

# The Urban Amphibious

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We are in the middle of the biggest reappraisal of how historians should approach watery topics since the days of Fernand Braudel. Signs of disquiet go back at least to Daniel Vickers' 1993 review essay 'Beyond Jack Tar'.<sup>1</sup> Vickers questioned whether maritime history as such was a worthwhile proposition and noted that there was no body of 'maritime theory' to inform it, to supply important debatable propositions, or to help organize a body of scholarship that engaged in productive dialogue.

In recent years, the pace has intensified. There has been, of course, a 'Marcus Rediker effect' within the larger discipline, drawing people not educated within maritime history to the subject matter, yet not all with Rediker's exact interests and concerns. This parallels the increasing number of academics who work on port towns and coastal matters but who migrated there from anthropology, philosophy, architecture, 'blue' or 'wet' humanities, gender studies, film studies, leisure studies, and even criminology.<sup>2</sup> John Gillis' work forms only the most visible part of a rising tide of environmental history-oriented studies.<sup>3</sup> To suggest that maritime history *already* includes—as a matter of definition—'the study of man's relationship with the sea in all its facets, with all its connections' would miss the

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point.<sup>4</sup> The new scholarship is raising a host of issues and themes that have never been analytically central to maritime history. Indeed, many of us have encountered puzzled reactions to projects that seemed to be too maritime to some, and hardly maritime at all to others. This is work that is, too often, not intelligible or classifiable according to the received categories.

Some maritime historians have characterized the new developments as a sign that other scholars are finally catching up to where *they* had been all along.<sup>5</sup> I would argue that this is a profound misreading of where the historiography stands now, and where it is headed. Consider how much of the new scholarship displays a radical discontinuity with earlier work. One of the clearest indicators of the deep dissatisfaction with the category of 'the maritime' is that a range of scholars, each working independently, have devoted great effort to articulating completely new terms and concepts for what concerned them most, including Christer Westerdahl's 'maritime cultural landscape', Poul Holm's deployment of '*kystkultur*', David Jarratt's 'seasideness', Gerard Le Bouedec's 'paramaritime', and Michael Pearson's 'littoral society'.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, scientists and planners with watery interests speak of the 'urban ocean' and formulate intentionally unsettling slogans like 'look at the world as a gulf'.<sup>7</sup> While the term itself is not a new coinage, the recent popularity of 'sailortown' in academic studies also marks a complete revision, not to say reversal, of the priorities of most earlier work on seafarers.<sup>8</sup> It may be helpful to imagine a Venn diagram with coastal approaches sitting alongside neighbours such as maritime history, but scarcely overlapping with them in terms of sources, methods, research questions, or priorities. After a certain point, it is more practical to accept the emergence of a new and coequal subfield, rather than trying to shoehorn these jarring departures into a maritime framework that was not designed to accommodate them.

It is no secret that my initial formulation of 'coastal history' was written *against* oceanic history and *against* many of the manifestations of maritime history as I had known it.<sup>9</sup> Coastal history, I suggested in 2007, could reaffirm the local, the adjacent, and the domestic. Perhaps, in an era of gigantic globetrotting projects that often looked at the largest migrations or the most widely traded commodities, it was micro-history for watery topics. Some of the early adopters of coastal history found it helpful precisely for its small scale, or at least the ease of up- and downscaling that it permitted. Thus Julia Leikin began reinterpreting the history of the Russian Empire in relation to the not-quite-oceanic spaces of the Aegean and the Caspian, while David Worthington tackled firths

and ferry crossings.<sup>10</sup> Coastal history in this vein marked a departure from the heavy emphasis on deep water and extreme mobility that had become familiar in the 1990s and early 2000s.

What distinguishes the coast, beyond this necessary recalibration of scale? John Gillis, in his essay ‘Don’t confuse coasts with shores’, contrasts the *coast* as human, tampered artefact and the pristine *shore* untrammelled by engineering.<sup>11</sup> This is a somewhat stark opposition, especially given that there are few pristine shores left to study. There may also be situations where we do, in fact, want to blur the distinction between the natural and the cultural, the ‘fluctuant’ and the engineered; geographers invented the term *cultural landscape* some time ago for that very reason. A crisp contrast between the cultural coast and the natural shore, however, may be a useful starting point for thinking about what coastal history’s unique contribution will look like.

