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Seascapes: Shaped by the Sea

Edited by
Mike Brown and Barbara Humberstone

Seascapes: Shaped by the Sea

Embodied Narratives and Fluid Geographies

Edited by

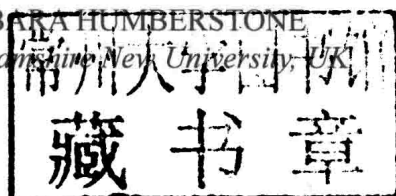
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SEASCAPES: SHAPED BY THE SEA

*In memory of Russell Brown (1937–2011),
who fostered and supported
a love of the sea*

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narrative, Barker enables the reader to see things from a different perspective. The poem upends our understandings by pointing out that for a polar bear an iceberg is a site of refuge, and a ship brings danger. And as a result we not only have an enhanced understanding of polar bear livelihoods; we also receive a new impetus for questioning our common sense assumptions about the ways in which we encounter and know a fundamental space of human experience: the sea.

By throwing our perceptual framework into disarray Barker's poem leads us to reconsider the sea as something much more complex than its usual depiction as the surface upon which elements including icebergs and ships float, occasionally meeting up with each other to disastrous effect. In *Have you got any news of the iceberg?* the sea is a space of both sanctuary and danger. It is an alien environment but also a habitat. It is a surface for crossings but also a site of distinct points (some of which are hazards, or refuges, or both). Those points themselves are mobile, which, in turn, challenges their ontological status as 'places' in the ordinary, static sense. Furthermore, we learn from Barker's story that the sea is not simply liquid water. It is also ice. And although Barker does not develop this point, it is also air, including the mist that complicated initial sightings of the iceberg by the Titanic and later sightings of the Titanic by rescue ships. And it is seabed, where the remains now lie.

Additionally, although the ocean in *Have you got any news of the iceberg?* is beyond land, it exists in constant interaction with land. In part, these connections with land are cultural, as in the voyages of cruise ships like the Titanic where land-based social rituals are transplanted to water. But they are also geophysical: the iceberg that sunk the Titanic consisted of glacial ice that almost certainly had calved off the coast of Greenland. In Barker's story we learn that the sea is forever (it is a timeless grave), but we also learn that it is a space of fleeting encounters and geophysical recompositions. Indeed, today, 100 years after sinking the Titanic, the iceberg that is the subject of Barker's poem in all probability no longer exists.

Perhaps most significantly, however, we learn from Barker's poem that the sea is a space of multiple, and at times contradictory, *experiences*. Whether experienced tactilely (e.g. by polar bears), visually (e.g. by cruise ship passengers), or virtually (e.g. by readers of the poem), the sea is a space where singular stories are told about a multiplicitous environment.

Barker's poem thus provides a fitting entry point for this book about the various ways in which we experience the sea and make sense of those maritime encounters. To be certain, not all of the themes suggested by Barker receive equal coverage in *Seascapes*. When the editors, Mike Brown and Barbara Humberstone, state in their opening chapter that they intend to focus on how 'experiences [of the ocean] might inform collective interpretations and how collective representations influence their lived experiences', they appear to be restricting their focus to *human* experiences. There are no polar bears in this book, and if they were to appear they almost certainly would not be talking. But even the human experience, especially at sea, has a more-than-human element to it. Consider one of the quotations from Bernard Moitessier that appears in Brown and Humberstone's introductory

chapter: 'I watch this fantastic sea, breathe in its spray, and feel blossoming here in the wind and space something that needs the immensity of the universe to come to fruition.' Moitessier's experience may be specifically human, but it is an experience of something that both *exceeds* and *becomes* himself.

In other words, even when experienced virtually, the ocean is encountered as a profoundly *real* space, a characteristic that is sometimes lost in nineteenth-century romantic accounts of the ocean sublime. The authors in this book not only think *with* the sea, they think *in* the sea, and, because the sea is immersive, it is, as Brown and Humberstone stress, also transformative of who we are and how we think. When we sense the awesome power of an undertow or a crashing wave or a glistening horizon, we are changed and our understanding of the world is changed, whether or not we get wet.

