**In the Wake of Asbestos: Ship Building and Ship Breaking in Ross Raisin’s *Waterline* and Tahmima Anam’s *The Bones of Grace***

ABSTRACT:

This article responds to novels—Ross Raisin’s *Waterline* and Tahmima Anam’s T*he Bones of Grace*—that invoke either Glasgow’s ship-building or Chittagong’s ship-breaking industries. It does so to address how variations in the cost of work, social fragility and health precarity across parallel postcolonial economies can be illustrated by comparing latent morbidities. Its conceit brings together two cultural works that share a preoccupation with the consequences of either ship-building or ship-breaking, but which do not consider how these activities might produce different latent morbidities for situations in the Global North and the Global South. Preoccupied with the immediate health concerns of their own histories, these texts pay scant attention to shared histories that intersect across this divide. Reading the novels together, on the basis of the conceit, demonstrates how each might supplement the other in attending to the health experiences of workers in ship construction and destruction.

In an essay that emphasises the potential for diverse literary texts to elucidate different aspects of a postcolonial political economy, the late Anthony Carrigan turns to two heterogeneous works ‘to link cruise tourism's environmental interventions to colonial histories and concepts of agency.’ (143) The challenge, concludes Carrigan, is not simply to ban cruise ships in Carribbean islands, where they have become vital to already precarious economies. It is ‘ensuring that resistance to cruise tourism's exploitative operations in the insular Caribbean is not conducted through a universalising “green imperialism” or “green globalism” (Lohmann) but according to local ethics and demands.’ (157) Carrigan’s texts, Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* and Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*, demonstrate these ‘local ethics and demands’ by emphasising howcruise liners ‘align’ with the island politics of those postcolonial environments that they visit. Marshall’s realist novel addresses life on board the cruise liner; Walcott’s epic poem considers the shore-bound vision of the liners: these differing points of perspective intersect, through Carrigan’s essay, as the ships come in to dock. And yet, alongside this spatial analysis must come what Carrigan calls the ‘circuits of touristic consumption [that] connect the Caribbean to the climes where many cruise ships are built’ (145), and which must necessarily extend even to where these cruise ships come to rest. For this essay, I adapt Carrigan’s conceit—the shared spatiality of cruise tourism—to the temporalities associated with the ships that enable it. As I track the life-cycle of these ships, from building to breaking, alongside the workers that undertake this precarious labour, I want to use the conceit to compare diverse economies across traditional divides between the Global North and Global South. Accordingly, I follow the breathing bodies of ship-builders and ship–breakers in Ross Raisin’s *Waterline* (2011) and Tahmima Anam’s *The Bones of Grace* (2016) to consider how these melancholic romances might be read together to shape an arc of continuity between the construction of ships in the Global North and their destruction in the Global South.

At the same time, I want to trouble the metaphoric ease with which we might evoke this continuous life-cycle by signalling the temporal problems it opens up. I illustrate these problems by contrasting the dominant latent morbidities in the novels. Each novel attends to forms of death and dying ostensibly forgotten by the other. In their processes of construction and destruction, the ships release forms of lethality. These have different latencies: a falling panel, obviously, has a much shorter latent morbidity for the worker it hits than any asbestos the worker might inhale. For ship-builders in the Global North, protected from the immediate dangers of falling equipment by more stringent Health and Safety Standards, this lethality is exposure to asbestos, whose long latency can elongate the effects of exposure by up to 50 years. Shipbreakers in the Global South are more concerned with more proximate dangers like falling or crushing. Differing priorities mean that workers in the Global North can better attune to the mineral’s ‘slow violence’ than their colleagues in the Global South, where experiences of risk is often more immediate. At the same time, workers in the Global North may well forget where or how the products of their work are disposed of. The novels accommodate these latencies in much the same way. Raisin’s novel focuses primarily on the long-term health consequences of asbestos inhalation in shipbuilders and their families in Glasgow; Anam’s novel does not even mention asbestos as it attends to the more immediate injuries facing shipbreakers in Chittagong. Running through this essay, then, is a tension between the narrative continuity that links two texts concerned with the life-cycles of ships and the epistemic disjuncture between their contrasting reflections of risk in the precarious economy of the World System.

This tension inheres in something like Christina Sharpe’s ‘wake work.’ (*In the Wake* 28) Drawing on the multiple meanings of wake—‘the keeping watch with the dead, the path of a ship, a consequence of something, in the line of flight and/or sight, awakening and consciousness’ (*In the Wake* 32)—Sharpe understands wake work ‘to be a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing [the episteme of slavery] with our known lived and un/imaginable lives’ (*In the Wake* 32). ‘Staying in the wake’ requires one to consider, with Sharpe, ‘what, if anything, survives this insistent Black exclusion, this ontological negation, and how do literature, performance and visual culture observe and mediate this un/survival’ (*In the Wake* 29) Sharpe’s focus is the aftermath of chattel slavery for the lived experience of Black life in America though she does enumerate what ‘living in the wake on a global level’ might entail (*In the Wake* 29). ‘In the Wake of Asbestos’, therefore, refers to the affective afterlife of asbestos for shipbuilders and –breakers, whether it is foregrounded, as for Raisin, or foreclosed, as for Anam. Raisin gives us the resources for thinking in the wake of asbestos, but he does not register the comparable privileges that sustain this thinking. Anam may not attend to the wake of asbestos but she does recall those forms of precarity that remove people prematurely from asbestos’s wake.

