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Penny Newell, 'The Embodied Performance of Writing on Water: Review of *Water Worlds: Human Geographies of the Ocean* by Jon Anderson and Kimberley Peters (eds.)'

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Reviews

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The Embodied Performance of Writing on Water:
Review of *Water Worlds: Human Geographies of
the Ocean* by Jon Anderson and Kimberley Peters
(eds.)
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Where does human practice converge with water? How do we occupy these spaces of drift and dispersal, and turn within them to pursue conceptual understanding and analysis in modes resembling social scientific enquiry? The liquid interface of bodies of water marks an epistemological boundary between materially estranged states of surface gazing, and the skin-smart of that seemingly unmediated moment of bodily immersion. The task of *Water Worlds: Human Geographies of the Ocean* (2014) is thus formidable. The social science essays gathered under the rubric of this

publication attempt to negotiate these experiential phases of water, drawing them together as a new means of criticism. On the one hand, *Water Worlds* endures the epistemological deferral entailed in encounters with the glassy and obliquely reflective, in order to question human modes of traversing water's surfaces; on the other, this is a text that undergoes constant sub/immersions, sinking, drifting and treading toward conclusions regarding the human praxis made possible in an arena of more-than-human dimensions. The book's espousal to think *from* the water is thus a political question (p.4); of human and cultural practice beyond land, and of the politics of critiquing that praxis from within geography.

These political stakes frame the essays of this publication. As Jon Anderson and Kimberley Peters make evident in their elucidatory introduction, *geo* (earth) and *graphia* (writing) etymologically recapitulate the epistemological "land bias" that geography, as a written practice, creates and sustains. The land writing of geography exhibits a solid-ground-ideology, borrowed from an industrial capitalist era and manifest in the post-industrialist discourse of the ocean as a 'spatial filler to be traversed for the capital gain of those on land' (p.3). As *Water Worlds* makes clear, to rescind this way of writing the ocean is to opt out of privileging stable ontologies, consequently refuting the historical "land bias" of geography. To water-write is thus to promote a politicized practice of thinking the world as water, 'in flux, changeable, processual and in a constant state of becoming' (p.5). Thinking through the 'actual mobilities that are experienced by those who traverse or gaze' upon these processual bodies (p. xvi), water itself emerges as a political question: how might thinking geographically happen when stripped of the etymological bias for the land? As Philip E. Steinberg highlights in the foreword, whilst history abounds with literary, artistic and poetic responses to water, *Water Worlds* brings clarity to the parity of responses to water within human geography (pp.xiii–xvii).

Part One: At the Water's Edge

... inexorable, unbending, unmodifiable – with a mind that we can never mould ourselves upon, and yet that we cannot endure to alienate from us.

George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (1995, p.433).

In the essay, 'Mediterranean Metaphors', Steinberg interrogates the land-locked nature of geography by providing a forum for the narratological cross-cultural construction of oceanic spaces. He explores the ascription of multiplicitous metaphorical meaning to the Mediterranean by gathering examples of '*stories that we tell about the sea*' (p.23). His essay intervenes in the apparent unity of these examples, looking at 'the world as a series of mediterraneans', in order that we might trace a cultural trend of eliding difference with ideas of connection by overlaying ocean spaces with the Mediterranean (p.33). Significantly, Steinberg characterizes this pluralisation of *mediterraneans* as reductive: made to perform as a malleable metaphorical vehicle, the Mediterranean Sea is reduced to 'a trope for understanding (or performing) postcolonial dynamics of connection amidst division' (p.33).

Expounding the ways in which the Mediterranean performs as metaphor for connection amidst division, Steinberg's treatment of water is suggestive of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's dynamic of territorialisation and deterritorialisation. However, it is only through becoming fixed as metaphor that the Mediterranean achieves this Deleuzian dynamic. Abstracted from its material reality, the Mediterranean thus achieves a disturbing fixity, and it is this fixity that comes to define it as a body of water within cultural discourse, denied of its aqueous qualities. Indeed, Steinberg's analysis suggests that the Mediterranean's role as a metaphor re-situates it as a Lefebvrian representational space (1991, p.33), such that this oceanic space emerges as a symbolic intellectual category, pertaining to an *a priori* principle rather than a vibrant process within which we might become submerged or immersed.

