

# A fin, a tale, a sail and a wave – where do we go from here?

■ *Mekhala Dave\**

When we think of the vast ocean space, we think, among other things, of movement. The majestic humpback whales cover the longest distances within the ocean space, migrating from cooler habitats in the summer to warmer ones in the winter. They move latitudinally from the north to south, from the Arctic to Mexico, both along and off the shores. An individual humpback whale helps to sequester carbon, equivalent to thousands of trees. Their fertilization maintains the health of marine ecosystems, and upon their death, they sink to the ocean floor, taking 33 tons of carbon out of the atmosphere for centuries.

Similar majestic movements have been made by humans. The great Atlantic Slave Trade was a journey undertaken by many black bodies, from land to sea, from fin to tail, with each wave breaking rhythm, each drowning a descent into the abyss – into the unknown. The Martinique scholar Édouard Glissant captured this past experience as “an open

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boat”, a sense of drowning “in the belly of the whale”, both lyrical and metaphorical: the multiplicity of hidden narratives and meanings carried within the undercurrents of the ocean space.

In parallel with these movements, humans and multispecies perceive the ocean space as a captivating intertwining of numerous journeys. Beyond the physical bodies, encircling lines, and grids suggested by colonial legacies to confine, control, and claim ownership of the ocean, the spaces become complex. Sovereign claims carry significant weight on the global map as they regulate, govern, and manage the ocean space, which ebbs and flows amidst troubled waters. How much do these claims detract from the glory of the ocean space and its abundant resources? Within the infrastructure of the ocean space, a complex web of networks and systems is established, facilitating the exchange of cultures, languages, services, technology, labor, and commodities. This mixture further mystifies the ownership of the ocean space and, with sovereign claims interfering, how do we, through design, knowledge, and speculative measures, contribute to both its extractivism and protection?

Such is the dilemma of our planetary crisis today: in our communal set up of infrastructures and despite technological advancement, we sail with boats and ships, use aqualungs to soar into the ocean space, employ technological visuals and acoustics to map the ocean space, and use devices for the extraction of its resources, which plunge in, devastate, and change the marine architecture. In the face of climate change, the ocean space and its inhabitants, such as the humpback whales, continue to be our greatest allies in combating the impacts of climate change.

This violence that is inflicted is a *slow violence*, a term coined by the scholar Rob Nixon. A violence that unfolds in the space and time continuum, much of it is hidden from view because of the agents, causes, effects, and consequences, and progresses to deepen into spaces that affect both ocean inhabitants and communities on the frontlines – all the while

overwhelmingly difficult to comprehend the scale of ecological devastation over time.

“We sweat and cry of salt water”, the scholar Teresa Teaiwa mentioned. This means there are no clear boundaries between the ocean space, communities, and movements that dovetail the endless thread of consequences, binding us all together in one large block of uncertainties resulting from our collective actions. This is precisely what is captured by the image (*L’ouie*, by Njaheut) on this Volume’s cover.

Bodies of water traverse the realms of humans, multispecies, and technology, blurring distinctions. The connectors of this fusion – their cable wires – lie on the ocean floor for miles. The minerals required to produce these devices in future supply chains will traverse the ocean space, transforming it into an economic and labor-intensive field for attempts at green energy transition to combat climate change and its impacts. This connection – clouds of data – is indeed part of the ocean space, much like the hunted humpback whales and the black bodies lost at sea during the great Slave Trade journey. Moreover, the intangible data of the acoustics of humpback whales calling to one another or the bodies that now remain part of the ocean in their disintegrated, invisible form. This evocation, in this sense, is of timeless information, running in braids of shared knowledge – knowledge that is transmitted to one moment, space, person, multispecies, wave, particle at a time.

Volume 3 offers commentary from various perspectives on the ocean space and its infrastructures, aiming to understand what comes to be, what or who can belong, and how we govern. It is important to acknowledge that our perspective of the ocean space should not be limited solely to sovereign claims, law, and policy. Instead, we must recognize that law and policy are intertwined with broader infrastructural frameworks, histories, memories, and lived experiences, originating from the hidden and invisible spaces of the ocean. For instance, the hunting of humpback whales led to near extinction, prompting a global sovereign power

to impose a moratorium on their hunting. The vast grids of cable wires transmitting information offer connectivity, yet they also create differential power challenges between sovereign powers. Additionally, deep-sea mining raises questions about the ocean's last frontier for extractivism and whether it truly benefits all. This volume is truly about the patterns at play: codes of law and policy are the result of defining, or rather, re-defining relations and shared knowledge of the ocean space. It's a pivotal moment to reflect on its potential engagement within a larger mapping between a fin, a tale, a sail, and a wave. Where do we go from here?

*NJAHEUT is a Belgian-Cameroonian photographer, art director and film director. Passionate about drawing, he joined the art school ESA-St Luc in Brussels before continuing his studies at the film school SAE in Brussels. Moving from drawings to the production of music videos and films, he finally found his happiness with photography, which allows him to fully express his creativity. The first tool in photography being light, NJAHEUT wonders about its mirror that is shadow and finds a parallel with his favorite subject: identity. "When we confront human beings with their identity, we stop at the appearance and not at what we could see, like their personality". With the human at the center of his photographs, NJAHEUT invites us to focus on bodies and objects rather than the interpretation we make of them. He leads us to reflect on the immateriality of the shadow, which allows us to escape from any identity, and suggests to question our stereotypes on the questions of gender, sexual orientation or ethnic origin. Through his unique point of view, he allows the viewer to see the rich complexity of our identities; a reflection that tells the human story in a poetic and metaphorical way, through a unifying message.*

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