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“Crisis” and Planetary Entanglements: Ai Weiwei’s *Pequi Tree* and John Akomfrah’s *Vertigo Sea*

Abstract: This chapter examines two visual artworks: Ai Weiwei’s 32-meter iron sculpture *Pequi Tree* (2018–20) and John Akomfrah’s three-screen video installation *Vertigo Sea* (2015). It evaluates how these pieces encourage contemplation on the planetary “crisis” and concepts related to the Anthropocene, such as the Plantationocene. This chapter endeavors to further explore the relationship between postcolonial theory and the idea of “crisis” by emphasizing these artists’ impact on a new politics and aesthetics centered on planetary consciousness. *Pequi Tree* by Ai and *Vertigo Sea* by Akomfrah are presented as works of artistic-intellectual and activist expression that boldly speak truth to power from within the museum and gallery spaces. To frame the analysis in the context of the artists’ engagement with the planetary “crisis,” I first discuss the idea of “the contemporary” and its connection to postcoloniality and the interconnected “crises” of the present, which intertwine with the Anthropocene. Then, I focus on adaptation as a creative approach to address representational and epistemic violence in the visual realm by continually transforming authorized, official “sources” and projecting the past into our understanding of current “crises.”

Keywords: Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Anthropocene, Plantationocene, activism, crisis

1 Introduction

Reflecting on the “deep history” of climate change, Dipesh Chakrabarty (see also the chapter by Jesse van Amelsvoort in this volume) notes how “[t]he mansion of modern freedoms stands on an ever-expanding base of fossil-fuel use,” and that “[m]ost of our freedoms so far have been energy-intensive” (2009: 208). The “freedoms” that resulted from European urbanization and industrialization in the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries continue to be achieved through the global-scale exploitation of human labor and resource extraction that characterized the Atlantic slave trade, imperialism, and colonialism. The “deep history” of anthropogenic climate change has been identified as corresponding to the geological epoch of the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000; Crutzen 2002). This chapter presents an

analysis of two visual artworks, Ai Weiwei's thirty-two meter iron sculpture *Pequi Tree* (2018–20) and John Akomfrah's three-screen video installation *Vertigo Sea* (2015), considering the ways in which they invite a reflection on the planetary "crisis" and Anthropocene-related concepts such as the Plantationocene (Moore 2013; Tsing 2015; Haraway 2016; Moore et al. 2019).

Based on Chakrabarty's idea that our "freedoms" remain resource-intensive and Rob Nixon's (2014) contention that "[w]e may all be in the Anthropocene but we're not all in it in the same way," the analysis of Ai and Akomfrah's artworks aims to further the conceptualization of the relations between postcolonial theory and the idea of "crisis" by highlighting their contribution to a new politics and aesthetics based on planetary awareness (Mbembe 2020). Ai's *Pequi Tree* and Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea* are presented as artistic-intellectual and activist works, voicing their creators' truth-to-power speech, or *parrësia* (Foucault 2010), from the museum and the gallery space. To frame the analysis in light of the activists' (Nossel 2016) engagement with the planetary "crisis," I begin by addressing the idea of "the contemporary," linking it with our condition of postcoloniality and the "crises" of the present moment, which intertwine with the Anthropocene. Then I turn to adaptation as a creative strategy to play out representational and epistemic violence in the visual field, ceaselessly transforming authorized, official "sources" and projecting the past into our experience of the "crises" of the contemporary.

2 The Anthropocene and the "crises" of the contemporary

In the essay "What Is the Contemporary?" on the meaning and time of contemporariness, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben notes the importance of speaking from an "untimely" position concerning our own moment:

Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands [. . .]. But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time [. . .]. Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. (2009: 40–41)

For Agamben, the loathing of their own time by "those who are truly contemporary" – while acknowledging these individuals are *of* their time and cannot escape it, as they are not separable from it – typifies their rare, singular ability to

see their time (2009: 41). “The contemporary,” Agamben states, “is the person who perceives the darkness of his time as something that concerns him, as something that never ceases to engage him” (2009: 45). The “truly contemporary” is “struck by the beam of darkness that comes from his own time”; the “truly contemporary” responds to the exigencies of contemporariness in that this darkness of the present demands courage and insight as it “infinitely distances itself from us” (2009: 45). Toward the end of the essay, reflecting on how our investigation of the past responds to the interrogations we subject our present to, Agamben summarizes his argument on what it means to be a contemporary:

