

The Trans-actional ocean. Excessive mobilities and immersive temporalities at sea

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Dialogues, bridges and critical positions

This special issue has had a long journey. A journey made of mentoring, of sharing oceanic thoughts, of rethinking and stepping back, of shared readings and dialogues, but, above all, of self-questioning, of questioning each other, of critical inquiry. When the project was born in 2022, we were weaving together our oceanic thinking, reflecting on the increasingly prominent path of what DeLoughrey (2016) and others have termed the *Oceanic Turn* within the humanities and social sciences and reflecting on the emergence of an aligned movement towards *Critical Ocean Studies* (Foley & Silver, 2026) and, more specifically, *Critical Ocean Geographies* (Peters et al., 2023).

As we began to question the space of thought that was emerging, and what was new in this geographical reasoning, two fundamental issues arose. The first concerned a recognition that scholars turning to the ocean, regardless of disciplinary specialization, were increasingly relying on the works of decolonial, postcolonial, Black, feminist, queer, Indigenous, posthuman, new materialist, and environmental humanities scholars, and in particular those who have studied the affordances and traumas of the Black Atlantic and the Black Mediterranean, in their efforts to extend their understanding of the ocean and connect it with other trends and concepts in social, cultural, and political thought. But secondly, we observed how, even amidst this turn to broaden the field, studies in ocean geographies remained anchored in whiteness – both as the centre of knowledge production, primarily located in the Anglo-American world, and as subjects and bodies of knowledge that interacted with, or claimed a desire to ‘dialogue’ with, the aforementioned critical productions. We recognized how, every time we used terms like ‘emerging’ studies, ‘new’ studies, or a ‘new’ turn, a modality of knowledge selection was operating, as ‘we’ (the authors celebrating this ‘emergence’) were implicitly defining norms as well as aspirations for expansions of contemporary thinking.

In short, we came to recognize a danger in the tendency (including, we acknowledge, in the original call for this special issue) to call for a ‘dialogue’ or ‘bridge’ between two strands of oceanic studies. We are suspicious of this tendency for a number of reasons. Most basically, this formulation is suspect on empirical grounds. It assumes the existence of two unified, distinct traditions: one based on the study of the ocean as a space of material and political alterity, and the other based on the experiences, meanings, and memories that groups of people attribute to the ocean. Countless scholars disrupt this classification: geographers who engage the specific nature of Black oceanic memories and experiences to interpret the spaces that are made in, across, and around the Black Atlantic and the Black Mediterranean (Chandler & Pugh, 2022; McKittrick, 2006; Noxolo, 2016; Steinberg, 2021; Walcott, 2021; Wright, 2019), as well as others who, while not primarily identifying as geographers, directly

inform the geographic literature on this topic (Bennett, 2018; DeLoughrey, 2007; Gilroy, 1993; Glissant, 1997; Gumbs, 2021; King, 2019; Smythe, 2018; Tinsley, 2008; Wardi, 2016). This heritage of scholarly influences becomes even richer when one extends beyond perspectives informed by the African diaspora to others who have looked at the ocean from non-heteronormative, non-white perspectives (Alaimo, 2012; Balzano, 2024; Neimanis, 2019). Indeed, by publishing this special issue in *Social & Cultural Geography*, we maintain a commitment that this journal has had to Black geography-informed critical ocean geography, or critical geography-informed Black geography, for at least twenty-five years (McKittrick, 2000, 2011; Pugh, 2016).

Given this long history of cross-influences, any claim that there are *now* distinct bodies of literature that need to be 'bridged' is an expression of epistemological privilege. Even if one holds that these two bodies of literature *are* distinct (which, we have just argued, is not the case), there is a certain arrogance in two white scholars – albeit from diverse geographic locations – from one side of this purported academic divide urging for a bridge to be built. Is there not already, in this gesture, a positional problem concerning who is calling for a need to 'dialogue'?

Whether 'bridges' can or should be built is an open question; in the articles that follow two sets of authors are highly sceptical (Akbarian, Saucier, & Woods; Teed & McAteer), while the others seem more open to the possibility (de Spuches; Palermo; Pille-Schneider & Sagna; Steinberg). Regardless, these are not questions to be worked out through a unilateral call for a 'bridge' to be built. Rather, a response to these questions requires the hard work of intellectual labour, with all its messy challenges. Indeed, quite a few of these challenges were encountered in the course of curating these articles, and we like to think that this special issue, as well as our own critical reflexivity, is the better for it.

