

Coastal Studies and Society: The Tipping Point

The encounter between liquid blue and brown sand is not made to last. But when it happens it is perfect, magical, intense. The rumor of the waters, the touch of the foam, the smell of salt, invite to dance, there in that wet empty land. Two elements passing through each other's lives, crossing for brief moments only, while the waves spread along the beach, before returning to the sea.

Coastal Studies is at home in the shallow waters (bays, coves, estuaries, firths, fjords, inlets), but it also speaks to interstitial watery realms of all sorts (straits and portages; reticulated systems of lakes, rivers, or inland seas; archipelagos or island clusters). With its focus on the local, the adjacent, and the domestic, it is grounded in the specificities of physical places, searching at the same time to relate these to the wider world. Coastal Studies is especially well-suited to investigating the range of subject matter that is sometimes overlooked as “not-quite-oceanic,” yet “not-quite-terrestrial.” Its ambition is to embrace the entire array of human or more-than-human elements imbricated in these hybrid spaces.

Despite their ubiquity, shallow water, sandy tracts, and waterfronts in particular are too often overlooked, or even disparaged. Perhaps this is simply because of their ambiguous placement, permeable nature, or intermediate location. Perhaps something more complex may be at work. In his essay “Brown,” Steve Mentz has argued that the nouns, verbs, and adjectives which adhere to the textures of these spaces (“ooze,” “seep,” “mire”) sometimes betray a visceral discomfort, an equation of “soupy, smelly” spaces with digestion, excretion, or decay which may subtly inform the thinking of ordinary citizens, policymakers, and academics, leading to ambivalence or disdain.¹ Acknowledging and embracing the inherent muddiness of our subject matter, we consider the outer limits of Coastal Studies to be incremental and shaded in both directions, like the coast itself. Coastal Studies topics are

¹ Steve Mentz, ‘Brown,’ in *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 193-212; see also Steve Mentz, *Ocean* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

exactly the ones that could fall “either way,” as they share the fluidity of the waves spread across the beach and the versatility of circulating sediments. Indeed, as Michael Pearson observed a generation ago, “how far does the coast extend inland?” is a research question, not a matter of definition.² If we think of coasts as cultural spaces and legal entities as well as material environments, then clearly the answer must also vary in different countries and historical eras.³

John Gillis warned against the inherent limitations of any history that began and ended on land. If history suffered from these landlocked preconceptions, shifting the emphasis to the deep blue offered one avenue of escape.⁴ Yet, as Gillis remarked more recently, it is high time to stop considering the shore simply as “the edge of something else” or as peripheral to another inquiry, whether maritime or terrestrial.⁵ With as many as 675 million human beings living in a low-elevation coastal area in the year 2000 and 879 to 949 million being expected in 2030, coasts are a relevant matter for a very large number of people today.⁶ The urgency of coastal issues is only exacerbated by risks raised by global warming and sea-level mean rise. These trends threaten some of the world’s biggest cities, and every coastal region must reckon with land loss (whether through erosion or submersion), superficial aquifer and soil salinization, and the depletion of ecosystems’ productivity. Sea-level rise puts many human values and activities in jeopardy as well.⁷

Despite the high economic, social, and cultural stakes in this area, matters relating to environmental and climate phenomena and their impacts on coastal ecosystems and populations have traditionally fallen within the scope of the natural sciences. These study the physical processes of the environment, characterizing the evolution of coastal zones, based

² Michael Pearson, ‘Littoral Society: The Case for the Coast,’ *The Great Circle* 7, no. 1 (1985): 1–8.

³ Here, our approach is indebted to work such as Philip E. Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and Godfrey Baldacchino, ed. *A World of Islands: An Island Studies Reader* (Charlottetown, PEI: Island Studies Press, 2007).

⁴ John R. Gillis, ‘Filling the Blue Hole in Environmental History,’ *Rachel Carson Center Perspectives* 3 ‘The Future of Environmental History. Needs and Opportunities’ (2011): 16-18.

