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Corto Maltese and the Myriad Narratives of a More-than-Human Ocean: Revisiting Some of UNCLOS' Ontological Assumptions

Apostolos Tsiouvalas 

Abstract, Graphic novels have been previously recognized by scholarly research as a valuable conceptual lens for thinking critically about law. Asserting the need for a deeper engagement with the material foundations, ontological beliefs and epistemological grids that lie under the development of international law of the sea, this article delves into the imaginary oceanic universe of Hugo Pratt's classic graphic novel series, *Corto Maltese*. In conjunction with the comic series, "law and comics" literature, Indigenous studies, and new materialism thinking, the article examines different ontological values related to the material oceanic universe that are incorporated in the graphic narrative, juxtaposing them with beliefs embedded in the Western legal understanding of the ocean systems. Using the graphic novel series as a methodological device, the article thus seeks to revisit some of the law of the sea's fundamental assumptions and ground future discussions towards a material turn of international law of the sea, and not least Western philosophy as a whole.

KEYWORDS, Corto Maltese, law and comics, law of the sea, new materialism, indigenous knowledge

I. PROLOGUE

Thanks to their pictorial quality, textual elements, and aesthetic properties, many comics,¹ like other forms of art and literature, have successfully managed to raise valid concerns about life and social issues,² navigate through identities and culture,³ reflect upon history,⁴ talk about right and wrong and achieve (social) justice.⁵ They often reflect the ideological background of the historical contexts in which they emerged, and may serve as an important conceptual lens for jurisprudence to critically consider law's very foundation.⁶ They also

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challenge mainstream legal dogmatic perspectives, and reflect on what is told to be true or not about the legal imaginary surrounding us.⁷ Whereas legal narratives challenge their readers – students, scholars and legal practitioners – to try to interpret verbal representations and imagine law within a designated framework, graphic narratives may allow readers to escape law’s imposed limits, material boundaries, and dogmatic realities and critically consider relationships in human societies, as well as with non-humans and the natural world⁸ and within a spectrum of infinite interpretations.⁹

Moving from the premises of a boundless conceptual universe that may spring from a graphic narrative, this article will try to demonstrate that comics can function as an important tool for legal scholars to revisit ontological assumptions pertinent to the legal conceptualization of the ocean systems. It does so by looking at the multifarious world of the sailor and adventurer Corto Maltese that appears in Hugo Prat’s eponymous graphic novel series. Oscillating between new materialism theories, Corto’s imaginary adventures, Indigenous knowledge systems, and critical jurisprudence, this article questions the traditional materialist approach of the law of the sea to the oceanic universe and suggests that the *Corto Maltese* series, as a polyvalent intellectual construction, unveils valuable aesthetic qualities that challenge established materialities in our legal perception of oceans. This article uses the series as a methodological lens to reflect upon existing ontologies incorporated in the graphic narrative, discussing them in relation to respective ontological views embedded in our legal understanding of the socioecological systems revolved around oceans.

Four parts follow this introductory segment, starting with a brief note locating oceans within the context of legal modernity and unpacking some of the fundamental assumptions that characterize the law of the sea’s current approach to the non-human gradients of oceans. Subsequently, there is a short introduction to the world of *Corto Maltese*; this precedes a chronological conceptual journey through the series’ key episodes in order to demonstrate how the comic narrative may challenge existing pitfalls of legal thought and communicate a different set of ontological views. A brief epilogue follows on the main lessons generated through this study, and presents some conclusory imaginaries about how the popular medium may foster the law of the sea’s reconciliation with the material oceanic world.

II. TRACING MATTER IN THE LAW OF THE SEA

The formation of law’s current rational boundaries and ontological background can be arguably traced back to the 16th century.¹⁰ Since at least the time of the scientific revolution, a mechanistic understanding of the surrounding world has been embedded in modern thought, grounded in the study of matter and the dualistic conception of nature as separate from human beings on the one hand,

as well as being inert and a passive object of human development and commodification on the other.¹¹ Following natural sciences' dichotomies and traditional classifications drawn on morphological and biological criteria, law has also conceptualized nature as a machine made out of discrete, measurable and exploitable parts,¹² considering humans to be separated from non-human sentient beings, as well as non-sentient elements of the Earth.¹³ In the absence of sentience, the non-human world has been seen as inert, enclosed within conceptual binaries (e.g. nature – culture), and subject to the regulation of human's annexation and control.¹⁴

This roughly 400-year-old “one-world world” paradigm, as sociologist John Law labels it,¹⁵ that characterizes modernity's ontological orientation towards the non-human material world has never been limited to the legal conception of land. Within the Eurocentric culture that shaped the development of international law of the sea, the ocean's legal architecture has gradually been consolidated to facilitate the exchange of goods and commodities among sovereign states and to institutionalize the free economic exploitation of non-human beings and matter with the perception of inexhaustible use.¹⁶ The foundations of the law of the sea reaffirm the tenacity of legal thought to reinforce binary conceptions, colonialist attitudes and territorialist logics.¹⁷

The current major legal instrument to regulate the world's oceans is the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS),¹⁸ according to which the marine space is partitioned into zones of different levels of state sovereignty and jurisdiction determined on the basis of adjacency to the land. Although under UNCLOS the pre-existing unrestricted exploitation of the non-human marine world became increasingly qualified by obligations to protect and preserve the marine environment (especially in its part XII), the perpetual logic of UNCLOS in objectifying non-humans and enclosing them within imaginary boundaries is often perceived as problematic.¹⁹ State and corporate actors legitimized by international law and driven by the neo-liberal world economic order tend to act upon oceans rather than develop with them, and maximize economic profit to the detriment of non-human ocean beings, which are merely reduced to “resources”.²⁰ While the international law of the sea nowadays increasingly seeks to account for the unique characteristics of the oceans, their fluid properties²¹ and ecosystem dependences, the mechanistic paradigm remains deeply ingrained in the current regulatory framework. As Susan Reid summarizes,

*“in the juridical imaginary, the ocean is valued as mineral stockpile, oil reserve, fish tank and food pantry, cabinet of potential pharmaceuticals, and endless supplier of materials in the service of the human project. It is an imaginary underpinned by cornerstone neo-liberal values: cheap nature converted for capitalism's gain.”*²²

This perception may unfortunately be considered to be not only inaccurate but also as a significant factor impacting the current status of the world's oceans (afflicted, *inter alia*, by ecosystem losses, pollution, mass extinctions) and environmental law's overall inadequacy to respond to the challenges facing the Earth's systems.²³

Driven by the proliferation of technological and scientific developments, as well as ongoing anthropogenic environmental crises,²⁴ scholars from a variety of intellectual crosscurrents broadly determined as new materialism(s) have recently initiated discussions aimed at the decentralization of the conventional Western dogma of social sciences, not least jurisprudence.²⁵ By alienating from modernization's dualisms and its derivative relationships of hierarchy and subjugation among beings (traditionally placing humans at the top of these hierarchies), current scholarship suggests a material "re-turn" to the conception of the world with a focus on both living and non-living beings.²⁶ When infused in the law of the sea, such critiques challenge the essentialism of law's boundaries, conventional dualisms and "anthropocentric leanings"²⁷ of ocean governance,²⁸ and instead embrace the entanglements amongst humans and non-human sentient populations, living and non-living elements of the oceans, organic and inorganic matter, and acknowledge that agency may be held by non-human beings too.²⁹

"*In a context in which the modality of ocean life is politically and technologically molten,*"³⁰ to quote Sarah Whatmore, the aesthetic qualities of comics, just like other forms of art and literature, may thus enable the reader to escape the boundaries of modern legal thought and allow for reconfiguring their interpretation of the material world as new materialist theorists suggest.³¹ Through technologies, spirits, superheroes, anthropomorphized animals and animalized humans³² and a hodgepodge of fantasy, imagination and realism, comics create a complex symbolic world that does not hesitate to expose law's inherent assumptions and challenge societies' existing normative relationship with the surrounding landscape. With the old materialism paradigm still reigning in international law of the sea, comics can provide legal thinking with a relational, aesthetic, and adaptive guiding ethos and give critical insights into the values that shape legislation, litigation, and resource management and governance in our ocean systems. To problematize the conventional relationship of law with the material oceanic world and render porous the boundaries that separate humans from non-human ocean beings, the following sections will delve into the fictional world of the *Corto Maltese* comic series and use it as a lens through which to challenge existing ontological assumptions that underpin international law of the sea.

