Introduction

Kären Wigen

To judge from movie marquees, tourist brochures, or bestseller lists, seascapes loom large in the public imagination. Yet on the mental maps of most scholars, oceans are oddly occluded. Geographically marginal to the grids of academic inquiry, the watery world seems to fall between our conceptual cracks as well. When not ignored altogether, maritime topics are routinely relegated to subfields on shipping or migration, pirates or fisheries. That ocean basins are sliced in half on our classroom maps only reinforces their academic invisibility. By contrast, the prestigious, central fields—as defined not only by cartographers but by doctoral committees, job listings, and publication categories—are overwhelmingly conceived in terrestrial terms.

Yet current events have a way of challenging scholarly convention. Rediscovered as a crucial space of globalization—and one with a fragile and imperiled ecology of their own—oceans have swung insistently into view in recent years. And slowly but surely, scholarly attention has followed. Tentatively at first, in experimental forums, new networks for scholarly exchange have sprung up around maritime basins, crossing traditional boundaries of state and civilization as well as discipline. The issues raised vary from field to field, as do the methods for addressing them. Broadly speaking, historians tend to view the ocean as a highway for intercontinental exchange, highlighting transoceanic interactions and the creole cultures they have spawned. Social scientists more often approach the sea as an arena of conflict, whether for trading privileges or resource rights. And humanists prefer to probe the elusive contours of the oceanic imaginary in film and fiction, map and metaphor.¹ Despite their disparities, what all such efforts share is a shifting of the frame: an effort to move the seas from the margins to the center of academic inquiry. In their different ways, each holds up a “seascape” to scholarly view.

Most such efforts to date address individual oceans, and for good reason. After all, outside the hydrological sciences, ocean-oriented research is only now evolving out of established fields that have historically been rooted
on land: imperial histories, national literatures, and, latterly, feminist, labor, and postcolonial studies. Rare is the scholar who trained within the still nascent domain that might yet become maritime sociocultural studies. Rather, for the most part, individuals who originally studied one or another landed society have at some point followed their subjects out into adjacent ocean space. The result is a burgeoning but fragmented body of work, framed within individual basins: the enclosed waters of the Black or Mediterranean Sea, the wider Atlantic, the Indian Ocean hub, or the sprawling Pacific.² Yet the kinds of problems that draw scholars into maritime topics in the first place tend to resist fragmented inquiry. Since seafaring humans are caught up in truly global webs, even a colossal fragment like the Pacific Ocean is not big enough to contain most oceanic themes. In practice, the skeins of maritime connection — whether in the realm of idioms and ideas, diasporic dispersals, imperial projections, scientific linkages, or strategies of resistance — quickly transcend the confines of a single ocean.

The conference at which the present volume was born was inspired by a bold but simple proposition. What if members of these emergent water-based communities were put in conversation with each other? What would happen if ocean-oriented scholars were brought together, not around a single body of water, but across far-flung places and times? Such a venture would be, of necessity, institutionally ambitious. To canvas such a fragmented field required appeals to every Area Studies association in the United States. In addition, to underwrite an inter-area conference of this kind required unprecedented cooperation and support from the Ford Foundation, the Community College Association, the American Historical Association, and the Library of Congress. But the undertaking was ambitious — and risky — in an intellectual sense as well. Bringing people together around an open-ended theme like “seascapes” was one thing; producing significant results was another. Absent the common ground provided by communities of specialization, would meaningful scholarly conversations take place? And if they did, would those conversations resonate beyond the conference itself?

The three dozen scholars who converged on the Library of Congress for a snowbound weekend in early 2002 answered the first question with a resounding “yes.” The conferees, while biased toward history, represented a remarkable range of disciplinary, area, and institutional affiliations. Some had lived on the littoral or studied seafarers for years; others had been pulled into their topics almost inadvertently, drawn to the water in pursuit of migratory subjects. For most, it was exhilarating to encounter others who were equally compelled by the sea. But it was also exhilarating to discover an intellectual field where the fundamental questions were all still in play.