⁵ John R. Gillis, ‘Afterword: Beyond the Blue Horizon,’ in *Coastal Works: Cultures of the Atlantic Edge*, ed. Nicholas Allen, Nick Groom, and Jos Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 268, quoted in Nicholas Allen, *Ireland, Literature, and the Coast: Seatangled* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 9. See also John R. Gillis, *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

⁶ Barbara Neumann, Athanasios Vafeidis, Juliane Zimmermann and Robert Nicholls, ‘Future Coastal Population Growth and Exposure to Sea-Level Rise and Coastal Flooding - A Global Assessment,’ *PLOS ONE* 10, no. 3 (2015) <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0118571>

⁷ J. Pat Doody, ‘Coastal Squeeze—An Historical Perspective,’ *Journal of Coastal Conservation* 10 (2004): 129-138.

on the analysis of data, such as micro-fauna, flora, sediments, geomorphology, currents, waves, tides, climate, and astronomical influences. Scientists are able to take into consideration the impacts of human activities in the coastal dynamic, or to acknowledge the full influence of humans as forcing mechanisms. But, they are less well-equipped to contextualize human values, behaviours and practices in their specific economic, political and social frameworks, particularly when connected to events that took place in the past, or that belong to a different array of disciplines.⁸ Places and resources have cultural and symbolic values and representations for people that are not easily translated into numbers, put into computer analysis or apprehended through global model perspectives. Knowing how (physical) environments work is not enough; they have to be considered also as living spaces and imagined futures, features that are embedded in local cultural practices and meaning-making traditions.⁹

Fortunately, in recent years, scholars in the humanities and social sciences have taken their own coastal turn, offering not a single new insight but a panoply of fresh approaches. In keeping with their origin in various fields of study, the new approaches to the coast go by diverse names: maritime cultural landscape, blue humanities, wet ontology, *kystkultur*, the paramaritime, the hydrosocial, seasideness, littoral society, coastal history and even terraqueous history.¹⁰ The recent proliferation of thought-pieces and attempts to articulate

⁸ Joana G. Freitas and João A. Dias, 'The Contribution of History to Coastal Zone Management,' in *Energy & Environmental Transformations in a Globalizing World. An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*, ed. Sophia Kalantzakos and Nikolaos Farantouris (Athens: Nomiki Bibliothiki, 2015), 204.

⁹ Mike Hulme, 'Problems with Making and Governing Global Kinds of Knowledge,' *Global Environmental Change* 20 (2010): 558-564; Joana G. Freitas, Maria Rosário Bastos and João A. Dias, 'Traditional Ecological Knowledge as a Contribution to Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation: The Case of the Portuguese Coastal Populations,' in Walter Leal Filho et al (eds.), *Handbook of Climate Change Communication*, vol. 3 (Springer International Publishing, 2018), 258.

¹⁰ Christer Westerdahl, 'The Maritime Cultural Landscape,' *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* 21, no. 1 (1992): 5-14; Gérard Le Bouëdec, 'La pluriactivité dans les sociétés littorales XVIIe-XIXe siècle,' *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l'Ouest* 109, no. 1 (2002): 61-90; Michael Pearson, 'Littoral Society: The Concept and the Problems,' *Journal of World History* 17, no. 4 (2006): 353-373; Isaac Land, 'Tidal Waves: The New Coastal History,' *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 3 (2007): 731-743; Steve Mentz, 'Toward a Blue Cultural Studies: The Sea, Maritime Culture, and Early Modern English Literature,' *Literature Compass* 6, no. 5 (2009): 997-1013; Jamie Linton and Jessica Budds, 'The Hydrosocial Cycle: Defining and Mobilizing a Relational-Dialectical Approach to Water,' *Geoforum* 57 (2014): 170-180; David Jarratt, 'Sense of Place at a British Coastal Resort: Exploring 'Seasideness' in Morecambe,' *Tourism* 63, no. 3 (2015): 351-363; Silke Reeploeg, 'Nordic Border Crossings: Coastal Communities and Connected Cultures in Eighteenth-Century Norway, Scotland, and Canada,' *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies/Études Scandinaves au Canada* 23 (2016): 28-47; Alison Bashford, 'Terraqueous Histories,' *Historical Journal* 60, no. 2 (2017): 253-272; Kimberley Peters and Philip Steinberg, 'The ocean in excess: Towards a More-Than-Wet Ontology,' *Dialogues in Human Geography* (2019): 1-15.

a new vocabulary points to an unlikely conclusion: The coastal realm is among the last remaining academic areas that might be described as *under-theorized*. The appearance of so many edited volumes as well as special issues of journals focusing on one or more aspects of coastal studies, many of which adopt a strongly interdisciplinary approach, is another indication that these converging flows have crested and overtopped a tipping point.¹¹

