OCEAN AND HUMAN HEALTH IN THE BLUE ERA, INDIAN OCEAN AND AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES[1]

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I discuss the fact that human-ocean relations are increasingly being scrutinized, as scholars seek to frame, understand and mitigate the impacts of climate change on Earth. I propose that for the southwest Indian Ocean that scholars follow Chimamanda Adichie's directive to critique 'single stories' by considering locally produced, embodied, sensorial relations of indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs) to the sea and coasts, as well as the role that such relations might play in shaping health. I add that such relations cultivate a 'blue' consciousness and a nascent 'blue' rights – borne of symbioses between humans and ocean. I add that these advance a holistic and integrated human and ocean health. The discussion makes the case for the re-*placement* of globalized paradigms of climate change and for the inclusion of locally generated narratives of human relations with the sea. I posit that a more careful analysis of coastal and oceanic (intangible cultural) heritages can reveal transmaterial, interspecies relations with the sea. Drawing on anthropological research in the Southwest Indian Ocean World (SWIOW) and then in coastal South Africa, I argue that such narratives can herald not only a notion of global blue rights, they can also herald, from the 'periphery', a blue era where there is deeper consideration of sustainable human relations with the sea.

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INTRODUCTION

Described as an 'eminently human affair,' the sea remains an integral part of human existence.[2] But, and as Godfrey Baldacchino eloquently puts it:

> words try but simply fail us as we seek to fully describe the manner and extent to which water and earth, land and sea, are imbricated and intertwined in our lives. Water is life, and much more. The fluidity of water unsettles us; the immensity of oceanic expanses belittles us; the wrath of ocean storms frightens us; the richness of marine protein sustains us; the mystery of seabed resources drives our explorations; warm lapping ripples on sandy beaches nourish our tourism industries; and sea level rise threatens the very existence of whole atoll states over the coming decades.[3]

Scholars worldwide continue to investigate the breadth and depth of human interaction with the oceans and seas, via studies on historical maritime activity, human use of the ocean for natural resource extraction, subsistence and heritage.[4] In recent years, and of grave concern to all, are the detrimental human impacts on the ocean. These impacts are said to be indicative of the Anthropocene an epoch of cataclysmic climate change and global level extinction caused by humans.[5] There are now urgent calls to reverse these impacts, as well as civil society protest for more comprehensive climate change action.[6]

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[2] Markus Balkenol and Michiel Swinkels, "Introduction: The sea as an eminently human affair," *Etnofoor,* 27 (2015), 7-11.
[3] Godfrey Baldacchino, "There is so much more to the sea: The myriad of aquatic engagements of humankind," *Etnofoor,* 27 (2015), 2.
[4] David Wilson, "European colonisation, law, and Indigenous marine dispossession: Historical perspectives on the construction and entrenchment of unequal marine governance," *Maritime Studies*, 20,1 (2021), 1-21; Gongcheng Zhang, Hongjun Qu, Guojun Chen, Chong Zhao, Fenglian Zhang, Haizhang Yang, Zhao Zhao, and Ming Ma, "Giant discoveries of oil and gas fields in global deepwaters in the past 40 years and the prospect of exploration," *Journal of Natural Gas Geoscience*, 4, 1 (2019), 1-28; Rosabelle Boswell, David O'Kane, and Jeremy Hills (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook on Blue Heritage* (Palgrave: London, 2022).
[5] Noboru Ishikawa, "Into a new epoch: Capitalist nature in the plantationocene', in *Anthropogenic Tropical Forests: Human-nature interfaces on the plantation frontier*, eds. Noboru Ishikawa and Ryoji Soda (Springer: Singapore, 2020), 589-95.
[6] IPCC, *Global Warming of 1.5°C: An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty*, eds., Valérie Masson-Delmotte, Panmao Zhai, Hans-Otto Pörtner, Debra Roberts, Jim Skea, Priyadarshi R. Shukla, Anna Pirani, Wilfran Moufouma-Okia, Clotilde Péan, Roz Pidcock, Sarah Connors, J.B. Robin Matthews, Yang Chen, Xiao Zhou, Melissa I. Gomis, Elisabeth Lonnoy, Tom Maycock, Melinda Tignor, and Tim Waterfield, (2018): https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/06/SR15_Full_Report_High_Res.pdf/ [Accessed: 25 May 2022]; Wahyu Rozzaqi Ginanjar and Ahmad Zakky Mubarrok, "Civil society and global governance: The indirect participation of extinction rebellion in global governance on climate change," *Journal of Contemporary Governance and Public Policy* 1, 1 (2020), 41-52.

Globally, the UN Decade of Ocean Science has set in motion various plans, policies and actions to safeguard ocean health and combat climate change. UNESCO is adding to these endeavours, as it recognises and seeks to conserve culture, specifically tangible and intangible cultural heritage, which according to the UN Convention on Biodiversity is inextricably linked to the conservation of biodiversity and ultimately, nature.[7] In the Hangzhou Declaration, the significance of culture to the conservation of biodiversity and the achievement of sustainable development is also noted.[8] And, in the UN Sustainable Development Goals, SDG 14 specifically focuses on the conservation and health of life below water.[9] Cultural heritage forms are however, diverse. There are morally ambiguous heritages, gendered heritages and heritages that are neither tangible nor intangible. There are now also blue heritages to accompany other signifiers (i.e., blue carbon sinks, blue bonds) of ocean conservation.[10] As I argue in this article, there is still very little discussion on intangible cultural heritage at the coast, or its potential relation to human health – especially in those communities historically oppressed and/or currently marginalized.[11] I argue that poverty and marginalization have major detrimental effects on humans and that coastal anthropological fieldwork is revealing how Indigenous Populations and Local Communities (IPLCs) in the Southwest Indian Ocean World (SWIOW) and South Africa are using the sea to reconstitute health and wellbeing. I use the 1948 World Health Organization (WHO) definition of health, as a 'state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.'[12]

In the southwest Indian Ocean islands and in South Africa, human relations with the sea and coast reveal the significance of *life with water*, as well as the role of the sea and coast in human health. There is also a rich coastal, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) that reveals a transmaterial, embodied and interspecies ecological consciousness that is preserving of ocean health. The data collected (1999-2016 and October 2020-May 2022)

