

P4 Reflection

'The relationship between knowledge and water is not simple, but understanding this relationship seems also to be a question of distinguishing between kinds of knowledge – knowledge that commoditizes and colonizes, knowledge that generates necessary anger and action, knowledge that heals. Knowledge that builds communities, or knowledge that fractures them. Knowledge that responds, or knowledge that masters'

Astrida Neimanis (2017). *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*

Process & Alignments

This thesis research–project derived from a personal quest of becoming urban designer in the midst of the complex urgencies and fragilities of the Anthropocene. It became clear to me – already during the course of my studies – that the current level of complexity associated with urbanization processes defies conventional approaches of solutionism and reveals significant delimitations of knowledge; usually connected to prevailing worlding practices in the state-regime nexus. Attempting, then, to go beyond such approaches and delimitations pointed towards a conscious Transition to paradigms of 'living with the problem' (Grosz, 2012) or 'staying with the trouble' (Haraway, 2016) that remain skeptical of concrete outcomes or narratives of savior. Instead, these paradigms suggested the adoption of theory critique, experimentation, and concepts as essential methodologies for the development of a design process capable of responding to the ongoing transitions of the 21st century Critical Zones.

In this context – and revolving around the very notion of Transition as both contextual and conceptual shift – my interest in ocean urbanization in light of the ongoing water crisis was marked by a deliberate decision to simultaneously transgress my personal delimitations of knowledge, and to search for alternative ways of coexistence in a 'troubled' planet through the development and the testing of a combined methodology of theoretical inquiry, critical analysis and conceptual experimentation. This research by design methodology, defined in the Inland-Seaward framework of the Transitional Territories studio, was directed by the understanding of the water crisis as not merely an environmental matter but also a socio-ecological one produced through dominating water imaginaries and complex material entanglements that territorialize and deterritorialize water rendering it placeless.

Realizing that it is precisely the contemporary water imaginary who has allowed – if not directed – its operationalization, appropriation, universalization, and transformation into a critical site of political praxis, was essential to recognize oceanic territories as ongoing projects whose analysis and design presupposes the challenging of land-based territorial arts and the tracing of counter-acts and alter-imaginaries of living with water. In this process, situatedness was deemed critical not only for the mapping or the experimenting but also for the understanding of knowledge as necessarily performative and proximal; produced through active interrelations between the material and the discursive and differentiated across various aqueous milieus. In the case of this thesis, then, the quest for situatedness drove the final site selection to the specific sea bounded system of the Mediterranean Basin which, being the water body that I was personally inextricably connected with while growing up, was defined as a mesocosm for the study of ocean urbanization in congested conditions of crises.

The selection of a continental site – through this back-and-forth process of design, critique, and reflection cultivated by the TT studio’s collective thinking – sealed my interest to understand planetarity and planetary urbanization not only as a top-down data-driven process of knowing Gaia and its concatenation of crises but also as a way to find the critical or neglected embedded details and to test how they can update our knowledge systems and our humancentric - or more precisely man-centric – worlding practices. In that sense, it used the same methodologies in the different interconnected scales – defined not as nested units but as relational bodies – always focusing on the conditions of transgression, liminality and in-between to explore the urban project as a curating practice in urgent need to give voice to those that don’t have voice and to develop a practice of becoming-with its human and more-than-human audiences.

This redefinition of what an urban project is – and what it can be or needs to be – entails the same attention to latency as the medianatureculture scenario elaborated throughout the report for the co-evolution of Julia; embodying a critical event that bridges the real and the virtual through its materialization. Acting as a cognitive and physical disruption, Julia reveals the limit of our current worlding practices and demands the cultivation of an artistic methodology of speculation as a bridge towards real transdisciplinarity and as a counterweight to the objectification currently exercised by our narrow understanding of science. Situated speculation, then, is suggesting a methodological turn in the way we analyze, represent and design responding to my initial quest for becoming a transitional designer developing counter-projects.

Methods & Approach

This methodological shift towards speculation as a design approach was inspired from the analytical-projective approach directed by the Transitional Territories studio during the collective mapping phases. Although the site selection was individual, the shared initial investigations and the extensive feedback sessions were foundational for the understanding of analysis and design not as sequential – leading with certainty from the one to the other – but as oscillational – simultaneously updating and challenging each other. The Accumulation-Clearance dipole, which was first implemented in the site selection phase and later elaborated in the Deterritorialization-Reterritorialization approach, directed the understanding of space as gestational; already containing within its current composition the signs of immanence and resistance that can lead to its alteration, and already dictating its spatiotemporal limits.

