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Salt lingers in the blood. A geographical dialogue on the Oceanic Sense of Place

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Abstract

This paper presents an enquiry into the possibility of defining an Oceanic Sense of Place, drawing upon critical ocean studies and engaging with geographical scholarship on place-making. It explores how the experiences of seagoing people contribute to the emergence of an Oceanic Sense of Place, grounded in emotionally felt and collectively elaborated attachments to the sea – expressed through imaginaries, narratives, symbols, jargons, and systems of life – and in the kinship between human and non-human communities and the Ocean. The paper unfolds as a dialogue—an imaginary navigation into our relationship with the Ocean, relies on reflective, qualitative embodied and embedded research which produced an auto-ethnographic and theory-informed dialogue upon place-making in the high sea. In line with Haraway's call for "stories (and theories) that are able to gather the complexities and keep the edges open" (Haraway, 2016, pp. 100-101), this paper unfolds as a imaginary navigation into our relationship with the Ocean. The creation of distinctive entanglements prompts a series of questions and suggests (embodied, embedded, and culturally constrained) responses: Can we consider the sea our home? How does this sense of place differ from land-based experiences? What technological translations and sensorial engagements are mobilised to render specific portions of the ocean recognisable? And, finally, how might this fluid, transient, and temporally grounded sense of place offer new perspectives on exclusionary practices tied to belonging and appropriation?

Keywords: Oceanic Sense of Place, Sea-Going People, Oceanic Belongingness, Localisation, Emotional Attachment

1. Introduction. "Telling stories and theories" toward an Oceanic Sense of Place

Since 2021, we have been living for the first time ever in the Ocean Decade proclaimed by the United Nations dedicated to build the "science we need for the Ocean we want" (UN, 2021). However, critical scholars have pointed out that, despite their well-intentioned objectives, prevailing approaches to ocean governance tend to reduce humanity's connection with the sea to a matter of survival

and economic utility. These frameworks often promote techno-solutionist interventions that may paradoxically exacerbate the very problems they seek to address (Bergmann, 2022; Yoshida et al., 2016). The solutionist and utilitarian perspective adopted in most cases emphasises the economic and political value of the Ocean (Gonçalves, in press) and prioritises the efficient management of its resources (Eikeset et al., 2018), including extractive practices – particularly for food and energy – alongside end-of-pipe technologies, and the construction of logistical and recreational infrastructure.

It is therefore unsurprising that, although these international initiatives are commendable in their intentions, the future of global ocean governance remains largely aligned with traditional geopolitical interests concerning oceanic space and resources. Marine geopolitics and geography have historically overlooked the sea – particularly the high seas – despite its profound significance in human history (Parrain, 2012; Squarcina, 2015). Thus, while societies have long engaged with the ocean, geographical analysis has primarily treated it as a passive backdrop, an imagined surface rather than an immersive entity imbued with meaning (DeLoughrey, 2007).

Recent developments in critical ocean studies challenge this enduring narrative that frames the sea merely as a stage for human history (Peters, 2016). Instead, scholarly attention has increasingly turned to the ocean itself (Anderson and Peters, 2014), opening up new avenues for exploring the diverse socio-spatialities emerging from the ocean's fluid materiality (Peters and Steinberg, 2015, 2019; DeLoughrey, 2017), and its ontological and political dimensions—particularly its volumetric, non-terrestrial, and dynamic nature (e.g., Anderson and Peters, 2014; Anderson et al., 2022; Palermo, 2024; Steinberg, 2001).

The distance between society and the Ocean is both physical and emotional (Regazzoni, 2022); in addition, international institutions recognise that ocean-literacy is crucial to appreciate the intrinsic value of the Ocean to feed an emotional, affective, and care-based relationship with it (EC, 2020; Glithero et al., 2024). Promoting ocean literacy – defined as a multidisciplinary understanding of the reciprocal influence between human societies and marine ecosystems (McKinley et al., 2023) – is essential for fostering engagement. We care for something we know, not merely because it provides goods or services, but because we feel connected to and ultimately love it.

Therefore, we follow Haraway's invitation to resist "managerial, technocratic, market-and-profit-driven, modernising, and human-exceptionalist business-as-usual commitments […] diminishes our capacity to imagine and care for other worlds, including those that are precariously existing today and those that we must co-create alongside other creatures to recover pasts, presents, and futures" (Haraway, 2016). Based on this belief, our research investigates how cultural geographers might contribute to strengthening human societies' attachment to the sea. This prompts us to ask whether we can conceptualise an "oceanic sense of place", and to explore how the seemingly undifferentiated oceanic expanse becomes a semantically meaningful, vibrant, and vital space through which both human and non-human life may flourish, circulate, and participate in ecological cycles.