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[7] UNESCO, *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (UNESCO: Paris, 2003); United Nations, *Convention on Biological Diversity* (United Nations: Geneva, 1992).
[8] UNESCO, "The Hangzhou Declaration: Placing culture at the heart of sustainable development policies," *UNESDOC Digital Library* (2013): https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000221238.locale=en [Accessed: 23 Sep. 2022].
[9] United Nations, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development* (2015): https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf [Accessed: 23 Sep. 2020]; United Nations, "Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources," *Sustainable Development Goals* (2015): https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/oceans/ [Accessed: 23 Sep. 2020].
[10] Boswell, O'Kane, and Hills (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook on Blue Heritage*.
[11] Jon Henderson, "Oceans without History? Marine cultural heritage and the sustainable development agenda," *Sustainability*, 11, 5080 (2019), 1-22.
[12] "Constitution of the World Health Organization," *Basic Documents: World Health Organization, 20th edition* (2020): https://apps.who.int/gb/bd/pdf_files/BD_49th-en.pdf [Accessed: 27 Sep. 2022].

shows reverence for the sea and consideration of sentience beyond humanity, as well as acceptance of agential capacities in nature.[13] These sentiments and values advance an ecological consciousness that echoes similar beliefs elsewhere.[14] They herald a 'blue consciousness' that challenges hegemonic narratives of anthropogenic climate change since they foreground positive human spiritual and embodied connections with the ocean. Ultimately and in my view, such a consciousness may seed universal 'blue rights' (i.e., commonly held, inalienable rights of living and non-living things in the marine space) and encourage a 'Blue Era,' an epoch in which there is consideration of transmaterial, transspecies existence and a rethinking of the conceit/centrality of humans on Earth.

Earlier arguments regarding globalized epistemicide and the non-recognition of pluriverses requires, as stated elsewhere 'bold thinking about the place of humans in a changing world [as well as the] need to consider and include the knowledge frames and ways of being in the world that our fellow human beings find valuable and significant.'[15] Presently, much attention is being given to singular narratives of environmental change and conservation. The narratives tend not to consider the plurality of human relations with the oceans and coasts, or potential redemptive values and practices in these places. Well-established circuits of knowledge and power foster cognitive hegemonies, which continue to obscure other stories of human-nature relations. These circuits transmit, as Chimamanda Adichie argues, single stories of the world.[16] But, and as suggested in this article, such circuits of power and knowledge are never complete or all-encompassing. Ways of being with the ocean and of conceptualising the ocean remain, creating possibilities for alternative knowledges and narratives of the sea.

RE-*PLACING* THE ANTHROPOCENE

The global climate crisis and declining ocean health has produced significant scholarly debate on the nature of the crisis, responsibility for the crisis and philosophy of the crisis. Part of these debates have generated the idea of the present epoch as the Anthropocene, a 'dark period of human-environment relationships associated with modernity and the

[13] Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021); Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an anthropology beyond the human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).
[14] Rosabelle Boswell, "Art and the senses for ocean conservation," *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures*, 10, 1 (2021).
[15] Ibid.; Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against epistemicide* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2014); Arturo Escobar, *Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
[16] C. N. Adichie, "The danger of a single story," *TED: Ideas worth spreading* (2009): https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story [Accessed 1 June 2022].

outgrowth of the Eurocentric belief in the divide between nature and humanity.'[17] Considering more recent ethnographic findings in Africa and earlier findings from the SWIOW, it is argued that the Anthropocene, visible in adverse anthropogenic impacts on the environment, presents only one story of human relations with nature. There are, however, many stories of human relations with nature in southern coastal Africa and the SWIOW. These do not feature in globalized accounts of human-nature relations. The stories foreground both spiritual and embodied relations with the oceans and coasts and challenge the homogenizing narrative of the Anthropocene, urging its re-*placement*.[18] Not all humans are complicit in, or capable of advancing a globalized capitalist regime to extract planetary resources. There are many human beings living, creating and producing narratives of nature that lie beyond that which is circulated in globalized places of power. Many are also victims of the historicized and globalized capitalist regimes.

Haraway's Plantationocene presents an epoch characterised by 'large-scale, monocropping production system across the surface of the Earth,' as well as the loss of refuges, a story of Earth and its oceans on the run from capitalism.[19] The power and speed of global cognitive realms is such that as a black woman from the periphery, I find it daunting to critique such confident paradigms of power. However, the data before me suggests that humans continue to make new refuges, to cultivate an extraordinary diversity in ocean beliefs, as well as conservation values and practices in the world. These new refuges are well worth exploring.

The Anthropocene/Plantationocene/Capitalocene do reveal visibilized patterns of values, behaviours and environmental outcomes but they also risk erasing inequalities and obscuring behavioural diversity across the globe.[20] The paradigms are also imagined and circulated from defined centres of influence and as such may miss the daily, small but significant efforts at recuperating nature. The paradigms also feature in global 'places' (i.e. the socially meaningful spaces of high impact factor journals, prominent universities and in wealthy, digitally connected states), where the philosophies and paradigms of the

[17] Andrew M. Bauer and Erle C. Ellis, "The Anthropocene divide obscuring understanding of social-environmental change," *Current Anthropology*, 59, 2 (2018), 210.
[18] Here I invoke Nadia Lovell's concept of place as culturally meaningful space. I do not deny the existence of the Anthropocene as a unit of geological time, I urge a reallocation of meaning to the narrative of the Anthropocene so that more space is made for alternative views, values and human environmental practices. See: Rebecca Lovell, Benedict W. Wheeler, Sahran L. Higgins, Katherine N. Irvine, and Michael H. Depledge, "A systematic review of the health and well-being benefits of biodiverse environments," *Journal of Toxicology and Environmental Health*, Part B, 17 (2014), 1-20.
[19] Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, capitalocene, plantationocene, chthulucene: Making kin," *Environmental Humanities*, 6, 1 (2015), 159-165; Ishikawa, "Into a new epoch," 590.
[20] Janae Davis, Alex A. Moulton, Levi Van Sant, and Brian Williams, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, ... Plantationocene?: A manifesto for ecological justice in an age of global crises," *Geography Compass*, 13, 5 (2019), 1-15.

poor and marginalized rarely appear. Since knowledge itself is power, these knowledge/paradigm asymmetries are mutually reinforcing. They ensure a steady circular flow of prestige and accolades, leading to ever more confident statements about human life on Earth.

