Beyond a Capitalist Atlantic: Fish, Fuel, and the Collapse of Cheap Nature in Ireland, Newfoundland, and Nigeria

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Abstract

This article takes a world-ecological approach to regional depictions of Atlantic coastal communities, analysing a widescale cultural engagement with regimes of fish and oil extraction. In Part I, I focus on Irish filmmaker Risteard O'Domhnaill's 2010 documentary, *The Pipe*, which depicts the battle of a coastal Irish community against a gas pipeline project, and his next major production, *Atlantic* (2016), a comparative documentary of fishing and fossil-fuel industries in Ireland, Newfoundland, and Norway. While *The Pipe* opens up the debate around energy, environmental futurity, and state violence, a world-ecological lens reveals how *Atlantic* normalizes a nationalist, capitalist attitude to oil extraction that contradicts both films' professed desires for sustainable fisheries and stable ecologies. In Part II, I turn to a cluster of three novels which also depict the interconnections between fishing and oil industries in different geographic settings along the Atlantic: *Solar Bones* (2016) by Irish author Mike McCormack, *February* (2010) by Canadian author Lisa Moore, and *Lagoon* (2014) by Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor. I outline how the oceanic aesthetics and narratives of these texts reveal and denaturalize the masculinist and capitalist epistemologies that drive ecological regimes of fish and oil extractivism over the *longue-durée.* The article ultimately argues that a multidisciplinary and multiform approach enables a wider comprehension of the cultural and ecological challenges facing the Atlantic today.

In Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel's *Leviathan*,[1] a 2012 film that captures the labour at sea of an Atlantic trawler crew, go-pro cameras attached to the fishermen, as well as strategically placed high definition cameras around the boat, immerse the audience in a ninety-minute spectacle of the brutality of fishery life. The directors forego a musical accompaniment, favouring a soundtrack of screeching gears and engine noise that, together with stunning visuals of raging seas and rapid work, emphasizes the visceral materiality of the conditions in which fish are captured and processed. Through lingering close-ups of fishermen's faces, machinery in motion, and suffocating sea life, *Leviathan* reminds viewers that the cheap fish they consume are the products of an intensive mode of labour from which most people are completely insulated.

Risteard O'Domhnaill's 2016 documentary film of labour and life at sea, *Atlantic*,[2] builds its narrative around comparative analyses of fishery and oil development in Ireland, Newfoundland, and Norway, using voiceover, archival footage, and interviews to unearth a tale of Irish mismanagement. O'Domhnaill outlines how greedy corporate entities have stolen fish and carbon reserves from Ireland, lauding the Nordic model of fossil-fuel development established in the 1970s, which funnels taxes and revenues back into the welfare state. Through geological good fortune and high demand from Europe for natural gas, Norway has become a major energy supplier, reinvesting the massive profits in social programmes.

Notes

[1] *Leviathan*, dir. by Lucian Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel (Arrette Ton Cinema, 2014 [on DVD]).

[2] *Atlantic*, dir. by Risteard O'Domhnaill (Scannáin Inbhear & Wreckhouse Productions, 2016 [on DVD]). Further references to *Atlantic* are given numerically as '(hours:minutes:seconds)' after quotations in the text.

Atlantic thereby presents an image of a benevolent petro-state that 'cracked' oil, while unease around energy futurity and environmental damage only begins to emerge as the film nears its end.

A brief comparison of these two films indicates how the political and aesthetic are intertwined, as the exhaustive exposure to fish killing in *Leviathan* immerses the viewer in the means of production, while O'Domhnaill's carefully plotted access to fisheries across *Atlantic* reveals a story of human greed and missed opportunity. *Atlantic's* didactic approach contrasts with that of O'Domhnaill's earlier production, *The Pipe* (2010),[3] which documents the battle of a small Mayo community against Shell's Corrib gas pipeline project, an ongoing conflict in which the Irish state has sided with the oil multinational. In contrast to *Atlantic's* narrative, *The Pipe* allows room for internal conflict within communities, while both films demonstrate how Big Oil profits from its centrality to capital, dispossessing and even destroying coastal regions in the name of cheap energy.

Throughout this essay, I explore cultural representations that engage with capitalist expropriation along the Atlantic's coastlines, using a world-ecological approach to elucidate the contemporary nexus between industrialized fisheries and Big Oil. In Part I, I investigate how the different politics and documentary techniques of O'Domhnaill's films contest and reproduce hegemonic beliefs in sustainability, development, and 'green' capitalism. In Part II, I analyse the literary mediation and depiction of Atlantic extractivism in Irish author Mike McCormack's novel *Solar Bones* (2016), Newfoundland author Lisa Moore's *February*

[3] *The Pipe*, dir. by Risteard O'Domhnaill, (Scannáin Inbhear & Underground Films, 2010 [on DVD]). Further references to *The Pipe* are given numerically as '(hours:minutes:seconds)' after quotations in the text.

(2010), and Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okordafor's *Lagoon* (2014),[4] arguing that these novels explore a more radical politics through their rejection of patriarchal control over nature. I do not claim that the novel form is necessarily better equipped than film to reveal the complex dynamics between fisheries and regimes of oil extraction; rather, I argue that these particular novels engage with the same crises encountered in O'Domhnaill's films, but enable more expansive readings, interpretations, and scales of engagement with the *epistemologies* and practices of capitalist accumulation. This multiform analysis allows a broad understanding of not only Ireland's position within the capitalist world-ecology, but the wider structures of feeling evident in coastal depictions that engage with fishery and oil development in different regional settings.

