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Slow Horizon curated by Karina Iskandarsjah

Donya Aref, Mitra Fakhrashrafi, Kim Ninkuru, and Adrienne Matheuszik

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slow horizon;

a phenomenon/state of simultaneity; of past and future, hope and pessimism, utopia and apocalypse.



Liberty or Death, Sons of Africa (2019), Nona Faustine.

I

Nona Faustine's photograph *Liberty or Death, Sons of Africa* is the jacket cover image for Claudia Rankine's book *Just Us*. Part of a series that confronts American national monuments (in this case, the Washington monument) as simultaneous sites of narratives for enslaved peoples, the photograph's darkened horizon conceptualizes

tension and trauma; [“that black bar is what’s hidden in all of that history.”](#)^[1] In *Just Us*, Claudia Rankine analyzes contemporary conversations and encounters that she has experienced in which race and racism casts a shadow over the scene. Despite the exhausted breath I can almost hear in between Rankine’s lines, she is determined in her role of educator to make connections, have compassion, and find ways to bridge communication and understanding.

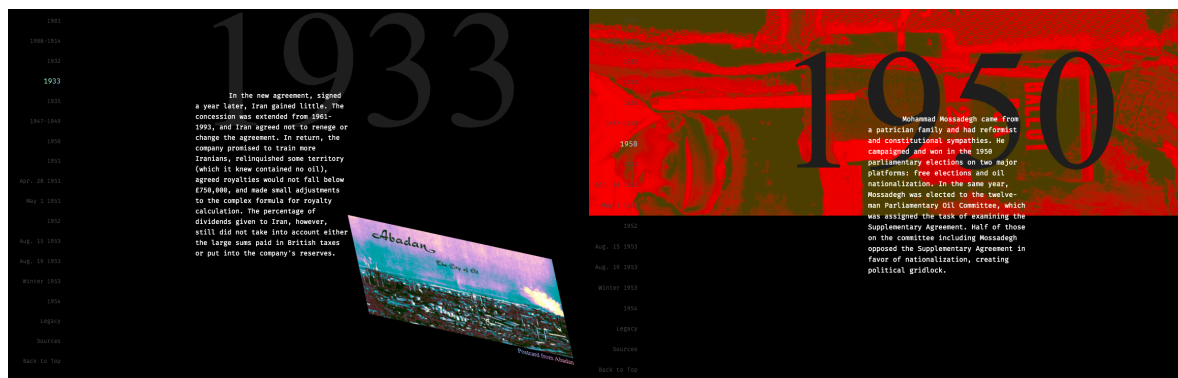
I start writing this essay, on [January 7th, 2021](#), a day after white supremacists gathered in mass, during a global pandemic, at the US capitol to display a weaponized tantrum in protest of the presidential election results. Watching the news unfold, I try to make sense of this phenomenon of existing simultaneously in the past and the future – witnessing a kind of violence and division often framed as something of the past, while looking towards thinkers whose vision for equity is often framed as too radical for the present. Science fiction writer and theorist China Miéville similarly describes a state of paradoxical simultaneity in a 2014 keynote speech at the Earth Day Conference of the Nelson Institute:

[“Apocalypse and utopia: the end of everything, and the horizon of hope. Far from antipodes, these two have always been inextricable \[...\] The utopia of togetherness is a lie, \[...\] we are not all in this together. Which means fighting the fact that fines for toxic spills in predominantly white areas are five times what they are in minority ones. It means not only providing livings for people who survive by sifting through rejectamenta in toxic dumps but squaring up against the imperialism of garbage that put them there, against trash neoliberalism by which poor countries compete to become repositories of filth.”](#) ^[2]

slow horizon is a group exhibition that takes inspiration from Miéville’s declaration of our world’s contemporary paradoxes, Rankine’s determination towards understanding and compassion despite inherent failures, as well as Faustine’s conceptual black bar of unknowable histories, framing its form as a blank horizon onto which we can project predictions and desires for a future.