Indeed, distance can sometimes enhance the encounter by providing a critical perspective. I became aware of this around 1999 when I was living in Florida and became friends with a somewhat bored computer network administrator who was seeking certification to fly recreational single-engine aircraft. I joined him in the cockpit on a few training runs and, probably in violation of Federal Aviation Administration rules, occasionally took over the controls. As we flew over the barrier islands of North Florida's Gulf Coast and I mischievously dipped the wings, I observed a diminishing series of sand bars in the water, parallel to land, each less distinct (and deeper) than the previous, trailing away from the coast. I had read previously about dunes migrating toward land, progressively forming new generations of barrier islands, cyclically disrupting and reproducing the coastal geomorphology as wave action pushes sediment ever coastward. I understood the process intellectually. But from the air I could actually *see* the temporality of the sea, not just in the circulations of waves and tides (which I had previously experienced on the ground) but in the long-term movements of sand. These movements, I realised, were a part of the sea, just as much as the shorter-term movements of water expressed through waves and tides. I understood, as never before, how the ocean is dynamic with sediment as well as water.

It was also at this moment that I truly understood that although the barrier island functionally appears to be *of the land* (one can walk on a barrier island, build a home there, and, perhaps most importantly, register that home with a civic authority as 'property'), ecologically it is *of the sea*. Prior to that day, I had spent many hours standing on barrier islands pondering the sea's awesome, transformative force and attempting to connect with it in successive expressions of an overreaching romanticism. But only now, by experiencing the sea from a new, distanced perspective, could I take this to the next step. Only now was I able to comprehend the limits of a perspective wherein one fragment of space is designated 'sea', another fragment is designated 'land', and wherein one is defined as a creature who thinks that one of these two categories of space is his natural habitat and that the other is inherently alien.

Was my aerial encounter with the ocean truly an *experience*? I acknowledge that it was distanced. Furthermore, it was limited to only one sense (the visual)

and at no point during the flight did I have a phenomenological experience of being ‘one with the water’ (which is probably a good thing!). But who truly has an authentic sea experience? The SCUBA diver looking through a face mask? The ship passenger gazing out from a deck? The surfer who for but a fleeting moment exists at the intersection of its various components – the making and breaking of waves, the movement of molecules, the joy of uplift? The swimmer who is counting breaths? Even for Les Barker’s polar bear the immersive experience of the ocean is mediated by a cognitive focus on distinct objects: the iceberg, the family members, the memories of home.

Of course, we can never truly know the thoughts of a polar bear, the elusive cyborg of this foreword. But we can think *through* the polar bear, just as we can think *through* the ocean, using these alternative (but nonetheless real) assemblages of space, time, and matter to upend our assumptions and change ourselves. The chapters of this book provide a key starting point for this project. Ultimately they are not so much chapters about the sea or even about our experiences of the sea as they are chapters about humans who are thinking, reactive creatures who navigate their place in the world as they navigate the oceans. No compass can guide this journey. Indeed, the journey never resolves itself in a ‘place’: the sea’s dynamism confounds our everyday understandings of a point as something to which we can return. If you define the ocean as your home, then, like Les Barker’s polar bear, you can recall it only in its dissipation and in its ultimate disappearance. But if one doesn’t have a destination, one can never be truly lost. Rather, the ocean is a journey of experiences filled with partial knowledges. And that is where this book begins.

Professor Philip Steinberg,
Durham University

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Introduction

Mike Brown and Barbara Humberstone

In the same year that humans stood on the moon for the first time, an intrepid group of sailors were attempting to complete the first non-stop solo sailing circumnavigation. On the home straight, seven months after departing England, the potential race winner Bernard Moitessier withdrew from the event. At the time of his withdrawal he had already crossed his outward path. After abandoning the race, Moitessier continued sailing for another three months, finally arriving in Tahiti in June 1969. In his communication to the race officials Moitessier simply stated, 'I am continuing non-stop to the Pacific Islands because I am happy at sea, and perhaps also to save my soul' (1974, p. 169).

