

Seagoing nightmares

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Dialogues in Human Geography
2019, Vol. 9(3) 308–311
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DOI: 10.1177/2043820619878571
journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg



Abstract

This response to Peters and Steinberg's 'The ocean in excess' tests the power and limits of their framings of 'the ocean within', 'the ocean beyond', and 'the ocean imagined' in thinking through the oceanic weave of transatlantic slave trade history and the recent long and deadly summers of migration in the Mediterranean.

Keywords

forensics, JMW Turner, middle passage, migration in the Mediterranean

Kimberley Peters and Philip Steinberg's call for a more-than-wet ontology asks scholars in critical humanistic and social scientific ocean studies to consider the excess of the ocean's liquid flow, integrating into our senses of the sea such forms and forces as ice, rain, mist, spray, the smell of seawater, the taste of fish, the sound of seashell resonance, the webwork of sea-salty fluid in organismic cellular material, and seaside imaginings and daydreams. Guided by Peters and Steinberg's call for attention to the multiplicity of ocean materialities, I here shift the focus from oceans as carriers of what they call 'the liveliness of the world' to turn my eye toward suffering and death at sea. I look at the oceanic weave of transatlantic slave trade history and at today's long and deadly summers of migration in the Mediterranean. I suggest that Peters and Steinberg's analytics of 'the ocean within', 'the ocean beyond', and 'the ocean imagined' can be usefully adapted to grapple with these seagoing nightmares and their associated imagings, particularly in artistic and forensic representation.

Hernan del Valle, head of humanitarian affairs for Doctors Without Borders, tells me about waves. We are outside his office at Harvard University,

where he is visiting for the year, writing about his organization's search and rescue efforts in the Mediterranean. He has been working on these matters since 2015, when migrants crossing the sea from its southeastern boundaries, hoping to get to Europe for work or asylum, started fleeing in the thousands, from civil war in Syria and Libya, from conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq, and from poverty, famine, and war in sub-Saharan Africa. Resurgent European isolationism, del Valle observes, has described migrants as surging across the sea in 'waves', pitching refugees as agents of threat, as an inexorable and overwhelming flow, seeing these people through a xenophobic optic that dehumanizes them. The wave metaphor displaces attention from the real, deadly waves over which so many people have traveled, waves that have become part of the dangerous force field that migrants confront as they cross the Mediterranean, often in overcrowded rubber rafts, fishing boats, and dinghies.

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Water waves are forms that, with rescue boats struggling to do their work, pattern a deadly, fluid border. In 2015 alone, del Valle says, some 4054 migrants drowned when their boats sank, a figure that would have been higher if not for interventions from NGOs like Doctors Without Borders (who from 2015 to 2018 ran 425 rescue missions, assisting 77,000 people [Abrams, 2019]). Waves have become graves—a connection made explicit by Syrian artist Khaled Barakeh in such works as ‘Multi-cultural Graveyard’, from 2015, in which he bears harrowing witness to death by gathering photographs of migrant bodies on beaches as they are washed over by waves, embalmed by the neglect of those who could have rescued them (see Mirzoeff, 2015).

Realities and representations of drowning, of swallowing water, struggling for oxygen, and sinking, suggest that there are ways ‘the ocean within’ can be far fiercer than the ‘appallingly wet’ ocean that Peters and Steinberg discern in their reading of *Life of Pi*. Add, then, to instances of the ‘ocean within’ examples that are more as well as less than the hypersea salt-in-our-blood, the smell of sea spray in our noses, and the taste of fish fingers in our stomachs. Reckon, additionally, with an ‘ocean within’ that follows seawater as it moves into human lungs, a killing ontology.

The official neglect of migrant death in a weaponized sea has been at the center of investigations by Forensic Oceanography, a research team at the University of London, led by architects Lorenzo Pezzani and Charles Heller, which has since 2011 dedicated itself to reconstructing the tracks of migrant boats crossing the Mediterranean. Their ‘Left-to-Die Boat’ project tracked the March to April 2011 travel, north of Libya, of a boat of 72 migrants, 61 of whom ‘lost their lives while drifting for fourteen days within the NATO maritime surveillance area’ (Heller and Pezzani, 2012). As Forensic Oceanography explains, ‘By going “against the grain” in our use of surveillance technologies, we were able to reconstruct with precision how events unfolded and demonstrate how different actors operating in the Central Mediterranean Sea used the complex and overlapping jurisdictions at sea to evade their responsibility for rescuing people

in distress’ (Heller and Pezzani, 2012; see also Heller et al., 2018). The sea, Heller and Pezzani say, might at first be judged an archive forever undoing itself:

The waters that cover over 70% of the surface area of our planet are constantly stirred by currents and waves that seem to erase any trace of the past, maintaining the sea in a kind of permanent present. In Roland Barthes’ words, the sea is a “non-signifying field” that “bears no message.” (2014: 657)

But we are no longer, if ever we were, in Barthes’ world, and Heller and Pezzani’s argument aligns well with Peters and Steinberg’s compelling argument against Carl Schmitt’s vision of oceans as characterless. Heller and Pezzani continue to offer a species of more-than-wet ontology, one that folds in the electromagneticosphere:

The contemporary ocean is in fact not only traversed by the energy that forms its waves and currents, but by the different electromagnetic waves sent and received by multiple sensing devices that create a new sea altogether. Buoys measuring currents, optical and radar satellite imagery, transponders emitting signals used for vessel tracking and migrants’ mobile phones are among the many devices that record and read the sea’s depth and surface as well as the objects and living organisms that navigate it. By repurposing this technological apparatus of sensing, we have tried to bring the sea to bear witness to how it has been made to kill. (2014: 658)

I would nominate the electromagnetic ocean as a version of what Peters and Steinberg name as the ‘ocean beyond’. If, as they argue, ‘the ocean does not simply consist of—and carry—elements and compounds in excess of its chemical material structure . . . [and] also carries with it and in turn transforms and leaks into artificial matter beyond the “earthly” [e.g. discarded trash, plastic]’, its materiality is also entangled with the modes through which its operational representation—in electronic and digital surveying—comes to shape experience in and of sea territory itself (Peters and Steinberg, 2019: 302). Think of the imagined sound of the sea in seashells (Helmreich, 2013), again, but now add in the resonances and etheric waves that bounce not

back ‘within’ human sensoria, but out ‘beyond’ everyday sensory apprehension, into the machinic domain of electromagnetic dataflow.

Here, then, is a contemporary mode of imaging and imagining oceans that extends Peters and Steinberg’s ‘more-than-wet ontology’ to include media ontologies. In characterizing such forensic approaches, Daniela Gandorfer (2019: 221–222) suggests that infrastructures and the built environment

function as media since they are storage and inscription devices, while they also interact and affect the very process they record. . . . In this account of reading, subject and object, reader (architect) and text (material interrelations and assemblages) switch back and forth, and thereby constantly affect and influence each other.

What this means is that such reading is always and necessarily political—cycling such an ‘ocean beyond’ into the politics of everyday seafaring and sea suffering.

Scholar of Mediterranean migration Alessandra Di Maio has called the deadly sea at the center of the early 2000s refugee story ‘the Black Mediterranean’, echoing Paul Gilroy’s 1993 frame of the Black Atlantic, his name for the territorial connections that have made the Afrodiaspora. Black, here, operates in a register overdetermined by, but also in excess of, racialized Africanity; Di Maio writes that Black ‘is the color—or rather, non-color—in which all shades merge, that which the sea assumes during the crossings pursued by the million migrants who have “burnt” it in the past three decades’ (2013: 42). The terrible death that now visits the Mediterranean echoes the earlier terrors of the Black Atlantic’s Middle Passage; people on boats captive, sick, dying, crossing a space of dispossession, of unmaking (Spillers, 1987).

Literary scholar Christina Sharpe (2016), in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, draws comparisons between today’s migrant deaths in the Mediterranean and the deaths of those kidnapped Africans who perished on the Atlantic Ocean during the days of the triangle trade. One emblem of that passage is JMW Turner’s 1840 painting *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon*

Coming On, a representation of a 1781 event in which a Liverpool slave ship, the *Zong*, threw overboard, that is, murdered, 142 captives to recalibrate its ballast—the vessel was built for 220 and sailed with more than twice that—and then proceeded to claim ‘property loss’ to its insurers. The waves, in Turner’s image rendered in smeared copper-red oil paint applied with a rushed brush—what Sharpe calls a ‘roiling, livid orpiment’ (2016: 36)—translate Turner’s disgust at slavery, and particularly its ongoingness in North America. S Ayesha Hameed, in ‘Black Atlantis: Three Songs’, writes that, ‘The storm is a concatenation of rain water, blustery wind, and crashing waves—a catalyst that puts into motion a chain of events on board a slave ship that refracts the zeitgeist of chattel slavery and maritime insurance’ (2014: 713). *Slavers*, exhibited at the First World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840 physicalizes a repugnance for slavery.

We move here toward Peters and Steinberg’s ‘ocean imagined’, now with the political stakes of a specific moment in Atlantic history made manifest and, more, of wide humanitarian concern. The ‘ocean imagined’ by Turner is meant to be one general to its historical time—though that aspiration to universality, along with the painting’s shimmering aesthetic, has historically made some commentators wary, arguing that the people drowning emerge as ‘exotic and sublime victims’ (Dabydeen, 1994: 8) making the painting, as ‘a monument without names’ (Wood, 2000: 46), an object that trades on images of Black suffering. The tug of war between aesthetics and politics that critics have mapped—with 19th-century critic John Ruskin arguing that the painting delivers ‘the greatest union of moral power and poetic vision that British art ever accomplished’ and late 20th-century critic Tobias Döring arguing that ‘the terrors of the [slave] trade have become transfigured as aesthetic objects produced for the delectation of spectators’ (both quoted in Frost, 2010: 380)—has opened up avenues for later artists, including Sondra Perry, in her 2018 ‘Typhoon Coming On’, which presents full-wall video screens showing digitally animated close-ups of Turner’s water, pressing viewers into, rather than away from, its beaten red waves, a visceral ‘ocean imagined’.

What kind of ocean ontology can be detected in this nexus of the transatlantic slave trade, the long summers of Mediterranean migration in the 2000s, and the representation in paint and in digital forensics of the seaborne nightmares of the dispossessed of world capitalism? One that I think Peters and Steinberg's provocative and productive *more-than* analytics can help us track—but that also requires us, as we ask about oceans 'within', 'beyond', and 'imagined', to ask *for whom* and *with what political implication* such within, beyonds, and imagined come to matter.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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