This means that the contemporary is not only the one who, perceiving the darkness of the present, grasps a light that can never reach its destiny; he is also the one who, dividing and interpolating time, is capable of transforming it and putting it in relation with other times. He is able to read history in unforeseen ways, to “cite it” according to a necessity that does not arise in any way from his will, but from an exigency to which he cannot not respond. It is as if this invisible light that is the darkness of the present casts its shadow on the past, so that the past, touched by this shadow, acquires the ability to respond to the darkness of the now. (2009: 53)

In the sense of the contemporary described above, Akomfrah and Ai are “truly contemporary” artists and public intellectuals who have honed “the ability to respond to the darkness of the now” through their artwork.¹ Their visual stories attempt to “answer the most basic question: ‘What’s going on?’” (a question that Lawrence Grossberg sees as the political role of cultural theory [1998: 67]). Akomfrah and Ai’s art “cannot not respond” to the exigencies of the contemporary moment – its “urgencies,” “emergencies,” and “crises,” such as those of the Anthropocene.

The narrative of the Anthropocene advanced in P. J. Crutzen’s 2002 article “Geology of Mankind” – which contends that the First Industrial Revolution in Europe and the United States led to a large-scale human impact on the Earth’s landscape, mainly in the form of climate change, and as such can be understood as marking the beginning of a new geological epoch – has been critiqued for the narrowness of its timeline and even denounced as not only “analytically defective, but also inimical to action” (Malm and Hornborg 2014: 67). Alternative ways of theorizing the Anthropocene have been put forward, such as the concept of the “Capitalocene” (the “age of capital”) and the “Plantationocene” (the “age of planta-

¹ On postcolonial public intellectuals, see the special issue of *Transnational Screens*, “Screening Postcolonial Intellectuals: Cinematic Engagements and Postcolonial Activism,” edited by Sandra Ponzanesi and Ana Cristina Mendes (2022). On Ai as a public intellectual, see Ponzanesi (2019: 216) and Mendes and Ai (2022: 160–161), and Zimanyi (2022: 142–143); on Akomfrah, see Harvey (2022).

tions”) (Moore 2013; Tsing 2015; Haraway 2016; Moore et al. 2019). As Donna Haraway puts it in her alternative conceptualization of the new geological epoch of the Anthropocene, the boundary event of the “Chthulucene” captures “a kind of timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in responsibility on a damaged earth” (2016: 2). McKenzie Wark phrases it this way: “there’s a widespread sense that the world, whatever it is, and whatever it may be, is in a lot of trouble. That is the elephant in the room. The most common name for this at the moment is the Anthropocene” (2020: 4).

Most thinkers of the Anthropocene agree that the roots of the climate change “crisis” and environmental displacement, especially in countries of the global south that face intense logging, mining, and pollution, lie in the collusion between capitalism and colonialism, and especially extractivism – the historical process of extracting natural resources led by western empires (Gómez-Barris 2017), materialized, for example, in multiple forms of past and present plantations. Describing our contemporary moment with the Anthropocene-related terms “Capitalocene” and “Plantationocene” aims to capture the extent to which the cause of modern environmental devastation lies in capitalist and colonial extractive systems that have produced enduring racial hierarchies and wealth inequalities, exploitative labor structures, and monoculture development. Haraway observes that the term “Plantationocene” was coined collectively during a talk at the University of Aarhus in 2014 to encompass “the devastating transformation of diverse kinds of human-tended farms, pastures, and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations, relying on slave labor and other forms of exploited, alienated, and usually spatially transported labor” (2016: 206). According to Haraway, for these authors, the Plantationocene has been operating since at least the seventeenth century, and its contemporariness resides in that it “continues with ever greater ferocity in globalized factory meat production, monocrop agribusiness, and immense substitutions of crops like oil palm for multispecies forests and their products that sustain human and nonhuman critters alike” (2016: 206).

To some extent, the multiplication and iteration of “the Anthropocene” and related terms exemplify the “epistemic accelerationism” characterizing current posthuman knowledge (Braidotti 2019). As Wark sees it, our conjuncture is characterized by a knowledge “crisis,” as the Anthropocene places specific demands on knowledge production, possibly amounting to a “global crisis of applied knowledge” that calls for “work[ing] out collaboratively, as a common task, some practices of putting parts of the elephant as we sense and know them next to one another” (2020: 4). Framing it in a context of the instrumentalization of discourses of “crisis” and “emergency,” and drawing on Janet Roitman’s (2013) idea of crisis as a narrative device, Wark underscores the need for taking on a “common task,” on various fronts, in the face of an Anthropocene-associated knowledge “crisis”:

crisis focuses attention, but it can short-circuit the common task of producing a knowledge of this world of the Anthropocene. There’s a rush to rename it, and in renaming it, call it something that makes it the special property of a particular way of knowing the world, to the exclusion of all others. It becomes an alibi for exacerbating the problem of knowing the world, at a time when not knowing is itself a key part of the problem. (2020: 6–7)