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This was one conference whose participants did not share—and could not imagine—a single set of axioms, priorities, or procedures. Even the historiographical reference points of the contributors were widely divergent. While it became clear that scholarly canons are forming for individual basins (particularly in the relatively well-developed Atlantic and Indian Ocean literatures), interocean paradigms remain very much up for grabs. The only assumption shared by the “Seascapes” conferees was that oceans matter. The consensus animating the meeting—and undergirding this volume—was that maritime peoples, environments, and dynamics deserve to be investigated, theorized, and taught in their own right.

How that might be done is another matter, as this diverse collection reveals. The first set of papers (by Gillis, Van Tilburg, and Gaynor) explores a handful of critical constructs for maritime studies: islands, littorals, ships, and sea space itself. The second set (by Phillips, Casale, Gould, and Karras) examines empires, tracing a series of efforts by territorial states to project their power across water. The third group of authors (Ward, Cobley, Faussette, and Balachandran) draws attention to sociologies on ship or at port, while the fourth group (Tai, Shapinsky, and Rediker) examines the worlds of smugglers and pirates, quintessential maritime transgressors. Before turning to the larger issues that these essays collectively engage, a brief overview of each is in order, if only to convey the richness and texture of the empirical settings in which scholars are developing their perspectives on seascapes, maritime histories, littoral cultures, and transoceanic exchanges.

CONSTRUCTS

The exploration of fundamental oceanic constructs begins with John Gillis’s expansive meditation on what he calls “Atlantic Oceania.” Gillis calls on us to rethink early modern history from an island-centric perspective. He contends that the years from 1500 to 1800 constituted a distinctive moment in the European geographical imagination: a time when islands took on an importance that they only later ceded to continents. This “Age of Islands” was discernable in multiple registers, from literature and maps to wars and revolutions. Renaissance intellectuals tended to think of the world archipelagically, imagining island utopias well into the nineteenth century. At the same time, European expansion overseas took the form of archipelagic empires, creating a capitalist geography where access to goods mattered more than control of territory. As the critical nodes in far-flung networks of trade, Gillis tells us, “islands were the most traded, fought over, renamed, cherished, and forfeited lands in the early modern period.” His richly footnoted
survey sketches the crucial roles that islands played in early modern commerce, navigation, and migration, as well as in the political and industrial revolutions that brought the era to a close.

Hans Van Tilburg directs our attention to another fundamental category: the ship itself. For Van Tilburg, maritime vessels are not just tools of transoceanic exchange, but products of that exchange as well. Through the contrasting histories of the California junk and the Hawaiian sampan, his essay reveals the striking range of trajectories for particular types of craft. In California, the junk effectively vanished. Once the “physical end of a very long trade diaspora” that had turned the Sacramento delta into a frontier of maritime China, the West Coast junk fleet was effectively set adrift by the anti-Chinese Exclusion Acts of the 1880s and 1890s. Forced sales put the boats into the hands of owners who lacked the skills to reproduce them, so that today they remain solely as archaeological specimens. In Hawai‘i, by contrast, the sampan survived enlistment by the U.S. Navy in the 1940s to emerge in the postwar period as an “engineered cultural hybrid,” manned by multinational crews. Both cases challenge scholars’ habit of assigning national labels to different types of maritime craft. We emerge from this lively essay with a new appreciation of the ship as a mobile, mutable cultural form. As Van Tilburg pointedly concludes, the attempt to nationalize inanimate objects in the effort to maintain boundaries at sea can only work against cultural exchange.