Oceanic perspectives invite different outlooks to ontologies rooted in the land. As Elizabeth DeLoughrey writes, the 'ontologies of the sea' invoke temporal scales that delegitimize anthropocentric and teleological formations, as ocean waves and currents confound 'the accumulation of narrative' through which linear, human progress is legitimized and comprehended.[5] In Irish Studies specifically, archipelagic critiques and Blue Humanities readings have enabled an expansion away from urban and agrarian emphases towards coastal

[4] Mike McCormack, *Solar Bones* (Dublin: Tramp Press, 2016); Lisa Moore, *February* (London: Vintage, [2010] 2011); Nnedi Okorafor, *Lagoon* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014 [Kindle eBook]). Further references to these three novels are given after quotations in the text.

[5] Elizabeth DeLoughrey, 'Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene', *Comparative Literature* 69.1 (2017), 32–44 (p.32–5) <https://doi.org/10.1215/00104124-3794589>

and sea-based understandings of culture.[6] I position this article alongside these Blue interventions, and argue that a world-ecological approach will further broaden the burgeoning oceanic conversation towards new comparisons, geographies, and modes of interdisciplinary critique. In order to set up this paper's expansive geopolitical nexus, I will now present a brief history of the North Atlantic through a world-ecological lens, demonstrating how practices of unsustainable fish and oil extractivism are rooted in epistemologies that have emerged over the capitalist *longue-durée.*

Fish, Fuel, and the Atlantic World-Ecology

Since early capitalism, the Atlantic has represented a central zone of power, trade, and profit. Between 1500–1800, successive hegemonic states – Genoa, Amsterdam, then Britain – catalysed a 'planetary shift in the global center of power and production from Asia to the North Atlantic' by making 'nature something productive' and external to (hu)mankind, a 'common sense of conquest and plunder' that continues to this day.[7] Environmental historian Jason Moore thus argues that capitalism is most accurately conceived of as a 'way of

[6] See Lucy Collins, 'Observations at the Surface: Contemporary Irish Poets and Marine Life', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 40 (2017), 174–93 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26333467>; John Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism: Literature in the Irish and British Isles, 1890–1970* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

[7] Raj Patel and Jason Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet* (Oakland: California University Press, 2017), p.46.

organizing nature'.[8] Using Moore's world-ecology paradigm, Raj Patel and Moore explore how the *appropriation* 'of the unpaid work of "women, nature and colonies" is the fundamental condition of the *exploitation* of labor power.'[9] Through frontiers of silver, fish, grain, sugar, coal, and oil, capitalism has 'mobilize[d] natures at low cost',[10] while women's work and bodies have been reduced to their 'natural' role – cleaning, cooking, sexual reproduction, child-rearing – within the larger 'strategy of cheap nature'.[11] *Society*, as such, is not simply a benevolent organization of human relations and governance, but a 'mythic domain' that must be 'protected' by capitalists and colonizers who rule over most of humanity.[12] Terms like *nature* and *society* thus represent 'forms of violence' that normalize global plunder and inequality. Patel and Moore call these terms 'real abstractions', since the power relations they entail have no natural basis; rather, they depend upon the reproduction of naturalized hierarchies, chauvinism, racism, and conquest, which in turn reproduce and excuse systemic, environmental violence.[13] A world-ecological analysis therefore reveals the multiple scales of intersecting power relations, technologies, human misery, and environmental devastation inherent to capital's ecological regime.[14]

The booms and busts of Atlantic fishing frontiers are instructive for understanding

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[8] Jason Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015), p.2.

[9] Patel and Moore, p.95 (my emphasis).

[10] Patel and Moore, p.19.

[11] Patel and Moore, p.63.

[12] Patel and Moore, p.30-1, 121.

[13] Patel and Moore, pp.47, 51–8.

[14] Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, p.27.

capitalism's dialectic of ecological expansion and frontier enclosure. Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, Dutch long-range fishing methods created a massively profitable herring frontier. Exhaustion of these fishing grounds necessitated a move towards a more expansive cod fishery, an opportunity seized upon by British and French fleets, triggering the 'globalization of the North Atlantic fisheries' at the moment of Dutch hegemonic decline.[15] Though less profitable than cod, the herring frontier also proved useful to British capitalists, and in the late 1700s, minor investment by joint stock companies in Britain created a Scottish inshore boat network.[16] The new herring fishery absorbed thousands of people into semi-proletarian relations following mass enclosures, while the fish they captured, salted, and barrelled provided cheap protein to feed slaves in the Caribbean and, from the nineteenth century, the new working classes across Europe.[17] However, capitalist speculation, shoal movement, and increasing European competition led to unsustainable costs and market gluts for British fishers, forcing crews to move from undecked, small boats to large steamers.[18]

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[15] Jason Moore, '"Amsterdam Is Standing on Norway" Part II: The Global North Atlantic in the Ecological Revolution of the Long Seventeenth Century', *Journal of Agrarian Change* 10.2 (2010), 188–227 (pp.216–7) <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0366.2009.00262.x>; Bo Poulsen, *Dutch Herring: An Environmental History* (Aksant: Amsterdam, 2008), p.190.

[16] Jean Dunlop, *The British Fisheries Society 1786–1893* (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1978), pp.23–6.

[17] Harold Innis, *The Cod Fisheries: The History of an International Economy*, revised edition (Toronto: Toronto UP, 1954), p.6.