The “darkness of the now,” the iniquity of the Anthropocene, which Ai and Akomfrah discern and convey through their artworks *Pequi Tree* and *Vertigo Sea* is complex and multiplicitous. To work towards a “common task,” as Wark puts it, to tackle the “darkness” of the Anthropocene entails disjunctures in ways of seeing “the now” and different ways of being in and out of time, to use Agamben’s expressions. Echoing Foucault, he claims that “the entry point to the present necessarily takes the form of an archeology; an archeology that does not, however, regress to a historical past, but returns to that part within the present that we are absolutely incapable of living” (2009: 51). Agamben uses the term “dis-chrony” to account for the non-coincidence that he sees as integral to contemporariness: “*that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*” (2009: 41; emphasis added). Instead of looking at the past while being in the present (diachrony), the method of “those who are truly contemporary” is to extract moments from history so that they can intervene in the present moment, bringing the past to act in the contemporary (dis-chrony).

3 Postcoloniality and the poietic work of adaptation

Grounding Ai and Akomfrah’s artwork in our condition of postcoloniality is key to understanding their artistic-intellectual intervention in the “crises” of the contemporary moment, particularly the “darkness of the now” of the Anthropocene, its world-ecological crises and the *longue durée* of colonial resource extraction. To speak of the long histories of colonial extractivism and its aftereffects in postcoloniality is to acknowledge that the meaning of the root word “colonial” in the term “postcoloniality” is contingent on the terms of the definition being used. “Postcoloniality” is not a temporal signpost but a critical term; it signifies a position of intellectual inquiry and a theoretical intervention, not a periodizing claim, and is based on an enduring state of coloniality, unapologetically entrenched in global, late capitalism and sustained by racializing assemblages (Weheliye 2014). When using the term “postcoloniality,” it must be acknowledged that it foregrounds the colonial experience, which has been seen as problematic, even “dangerous” in postcolonial theory (Chennells 1999: 109). At the same time, “postcoloniality” di-

rects our attention to the enduring “coloniality of power” (Quijano 2010), which requires a disc-chronic perspective, to return to Agamben’s concept. Likewise, the understanding of coloniality’s *longue durée* aligns with Aníbal Quijano’s decolonial thesis on the “coloniality of power,” or “modernity/coloniality,” which seeks to extend the notion of coloniality beyond the official chronological end of colonial rule. Accounting for the continuity of colonial structures and systems, Quijano’s idea of “coloniality of power” grew precisely from a dissatisfaction with the prefix “post” in postcoloniality as signifying the end of a historical process, the “coming after” moment of colonization.

Colonialism is, in many ways, ongoing. Postcolonial studies has been expanding the temporal and spatial scope of coloniality at least since the 1980s, demonstrating that the resistance to European colonial power structures that we associate with the postcolonial as a periodizing marker was already taking shape beyond the strictly defined historical period of political colonization and decolonization (i.e. when colonists administered colonial subjects until the event of political independence). The intellectual project of postcolonial studies has been to examine the lingering legacies of colonialism on both the colonizer and colonized, from the first moment of colonial contact, not just in a historical, clearly marked moment of post-independence. For example, Chandra Talpade Mohanty observed that “colonization has been used to characterize everything from the most evident economic and political hierarchies to the production of a particular cultural discourse about what is called the ‘Third World’” (1984: 333). Colonization instituted the power structures of colonialism; coloniality is the expansion of economic, political, and epistemic colonization. For Ashis Nandy, colonialism “represents a certain cultural continuity” (1989: 2) – extending the timeframe of political colonization toward colonization as an epistemic project, that continuity is the condition of postcoloniality or coloniality’s *longue durée*.