The final contribution to this section is by Jennifer Gaynor, who attends to notions of the sea itself. Her chapter considers how conceptions of sea space have been integral to political imaginaries in Southeast Asia, where geopolitical notions of place have long included not just a homeland but the seas as well. In modern Indonesia an increasingly territorialized notion of space has in turn shaped ideas of ethnic difference and the position of “sea people” in particular. The keyword here is “nusantara,” a concept that originated in fourteenth-century Java as a term of reference for other islands, but that evolved over time into a more encompassing and decentered concept denoting the archipelago as a whole. Borrowing the terminology of Thongchai Winichakul’s Siam Mapped, Gaynor argues that nusantara came to constitute the “geo-body” of Indonesian nationalism: an abstract geographical signifier that was a model for, rather than a model of, what it purported to represent. And having been transformed into an icon of pan-Indonesian nationhood for anticolonial nationalists, it subsequently became an idiom through which the state could claim ownership of all material resources within and below the waters between the archipelago’s islands. Cartographic conventions aided in this appropriation, for whereas places
on land stood for various groups of people, the same principle could not be applied to people associated with the seas. “Sea people,” apparently lacking a particular place on land from which they might claim to hail as a group, came to occupy a kind of structural blind spot, their lack of a homeland marking them as “gypsies” in the colonial imagination.

Gaynor’s paper ends with a meditation on the erosion of local autonomy in the Southeast Asian littoral, a tragedy with parallels in many other places. As political imaginaries become increasingly territorialized, she finds, people who make their living on and from the sea have paradoxically been marginalized from the political process. For while hardly isolated from other people and places, they are isolated in relation to administrative structures and centers. She observes that sea people in modern times, to their detriment, have not formed the kinds of ethnic patronage networks that are supported by territorial administrative structures. Such was clearly not the case for those metropolitan power-holders who carved out successful maritime empires, however, as our next contributions make clear.

EMPIRES

Part II turns to the transmarine empire, a geopolitical form that has arisen repeatedly across the last millennium of global history. The chapters in this section offer, as it were, a top-down perspective on seascapes: the perspective of metropolitan elites who attempted to project their power across the water. Focusing on the Iberian empires, Carla Rahn Phillips reminds us that this was no easy task. Her fundamental question concerns the daunting challenge of colonial logistics in the age of sail: how were early modern states able to sustain global empires, she asks, at a time when transoceanic exchange was both infrequent and fragile? As she points out, the Spanish empire in the Americas held together politically for more than 300 years, in a space that came to include over 12 million square miles and over 15 million people. Given the slowness of early modern communications and the vulnerability of seafaring craft, how was that possible? Rahn’s answer highlights “the intricate fabric of public and private traditions and institutions that Iberians carried with them overseas.” Crucial here were traditions of seafaring and mariners’ guilds; an empire-wide framework of written law; a variety of models for colonial rule, from captaincies to royal charters; a modular bureaucratic structure of local councils and committees; a common Catholic faith; elastic networks of community and kin; and above all, the unifying figure of the king. Rahn insists it was not the crown that controlled the colonies, but rather the colonists who controlled the colonies in the name
of the crown. What empowered them to do so, in the end, was their strong sense of inhabiting a shared emotional space with kin and countrymen at home, despite the vast oceans in between. That conviction, she concludes, was essential to the Spanish empire’s remarkable resiliency.

The next essay offers yet another perspective on early modern seaborne empires, focusing on their intimate relationship to geographical discovery and reconnaissance. Giancarlo Casale draws attention to the striking parallels between the European discovery of the Atlantic realm and the simultaneous Ottoman discoveries in the Indian Ocean. These parallels have gone virtually unnoticed, he claims, because modern scholars have assumed that the Ottomans were already familiar with the Islamized realm into which they advanced after 1517. On the contrary, Casale’s careful research reveals that the Ottomans were surprisingly ignorant of medieval Islamic geography—a body of scholarship that was nearly as foreign to them as it was to their European contemporaries. In a sense the Indian Ocean realm was as much a “New World” for the Ottomans as the Americas were for the Portuguese. Moreover, the first eyewitness accounts of the Indian Ocean by Ottoman authors bear a striking resemblance to contemporary Western accounts of the Americas, reflecting similar concerns with assessing the economic resources, technological sophistication, and military potential of the newly discovered territories. Casale’s chapter chronicles how quickly Ottoman scholars moved from a state of almost total ignorance about the world of the Indian Ocean to a comfortable familiarity, the product of both firsthand experience and sustained intellectual commitment. In short, the “age of discovery” was not just a European phenomenon; it was a process whose limits far exceeded the traditional boundaries of western civilization.

