

# anais de história de além-mar

## XXI

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ANO 2020

CHAM – CENTRO DE HUMANIDADES

FACULDADE DE CIÊNCIAS SOCIAIS E HUMANAS  
UNIVERSIDADE NOVA DE LISBOA

UNIVERSIDADE DOS AÇORES

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**Mentz, Steve.** 2020. *Ocean*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. 192 pp., ISBN: 978-1-5013-4863-1

**The Ocean-Object: Views of the Water-World, the Blue Humanities, and the Wet Globalization in Steve Mentz's Ocean**

*“Humans live near water. Water frighten us and lures us into danger, but we never want to be too far from it”.*  
(Mentz 2020, 12)

How do I see the Ocean? I mostly see it as the liquid realm of my childhood, kind of my backyard or favourite playground, as I used to live by the ocean for several months each year.

In fact, from Herman Melville to Philip Hoare – myself included –, we all feel the urge to justify our primeval connection to the sea or to the perennial whale, the total symbol of the paradoxes of the ocean, as if logical explanations for the human attraction for the Other were possible - being the Other a person, an animal, a place or an object. We are simply attracted to one another. In this case, we are constantly drawn to the radically different aquatic masses, as if all our lifelong events would bind us irrevocably to the foam of the waves and the foggy blows - this enormous monstrous entity with its kingdom of dark depths and secret profound abysses. Like if our opposite element, the marine ecosystem – so totally antipodal to us –, had been tattooed on our genome or had interfered in the interstices of our true familiar, cultural, and social environments. Is it possible to explain the unaccountable, to justify the unjustifiable, or to romanticize love? It simply is.

We, land mammals, are attracted to the aquatic world. It is that simple. Human settlement patterns have always oriented themselves around access to bodies of water (p. 12). Myself, I am constantly drawn to the ocean, in my life and in my work<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, many other authors and scholars have reached out for the ocean as a subject of their inquiry. Understanding peo-

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<sup>1</sup> In my own line of research, I explore mostly early modern European documental and iconographic sources that allows addressing the oceans' past and the past of different societies' relationships with the marine environment. The Atlantic is my focus as are the interactions of Portuguese and Spaniards with the sea and its animals and resources, both in the Iberian Peninsula and in their extra-European territories and colonies that resulted from early modern expansions. At the same time, looking at how different societies (traditional, local and indigenous) dealt with the ocean, its resources, and its symbolic meanings is also a focus of my attention.

ples' motivations to interact with the shores, coastal seas, or the open ocean has paved the way to what we now call the "Oceanic Turn"<sup>2</sup>, the "Blue Humanities"<sup>3</sup> or, in the words of Steve Mentz, the "Wet Globalization".

In his recent book *Ocean* the ocean is an entity, an object, one that we can look at from different viewpoints. A kaleidoscopic perspective is allowed, as long as the reader is able to "deterritorialize" (p. xv) their own glares and perspectives. Mentz helps us to do just that by opening the narrative with a preface turned into glossary. He presents us with a set of words directed to the oceanic viewpoint. And by doing so, he submerges the reader in the fluid all-encompassing aquatic realm and offers an opening to the Blue Humanities perspective as "an ocean-infused way to reframe our shared cultural history" (p. xviii).

Reading Steve Mentz' *Ocean*, I should have had my feet deep in the beach sand while feeling the ongoing movements of the cold salty tides of the Portuguese mainland coast. But instead a storm raged out there and, as I write these words, and I am simply sitting by the sea trying hard to see the horizon across a shouting sea in shades of storm and grey. As I am quietly and safe inshore, I can't help but wonder how do humans set their minds into the open sea, this immense, wintry and endless water body? Just how do they take off to the sea? The absolute immensity of the ocean is overwhelming, both in its spatiality and over-dimensionalities but also in its span across time. Close to the waves that erode the cliffs where I stand by, passers-by leave their traces and footprints. Other peoples' feet are now leaving their mark where before prehistoric giants walked, where in the past extinct whales stranded and were hunted. Today, only paws of seagulls that cannot stand in the air with the wind-storm and stubborn children building ephemeral sandcastles doomed to be destroyed by the waves – plus the animals that remain and peoples' recreation, appreciation and contemplation of the shore and the sea. And I keep wondering, how about in the past, when the ocean was simultaneously a wall impossible to transpose and an open path full of possibilities? How about the premodern world, at least from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, that humans built relying on the "the structural movement and violence of the sea" (p. 41)?

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<sup>2</sup> DeLoughrey, Elizabeth. 2017. "The submarine futures of the Anthropocene". *Comparative Literature* 69: 32–44.

<sup>3</sup> Steinberg, Philip E. 2014. "Foreword: On Thalassography". In *Water Worlds: Human Geographies of the Ocean*. Edited by Jon Anderson and Kimberley Peters. Farnham: Ashgate.

As I abovementioned, in his book, Mentz places the readers in the ocean, in a water-world full of currents, connections, mobility, and exchanges. These are historic and spatial, but also poetic. He shows that the ocean has shaped almost all corners of humans' existence, from forging early modern globalizations to being conceptualized in myths, literature and poetry. As he puts it: "Sea poetry enters the World Ocean through a gate. During the early modern wet globalization, that gate shifted from the Pillars of Hercules to Adamastor's Cape of Storms" (p. 43). Crossing time, and authorships – from Luís de Camões to Herman Melville and Walt Whitman – he docks in Emily's Dickinson's visionary sea poetics. Mentz sees in Dickinson, and I totally agree with him, "the use of the sea as a symbol and a force, imaginative pressure and inhuman immensity, [that] makes her an ideal poet of the Ocean" (p. 78). If he knew of her, Mentz would for sure add to this group of poets and writers, the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Portuguese poet Sophia de Mello Breyner Andersen, a woman of the salty wor(l)ds.

Mentz organized his writing - and alternated themes in the book's chapters - as waves breaking in a rocky shore, making a splash, going gently back to the sea to once again reach the land wall with noise while spreading pieces and bits of foam everywhere. The book unfolds along 12 chapters gently as a summer brise. The topics - geology, history, myth, history (again), poetry, technology, poetry (again), myth (again), environmentalism and stories. Mentz moves within interdisciplinarity with ease and shows us the plural ways of looking at this 'object' and how the myriad of views do complement each other and our global comprehension of it. I miss only the absence of the marine animals and resources, even if indirectly represented by the reference to *Moby Dick*, the eternal Leviathan of the contemporary maritime world. The non-human animals of the ocean are a vital component for the understanding of below-the-water realities<sup>4</sup> and above-the-water interactions with humans and impacts on societies. Nevertheless, all makes sense in *Ocean* and the contents makes the reading a true journey across eras of the planet and of the humanity, across different human societies, its worldviews, and materializations. It ranges from the tangible to the intangible, including memories. And a sense of memories fulfilled, yet an urge to reread it, is the final feeling as we close the book.

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<sup>4</sup> Jones, Ryan Tucker. 2013. "Running into Whales: The History of the North Pacific from below the Waves". *American Historical Review* 118: 349–77.



*Ocean* is a must-read, either for a scholar in the field or for the public at large. It gives word to a much need call of the humanities for the ocean as we open a new decade of studies and the development of knowledge about the ocean and seas and its sustainable uses for humans.

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