III. A SHORT INTRODUCTORY NOTE ON THE WORLD OF *CORTO MALTESE*

Corto Maltese's creator Hugo Pratt was born in Rimini, Italy on June 15, 1927, the son of a family with English, Marrano Jewish, and Turkish origins.³³ At the

age of ten, his family was transferred to the Italian colony in Abyssinia, which at that time spanned modern day Ethiopia and Eritrea. As a teenager, Pratt was forced by his father to join the colonial police, thus becoming acquainted with the military world of Abyssinia, which at the time encompassed, next to Italian forces, the British, Abyssinian, Senegalese, and French armies.³⁴ In 1943, after the death of his father, Pratt returned to Italy for his studies, and moved to Buenos Aires in 1949 for the next thirteen years.³⁵ After short stays in Brazil and London, he eventually returned in Italy.³⁶ From 1984 until his death in 1995, Pratt lived in Switzerland.³⁷ Pratt has been acknowledged as one of the most important graphic novelists of the 20th century, authoring a large collection of published works.

Combining strong storytelling skills with extensive historical and geopolitical research, the graphic novel series, *Corto Maltese* is considered to be the most successful of Pratt's published artworks, ranked among the most significant comics ever produced.³⁸ The *Corto Maltese* series (first published in 1967)³⁹ describes the adventures of the eponymous sea captain, Maltese-born in 1887 to a gypsy mother from Seville and a British father sailor from Cornwall.⁴⁰ Corto participates in a plethora of adventures from the sub-Arctic to the tropics spanning about 30 years.⁴¹ Pratt has hinted that Corto was killed later during the Spanish Civil War, but he never created an episode about it.⁴²

The cosmopolitan environment in which Pratt grew up and lived largely informed his understanding of the world and of art, and is fully reflected in the quasi-fictional world of *Corto Maltese*. Corto is a laconic and enigmatic character who enjoys being lost in thoughts, imagination, and books.⁴³ Corto's adventures fluctuate between realistic historical events, mystical dreams, and obscure realities. Through his journeys across the world's ports and oceans, Corto encounters pirates, soldiers, Indigenous communities, fortune tellers and shamans, occult women, thieves wanted by the police and furious or friendly animals and spirits. He experiences the Russo-Japanese War,⁴⁴ the First World War in several locations,⁴⁵ participates in the Russian Civil War following the Great October Revolution,⁴⁶ and lives through the early phases of fascism in Italy.⁴⁷ Against this backdrop, the series involves several real-world persons of Corto's time such as the Mongolian partisan leader Damdin Sükhbaatar,⁴⁸ Baron Roman von Ungern-Sternberg,⁴⁹ the future billionaire Aristotle Onassis,⁵⁰ novelists Jack London,⁵¹ Ernest Hemingway⁵² and Hermann Hesse,⁵³ the Turkish general Enver Pasha,⁵⁴ the legendary pilot Red Baron,⁵⁵ the famous outlaw Butch Cassidy,⁵⁶ the poet and forerunner of Italian fascism Gabriele D'Annunzio,⁵⁷ young Joseph Stalin,⁵⁸ and many other historical figures who significantly influenced the history and culture of the twentieth century. In this discussion, the article refers to the English black and white edition of the graphic series published by Idea and Design Works, LLC (IDW) EuroComics.

IV. LESSONS FROM *CORTO MALTESE*'S ONTOLOGICAL UNIVERSE

Drawing on, among others, natural science observations, technological advances, environmental studies, feminist theories, queer studies, biopolitics, critical race and post-colonial theory, new materialist theorists may employ dozens of methods to approach knowledge. What is common among such theorizations is that they collectively move away from Western human exceptionalism, focus on the reconceptualization of matter, and challenge contemporary societies' dualisms and ontological assumptions about the non-human material world.⁵⁹ During the period *Corto Maltese* was published, from 1970 to 1989, discussions about this theoretical shift to rethink matter were minimal.⁶⁰ The inclusion of such insights in Pratt's work is however laudable. Through prominent research mainly drawn from historically marginalized epistemologies across the globe, Pratt managed to turn the series' rationale away from the persistent binaries of modern and humanist traditions and to expose dogmatic positions of Western thinking that are still dominant.

The following three subsections demonstrate how the graphic novel can be viewed as a representation of legal ideologies that dispel the myth of persistent Eurocentrism, reject the dualisms of modernity, reposition the human in relation to non-human beings and reapproach the material oceanic world in a way that largely shares common values with new materialist theories. With the latter diverging from the law of the sea's mainstream normative conceptualization of the marine world, theoretical insights from the comic narrative will be distilled in order to assess their ability to interrogate the juridical imaginary of the oceans.

DECOUPLING FROM THE WEST AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL PLURALISM

Looking at the history of international law of the sea, it is clear that its evolution has been motivated by two intertwined aspects associated with the human/ocean conceptual binary: territoriality and economic profit.⁶¹ Although the development of the modern law of the sea technically began right before the emergence of liberalism, Grotius and other notable early scholars of international law shared the same conceptual understanding of liberalism and theorised the oceans as an arena for free navigation and limitless exploitation of resources.⁶² Roughly concurrent with the age of exploration and the era of "merchant capitalism" that followed, it is often argued that the aim of Grotius' famous *Mare Liberum*⁶³ was not to establish a free sea *per se* as a flat plane of transit and wide global "common," but a sea free for trade, navigation, mercantilism, and presumably unhindered economic use and indefinite exploitation.⁶⁴

On the same spatial and economic premises, the freedom of the seas principle served for centuries and continues to serve under UNCLOS' territorial zonation apparatus⁶⁵ as the ideological platform for securing unimpeded international trade through the world's oceans.⁶⁶ With minimal international legal developments in the sea at the beginning of the 20th century when Corto lived,⁶⁷ the oceans, governed by the freedom of the seas doctrine, were arguably underregulated, subject to the dominant materialistic character of Western nations and their ruthless goal for appropriation, industrialization and (over)exploitation for the benefit of humans.⁶⁸ This understanding has also been reflected within the popular literature of the time.⁶⁹ In contrast to the traditional sailor profile of the first three decades of the 20th century when Corto travelled, the narrative of the series articulates an alternative reading of the marine world, woven into a romance of Pratt's composition.

Corto's character constitutes the personification of a brave, enigmatic hero (or even better, an anti-hero) with a free spirit, often sarcastic and fatalistic, who stands with the poor, supports the oppressed, joins revolutions and observes massacres. One of his most profound qualities is his overt skepticism of the dogmatic ideological, nationalistic and religious assertions of his time. Corto appears to understand the remorseless inequities of coastal societies of his era and is compassionate toward pirates, outcasts, revolutionaries, oppressed women, and kids. He not infrequently puts his high ideals over the economic benefits, self-interested individualism, and opportunism that other heroes in the story demonstrate.⁷⁰ Characteristically, in the episodes *Corto Maltese: in Siberia* and *Corto Maltese: The Golden House of Samarkand*, although his crew is searching for a valuable treasure, his persistent idealism makes Corto renounce material gains and prioritize ideals such as friendship and solidarity.⁷¹ This symbolic universe that Pratt articulates challenges not only the idea that pirates and sailors in pop culture are remorselessly fighting for booty and hidden treasures, but the overall biases and mercenary incentives that underlie Western thinking. Although he is a Western sailor, Corto appears as an anti-hegemonic person who denies the capitalist and colonial values of law and life at sea.

