

- Response -

LIQUID PORTRAITS & AQUAPELAGIC INTERIORS:

From the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region of Italy to the Caribbean's
Windward Passage

[Received March 9th 2025; accepted March 15th 2025 – DOI: 10.21463/shima.257]

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Philip Hayward's and Francesco Visentin's debates article 'Interior Aquapelagos' (2025) is a treatment of imaginative perspectives, presenting their conceptualisation of aquapelagic interiors as they appear in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region of Italy. The conversation developed out of a conference, 'Nature and Society and Culture in Hydrography,' that took place in May 2024 at the University of Udine. As a result of the author's conceptualisation and organisation, the first international conference of its kind was an assembly of community, and the resulting article demonstrates the multivocal analysis often present at such events. By way of introduction, Hayward and Visentin offer a detailed comparative analysis of the region's waterways, natural formations, and man-made canals and passages. This is followed by one of the principal research questions regarding, "the *need* or *opportunity* to develop new conceptual models of how inland waterscapes operate in practical, conceptual and imaginative ways" (p.14). The reader is treated to a rich exchange of dialogue between authors who are intentionally thinking through various hydro-centric perspectives. Finally, the duo's research questions lead them to cartographic/artistic primary resources including a mural painted by artist Afro Basaldella (1938), Paolo Forlani's map of Friuli (1563), and Joseph Heintz the Younger's elevated perspective map, (c. 1650). However, before taking up the key concepts of interior aquapelagos, I believe the format of conversational discussion requires necessary attention because of its fluidity and intellectual persuasiveness.

The amiable flow of dialogue between Hayward and Visentin is a mimesis of a river's active waterflow. What we discover in the verbal nimbleness is the graceful handling of language that teases out the formation of watery concepts in real time. This is one of the inimitable strengths of the essay because it calls forth a position of vulnerability to present works in progress, opening up the creative process, and feels more like an invitation to think through these concepts and along with the interlocutors, as opposed to the presentation of an overbaked conceptualisation borne from a siloed thinking. That is to say, the theoretical concepts under consideration are not in the slow flow of incubation but rather let's say in their own hydrological cycle shifting our spatial and temporal wet realities.

For example, Hayward wrestles with the appropriate expressions to describe the relationship between terrestrial and aquatic systems admitting, "[Ah, but here language fails us...]" (p. 15). The failure falls on the term *inland* or *in-land*. One of their research questions subscribes to

the displacement of the primacy of land in favour of thinking about the relationship between water and land. Hayward offers up 'interior' because it lacks the solidity of the terrestrial, as in 'interior waterways'? 'interior aquapelagos'? It is suggested that 'interior's' viability be subjected to examination and test-driven for efficacy. Visentin picks up the verbal baton and contextualises the benefits of 'interiority' as one that presents the flexibility of discussing the "multi- and inter-dimensionality of water through transformation/evolution in space and time." He continues to build the framework for 'interior' by expressing its possible utility with respect to water cycles, natural and artificial factors, and the dynamics of the hydrological regime. Alongside 'interior,' Visentin suggests a framework that also considers concepts such as assemblage, hybridity, and wetness. It is the toggling between new language and concepts that activates the reader's participation in the ever-expanding vocabulary of water-spheres and creates space for the possibility of creative problem solving. It is a technique of intellectual placemaking where form over function sets the atmosphere for evaluating concepts such that the format of a free-flowing open dialogue, self-conscious of its own language limitations strives to achieve greater clarity which culminates with a more nuanced understanding overall.

Rivers are primordial, bearing something of an etiological urge that accounts for the wet reality and the roles of rivers in relation to one other and their directions of ebb and flow. I am thinking of the biblical Genesis when a river went out of Eden to water the garden and was parted into four heads: the first was Pison; the second was Gihon; the third was Hiddekel; and the fourth is called the river Euphrates. The four rivers parting in four directions, originating from the one source, each detailing their own favourable attributes of geological significance, (i.e. gold, bdellium, onyx stone, etc.), that is their elemental or mineraloid characteristics, counted as a single entity (river and substance). The wealth of a river's terrestrial counterparts offering new meaning to the term riverbank, where the river's wealth could fill up the banks, as in a repository for currency. It is the river that structures the beginnings, where the cartography is wetness, as opposed to the aquatic phenomena of oceans, seas, lakes, bayous, wetlands, canals, ponds, or lagoons. The dialogue between Hayward and Visentin stretches out like two heads of the same river, in the flow of collaboration and generative understanding of the built and natural environment. It is the assemblage of rivers and their elemental counterparts signifying the complexities of their operations together where both authors are thinking through aquapelagos. First with Visentin reminding us that:

We are always focused on the terrestrial aspects of our activities while the truth is that we model, change, adapt the Earth in relation to water, and not the other way around. We are not working to deconstruct the studies of water that underline its cultural, economic, social or political power but rather to identify new conditions and purposes that could help us redress our approach to human livelihood activities in relation to water-spheres and, in some ways, to investigate the relational entanglements and the assemblage effects apparent in the transformation of land in favour of water. (p.15).