Moitessier's *The Long Way* is a classic account of an individual's desire to escape what he saw as the corrupting influences of modernity and find peace at sea. It sits within a long tradition of sea narratives that are heavily influenced by the Romantic movement, which saw the sea as one of the last great wildernesses. Jessica Watson's (2010) *True Spirit: The Aussie Girl Who Took on the World* is a more recent manifestation of the continued appeal of this genre. Stories of adventure, self-discovery, of daring rescues and exotic destinations, continue to resonate with readers and audiences in Western societies (for example, the movies *All is Lost*, *Captain Phillips*, *Life of Pi*). As Phelan has noted, the 'received metaphors and literary allusions' (2007, p. 8) contained within literature of the sea, coupled with our direct experiences, have become an integral component of how we perceive the sea.

Accounts of people's encounters with the sea, as narratives of discovery, escape from humdrum existence or competitive endeavours are plentiful, as are scientific, historical and archaeological accounts of seafarers and maritime technologies. These diverse approaches to writing *about* or *of* the sea shape the way we engage with the sea and the nature of our relationship with it. Different genres of writing and disciplinary traditions present the sea in very different ways. For example, Moitessier's evocative 'I watch this fantastic sea, breathe in its spray, and feel blossoming here in the wind and space something that needs the immensity of the universe to come to fruition' (1974, p. 138) provides a very different account or perspective from that of the United States Geological Survey, which reports that the volume of the world's seas is 1,338,000 km³ or 0.12 per cent of the planet's volume (see Steinberg, 2014).

In the chapters that follow, we have drawn together a range of different perspectives of being *with* the sea. The central theme running through the book is

the way that lived experiences with the sea shape who we are. Rather than writing about the ‘idea of the sea’ (Mack, 2011, p. 25) through the use of metaphors, the authors have conveyed their experiences of the sea as a lived reality. They have been required to grapple with the challenges presented by sea writing, or thassalography (Steinberg, 2014), in representing embodied personal experiences within a broader social framework.

The authors have linked their personal experiences of the sea with a variety of theoretical perspectives to reflect on how our relationship with the sea shapes our understanding of both the human and non-human world. As editors, our brief to contributors was simple: write about your experiences of the sea and how they have contributed to your way of being in the world and how this might connect to broader issues in society. The authors seek to understand how personal experiences might inform collective interpretations and how collective representations influence their lived experiences. Strang highlights the reciprocity between the individual and collective thus:

Although located in the individual, sensory experience incorporates the learned perspectives and interpretations that are the product of collective social and environmental interaction. Thus the meanings engendered by experience are simultaneously part of the cultural landscape that every person enters and exits over an individual lifetime. As many ethnographies have shown, shared meanings are upheld – and continually developed – through a range of cultural forms, including myth, art, ritual and everyday practice. (Strang, 2004, p. 67)

The felt and lived experiences of being *with* the sea act as the grounding for what has been written. This collection of ethnographically inspired narratives provides an approach focus, which complements existing works that represent the human–sea relationship.

A Collaborative Endeavour

Mike's Starting Point

My path and Barbara's have crossed at various conferences, in airport lounges and via emails, as editors and reviewers for journals over the past decade. As individuals with long-standing involvement with the sea, we inevitably found points of common interest relating to being *on* or *in* the water. In 2012 I had the opportunity to take study leave. I spent some time in Edinburgh and wrote a chapter in *Outdoor Adventure and Social Theory* (Pike and Beames, 2013). Whilst struggling to think about how I might connect Durkheim – the social theorist I was asked to write about – to adventure, I went for a run and found myself drawn to the docks. I came across the 60-foot yacht of the Scottish entrant in the 2012 Vendée Global Ocean race. Designed for single-handed racing, these are highly

specialised ocean-racing machines. I memorised the internet address on the side of the boat and, after visiting the website, I found a solution to my writing block. The material presented provided avenues to explore how social cohesion might be achieved through appeals to national identity. Ideals of being a true Scot or being of Scots descent were used to encourage support for the Scottish entrant (see Brown, 2013). It was shortly thereafter that I met up with Barbara again at a conference at the University of Edinburgh. With my current writing project still on the go, coupled with my earlier work on place, belonging and identity (Wattchow and Brown, 2011), ideas that I had been mulling over for some time started to coalesce. Fuelled by my interest in the ideological messages contained on the Team Vendee Scotland website, my academic background, coupled with my own lived experiences of the sea, I was increasingly interested in exploring how people experienced the sea and how it shaped their sense of self. The Scottish Vendee Globe public relations person portrayed the sea, and one's relationship with it, in a way that differed greatly from Moitessier's sea. Was 'the sea' that I experienced mine alone or was there commonality with others? How had it shaped me? Why, in a new city, did I seek out the docks, marinas and maritime museums (from Halifax, Nova Scotia to Freemantle, Australia)? How did other people experience the sea and what did it mean for them? Knowing of Barbara's windsurfing experiences and research interests, I broached the subject of editing a book with her. Her enthusiastic response, based on my initial rough outline, has helped bring this edited collection to fruition.

