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Australian Seascapes

Special Issue

Oceans shape our planet. Their ability to absorb large amounts of CO₂ and store heat makes them a stabilising element in the climate system. However, oceans and their currents are not only crucial for the climate: around half of the world's population lives within 160 kilometres of an ocean. Human life is therefore always shaped by the sea. This proximity to the sea becomes particularly clear when looking at a map of Australia: embedded in the Pacific Ocean, the continent nestles up against the island worlds of present-day Papua New Guinea, Indonesia and Malaysia, as the oceanic "Spilhaus projection" (Fig. 1) clearly shows.¹ "The Pacific Ocean has washed, scoured and thumped Australia's east coast for more than five million years".²

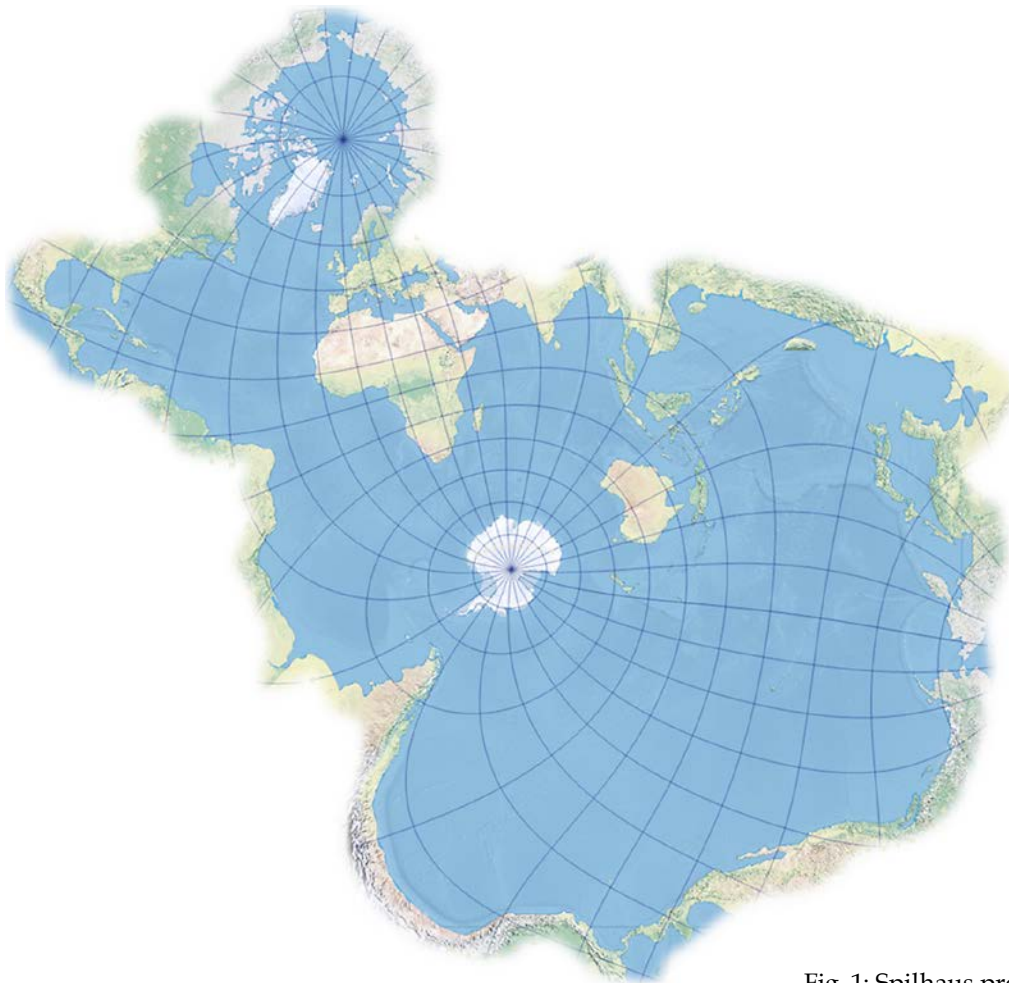


Fig. 1: Spilhaus projection.

- 1 Bojan Bojan Šavrič, David Burrows, Melita Kennedy: The Spilhaus World Ocean Map in a Square.
- 2 Ian Hoskins: Australia & the Pacific, p. 1.