By thinking about those workers left in the wake of cruise liners in Sharpe’s terms, I do not presume to correlate these workers with the ongoing consequences of the Middle Passage in the experience of Black life. Nor do I wish to appropriate Sharpe’s meditation as a merely theoretical enterprise. Rather, I draw on Sharpe’s work because of a moment when her personal position in the wake aligns with asbestos latency. Sharpe remembers her brother, Stephen, when he is diagnosed with mesothelioma. They could not be sure when he was exposed to asbestos.

We were struck that the damage from one summer’s work forty-five years earlier at a local insulation company in Wayne, Pennsylvania, when he was fourteen years old could suddenly appear, now, to fracture the present. In the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always to rupture the present. (*In the Wake* 23)

Sharpe’s personal encounter with mesothelioma in someone she loves leads her to a reflection on the manner in which ‘wake work’ must attend to that which is latent. The wake is, then, not simply an analytic that attends to those concerns that, forgotten, are need of remembering. It also attends to the rupturing force of a latent past for the present. In this regard, Anam’s decision not to include asbestos in her novel seems a failure to attend to the virtual futures of the shipbreakers, in which their present inhalation of asbestos may have disastrous consequences. Given the social justice realism of the novel, at least in its sections about ship-breaking, the oversight is striking. If Raisin’s novel ignores the political economies of ship-breaking by focusing, exclusively, on shipbuilders in the Global North, Anam’s novel effectively dismisses the anticipatory future of her shipbreakers by not attending to the asbestos that the real counterparts to her characters certainly inhale.

*Waterline* and *The Bones of Grace* are realist romances set in the ship-building and ship-breaking contexts of Glasgow and Chittagong. Raisin’s Mick, the focaliser for much of *Waterline*, begins the novel as a taxi driver in Glasgow, Scotland. He mourns his wife, Cathy, has recently died of mesothelioma, an asbestos related disease. Anam’s Zubaida, the first person narrator for two thirds of *The Bones of Grace*, is completing work for her PhD in Archaeology at Harvard University. As she puts together the bones of an *Ambulocetus* (an amphibious ancestor to the whale), she composes a letter (the novel) to an absent lover, Elijah, which recounts her experiences in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Dera Bugti in Pakistan, and Dhaka and Chittagong in Bangladesh. Beneath these conventional, if geographically eclectic, romances of mourning and melancholia, both novels draw on historical and anthropological texts to develop realist critiques of, variously, precarious work practices, conservative family relations, and temporal risk. These critical frames imply an *oikeios*, which Jason W. Moore takes as ‘the relation of life-making’, whereby ‘manifold species-environment configurations emerge, evolve’ as part of a web of life that extends beyond both novels, and, indeed, in ways that neither novel fully comprehends (Moore 20). *Waterline* considers how economically deprived former ship-builders of Glasgow are affected by the asbestos used in the construction process, but it does not attend to what happened to those ships, or the asbestos they contained, after construction was completed. *The Bones of Grace* explores the lives of the Chittagong ship-breakers, many of whom are exposed to a variety of risks, but without considering the deep histories, nor the asbestos, of the ships they destroy. Asbestos is never mentioned in the novel, and yet, as I will go on to demonstrate, this absence is perhaps more weighted than first it seems. Despite their obvious differences in locations, characters, and objects of attention, the novels share three features that ease the figural arbitrariness of their connection. The characters encounter precarious labour practices, conveyed in a realist mode. At the same time, they are forced to negotiate, in affective terms, the personal consequences of decisions about their working life. This negotiation is made more difficult by an aspirational disconnect between their work circumstances and the dizzying products of their work, those sublime ships, ‘white, immense, violent’ (*Bones* 146), that momentarily dominate the narrative frame.

In both cases, the environment-character-ship composite develops out of economic relations, hence my preference for *oikeios* over ‘affinity’ (Donna Haraway), ‘agency’ (Karen Barad), or ‘mesh’ (Timothy Morton). One of the substances that constitutes a uniform risk for the shipworkers, across the different temporalities of the *oikeios*, is asbestos. Despite its reduced affective impact on workers in Chittagong, asbestos consolidates this *oikeios* by throwing into stark relief how temporalities of risk shift between those regulated construction conditions of the Global North to the underregulated disposal practices of the Global South. Because workers in the Global North understand their risk as contained, their attendance to the risk posed by asbestos registers as a temporal lag, sometimes stretching out as long as fifty years. Workers in the Global South, attending to risk as a matter of instants rather than decades, cannot afford to preoccupy themselves with asbestos latencies.