The third paper in this section, by Eliga Gould, maps the legal geography of the English-speaking Atlantic during the long eighteenth century. Gould examines the idea that the western and southern Atlantic lay beyond the pale of European law, constituting a region where law-abiding peoples were free to engage in practices that would have been unacceptable in Europe. This notion, shared by Americans and Britons alike, was critical to both English-speaking empires in the wider Atlantic, where “Weber’s theoretically distinct categories of legal accumulation and lawless aggression remained explicitly intertwined.” This geographical construct manifested itself in the doctrine of autonomous spheres: one, the European quadrant of the globe, where the law of nations applied, and another, beyond the so-called lines of amity, where they did not. Such a division made it possible for Europeans to act with impunity, and even to wage war on each other, in the
Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans, while maintaining peace (or "amity") in Europe and its nearer waters. In a word, might made right beyond the line.

Although the doctrine of autonomous spheres lost its formal legitimacy in European international relations after the mid-eighteenth century, the presence of overlapping claims, and the absence of clear boundaries, allowed people on the margins of competing empires to continue engaging in local violence and undeclared warfare. This was especially true at sea. “Not only were ships thought to be places of rough manners and casual violence, but the waters through which they sailed often lay beyond the control of even Europe’s mightiest navies.” In dealing with native peoples, lawless behavior was further justified by the conviction that indigenous societies had no law. Gould concludes by showing that Americans found reasons of their own to perpetuate the geographical division between Europe and the western reaches of the Atlantic world.

The following essay, by Alan Karras, probes a case study from a maritime zone of continually contested sovereignty: the colonial Caribbean, where French, Dutch, British, and Spanish interests collided. Karras argues that Adam Smith and the Scottish Enlightenment provide a crucial intellectual context for thinking about this fragmented maritime world. As he wryly notes, “no place within eighteenth-century Atlantic America can better illustrate the human propensity to ‘truck, barter, and exchange’ by challenging legal restrictions than can the Caribbean islands.” Aided by physical distance from their respective metropoles, white islanders in the region readily transgressed any policies that interfered with local business, turning Caribbean ports into places where locals trafficked in legal interpretations as well as in consumer goods. This chapter elaborates a three-part typology of Caribbean ports, distinguishing officially recognized trading sites (those endowed with customs houses responsible to the metropole) not only from licensed “free ports” (where duties were typically much lower) but also from a third type of settlement, where trade was neither officially monitored nor legally recognized. Monte Christi, a vibrant example of the latter, became the site of a flourishing illegal trade. But it did so at the expense of the law. Karras concludes that the mercantilism of the Atlantic world came to an end because illegal smuggling ate away at its foundation, undermining the colonial political framework. As he memorably puts it, “the propensity to consume, in short, trumped any laws put in place to regulate it.”

Taken at a conceptual level, these papers identify four signature features of transmarine imperialism. Phillips’s focus on maintaining symbolic and affective bonds, Casale’s highlighting of exploration and discovery, Gould’s
clarification of legal frameworks, and Karras’s emphasis on commercial regulations together begin to inventory the parameters and preconditions for the transmarine projection of power. Whatever elements one might add to this list, there is no question that social networks, geographical knowledge, legal codes, and customs regimes have all been essential elements of the imperial arsenal. Nor can there be any doubt that each has posed special problems at sea. These papers sketch the contours of a fascinating new field focused around just such problems.