Whose culture, though? There is some need for a counterbalance against some of the more nostalgic tendencies in recent scholarship. Consider this memorable anecdote from Michael Pearson about the coastal present in India: ‘A beach scene frequently found in Goa—and in other beach resorts on the west coast, such as Kovalam—is portly Western men in G-strings self-consciously helping traditional fishermen haul in their nets, which may contain enough for one meal. Their bikini-clad women enthusiastically take video pictures of this picturesque scene.’<sup>12</sup> It is striking to compare this with similar passages in the last chapters of two sweeping, big-picture histories, Gillis’ *The Human Shore* and David Abulafia’s *The Great Sea*. Gillis warns that ‘the coast has become a place with no memory of itself’ leaving a space where ‘tourism and recreational activity have colonized the shores’ and ‘work has been replaced by consumption’.<sup>13</sup> Abulafia strikes a more ambivalent note, deploring mass tourism but also dissecting some of the reasons that it has taken one form or another, distinguishing (for example) between what motivates nudists from Scandinavia versus fans of Elizabeth David’s cookbooks, or admirers of the novel *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin*. His chapter title (‘The Last Mediterranean, 1950–2010’) is nevertheless a sombre one.<sup>14</sup> The common pattern is to assess recent trends in terms of the ruined, the inauthentic, the empty, or some combination of these.

Is sun-and-fun tourism, the rise of container shipping, and the prevalence of aeroplanes for long-distance passenger travel basically putting historians of the coast out of a job? These strong reactions are unintentionally revealing of how deeply our conceptual categories were tied to particular

situations ('the busy waterfront') or transport regimes. If, for example, the Mecca pilgrimage in the Indian Ocean region no longer involves multiple stages of seaborne travel, and specialized pilgrim brokers to smooth the process, does that really mean—as Michael Pearson has suggested—that the Indian Ocean itself has been bypassed and is today less meaningful? To say that *something* was lost is, no doubt, accurate; to say that *everything* has been lost bears the marks of a debilitating nostalgia.

Put a somewhat different way, if we write off today's coast as moribund or inauthentic, what are we missing out on? We need look no further, for instance, than the history of gender and sexuality to see how contemporary controversy and moments of doubt and introspection also provoked a reappraisal of a host of different elements from the past, including primary source evidence, that had been hidden in plain sight.

As a thought experiment, it is worth posing the question: What would happen if we recognized the analytically interesting dimensions of our dynamic and troubled present, and drew inspiration from them for research ideas, rather than depicting the coastline we see today as the nullification of what had gone before? In this chapter, I will explore where that line of reasoning might lead.

### FORESHORE, OFFSHORE, ESTUARY: TOWARD A COASTAL VOCABULARY FOR THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

A flexible framework for the urban amphibious would be one that is not unduly wedded to a particular time period or level of technology. We need, then, a somewhat more generic vocabulary. Ideally, the terms would also be as value-neutral as possible; coastal activity could mean fishing, warehousing, or caulking, but it could just as easily involve tanning, surfing, and eco-adventuring.<sup>15</sup> It would be as open to a sailor's wife, or to woman who ran her own dockside tavern, as it would be to a merchant or a sailor.<sup>16</sup> It would also be receptive to contact and competition between altogether different modes of coastal activity, as when dredging a channel to facilitate the passage of pleasure craft disrupts the flow of sand to replenish a beach, or plans for offshore wind farms and tidal energy plants jostle against the redevelopment of a 'rust belt' waterfront area as a luxury resort.

With all this in mind, I have proposed a trio of terms, which I called *the coastal-urban forms*: the urban foreshore, the urban offshore, and the urban estuary.<sup>17</sup> I appropriated and modified these terms, of course,

from the natural sciences, where the littoral zone necessarily refers to something different, as a way to be more flexible across time, space, and cultural difference than more familiar standbys such as ‘water-front’, ‘harbour’, ‘sailortown’, or even ‘port’ itself. That said, I must preface any further discussion by emphasizing that my intent was primarily to provoke discussion, disagreement, comparison, and contrast. In Daniel Vickers’ spirit, we cannot have a cohesive field and coherent debates without some theorist who is willing to be usefully wrong. Nor was my list of terms ever intended to be final. Postulating *at least three* urban coasts at the outset makes it less likely that coastal history will be reduced to mourning the loss, if a situation does not line up with a single Platonic ideal.

