Decolonizing Seascapes: Imaginaries and Absences on an Island Hub

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> [The Fijian] looks with pleasure on a globe, as a representation of the world, until directed to contrast Fiji with Asia or America, when his joy ceases, and he acknowledges with a forced smile, "Our land is not larger than the dung of a fly" but on rejoining his comrades, he pronounces the globe "a lying ball."
>
> Thomas Williams and James Calvert, Fiji and the Fijians (1858)

1. Introduction

The opening quotation of this chapter was penned by English Wesleyan missionaries Thomas Williams (1815-1891) and James Calvert (1813-1892), who developed a keen interest in ethnography during their stay in Fiji. Their material was amply illustrated with sketches, and upon publication in London, was widely accepted as an early colonial account of Fijian society before the conversion of Thakobau, the Chief of Bau, to Christianity in 1854. What remains intriguing about this snippet is not so much the familiar civilizing mission, nor the hegemonic cartographic representation that it reveals. Indeed, the spatialized representations here remain as hegemonic categories, if one were to think of the Heideggerian notion of "*Weltbild*" (or the "Age of the World Picture"), through the splitting of the world into object and subject, the observer and the seen. Yet what is arguably more interesting in this snippet is the relational response of the Fijian cosmological imaginary, of land and the sea as a unified whole. It is after all the terrestrially oriented "world picture" that draws these artificial distinctions.

Taking my cue from critical oceanic and coastal scholarship in the humanities and social sciences, it is hardly surprising that a plethora of postcolonial and indigenous work on seascapes[1], from E'peli Hau'ofa's (2008) work on Oceania to Nonie Sharp's (2002) writing on Aborigi-

nal seafarers questions the elemental distinction between the *terra firma* and fluid waterworlds, not only conceptually, but also in the context of everyday communal life. Moreover as Connery (2006) argues, drawing from the example of imperial China's longer maritime presence in regional mercantilist histories (in comparison with Europe), China never came to have an "elementally" dominated antithetical imaginary of the sea that was to be traversed, discovered, mapped, and occupied, unlike land. He argues that despite having one of the most sophisticated cultures of landscape aesthetics alongside its literary tradition, imperial China barely articulated meta-narratives of oceanic conquest or voyaging. Nevertheless, it is in the contemporary post-socialist context that marine territorial place- and claims-making have become all the more pronounced (see Roszko 2015). Implicitly this apparent historic "absence" could mean that the sea was never featured as something to be thought of as apart from human life, or metaphorically, as suggesting chaos, placelessness or timelessness, a non-civilizational space, a vast expansive nothingness as pre-Braudelian Western European philosophers and historians once imagined it.

Using this puzzle as a point of departure, this chapter engages with the question of how to reframe practical epistemic sensibilities related to maritime lifeworlds and encounters without essentializing and romanticizing the imaginative (terrestrial) Other. Put differently, it could be argued that the very quest in studying marine epistemol-

ogies and ontologies as bounded conceptual containers runs the risk of objectifying and polarizing the terra-firma. Owing to the fact that most humanistic disciplines did emerge from distinct continental, land-based imaginaries, an intellectual counter-hegemony appear futile. Arguably then, it might be worth contemplating ways with which to unlearn and de-normalize concepts, vocabularies and practices that are simplistically associated to territorialized seascapes, with readings and sensibilities of their fluid, watery spaces, voluminalities, depths, intimacies, and multiple encounters (Hessler 2018; 2019; DeLoughrey and Flores 2020; Sammler 2020).

It is here that the quest for un/picking so-called occidental and modernist interpretations becomes increasingly problematic. When considering the material spaces and historiographic retellings of oceans and seascapes, the question of whose voices, knowledge(s), encounters, and experiences matter becomes all the more salient. This assertion may seem self-evident, for these spaces and narratives also embody historical and contemporary readings of cultural *land*scapes—such as rainforests, mountain terrains, plains, and deserts for example. Yet the location of the "marine" (with its multiplicity of non-human lives, flows, teleconnections, and depths), is far more complex than the narrowly focused resource-centric "maritime" lens (i.e. suggestive of human-centered mercantile and military interests), that has overwhelmingly dominated the social sciences.

In many ways, studying the marine realm (in conversation with its terrestrial), enables the creative rupturing of a series of familiar dichotomies comprising the occidental/oriental, Nature/Culture, the sedentary/the mobile, among others. It potentially brings to the fore peripheralized forms of knowledge, their flows, and modes of knowing/being that diverse fresh and salty waterworlds may afford. By extension, it may not be wrong to speak of distinct marine and coastal cosmologies, not only of Austro-Aboriginal, Arctic First Nations, and Pacific Islanders, but also those of Gaelic and Icelandic stock for example. Indeed, the term "Western-centric" has never been singularly rooted to a particular cultural and geographic orientation, but rather a modernist one that privileges particular modes of dwelling and of "progressive" knowledge.

In particular I take into consideration the argument that decolonization ought not to be used metaphorically as a catchall to fit other strands of social-political critique—whether they constitute anti-colonial/neo-liberal struggles, critical methodologies, and other justice-related issues (Tuck and Yang 2012). While the decentering of settler perspectives (of legitimate presence, occupation and ultimately civilization and "liberation") serve to deepen decolonial critique, this chapter also draws attention to the inherent conceptual and empirical challenges when exploring narratives of arrival and presence, con-

nection and difference through littoral seascape imaginaries. Arguably much of this stems from the emphasis on terrestrial modes of being and knowledge-making, taking for example the lifeworlds of the agro-plantation or the neoliberal academy. This reading of decoloniality—as opposed to postcoloniality—complicates particular interpretations of land-sea encounters both spatially and historically, bringing into ambit a host of non-Western sea-borne influences and patterns of ascendancy, invoking for example the Indianization or the Sinicization of Southeast Asia, or the reach of the Persian and Ottoman Empires.

