

The Shore is Not a Beach

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Introduction

In what ways are place and identity implicated in our coming to terms with environmental crises? This is the question I wish to address in texts that foreground how we experience *change*—to ourselves and our environments. What I hope to do is track some of these representations to explore how we make sense of catastrophic change. I know I'm not alone in, as Kavita Philip puts it, "struggling for metaphors that summon a possible progressive reaction to the endtimesque dangers of nuclear annihilation, ecological breakdown, endless war, discrimination and exploitation" (Philip 2008, 69). It is not only a struggle over meaning, but against, as Peter Jacques puts it, a "deep anthropocentrism" which limits "the meaning and experience of justice, to maintain the domination of the non-human world [by] the Western industrial network of knowledge and power" (Jacques 2008, 10).

One change I'm exploring is found in the movement from beach to shore. The reading here is not only thematic, but resolves into an operation *between* the different representations of shore and beach, allowing the causes of ecological breakdown to be exposed, and with them the values shoring up Western identities, to decentre this "deep anthropocentrism" and its domination over nature. This operation gathers a force, I argue, that has moved beyond that of other metaphors in circulation. It does of course reference sea-level rise as a marker of climate change. Last century we caused 0.17m of sea-level rise; in the conservative estimates of the IPCC, we can expect between 0.8 and 5.9 metres over the next century (IPCC 2007, 17). The hope is we can build momentum with this 'hot' metaphor in the way that images of a 'hole' aided responses to the crisis in the ozone layer.

In the wider project I am looking at texts in a period that begins in 1938, when G.S. Callender first presented findings of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions warming the climate. Today I look briefly at this brace of metaphors in the non-fiction of Rachel Carson and Mark Lynas; from where I will trace them through the work of J.G. Ballard and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. From there I will offer discussion on why we need to leave the beach to arrive *at least* at the shore, to see what happens to identification in the space between these two signifiers of an environment subject to catastrophic change.

Beachcombers, Onshore Winds

How is a beach different from a shore? They are not a binary, but a movement along an axis, where the beach is signified by its use value to us, a commodity on the hotel brochure, for the resort. The shore is a less commodified representation: beach houses, yes, shore houses, no; shoring up is for those in a state of dilapidation, overcome by 'natural' elements, damp, subsidence, encroachments unfriendly to fixed address. On the beach, the domination of the non-human world is saturated by land's use value. The shore allows for slippage: nature has just a little more play.

It is a question of play. For Stuart Hall, identification, is “a process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination, not a subsumption” (Hall 1996, 3). Particularly relevant is the idea of “frontier-effects” (Hall 1996, 3), where identification, quoting Hall, is “formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us [as] historically, not biologically, defined’ (Hall 1992, 277). This shifting response to what is shifting around us is central to my reading. One of the first writers to recognise this movement in understanding the treatment of the environment was Rachel Carson, author of the landmark *Silent Spring*. Written in 1962, the book questions what Adrian Wilding calls the “antagonism” (Wilding 2008, 56) at work in social relations that plays out as domination over nature. As her biographer Paul Brooks states: “Her book helped to make *ecology*, which was an unfamiliar word in those days, one of the greatest popular causes of our time” (Brooks 2000, xvi). Carson’s writing, however, began in 1941, with *Under the Sea Wind*, on the shore, in the chapter ‘Flood Tide’:

The island lay in shadows only a little deeper than those that were swiftly stealing across the sound from the east. On its western shore the wet sand of the narrow beach caught the same reflection of palely gleaming sky that laid a bright path across the water from beach to horizon. Both water and sand were the color of steel overlaid with the sheen of silver, so that it was hard to say where water ended and land began (Carson 1991 [1941], 1).

Here, in writing contemporaneous with our emerging awareness of an anthropogenic age of warming, we find a first example of this movement between two representations of landed place. There is a continuum between land and sea (‘hard to say where water ended and land began’) but also a differentiation between shore and beach (‘on its western shore the wet sand of the narrow beach’) – the shore is supplemental to the beach, in its deconstructive sense; both a part and apart from it. As such, it begins to unsettle the imposed meanings for both: Carson told her editor that in writing *Under the Sea Wind* she was attempting to avoid the ‘human bias’ in (marine) geography (Montefiore 2001, 51).

