

I WATERWAYS: ARTERIES, RHYTHMS AND KINSHIP

AMA JOSEPHINE BUDGE JOHNSTONE AND EMILIE GLAZER

Waterways: Arteries, Rhythms and Kinship was a three-day symposium exploring how water binds us across histories and futures. Organised by Hyundai Tate Research Centre: Transnational in partnership with Hyundai Motor, the event ran from 18 to 20 October 2024, with a two-day conference at Tate Modern followed by a day of workshops delivered by the artists Taey Iohé, Jumana Emil Abboud and Julie Gough at sites across London. In Part 1 of this review, Ama Josephine Budge Johnstone reflects on the conference and Julie Gough's workshop, *The Mire*, at Bankside Pier; in Part 2, Emilie Glazer discusses Taey Iohé's *Messengers* and Jumana Emil Abboud's *Your reflection on the gentle sea*, both at Walthamstow Wetlands, east London.

Water doesn't have to belong to anywhere. It's always crossing the boundaries, always crossing the borders, and by the very nature of the flowing, it almost asks us: aren't we all meant to move? Aren't we all meant to flow? And even in that flow, you can seek for belonging.

Taey Iohé

Part 1

By Ama Josephine Budge Johnstone

I attended *Waterways: Arteries, Rhythms and Kinship* with a hopeful, but somewhat suspicious heart. Exploring Black, Brown and Indigenous histories and futures through decolonial lenses within the bowels of Tate – of Tate and Lyle sugar's contemporary art(washed) ribcage – felt like something of a misnomer; something of an impossibility. What unfolded over those three days was indeed a series of impossibilities: ephemeral encounters, sonic rituals, visual transportations and collective walking/flowing/dreaming sessions coagulating into a rich and fecund, yet still haunted celebration of our continued existence, beauty and abundance in the face of so many impossibilities.

The symposium aimed to explore 'how water binds us across histories and futures. Meeting bodies of water in their insistent flow as joyful kin and as carriers of trauma'.¹ Comprising a balanced, if jam-packed, series of film screenings, panel discussions, walking workshops, performances and listening sessions, the conveners had clearly worked hard to prioritise the care and accessibility of a programme that asked as much of its audience as it did from its contributors. The symposium invited us to 'stay with the trouble' of water, whiteness, erased histories, ongoing settler colonialism and ecological destruction; the withholding of Indigenous archives by Western collections and the ways in which the violences of empire continue to hound the daily lives of those it sought to conquer in material, embodied and spiritual ways.² The contributors called on us, too, to create, attend, honour and hold space for parties. For dance. For celebration.

As an artist, researcher and pedagogue who seeks to forge transoceanic frameworks in which to consider and nourish intimate and sensual relations between Black and Indigenous communities with the more-than-human in the face of climate colonialism, *Waterways* felt like something of a homecoming; a convergence of tidal thinkers, artists and witnesses each flowing towards belonging with our respective ecologies and with each other. At multiple times throughout the weekend, I felt so honoured to be in the room, a time and place where worlds could be forged.

In one conversation between sessions, Lisa Reihana (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Tōteauru, Ngāti Hine, Ngāti Tōpoto), an acclaimed multidisciplinary artist from Aotearoa New Zealand, shared that when Indigenous people first met European colonisers, they were confused and appalled that they did not take the time, nor honour the importance of naming and calling in their titles, their responsibilities, their elders, the lands they were arriving upon and those they brought with them. The opening remarks by the conveners, Portia Malatjie, Nabila Abdel Nabi, Odessa Warren, Marleen Boschen and Kimberley Moulton, who had clearly worked tirelessly to create something closer to a sacred space than a conference, took the time to do just that.



Waterways: Arteries, Rhythms and Kinship, Tate Modern, London, 18–20 October, 2024. Photo © Tate (Ben Fisher)

They called the ancestors into the room, holding space for the grief, melancholy and violence that has marked so many of our lineage's connection to this island, this England, and its major artery on whose banks we are sitting, the River Thames. They know the troubled ground on which we are standing, inviting us to hold this land and this institution to account. They asked us to imagine what a reparative practice might look like, a tidal re-imagining of intra-oceanic solidarities, a new/old language for honouring our dead, a new/old voyaging towards remapping our futures.