[18] James Coull, 'Penetrating and Monitoring the Market: The Development of the Continental Market for Scottish Herring in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', *Scottish Economic and Social History* 19 (1999), 117–31 (p.129); Malcolm Gray, *The Fishing*

While fisheries traditionally depended on sinew and wind power, fossil fuels became increasingly important to coastal life and labour at the end of the nineteenth century, enabling even greater levels of appropriation. By the early twentieth century, 'Oil [became] a way of organizing society',[19] hearkening an era of cheap energy that fuelled the rise of a new middle class with millions of empty refrigerators. Canadian and American fishermen took advantage of the new frozen food market through small and medium boats in the 1950s, but by the following decade, the emergence of a global industrial factory and trawler regime greatly accelerated species depletion in their waters.[20] This system of factory fishing and freezing most famously reached an impasse with the 1992 cod moratorium in the North West Atlantic, which ruined the livelihoods of tens of thousands of coastal dwellers across Atlantic Canada. Yet capital's need for endless accumulation has seen overfishing and deep-sea drilling continue. Today, industrial fisheries and oil companies invest time, energy, and money into keeping the South and East Atlantic free for their super-trawlers, privatized sealanes, and oil tanker transports.[21] Many powerful seafood corporations enjoy the protections of flags of

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Industries of Scotland, 1790–1914: A Study in Regional Adaptation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) pp.146–7, 160–76.

[19] Petrocultures Research Group, *After Oil* (Edmonton: Petrocultures Research Group, 2016), p.19.

[20] Grant Murray, Barbara Neis, and D. C. Schneider, 'Lessons from a Multi-Scale Historical Reconstruction of Newfoundland and Labrador Fisheries', *Coastal Management* 36 (2008), 81–108 (p. 91) <DOI: 10.1080/08920750701682056>

[21] Elizabeth DeLoughrey, 'Revisiting Tidalectics: Irma/José/Maria', in *Tidalectics: Imagining an Oceanic Worldview through Art and Science*, ed. by Stefanie Hessler (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2018), 92–101 (pp.98–9); 'Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene', pp.40–1.

convenience and favourable quotas as they plunder unprotected fishing zones, 'operating across entire supply chains from production through to retail',[22] a 'Big Fish' equivalent to Big Oil's continued ecological violence in the Niger Delta, the Gulf of Mexico, and other regions. Militant activity in the Delta, piracy along the Gulf of Guinea, and protests against supertrawlers and pipelines off the Irish southwest coast can thus be viewed as regional movements against a larger nexus of Big Oil and Big Fish.

The above historicization demonstrates how ecological crises of both industrialized and non-industrialized fishing communities cannot be separated from their imbrication in fossil-fuel and capitalist accumulation regimes. A critical approach alive to the epistemologies and practices of capitalism is therefore essential to understanding the contemporary environmental crisis and the necessity of thinking through new forms of socioecological organization. As I will now show, although *The Pipe* engages a communal politics that explores the possibilities and limits of local protest, *Atlantic* naturalizes carbon extraction, masculinist dominance, and North Atlantic hegemony, foreclosing the possibility of imagining post-oil or post-capitalist futures.

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[22] Just thirteen corporations control between 20–40 per cent of the most valuable fish stocks in the world and are heavily involved in fishery management policy, making them 'keystone actors' in oceanic depletion. See Henrik Österblom, Jean-Baptiste Jouffray, Carl Folke, Beatrice Crona, Max Troell, Andrew Merrie, and Johan Rockström, 'Transnational Corporations as "Keystone Actors" in Marine Ecosystems', *PLoS ONE* 10.5 (2015), n. pag. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0127533>

I. Fear of Missing Oil: *The Pipe* and *Atlantic*

Ireland's historical role as a grain frontier and, after the famine, a meat frontier, was central to larger food and energy complexes that fed populations across the globe.[23] Following independence from Britain, the state maintained an urban and agrarian focus at the expense of coastal fishing communities.[24] Government decisions to trade fishing grounds for EEC membership and grant tax write-offs to fossil-fuel developers are critiqued in both of O'Domhnaill's films, but in *The Pipe*, there is a much stronger registration of the interconnections between environmental violence, fossil-fuel extraction, and capitalism itself. The film documents a small Mayo community's struggle against Shell Oil's plan to build a high-pressure pipeline in Rossport that would run through farms and unstable turf land towards a refinery at Bellanaboy, posing a serious threat to communities in the case of leakage or explosion. The documentary relies primarily on the voices of leaders in the struggle, who face police and legal battles, while the invasion of a three-hundred-metre pipe laying ship, *Solitaire*, moves the film more explicitly towards the conflict between local fishery and Big Oil.

The Pipe opens with a series of extreme long shots of the coastline, intercut with point-of-view hand-held shots of police assaulting peaceful protestors, a stark contrast that serves to indigenize the local population within their environment, both of which are under

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[23] Liam Brunt and Edmund Cannon, 'The Irish Grain Trade from the Famine to the First World War', *The Economic History Review* 57.1 (2004), 33–79 (pp.41–4) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3698666>

[24] Jim Mac Laughlin, *Troubled Waters: A Social and Cultural History of Ireland's Sea Fisheries* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010), pp.111–2.

siege. Following the opening landscape shots, numerous people in the community point to their longstanding commitment to the land and coast. Fisherman Pat O'Donnell states 'The fishing was in my family, my blood' (3:11–3:14), while farmer Willie Corduff, one of the Rossport Five,[25] similarly points out that he came to the strand with his parents and learned to dig clams, 'a great source of food in the old days' (5:19–5:55). O'Domhnaill also follows long-time resident Monica Muller, originally from Germany, who demonstrates her attachment to the community by leading numerous court injunctions against Shell's trespass on a commonage of sixty-two shareholders.

O'Domhnaill's extensive use of handheld and point-of-view shooting is bound to a localist politics that rejects state brutality and surveillance, using the same technologies as state forces to document injustice. Throughout the film, police officers intimidate locals by pushing cameras in their faces, while personnel employed by Shell on the construction site use mobile phones to video protestors within the vicinity of the pipe-laying, an unashamed criminalization of the right to protest. In contrast to this use of technology for intimidation, the intimacy of handheld allows O'Domhnaill access to conflicts within the community, as well as the anti-capitalism inherent to the protests of activists like Maura Harrington, who eventually goes on hunger strike to protest the continuing presence of *Solitaire* in Broadhaven Bay. O'Domhnaill skilfully allows alternative, often irreconcilable viewpoints to clash by means of his fly-on-the-wall approach, tying his documentary form to the evolving community politics, thereby avoiding simplistic didacticism in relation to the 'correct' solution to the Shell invasion.

