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## Introduction: theorising heritage for the seas

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### ABSTRACT

This Introduction makes the case for a more critical engagement with oceans and the maritime within critical heritage theory. We lay out a research agenda that more consciously foregrounds aquatic domains in debates about conservation, sovereignty, governance, state power, and the politics of memory. In laying the ground for the papers that follow, we portray oceanic geographies and maritime heritage as politically and culturally charged arenas in order to argue that oceans are far from neutral or culturally egalitarian spaces and are subject to human-imposed hierarchies and competing ontologies. We scrutinize the dynamic interplay between maritime and marine realms to challenge conventional understandings of space, territory, and ownership, advocating for a reimagined approach to heritage that recognizes the ocean's pivotal role in shaping human history and culture.

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Scholars of heritage have become highly familiar with a variety of abstractions: universal value; humanity; or future generations, to name a few. In the writing of heritage and conservation history, it is widely documented that such ideas were institutionally imprinted during the course of the second half of the twentieth century during an intense period of internationalism in the wake of two devastating world wars and the threat of nuclear conflict. In the infamous international campaigns to save the archaeological and architectural sites of Nubia and Venice, respectively, the looming threat, however, was rising water. In the numerous books and articles documenting these events and their influence on the subsequent world heritage paradigm, the name of Arvid Pardo rarely, if ever, appears. It is an omission that is somewhat remarkable given that, in his capacity as Malta's Ambassador to the United States, Pardo declared the need to protect 'the common heritage of mankind' during an impassioned speech to the UN General Assembly on 1 November 1967. In seeking a solution for the equitable management of regions characterised by ambiguous jurisdictions and governmental indeterminables, Pardo's speech remains prescient, yet controversial, across multiple policy domains today. Within the field of heritage studies, however, Pardo's legacy has received little attention, despite the fact that he laid out a paradigm for governing vast geographical regions of global consequence, the sea-bed and 'international waters'. Such themes are taken up by Hang Zhou and Jieyi Xie in their contribution here.

Why, then, should scholars of cultural heritage need to engage with oceans and their floors? The first answer to that question might revolve around issues of conservation and resource extraction from the realm of nature for the presumed benefit of all present and future generations. Yet, the connection of the 'common heritage of [hu]mankind' with the world understood as a 'global society' is a relatively recent idea. <sup>1</sup> Transcending the limits of state sovereignty, the universalising

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concept of the ‘common heritage of [hu]mankind’ pertains to the idea of oceans as the domain of nature and that high seas, ocean floors and occasionally submerged shipwrecks are the property of humanity as a whole. As noble and progressive the label of common heritage proposed by Pardo might appear, it is in actual practice predicated on particular Western geographic imaginaries and scientific mapping of the ocean that became hegemonic on a global scale, erasing Indigenous and subaltern transoceanic histories while spreading and vernacularising Western immobile land-based categories (Trouillot 2002, DeLoughrey 2007, Roszko 2022). In that sense, the idea of ‘common heritage of [hu]mankind’ indexes oceanic timelessness and disconnected from social and ecological relations, thereby perpetuating the Cartesian dualism embodied in human-nature divisions, and allowing the reduction of both human and non-human lives to their economic value (Moore 2015, Strang 2023). Regardless, whether our empirical focus is on land or sea, or on humans or nature, however, heritage is about competing and converging values; it is about the making of claims, and it thus revolves around issues such as law, property, territory, sovereignty, governance, memory, futures and so forth (cf. Salemlink 2021). This special issue seeks to demonstrate, then, that there are distinct benefits in turning to aquatic domains for instruction and possible insight for understanding such issues, and especially how such claims are made when it comes to deep oceanic settings that have hitherto been unclaimed by states.

Our argument is not that all scholars of heritage should develop an interest in shipwrecks, coastal wetlands, fishing cultures or maritime gods. Rather, our provocation is twofold. First, that rivers, seas, oceans and other aquatic features and spaces should be more broadly incorporated into various heritage debates, regardless of whether they pertain to the cultural and/or natural realm, because they unsettle the representation of the world in terms of territorially bounded empires, nation-states, inward-looking national histories or a space domesticated by humans. Second, that there is a productive literature on ocean ontologies that offers new ways of thinking about heritage (e.g. Steinberg 2001, DeLoughrey 2007, Rozwadowski 2018). As this special issue – and vividly Tim Winter in his article – argues here, what happens if we take water – rivers, oceans and seas – as our starting point for thinking critically about heritage? And what does it mean to think through the marine and maritime? Both questions need to be answered in two ways. First, there is a need to think through what we mean by marine and maritime, and consider what maritime heritage might encompass if we explore it expansively. The second, larger issue, however, pertains to the exploration of the maritime that pushes us to include marine dimensions and rethink some key debates within heritage studies.