Trace this forward 65 years to the work of Mark Lynas, lead British author on the threats of climate change, who similarly uses literary tropes to shape his books, *High Tide*, and *Six Degrees*. Both begin with the highly visual effects of climate change of flooding (in Oxford, where Mark lives) and sea-level rise in the Pacific atoll islands. He writes:

The end for atoll countries will not be rapid [at least not in human terms] or cathartically dramatic. Instead it will be death by a thousand cuts... Each bit of beach lost. Decades before the last bit of coral disappears under the sea, community services will decline, children will emigrate, schools will close, and the fabric of a nation will begin to unravel (Lynas 2006, 47).

‘Each bit of beach’ is listed in human terms: community services, schools, and national identities. The coral remains even after ‘the beach’ is lost. Here the beach offers no space for the recognition of nature. Drawing on Schlosberg’s conception of environmental justice, “if you are not recognised, you do not participate” (Schlosberg 2004, 520). Nature is subsumed under human associations. This is not a criticism of Lynas, but an example of how

the beach, further back from the shore, has come to represent an appropriation of land dominated by culture. As Lukes says, this is “recognitional domination” rendering invisible those, here the non-human coral, that we dominate (Lukes 2005, 120).

This has been brought to the fore and questioned in literature. In particular, the work of J.G. Ballard, whose texts trouble identity through representations of land. In his 1962 novel *The Drowned World*, Ballard plays with the discursive space between shore and beach. A small cast of characters inhabit the drowned cities of the past. Kerans, the protagonist, is “busy himself with the job of mapping the shifting keys and harbours and evacuating the last inhabitants [some of whom were] unable to separate their own identities from the cities where they had spent their lives” (Ballard 1999 [1962], 12). Kerans’s own identity is also problematized by his relation to, specifically, the beach. The ghostly mercenary Strangman torments Kerans’ crumbling identification as a subject able to rationalise his own decisions:

“Your motives seem so complex, Doctor,” he remarked to Kerans. “But perhaps you’ve given up hope of understanding them yourself. We shall label them the total beach syndrome and leave it at that.” (Ballard 1999 [1962], 90)

The rising tide of the subconscious which the total beach syndrome attempts to repress finds other articulations. In Ballard’s short story ‘The Terminal Beach’, a re-vision of Hiroshima, a dead Japanese tourist speaks to the protagonist at the centre of the island:

The beach is a dangerous zone. Avoid it. Have a proper humility, pursue a philosophy of acceptance. (Ballard 1964, 156)

The beach represents human identity fixed in its social relations, unwilling to recognise antagonisms. Ballard’s text critiques the destructive capacity of the ways in which the Enlightenment desire for a fixed identity is central to—responsible for—the destruction of nature. As articulated by Doreen Massey, the text here offers representation as “equated with spatialisation but that the characteristics thus derived (fixation, stabilisation) have come to be attribute to space itself” (Massey 2003). In the process, possessive individualism erases the land with which the identification is made. For Peter Jacques, it is “an erasure of meaning and ethical obligation to anything outside the possessive individual” (Jacques 2008, 28). The beach as fixed identity exposes the relations that support the prevailing structures of power: nature is destroyed as by-product of the social antagonisms of human activity.

However, this is set against those moments where Ballard introduces the shore as a more ambivalent, less fixed space, identified as a ‘zone of transit’ where individual identity is still open to change. For example, in *The Drowned World*, the professor Bodkin to Kerans:

The very junction where we stand now on the shores of this lagoon... the great zone of transit... recollecting in our unconscious minds the landscapes of each epoch.

(Ballard [1999], 1962, 44).

And it is on the shore, not the beach, where the 'Terminal Beach' resists closure: "...as the waves broke on the distant shore" (Ballard 1964, 157). The shore begins to put some distance between land and the myth of totality, offering a multiplicity of conditions for existence: what Massey calls "the gift of space. Space is the sphere of the possibility of the existence of plurality, the co-existence of difference" (Massey 2003). It allows for a reminder "of this place's place within the wider scheme of things" (Massey 2003).