The *urban foreshore* is a relatively thin strip of territory that is principally concerned with the needs of arriving strangers. It may welcome them, orient them, or address their immediate needs, whether personal or commercial. Notoriously, this might involve pawn shops, taverns, and brothels. However, the urban foreshore is also a public space that has often served as a site for spectacle and political display, including ceremonial ship launches and the reception of diplomatic delegations. In Europe, planners came to view water ‘as an urban space that, like a piazza, offered a visual prospect of other parts of the city beyond itself’.<sup>18</sup> Waterfront facades could impress visitors, or convey a more complex message, as in Peter the Great’s design of a new Baltic capital for Russia.

In the twentieth century, the industrial foreshore—perhaps most vividly represented by icons like Clydebank’s Titan Crane and Liverpool’s miles of docks—gave way gradually to other foreshores. Many waterfront districts that lost out to container shipping eventually reinvented themselves as pedestrian-friendly areas that encouraged museums, aquariums, amusement parks, performance spaces, hotels, and areas for fashionable shopping and eating, still taking advantage of the proximity to water in various ways. There is room for debate about continuity versus discontinuity, but it is possible to write the history of an urban foreshore over a very long period as a series of reinventions.

Perhaps the most important urban foreshore in recent years has been the beach. Narratives of beach history often succumb to the temptation of focusing primarily on the history of swimwear and sexual self-expression. A rather different narrative involves the history of the sand underfoot.<sup>19</sup> According to Lena Lenček and Gideon Bosker, Miami Beach rivalled the ‘Egyptian pyramids in scope, engineering, and the

sheer number of its builders'.<sup>20</sup> Many modern beach resorts are artificial creations, and even those that were not originally have come to rely on replenishment techniques. To preserve their apparently pristine appearance and combat the inevitable erosion by wind and wave, beaches require 'grooming' and more invasive measures including 'sand jacking' and 'geotextile revetment'. Although the scientific community quickly understood that these measures were futile, political pressure led the US Army Corps of Engineers to spend almost one billion dollars over the second half of the twentieth century on restoring sand to beaches that would only lose it again in short order.<sup>21</sup> This bizarre activity makes a kind of sense in light of the tracts of expensive real estate whose value relies on the survival of the beach in its current form.

Considered globally, the massive redistribution of sand to underpin real estate speculation has only accelerated in recent years. It would be difficult to pin down an exact figure for how much sand is used annually for beaches, artificial islands, and land extension projects, as sand is also used extensively in the cement industry. Also, a great deal of sand extraction is carried out illegally, making it difficult to even arrive at a useful overall figure. However, Indonesia's claim that 'sand miners have completely erased at least two dozen islands since 2005' rings true, especially given that Singapore—where that sand allegedly wound up—has a stated, public goal of expanding to 30% beyond its original size by the year 2030. Having alienated its immediate neighbours, Malaysia and Indonesia, with its appetite for sand extraction, Singapore has turned further afield to cash-poor countries such as Myanmar and Cambodia. Projects on this heroic scale transform two coasts at once, reconfiguring one littoral region, at the risk of great environmental and economic upheaval, to benefit property speculators in another.<sup>22</sup> Singapore's twenty-first-century foreshore is its iconic new 'Gardens by the Bay' development. The gleaming, futuristic 'supertrees' and rainforest-friendly greenhouses ringed by upscale shopping malls and luxury apartments have quickly become the public face of the city-state, but awed visitors are not reminded that they are standing on what developers euphemistically call 'reclaimed land'.