*Waterline* and *The Bones of Grace* bridge the pseudo-divide between metropole and postcolonial literature precisely because their characters’ concerns are included in the political economy of ships. The affective concerns of the characters are aligned with the structural role played by the ships themselves, particularly in developing an *oikeios* of human/non-human relations that include and envelop Mick, Anwar and Zubaida. Expanding the reading of the novel beyond the remit of social justice permits a more expansive reading of the ways in which the novels draw on a political economy of affect. Their emotional states moderate and are moderated by a network of ecological relations emergent in the birth and death of ships. These relations are also, and at the same time, location specific and generic. When he briefly works in Newcastle’s Swan Hunter Shipyard after losing his job in Glasgow, Mick will feel ‘it wasn’t his yard, his river. He didn’t belong there. Didn’t get the same feeling from it: that sense of the river always being there, around him, inside him’ (*Waterline* 97). His response to the river is that it should, like Moore’s *oikeios*, be a relation between and within human and extra-human natures.Clearly, when he refers to the sense of the river inside him, he does not mean the water, literally, inside him. This affective relation is more obvious when he describes ‘the sheer thrill of a ship on its stocks, grown from just a few small pieces of metal, walking toward it each morning and seeing that it was bigger, looking like it was parked there at the end of the street, looming over the end tenement’ (*Waterline* 97). Zubaida experiences the obverse sense of awe, when, arriving in Chittagong, she finds herself in a landscape ‘where everything was salvaged and half-broken’, matching ‘the chaos I felt within me’. Similarly, she is startled out of her numbness by ‘an oil tanker in the final stages of being pulled apart, a felled dinosaur of metal lying on its side’ (*Bones* 136). The specific interaction between character, environment and ship precipitates a generic thrill, an affective connection to an *oikeios*.

In following the life-cycle of ships, I am taking my cue not just from Carrigan but also from Nicky Gregson et al who respond to Arjun Appadurai’s call to ‘follow the things themselves’ (Gregson et al ‘Following things’ 847; Appadurai *Social Life*). If Appadurai was primarily interested in global flows from developing world producers to developed world consumers, Gregson et al aim to direct attention ‘down’ the value chain to the ways in which the developing world also becomes the repository of the developed world’s waste, in this case ‘end-of-life ships’, those ships that are sent to Bangladesh, after their decommission, to be stripped and recycled. If *Waterline* fails, spectacularly, to address this value chain, Anam’s *The Bones of Grace* does so with an acute awareness of the consequences for the workers involved. Gregson, however, is committed to thinking about this practice in posthumanist relational terms, against a dichotomous reading of the shipbreaking industries of the Global South and Global North (Gregson ‘Ship Disposal’ 138). She acknowledges an incontrovertible difference between a labour intensive, uncontained practice in the South and a technology intensive, contained practice in the North, but, as she shows, these differences are often used to contrast ‘green practices’ of ‘ship recycling’ in the North to environmentally ‘unfriendly’ ‘ship breaking’ of the Global South. The challenge is to make connections that do not rely on uninterrogated dichotomies. Gregson’s response is to develop a posthuman reading of the industry, grounded in corporeality, materiality and performativity. The emphasis of this ‘assemblage’ will be ‘the conjuncture of vulnerable, fleshy, breathing human bodies […] with metal, rust, furniture, fixtures and fittings, heavy metals, plastics, paint flakes, asbestos’ (Gregson ‘Ship Disposal’ 150). Gregson’s enumeration continues, but I halt on asbestos because it is in my focus on this strange and deadly mineral that my own connective strategy differs from Gregson’s.[[1]](#endnote-1) I share Gregson’s basic inference that an interaction between the ‘breathing human body’ and ‘asbestos’ (for instance) produces an assemblage that puts the spotlight on ‘the human within the [asbestos] assemblage, to focus not on the conditions of labour, or containment, but on the corporeality of disposal work and its iterative inter-activity with matter’ (Gregson ‘Ship Disposal’ 151). Although asbestos may be absorbed through ingestion or through the skin, the overwhelming cultural attention has been on its reaction with lung tissue when inhaled. A political economy of asbestos, then, posits an environmental relation between the human and extra-human (an *oikeios*) predicated upon breathing as the form this relation takes. But where Gregson focuses on an underlying congruity between North and South practices of ship breaking—an effort comparable to connecting narratives of ship-birth and ship-death—I want to address the tension created when literary texts do not attend to the same forms of lethality. Rather than focus on the processes of ‘un-becoming’ that link the destruction of ships to a wider literature on waste (Crang ‘Death of Great Ships’ 1085), I contrast the Global North concern with asbestos to the more immediate concerns with physical danger in workers in the Global South. To draw out this tension, we should contrast Gregson’s reflections on the political economy of shipbuilding or shipbreaking with an affective economy that persists even in those texts like *The Bones of Grace*, which, in attending to more immediate risks, disclose other latent effects of living in the wake.