There were too many deeply moving and artistically profound moments to give each their due here. Questions were raised and connections formed, not only during the events themselves, but also in the café, over lunch, in the green room, walking to and from workshops, and, inevitably, at the afterparty.

Here, a selection of moments to bring into your bodies; flowing 'tidalectic' across the non-linear ocean of these days.³

A multiplicity of cultural, acoustic and cosmological contexts, each presented as distinct, complex, nuanced and full of depth. Yet across the weekend currents of violence, of resistance, of perseverance, of Spirit, layered themselves one upon the other, strengthening the weave of Indigenous and racialised being. Porous, watery and tidal, inescapable, our existence, irrefutable, our persistence, our manoeuvrable, voluptuous, green and wet bodies, flowing to these shores. Back and forth, back and forth. Strengthening the weave.

Day Two, in the East Room, the river seeming to lap at the walls, refusing to allow us to settle. Morning light flashes from atop waves and mirrored buildings alike, lancing any possibility of sedimentation. A two-hour listening session during which we become attentive to what we feel, what we smell. In the absence of 'somewhere to look', we watch each other's bodies as they move sensuously to the non-beat of the soundscapes. Ayesha Hameed's *Sing of the Sea, I am Mermaid of the Trees* (2021) sounds at once high-pitched and disturbing, haunting, disquieting, at other moments rhythmic and enlivening. My heart pounds, feeling I/we cannot go on, cannot go on listening. The work becomes laboured, breathless, vocalising the impossibility of continuation: 'I sing of trees, I am a mermaid's body on the sea floor... I sing, I speak, I dot, I dash. An all-red line wrapping the sea like a girdle pulled tight around the world... I am a mermaid I sing the body of the earth electric.'⁴ Bint Mbareh leading a cacophonous joining of our voices with many liquid arteries: 'the river Thames, sorry I meant Effra, sorry I meant Amazon, sorry I meant Euphrates, sorry I always mean Gaza and a river of blood, muck and piss.'⁵

Chandra Frank, Julie Gough, Ola Hassanain and Sonia Levy sharing practices, places their bare feet have walked, mud hikes across a receding shoreline, collecting 17 kilos of 'river bones' beside the banks of the Thames, a giant mussel colony blackly moving along a canal wall: zebra mussels brought from the Baltic Sea with Baltic timber to an already deforested Great Britain. Of lands, rights and peoples 'given to British colonists by themselves'.⁶ The carefully built home of a loved one near the Gezira Scheme between the Blue and White Nile rivers that, even before it was built, brick by brick, would always be uninhabitable. 'Sentience as a gesture towards consciousness or *filling*, and being touched by the landscape.'⁷ A deeply moving and affective offering from Gough, in which the complicity of the institution and the state become excruciatingly present, as are our entanglements within it: 'My definition of catastrophe – a perpetuation of uninhabitability.'⁸

Black bodies ebbing and flowing on the screen along a foamy shore in eThekweni, Durban: the first time I have seen so many Black bodies moving all together and not felt our Nywose reduced to a nameless mass. The possibilities of Black bodies at leisure. Luvuyo Equiano Nyawose invokes Ngoni cosmologies: 'the ocean as a witness and space as a site of memory-making ... The beach as a meeting point of Black people ... as crucial for spiritual survival.'⁹ Testimonies as forms of storytelling. It is not how we describe ourselves, it is the work we do, the way we live, the testimony we give.

Lisandro Suriel asking who we were before coloniality tore us apart, and positing the imagination as 'the interface through which spirit communicates!'¹⁰ Asking us to tell him our ghost stories. Christina Peake's voice bubbling over, telling us the toll it takes to go into institutional archives, the ritual work that is required to withstand their violence. The scores that cannot be counted, the scars that cannot be salvaged.