In this sense, the produced incomplete cartographies of the studio investigations – titled as Transition, Transgression and Territorology in the Monographies chapter – built up a very strong data-driven layered basemap while highlighting fragility, latency, and temporality through experimental representations of scales, relations, possibilities, subjectivities, agencies, contradictions, or narratives. Between the two – the first following the conventional urban, or even planetary, design process and the second consisting of various artistic figurations – the project’s approach was evaluated, always in coordination with the given feedback, in need of situatedness. This requirement was fulfilled through the acupunctural field work that combined photo documentation and storyboard techniques to develop an embedded figuration narrative – elaborated in the Situated Knowledge chapter.

Combining the conceptual and the contextual, then, led into the Diffraction inquiry-approach which translated the neomaterialistic thinking into an intentional speculative project bridging the site and the sight of the synecdochical island. Through this bridging, that followed the same analytical-projective

methodology established by the TT studio in the first part and that used all feedback sessions, presentations, or exhibitions as moments of reflection and redirection, the design process was broken into three constitutional parts: the Speculative (Re)Fabulation, the Sympoiesis, and the Weaving Worlds which tested the concepts elaborated by Haraway (2016) in a materialization scenario. Meant to embody the assessment of speculation as design approach, the project concluded by intentionally evoking a nonscalability approach to emphasize the politics of location.