The exhibition selects new media and hybrid-format art works by [Donya Aref](#), [Mitra Fakhrashrafi](#), [Kim Ninkuru](#) and [Adrienne Matheuszik](#). These artists use data visualization, design communication, and science fiction tropes as tools to uncover fractured, disturbing and ambiguous narratives brought upon by colonial legacies and late-stage capitalism. The works range in form: a website, textbook syllabus, and performances by digitally animated clones. They hybridize a sense of self with multiple histories and speculative fictions to transcend our present moment and become non-synchronous to the very issues they speak to.

In the 90s and 00s, art critics and writers like Hal Foster and Mark Godfrey argued for the importance of artists who take on the role of historian/archivist. What is not included in their testimonies however is that the *modus operandi* of the artist-historian is crucial for the marginalized and colonized subject, whose imagination is needed to put together the fragmented, violent and buried histories critical to understanding contemporary inequalities and global hierarchies. Donya Aref and Mitra Fakhrahrashi take on the artist-historian role in their works *Of Violent Extractions* and *Salt of this Sea Syllabus*. They articulate narratives through accessible and engaging formats that disengage from the [Coloniality of Power](#) that has marginalized the very histories and issues that their works spotlight.



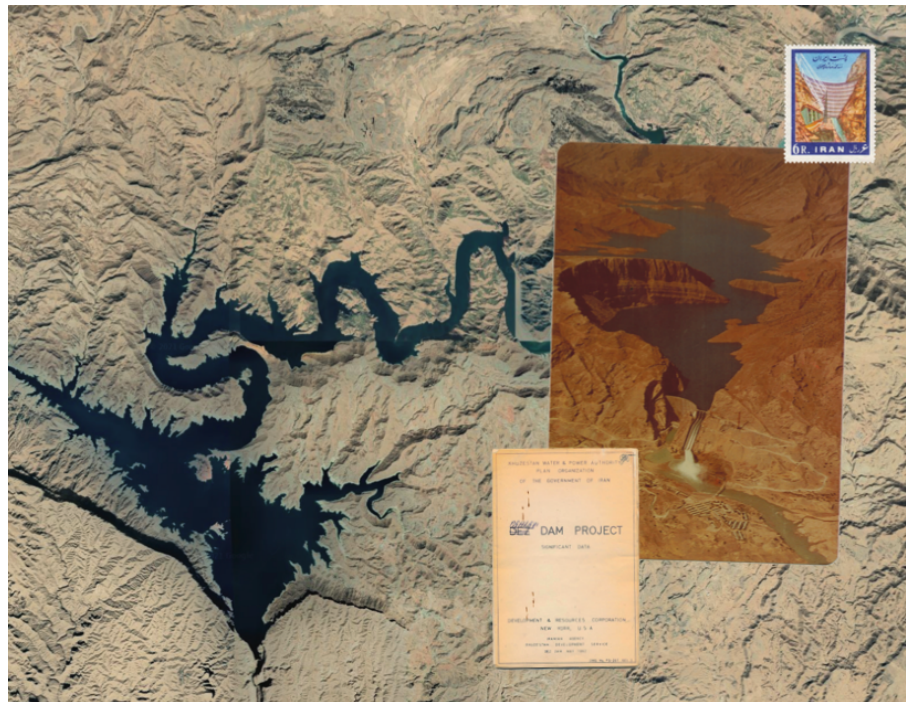
Of Violent Extractions (2019), screenshots, Donya Aref.

[Of Violent Extractions](#) is an interactive web-based timeline project by Donya Aref that outlines events that resulted in the 1953 Iran coup, led by the CIA. The timeline accounts for how a century-old oil crisis between Iran and Britain caused more recent antagonism between Iran and the U.S. It argues for the position that, were it not for the coup, Iran would now be a mature democracy, and that the 1953 coup and its consequences were the starting point for much of the political climate of the Middle East today.