Barbara's Commentary

Mike approached me at the conference to co-edit a book exploring the sea through narrative. Surprised and intrigued, having had no idea of Mike's seafaring background, I considered the invitation with great interest. I had met with Mike intermittently on a number of occasions, and a former PhD student of mine had appreciated time spent with him. As time went on and we became occupied further with the project, it became clear that, although our various experiences of the sea are different, there is much in common, particularly in relation to the importance of the sea to our consciousness. My particular current research interest in the sea is to do with bodily kinetic engagement with the sea when windsurfing and the possibilities and potentialities of 'kinetic empathy' (Thrift, 2008). This specific interest emerged from my academic curiosity in embodiment, movement in nature and the senses, which had been stimulated through themes proposed for a European Institute 'Youth for Europe' conference in Germany, the focus of which was 'experiencing water'. Thus my lifelong engagement with the sea initially came together as an academic piece, which attempted to evoke the experience of windsurfing through the narrative form. Mike had identified the possibility of combining our academic commitments, and our collaboration uncovered our life-long shared connections with the sea. Thus our common and diverse interests in the sea underpin the production of this edited collection.

The Sea is Integral to our Everyday Lives

Peters argues that in contemporary society the sea continues to be ‘a vital space and one that is integral to the workings of the world as we currently know it’ (2010, p. 1260). This book’s focus is on how the sea, as an embodied cultural and material ‘vital space’, is experienced in the lives of a number of individuals. By reflecting on personal experiences, situated within broader discourses, the contributors explicate the ‘dynamic and recursive relationship’ (Strang, 2008, p. 52) with the sea that shapes us as human beings, both individually and collectively.

Whilst conducting research for this book it became evident that there has been an increase in scholarly attention on the human–sea relationship (for example, Anderson and Peters, 2014; Ford and Brown, 2006; Mack, 2011). As Anderson and Peters have stated recently, ‘Our world is a water world. The oceans and seas are entwined, often invisibly but nonetheless importantly, with our everyday lives’ (2014, p. 3). Their opening chapter entitled ‘A Perfect and Absolute Blank: Human Geographies of Water Worlds’ details human geography’s turn to the sea as a topic worthy of study. Critiques of the terrestrial bias in human geography are comprehensively discussed elsewhere (see Anderson, 2012; Lambert, Martins and Ogborn, 2006; Peters, 2010) and we see little purpose in reiterating critiques, while an explication of the possibilities of understanding the human–sea relationship from ethnographic perspectives offers an avenue for thinking about what is, or what can be, rather than what was. A number of writers have provided eloquent and persuasive arguments to validate the importance of the human–sea relationship in contemporary life (see Anderson and Peters, 2014; Cooney, 2003; Ford and Brown, 2006; Mack, 2011; Peters, 2010; Steinberg, 1999, 2001, 2013). The focus of this book is to further Lambert et al.’s quest for greater consideration to be given to ‘the imaginative, aesthetic and sensuous geographies of the sea’, thereby opening up ‘new experiential dimensions and new forms of representation’ (2006, p. 479). In doing so we seek to

demonstrate the ways in which the sea is not a material or metaphorical void, but alive with embodied human experiences, more-than-human agencies and as well as being a space in and of itself that has material character, shape and form. (Anderson and Peters, 2014, p. 4)

Ethnography and Embodiment

Through the use of autoethnography, the contributors reflect on how the sea has shaped their sense of who they are and their relationship to the human and non-human world. The significance of autoethnographic approaches in understanding human beings’ engagement with the sea has considerable potential to enhance ‘empathetic forms of understanding’ (Sparkes, 1999, p. 19), which