Regional and community specific studies reveal the salience of often peripheralized values and practices to environmental conservation. As Mamati and Maseno and Makinde assert, Africa, often on the margins of global debates concerning climate change, has rich indigenous knowledges that can be used to facilitate new ecological consciousness and ultimately, redemptive environmental practices.[21] Religion and/or belief systems are key in this regard, as these tend to inform communities' environmental practices. For example, in Cape Coast Ghana there are intricate, gendered rituals conducted to achieve ocean sustainability.[22] These rituals are part of locally created eco-*logics* and their uses are only now being revealed even though Ghana has been independent of British colonial rule for decades. The ethnographic offerings below, show that African and diasporic relations with the sea and coast are often experiential, palpable and phenomenological. These relationships positively influence human physical and psychological health. They also have the potential to positively impact ocean health. Such consciousnesses (and associated practices) persist even in capitalist states and neo-colonial states where excessive extraction of natural resources persists.

Literature on embodied, co-evolved, transmaterial, interspecies experiences of the sea and coast take scholars away from large scale narratives of climate change to body-close accounts of the sea as palpable matter and an archive – a source of micro-biopolitics, ocean imaginaries, trans-continental sisterhoods and oceans within.[23] Related studies indicate 'blue spaces' and 'blue care' as sea-proximal experiences of health.[24] Together,

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[21] King'asia Mamati and Loreen Maseno, "Environmental consciousness amongst indigenous youth in Kenya: The role of the Sengwer religious tradition," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 77, 2 (2021), 1-10; Olusola Oladapo Makinde, "Evaluating indigenous environmental consciousness with residents of Ogbomoso in Nigeria," *Journal of Geography and Planning*," 9, 5 (2016), 87-103; Ronald Fernando Quintana Arias, "Cultural conception of space and development in the Colombian Amazon," *Indigenous, Aboriginal, Fugitive and Ethnic Groups Around the Globe*, ed., Liat Klain-Gabbay (London: IntechOpen, 2019).

[22] Georgina Yaa Oduro, John Windie Ansah, and David Wilson, "Narratives of non-compliance in 'Tuesday non-fishing day' in Ghana," *The Palgrave Handbook on Blue Heritage*, eds., Boswell, O'Kane, and Hills.

[23] Astrida Neimanis, "Hydrofeminism: Or, on becoming a body of water," *Undutiful Daughters: Mobilizing future concepts, bodies and subjectivities in feminist thought and practice* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2012); Stefan Helmreich, "Human nature at sea," *Anthropology Now*, 2, 3 (2010), 49-60; E. Deloughrey, "Submarine futures of the Anthropocene," *Comparative Literature*, 69, 1 (2017), 32-44; Jaimey Hamilton Faris, "Sisters of ocean and ice: On the hydro-feminism of Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and Aka Niviâna's rise: From one island to another," *Shima*, 13, 2 (2019), 76-99; Dianna L. Schulte McMenamin and Mark A. McMenamin, *Hypersea: Life on land* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

[24] Mathew P. White, Lewis R. Elliott, Mireia Gascon, Bethany Roberts, and Lora E. Fleming, "Blue space, health and well-being: A narrative overview and synthesis of potential benefits," *Environmental Research*, 191 (2020), 1-14; Easley Britton,

these studies suggest aquapelagic domains which can reveal local aetiologies, ecopsychologies and spatial relations, as well as resiliences.[25] In sum, these literatures make space for sensory, indigenous and diverse health narratives of human relations with the ocean, re-*placing* (and thereby reallocating meaning to) the Anthropocene.

African government literature, however, still presents African oceans and coasts as resources from which to leverage economic benefit.[26] The spiritual relations of Africans with the sea and coast are hardly considered. Even so, African and diasporic values and practices involving the sea and coast are apparent.

My anthropological research in Africa and its nearby diaspora in the SWIOW reveals diverse imaginaries and relations with the oceans and coast. I propose that these imaginaries and relations are seeding a 'blue era,' an epoch of spiritual relations with nature, including the conservation of the oceans. I feel that this can shift other, equally powerful narratives of the oceans and climate change. For example, a geologic epistemology informs oil and gas extraction along African and nearby SWIOW coasts. This narrative, which considers long-spans of time (millions of years of evolution) is 'authorized' in natural science. It downplays cultural, anthropogenic frames of the ocean, presenting geological analyses as fact/reality. Closer and better attention to indigenous and local human relations with the sea and coast, however, revealed beliefs regarding the ocean that are powerful and very real. In the following part of the discussion, I share early encounters with an SWIOW ecological consciousness. This is followed by a discussion on findings from South Africa.

FEELINGS IN THE SWIOW

Anthropologists have always been fascinated with islands. Ma's genealogy of island research in anthropology highlights the shift from a perception of islands as isolated cultural settings to interconnected sites of exchange.[27] Island societies are shaped by the

Gesche Kindermann, Christine Domegan, and Caitriona Carlin, "Blue care: a systematic review of blue space interventions for health and wellbeing," *Health Promotion International*, 35, 1, (2020), 50-69.

[25] Philip Hayward, "Aquapelagos and aquapelagic assemblages," *Shima: The international journal of research into island cultures*, 6, 1 (2012), 1-11.

[26] African Union, *Agenda 2063: The Africa we want* (African Union Commission, 2015): https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/36204-doc-agenda2063_popular_version_en.pdf [Accessed: 26 Sep. 2022]; Ifesinachi Okafor-Yarwood, Nelly I. Kadagi, Nelson A. F. Miranda, Jacqueline Uku, Isa O. Elegbede, and Ibukun J. Adewumi, "The blue economy–cultural livelihood–ecosystem conservation triangle: The African experience," *Frontiers in Marine Science*, 7, 586 (2020).