To understand how the ocean can embed itself so deeply in one's body, imagination, relationships, and thoughts, we metaphorically claim that marine salt lingers in the blood; and we embark on an imaginary navigation into our relationship with the Ocean. To this end, the paper presents the content of a dialogues which has been carefully prepared in advance, substantiated with practical experiences and recursively elaborated up to the final form (Bakhtin, 1981).

The dialogue unfolds as an imaginary navigation into our relationship with the Ocean, elaborated through a reflexive, embodied and embedded research (Ingold, 2011) conducted via identification of key interpretative clusters in the literature review; the creation of a joint thinking-through-practice at sea; the elaboration of theory-informed and experience-based reflections (Springgay and Truman, 2018) condensed into long dialogues (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) upon which recursive semantic analysis enucleated the following pages, which present

an auto-ethnography of ocean sense-making processes.

We have chosen a dialogic format to convey our reflections on the paper's theme, evoking the sensation of being caught between tides and waves, with thoughts and words ebbing and flowing. Our three-hour conversation was carefully prepared: we identified and organised the key questions we wished to explore; we recorded, transcribed, systematised; and translated the discussion from Italian into English. Inevitably, the translation of this informal and oral exchange entailed a certain degree of loss (particularly the expressive richness of local nautical terms and the intangible elements that often defy verbal articulation). Moreover, in the written form, we enriched our dialogue with bibliographic references coming from the joint work conducted over the past three years.

Following Haraway's call for "stories (and theories) that are able to gather the complexities and keep the edges open […] to make possible partial and robust biological-cultural-political-technological recuperation and re-composition" (Haraway, 2016, pp. 100-101), we thought, discussed and wrote this paper from a culturally dense, embedded and embodies perspective. Notably we are a social geographer who knows the ocean by books (signalled with "C" in text) who is working to define the new "marine social geography" domain, bringing together international research on disruptive social practices and participatory engaged research in/on the sea; and an oceanic sailor who knows the ocean through lived experience (signalled with "F" in text) with decades of experiences in solo and crew sailing in the Mediterranean sea, North sea and Atlantic ocean, winner of the Esprit Marin Prize 2013 for the solo-crossing MiniTransat regatta, and director of an independent international hard-news agency. Therefore, we cannot but admit that this paper presents our partial and situated "two cents" in marine research—still these pages build upon our entrenched enthusiasm in working with/through/by/on the Ocean (Figure 1).

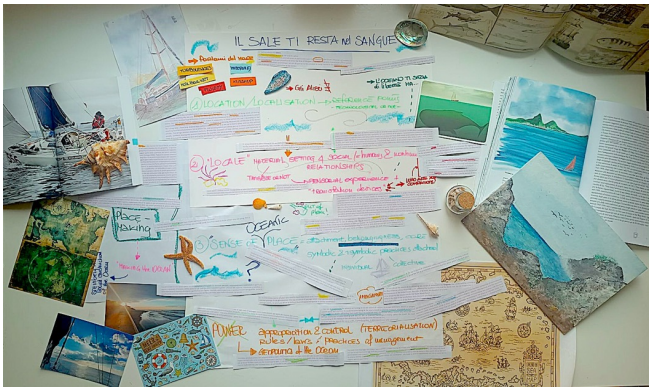

Figure 1. Setting stage for thinking through the Ocean. Photo: Authors.

2. An Oceanic Sense of Place. Feeling connection and nurturing care

C: The acceleration of the blue economy paradigm – such as in *The EU Blue Economy report* (EC, 2024) – is reinforcing a view of the ocean as an economic asset, encouraging societies to recognise their dependence on marine resources (Ertör and Hadjimichael, 2020). As a result, marine-related research is frequently directed towards optimising planning and management strategies (Soma et al., 2019; Eikeset et al., 2018), including investigations into social agency and governance mechanisms (Outters et al., 2017). Traditional marine geography has historically focused on analysing the ocean either as a conduit for the movement of goods, people, and knowledge (Law, 1984), or as a medium for projecting power across distant territories (Driver and Martins, 2006; Ogborn, 2002; Peters, 2010). However, although much of the geographical literature addresses marine territorialisation in terms of geopolitical control (Prescott, 1983; Kidd and Shaw, 2014), attachment to the sea can also emerge through alternative approaches that foster a sense of belonging (Peters et al., 2018), while also promoting ocean literacy and education (Squarcina and Pecorelli, 2017, 2018). Let us begin with a key question: can we conceive and describe a "sense of place" for a space such as the ocean that is neither stably inhabited nor conducive to human life?

