

SEAS AS PLACES

Towards a maritime chorography

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Introduction

This short response to Hayward's proposal of the concept of aquapelagos elsewhere in this issue provides a context for such re-imaginings of place and human occupation and identifies chorography as a potential model for further exploration.

Keywords

Aquapelago, chorography, local knowledge

In the *Phaedo* (360 BC), Plato famously observed that the Hellenes lived “like ants or frogs around a pond” (3, 58). The interesting thing about frogs, of course, is that they live *in* ponds as much as they live around them. They are creatures of the water, just as the Athenians turned their backs on Attica and became creatures of the Aegean (and beyond).

We are familiar with the idea that the sea binds particular modes of civilization together. David Abulafia's recent *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* (2011) pursues this line convincingly, framing southern European history in terms of the maritime connection between nodal points—port cities waxing and waning in synch with the demand for various commodities. In such accounts, however, the sea itself figures as the in-between, a space to be traversed, rather than, perhaps, a place, or series of places, in its own right. The definite article construction itself hints at a certain lacuna: ‘the sea’ suggests an undifferentiated expanse, rather than discrete, knowable places.

Of course, for those who spend time at sea, nothing could be further from the truth. The seas, constituted in, through and as what Clifford Geertz (1983) celebrated as ‘local knowledge’, are multiple and complex, known and unknown in their specificities. More, the seas are known (as are the lands) in and through processes of embodiment: they are felt, attuned to, personified, negotiated with and incorporated, as much as they are charted, quantified and overcome. The sailor takes to land with the pitch and scend of sea in his or her legs, just as the weight and texture of the wind registers in the ache of

muscles and coarsening of hands. The seas are lived in and through, as much as they are traversed.

The concept of the aquapelago lays these knowings in front of us, inverting familiar figure-ground logics, inviting us to acknowledge the worlds of the sea not merely as natural science, as (threatened) ecosystem, (untapped) resource, mystery, natural wonder (cf James Cameron's recent, somewhat breathless voyage to the bottom of the Marianas Trench), wilderness, but as being fundamental to our understanding of what it might be to be human.

Reading Hayward's essay (2012), a tumble of literature came to mind, from the fantastical Homeric rendering of the Mediterranean to Will Kyselka's *An Ocean in Mind* (1987) in which we learn of a Polynesian mariner able to navigate through his feel for the play of seven distinct Pacific swells through his body (his apprentice, at one point, laments that he can only discern three). Even Sebastian Junger's pot-boiling verité thriller *The Perfect Storm* (2009) has the virtue of evoking a sense of the Grand Banks as place: not merely the scene in which action takes place, but, as it were, as a character in the narrative in its own right.

A great deal of work in my own discipline, Performance Studies, has, in recent years, taken a lead from what phenomenologist Edward Casey (1997) refers to as 'the primacy of place'. Casey's critique of post-Enlightenment discourses of 'space', in which place is understood merely as instantiation of a broader, abstract, *a priori* extensionality, takes its lead in part from Merleau-Ponty's understandings of the fundamentally embodied nature of being, and, by extension, of our being's primal intercorporeality: rather than being set against the world we inhabit, we are given through and with it. We live a radical continuity with our worlds. In Performance Studies, this insight has been taken up in order to understand how place and performance inter-animate, or are co-constitutive of meaning for participants and spectators alike: no stage is, as the English director Peter Brook believed, an *empty space*. It is, first and foremost, a place, in and of the world. The place-ness of place is not merely relevant: it is foundational.

In his 2008 book, *"In Comes I": Performance, Memory and Landscape*, a ground-level, multiply-perspectival, performative rendering of 'the square mile of childhood', performance theorist Mike Pearson offers a model for pursuing the implications of such thinking: the 'chorography', a radically interdisciplinary writing of the meanings of place, a writing that draws together natural and social histories, and presenting place in its very em-placedness. Chorographies, from the Greek *khora*, for 'region', Pearson explains, were a late medieval genre which "collected and arranged natural, historical and antiquarian information topographically" from a district, "place by place, village by village . . . without necessarily relating it to larger spatial frames" (ibid: 9). Generally taking the form of a gazetteer, a chorography would include systematic descriptions of people, natural features, customs and so on. At times Pearson's rendering of the genre reads as ethnography, at other times as geology, archaeology, paleontology, meteorology, agricultural economics, census, the chorography renders (a) place in (its) chiasmatic idiosyncrasy, setting subjective and objective epistemologies into productive dialogue.

Hayward's essay asserts, with what amounts to self-evident clarity, the imperative to give the seas their due. At the risk of adding to the neologisms, it might be possible to

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conceive of something along the lines of a thallassochorography: a writing of sea as place, in which such an imperative is taken up. And perhaps, as we read of the impending immersion of Kiribati, nothing could be more timely, or more urgent.

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