The most visible use of dredged sand in urban spectacle, of course, is 'The World Islands' project in Dubai. In contrast to waterline spectacles like naval reviews, 'The World' is visually satisfying only if seen from above. Since both Dubai's iconic skyscrapers and the sandy archipelago

are intended as platforms for pricey real estate, it is hard to say whether the view from one is meant to enhance the other, or vice versa. Of course, promoters could rely on aerial snapshots, Google Earth images, and even a time-lapse photography ‘watch it grow’ featurette compiled from NASA satellites to disseminate images of the ‘The World’ and the nearby, larger ‘Palm Islands’ to an admiring global audience. The Atlantis Hotel, which gives its address as simply ‘The Palm, Dubai’, includes some underwater suites with panoramic windows. Judging from the promotional materials, at least, the view from these windows is always packed with colourful marine life passing by. A single night in one of these underwater suites costs around \$5000. While the economic and political underpinnings of Dubai and—for example—eighteenth-century St Petersburg are clearly not the same, there are interesting aspects of continuity in the foreshore function, including the element of architectural shock and awe.

It would be difficult to keep track of these kinds of developments if we defined the foreshore primarily, or exclusively, in terms of its passenger- or cargo-handling capacity. There are other ways to measure foreshore activity. A graph showing the overall trends over the last hundred years, including the redistribution of sand, the change in the price of coastal real estate, and the overall shift of world population toward the coast, would underscore the points I have made here: the explosive growth of the urban foreshore is one of the great stories of our time.

While the concept of an *urban offshore* may sound like a contradiction in terms, zones of exception have long performed important work in urban settings. Quarantine areas helped keep disease at bay while permitting the movement of people and goods; some societies kept disruptive foreign influences corralled in another sort of quarantine, the circumscribed trading enclave.<sup>23</sup> These two examples suggest an important point about the urban offshore: it is often quite nearby, and its adjacency is part of its function. Specialists in island studies have written about the many possible uses of this kind of ‘near abroad’ for some time. For example, the island nation of Bahrain is, today, joined to Saudi Arabia by a long bridge. On weekends, tens of thousands of Saudis cross the bridge and enjoy a laxer regime (for example, on the regulation of alcohol) than they can at home.<sup>24</sup> It is also possible for a government to decree a mainland area *to be* offshore for legal purposes; this process of excision is what Godfrey Baldacchino has called ‘idiosyncratic governance’.<sup>25</sup>

Even before the crisis associated with the Syrian refugees, the use of idiosyncratic governance to reroute seaborne migrants to containment areas (and legal limbo) was becoming increasingly common.<sup>26</sup> Australia's 'Pacific Solution' to migrants launching from Indonesia involved holding them on places like Christmas Island, where mainland Australian legal protections would not apply. In the Mediterranean, relatively short distances encouraged migrants to pay for passage even on leaky and poorly maintained boats. Lampedusa, a tiny Italian island within striking distance of Tunisia and Libya, drew international attention as the terminus—or intended terminus—of the world's deadliest illegal migration route. The surge of refugees from the Syrian war nevertheless caught Europe unprepared; coastlines along the Aegean became the scene of macabre spectacles, epitomized for many by the photograph of the washed-up body of the toddler Alan Kurdi. The distances in the Aegean were even shorter than those separating Italy from Africa, with some Greek islands plainly visible from Turkish beaches and others just over the horizon. Hundreds of thousands of people crossed the Aegean in 2015, leaving a 'life jacket mountain' on one beach in Lesbos. The logistical challenge at the local level was, of course, daunting, although the residents of Lesbos were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for their humane response.<sup>27</sup>

At the other extreme, the walled-off migrant camps at Calais present the inhumane face of idiosyncratic governance. Positioned at a key ferry crossing within sight of Dover and the French opening of the Channel Tunnel, Calais attracted migrants hoping to cross to the UK. Some of them, would, instead, spend months or years in unsanitary camps, frozen between jurisdictions. While offshoring people in this way must have seemed politically expedient to decision makers who did not have to live near the site, confining thousands of human beings in the middle of a transport hub and densely populated area inevitably involved riot police, razor wire, and seething tensions. Meanwhile children in the camps, according to a UNICEF report, were at the mercy of human traffickers and subject to many kinds of abuse, including sexual molestation.<sup>28</sup> With refugee numbers worldwide now at their highest levels since the end of the Second World War, these dangerous 'zones of exception' on the coast are becoming all too typical.