To repeat, the question of whether a bridge can or should be built remains open. Perhaps, the perspective from the sea can truly help us question, decolonize, and unlearn forms of power reproduction. Or perhaps the uncertainties underpinning calls for building theoretical bridges invite us to reconsider the nature of a *bridge* (e.g. Anzaldúa and Morraga, 1981) as this concept reflects the different valences of the sea as a colonial space of accumulation, violence, and death within racial capitalism, as well as its persistence as a space of possibility. The opening of these questions invites us to challenge the nature of academic knowledge itself in relation to these productions, interrogating postures, positionalities, privilege, and the racializations that characterize geographic thought.

In other words, this engagement with multiple valences of critical ocean geographies, beyond opening up alternative ways of thinking about space, relationalities, perspectives, and especially the coloniality of geography, also opens up a breach in the very modes of academic knowledge production that obscures, erases, and selects which seas and which knowledges about the sea are recognized, but also in how we might talk *with* rather than *about* the sea (see: George & Wiebe, 2020; Lobo & Parsons, 2023). This engagement can help us to shift our gaze and question our posture in two ways: first, by leading us to reconsider what kinds of knowledge we want to produce as we look at the sea, from our specific positionalities, as a pivotal space for the generation of coloniality and the violent geographies of racial capitalism; and, secondly, as we seek to bring forth the counter-archives that emerge from the sea – as practices, knowledges, and conflicts, as excessive mobilities and immersive temporalities.

The trans-actional ocean?

In fostering a perspective where the ocean is used to reflect on ourselves, our scholarship, and the ocean around us and in our histories and futures, we draw on Christina Sharpe's notion of the 'Trans*Atlantic', where the asterisk signifies multiple meanings: the possibility of thought, the embodied experiences of gender, the configurations of Black Being in forms of 'translation, transatlantic, transgression, transgender, transformation, trans-mogrification, transcontinental, transfixed, trans-Mediterranean, transubstantiation [...], transmigration, and more' (Sharpe, 2016, p. 30). This formulation, for us, resonates with the concept of the *excessive* ocean developed by Peters and Steinberg (2019), where the sea is understood as a relational phenomenon beyond itself: not an entity, but an *excess* that exists beyond the liquid spaces marked on the map.

Combining these perspectives, we turn our attention to what we call the *trans-actional ocean*, a space that endures in excess of its materiality – as it exists in liquid, solid, and gaseous states. It is present in the constitution of a pluriverse of relations, thus facilitating imaginative transformations and the construction of other politics. The sea is history and geography, and its models and mediations, from geophysical, geopolitical, and geocultural points of view, reach into and tell stories from 'the water's depths, its phenomenological affordances, its absorptive liquidity, its sonic resonances, its blinding darkness, its incessant mobilities (both periodic and chaotic), its life-giving, and life-taking molecular structure' (Steinberg, 2021, p. 4). This excess is both present and absent in the wake (Sharpe, 2016), a continuing reminder of the ocean's persistence and its dissolution in African memories.

Bringing together these perspectives on ocean-time, ocean-space, and ocean-thinking, the sea emerges, on the one hand, as a pivotal space for capital's productive and reproductive processes and its accumulation through class, race, and gender hierarchies. On the other hand, the sea, through its evocations of alternative temporalities and connections, emerges as a space of conflict and resistance – of regenerative processes, where forces of the living and the dead co-compose – as a space for the imagination and practice of possible and alternative oceanic futures. Hence, it is *trans-actional*.

This potential of the ocean to stretch stories – stories of pain and stories of struggle – across space and time was revealed in the role of the Mediterranean Sea as a point of conflict in the dispossession and ultimate destruction of Gaza, where ongoing, everyday uses of the sea by Palestinians were disrupted by Israeli military power. From across the Mediterranean, allies' declarations of solidarity through the launching of aid flotillas were met by Israeli interdictions which, in turn, led to further expressions of solidarity. In Italy, millions of people took to the streets, blocking ports, airports, and highways, and organizing two general strikes—one of which, on 3 October 2025, saw two million people participate, bringing factories, universities, and all sectors of production to a halt. Continuing a theme that has been dominant in protests against the interception of vessels by which migrants cross the Mediterranean, activists connected the excessive nature of the sea struggle with the political struggles playing out on land. Just as, a decade earlier, Dutch protesters urging for the protection of migrant vessels marched with life preservers to join the struggles of land-based civil society with the connections and dangers mobilized by the sea (Steinberg, 2018), protesters in Italy were now claiming

a maritime presence by chanting ‘we are the land crew [of the Palestinian humanitarian aid vessels]’ as they protested the arrest of the vessels’ crews out on the water (Simoncini & Trenz, 2025).

