

The Monstrous Sea

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Abstract Through an anthropological lens, this essay examines the sea’s dual capacities to bring order and chaos. Drawing on a major comparative study, it examines hydro-theological water beings who personify the sea’s agentive powers, compose the world, and move spirit and matter through time and space. It explores the oceans’ capacities to consume human lives and threaten material stability, and considers how people respond to fears of being overwhelmed. It proposes that, rather than trying to control the sea with coastal fortifications, societies should seek more ecologically convivial solutions to stop climate change and support marine ecosystems.

Keywords Sea. Tsunamis. Water beings. Cosmology. Hydro-theology. Materiality. Infrastructure. Sustainability.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Cosmic Sea. – 3 The Generative Sea. – 4 The Swallowing Sea. – 5 The Monstrous Sea. – 6 The Agent Sea. – 7 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

Some years ago I went to visit one of my doctoral students who was doing ethnographic fieldwork in Sāmoa. It was shortly after a major tsunami had swallowed several coastal villages. There were some skeletal traces of the pretty thatched *fales* that the sea had engulfed [fig. 1], but their inhabitants – those who had survived the catastrophe – were living up in the hills, afraid to return to the shore. I stayed in a small beachside *fale* that had escaped the giant wave, but despite the beauty of the tropical bay with its rustling palms and soft sand, it was impossible to push away the image of the vast consuming maw that the sea had briefly but traumatically become.

Cars teetered where they had been thrown, on top of rubble from collapsed dwellings. Fridges and air-conditioners floated in the sea. A bus sat in a pool of water and mud [...] The *fales* where my husband and I stayed had entirely disappeared. A woman called to me, ‘Were you staying here? We found a woman’s body over there in the bushes, but no one has claimed her’[...] Many people are missing, mainly Samoan villagers. A warning siren did sound, but either people did not hear or heed it, or could not move to safety fast enough [...] Children were out and about on their way to school at that time, and there are many unaccounted for.¹

Drawing on long-term anthropological and interdisciplinary research examining human relationships with water, this essay is about the dark side of the sea: its capacities to be monstrous, and to inflict fluid chaos even on putatively secure *terra firma*. As this implies, like water in all of its forms, the sea has a dual nature. Archaeologist Matt Edgeworth describes freshwater bodies as the “dark matter” of the landscape (2011, 25), and the sea appears in many cultural and historical imaginaries as the dark matter of the Earth. As anthropologist Stefan Helmreich says, it traverses dualistic categories of culture and nature: “Seawater as culture manifests as a medium of pleasure, sustenance, travel, disaster” but it sits largely in the latter category, as ‘potentiality of form and uncontainable flux’ (2011, 132).

The sea’s ‘uncontainability’ is elemental. The oldest tsunami recorded was in Greece, in 497 BCE and there are about ten major tsunamis every century. The waves, sometimes over 100 feet in height, can rush across the sea at more than 500 miles an hour. The 1908 Messina tsunami in the Mediterranean, which inundated parts of

¹ Stephenson-Connolly, P. (2009). “Samoa Tsunami: Eyewitness Account”. *The Guardian*, 30th September. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/sep/30/pamela-stephenson-connolly-witness-samoa>.



Figure 1 Fale (traditional house), Upolu, Sāmoa. © Author

Sicily and Calabria, killed approximately 123,000 people. In 2004 the tsunami in the Indian Ocean drowned 230,000.

The sea is a vast source of positive material agency, in supporting hydrological cycles, in its provision of abundant resources, in connecting and separating land, and in inspiring the human imagination. Rachel Carson (though better known for her *Silent Spring* in 1962), was previously known as a ‘poet of the sea’ whose work highlighted the oceans as the source of global climate and life itself (1941; 1951; 1955). But the sea is, schizophrenically, both a creative, generative force and an agent of death and destruction.

People who have directly survived tsunamis are often marked for life, experiencing post-traumatic stress and depression. Long-term effects are particularly evident in children (Thienkrua et al. 2006). Such trauma also has national impacts. “Such a hugely complex disaster inevitably has negative psychological effects on general populations as well as on the direct victims” (Kyutoku et al. 2012, n.p.).

The oceans’ capacities to be monstrous are increasing as sea levels rise in response to the anthropogenic effects of climate change, casting doubt over the safety of all low-lying coastal zones. This doubt is particularly sharp for islanders isolated in the world’s largest oceans. In the Pacific, Marshallese islanders have inhabited their 29 coral atolls for 3,000 years, sustaining traditional lifeways through careful use of marine resources. But, lying a mere six feet above current sea

levels, their island homes now constitute what filmmaker David Buckland calls “the most existentially threatened place on the planet”.² As one of the artists involved in his project has observed, in an exhibition entitled *Come Hell and High Water* (Pinsky 2006), the swallowing of such tiny islets of land by the ocean are the precursors of a much larger problem.