For the moment, let us return to Glasgow. Mick, the protagonist of *Waterline*, is grieving the death of his wife, Cathy, by pleural mesothelioma. Mesothelioma is a cancer that affects either the lung lining, the pleura, or the abdominal lining, the peritoneum. Ever since the epidemiological work by J. C. Wagner et al published in 1960, mesothelioma has been almost exclusively associated with asbestos exposure. In Cathy’s case, this exposure happens when she inhaled the asbestos dust clinging to Mick’s overalls. Wagner’s work heralded a significant departure from the epidemiological consensus that asbestos was simply an occupational hazard, since the majority of Wagner’s sample had para-occupational exposure, rather than occupational exposure (i.e. they were family members of asbestos workers, exposed to ‘take-home’ dust, rather than workers exposed at work). Wagner linked even comparatively mild exposure to asbestos with a risk of mesothelioma, an insight which shaped asbestos’s transformation into the fearful substance we know today. This association is the basis of Mick’s anger, guilt, and, eventually, shame, all of which form the affective substrate of the novel. Mick worked in the ship building industry on Glasgow’s Clydeside and, like many of those workers, he recalls bringing the asbestos home: ‘Him that played snowballs with the stuff and came home with it stored in the turn-ups of his trousers’ (*Waterline* 37). ‘Coming home with it stored in his trousers’ acknowledges a circumstantial history of responsibility, while implicitly suggesting his own innocence and ignorance.

‘Playing snowballs’ carries associations of innocence, childhood and play. Mick contrasts ‘snowball’ play with asbestos’s ominous intrusion into the home, as a ‘paraoccupational’ or environmental risk. Paraoccupational exposure describes that incidence of asbestos ‘travel’ where workers would expose non-workers to dust that had fallen on their clothes and belongings. The ‘snowball fight’ is a historiographic *leitmotif* of many accounts about the asbestos industry, where the contrast between innocence and risk helps to emphasise stories of unsuspecting workers unintentionally exposing their families and themselves to the dust.[[2]](#endnote-2) The conceit plays a particularly important role in witness testimony for the asbestos litigation industry, which specialises in securing compensation for Asbestos Related Diseases. Raisin signals its entanglement with legal economics when he introduces the image in Mick’s response to a letter that he receives from Alice, a widow who has made a claim for compensation after her husband’s death. ‘It’s not about the money’, Alice has written, ‘it’s about justice.’ (*Waterline* 37) Mick deconstructs this implicit equation between compensation and justice:

The idea of it – justice – seems pure absurd. Alice is gone down that route and fair enough […] but the thought of it – how many thousands have died and still you’ve to tear yourself inside out dragging through the courts […] And it’s not no even him dead […] Justice is a word for it maybe, getting the payout, but it doesn’t feel sitting here like the right one, not the right one at all. (*Waterline* 37)

Alice relies on a distinction between money and justice to make her case for compensation. Mick elides the distinction by referring to compensation as a payout. Alice couches her decision within a discourse of justice, while Mick finds himself unable to do so. Appreciating Mick’s inability, or refusal, to salve his guilt by casting himself as unknowing victim is crucial for understanding how the novel traces his gradual disintegration from working homeowner to homeless alcoholic. He moves into the garden shed to avoid his house; turns to alcohol to avoid thinking, stops working to avoid socialising. Eventually he leaves Glasgow for London, where, after some time as a live-in dishwasher at an anonymous Heathrow based hotel, he becomes homeless. This pattern of self-abnegation comes from his refusal to understand Cathy’s work in the house as work. Mick reflects:

They deserved everything that was coming to them. And if it was him dying, the maybe he would go down that route. Secure a future for Cathy. But it wasn’t; it was him brought the stuff in the house. And he should have known […] why should *he* get a windfall? Him that brought it into the house and handed her the overalls to wash and here’s two hundred grand, pal, take it, it’s yours – you deserve it. (*Waterline* 65-66)

Something symbolic is happening in the exchange of ‘overalls’ for ‘two hundred grand’ that extends a gendered division of labour beyond the merely conventional breadwinner-homemaker dyad. In short, his refusal to accept the exchange demonstrates an inability to understand Cathy’s work in the home as labour: a commodity that might be fungible, and therefore subject to exchange. Alice is able to claim compensation ‘fair enough’ because her husband worked, but Mick cannot because, to his mind, Cathy did not. Raisin makes this point by combining a syntactic continuity (‘and…and…and’) with semantic disjuncture. He interrupts a run of conjunctions in the third person by shifting the register from the descriptive to the conversational and the narrative perspective from himself to the payer of the two hundred grand. Mick’s inability to understand why he might deserve the two hundred grand, combined with his feelings of responsibility, turns his self-abnegation into both product and producer of his environment.[[3]](#endnote-3) Because he won’t take money, whether compensation, the dole or a handout from his son, he is ultimately unable to support himself, which precipitates his move to London, and then around various homeless shelters.