Next to the capitalistic nature of European maritime nations, Pratt calls into question issues of colonialism and acknowledges the plurality of knowledge systems across the oceanic world. The stories often see Corto aligned with Indigenous communities, helping colonized people recover their lands and revolt against their oppressors.⁷² In the sixth volume of the series, *The Ethiopian*, Pratt presents the liberation struggles in the Horn of Africa.⁷³ There, Corto supports the anti-colonial struggle, aligns himself with African revolutionaries, and rejects the colonial racial hierarchy. While throughout the story Corto appears to be at times confused when encountering African customs and traditions, as he is a European sailor, Pratt surprises us with a self-critical twist, by making a

“leopard-man” say: “*White people never understood Africa. They brought their laws without understanding that we have laws of our own, the authentic law,*” thus making clear that the conceptualization of law may largely vary among cultures.⁷⁴ Similarly, in the substory *Sureshot Samba*, part of the volume *Beyond the Windy Isles*,⁷⁵ Corto and his companions join the bandit *cangaçeiros*⁷⁶ in a fight against the colonel who occupied their traditional territory. When his good friend professor Steiner asks Corto if he truly believes that the conflicts will continue after the white colonel’s execution, Corto replies: “*You can be sure of it. And after him there will be another; until there is justice and freedom for all.*”⁷⁷

Although the overall comic presents Indigenous communities and traditional practices as pre-modern, as opposed to the rather “modern” sailor’s profile of the main character Corto, Corto’s sublime idealism expands to confront the way the West approaches other knowledge systems and brings forth what George Dei calls “epistemological equity” in the sense that Indigenous knowledge is treated on equal terms to the Western one.⁷⁸ The series takes for granted (or at least rarely problematizes) the fact that the oceans are a “pluriverse” to which Western epistemology only constitutes a single part.⁷⁹ Many examples demonstrate that: in the volume *Beyond the Windy Isles*, Corto is suffering from a severe form of amnesia. Then, his friend Steiner asks antique collector and dealer in Paramaribo Leví Columbia to give him magic mushrooms used by coastal Indigenous communities of Brazil, hoping that “magic” may manage to achieve what Western medicine does not.⁸⁰ While Professor Steiner personifies the mainstream Western academic, a graduate from the prestigious University of Prague, Pratt breaks the boundaries of Western knowledge and opens up room for alternative epistemic beliefs and traditional knowledge systems, thus demonstrating their value.

In other episodes, Corto encounters shamans, sorcerers, and figures with abilities which Western thought may interpret as “supernatural”.⁸¹ For instance, in the third chapter of *The Ethiopian*, Corto and his friend Cush meet Shamael, an African shaman who can hear the voices of the dead. While Shamael’s abilities seem, at first glance, strange to Corto, his friend Cush validates them, by simply declaring that they make sense because Shamael is “*the son of death and the devil*”.⁸² Likewise, in the substory, *Voodoo for the President* in the volume *Beyond the Windy Isles*, Corto meets a native Latin-American sorcerer who uses black magic to kill others telepathically.⁸³ While witchcraft and mystical beliefs were historically used as evidence of the primitive nature of non-Western societies to justify the settlers colonial expansion, Pratt’s narratives escape the stereotypes and orientalist biases of Western thought. Instead of exotifying such interactions, he represents them as absolutely normal, and builds up a smooth epistemological blend of spiritual understandings, Indigenous cosmovisions, and traditional knowledge systems, together with historical events, precise cartography, and historical figures.⁸⁴

Corto Maltese, like many other graphic series, navigates through an alternative legal discourse that enables complex interactions between various epistemological standpoints.⁸⁵ The series' epistemological plurality often draws on world assumptions of coastal Indigenous communities that extend beyond the foundations of modern thought and expose their limits. Such knowledge systems have often been inseparable from local communities' understandings about nature, plants and animals, and the ways people live and relate to each other and to the surrounding ocean systems.⁸⁶ Whereas Western philosophical (and legal) thought exclusively relies on empirical evidence and scientific evaluations in order to find meaning and interpret natural phenomena, coastal Indigenous communities have also used data that cannot be positivistically interpreted to reason individually or collectively.⁸⁷ Their approach to the material world may thus be driven, next to practical knowledge, by spiritual beliefs. This is demonstrated in the comic's narrative through a combination of Indigenous empirical observations and emotional and spiritual conceptions. Pratt's portrayal of a diverse and multicultural oceanic society beyond the subjugation to the West is expanded in the series' last episode, where Corto's friends and allies from earlier stories – representing cultures from all across the world – join him on board a schooner, all together for one last time, to search for *Mu*, the lost continent.⁸⁸ The narrative of the series, through the eyes of Corto, is critical of existing doctrines and brings forth a legal view of oceans that largely stems from non-Western knowledge systems.

RECONCILING WITH NON-HUMAN AGENCY

The objectification and technological mastery over matter logically resulting from humanity's mechanistic view has been a foundational understanding in the law of the sea's construction and implementation. Under UNCLOS' jurisdictional matrix, non-human living beings have been reduced to "resources," subject to appropriation and exploitation. Even conservation processes pre-necessitate the objectification of the non-human world, its enclosure within designated boundaries and establishment of *dominium* by states on the basis of sovereignty, while, in turn, environmental law has built its own legitimacy on the same rationale of appropriation and extraction.⁸⁹ In that regard, although ocean governance may in many cases be dynamic and adaptive, legal frameworks are rather reluctant to acknowledge the "agentic" capacity of non-human beings,⁹⁰ and insist on seeing other beings in nature as "resources" rather than "agents".⁹¹ The idea, known as "agential realism," denoting that each single matter and aspect of reality has agency, was first coined by Karen Barad in 1996.⁹² Since then, an efflorescence of interest in Barad's agential realism can be observed. This efflorescence includes numerous contributions that employ a terminologically novel vocabulary

to conceptualize agency held by non-human beings,⁹³ and deviates from the old materialist understanding that attributes agentic properties only to humans.

The *Corto Maltese* series' antithetical character to the mainstream material qualities of Western cultures is seen in different interactions with non-human living beings in the oceans. In the second and most popular episode of the series, *Ballad of the Salty Sea*, the young Māori sailor Tarao attempts, together with a young girl prisoner named Pandora, to escape from a pirate island using a small raft.⁹⁴ With no navigational instruments available on board, it initially seems that they are going to be lost in the dangerous open sea. Yet, Tarao decides to follow an old Māori myth according to which brave sailors are helped by sharks to navigate. To show him the way to Aotearoa (the Māori word for "New Zealand") he invokes a shark.⁹⁵ The shark responds and does exactly what Tarao asked him. Soon after, Tarao is seen replicating the act in front of English admirals, who view this shark-sailor interface with confusion and surprise.