The bookending of the symposium with cinematic journeyings – Reihana's *Groundloop* (2022) setting a tone of radical transportation: 'dreaming pathways – origin stories ... Here are the elders, past, present and future.'¹¹ Opening up the expectations that worlds would be travelled throughout this conference, that we, too, were setting forth on rafts of possibility, dialogue and intervention. Angela Tiatia's *The Dark Current* (2023), sea levels rising over a pearl-encrusted iris; an exuberant overflowing of abundance in pink silk, limbs overlapping in undulating ecstasies; layers upon layers of dancing bodies; appendages metallic and fleshful and fierce; an insistence on life, a look behind the scenes. The water is still rising. We carry on, together. We throw parties and feast together, sharing ritual practice and lessons for survival.

A wet and windy walk on the final day, the Thames breaking its banks, overflowing our failed attempts to contain it. Sludge lapping at our trainers, platforms, boots, coats and hems, staining our contemporary art chic, huddling together under umbrellas, breath and bodies beating. An unexpected collaboration: Gough returns her river bones to the water, Reihana ululates a blessing. Under the shadow of a war memorial commemorating 21 British and Royal Navy officers who died during the so-called 'New Zealand War' – 14,000 Imperial and colonial troops against 4,000 Māori warriors, commemorating invasion, occupation, dispossession – Indigenous voices mourn in song, honouring different human and more-than-human dead, telling a different kind of story. 'Loss gives rise to longing, and in these circumstances, it would not be far-fetched to consider stories as a form of compensation or even reparations, perhaps the only kind we will ever receive.'¹²

Across the three days, there were of course moments that worked less well, in conversation Chimurenga's *Pan-African Space Station*, which was lost amid so much conversation, ours and Tate's wider publics, in the Corner bar. Yet, overall, this was a time-travelling vortex of possibility, collective mourning and galvanising connection that I felt so honoured to be a part of.

Key questions that were not new questions were raised in exciting and possible-feeling ways, with new configurations of kinship brought to the room and to the conversation. In this post-Covid moment, I reflect on the importance of non-virtual entanglements, of being in the room together, touching hands and voices, exchanging beautifully engraved business cards and debates on the possibilities of queer Black joy en route to the bathroom or in transoceanic.

Creating spaces like this requires an extraordinary poetics of care, labour and inalienable solidarities, as we are asked to hold together both our flooding, drought-ridden homelands and the abundant worlds we still seek to build be/in/along/side them. We cannot do this work alone; we cannot language these poetics in only one tongue. We must seek out the waterways where our arteries convergence, the rhythms that guide our feet to walk over oceans, to meet and welcome one another as kin across far distant shores.

Part 2

By Emilie Glazer

'Come closer', Taey Iohé beckoned. Our group was gathered inside the Engine House building at the Walthamstow Wetlands on a Sunday morning. The weather was cold and windy, and grey clouds covered the sky as droplets of rain dipped in and out of the day. We huddled together at Taey's invitation. They asked us to find a partner, a person we had not yet met. 'Think of the water where you come from', Taey said. 'It can be a puddle or a bucket of tears.' They invited us to introduce ourselves, in our pair, by way of these waters, and to come with intention, to focus on listening, to do this with care.



Waterways: Arteries, Rhythms and Kinship, Walthamstow Wetlands, London, 18–20 October, 2024. Photo © Tate (Ben Fisher)

Taey Iohé is a transdisciplinary artist, writer and listener, born near the Han River, whose practice is rooted in collective care, humility and ecological belonging. Their workshop was one of two sessions at the Walthamstow Wetlands. The artist Jumana Emil Abboud guided us through the second, drawing from her work grounded in Palestine, embodied waters, folk tales and storytelling, memory and dispossession. I have known Jumana since we met in Palestine in 2021, where we worked on water stories with a group of women in Silwan, Jerusalem. Following a brief chat with Taey a few months before, among friends, this was a welcome chance to spend more time with their work.

Across Jumana and Taey's sessions, care was at the heart of relations with water, in the recognition that life and political possibility is embodied and interconnected. Reflecting on these workshops now, I recall an issue of the journal *Social Text* on radical care, edited by Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakaahapulanani Hobart and Tamara Kneese. In their introduction, they write of collective care as a 'radical survival strategy' based on reciprocity and attentiveness, which holds the capacity to 'radically remake worlds that exceed those offered by the neoliberal or post-neoliberal state'.¹³ On this Sunday, we nourished care through water, in registers that also held the power to transform amid grief and violence, with slow, quiet acts of listening and collective conjuring, with stories and love.