In turning to the limitations of perceiving marine encounters and lifeworlds through the triadic maritime trade-exploration-conquest lens, this chapter advances several tangents with which to conceptually decolonize oceanic and diverse seascapes. Sections 2 and 3 of the chapter locate the question of marine epistemologies—through the notion of a *mare imaginalis*—while further questioning the boundaries and contradictions inherent in thinking through/with the sea. The fourth section more concretely locates key questions on decoloniality and border thinking in the imaginaries and representations of coasts, seas, and oceans, before grounding these arguments in an empirical context. In the final section, I revisit recent writings on "islandness" and various critiques of its insularized or capsular imagination by drawing on postcolonial Ceylon/Sri Lanka for inspiration.

Rather than to pick out less discernible marine epistemologies, I center more on the ambiguities and contradictions that these littoral silences (that often privilege the grounded *terrene*) implicate. In particular, I draw attention to the curious figure of the island "hub" and its discursive meanings—particularly in the sense of reproducing and maintaining conventional land/sea-based distinctions and other kinds of discontinuities.

2. Oceanic Imaginaries: Towards a Mare-Imaginalis?

What are imaginaries, and why do they matter in the environmental humanities and social sciences? At its broadest sense, an imaginary refers to "that social domain of seeing, experiencing, thinking, fantasizing, discussing and enacting aspects of the material world" (Neimanis et al. 2015). Not only do imaginaries shape a sense of self and personhood, they also create expectations that guide everyday social interaction. While intricately interwoven with "value regimes" (Levy and Spicer 2013, 673), imaginaries form a crucial part of any sphere of governance or political reality—as they weave in and out of visions and discourses that are at the same time normative and performative, as well bearing marks of deep ambivalence and historic contradiction. For example, oceanic and coastal/littoral imaginaries have never been atemporal or culturally universal. Bearing in mind how the retributive seas of early Judeo-Christian narratives gave way to notions of imperialised oceans as spaces

of sojourn to be discovered, mapped, and claimed in a contemporary neoliberal context, the practices of mass coastal tourism, cruising, and private property development continue to transform seascapes into playgrounds of affluence and excess consumption.

While being intimately bound to particular socio-political configurations imaginaries are, for thinkers like Henry Corbin (1964, 1969) and Arjun Appadurai (1996), neither falsities, daydreams, nor abstract fantasies. Considering the powerful ordering, norming, practice and discourse-shaping forms and roles of imaginaries—or *mundus imaginalis* and the imaginal (Corbin 1964)—why do oceans, seas, and their diverse forms of coast-based, marine and maritime life matter? I argue that the "oceanic turn" across the social sciences and the interdisciplinary sustainability sciences (see Cordell 2007), together with less recent currents in New Thallasology (Horden and Purcell 2006), represent but a fragment of the puzzle. These disciplinary shards often come together to articulate what Lambert et al. (2006, 479) refer to as "putting the seas and oceans at the centre of [its] concerns" —taking the example of a revisionist historic geography for example.

This assertion in no way discounts the countering of multiple terrestrial or landlocked biases within the humanities and the social sciences, which in turn mark profound ontological, epistemological, and political depar-

tures. That is to say, departures in the ways in which seas, oceans, coastlines, microbial, animal, and other forms of marine life, tidal and wind circulations and more came to be interwoven into interpretive, constructivist, and embattled accounts of seascapes and the littoral seashore. At the same time, the marine also continues to prefigure multiple entanglements across these disparate contemporary contexts and domains—implicating flows of globalised capital, circulating orthodoxies around socio-environmental governance, practices of resource appropriation and exploitation, economic growth, overpopulation and fiscal austerity, together with the un/remaking of territories through regimes of boundary-policing and surveillance.

Rather than merely focusing on the diversity of marine imaginaries, I ask how multiple thematic, ontological and epistemological borders have been crossed within the last two decades at least, after scholarship within the mainstream humanities and social sciences increasingly started putting themselves "out at sea." Recent scholarly interest has paid lively attention to the intertwined material, relational and symbolic meanings of the sea and its corresponding coastal cosmologies. This gaze was further complemented (and complicated) by how oceanic and sea-based lifeworlds remained distinct from those of their hinterlands (see Astuti 1995; D'Arcy 2006; Cohen 2010). Indeed, at first glance, this buoyant thematic pluralism proved essential in countering early Enlight-

enment imaginaries of the sea as socio-culturally barren, ahistorical, unknowable, and at times feminised, as quintessentially remaining a *placeless* void (Irigaray 1991; Cocco 2013).