2 The Cosmic Sea

The duality of the sea is eloquently expressed in stories of cosmogenesis. In many of the narratives that societies have composed about ‘how the world came into being’, the primal sea appears as formless chaos and, quite literally, as the matter of life and death. This duality is similarly embodied in the serpentine water beings who, in these cosmic origin stories, personify the agency of water and its power to act upon all living kinds and the material environment [fig. 2].

Such water beings have occurred ubiquitously in human history, reflecting a reality that – just as people think with all aspects of the material world and their physical properties (Levi-Strauss 1964) – they “think with water”, its movements and hydrological cycles, to imagine concepts of time and flow, and material and spiritual transformation (Tuan 1968). These concepts are given form through water deities: a polysemic family of supernatural beings who reflect the material properties and behaviours of water. They share its fluidity, its serpentine movements and colours, its generative and destructive powers, and its capacities for transformation. They incorporate the features of local species that water generates, in particular the snakes and eels that mirror its sinuous movements. Those representing the celestial half of the hydrological cycle have wings and feathers, and spit the lightning and fire that signals the coming of the rain (Schaafsma 2001). And, as all early human societies worshipped ‘nature’, the water beings representing the element most essential to their lives were central to their ideas about how the world was created (Strang 2023).

In Egyptian origin stories, for example, a great serpent emerges from the ocean to form material being out of light and water, and to bring enlightenment to humankind (Cooper 2005) [fig. 3]. In the Mesopotamian story of Tiâmat the great serpent is known as “Mother Hubur who forms everything” and, in an act of parthenogenesis aided by the sun deity Marduk, heaven and earth are made from the two halves of her body (*Enuma Elish*; cf. Lambert 2013, 459).

In Mayan cosmogenesis a water deity, Itzam Na, surfaces from primal seas to generate living kinds and carry them upon its back (Deimel,

² <https://ourlifeishere.org/>.



Figure 2 Temple mural of water beings, Saigon, Vietnam. © Author

Ruhnau 2000). In the Chinese Taoist cosmos, under the heavenly river Tian He, land is surrounded by a “roaring sea” and the Azure Dragon plays a key role in maintaining orderly material flows (*feng shui*) (Chen, Yang 1995). In Aboriginal Australia the Rainbow Serpent has cosmic role in the Dreaming as the primary ancestor who spews or spits into the world all the living kinds who form the landscape and became the totemic ancestors of Aboriginal clans (Strang 2002; 2022a).



Figure 3
Egyptian serpent beings on stele,
New Kingdom 1295-1069 BCE Thebes.
Louvre. Wikimedia Commons

In the Māori cosmos life begins with *Te Kore*, the fluid chaos out of which the world is created (Barlow 1991). Water beings emerge from the creative process as key ancestral figures, and there are major sea *taniwha* (*marikihau*), such as Parata, whose breathing creates the inflowing and outflowing tides (Bacon 2004). Other *taniwha* create rivers and lakes and carve out harbours (Government of New Zealand 2018). They remain in water bodies as a powerful ancestral presence.

When, over time, the serpentine water beings of ‘nature religions’ are subsumed by humanised deities, a supreme God still replicates their original role, separating the primal seas to bring forth the light that enables the material world and its inhabitants to be created:

The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, “Let there be light”, and there was light. And God divided the light from the darkness. And God said, “Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters”. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament. And God called the firmament Heaven. And God said, “Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear”, and it was so. And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters He called Seas. (*Gen.* 1,2-26)

At a cosmic scale the sea therefore offers creative but also apocalyptic visions, in which worlds are created but may also dissolve back into chaos. The Egyptian Book of the Dead warns that, at the end of time, “the world will revert to the primary state of undifferentiated chaos and Atum will become a serpent once more” (Joines 1974, 97), or as the Scriptures anticipate: “The dragon who is then named as Satan, causes a huge flood, whereupon the beast of the Apocalypse arises from the sea” (*Rev.* 12,3).

But until that time, cosmic creativity centres upon a notion of the material world ‘becoming’ (Deleuze, Guatarri 2004) or ‘taking form’ out of the ocean. The appearance of dry land provides some degree of material stability upon which human and other lives can be founded. The notion of *terra firma*, from the Latin *terra* (earth, land) and *firma* (strong, steadfast) is the polar opposite of fluid chaos, reifying the material and social order that prevails against the potential disorder represented by the chaotic fluidity of water bodies.

This polarity is often revealed by liminal areas of ambiguity, in particular wetlands that are neither land nor water, but an uncertain, untrustworthy mix. Rod Giblett writes imaginatively about “quaking zones” and the psychological terrors evoked by mud and slime, which appear with vivid horror in accounts of war zones and their oozing, slippery, life-consuming trenches (2009). In contrast, *terra firma* speaks of safety and of material and social governance. This is nicely expressed in the term’s historical origins. In the fifteenth century, the Venetian *domini di terraferma* comprised the ‘mainland domains’ of the Republic of Venice, which might be more readily defended than its maritime areas, the *stato da màr*.