SOCIOLOGIES

Part III, on maritime sociologies, shifts our gaze toward the very different “bottom-up” seascapes of working men and women. Kerry Ward’s essay kicks off this section by plunging us deep into Eliga Gould’s lawless zone. Ward’s research on the Cape of Good Hope provocatively challenges prevailing conceptions of global oceanic space in the early modern period. In contrast to schemes that characterize port cities as either “Asian” or “Atlantic”—and that often go on to identify the Asian sphere with commerce and the Atlantic with war—her careful research illuminates Cape Town’s position as both an oceanic and a historiographical crossroads. Lacking any indigenous connection with Indian Ocean shipping networks (or, indeed, any local orientation toward the sea), Cape Town grew up specifically to serve European ships that traveled between the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. This transregional role gave it a highly transient population; the settlers, slaves, sojourners, sailors, soldiers, convicts, and exiles who thronged the city’s streets were usually on their way to somewhere else. Ward shows why it is crucial to remap the port city within sojourning networks if we are to grasp its social character.

The next essay focuses on another mobile maritime community, that of Caribbean sailors. Informed by Paul Gilroy’s work on the Black Atlantic, Alan Cobley asks why Caribbean seamen have had such a disproportionate influence in the worlds of labor organization and black political consciousness. His suggestive chapter begins by stressing the dire labor needs of military and merchant shipping, especially in the second half of the eighteenth century. Given the low pay, bad food, heavy work, harsh discipline, and high mortality rates that came with the job, recruitment was never easy, and captains struggling to fill out their rosters turned to whatever supplies of labor they could find. As a result, large numbers of unfree blacks throughout the Caribbean went to work on either military or merchant ships. After the British Emancipation Proclamation of 1834, the sea continued to provide one of the few viable avenues for black employment. The rise of steam from the 1840s onwards only raised the demand for non-British laborers, who
were typically hired to fill the dirty and dangerous positions of fireman, stoker, coal trimmer, cook, and steward. Over the course of the nineteenth century, these seafaring laborers joined a many-streamed diaspora, dispersing along all the international trade routes and across all the oceans of the world. Cobley suggests that Afro-Caribbean seafarers may have been socially, culturally, and ideologically prepared for this experience in ways other groups were not. Wherever they went, West Indian seamen founded local families and created creole communities. Yet it remained for the Caribbean islands themselves, with their strong face-to-face networks centered on family, church, and school, to provide the social base from which black seafarers would shape the language, culture, and “idiom of freedom” throughout the Atlantic world.

Risa Faussette hones in on another group of Caribbean maritime laborers, the waterfront workers of the West Indies. Trapped in the lowest-paid sector of the workforce, but exploiting their strategic location in the commercial nodes of maritime empires, these men emerged as the vanguard of the urban labor movement throughout the Caribbean basin. Faussette’s story begins in the late nineteenth century, as the withdrawal of British capitalists from the Caribbean allowed American investors to move into an increasingly neglected and easily penetrable colonial zone. West Indian workers migrated along the resulting cusp between a declining British imperium and an emerging American maritime state in the western Atlantic world. Yet the coming of American capital failed to alleviate their impoverishment, setting in motion a pattern of recurrent inter-island migration as working men searched for a living wage. Their circuit of migratory labor, she finds, established lines of communication between various enclaves along the maritime avenues of trade, giving West Indian migrants a cosmopolitan awareness of labor issues beyond their region.

One of those enclaves was Panama, whose massive canal project in the first years of the twentieth century created a temporary surge of labor demand. As canal construction wound down after 1903, authorities took aggressive policies to depopulate the zone. In response, West Indian workers developed strategies and institutions to mobilize rapidly for protest. By reading working-class newspapers of the era and conversing with radical sailors passing through the Zone, Faussette tells us, Caribbean dockworkers were able to grasp that port-city laborers occupied a pivotal place in international commerce. Well aware of victories won around the world by similar laborers (reflected in the higher wages paid to their counterparts in other Atlantic ports), the men understood that their work was of strategic importance in the emerging structure of international commerce. Yet their movement was
ultimately broken, prompting a massive exodus to the United States — and revealing the need for scholars of labor history, like the people they study, to cross national boundaries.