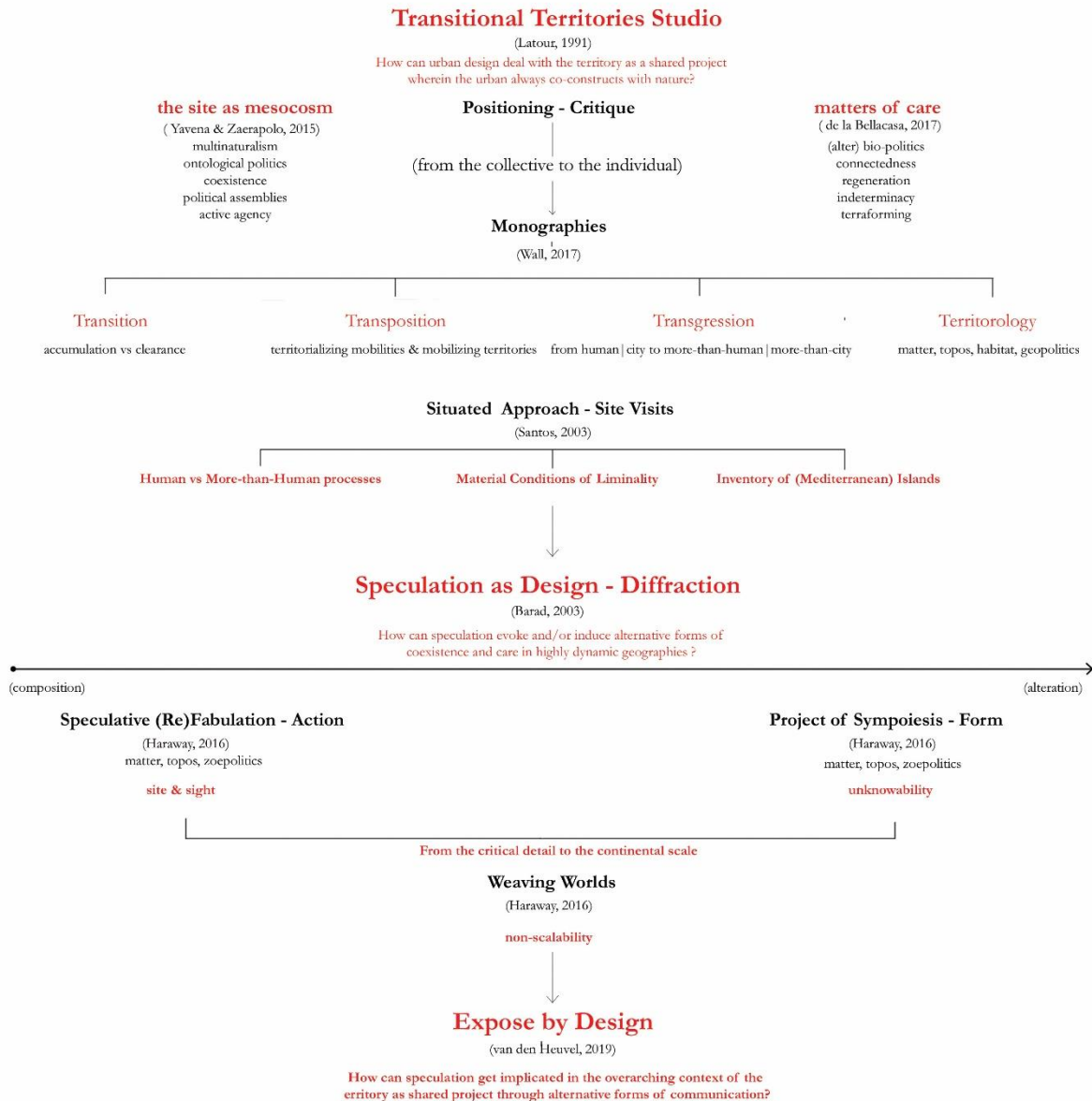


Figure 1: Graduation Approach Framework

'Art is intensely political not in the sense that it is a collective or community activity (which it may be but usually is not) but in the sense that it elaborates the possibilities of new, more, different sensations than those we know.' (Grosz, 2008)

Evaluation & Significance

Scientific Value

The thesis takes place in a crucial moment for the study of extended more-than-city urbanization and specifically – in light of the generalized water crisis – the urbanization of the sea. The notion of 'Anthropocene water' shifts the focus to the hydrosphere while intensive extraction practices make the ocean the new frontier for human occupation. Operationalized, instrumentalized, militarized, politicized, and commercialized the largely underexplored or intentionally obscured oceanic territories are densely inhabited and radically appropriated violating unknown spatiotemporal boundaries, restraining flows, disrupting fragile ecosystems, and systemizing expulsion through land-based territorial practices. As urban designers start acknowledging the space of the sea as a crucial subject for their discipline, its reconceptualization becomes urgent requiring a consistent methodology not only for the conducting of analysis, mapping, and scientific observation but first and foremost for the development of speculations, imaginaries and entanglements that oppose the prevailing urbanization practices.

In parallel, this shifted focus to more-than-city urbanization in relation to the extended consequences of the interconnected ecological crises even in traditional urban spaces dictate the need for a new breed of transdisciplinary, territorial, and transitional designers to emerge; capable of transgressing conventional cognitive and disciplinary boundaries in order to establish new ways of knowing and inhabiting the world as part of complex human and more-than-human assemblages. In this process it is the very practice of urban design that is challenged requiring the emergence of new methodologies to imagine living under different paradigms and with different consequences.

Set between these two challenges, the thesis' speculative methodology offers a foundation for the reconceptualization of living in extreme environments of crises paying attention to the critical details, the neglected stories, the sacrificed worlds, and the unexpected entanglements. Using theories and concepts as bridges between reality and virtuality, it moves to contextualize a staying with the trouble approach in order to evaluate its capacity to lead to the creation of collective landscapes even in the ruins of our current living patterns. Coupling art and science in its exploratory matterings, it arguments against conventional disciplinary and conceptual dichotomies, while by employing non scalability challenges the modernistic ideal of endless expansion.

Societal Value

The challenging of endless expansion no matter the consequences becomes even more crucial in the site-specific case of the Mediterranean Basin whose importance as an urbanized entity is historically validated and societally undeniable. Being the world's most colonized and militarized sea, the Mediterranean is still the scene of violence that unites and defines the three surrounding continents. It is the 'table' that, in the words of Lahoud (2013) 'binds together the consequences of Western industrialization, global carbon emissions, aerosol dispersion patterns, sea surface temperatures, monsoons, precipitation, pastoralists,

herders, farmers, cultivars, migratory routes, treaties, coast guards, statistical models, satellite imagery, and detention centers' in a diachronic accumulation of societal implications which extend from human to non-human entities and assemblages.