Pratt does not delve into details to debate the conceptual boundaries between Māori and Western thought, nor tries to explain what has just happened; conversely, he presents Tarao's interaction with the shark as something entirely normal. This scene enables the reader to rethink the human-non-human relationship in the law of the sea and the role that sharks have traditionally given by humans and prompts them to pay attention to non-human ocean life and matter. Despite the rarity of people being killed or injured by sharks, such incidents have regularly attracted great media and political attention. The tremendous fear sharks induce in many people has been widely incorporated into pop-culture as well, with many comics presenting sharks as a symbol of fear, death and danger.⁹⁶

Several comic artists portray humans as animals; however they tend to do so in such a way as to reinstate traditional cartesian divisions (animal versus human and mind versus body). In contrast, Pratt illustrates a prominent example of multispecies ethnography: the *Ballad of the Salty Sea* acknowledges that sharks are sentient species who interact and coexist with humans in the marine space, being inextricably linked to Indigenous cultures and their spiritual and material ocean values.⁹⁷ Tarao's collaboration with the shark is well-aligned with the philosophies of many coastal communities that are traditionally based on the belief that the human relationship to the Earth is primarily one of partnership, fundamentally differing from the dualistic relationship of nation-states to the oceans and the anthropocentric understanding that lies underneath.⁹⁸ In many Indigenous cosmovisions, the term "community" is conceived as a unit of life made up of all forms of existence, humans and non-humans – not merely as a social structure consisted of human beings only.⁹⁹ As observed by Rosiek et al., non-human agency in Indigenous thought was developed thousands of years before new materialists "coined" the theorization of the concept.¹⁰⁰

The same idea is also reflected in the story *The Seagull's Fault* of the volume *Under the Sign of Capricorn*.¹⁰¹ The story starts with Corto shipwrecked on an island in British Honduras (nowadays Belize). There, Corto is hit on the head and loses his memory when a seagull appears and, although irritating him, it guides him through a dreamlike situation where he manages to find his friends. At the end of the story, while Corto admits that he doesn't even remember his own name, he argues that the seagull is the only one observer who knows everything happening on the island.¹⁰² Pratt's own respect to non-human ocean agencies and their symbiotic relationship with premodern communities is also pertinent here, with the author highlighting that, for centuries preceding the arrival of Europeans, the island was called *Maracatoqua* (which means "belonging to the seagull" in the Caribi language).¹⁰³

Likewise, in the last chapter of *the Ethiopian*, a leopard appears in another dreamlike situation, when Corto has fallen in coma after being shot with 38-caliber bullets.¹⁰⁴ Using a human language, the leopard self-identifies as a leopard-man who has come to deliver justice according to African law, and, after a short discussion with Corto, runs away.¹⁰⁵ A full explanation of whether this entity refers to an animal or a human is omitted from Pratt's narrative, yet it could be once again gathered here that this ontology revisits the sharp binary of human-non-human separation and the derivative axiological discrimination that puts humans above the non-human material world and denies humanity's domination over the rest of natural beings.

For Pratt, the agency of non-humans is taken as a given, and more emphasis is placed on the communication and the interactions between non-human and human beings, rather than on the realization that the more-than-human world may hold agentic capacities. It is worth mentioning that the attribution of agency to non-human beings in the comic most probably springs from Pratt's admiration for pre-modern cultures and non-Western traditions, as opposed to most contemporary new materialist discussions on non-human agency that are mainly premised upon natural science observations, technological developments and post-modern Western philosophy.¹⁰⁶ Pratt's family mixed ancestry, his personal cosmopolitan experience and contact with a plethora of cultures further supports this argument.

REVISITING MATTER-REALITY

Another omnipresent salience in Corto's world is the constant oscillations between reality, dreams and imagination. Modern legal realism, within which the international law of the sea has been shaped, is associated with existing evaluations of the surrounding world that can be only sensory conceived of, empirically verified and scientifically interpreted. While law seeks to instrumentalize

empirical facts that can be inserted into the rational reasoning of legal discourse, the reality of comics can escape all attempts at subjugation and continues to operate in all its splendor.¹⁰⁷ Reality in *Corto Maltese* stories is rather relational and moves indiscreetly between dreams, imagination, and a material world, which cannot always be seen, touched, heard or in any other way empirically understood. Corto's adventures encapsulate numerous examples of an unbounded reality that continuously manifests on its own terms.

While the first episodes of the series tend to follow real events, the vacillations among real and imaginary incidences climax towards the finale of the series. In the third episode, *Under the Sign of Capricorn*, a Latin-American tarot-reading sorceress communicates telepathically with her young half-brother Tristan, whom the sorceress has never met in person. Soon after, the boy enters an endless dreamlike situation in which he is guided by his own shadow towards the entrance of the mythical continent, *Mu*.¹⁰⁸ In the following volume *Celtic Tales*, the action moves from South America to Europe in the context of WWI, where mythological figures appear throughout the story and play an instrumental role in the course of events. In the six substories of the *Celtic Tales*, Pratt sheds light on complicated themes such as war, nationalism, revolution, opportunism and betrayal. Yet, while the first three stories of the volume are lacking ambiguity, the last three are grounded in a confusing blend of real events, imagination and dreaming. For instance, in the substory *A Midwinter Morning's Dream* – Pratt's tribute to Shakespeare – set at Stonehenge on the plains of Salisbury, Corto is joined by hypostasized mythical figures, such as the wizard Merlin, the Avalon's fay Morgana, Shakespeare's Puck, and Oberon, while trying to save Britain from the Teutonic invaders.¹⁰⁹ Likewise, in the substory *Burlesque Between Zuydcoote and Bray-Dunes*, Corto reunites with his old friend Cain who, like a memory, appears from that salty sea where the story first began. Eventually, the episode's mythical figures make sure that Corto thinks that he had only dreamt of certain events, leaving the reader wondering whether these events are only imaginary or have actually occurred.

Pratt's magic realities seem to subjugate the canonical set of principles that nowadays determines reality, as imaginary incidences prevail over empirical observations throughout these episodes. The conceptualization of these realities rests with each reader's different unifying framing act of perception and interpretation of image and text that enables the comic and allows the communication of a message.¹¹⁰ The same point is applicable to the following volume *The Fable of Venice*, where the narrative encompasses a compilation of politics, dream-quest, history and fantasy, and eventually Corto himself decides to exit the story to escape this dreamlike reality. In this episode, Corto agonizes over a well-blended mix of dreams and empirical observations and seeks answers from

philosophers and theosophists, including the beautiful and surreal Neoplatonist philosopher Hypatia.¹¹¹

Another incidence of an alternative perception of reality is articulated in one of Corto's most romantic adventures, *Tango*, where the protagonist is looking for the daughter of an old friend who was killed in Argentina. At the beginning of the story, while staring at the sky of Buenos Aires, Corto realizes that two moons shine simultaneously. The two-moon phenomenon resurfaces several times in Pratt's illustrations throughout the story, with Corto reflecting on whether they are a product of his imagination or an actual phenomenon. Without doubt, by the end of the episode, the existence of two moons is a reality. Although *Tango's* intrusions to reality are limited to the seamless co-existence of two moons over the sky of Buenos Aires, the following episode *The Secret Rose* reaches the apogee of Pratt's "magic reality." There, Pratt immerses Corto thoroughly in a surreal dreamlike world, where he encounters medieval mythological creatures, yet this time in a landlocked place. As Corto is looking for the Alchemy Rose, the story makes reference to several mythological creatures such as the Holy Grail, the Devil and the Sandman, as well as to real persons of the time such as the attractive woman and talented artist Tamara Łempicka.¹¹²

The valedictory episode of the series concludes with a search for the lost continent of *Mu*, the mythical Atlantis. *Mu's* reality encompasses a complex material universe that involves, next to realistic representations, anthropomorphic underwater Mayan statues – these are given agency by the narrator, live in the sea and can communicate with humans – mythological creatures, psychotropic mushrooms, scorpion-men, the monolithic *Moai* figures of the Easter Islands, a sinking island, and other more-than-human actors that play a significant role in the story. Corto interacts with all these actors and traverses an oceanic universe that has only blurred boundaries between land and sea, reality and imagination. The visuality of *Mu's* storyline further embraces this blend, with the design of *Mu's* figures and seascape being less polished and more decoratively abstract than in any other episode of the series. In *Mu*, Pratt attributes agency to a myriad of beings and welcomes an ongoing fluidity between the real and the surreal within a shared world of imaginative relationality grounded in dynamic relations among beings and spaces.