Scrolling down Aref's dynamic interface, a chronology of text, images and design elements float past non-synchronously. *Of Violent Extractions* creates an atmosphere of a deconstructed zine in the matrix, in which the clicking and hovering of your cursor animates collaged elements and imbues them with faux-materiality, revealing careful digital renderings of texture and dimension. In the hands of the artist, this historical information is re-imagined and given an afterlife as digital debris, to be extracted and reinserted as counter-perspectives to western imperialist narratives.

In Mitra Fakhrahrashi's similarly hybrid-format zine, the banality of imperial violence becomes clear, but even more so, the inevitable tide of resistance against it. A direct response to Aref's work, Mitra Fakhrahrashi's [Salt of this Sea Syllabus](#) offers an unusual use of institutional language: that of the academic syllabus. Equipped with

intertextual hyperlinks, this digital zine is a prescribed list of media and reading resources that trace stories of Black, Indigenous, and racialized people who have long experienced water both as a source of threat and a source of possibility. Complementing Donya Aref's digital timeline of a battle over a vast natural resource between a pseudo-colony and its imperial master, Fakhrashrafi illustrates the persistence of imperial violence at bodies of water.



Salt of this Sea Syllabus (2021), screenshot, Mitra Fakhrashrafi.

Salt of this Sea Syllabus borrows its name from the title of Annemarie Jacir's 2008 film where Soraya, a forcibly displaced Palestinian-American woman, gazes at the sea where her grandfather swam before the illegal Israeli occupation and apartheid. Connecting essays, poetry, art, and film, Fakhrashrafi's crash course offers a holistic view of vast but interconnected contemporary issues related to "watery borderlands,"[3] which are simultaneously sites of [mobility and immobility](#). It includes readings about how identities are shaped by cartography and nationhood as well as case studies which take a close look at how colonial infrastructure and water management have had a lasting impact on life and labour - and by extension - access and mobility.

Fakhrashrafi's intentions are made clear in the course description; "as colonial border violence continues from the Mediterranean Sea to [St. Marys Bay \(Mi'kmaq territory\)](#) and beyond, readers are invited to wade through history, nurture imaginings of a world without borders, and demand no less." [4] *Of Violent Extractions* and *Salt of this Sea Syllabus* both contend with the senseless greed of imperial domination. They decipher materials of the past in order to make visible the persisting tendrils of

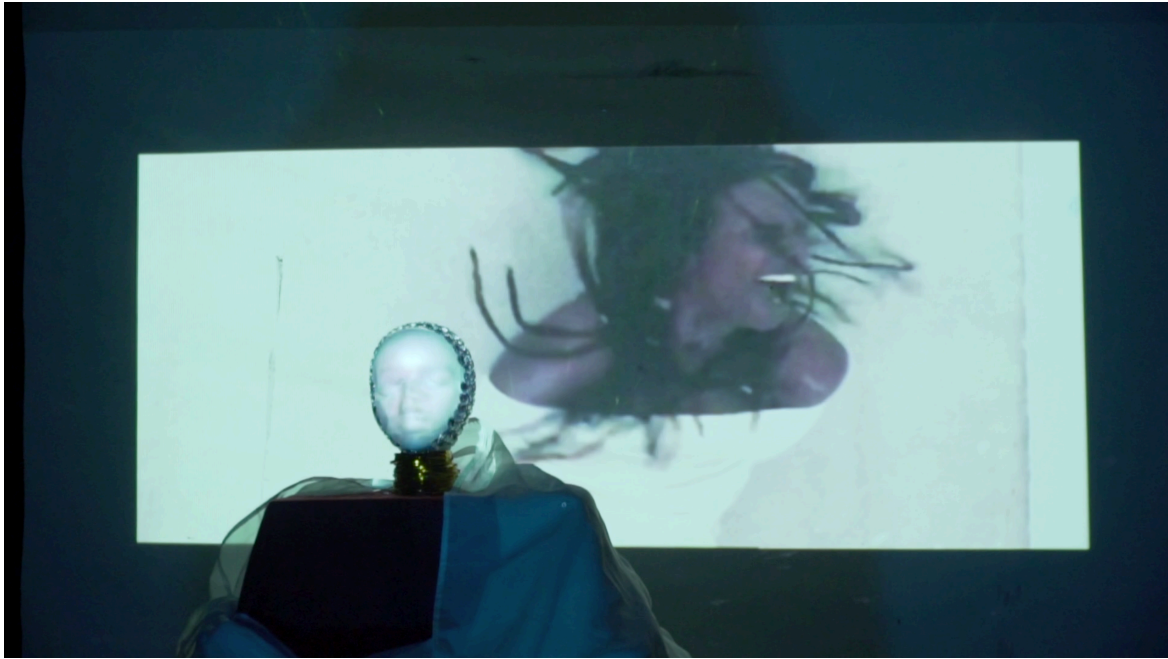
colonial legacies (turned into capitalist ventures), and demand that we simply reject the extremely uneven and deeply racialized allocation of natural resources.