Living and dying processes are constantly renegotiated in its deep oceanic space although response-abilities are mostly invisibilized and accountability remains largely out of the question, especially when it comes to the Mediterranean more-than-human bodies. In this sense, the very essence of the common ground is foundationally ruptured and entirely mediated through colonization processes; rendered possible through the recognition of bios (political life) as superior to zoe (animal or bare life). Even the act of knowing – as executed through science – becomes a conscious attempt for thingification which deprives bodies from their inherent agency, latency, and capacity.

In this setting – and avoiding to implicate itself in solutionist approaches – the thesis becomes relevant by challenging the established order of things and by reinstating sympoiesis as the essential practice of becoming-with, of forming relations and of evolving without necessarily expanding and definitely without violating the circles of living and dying. Using the archetypes of the island and the cave to speculate a second origin, it decenters state-oriented narratives of agency and citizenship to fabricate a post-colonial geography. This post-colonial geography, then, presupposes an obviation of archetypical divisions of subject/object, nature/culture, bios/zoe re-establishing the in-between as a leading condition for the establishment of counter-paradigms for coexistence in the Anthropocene.

Limitations & Further Research

This notion of post-colonial geography is at the center of the thesis' ethical and contextual limitations challenging whether a second origin can be the counter-weight to the prevailing power structures that have been dictating living and dying in the Mediterranean Basin and more broadly in the oceanic territories. Although the figure of the ephemeral island and its synecdochical relation to the Mediterranean Basin evokes a very powerful figuration narrative about alternative conditions of co-existence and co-evolution, the dominating reality of Necropower – describing colonization effects more precisely than both notions of biopower and Geontopower – dictates a continuous revolving around death, even through its negation. Accountability to living and dying patterns, then, demands further analysis on the relation between politics – in all its appearances as geopolitics, kinopolitics, biopolitics, zoe-politics - and death, especially in a historically colonized space.

Active decolonization, although speculative, does require defamiliarization and does presuppose approaches of staying with the trouble, but it also demands accountability about the already existing marks on bodies. This type of accountability is tied to a line of inquiry around Necropolitics – defined by Mbembe (2019) to describe the surplus value of death in the capitalist sovereignty regime – which was not prioritized in the timeframes of the current report although it was understood as essential for the continuation of the speculative methodology, the testing of the actual consequences of the shifted focus towards zoe (bare or animal life) instead of bios (political life), and the mingling of archetypical divisions between subject/object, ontology/epistemology, material/discursive, nomadic/sedentary.

In fact, the in-between, besides being the essential condition for entanglement, sympoiesis, weaving, tentacularity, viscosity or transformation, is also devoid innocence in the occupational approach of sovereignty. It has already been expressed and used in the establishment of the condition of sacrifice; embodied in the situated narratives of the Mediterranean Sea in the figures of the slave, the migrant, the stateless, the life surplus – in its human and non-human manifestation. Invoking, then, any in-between condition – especially in the world’s most appropriated and militarized sea – entails significant ethical considerations, violates invisible limits, and demands careful consideration of the ways prevailing practices of violence invade and colonize even the most well-intended attempts for Clearance and alternative ways of co-existence. Similarly, the nomadic subject, although transgressive, embedded, potentially sustainable and definitely compliant to the watery milieus of the Mediterranean, can be weaponized on the base of its ephemeral belongings and its subsequent unaccountability. (Mbembe, 2019)

In this light, and staying with the ethical considerations, the next step of the Diffraction investigation- as developed through the Speculative (Re)Fabulation, the Project of Sympoiesis and the Weaving Worlds inquiries - would most probably be a counter study of the consequences. Although the sympoietic arrangements are de facto open to transformations, mutations and surprising change, the elaboration of a medianatureculture scenario for Julia initiates a very prominent disruption in the established living patterns in the Mediterranean threatening to completely obviate life as it was known. It may be the case that this disruption is desirable, but it does need to gain accountability towards its own consequences; the worlds it sacrifices, the bodies it kills, the relations it cuts, the stories it neglects, the spatiotemporal boundaries it transgresses, the orders it establishes, the possibilities it leaves open, the states of exemption it evokes.

In this setting, then, the Reflection chapter could not conclude with a set of statements-answers but with **a set of further questions that will guide the continuation of the research besides the thesis completion.** What does it mean to be not only response-able but truly accountable to the consequences of your implication in zoe processes of living and dying? What is the relation between (zoe)politics and death in sympoietic arrangements? How can the method of speculation as design ensure that knowledge doesn’t become colonizing, oppressing or mastering? How can speculation extend beyond the limits of its scenario and towards an open system of knowledge? How can a curational approach establish a materialized collective landscape? What other possibilities does the curational urban project evoke?