***F**: This fundamental question inevitably leads to several others: if a sense of place enables us to call a location "home", feel attachment, care, and belonging, can such feelings be extended to a portion of the open sea which is fluid, mutable, potentially unrecognisable, elusive, and turbulent? What forms of technological equipment and sensorial experience assist us in identifying a specific portion of the ocean as unique? How can cultural and social constructions characterise one portion of the vast ocean as different from another—and to what extent can such narratives align with actual conditions? How might such insights help us to counter the exploitative approaches towards the ocean?*

C: The notion of "sense of place" is foundational in cultural geography, referring to the personal and emotional connections individuals develop with particular locations. Agnew (1987) conceptualised place as a meaningful location defined by three key elements: location, denoting a specific point on the Earth's surface; locale, the physical setting in which social interactions occur; and sense of place, which encompasses the emotional and personal attachments individuals form to a place. These attachments are shaped not only by physical characteristics but also by the meanings ascribed to them (Cresswell, 2016; Hopkins, 2010). The sense of place that we, individually and collectively, construct is grounded in the diversity of experiences we encounter in different locations, and influenced by our identities (Relph, 2008). It is also linked to the "geographical imaginations" (Massey, 2006): mental representations of the world shaped by our lived experiences and perceptions of place. For Massey (2005), a place's uniqueness arises from its historical and contemporary interactions with other places, and is often imbued with dynamics of power, privilege, and control. These "power geometries" (Massey, 2005) shape how different groups experience and represent places, guiding the transition from place-making to territorialisation – a process which supports geopolitical interests over territories, including "territories beyond terra", such as the Ocean (Peters et al., 2018). However, we deliberately choose not to fall into the territorial trap – that is, the geopolitical mechanisms of territorialisation which stimulate the desire to control and exploit the natural environments. In contrast to such dominant perspectives, alternative approaches highlight the dynamic and interrelated movements of marine entities, standing in opposition to geopolitical and economic interpretations of the ocean's value (Bear, 2013).

***F**: When one looks at, experiences, and feels the Ocean, fantasies of control, appropriation, and power appear not only arrogant but also blind, especially against the Ocean's vastness and unknowability. The Ocean is the school par excellence from which we can learn about attachments, entanglements, fluidity, turbulences, movements and watery kinships. Human societies are literally immersed in the global Ocean covering the seventy per cent of the Planet surface and entangled in an immensely intricate network of non-human, material relationships made by an unimaginable number of chemical, physical and biological processes. Starting from our geographical knowledge and out to sea experience, the "oceanic sense of place" cannot but emerge from merging theoretical elaborations and grounded practices.*

3. Localisation. "The only thing I long to know is where am I - and where are the others"

C: The process of place-making occurs through a series of interconnected steps. The first one, *localisation*, involves identifying a specific point on the Earth's surface by recognizing reference elements (Figure 2), which may rely on either direct observation or the use of technical tools and measurement instruments.

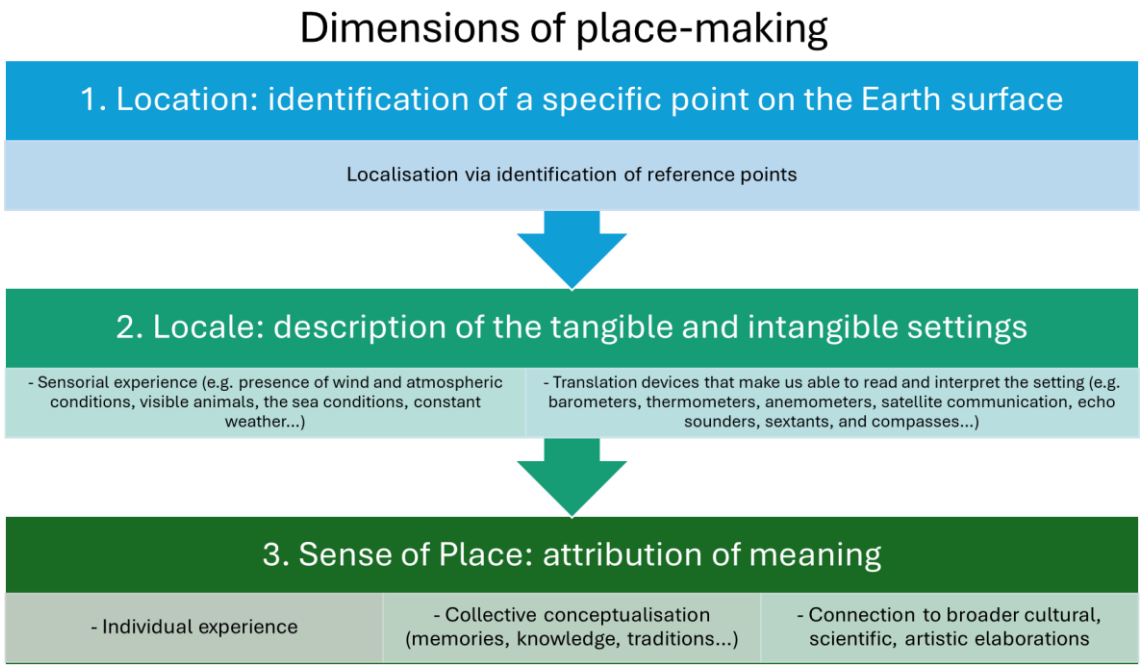

Figure 2. Dimensions of place-making at the Ocean. Authors' elaboration.