[25] These five men were jailed for contempt of court following their protest against a Compulsory Acquisition Order to allow Shell to put a pipeline through their land.

Point-of-view camera allows multiple local perspectives to emerge, and at the end of the documentary, O'Domhnaill uses the medium to indicate that community alliance trumps state violence. Damage to *Solitaire* means it must leave Irish waters, and with winter coming, Pat O'Donnell decides to take a break with his family away from the struggle, and ends the film on a comforting note:

> PAT: That's the story for now! [laughs] Come on now, Richie, you have enough [laughs], ye fucker, ye. C'mon now [stretches]. Are ye on for a cup of tea?
>
> RISTEARD: I will, yeah.
>
> PAT: Go on (1:17:52–1:18:06).

The handheld camera carelessly drops to hip level as both men head up to the house, before a post-script informs the viewer that police eventually impounded O'Donnell's boat, allowing *Solitaire* to lay the pipe. In stark white writing on a black screen, the final message of the film appears: 'the community have vowed to continue their struggle...' (1:18:56–1:19:04, *ellipsis in original*). Despite the immensity of this promise, the weight-off-the-shoulders drop of the camera and invitation into the home re-enables a sense of the communal solidarity that Shell try to undermine through cash offers and intimidation throughout the film. The continuity between *The Pipe's* form and politics therefore prevents a closed loop as its end signals neighbourly support in future protest, offering an invitation to observers to become part of the struggle.

The Pipe embeds itself in local and national politics, opposing Shell's imaginary of a pliant Irish population who will present no opposition to Big Oil. In contrast, *Atlantic* is an expository documentary, couched in a 'voice-of-God' narration, given further 'authority'

through archival and on-the-ground footage.[26] The film is seduced by its own story of missed economic opportunity in the globalized resource market, proffering a narrative of Ireland's putative right to frontier natures that inadequately engages with the global environmental crisis of carbon-driven development. As I will now demonstrate, *Atlantic* ultimately champions resource nationalism and masculinist notions of fishery culture over environmental longevity.

Atlantic opens with stirring visuals of crashing waves, rugged coastlines, playful dolphins, and soaring birdlife, accompanied by a hesitant, free-time string instrumental that grants the film's early moments a contemplative air. Narrator Brendan Gleeson puts words to the stunning imagery, beginning his narrative with the opening lines of Martha Lavinia Hoffman's poem, 'Lines to the Ocean':

> Old Ocean, none knoweth thy story;
> Man cannot thy secrets unfold,
> Thy blue waves sing songs of thy glory
> But where are thy treasures untold? (1:44–2:01).

Following more underwater and landscape long-shots, Gleeson drops poetry and contemplation for a more direct narrative: 'The resources of the Atlantic Ocean are vast' (2:32–2:35). Through this juxtaposition of extractivist vocabulary and traditional poetic metre, the film invokes a timeless tale of mankind's search for 'treasures', which today, as Gleeson soon informs us, consist of fish and oil. Though the opening narrative captures the multiple levels and abstractions through which the ocean is viewed – as an elemental space, a zone full of cheap natures, a home to many animals, and a line of connection from coast to

[26] Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p.34.

coast – Gleeson's narrative prioritizes the resource purview, setting the scene for a story of economic mismanagement.

As the film progresses, this resource imaginary combines with a regionalist politics enlivened by interviews with a small number of fishermen from different coasts, all of whom share a paternalistic concern with defending *their* waters. However, the politics of this exclusively male perspective of fisheries are troubling; women's presence and work at the fishery are entirely absent from *Atlantic*, erased by a patrilineality best captured by Newfoundland fisherman Charlie Kane, who tells the camera, 'My father had thirteen youngsters' (08:25–08:26). Norwegian fisherman Bjørnar Nicolaisen waxes lyrical on the opportunities for his son to make 'a lot of money' (20:24), while Irish fisherman Jerry Early, irritated by the number of foreign fishing boats off the southwest coast of Ireland, states: 'Our waters, belonging to the state, and people have no idea of what's going on, and, I hate to use the word "rape", but that's exactly what they're doing, they're raping our waters' (15:55–16:08). Across the *longue-durée* of capitalism, abstraction, extraction, and violence against nature/women have produced a psychic and material devaluation of women's work and labour,[27] a diminution uncomfortably mirrored in Early's use of the rhetoric of sexual violence. Strikingly, when processes of divide and prosper fund the welfare state and provide local jobs, the mood of the film is more celebratory, as numerous male politicians are praised for their efforts to gain a 'share of the pie' or 'cake' by striking lucrative deals with Big Oil (31:10–31:22, 36:18–36:22, 50:28–50:32). Such clichéd expressions are symptomatic of short-run attitudes towards the complex socioecological reality of energy futurity, environmental destruction, and resource-fuelled economic boom.

[27] Sylvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Canada: Automedia, 2004).