Our point here, in elevating the concept of the trans-actional ocean to interpret oceanic politics, from the conflict over the Gaza aid flotilla to the wake of the Middle Passage, is that we cannot speak of *critical ocean geographies* without recognizing the uses of the sea that are at stake – the coloniality, the archive, the academic space of certain knowledges, and the ways in which the ocean’s seeming alterity enhances its presence as a space of contestation. If we are to think of the sea and the ocean, can we ignore all this? Does not the very materiality of the sea speak precisely to these questions?

Overview of the collection

As we have already suggested, the contributors to this special issue are divided over the possibility of critical ocean geographies. The various authors who contribute to this special issue articulate different perspectives, postures, and responses to the possibilities posed in the initial call for submissions. In their different ways, the articles by de Spuches and Pille-Schneider & Sagna, as well as those by the special issues’ curators (Steinberg and Palermo), engage ocean-focused literature and performance as a tool to turn the gaze, to interrogate the multiplicity of narratives with, on, and through the sea, and, above all, to bring out and reveal the centrality of the space of the sea for racial capitalism and coloniality in their multiple constructions. In contrast, the articles by Akbarian, Saucier, & Woods and by Teed & McAteer critique this potential. Constructing a ‘counterpoint’ to critical ocean geographies, they warn that the corpus of ‘aquatic’ theories risks romanticizing the space of the sea and undermining the Black radical tradition.

Yet, despite these different and mutually critical postures, the articles are united by a series of convergent themes that emerged in spite of the original call for papers. Although the call invited reflections on the trans-actional ocean as an unspecified arena of intersectional hierarchies, all of the articles think and work with the category of race and thus with the violence of whiteness and with Black epistemologies and practices. More specifically, each of the articles starts from the Black Atlantic and the violence of modernity marked by the Middle Passage, turning to this fundamental Black experience as a sort of indispensable genealogy, not only for the reflection posed by this special issue but for the attempt to understand the space of the sea in its entirety, as well as in its partialities. Developing this point further, the articles in this special issue think with two specific sea spaces: the historic Black Atlantic, a pivotal space for the construction of race and colonial violence, but also the contemporary, racialized ocean, from the waters off Senegal, which has witnessed a mobility denied by European Western necropolitics (see: Pille-Schneider & Sagna, this issue) to the contemporary Mediterranean Sea, where European border policies produce a necrospace (Mbembe, 2003) that absorbs the bodies of people attempting to cross it (see: de Spuches and Palermo, this issue). In this sense, although this collection was intended to consider the trans-actional ocean writ large, it ended up positioning itself centrally within the specificity of Black experience. Although this focus was unintended and, in a sense, partial, it speaks to the centrality of Black oceanic mobilities, in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, historic and contemporary, to the themes posed by the call.

Another unintended convergence is the centrality of artistic productions in each of the special issue articles, whether focusing on literature (Palermo, Pille-Schneider & Sagna, Steinberg), performance art (Akbarian, Saucier, & Woods), music (Teed & McAteer), or theatre, film, and material art (de Spuches). Although the call for papers made no reference to art, in the collection that resulted each author turns to art to shed light on narratives of transparency and opacity, liberation and dissolution (Glissant, 1997) that resist expository writing. This is not to say that the authors are in agreement about the function of art: contrast, for instance, Steinberg with Teed & McAteer on the power of metaphor. However, each of the authors is implicitly making the argument that cultural products serve a crucial function in articulating a wor(l)d that cannot be spoken.

Turning to each article in greater detail, the collection begins with Steinberg's article (*Thinking from multiple oceans: historical and elemental lineages and futures of ocean geography(s)*) which addresses a central tension in critical ocean geographies between two epistemological modes: *thinking with* and *thinking from* the ocean. Steinberg shows how this dualism runs through contemporary oceanic theory and argues that it can be dissolved (or at least problematized) by engaging in dialogue with traditions of Black critical thought. In order to construct this line of reasoning and analyse this tension, the article undertakes a critical dialogue with Melville's *Moby-Dick*, and with its interpretations in particular by C.L.R. James and Paul Gilroy, thus choosing a literary text and its multiple critical readings to reflect on the space of the sea and the possibilities of oceanic thought.

Akbarian, Saucier, & Woods (*On the drag of the ship(ped)*) turn to a work of performance art – *Mediterráneo*, by Afro-Cuban artist Carlos Martiel – to construct their critique of critical ocean studies. In contrast with oceanic theorizations, that that they reject as seeing the sea as a porous space of common becoming, they call instead for an analysis that draws from the specificity (and impossibility) of Blackness in the modern imperialist world. *Mediterráneo* is analysed as an emblematic artwork on the Mediterranean basin and the migrant crisis that does not speak of relations, but symbolises social death; it calls for a structure-destructive thought that, following Fanon, introduces invention into existence, disrupting western humanist dialectical reason.