G. Balachandran wraps up the section on oceanic sociologies by drawing attention to a group of whom remarkably little is known: the so-called lascar sailors from India. Aside from recent histories that attempt to recover a multicultural past for Britain, he finds, Indian seamen have been almost invisible in academic literature. The colonial state did everything it could to render their everyday presence invisible; shipowners resisted any inquiries that might increase the danger of regulation; and white British sailors resisted incorporating colonial sailors into their unions. Yet Balachandran finds that their very neglect paradoxically enabled Indian seamen to evade both the state's and the unions’ disciplinary regimes until the eve of World War II. It also gave them the autonomy to adapt in their own ways the many ideas, beliefs, and modes of action that they encountered in the various worlds through which they passed. His essay probes the complexities of these men's growing colonial subjectivity in the wake of World War I: a double-edged sword that brought rights and opportunities even as it imposed new disciplines.

Together, these papers shine a powerful light on the subaltern worlds of the maritime working class. They remind us that transmarine empires everywhere have been built on the backs of laboring men and women, often under brutally coercive conditions. Whatever other operations such empires deployed, all have depended on forceful systems for drafting and disciplining a large, dispersed, and mobile labor force. At the same time, every case on offer here highlights the resilience and resourcefulness—in short, the agency—of the workers themselves. If keeping maritime manpower in line proved problematic, it was largely because sailors and dockworkers inhabited an expansive social world; not just capital and commodities, but visions and strategies of resistance as well moved easily along the sea lanes. As a result, the maritime world created both brutal disciplinary regimes and spaces of refuge for those who would flout the law. It is to this maritime underworld that the last section of the anthology turns.

**Transgressors**

The final set of papers deals with maritime subversives. Emily Sohmer Tai opens this section with an essay on piracy in the medieval Mediterranean, challenging scholars to conceive maritime predation as a means both of drawing and contesting boundaries. Tai’s research reveals a deep cleavage
between land-based political interests, which sought to extend their jurisdiction over the sea, and commercial interests, which typically resisted this territorialization. Maritime theft in the medieval Mediterranean, she argues, signaled contention not merely for material resources but for political advantage as well. The doges of Venice hired corsairs—effectively state-sanctioned pirates—to assist in their project of “marking water.” Genoa likewise used corsairs to extend its control to Levantine island outposts. While merchants are often said to have welcomed such expeditions as protection from piracy, Tai finds evidence that merchants were ambivalent about the territorialization of their commercial highway, and may have shared the pirate’s mental map more than that of the prince. Maritime experience, she suggests, invited Europeans who relied on the sea to imagine political space as fluid and fragmented, even as the sea afforded them mobility to transcend political rivalries in ways their inland kin could not.

Peter Shapinsky follows with a fascinating look at medieval Japanese piracy. In the fragmented world of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Japan, pirate-lords wielded formal authority over maritime space and populations at the heart of the archipelago. In analyzing their social and economic roles, Shapinsky eschews a terra-centric perspective, from which pirates are seen as seafaring bandits on the periphery. Instead he looks on them as littoral powerholders who engaged in both licit and illicit maritime activities. A pirate-lord’s domains typically consisted of a network of fortifications and private toll barriers located at various choke points of the Inland Sea. They typically oversaw trade in marine products (including shellfish, fish, and seaweed), as well as providing protection for merchant and pilgrim ships, but most of their wealth came from anchorage and safe-passage tolls. This pioneering essay shows how armed denizens of the medieval Japanese coastlines took advantage of their maritime superiority to negotiate the continuum of pillage and patronage, carving out their own space in a parcelized polity.