III

“Every historian of the multitude, the dispossessed, the subaltern, and the enslaved is forced to grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters, and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor.”^[5]

Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments by Saidiya Hartman, examines the fragmented and incomplete archives that accounted for the lives of “riotous Black girls, troublesome women, and queer radicals” in Philadelphia and New York at the beginning of the twentieth century. Weaving fictional elements into archives to fully immerse the reader in her subject’s lives, Hartman retaliates against the unjust treatment and exploitation of her archival characters, whose lives and likenesses were exploited by the white gaze that recorded them. The lives of marginalized and racialized peoples are erased from narratives of the past as often as they are erased from narratives of the future. Particularly, science fiction has been criticized for being rooted in the imagination of Western colonialism; “a managerial, bio- and ecopolitical place”^[6] in which economic productivity - the plantation, mine, or factory - are means of suppressing other futures.

Theorist Kodwo Eshun argues that science fiction is often “neither forward-looking nor utopian,” rather - through the white gaze - it focuses on distortions of the present, in turn producing future horizons of white utopia, creating a feedback loop that comes back to shape the present. If science fiction narratives are present distortions of colonial imposition, then Afrofuturism (according to Eshun) is an intervention that envisions life “beyond the determinism of Western technoscience.”^[7] In line with Afrofuturist conventions, Kim Ninkuru and Adrienne Matheuszik embrace science fiction tropes in their works *These are My Reparations (Part II)* and *Somewhere* to critique current racial tensions and the social conditions that produce them.



These Are My Reparations (Part II) (2019), still from video documentation of performance, Kim Ninkuru.

[*These Are My Reparations \(Part II\)*](#) by Kim Ninkuru was originally created for *Dispatch*, a line-up of performance art works by Black creators during the 2019 Toronto Biennial. The work is a video performance and installation that presents a robot performer named RadioHead, created in the likeness of the artist. “What would you like to hear?” RadioHead asks at the start of the performance. She stands in front of a video of the artist pacing around in an empty room, a musical lip-sync performance gradually transforms into dissonance between the sound of RnB music, heavy breathing, a glitching robot and distressing shots of the artist’s body being dragged away.

This scene is part of a larger and continually unfolding narrative which takes place in a future where, since the revolution, live entertainment no longer exists. Unknowingly signing her freedom away, a young woman accepts to sell the rights to her likeness to be used for an AI robot designed to perform live music to the rich elite. Through a dichotomy of cultural expectation and horrific discomfort, Ninkuru illustrates the paradoxical reality of the co-opting of Black/femme identities into popular culture (especially within the entertainment and art industries) while disregarding their lives within the violence of white supremacy.

Rooted in the affirmation that [“blackness is past, present, and future, always.”](#)^[8] Ninkuru’s science fiction world is a queer and open-ended narrative unrestricted by time or place. Despite being the first iteration of this story, the performance is deceptively labelled “(Part II)”, insinuating a state of chronological precariousness around issues of representation, reparations, and sanity.



Somewhere (2019), film still, Adrienne Matheuszik.

