5

Shark

I have sometimes, not without horrour, seen the dismal Rapaciousness of these Animals; four or five of them together shoot to the bottom under the Ship to tear the dead Corps to pieces, at each bite an Arm, a Leg, or the Head is snapt off; and before you can tell twenty have sometimes divided the Body amongst them so nicely that not the least Particle is left.

—William Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* (1705)

I come to this place, . . . to this water that was bigger than the whole world. And I looked out, . . . and I seen these bones rise up out of the water. Rise up and begin to walk on top of it.

—Harold Loomis, in August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

Those African persons in "Middle Passage" were literally suspended in the "oceanic," if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy for undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet "American" either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also nowhere at all. Inasmuch as, on any given day,

> we might imagine, the captive did not know where s/he was, we could say that they were culturally "unmade," thrown in the midst of a figurative darkness that "exposed" their destinies to an unknown course.
>
> —Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book"

In the darkest recesses of the deep sea, altogether impractical colors take hold. Purples, greens, and yellows that exist for no discernible reason, shades and hues that serve no evolutionary purpose one might easily trace given the utter lack of light, the absence of photons that might make such traits beneficial to a given creature's duration. I would like to suggest that the capacious, irreducible blackness found at the bottom of the ocean, as well as the myriad forms of uncanny life we observe there once we dare to look—dragonfish with appendages that end in the shimmer of a bright green bulb, *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* with its twin rows of teeth like razor wire adorning each side—serves as an occasion for thinking about the relationship between blackness as a means of organizing both human and nonhuman life (that is, the color line as the human-animal divide *by another name*) and the social lives of the nonhuman animal entities that dwell within the oceanic realm. For even if we turn away from the very depths of the water and train our gaze on its surface, we will find a history of violent proximity between the people who are called black and the nonhuman animals who roam the waves. Though this proximity does not *begin* with the institution of chattel slavery in the Americas, it is from that nodal point in the ever-expanding archive of African diasporic letters—as well as that foundational

moment in the development of the modern world economy and *ecology*—that this particular study takes flight. We will begin in the hold of the ship and move from there to a consideration of what the sea and its animal life-worlds make possible for the black literary imagination—what they potentially, or necessarily, foreclose.

How does the ever-present specter of the transatlantic slave trade—what we might think of, following Saidiya Hartman and others, as the afterlife of slavery—propel us to theorize black ecopoetics not as a matter of *ground* but as an occasion to think at the intersection of terra firma and open sea, surface and benthos, the observable ocean and the uncharted blackness of its very bottom?[1] Given recent critical attention paid to African American nature writing in anthologies such as Camille Dungy's *Black Nature,* as well as academic monographs including Ian Finseth's *Shades of Green: Visions of Nature in the Literature of American Slavery,* Dianne Glave's *Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage,* and Paul Outka's *Race and Nature: From Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance,* among others, I am interested in how we might think alongside black writers who have historically taken up oceanic ecology, and their necessarily strained relationship to it, as a central concern.[2] Specifically, in the body of this chapter, I will concentrate on the writings of two major twentieth-century African American poets, Robert Hayden and Melvin Tolson, toward the end of elaborating a theory of black ecopoetics gone offshore. I will undertake this project primarily through investigating the ways that both poets deploy sharks in their writing about the long historical reach of antiblackness as a dominant structure of feeling, as well as the ongoing presence of black persistence and black fugitive possibility.

The first section of the chapter is concerned with Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage" and investigates a set of scenes in which sharks are invoked as a means through which to illuminate the particular, peculiar horrors of everyday life aboard the slave ship. In the universe that Hayden fashions, sharks function as a central component of a broader network of living and nonliving actors—the boat crew, the chains, the slave ship itself—which make up what we might think of as a fundamentally antiblack ecosystem. Sharks represent the ever-present threat of imminent death for the enslaved during their time at sea. Yet and still, the enslaved characters in "Middle Passage" are able to leverage the threat of being killed by sharks—effectively reimagining a site of great peril as a means of escape—in order to rebel against the slavers and ultimately to undermine the terms of their captivity. Thus, by way of examining scholarship concerned with the experiences of enslaved persons forced to live through, and engineer a kind of life in spite of, the gratuitous violence endemic to living aboard the slave ship, I argue that the scenes in which sharks appear in "Middle Passage" provide us with useful instruments for theorizing black resistance on the open sea.