## Marine and maritime dimensions

Common sense suggests that the term maritime relates to seas, oceans and water more broadly. But as we begin to move beyond the normative, things quickly become more complicated. Boundaries between land and ocean, river and hinterland are inevitably blurred. Sail further, rather than dig deeper, and things continue to open up. Move away from the terrestrial, with all its associations of borders, solidity and fixity, and the maritime reveals a new conceptual vocabulary, one that forms around ideas of fluidity, saturation, waves, currents, floods and such like. Such a shift in emphasis can be productive for heritage theory, which remains overwhelmingly terracentric for a variety of practical, political and intellectual reasons (cf. Winter, this issue). We are disposed to historicise and construct spatial categories in terms of land-based regions and continents (Roszko 2015, 2022). The teleological narratives of history are familiar, kingdoms became empires, became nations. This means then, and as Fernand Braudel (1972), Paul Gilroy (1993); Michael Pearson (2003), Philippe Beaujard (2019), Lincoln Paine (2013), and others have noted that the relationships between the sea, history and social memory are much less well understood, both in academia and in the public imagination.

It thus follows that across academic and heritage practice, ideas about cultural and natural heritage have foregrounded the geographies and conceptual imaginaries of the

terrestrial and their projections on the sea. Addressing this terrestrial bias and human-centrism, cultural anthropologists have started to debate the dialectical relationship between *maritime* and *marine* contesting, rejecting or reasserting the binary between land and sea and between nature and culture. While maritime is defined as ‘sea-borne activities and practices (...) on the sea surface’, including connections with the land, ‘marine’ forces us to think beyond the terrestrial and to include ‘the organic life and inorganic materials and movements under the sea surface (on which maritime objects float, drift, and move), involving non-human life *in* and maritime extraction of resources *from* the sea’ (Roszko 2021a, 312). The critical reassessment of the tendentious distinction between maritime and marine as homologous to the culture-nature binary compels us to take into account the bio-physical and cultural heterogeneities of forms through which the ties between the sea environment, subaltern and global histories and civilisation are established, offering a way out from the landlocked categories of *terra firma*. The notion of ‘landscape’ and its hegemonic place in theory offers a case in point, wherein the surface of land has long dominated representations of space and time, such that the crudest records of human activities and civilisational achievements embedded in that surface have been exposed to different forms of historicization (Domosh 2020, 118). We might ask, then, what happens if we shift our gaze to seascapes, and to those ‘unmarked’ spaces of oceans, in our effort to recover history/ies? Elisabeth DeLoughrey (2007, 55) argues that ‘unlike terrestrial space, the perpetual circulation of ocean currents means that as a space, the sea necessarily dissolves local phenomenology and diffracts the accumulation of narrative. In other words, the ocean suspends and distorts terrestrial marking of temporality’. But what does it mean to temporalise ocean space? And how is such temporalization inscribed in materially across floating, ever-changing worlds in ways that build new and alternative historical legacies?

