
Book Review

Reviewed by Jim Macbeth

Email: J.Macbeth@murdoch.edu.au

Seascapes: Shaped by the Sea
by: Mike Brown and Barbara Humberstone (Eds.)
Published 2016
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon,
Oxon OX14 14RN, UK, 200pp
ISBN: 9781472424334

Be aware, this review was written while I was anchored on my yacht enjoying the motion of wind and wave, the changing tides and the sea life around me. To me, this bit of the Western Australian coast was the perfect place to evaluate a book based on narratives of the sea and its shores, a book rich in activities and verbal images, rich in the narratives of people who have special relationships with the sea. I was enthralled by most chapters and enjoyed the theoretical mapping of lives and experiences of the sea.

The introduction and the first two chapters position the editors. Mike Brown comes to this work as a sailor, a yachting, as we often say, someone who understands their relationship to the sea, what I would call the ocean. Barbara Humberstone considers herself a seaside girl as she spent summers at the Sallyport beach of Portsmouth. She is a keen windsurfer and walker. The editors' brief to authors was "simple: write about your experiences of the sea and how they have contributed to your way of being in the world and how this might connect to broader issues in society" (p.2). The authors went beyond this instruction to introduce interesting and useful theoretical perspectives from sociology, geography and outdoor education.

The intellectual and physical histories of the editors and the authors are fundamental to the way this book was conceptualised, which research genre was to be favoured, along with what aspects of social knowledge and the sea were to be foregrounded. Narrative and autoethnography underpin the chapters. That said, an important aspect of this book is the variety of ways people explore their activity, even when different chapters focus on the same activity. For example, each of the three surfing chapters is very different from the others with different narrative styles (of course) but also a different balance between theorising and story telling. Underlying this book is not just the idea of the sea but 'perspectives of being with the sea' (p.1).

The sea has traditionally been represented as dangerous and chaotic, as blank and as sublime, wild. One of the key values of this book is that it puts our taken-for-granted attitudes to the sea *qua* humans into a specific narrative and intellectual context. Of course, this book is not alone in doing this, holding up our assumptions about the sea to scrutiny, but this book does it through autoethnography. I will now outline each chapter, each author's very personal understanding of their relationship to the sea.

Chapter 1: Seascapes (Mike Brown)

I smiled inwardly as I read the personal statement that opens Mike Brown's chapter. Further, along the coast on my yacht, again at anchor so that the sounds and motions Mike experiences are mine, too. On the sea again, he says "It is here that I belong" (p.13).

But, what are *seascapes*? "As a scape, the sea 'is a participant in, not a contextual backdrop to, social engagements. ... Maritime people technologically travel *across* the sea but socially negotiate their way *through* a seascape' [McNiven, (2008), p.154]" (p.20). Seascapes as embodied experience add another dimension and are central to this book. "Seascapes are not 'outside' us; they are part of us as we are part of them. ... [O]ur engagement with seascapes shape who we are" (p.24).

Chapter 2: Embodied narratives: being with the sea (Barbara Humberstone)

Barbara considers that in autoethnography the body is in the place, whether landscape or seascape, an idea that permeates all the chapters.

"Being in or on the sea attends to the whole body, not the (un-)consciousness in isolation but the whole of the corporeal body: mind, senses, their inter-relatedness and particular embodied relationship with the sea" (pp.28–29).

This book is very much autoethnography with rich narratives throughout. "These stories entwining self with the sea ... [bring] to life the ways in which people learn to become in the mobile sensorial seat of the sea" (p.33). Who she is and could become "...is constructed through and within these self-narratives" (p.36). This is an important aspect of this book as the authors' self-narratives help the reader to think about themselves, to review the meaning of their own self-narratives, along with their embodied self, whether it be sea or land-based or in the air as pilots and sky-divers.

Chapter 3: Seaspace: surfing the sea as pedagogy of self (lisahunter [sic])

Compared to the next chapter, this one is much more reflective, more introspective. To quote: "Surfing the seaspace is a metaphor for the life of my reflective and pre-reflective mind. ... Each individual experience is like surfing a different wave from the same sea of self..." (p.52).

Chapter 4: On being shaped by surfing: experiencing the world of the littoral zone (Jon Anderson)

This is really a chapter about surfing and surfing technology. It nicely explains different types of surfing and the related technologies because body surfers and boarders *lie* down, surfkayakers *sit* down and surfboard riders *stand* up. But, there is an elitist tinge to this chapter in the implication that board riders are *the* 'water people'.

Chapter 5: Sailing across the Cook Strait (Robyn Zink)

"I had *Valerie May*, a 32-foot Herreshoff yacht built of kauri. She had beautiful lines and creaked and groaned in the way wooden boats do" (p.71). This chapter is about when "...everything 'feels right'" (p.72) and is a much more theoretical chapter than the previous one because the author is trying to understand the 'assemblage' that makes up

the whole corporeal body, not her body/self, but “about wind/body/boat/sea/movement as an assemblage”... (p.77).