Waterways: Arteries, Rhythms and Kinship, Walthamstow Wetlands, London, 18–20 October, 2024. Photo © Tate (Ben Fisher)

This care was, in part, rooted in an understanding of how we belong to bodies of water, and how, in its expansiveness – as water circulating, spills, leaks, converges, infuses – it forces us to confront the ties that bond us to wider collectives, whether desired or not. In Jumana's workshop, these bonds were woven streams of a story that she conjured with us, as we sat under the canopy of a beech tree. The streams followed a Palestinian folk tale about the quest of a gazelle, but also the memories of water diviners, the collectives Jumana has worked with over the years. We heard the first-person narration of encounters with springs in a landscape scarred by Israeli militarised occupation, the shadow of unspeakable genocide and words spoken in response to named springs. After, we practiced weaving stories ourselves. Sitting in small groups of three and four, Jumana encouraged us to each share a memory of water, and to craft a story composed of them together. We spoke of how water is a vessel for memory. In stitching these vessels together we made new collectives, even in the fleeting moment of telling a story.

Taey guided us through yet further bonds. They told us about the local waters we walked through. Hosting active reservoirs from which seventy-five per cent of London's drinking water is drawn, the wetland is part of a privatised infrastructure comprising processes of toxin removal and computerised pipelines so old that leakages contribute to institutional debt, for which, Taey reminded us, we will pay. As we followed the path, Taey, along with residents, friends and teachers – including the local community herbalist Rasheeqa Ahmad and the artist Rachel Pimm – invited us to explore the habitats of migratory birds and riparian life shaped by the reservoirs. Together, we reflected on the seepages these environments generate. During the workshop, these leakages highlighted the importance of care for oneself, for strangers and for more-than-human teachers; a care practiced through the act of listening. We stood by reeds under a willow and felt what it might tell us; we linked arms, closed eyes, and walked along a dirt road, feeling the ground beneath our feet. But leakages also reveal vulnerabilities. We discussed how they surface in the imbrications of water with power, and in the grief that comes from personal and collective loss: of loved ones, of plundered lands, of colonial erasures to be undone.



Waterways: Arteries, Rhythms and Kinship, Walthamstow Wetlands, London, 18–20 October, 2024. Photo © Tate (Ben Fisher)

Bodies of water can unleash this grief, and they can also heal. In these realms of care, there is the potential to transform. Jumana's story saw the gazelle moving mountains at the end of her quest. At her journey's start, Jumana placed woven cloths of Tatzeez stitching into the hands of several amongst our group. Then, when invoked to stand, each person became the embodied figure of one of seven springs. We poured local water into our hands, and passed it between us to make a wish, to keep a secret; a fox in the garden became an enchanted spirit in our tale. At the end of the story, the gazelle has a dream. Across the river she sees stories of water from different places, all connected. 'She feels lucky', Jumana said. This dream could be this Sunday. Through tuning into the multiplicity of leakages that water forges, through the bodies of water we come from and live with, and as bodies ourselves, we created shared stories. Fiction became truth, and stories of water were shown to move mountains.

NOTES

1. 'Waterways: Arteries, Rhythms and Kinship', *What's On*, Tate Modern, London, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/waterways>, accessed 16 December 2024.
2. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham, NC 2016.
3. Kamau Brathwaite, *Barabajan Poems 1492–1992*, Kingston and New York 1994.
4. Ayesha Hameed, *Waterways*, 18–20 October 2024, Tate Modern, London.
5. Bint Mbareh, *ibid*.
6. Julie Gough, *ibid*.
7. Chandra Frank, *ibid*.
8. Ola Hassanain, *ibid*.
9. Luvuyo Equiano Nyawose, *ibid*.
10. Lisandro Suriel, *ibid*.
11. Lisa Reihana, *ibid*.
12. Haidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe*, vol.12, no.2, 2008, p.4.
13. Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakaahapulanani Hobart and Tamara Kneese, 'Radical Care: Survival Strategies for Uncertain Times', *Social Text*, vol.38, no.1, March 2020.

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