

## Durham Research Online

---

### Deposited in DRO:

07 November 2019

### Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Steinberg, Philip and Peters, Kimberley (2019) 'Cross-currents and undertows : a response.', *Dialogues in human geography*, 9 (3). pp. 333-338.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820619879521>

### Publisher's copyright statement:

Steinberg, Philip Peters, Kimberley (2019). Cross-currents and undertows: A response. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 9(3): 333-338. © The Author(s) 2019 Article reuse guidelines: [sagepub.com/journals-permissions](http://sagepub.com/journals-permissions) DOI: [10.1177/2043820619879521](https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820619879521) [journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg)

### Additional information:

## Use policy

---

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in DRO
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full DRO policy](#) for further details.

## Cross-currents and undertows: A response

Philip Steinberg & Kimberley Peters

Reflecting back on ‘Wet Ontologies’ – our initial effort at thinking with the ocean to understand space, time and movement – it would be fair to say that the concept’s uptake exceeded our expectations. The initial trio of papers (Peters and Steinberg 2014, 2015; Steinberg and Peters 2015) were not simply read, engaged with and cited by ‘ocean’ scholars, within and beyond geography. Their reach also exceeded the ocean, finding application in work on animal geographies (Lorimer et al. 2019), the ‘volumes’ of city spaces (McNeill 2019), sandscapes (Kothari and Arnall 2019), walking and pedestrian encounter (Barry 2018), the landed terrains of warfare (Gordillo 2017), the geopolitics of outer space (Beery 2016) and a range of other venues. Although the ‘Wet Ontologies’ project was never written to be only oceanic in scope, its reach has been both humbling, and exciting, to follow.

In many ways, thinking about how those original pieces ‘stretched’ beyond the ocean provides a useful starting point to help us situate and reflect on this paper – ‘An Ocean in Excess’ – and the rich, thought-provoking responses to it. In our earlier ‘Wet Ontologies’ pieces, perhaps without consciously realising it, we were already hinting towards an ocean in excess – an ocean that leaks, seeps, infiltrates, stretches, moves, shape-shifts, state-shifts and makes itself known in ways other than ‘wet’ liquid materiality. We discussed this in view of ice, but also in our underlying argument – that tropes of space, time and movement can be thought of anew through a ‘wet’, ‘churning’, ‘voluminous’ ontology. In turn, we were positing that space, time and movement might be better thought of as *oceanic* in their character and quality. Accordingly, then, the use of ‘Wet Ontologies’ in such varied work as noted above demonstrates a way in which the ocean exists in excess – where oceanic ontologies come onshore, emanate to the skies and exceed the boundaries of the planet.

We note the variety of ways in which the ‘Wet Ontologies’ perspective has been applied because it forms an important backdrop for our theorization of this piece, and also our responses to the commentary on this latter paper, where we take up the idea of the ‘Ocean in Excess’ more explicitly. ‘More-than-Wet Ontologies’ is *more than* an addition, addendum or assessment of critique to our earlier work. Rather than simply thinking *with* the ocean, we question what the ocean *is*, *can be* and *might be*, as a term, concept, tool, site, spatiality, element, material, state and temporality. We explore how perspectives are broadened by thinking with the ocean, through its extensions, its excessive qualities and, as Sasha

Englemann notes in her response, its ‘entanglements’ beyond the ‘wet’ ocean that seemingly resides as the oceanic blue on the map. In the process, we revise how we might think about what constitutes the ocean, where the ocean ‘begins’ and ‘ends’ (or rather how it ‘becomes’ and is ‘emergent’).

This is an ambitious agenda. Indeed, several of the respondents suggest that perhaps it is *too* ambitious: If indeed, the ocean is, as we suggest, ‘everywhere’, does it become, after Barthes (1972: 112), “a non-signifying field [that] bears no message”? Might our ocean be *too* excessive? This question points to a deeper issue of methodology: What is the preferable ontological strategy for provoking a new epistemology, or, put another way, how can we best utilise a shift in the way that we conceptualise the world around us to develop new analytical frames? If the purpose of our work is to upend our ways of understanding, should we focus on the encounters that occur around a specific object or within a specific space, or should we revolve our work around, on the one hand, processes and relations and, on the other, the fundamental elements that are enlisted in these processes and relations?