The second kind of border traversing concerns itself with epistemology, and more concretely, with overcoming a series of pervasive dualisms that haunted trope-based, theoretical and metaphorical distinctions between the marine and the terrestrial Other (see Ingersoll 2016). As previously mentioned, merely attending to the overemphasis on landlocked spaces—or the lack of marine-based concepts and sensibilities thereof—may prove insufficient. Thus, this category of border transgression took a form that was more deeply embedded in overcoming binaries, not simply between water and land, but their corresponding dualisms such as nature/culture, wilderness/civilisation, sea-borne/agri*cultural*, mobile/sedentary, fluidity/matter, *tabula rasa*/historic, femininized/masculinized, etc. The pre-Renaissance infiniteness of the sea had in turn been replaced by instrumental hegemonic discourses of the explorative *in*quisitive-*ac*quisitive "complex amongst which commerce, exploitation and empire have always been identified as prominent" (Mack 2011, 15). Recent geopolitical and neoliberal articulations for a "Blue Economy" and of oceanic literacy in which the epistemic project of financializing and privatizing coasts, oceans and seabeds are but continuities.

Yet, as those writing across the critical marine humanities and social sciences posit, "we" are only but beginning to dismantle the very land-b(i)ased imaginaries and conceptual tools at our disposal when reflecting on the sea, although often not very reflexively. For example, as Mack argues, much theory-work and empirical refocusing is needed in order to bring the study of "seascapes" to the same conceptual depth as the study of *land*scape geography or anthropology (2011, 23). Moreover, a new agenda warrants a deepening of scholarly work on the high seas (e. g. on volume and column-based cultural geographies, underwater ethnography), as opposed to merely engaging with the sea through its coastal fringes and margins, and with social groups such as fisherfolk and iterant tradespeople who still remain largely land-based yet liminal, and are often framed in terms of their alterity to more sedentary societies.

3.Beyond the lens of territoriality and re/presentation

As the previous section illustrates, historic and contemporary imaginaries of the marine and the maritime have had a powerful influence, not only in the ways in which sea-related spaces and maritime lifeworlds were envisaged and written. These meanings imply an artificial dichotomy between territorialisation and boundary-making of Empire on the one hand, and hybrid flows and fluid entanglements of socio-cultural borderlands on the

other. Scholarly narratives that continue to engage with meanings of the sea and encounters that the near-colonial past brings, for example, continue to embody the spatial configuration of oceanic spaces as resource frontiers, and of the high seas and coastlines as charted navigational realms. What this observation implies is that the sea is barely re-theorised as a socio-cultural cosmos, but rather lingers as a circumstantial subject to, for instance, the grand narratives of exploration, diplomacy, religious flows, trade, quarantine, exodus and exile (see Lee et al. 2008; Shell 2014).

What remains unsettling, however, is not this dichotomy itself, but rather the colonial/modernist configuration on which these imaginaries of the sea rest. Often such imaginaries foregrounded potent tropes of modernity, limitation and backwardness or, on the other hand, promised more empowering counter-narratives of pre-colonial sojourning and cultural connectivities that were specifically linked to local histories, communal fortunes and have, in diverse ways, historically shaped social identities. For example, if the sea was singularly perceived as territory and a medium to be crossed—as a transit passage—then oceans and seas irrevocably became and remain territories and sites of struggle, marking ambits of commercial and naval power. Similarly, a Braudelian (1949) reading of shared marine borderlands (e. g. the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, or the Indian Ocean) enlisted seas, oceans, straits, and more as hybrid sites of social interaction and

of commercial, diplomatic, knowledge and cultural exchange. The sea becomes a shared cosmos and a zone of liminality, a ubiquitous imaginary that has held sway since early maritime sojourning (Mack 2011, 24; D'Arcy 2013; Malekandathil 2010).

In an ontological sense, this brings us to the third site of border traversing that is increasingly being inspired by more post-natural theorisations (see Purdy 2015)[2]. The infinite, mysterious and often antagonistic oceans, waves, and watery depths of Daniel Defoe, Jules Verne, Herman Melville, R.L. Stevenson, Joseph Conrad and others are no longer dark expansive frontiers, a last wilderness, yearning to be discovered, sailed, named, and claimed. Indeed, an inherently anthropocentric ocean replete with deep-sea sound pollution and, marine litter, from bio-prospecting expeditions to deep-sea mineral mining have marked the high seas as a *civilizational* space, crisscrossed by a myriad of cargo vessels, tankers, icebreakers, and reefer ships to underwater submarine communication cables and more.

I turn to decolonial thought and border thinking as a means of theoretically attending to this lacuna As a start, it is imperative to explore the parochial character of arguments about the endogenous European origins of modernity in favour of arguments that suggest the necessity of considering the emergence of the modern world in the broader histories of colonialism, empire,

and enslavement (Bhambra 2014, 115). In this light, decolonial thinking (as both philosophy and practice) bore different origins from the diverse intellectual canon that characterises postcolonial studies, with its distinct roots from across the Americas. What prompts its radical differentiation from postcolonial currents is the distinct conceptual lens that decoloniality offers, not as an intellectual discipline but as an epistemological and praxis-centred movement that questions the artificial distinction between coloniality and modernity. The value of engaging in scholarly work through the lens of decoloniality and border thinking may seem evident. Yet the less definitive question of how a particular decolonial reading matters (as opposed to why) is further explored.