The second section of the chapter is an analysis of Melvin Tolson's poem "The Sea-Turtle and the Shark." I am interested here in examining the central narrative thread of the poem, wherein a sea turtle is consumed by a shark and subsequently burrows through its stomach to freedom. This operates, I argue, as a metonym for the myriad ways that black persons are made to navigate the interlocking systems of domination that give shape and form to white civil society and the US American nation-state in particular. In Tolson's vision, blackness is always on the move, always pushing back in ways seen and unseen against a much broader set of op-

erations that seek to curtail life at every turn. In the end, I argue, Tolson offers us a robust, *fleshly* image of black liberation through the sea turtle, one that honors the power of revolutionary violence and refuses to flatten or romanticize the sheer duration of the black freedom struggle.

Finally, I will pivot in the coda to this chapter by turning toward the contemporary poet Xandria Phillips's poem "For a Burial Free of Sharks." I argue that Phillips's poem presents a vision of black sociality that works to further complicate the visions we gather from Hayden and Tolson as it pertains to the potential interplay of black life on the ship and the presence of the sharks in the water below. In Phillips's hands, the slave ship becomes a space from which we might launch a critique of *the overrepresentation of Man* as the only meaningful genre of human life and, what is more, the dominant configuration of the human body itself as always already independent and autonomous.[3] "For a Burial Free of Sharks" asks us instead to embrace the swarm or the school (in the doubled sense that an aquatic register demands), over and against an individualized subject position or self; it asks that we reckon with the possibility of becoming multiple, that we might better understand how the enslaved survived the hold, what they transformed it into, and what such transformation means for how we imagine sociality *as such.* In sum, my goal in analyzing this constellation of texts is to elucidate a divergent approach to the work of thinking at the intersections of black studies, animality studies, and ecocriticism, to turn toward the sea that we might unsettle the sort of historical terracentrism that obscures the social and political possibilities of a wetter archive, a black hydropoetics that does not require solid ground in order to make its claims or sustain its movement but rather relishes the freedom of the open water,

dodges death at every turn, makes hazy the division between person and nonperson so that a more robust, ethical lexicon for black life might rise to the air.

❁

From the opening lines of Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage," it creates a world in which the boundaries between animate and inanimate, human and nonhuman, living and dead, are thrown into crisis. The poem's primary setting is a manned ship at sea, the *Amistad*—or, from another angle, what we might also read as many ships operating under the metonymic reach of a single dreamscape, indistinguishable from one another against the haze of the speaker's memory—which famously bore human chattel as its primary cargo:[4]

> *Jesús, Estrella, Esperanza, Mercy:*
> Sails flashing to the wind like weapons,
> sharks following the moans the fever and the dying;
> horror the corposant and compass rose.
> Middle Passage:
> voyage through death
> to life upon these shores.
> "10 April 1800—
> Blacks rebellious. Crew uneasy. Our linguist says
> their moaning is a prayer for death,
> ours and their own. Some try to starve themselves.
> Lost three this morning leaped with crazy laughter
> to the waiting sharks, sang as they went under."
> *Deep in the festering hold thy father lies*
> *of his bones New England pews are made,*
> *those are altar lights that were his eyes.*[5]

The reader is presented here with an image of the slave ship as not only a site of unrelenting violence but one in which species boundaries are crossed as a *direct by-product* of such brutality. The migratory patterns of the sharks in this passage are transformed in the wake of blood spilled from the decks of the seaborne vessel, their every movement altered by the brutal scenes taking place above the surface of the water. The ineluctable irony of each ship's name lands like a blade: *Jesus, Estrella, Esperanza, Mercy,* all transcendent principles or else celestial beings, gods and stars and holy affect, all of which belie the muck and grime of the hold, the labor carried out under banners that to many people might have signified another, higher world, one altogether incompatible with the degradation that serves as the slave ship's condition of emergence. The first set of sharks in this opening scene are merely one component of a much larger network of ultraviolent actors that Hayden draws our attention to from the outset. Even the sails are instruments of war, "flashing . . . like weapons" as sharks dart through the current below. The compass rose is fear itself. Everywhere, in Hayden's landscape, terror reigns, and human beings are not the only ones that serve as its enacting agents.