Responding to this call for sub/immersion, Anne-Flore Laloë's "Plenty of Weeds & Penguins": Charting Oceanic Knowledge' and Jon Anderson's 'Merging with the Medium: Knowing the Place of the Surfed Wave', enter decentred modes of writing, enacting and examining embodied modes of thinking water geographically. In her analysis of the charts of HMS *Julia*, Laloë underscores maritime historians and

geographers who collectively see ‘the ship itself as a way of knowing the ocean’ (p.39), with the further suggestion that ships’ ‘tracks on maps [...] illustrate the difficulty of charting the ocean’s surface and are important proxies of geographical knowledge’ (p.43). This turn to the trace is accompanied by a beneficial reproduction of the 1817 chart of HMS *Julia*, showing a single line zigzagging across a cartographic blank, as the ship seeks out an island that does not exist [see Figure 3.1] (p.42). This chimes with Geoff Quilley’s recent claim that ‘in their very ambiguity, maps and travel imagery throw light onto disciplinary genealogies that help us to understand the relation between art history and historical geography’ (Quilley, 2014, p.3). In her analysis of ship charts, Laloë appears to have located the point at which historical geography ruptures into art history, whereupon the chart becomes an aesthetic object, symbolic of the failure of the ship as an instrument of knowledge. As such, ‘[bearing] witness to the complexity of affixing places to oceanic spaces’ (p.45) is as much an aesthetic task as a geographical undertaking; an ambiguous disciplinary dance, permitting Laloë to mimetically contest a like ambiguity in this mode of knowledge production *qua* knowledge production. The notion of human sub/immersion introduces this mimetic function. As Bärbel G. Bischof states: ‘because oceans are encountered as both objects of consumption and objects of aesthetic utility, the role of humans in the environment becomes confusing and ambiguous’ (p.63).

Anderson’s decidedly post-structuralist critique, ‘Merging with the Medium’, makes most explicit this characterisation of the human material engagement with water as constitutive of moments of affective rupture in the knowledge production of geography. Anderson provides a balanced overview of different ways of understanding the experience of surfing, assessing how surfers conceive of the place of the ‘surfed-wave’ (p.81). This collation of ‘surfer’ and ‘wave’ is key to Anderson’s argument, as it is through analysing the convergence of the ‘surfed-wave’ that he ultimately ‘emphasises the importance of corporeal engagement with the sea’ (p.83). For Anderson, the wave-human union of the ‘surfed-wave’ places surfers within the fluid ontology of water: Anderson’s surfer approaches a material entanglement with fluidity, transforming conceptions of ontological stability. Turning to the post-structuralist body of work from which Anderson inherits much of his thinking, we see that this opens a central tenet of *Water Worlds*: how might one move through the vital transformative material confrontation with the sea, to manifest these affective

ruptures in knowledge production as geographical thinking? Or more judiciously: can *geo-graphia* think the sea?

Part Two: Material Pages and Embodied Water Writing

How will it be? How? Falling a mile into the wrinkled sea?

Saul Bellow, *Dangling Man* (1973, p.123).

The task of *Water Worlds* is necessarily incomplete. As the authors of ‘Part II’ of the publication make evident, to write from the perspective of water is to submit to fluid forms of knowing: ‘[we] learn as we go. We find our ways along paths of exploration’ (p.100). To do so, then, is to submit one’s text and one’s readers to processual dynamics of knowledge production, such that to finish one’s task would repeal the very qualities of water that permit it to dismantle, challenge and throw into disarray. Phillip Vannini and Jonathan Taggart argue that ‘water is obviously a material we can do things with, but it is also a constant process’ (p.96). This speaks both to the human convergence with water and to the critical task of writing about that convergence. At once process and material, the subjective appeals of their writing begin to inflect upon any objective claims, unleashing them from fixity, undoing their conviction, and subsequently challenging the reader to tread a path of exploration across the ‘wrinkled’ pages – to echo Saul Bellow – where we might otherwise have sought linear routes to understanding.