In approaching such questions, we are faced with the ambiguities of what the term maritime actually encompasses, and how it differs from the marine. One starting point refers to those institutions that define their domain of activity as maritime heritage. The Marine National Monument (Papahānaumokuākea) in Hawaii, for example, suggests it is ‘a broad legacy that includes not only physical resources, such as historic shipwrecks and prehistoric archaeological sites, but also archival documents, oral histories, and traditional seafaring and ecological knowledge of indigenous cultures’. Of course, this also includes land-based sites such as port-cities, shipyards or lighthouses, which together are in some way or another associated with aquatic environments. But the very idea of what constitutes maritime heritage remains an elusive concept when it comes to oceanic geographies and overlapping pasts. Perhaps broadly defined as ‘heritage that is *of* or *pertains to* the sea’, the term still begs the question what constitutes the sea and which conceptions or imaginaries of the sea are privileged and which have been silenced or appropriated (Hutchings 2017, 9, emphasis in original)? Contemplating the edges of aqua and terra along horizontal (*maritime*) and vertical (*marine*) scales, we insist that rather than ‘thinking about water’ as a subject analytically confined to resource, we should keep ‘thinking with water’ as an object tied to the social fabric and ‘embodied in specific materialities and spacetimes’ (Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis 2013, 5). Indeed, thinking *with* water already has spurred the ‘oceanic turn’ in social science and humanities and among those scholars who started to address terrestrial bias by temporalising oceans and seas as geopolitical, socio-economic and bio-physical arenas (Steinberg 2001, DeLoughrey 2007, Helmreich 2009, Rozwadowski 2018, Sivasundram, 2020, Roszko 2021b, Tagliacozzo 2022). While turning to the sea as history might have an ‘equalizing effect that allows us to recognize non-European maritime histories’ (DeLoughrey 2007, 21), it also carries the danger of making some histories visible while obscuring others, an issue, for example, Xuefei Shi and Edyta Roszko’s geo-history of seafaring or Natali Pearson’s concepts of transnational or multispecies wreck take up – and it provokes us to develop an analytical language that goes beyond facile binaries of land and sea, culture and nature, and maritime and marine.

## Beyond terrestrial language

Thinking with oceans, therefore, requires that our vision and articulations go beyond the sea surface as the horizontal extension of land, and dive into underlying depths both conceptually and semantically. Non-European languages, such as those of Austronesian-speaking people, are saturated with the vocabulary specifically related to three-dimensional, fluid and dynamic oceanic space that belongs to both nature and humans. In turn, the English language ‘is littered with dead nautical metaphors’ denoting the subordination of time to space and conscription of the sea into a national and global territorial grid defined by latitudes and longitudes – a cultural and political construction of the oceans that enables further enclosures of watery spaces into empires and nations (Raban 1992, 7; DeLoughrey 2007, 54–56). Veronica Strang (2023, 26) notes that ‘[I]n societies with high expectations that human agency will impose order, water cannot be trusted’. Consequently, when we refer to the sea, we tend to use negatively charged water metaphors such as ‘tsunami of migrants’, ‘flows of refugees’, ‘a new wave of migrants’ (Porto 2022), ‘flood of fake imports’, ‘ocean is a mighty beast’ or ‘crying the ocean of tears’, just to mention a few.

If ‘fluidity readily becomes instability, transgressing the boundaries’ (Strang 2023, 26), the terrestrial bias in our everyday ways of talking is even more apparent, such that the metaphors and figurative forms of language we use invariably revolve around the land. In her book *Wild Blue Media*, Melody Jue (2020) says that we are, after all, immersed in air, not water. Here, Jue suggests that we can engage with the latter in both physical and speculative ways. Diving is her way of being physically immersed. Perhaps more interesting, though, are her ideas about speculative immersion; thinking through different media – digital and analogue – which take us into the ocean in ways that defamiliarise us from our earthly surroundings. As she notes:

milieu-specific analysis differs from previous work in the ocean humanities by engaging with the ocean as an environment for thought rather than as an object of analysis or region for the study of cultural representations. (Jue 2020, 16)

Jue’s (2020, 16) emphasis on how oceans require multidisciplinary expertise from ‘interstitial scholars who loosely identify under the umbrella of the ocean humanities’ could be put in conversation with Stefan Helmreich’s (2009, 2023) conceptualisation of ocean as a ‘theory machine’ generating insights into the work of oceanographers, politicians, or sea-bed exploration companies or as a form of media carrying ecological, geopolitical and climatological information about our planet. In that sense, both authors plead for visibility of ocean in its biological, geological and cultural diversity.

Himanshu Ray (2016, 11) takes this analytical disposition further, suggesting that the ‘inter-connectedness of maritime spaces and cultural traditions’ needs to be understood as ‘varied articulations of social and political power, as well as regional and local nautical traditions’. For example, the articles by Winter, Roszko and Shi in this theme section interrogate these empirical and conceptual questions beyond universalised normative visions of the world. Together, they identify previously ignored formations of social and political power that play out in the aquatic domain. The aim is to go beyond rethinking the politics of port cities or the importance of fishing traditions in national identity constructs, as important as such topics are. Our position in conceiving this collection is more ambitious, in that we want to sketch out the broader analytical insights that can arise from pursuing a maritime imagination away from unitary models such as bounded nations or empires. The first step then is to unsettle some entrenched norms and conventional ways of thinking. In addition to shedding light on our privileging of the terrestrial, there is a need to challenge the popular, and somewhat contradictory, imaginaries of ocean and sea as untamed or domesticated spaces (Helmreich 2009). At one level, they are seen as domains of nature; great voids decoupled from the events of the terrestrial. At the same time, they are commonly portrayed as geographies of connectivity, and as domains of trade and exploration. As a number of our articles (by Saleminck, Pearson, and Zhou and Xie) show, these imaginaries have material implications and