F: *In the Ocean, the reference points we are used to look for on land disappear. On land, the sense of place is tied to fixed elements such as mountains or rivers, buildings, infrastructures. The ocean is a place where the lack of visually stable elements makes it impossible to know where you are. The sun, the stars, the constant winds have historically served as reference points, but there might be sudden changes in the atmospheric conditions, and these references disappear or become unclear. Now we have technological devices such as GPS that signal our exact position even in the middle of the Ocean. Nevertheless, leaving the coast still produces the feeling of being lost, of being alone and without certainties. The need for localisation is pressing – knowing where you are is a matter of survival. There are no or few possibilities – also on a well-equipped boat – to get necessary basic resources for human life and survive on the sea longer than expected. While sailing the Mini Transat in 2013, a trans-Atlantic solo regatta departing from France and reaching Guadeloupe on a 6.5-metre sailing boat, I had no other way to localise my position than the map where I calculated the ship's position on the basis of a single GPS signal a day. The only thing I longed to know is where was I – and where others were.*

C: Another fundamental difference in the Ocean is that contrary to the relative stability of reference points on land, at sea, everything is in motion. The Ocean is a place of turbulence and shuffling, devoid of fixity. Its essence is fluidity: matter moves, shifts relentlessly (Figure 3). In the sea, the physical and material dimension dominates over the symbolic or imaginary one. It is not a human-made space – although there are large ships along commercial routes, platforms, and other premises where humans work and spend most of their lifetime. However, these remain as isolated points in a boundless liquid vastity - even difficult to conceive for the human mind. In a radically different way compared to land, localisation in the ocean requires locating while moving and entails temporary presence.

F: *Tracing the route is for sure most important because you cannot stand in the sea, you are always going, therefore need to know where to. But every travel and every day of a travel are different from the others because environmental conditions are constantly changing. When you sail offshore, away from the coast for days, the only available reference points are mutable themselves: the weather, the sea, the temperature... These mark the passage of time and dictate the rules. During the last round of world races, such as the Global Solo Challenge or the Vendée Globe, all the participants talked about "rhythm". You cannot impose your life rhythm to the sea, you must adapt to its own. The most performant sailors are those who can adapt immediately to any change and pick up the pace quickly. The sooner they do it, the sooner the boat is back in trim, and so the sooner they get going again, gaining speed. This ability to adapt only comes with experience and willpower, it is like becoming one with an ever-changing place, whose signals you learn to recognise.*

C: As Squarcina suggests: "Sea is the exact opposite of stability, it seems a space that is both uniform and whimsically iridescent, but those who frequent it, for work, sport or pleasure, and know the physical and climatic characteristics of the various seas and individual portions of them, can recognize regions characterized by a certain degree of physical stability and homogeneity. Physical homogeneity […] has given rise to the identification of oceanic regions based on elements such as the system of winds, currents, temperatures, salinity" (Squarcina, 2015)[1].

[1] All quotations from Squarcina 2015 are the authors' own translation.

Figure 3. Turbulences. Photo: Giuseppe Lupinacci/ Raw-News.

4. Locale. "Trade winds do not exist"

C: Here we come to the second stage of the place-making process: the creation of the locale, which refers to the material and environmental setting where social interactions – both human and non-human – take place.

F: *Understanding the oceanic setting requires a comprehensive consideration of sensorial experience for perceiving the tangible and non-tangible elements constituting the essence of a place, the material setting of social relations (and in the ocean these relationships cannot but include the non-humans and the technologies, the environmental cycles, the abiotic factors…). Wind patterns, atmospheric conditions, the presence of wildlife, and the characteristics of the sea – such as colour or smell – contribute to one's perception of an oceanic place. But the creation of the locale also relies on translation devices that make us able to read and interpret the environmental conditions (e.g. barometers, thermometers, anemometers, devices that allow checking the water composition, the presence of bacterial life and invisible organisms typical of certain regions, satellite communication, echo sounders, sextants in the past, and compasses…). These allow for "seeing" physical and biological characteristics of the ocean we cannot perceive – at least not precisely – with our senses. However, these devices are imbued with our previous knowledge, with culturally biases, and while*

they make it possible for us to "see" certain aspects, we cannot but ignore others.