Traversing the pages of Anderson’s ‘What I Talk About When I Talk About Kayaking’, this surface act of reading becomes redolent of the critical issues at play in ‘Part I’ of the book. While Anderson is submerged – somewhere below the page’s surface – the pages of his essay evoke our material estrangement, situating the reader at the water’s edge. The questions opened by these moments are no less productive than they are troubling and, though geography always already had a firm footing in cross-disciplinary conversations, *Water Worlds* gestures to the ways in which thinking hydrographically constructs new alliances between geography and such fields as performance studies, aesthetics and art history. Can we experience Stephanie Merchant’s underwater dive, reading her chapter, ‘Deep Ethnography: Witnessing the Ghosts of SS *Thistlegorm*’? Can knowledge or thought be ours as readers if, as Anderson suggests, we re-conceive ‘Kayaking as Epistemology’ (p.113)? How do we

orient ourselves in relation to this ‘I’ of Anderson’s kayaker? What can a trace on a map reveal about the experience of becoming bound with a body of water?

There is a new texture to this mode of questioning, one that may feel familiar in certain arenas of thinking. It is a texture that renders legible a question of politics—of the capital gains of graphia—and as such, largely, a question of style.

Part Three: ‘The Ocean Remains...’

But understanding fails just as the questions get truly interesting.

Sidney Perkowitz, *Writing on Water* (2002, p.5.)

Parts I and II of *Water Worlds* achieve a structural shift from land writing to water writing. Indeed, the affective encounters with water that dominate ‘Part II’ of *Water Worlds* are largely a response to the critical problematisation of normative forms of geographical discourse about the ocean. Accordingly, the lack of conclusiveness within the writings of Vannini, Taggart, Anderson and Merchant, reads as symptomatic of the wreckage of the solid-ground-ideology of the practice of *geographia* that the book seeks.

It is to the credit of ‘Part II’ of the book that these treatments of the more-than-human become inflected as problematic, and it is perhaps also a fault of the linear nature of my own reading style (can reading have a “land bias”, too?). Continuing to address concerns of the human material engagement with the ocean in its material reality – focusing largely on fishermen and the ways in which the sea and its fish demand mobile, fluid social arrangements – ‘Part III’ stylistically echoes ‘Part I’ of *Water Worlds*. Indeed, Juliette Hallaire and Deirdre McKay suggest that ‘the ocean *remains* the decisive space *embodying* power [my emphases]’ (p.144). This descriptive language used by Hallaire and McKay is open to the critique of Steinberg’s essay, retreating from the formal nuances of the water writing of ‘Part II’. Christopher Bear, in ‘Governance of the Seas’, outlines his approach as, firstly, ‘[adopting] a descriptive anthropocentric approach’ before subsequently ‘[demonstrating] that such approaches are not sufficient’ and foregrounding ‘the active role of non-humans’ (p.148). Yet, as in Hallaire and McKay, Bear’s style feels resistant to the wreckage of writing wrought by the material encounter with water, and its non-human impingement on the practice of geography.

Despite the entailment of internal contradiction, *Water Worlds* gestures to a field of theorists asking clear methodological questions of thinking about water and, more broadly, to a large index of individuals working to specify, scale or even obliterate the barrier between humans and the ecology. Though 'Part III' lacks the mimetic 'messiness' (p.167) that Anyaa Anim-Addo claims as characteristic of the co-constitution of human practice upon non-human oceans, this permits the text to resist becoming, in its entirety, 'hostage to the coalescing forces of nature' (p.184). This is where its greatest strength lies, in my opinion. As Brian Moss suggests, in *Ecology of Fresh Waters* (2010), water is peculiar to us as humans, as a remarkably unremarkable substance of the world. Reading *Water Worlds*, we are somewhere between marking, remarking and unmarking. Hostage both to the post-industrial capitalist land-bias of thinking and to the forces of nature rescinding these structures, we are drawn to wonder how from the wreckage wrought by proper contemplation of the latter, we might begin to reassemble the former in new ways.

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