Marcus Rediker closes the collection with a disturbing look at crime and punishment in the early modern Atlantic, a world of class warfare where disciplinary brutality met with violent resistance. In Rediker’s account, ships and harbors were not only tools of trade but sites of bloody public ritual, where merchants and pirates were locked in a “dialectic of terror.” In the mid-eighteenth century, pirates were hunted with a vengeance and, when caught, were hanged with great fanfare. These public rituals afforded officials a chance to enact their power (and to instill fear in those sailors who yearned to join the pirate bands). Yet they might also afford the condemned a last stage for enacting defiance, mockery, and rage. For pirates knew well the uses of public theater. On the high seas, Rediker finds, rebel crews would
turn the deck of a captured ship into a stage for an oppositional ritual of their own, called the “Distribution of Justice.” In this symbolic inversion of power, abusive captains would be beaten in the same social space where they had inflicted punishment on their crews. Analyzing these reciprocal, if highly unequal, rituals allows Rediker to recast both ship and port as staging points for an early modern theater of terror.

LOOKING FORWARD

As these brief descriptions suggest, the research presented in this volume showcases a wide-ranging sample of work on maritime worlds. If the collection as a whole represents more than the sum of its parts, it is because these careful case studies provide tools for refining the still crude categories through which scholars are attempting to apprehend seascapes, maritime histories, littoral cultures, and transoceanic exchanges. It seems only fitting, then, to close this introduction by reflecting on how these studies might be put into dialog with other seminal works in the growing field of interocean studies. By my reading, the papers here highlight three interconnected challenges for that nascent field: those of space, time, and knowledge.

First, with regard to space. Approaching human society from the water is prompting scholars to think afresh about such basic elements of geography as distance, scale, and boundaries. For starters, these papers make it clear that maritime social-cultural history as an analytical project requires an expansive spatial vision, extending not only from the ships to the docks but bridging multiple regions of the ocean and including littorals and their hinterlands as well. Beyond that dictum, however, generalizing about oceanic social geography is a dicey matter. When the medium itself is fluid and moving, what is a meaningful measure of distance? When a given littoral community may be engaged simultaneously in dockwork, near-shore fishing, and interoceanic voyaging, how are we to think about scale? When the same sea is both barrier and connector—an elusive target for legal regimes and police powers alike—how are we to think about boundaries? Finally, since meaningful regions of interaction at sea are seldom coincident with the reach of any single polity and its archive (as land regions often are), how is a scholar to demarcate an area of study in the first place?

If anything, these papers underscore the need to engage these fundamental issues of spatiality on a case-by-case basis. Among the many discoveries on offer here, perhaps the most important is the irreducible specificity of different maritime worlds. Particular seas have particular geographical configurations, and those differences of geography have historically trans-
lated into very different sets of possibilities and constraints for those who lived on or near their shores. Where some bodies of water are relatively enclosed, others are vast and open-ended; where some are crossed by predictable seasonal winds, others have more erratic weather. Likewise, where some have relatively small and steep drainage basins, others are connected by navigable rivers to millions of miles of productive land. This point has been raised eloquently by Alan Villiers, in his evocation of how geography has conditioned trade and empire differently in the North and South Atlantics. Villiers notes of the North Atlantic that the length of its vast coastline, the tremendous area drained by the rivers flowing into it (some four times that draining into the entire Pacific), the great inland bays and seas that open from it on both sides, the wealth and power of its bordering lands, the profusion of good harbors, and the richness of its fisheries have all combined to give the North Atlantic an irrefutable centrality in the modern capitalist world system. The South Atlantic, by contrast, is a very different division of the ocean: its coastline is simple, its fronting continents are narrow, it harbors no great inland seas, and few great rivers empty into it.³ But geography plays no less a role on a smaller scale. As the chapters by Shapinsky, Karras, and Tai in this volume reveal, the intricacies of a particular coastline, the distribution of islands, and the location of strategic choke points shape not only shipping circuits but patterns of empire and piracy as well. Due to these and other differences, the pattern of interaction in any one sea-region may be useful to scholars elsewhere less as model than as foil.