C: Despite being culturally biased, we are glad to have some devices making the ocean to "speak" in a way we can understand (Latour, 1987). In the traditional Western geography mapping, the sea often appeared as a silent, uniform, indeterminate blue space. But Squarcina, building on Parrain (2012), contests that from the perspective of those who experience it, the sea is far from empty: "I do not find it empty at all. I find there the great breath of the trade winds, the rhythmic succession of the waves, the gusts of wind that draw crystal fans, the persistence of the foam of the breaking waves, the vast muddy plains left by the retreat of the Breton tide, the encounters, made precious by their relative rarity, with the brown backs of whales, with the flashes of dolphins, with the banal and tragic end of the flying fish found on the deck in the morning, with the calm gait of the cargo, with the elegance of the sails regatta, with the aerial ability of seabirds" (Squarcina, 2015). These phenomena are often not even reflected in the toponyms of the sea but rather exist in the stories of those who navigate it. Therefore, the creation of the locale in the ocean is possible upon the relationship between individuals and the sea they frequent. We cannot but move from somewhere, from our bodies in the ocean, from a theory of situated knowledge (Braidotti, 1995), and start from our subjective experience, recognising dignity and value in individual paths and forms of expression. So, starting from our personal experience (Muraro, 1996), is it possible to identify the locale of portions of the Ocean constantly moving?

F: *For almost twenty years I transferred boats in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, I did charters and regattas. Eventually, I didn't even need to consult a map or a nautical chart – at least in the Tyrrenum. I recognised Giglio Island from a distance, as well as Montecristo and Pianosa islands, simply by observing the ocean around me, the shape of the lands, the usual winds. Only by the sunlight, at a certain time, you understand exactly where each island was. I knew some portions of sea like my pockets, island silhouettes were part of the daily horizon. At night, however, everything changed. I could not trust my senses, confidence was vanishing. Even when I could still make out the island shapes, the distance became deceptive. An island like Montecristo, which during the day you recognised immediately even ten miles away, at night could seem like a rock just twenty metres away. This was very unsettling, especially if the sky was overcast. It is incredible how much the sensorial perception changes in the sea. Even on land, day and night make a difference, but not so drastically because we move along already traced paths. The sense of belonging to an oceanic place is built day after day. At first, it is foreign, even intimidating if you have never sailed in certain areas – there is tension, there is fear. Only over time, signs become clearer, I got used to marine and weather conditions becoming part of my way of reading space and time.*

C: We can say that thanks to constant frequentation of specific portions of the global ocean, it is possible to identify them as distinctive places. Differently from the land experience, one can only have an experience *in motion* of the ocean; the oceanic sense of place is created by navigating it, as one cannot just stand in the ocean. Nevertheless, despite the sea may appear as an unstable (and unpredictable) space, those familiar with it can recognize relatively homogeneous and somehow stable regions as distinctive ones. The identification of such oceanic places is based on factors like wind systems, currents, temperatures, salinity, which together form recognizable physical landscapes.

F: *At sea, space is created not only through knowledge of location and navigation route, but mostly through weather phenomena you observe and record day after day. With daily logs you deepen your understanding and interpretation of weather systems, and you realise that, even in the open sea without visible landmarks, a unique portion of the ocean becomes more and more "your own" place. When you get this intimacy with the sea space, terrestrial time loses its meaning. Despite the GPS might tell you that you are 2000 miles away from shore, you no longer care. As you enter the ocean rhythm, the day-night cycle merges into one continuous flow. Time is no longer marked by clocks, but by the sea itself, by the passage of the sun and moon, by the shifts at the helm, by the perception of*

being completely immersed in the sea with your personal biorhythms. If these rhythms are constant for days, the only real reference becomes your body. Everyone has her own balance: some people wake up early and feel active immediately, while others have different energy at opposite times of the day. During long navigations, the constant change in time zones does not allow to check the time to mark your life on board. Time is just a single flow, no longer marked by hours, but by the sea, the sun, the wind, your own inner rhythm (Figure 4).

C: According to Finney (1998), traditional navigators in the Pacific Islands relied on knowledge of the waters, movements of the stars, sun, wind, wave motion, and even biological indicators like birds and animals. Learning was based on recitation, mnemonic exercises, songs, and dances to remember the sequence of islands and stellar courses or to create mental diagrams of them. Such a mix of practical skill and spiritual elements developed over generations of navigators whose techniques relied on reading natural signs rather than using charts or instruments.