The third coastal-urban form, the *urban estuary*, resonates with themes familiar in the historiography of the cosmopolitan port towns of the Levant and of Southeast Asia. There is a helpful distinction to be



made between the welcoming behaviour of the urban foreshore, which corresponds more to the ancient ‘trade truce’ or what the sociologist Elijah Anderson has more recently dubbed ‘the cosmopolitan canopy’—with all its tent-like associations of flimsiness, situation-specificity and short duration—and the deeper, slower processes of admixture.<sup>29</sup> We might associate the urban estuary with the production of new dialects, with extensive borrowing of vocabulary and concepts; hybrid cuisines and musical traditions; syncretic religious experiments; and even new ethnic groups like Eurasians, Peranakans, and Luso-Africans. A cosmopolitanism of convenience, which may merely ‘tolerate’ difference, is not the same as a cosmopolitanism of conviction.<sup>30</sup>

As a metaphor, speaking of the slow-moving but rich and heavily weighted waters of the urban estuary also helps to direct our attention to the stubbornly local ethos of many port towns, which were not expressed in the language of the transnational or of hypermobility, but rooted in the identity of the neighbourhood or the town itself. When, for instance, Karl Bell writes about the superstitions and lore of sailortown that proved so remarkably resistant to the efforts of evangelicals and urban reformers, this has interesting affinities with the writings of Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff on the ‘Levantine’ as a distinct personality type and a set of values that could remain firm even in the face of the wild upheavals wrought by war and nationalism in the Middle East.<sup>31</sup>

Changes in technology have dried up most of the proximate causes of boisterous, libertine sailortowns as well as exuberantly diverse waterfronts (such as those of Kahanoff’s beloved Levant). Oddly, though, what has survived is the debate over what makes ‘bourgeois bohémias’ so special, so productive, and so creative. The ‘add weirdness and stir’ corporate culture of Silicon Valley, in our own era, has provoked fascination and widespread attempts at imitation. Without uncritically accepting the premise—advanced by Steve Jobs and others—that it was the Bay Area’s rich eclecticism, its counterculture, and its ineffable ‘coastal’ quality that made Apple and similar companies what they were, we can nevertheless explore the idea of ‘coastal exceptionalism’ in different contexts. The American example has received a great deal of attention in recent years, perhaps culminating in the denunciations of ‘coastal elites’ by Republicans in the 2016 presidential campaign and the loss of important Midwestern states to Donald Trump, but the opposition of one or more permissive, dynamic coastal cities balanced by a more politically conservative hinterland is not unique to the USA.<sup>32</sup>

Many accounts of the neoliberal world order, such as Saskia Sassen's, had assigned a prominent role to small enclaves of highly paid professionals, but considered the exact physical location of these enclaves as an arbitrary matter.<sup>33</sup> The pushback against the Trump Administration's Executive Orders on immigration in the early months of 2017 told a somewhat different story, with the attorneys general of two coastal states, Washington and Hawaii, leading the charge. Technology companies based in the Seattle area, which saw diversity as integral to their corporate identity and even to their business model, played an important public role in speaking out in support of the actions of their attorney general. In California, the idea of coastal exceptionalism seems to have shaped the initial political response both to the Trump victory and to journalistic coverage of the resistance there.<sup>34</sup> It may seem ironic to see cosmopolitan values defended, not in terms of universal philosophical principles, but as a stubborn local identity with deep historical roots, but perhaps this is the latest instance of the urban estuary in action.

In contrast to the familiar 'decline of the waterfront' narrative, today's urban foreshore, urban offshore, and urban estuary are—each in different ways—caught up in breakneck growth, furious and intensifying controversy, and undeniable relevance. If big-picture coastal histories wind up on a weak or lugubrious note, that is not the result of a lack of material for the last chapter. Just expanding on the themes I have discussed so far would leave readers with the impression that today's coast was entering one of its most dynamic eras to date. And that is *without* reckoning on the impact of climate change and sea level rise.

### COASTAL STUDIES AND THE PRESENT CRISIS

Today we are more coastal than ever before in recorded human history. While estimates of what percentage of the human population are now 'coastal' vary depending on definitions and methods used, the broad contours of the 'coastal population explosion' are there for all to see.<sup>35</sup>

Tragically, the great migration to the coast coincides with a lack of political will. It now seems clear that there will not be a pre-emptive, 'big fix' solution to climate change, but rather a patchwork of improvised, stopgap measures that will vary considerably from place to place. The challenge here is to preserve the elements that make cities livable and functional in a state of partial inundation.