Atlantic reveals the unfair legal biases against Irish coastal communities, but it muddies the waters in relation to how environmental violence is directly linked to capital's internal contradictions. Although a marine ecologist and bio-acoustic specialist in the film describe the dangers of carbon bubbles and the disruption to marine habitats caused by seismic shooting for oil deposits, the narrative emphasizes the economic and social benefits of petrolic development for states bold enough to grasp them. Having bemoaned Ireland's fire sale of carbon assets and fishing quotas for much of its first half, *Atlantic* admires Norway's careful absorption of oil into the state pension pot, only critiquing environmental impacts when they directly harm local fishing communities and whales, while completely eliding Norway's planetary carbon contribution. In the Newfoundland segments, the tensions between the provincial development promised by Big Oil across Canada[28] and the culture of consumption encouraged by short-lived oil booms play second fiddle to the tale of Premier Danny Williams, who has been central to negotiating the region's profitable oil stake. Kane states that Williams 'should be canonized' for taking back control from Ottawa following the cod collapse in the early 1990s (36:56–36:58), which granted families a second chance to thrive, no longer 'here because of fish, [but] here because of oil' (38:09–38:13). His sons give a less utopian perspective, mentioning the 2014 oil shock that left people with 'big houses and big payments, because with the big money with the oil, everybody went out and bought everything' (1:05:28–1:05:35). But rather than pushing this tension towards an ideological critique of regional fishery, Big Oil, neoliberal governance, and planetary crisis, the film jumps to Jerry Early's court case for salmon poaching, short-circuiting an evolving recognition of capitalism's incompatibility with oceanic longevity. Gleeson's narration soon

[28] See Sheena Wilson, 'Oil Ethics', *American Book Review* 33.3 (2012), 8–9 <https://doi.org/10.1353/abr.2012.0085>

ends *Atlantic* by pondering a 'choice between short-term gain or long-term sustainability' (1:12:27–1:12:34), but such a 'choice' does not engage with the epistemologies and practices that enable the market logic and greed that *Atlantic* rails against, hence the severely limited political possibilities of what might be called the film's 'localist fishery exceptionalism.' Though a viewer might come away from *Atlantic* thinking that a reduction in carbon extractivism and factory fishing will safeguard coastal futurity, as Gleeson implies, the global crisis of ocean toxification and declining fish biomass will continue as long as capitalism is the dominant economic system, regardless of whether Atlantic 'resources' belong to communities, regions, states, or corporations.[29]

Ultimately, the irreconcilable conflict between the carbon-funded welfare state and planetary survival remains secondary to *Atlantic's* belief in resource-enabled self-determination, a destructive politics for coastal communities in a time of rising ocean acidity and sea levels. Despite registering the contemporary nexus between fish and oil production and extraction, *Atlantic's* non-dialectical comparativism reproduces epistemological blind spots, thus normalizing capitalist ideologies of accumulation and western ideological biases of human dominion over nature-as-resource.[30] This limited outlook is certainly not due to documentary form itself, as evidenced in *The Pipe*'s polyphonic depiction of anti-systemic politics. Nonetheless, neither *The Pipe* nor *Atlantic* explore alternatives to capitalist regimes of appropriation. This is where the novels I will examine in Part II make a pivotal

[29] Patel and Moore, p.23.

[30] For an account of how post-war oceanic documentaries and television programmes normalized North Atlantic, capitalist dominance, see Nicole Starosielski, 'Beyond Fluidity: A Cultural History of Cinema Under Water,' in *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, ed. by Stephen Rus, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt (New York: Routledge, 2013), 149–68.

intervention, revealing and denaturalizing the masculinist and capitalist epistemologies that normalize regimes fish and oil extraction.

II. Beyond a Masculinist Atlantic

The novel has been central to the long-history of capitalism, contributing to and reflecting not only hegemonic power, but crisis moments and the possibility of historical change. Numerous literary scholars have advocated for a world-ecological approach to comparative literary studies, demonstrating how literatures mediate the ever-shifting ecological, social, and even epistemological norms demanded by capitalist accumulation regimes. These readings theorize the formal and aesthetic valences around depictions of commodity frontiers like oil, sugar, and coal, advancing world-literary analyses of capitalist contradiction towards an understanding of the novel's mediation of capitalist *ecological* crisis.[32] This interpretive frame allows a materialist, environmentalist approach to the temporal scales, experimental aesthetics, and post-masculinist imaginaries that manifest around oil, fish, and the ocean in *Solar Bones*, *February*, and *Lagoon*. By analysing these texts comparatively, I will demonstrate how they mediate and respond to the violent epistemologies and abstractions through which capitalism reduces nature and work to frontier and free energy. After exploring how *Solar Bones* and *February* engage with Ireland's and Canada's respective positions within Atlantic extractivist regimes, I will finish this article by analysing *Lagoon*, which, by integrating residual folk histories and

[32] For example, see Michael Niblett, 'Spectres in the Forest: Gothic Form and World-Ecology in Edgar Mittelholzer's *My Bones and My Flute*', *Small Axe* 44 (July 2014), 53–68 <https://doi.org/10.1215/07990537-2739839>

mythologies into a science fictional narrative, imagines how ecological crisis points can offer opportunities for new alliances between humans and the rest of nature.

As seen in *The Pipe*, the Irish state put the requirements of capitalism before the rights of the coastal communities of Rossport. Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* is based predominantly in a nearby Mayo village and invokes the Rossport crisis on several occasions, as well as other regional issues created by, or enabled by, the neoliberal state. The novel is voiced in one long unfolding sentence by Marcus Conway, an engineer who dies on the cusp of the post-2008 recession, having lived through Ireland's development from impoverished European periphery to Celtic Tiger. The narrative form fluidly moves between worldscale conflict and local disputes, while also taking in Conway's intimate memories of family life and childhood, interweaving personal life, regional development, and systemic conflict.

As he considers the various actions that have come to define his life, Conway seeks solace in memories of time spent with his father, a farmer and fisherman who 'had a neat way of invoking the world as a properly ordered and coherent place in which a man could find his way' (p.87). He recalls their trips to collect crab pots, which formed Conway's

> childhood conviction that there was nothing greater than the sea [. . .] because the older I got and the more I had advanced in my work as an engineer the more certain I had become that out there, on the blue bay was where my sense of scale and ratio was established (p.87).