4.Marine epistemologies and ontologies: How decoloniality matters

Unsurprisingly, in the last decade the revival of decolonial and border thinking, particularly across academia, has been somewhat resounding. Indeed, much attention was paid to identity politics at the borders and fringes across diverse strands of feminist scholarship, racial identity, diaspora and critical black studies, thereby reshaping debates on queer theory and transgender politics, etc. This argument also applies to the marine humanities and social sciences—taking the case of museum studies, maritime history, maritime sociology and

anthropology, and coastal geography, which were richly advanced by currents in postcolonial thinking. Indeed, it was these very epistemological encounters that opened spaces for work and the further reimagining of themes such as Cis-Atlantic history, Black Atlantic and Black Pacific studies (weaving in not only genocidal and diasporic histories, but also of cultural artistic flows, black literary representations and shared connections, *redes* or networked socialities), and the study of "small places"—islands, archipelagos, liminal port cities, and shorelines in themselves (Gilroy 1993; Lambert et al. 2006; Escobar 2008; Shell 2014; Shilliam 2015; Bremner 2017).

Yet their discursive limitations remain most telling when it comes to a matter of articulating how the decolonial matters. As a start, one could begin to understand how islands themselves are reproduced, as Connery (2006) would argue, as figures and constructions of western thought, as spaces that are hybrid yet peripheral, possibly linked to former colonial empires, or at times being patterned by the complexities of the present (normed) political ordering of Foreign Overseas Territorialities. Decolonial scholars such as Frantz Fanon and Walter Mignolo would then posit that a self-contained conversation takes place circumscribed by the precincts of *a* particular colonial encounter—of both legacy and of multiple forms of dispossession (and disobedience) of epistemic dependence and of physical presence (Césaire 1969; Tuck and Yang 2012).

There are several interrelated points of departure from which to explore these imaginaries through the lens of decoloniality and border thinking. The first and my most visible decolonial vantage point is what I term the double bind of "*resource-determinism"* of sea- and oceanic epistemologies. Indeed, marine realms—as spaces—have come to be chartered and navigated through the entangled histories of trade, slavery, piracy, human and non-human conquest, taking for example market expansion, leisure, cartography, scientific discovery and species taxonomy as epistemic frontiers in their own right. These historic practices of course shaped ways in which the sea came to be imaginatively reconfigured—as resource frontier, a highway, as passage or lifeway (e. g. as exodus or exile, rite of passage etc.), territory and as a tourist playground. The potency of these imaginaries can be acutely seen not just in contemporary policy templates, but also critical academic constructivist scholarship on seas, oceans, and marine depths that are often perceived through the lens of capital circulations, vessel-bound mobilities, and practices of resource appropriation and extraction (Steinberg 2001).

Thus, a critical oceanic gaze, as seen in the work of scholars like Steinberg (2001), Helmreich (2009), and Peters (2010) explore crucial historic turning points and contemporary ubiquitous socio-environmental processes which pattern the way in which coastlines, seas,

oceans, their beds, and other depths are being rendered knowable, classifiable, manageable, and exploitable. Indeed, these processes do not emerge as a single, totalising narrative in terms of a marine politics and as a distinct ethics of life[3]. Certainly none of the meanings they hold—not only of alterity, the mystical and the romanticised, but also of the microbial and the genomic—are universally defined and shared. For example, writers and scholars originating from Oceania—who were among the most vocal adherents of advancing a decolonial re-reading of islandic, archipelagic and oceanic spaces and sea-patterned lifeworlds offered a timely point of departure in deliberating upon cultural specificities that mark seas as life, as opposed to an encircling space that must be chartered (Hereniko 2001; Hau'ofa 2008). Land then, is more than just a parallel cosmology that is at the same time interrelated and complementary.

The third point of departure rests on implicit tensions between the *maritime* and the *marine*, prompting a rethinking of these two categories without reinforcing a binary opposition between them. The key epistemological challenge here rests in a more ubiquitous dichotomy that undergirds scholarship within the environmental humanities and the social sciences—the marine-terrestrial divide. Thematically, the "maritime" has often engaged with the commercial-military-technological nexus of navigation and trade, territoriality, and boundary/place-making. This foregrounds a modernist preoccu-

pation with the control and mastery over the sea and other salty spaces. The *marine* implies a more expansive notion comprising shared relational spaces, circulations and embodied practices between the human and the more-than-human (i.e. microbial, sentient, mechanistic, metallic and geological etc.).

Contemporary coastal and maritime ethnographies, for example, have shown how the marine and coastal lifeworlds (and lifeways) continue to be marked by difference from relatively more sedentary and bounded, grounded life (see King and Robinson 2019), particularly by exploring the very cognitive lenses, emic terms and vernacular theories through which people express their state of being—either ashore or at sea. Hau'ofa tellingly terms and re-frames Oceania as "Our Sea of Islands" (2008, 27-40) as opposed to recognising these borderlands as a land-bound mass, or as a string of islands in the sea. Similarly, one could speak of "ocean worlds," rather than "world oceans." What this implies is an imaginative rendering the other way around—from the sea to the shore. Yet, particular attention must be paid to un-privileging either of the two material-ontological domains, if one is to engage with border thinking. Therefore the next and final section of this chapter turns to the island-state of postcolonial Ceylon/Sri Lanka for ethnographic insight, with which to question modes of *terra*/marine un/privileging, and their broader material and symbolic implications with reference to

both historical narrations as well as to everyday life.

