weird form in *The House of Rust* reshapes the child as a figure of connection whose power is enabled by the temporal and spatial flux of the ocean.

Aisha, the young heroine of the novel, sets out on a quest from the coastal city of Mombasa to find her fisherman father, Ali. In a boat made of bones accompanied by a talking cat, Hamza, she faces horrific sea monsters who reveal ancient cross-species contracts that expose the city's buried colonial history while also enabling Aisha to form new alliances with sharks and other less favoured creatures, straddling the divide between land and ocean, human and non-human. The quest trope as used by Bajaber aligns with Cajetan Iheka's observation that many contemporary African narratives with an environmental focus "promise a search for a human being, but that premise is soon extended to reveal the prevailing state of the environment. In other words, the object of the search becomes enlarged to include the space covered in the quest."[3] This article explores how the space of Aisha's quest (the Indian Ocean and Mombasa), and its animal inhabitants, become the novel's object of focus via the child's capacity for inter-species connection. It argues that in directing our attention to the environment the novel reframes discourses of childhood in relation to colonial trauma and climate crisis, highlighting the centrality of childhood to postcolonial ecological thinking.

My analysis of *The House of Rust* addresses these concerns by bringing the blue humanities and childhood studies into sustained dialogue. Scholars in the nascent field of blue humanities, which explores the ways humans engage with water, have not yet prioritised childhood or the child as distinct aspects of the human, although there is some acknowledgement of their importance both in relation to human origin narratives and posthuman futures.[4] Susan McHugh recognises the importance of focusing on childhood for imagining indigen-

1 See Haraway, 2016.

2 See Edelman, 2005.

3 Iheka, 2019: 204.

4 For instance, while Graham Huggan explores the role of sea creatures in childhood imaginaries and notes a deep cultural history connecting children and cetaceans, he does not focus on the child or childhood as critical concepts (see Huggan, 2018). Childhood is mentioned in passing in relation to postcolonial autobiography in Steve Mentz's *An Introduction to the*

ous futures via "conservation for all," highlighting the role of children who, like Aisha, navigate the deepening fault lines between species driven by colonial exploitation.[5] McHugh does not discuss the child explicitly; however, her contention that "cultural continuity requires children and other loved ones to recognize and respect the dead in many forms" points to the role of childhood in decolonial ecological debates and the need for further investigation of how childhood, colonialism and ecology are intricately linked in literary imaginings of the past and the future.[6]

In childhood studies, "water-centric thinking"[7] has been utilised by scholars to emphasise the often rapidly changing shape of children's lives in coastal communities, but there is scope for further thinking about how foregrounding human interactions with water, and the creatures that inhabit it, might impact how we conceive of childhood, and indeed how children think about themselves.[8] Critics including Christina Sharpe and Isabel Hofmeyr have argued that paying attention to the ocean makes overt the relation of history to colonialism and slavery; black lives exist "in the wake" of the slave ship and so then do wider discourses on the value and purpose of humanity, to which childhood is central.[9] The opportunity for thinking about the ways childhood and water come into contact is particularly pertinent in the context of the Indian Ocean which, as Hofmeyr shows, has until recently received less attention than the Atlantic and the Pacific.[10] I propose that focussing on childhood in Indian Ocean literature can help us redress this balance and realise the interdependency of colonial histories, climate crisis, and cultural constructions of childhood, and the traumas they all carry. As Sonia Baelo-Allue puts it in explaining posthuman frameworks for trauma, we seek "a more embedded and embodied vision of the trauma process that takes into account the ties of humans to other organic bodies, machines, and material forms."[11] My analysis of *The House of Rust* focuses on the potential of oceanic weird fiction to develop such an "embodied vision" of the child's relation to the environment.

I am prompted by Nikolas Mattheis's demand for "childist kinship" in which the child is actively positioned rather than a passive conduit of adult control,

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Blue Humanities (Mentz, 2023), suggesting that across the broad range of genres that Mentz discusses, there is potential for more critical exploration of the topic.

5 McHugh, 2021: 94.

6 McHugh: 94.

7 See Mentz, 2023.

8 See, for instance, Kjørholt et al., 2023.

9 See Sharpe, 2016.

10 Hofmeyr, 2010.

11 Baelo-Allué, 2022: 119.

as he suggests is the case in Haraway's conception of kinship across species.[12] Mattheis agrees with Haraway's emphasis in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) on "response-ability" as the capacity to come together to care.[13] But he contends that even in "striving towards a 'pro-child' position on kinship" in a 2018 intervention that takes into account worries about eugenicist elements in her proposal, Haraway reproduces "adult constructions of children as passive kin 'being made.'"[14] Mattheis warns against demonising the child as indicative of naturalised heteronormativity. Instead, he proposes that practices of speculative fabulation, as advocated by Haraway, are key to "changing the story of kinship in the 'Anthropocene'" and argues that children and childhood should be and are active within them.[15] Such practices can involve actual and fictional children, and indeed each influences the other in framing children and childhood as vital to new forms of kinship. In my reading of *The House of Rust*, I combine Mattheis's childhood studies perspective, which prioritises the fluid rather than fixed nature of childhood, with the insights of blue humanities scholars into the impact of the ocean's spatial and temporal instability on our understanding of the human. I aim to show that the oceanic weird can undo, or at least offer a twist on, the "reproductive futurism"[16] attached to the child to which beliefs in human exceptionalism still cling.