The humanities' interest in coastal studies is a late arrival, considering that coastal geology, coastal ecology, coastal geography, and coastal engineering are all established academic disciplines, with their own degree programmes, endowed chairs, and major peer-reviewed journals. The advent of humanities to these specific studies should not be seen as competition or as an infringement on the territory of other disciplines, but as an opportunity for fostering collaboration in order to achieve more integrated and holistic approaches. The coastal theme is a natural integrator of interdisciplinary synthesis. On the brink of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030), considering that coasts are the place where the ocean impacts human lives the most, policy makers will turn to scientific data and professional bodies of expertise for advice. At a time of climate crises and rising demands for social justice, the social sciences and humanities must have a role in these discussions. A flagship interdisciplinary journal to represent and consolidate this confluence of new and promising approaches is timely. Indeed, it is overdue.

The background to *Coastal Studies & Society* stems from a number of emerging scholarly networks, conferences and publications, but primarily it originated in the Port

¹¹ For example: Carola Hein, ed. *Port Cities: Dynamic Landscapes and Global Networks* (New York: Routledge, 2011); D. Catterall and J. Campbell, eds., *Women in Port: Gendering Communities, Economies, and Social Networks in Atlantic Port Cities, 1500-1800* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); special issue of [Atlantic Studies 10, no. 2 \(2013\)](#) on 'Oceanic Studies'; special issue of [Environmental History, 18, no. 1 \(2013\)](#) on 'New Directions in Marine Environmental History'; special issue of [Isis 105, no. 2 \(June 2014\)](#) on 'Knowing the Ocean'; Brad Beaven, Karl Bell and Robert James, eds, *Port Towns and Urban Cultures: International Histories of the Waterfront, c. 1700-2000* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); David Worthington, ed. *The New Coastal History: Cultural and Environmental Perspectives from Scotland and Beyond* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Nicholas Allen, Nick Groom, and Jos Smith, eds., *Coastal Works: Culture of the Atlantic Edge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); special issue of [Women's Studies Quarterly 45, No. 1/2 \(Spring/Summer 2017\)](#), 'At Sea'; special issue of [Comparative Literature, 2017](#) on 'Ocean Routes'; special issue of [Configurations \(Fall 2019\)](#) on 'Science Studies in the Blue Humanities'; special issue of [Humanities \(2019\) on blue comparative literature](#); special issue of [Journal of Transnational American Studies 10, no. 1 \(2019\)](#) on 'Archipelagoes/Oceans/American Visuality'; Margaret Cohen and Killian Quigley, eds., *The Aesthetics of the Undersea* (London: Routledge, 2019). See also Emma McKinley, Tim Acott, and Katherine L. Yates, 'Marine Social Sciences: Looking Towards a Sustainable Future,' *Environmental Science and Policy* 108 (2020): 85-92; Maarten Bavnick and Jojada Verrips, 'Manifesto for the Marine Social Sciences,' *Maritime Studies* 19 (2020):121-123.

Towns and Urban Cultures (PTUC) research group, which was established in 2010 by historians based at the University of Portsmouth, UK (<http://porttowns.port.ac.uk>). The aim of PTUC was to provide a platform for scholars working in social and cultural maritime history to move beyond “treating the port town as merely the sluice gate regulating how the mighty oceanic flows interact with the mainland”, and instead place these intersections of maritime and urban space at the centre of the inquiry.¹² In the course of developing scholarly networks on this theme, it was found that the term ‘maritime’ itself created more problems than it solved, and the group found itself looking for a new paradigm altogether. Coastal studies offered the solution.

Like the definition of coast itself, we came to recognize that what the adjacent, the local, or the domestic might mean varied considerably depending on location and context. The new appraisals of “sailortown,” for example, had undertaken a fruitful re-evaluation of waterfront neighbourhoods along these lines.¹³ Yet the rich new lines of inquiry into the study of beach leisure—including surfing and sunbathing—also concerned themselves with the adjacent, the local, and the domestic, but pursued this through a strikingly different set of research questions, source materials, and conclusions.¹⁴ Rural coasts were, if anything, even more varied than their urban counterparts, and when scholars as diverse as Bathsheba Demuth, Jenia Mukherjee, and Sharika Crawford (to mention only three examples)

¹² Isaac Land, ‘Doing Urban History in the Coastal Zone,’ in *Port Towns and Urban Cultures: International Histories of the Waterfront, c. 1700-2000*, eds. Brad Beaven, Karl Bell and Robert James (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 265.