5. (Is)land Geographies, Littoral Silences? Notes from an Island 'Hub'

As previously mentioned, islands—in both senses of the material and the metaphoric—serve as microcosms of colonial encounters and sensibilities. Often the figure of the island (whether a speck in an archipelago or a continental land mass), features prominently in imperial imaginaries invoking hackneyed representations of Colombian landings, and "Natives" on pristine shorelines. Islands also fell under the same binary-laden reductivist gaze, for example when depicted in Cesaire's postcolonial Caliban in his critique of the Shakespearean character symbolizing the tribal, the beastly, and the primitive inhabiting terra nullis, an imaginatively remote peripheral space that history left behind. It is this notion of "geopolitical belittlement" (n.p) that Hau'ofa (1993) writes of, which not only legitimates and reinforces perceived island imaginaries of smallness, insularity, and isolation. Indeed, the fictitious nature of remoteness and of capsular "island dependency" has been well revealed throughout histories of empire, land dispossession, resettlement as they have long been possessed as military bases, turned into reservations, spaces of quarantine, sites of post-war nuclear testing[4], as well as offshore (jurisdictional) zones of exception and internment. As

recent multidisciplinary developments such as island studies, together with research on urban archipelagoes and aquapelagoes have been gaining increasing traction (see Baldacchino 2004; Bremner 2017), the expansive range of often ambivalent and multistranded meanings of islands—in all their diversity—are yet to be more comprehensively explored. As John Gillis posits, "islands evoke a greater range of emotions than any other land form" representing continuity and separation, paradise and hell, connection and isolation, vulnerability and freedom, being as it were "the West's favorite location for visions of both the past and future […] origins and extinctions" (2004, 3).

Within this frame, the notion of the "island hub" potentially complicates the remote and virginal meanings of island spaces as the civilizational Other of larger continent-based landmasses and their historiographies. Indeed readings of island peripherality barely hold much resonance in contexts such as Mauritius, Jamaica, and Singapore that were geo-politically and administratively rendered as islands as a result of colonial expansionism. Yet in many such cases contextualizing their identities as oceanic "hubs," particularly as islanded ones, potentially complicates container-like fixities of place by drawing attention to the multiplicity of crisscrossing movement, flows, and circulations between people, animals, microbes, goods, ideologies, foodways, spiritual practices, lifestyles, institutions, and more. At the same time, their

role as nodal positions across various networked trans-local relations of trade and enmeshed political interests still reinforce particular readings of openness and insularity, connectivity and disconnection, reproduced materially through border-making processes and imaginatively through discourses of cultural uniformity and difference (see Alpers 2018).

By no means have *imaginaries* of/as island hubs been merely constructed in an imperial sense, for many have constituted pre-colonial trading and cultural centers. Yet what characterizes the layering and folding over of these knowledges are not simply that they came to be muted, written over, co-opted, or hybridized during the colonial encounter. The peripheralized (narrative) presence of the sea and of intergenerational collective memory comes to be read against a pervasive land-sea dualism. In this context, the carving out of particular imaginative categories comes to redefine and totalize the very terms in which seascape meanings are produced, filtered, remembered, or forgotten. Selective questions on whose hub and memories of/around "hubbing", why and how it matters melds into the very singularized meta-historical narratives that privilege particular historic relations of power and vested (contemporary) socio-economic interests.

As an Indian Ocean island having had three sequential colonial encounters (Portuguese, Dutch, British),

Ceylon/Sri Lanka appears to be no different. Official historic narratives call attention to its strategic location housing a series of pre-colonial trading ports along the maritime Silk Route, as a garrison Crown Colony governed separately from British India (and latterly as an Allied regional military base during World War II), to an island-state during times of civil war, with a brief postcolonial history of socialist politics. Indeed the sea and its contested coastlines have featured prominently in Lanka's multi-stranded history. While the armed conflict transformed coastal and maritime spaces of postcolonial Sri Lanka into resource frontiers and territories that were to be primarily fought for and fought over, the everyday imaginaries of littoral communities whose lives were intimately bound to the sea have seldom been given much recognition in the island's meta-histories and geographies.

Since the 1950s, the images that were being touted by cruise companies and the Ceylon Tourist Board alike were of vapid palm-fringed lagoon-laced beachscapes—of an islanded nodal tourist stopover *en route* to the Asia-Pacific, a fleck on the Indian Ocean where "summer never ends." The straw-hatted stilted fisherfolk that graced its early posters and brochures—as in the case of today—were but figures in a shadowy aqua-azure backdrop, where sea meets sky. Indeed, the strategic hub-borne trade-military-leisure complex, while offering interrelated tropes, continues to weave through distinct

seascapes by singularizing or flattening other meanings and socio-spatial identities. My curiosity in these relatively less discernable and muted marine knowledges is not simply a matter of historical narrative forgetting. Invoking Bremner, a more expansive decolonial perspective would not simply concern itself with "the history of the sea" as opposed to "history *in* the sea" (2014, 18). My interest then lies in mapping the historic contours that produce and sustain these omissions and silences as much as their echoes.

For a start, the sea and its concomitant forms of littoral life hardly reveal themselves in everyday cultural imagination. This is not in the least to state that regionally diverse local mythologies have not implicated the sea. As a polemic Buddhist legend beholds the tale of a great tsunami-like wave that flooded the island after an irate king condemned an innocent monk to death by boiling him in oil. Somewhat predictably, a princess had to be subsequently offered as a sacrifice to appease the raging waters. Yet tales such as "Vihara Maha Devi" still depict marine and shore life against an obscure backdrop, if at all, indicating one of the few metanarratives of its kind. In such accounts, the sea carries socio-cultural meanings of concealed danger and dark retribution, as an asocial void bereft of human history, a place that is best avoided. Everyday folklore among diverse communities in Sri Lanka makes remarkably little reference to the sea, its creatures (both mythical and biological), or its agency in

shaping human life, unlike in the context of coastal Nusantara or other parts of Southeast Asia, for example.