The entire ship, as well as the broader environment surrounding it, comes alive and works in tandem to create what we might envision, to invoke Stephanie Smallwood's work, as a kind of living death for every enslaved person onboard.[6] In this sense, the very phrase "Middle Passage," it seems, connotes both a literal movement along the routes of the transatlantic slave trade over the course of several centuries and an intermediary category betwixt living and dying that is not a space of limbo so much as the fusion of both planes into something like a deathly persistence—a mode of existing outside the boundaries and protections of the genre of

Man and thus in closer, generative proximity to nonhuman life forms. It is during this process, while being forced to move through the countless, day-to-day violences endemic to life aboard the ship, that the enslaved Africans who serve as Hayden's primary points of concern first learn what it will mean to live as black nonpersons, Negroes, the objects against which the utopian vision of a life worth living on the very shores he describes will come to be oppositionally defined.

Rather than accepting such a fate with quiet resignation, the enslaved characters in "Middle Passage" rebel from the very first, striking back against their captors in order to take the vessel as their own. Sharks are part and parcel of this collective resistance; the insurgents that Hayden describes leap overboard once it is clear that there is no rebellion that can be waged and won on the decks of the ship. Marcus Rediker writes about this historical practice—that is, of enslaved insurgents deploying suicide as a means of resisting the conditions of their bondage—in his seminal study *Outlaws of the Atlantic: Sailors, Pirates, and Motley Crews in the Age of Sail:*

> Some jumped in the hope of escape while docked in an African port, while others chose drowning over starvation as a means to terminate the life of the body meant to slave away on New World Plantations. This kind of resistance was widely practiced and just as widely feared by the organizers of the trade. Merchants warned captains about it in their instructions, formal and informal. Captains in turn made sure their ships had nettings all around. They also had the male captives chained to a ring bolt whenever they were on the main deck, and at the same time made sure that vigilant watches were always kept. . . . One of the most illuminating

> aspects of these suicidal escapes was the joy expressed by people once they had gotten into the water. Seaman Isaac Wilson recalled a captive who jumped into the sea and "went down as if exalting that he got away."[7]

Not unlike Hayden's vision of the affective economies and exchanges that characterized the Middle Passage for the enslaved, what Rediker describes here is a social world in which any and all approaches to opposition are at play, means that also include leveraging the presence of nonhuman animal actors toward the end of *stealing oneself away,* refusing to become the property of another even if that choice ends in death. Sharks, which are described in the preceding section of "Middle Passage" as simultaneously *waiting* and *following,* thus function as a kind of specter, both an ever-looming threat to the flourishing of black life and a release valve, a guaranteed exit. This is especially important given all of the precautions taken by slavers—the aforementioned netting around ships, for example—to ensure that the black human beings onboard lived long enough to be appraised and sold. Of critical import here also is the role of West African cosmologies and spiritual practice as it pertains to the enslaved and their vision of what it might mean to steal away; many saw biological death not as an absolute conclusion but rather as a means of returning to one's native land.[8]

Stealing oneself away was a refusal of objectification, an unmooring of the relentless, necromantic machinations of a global order that demanded human beings be transformed into saleable commodities. Over and against the lethal pressures of global white supremacy, the men and women whom Hayden describes herein dared to imagine a second home beyond the sea, life and death by