In the remainder of this brief counter-response, we address two ways in which the respondents approach these questions. The first concerns whether our focus should be the ocean, or if, rather, it should be the sea, water, liquidity, wetness, the hydrosphere, or something else entirely. How this question is tackled ultimately rests on the approach taken to the relationship between matter, elements, space, phenomenology and essence, and to where the concept of ‘ocean’ fits into this mix. The second, related concern queries the degree to which, and ways in which, we acknowledge the liveliness of the ocean. As one turns to an ocean that is alive in its own distinct, self-constituting processes (the ocean of ‘nothing but waves’, in their infinite multiplicities), how does one give adequate weight to the lives – human and more-than-human – that course through the ocean, leaving behind a web of politics, histories and material artefacts? In other words, how do we draw attention to the liveliness of the ocean without losing sight of the liveliness *in* the ocean?

### **Toward a more- or less-than-ocean ‘ocean’**

Turning to the first of the two outlined concerns, Christopher Bear, Jon Anderson, and Sasha Englemann all question our decision to retain a focus on the *ocean* as we extend our ‘Wet Ontologies’ beyond the paradigmatic space that anchored our original articles on the topic. Bear stresses the multi-directional linkages that join the ocean with other watery spaces. By working from the ocean as our starting point, and by working through oceanic examples, Bear suggests, we not only fail to appreciate the important intersections of riverine and

marine environments and species, but we also fail to appreciate the ways in which the ocean is shaped *by* these other ‘wet’ spaces. As he writes, “[i]f oceans exceed, they are also exceeded.” Anderson extends this argument further, suggesting that it would be more productive to extend our analysis to the *hydrosphere*; anything less, he argues would ground our ‘Wet Ontologies’ in a bounded ocean that will limit the perspective’s subversive potential. Engelmann goes further still, pairing her argument for an *elemental* perspective with an argument for non-linear, non-textual modes of presentation that can help us avoid analytical accounts that reduce specific surfaces, states, or spaces to essences.

Our decision to highlight the *ocean* in ‘The Ocean in Excess’, as opposed to *the sea* or *water* or *H<sub>2</sub>O* or the *hydrosphere* or the *world of watery spaces*, was a conscious one. On the one hand, ‘grounding’ our analysis in *the sea* would have been too restrictive, as it points to a single, spatially defined unit (or, arguably, several distinct units). We sought a more open, less geographically determinate starting point in our quest to explore the epistemological potential of the watery world’s boundlessness and the ways in which it permeates into a myriad of spaces and experiences. At the same time, however, we were (and remain) cautious about swinging too far in the other direction and abandoning all together the distinct *spatiality* of the ocean. As Massey (2005) reminds us, turning toward an individual space and its distinctiveness is *not* a turn away from time, processes, relationality and politics. Rather, just the opposite: One must turn one’s attention to spatiality if one seeks to explore a space’s politics, its history, the ways in which it is constructed as a *perceived object* in a kaleidoscope of materialities and meanings, assemblages and encounters. When one navigates the ocean, when one regulates it, or when one floats on its surface or sinks in its volume (whether as fish or human, research buoy or microplastic pellet), one is not merely encountering water. One is encountering a space of histories and ecologies, politics and predations (Rozwadowski 2018). In short, although we wholeheartedly engage the *material* as we explore what it means to think with the ocean, we are alert to the dangers that occur when one takes this one step further, to the *elemental*, where politics and history may be left on the beach.

Of course, the critique levelled by Bear, Anderson and Engelmann is not just about our use of the word *ocean* as opposed to an alternative like *sea*, *water*, or *hydrosphere*. Rather, they are pointing to a broader tension that has bedevilled the ‘Wet Ontologies’ project from the start: How does one promote a form of thinking that is derived from our perception of the dynamics of a certain space (in this case, the ocean) without either reducing our analysis to a study of the ocean in its specificity or elevating the ocean to a world-defining essence that exists, as a unified whole, logically prior to the universe within which it is

located. In 'The Ocean in Excess', we attempt to address the first problem directly, by stretching the boundaries of the oceanic in three directions (to the oceans within, beyond and imagined). However, the question of logical priority is more difficult to address because, in a sense, it will always be present in any geographical analysis. In effect, it is the question of how one writes without a starting point or, if one must adopt a starting point, how one decentres it even at the moment of its conception. In 'The Ocean in Excess' we rely on the concepts of 'excess' and 'extension' to decentre the ocean even as we suggest its pervasiveness. We also further decentre the ocean as objective essence by bolstering a phenomenological aspect to our approach that was only hinted at in the earlier 'Wet Ontologies' pieces. In 'The Ocean in Excess' there is a greater emphasis on *wetness* as well as *liquidity*, *encounter* as well as *object*.