The House of Rust utilises the oceanic weird to explore the transcultural heritage of the Indian Ocean region; Bajaber describes its context as "a poet culture" mixing Swahili and Hadrami.[17] The novel hasn't yet received scholarly attention but was greeted with critical astonishment. In the words of A. Igoni Barrett, judge of the Graywolf Prize that the novel won in 2021, "on the surface this is a limpid tale – a straightforward quest story – of a young Mombasa-born girl seeking her missing fisherman father, but it is eddied and enriched by what lurks beneath the surface of both the sea and the prose."[18] It is therefore an ideal text for exploring "entwined histories in Black and indigenous ecologies, as well as histories of oppression, that may trouble territorial bound-

12 Mattheis, 2022: 518.

13 Haraway, 2016: 78.

14 Mattheis, 2022: 513; Haraway, 2018. Mattheis summarises a range of critical responses to Haraway's propositions (Mattheis, 2022: 515–517).

15 Mattheis, 522.

16 'Reproductive futurism' is a term used by Edelman (2005) for the child within the nuclear family as a figure of the capitalist-colonialist status quo and a way of policing social and political relations.

17 Tepper, 2021.

18 Graywolf Press, 2021.

aries and expand relationalities,"[19] in particular the relation between the child and the environment. By "reading for water,"[20] I show that the novel's depiction of the child in an oceanic space diverts the timebound logic of child development (and its master timeline of capitalist modernity), enabling inter-species relations as part of a transcultural ecological vision. This is not to say that childhood becomes a utopian state any more than the ocean is a utopian space, but that allowing childhood a complexity outside of gendered and racialised norms releases its 'weird' potential as well as implicitly recognising the diversity of actual children's experiences. Hofmeyr, Nutall and Lavery cite Amitav Ghosh's assertion in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2017) that "climatic truth is stranger than fiction"[21] as inspiration for "reading for water." In a similar vein, I wish to investigate how Bajaber's use of oceanic weird strategies troubles the cultural contours of the child within colonial capitalism, thereby also drawing attention to how actual childhoods in the global south are impacted by climate breakdown.

In its transcultural multilingual form, *The House of Rust* has commonalities with other Indian Ocean works, including the writing of Mia Couto, Abdulrazak Gurnah and, most obviously, Yvonne Owuor, whose *The Dragonfly Sea* Bajaber singles out as an inspiration.[22] As such, the text also contributes to growing historical, cultural and literary interest in the Indian Ocean region.[23] It is part of a wave of experimentation in African writing that, according to Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra, drives "the current amplification of African literary production."[24] Her demand that we approach the African novel as "the vanguard rather than a marginal other or belated case"[25] can also be viewed as an ecological one; the "protean" form of the novel being suitable for exploring the unequal impact of climate change within what Jeanne-Marie Jackson calls "the disorientating web of global systems."[26] As geographers Phillip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters show, using a Deleuzian methodology, the ocean can be considered via "the concept of the dynamic assemblage, in which mobile human and nonhuman (including molecular) elements and affects are not merely passively consumed

19 Etherington and Kumavie, 2024: 1.
20 See Hofmeyr, Nuttall, and Lavery, 2022.
21 Hofmeyr, Nuttall and Lavery, 2022: 304.
22 Tepper, 2021.
23 See Hofmeyr, 2010.
24 Armillas-Tiseyra, 2022: 248.
25 Armillas-Tiseyra, 2022: 244.
26 Jackson, 2021: 180. Meg Samuelson calls these systems "racial capitalism," while Sharae Deckard and Kirstin Oloff refer to "colonialist capitalism"; see Samuelson, 2018, and Deckard and Oloff, 2020.

but imagined, encountered, and produced."[27] I now go on to examine how the oceanic weird form in *The House of Rust* is in synergy with these insights and how it impacts our understanding childhood in relation to climate breakdown and inter-species kinship.

1 The Oceanic Weird

The term "oceanic weird" is an offshoot of "the new weird"[28] and the related "ecoweird," protean forms pushing conceptual and formal boundaries. The oceanic weird sucks in aspects of hydrocriticism, black hydropoetics, and literary oceanic studies and carries them, tidally as it were, back and forth. It makes fluid the boundaries between bodies, species, cultures, and disciplines in the Anthropocene that Samuelson characterises as possessing a horror "generated by the return of strangely familiar vulnerabilities that human mastery had sought to ward off" but which renders the planet as perpetual disaster.[29] At least partly an anxious reaction to global capitalism, the new weird is, as Roger Luckhurst shows, "a fugitive category, a blur in the corner of other genres."[30] Pioneer of the genre M. John Harrison describes it as "constant collisions, engagements and exchanges of fluids between the horror story, the ghost story, landscape writing, the hauntological and psychogeograpical perspectives."[31]

As a global form able to express vulnerabilities shared across various localities, the oceanic weird is particularly suited to narratives of the Indian ocean. As Charne Lavery has shown, there is a growing body of fiction that "imaginatively links East Africa, South Asia and the Arab world via a network of south-south connections that precedes and survives European imperialism."[32] Writers of the Indian Ocean littoral and transoceanic networks from Abdulrazak Gurnah

27 Steinberg and Peters, 2015: 256. See also DeLoughrey, 2019.

28 "The New Weird" is thought to have been first used by the writer M. John Harrison in 2003 and has since been debated by well-known novelists working in related genres. Jeff and Ann VanderMeer edited an anthology, *The New Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories* in 2011.

29 Samuelson, 2018: 33. On hydrocriticism and literary oceanic studies see Hofmeyr, Nuttall and Lavery, 2022: 304.

30 Luckhurst, 2017: 1041.

31 Harrison, 2023. As Sharae Deckard and Kirstin Oloff describe, "The Oceanic Weird emerged within a larger tradition of ecophobic tales at the turn of the twentieth century in a world still dominated by European colonialism, but increasingly reshaped by emergent US imperialism", 2020: 2.