F: *The wind and the sea constitute an interconnected system: sometimes you see long waves and realise that something is coming from afar, a disturbance is approaching. There are no certainties – it might not be the case – but it is an indication to be taken into consideration. Predicting the weather on your own is essential in the ocean, but as Jean-Yves Bernot says, it should be done with caution and long experience. Especially when you have no satellite communication, no telephone, no contact—only your boat and your observation skills. You study day by day, by sailing, taking notes, building on errors, keeping a logbook every six hours to record temperature, wind, sea conditions, wave strength, GPS point, time, and day… and you update it regularly.*

C: The senses are the only elements you have to orient yourself and perceive where you are. The mutability and complexity of the entwined ecological systems that interact in the ocean (including meteorological, oceanic, bio-chemical systems, and the immensely unknown network of submarine connections) make it almost impossible to encounter precise and recurrent scenarios. Nevertheless, the ocean is culturally dense—from the perspective of those who sail it. There are tales, images, scientific reports, artistic creations about it… and these create expectations about what distinct places in the global oceans might look like. But what happens when those cultural elaborations do not match your experience?

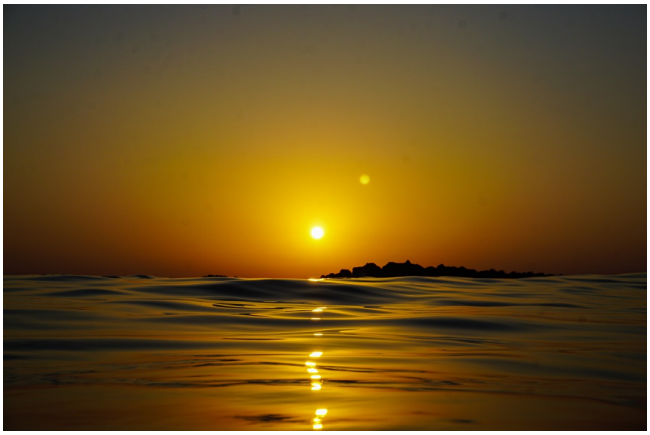

Figure 4. Shapes in the ocean. Photo: Giuseppe Lupinacci/Raw-News.

F: *It is true that the sea is more than just a physical space; it is a concept that transcends the geographical dimension and becomes the result of a complex interaction between what we perceive, our mental representations, and the cultural constructions of it. Personal experiences, cartographic representations, and cultural contents deeply influence our understanding of the sea. But even when you get acquainted with the rhythms of an oceanic place, there always comes a time when everything suddenly changes. Adapting to new events – such as a wind that changes direction or a disturbance that catches you unprepared – is upsetting but necessary. Whenever we are faced with a technical or metereological issue - be it a break in the trade winds or a stronger wind than expected, we must recalibrate our actions. Once in the Atlantic- an atmospheric front bringing strong winds broke the trade winds and destabilised the boat, the climatic conditions, and my very approach to sailing. Where I expected to find the trade winds pushing me west, I found 40 knots of constant wind*

pushing me back east. The gale only allowed me to wait for it to pass, clinging to the boat, adapting to the sea.

C: A key element that derives from the experience of the ocean is the need for mediation or translation tools—instruments that allow us to engage with the sea physically (and emotionally). Often, the sea eludes cultural conceptualisations. Still, to deal with it, we need tools resulting from millennia of human cultural and technological evolution. The constant companion at sea: your boat...

F: *The boat is what allows us to survive in the open sea and works as the ultimate mediator between you and the marine element. The way we perceive the sea is unavoidably linked to, and influenced by, how we approach it—and this means it is the result of our history, our experiences, and the cultural and technological mediations that take us there. The boat is an assemblage of cultures, traditions, and technologies, matters and physical constraints, that bring you into the sea and allow us to experience being in a place otherwise inaccessible. The boat is part of you, especially when sailing solo. The bond is so strong that, at the end of a long voyage, the first thing everyone does is to thank her boat… may be hugging the bow, take care of it. There is no distinction between you and the boat: it is the place where you have lived, a physical extension of ourselves, a companion that has withstood all the perils with us. It is what makes possible your relationship with the water, with the wind, and with the sea itself.*

C: And being in the sea entails entering a network of relationships, a kind of 'kinship' with all the forces, creatures, and processes that constitute it. *Sympoiesis*, or "becoming together", is the term used by Donna Haraway (2016) for this bond, and it highlights the intertwining of human societies with non-human societies, abiotic components, and ecological cycles, as well as techniques and technologies – the material and immaterial products of human culture – all of which in the sea quickly form inseparable, uncanny assemblages.

F: *Despite the existence of large ships and cruisers with hundreds of people, seafarers sharing the oceanic experience for months, the ocean is not a place for humans. Oceanic society is made up of uncanny assemblages (as you call them): technologies, animals, ecological conditions, waves… The ocean is where technology and culture make (and have made throughout human history) survival possible; therefore, an oceanic sense of place is strictly connected with the technologies that allow it to emerge.*

C: Elaborating on Haraway's theory, we can claim that staying with the ocean requires co-participation, and reknitting human society and non-human society with ocean life—reconsidering both the narrative and pragmatic conditions shaping the hybrid composition of the ocean. We can probably extend Haraway's considerations on earthly connections to the ocean the practical experience of it shows that knowledge of it requires "commitment and collaborative work and play with other terrans, flourishing for rich multispecies assemblages entangled in myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages—including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus" (Haraway, 2016, pp. 100-101).