even though they might include ocean depths the temporalization of the ocean remains overwhelmingly two-dimensional and nation-centred.

It is important then to see aquatic environments – in their horizontal extension and vertical depth – as sites of struggle and contestation, where pasts and futures are envisaged and claimed, or indeed lost. Our contributors take the oceans and seas in their three dimensions, rather than the maritime empire or nation-state, as the unit of analysis. Such a perspective reveals, for example, the ways in which maritime heritage has been used to reconfigure continental powers as maritime civilisations (cf. Winter, Roszko, this issue) and how historical seafaring routes are portrayed as representations of civilisational progress (cf. Roszko), or how shipwrecks become a focal point for claims of cultural and political sovereignty (cf. Pearson). Fascinating questions arise when we examine the sea-bed in such ways. How, for instance, is a shipwreck different to a land-based ruin? Where buildings emerge from the soil, ships descend from above to their ‘final resting place’. Often described as ‘time capsules’, shipwrecks are, by definition, out of place as the sea-bed – on which they rest – is cognitively isolated from the seascape. How, then, the sea-bed with the remains of enslaved Africans or of contemporary migrants and refugees – who drown in the Atlantic or the Mediterranean – is different from a land graveyard? Perhaps, more importantly, how could an ocean graveyard become a memorial? How does such an oceanic memorial of slavery or refugees make visible subaltern histories of those who had gone to deep ocean? To whom do such memories and narratives – that the remains of African captives and migrants or even shipwrecks elicit – belong?

### The contributions

As we see across a number of the papers, a terrestrial politics of powerful pitched against less powerful nations now plays out in the mining of the ‘high seas’, meaning, for example, that the protection of underwater graves of enslaved African who died in the ‘Middle Passage’ comes up against instrumentalist interpretations of the common heritage of humankind, which privilege resource extraction through mining. And whilst some shipwrecks have become celebrated metonyms for trade, imperial power, war or industrial modernity – and here we might think of the *Belitung*, *USS Arizona*, *HMS Victory* or *Titanic*, respectively, – what can those vessels lost to the currents and swells of the ocean tell us about the world, past and present? Where, how and to what end should we commemorate the underwater graves of enslaved Africans who died crossing the Atlantic? Equally, as Oscar Salemink explains in his paper, how might we rethink Europe and the Mediterranean as geocultural imaginaries through a focus on those migrants and refugees who travelled from elsewhere and drowned at sea? In contrast to the anonymous enslaved Africans, these migrants have yet to secure a place in the global memory discourse. Given the distinct challenges seas pose to mnemonics, but also its increased weaponisation, artists – rather than politicians – create artwork memorialising the drowned bodies of refugees and thus seek to constitute the cultural heritage of the future. Attending to current developments in this space also highlights the ways in which long-standing, intersecting colour-gender hierarchies that have structured land-based discourses of heritage and memory are transposed on to the sea. In other words, in its capacity to drown and saturate, water is far from politically inert.

Look elsewhere and we see that seascapes – the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, as well as the South China Sea, Java Sea and others – can together be formative and constitutive spaces for the generation of new narratives and imaginaries, a theme our contributors take up. More theoretically oriented, Tim Winter calls for a maritime turn in heritage theory that engages spatial and temporal indeterminacies and fluidities to understand complex heritage politics that arise from competing terrestrial and oceanic ontologies. He begins by taking up the idea of the ‘ocean in excess’ to argue for a maritime imagination, one that overcomes the separation of land from water, culture from nature. The value of ocean ontologies is explored as an intellectual framework that has broad

application, including understanding the maritime as a domain of state power and competition vis-à-vis world ordering ambitions.