[27] Guoqing Ma, "Islands and the world from an anthropological perspective," *International Journal of Anthropology and Ethnology*, 4, 12 (2020), 1-17.

ebb and flow of local and global values. Islands have also been studied as the site of multiple globalizations, creolizations and for their effects on belonging.[28] Anthropological fieldwork is also often discussed as an emotional, feeling-imbued process and outcome.[29] My research in the southwest Indian Ocean region (1999-2016), including in Zanzibar, Mauritius, the Seychelles, and Madagascar, began with the idea of 'island societies' as body-distant, comparable socio-geographic settings shaped by hierarchies originating in the slave and plantation system. In the early days, I pursued 'findings,' which I imagined could be found in visually identifiable, largely a-sensory sites. To me, the SWIOW was then, primarily a space where those oppressed tried to produce liberating narratives and value orientations but failed because of the oppressive nature of the racialized regimes in which such communities were embedded. Subconsciously, however, I sensed that the SWIOW was much more than this. It was more than a site of remarkable 'creolization' or a place where some islanders had achieved ethnic compromise.[30] It was also much more than a site heavy with the burden and legacy of colonial rule.[31] Like Cole, I was seeing new imaginings and journeys in generationally diverse settings.[32]

Closer attention to the context of anthropological fieldwork allowed perception of alternative grounds for personhood and identity. The fieldwork revealed richly sensuous existences, shaped by the tastes and sounds of interaction with the ocean, as well as embodied resistances and effort to communicate the texture of oppression. I observed how women and men were physically and economically dependent on the sea and lagoons. The lagoons and tidal zones structured daily, gendered activity and sociality. Women woke up at dawn to collect specific shellfish from the tidal zones and at low tide in the late afternoon, women and children set out once more, to collect specific shellfish species for dinner. By contrast, men woke at dawn and set out to sea to catch fish and lay fish-traps. They returned at noon or shortly thereafter with the day's bounty. These rhythms with the sea shaped gendered human bodies and minds and produced a *culture* of the sea. Going

[28] Godfrey Baldacchino, "Islands and the sea," *The Palgrave Handbook on Blue Heritage*, eds., Boswell, O'Kane, and Hills; Iain Walker and Marie-Aude Fouéré (eds.), *Across the Waves: Strategies of belonging in Indian Ocean island societies* (London: Brill, 2022); Thomas Hylland Eriksen, "Creolization in anthropological theory and in Mauritius," *Creolization, History, Ethnography, Theory*, ed., Charles Steward (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc., 1999).
[29] Glynis Pellatt, "Ethnography and reflexivity: Emotions and feelings in fieldwork," *Nurse Researcher*, 10, 3 (2003), 28-37.
[30] Megan Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Mauritius* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Common Denominators: Ethnicity, nation-building and compromise in Mauritius* (London: Berg, 1998).
[31] David Graeber, *Lost People: Magic and the legacy of slavery in Madagascar* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007).
[32] Jennifer Cole, *Sex and Salvation: Imagining the future in Madagascar* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

out to sea, or to the tidal zone, was not merely about the catch, it was about the feeling of being in or with the sea, it involved sensory anticipation, thinking about what conditions on the water are going to be like – the buoyancy of the sea, the ruggedness of waves the pull of specific currents and the simultaneity of multisensory experiences of the ocean, i.e., the searing heat on the lagoon when the sun is high along with the wetness of ankle-deep water at low tide and the rising stench of a briny sea.

In Zanzibar, being with the sea was an especially olfactory experience. Women seaweed cultivators in Zanzibar explained that not only were their skins burnished by the sun, they also acquired certain smells from working with seaweed. In a society focused on aroma, these smells made some women outsiders because women had to continuously reassert their aroma/goodness via multiple sensory repertoires, the use of jasmine and patchouli to kindle romance, the use of *mrashi ya moshi* (smoke of believers) to assert the holiness of the marital room and the use of *udi* (locally made perfume without alcohol) to entice potential suitors.

Much later and reading de Sousa Santos and Laplantine, the disciplining (and by this, I mean the desensitizing) of disciplines and the liberatory sensibility of human existence became more vivid.[33] It became clear that existing framings of ethnographic data required cognitive, body-distant (masculine?) engagement with findings, while I was experiencing body-proximal (feminine?) 'feelings' from the SWIOW. Even words encountered had trans-sensory effect in the SWIOW. Stories heard evoked the 'bitterness' of the past, the 'sweetness' of romance, the 'darkness' of grief. The fieldwork was more *participant sensation* than participant observation. Laplantine's work on sensibility encouraged the feeling of context and the use of feelings as an analytical tool.[34] His work encouraged me to go back into my fieldnotes and memories of being in the field to surface its experiential, embodied aspects. Going back into the data, I saw that people were using the sea to break from an oppressive, capitalist regime – upending the idea of the eight-hour day, or of relentless work on the plantations. People were restructuring their lives and bodies by going to the sea and lagoon at specific times of the day. These new chronologies changed people and the way in which they perceived themselves. They were no longer tied to the plantation or its punishing rhythms and logics.

[33] Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "Beyond abyssal thinking: From global lines to ecologies of knowledges," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 30, 1 (2007), 45-89; de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South;* François Laplantine, *The Life of the Senses: Introduction to modal anthropology*, trans., Jamie Furniss (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).
[34] Laplantine, *The Life of the Senses.*

Efforts at 'liberation' appeared long before African descendants physically left the plantations and such liberatory efforts continued after abolition. In Mauritius, for instance, there are marine and maritime references in speech, in riddles and in jokes that originate from the time of slavery. The sea (and characterization of marine life) was not only 'there' to provide breaks from the monotony of a plantation life, it diversified language and enlivened speech, allowing those visibly oppressed to respond to oppression. Song, for example, was recruited to promote what I called voicework – politically potent, humorous, charged lyrics composed by the seaside (a *place* of liberation), and emphasized the spontaneity of existence and creativity, which contrasted with the drudgery of plantation and subsequently sugar factory life. In Seychelles, I also saw how people's time and bodies were shaped by daily and rhythmic engagement in a society shaped by colonial relations with the sea. By contrast in Madagascar, I observed people 'collapsing time' by engaging healer-diviners to commune with historical ancestral spirits to resolve present challenges.

In Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar and Zanzibar, the ancestors loom large. In Madagascar (specifically Nosy Be), I came across spirit mediums who would help locals to reach their dead ancestors in order to know what ailed them and what to do to appease suffering in the world of the living. In Mauritius and Seychelles, African descendants often spoke about the ancestors, offered them drinks and treats at the cemetery or at shrines specifically created to remember them. In Zanzibar, ancestors lived in the forests and in sacred nature places. Such findings compelled body-proximal, time-aware analyses of the Indian Ocean 'World,' as well as sensory stories of everyday human experience and perception of diversely constituted selves. The stories align with the sensory work of Howes and body-conscious analysis of van Wolputte, Gimlin and Tate all of whom call for a democracy of the senses, believing that inclusion of embodied human experiences can reveal a more holistic and ecosystem integrated human.[35] Finally, the findings on feelings in the SWIOW revealed to me that historically oppressed communities in the region engage in sensory ways with the sea and coast to break free from the chronologies and ideologies imposed by slavery and colonial rule. Those in power tended to perceive embodied actions as signs of atavism. But, and as I found, these actions served to liberate African descendants, to provide contrapuntal paradigms, even within an oppressive

[35] David Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the senses in culture and social theory* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003); Steven van Wolputte, "Hang on to your self: Of bodies, embodiment, and selves," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 33, (2004), 251-269; Debra Gimlin, "What is body work? A review of the literature," *Sociology Compass*, 1 (2007), 350-370; Shirley Anne Tate, *Black Women's Bodies and the State: Race, gender and culture* (London: Macmillan, 2015).

system. In the next part of the discussion, I offer ethnography on South Africa, to show how there, the ancestors were not only 'confined' to shrines or cemeteries, they were also in the sea – and they played a critical role in a number of rituals and practices of both social and psychological health.

ANCESTORS OF THE SEA

South Africa's multilingual population is spread across ecologically diverse settings.[36] The field research in the country involved fieldwork in Northern Cape coastal towns on the edge of the Namib desert, to the lagoons of the West Coast of the Western Cape and the coastal forests of the Eastern Cape Province. In each place (but specifically in the Northern and Eastern Cape provinces) the team encountered First Peoples (Khoisan) and Nguni peoples who believe in the existence of ancestors, those who have died but continued to influence the living from a spiritual realm. Those encountered believe that the ancestors can be communicated with, via specific ritual practices and via dreams or manifested forms of spiritual 'disturbance.'

South Africa's history is intimately connected to the history and stories of the SWIOW. The Cape of Good Hope was for some, a refuelling station on the way to the East. Dutch colonialists settled at the Cape, and in Mauritius, they extracted natural resources from both. Slavery was implemented by the Europeans both at the Cape and in the SWIOW. Slave populations consisted of Malagasy, Mozambicans and other African descendants, and slavery was prominent both in the Cape and in the SWIOW.[37] In one story, a Mauritian slave led a rebellion at the Cape.[38] Contemporary South African

[36] The fieldwork presented in this article was conducted between October 2020 and May 2022. A more detailed discussion of these findings via the analytical frame of biocultural heritage has been published in: Rosabelle Boswell, "Salted identities: Biocultural heritage for a rehumanized ocean management in South Africa," *Anthropology and Humanism*: https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/anhu.12402 [Accessed: 29 Feb. 2022]. During this time, more than 100 people were interviewed in the Eastern Cape Province, 99 people were interviewed in selected towns from the Northern Cape Province to the Western Cape Province. There were slightly more men than women interviewed, mainly because much of the interviews included Small Scale Fishers (SSF) most of whom are men. Anthropological research, conducted by a multilingual, multiracial team in the coastal towns of three provinces of the country: The Northern Cape Province, the Western Cape Province and the Eastern Cape Province – involved investigation of intangible cultural heritage in coastal towns and cities. Approximately ten coastal towns were selected for research, either because they contained significant numbers of SSF communities or because preliminary, secondary data analysis revealed that there was multiple uses of the sea and coast there, as well as deep spiritual connection to the oceans. The population of South Africa is approximately 60 million. The people speak more than 11 languages originating in Bantu, Dutch, other European languages and Hindi.

[37] Robert Carl-Heinz Shell, *Children of Bondage: A social history of the slave society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1838* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 1994).

[38] "Louis van Mauritius and the Slave Revolt of 1808," *South African History Online* (28 Nov. 2017): https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/louis-van-mauritius-and-slave-revolt-1808 [Accessed: 31 May 2022).

ethnography does not suggest these connections. Instead, one finds a focus on locally embedded indigenous and autochthonous identities. It is only in historical accounts of the country that one encounters stories of contact and exchange between South Africa and the SWIOW. The local (South African) narratives reveal deep beliefs about human spiritual relations with the sea and coast. The beliefs are apparent across the culturally diverse group of Khoisan [First Peoples] and Nguni descendants.[39] A research team working under my leadership gathered, there are many South Africans of mixed descent who also share in a belief in ancestors, mainly because they partly identify as Khoisan (and therefore subscribe to a belief in the ancestral world), or they have experienced spiritual events that lead them to consult with healer-diviners who tell them of the existence of ancestors.[40]

The research team that I led implemented anthropological fieldwork along the Garden Route from Tsitsikamma in the Eastern Cape Province to Wilderness in the Western Cape Province (see *Fig.1*). Tsitsikamma was chosen first because it features prominently in narratives of First Peoples' cultural heritage. The name itself translates from Khoi as the 'place of much water.' It forms part of a larger complex of historically and ecologically significant terraqueous places, that include the Western Cape Province Goukamma Marine Protected Area (MPA) declared in 1990 and the Gamtoos River, areas historically associated with the descendants of Khoisan peoples. Tsitsikamma also has an MPA, which is the oldest MPA in South Africa, declared in 1964. The aim of the research was to uncover coastal cultural heritages, specifically intangible cultural heritages (ICH) along this stretch of coast, to investigate the importance of ICH to human-nature relations.

The research revealed the centrality of coastal waters to both physical and mental health and the association of these forms of health with intangible cultural heritage. While secondary data analysis of the role of water in the belief systems of several Khoisan groups reveal discussion on water in its various forms (sea mist, fog, drizzle and pools), there were also beliefs in mystical marine/human forms (i.e. mermaids and ritually significant snakes) that informed Khoisan/Nguni cosmology.[41] Images of such beings are depicted in

[39] South Africa's population also includes Indian and European descendants, as well as people of mixed descent.
[40] As a multicultural society, South Africans 'hold' a diversity of identities and can shift between identities to meet present imperatives. For people of mixed cultural and racial heritage, this may involve shifting not only between cultural identities but also racial identities. This is done through use of particular languages, diacritical markers and cultural practices. See W. James, "The Meaning of Race in Modern South Africa," *Focus 67- State and Nation (Helen Suzman Foundation)*, (20 Nov. 2012): https://hsf.org.za/publications/focus/focus-67/DrWJames.pdf [Accessed: 13 July 2022].
[41] Rosabelle Boswell and Jessica Leigh Thornton, "Including the Khoisan for a more inclusive blue economy in South Africa," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 17, 2, (2021), 141-60.

rock art, in the Klein Karoo – an arid inland area, five hours from Plettenberg Bay, in an area called Meiringspoort, where there is a waterfall and deep pools.