Hayward's follow up harmonises with this assessment and poses, "the paradigm of wetness softening (rather than entirely dissolving) conceptual solidities – such as terracentric thinking – and inviting us to be fluid in how we can reconceive relationships" (p. 15). What I appreciate about this is the negotiation for 'relational entanglements' that argues for greater purchase of water's active role in the human experience. Borrowing from Stefan Helmrich's "theory machine" (2011), the authors support the unity of aquapelagic thinking that eschews the limitations of the "dynamic of division." This aquapelagic sensibility considers the

fungibility of waterscapes without swinging the pendulum too far in either direction focusing exceedingly on the terrestrial or the aquatic – but buoys us somewhere in the midst of an assemblage of a hydrological regime. Illustrating this notion is the proposition of wetness *softening* terracentric thinking without completely *dissolving* it that strengthens the possibilities for a reconceptualisation. What emerges from these exchanges is fluidity as a kind of methodology. This approach proves quite satisfying when thinking through a reorientation or remapping an approach to aquapelagic interiors.

Perhaps it is the author's engagement with maps and alluvial surveys dating back to the 16th century that demonstrates this fluidity as methodology. When Hayward and Visentin encountered the mural of Udine, (1938), painted by Afro Basaldella, they noticed the mural combined an elevated representation of Friuli, "with symbolic and representational figures and a cartographic insert" (p. 16). Referencing the work of Tania Rosetto whose expertise in object-oriented cartography provides the term, "mappy representations," which clarifies:

the map is not always a map: in past times, the map was often a vehicle for nongeographical ideas. Even today, maps are ideas, they are ways of knowing, thinking and acting, they hold cultural meaning and political messages, but also hopeful imaginings. (Rosetto, 2019, p. 46)

Paired with this imaginative take on map making, the authors consider the overemphasis of the hippocampus and its rider in Afro's mural. A denuded male youth is riding the mythological creature that is a composite of a horse's head and torso joined by lower piscatorial extremities equipped with a fish's tail. Arguing for and against the under-valourised waterways of the region which normally do not receive attention from such a grand mythological gesture, and yet the overdramatisation of the figure and hippocampus beg further inquiry as to the historical significance of the area's aquatic features and activities.

Returning to Rosetto's formulation of "mappy representations" where maps are sites of nongeographical ideas, repositories for cultural meanings, political ambitions, and hopeful imaginings, we might reconsider, as do the authors, the heroic outsizing of the rider and hippocampus as carrying greater influence in excess of its aesthetic value. Here, I would like to introduce by way of comparative analysis the work of Dominican-born and New York-based contemporary artist, Firelei Báez. In her two large paintings, *Untitled (A Correct Chart of Hispaniola with the Windward Passage)*, 2020 (Figure 1) and *Untitled (New Chart of the Windward Passages)*, 2020 (Figure 2), the artist superimposes a mythological creature on top of maps of the Caribbean dating to the early colonial period. The titles refer to a strait in the Caribbean Sea that separates Haiti and Cuba known as the Windward Passage which connects to the Atlantic Ocean. The Windward Passage has been a virulently contested space for its accessibility leading from the Bahamas, between Cuba and Hispaniola, and reaching the ports of Jamaica. From the seventeenth to the mid-18th centuries, the Windward Passage was a hotbed of maritime piracy contributing to the infamy of pirates like Pierre and Jean Lafitte.

Báez's technique of incorporating a map onto which she superimposes an anthropomorphic creature is similar to the rider and hippocampus superimposed on the map of Friuli. Báez approaches these constructions as a painter cartographer correcting a botched mapping with her *Correct Chart of Hispaniola* by invoking the marvellous with her portrait of the Windward Passage as a hybrid creature inhabiting land and sea, terrestrial, aquatic, and atmospheric simultaneously. Her Windward Passage's composite construction is a colourful

