**Writing *with* the sea: Reflections on in/experienced encounters with ocean space**

**Abstract**

How does being *with* the sea, change how we write about the sea? This paper is constructed as a reflective/reflexive consideration of being at sea as part of an experimental week-long symposium held on board an 80-foot yacht in the Hauraki Gulf, New Zealand, in early 2016. The event focused on the ways society lives with the sea in the 21st century – how awareness is raised and action is instigated – in light of growing threats to ocean spaces worldwide. Whilst generating conversation on this theme, the location of the symposium was also pivotal in generating embodied knowledge of the topic under investigation. This paper follows the afterthoughts of the symposium organiser (an outdoor educator and professional yacht skipper) and an attendee (a geographer of the sea, non-swimmer and first-time sailor). It investigates how academic events that take place *in place –* in this case at sea – may generate unique knowledges on conference themes, and for academic work more generally, by opening up new experiential worlds.

**Proem**

*“Hi Kim, how ya getting on?”*

*Sitting on the windward side deck, body leaning on the lifelines, legs dangling against the hull, she turns and looks at me with a stunned expression. She makes an effort to speak but for several seconds nothing is forthcoming.*

*“I, I …. I can’t put it into words”,*

*I smile, relieved she’s alright.*

*Her broad smile and sparkling eyes tell me she’s not just okay, she’s positively buzzing with excitement. Our conversation is brief, mostly because she’s stumbling to find the right words. I turn and make my way around the other participants to see how they are coping in the windy and choppy conditions.*

[Insert image 1]

**A start point**

To be honest, *I* was relieved I was alright.

You see, I’d once written the following lines with a colleague and friend:

How does our perspective change when we think not only from the sea, but with the sea? Over the past two decades, the sea has slowly crept into human geography. Together with colleagues in the emergent field of critical ocean geography, we have been making the argument, time and again, that geography has historically been a land-locked and terra-centric project. Geography is ‘earth-writing’, and earthliness has been taken very literally in shaping the spaces in which geographical study has taken place. (Yet) as we have been arguing, new geographical knowledge can be unearthed when thinking from (and with) the sea, and an increasing number of scholars are joining in this project … This project is still ongoing[[1]](#endnote-1)1

A new episode in this ongoing project emerged when I received an invitation from Mike Brown – maritime scholar, outdoor educator, sailor – to attend a watery maritime symposium that would be held in early 2016. The symposium had an unconventional, yet appropriate setting – an 80-foot former race yacht. ‘Seascapes: Living with the Sea’ would be held *at* sea over three nights and four days in the Hauraki Gulf, New Zealand. It would bring together delegates, internationally, from cross-disciplinary perspectives (education, law, architecture, planning, geography) and from stakeholder groups and activist organisations. It would bring them together to sail. To talk. To write. To learn. And ultimately to ask, ‘What is it to live *with* the sea?’

[Insert image 2]

Phil and I had said it ourselves2– to change how you think about the sea you can’t think *from* the sea. You have to think *with* the sea. Alongside thinking *with,* is the imperative then to write *with* the sea.

But this was part of the project I wasn’t sure I’d fully understood, or embraced. Not really.

I’d written about the very material, molecular, geo-physical nature of the sea and how this combined *with* the human condition[[2]](#endnote-2)3. But I’d done so through a lens. Through the experiences of others. Faceless names in records, held in manuscripts, buried on library shelves. Someone else’s voice from the past. How could I legitimise my own argument when I didn’t really know what it meant?

I couldn’t. Not really.

In the days leading up to my departure I found myself becoming increasingly preoccupied with thoughts of ‘What am I doing?’ I was a bundle of nerves. About to fly to New Zealand. About to go to a symposium. About to get on a boat. About to go to sea.

***Seasickness and surprise***

I felt sick. And I hadn’t even got on the boat yet. Let alone gone to sea. If I am completely honest, I’d felt sick for weeks. It wasn’t the usual feeling I got before a conference event. *I liked conferences, workshops, symposiums*. But here I was, sick to the pit of my stomach. Not the kind of sick you feel when you are actually going to *be* sick. No, it wasn’t that unmistakeable and uncontrollable bodily reaction. It was that underlying anxiety. The sort of sick that you feel when you’ve done something wrong. Told a lie. Misled someone. It was that kind of sick. That said, it did get worse at the barbeque.