32 Lavery, 2021: 1.

to Lindsey Collen and Sophia Mustafa have sought to "recuperate alternative maritime histories and indigenous epistemologies that contest the narratives of the ocean as an empty space claimed by Western imperialisms and globalization."[33] Deckard and Oloff agree, elucidating "the ways in which the genre's aesthetics and themes mediate the violence, epistemes and sociological relations corresponding to eco-racial regimes of capitalism and colonialism" via readings of oceanic weird fiction that reveal the disruptive presence of indigenous cultural forms.[34]

The forces driving capitalist world ecology are present in *The House of Rust*, indeed are literally elemental, but they are not easily grasped and are caught in cultural and literary currents that combine in the world of its child protagonist. In Aisha "non-human life and non-European civilisation"[35] meet and she is labelled "monster-girl-weirdo" by her enemies. To examine her role is therefore to probe the ecological vulnerability of the Anthropocene, or the Capitalocene, if we prefer that term, and to imagine how to live otherwise.[36] In arguing for a non-anthropocentric approach to kinship, Haraway suggests the multiple signifier SF, which, as mentioned above, includes speculative fabulation and speculative feminism. Here I am interested in how this urge to invention, exemplified in the oceanic weird, combines with the "complications" of power that Steinberg and Peters identify in the ocean, and in exploring how both impact the way we think about childhood.

The sea as "a space not moved on but *through* and *under*"[37] activates in the imagination the dimensions of material volume, vertical depth, and horizontal motion identified by Steinberg and Peters as well as a fourth proposed by Joline Mathieson: "the hydroelemental force of marine animality."[38] Steinberg and Peters contend that "a "wet ontology" can reinvigorate, redirect, and reshape debates that are all too often restricted by terrestrial limits."[39] Taking up these insights from a literary perspective, Mathieson claims that "the oceanic weird –

33 Rajbhandari, 2022.

34 Deckard and Oloff, 2020: 3.

35 Deckard and Oloff, 2020: 2.

36 Haraway weighs up these terms, acknowledging that such terminologies are imposed, controlling those who have little agency (including, of course, children): "Capitalocene at least captures that this is a few-hundred-year-old process of building wealth through exterminationist extraction. In comparison, *anthropocene* implies that this is somehow a species act; that it's the separation of whatever it is that makes us human from all else, and that it's another human exceptionalist move," Haraway, 2016.

37 Steinberg and Peters, 2015: 253.

38 Mathieson, 2016: 113.

39 Steinberg and Peters, 2015: 47.

the hodgepodge and mutations of fictions that include maritime science fiction, horror, and fantasy – offers us sophisticated, often self-reflective models of wet ontologies."[40] In *The House of Rust*, Aisha's ocean adventures offer us exactly such a self-reflective model of relationality between childhood and ecology. The child brings the past (enduring legends and traditions and hidden histories), the present (a confusion of loss and liberation as belief in human control breaks down) and the future (the child itself and its relation to the planet) into contact in speculative ways. The novel's "wet ontology" reveals the weakest being (the girl protagonist herself) to actually be the strongest because she's able to break, or at least weaken, the link between humanity and control over the natural world, to alter her perspective and relationships within the flow of oceanic experience, and to move between the horizontal relations of land and the vertical relations of the sea. She defies teleological models of child and human development while maintaining her purpose: to save her father and, more crucially, to resist the "making uninhabitable of the world."[41] Approaching the child through "wet ontology" is a means of asking how it is possible to "make kin" amidst the ghosts of planetary destruction.

Having outlined how I'm using the "oceanic weird" in this article, I will now consider three key ways in which the text reimagines childhood: domestic rebellion as ecological care, feminist (anti)-quest, and inter-species kinship. This trajectory moves from the domestic and traditional roles of service that fall to Aisha as a girl (the past) via her sea voyages (the present) and, lastly but with no finality, the cross-species connections she forges on land and sea (the future). The temporal markers operate in the recursive context of a non-future in which, I contend, Edelman's designation of the child as a cipher of capitalist modernity is challenged by the child as a seeker of kinship in the "haunting afterlife" of the Anthropocene.[42]

2 Domestic Rebellion as Ecological Care

Aisha has many names, most of which belittle her. She is called "girl," "child," or "fishling," but fights to own her given name, Aisha (meaning "life"). She is persistently haunted by thoughts of her mother, "Shida" (meaning "trouble"), who was unwillingly bound to a domestic life and died young: "for Aisha, in her

40 Mathieson, 2016: 112.
41 Samuelson, 2018: 35.
42 Samuelson, 2018: 32.

mother's name hung rainstorms and rust. Ungalvanised, galvanizing, *sharp*."[43] Aisha's journey begins where her mother's ends, with her struggles to untangle herself from the obligations of a young woman in a traditional Hadrami community.[44] She becomes known as "monster-girl-weirdo" by the crows who keep watch on her movements and although she is under threat, it is this hybridity that enables Aisha to drive the narrative beyond normative ideas about children, and other creatures. In her associations with both ocean and land animals, including sharks, goats, rats and crows, she uncages a strangeness that she and they share. Through this "weird" child and her animal associates the novel exposes gender and familial norms as restrictive, with "womanwork" in particular being challenged:

> She was no great beauty, nor exceptionally religious, nor as intelligent as the sort of women who end up running businesses or becoming great matriarchs. She was an isolated strange fiction of a girl. Doing what she was told, yet keeping the rest of her to herself. (31)

This is the first step in Aisha learning her own strength by embracing her weakness and impressionability: "her mind an empty room where visitors came and left" (39). Performing her gendered role initially, she protects the secret space of her imagination, not filling it with her own ambition or with others' expectations. Indeed, she only succeeds in the novel through collaboration and through forming alliances (with Hamza the cat, sharks, monsters, and other humans). She tries on stories of heroism and victory but finds they don't fit: "I don't need you to believe in the story," Aisha tells her grandmother, "I just need you to believe in *me*" (209). In a world of magic, trickery and past betrayals, particularly of the small migrant community she comes from, this is no simple demand. Indeed, it could be viewed as a decoy, for Aisha is, in any straightforwardly individual heroic sense, destined to fail. Bajaber said in an interview that she initially told the story to her family during a blackout without knowing where it would lead, and this sense of moving through the dark is main-