collision of fluidity as methodology. Báez reminds us of the subjective nature of maps, borders, and colonial enterprises where cartographical distortions served the economic interests of empire. Her *Windward Passage* is gendered female, balanced on the balls of her feet which are dually represented as human and cloven – another expression of human-nature kinship through an embodied figuration. The *Passage's* body is an amorphous situation of curvilinear geometries like the rolls of waves knotted into a rainbow of fleshy organs. Her *Windward Passage* is an embodiment of a watery domain and causes me to consider Afro's hippocampus as one that embodies Friuli's 'riveriness.' In other words, might the hippocampus reference the 'formerly wetter delta region,' as a mashup of human-nature relationships? The authors consider such illustrations as perhaps unconsciously representing, "the growing capacity of humans to manipulate and control water in favour of land" (p.22). In contrast however, Báez's *Windward Passage* clearly dominates the landscape, uninhibited by man's forces, stamping her feet on a colonial map, taking up space, and casting a shadow over the corrupted cartography or mismapping of herself. In Báez's hands the *Windward Passage* argues for a hydro-centric understanding of maps by invoking a hydrological imagination.



Figure 1 - Firelei Báez, *Untitled (A Correct Chart of Hispaniola with the Windward Passage)* 2020, Oil and acrylic on archival printed canvas, 104 1/4 x 122 3/4 in. Photograph by Phoebe d'Heurle. Courtesy of James Cohan Gallery.

In *Untitled (A Correct Chart of Hispaniola with the Windward Passage)*, the artist articulates a monumentally vibrant *ciguapa*. A *ciguapa* is an untraceable female creature because her feet are positioned backwards and is visually interpreted by Báez as a bi-ped monstrosity of hybridity covered in polyps of long hair and a torso of colourful flora. In other portraits from the series, the *ciguapa* maintains exquisitely coiled coils of hair set off by a dark bubbling pustule of wounded fleshiness where the visage of the creature might appear. The *ciguapa* at once is a beautiful expression of nature's vibrant tropical flora and yet, presents a

hideousness through a corporeal hirsute excess compounded by bloody blisters dripping like sap from a tree. The aesthetic contradictions of female monstrosity, copious flora, and battered seascape offer a poignant portrait of aquatic corruption, or wounded waters. Similarly, in *Untitled (New Chart of the Windward Passages)* (Figure 2), the map is dominated by the Windward Passage as a recognisably human female figure of outsized proportions, a swirling galaxy of indigo waves on an outstretched left leg landing on Jamaica, her right foot balancing on the balls positioned near the artist's birthplace in the Dominican Republic, and her right hand near Cuba, stabilising her entire body. The Windward Passage's head and left arm do not appear on the map as we imagine them reaching up into the clouds above.



Figure 2 - Firelei Báez, *Untitled (New Chart of the Windward Passages)*, 2020, Oil and acrylic on archival printed canvas, 66 x 86 1/4 in. Courtesy of James Cohan Gallery.

In some ways the Windward Passage, although unlike the rivers considered in Hayward's and Visentin's essay, may be considered an interior aquapelago in the hands of Báez whose work may be attributed a more-than-human analysis of an aquasphere that softens terracentric thinking. She accomplishes this through the dominating figures in a kaleidoscope of colours and watery allusions to socio-spatial perceptions situated atop colonial maps of empire. I see Báez's "mappy representations" as an overturning of, "a terrestrial focus and reason through water rather than land" (Hayward & Visentin, 2025, p. 24) where she negotiates human-nature relationships, liquid, solid and atmospheric realms co-habiting in her Windward Passage. More than a map, Báez's corrections are hopeful imaginings with a hydro-centric focus on interior aquapelagos offering a new kind of elevated perspective, unlike that of Joseph Heintz the Younger's, where her terrestrial map is illegible without first engaging a "mappy representation" of the aquatic figure. In other words, affording water the primacy of initial engagement, and then thinking about the terrestrial is apparent in Báez's work. Báez's work is an interrogation of tropical signifiers, gendered cartographies, imaginative aquapelagos, and a mythological hybridscape that illustrates, "how such units of anthropised space embody the great visions and transformations of the world's interior waterscapes" (Hayward & Visentin, 2025, p.25). As the authors mention,

evaluating the subsurface elements and the assemblages/hybridsapes within interior aquapelagos is a productive area of future research and I believe imaginative gateways such as these visual “mappy representations” allow for this kind of reconceptualisation.

Curiosity and creativity are powerful forces both methodologically and pedagogically. In an academic landscape that suffers under its own certitudes, where scholars are often burdened with presenting works that have it all figured out, the result is frequently the ossification of intellectual engagement and fossilisation of imaginative thought and discovery. In contrast, Hayward and Visentin present a refreshing flow of exchanges, thinking through waterworlds in real time. Water asks us to reconsider what it is we think we know and understand. ‘Interior Aquapelagos’ dives in discovering fluidity as a methodology and interior aquapelagos are concepts that holds water.

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