3 The Generative Sea

Helmreich’s observation that seawater provides a ‘theory machine’ for generating insights about human cultural organisation is well illustrated by its role in producing people and resources (2011, 132). As well as providing a source of cosmic creativity, the sea is also integral to many societies’ visions of both hydrological and hydro-theological life-cycles (Tuan 1968). Although ideas about hydro-theology are often located in the natural theological treatises of the early eighteenth century, the use of the hydrological cycle as a metaphor for spiritual cycles of life, death and renewal has a much deeper history. Russell points to the interest in water as a theological substance in ancient Egyptian and Babylonian cosmologies (2007, 163), but clear models of cyclical hydro-theological thinking can be observed in the longstanding cosmologies of traditional hunter-gatherers, whose primary water beings are often seen to have a key role in moving spirit and matter through cycles of life and death.

For example, the Australian Rainbow Serpent embodies the generative powers of water, bringing rain and resources, and ensuring annual cycles of ecological reproduction. It has a similarly central role in the cyclical production of human spiritual being, generating the human spirit from the invisible dimension of the Dreaming into the material visible world, to be incarnated in physical and conscious form (Strang 2015). At the end of life, which entails a loss of conscious being or ‘forgetting’ and the dissolution of form, it absorbs the spirit back into an invisible, immaterial pool of ancestral power (Morphy, Morphy 2014).



Figure 4 Clarence Strait, Tiwi Islands, Northern Australia. Wikimedia Commons

These ideas were powerfully illustrated in a recent legal battle in which the Indigenous community on the Tiwi Islands (situated to the north of Darwin) sought to protect their marine areas or ‘sea country’ from the social, spiritual and ecological damage potentially caused by undersea mining [fig. 4]. In a landmark case that effectively called a halt to the drilling into the nearby reefs, the traditional owners highlighted the role of the *Ampiji*, serpentine beings who ‘travel’ through fresh and saltwater bodies. The *Ampiji* generate human spirits (*putapawi*), which must be returned to them via mortuary rituals when a person dies, so that, as they put it, their “Spirit go passed out to sea” (Davis 1983, 55, quoted in Strang 2022b).

The spiritual movements enabled by hydro-theological cycles in many Indigenous belief systems have some resonance with popular ideas in larger societies which connect water and spiritual movements through the metaphor of a ‘river of life’. The mountain spring appears as a source of the youthful spirit, growing and maturing as it flows downhill. It eventually becomes ‘old man river’, and is at last reunited, in death, with the all-absorbing ‘great sink’ of the sea, from which it might then be regenerated.

The hydrological cycle therefore provides “metaphors we live by” (Lakoff, Johnson 1980), providing a model for cycles of life and for the movements of spirit and matter between visible material worlds and invisible hidden ‘other’ dimensions. At both a cosmic and everyday spiritual and social level, the sea is both a generator of life and form, and a mortal realm of ‘unbecoming’ into which life is swallowed and consumed.

4 The Swallowing Sea

Ideas about the beings who personify water swallowing and regurgitating people recur in diverse ethnographic and historical contexts. In Australia, as well as supporting cycles of life between material and non-material domains, the Rainbow Serpent also enables movement between these worlds during important rituals for ‘clever doctors’, who have a shamanistic role in ceremonies. A rite of passage described as ‘passing through the rainbow’ (which entails immersion in water), gives these individuals access to secret and sacred knowledge, and therefore endows them with social power and authority (Taylor 1984).

Similar rituals, in which priests or shamans enter serpentine water beings to visit other domains, occur in various parts of the world. Amazonian Desana rituals, aided by the ingestion of hallucinogens, involve travel to alternate dimensions of time and place in a giant anaconda-canoe (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1989; see also Eliade 1964). In Central America, Mayan leaders enter the watery underworld of Xibalba to gain sacred knowledge via sacred cenotes, or ‘the serpent’s mouth’. Mayan architecture represents this access to the otherworld as a zoomorphic cleft or fontanel, associating it with consciousness and enlightenment. Temple entrances also serve as serpentine portals to Xibalba, and this is clearly expressed by the famous site of Chichen Itza (which translates as ‘mouth’ and ‘well’) and the Temple of the Serpent’s Mouth at Chicanná (Lucero, Kinkella 2015) [fig. 5].