other names. The afterlife of such thinking can be found, it bears mentioning, within the realm of twentieth- and twenty-first-century black expressive cultures. The Detroit-based electronic band Drexciya, for instance, constructed an entire mythology around just such a vision of black social life beneath the sea.[9] In the sleeve notes of the band's 1997 album, *The Quest,* the electronic music duo—composed of James Stinson and Gerald Donald—first began to fashion an origin story wherein the band's name is said also to be that of an entire underwater country, one founded by the children of enslaved women thrown overboard, women whose children developed the ability to breathe water in utero, survived, and went on to found something akin to a black Atlantis, an underwater utopia far more advanced in its technology, and its ethics, than any civilization on land. This notion of an underwater refuge for black people is also reflected in the works of other artists such as Sun Ra, the experimental film collective the Otolith Group, and the visual artist Ellen Gallagher.[10] In all of these works, the haunting presence of the Middle Passage is recalibrated toward the end of imagining an elsewhere, however remote or deeply submerged, where black life can flourish. Conceptualizing a black Atlantis is labor that unsettles the terracentrism of our political imaginations, threatens the seeming interminability of the land-borne nation-state, and demands a more dynamic approach to organizing life on Earth. Gratuitous violence is alchemized in the light of the black fantastic, allowing for new practices of being together to emerge.[11] When we immerse ourselves within this archive, we find both otherworldly despair and fugitive possibility—uncharted, undercommon marronage made possible by the opacity of the oceanic realm.[12]

In this vein, the outpouring of exuberant affect that both Hayden and Rediker describe in the moments when enslaved per-

sons begin to sink below the surface of the sea also demands our attention. How do we make sense of such unfettered emotion on this occasion? The captive gives his very suffering over to the tide, and all he can do is exalt, the slaver's power torn asunder at last by laughter. This refusal to be transmogrified into property without will or imagination, especially as reflected in the act of giving one's flesh to the water, is a theme of critical import throughout "Middle Passage" and is most forcefully articulated toward the end of the poem's first section, where sharks yet again make an appearance, though in a fashion that veers somewhat from their role earlier on:

> Misfortune
> follows in our wake like sharks (our grinning
> tutelary gods). Which one of us
> has killed an albatross? A plague among
> our blacks—Ophthalmia: blindness—& we
> have jettisoned the blind to no avail.
> It spreads, the terrifying sickness spreads.
> Its claws have scratched sight from the Capt.'s eyes
> & there is blindness in the fo'c'sle
> & we must sail 3 weeks before we come to port.
> *What port awaits us, Davy Jones'*
> *or home? I've heard of slavers drifting, drifting,*
> *playthings of wind and storm and chance, their crews*
> *gone blind, the jungle hatred*
> *crawling up on deck.*[13]

Here, the aforementioned sharks transition from being invoked as physical threats to human life to serving as metaphors for the broader set of troubles that pursue the ship and its crew. And though the primary focus of this section is a wave of ophthalmia

that overtakes the boat's inhabitants, we might also read the invocation of the sharks here as a reversal in polarity, that is, the sharks as a source of fear and imminent danger for the white crewmen *as opposed to the enslaved*. This shift represents a critical turn in the narrative trajectory of "Middle Passage." The speaker's referring to the sharks as *grinning gods,* for example, works to invert the myth of whiteness as "the ownership of the world forever and ever," whiteness as immortality.[14] No one here evades the grave. Following this section, the sharks disappear, and there is no guardian remaining to protect the white crewmen. The "jungle hatred" described by the speaker reads almost as a plague of some higher origin, the embodiment of the rage of the enslaved, and a harbinger of the destruction to come in the poem's second section. In these final two movements, the ship is taken over in an act of outright insurrection, the captain and crew slain by the insurgents formerly resigned to life in the hold.

This portion of the text is meant to directly mirror the most well-known historical accounts of the insurgency aboard the *Amistad* and, in doing so, grounds us in a historical archive of slave rebellion made legible by the invocation of the names of the rebels themselves, most notably Cinquez, whom Hayden describes in the poem's last lines as the "deathless primaveral image" of human freedom's "timeless will," a "life that transfigures many lives."[15] In the poem's concluding scene, the grinning shark gods—as well as the crew of slavers we might think of as made in their very image, or else acolytes of their storied rage, voracious hunger—are done away with in the name of an alternate eschatology, one in which the spirit of a certain black radicalism prevails over the unchecked cruelty of the slave system, its endless tentacles that extend even into the social lives of animals. As Hayden demonstrates, a rig-

orous accounting of chattel slavery and its afterlives demands that we engage nonhuman life-worlds, that we recognize the work of Afro-diasporic ecopoetics, and black study more broadly, as *species thinking*, as ecological thought at the end of the world.[16]