As a creative strategy, adaptation allows for emphasizing coloniality’s *longue durée*. Adaptation is always already an iteration and revisiting of the past. One of adaptation’s fundamental modes of epistemic redress is its invitation to reread and resignify the past – to bring the past into the present, often in dis-chronic ways, to write from previously unheard perspectives as a way of thinking-acting in the present. Thinking-acting about the present means thinking about the issues that the present projects into the past – precisely the work of postcolonial studies – which emerged out of the need to create knowledge on and intervene in the present systemic inequalities arising out of the past of European colonialism. Homi K. Bhabha (1994) influentially explained the postcolonial work of adaptation through the idea of “the English book.” For Bhabha, the postcolonial encounter with the “signifier of authority, the English book” generates meaning because of the postcolonial dissension-desire to rewrite it to disempower the “original” co-

lonial trauma.² The image of colonial difference "can neither be 'original' – by virtue of the act of repetition that constructs it – nor identical – by virtue of the difference that defines it"; as such, and paradoxically, "the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference" (1994: 107).

What does adaptation *do* – theoretically, epistemologically, and ontologically – in contemporary image making and circulation? If adaptation as product, process, and hermeneutic is both ubiquitous and protean, it is theoretically unstable and challenging to pin down, given the various definitions and debates that have accrued to it. Adaptation's theoretical instability produces its greatest strengths. The process of adaptation has come to have almost as many descriptors as theorists, academics, creators, readers, and audiences. Descriptors for adaptation can be appropriation, incorporation, transposition, re-situating, re-voicing, and, as described by Lucy Fischer, "translation, performance, dialogue, recycling, ventriloquizing, or decomposing" (2013: 7). Linda Hutcheon points to three distinct but inter-related dimensions of adaptation: a product, a process, and a type of intertextuality reliant on reception (2006: 8). The first dimension corresponds to adaptation as a formal entity or product, according to which the adaptation is "an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work" across media, genres, or contexts; the second relates to the process of creation, given that adaptation involves (re-)interpretation; the third underscores the relevance of processes of reception for adaptation (Hutcheon 2006: 12–13). Hutcheon's tridimensional definition of adaptation discloses a tension between the ontological and the epistemological, between the referent of the adaptation and adaptation as a site of knowledge. Adaptation is a key mode of production and circulation of world images; it is a form of knowledge production, of creating new images of the world – of *poietic praxis*. Representation constitutes and co-constructs the world as we see it (Hall 1997). The world we see – social imagery – is shaped through texts. Through this social imagery, "we perceive the 'worlds,' the 'lived realities' of the others, and imaginary reconstruct their lives and ours into intelligible 'world-of-the-whole,' some 'lived totality'" (Hall 1977: 341). The poietic action of broadening the spectrum of representation is one of the many things adaptation *does*: it is part of the *work of* adaptation in postcoloniality.

2 Leela Gandhi similarly noted that the "task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past [. . .] discloses a relationship of reciprocal antagonism and desire between colonizer and colonized" (1998: 4).

In adaptation, engaging in the tradition of *imitatio* to establish an affiliation can serve as an act of *poiesis* (“to create” – the act of creative transformation, of bringing into being that which was not there before). The term *poiesis* tends to be associated with poetry and other forms of verbal cultural making. Still, *poiesis* can be brought into contact with both *praxis* and *imitatio* (in the rhetorical sense of enacting a practice of affiliation) to understand the cultural work of visual adaptation. *Praxis* (“to practice,” “to embody” – the act of materializing and representing that which already existed) connects *imitatio* and *poiesis*. This connection of *poiesis* and *imitatio* with *praxis* runs counter to the Aristotelian philosophical tradition that instead links *praxis* to *theoria*, a move that privileges *praxis* over *poiesis*, setting the two in opposition to one another. A revision of an Aristotelian oppositional configuration, attuned to the poietic processes of visual adaptation and resignification, contributes to understanding how adaptation operates in the public sphere and opens possibilities for social transformation and justice. In this respect, Ai and Akomfrah’s poietic adaptation in *Pequi Tree* and *Vertigo Sea* push postcoloniality into the public sphere, making visible its various forms of violence (physical, representational, or epistemic) and shaping new worldviews.

Ai and Akomfrah’s adaptations are endowed with *parrēsiastic* power, or the power to speak truth to power. Drawing on the ancient Greek practice of free or “truthful” speech, Michel Foucault defines *parrēsia* as a kind of truth-telling necessary for democratic life in the polis (2010: 155). Yet *parrēsia* entails a personal risk, as speaking truth to power is a direct critique of authority. Among visual artists, celebrity activists have created for themselves a unique platform for *parrēsia* – the “certain superiority which is also an ambition and effort to be in a position such that one can direct others” (2010: 155) – which connects to having a voice that can be heard more loudly and exert more impact and influence than others. Foucault writes: “For there to be democracy, there must be *parrēsia*; for there to be *parrēsia* there must be democracy” (2010: 155). Yet one of the paradoxes of *parrēsia* is that, while “this true discourse is what will enable democracy to exist, and to continue to exist,” it is democracy itself that enables truth-telling (2010: 184). At the same time, the enlightened elite Foucault examines in ancient Greek democracy does not overlap seamlessly with the role and position of contemporary celebrity activists such as John Akomfrah and, to an even greater extent, Ai Weiwei (here, it is essential to recognize these activists’ privileged access to prestigious art exhibition venues).