Figure 5 Chicanná, House of the Serpent's Mouth. Ca. 600-830 CE. Campeche, Mexico. Wikimedia Commons

Many objects and images depicting water beings show them either swallowing or generating/regurgitating humans or gods. Indian *makaras*, which appear, usually as dual or twin serpentine figures, in temples across Asia, often have figures in their mouths (Gyun, Atkinson 2005), as does the famous *biscione* Visconti serpent in Milan, used since the eleventh century as a heraldic image, and more recently popularised in the logo for Alfa Romeo cars (Strang 2023).

In a well-known Hindu story the serpent being Agashura swallows Krishna as well as some *gopas* (pastoralists) and their cattle. The Egyptian 'green god' Osiris, though originally described as a 'shining serpent', also appears in humanised form to be swallowed by his evil serpent twin Seth/Typhon. He must pass through the underworld and return so that annual floodwaters can be generated: thus he enters the tail of the serpent and emerges from its mouth, and his reappearance brings the spring solstice. In the ancient Greek story about his search for the Golden Fleece, Jason is swallowed and regurgitated by the serpent guarding the sacred tree. Stories of Jonah or Yunus being swallowed by a whale or giant fish, and then 'vomited' onto dry land occur in Judaeo-Christian and Islamic narratives. And in recurrent images of the ouroboros, in Egyptian, Norse and other ancient cosmologies, a symbol of infinite time and regeneration is provided by the world-encircling serpent swallowing its own tail.

So to be swallowed by water, to be consumed by it, is to leave this world and enter another, sometimes on a cyclical return journey, and



Figure 6
Visconti serpent. Milan.
© Author

sometimes on a one-way flow to mortality with only a faint prospect of return on a far-distant judgement day. While such journeys represent orderly spiritual cycles in many cultural worldviews, water beings can also swallow people in less benign ways. In Australia, when people transgress customary Law, the Rainbow Serpent may simply consume them. This underlines the power and agency of water beings, and their capacities to be punitive when their authority is not respected.

There are many similar examples of ‘swallowing’ serpent beings, as I have noted elsewhere [fig. 7]:

Anthropophagic serpents include the Aztec Hapai-Can; the Māori *taniwha*; the Algonquin *windigo*; Australian Rainbow Serpents; the Cherokee *utkena*; and the Kiau in the seas of northern China. The existential threat of mortality that underlies such imagery is equally recognizable in the maw of the great serpent that comprises the ‘mouth of Hell’ in Christian iconography, surely one of the most terrifying representations of death imaginable. (Strang 2023, 65-6)

There are more prosaic explanations for assigning symbolic weight to images of anthropagy. Joseph Andriano argues that the vulnerability of prehistoric societies to being eaten by sharp-toothed predators instilled a primal fear of being swallowed by monstrous beings (1999, 91). There is no reason to exclude such evolutionary perspectives, but the multiple recurring narratives describing person-consuming

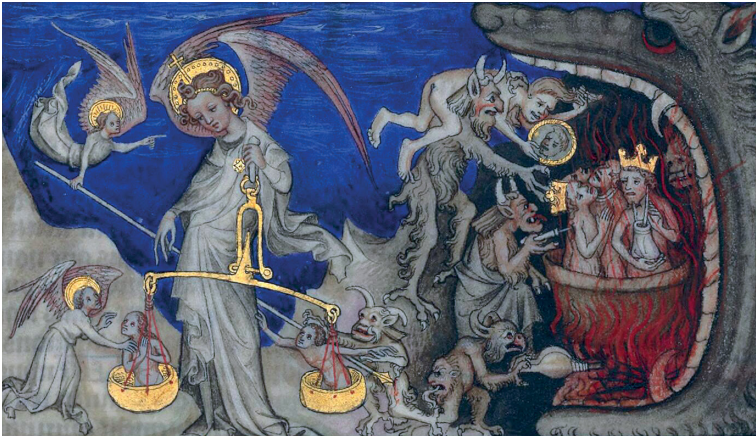


Figure 7 From *Judgement to Hellmouth*. Fourteenth century. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Wikimedia Commons

water serpent beings suggest that they have a far more complex role. In essence, they meet human needs for cosmological explanations that enable them to deal with flows of time and life, the arrival and disappearance of persons, and the potential for stability and order to be overwhelmed by chaos.

5 The Monstrous Sea

David Gilmore draws attention to Jung's view that the sea represents both an individual and collective unconscious, an Id which, despite all efforts to repress its impulses, might at any moment give rise to tumultuous waves of emotion, laying waste to the orderly structures of the Ego (2003). At an individual and societal level this chaotic inner sea endangers the self, the body, and the mind. This view intersects usefully with contemporary thinking about the extended mind, and anthropological understandings of identity through which individuals and groups project themselves outwards and locate identity and memory externally (Anderson 1991; Clark, Chalmers 1998; Myers 1986). The individual is extended into visual imagery and material culture; the house becomes an extension of familial identity; a cultural landscape represents a local community; and a nation provides a collective persona for the society it contains. At each level of scale there is an intrinsic tension between order and disorder, as individual, collective, social and material elements that are not readily controlled threaten disruption (Douglas 2002). Thus, at all levels, internally and externally, there is a fear of the consuming flood.