It was 27 degrees. Hot. Hot for my body that had just left 2 degrees in London. I began to feel hot beyond the temperature. Hot with embarrassment maybe. I had an invitation to Mike’s for a meal with his family and some sailing friends, visiting from the UK. It was a kiwi BBQ. A social affair. A seafaring affair. There must have been years of sea-based experience around that table. The language of sailing floated effortless upon the surface of conversation. Below, inside, I felt sicker still.

I’d withheld something. Here I was, supposed scholar of the sea. I’d written about seasickness for goodness sake. And yet – two feet on dry, stable ground – I was feeling as sick as a dog. Talk about inexperienced. I had admitted, before the symposium, that I could not sail. I hadn’t ever sailed. But the closer it came, the more I came to know of the boat – the kit list, the crew, the experience of the other delegates – the more fraudulent I felt.

The truth of the matter was that the sea *was* my life. I lived and breathed it through the way I researched and wrote about. From the land. I loved it through the way I engaged with it. From the safety of the promenade. It wasn’t just that I couldn’t sail, I could barely swim. I was fine in a pool, but the sea? Its constant movement. Its currents. Its churn. Its sheer scale. Its endlessness. It frightened and fascinated me in equal measure.

Now I stand by the fact the sea exists beyond the sea. Beyond is salty, material fluidity. Its powers of immersion can capture you through forms of the ocean that are far from wet. Paintings. Film. Poetry. I stand by the fact, that for some, this knowledge of the sea is all they will ever have, and can ever hope to have. And this experience is not diluted. But the researcher in me, the inquisitive strand, the part of me that was sick to the very core, needed to know more.

So here I was. At a BBQ, coming clean. Somehow it fed the sickness even more. I wasn’t sure if there was surprise or disappointment in my confession. ‘You’ve spent some time at sea?’ Mike said. ‘No’, I had to reply. *In a dockyard. Yes. On several boats, in a dockyard. Yes. At sea? No. No I hadn’t.*

So there you have it. A new form of seasickness. A dry land, sea-infused, anxiety-ridden sickness. The sort of sickness you get when you have made a categorical error for which there is no going back. And there really was no going back. We were going to sea.

***Pitch and slam***

I’ve never felt less sick.

I’d also never spent more than a couple of hours at sea. And that was always on a craft designed to dull the sensations of the sea. With a belly load full of cars. A craft intended to get you from A to B efficiently, and smoothly, with minimal movement. But here I was, on the deck of yacht, perched at an odd angle, and I couldn’t have felt less like vomiting.

I was ecstatic.

But there was no denying. This boat *moved.*

[Insert image 3]

And it moved in a way that was alien to my legs, my arms, my sense of balance. Day one, and in a bid to capture this world of full motion, I made two brief observations jotted by head-torchlight on my bunk on the *Steinlager 2*. But these weren’t really observations. Sensations maybe. Affects, certainly.

The first was the pitch. The sea – the wind against the sail – it threw that boat upwards, sideways, down. I’d written about a dynamic sea of angles. A more-than-horizontal world of shifts and verticals. But being at sea, being *with* the sea. It was different somehow. Now those words were just words on page. Flat representations of a three-dimensional world. I was now *in* that three-dimensional world. And that three-dimensional world was in me. Moving my limbs, feeding my enthusiasm.

The second was the slam. I still don’t know what to make of this. But the sea lifted that boat up. And it dropped it right back down. With a thud. Before repeating – though never *exactly* repeating – that motion. Lift. Slam. Lift. Slam. Elemental forces slapping against the carbon fibre hull. So it happened again. I thought ‘I’ve written about a motionful, liquid sea’. But something didn’t fit. This sea was also solid.