*Waterline* might be divided into two parts: a meditative, ‘static’ period before Mick leaves Glasgow and the frenetic, ‘mobile’ period after he arrives in London as he moves restlessly from kitchen work to the various permutations of homelessness (accompanied/unaccompanied; in shelter/unsheltered). This concise division ignores the structural continuity of precarious labour and the affective continuity of Mick’s anxieties about ‘justice’. Mick’s work, whether in Glasgow, in Newcastle, in London is always unreliable. It is subject to conditions of casualised labour, and similarly likely to be misrecognised as non-work. At the same time, Mick’s strategies for avoiding the aftermath of Cathy’s death might differ in different locations, but they coalesce around his failure to fulfil his role as husband or parent. In fact, this affective dimension extends back into the structural analysis of what it means to work. Such casualised labour is, if anything, intensified in the shipbreaking industry of Chittagong.

Chittagong’s shipbreaking industry began, so the story goes, when a ship, *en route* from Glasgow, ran itself aground on the Karnaphuli river mouth in low tide. Certainly, the story of the *SS Clan Alpine*, formerly the *Empire Barrie*, provides a useful conceit with which to introduce my analysis. The *SS Clan Alpine* was a cargo ship built in Sunderland in 1942 under the name *Empire Barrie*. After 18 years of service to, variously, the British Navy, Clan Line Steamers Ltd, and Bullard, King & Co. Ltd., it left the Mersey, Liverpool on what would be its final journey. After a brief period in Glasgow, it left for the Suez Canal, later tracing a path, via Aden, to the Indian subcontinent. In response to reports of a cyclone, off the Bangladesh coast at Chittagong, it sought shelter in the nearby Karnaphuli River and, there, ran aground. The crew were rescued and sheltered at the local club, itself a relic of British colonialism. The ship was subsequently stripped, its steel a valuable commodity in the booming construction of then East Bengal.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Zubaida, the narrator of Anam’s *The Bones of Grace*, calls this story ‘apocryphal’: ‘a cyclone in the Bay of Bengal, a ship banked on the shore, a group of scavengers, the discovery of steel, and then, eventually, businessmen who turned ill-fortune into profit.’ (*Bones* 142) Anwar, the migrant worker and, later, shipbreaker whose narrative punctuates Zubaida’s, is less concerned with its veracity. [The old man] ‘Tells me there used to be nothing here, then a storm and ship that got washed up and stuck in the sand. There was a foreigner, a Captain, he started the whole thing. I don’t believe him, just let the old man talk – what’s left when you’re old except the ears of the young?’ (*Bones* 235) For Zubaida, a middle-class activist, the story evokes a history of capitalist expansion from the chance conditions of a natural event. For Anwar, a worker, it is a meaningless genesis tale, which can be received without belief, but which does demand the performance of attention ‘no matter how long or made up’. The inclusion of the stories demonstrates Anam’s attentiveness to the actual-existing *mythos* surrounding the Chittagong ship-breaking industry. Both versions try to develop an *oikeios*: ‘*Oikeios* is a way naming the creative, historical, and dialectical relation between, and also always within, human and extra-human natures.’ (3). By exploiting cheap labour, waste ships reframed as raw material, and the energy of the tides, the shipbreaking industry creates an ecology that is detrimental to the health of workers and the environment.[[5]](#endnote-5) But, equally, it sustains those workers and shapes their environment, giving them origin stories and new patterns of social interaction. By contrasting Zubaida’s and Anwar’s experiences of the shipbreaking environment, the novel attends to those shared concern with justice.

There are ample comparative bases for thinking about *Waterline* alongside *The Bones of Grace* by focusing on justice. In his ‘Testimony’, Anwar, the worker, seems to be as stricken by the failure of justice as Mick. The narrative occurs midway through the novel and recounts his search for Megna, his sometime lover and Zubaida’s missing twin sister. Although he describes the shipbreaking as ‘hell’, ‘this is what I deserve after all the bad I’ve done. This work at the end of the world’. (*Bones* 236) His ‘bad’ includes abandoning Megna to eventual prostitution and death by venereal disease so that he might find work in ‘foreign’ (i.e. Dubai), taking a ‘payout’ in exchange for not reporting on the unsafe work environments that caused the death of a co-worker, leaving his wife to find Megna, and spending all their assets to bribe police officers to release him from jail. The ‘bad’ that concerns him most, however, is abandoning Megna’s child. Hence his ‘hunt’, his search for Megna and their child: ‘my bones are dead. I’m stupid and my luck is over. I have to give up. I’m an even bigger fool if I don’t see that my girl and my kid are never going to be found […] I’m so fed up with my life it’s like I’m drunk too, so I say, “I don’t even know if it is a son or a daughter.”’ (*Bones* 239) Both Anwar and Mick have lost lovers. More significantly for their affective states, they both assume a responsibility to protect these women, while finding themselves inadequate to the task.