The sea provides an imaginative home for these anxieties. Despite the putative nets of governance cast over it, in the form of maritime zones and regulation, and the fortified sea walls erected to keep it at bay, it is ultimately beyond control. It epitomises the limitations of human capacities to maintain order and assure social and material stability, and a fear that all such efforts will be overwhelmed. A visceral terror of the deep and its hidden powers, which Keller describes as “*tehomophobia*” (2003), is reflected in ideas about the sea and its potential to be monstrous. The Judaeo-Christian story of Genesis, in which God quells the chaotic primal sea, contains both a vision of patriarchal mastery and a fear that this control will not withstand the sea’s potential chaos.

The term ‘chaos’ itself, from the Greek *kháos* (χάος), means ‘emptiness, vast void, chasm, or abyss’, and a struggle to impose order on a sea of chaos, or *chaoskampf*, is a recurrent theme in many cosmologies. As noted above, the creativity of chaos is personified in great serpent beings, and so too is their potential for destruction.

The dark side of water beings (and other non-human deities) comes more strongly to the fore as societies make transitions from venerating ‘nature’ beings and their generative powers, to belief systems in which such deities are humanised, or replaced by deities in human form. When the Canaanite god Baal, originally a storm god/water being, acquires a more human form he defeats the Ugaritic serpent Lôtān (Day 1985). The Greek god of the waters, Poseidon, seen in a pre-Hellenic era as a chthonic fertility figure, is later depicted in human form but retains the earthquake and flood-making capacities of earlier great serpent beings.

When monotheisms hand the role of world-making to God the Father and seek human dominion over an alienated domain of ‘nature’, the *chaoskampf* becomes particularly adversarial. Water is recast either as ‘good water’, compliant to human direction and control, or as unruly and evil, and potentially inhabited by demons (Smith 2017). Pre-Christian water deities representing untamed non-human powers are duly demonised and made monstrous, and with the emergence of militant monotheistic evangelism in the medieval period there is an orgy of dragon slaying (Riches 2004; Strang 2023).

For example, although Leviathan shares the serpentine and seawelling characteristics of the creative serpent beings of Egypt and Mesopotamia, and is seen by the Ophites as a world-containing ouroboros (Rasimus 2009), the dragon is transformed in Old Testament into a seven-headed fire-breathing embodiment of evil who must be defeated so that Judaeo-Christian order can be imposed [fig. 8]. While he may “frolic” in the sea (Psalm 104, 26), he appears in Isaiah as a “coiling”, “writhing” or “twisting” serpent: a “dragon of the sea” who must be slain by the Lord’s “great and strong sword” (Isaiah 27, 1).

Though didst divide the sea by thy strength: though brakest the heads of the dragons in the waters. Thou brakest the heads of leviathan in pieces, and gavest him to be meat to the people inhabiting the wilderness. (Ps. 73,13-14)



Figure 8
Giacomo Rossignolo, *Last Judgement*.
Ca. 1555. Fresco. Wikimedia
Commons

As previously observed, it is also in Judaeo-Christian iconography that the serpent's consuming maw becomes a portal not to spiritual reincarnation, but to damnation in the fires of Hell. This establishes a fearful vision of mortality inextricably linked to serpentine beings and anthropagic life-swallowing, and this vision is echoed in the 'monstrous' water beings that manifest the capacities of the sea to swallow and consume.

Monsters inhabit every cultural and historical context, and they have a purpose. Recent anthropological literature (Gilmore 2003; Musharbash, Presterudstuen 2019) has drawn attention to their vital social function in enabling people to articulate their fears:

The mind needs monsters. Monsters embody all that is dangerous and horrible in the human imagination. Since earliest times people have invented fantasy creations on which their fears could safely settle. (Gilmore 2003, IX)

Whether located in external (possibly invisible) worlds, or inhabiting the psyche, monsters invariably express specific cultural and historical meanings (Williams 2011). Morphologically they share some

common characteristics. They are typically hybrid in form, reflecting categorical uncertainties. They are sharp in tooth and claw, and they prey mercilessly on humans and/or their domesticated livestock. Terrestrial monsters tend to lie hidden, in marginal hinterlands and unknown territories, in dense forests and caves and – frequently – underground. Many are water beings, lurking in rivers and deep lakes, and in the sea, embodying people’s fears of fluid realms [fig. 9].