At first blush, the temptation—particularly in richer, more developed areas—is to engineer toward a Venetian outcome, with today’s streets becoming tomorrow’s canals. This vision of an amphibious yet affluent city is attractive to existing real estate investors, who imagine that they can avoid catastrophic losses in a sea level rise scenario, but it does not speak to unexpected tidal surges, or to the ways that an elevated water table would impact existing sewage and water purification systems.<sup>36</sup>

One alternative to the total abandonment of a coastal community would be a tactical retreat to slightly higher ground nearby. The option of an incremental urban withdrawal has become newly plausible in the era of industrial-scale 3D printing, which is already used in war zones to instantly fabricate daily necessities and even entire buildings as needed.<sup>37</sup> When ISIS destroyed much of the ancient site of Palmyra in 2015, a serious discussion arose about the pros and cons of using 3D printing to build a replacement.<sup>38</sup> This complicates the argument for those who present even modest sea level rise as unthinkable because of the loss of monuments and iconic buildings. The possibility of replica streets and even entire replica cities will be embraced by advocates of a ‘muddling through’ approach.

However, the actual pace of sea level rise is difficult to predict. An abrupt inundation could make a mockery of plans to adapt on a street-by-street basis, and it could easily strike in a coastal region with limited resources. *The Guardian* offers this grim appraisal:

A recent report by Christian Aid places more than a billion people in coastal cities vulnerable to severe flooding and extreme weather due to climate change by 2070, with Kolkata, Mumbai and Dhaka topping the list. Many more people face the knock-on effects of severe flooding such as fresh water shortages, refugee crises and political instability.<sup>39</sup>

It is not difficult to imagine, for example, a tidal surge that affected South Asia’s entire coast at once, leaving any humanitarian response racing to beat the clock, with the neighbouring authorities best positioned to help facing the same unimaginable challenges themselves.

While a high-speed catastrophe on that scale is perhaps a low probability event, humanity’s coastal billion can reasonably expect a gradual water level rise, hitting the lower-income neighbourhoods the hardest, accompanied by cascading urban dysfunction. Despite occasional media reports that imply climate change would simply erase coastal cities, a

more plausible (and possibly long-lasting) transition state would be slums on stilts, or armadas of houseboats looking for a place to anchor. Some ‘floating slums’ already exist and function, the result of bitter necessity and the ingenuity of the residents.<sup>40</sup>

Without knowing the exact form that sea level rise will take, we can at least begin planning ways to build up the amphibious resilience of existing communities. The Nigerian-born planner Kunlé Adeyemi envisions floating cities of inexpensive A-frame houses, schools, and hospitals, all powered by solar panels on the roofs, while the Dutch firm DeltaSync proposes a modular, expandable settlement of floating geodesic-dome pavilions connected by roaming ‘podboats’.<sup>41</sup> The first international conference on amphibious architecture was held in Bangkok in 2015. The organizing body defined amphibious architecture to include structures that would function equally well resting on a foundation of dry land, or floating.<sup>42</sup> Just as past generations living in earthquake-prone areas took it for granted that all structures would be designed with an earthquake in mind, we are most likely transitioning into a period in which amphibious architecture, and amphibious urban planning, will become pervasive and routine in coastal areas worldwide.

There will be a wide variation in approaches to funding and governance that may equal the variation in technical methods. It is revealing that the Seasteading Institute, a leading force in the effort to untether cities from dry land, was founded by Patri Friedman, the grandson of the libertarian economist Milton Friedman, with funding from the internet entrepreneur and unorthodox political thinker Peter Thiel.<sup>43</sup>

It is important, however, not to be so distracted by the urban planning proposals and utopian projects as to obscure the rough-and-tumble contests unfolding worldwide, with no referee or governing authority strong enough to adjudicate them. In Beirut, urban growth has continued undeterred by civil war and foreign invasion (or perhaps in certain ways even accelerated by them) and the stench from the Costa Brava landfill now greets passengers as they disembark at the international airport. This coastal landfill grew so large that it displaced a small beachfront area, poisoned the fish that local people used to catch, and even attracted swarms of gulls in such numbers that the birds themselves posed a hazard for aeroplanes trying to land on the adjacent runway.<sup>44</sup> Here, a concept like ‘coastal squeeze’—another new coinage—is very useful to describe the bitter competition for resources, attention, and space.<sup>45</sup>