¹³ Valerie Burton, ‘Boundaries and Identities in the Nineteenth-Century English Port: Sailortown Narratives and Urban Space,’ in *Identities in Space: Contested Terrains in the Western City since 1850*, ed. Simon Gunn and Robert J. Morris (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 137-151; Isaac Land, ‘The Humours of Sailortown: Atlantic History meets Subculture Theory,’ in *City Limits: Perspectives on the Historical European City*, ed. Glenn Clark et al. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010), 325-347; Brad Beaven, ‘The Resilience of Sailortown Culture in English Naval ports, c. 1820-1900,’ *Urban History* 43, no. 1 (2015): 1-24; Robert James, ‘Cinema-Going in a Port Town, 1914–1951: Film Booking Patterns at the Queens Cinema, Portsmouth,’ *Urban History* 40, no. 2 (2013): 315-335; Karl Bell, ‘Civic Spirits? Ghost Lore and Civic Narratives in Nineteenth-Century Portsmouth,’ *Cultural and Social History* 11, no. 1 (2014): 51-68; Graeme Milne, *People, Place, and Power on the Nineteenth-Century Waterfront: Sailortown* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Tytti Steel, ‘Encounters on the Waterfront: Negotiating Identities in the Context of Sailortown Culture,’ in Brad Beaven et al, eds. *Port Towns and Urban Cultures* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 111-132.

¹⁴ Krista Comer, *Surfer Girls and the New World Order* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Caroline M. Ford, *Sydney Beaches: A History* (Sydney: New South Books, 2014); Scott Laderman, *Empire in Waves: A Political History of Surfing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Andrew Kahrl, *The Land Was Ours: How Black Beaches Became White Wealth in the Coastal South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Carina Breidenbach, et al., eds., *Narrating and Constructing the Beach: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2020).

interrogate the adjacent, the local, and the domestic, it is wisest to keep an open mind about what questions will be asked and what answers may emerge.¹⁵

In that spirit, we expect-- and welcome-- a wide, eclectic range of submissions. There is, undoubtedly, an *occupational* coast (agriculture, aquaculture, fisheries, pluriactivity, salt production, ship-building, seafaring, trading, merchant shipping, industries), and we would not wish to exclude this important subject matter-- whether in itself, or in its intersections with other areas. However, *Coastal Studies & Society* is particularly committed to publishing scholarship which has historically been underrepresented, or has lacked a clear, highly-visible "home" journal in either the humanities or the social sciences. Examples of such topics and themes include:

- The ecological coast (watersheds, lakes, sand, waves, currents, wind, fauna and flora, storms, river deltas, erosion, accretion, flooding, tsunamis, pollution);
- The urban coast (port towns, waterfronts, resorts, real estate speculation, property rights, insurance, disaster relief);
- The political coast (nations, governmentality, frontiers, waterborne migrants, social justice, exclusive economic zones, resources, regulation, control and exploitation, lifesaving and humanitarian considerations);
- The cultural coast (myths, legends, traditions, literature, identity, cosmopolitanism, religion, leisure, sports, cinema, music, visual representations, tourism, the heritage industry, contested memory);
- The engineered coast (dredging, land reclamation, harbours, dockyards, artificial beaches and islands, groynes, seawalls, pipelines, offshore oil rigs, wind farms);
- The managed coast (legislation, uses, conflicts, sustainability, conservation, adaptation, post-industrial redevelopment);

¹⁵ Epeli Hau'ofa, *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008); Karin E. Ingersoll, *Waves of Knowing: A Seascape Epistemology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); David Gange, *The Frayed Atlantic Edge: A Historian's Journey from Shetland to the Channel* (London: William Collins 2019); Bathsheba Demuth, *Floating Coast: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019); Jenia Mukherjee, 'No Voice, No Choice: Riverine Changes and Human Vulnerability in the 'Chars' of Malda and Murshidabad,' Occasional Paper No. 28, (Kolkata: Institute of Development Studies, 2011) <http://idsk.edu.in/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/OP-28.pdf> accessed November 24, 2020; Sharika D. Crawford, *The Last Turtlemen of the Caribbean: Waterscapes of Labor, Conservation, and Boundary Making* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

- The future coast (eco-fiction, amphibious architecture, prospective model scenarios, geoengineering, resilience, retreat, building with or opening space for nature).