43 Bajaber, 2021: 4. Further references are in the main text.

44 Ann Bang summarises the long history of Hadramis in Africa: "The Hadramawt is a region of in the south-eastern part of present-day Yemen […] The migrants were, from the early period until well into the 20th century, almost exclusively male, and they tended to marry strategically into local clans to obtain access to trade networks. Over time, many lost their connection to the Hadramawt, but they might reactivate that identity at times when 'Arabness' was a political advantage, such as during the period of Bu Saidi rule in East Africa. The colonial period led to restrictions on movement to and from the Hadramawt, but also to new business opportunities for Hadramis in Africa." Bang, 2019.

tained throughout the novel. The notion of individual heroism is worthless in the context where generational bonds are under strain, ecological systems are breaking down, and more radical forms of kinship are necessary. As Kathryn Yusoff cautions, all "origin stories bury as much as they reveal" and, while Aisha is initially concerned with unravelling her past, it is the knotty demands of the present that require her attention.[45] Outside of the confines of the home, Aisha's familial narrative instils a sense of destiny but not in the recognisably human-centred terms of bravery, determination or even resilience. Rather, the emphasis is on the plasticity of the child and her search for a fresh approach. This is demonstrated in the opening fishing scene with her father Ali, "a master of the waves" and a "reckless" chancer (19):

> When Aisha was younger her father used to take her out to sea.
>
> Her mother had been beset with pains and, Aisha suspected, rather sick with the sight of her, so her father, bereft of sons, would heave Aisha up onto his shoulders and leap onto the boat.
>
> *Pay attention*, he said, guiding her hands into the stomach of a red-edged changu. Feathered filaments torn, raggedly inflating within blood-speckled gills. Ali laughing a bright summer laugh, crooking his finger in the tuck, hooking from the inside. His little finger gleaming and wriggling like a worm.
>
> He had looked into her face and what he saw there stopped his smile, his mirth fading. She would remember this ever after, sensing that she had failed not just at a task, but at possessing some important instinct. That she had both disappointed her father and yet done no more than expected the first time. It was not unforgivable. There were lessons here [...]
>
> He flung the mutilated thing over the side, and just as the cold cord of its guts began to cloud the water pink, a black fin cleaved the wave, quick as a scythe, and vanished. A light white froth, milky as boiling rice, bubbled up in a fizz before it too dissolved.
>
> Pay attention, Aisha. *Everyone must have their share*. (1)

Here Aisha has failed not only to kill for food but to feel the drive to do so. She feels death with her hands being "guided" inside the fish, participating in causing pain but also, gruesomely, giving birth to an ecological consciousness that is different from but related to the "instinct" her father wants her to have. Her gender means that she is expected to doubly fail and does so. And yet "it was not

45 Yusoff, 2018: 58.

unforgiveable" suggests that her redemption, the lessons that she will learn will be through forming a new relationship with nature via another instinct present in the Mombasa fishing community to which she belongs; ecological care. The "cold cord" of the changu's guts before it is taken as food by the sharks exemplifies the interconnection of human and animal, paralleling, or even superseding, the connection of mother and child that in Aisha's story is troubled and prefiguring the later solidarity between the girl and the sharks who "quick as a scythe" take their piece of flesh in this scene. As I discuss below, sharks are key to the inter-species care and kinship at the centre of the novel. Being bound to the service of vicious monsters and feeding on death they (like the fishermen) are both victims and culprits; "situated in larger force fields that reverberate from the plantation to the global tourist market."[46]

The demand to share recurs through the text, serving as a pointer to the extractivism of colonial capitalism and a warning that "oceanic plenitude"[47] is itself a myth whose time is running out. As I will go on to consider, the oceanic weird enables a "thinking *with*" sharks as a companion species, in Haraway's terms, "in order to trace the threads of transspecies entanglement and the intraspecies fractures that compose and capture disposable life."[48] The changu here are both "disposable" lives to be sold and consumed and part of a ritual of appeasement of the gods/monsters of the ocean. Both worldviews co-exist in the education about the ocean that Aisha receives:

> Locals of all faiths know to utter a prayer. God's name at least once. God's name crowds the hearts of coastal folks […] The locals give the water due respect and they are for the most part left unmolested, should the water feel that day that there are no lessons to be taught […]. The locals know, there are things in the water that would eat you alive. (5)

Such respect for the natural world while making use of its resources often characterises relations in the peripheral zones of capitalism, notably in coastal or rural communities, that are subject to the depleting dynamism of capital accumulation that Jason Moore describes: "Capital's dynamism turns on the exhaustion of the very the webs of life necessary to sustain accumulation."[49] In *The House of Rust*, the side-by-side (horizontal, historical) existence of human and nature, religion and trade, is disrupted, as we'll discover in analysing Aisha's

46 Samuelson, 2018: 44.
47 Deckard and Oloff, 2020: 10.
48 Samuelson, 2018: 32.
49 Moore, 2011: 109.

encounters with monsters, by the resurgence from the depths of the ocean of resentment and violence at this destruction (the verticality that ocean studies scholars emphasise). The question of exactly who is deserving and how much they should have becomes dependent on the child after her father disappears. Aisha's refusal to kill is not a refusal to bear witness, or even to take action; her lesson is in the acceptance that the spoils of violence, on a small scale at least, will be hers to distribute. As Matthias observes, children are implicated in human destruction, even if they do not directly do the work of death. To be anti-violence therefore comes close to being anti-child; only by taking seriously children's own resistance (with an awareness of both the systemic strictures around it and the dissolution of the human subject required for the emergence of new worldviews), is it possible to reimagine the relation of child and environment. In the context of colonial trauma, agency must mean prioritising interdependence between creatures as well as between human generations.[50] As Ryan Topper argues, "conceptualizing trauma as cosmological, the rupture of a world-system perpetually constituted by networks of living forces, resonates with current turns to the more-than-human dimension of African literature."[51] The first fishing scene operates as a childhood trauma that prepares Aisha for her later oceanic quest and, crucially, readies the reader for a recalibration of childhood that will confront the traumatic rupture of colonialism as cosmological, cultural and material by surfacing the weird and mysterious aspects of this "more-than-human dimension."