In both cases, a dual affection of responsibility and recrimination, caught up in a discourse of social justice, accounts for a movement towards activities with increased precarity, whether to casualised labour or unsafe environments. Zubaida mirrors this movement in a less dramatic way: unhappy in her arranged marriage to a childhood sweetheart and distraught over the miscarriage of their child, she attempts to distance herself from their privileged lifestyle by moving to the family’s summer house in Chittagong, and then, to the living quarters of the Chittagong-based NGO called Shipsafe. She herself remarks on this movement at the end of Anwar’s ‘Testimony’: ‘I wasn’t the only one in Chittagong in search of a self. I wasn’t the only one who felt like the loneliest person in the world’ (*Bones* 252). Zubaida, who also mourns a lost love object (Elijah) in a way that is self-recriminating and self-conscious, is in a less demonstrably precarious position than Anwar. It would be a mistake, however, to think of her upper middle class lifestyle as anything but contingent on the good will of her husband, Rashid, and her parents-in-law. Her work for Shipsafe exasperates Rashid because he cannot see it as more than just the affectation of a bored housewife. Even Gabriela, the film-maker for whom Zubaida acts as translator, finds it difficult to assert meaning to their work, in the face of the workers’ precarity: ‘a film,’ she remarks, ‘seems like a pathetic response’ (*Bones* 173). As in *Waterline*, the solace offered by the work is incommensurable with the requirements of justice.

Zubaida works as a translator for Shipsafe, which ‘for years […] had been campaigning for a ban on the whole industry.’ (*Bones* 144) Even fictional NGOs justify their campaigns by using advocacy documents like the International Labour Organization’s Conventions (ILOC). Although Bangladesh is not a signatory to ILOC 162 of 1986, otherwise known as ‘The Asbestos Convention’, asbestos is generally cited in advocacy reports and academic research on Chittagong because the substance is a recognised hazard (Bailey 2000; Andersen 2001; Cairns 2007; Cairns 2017). Perhaps because of this attention, journalism about the Chittagong shipbreakers has tended to foreground asbestos exposure in short form abstracts (*The Guardian* 2012; Jansen in *Vice* 2014; Gwin in *National Geographic* 2014). If the first conclusive study to demonstrate asbestosis in ship-breakers was only released in 2017, after *The Bones of Grace* was published, there is almost twenty years of work on the Chittagong shipyards that foregrounds exposure to asbestos as a marked, if not primary, concern. Given this weight of scholarship, I want to query Anam’s decision to disregard Asbestos Related Diseases in *The Bones of Grace*. Anam’s preoccupation with other matters contrasts the concerns of *The Bones of Grace* to those of *Waterline*. By not mentioning asbestos, she attends more closely to the lived experience of the workers she depicts, concerned as they are with immanent risk, than to the advocacy documentation about the industry. Since the latency period between exposure and the development of an ARD can be anywhere up to fifty years, the Chittagong-based ship breakers are more likely to worry about the immediate risks of physical harm (whether falling from a ship or being crushed during the de-structuring process) than the eventual manifestation of a disease.[[6]](#endnote-6)

This is demonstrated in the actual accounts of Chittagong shipbreakers. “Every day I go to work thinking I might die,” says Massood, a Chittagong shipbreaker interviewed by *Vice* for a feature in 2014 (Jansen “Visiting”). Anam’s novel implicitly acknowledges this pragmatic fatalism by portraying Anwar, the migrant worker, as far more concerned with the risk of falling (when working on the skyscrapers of Dubai) or being crushed (in the ship breaking yard at Chittagong), than with any eventual disease he might contract. The emphasis on imminent precarity is a structural feature of the novel that extends beyond affective fatalism: the narrative culminates in the death of a young boy, Mo, who is crushed by a falling crate. Given the immediate risks to life posed by the physical and psychological traumas of ship-breaking, the risk of eventual asbestos related disease recedes into the background. But asbestos exposure itself produces “a culture of pragmatic fatalism” typical of workers exposed to asbestos (Boggio 47). The difference between exposed characters in both novels, then, is not so much inherent to their fatalism, as a feature of the temporal objects this fatalism attaches to. For Anwar, it is the more immediate risk of falling; for Mick, it is the long-term effects of asbestos exposure.

The matter of relative risk becomes reflexively important to an analysis of *Waterline* because of our reading of *The Bones of Grace*.Raisin is obviously familiar with the literature on asbestos and the Clydeside ship builders, and not simply because he mentions ‘snowballs’.[[7]](#endnote-7) Woven throughout *Waterline* are similar recollections to those found, for instance, in Ronald Johnson and Arthur McIvor’s oral history, *Lethal Work: A History of the Asbestos Tragedy in Scotland* (2000). Here, for instance, a moment from an interview by Johnson & McIvor: ‘When you went in the door of Turner’s asbestos there was a Factory Act with all the stuff. The only problem was that you couldnae see through it with the layer of asbestos cement on the glass’ (Johnson & McIvor 72). Raisin reframes a similar memory as the action of a hypothetical ‘we’, to imply a greater agency on the part of the factory owners, and, therefore, a greater culpability:

We’ve put the signs up – telling about ventilation and masks and dust checks and all these things that were never bothered with and nobody ever thought to ask for because you couldn’t read the bloody sign even, it was that covered in fucking dust. (*Waterline* 65)

In both accounts, the irony of the sign lies in its misplaced signification: instead of informing the workers about health and safety, it demonstrates a failure to attend to the conditions that occasion the regulations in the first place. The problem with this appeal to irony is that it perpetuates the fiction that, had the workers known the risks they were facing, they might have chosen otherwise. The fiction of ‘choosing otherwise’ ignores the structural inequalities that generate in workers a certain fatalism about their circumstances. It translates a structural obviation of risk into the moral arena of innocence and guilt, whereby workers whose complex decisions, offsetting economic precarity with health risks, are recast as innocents, without agency.