To be sure, the potential scope of coastal studies is broader than any such schematic list. Not only do many of these topics naturally blend together or exist only in dialogue with each other, there are important categories of analysis--such as gender and sexuality--which could be inflected by any of the subheadings above, or vitally inform an inquiry into any of them. Similarly, certain events, such as the founding of the Beach Erosion Board in the United States in 1930--because they are an assertion of power and an exercise in the production of knowledge--can themselves exert a transformative effect upon basic assumptions about the world.¹⁶ Such an entity, that appeared at the intersection of emerging leisure practices, urban planning, scientific research, and real estate speculation, brought policy expectations into being, while on the other hand assigning a particular role to nature and the natural order. In that spirit, we recognize that terms such as “the cultural coast,” “the political coast,” or “the ecological coast” must be defined--or, indeed, challenged, interrogated, and set aside--according to the needs of a particular method of inquiry, and a specific location in space and time.

No matter the approach, the challenge, going forward, is to develop an analytical multi-lens trans-chronological framework to include the entire array of natural-human coastal experiences. In addition to conventional articles and “state of the field” review essays, *Coastal Studies & Society* will, from time to time, also publish in formats which take advantage of the flexibility of an online journal. Although maritime specialists sometimes lament “sea blindness” (the wilful or unwitting ignorance of oceanic space), it is worth noting that *coasts* are often extremely visible, and this visibility and accessibility--however problematic--deserves close and critical examination in its own right.¹⁷ Photo essays, as well as practitioner-

¹⁶ Elsa Devienne, *La ruée vers le sable: Une histoire environnementale du littoral de Los Angeles au XXe siècle* (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2020), 112-115, forthcoming in English as *The Sand Rush: An Environmental History of the Los Angeles Beaches in the Twentieth Century* from Oxford University Press.

¹⁷ Kim McQuaid, ‘Selling the Space Age: NASA and Earth’s Environment, 1958-1990,’ *Environment and History* 12, no. 2 (May 2006): 127-163; Belinda Wheaton, ‘Identity, Politics, and the Beach: Environmental Activism in Surfers Against Sewage,’ *Leisure Studies* 26, no. 3 (2007): 279-302; Antony Adler, *Neptune’s Laboratory: Fantasy, Fear, and Science at Sea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), see especially the discussion of museums, aquaria, and marine coastal research stations; A. M. Dietsch, K. E. Wallen, S. Clayton, H. E. Kretser, G. T. Kyle, Z. Ma, and A. Vercammen, ‘New Directions in Conservation Psychology at a Critical Time,’ *Conservation Biology* 34, No. 6 (2020): 1335–1338.

, pedagogy-, or policy-oriented pieces, offer multimedia modalities particularly well-suited for showcasing projects grounded in fieldwork, oral history, public history, museology, or conservation psychology.

Taking inspiration from the Swedish expression “one boot in the boat, and the other in the field,” *Coastal Studies & Society* is particularly interested in exploring the hybridity between environments, people, activities and things, on and across the margins where water encounters land, and along all the possible articulations between them.¹⁸ If you find coastal studies ambiguous, that is not a bug; it is a feature of the software. Emulating the messy, intermediate spaces which we study, we hope to provide a space where processes, theories and lived experiences related to the coast can all be shared in one place, and mutually benefit from the unexpected juxtapositions that result. Indeed, it is precisely this untidiness and liminality which makes a coastal position the perfect spot from which to launch less conventional research and narratives, or contemplate fresh possibilities.¹⁹

It is fitting, at a time when we confront the threat of a cascading environmental and humanitarian crisis centred on the low-elevation communities closest to the world’s shorelines, that a new vision has emerged which puts that very coastal zone at its centre. While the scope of the crisis is daunting, it is also now possible to discern an emerging rich and provocative set of creative thinking about coastal pasts, the coastal present, and possible coastal futures. Not since the days of Fernand Braudel has there been such a clear sense that a comprehensive reconsideration of watery subject matter was imminent. Our ambition for *Coastal Studies & Society* is to offer a forum for all of these scholars and practitioners--with their different origins, experiences and purposes--to meet and learn from each other. We seek to encourage methodological, thematic and topical experimentation within and across the disciplines. The challenges of the twenty-first century require nothing less. We invite you to join us.

¹⁸ The Swedish expression is quoted in Gillis, *Human Shore*, 273.

¹⁹ Mentz, *Ocean*.