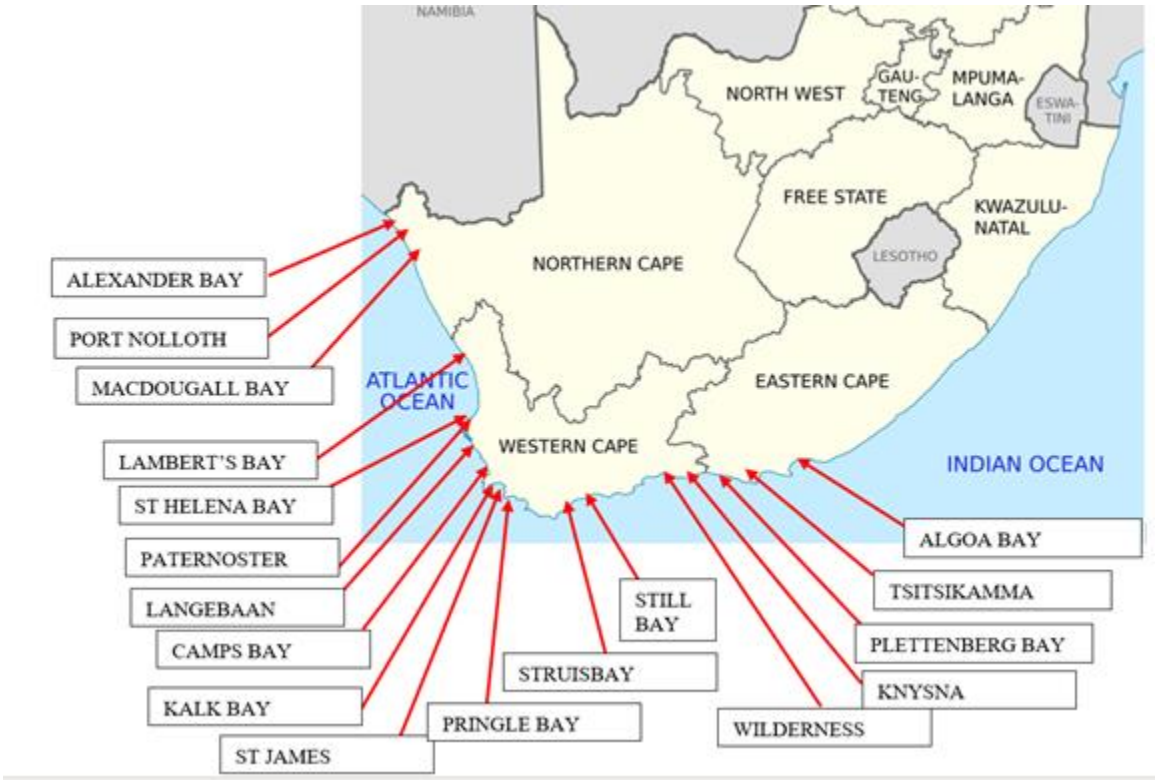

Fig. 1. South African field sites October 2020-May 2022.

The significance of water spirits and sea-like creatures in pools, rivers, streams, and ultimately, the sea in local cosmology and psychological/religious wellbeing was apparent across several interviews conducted for the fieldwork. One interviewee, a healer-diviner told us, 'The rules of being *iqgrirha uyafukamisa zonke ezindawo* (ritual involving healing with the ocean) happens because we believe in ancestors. In traditional healing, we have people who are *from the ocean* and people who *from the water/river*. It is important then that when we go to ocean, we go there are pray and ask the ancestors for help.' His words confirmed the existence of a unique hydro-ontology in South Africa, that is, water as a source of culture.[42] For example, many people in South Africa perceive the ocean as a biocultural complex and living organism. The sea has spirit (agency and presence), and it contains the spirits of those who have died. Therefore, the ocean is not merely a resource to be exploited, it is critical to human health and human ritual relations with the ocean,

[42] Isabel Hofmeyr and Carne Lavery, "Oceanic humanities," in *The Palgrave Handbook on Blue Heritage*, eds. Boswell, O'Kane, and Hills.

advance ocean health. For example, in May 2017, Italian architect, Magda Minguzzi who investigated Khoisan identity and spatial relations of colonization in South Africa, documented the pilgrimage of a group of Khoisan chiefs and subjects as they publicly revered their ancestral spirits in the sea. Minguzzi noted that the Khoisan descendants invoked the 'spirit' of the sea, recognizing the inherent agential capacities of nature, as well as the Khoisan's ancestral connections to the sea and coast.[43]

The sea is, and as Deloughrey asserts, sensory matter.[44] It is also part of an ecologically balanced whole.[45] One interviewee, a healer-diviner from Tsitsikamma told us, '*Ulwandle nalo luyafukenyele*, you could stay there for a week and *listen to the noise the ocean makes*. Sometimes, someone could have strange noises in their ears and not hear and we say that person must go and *experience the noise of the ocean*. Sound can open the ears, or even pouring the [sea] water into the ears will have the effect of opening the ears.' A fisherwoman in Kalk Bay, in the Western Cape Province explained how the noise of the ocean is now part of her soundscape. She said she is 'used to that now, the noise of the sea. [She] wouldn't be able to do without it.'

Interviewees engaged in October 2020 in Tsitsikamma and nearby towns of Clarkson, Kranshoek and Thornham, stated that the sea is important to relaxation, physical rejuvenation and psychological wellbeing. One of the male interviewees said, 'I did not believe it until I discovered it. You're drinking this litre to clean your stomach. The ocean cleanses you and many days…You have ride over the water (*referring to illness*), so the sea spits you out again and it doesn't spit you out where you fell, it spits you out in a different place. But when it comes to sicknesses, you can drink the water to clean yourself on the inside. You don't have to go to town, just fetch a litre of water and drink it and then you're cleaning your body on the inside and then you're fresh.' In this statement, the interviewee was referring to the practice of drinking seawater as a spiritual and physical emetic, a practice that is common among Nguni descendants who believe it to be a necessary ritual step in the process of communing with the ancestors. However, in this case, the interviewee self-identified as Coloured (a person of mixed cultural and racial heritage) and his comment confirmed that even those who do not identify as an Nguni descendant can partake in ritual activities that are common to Nguni peoples.