4 Ai Weiwei’s *Pequi Tree* as crisis-artwork

I think that an artist’s, or person’s, concern with attitudes of existence is always related to politics. (Ai 2011: 239)

Living with and through various “crises” as a global, intertwined community is what Achille Mbembe (2021) describes as “planetary entanglement.” From a markedly post-humanist perspective, Haraway (2016) pronounces this entanglement as “staying with the trouble,” an invocation of tactical optimism and un-melancholic differentiation between the failures of our societies and the failure of theory (connected, undoubtedly, to earlier “crises” of theory and post-theory [Latour 2004; Felski 2008]). Ours seems to be a transitional moment, marked by a perpetual sense of “crisis” and the polarizing dynamics of groupness. On the one hand, this moment is characterized by a sense of an absence of emergency, as if we have been anaesthetized by being surrounded by multiple “crises,” and, on the other, increasing uncertainty about how to describe, analyze, and respond to “what’s going on” (Grossberg 1998: 67). This ambivalence reflects anxieties concerning whether the intellectual tools and practices of knowledge, in areas such as cultural studies and postcolonial studies, are sufficient and adequate to come to terms with “what’s going on.” Moreover, these anxieties are not only theoretical, related to the urgency of developing new intellectual practices and widening the existing conceptual frames in the humanities and social sciences, but also connected with a perceived failure to generate adequate political and aesthetic responses to the planetary “crisis.”

Planetary entanglement is a continuing concern for the activist Ai. The iron sculpture *Pequi Tree* (Figs. 1 and 2) is a form of poetic adaptation as visual activism of a (now) dead Brazilian tree belonging to the endangered *Caryocar brasiliense* species endemic to the relentlessly deforested Atlantic Forest. *Pequi Tree* is a multi-layered work, both in terms of the construction process (the actual physical layers that had to be balanced to create the artwork) and the layers of “deep history” (Chakrabarty 2009: 212–213) that it evokes. Arguing against a “shallow” history of the relationship between human beings and climate change, Chakrabarty underscores: “Without such knowledge of the deep history of humanity it would be difficult to arrive at a secular understanding of why climate change constitutes a crisis for humans” (2009: 213). The historical shift from wild, untamed, “natural” spaces to “cultured” spaces, cultivated by humans via agriculture and enclosed in plantations or plantation-like spaces, is hence central to the concept of the “Plantationocene” (Moore 2013; Tsing 2015; Moore et al. 2019). Being aware of this natural-cultural shift is also important to understanding the role of the tree in the western cultural imagination: the tree, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari remarked before the more recent theorization on the Plantationocene, “has dominated Western real-

ity and all of Western thought,” which entails, for the philosophers, “a special relation to the forest, and deforestation” in the West (1987: 181).

Radical imagination is crucial in the face of planetary “crisis.” Writing on the interdependence of all living creatures, Mbembe argues that the “history of [humans] entanglement with multiple other species requires that the reality of objects be rethought beyond human meanings and uses, in their ‘thingness’ and in their ‘animate materiality’” (2021: 19). Responding to planetary entanglement is an ontological-ethical principle, at which the title of Ai’s exhibit, *Entrelaçar/Intertwine*, at the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art and the Serralves Park (July 23, 2021 to July 9, 2022) explicitly hints.³ *Pequi Tree* forges a link between “crisis” and the radical possibilities afforded by imagination and critique, asking us to reflect on our condition in postcoloniality as “mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings” (Haraway 2016: 1). Not only are the ideas of entanglement and interlocal connectivity, of mutualism and “mutuophagia,”⁴ key here, but so is that of mortality, of “living and dying.” The latter surfaces in how the specter of a dead Brazilian pequi tree is re-attached through various technologies of copy (molding, casting, coating, photographing, and filming) in both the sculpture *Pequi Tree* and its companion documentary film *Tree* (2021).