Here, memories of calm seas and currach fishing grant Conway a sense of 'scale' and teleological progression from boyhood to manhood, father to son. Yet his embrace of the bay view is immediately undermined as the narrative moves to a different memory, a tale told by Conway's father of 'a massive ship [that] came into Clew Bay', heavily militarized, 'coughing up big balls of black deatach [smoke]' as it fires two shells into the mainland.

Following this invasion, the ship 'turn[ed] on its own central axis with its massive diesel engines churning and pushing it out into the Atlantic beyond whence it came' (pp.88–9). The external interruption is made stranger by the ship's cargo, timber that when put through the bandsaw pollutes the air with 'blue dust' that causes long-term ill health for the workers. Although Conway assures the reader that this story is 'pure fucking nonsense', the 'image of that ghost ship' stays with him long after (p.89). Much like *Solitaire's* invasion of Broadhaven Bay, the ship reminds this small Mayo town that the sureties of local politics and capitalist job creation cannot be separated from a world-system that may bring destruction to local communities. Indeed, the novel's opening reference to Maura Harrington's hunger strike against the presence of *Solitaire*, 'that dangerous confluence of the private and political converging on this frail woman's body' (p.15), articulates how environmental violence and neoliberal enclosure are experienced on multiple scales, from human bodies to bodies of water. Though Conway follows the tale of the ghost ship by recounting his father's famous victory in a currach race and his ability to pinpoint the location of a shellfish ground through an 'old method' of spotting 'landmarks', which proves faster than sonar (p.90), a sense of irreconcilability between encroaching world-system, traditional fishery culture, and the needs of coastal communities haunts the text.

Alongside its depiction and registration of violent extractivism, *Solar Bones* mounts a combined critique of tradition, localism, and masculinism through an oceanic aesthetic that goes beyond not only the fisherman's horizon, but the cultural values of the Irish state. Following Conway's recollection of receiving his daughter Agnes' birth certificate, a two-page narrative celebration of the 'state's mindfulness' and paternalistic benevolence (pp.39–40), the novel jumps forward by twenty-two years, focusing in on Conway's visit to Agnes' art exhibition with his wife. The exhibition, entitled *The O Negative Diaries*, consists of a selection of 'news stories lifted from the provincial papers' (p.42), incidences that Conway

feels should not be brought into the aesthetic realm, primarily 'drink-driving convictions, common assault, public order offences' (p.52). Unlike the solidity of the birth certificate, a guarantee that his daughter cannot be 'infringed on in any way which might blur her identity' (p.43), his perception of the exhibition is couched in oceanic tropes of disorienting fluidity and mobility:

> a *surge* of red script *flowing* across the gallery, ceiling to floor, *rising and falling in swells and eddies* through various sizes and spacings, congested in the tight *rhythms* of certain examples only to *swell out in crashing typographical waves* in others, a maelstrom of voices and colour and it was quite something to stand there and have your gaze drawn across the walls, *swept along in the full surge* of the piece while resisting the temptation to rest and decipher one case or another, wanting instead to experience the *full flow and wash* of the entire piece, my gaze swept on in the relentless, *surging* indictment of the whole thing, *its swells and depths*' (p.43, emphasis mine).

This stylized representation of wave-like flow, movement, and return threatens Conway's binary viewpoint and sense of order. The novel here echoes the 'tidalectic' imaginaries of island writers on the other side of the gulf stream, who challenge 'the binarism of Western thought' through a rejection of boundaries between land and sea, 'invoking the continual movement and rhythm of the ocean'.[33] In this moment, *Solar Bones* deploys a more challenging oceanic aesthetic than Conway's bay view, denaturing the 'unmarked masculinity' of the seascape so central to his sense of ontology.[34] The novel links the viscous messages, scrawled across the walls in Agnes' blood – a salty liquid not dissimilar to sea

[33] DeLoughrey, 'Revisiting Tidalectics', p.94.

[34] Elizabeth DeLoughrey, 'Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene', pp.32–3, 42.

water – to an anti-chauvinist politics and aesthetic that refuses order and closure, hence Conway's feeling of 'real guilt' in the face of the exhibition (p.44). The tidalectic style thus briefly takes the narrative trajectory away from Conway, registering that the sea is not simply a zone of masculine prowess or path to a larger, mysterious world-system, but in its irreducible movement and numerous symbolic meanings, a possible force of revelation.

Lisa Moore's *February* can similarly be interpreted as articulating an anti-masculinist perspective, registering how fishery and oil industrialization is experienced on personal, familial, national, and systemic scales. The novel's plot centres around the sinking of an oil rig, *Ocean Ranger*, in 1982, which resulted in the deaths of all eighty-four crew members, most of whom were from Newfoundland and Labrador. Helen, the protagonist, lost her husband, Cal O'Mara, in the accident, and we follow her struggle to raise a family and find love decades later. John, their son, now thirty-five, is a petromodern elite, living a life travelling around the world for oil companies as a safety analyst while sleeping with women in their mid-twenties, rejecting the possibility of long-term connection and family.

During a job interview for a high-level position in a company that specializes in risk assessment and restructuring, John contemplates his previous position as a salesman, recalling the sexualized vocabulary deployed in the company's workplace culture: 'The bits were hard and the sea floor was wet and it resisted and finally gave, and there was nothing a good bit couldn't penetrate' (p.139). Conversely, Shoreline Group, his prospective employers,

> specialized in all the touchy-feely stuff from the 1980s: lateral thinking, creativity in the workplace, psychological support during downsizing or natural disaster, pink slips, sweater-vests and distressed denim, a bold new self-generating speak that boiled over and reduced to a single, perfect word: efficiency' (p.130).