The sea also plays a special role for Australia from a historical perspective: maritime resources were already of great importance to indigenous societies and coastal regions were an intensively utilised economic area. The European land grab after 1788 always began from coastal bases. The settlers did not migrate from one coast to another, as in the case of the USA, but from various maritime border areas into the interior. Accordingly, the sea also plays an important role in Australia's cultural memory: as a colonial contact zone, as a bridge between the old and new homelands or as the demarcation line of a 'White Australia' and the associated immigration policies.

To this day, around 85% of Australia's inhabitants live in metropolises such as Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane or Perth and are therefore never more than 50 km from the coast. The sea is also an economic factor. Maritime industries, from gas and oil extraction to cruise shipping, generated around AUD 68 billion in 2015-2016, or 2% of Australia's GDP.³ The Australian marine environment, such as the Great Barrier Reef and the beach as a space of freedom and leisure, are not only the destination of national and international tourism (Australia as a 'brand'), but also important reference spaces in discourses on national identity.

These economic, political and cultural relationships give rise to a variety of different, interwoven spaces, which were discussed by more than 46 experts from the field of Cultural Studies (literature, performing arts, film, visual arts), History, Political Science, Anthropology and Geography at the biennial conference of the Gesellschaft für Australienstudien | Association for Australian Studies from 27 September to 2 October 2021.

Following the work of Greg Dening, Epeli Hau'ofa, and Karin Amimoto Ingersoll,⁴ the conference charted the multiplicity of Australian seascapes as socially constructed spaces, constituted by connections, exchanges and entanglements rather than by boundaries or by a separating void. In this way, the understanding of 'Australian seascapes', originally used only as a term for the (mostly artistic) representation of a coastal view, was conceptually expanded to describe the different views and perspectives resulting from the investigation of the above-mentioned maritime spaces. Looking at seascapes shows Australia's deep connection to Oceania, the Pacific region and the world. However, in the face of climate change and rising sea levels, many of these connections are becoming tenuous.

Correspondingly, the significance of the sea and Australia's connection to the ocean is widely studied in Australia. In recent years, several key areas of research have emerged in the humanities and social sciences: Firstly, this includes the relationship between humans and the environment, particularly in its literary adaptations.⁵ Here, the Great Barrier Reef is often at the centre of attention.⁶ Secondly, more recent research reconstructs the relationships between indigenous societies

3 Australian Institute of Marine Science: The AIMS Index of Marine Industry, p. 6.

4 Cf. Greg Dening: *Beach Crossings*; Epeli Hau'ofa: *We are the Ocean*; Karin A. Ingersoll: *Waves of Knowing*.

5 Cf. Anne Collett, Olivia Murphy (eds.): *Romantic Climates*; Margaret Cohen, Killian Quigley (eds.): *The Aesthetics of the Undersea*.

6 Cf. Ian McCalman: *The Reef*; Ben Daley: *The Great Barrier Reef*; Ann Elias: *Coral Empire*.

and the sea, starting with the “maritime colonisation” of the continent by Aborigines more than 50 000 years ago, through the mobility of indigenous actors and exchanges between Aborigines and neighbouring Asian societies in the north of the continent, to indigenous maritime cultural landscapes.⁷ Thirdly, early contact and exchange relationships between Europeans and Aborigines as well as early voyages of discovery and trans-imperial actors will be increasingly focused on.⁸ A fourth focus is emerging in the field of political science on the topic of border regimes and migration policy as well as the significance of a specifically Australian “insular imagination”.⁹ This is followed by work on the history and effects of the so-called White Australia Policy.¹⁰ Studies on pearl fishing,¹¹ particularly in Broome, Western Australia, form a special focus here, as the interweaving of racist immigration and settler-colonial assimilation policies characteristic of the White Australia Policy is particularly evident here.¹² Furthermore, based on Australia’s geostrategic and economic interests in the region, a fifth research focus is developing at the interface between political science, economics and geography. Here, the focus is often less on a critical stocktaking in times of climate change and more on the design of future scenarios for policy advice.¹³

The conference papers published in this special issue focus on selected literary, artistic and media representations associated with the Australian Seascapes. Three of them show how deeply interwoven Australian imaginations are with sea images of European (thought) traditions, Christian theology, mythology and art movements on the one hand, while at the same time, characterised by the specific experiences of the settler colony, they create new images and imaginations by appropriating, reinterpreting or delimiting European traditions.