By the same token, most historians, explorers, and missionaries in then Dutch and British Ceylon seemed to have summarily bypassed the cultural histories of fishing and other maritime communities in their diverse accounts of the island. For example, in R.L Brohier's historical writing in volumes such as *Seeing Ceylon* (1965) we witness a single-minded interest in rural pastoralism, of "tank-country" and paddy farming, lionized by his nostalgia for the historic *Rajarata*,[5] with its seemingly golden past, marking ancient pre-colonial hydraulic pastoral kingdoms dating back to approximately 377 BC-1310 CE. Indeed, this thinking was remarkably characteristic for (primarily) men of his time who reimagined a renaissance of the Dry Zone, a call that was later legitimated through extensive state-funded irrigation and land colonization schemes. Its symbolic triad comprising the irrigation-tank, temple *stupa*, and paddy field, offered a trenchantly static and orientalist image of "village republics" that not only formed the basis of modern colonial Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, but also the very microcosm of the utopian albeit singularly terra-rural imaginary of the postcolonial nation-state (Mohan 2014, 132-134). The inclination was therefore to look inwards, towards the land, to privilege agrarian life and settlerhood, thereby erasing or flattening a plethora of crisscrossing histories of mobility, coasting, and other forms of marine sojourn.

Moreover, another salient bias that influenced the apparent invisibility of fishing and maritime communities in general has had more to do with the seeming non-discernibility of seaborne lifeworlds within Ceylonese postcolonial writing. One of the rare volumes (more biographical and literary) that dedicates a chapter to marine fishing collectivities can be found in Vijayatunga's *Grass for My Feet*, a collection of vignettes of village life in the deep-South:

> For an island race fishing as a pursuit is inevitable, but it would be interesting to know how far back fishers became a caste. The question becomes all the more interesting because, unlike the fisherman in India, the fisherman in Ceylon is also a farmer-man. At one time we must have all been farmers. (1935, 28-29; emphasis added)

What this passage in part draws attention to is not simply the idealization of one state of being over another (i.e. agrarian versus the littoral), but the very inconsequentiality of fishing lifeworlds as a world *apart*. Moreover, the inevitability of fishing as a livelihood practice (for an "island race") stands in stark contradiction to its agri-*cultural* salience.

More recently, a number of scholars have called to question the very constructedness of Ceylon/Sri Lanka as an "island" container space, by tracing its making as an

imperial project and postcolonial construct. As Tariq Jazeel writes, "like all geopolitical facts [...] the Sri Lankan island is also a mapping; a way of seeing and imagining space that itself has a representational history" (2009, 400). The seeming naturalization of Ceylon as an island is further questioned in Sujit Sivasundaram's (2013) historic volume on British state-making, drawing attention to how Ceylon was "partitioned and islanded", not only in terms of the ways in which it was ruled, but also in relation to how "native" knowledges of those that were governed came to be co-opted and naturalized as privileged imperial knowledge. If knowledge was a means by which to govern, the dizzying "cosmopolitanism" of Ceylon, as evidenced by one of the earliest British travel writers Robert Percival (Sivasundaram 2013, 21), stands in stark contrast to the racialized identities by which its islanders—many of whom have had long-standing biographical histories of inter-coastal sojourn and seaborne mobility—were counted, classified and *sedentarized* into less than a handful of ethnic groups. Moreover, as scholars such as Sivasundaram argue, the rigid separation between the hilly hinterlands and its flat littoral spaces barely prefigured in the pre-colonial imaginary, as landward kingdoms invariably had coastal connections through which trading and the appropriation of crucial resources such as salt were facilitated.

Imaginaries of precolonial seascapes featured just as much in the hinterlands of the Central Highlands, taking

for example the unusual cosmological pre-colonial referencing of the Kingdom of Kandy's primary artificial freshwater lake as its "*Samudra*"—the Great Sea. Yet the "maritime" hub in the context of the contemporary island-state bears predominantly Euro-colonial references, as local coastal museums that historicize narratives of the sea invariably comprise more Euro-imperial artifacts—parts of vessels and sea-based technology, canons and other kinds of weaponry, and the odd pre-colonial maritime artifact. It may seem as if it were the oceanic meta-histories that mattered, through representations of a singularized maritime sensibility of colonial encounter, with little reference to the far-reaching networks from both the West and East, whether from the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago, the Swahili coast, the South China Sea, or the Arabian and Persian Gulfs, despite a plethora of emerging scholarly work under the rubric of Indian Ocean Studies. Moreover within the contemporary context of historic knowledge production in Sri Lanka, the predominance of Eurocentic epistemes and interactions are being progressively challenged through nascent research on maritime sojourn and transcultural "connectivity in motion" (Schnepel 2018, 24). The recent transnational establishment of Colombo's Ibn Battuta Foundation marks a significant juncture, named after the 14th century-Moroccan traveler whose writings of the island were barely known outside academia (see Wahab-Salman 2016), in comparison to the knowledge of European sailors and castaways from Marco Polo to Robert Knox.