3 Feminist Anti-quest

When her father's boat is "smashed apart like a child's toy" (14), the boundary between adulthood and childhood is breached and Aisha must step outside of the domestic sphere to begin her quest: "His being missing had awoken in her the extraordinary, a monster of childhood, the serpent that lurked beneath her father's boat, tearing apart the fish it was thrown" (35). The monster here is both the fear of the unknown for the child confronting death and the fear of the unknown elements within the child themselves, often associated with weird fiction via tropes of the gothic or the uncanny. Aisha confronts these double fears by going to sea and in doing so fulfils the destiny to resist prescribed female roles passed on from her mother: "Orphans, widows, women

50 See Abebe, 2019.
51 Topper 2025: 7.

were expected to scan horizons till their eyes hurt, so that if her father came she would be there to greet him, a good daughter, a good wife, a good mother, a good host" (35). Aisha makes the choice to defy the repetitive demand to be "good" placed on women and girls. However, she does so in a spirit of connection rather than confrontation. Leaving her paternal grandmother to take care of the home, Aisha enacts a rebellion that is also a recognition of the history of her people, the Hadrami, who historically have always been migrants adapting to new locations and cultures and weaving new lives from old traditions, making the ocean a part of their identity as well as a source of income. As Hofmeyr emphasises, "the Indian Ocean – home to the world's oldest transoceanic long-distance trading systems – folds together old diasporas (like the five-hundred-year old Hadrami network from Yemen) [...] with a range of Western imperial formations."[52] Aisha's motivation fits with Mattheis's critique of Haraway's pitching of "kin against kind, odd-kin against biogenetic offspring," suggesting a kinship not driven to prioritise "non-biogenetic oddity" but making use of the oddness of the migrant familial in order to seek kinship outside the human.[53] Aisha rediscovers overlooked biogenetic ties (her feminist genealogy is via her dead mother) just as she begins to form voluntary kinship relations across species.

The sea and its creatures must "have their share" of human spoils in the present, but human exploitation has wider impacts, historically and geographically, that the locals are only partially aware of and that become visible through Aisha's adventures. These take the form of undercurrents of eeriness and dread, a recognisable feature of weird fiction, that attach both to Aisha herself and the creatures she encounters. As Deckard and Oloff remind us, citing China Miéville: "Many writers of the Old Weird conceived of a world where the divine inhabits the everyday often expressed through terrifying awe."[54] Indeed, as Mary Woodbury points out, the natural in and of itself is the most weird, because we cannot predict it, just as Aisha cannot predict how her encounters with animals, monsters or gods (jinnis) will turn out.[55] This unpredictability works both ways with Aisha as "monster-girl-weirdo" being intensely watched by the crows who try to predict her movements for their master, Old Snake/Almassi, but can never be confident in their assessments. Like the chicken that reappears apparently randomly around the city as Aisha seeks the rumoured

52 Hofmeyr, 2010: 722.
53 Mattheis, 2022: 7.
54 Miéville, 2009: 511, cited in Deckard and Oloff, 2020: 10.
55 Woodbury, 2017.

House of Rust in between her sea voyages, her trajectory to them appears chaotic and therefore threatening.

Aisha takes inspiration from animals in freeing herself from the human demands for order. As well as Hamza, her philosophical advisor, she finds friends in the masterless goats who have free run of the city. Criticising Aisha's foolishness and lack of "sense," her grandmother, Hababa, likens her to "The masterless mombe – *mbuzi* of Mombasa" (165). The multilingual negotiation of the novel is important here, as Hababa confuses mombe (cows) for mbuzi (goats) in Swahili and is corrected by Zubair, the wise fisherman who informs Aisha on the dangers of going to sea. In these misnamed but free animals Aisha finds inspiration for her own independence: "Aisha saw Aisha [...] a master of her future" (178). The child and the natural world are aligned in multiple intersecting ways on land and at sea: the intrigues of the crows and Old Snake in the city parallel that of the sharks and the sea monsters in the ocean, and the child moves in between. The child-nature alliance is not premised upon innocence or futurity but on an evasion of authority via slippery alliances and mutually beneficial arrangements. Aisha takes on aspects of animality:

> Aisha moved like an animal. Had the flat, direct stare of an animal. She never blinked unless she reminded herself; he saw her sometimes pause to look down, timid, before she looked up again [...] It was like staring into the unknowable sea. (31)

Because of her hybrid state, the crows debate her motives obsessively, amplifying her oddness from all angles, and beginning also to question their own enslavement. Aisha's undetermined status prepares her to face what Luckhurst calls "a dread that is irreducible, that cannot be reductively interpreted, translated or returned"[56] and its biological manifestations, including the "serpent of eyes" with all over "gelatinous consistency" (159). These not-yet-formed manifestations of the weird provoke both physical recoil and intellectual confusion that evoke the ungendered racialised "flesh" through which Hortense Spillers approaches the non-being and unbelonging of Black life measured against (white) humanity.[57] Alexander Weheliye, following Spillers, turns to the "the hypervisible yet also illegible hieroglyphics of the flesh" as a site of both mourning and potential.[58] When applied to *The House of Rust* this apprehension of racial trauma as undoing the very idea of the human contrasts