This emerges in Ballard, but is perhaps more forcefully updated elsewhere. George Monbiot writing in the *Guardian* called it "the most important environmental book ever written". Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* is the story of a father and son in a world that has lost civilisation, overheated and covered in ash. It is the story of their passage to the sea: a road trip into the *Inferno*. The journey is an encounter with the endgame of possessive individualism. But, encouraging hope, Doreen Massey suggests: "An encounter is always with something 'on the move'. The voyager is not the only active one. Origin and destination have lives of their own" (Massey, 2003). Not only the origin and destination, but also the trajectory. So, when the boy and man first encounter another human being, it is on a road itself melting onto their shoes, a path that moves with them. It is at this point that the text couples together the road with the unsettling of the identities of those who travel along it:

Someone had come out of the woods in the night and continued down the melted roadway.
Who is it? said the boy.
I don't know. Who is anybody?

(McCarthy 2006, 50)

The road itself is reminder of the organising tendency at the centre of modern society, now a principle of disorder. But they stick to it, literally, to reach their destination. And it is here where this play between the two representations of beach and shore reaches its apogee.

Then they came upon it from a turn in the road and they stopped and stood with the salt wind blowing in their hair where they'd lowered the hoods of their coats to listen. Out there was the gray beach with the slow combers rolling dull and leaden and the distant sound of it. Like the desolation of some alien sea breaking on the shores of a world unheard of.

(McCarthy 2006, 230)

Suddenly what is foregrounded is the space, the distance, between the two signifiers. The beach is here, but only *like* the desolation on shores of a world unheard of: a world without human agency. Up to this point, the edge of landed space has only been represented as the shore. *The Road* begins on a shore:

And on the far shore a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders.

(McCarthy 2007, 1-2)

This shore reappears throughout the novel in the man's dreams. But on reaching the sea, the text oscillates between the two. They scavenge for goods. The man tells the boy they are "beachcombers" but the boy has no referent against which this word makes sense. The man explains that beachcombers are "people who walk along the beach looking for things of value that might have washed up" (McCarthy 2008, 235). The boy asks: "What kind of things?" He has no understanding of 'things' of 'value': use or exchange. They beachcomb, but what they find is life erased by ecological breakdown: the shore is terrifying in its animality and ambivalence to human process: "At the tide line a woven mat of weeds and the ribs of fishes in their millions stretching along the shore as far as the eye could see like an isocline of death. One vast salt sepulchre. Senseless. Senseless" (McCarthy 2006, 237). The movement between these signifiers exposes the lack of recognition for the ecological world, subsumed under a beached humanity, cleaved of life. Nothing makes sense at the location of signification—the shoreline. What is happening, as the sea-levels rise, is the exposure of the work of cultural signification itself. Earlier, the text describes this process:

He lay listening to the water drip in the woods. Bedrock, this. The cold and the silence. The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again. Everything uncoupled from its shoring.

(McCarthy 2006, 10)

It is this second sense, the breakdown of signs shoring up meaning in a senseless world, which underpins the first, sets it apart from the beach. 'Things' fail to signify, making impossible any identities constructed through our relation to things, others, the world. As McCarthy writes: "The frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night. The last instance of a thing takes the class with it" (McCarthy 2006, 28). We are left with, to use Joel Kovel's term, "the cold and dark dead end signified by a dying capitalism" (Kovel 2008, 14).

Conclusion

To conclude, what I hope to have done is trace, briefly and scattered, an argument for the shore that is not a beach. Where we are witnessing the encroachment of our warming climate through real, not metaphorical, sea-level rise. I believe that this force at work in the movement from beach to shore can help us question the relations of power at work in a particularly Western identification at the heart of ecological crisis. Both representations, beach *and* shore, are structured within language, and so both are forms of meaning-making that privilege human agency; but, in these texts, and I would argue, more widely, what is at work in the movement at the shoreline offers a way of mobilising positive environmental identification, one less about nature existing 'for us' and more about nature identified with outside of attempts to dominate it. Is it, however, enough? As Adrian Wilding asks: "Will preservation against ecological catastrophe be an equal right of humanity, or will it more likely fall unequally to the powerful? As the waters—perhaps literally—rise around them" (Wilding 2008, 66).

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