Scales of risk correlate to those time frames with which the characters most relate. For this reason that *The Bones of Grace* does not delve into the asbestos problems of the shipbreaking industry at Chittagong, despite its prominence in the related environmental and anthropological literature. The occupational time frames of Anam’s novel are principally concerned with intervals that are either too short (the narrative covers the period of a few years) or too long (the *Ambulocetus* skeleton that Zubaida reconstructs is described as ‘fifty million years of history encased in calcium, iron, and sediment’). Substantial mid-range time frames in the novel, measured in the ‘family time’ of a few decades, do not involve the shipping industry. Anwar is employed in the shipbreaking industry only briefly. Zubaida works for Shipsafe for some months. Even the stories that she elicits from the workers measure their experiences in the Prosperity Shipbreaking yard by timescales too brief for the manifestation of an ARD. *Waterline*, which focuses on the ways that Mick’s memories obtrude into his present, seems better fitted to address a temporal mismatch: for the mesothelioma sufferer and their family, a decades-long latency must be negotiated when calculating the time between asbestos exposure and the manifestation of the illness.

So, while the novels are united in a shared *oikeios* that concerns itself with problems of social justice, their coincidence across the life-cycle of ships is disrupted by opposite, even opposing, responses to temporal risk. In order to cut across these contrasting positions, I turn again to Sharpe, who arrives at ‘aspiration’ as ‘the word […] for keeping and putting breath in the Black body.’ (*In the Wake* 132) Aspiration evokes those deflated dreams of economic empowerment that sustain Mick and Anwar in their precarious labours. But aspiration’s complementary senses include ‘the withdrawal of fluid *and* the taking in of foreign matter (usually fluid) into the lungs with the respiratory current, *and* as *audible breath* that accompanies or comprises a speech sound.’ (*In the Wake* 113).

Breathing in asbestos is generally recognised to be harmful to health. This observation, prevalent in accounts of public health, ignores a variable politics of use in which long-term health risks are balanced against other, more immediate threats to bodily integrity. And yet, it provides the basis for comparing wildly different circumstances of asbestos use that transect clear divisions between the Global North and the Global South. The possible ill effects of asbestos are, it seems, as ubiquitous as breathing. This is in no small way due to the production of asbestos bodies. An asbestos body is a cyborg formed of asbestos fibre, breath, tissue and time.[[8]](#endnote-8) Asbestos, a generic term for a silicate *form*, is a long, thin, fibrous crystal that may itself break down into millions of microscopic fibrils. When a fibre is breathed into the lungs, it lacerates the lung lining and embeds itself into the lung wall. The body responds in two ways: it builds up scar tissue over the lacerations, which impedes the transport of oxygen to the blood, and it forms asbestos bodies, fibres encased in human tissue. It may be these asbestos bodies that cause, rather than prevent, the malignancies that lead to ARDs. Certainly, asbestos bodies are recognised indicators of ARDs, and form the basis of many post-mortem diagnoses of asbestos exposure. Such negative health associations justify the righteous anger of activists when asbestos exposure is lifted to the level of a political case, whether this be the systemic obfuscation of health-related concerns about asbestos by the asbestos industry over the 20th Century, or the ongoing production and use of asbestos by, particularly, BRICS countries, or the historic burden of past use, that makes itself felt in the present in efforts to dispose of asbestos safely. But righteous anger risks ignoring other systems, where each breath is a wager with death in a political economy that weighs affect against structural uncertainty. By surveying the treatment of breath in both novels, I highlight those breath economies that underwrite the aspiration to social justice that unites the lives of ship workers across both novels *and* the violence implied in their respective temporal contradictions.

References to breath in *Waterline* recall the consequences of asbestos exposure, breath in *The Bones of Grace*, in the manner of conventional romance, marks the immediacy of high emotion. Consider, for instance, Mick, whose breath will be describe, in moments of high emotion, as ‘all over the place’, ‘snatching’, ‘stopping’, ‘constricting’, and ‘dying’ (*Waterline* 51; 92; 147; 175; 202). When read against the following description of a panic attack, the descriptors cohere through their implicit association to Cathy:

What is normal? There isn’t a normal. He swings his legs over the bed and sits up. Everything racing and rushing. He is sucking for breath but it’s no good, sitting up is making him feel boaky, so he lies back down […] She is normal. That is what normal is. (*Waterline* 101)