Whereas contemporary philosophical and legal realist thinking draws on phenomenal reality according to which reality results from the human capacity to experience situations and frame them under categories and concepts,¹¹³ Corto's imaginary reality takes for granted that reality may have a myriad of colors (not always understood by humans), radicalizes its culture, and allows for different interpretations, relationality and contingencies. These "materialist ontologies" in Corto's world even have room for emotions, feelings, and spiritual elements as active forces that produce reality – an idea nowadays echoed by "speculative

realists.”¹¹⁴ New materialist scholars suggest speculative realism as a philosophy concerned mainly with a metaphysics that seeks to reject the centrality of Kantian observations in human thinking, according to which reality cannot move beyond the intrinsic limitations of common sense and empirical observation.¹¹⁵ Speculative realism explores what it means to think about reality, without placing emphasis on the ability of human beings to know and fully understand the world.¹¹⁶ Pratt’s imaginary universe denies any subjugation and embraces a multidimensional reality that its heroes can only in part comprehend. The fables of *Corto Maltese* thus demonstrate that comics may help understand innumerable components as bits of reality and re-capture the material and semiotic valences of law and life in the sea.

V. EPILOGUE

Interweaving the different ontological accounts resulting from the symbolic universe of the *Corto Maltese* series, the article has sought to argue that the graphic novel communicates insights that allow legal thinking to revisit conceptual biases underlying the juridical imaginary of ocean governance and move beyond orthodox legalities and ontological assumptions embedded in legal thought. Modernity has taught us to presume that there are intrinsically existing objects, subjects, or actions, creating an oceanic reality that can be “experienced” and regulated only by humans. In this context, the current management regime of the oceans reflects an old materialism, with human beings presumed to be the primary actors on the seascape, and the law of the sea focusing on increasing state control over ocean space and matter. Neoliberalism, sovereign states, and capitalism are the driving pillars of this understanding, but they increasingly fail to address the main challenges the oceans face today.

Comics may thus bring into the foreground the intrinsic shortcomings of existing ideologies embedded in ocean legal thinking and point towards alternative trajectories.¹¹⁷ Rather than seeing the oceans as a fixed Euclidean space wherein power is only exercised by humans, Pratt’s illustrations and storylines appear subversive toward the dominant values of his era and offer an idealistic reading of the marine world, a mosaic of ideological beliefs that could be considered radical even today. The material oceanic universe of *Corto Maltese* draws from a materialism that eliminates the rigid boundaries between human and non-human, reality and imagination and sees in all matter their own agency and liveliness. In this process, the law of the sea’s discursive material reality becomes an object of aesthetic criticism, deconstructed, transfigured, and problematized. The series’ overall performativity affirms the conviction that Pratt’s tremendous openness to the otherness and genuine respect for more-than-human interactions emerged as a result of the artist’s own metissage and childhood in the Italian

colony of Abyssinia – not coincidentally reflected in Corto’s own openness, biracial origins and cosmopolitan background. Pratt’s intimate knowledge of history and mythology, as well as his intellectual interest in agnosticism, esotericism, freemasonry and alchemy, further elucidate his aesthetic.¹¹⁸

Approximately three decades have passed since the last episode of *Corto Maltese* was published and about twenty-five years from Pratt’s death. Yet, considering the current socioecological status of the world’s oceans, Pratt’s work seems more topical than ever before and an extremely valuable intellectual tool for re-thinking the ocean’s legal imaginary. With humans being the dominant actant and driving force of our era, international law of the sea plays an important role in ensuring the futurity of the non-human marine world; however it remains bounded by ontological assumptions that have now proven to be inadequate, if not false. The normative world of *Corto Maltese* and its alternative matter-reality can be used as a lens to revisit the way the law of the sea is considered, by disregarding conceptual static binaries, erasing lines that divide land from sea and humans from non-human beings, revisiting the colonial and capitalistic legacy of life and law in the sea, and acknowledging the agency of non-human actors. Such a material turn to jurisprudence could help rethink the relationships among matter and reflect upon the dynamic and contingent aspects of reality by challenging what is known to be real. Pratt’s work can therefore serve as an instructive departure from law’s mainstream approach to the oceans.

Applying this material thinking to the comic series is not a normative attempt to place humans symmetrically to other matter and reconstruct this relationship through a symbolical analysis. It is rather a theoretical investigation to destabilize what legal scholars take for granted, enable critical thought, and advocate for an alternative ontological stance through the lens of a popular medium. In the geological era in which the law of the sea’s mainstream approach to the material world is no longer functional, such theoretical exercises may urge legal scholars to rethink fundamental assumptions that inform our societies’ normative relationship to the sea, and tackle issues that require redress. The status quo of the world’s ocean systems signals a material re-examination of the seas, along with an epistemological watershed in ocean governance. Conceptualizing this relationship between word and image, and engaging with the narrative of a comic, thus becomes not merely a way to be reflective about the world surrounding us, but a conceptual opportunity for contextualizing the law of the sea within a larger framework of life and roles of which humanity constitutes just a tiny part.

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1. To frame the complex narrative qualities of comics, Giddens labels them as a “multimodal” medium in the sense that they employ a variety of different modes in communicating messages combining *inter alia* visual, graphic, and textual elements; see, in general, the discussion in Thomas Giddens, *On Comics and Legal Aesthetics: Multimodality and the Haunted Mask of Knowing* (Routledge, 2019), 1-27.
2. See, for instance, Renee Krusemark, “The Role of Critical Thinking in Reader Perceptions of Leadership in Comic Books,” *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education* 2, no. 1 (2015): 1-25.
3. Just think of the navigation through homosexuality in Marvel’s *Northstar*, where the first depiction of a same-sex wedding in mainstream comics culture is coined, or the description of the fundamentalistic and ever-shifting Iranian traditions in Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*; see respectively Marjorie Liu, *Astonishing X-Men no.51* (Marvell, 2014); and Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (Pantheon Graphic Library, 2004).
4. There is no better example I could come up with than the comprehensive research conducted by Joe Sacco in his comic journalism works, exploring themes such as the Israeli-Palestinian relations in *Palestine* (1996) and *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009), the Bosnian War in his *Safe Area Goražde* (2000) and most recently in *Paying the Land* (2020), navigating through cultural colonization issues and resource development disputes among the Dene Indigenous peoples and the Canadian state; see, respectively, Joe Sacco, *Palestine* (Fantagraphics, 1996); Joe Sacco, *Footnotes in Gaza* (Henry Holt and Company, 2009); Joe Sacco, *Safe Area Goražde* (Fantagraphics, 2000); Joe Sacco, *Paying the Land* (Jonathan Cape Ltd, 2020).
5. Comic characters may attribute justice or practice law both in the court rooms and on the streets, such as the blind superhero Daredevil (Matt Murdock) does, being a skilled and respected New York lawyer-by-day and a masked vigilante who fights crime by night. Some heroes may even enact justice from their bedrooms, like Yagami Light, the genius teen, who discovers the mysterious notebook “Death Note” that grants the user the supernatural ability to kill anyone whose name is written in its pages. See respectively Stan Lee, *Daredevil* (Marvel Comics, 1964-ongoing); Tsugumi Ohba, *Death Note* (Shueisha, 2003-2006).
6. Luis Gomez Romero and Ian Dahlman, “Introduction - Justice Framed: Law in Comics and Graphic Novels,” *Law Text Culture* 16 (2012): 16.
7. Navigating through conscious and unconscious spheres and locating law within an infinite frame of ingenuity, comics may not only influence our way of perceiving law but also the way legal scholars conceptualize