Pequi Tree is the copy, the adaptation of a tree that was both living and dying: a hollow dead tree inhabited by several living species standing in Trancozo, Bahia, a state in eastern Brazil, and now is no more as it collapsed in 2020 following heavy rain. *Tree* meticulously documents, for around four-and-a-half hours, the process of adapting a tree from the Atlantic Forest, painstakingly developed across continents so that *Pequi Tree* could be exhibited in Portugal, in a museum in Porto. The “original” tree, the thing now non-existent in its natural form as a material tree, was adapted (as process and product) through the *poietic praxis* of technological reproducibility (Benjamin 2003). In this respect, the casting of Ai’s own body for the plaster sculpture *Two Figures* (2018) is another adaptation: the re-enactment of the process of casting the tree, which is almost a photographic process.

In our new conjuncture (Hall 1996: 230), the double act of interpretation of the old (or the past) and creation of newness (or the future) involved in the process of adaptation (Hutcheon 2006: 25) can be a way of “staying with the trouble in real and particular places and times” (Haraway 2016: 3), living with and through

³ See my interview with Ai on the occasion of his 2021–2022 exhibit (Mendes and Ai 2022).

⁴ The exhibit *Entrelaçar/Intertwine* also included seven sculptures entitled *Iron Roots* (2015–2021) and the photograph *Mutuophagia* (2018).



Figure 1: Moulding the “original” pequi tree in Trancoso, Bahia, in 2017 (still from Ai Weiwei’s 2021 documentary film *Tree*). Image courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio.

crisis and entanglement. To engage in reimagining, or imaginative transformation, conversion, revision, resignification, salvaging, and recovery – strategies of adaptation, or the ability to adapt the form according to the media available and considering different contexts – is part of “learning to be truly present” (2016: 1). Adaptation can help unleash generative possibilities, and even install in us the sense of urgency required to act. To adapt Haraway’s expression “staying with the trouble,” while circling back to Agamben’s idea of the contemporary, staying with the “crisis” of the Anthropocene asks that we respond to “that part within the present that we are absolutely incapable of living” (Agamben 2009: 51).

5 The “Anthroposcenic” seascapes of John Akomfrah’s *Vertigo Sea*

Created for the 2015 Venice Biennale, *Vertigo Sea* (Fig 3), Akomfrah’s visual and acoustic artistic manifesto on the planetary “crisis,” was inspired by a radio interview with a group of Nigerian migrants who had survived a journey across the Mediterranean, despite facing numerous challenges and obstacles such as harsh weather conditions, limited resources, and the risk of being intercepted by authorities for attempting an illegal crossing. The installation becomes a historiographic



Figure 2: Installation of Ai Weiwei's *Pequi Tree* (2018–20; cast iron; 32.4 x 11.5 x 9.8 m) at the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Porto, for the exhibit *Entrelaçar/Intertwine* (July 23, 2021, to July 9, 2022). Image courtesy of Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art and Ai Weiwei Studio.

project, seeing the vast numbers of refugees as voice-less in the historiography about the refugee “crisis” and drawing a line between this epistemic violence (Spivak 1988) and the violences of the European colonial past that witnessed the Zong slave ship massacre of 1781, in which 133 enslaved people were thrown overboard into the Caribbean Sea to claim their insurance value as lost cargo. Akomfrah’s 48-minute film, exhibited on three screens, invites a reflection on the legacies of Atlantic imperial expeditions and Black enslavement as ongoing racial capitalism (Robinson 2000), the remnants of the violence inextricable from the history of Euro-Atlantic modernity and, specifically, “an Atlantic cycle of accumulation” (Baucom

2005: 32), and the refugee “crisis” through images of individuals risking their lives trying to cross the Mediterranean on crowded vessels because they have been designated as “illegals” or “irregular.” *Vertigo Sea* conjures a transtemporal necropolitical continuum (Mbembe 2003) through the sequencing of recent news-like images of a capsized boat overcrowded with “illegal” or “irregular” migrants in the Mediterranean, glaciers melting and rising seas, archival footage of nuclear testing and whaling, and a sort of oceanic *tableau vivant* featuring Olaudah Equiano (1745–1797), the formerly enslaved Black person who became a key figure in the British abolitionist movement.

