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Abstract

The coastline –the space between the ocean and the land– is a both a barrier and an invitation to go beyond the land's edge and enter an otherly realm. Humans have skated over the water in boats and other kinds of watercraft for thousands of years. But they have always been (and continue to be) reluctant to immerse themselves in the ocean. Despite humanity's eons long interaction with water, as Charles Sprawson's marvellous paean to swimming Haunts of the Black Masseur documents, it is only the past 150 years or so that humans have been swimmers and not bathers.

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THE EPHEMERAL COAST: ON THE EDGE OF THE OTHERLY REALM

Ian Buchanan, Director of the Institute of Social Transformation, University of Wollongong, NSW

The coastline –the space between the ocean and the land– is a both a barrier and an invitation to go beyond the land’s edge and enter an otherly realm. Humans have skated over the water in boats and other kinds of watercraft for thousands of years. But they have always been (and continue to be) reluctant to immerse themselves in the ocean. Despite humanity’s eons long interaction with water, as Charles Sprawson’s marvellous paean to swimming *Haunts of the Black Masseur* documents, it is only the past 150 years or so that humans have been swimmers and not bathers.

Water is endlessly fascinating to artists and poets, and indeed some of our greatest artists and poets have also been great swimmers (Lord Byron is the most well-known of the poet swimmers; Swinburne was no slouch either) but that fascination has always been tempered by fear, and the deeply felt sense that water is not a human domain (this was Shelley’s view, which he effectively proved by drowning – Shelley wasn’t the only poet to drown himself, either; Hart Crane also chose this mode of death, as did Virginia Woolf).¹ To swim, then, is to immerse oneself in an otherly realm that is both deadly to humans and teeming with its own life as great ocean-explorers like Jacques Cousteau and Hans Hass revealed in the middle of the twentieth century.

Swimming is among the most sensuous of all the forms of mobility humans have contrived. In water one can feel one’s own skin–the most taken for granted, but also the most powerful, of our senses, namely touch, suddenly comes alive. The water caresses us, even as it cleanses us, which is doubtless why the bath has become such an emblem of ‘self-care’ in Foucault’s strong sense of that idea (as opposed to the way advertisers conceive of it).² French poet Paul Valéry goes so far as to

1. Sprawson 1992: 32-33; 99-101; 103-105.
2. Foucault 1986.

describe swimming as “fornication avec l’onde”.³ Great swimmers like Ian Thorpe and Michael Phelps attribute their success in the pool to their ‘feel’ for the water and as their respective autobiographies make clear, this is as much a matter of emotional feel as it is tactility. Terry Laughlin’s *Total Immersion*, advises that swimmers need to let their nerve endings be their coach because in contrast to other sports the results of swim-training can only be felt, not seen.⁴ This, according to Sprawson, is the reason competitive swimmers ‘shave down’.

In order to intensify this feel for water, Australian swimmers of the Fifties started shaving down their legs before important races. The idea spread to America in 1960 when [Murray] Rose moved to Los Angeles. [...] Rose described the immediate sensual awareness of water as he dived in, the feeling that he was suspended, united with the element, the sudden surge of power like that experienced by ballet dancers who remove their hair to activate their nerve-endings.⁵

Johnny Weissmuller, five time Olympic gold medallist and ubiquitous star of the Tarzan films, wrote in *Swimming the American Crawl*: “Water is elusive, but you can get ‘hold’ of it if you know how to go after it”.⁶ Swimming or drowning, one surrenders to the water. Before one can catch the water, as Weissmuller enjoins us to do, one must first of all submit to the water, and enter its domain and go with its flows. This is a relatively easy thing to manage (cognitively, if not physically) in a pool with its defined depths and transparent water, but much more daunting in the open water of oceans, lakes, and rivers where currents and creatures (real and imagined) conspire to torment the hapless water-goer.

3. Cited in Sprawson 1992: 101.
4. Laughlin 2004: 70.
5. Sprawson 1992: 14.
6. Cited in Taormina 2012: 22.

Little wonder, then, that before “the late seventeenth century, the sea was regarded [by Europeans] as a place of danger and death, the aspect of houses was directed inland, sailors were not taught to swim in order to foster in them a true respect for the sea. The ocean stank, was dangerous, belched up seaweed and flotsam, and was full of marauding pirates and monsters.”⁷ The shark hysteria that erupts every few years in Australia is a continuation of this same elemental fear of the open water that European cultures have and reflects the degree to which Australia’s settler peoples remain at odds with their ‘home’.⁸

In Australia’s geographical unconscious, open water is more for looking at and moving across than swimming in, which perhaps explains our relative lack of care for our oceans and waterways as well as our lack of knowledge about them. Jellyfish kill far more people than sharks do, and not only that, they are steadily killing off large sections of the ocean, strangling the life out of it, yet it is sharks that we fear.⁹ We pollute our natural waters and exploit them because they are not part of ‘our’ spatial domain. It is telling, I think, how few words swimmers have for varieties of water compared to say sailors or surfers – it is either clear or murky, smooth or rough, cold or warm, moving or still, but beyond these crude binaries we have no words for the many other nuances of water swimmers experience.

Water’s power to bring out our contemplative side is not only known to swimmers. One of the most striking things about Australia’s beaches and waterways, apart from their startling natural beauty, is how most of them, particularly the more beautiful examples, are ringed by

7. Shapton 2012: 289.

8. Europeans imported their fear of sharks to Australia. See Tiffin 2009.

9. On our fear of sharks see Tiffin 2009; on the lethality of jellyfish see Gershwin 2010.

towering concrete edifices with multiple viewing-platforms built into them that function like gargantuan ‘walls of separation’ standing between the lifestyle ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’. Australians, particularly, like to live, work, spend their leisure time, in sight of great stretches of water, the more expansive the better. So powerful is this desire, Australians want to possess this view, own it, and prevent others from sharing it. In contemporary, real-estate obsessed, neo-liberal society only the privileged few get to enjoy both proximity to the water and the view.

Freud famously described religion as an ‘oceanic sensibility’, by which he seemed to mean that it is an encounter with a fathomless immensity. Perhaps one can say that the ocean calls to mind something of the same order as a God, a kind of transcendence on earth, or what Kant referred to as the sublime (his key example in this regard was the forest). Freud’s disciple, Otto Rank, thought the appeal of the ocean was that it recalled the liquid confines of the womb. In any case, the sensibility Freud speaks of is a reverential attitude, one that treats the ocean as an ‘other’ realm, an unearthly space that one should not, and in a certain sense, one cannot enter.

But if the ocean is the inspiration for our notion of what it means to be religious, as Freud supposes, then it is clearly losing its power, or else globally we are more secular than we realised. Just as Nietzsche said, humanity is killing its god: The ocean is today more imperilled than any of us really knows or understand. It may be that we cannot breathe in its watery depths, but without its carbon-scrubbing powers, we soon will be unable to breathe in our own realm. We worry about being inundated by rising tides as the polar caps melt, but the real threat to the future of the planet is the loss of the ocean as the essential oxygen-producing machine that gives us all life. If the ocean dies, then so do we. Thus, to stand on the coast is to stand before life itself.

Biography

Ian Buchanan is professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Wollongong. He is the author of the Dictionary of Critical Theory (OUP) and the founding editor of Deleuze Studies.

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