The same interviewee added that the sea rejuvenated him physically and that for this reason, he often went to the seaside. He articulated an embodied relation with the sea,

[43] Kohn, *How Forests Think.*
[44] Deloughrey, "Submarine futures of the Anthropocene."
[45] James Lovelock, *The Vanishing Face of Gaia: A final warning* (London: Penguin Books, 2009).

‘If I just feel that breeze in the morning, that inhalation, then you feel human. If I’ve had a drink at night and go swimming the next morning, then I’m like a fresh buck that jumps all day. I always told my father when he was alive, my sick dad, ‘daddy take me to the beach.’ Then I would’ve had some alcohol the previous night and he would complain that I shouldn’t drink. I would take a quick swim and I’d be like a buck for the rest of the day.’ A further conversation with this interviewee also revealed interspecies ‘communication’ or exchange. The interviewee told us how, when fishing, the fish would pull *him* to the water, as if the two of them were in a dance, a mutual demonstration of power. Similar comments were made in the West Coast towns of the Western Cape (St Helena Bay, Paternoster and Steenberg Cove), as well as Port Nolloth in the Northern Cape Province. Specifically, SSF interviewed there told us about dancing fish. The fish do not just swim away from the fishers, they play and dance away, they are clever fish and humans, like the old man in Hemingway’s story of *The Old Man and the Sea* must play and dance with the fish, to be clever like them, to play *their* game – in the hopes of catching them. Fishing was therefore not just about subsistence, it included a relationship with marine species, knowing the latter’s foibles and accounting for them.

The data collected from Nguni peoples revealed spiritual connection with the sea and coast and the role of this connection to spiritual and physical healing. Specifically, the data from Nguni healer-diviners revealed that the sea is believed to contain ancestral spirits, that the patterns of waves and ‘unusual’ marine animal behaviour at a seaside locale can indicate the presence of ancestral spirits. These spirits appear in dreams to the healer-diviners (or ordinary people) and call them to implement specific ritual acts.

A brief quantitative analysis of the data collected in 2021 (63 interviews predominantly from the Eastern Cape Province) revealed that 24 percent mentioned the cultural and spiritual value of the oceans and coasts for them. Qualitatively, a rich narrative of cultural-spiritual relations with water, and specifically, the sea emerged from the research. The healer-diviners interviewed in the Eastern Cape Province told us that, ‘So, in terms of water, I believe that you may know that life began at water and that’s where we then go and have these talks with spirits and with our forefathers. We may ask for whatever that we would ask in terms of having to live, to heal. If its darkness, that’s overshadowing us, we may ask for that darkness to be removed.’ The healer-diviner added, ‘You would have dolphins just swimming around and sharks and so on and so forth. It just shows that they [the ancestors] are there for you. You’d feel the atmosphere around you, the background and the presence and then you would address and say

whatever you want to say. If they want you to go cleanse yourself, they'd actually tell you that you must actually go cleanse yourself at the sea.'

Interviews beyond those who self-describe as indigenous and First Peoples, revealed a growing care for the ocean and coast, as well as the role of the ocean and coast in human health and wellbeing. What emerged was that many coastal peoples encountered perceived the sea as part of an integrated 'whole' of which they are a part. One woman interviewed explained how she perceived recurring patterns caused by the tides in wave formations and how she believed that similar patterns are replicated in the sand and in shells. She briefly mentioned knowledge of the Golden Ratio but went on to elaborate that for her, humans are part of a larger, patterned existence and that the repeating motifs are integral to a balanced, healthy self.[46] In her narrative she added that, water buoys, wets, carries, pressurises and submerges. She felt it was important to humans because it counteracted their perceived sentience, rationality and control. She added that by contrast, when one is in water, it is water that controls. I heard many other stories of this nature across the coastal field sites in South Africa, these relayed that humans engage with the sea to free themselves from the pressures of a capitalist human existence and that the sea provides an alternative medium and plane of consciousness, as well as a viscous context and wide expanse in which to dissolve human care.

What I also saw is that what may appear to be leisure are in fact deeply cultural relations with the sea, relations that are critical to either physical or spiritual/psychological healing. Kite surfers, swimmers, paddlers, divers, SSF and other 'leisure' users of the sea told of the importance of the sea to their mental health, articulating that leisure activities at the seaside had become part of ritual practice that enabled them to access their spiritual existence as human beings. These accounts cohere with White et al.'s analysis of the potential of the sea in 'blue care.' White et al. specifically mention the role of proximity to water and increased perception of life satisfaction, as well as actual better physical and mental health, including fewer incidences of schizophrenia, obesity and depression.[47]

Finally, because of South Africa's diversity, various immigrant populations have enriched the country's cultural heritage and cultural repertoires. Although field research was not done along the Kwazulu-Natal coast where many Indian descendants (who arrived in South Africa as merchants and indentured labourers in the nineteenth century), some interviews were conducted with Africans not born in South Africa. One such interview

[46] Abigail Van Essendelft, "The Golden Ratio: Mathematics in nature and art," *Math 400- College of William and Mary* (20 Sept. 2020): https://cklixx.people.wm.edu/teaching/math400/GoldenRatio-paper.pdf [Accessed: 1 June 2022].
[47] White et al., "Blue space, health and well-being," 3.

revealed that even inland peoples like Zimbabweans subscribe to a belief in water spirits and the power of ancestors who reside in the sea. The interviewee told us that she would take bottled seawater from South Africa to Zimbabwe to share this spiritual power with people at home and enable them to enact rituals that would otherwise have to take place at the coast. Thus, the sea provides health to humans not only at the coast but inland, and health preserving philosophies of water move with populations that travel from the coast to landlocked states and villages.

These accounts show that in diverse ways, the ocean is integral to human health and that human rituals at the sea and coast indicate a reverence for the sea and nature, as well as a desire to conserve ocean health.