Figure 9 Olaus Magnus, *Carta Marina*. 1539. Wikimedia Commons

To be literally at sea, to venture out across the ocean’s vast hidden depths, is to leave the relative safety of *terra firma* and risk being swallowed. Sea-faring societies therefore require sea monsters to “settle their fears upon” (Gilmore 2003, IX). Like all water beings these reflect both the material properties of water and the features of local life forms. Thus the Norse ship-swallowing *kraken* (something twisted) has the features of a giant octopus. The Icelandic *hafgufa*, a giant water being whose name, composed of *haf* (sea) and *gufa* (steam), gives form to the consuming sea mists that swallow ships. In the Caribbean, folk tales describe *Lusca*, a giant sea monster with the head of a white shark and multiple tentacles, who is said to be a nemesis for unwary sailors (Stephens 2022).



Figure 10 Scylla with kētos (sea monster) tail and dog heads, ca. 450-425 BC. Red-figure vase. Louvre. Wikimedia Commons

In Homer's *Odyssey*, the goddess Circe warns Odysseus about two monstrous sea beings that guard a narrow strait: Scylla a multi-headed serpent with jaws that snatch and consume passing sailors, and Charybdis, a whirlpool that swallows ships whole [fig. 10].

Therein dwells Scylla... an evil monster, nor would anyone be glad at sight of her, no, not though it were a god that met her. Verily she has twelve feet, all misshapen, and six necks, exceeding long, and on each one an awful head, and therein three rows of teeth, thick and close, and full of black death... By her no sailors yet may boast that they have fled unscathed in their ship, for with each head she carries off a man, snatching him from the dark-prowed ship. But the other cliff, thou wilt note, Odysseus, is lower... beneath this divine Charybdis sucks down the black water. Thrice a day she belches it forth, and thrice she sucks it down terribly. Mayest thou not be there when she sucks it down, for no one could save thee from ruin... Nay, draw very close to Scylla's cliff, and drive thy ship past

quickly; for it is better far to mourn six comrades in thy ship than all together. (Homer, quoted from Murray 1919)

Sea serpent beings simultaneously give form to anxieties about the ocean's propensities to swallow those attempting to enter its waters, and to larger fears about mortality and the inevitability of being consumed by death itself. These fears are beautifully encapsulated in Melville's *Moby Dick*, in which the monstrous white whale provides a multivalent image representing God, nature, the ocean, and fate. Pursued by the obsessive Captain Ahab, Moby Dick sinks the whaling vessel, *The Pequod*, with "infernal aforethought of ferocity", and drowns all of its crew except for the narrator. Ishmael is filled with "nameless horror" at the sight of the white whale, caused in part by the "intelligent malignity" of the monster:

Nor was it his unwonted magnitude, nor his remarkable hue, nor yet his deformed lower jaw, that so much invested the whale with natural terror, as that unexampled, intelligent malignity which, according to specific accounts, he had over and over again evinced in his assaults. More than all, his treacherous retreats struck more of dismay than perhaps aught else. (Melville 1851, n.p.)

The monstrous sea recurs in multiple literary contexts. In a very different style, John Wyndham's tale *The Kraken Wakes* (1961) links the seas with alien beings in outer space. Having invaded the Earth, the aliens colonise the oceans, sending out vast tentacles to drag people into the water. Then, in response to being attacked with nuclear bombs, they change the climate, raise the sea levels, and literally drown humankind.

The visual arts similarly communicate the terrors of being swallowed by the deep. Describing the fate of the *Méduse*, shipwrecked on its way to Senegal in 1816, Théodore Géricault's painting, *Le Radeau de la Méduse* (Raft of the Medusa) shows the desperate terror of the survivors abandoned on a hastily constructed raft [fig. 11]. In 1819 the French painter Eugène Delacroix, was so shocked by this image that he fled from the gallery where it was being exhibited. Similar horror was induced by Turner's painting *The Shipwreck*, which recalled the sinking of the *Earl of Abergavenny* near Weymouth on 4 February 1805.



Figure 11 Théodore Géricault, *Le Radeau de la Méduse*. 1818-19. Oil on canvas. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Wikimedia Commons

6 The Agent Sea

If we circumnavigate back to the port of departure for this essay, we can see that fears about the monstrous sea are carried across time and space by the reality that, materially and metaphorically, the sea can always swallow human lives. In 2023 the loss of the submersible *Titan* brought the reality of this oceanic agency home with dramatic force. The submersible, a tiny bubble of resistance to the powers of the sea, disintegrated while carrying wealthy tourists into the depths to survey the wreck of the *Titanic*. The journey aimed, ironically, to satisfy their abiding fascination with that earlier expression of hubris. Yet the intense curiosity still engendered by a ship swallowed by the sea over a century ago persists precisely because of its builders' certainty that the *Titanic*, seen as an apotheosis of human technology, was 'unsinkable': a certainty shared by the builders of the *Titan*. Hardy's poem about the 'vaingloriousness' of this belief remains apt:

In a solitude of the sea
Deep from human vanity,
And the Pride of Life that planned her, stilly couches she...
Over the mirrors meant
To glass the opulent
The sea-worm crawls - grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent...
Dim moon-eyed fishes near

Gaze at the gilded gear
And query: "What does this vaingloriousness down here?"
(1923)

The fate of the *Titanic* and its miniature emulator highlights the eternal tension between the sea's capacities to become a life-swallowing 'chaos monster' and human attempts to defy death and maintain stability and order. It reminds us that water is not a passive subject of human will, but always a co-creative - or destructive - actor in our multiple relationships with the non-human domain. Joseph Conrad's writing illuminates this agency. He personified the sea winds and their different characters, and the overwhelming power of the ocean itself.