5. Sense of Place. "Tell me about the Ocean" – "The Ocean cannot be told"

C: The third phase of place-making is the emergence of a sense of place. It pertains to the emotional attachment and sense of belonging that individuals and communities develop toward a specific location. This phase is characterised by the attribution of meaning to a defined portion of space we come to call *our* place. It requires the merging of individual experiences – such as memories, emotions, and lived interactions – with collective conceptualisations (traditions, historical events, narratives, scientific and artistic representations…) (Squarcina and Neri, 2024; Stocco and Rocca, 2024). So, tell me about the Ocean.

F: *The Ocean cannot be told—it can only be sailed. The oceanic experience is entirely physical, material, sensorial. The body – before the mind – guides us toward feeling the oceanic sense of place. The emotional connection flows*

through the senses. It is only when you experience the ocean, navigate it, and perceive it on your skin that you can "understand" it culturally. And here lies the difficulty: you can only live this feeling—it cannot be fully conveyed through words. To develop a true attachment to the sea, however, it is not necessary to venture into the open ocean. For instance, when spending time with fishermen, I recognise that – despite their daily lives being extremely demanding – they are in love with the sea. Their job is often a family tradition, but their connection to the sea comes from personal experience, patience, and a deep sense of gratitude.

C: I know what you mean when you say the physical experience is crucial. For example, when I go surfing, I love the sensation of entering the water, the impression that the sea is penetrating your body. When you're overwhelmed by the waves and lose all sense of direction – up and down blur together – it's frightening and awe-inspiring. But it also offers a tangible, entangled, entwined experience that has no equivalent on land. The physicality of the ocean makes it possible to understand it—even if it remains, by its very nature, unknowable (Figure 5).

F: *There are many narratives about the sea, but in most cases, they are narratives of* our *experiences* in *the sea – stories of travel, harbours, fishing, or sailing technologies – not of the sea* per se*. The sea resists our attempts to turn it into an object of culture (Larsson, 2015); it escapes definition. Words or images cannot grasp its true nature, even when you are familiar with a particular portion of it. For instance, I have navigated the Solent in the English Channel multiple times—the stretch that separates the Isle of Wight from the Hampshire coast. Here, marine overfalls occur under specific atmospheric conditions, resembling to waterfall, due to the strong tides. When entering the Channel, studying the currents is essential—without that knowledge, you cannot proceed. It's fascinating: pilot books and tide tables describe the coastline section by section—the landings, dangers, anchorages, and areas to avoid. Yet, unlike the Mediterranean, this is not enough. In the Atlantic, you must also understand the workings of time and tides, water streams and currents. Once, we faced the Solent overfalls with 30 knots of wind behind us—and yet we weren't moving at all. The waves were coming in with the wind, but the current was creating a constant roll, like a massive tube of water spinning in on itself. The log showed a speed of 10 knots, but the GPS read 0.1, 0.2... We were stuck. In such situations, considering the time of day, the moon phase, the sea state, and the wind, it's better to quit and wait for the right moment—to take advantage of the currents.*

On another occasion, leaving Douarnenez on France's Atlantic coast, we sat sail at 5 a.m., in total darkness, to cover the 20 miles up to Raz du Sein during a precise time slot that allowed favourable currents. The only comparable place in the Mediterranean is the Strait of Messina. During a regatta, I once got stuck there—whirlpools everywhere, Scylla and Charybdis before my eyes. The current turned the boat around—it was impossible to move forward. As with surfers, all seagoing people know they must read *the sea—search for the right spot, the opening that allows you to enter or exit faster, and more safely.*

C: In this effort to read the sea, collective narratives, myths, regulations, and cultural elaborations can be helpful. As Squarcina suggests: "Above all, the frequentation of the sea and the belonging to the community of those who frequent the sea […] allows the identification of regions and the attribution of cultural, symbolic, emotional and identity values […]. Thus, for example, the area of the trade winds, the *Pot au noir*, the Horse Latitudes, the Agulhas Current, the Roaring Forties and the Screaming Fifties – portions of pelagic expanses with historical stratification and human meaning – become regions and places well known to those who travel by sea" (Squarcina, 2015). Consequently, he argues that the sea is both a space of solitude and a space of solidarity among crew members and among the broader, ideal community of seagoing people.