Engelmann, though, urges us to go further by engaging alternative narrative forms. We concur. Indeed, the earlier, workshopped version of 'The Ocean in Excess' was presented through a series of disjointed vignettes, in part to destabilise any attempt to elevate an oceanic essence. The vignette format was ultimately abandoned because, contrary to our intentions, we found that in its partialness it implied holism and universality (i.e. there was no good way to argue for what vignettes were *not* included). We suspect, however, that we will continue to experiment with modes of presentation, and it is one of the many domains in which we hope to be able to continue this dialogue with our colleagues.

### **Toward a more lively (and deadly) ocean**

The second concept that runs through several of the commentaries is that of liveliness. Christopher Bear, Charity Edwards, Stefan Helmreich and Gordon Winder all, in different ways, draw attention to the lives that are *not* present in our 'More-than-Wet Ontology', our 'Ocean in Excess'. Whilst these are important reflections on our piece, they also highlight a particular interpretation of the lively. Whilst a dead fish wrapped in batter or a sea-shell utilised for sound without the presence of its former inhabitant evokes a rather 'dead' kind of ocean, it also evokes a certain kind of liveliness. Those dead fish, crustaceans and other sea-creatures give rise to ways of living with the ocean where we might become more attuned to its liveliness via (ironically) the scarcity of resources, or the fragility of oceanic life. Or through our consumption and leisure practices we may become attuned to how our lives are forged or made alive, and lively, through the ocean. To expand on this point, although our discussion of *Life of Pi* highlights pain and death, the novel is also a meditation on the intersection of human life and ocean. The ocean makes Pi feel alive, even as it

simultaneously threatens his life. The ocean is lively through Pi's drifting and his engagements with other human-non-human life onboard the dilapidated dingy. His sense of 'being alive' is captured in the way the ocean scars and marks him, both physically and emotionally. Ours is not, then, an ocean absent of life – nor of oceanic hardships or struggles.

This is not to say that we couldn't, and shouldn't, do much more here. We most definitely can and must. Bear is right in arguing for the need to “[m]ore fully acknowledge... the ability of nonhumans to create places” and to speak from more-than-human, not just human, perspectives. Our ocean-in-excess is anthropocentric in its liveliness, and given that the ocean offers “99% of the environmental space available for (all) living things” (Rozwadowski 2018: 8) we agree that thinking in 'excess' requires exceeding our understanding of liveliness beyond the human or, for that matter, the geophysical. Edwards argues further that we must engage not just with the more-than-human – with marine and plant life – but with the technological, the non-human, and the artificial, an arena garnering much attention through the use of, for example, ocean data portals and underwater autonomous vehicles (see Boucquey et al. 2019; Lehman 2016). This, we agree, is vital. We also affirm Winder's point that, in order to fully appreciate the ocean's multivalent liveliness one must engage perspectives on ocean life from beyond the Western, Enlightenment tradition. And finally, although we describe Pi's deterioration by the ocean, Helmreich is correct to note that lively (and deadly) engagements with the ocean can be “far fiercer” than those we describe, when we think to historic and recent forced migrations (see also Stierl 2016 and Stratford and Murray 2018).

To remedy these omissions, we could certainly 'fill' our ocean with the examples that each respondent brings up – salmon, underwater autonomous vehicles, Polynesian navigators, migrants. This is arguably an important extension of this project. But their observations also raise another important point. Bear, Edwards, Helmreich and Winder all identify a gap that emerges from the way in which the two of us have tended to engage the ocean as a dynamic space. In our various works, writing individually and as a pair, we have highlighted the liveliness of the ocean by focusing on the mobility and indeterminacy of the ocean's molecules and the forces that run through them. When we have drawn on science, we have typically turned to physics and oceanography more than biology. When we have sought philosophical anchors to reorient our universe, we have typically turned to Deleuze and Guattari (1988) more than Haraway (1990). There are exceptions: Peters' work (with Turner) on carceral ships (2015); Steinberg's work (with Kristoffersen and Shake) on ice-edge biology (2020); our joint engagement with the concept of 'Hypersea' in this piece. We have

no doubt that there is ample room for perspectives focused on geophysical and biological liveliness to productively cross paths and for conceptual hybrids to emerge; indeed, this is already happening. Nonetheless, the engagement in our own work is at present uneven, and this presents both opportunities and challenges. For now, our ‘Ocean in Excess’ approach appoints us well for taking an elemental or hydrospheric perspective that engages the ocean’s (or water’s, or the hydrosphere’s) dynamic materiality, or liveliness, to rethink our watery world. But it probably does leave us less well equipped for appreciating the vast complexity of livelihoods and histories that constitute (and continually re-constitute) the oceanic assemblage. We hope, however, that our ‘More-than-Wet Ontologies’ approach can accommodate a range of human and more-than-human actors and technologies, extending thought in unbounded ways, beyond the spaces and temporalities that all too often fix them in contemporary understanding.