BLUE CONSCIOUSNESS, RIGHTS AND HEALTH IN A BLUE ERA

At the start of this article, it was proposed that an ecological consciousness is apparent in coastal communities both in the SWIOW and coastal South Africa. It is also proposed that this consciousness arises, as Hayward would argue, from aquapelagic relations that humans have had with the oceans for thousands of years.[48] Indeed, and as argued elsewhere, similarly sensory relations with the sea are apparent among the Haida Gwaii in British Columbia and in the Pacific region.[49] These relations also articulate an ecological consciousness informed by the form, substance and metaphors of the sea. Ultimately, the consciousness advances reasons to conserve the ocean, as it involves reverent, ritual actions with the sea and recognition of the sea as integral to humans' spiritual, embodied and sensorial health. The findings suggest that not only do humans recover sensory selves via lived experiences with the sea and coast, they also recognize the agency of the sea, its will and purpose as a sentient, interactive 'organism' on Earth. I propose that these relations and experiences encourage a 'blue consciousness,' an awareness of the ocean not as resource but as a context, being and substance, which humans imbue with particular characteristics and cultural meanings. The consciousness enables a politics from 'below' because seawater not only supports those who swim in it, it also (in the South African context) contains the ancestral spirits and associated ideologies of ancestral veneration – an ideology that opposes imposed Cartesian views of nature. For African descendants in the SWIOW, a blue consciousness removes the need

[48] Hayward, "Aquapelagos and aquapelagic assemblages."
[49] Boswell, "Art and the senses;" Jeremy Hills, Kevin Chand, Mimi George, Elise Huffer, Jens Kruger, Jale Samuwai, Katy Soapi, and Aanita Smith, "Blue heritage in the blue pacific," *The Palgrave Handbook on Blue Heritage*, eds., Boswell, O'Kane, and Hills.

to engage in land-based/plantation dialectics of borders, hierarchy and roots common to colonisation and slavery.[50] It also removes them from global narratives of climate change and resource extraction. Being with the sea produces new chronologies and physiologies shaped by water, tides and marine life. It also offers the possibility of re-*membering*.

In South Africa, for example, it was found that some people designated as Coloured (i.e. people of mixed racial and cultural heritage) are in the process of reconstituting their identity as Khoisan, returning to a precolonial past, and re-*membering* the Khoisan nation. An embodied, spiritual relation with the sea and coast facilitated this process, as it allowed people to remember the slave past, to enact ancestral/spiritual rituals at the sea and to remember the role of the sea in slavery; to reconcile with that past. In this way, the sea also offered psychological closure because people can, through public commemorations (e.g., the celebration of Abolition Day on 1st February in Mauritius) reconcile with the history of slavery.[51]

Current state level strategies for ocean management both in Africa and SWIOW overemphasizes the natural resources to be extracted from the oceans. National governments perceive their territorial seas (i.e. waters within the Exclusive Economic Zone of each country) as national assets to be exploited for economic gain. Citizens' rights are confined to land. In the case of South Africa there are comprehensive discussions on land restitution and land rights.[52] However, the findings in the SWIOW and South Africa suggest that human beings should have *blue rights*, inalienable, fundamental rights in respect of the ocean and coasts, since these form a critical part of their identity and health. I specifically choose to use the term 'blue' rights, not only to reflect rights in relation to the sea/oceans but to articulate the original interpretation of the term blue rights which emphasizes the protection of the individual from the excesses of the state.[53] The latter is especially critical in the SWIOW (including South Africa because of its enduring connection with the rest of the IOW), as the history of slavery and colonization have 'left' these populations (especially the African descendants) in poverty and poor health. For

[50] For example, a key argument made elsewhere is that one of the major challenges to the integration of African descended Creoles in multicultural Mauritius is the fact that the population is perceived to have no roots – no fixed identity or genealogy. Genealogies are key to plantation societies, as they assert belonging, rootedness and ultimately, purity of identity. See: Rosabelle Boswell, *Le Malaise Creole: Ethnic identity in Mauritius* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006).
[51] See, for example, a form of this public reconciliation in the undersea statues of Jason de Caires Taylor off the shores of Grenada.
[52] Fred Hendricks, Lungisile Ntsebeza, and Kirk Hellicker, *The Promise of Land: Undoing a century of dispossession in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2013).
[53] Irus Braverman, and Elizabeth R. Johnson, "Blue legalities: Governing more-than-human oceans – an introduction," in *Blue Legalities: The life and laws of the sea*, eds. Irus Braverman and Elizabeth R. Johnson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

these populations, the sea represents an opportunity for livelihood and better physical and mental health, especially after slavery and colonisation and in contexts where economic and political oppressions continue.

The existence of a blue consciousness signals that there are parts of the world that are not primarily part of the Anthropocene/Plantationocene. These epochs of degradation and inequality exist, objectively but they are not the only narratives of human relations with the sea.

CONCLUSION

Britton et al. state that an interest in the role of blue spaces is emerging, as is the interest in nature-based therapies.[54] These indicate that the sea (and other similarly watery spaces) improves both physical and psychosocial wellbeing. To date, intangible cultural heritage is described as indicative of human creativity and diversity. There is still very little discussion on coastal cultural heritage, specifically ICH at the coast, or its role in securing and restoring health. This article, focusing on the SWIOW and South Africa, has sought to weave different, hopefully equally important strands together. Specifically, the article has sought to discuss the manifestation of human-ocean relations among mainly African descended peoples in the SWIOW, to offer alternative analytical grounds and frames for scholars of the region – and to emphasize the diverse and meaningful uses of heritage.[55] Secondly, the article has shown how South African cultural valuations of the oceans reveal alternative platforms for identity and consciousness, as well as human-ocean health symbioses. The discussion also offers that such symbioses might lead to a blue consciousness and the possibility of blue rights, especially in a world overcome by the excesses of neo-colonial states. The article asserts the 1948 WHO definition of health as a holistic experience, presenting this as part of human rights.

Human health in the SWIOW and coastal South Africa is intimately linked to interaction with the oceans and coasts. These contexts provide physical and spiritual wellbeing, as well as resolution of different (historical) traumas. They also offer the possibility of new paradigms for human-ocean-climate relations and for the possibility of an alternative, planet preserving epoch, the Blue Era.

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[54] Easkey Britton, Gesche Kindermann, Christine Domegan, and Caitriona Carlin, "Blue care: A systematic review of blue space interventions for health and wellbeing," *Health Promotion International*, 35 (2020), 50-69.
[55] Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).