> I learned that the shark and the slave trade had gone together from the beginning. Indeed, one of the prevailing theories about the origin of the term "shark" in English can be traced back to the first English slaving voyages to West Africa, led by Captain John Hawkins during the 1560s. When someone captured, killed, and brought to London one of the huge creatures in 1569, the people of the city stood amazed but knew not what to call the "marueilous straunge Fishe." According to sixteenth-century ballads and broadsides, "sertayne men of Captayne Haukinses doth call it a sharke." "Shark" thus seems to have entered the English language through the talk of slave-trade sailors, who may have picked up and adapted the word "xoc," pronounced "choke," from the Maya in the Caribbean. "Shark" would soon take its place in the lexicon of class description, a cant term signifying a worthless fellow who made a living by his wits, sponging, swindling, cheating, and scamming.
>
> —Marcus Rediker, "History from Below the Water Line: Sharks and the Atlantic Slave Trade"

The twentieth-century poet and critic Melvin Tolson's "The Sea-Turtle and the Shark" is an altogether brief yet striking meditation on the shape and tenor of black social life in modernity, a harrowing account of how it feels to navigate a world in which one is forced to live daily under the threat of violence that is not aberrational but *algorithmic*, built right into the code of the contemporary social order.[17] Tolson's poem intervenes as an alternative cartography of the present, a set of instructions as to how one might

survive when one is, to use Stokely Carmichael's turn of phrase, born in jail.[18] From the outset of the poem, readers find themselves forced to look outward from the confines of an enclosure:

> Strange but true is the story
> of the sea-turtle and the shark—
> the instinctive drive of the weak to survive
> in the oceanic dark.
> Driven,
> riven
> by hunger
> from abyss to shoal,
> sometimes the shark swallows
> the sea-turtle whole.[19]

We are introduced to the sea turtle as a character that serves as the embodiment of "the weak," a broader network of actors whose survival is marked throughout as unceasing labor, an ongoing refusal of the normative order of things. Indeed, readers are forewarned that what they are about to read is a "strange but true" story. This strangeness demands our attention, that is, the particular set of inversions deployed by Tolson in order to use the sea turtle as a metonym for black experience. The inside of the shark's body is a darkness within darkness, a blackness born of the deep in which normative hierarchies are destabilized.

Tolson's imagery in this portion of the poem can also be read as a gesture toward the biblical narrative of Jonah and the giant fish. Within the context of that particular tale—which merits an abridged retelling if only for the sake of clarifying the extent of Tolson's rather subtle riff—Jonah's extended interment in the fish's body is the product of his refusal to follow a direct command from

the mouth of God: a call to preach the need for repentance to the denizens of the city of Nineveh. Jonah eventually takes flight and boards a ship full of other fugitives in hopes of evading divine commission. His plan—doomed perhaps from the very start, rooted as it was in evading the will of the sovereign in plain sight—fails spectacularly. An especially vicious squall strikes while he and his fellow crewmen are at sea, a catastrophe that he reads as a sign that he must repent and accept punishment for his attempt at rebellion. He asks that his body be cast overboard, a last-ditch plan to evade the wrath of the divine. This time, Jonah's gambit is a successful one, though not in the way he expects; the storm quiets, and everyone onboard the ship lives. But rather than drowning, and in the process giving over his life in an act of penance, Jonah is swallowed by a giant fish, lives in its stomach for several days, and is eventually spit up on land, finally prepared to undertake the evangelical labor to which he had been called days earlier.