- knowledge or aspects of reality; see, below, section IV "Revisiting Matter-reality."
8. On interspecies interaction and human-non-human relations in comic narratives, see, for instance, Daniel F. Yezbick, "Lions and Tigers and Fears: A Natural History of the Sequential Animal" in *Animal Comics: Multispecies Storyworlds in Graphic Narratives*, ed. David Hermann, (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 29-52; Glenn Willmott, "The Animalized Character and Style" in *Animal Comics: Multispecies Storyworlds in Graphic Narratives*, ed. David Hermann, (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 53-76.
 9. Giddens, *On Comics and Legal Aesthetics: Multimodality and the Haunted Mask of Knowing*, 8-9.
 10. As observed by Fesmire, this ontology is often understood as an "object ontology" referring to a mechanistic, linear and reductive philosophy of the world, as opposed to the "field ontology" which is grounded in ecological thinking; Steven Fesmire, "Ecological Imagination," *Environmental Ethics* 32, no. 2 (2010): 197.
 11. Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (Routledge, 1993), 36.
 12. Fritjof Capra and Ugo Mattei, *The Ecology of Law: Toward a Legal System in Tune with Nature and Community* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2015), 3.
 13. Irus Braverman, "Law's Underdog: A Call for More-than-Human Legalities," *The Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 14, no. 1 (2018): 140.
 14. Melinda H Benson, "New Materialism: An ontology for the Anthropocene" *Natural Resources Journal* 59, no. 2 (2019): 257.
 15. Sociologist John Law uses the concept of "one-world world" paradigm to denote that Western thought is almost universally grounded in a unified ontological assumption of a single objective; John Law, "What's Wrong with a One-World World?" *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 12, no. 1 (2015): 126-139; for a legal discussion on Law's "one-world world" paradigm, see also Emille Boulot and Joshua Sterlin, "Steps Towards a Legal Ontological Turn: Proposals for Law's Place beyond the Human," *Transnational Environmental Law* 11, no. 1 (2022): 13-38.
 16. Pierre Cloutier de Repentigny, "To the Anthropocene and beyond: the responsibility of law in decimating and protecting marine life," *Transnational Legal Theory* 11, no. 1-2 (2020): 181.
 17. Vanessa Burns, "Analysis of ocean ontologies in three frameworks: A study of law of the sea discourse," *EPE: Nature and Space* 0, no. 0 (2022): 1-26.
 18. Convention on the Law of the Sea (adopted 10 December 1982, entered into force on 16 November 1994) 1833 UNTS 3 (UNCLOS).
 19. Law's spatiality in relation to non-human ocean elements and their hydrological materiality and mobility is mainly discussed in the work of legal geographers; see, for instance, Philip E Steinberg and Kimberley Petters, "Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume through Oceanic Thinking," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 33, no. 2 (April 2015): 247-64; Mara Ntona and Mika Schröder, "Regulating oceanic imaginaries: the legal construction of space, identities, relations and epistemological hierarchies within marine spatial planning," *Maritime Studies* 19, no. 1 (2020): 241; Kimberley Peters and Philip E. Steinberg, "Volume and Vision: Fluid Frames of Thinking Ocean Space," *Harvard Design Magazine* 124, (2014): 35.
 20. Christian Erni and Marianne Jensen, *Indigenous Affairs 3/01* (Copenhagen IWGIA 2002) 27-30.
 21. For example, to ensure the long-term conservation and sustainable use of straddling and highly migratory fish stocks, an agreement was adopted by the UN in 1995; see the Agreement for the Implementation of the Provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas of 10 December 1982 Relating to the Conservation and Management of Straddling Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks, Conference on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks, 6th Sess., U.N. Doc. A/CONF.164/37 (1995).
 22. Susan Reid, "Solwara 1 and the sessile ones," in *Blue Legalities: The Life and Laws of the Sea*, ed. Irus Braverman and Elisabeth R Johnson, (Duke University Press, 2020), 27.
 23. Scholars tend to frame as "Anthropocene" the present era where the repercussions of humanity's action on the Earth's systems are

- omnipresent. On the Anthropocene and law of the sea, see Davor Vidas, "The Anthropocene and the international law of the sea," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A* 369 (2011): 909.
24. Jelena Djuric, "Emergence of new materialism" (*New materialism: How Matter Comes to Matter*, 15 March 2018) <<https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/e/emergence.html>> accessed October 31, 2022.
25. While it is not the purpose of this article to summarize the tremendous breadth of this literature, it is important to provide the main insights drawn from this scholarship: in a nutshell, new materialist theories share the idea that beings emerge out and interact through relational and contingent processes rather than being fixed or stable; reject the dualistic ontologies of nature/culture, human/nonhuman, mind/matter and so on, and acknowledge "the agentic capacities of all matter"; see Nick J. Fox and Pam Alldred, "Sustainability, feminist posthumanism and the unusual capacities of (post)humans," *Environmental Sociology* 6, no. 2 (2020): 128; Although there is no singular sense for the concept of "agency," it overall refers to beings' "capacity to make new, to transform, change, disrupt, differ and so on"; see Sean Bowden, "Human and Nonhuman Agency in Deleuze," in *Deleuze and the Non/Human*, ed. Jon Roffe and Hannah Stark, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 61.
26. Kimberley Peters, "Preface" in *Territory Beyond Terra*, ed. Kimberley Peters and others, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 15; Jelena Djuric, "Emergence of new materialism" (*New materialism: How Matter Comes to Matter*, 15 March 2018) accessed online at <https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/e/emergence.html> online.
27. For a critical engagement with the anthropocentric nature of law, see Anna Grear, "Deconstructing Anthropos: A Critical Legal Reflection on "Anthropocentric" Law and Anthropocene 'Humanity,'" *Law Critique* 25, (2015): 225.
28. Peters and others, *Territory Beyond Terra*, 15; De Repentigny, "To the Anthropocene and beyond: the responsibility of law in decimating and protecting marine life," 180.
29. For the later legalities, see Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, "The normativity of an animal atmosphere," in *Law and the Question of the Animal: A Critical Jurisprudence*, ed. Yoriko Otomo, Edward Mussawir, (Routledge, 2013); see also Bruno Latour, *The Making of Law: An Ethnography of the Conseil d'Etat* (Polity, 2009).
30. Sarah Whatmore, "Materialist returns: practising cultural geography in and for a more-than-human world," *Cultural Geographies* 13, no. 1 (2006): 600.
31. While law has boundaries and limits, comics as an artistic (and generally fictional) expression tends to be limitless and loosely driven by its aesthetic qualities. It is this unbounded nature of comics that activates critical thinking in many ways and penetrates existing legal boundaries; for instance, through a discussion based on Shirow Masamune's classic manga *The Ghost in the Shell*, Giddens has demonstrated the fluidity of the uncertain boundary between humans and machines due to the growing integration of technology into human lives and examines the role of law in establishing certainty on this fluid boundary. In his article, Giddens employs *The Ghost in the Shell* as a tool to show that although law is inherently aiming at certainty and stability, the boundaries between humans and machines are ever-changing and unstable; Thomas Giddens, "Law and the machine: fluid and mechanical selfhood in *The Ghost in the Shell*" in *Graphic Justice: Intersections of Comics and Law*, ed. Thomas Giddens, (Routledge, 2015), 89-105.
32. Anthropomorphism (humanlike metaphors for non-human agents or entities) and zoomorphism (portrayals of humans or other kinds of entities as animals) are very regular phenomena in comic narratives; zoomorphism, for instance, is omnipresent in Art Spiegelman's most popular graphic novel *Maus* where Jews are presented as mice, Germans as cats, and Poles as pigs; see Art Spiegelman, *Maus* (Pantheon Books, 1980-1991).
33. "Hugo Pratt" (*Corto Maltese*, 2021) accessed online at <https://cortomaltese.com/en/hugo-pratt/>
34. Mr Geo Neo, "Hugo Pratt (1927-1995)" (*Illustrator's Lounge*, 2016) accessed online at <https://illustratorslounge.com/comic/hugo-pratt-1927-1995/>