Paul Giles presents in his contribution ‘Negative Antipodes: Australian Literature and Planetary Seascapes’ some fundamental reflections on the question of how notions of the sea clearly (albeit indirectly) shape our understanding of Australian culture today. The reference to the sea, he demonstrates, for example, using Alexis Wright’s novel ‘The Swan Book’ (2013), serves as a rhetorical device

7 Cf. Sue O’Connor, Foss Leach, Geoffrey Clark (eds.): *Islands of Inquiry*; Jane Balme: *Of Boats and String*; Lynette Russell: *Roving Mariners*; Lynette Russell: *Aboriginal Australians as Southern Oceans Mariners*; Rachel Standfield (ed.): *Indigenous Mobilities*; Marshall Alexander Clark, Sally K. May (eds.): *Macassan History and Heritage*; Jan J. McNiven: *Salt-water People*; Jan J. McNiven: *Inhabited Landscapes*; Madeline Fowler: *Aboriginal Maritime Landscapes in South Australia*.

8 Cf. Gillian Dooley, Danielle Clode (eds.): *The First Wave*; Peter Veth, Peter Stutton, Margo Neale (eds.): *Strangers on the Shore, Early Coastal Contacts in Australia*; Sylvie Largeaud-Ortega: *The Bounty from the Beach*; Kenneth Morgan: *Matthew Flinders, Maritime Explorer of Australia*; Nigel Rigby, Pieter van der Merwe, Glyndwr Williams: *Pacific Exploration*; Christopher Maxworthy: *British Whalers, Merchants and Smugglers*.

9 Cf. Suvendrini Perera: *Australia and the Insular Imagination*; Peter Chambers: *Border Security*.

10 Cf. Aileen Moreton-Robinson: *The White Possessive*.

11 Cf. Julia Martinez, Adrian Vickers: *The Pearl Frontier*.

12 Cf. Steve Mullins: *Octopus Crowd*; Ruth Balint: *Aboriginal Women and Asian Men*; Sarah Yu: *Walking Jetty to Jetty*.

13 Cf. Jacek Zaucha, Kira Gee (eds.): *Maritime Spatial Planning*; Erika J. Techera, Gundula Winter (eds.): *Marine Extremes*; Geoffrey Till: *Seapower*; John Nash, Ben Herscovitch (eds.): *The Blue Economy*.

to visualise the indigenous but also planetary dimension of human experiences of displacement and exile in times of climate catastrophe.

Jean Page examines James McAuley's reimagination of the Pacific voyages of Pedro Fernandes de Queirós ("Quiros"), a Portuguese navigator in Spanish service, who led several voyages of 'discovery' in the Pacific around 1600. McAuley's poems, published in the 1960s and early 1970s, Page can convincingly argue, present Australia from its oceanic side, as part of the South Pacific, contrasting today's dominant notions of Australia as a closed, encapsulated continent. In this sense, the depiction of the Australian Seascapes is part of the Australian nation's self-positioning in the (post)colonial Pacific of the post-war period.

Imke Lichterfeld makes a similar argument in her contribution to the 'Heidelberg School', a group of painters centred around Tom Roberts, Charles Conder and Arthur Streeton, who in the late 1880s adopted the style of the French Impressionists and placed themselves in the service of the growing Australian nationalism. In the paintings of these artists, Australian seascapes unite the seemingly contradictory ideals of modernism: industrialisation and mechanisation on the one hand and the idea of nature as an idyllic and relaxing place of bourgeois leisure and recreation on the other.

The fourth contribution in this issue approaches the Australian Seascapes in essayistic-artistic form. In his 'Confessions of a Littoralist', Stephen Alomes addresses the notion of Australia as an island, as a colony, and a nation in a, at times, provocative manner. Australia, he states, is deeply connected to the sea. But behind this lie diverse, sometimes contradictory individual and collective experiences. How do these experiences translate into (changing) Australian politics, social practices or people's dreams?

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