For what is the array of the strongest ropes, the tallest spars and the stoutest canvas against the mighty breath of the infinite, but thistle stalks, cobwebs and gossamer? Indeed, it is less than nothing, and I have seen, when the great soul of the world turned over with a heavy sigh, a perfectly new, extra-stout foresail vanish like a bit of some airy stuff much lighter than gossamer [...] Gales have their personalities, and, after all, perhaps it is not strange; for, when all is said and done, they are adversaries whose wiles you must defeat, whose violence you must resist, and yet with whom you must live in the intimacies of nights and days [...] [Following a storm] I looked with other eyes upon the sea. I knew it capable of betraying the generous ardour of youth as implacably as, indifferent to evil and good, it would have betrayed the basest greed or the noblest heroism. My conception of its magnanimous greatness was gone. And I looked upon the true sea - the sea that plays with men till their hearts are broken, and wears stout ships to death. Nothing can touch the brooding bitterness of its heart. Open to all and faithful to none, it exercises its fascination for the undoing of the best. (Conrad 2013)

For Conrad, the sea does not merely "undo the best" who venture into its embrace, it also assaults the land:

[The West Wind] is the war-lord who sends his battalions of Atlantic rollers to the assault of our seaboard. The compelling voice of the West Wind musters up to his service all the might of the ocean. At the bidding of the West Wind there arises a great commotion in the sky above these Islands, and a great rush of waters falls upon our shores. (Conrad 2013)

In a recent essay on Conrad's writing Maya Jasanoff considers how the agency of the sea appears in a contemporary world:

The 21st-century economy depends more than ever on ships, which carry 90 percent of global trade. Sending data ‘into the ether’ often means sending it through cables laid across the sea floor, just like the telegraph. The ocean also shows the failures of progress. It is where thousands of refugees drown trying to reach prosperity. It is where slavery and piracy flourish in the face of modern law. It is where industrial chemicals and plastics pollute and destroy ecosystems. And it is where, with rising sea levels, the planet pays us back even beyond Conrad’s imagination for our embracing fossil fuels over the enduring benefits of sail. (Jasanoff 2013, n.p.)

Human fear of the monstrous sea is most clearly revealed in societies’ material efforts to defend *terra firma*. The term ‘bulwark’ (from Middle English *bulwerke* and early Dutch *bolwerk*) is most often associated with ships, and describes the sides of the vessel above the deck. But it is also used to refer to sea walls and port fortifications and, metaphorically, to describe any social or material barrier protecting against invasion. This “scheme transference” (Bourdieu 1990) highlights the precarity of the shore and communicates a sense of how, on a global scale, the land provides humankind with a (putatively) ‘safe’ material haven between oceans of potential chaos.



Figure 12 Lighthouse, Phare du Jumont, Brittany. Wikimedia Commons

A similar message is communicated by lighthouses [fig. 12]. Until rendered obsolete by radar and other emergent technologies, these held a key role in societies’ relationships with the sea: guiding ships safely to harbour; standing with phallic pride as bulwarks against invasion; and maintaining sentinel surveillance over the ocean with a searching ‘eye’ of light. Lighthouses are boundary markers between land

and sea and the guardians of *terra firma*. As my colleagues and I observed, in an interdisciplinary conversation about light:

The potential for lighthouses to encapsulate ideas about light and dark as a matter of life and death is compounded by another major dualism: their position at the edge of safe and solid land where it meets the dark formless deep... The lighthouse is a sentry that defies the chaos of death, a concrete material bastion against fluidity, against dissolution into non-material being. This highlights the role of lighthouses as part of the essential infrastructure that maintains both material and social order. (Strang et al. 2018, 23; see also Bachelard 1983)

In this sense, lighthouses are part of the material activities through which societies seek to concretise their particular visions of order. In Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox's work on infrastructure, roads cast a net of social, political and material control over landscapes (Knox 2015; cf. also Larkin 2013). So too do communications technologies, fences and the dams and concrete river banks constraining freshwater flows. Precisely the same intentionality attends the building of sea walls, flood defences, harbours and other barriers aiming to keep the sea from invading and overwhelming *terra firma* (Helmreich 2019). Like other material culture imposing human will on the environment, aspirations to gain control over the sea raise similar issues about "infrastructural violence" (Rodgers, O'Neill 2012) and the concomitant costs to ecosystems and their human and non-human communities (Strang 2017).