35. Mr Geo Neo, "Hugo Pratt (1927-1995)" (*Illustrator's Lounge*, 2016) accessed online at <https://illustratorslounge.com/comic/hugo-pratt-1927-1995/>
36. Mr Geo Neo, "Hugo Pratt (1927-1995)" (*Illustrator's Lounge*, 2016) accessed online at <https://illustratorslounge.com/comic/hugo-pratt-1927-1995/>
37. "Hugo Pratt" (*Corto Maltese*, 2021) accessed online at <https://cortomaltese.com/en/hugo-pratt/>
38. Pratt's most popular episode of *Corto Maltese*, *The Ballad of the Salty Sea*, was listed among *Le Monde's* 100 most important books of the 20th century, being one of the few comics in that list; see Hugo Pratt, *The Ballad of the Salty Sea* (IDW Publishing, 2020).
39. "Hugo Pratt" (*Corto Maltese*, 2021) accessed online at <https://cortomaltese.com/en/hugo-pratt/>
40. According to the legend, Corto was born without a fate line on his palm, which had not discovered until a gypsy tried to read it.
41. Corto's adventures are illustrated in 12 graphic novels translated in English as 1. *Corto Maltese: The Early Years* (set in 1905); 2. *Corto Maltese: The Ballad of the Salty Sea* (set in 1913-1915); 3. *Corto Maltese: Under the Sign of Capricorn* (set in 1916-1917); 4. *Corto Maltese: Beyond the Windy Isles* (set in 1917-1918); 5. *Corto Maltese: Celtic Tales* (set in 1917-1918); 6. *Corto Maltese: The Ethiopian* (set in 1918); 7. *Corto Maltese: In Siberia* (set in 1918-1920); 8. *Corto Maltese: The Fable of Venice* (set in 1921); 9. *Corto Maltese: The Golden House of Samarkand* (set in 1921-1922); 10. *Corto Maltese: Tango* (set in 1923); 11. *Corto Maltese: The Secret Rose* (set in 1924); 12. *Corto Maltese: Mu, The Lost Continent* (set in 1925). The series was continued in 2015 by Ruben Pellejero and Juan Diaz Canales, with three following volumes being released so far, chronologically set between the volumes *The Early Years* and *The Ballad of the Salty Sea*.
42. "The story of Corto Maltese" (*Corto Maltese*, 2021) accessed online at <https://cortomaltese.com/en/my-story/>.
43. Corto's favourite reading is Thomas More's *Utopia*, which however he never manages to complete.
44. The story *Corto Maltese: The Early Years* narrates this period; see Hugo Pratt, *Corto Maltese: The Early Years* (IDW Publishing, 2019).
45. *The Ballad of the Salty Sea*, for instance takes place on WWI-era Pacific Islands, while in the *Celtic Tales*, Corto encounters the legendary German WWI pilot *Red Baron*; see, respectively, Pratt, *Corto Maltese: The Ballad of the Salty Sea*; Hugo Pratt, *Corto Maltese: Celtic Tales* (IDW Publishing, 2016).
46. Hugo Pratt, *Corto Maltese: In Siberia* (IDW Publishing, 2017).
47. Hugo Pratt, *Corto Maltese: Fable of Venice* (IDW Publishing, 2017).
48. Pratt, *Corto Maltese: In Siberia*.
49. Pratt, *Corto Maltese: In Siberia*.
50. Pratt, *Corto Maltese: Celtic Tales*.
51. In *Corto Maltese: The Early Years*, the writer Jack London appears to be the protagonist of the story alongside with Rasputin; Pratt, *Corto Maltese: The Early Years*.
52. Pratt, *Corto Maltese: Celtic Tales*.
53. Hugo Pratt, *Corto Maltese: The Secret Rose* (IDW Publishing, 2019).
54. Hugo Pratt, *Corto Maltese: The Golden House of Samarkand* (IDW Publishing, 2016).
55. Pratt, *Corto Maltese: Celtic Tales*.
56. Hugo Pratt, *Corto Maltese: Tango* (IDW Publishing, 2018).
57. Pratt, *Corto Maltese: Fable of Venice*.
58. Pratt, *Corto Maltese: The Golden House of Samarkand*.
59. For new materialisms in law of the sea scholarship, see, among others, the contributions in Braverman and Johnstone, *Blue Legalities: The Life and Laws of the Sea*.
60. There were rather the foundations of new materialisms established at that time, such as the nascence of the theory of assemblage by DeLanda, and Deleuze and Guattari and the Actor Network Theory (ANT) of Latour and John Law that set the scene for the emergence of the new material stream. For a historical development of materialist thinking and its evolution from "old" to "new," see Christopher N. Gamble and others, "What is New Materialism?," *Angelaki Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 24, no. 6 (2019): 111-134.
61. Becky Mansfield, "Neoliberalism in the oceans: 'rationalization,' property rights, and the