56 Luckhurst, 2017: 1052.
57 See Spillers, 1987.
58 Weheliye (2014): 110.

markedly with the potentiality of Aisha's hybrid child-animal state, the latter being more in line with the speculative re-forming of the human championed by Haraway. However, as Irene Visser points out, in a postcolonial context, the unknowability of the traumatic experience of dispossession does not necessarily "oppose the notion that narrative is curative."[59] Topper agrees, arguing that African texts use indigenous animist modes in a recuperative way, to capture how the past is perpetuated in the present while the dead remain vitally connected to the living. For Topper, African texts "creatively recreate Indigenous cosmologies in response to their erasure under the pressures of colonial modernity."[60] The oceanic weird as used in *The House of Rust* channels this paradox in which death becomes life, combining old horrors with current ones and indigenous cultural forms with speculative contemporary ones to form a collective whole connecting human and more-than-human. As such, it articulates the kind of inter-species kinship required for "a non-capitalist worldview that resists extinction" even amidst the spoils of colonialism.[61]

The blood of the past returns in the bloody maws of the monsters who cover Aisha in gore and in the mysterious House of Rust itself, the decaying site of knowledge that the novel never explains. It leads us, like Aisha, to seek answers in the ocean rather than at the sites of ancient texts or land-based learning. As Bajaber herself says:

> People talk down a lot to Mombasa folk, and Coast folk in general. They praise our hospitality but forget that we have teeth too. We have intrigues of the likes that would bring those unschooled in the ways to tears. Here there's mischief, there's cleverness, there's sarcasm and wit. I think I wanted to say, "There are things we know that you can never know."[62]

In the briney atmosphere of the novel knowledge is both a treasure and a mortal danger. It is the scene of "an old game" that Aisha must play but that shifts in response to "the hybrid world of the Anthropocene."[63] This is the weird as Luckhust defines it, "a place for potentially radical disarticulations and refor-

59 Visser, 2015: 255.

60 Topper 2025: 3. Topper defines animism as 'an umbrella term for Indigenous knowledge systems that reject the ipseism of the Cartesian subject, conceptualizing instead a subject infinitely implicated with the rest of the cosmos.': 5. See also Garuba 2003.

61 Deckard and Oloff, 2020: 12.

62 Tepper, 2021.

63 Luckhurst, 2017: 1056.

mulations of traditional binaries."[64] Beyond "subjects" and "objects," "child" and "adult," or "local" and "global" emerge new entanglements that have "no clear boundaries, no well-defined essences, no sharp separation between their own hard kernel and their environment."[65] It is in this state of dissolution that Aisha finds her own power:

> She was a washed stone whose gleam was wet from tides, worn down from being taken anywhere by the weather, by boats and cats and other deciders. Locked in by negligence and the owing of things, creating barely a sound and with no desire except to sever this ugly monster the way it readied to sever her. To divide her, to eat her, to own her.
>
> She was a flinty tongue darkening with the taste of the blood, the pain of it like a blooming flower. "You are no king. You are not even a worm. You are a belly filled with rot and hatred. You are a petty, dead thing and your lord will call you and death will enshroud you and on the last day you would be so lucky to turn into sand" [...]
>
> She was an angry, drowned thing, alive in a land beyond name – on a borrowed boat, with a borrowed cause, with a borrowed hurt. But she had a name and it was not fishling or girl or Shida, it was not bones and nothing. It was neither spell nor curse nor ritual. It was hers and not a thing to be given away or a cup to sip from. (105–106)

In this mode of raw survival where she realises that everything she has is "borrowed," Aisha gives up the idea of animate life, becoming a stone, "flinty," and yet still feeling pain. The fluctuations of imagery in this passage – between the corporeal taste of blood and the abstraction of "a name" that is not predetermined by human beliefs – refuse a settled meaning. Rather like Timothy Morton's idea of the looping weirdness of "deep ecology," this scene shows radical relationality between human and non-human through an urge not towards unity but towards separation.[66] Aisha's need to "sever" the monster in a response to its attempt to destroy her is also a desire to separate from her father (we are reminded by the mention of a worm of his finger inside the fish), from her quest, and from the shadow of her mother. In this she becomes the opposite of the girlchild she was required to be; not controlled by "owing" anything, whether in terms of labour, behaviour, marriage, or procreation (parodied in the belly filled with "rot and hatred"). This paradoxical oceanic state of being

64 Luckhurst, 2017: 1053.
65 Luckhurst, 2017: 1053.
66 Morton, 2016.

at the mercy of tides even though she has the solidity of a stone (which, of course, can be ground down to sand) prepares Aisha for the kinship in which her newfound being will come into relation with the world.

4 Inter-species Kinship

As well as monsters Aisha meets a mirror of herself, another child who explains something of the alternative oceanic reality:

> From the water rose a ghostly figure […] It was a child, small and skinny; under the surface it glowed like luminescent marble. Its head breached the water, then its neck and shoulders, and it rose like a wax candle and stood on the black water as if on a steady floor. A boy made of white marble, catching all the light that was not there. A ghostly moon […]
>
> "A pretty song from so plain a girl." The words came, but his stone mouth did not move. It was the many overlapping whispers of children, wispy and scraping that chalky shiver along her arms like a scythe over stone. "Might be I should eat such a vessel, wet cat and all."
>
> She heard in his voice old wrath, old blood, old resentments. A king of rot, a keeper of graves. (85–86)

In this solid but ghostly vision of the marble child the permanence desired by civilisations that have come and gone around the Indian Ocean is evoked. The gothic trope of the moon ushering in the whispering children of the past suggests the idealised child has been held on a pedestal (literally in this case) while the suffering of actual children has been buried and denied. For Aisha, it is her relation not to the child but to the animal that enables her to act in this moment of revelation: "the cat's claws were in her shoulder, anchoring her to the present" (86). The marble child tells her a fable of the ruination brought by humans:

> "Where do the old contracts manifest? In the old time, in the long days, before Mombasa had a name such as your mouth could pronounce the coast was *wild*.
>
> "The land and the sea had no great separation, they were apart only as two brothers are apart: shared blood, an understanding. There was a language between them. The shore-line was not a slash upon which the two were severed – but the very seam, parting only as a mouth does. These two were joined.