This entire chapter is written in a style of lists and short, gruff comments about work, job opportunities, and salaries, a textual mediation of a managerial ethos that seeks '[s]mart men' who provide quick solutions, men whose 'intuition' gives reliable answers in an industry where time is money, with costs of 'a million-point-five a day to keep a rig operating' (p.135). At the same time, the neoliberal, soft-skills management style reserved for labourers further down the pecking order conceals the violent continuum of frontier extractivism and exploitation, embracing the façade of a *green* capitalism that supposedly works for 'the general good [of] communities,' 'profit margins', and 'stakeholders' (p.139). While sales are 'all about penetration' (p.139), company strategy is 'all about acceptable levels of risk' (p.118). Fittingly for the story, John miscalculates his personal risk while on business for Shoreline, and has unprotected sex with a PhD student, Jane, who contacts him over six months later to tell him she is pregnant. John's first response is to ask, 'Why didn't you get an abortion', despite already realising that this is no longer an option (p.32). This moment registers the contradictory oil ideology of contemporary Newfoundland, where demands for labour mobility, as well as the boom and bust propensities of the oil economy, ignore the longer temporality of social reproduction through which capitalism has reproduced itself over the *longue-durée*. In his reaction, John mirrors the abdication approach of companies like Shoreline, whose 'efficiency' excuses them from responsibility in inevitable crises, outsourcing care and obligation onto the most vulnerable when plans go awry.

Despite rejecting fatherhood, John seeks solace in the family unit, calling his mother from Singapore airport. He invokes a 'natural' vision of maternal care in his wish for 'his mother to dig deep into the secret womanly knowledge buried in the pheromones and cells and blood of that murky, heady thing that he thought of as femininity, and to report back: John, you owe that woman nothing' (p.34). He feels betrayed when she makes him 'take responsibility' (p.41), and eventually finds a temporary surrogate in a hostel in Tasmania, a

woman from Sydney who is cooking with her daughter. She responds to his troubles by detailing her time working at an Icelandic fish plant, where unwanted horseplay from a male co-worker resulted in her throat being 'slit' by a power-hose (p.91). The narrative allows an exploration of the symbolic weight of this incident by intercutting her story with descriptions of her food preparation, John's recollections of succubus nightmares that feature an 'old hag' (p.93), and his thoughts about Jane. The chapter jumps between multiple temporal, geographic, and emotional scales, drawing the reader towards a wider recognition of the precarity of women under capitalism, made more acute by male expectations of care and support. By linking personal traumas and their interrelation with regimes of fish processing and Big Oil, *February* thus calls attention to the intersections between corporate violence and everyday sexism that normalize capitalist extractivism and male dominance.

As such, comparison between *Solar Bones* and *February* points to the gendered violence of neoliberal capital, the region-specific articulation of energy tensions, as well as Canada's and Ireland's positions within the larger ecological regime of Atlantic extractivism. Yet the novels' predominant focus on regional crises and familial conflict in a realist mode in Moore's case, and posthumous narration in McCormack's more modernist narrative aesthetic, represents a limit to thinking through the new relations that might emerge in a post-oil/post-extractivist/post-masculinist future. Like *Solar Bones* and *February*, Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* invokes the oceanic to critique the violence of chauvinist ontology, but embraces the speculative potential of Afrofuturism, through which the ocean becomes a 'catalyst for future evolution'.[35] Afrofuturism combines and uncovers Black mythologies, diasporic histories, as

[35] Melody Jue, 'Intimate Objectivity: On Nnedi Okorafor's Oceanic Afrofuturism', *Women's Studies Quarterly* 45.1 & 2 (2017), 171–88 (p.177) <https://doi.org/10.1353/wsq.2017.0022>

well as old and new science, philosophy, and technology towards emancipatory visions.[36] In *Lagoon*, a science fictional narrative about an alien invasion that begins in the waters of Lagos, extra-terrestrials trigger a short-term crisis and promise a long-term energy utopia, clearing the way for a world that can move beyond the cultural and material limits of oil.

Okorafor's text combines old mythologies and indigenous beliefs with new technologies and ways of seeing, as opposed to the shares in 'pie' championed by the politicians in *Atlantic*. There is much emphasis on 'mixing'[37] and transition throughout *Lagoon*, with numerous meeting points between humans and non-humans posing a challenge to the ontologies of anthropocentric dominance and linear progressivism: the ecotone of Bar Beach, where 'The ocean mixed with land and the wealthy mixed with the poor' (Ch.1); the aliens who can recombine matter in any form they choose; a LGBTQ group, Black Nexus, whose members see the aliens' ability to shapeshift as the opportunity to go public; and the new possibilities enabled by combinations of old gods and extra-terrestrials, as in the conjoining of a personified Ijele, 'The Chief of all masquerades', and an alien in a computer, who together wipe it clean of 419 scam emails (Ch.39).[38]

From the novel's opening, Okorafor links the need for new hybridizations to Nigeria's

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[36] Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones, 'Introduction: The Rise of Afro-Blackness', in *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Afro-Blackness* (London: Lexington Books, 2016), vii–xviii (p.viii).