Sea level rise will only make situations like this more common, and more urgent, by reducing the amount of available space in already heavily congested areas. We can expect to see stories about these unfolding confrontations regularly on our newsfeeds. The concept of coastal squeeze first appeared in the *Journal of Coastal Conservation*, but it translates very effectively into other disciplinary languages. It is a contest over territory (even if it is stated in tactful ways such as ‘managed realignment’ and the search for ‘resilience’) that is inextricably also a contest over people, power, and values. The question is more complex than ‘what can be saved’ or even ‘how much it would cost to save that’; rather it is ‘who decides what is worth saving’.<sup>46</sup> Engineers, entrepreneurs, and economists will undoubtedly have much to contribute, but the decision-making process should not be in their hands exclusively. Among other experts and stakeholders, people who study culture, society, and politics need a seat at that table.

## CONCLUSION

When I introduced the term ‘coastal history’ ten years ago, I emphasized the local, the adjacent, and the domestic. I envisioned an approach that had a lot in common with cultural geography, attentive to fine distinctions and gradations along the littoral spectrum. I would stand by this approach today, yet there is nothing *small* about coastal history’s potential, or about the potential of interdisciplinary coastal studies. In a world of crowded coasts and rising waters, there is a manifest need for a subfield where ideas from the humanities and social sciences meet the concerns of policymakers, the business community, grassroots citizen groups, and environmentalists. Of the newly coined terms that I have discussed in this chapter, it may be ‘coastal squeeze’ that, in the long run, proves the most important of all.

Is there a risk, in conceding that the debate going forward will be over variations of coastal squeeze, that we have surrendered important ground before the battle has even begun? I would counter that it is precisely the complex and *contested* nature of engineered, managed, and refashioned environments that interests us. We could treat ‘coastal management’ as a dirty word (or the confluence of two dirty words), but we would be missing out on where a lot of the action has been, and will continue to be. The humanities and social sciences come well equipped

to analyse human behaviour, whether it involves building, consuming, representing, boundary drawing, resource grabs, or power plays. There is no reason that coastal history, because it starts with human impact as an expected part of the picture, must be uncritical or fatalistic. Anthropocene scholarship has certainly managed to adjust to a changing reality, without placidly accepting misguided geoengineering ‘solutions’ to climate change as a *fait accompli*.

Coastal history is perhaps most promising as a point of inflection between past and present on these issues. Historians of the beach can offer a deeper, critical perspective on earlier efforts to manage the coast and the consequences of picking winners and losers. For example, Caroline Ford’s book on the beaches of Sydney, Australia discusses a long history that includes fencing to tame unruly sand dunes, artificial barriers to protect anxious swimmers from shark attacks, and the human consequences of ‘development’, including the displacement of aboriginal populations as well as non-aboriginal groups of ‘campers’ or squatters from desirable seafront property.<sup>47</sup>

Despite the potential intellectual, political, and policy benefits of a fresh approach to coastal issues at this historical moment, progress has been slow. In the absence of an academic brand that can serve as a rallying point, many of us—particularly early career researchers—have struggled in our efforts to communicate why our work is relevant, necessary, and indeed part of a larger movement. Establishing a ‘watery-but-not-maritime’ subfield with its own toolbox of coast-centred terms is a necessary first step. Logically, an interdisciplinary academic journal, regular conferences, and a book series would follow.

I would advise against spending a great deal of time debating at the outset exactly where the coast begins or ends, or which historians are coastal enough. The most effective path forward is to *ask the coastal questions*, in as many variations as we can, and see where that leads, and who steps forward to join the conversation. For us, the aphorism rings true: there is nothing so practical as a good theory. If coastal history becomes the place where the interesting debates happen, the subfield will flourish and draw in new talent who will keep that restless, questioning spirit alive. For all of the reasons that I have discussed in this chapter, it seems clear that the twenty-first century will be a golden age for coastal studies in some form. It remains to be seen which disciplines in the humanities and social sciences will seize the moment, and under what banner.

## NOTES

1. D. Vickers, 'Beyond Jack Tar', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 50(2) (1993), 418–424.
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