Many physical defences against the sea are built in response to traumatic incursions [fig. 13]. The Japanese government began building sea walls following a major tsunami in 1933. These were breached when a (magnitude 9) earthquake in March 2011 caused a tsunami that engulfed many coastal towns and villages with waves rising to nearly 70 feet in height.

March 11th, 2011... Mother Nature ripped her fingers through the northeast region of the country and caused a whole nation to shake... The closest thing at hand for any kind of news source was a mobile phone... the first thing we saw was a map of Japan flashing incessantly - the whole of the east coast from Hokkaido right the way down to the Kansai area was lit up all red. Alarms wailed. One announcement later and we learnt that the Tohoku region had been completely ravaged in an instant. (Lucas 2011)

At a cost of over 1.4 trillion yen (\$ 13 billion USD), approximately 145 miles of sea walls, some of them three stories high, have been built or are under construction along the coast of Japan [fig. 14]. But these



Figure 13 Print illustrating Meiji Sanriku earthquake and tsunami in 1896. UBC Library. Wikimedia Commons

walls are controversial: they have been imposed by the central government despite protests from coastal communities who argue that such vast infrastructure destroys their lifeways, have multiple negative impacts on coastal ecosystems, separate them from the sea both physically and visually, and make them feel imprisoned. It has also been suggested that sea defences provide a false sense of security, delaying decisions to evacuate coastal areas in response to tsunami warnings, when “waves of a scale similar to the surge in 2011 are expected to overwhelm the structure anyway” (Kawaguchi, Suganuma 2021, n.p.).

What ambivalence this problem reveals. On one hand are passionate desires to connect with the sea: to swim in the amniotic embrace of this vast salty womb; to fish in it, sail across its surface, and delight in its shimmering presence. On the other is terror: the fear of the monstrous sea and the consuming waves that might, at any time, emerge from its bottomless depths to invade the shore, smash houses into matchsticks, swallow human sacrifices, and render futile all attempts to maintain material stability.



Figure 14
Japanese sea wall.
Asahi Shimbun
file photo

7 Conclusion

There is no resolution to this conundrum: life sits precariously on *terra firma*. In some cases, where rising seas threaten to swallow coastal and island communities, there are few choices beyond fleeing to higher ground or wholly abandoning traditional homelands. What is really needed, globally, is an urgent change in direction to halt the fossil fuel burning and land clearance that is driving climate change and causing sea levels to rise. However, even with a super-human collective effort (which seems painfully elusive), this cannot be achieved within a timescale that will prevent harm, or remove the likelihood that some communities will be – are being – forced to leave their homes.

There are more subtle choices to be made about how much coercive material control societies should try to impose on the material world. Nations must consider the wider social and ecological costs of merely continuing, doggedly, to build coastal bulwarks against chaos. In Japan, a few communities defied the central government and rejected sea walls in order to maintain their traditional lifeways. But such choices entail accepting a considerable degree of risk.

Such difficult decisions point to the importance of alternative ‘green’ solutions that aim for mutually beneficial human-non-human

relations. Many coastal areas used to have quite effective non-human defences, such as extensive mangroves and wetlands that helped to dissipate the force of incoming waves. All too often these marine mitigators have been removed and replaced by concrete developments bringing urban structures right down to the shore. But mangroves are vital in providing safe nursery areas for marine life, and coastal wetlands comprise some of the Earth's richest ecosystems. There is much to be said for reinstating them and creating soft buffer zones, and, rather than building sea walls, focusing on 'green engineering' such as artificial reefs that, as well as absorbing the force of incoming waves, can create biodiverse undersea habitats.

Of course the same argument can be made for reviving wetlands and forests comprehensively throughout river catchments, to steady the freshwater flows that with increasing frequency overwhelm concrete river banks and flood low-lying urban areas, many of which are located in deltas also vulnerable to sea incursions. Here too there is much evidence that it is very costly to exert coercive control over water bodies rather than nurturing healthy ecosystems and making room for water's normal behaviours. A useful model of alternative thinking is provided by the Dutch *Ruimte voor de Rivier* (Room for the River) project which is currently removing tightly constraining dykes and providing space and renewed habitats into which water flows can expand (Dutch Water Sector 2021).

In human relationships with both fresh and salt water bodies there is much potential to achieve better partnerships with the non-human domain, and with water's creative and destructive forms of agency. Rather than frantically building barriers against the monstrous sea, societies might do better, in the long term, to accommodate and mitigate its capacities for chaos by restoring the coastal and marine ecosystems that mediate between the oceans and *terra firma*.

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