Yet to map the diversity of oceanic island and littoral perspectives in ways that allow for more multivocal articulations in turn beckons the need to acknowledge the different kinds of terrestrial and marine entanglements that come to be—taking it well beyond the imaginaries of colonial and neoliberal socio-economic connectivities. What do contemporary Lankans make of seascapes and the waters that hem in its coastlines that are so decisive in defining this project of an island nation-state? How markedly do the socio-spatial identities of the oceanic and the littoral differ—when one is to invoke the resource-rich, benevolent seaboards and the sandbanks of the Northeast and West, the capricious waves of the inter-monsoonal seasons, the UNESCO maritime heritage sites of Galle, its "boutique fortress" and its extension of upper middle class Colombopolitanism as coastal distances between commercial capital and getaway are bridged? Or the dimly lit clandestine shorelines of the deep provincial South and the North where the bodies of assorted political victims were made to disappear during subsequent neo-Marxist struggles and separatist movements since the 1960s?

While historic erasure of the marine has been one of the most potent forms of island colonization with respect to its submerged oceanic and littoral imaginaries, the long-standing contention in how to problematize "cultural islands" remains another question. With this el-

emental dualism (and the historicized postcolonial prevalence of the terra firma) comes the insular reification of communal purism, akin to the taxonomic "endemicization" of biodiversity species, popularized by 19th century-ecological paradigms such as island biogeography. This parochial form of unique nativism often translates itself into the modernist, statist construct of ethnicity, for as Eriksen writes, cultural islands have barely existed in time, making the prevalence of ethnic boundaries one of its most striking features of insular imagination (1993, 143). Yet I beg to differ that in the case of island hubs, insularity—as both sensibility as well as a social identity—is not simply produced into being through seemingly "objective processes of isolation" and marine/terrestrial otherness.

Here, contemporary narrative interpretations of the *Mahavamsa* chronicle's founding myth of Lanka's majoritarian Sinhalese ethno-linguistic group stands as a case in point (see Strathern 2014). The narrative entails that of seaborne advent and settlerhood, featuring Vijaya, a prince who arrives at its shores after having been expelled from his kingdom (now constituting a part of modern-day India), for the crime of patricide. As popular retellings go, the visitor subsequently tricks Kuveni, often portrayed as the island's ruling "enchantress" into handing him her queendom, while further strengthening his power through maritime reinforcements and the importation of an Indic noblewoman to continue his

royal bloodline. Pictorial depictions of the grotesque demon-like island "tribes" of Kuveni's time also invoke a distinct land-bound ethic, further accentuating a sense of disconnectedness and candor, for as the legend goes, when expelled the people of Kuveni were said to have run interior "into the forests." While the Vijayan narrative(s) have been richly analyzed for their seemingly contradictory re-scripting of outsiderliness and its emplacement within the discursive canvas of proto-Sinhalese nationalism (and island endemicization), it is not simply the figure of the stranger that marks its particularity as a founding myth. As Salgado writes, the paradox of island space—in terms of both its simultaneous isolation and openness becomes "central to an understanding of the construction of the islands as a place of compromised belonging" (2012, 1). What mythico-histories like these do is to separate teleological trajectories of arrival and settlerhood, sojourning and islanded presence in which the sea (as opposed to grounded land) becomes an ambiguous figure of primordial angst, given its myriad flows, possibilities for flux and impermanence through its ability to carry away and to morph communal identities, identities that are otherwise re-scripted by the nation-state (and its competing nationalisms) as static categories.

Yet at the same time it could be argued that the compelling metaphor of the oceanic island hub is one that celebrates precisely narratives of arrival and encounter,

potentially disrupting the mythos of bounded homogeneity and cultural purism. Highly ethnicised islands such as Mauritius, Penang, Madagascar, and Sri Lanka relay their postcolonial multiculturedness not through the porous articulations of historicized hybridity. It is the stocks of ethno-linguistic, physiological, and religious markers that define island pluralism, by implicitly having communal selves identify with distinct seaborne arrival narratives—whether they be those of the Straits-born Peranakan Chinese, or of more recent post-Partition Muslims or Sikh Indians. Any project of decolonizing histories and imaginaries of the marine/littoral also brings into view the imperative of not merely unpicking the patterns of self-sameness and purism, but of border thinking through the very fringes and thresholds which creatively rupture such articulations. Thus the elemental land-sea divide ceases to hold much imaginative sway if marginal visions of the island hub and of hubbing were enlivened through more transgressive yet inclusive acts of *mongrelization*—of personhood, and of entire social collectives.

Here I turn to the Lankan-Australian scholar, novelist and playwright Visakesa Chandrasekaram's *The King and the Assassin*, a futuristic narrative in which a 15-year old child prodigy Faizal, who is relentlessly tormented for being born fatherless, begins to ponder about questions of ancestry, otherness, belonging, and ethno-racial purity. And so, in finding a way in which he could "dispel the

myth of purity and settle the question of his bastardry once and for all", embarks on what came to be known in the novel as the Dirty Blood Project, making public a form of knowledge through DNA tracing that would be transgressive as much as it would be emancipatory. As Chandrasekaram writes: "no one would see themselves in the mirror in the same way again. Their invisible ancestors from the past would haunt them," for not "all who landed in Lanka left no traces" (2014, 146). While I do not endorse the biopolitics of what could be referred to as the cult of DNA ancestor worship, moments like these do enliven dissonances within the context of the bounded, insular(ised) island-state. They bring to fore the many hybrid entanglements through both land and sea, offering further possibilities of dismantling perilous myths—through varied experimental means from literature, fine art, theatre, and music to public anthropology.