Similarly, [Somewhere](#) by Adrienne Matheuszik is a work that takes place in an indeterminate universe where time is unfixed by an eternal state of liminality. *Somewhere* is a short animated film part of a larger series of works titled *Ambiguous Origins* that surveys new media technology, science fiction, and mixed-race identity. Through sculptural installations, 3D animation, and augmented reality, *Ambiguous Origins* investigates the boundaries between physical and digital space as an analogy for ethnic hybridity and the experience of being misidentified. The film *Somewhere* features a digitally animated clone of the artist, referred to as “the other adrienne”, who is alone on a ship moving through space. In her travels, the other adrienne repeatedly encounters the Object of Ambiguous Origin (OAO), forms an affinity to it, and begins to envision her existence devoid of any social or environmental context.

The title *Somewhere* refers to a song that ties into stories based on fears of racial mixing. It was written for the 1957 Broadway musical *West Side Story*, a reimagining of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (a plot about racism and fears of miscegenation) and expresses the protagonist's desire for [“a place,”](#) and a future. However, in her thesis paper, Matheuszik frames this desired future “place” as a problematic concept. Responding to a 1993 *Time* magazine cover labelled [“The New Face of America”](#) (a computer morphed face of fourteen models of different racial backgrounds), Matheuszik notes that a racially ambiguous person “exists as a dream of the future – post-racial and utopic – [but] does not offer any real solutions to the present realities of racism and oppression.”[10]

Although a position at the border of race and culture offers new possibilities and perspectives, an overemphasis on hybridity can conceal the actual violent politics of these borders. Similar to Ninkuru’s performance, Matheuszik’s vague and atmospheric narrative embraces hybridity in multifaceted ways. However, they do so to directly

intervene in the perception of racialized identity. In both *These are My Reparations (Part II)* and *Somewhere*, representations of the self are combined with speculative fiction. In turn, they successfully address issues grounded in the present and reveal unrecognized layers of lived experience by transcending the constrictions of time and space.

IV

The works by Aref, Fakhrashrafi, Ninkuru, and Matheuszik look towards conceptions of the past, present, and future to intervene upon the catastrophes of colonial legacy and late-stage capitalism. Through their aesthetic interpretation of archival materials, *Of Violent Extractions* and *Salt of this Sea Syllabus* are firmly committed to education as means to encourage members of the public to demand accountability and transparency from their governments, overdue reparations, and release from exploitation. Contrastingly, *My Reparations (Part II)* and *Somewhere* experiment with abstracted lived realities to subvert expectations of clarity in the perception of racialized identity, especially when violent contradictions are inherent within them.

If the horizon of the near future looks blank, it's because we can no longer accept the unjust circumstances fixed to the imaginations produced by colonality of power. *slow horizon* advocates for the desires and predictions made by artists in the margins, whose points of view dispel the notion of a "utopia of togetherness" and dismantle violent political and socio-cultural borders.

-Karina Iskandarsjah

Footnotes

- [1] Sunday, Sarah. "AR'N'T I A WOMAN: INTERVIEW WITH NONA FAUSTINE." *Musée Magazine*, April 8, 2020. Accessed January 7, 2021. <https://museemagazine.com/features/2019/4/8/arnt-i-a-woman-interview-with-nona-faustine>.
- [2] Miéville, China. "The Limits of Utopia." In *Futurity Report*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2020.
- [3] Fakhrashrafi, Mitra. "Salt of this Sea Syllabus." 2021.
- [4] Ibid.
- [5] Hartman, Saidiya. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020.
- [6] Marques, Pedro Neves. "If Futurity Is the Philosophy of Science Fiction, Alterity Is Its Anthropology: On Colonial Power and Science Fiction." In *Futurity Report*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2020.
- [7] Eshun, Kodwo. "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism." *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 2003, 287-302.
- [8] Ninkuru, Kim. Artist biography, 2020.

[9] Matheuszik, Adrienne. "Ambiguous Origins: Mixed Race and Mixed Reality." Master's thesis, OCAD University, 2019.