- commons question," *Geoforum* 35, no 1 (2004): 313-326.
62. De Repentigny, "To the Anthropocene and beyond: the responsibility of law in decimating and protecting marine life," 180.
63. Hugo Grotius, *The Freedom of the Seas, Or, the Right Which Belongs to the Dutch to Take Part in the East Indian Trade* (Oxford University Press, 1916).
64. De Repentigny, "To the Anthropocene and beyond: the responsibility of law in decimating and protecting marine life," 181.
65. As argued above, within UNCLOS, the freedom of navigation has been complemented by a zonation system that is expressed through different ways of drawing sovereignty or sovereign rights on the oceanic space on the basis of adjacency to land.
66. Davor Vidas and others, "International law for the Anthropocene? Shifting perspectives in regulation of the oceans, environment and genetic resources," *Anthropocene* 9, (2015): 1-13.
67. The formation of the League of Nations in 1920 led to the first preliminary discussions on territorial seas and treatment of foreign vessels but was eventually not included by the League of Nations Codification Conference of 1930 and was not crystalized until the First United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea in 1958; Donald R Rothwell and Tim Stephens, *The International Law of the Sea* (Hart, 2016), 4-5.
68. Mansfield, "Neoliberalism in the oceans: 'rationalization,' property rights, and the commons question," 313-326.
69. Just thing of the individualist and materialist profile of Wolf Larsen, captain of *the Ghost*, a seal-hunting schooner in Jack London's *Sea Wolf* (1904), or, a few decades earlier, Captain Ahab's character in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851).
70. These characteristics are rather incorporated within the character of Corto's friend, Rasputin, whom Pratt presents as an avaricious and arrogant man, yet too credulous and naïve.
71. For a deeper discussion on Corto's idealism that exceeds beyond material gains, see Peter Stanković, "Corto Maltese and the process of endless semiosis," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 12, (2019): 375-391.
72. See, for instance, the substory *Banana Conga* of the volume *Beyond the Windy Isles*, where Pratt illustrates the struggle of coastal nations emerging from the yoke of colonialism.
73. Hugo Pratt, *Corto Maltese: The Ethiopian* (IDW Publishing, 2016).
74. Pratt, *Corto Maltese: The Ethiopian*, 138.
75. Hugo Pratt, *Corto Maltese: Beyond the Windy Isles* (IDW Publishing, 2015).
76. *Cangaço* was a form of "social banditry" against the Brazilian government from the late 19th to early 20th centuries.
77. Hugo Pratt, *Corto Maltese: Under the Sign of Capricorn* (IDW Publishing, 2018), 72.
78. George J Dei, "Indigenous knowledge studies and the next generation: Pedagogical possibilities for anti-colonial education," *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* 37, no. 1 (2008): 8.
79. Borrowed from Arturo Escobar, the parable of "pluriverse" here refers to "that other world where many worlds fit," breaking with conventional premises of the real and the possible; for a deep engagement with the "pluriversal" politics, see Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the pluriverse. Radical interdependence, autonomy, and the making of worlds* (Duke University Press, 2018).
80. See Pratt, *Corto Maltese: Beyond the Windy Isles*.
81. For instance, in the episode *The Golden House of Samarkand*, Corto goes to the house of his Greek friend Cassandra, who uses her skills in tasseography to guess his future by reading Greek coffee grounds; Pratt, *Corto Maltese: The Golden House of Samarkand*, 17-18.
82. Pratt, *Corto Maltese: The Ethiopian*, 57.
83. See Pratt, *Corto Maltese: Beyond the Windy Isles*, 70.
84. Several other comics of the time, such as Tintin, tend to exotify non-Western knowledge systems and have been criticized for perpetuating colonial stereotypes; see, for instance, the discussion in René Provost, "Magic and modernity in Tintin au Congo (1930) and the Sierra Leone Special Court" *Law Text Culture* 16, (2012): 183-216.
85. Gomez Romero and Dahlman, "Introduction - Justice framed: law in comics and graphic novels," 6.

86. Robin M Wright, "Wise People of Great Power: Indigenous prophetic visions in the Northwest Amazon Little Bear," *Journal for the Study of Religion Nature and Culture* 2, (2009): 170.
87. Val Napoleon and Hadley Friedland, "An inside job: engaging with indigenous legal traditions through stories," *McGill LJ* 61, no. 4 (2016): 725-743.
88. Hugo Pratt, *Corto Maltese: Mu, The Lost Continent* (IDW Publishing, 2020).
89. See, in particular, Capra and Mattei, *The Ecology of Law: Toward a Legal System in Tune with Nature and Community*; Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 120-140.
90. Tim Ingold, *Making Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (Routledge, 2013), 132; see also Andreas Weber, "Reality as Commons: A Poetics of Participation for the Anthropocene," in *Patterns of Commoning*, ed. Bollier and Helfrich, (Amherst, 2015), 369.
91. This is widely opposed by new materialists who agree that non-human / more-than-human / other-than-human matter have agentic capacity, which is defined, distributed, and organised by their relationality with other matter; see, for instance, Felicity J Colman, "Agency" (*New materialism: How Matter Comes to Matter*, 2018) accessed at <https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/a/agency.html>.
92. Karen Barad, "Meeting the universe halfway; realism and social constructivism without contradiction," in *Feminism, Science and the Philosophy of Science*, ed. Lynn Hankinson Nelson and Jack Nelson, (Kluwer Academic, 1997), 161-194; Barad's idea was eventually published in 2007 in book format; see Karen Barad, *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007).
93. Just to name a few, Jane Bennett, Alaimo Stacy, Alecia Youngblood Jackson, Lisa Mazzei and Ezekiel Dixon have extensively written on "non-human agency."
94. Pratt, *Corto Maltese: The Ballad of the Salty Sea*.
95. Pratt, *Corto Maltese: The Ballad of the Salty Sea*, 122-123.
96. Indeed, the literature has recently started to depart away from the conventional reductionist approach that conceives of sharks as a "ruthless fish" and acknowledges the agentic capacity of sharks and their position as actors in shaping the marine space and legalities within it; in that regard see the beautiful piece by Leah Gibbs, "Sharks, Nets and More-Than-Human Territory in Eastern Australia," in *Territory Beyond Terra*, ed. Kimberley Peters and others, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 203-219.
97. Prominent multispecies interaction in the context of ongoing risks in the oceans can be also observed in Matt Dembicki's 2012 graphic novel *XOC: The Journey of a Great White*; Matt Dembicki, *XOC: The Journey of a Great White* (Oni Press, 2012)
98. Jonas Perrin, "Legal Pluralism as a Method of Interpretation: A Methodological Approach to Decolonising Indigenous Peoples' Land Rights under International Law," in *Universitas- Revista de Ciencias Sociales y Humanas* 26, (2017): 23-60; Kenneth Ruddle and others, "Marine Resources Management in the Context of Customary Tenure," *Marine Resource Economics* 7, no. 4, (1992): 249-273.
99. Perrin, "Legal Pluralism as a Method of Interpretation: A Methodological Approach to Decolonising Indigenous Peoples' Land Rights under International Law," 38.
100. Jerry L Rosiek, "The New Materialisms and Indigenous Theories of Non-Human Agency: Making the Case for Respectful Anti-Colonial Engagement" *Qualitative Inquiry* 26, no. 3-4 (2019) 331, 332.
101. Pratt, *Corto Maltese: Under the Sign of Capricorn*.
102. Pratt, *Corto Maltese: Under the Sign of Capricorn*, 138.
103. Pratt, *Corto Maltese: Under the Sign of Capricorn*, 119.
104. Pratt, *Corto Maltese: The Ethiopian*, 91-92.
105. Pratt, *Corto Maltese: The Ethiopian*, 92.
106. For an interesting interface of human-non-human relationships among new materialism and Indigenous philosophies, see, overall, the discussion in Rosiek, "The New Materialisms and Indigenous Theories of Non-Human Agency: Making the Case for Respectful Anti-Colonial Engagement," 331-346.
107. Provost, "Magic and modernity in Tintin au Congo (1930) and the Sierra Leone Special Court," 209.
108. Pratt, *Corto Maltese: Under the Sign of Capricorn*, 40-44.
109. See Pratt, *Corto Maltese: Celtic Tales*.
110. See Pascal Lefèvre, "Narration in Comics," (*Image and Narrative Online Magazine of the*

- Visual Narrative, 2000) accessed at <http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/narratology/pascalfevre.htm>.
111. Pratt, *Corto Maltese: Fable of Venice*
 112. See Pratt, *Corto Maltese: The Secret Rose*.
 113. Kant's most famous work, *Critique of Pure Reason*, sets the foundations of phenomenal reality; see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Penguin 2007).
 114. Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible* (Duke University Press, 2020), 36.
 115. Speculative realists are realists because they acknowledge that humans are always in contact with reality in one way or another, but they are also speculative, since they openly explore traditionally metaphysical questions, rather than limiting themselves to matters of logical form, on the one hand, and empirical inquiry, on the other; see Benson, "New Materialism: An ontology for the Anthropocene," 255-256.
 116. This stream turns away from both scientific positivism and the mainstream "social constructionist" debunking of science.
 117. Gomez Romero and Dahlman, "Introduction - Justice framed: law in comics and graphic novels," 22.
 118. Pratt's intellectual curiosity and work within these fields is further discussed in David Martín López and Antonio Jiménez Nievas, "Hugo Pratt and the Freemasonic Aesthetic: Corto Maltese, The Last Romantic Mason?," *REHMLAC* 10, no. 2 (2018): 120-138.

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