The land/sea distinction often sets the two apart on physical terms. One is solid. The other liquid. One you can be *on*. The other you can be *in*. Many have critiqued this neat delineation[[3]](#endnote-3)4. The landscape is no less fluid, so the argument goes. It moves, just more slowly. And we can be enfolded within it. We can sink into it. But – as I’d argue – this critique prioritises *the land*. It’s a terra-focused critique.

But no one is contending that the liquid sea is solid[[4]](#endnote-4)5. Can the sea be solid? This sea was, of course, liquid. No doubt. But it had form. A mass that made it strong. Firm against the boat. Surrounding the boat. Slamming against the boat. There was no doubt. It felt *solid.*

***A perfect and absolute blank***

And there you have it. I wasn’t sick on that solid sea. But I was getting sick of something – my inability to express the way it felt to be on that boat. So this is what it felt like to be a dry geographer of the ocean, living *with* the sea.

At the start of another project, with another colleague and friend, we reprinted selected lines from the poem ‘The Hunting of the Snark’ by Lewis Carroll[[5]](#endnote-5)6. In describing the navigation of the ocean, Carroll writes,

… He [the Captain] had bought a large map representing the sea,

Without the least vestige of land:

And the crew were much pleased when they found it to be

A map they could all understand…

“Other maps are such shapes, with their islands and capes!

But we've got our brave Captain to thank”

(So the crew would protest) “that he's bought us the best—

A perfect and absolute blank!”[[6]](#endnote-6)7

When I was on the boat, one line of this poem kept coming back to me, again and again. ‘A perfect and absolute blank’. A perfect and absolute blank. Carroll’s seafarers made sense of the sea not in the way it was represented, described, or committed to paper. They could only make sense of it in the absence of any depiction.

It’s the paradox of being *with* any environment. It’s the contradiction of a world that is lived. It eludes representation. Represented, it then eludes authenticity. They say the sea has been emptied in the social science – emptied of significance. But maybe the vocabulary is just empty of the right words. Maybe our images are just devoid of the right pictures. Maybe the fullness of the sea – all those things the seafarers see, feel and know – maybe sometimes they cannot be conveyed.

It was like that for me.

I’ve never found it hard to write *about* the sea. And I’ve been writing about the sea *a lot.* I’ve never found it hard to write *from* the sea either – to write from the perspective *of* being at sea, through the voice of someone else. But to write *with* the sea myself? That was harder. I made notes, jotted down feelings, tapped my pen on a blank page. Trying to convey ineffable encounters. Ineffable was the word. Mike had used it. And he was right. For the time being I’d drawn a blank. A perfect and absolute blank.

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**Looking back**

*One of the things that struck me early in the week was the assumptions that I’d made about the symposium’s attendees embodied engagements with the sea[[7]](#endnote-7)8. I was required to broaden my perspectives of what it meant to be a sea scholar. As Kim details, we can be ‘sea people’ without being immersed in it or floating on it – but being with the sea does alter our relationship with it. My desire for us to be with the sea underpinned the format of the symposium. As an outdoor educator and sailor I knew how the physical space on a boat would require the negotiation of boundaries – of both personal and scholarly space. To live together, to share meals, to laugh, to work alongside each other, and to engage in scholarly discourse - within each day’s dedicated discussion sessions and during casual conversations – provided opportunities that would be hard to replicate elsewhere. For example, the perspective of the landscape architect awoke a new appreciation of how sea walls, wharves and coastal pathways embrace the watery world or attempt to keep it at bay. Physical structures of the ‘everyday’ (e.g., a wharf, the orientation of the windows in a holiday home) reveal something of our relationship with the sea. Serendipitous events lead to unexpected discoveries. During an early morning swim someone commented that the water tasted less ‘salty’ than at home which sparked a discussion on perception, taste, salinity, water temperature, ocean currents and global warming[[8]](#endnote-8)9. Walks ashore permitted opportunities to see and discuss the tangible outcomes of environmental activism and to discuss how lobbyists, environmentalists, scientists and philanthropic organisations can work together to restore island habitats[[9]](#endnote-9)10. Short sailing passages between anchorages allowed people to relax, socialise, contemplate, or engage in the sailing of the vessel.*