[37] Esthie Hugo, 'Looking Forward, Looking Back: Animating Magic, Modernity and The African City-Future in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*', *Social Dynamics* 43.1 (2017), 46–58 (p.50) <https://doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2017.1345528>

[38] Fraudulent emails that extort money predominantly from westerners, a major source of income in Nigeria's informal economy.

peculiarly brutal experience of oil extractivism. *Lagoon's* prologue introduces a mutating swordfish, complexly aware of the indifference of men who 'made the world bleed black ooze that left poison rainbows on the water's surface'. She pierces the 'thing that looks like a giant dead snake' and draws 'black blood,' oil from a pipeline (Act I, Prologue). The agency of the animal, who is willing to die to defend '*Her* waters', is reminiscent of the various movements that have battled oil interests in their defence of the Niger Delta,[39] suggestive of an extra-human militance against neo-imperialist oil extractivism. Indeed, a number of fish hybrids wander Lagos across the novel, including Adaora, a marine biologist and the novel's protagonist, later revealed to be a 'fish woman' born with webbed feet and hands (Ch.4); and Ayodele, the shapeshifting alien who brokers with the animals of the sea before dealing with the humans, giving the fish 'whatever they want' (Ch.5). Yet one aquatic hybrid in particular encompasses a much wider temporal and spatial reckoning that links the crisis in Lagos to the *longue-durée* of capitalist and colonialist brutality: Mami Wata. This water spirit emerged from the contact between West African folk traditions and the circuits of the Atlantic slave trade, a 'protocapitalist' amalgam of 'nurturing mother; sexy mama; provider of riches; healer of physical and spiritual ills; embodiment of dangers and desires, risks and challenges, dreams and aspirations, fears and forebodings'.[40] For her contemporary adherents, she

[39] Michael Watts and Ibaba Samuel Ibaba, 'Turbulent Oil: Conflict and Insecurity in the Niger Delta', *African Security* 4.1 (2011), 1–19 (pp.7–13) <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2011.563181>

[40] Henry John Drewal, 'Local Transformations, Global Inspirations: The Visual History and Cultures of Mami Wata Arts in Africa', in *A Companion to Modern African Art*, ed. by Gitti Salami and Monica Blackmun Visonà (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 23–49 (pp.23–5).

provides a 'curative' presence in the face of accelerating socioeconomic change,[41] and in Okorafor's text, 'cures' the city of a predatory figure, Father Oke, who attempts to manipulate the alien invasion to advance his position in the church and community.

Mami Wata's presence in *Lagoon* symbolises the potential of fluid, evolving traditions to challenge power structures. During the riots, Oke comes across a voluptuous woman who 'spoke like she was from the Niger Delta region' (Ch.46), a presumption that ties this figure to an oil-annihilated periphery. As Oke 'imagin[es] her heaving breasts bouncing above him as he took her right there on the deserted beach', she interrupts his fantasy with a reminder that, in the new world being built, his desires must contend with the multiform agencies of forces beyond his understanding. Revealing her true identity, she tells him that 'the Atlantic always overflows at Bar Beach [. . .] it's not the ocean that is attracted to this place. That it is Mami Wata'. Suddenly recognizing this figure for who she is, Oke realizes that, today, he has been confronted by two presences that are beyond the bounds of his religion: one woman 'from outer space' and one 'from the earth's water'. Across the novel, continuous fusions between traditional and modern, archaic and extraterrestrial, synthesize into new formations that men like Oke cannot comprehend. Realising that the world no longer correlates to his chauvinistic beliefs, he voluntarily follows Mami Wata towards the sea and is never heard from again.

In stark contrast, after meeting the aliens in their underwater base, Adaora, along with her friends Agu and Anthony, only remember segments of their conversation, as the novel rejects didacticism in favour of narrative potentiality. Registering the need for revolution, Ayodele morphs into Karl Marx upon meeting the president of Nigeria, who is suspicious of her, saying she resembles 'a woman from Igboland' (Ch.42), again invoking the Delta region.

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[41] Drewal, p.24.

Ayodele-as-Marx invites the president to catalyse change, stating, 'You believe in Marxism, yet you are too powerless to enact it'. This trans-Marx figure, who fulfils the Black Nexus group's desire to see Ayodele 'change from a woman to a man' (Ch.14), makes supposedly natural binaries fluid and pushes for radical revolt. The novel ends in victorious recognition of cooperation after chaos, as the aliens promise a post-carbon and, implicitly, post-capitalist future, with Nigeria taking the lead.

In short, *Lagoon* articulates how transition to a post-petroleum logic requires a wholescale change of ontology and embrace of fluidity reflected in the text's admixture of the archaic and alien. The formal experimentation of *Solar Bones* similarly gestures towards the need for a more fluid aesthetic that sees the oceans not as zones of extraction and appropriation, but spaces of irreducibility and counter-histories. *February* is more traditional in its form and structure, but finishes with a positive depiction of a non-traditional, elastic family unit, as John and Jane take separate apartments nearby each other to support their child. The novel ultimately rejects the fast-paced temporalities of neoliberalism, looking optimistically towards the future, and fittingly ends with Helen's new husband wading through the tide towards her on their honeymoon. Taken together, the three novels communicate a range of affects and ideals around the possible futures beyond the capitalist *longue-durée*, invoking oceanic aesthetics and viewpoints that reject violent hierarchies and, to varying degrees, promise change.

Conclusion

This article is not intended to stand as the definitive account of Irish and Atlantic oceanic depictions; rather, it outlines a particular mode of world-ecological criticism that interprets cultural representations of the nexus between fish and oil extraction. It shows the possibilities of a dialectical, comparative critique that maps the semiotics of fish and oil in

relation to offshore extraction, their centrality to market stability, their embeddedness in world-systemic networks of power and privilege, and their metabolization in the rhythms of urban, suburban, and rural life. Although my readings were compressed for reasons of space, it is my hope that they illustrate the rich potentiality of an oceanic mode of criticism that explores the interrelation between epistemologies of masculinist extractivism and environmental devastation. Though such critiques are important in understanding capitalism's totalizing logic, I also hope that future research in this area will look to the sea and find old, new, and hybrid forms and aesthetics that gesture beyond a capitalist horizon.