Contemplating marine heritage beyond human-nature dichotomy, Natali Pearson offers a different temporalization of oceans that considers the time between the loss of a seafaring vessel at sea and its rediscovery. By analytically unpacking the process by which a ship becomes a wreck and a wreck becomes a reef, she fleshes out a process in which values are ascribed to underwater cultural heritage and their potential simultaneously to reinforce and disrupt the nature-culture binary. Her concept of the multispecies wreck, therefore, captures the co-constitutive relationship of maritime-marine dimensions in heritage and offers a more holistic way to imagine oceanic ontologies, beyond human, terrestrial and material.

Focusing on the maritime and marine domains sheds light on the ways in which narratives of regional and world history have been constructed around the land. Moving back our gaze from the continents to seafaring voyages, various transoceanic diasporas and their non-linear ocean-centred histories come to the fore (cf. Roszko 2022). The transformation of a terrestrial deity into a sea god is one example that offers a deterritorialised view of heritage, as discussed by Xuefei Shi. The practices of overseas Chinese not only contest the ‘seemingly unbreakable, unified, and continuous nature of Chineseness’, but they also display the appropriation of subaltern heritage of a transoceanic diaspora by the state via a reverse process of ‘terrestrialisation’, which makes national connections more visible than others. As the articles by Salemink, Hang and Xie and Pearson reveal, the categories of maritime and marine help us rethink and re-write the past, and thereby reveal previously unseen connections, relationships and forces. Better understanding oceanic temporalities is not merely a question of identifying historical connections between regions, it is also a re-orientation towards the interpretation of how nature, cultures, places and values develop over time. Through such frameworks, we begin to see how a geopolitics of heritage plays out across maritime and marine domains, as various states rewrite their connections to the seas and oceans that surround them in an effort to advance strategic and security goals. In speaking to such themes, Edyta Roszko shows that heritagisation of seafaring in the South China Sea serves proprietary and thus territorial claims for China’s rhetoric of maritime ecological civilisation. By attending to how communities and authorities represent and claim seafaring traditions, she reveals that maritime heritage became a tool to project maritime geographies and marine depth as simultaneously shackled to and unchained from their ‘backward’ past. Subsuming nature to human will through the construction of artificial reefs and underwater explorations, Roszko argues, China discursively and practically historicises the ocean as representative of its civilisational development.

Read together, the contributions in this special issue magnify how temporalization of the ocean is an ideological and political project. Where Hang Zhou and Jieyi Xie juxtapose the cultural value of the maritime heritage of the Middle Passage against the exploitation of seafloor resources that denies any historical depth to the ocean, Pearson focuses on submerged shipwrecks as not the exclusive property of states or companies but also as living organisms in the ocean. In turn, Salemink shows that the refugees disappeared in the Mediterranean abyss could be mnemonically recovered through their material commemoration in spite of Europe’s indifference. These analyses of how maritime environments and the human practices and productions associated with them are being harnessed, appropriated and reworked show the importance of understanding the politics of ocean-oriented futures.

Our exploration of such themes enables us to reimagine and re-value our connections to the ocean worlds, where environmental histories become part of a new way of thinking about the hyphen in maritime-marine heritages. Taking their physical interconnectivity rather than analytical rupture as a point of departure, the maritime-marine nexus indexes not only horizontal spaces and vertical state powers, but also the voluminous dimensions of natural histories of the oceans that encompass heritage practices and claims. To this end, we propose to investigate the role of oceans not only as seafaring routes or lines of connectivity but also as domains available for all kinds of living things. We consciously turn away from the conceptualisation of the world into distinctive continents and oceans to show their relationality along geocultural and environmental scales and

temporalities, and the implications this holds for maritime heritage claims. This collection of articles may serve as portraits of oceanic ontologies that oscillate between these dimensions in their pursuit of plural transoceanic identities and exclusivist terrestrial priorities. In that sense, the envisioning of oceanic geographies and maritime heritage is a politically and culturally charged exercise that projects oceans and seas not as neutral and culturally equalising spaces, but as subject to human-made hierarchies. In broad theoretical strokes but also in empirical detail, then, the contributions to this theme section show how heritage could be understood differently – unmoored and de-terrestrial, unfixed and fluid – if viewed from the sea.

## Note

1. The common heritage of [hu]mankind is better known as ‘common heritage of mankind’. We choose to use the term ‘common heritage of [hu]mankind’ because it is gender neutral.

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