6. Conclusion

When considering ways with which to perceive oceanic, littoral, and island-borne imaginaries through the lens of decoloniality (and indeed its very efficacy), this chapter began by exploring two intertwined tropes. First, the prevalence of antithetical "elemental" readings that marine and the grounded *terra firma* as one form of epistemic knowing/privileging the other, which may not necessarily be an entirely "Eurocentric" one. Second, the possibility of venturing beyond historiographies that primarily

focus on the exploration-trade-conquest triad, through plural means of knowing and experiencing marine spaces. In particular the overwhelming resource-centrism in epistemologically defining, territorializing, and utilizing oceanic and littoral milieus can be critiqued, in tandem with this elemental privileging in reducing seascapes into capital assets and resource bases.

In turning to the island-state of Ceylon/Sri Lanka for ethnographic insight and by drawing on recent scholarship on the historic and socio-political construction of its "islanded" presence, I show how silences and omissions relating to seascapes as *other* than a colonial material realm has played out in a number of ways, both historically as well as in a contemporary context. In particular I draw attention to the notion of the "island(ed) hub" in which littoral/hinterland and land/sea distinctions play out in a number of ways, often with regard to peripheralizing particular littoral and marine-related social histories and epistemologies. Yet one is left asking: if the embodied and cognitive littoral/hinterland and marine/terra are by no means culturally universal, does it still matter both conceptually and politically to study their essentialisms for what they are, and for what they imply? I answer this question in the affirmative, for if decolonial border thinking serves to dismantle dualisms of the exterior and of otherness, it also provides potent tools with which to trace the re-assembling of antithetical imaginaries in ways that serve hegemonic power interests in a contemporary world.

While drawing attention to hierarchies of knowledge, knowing, and being, the question of "decolonizing" seascapes—for whom, how, and to what extent remain key questions. It is here that I go back to Tuck and Yang's forewarning of the tendency to domesticate decolonization, as a bland form of inclusion, and thereby as enclosure and "foreclosure, limiting in how it recapitulates dominant theories of social change" (2012, 3). For *knowing* oceanic depths and littoral seascapes (through cartography, maritime navigation, and sailing), and by materially *utilizing* it as a "resource base" (via a plethora of practices such as territorialization, industrial fishing, deep-sea mining etc.), calls to question particular forms of legitimized presence, occupation, and dispossession that seemingly replicate land-based settler trajectories, although bearing significant differences.

Therefore as a point of departure, the epistemological parallels between the terrestrial and *mare-imaginalis* might be drawn—on the one hand by tracing normative "frontier" discourses (for example through the monetary valuation of oceans), through to their seemingly antipodal narratives of shared "global Commons", particularly in the context of the high seas and of world maritime heritage. Yet historically, the politics of place-making—even within the ethics of deep ecological conservation—have hardly been "commoned", given the diverse ways in which they continue to be perceived, accessed, and experienced, mediated by geo-politics, "race", het-

eropatriarchy, class, speciesism, and more. Therefore a line of inquiry that warrants further exploration is the sense-making of *elemental difference* (and of hierarchies), between terrestrial and marine modes of knowing, being, and claims-making. It calls to question ways in which such distinctions derive their meanings (or do not), in collective imaginaries. Moreover these concomitant questions draw attention to the urgency of mapping flows of knowledge, the very institutional practices and circumstances that facilitate newer, contemporary trajectories of marine and littoral possession (of coastlines, oceanic surfaces, depths, the seabed etc.), in ways that mark historic continuities in comparison with earlier forms of *landed* settlerhood, together with their inherent differences and ruptures.

Notes:

1. I use the term "seascape" not merely in tandem with how the aesthetic-affective and multi-sensory representative imaginaries of sea/landscapes are re-theorized by cultural geographers, coastal historians, and anthropologists (see Brown 2015). To take it beyond its visible and symbolic pictorial nature would also mean defining seascapes in terms of their relational qualities, as fluid borderlands and as liminal, interactional zones that are essentially lived—rife with myriad socio-ecological dy-

namics that unfold between land, sea and air that create distinct materialities, rhythms, and lifeworlds of their own.

2. I refer to a body of diverse literatures from philosophy, environmental history and multi-species to science and technology studies which seek to explore diverse socio-natural entanglements, particularly by paying attention to hybrid lives, objects, processes, and modes of being. To echo Arias-Maldonado "paradoxically, this does not mean that there remains no separation between human beings and nature. […] It is the delusion of naturalness that fades" (2015, 2).

3. One of the most telling moments here can be found amid the varied exhibits of older maritime museums, which bear a penchant for displaying ships and largely water-borne vessels. Over time, the exhibits of maritime museums have been growing in diversity, in acknowledging the more-than-representational, relational and emotive aspects of life out a sea, the body-politics of the tattoo for example, or underwater exhibiting in the case of the Lampedusa migrant tragedy.

4. For example the islanders of Banaba and Bikini were both dispossessed: Banaba for phosphate mining, and Bikini to be transformed into a nuclear testing ground. The Trust Territories of Micronesia supported a flourishing aid industry, being forced to receive thousands of

migrants from Europe while its own inhabitants were denied border-control free access into Europe.

5. A historic-territorial space in the island's agricultural interior. The label itself conflates a number of successive pre-colonial agro-hydraulic urban centers governed by kingly and feudal rule.

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