*Whilst trying to write with the sea may have presented Kim with challenges, and a form of writer’s block, which she describes as a ‘perfect and absolute blank’, the sea itself is not blank, nor featureless[[10]](#endnote-10)11. This is something that Barbara and I tried to capture with* Seascapes: Shaped by the Sea[[11]](#endnote-11)12 *and something that I wanted to make available for attendees of the symposium. The sea communicates with us in a myriad of ways. Whether we experience it via the pitching, rolling, and yawing movements of the boat, the tingling on our skin as we take a morning plunge, or the clicking noises of snapping shrimp (alphaeus novazealandiae) that send us to sleep at night. The challenge for us is to listen to what the sea has to say – and as with any relationship – what better way to do this than attend to be with the other participant? And this, if I may paraphrase Peters and Steinberg[[12]](#endnote-12)13, is an ongoing project.*

**Postscript**

*After the ‘welcome to NZ’ BBQ I remember thinking how badly the conversation had gone. Poor jetlagged Kim had been surrounded by sailors trading tales of misadventure. At times I wish I could have turned the discussion to gardening or hill-walking, or anything land-based.*

*Two weeks after our symposium we all gathered together for another meal – were you just too polite to say no Kim? This was to farewell my sailing friends who were heading back to the UK after having spent most of their New Zealand stay cruising in the Hauraki Gulf. I don’t know how sick she was feeling on this occasion – but one thing’s for sure – Kim had found the words to communicate (at some length I might add) with sailors borne from her experiences with the sea. Direct and visceral encounters with the sea shape who we are and how we think about our fluid world in a myriad of ways. Ways that have yet to find full expression in the academic literature concerned with our relationships with the sea.*

1. 1 See K. Peters and P. Steinberg, ‘A wet world: rethinking place, territory and time’ from <<http://societyandspace.com/2015/04/27/a-wet-world-rethinking-place-territory-and-time-kimberley-peters-and-philip-steinberg/>> (May 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. 3 K. Peters, ‘Manipulating material hydro-worlds: rethinking human and more-than-human relationality through offshore radio piracy’, *Environment and Planning A* 44 , 2012, pp. 1241-1254 and K. Peters, ‘Drifting: towards mobilities at sea’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 40, 2015, pp. 262-272. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. 4 See, for example, D. Massey, *For Space* (Sage: London, 2004) and J.Wylie ‘A single day's walking: narrating self and landscape on the South West Coast Path’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 30, 2005, pp. 234-247. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. 5 See, H. Gerhardt, P.E. Steinberg, J. Tasch, S.J. Fabiano and R. Shields, ‘Contested sovereignty in a changing Arctic’. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers,* 100, 2010, pp. 992-1002 where it is argued that the sea can become solid, literally, through processes of ice freeze, before becoming liquid via processes of ice melt. However, here the liquid sea is not thought of as solid, only the frozen ‘solid’ sea. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. 6 J. Anderson and K. Peters, *Water Worlds: Human geographies of the ocean* (Ashgate: Farnham, 2014) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. 7 From <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173165>> (February 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. 8 Being on a vessel of this nature provided opportunities to experience the sea in a particular way but it also potentially restricted, or ‘put off’ some scholars with an interest in mobility and the sea. For a fuller discussion of the opportunities, affordances and limitations of mobilizing knowledge see L. Bissell and D. Overend Reflections on a mobile train conference from Helsinki to Rovaniema, *Cultural Geographies* 22(4), 2015, pp. 731-735. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. 9 The conversation continued several months later when I received the following article from one symposium participant: <http://www.stuff.co.nz/environment/climate-news/84024829/antarcticas-southerly-winds-have-made-the-southern-ocean-less-salty> (October 2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. 10 <http://rotoroa.org.nz/> (October 2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. 11 S. Winchester, *Atlantic: A vast ocean of a million stories* (Harper Press: London, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. 12 M. Brown and B. Humberstone, *Shaped by the Sea: Embodied narratives and fluid geographies* (Ashgate: Farnham, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. 13 K. Peters and P. Steinberg, ‘A wet world: rethinking place, territory and time’ [↑](#endnote-ref-12)