In the next article, Pille-Schneider & Sagna (*The Black Atlantic in the wake of a contemporary shipwreck: the Joola's last voyage and its memorialization in Fatou Diome's Les veilleurs de Sangomar*) critique the non-centrality, if not the marginalization, of Africa in Gilroy's Black Atlantic. They propose instead a reading rooted in oceanic materiality and in Senegambian geography through the analysis of the Joola shipwreck (2002) – one of the largest contemporary maritime tragedies, with about 1863 deaths – and its literary memorialization in Fatou Diome's novel *Les veilleurs de Sangomar* (2019). A literary narrative is thus chosen not only to recentre the Black Atlantic by positioning it in Africa but also to think with the sea not as metaphor at all, but as an agent of memory, materiality, and temporality. The novel's protagonist, Coumba, works through grief by means of a nocturnal writing practice that functions as *wake work* (Sharpe, 2016), made possible by the tidal rhythms of the Saloum Delta and by archipelagic memory.

Palermo too, in her article (*Thinking- and telling-with the sea: understanding a trans-actional Mediterranean through Lalami's Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*), looks critically at critical ocean geographies and at the liquid and more-than-wet counter-archives of a trans-actional Mediterranean through the potential of stories, in this case, Laila Lalami's novel *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005). By reflecting on Lalami's

protagonists as they cross the Mediterranean from Morocco to Spain, Palermo illuminates the Mediterranean as a space of depth and hardship, portraying its volume not simply as a necroscape but as a place where futures are imagined or, in some instances, abandoned ... a place where Lalami's characters have agency even as they interact with the sea's materiality.

Teed & McAteer (*Dissonant seas: Black critical theory, river run thee, and the counterpoint to critical ocean geography*) construct their counterpoint to critical ocean geography through Matana Roberts' experimental sonic artwork *river run thee*. For Teed & McAteer, Roberts engages the oceanic not as a novel material site for rethinking statically modernist geographic logics but as an antiblack watery tomb, forged in the trauma of the Middle Passage. The interrogation of Roberts' sonic geography offers Teed & McAteer an opportunity and a method for 'staying in the wake' (Sharpe, 2016), as the authors seize upon the power of the oceanic metaphor as a tool for articulating the ocean's meaning.

Finally, de Spuches (*Mediterranean geographies from the abyss. Traces of the wake: boats and shipwrecks*) proposes a reading of the contemporary Mediterranean through critical ocean geographies, showing how shipwrecks are not natural events but political effects of Fortress Europe, its violence, and its immobility. The author weaves together personal experience, critical theory, and art through her performance *E l'Europa disumanizzò sé stessa*, a dialogue between Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and border violence in the Mediterranean. The article then interacts with various works of art and critical cartography to explore possibilities for building a different language with the sea, against flat and immobile representations of EU violence.

Space and time in the trans-actional ocean

We conclude this introduction by drawing attention to a final theme: that the trans-actional ocean is one of *excessive mobilities and immersive temporalities*. Paralleling the subsequent articles' engagement with mobility through the crossing of necrospace (the historic Middle Passage, the contemporary Atlantic, the Mediterranean) is an engagement with mobility as *excessive*, intertwined with the oceanic materiality that builds links across different time period, where movements across the sea's surface are entangled with historic and contemporary oceanic violences and turbulences, in processes of remembrance and dissolution (Lehman et al., 2021). The archipelagic memory and the tidalectics of ebb and flow in Diome's novel; the 'radical untimeliness' that defines Martiel's work; the Mediterranean abyss constructed through the structure of *vertex and vortex*; the rhythm of the dissonant geographies of Matana Roberts' *river*; Harrison's transcolonial continuity made visible in the trans-actional Mediterranean of the *harraga* in Lalami's novel; the immersive oceanic temporality evoked by the abyss opened by *Moby-Dick*: all these reflections addressed by the articles that follow recognize and engage in some way with a circular temporality. This is not a temporality that is linear or progressive, but rather a temporality that sees the copresence of past, present, and future in the structuring of colonial capitalism, in its use of the sea as an abyss of death. It is a silencing archive in the presence of memories, voices, stories, counter-archives, and conflicts.

Crossing the Atlantic in the hold of a ship, crossing the Mediterranean in a crowded inflatable boat, drowning in the turbulence of the wake: the works engaged in the subsequent articles, even if from diverse point of views, engage with the sea as

a pivotal space for understanding our contemporary world and its accumulation of an ever present past. This is a trans-actional ocean, an ocean whose excessive mobilities and immersive temporalities clash, witness, and interrogate.

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