Tolson reworks this tale toward radical ends. The rest of the poem reads as follows:

> The sly reptilian marine
> withdraws,
> into the shell
> of his undersea craft,
> his leathery head and the rapacious claws
> that can rip
> a rhinoceros' hide
> or strip
> a crocodile to fare-thee well;
> now,
> *inside* the shark,

the sea-turtle begins the churning seesaws
of his descent into pelagic hell;
then . . . *then,*
with ravenous jaws
that can cut sheet steel scrap,
the sea-turtle gnaws
. . . and gnaws . . . and gnaws
his way in a way that appalls—
his way to freedom,
beyond the vomiting dark beyond the stomach walls
of the shark.[20]

The story of Jonah and the giant fish thus becomes an allegory put to revolutionary use, a black radical operation with a nonhuman actor at its center. Herein, the forms of life trapped in the blackening depths of the leviathan's belly are not rescued by the workings of a watchful sovereign. They suffer and are not saved. Instead, the sea turtle uses all that it has at its disposal, its very flesh, to tear a pathway through the body of the shark, which, for Tolson, stands in for the interlocking systems of domination that serve as civil society's architecture. The sea turtle does not, cannot, wait to be rescued. It takes its freedom back through a gradual cutting away at the material foundations of its cage. Held firmly within the belly of the shark and nonetheless alive, Tolson's sea turtle provides us with a theory of black fugitivity in the flesh of the animal, its persistent burrowing a model for how we might enact our freedom dreams though we might be hunted, hamstrung, surrounded on all sides. Notice too how Tolson invokes an entire bestiary full of larger creatures in order to emphasize the sheer power of the sea turtle's bite, its largely unheralded *capacity for de-*

struction. Crocodiles and rhinoceroses alike are cited as no real match for the sea turtle's hidden power; both are invoked as a means of making a certain argument against appearance, against the utility of possessing brute strength alone.

Rather, it is precisely the size and otherwise advantageous attributes of the crocodile, the rhinoceros, and the shark that bars them from the sort of life-worlds available to the sea turtle, which is underestimated, demeaned, seen as little more than raw matter fit for consumption. From this position at the very bottom of the hierarchy, the sea turtle attacks, gains its freedom, and also, readers are led to believe, mortally wounds that which depends on its destruction for sustenance. The sea turtle's work, the speaker tells us, is *appalling*. It is not quick or pristine. It reminds us, per Fred Moten and Saidiya Hartman's recent commentary in "The Black Outdoors," that fugitive practice is inherently processual, that escape is not an achievement but an *activity*.[21] The rigorous push toward liberation as it is framed by "The Sea-Turtle and the Shark" is an altogether bloody affair and takes place in a space of what many would call nothingness. These are the conditions from which abolitionist instruments emerge. This is how, and where, one develops the meditative tenacity needed to slice the machine clean through. Envisioning resistance, for Tolson, begins with those who have been all but completely consumed by the present order, the ones detained, held in suspension, never allowed to breathe. Rather than begin with the birds of the air or even the various forms of animal being and becoming that can be found beneath the surface of the earth, Tolson elects to turn toward the sea that he might imagine black flight anew. He transports the hold from the surface of the ocean to its very underbelly. And there, in the absence of light or human life, he sketches a world wherein the shark, the

very embodiment of an antiblack social order—and thus, it follows, precisely the sort of exploitative, exorbitantly violent figure that Rediker's etymology gestures toward—is decimated from within, laid to waste by the least of these, the drowned and yet undead.

❁

(I suffer, I am that man anonymous in the waves)
—Rickey Laurentiis, "Mood for Love"

Xandria Phillips's "For a Burial Free of Sharks" attends as its central objects of inquiry to people who, to use Mariame Kaba's phrase, *had no selves to defend,* those whose very living served as a critique of selfhood.[22] The poem's first lines provide a critical language for the experience of utter fungibility, which is also always to say, black life within the confines of the hold:

> in the hull we worked we wormed at earth's lack in we lives and in those deaths / and I say we / not collective not tongued the same and not kin and not in love / but in all of we pressed up against we heat and doings similar and reduced to sameness / saw the first of we plunging for home / . . . / we risked death to put dead in the ground[23]