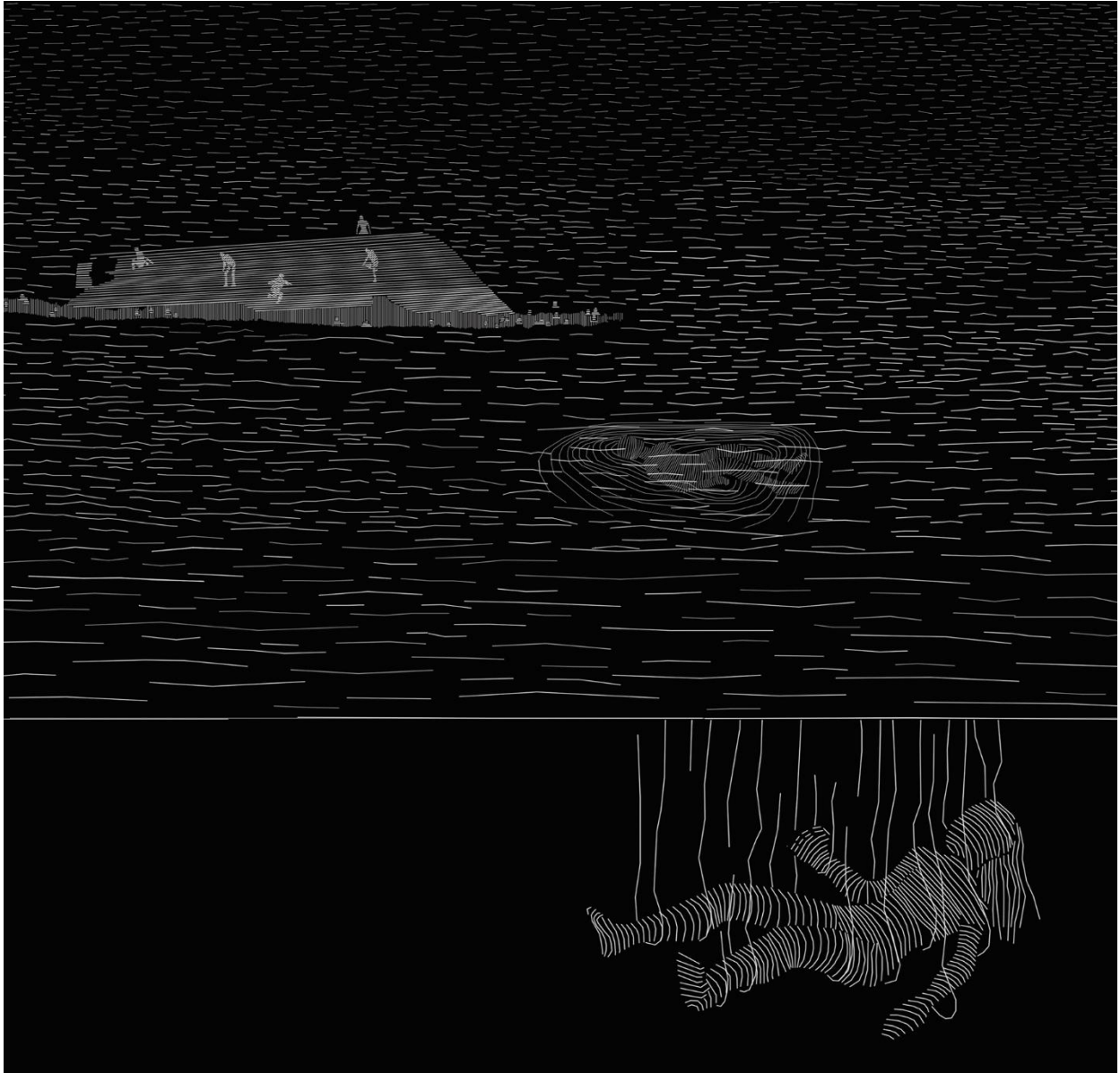


Figure 2: Necropower as manifested through the deadly shipwrecks of migrant boats in the Mediterranean