> "In the old time, in the long days, the jinnis of the sea moved freely and spoke and lived among the jinnis of the land. Sea and land and sky, merely provinces.
>
> "And then *Man* was created, and what a new thing man was. New-born, interesting, a blood clot hatched. So favoured, yet so burdened […]
>
> "Man built villages and lived. In those days it was not so strange nor so rare for Adam's kin and mine to converse, trade, marry, and swear to labour together and for one another. No place was more full of contracts such as these than Mombasa. One family in service to another, one family vassal of another, the alliances if you will, the fealties … were the culture and the tradition.
>
> "But as your *religions* spread, when *Islam* came especially, many such contracts tore. Partnerships formalized millenniums ago, *dissolved*. The sea jinni returned to the water and those of the land departed, looking for far-flung hidden hovels to haunt.
>
> "So we savage fled to this sea. We remember the contracts. (86–87)

The story chimes with the historical understanding of the Indian Ocean as a transcultural and transhistorical site of negotiation that was once ecologically in balance with ecosystems operating in sync without the interference of shipping, large-scale fishing, or industry.[67] As is typical of new weird fictions, the novel here combines temporal scales: a mythological or spiritual time of gods and spirits with "the 500 year durée of colonialist capitalism."[68] While the former is present in Aisha's daily experience, fed by the folk tales and traditions of Mombasa, the latter is more obliquely present in the suspicion that permeates the city and in the struggles of the local fishing community to maintain their livelihood. As well as the shifting matter of water, throughout the novel there is a focus on blood, another fluid with many functions and meanings. Blood can indicate a shared heritage connecting sea and land, family and family, creature and creature. The shedding of blood also suggests the capitalist drive to colonise and accumulate, destroying known networks and hierarchies, that we could think of as veins and arteries, and replacing them with extractive relations that are harder to map but have larger historical and geographical impacts. Furthermore, blood as able to "hatch" new beings from its clots links the narrative to the fear of being invaded by "other" bodies that writers from HP Lovecraft to Octavia Butler have explored in their amorphous creatures.[69]

67 See Hofmeyr, 2010.

68 Deckard and Oloff, 2020: 9.

69 See in particular Butler's short story "Bloodchild."

The co-existence of the blood contracts of the past and the oceanic destruction of the present positions Aisha between the parallel worlds of children who have been or who will be lost; a classic feature of gothic or horror fiction. Their suffering is symptomatic not just of personal loss but of ancestral loss of land, of cultural and linguistic autonomy, of damage to the natural environment that is also a way of life. It exemplifies the need for understanding trauma as collective and for "decolonial ecologies."[70] Just as the jinnis in the fable haunt the land they once occupied, the city of Mombasa and other coastal places feel the real impact of climate crisis as a seeping of the strange into the familiar so that, in Woodbury's words:

> The places we live in now seem to be haunted, in that so many species are going extinct and landscapes change due to humans using more and more natural resources [...]. The original places symbolically become ghost-filled, and if we looked at the elements of them that memory rues, we might see them as also symbolically supernatural – or places that we no longer understand.[71]

The adults in Aisha's life have an understanding of the places they inhabit, but it is a partial one based on fading rituals and traditions and the belief that working hard and honouring your family and community will be worthwhile. It is Aisha, as a child who is also identified as animal, who apprehends the dynamic and precarious perspective of lives defined by the ocean. We know that, particularly for workers in industries such as fishing that depend on natural resources, catastrophes are becoming more frequent. Paradoxically, this is made clearer by Aisha's weird encounters than by her positionality as a young minority girl in a community directly affected by climate change. The advantage of the oceanic weird here is that it draws together without simplification the unfathomable duration of planetary history, the shorter trajectory of colonialist capitalism, and the smaller but no less definitive period of childhood that is both the invention of colonial modernity and a way of conceptualising its crisis. The coupling of the ocean with the child via weird fiction exemplifies Steinberg and Peters' "concept of the dynamic assemblage" through which the human and nonhuman are actively "encountered" and emergent kinships are created.[72]