The figures that Phillips invokes have no access to any legible form of individualized personhood. What takes its place, at least within the world of the poem, is an echoing *we,* a refrain that doubles as a critique of Man, an unmooring of any singular, autonomous speaker. Over and against a dominant, Lockean vision of personhood in which a given body—as Monique Allewaert reminds us—is imagined as a "single, self-identical and particular consciousness that persists despite the diverse materials, things, temporalities, and

places that press upon it and pass through it," the speaker of "For a Burial Free of Sharks" enacts a vision of personhood that is *inherently* multiple.[24] That is, it is a vision of human becoming akin to what Frantz Fanon describes in "The Fact of Blackness" as *inner kinship,* the sense that blacks are not unitary beings but multitudinous, always already representing not only themselves as individual actors but a larger, diasporic conglomerate, as well as one's deceased ancestors, during any given moment of racialized encounter.[25]

One hears echoes of Fanon in the speaker's invocation of a people that are "not kin" but "reduced to sameness." The lived experience of this *reduction*—the social practices and protocols, the black operations that emerge from such brutality—is a central focus of the poem. This emphasis is expressed most poignantly perhaps in the speaker's claim that those who were forced to live in the hold were willing to sacrifice their very lives in order to honor the dead. On the funereal practices of the enslaved, Vincent Brown writes,

> The death rite thus enabled them to express and enact their social values, to articulate their visions of what it was that bound them together, made individuals among them unique, and separated this group of people from others. The scene . . . typifies the way that people who have been pronounced socially dead, that is, utterly alienated and with no social ties recognized as legitimate or binding, have often made a social world out of death itself. The funeral was an act of accounting, of reckoning, and therefore one among the multitude of acts that made up the political history of Atlantic slavery. This was politics conceived not as a conventional battle between partisans, but as a struggle to define a social being that connected the past and present.[26]

Following Brown, then, we can imagine the space of the hold in "For a Burial Free of Sharks" as one in which the enslaved came to bend and blur the division that demarcates life and death as such. The world of the poem offers a space of indeterminacy in which there is no need for earth in order to bury the deceased, no ground to dig up or stand on, ontological or otherwise. One might argue in fact, as Jonathan Howard does, that "slaves in the hold may be understood to have constituted the ground upon which whiteness could originally stand and purport to be."[27] For both Brown and Howard, then, there is a kind of life beyond life, a form of being without borders, that finds expression in the hold. From within the irreparable break engendered by the instantiation of the transatlantic slave trade, the ever-expanding caesura that has many names but no sufficient description, there emerges a critique of Western civilization that extends far beyond the slave ship. In the absence of ground, the enslaved imagine and enact a modality that operates under radically divergent principles: a grammar of the flesh.

The question of groundlessness, or rather, another sort of ground altogether, is central and reappears explicitly in the poem's final movement:

> but tides did rise and sharks plowed what we hands put over we / found we bodies to devour / failure to send we home was not without punishment / one of we / not I was tethered / ankle to hull / and we saw this one we disappear by limb until there was only a pair of feet trailing the ship / I still haven't a want for death / and I know my burial impends / we all been too physical / our flesh is the closest ground in sight / putting the mind on a high shelf is a burial without sharks / I double where my joints can and bury self in self[28]

At long last, in these closing lines, the eponymous sharks swerve into the frame. In the first instance, they seem to operate in a vein not unlike those of Hayden's "Middle Passage," that is, as a persistent, existential threat to the lives of the captives. The second time they appear, however, the sharks are more or less immaterial, more an abstract illustration of the continuous threat to black life that modernity represents than any discrete danger. The speaker claims that something like a *natural death*—one without the spectacular violence that so often attends black mortality—is only possible through placing the mind "on a high shelf," one far higher, we might imagine, than even the topmost corners of the hold, higher than the walls of any cage in the world. Thus, the dream of a burial free of sharks is not just the dream of black life lived beyond the reach of the bull's-eye. Rather, it is enacted in the everyday social practices, and *mentation,* of those who know that the sharks are everywhere and always in relentless pursuit, those who nonetheless look to the blackness of the deep and dare to proclaim that they are likewise unfathomable, untamable, endless.