F: *The community of sailors is bound together by a connection stronger than words. Solidarity arises from shared experience—the tacit understanding that each of us has crossed the sea, out of time and outside the reach of land-based society. The sea, then, becomes not only a*

space of solitude, but a place of belonging and identity. It is a form of identity no longer anchored to the land, but to the sea itself—and to its power to transform those who navigate it. It's a bond forged by time and nature, not language. And in the end, we all know that salt lingers in the blood—the sea always gives back more than you expect.

C: Don't you think that – even if it's difficult to express in words – we can, in fact, conceive and describe an *oceanic* sense of place? And that our experiences of the ocean forge a link with it through flesh, matter, bodies, and senses—before imaginaries, knowledge, or narratives?

F: *Indeed. What a pleasant breeze this evening... more wine?*

Figure 5. Dark waters. Photo: Giuseppe Lupinacci/ Raw-News.

6. Conclusion

This paper explores the possibility and the ways in which an oceanic sense of place – a feeling of belonging and attachment to the ocean – can emerge, despite the sea's fluidity, instability, and its inhospitable nature.

Through bodily and technical practices – sailing, observing, listening, measuring – over time we transformed the ocean from an alien space into a familiar and meaningful place (Steinberg, 2001). This process of place-making at sea still follows the classic stages from cultural geography – localization**,** creation of the locale, and formation of a sense of place – but these stages take on unique characteristics. As described in the dialogues, localization does not rely on fixed landmarks but on shifting coordinates and temporary positions. The *locale* is created through interactions between bodies, technologies, and non-human elements. The sense of place emerges from an immersive, experiential, and transformative relationship with the sea and its rhythms. Unlike on land, the essence of the ocean lies in constant movement, transformation, and uncertainty. Yet, it is precisely this dynamic nature that becomes a site of learning, adaptation, entanglement, and situated knowledge (Squarcina and Pecorelli, 2017).

The dialogue revealed some peculiar traits of the oceanic sense of place creation. First of all, in the Ocean, place is not something one stands in, but something one navigates through specific regions. These regions – defined by winds, currents, temperatures, and salinity – form a kind of physical and perceptual geography that becomes recognizable to those who spend extended time at sea. Knowledge of the ocean is profoundly embodied as it was for traditional knowledge (Squarcina and Neri, 2024). Second, ocean learning happens incrementally, through a slow accumulation of experience, mistakes, and adaptation. This knowledge is neither purely scientific nor purely intuitive; it is a hybrid form, blending empirical observation with emotional intelligence, memory, and cultural heritage. Yet, despite the abundance of stories, myths, charts, and artworks, the ocean remains largely resistant to cultural representation as the nature of the sea reveals only in direct, embodied encounter. Third, the ocean is not only a space of human experience—it is a vast more-than-human assemblage, alive with non-human forces, organisms, and systems. Going through the ocean means entering into a relationship of mutual adaptation with these elements via physical participation, emotional openness, being "rooted" in movement, immersion, and relational depth.

An oceanic sense of place refers, thus, to a form of belonging that rejects narratives of exploitation and power, as described in geo-political research (Kidd and Shaw, 2014), and

instead proposes a relationship rooted in situated knowledge, direct experience, and emotional connection (Regazzoni, 2022). In this perspective – also promoted by international organisations (e.g. European Commission, 2020) – the ocean ceases to be just a resource or a space to be crossed; it becomes a lived, perceived, narrated space, recognized in its otherness and its transformative power. From this very otherness, the potential arises to resist dominant exploitative imaginaries of the ocean and to foster alternative ways of care, respect, and oceanic belonging (Neri et al., 2024).

Future research on the oceanic sense of place are therefore expected to investigate – ideally via participatory cross-fertilising discussions- how different marine societies and seagoing groups understand their embodied, embedded, and culturally constrained experience of the sea; how they attribute diverse meaning to apparently undistinct portions of the global Ocean. This can relay on out to sea documentation of mariners, seafarees, fishermen, sailors and seaworkers in different geographical contexts of their own oceanic sense of place in order to compare different experience.

While opening new horizon in marine education and citizenship (Squarcina and Pecorelli, 2018), this exploration can also contest exclusionary practices tied to belonging and appropriation of the Ocean, by advancing an understanding of the sense of place as fluid, transient and temporary. As such, future exploration into the oceanic sense of place can contribute toward dismantling the classic geopolitical interpretation of marine territorialisation as a chief means through which human society relate with the Ocean (bringing about issue of exploitation, control and ownership and allowing for the extension of terrestrial social-spatial reproduction processes in the oceanic environment). Such a perspective can powerfully contrast the localism, nationalism and reactionary defense of "own" place associated with a chauvinistic idea of places (Massey, 1991). Rather it will investigate how the experience of seagoing people helps at unveiling an Oceanic Sense of Place elaborated throught emotional attachments and kinships creation between human and non-human society and the water.

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