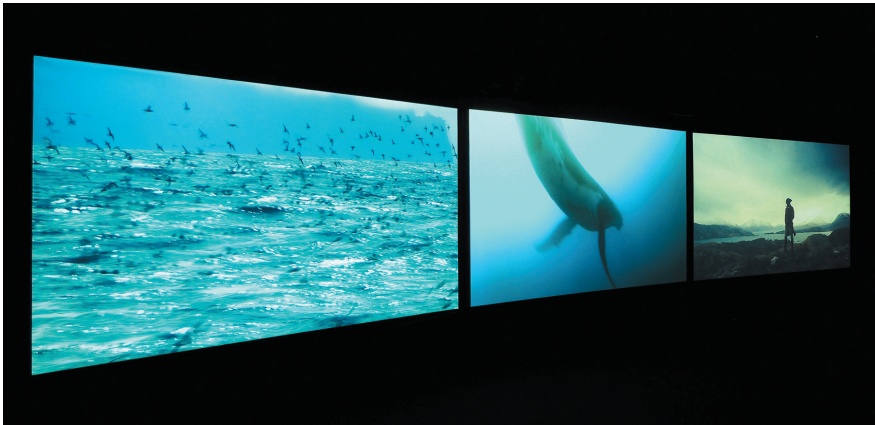


Figure 3: John Akomfrah, *Vertigo Sea*, 2015. Three-channel HD color video installation, 7.1 sound, 48 minutes 30 seconds (Artloveruk, CC BY-SA 4.0) (still).

The “Anthroposcenic” seascapes⁵ of *Vertigo Sea* offer an aesthetic reflection on human beings’ relationship to the sea, specifically relating to colonization, migration, and climate change. To compose these seascapes, Akomfrah adapts elements of sea narratives in various media. Adaptations “can take an activist stance toward their source novels, inserting them into a much broader intertextual dialogism” (Stam 2000: 64). Akomfrah’s use of sea narratives (Mathieson 2016) builds on this dialogical process: he adapts literary texts such as *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, and Heathcote Williams’ epic poem *Whale Nation* (1988), re-enacting sections of these works. In turn, Melville was influenced by

⁵ I am deploying the concept of “Anthroposcenic” (Matless 2017) to reflect on the effective changes in the conditions of visibility in the Anthropocene (Davis and Turpin 2015).

Turner's seascapes and whaling representations (Wallace 1992). The "Anthroposcenic" seascapes of *Vertigo Sea*, adapted mainly from Melville and Turner, aesthetically convey the entanglements between colonial dispossession, such as the extractive economies of Black enslavement and the cruelty of the whaling industry (an extractivist precursor to fossil fuels), and the contemporary planetary "crises" of illegalized migration and climate change.

Akomfrah's installation reframes and re-engages with Turner's representations of Black enslavement and colonialism to make visible their legacies in the uneven and global effects of the post-industrial anthropogenic footprint, such as human precarity, eco-migration, and environmental displacement. Turner's response to the "end of nature" (McKibben 1989), i.e. to the imposing urbanization and industrialization of nineteenth-century Europe, is manifest in the paintings "*Now for the Painter*" (*Rope*) – *Passengers Going on Board* ("*Pas de Calais*") (first exhibited in 1827) and *The Slave Ship* (*Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On*) (1840). Human vulnerability, a recurring theme in Turner, was often expressed in tempestuous seascapes. *The Slave Ship*, in particular, was a reaction to the atrocities of the Atlantic slave trade, amplifying the moral outrage against Black enslavement, then at the height of controversy in Great Britain.⁶ Inspired by the case of the Zong slave ship massacre and its subsequent legal battle, the painting was first exhibited in 1840, fifty-nine years after the massacre. Turner's use of color, shape, and form accentuates the dramatic and harrowing dimensions of the atrocity.

In the "Anthroposcenic" seascapes of *Vertigo Sea*, migration and climate change are entangled: migration has brought on climate change, and climate change has brought on forced, illegalized migration and environmental displacement. The installation asks us to meditate on the intertwined histories of conquest and colonization of lands and people, but also of other forms of life for profit, greed, and rapacious exploitation in the Anthropocene. The "deep history" (Chakrabarty 2009: 212–213) of these seascapes is that of the centuries-old, large-scale translocal interactions and transactions and awareness of the Other that Arjun Appadurai refers to, facilitated by "the long-distance journey of commodities (and of the merchants most concerned with them) and of travelers and explorers of every type," but also warfare and religious conversion (1996: 27). They reflect a historically layered, adaptive and cross-media reading of the centuries-old sea-

⁶ The Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 abolished the slave trade in the British Empire. Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, the Quaker social reformer and advocate for the abolition of enslavement in the British colonies, published the controversial book *The African Slave Trade and Its Remedy* in 1838.

scapes inhabited by sailors and merchants, enslaved and indentured laborers, soldiers and “discoverers,” migrants and refugees, tourists and sojourners.