Not only is breath never normal in *Waterline* – throughout, references to breath are marked by constraining adjectives – they are implicitly associated with Cathy, Mick’s ‘normal’. By extension, they may be linked to Cathy’s constricted, snatched, stopped breath, the consequence of her death from a debilitating asbestos-related chest cancer. By contrast, breath in *The Bones of Grace* indexes more varied affective states, but most of these seem to be associated with conventions of the romance genre. Lovers feel each other’s breath on their skin (*Bones* 120, 276, 277, 389, 390); breath gives away clues of drinking (*Bones* 119, 132) or smoking (*Bones* 307); things that ‘take the breath away’ (*Bones* 45), cause characters to take a breath (*Bones* 373) or make ‘the breaths [come] so sharply out of me that I could hardly speak (*Bones* 366) generally use the breath as a simple realist device: a physiological reminder of how the body reacts to surprise or shock. It is only occasionally that breath is made to reference the concerns of the worker characters, as when Anwar refers to building the Dubai skyscraper ‘working through the devil’s breath of summer’ (*Bones* 188). When it does, however, the theological implications emerge more than once. Perhaps most interesting of these, given the emphasis I have placed on the creation of an *oikeios*, is the moment thatthe manager of Prosperity Shipyard, Ali, marks the grounding of the eponymous cruise ship of *The Bones of Grace*, the *Grace*,by muttering a prayer ‘under his breath, then blew the air out of his cheeks, spreading the blessing’ (*Bones* 146). This release of the prayer out into the environment is one of the few moments when the novel concerns itself with Gregson’s ‘iterative inter-activity with matter’ as a function of the breath. Ali’s gesture expels this interaction into the environment, occasioning a renewed attention to how breath connects a larger assemblage that includes the workers, the worker’s yard and the cruise ship.

By way of conclusion, I want to suggest that comparing *Waterline* and *The Bones of Grace* extends a postcolonial analytic that incorporates not simply the birth (Johnson & McIvor) or death (Crang, Gregson) of ships, but the latent harm they can deliver to the people who engage with them. If we follow Carrigan’s analysis, we do not simply find an intertext for Mick’s ship, ‘parked at the end of the street’, when, in Omeros (1990), Derek Walcott calls Fame ‘that white liner / at the end of your street, a city to itself’ (72). We also find a paradigm for the ways in which the liner dwarfs those concerns of the people who must necessarily live in relation, rather than in, it.

The immaculate hull insulted the tin roofs

beneath it, its pursers were milk, even the bilge

bubbling from its stern in quietly muttering troughs

and its humming engines spewed expensive garbage (73)

The cruise ship’s wake includes more than those more immediate forms of waste, bubbling from the bilge or spewing from the engines. It charts an assemblage of workers, ‘insulted’ by ‘immaculate hulls’, whose process, from the birth of the ship to its death, is tracked by inevitable relation with substances that harm, substances like asbestos. The cruise ship itself encourages us to carry concerns across oceans, those spaces that can be relied upon to partition identity concepts. In this light, it has received ample attention as a translocation of cultural economic exploitation. But within the ship, there lies a latent harm substance, which manifests its own economy most devastatingly at each end of its carrier’s long and varied life. This asbestos load is felt acutely in the wake of ships long departed, in launch or final rest, at Glasgow and Chittagong.

1. Gregson has written elsewhere on the extraordinary materiality of asbestos (2016), a material which ‘notwithstanding human attempts to sequester and contain it, asbestos is endlessly potentially recurring, dispersed and dissipated, and as such touches us all.’ (271) Although she doesn’t mention Moore’s *oikeios*, she too understands asbestos as party to ‘a materialist politics that enacts a radical network ecology, comprising myriad transient associations and connections of human and more-than-human bodies with materials and their effects.’ (271). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The snowball metaphor has also been a partial focus in two productions about the paraoccupational exposure to asbestos of people living around the JW Roberts Asbestos Factory in Armley, West Yorkshire: Alice Nutter’s radio play, *Snow in July* (2008), and Kenneth F. Yates’s theatre play, *Dust* (2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. It should be noted that this passage occurs soon after Mick has moved into his garden shed, when he is struggling to sleep. The first three paragraphs of the chapter begin with physical observations, ‘It is cold’, ‘He turns over’, ‘He presses himself into the crack’, that give way to extensive mindwandering about different aspects of asbestos at work and at home. This mindwandering itself is an unwanted byproduct of his efforts not to think. Again and again, Mick will try to ‘shut the thoughts out’ (66). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This summary is derived from John Morris’s account, “Last Voyage of the S.S. Clan Alpine” from the Southampton Master Mariners’ club journal, *The Cachalot*. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Moore describes these, together with food, as the ‘Four Cheaps’ (labour power, food, energy and raw materials). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Linda Waldman, in *The Politics of Asbestos*, notes how sufferers of ARDs in India, South Africa and the UK, are more or less likely to respond to asbestos diseases as, respectively, a necessary byproduct of modernisation, a welcome source of compensation to relieve extreme poverty, and a pernicious force that erodes the masculinity of the sufferers.  [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. He also acknowledges the support of the Clydebank Asbestos Group and GMB Union at the end of the novel, implying some first-hand research contact.

8 The scientific correspondent to this analysis would be increased attention on ‘asbestos bodies’, a term first coined by Marchand (1906), for an asbestos fibre that, through its interactions with the human body, comes to be coated in iron and proteins. (Churg et al 1981; Bardelli et al 2017)

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8. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)