### **Extensions of gratitude**

We are grateful for the generous and constructive comments offered by the six respondents. Each has, in various ways and using numerous examples, raised necessary points and useful reflections. In addition to their contributions in this *Dialogues* issue, Jon Anderson, Christopher Bear, Charity Edwards and Sasha Engelmann each provided detailed feedback during the initial presentation of this paper at the Royal Geographical Society (with Institute of British Geographers) meeting in 2018, while Stefan Helmreich was a discussant when an earlier version of this paper was workshopped at the ‘Ocean Ecologies and Imaginaries conference’, in Irvine, California (2017), organised by Elizabeth DeLoughrey. Although not part of this printed discussion, feedback received at the ‘Seascapes conference’, in Auckland, New Zealand (2016), organised by Mike Brown, was also central to the development of the piece. We are furthermore appreciative of the input of Gordon Winder, whose earlier work in *Dialogues* (with Richard LeHeron, 2017) has, in many ways, paved the way for our intervention. In short, we are honoured that our work has been so thoroughly engaged with by esteemed colleagues, mentors, and intellectual heroes, and we hope that our response contributes to a conversation that will perpetuate in *excess*, far beyond the boundaries of this volume.

### **References**

- Barry, K. (2018). More-than-human entanglements of walking on a pedestrian bridge. *Geoforum* (early online) DOI [10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.10.015](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.10.015)
- Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies*. Paladin: London.
- Beery, J. (2016). Unearthing global natures: Outer space and scalar politics. *Political Geography*, 55, 92-101.
- Boucquey, N., St. Martin, K., Fairbanks, L., Campbell, L. M., & Wise, S. (2019). Ocean data portals: Performing a new infrastructure for ocean governance. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 37(3), 484-503.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1988). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Bloomsbury Publishing: London.
- Gordillo, G. (2018). Terrain as insurgent weapon: An affective geometry of warfare in the mountains of Afghanistan. *Political Geography*, 64, 53-62.
- Haraway, D. (1990). 'A manifesto for cyborgs: Science, technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980s'. In Nicholson, L.J. (Ed.) *Feminism/postmodernism*. Routledge: London, 190-233.
- Kothari, U., & Arnall, A. (2019). Shifting sands: The rhythms and temporalities of island sandscapes. *Geoforum* (early online) DOI [10.1016/j.geoforum.2019.03.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2019.03.006)
- Lehman, J. (2016). A sea of potential: The politics of global ocean observations. *Political Geography*, 55, 113-123.
- Lorimer, J., Hodgetts, T., & Barua, M. (2019). Animals' atmospheres. *Progress in Human Geography*, 43(1), 26-45.
- Massey, D. (2005). *For Space*. Sage: London.

McNeill, D. (2019). The volumetric city. *Progress in Human Geography* (early online) DOI 0309132519863486.

Peters, K. and Steinberg, P. (2014). Volume and vision: toward a wet ontology. *Harvard Design Magazine* 39: 124-129.

Peters, K. and Steinberg, P. (2015). A wet world: rethinking place, territory, and time. Available on the Society & Space website, <http://societyandspace.org/2015/04/27/a-wet-world-rethinking-place-territory-and-time-kimberley-peters-and-philip-steinberg> (accessed 8 August 2018).

Peters, K., and Turner, J. (2015). Between crime and colony: Interrogating (im) mobilities aboard the convict ship. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 16(7), 844-862.

Rozwadowski, H. M. (2018). *Vast Expanses: A History of the Oceans*. Reaktion Books: London.

Steinberg, P., Kristoffersen, B. and Shake, K. (2020). Edges and flows: exploring legal materialities and biophysical politics of sea ice. In, Braverman, I. and Johnson, E.R. (Eds.) *Blue Legalities: The Life and Laws of the Sea*. Duke University Press: Durham, NC, 85-106.

Steinberg, P. and Peters, K. (2015). Wet ontologies, fluid spaces: giving depth to volume through oceanic thinking. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 33(2): 247-264.

Stierl, M. (2016). A sea of struggle—activist border interventions in the Mediterranean Sea. *Citizenship Studies*, 20(5), 561-578.

Stratford, E. and Murray, T. (2018). 'Bodies: The body of the drowned: convicts and shipwrecks' In, Peters, K., Steinberg, P., & Stratford, E. (Eds.). *Territory beyond Terra*. Rowman and Littlefield International: London, 169-184.

Winder, G. M., and Le Heron, R. (2017). Assembling a Blue Economy moment? Geographic engagement with globalizing biological-economic relations in multi-use marine environments. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 7(1), 3-26.