On the transmutations and transtemporal continuities of racial capitalism today, Christina Sharpe (2016) draws a persuasive analogy between Black enslavement (with specific reference to the experience of the slave ship) and global illegalized migration that expands our understanding of how enslavement remains encoded, albeit transformed – a specter even – in the neoliberal discourse about the refugee “crisis.” In this respect, Jacques Derrida’s (2006) concept of the specter strengthens a parallel between the refugee “crisis” and the specters of European colonialism; the latter contracts the relation of life and death into a central instance of “camp-thinking,” an exclusive formation of subjectivity that incites hostility between self and other and undergirds racialized violence. For Sharpe, there is a transtemporal continuum where “the semiotics of the slave ship continue: from the forced movements of the enslaved to the forced movements of the migrant and refugee” (2016: 21).⁷ In this light, Akomfrah’s focus on the refugee “crisis” in *Vertigo Sea* highlights a continuum of necropolitical violence, part of the ongoing wake of transatlantic enslavement. Still, as Yogita Goyal queries in her scrutiny of theoretical transtemporal analogies between Black enslavement and the refugee “crisis” – in other words, between the water deaths in the context of the Middle Passage and the present-day Mediterranean: “Does seeing the contemporary refugee as a specter of the Atlantic slave summon up the ethical claim of the past on us?” (2017: 544). *Vertigo Sea* compellingly draws attention to the danger of erasure from the collective memory of those necropolitical regimes. Yet, Akomfrah’s deployment of a “logic of analogy” also asks us to consider the limits of transtemporality in the conflation of, on the one hand, “past and present,” and, on the other, “a hegemonic global north and a perpetually marginalized global south” (Goyal 2017: 544).

6 Conclusion

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories. (Haraway 2016: 12)

⁷ Before Sharpe, Paul Gilroy, in *The Black Atlantic*, had already deployed a ship metaphor to evoke the Middle Passage and represent the Black experience of forced transatlantic movement: “The image of the ship,” Gilroy argues, is “a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion” (1993: 4).

If we return to Agamben's idea of contemporariness and layer it onto Stuart Hall's idea of "unity in difference" (Slack 1996: 122–124), a unity formed by articulation, the "truly contemporary" artists Ai and Akomfrah usher in a dialectical relationship between the material context and the ideas, concepts, theories, and art forms that arise out of it and respond to it – a dialectical relationship that, as Hall describes, is a constitutive one (1992: 13). Here, the relevance and "strength" of postcolonial theory "is that it provides us with a critical framework that validates the local epistemologies necessary for the formulation of global ethics" (Rao and Wasserman 2007: 34). In this framework, the poietic work of the adaptive artworks *Pequi Tree* and *Vertigo Sea* is vital. The process of adaptation is one of constantly rereading "source" texts regarding their moments of reception and is, therefore, a site where "resistant imaginations" (Medina 2013) are possible. As adaptations that seek epistemic justice and serve as activist acts of *parrësia*, *Pequi Tree* and *Vertigo Sea* intervene in public discourse, influencing that discourse by responding to the contemporary "crises" of the Anthropocene and the migrant and refugee "crisis."

As the analysis of these artworks illustrated, adaptation can highlight the transtemporal continuums between the violences exerted on the others of Euro-Atlantic modernity and imperial accumulation, and extractivism on the others of the Mediterranean refugee "crisis" (a continuum and analogy that, nevertheless, need problematizing). At the same time, adaptation voices possibilities that are needed, desired, and might be imaginatively conveyed and politically realized in the face of multiple "crises." Adaptation can be a vehicle for redress by shaping public knowledge and pushing hidden forms of representational and epistemic violence into the public sphere – a strategy of epistemic justice and restitution. On the epistemological and political work of adaptation, the alternative epistemologies and hermeneutics circulated through adaptive artworks in the public sphere shape the political context into which, and because of which, they emerge. *Pequi Tree* and *Vertigo Sea* exemplify this epistemological and political work of adaptation in postcoloniality, encouraging us to think in terms of "deep history" (Chakrabarty 2009: 212–213) and a "thick present" (Haraway 2016: 1). Here, speaking directly to the exigencies of the present political moment, adaptation brings forth, through *poiesis* and in line with the critical tradition of *parrësia*, an indictment of the entangled "crises" of our contemporary moment.

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