70 Ferdinand, 2022.
71 Woodbury, 2017.
72 Steinberg and Peters, 2015: 256.

From the Sunken King to the disembodied flesh-eating eye that Aisha captures in a jar, the prehistoric horrors of the novel's ocean world both draw upon "that mythic realm explored by everyone from Homer to Hemingway"[73] and stretch imaginative limits via the elasticity of the child in the alterity of the Anthropocene. Asked by the Sunken King, "What historian follows a fisherman?," Aisha replies "One in love with story-craft" (83). Aisha is a new kind of sailor, one poised to learn painful lessons as much as impart them. The chief of these is taught by the sharks who inhabit the text's margins from the outset (paralleled by the crows on land). Initially they are instinct-driven eating machines operating en masse at the command of the ultimate monster, *Baba Wa Papa*, father of sharks. However, under Aisha's influence, they become a smoothly operating army of liberation: "On a white wave of shark did they surge on, the fishy bodies rolling beneath them like the wheels of a juggernaut. This envoy of teeth, this retinue of devourers" (111). Previously enslaved, they work with Aisha to claim their freedom in the only way they know: "They were avenging themselves upon all the sly creatures, all the cunning liars who had kept them bound or been too indifferent or afraid to intervene and free them" (113). The shark as a creature constructed in human discourse as fearsome but also essential to marine ecology becomes a metaphor for the fight against the colonialist-capitalist order and for the complexity of planetary relationships. In her work on fiction and extinction, McHugh demonstrates how these relationships work: "people and sea creatures come to some shared understanding across super/natural lines in places where they and their kind share histories that include enduring colonial exploitation." Threatened beings, human and animal, "conjure" the dead "as active presences […] enabling different possible endings."[74] As Samuelson points out, in the history of the slave trade sharks were the accomplices of death: "sharks were used to cast the majority of the population beyond the pale of life-that-matters by reducing their status to meat."[75] She therefore advocates "thinking with sharks" "in order to trace the threads of transspecies entanglement and the intraspecies fractures that compose and capture disposable life."[76] The entwining of Aisha's life with those of the sharks therefore releases the chains of their mutual association with death in the murderous past and the endangered present. It also makes visible and challenges the entrapment of the child in the (death)work of capitalist futurity.

73 Graywolf Press, 2021.

74 McHugh, 2021: 72. McHugh is analysing novels focused on the deaths of cetaceans in the Pacific, but I see her point as also applicable to sharks in the Indian ocean.

75 Samuelson, 2018: 32.

76 Samuelson, 2018: 32.

When Aisha meets the final monster with "teeth tall as houses" (103), he belittles her as a "weak fishling," saying "You have bought my audience with a scholar's cat but your wearisome, boorish childishness guarantees you a seat within. Now … how shall I eat you?" (104). Here, the word "childishness" indicates inferiority but also points to the invention of the child as an idea that is not securely attached to age or status. Where to be "childlike" suggests a lack of knowledge or guile, to be "childish" is to be weak, or savage, driven by instinct in the manner associated with animals. Aisha's weakness is her strength, however, for she has already plumbed the depths of her own desires as a child who has almost become prey, who is afraid and unsure, who repeatedly fails: "I thought for a moment that I could be one of the girls in the stories, that I could be brave and certain and true and *more*. In the stories they're guided by some force that makes them righteous and honourable. But I am no such person" (88). She is neither "childlike" in the sense of being simpler or more malleable than adults, nor "childish" in the sense of behaving selfishly and inappropriately for her age. Nor is she the stalwart female heroine that she wished to be. Rather, the only certain thing about her is that she is "a fiction" and a weird one. She is the "and *more*," the supplement to the child, the more-than-human instrument in the "making kin" that Haraway demands. As David Chandler argues in making a case for "nihilist hope": "If the Anthropocene as a condition is the product of taking a narrow reductive approach to the world […] then access to the unseen world becomes a necessity."[77] Bajaber's use of the oceanic weird demonstrates that this access is not easy, whether we look to the ocean's hypermateriality or to spiritual, animist or mythological conceptions of humanity's relation to the world, but can be facilitated by (re)thinking the world *through* the child rather than to the child's exclusion.

5 Conclusion

M. John Harrison stresses that efforts at interpreting weird fiction are always frustrated: "A Weird text may not add up. It may not resolve. In fact it almost certainly won't […] any episteme you can assemble to "understand" the Weird should fail; or even better, *almost succeed*."[78] This notion of nearly not failing is relevant both to *The House of Rust*, whose heroine gives her energy to a world she cannot grasp but hopes to alter, and to critical attempts to consider the

77 Chandler, 2024: 1.
78 Harrison 2023.

role of the child in the Anthropocene. Aisha's weirdness is active, dynamic, even playful, as Morton suggests our apprehension of life in the Anthropocene should be. "You just came here to be shady and mysterious and talk down to me" (228) Aisha tells the last monster, reminding us of the power of speculative fabulation to provoke a response to the "opacity and hope" of ecological crisis.[79] Aisha vacillates between incomprehension and a flinty purpose to find out exactly how far, and how deep, she can go, spatially and temporally, literally and metaphorically via the ocean. In her refusal of childhood as it has been offered to her, Aisha's story immerses the child in the "world-engulfing"[80] weirdness of the Anthropocene, and what emerges is a version of inter-species kinship that confronts the long history of colonialist-capitalism and the immediacy of climate catastrophe.

The dialogue between childhood studies and the blue humanities that this article has fostered repositions the child as an active figure of interspecies connection in relation to posthuman and planetary discourses. As such it is driven by the urgency across scholarly fields to engage with the "cosmological" trauma of colonialism that Topper emphasises is transpersonal and transhistorical: "a rupture in the networks of life forces animating a given environment and historical moment" and that is redressed by the adaptation of indigenous literary forms to meet the modern world.[81] Through paying close attention to Bajaber's use of the oceanic weird as a hybrid form associated both with horror and with hope, my reading of *House of Rust* highlights the potentiality of contemporary African and Indian Ocean fictions to reshape traumatic ruptures so that new kinship connections counter a deathly history of division. It contends that weird texts such as *The House of Rust* are innovative in extending our comprehension of childhood beyond anthropocentric norms, often in a way that frustrates or fractures our reliance on the child as a figure of comfort and promise. The novel exposes the social phenomenon of childhood (gendered and racialised) and the universalised concept of the child to scrutiny, inviting us to take part in postcolonial ecological and planetary (re)thinking through a familiar figure made strange, and therefore enabling us to better confront the traumatic legacies of the Indian ocean region.

79 Chandler, 2024: 1.
80 Howe and Pandian, 2019, 22.
81 Topper, 2025: 5.

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