Chapter 6: Being a brown bodyboarder (Mihi Nemani)

Mihi’s chapter lifted my spirits, perhaps because of the spirit of the author that comes through. She tells us a story that she has understood in part through Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, field and capital. The author is brown, a female and a bodyboarder, each of which is a minority within surfing subcultures. Her multiple world views come from her ‘location’ as a Maori, Samoan, New Zealand born and raised female surfer. “The surf enables me to express myself freely, to show that yes, I am different but I belong here” (p.97).

Chapter 7: Sailing with Gregory Bateson (Peter Reason)

The author uses a difficult sailing passage on the coast of France to explore aspects of Bateson’s (1972) work in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Reason’s yacht, *Coral*, is fitted with an Aries wind vane (as is my yacht), which “works as a simple cybernetic system, encompassing all of what Gregory Bateson (1972, p.92) called ‘criteria of mental process’” (p.104). The important issue here is that the “...Aries works on the same principles as all natural ecological systems to maintain a dynamic balance around a zone of stability” (p.104).

Chapter 8: In the middle of the deep blue sea (Karen Barbour)

I could not put the book down! The autoethnographic narratives of the family migrants were arresting and so subtly about the sea. The three narratives about three different ‘voyages’ (1951, 1961, 1998) by three generations captured so much about the three women: grandmother on a liner from Scotland to New Zealand; mother on a freighter from Eastern Canada to New Zealand; daughter (Karen) on a yacht from New Zealand to Fiji. Three seascapes, three different experiences. But, there is more with Polynesian ancestors in the author’s family, too.

Chapter 9: Standing then floating: searching for a sense of sea-place on the South Coast of Australia (Brian Wattchow)

Brian takes us to such imaginings beyond the horizon by continually looking out from the beach. For Brian, “[p]erhaps that is what my coast-life story is about – feeling connected to the sea as a place...” (p.131). In closing, Brian adds another dynamic: the edge, not simply a shoreline.

Chapter 10: In the name of the whale (Robbie Nicol)

The underlying theme of this paper is how to live a meaningful and sustainable life. Sea kayaking takes Robbie close to nature and to three encounters: with a close friend, with a cormorant (tangled with fishing hooks and barbs) and with a whale carcass on a beach. His sea kayak has a cargo of ideas that are explored in his narratives and through

philosophical discussions. It is a challenging chapter that poses questions about being in the world or theorising about the world, environmental ethics, the emotions and the intellect.

*Chapter 11: Unlikely becoming: passion, swimming and learning to love the sea
(Karen Throsby)*

This chapter explores how Karen became a marathon swimmer, including an English Channel swim and how this seascape world functions. Using Howard Becker's concepts of deviance, marathon swimming is seen as a form of positive deviance; becoming such a swimmer follows a trajectory that can be understood using Becker's concepts. We can see similarities with other chapters in the sequence of becoming: learning the techniques, learning to perceive the effects and learning to enjoy the effects (headings on pp.159, 162, 165).

*Chapter 12: 'Do we keel haul the little %\$#@ or chuck him in the chain locker?'
How life at sea becomes 'stories to live by' for a woman on a fishing vessel
(elka emerald [sic] and Fiona Ewing)*

elka is an ethnographic researcher and Fe is a marine scientist with experience as an onboard fisheries compliance and research officer. But, she is also a "meaning maker – she searches for meaning and she is fearlessly self-reflexive" (p.176). The two authors are friends from school days and here they sit around a large, heavy wooden table or on the shoreline while elka "seek[s] to fathom Fe's 'seascape'" (p.177). How does Fe's sea life come ashore? At sea at 25, Fe learned about her boundaries, expressed in metaphors: elka's "bumper sticker versions of stories-to-live-by: 'If you can't add value to the space, just keep out of the way'; 'I am too old to piss in a bucket'; 'Move with currents, ride the waves'; 'I am my environment, my environment is me'" (p.184).

*Chapter 13: Embodied narratives and fluid geographies (Barbara Humberstone
and Mike Brown)*

The chapter is short, a "hope that this collection of narratives provides new ways to contemplate *with* the sea rather than on it or at it" (p.187). It does this.

One of the joys of reading this book is the way it has invoked my own memories of the water, whether river, lake or ocean. I have and still do enjoy many aspects of the ocean and have had many of the experiences narrated by these authors. This book has helped me to understand my experience of the ocean in another dimension and for that I am grateful. It could do the same for you, even if you are not a sea person.

There are always a few minor problems. Freemantle is not how you spell Fremantle. There is a problem with some text printed over a picture, making it unreadable. There are some proof-reading errors (e.g., extra words) and at least one place where the meaning is, I think, opposite to the way it is written. The three surfing chapters could be grouped.

All in all, I loved this book and it would provide some good readings for a research course and the sociology of leisure and outdoor education.

References

Bateson, G. (1972) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Chandler, San Francisco.

McNiven, I. (2008) 'Sentient sea: seascapes as spiritscapes', in David, B. and Thomas, J. (Eds.): *Handbook of Landscape Archaeology*, pp.149–157, Left Coast Press, Walnut, CA.