

ZONE OF EXAGGERATED DREAMING – Artist Statement  
Erin Robinsong

*Abyss* is a very old word that has changed very little. From the Greek *abyssos* meaning “the great depth, the underworld, the bottomless pit”, and the Latin *abyssus* meaning “depths of the earth or sea; primordial chaos.” The abyssal ocean, beginning at 4000 metres below the surface, is most of the world, making up 95% of the volume of Earth’s biosphere, or habitable space for living organisms on the planet. It exists in permanent darkness, apart from inhabitants who make light in their bodies, about 76% of known creatures in the deep sea. This vast, dark majority of the biosphere does not belong to anyone, most of it lying outside national jurisdictions. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), an international agreement established in the 1950s and now comprising 168 countries and the EU, provides the legal framework for human intervention in the sea. The name UNCLOS has given everything that lies outside national jurisdiction, that is, most of the world, is “The Area.” It is in *The Area* that I situate this work, in a manganese nodule field, as I explore ways my existence is intimately bound up with this seemingly distant ecosystem, its inhabitants and their strategies for living under extreme pressure.

Abysses abound here on earth – in vaporous, solid & liquid forms: the abyss of sky above, soil and ocean below. What is bottomless or fathomless from *this* body, *this* place. While remaining situated, how do we imagine into the ‘faraway’, and/or uncover the wormholes and loops that intimately connect us? The abyss in this work starts in the deep sea and travels into abysses in my garden, in language, in time, talking rocks, and my mother’s brilliant abysses as she voyages in dementia.

Formally, this work arises out of a desire to create material and sonic environments for language. Language is always material, but as signifying symbols, what happens when they interact with sensuous materials? How might this change the way materials ‘speak’? How might this affect the pressure on language to *mean* beyond itself? What conversations and/or layers of meaning shimmer between word and world in performative encounter? What happens to the ‘poetry reading’ when the poems are recited, with no reading material in sight? When the words appear in the dark? Float in sound? Interact with slime, light, smoke, scent, sea water, sequins, ceramic

nodules glazed in manganese? I'm experimenting with putting the sensuous world into the poetry reading – not because words on their own can't evoke any and all of these things, but because I am interested in what happens when the real and the symbolic converse in ways that put pressure on their ways of speaking.

Bodies that live in the abyssal ocean are adapted not only to tremendous pressures, as well as lack of oxygen, near freezing temperatures and permanent darkness – but the most potentially destructive is the looming pressure exerted by the material needs of the clean energy transition. This is one reason that the abyss, one of the most intact, biodiverse and unknown ecosystems on the planet, is now entering public imagination, debate and protest. New sources of metals like cobalt, manganese, and copper, found in abundance in polymetallic nodules on the abyssal plains of the Pacific, are needed to make rechargeable batteries for electric cars, computers, phones. Much of the technology required to explore the deep is funded by mining interests, with familiar extractive intent of previous colonial 'explorations'. Indeed, as Indigenous Pacific Island activists opposing deep sea mining have pointed out, even as mining companies operate under veneers of environmental ethics in their quest to fuel the 'Green transition', neocolonial intent is on full display, most flagrantly as a UK research vessel called the RRS James Cook explored areas of the Pacific targeted for deep-sea mining earlier this year. James Hita, an activist who blocked the vessel with his body in the water, said: "As if sending a ship to enable further destruction of our ecosystems wasn't offensive enough, sending one named after the most notorious coloniser of the Pacific is a cruel insult. For too long, Pacific peoples have been excluded from decision making in our own territories and waters. As representatives of the indigenous movement of the Pacific, we're here to say that this industry is yet another example of neo-colonial forces exploiting the Pacific without regard to people's way of life, food sources and connection to the ocean."

As we transition from a fossil fuel economy, how can we avoid repeating extractive, colonialist stories, transposed into the deep sea? What can we learn about imaginative survival under extreme pressure from the diverse and brilliant lifeways of deep sea creatures, who have found entirely different ways to power their lights and their economies? To think this anew, perhaps we must move our thinking to poetry. In 1946, the great Martinican poet Aimé Césaire writes,

“As everything was dying  
I grew, I grew larger—like the world—  
and my consciousness broader than the sea!

Last sun.  
I explode. I am fire, I am sea. The  
world is dissolving. But I am the world

The end, the end as we said.

What nonsense. A peace proliferating  
with obscure powers. Operculum gills,  
palm syrinx quills. There grow  
all over my body, invisible and instantaneous,  
secretly required, senses,

and behold we are caught up in the sacred  
whirling primordial streaming  
At the renewal of everything.”

- Aimé Césaire, *Miraculous Weapons*