One can hardly help recalling here the scholarship of Fernand Braudel, whose musings on the relationship between water, land, and history in the Mediterranean have inspired virtually all scholarship in this area to one degree or another. Gaynor discusses Braudel’s paradigm explicitly, noting that a model developed for an enclosed basin does not easily apply to the much more open-ended waters of Southeast Asia. There, in contrast to the historical Mediterranean, maritime communications did not lead to long-lived transmarine polities. Yet the absence of political unity did not render this or any other ocean a “vast stretch of neutral water.” On the contrary, Gaynor finds that even waters that do not share the enclosed geography of the Mediterranean can nonetheless offer symbolic and material resources for landed states — and thus remain hotly contested in imperial, national, local, and ethnic contexts alike. In short, it may be best to think of spatial models like Braudel’s as akin to the oceangoing craft studied by Van Tilburg: simultaneously vessels and products of exchange, they must remain open to transformation and modification in the process of their travels.

Closely related to the issue of space is that of time. Compared with the
stable conventions for marking eras on land, maritime periodization is remarkably fluid. Part of the reason is that maritime life itself has taken shape in a sort of floating temporal interstice. Before the modern era, the rhythms of life around a given ocean followed discrepant temporal schemes, dictated by the individual communities, empires, or state systems along its various shores. With mastery of currents and winds, however, the connecting function of the sea itself helped to push those discrepant timelines into rough synchronicity, first across individual basins and later across the globe. Where oceans once divided, seas came to connect. After the fifteenth century, an increasing density and scale of interregional interaction led to the forging of a single world system, and oceans were a major site in which that process played out. Indeed, the modern world system has been defined as an oceanic system. This shifting role of oceans at once permits and requires creative thinking about time, rendering periodization a high-order conceptual challenge for ocean-centered studies.

One scholar who has devoted extensive thought to this matter is geographer Philip Steinberg. Steinberg schematizes the social construction of ocean space over three millennia, first under a trio of distinctive nonmodern societies (in the Mediterranean, Indian Ocean, and Melanesian worlds) and then under successive global capitalist regimes (merchant, industrial, and postmodern). Intriguingly, he finds that each of the latter echoes features from one of the earlier regional models. From roughly 1500 to 1800, Steinberg tells us, the primary construction of the global sea was as a Mediterranean-style “force-field.” Channeled circulation was a defining political-economic activity under mercantilism, and so the states of the era constructed the sea as an arena in which they claimed stewardship rights to distinct ocean routes, but did not attempt outright possession. In the industrial capitalist era, the key economic activity shifted from circulation across space to investment (and disinvestment) in specific production and consumption sites. Since these sites were located almost exclusively onshore, the deep sea became defined as a great void, idealized as outside society. This posited a global sea less on the model of the Mediterranean than on that of the premodern Indian Ocean: an asocial space between societies. Over time, however, Steinberg sees the latest iterations of capitalism as giving rise to increasingly rigid territorialization of the sea—a practice with premodern parallels in Micronesia.

Complementing Steinberg’s scheme is a landmark essay by Michael Geyer and Charles Bright on the history of globalization. In Geyer and Bright’s narrative, the mid-nineteenth century represents a turning point, both for the evolution of the world system in general and for the role of oceans in particular. Until that point, they write, global development rested
on a series of overlapping, interacting, but basically autonomous regions, each engaged in processes of self-organization and self-reproduction. In this world, oceans served above all a distancing function. Contacts between the key regional centers extended across space through physically liminal zones — oceans and deserts — which doubled as social buffers (inhabited by microstates, pirates, and nomads). These zones of transition were crucial both for the conduct of commerce and for the exercise of power. After the crises of the mid-nineteenth century, however, deeper and more frequent contacts among all regions forged a new synchronicity, as regional interactions were lifted to an unprecedented pitch of “sustained, continuous, competitive, and often violent contact.” In the process the connective function of oceans came to superecede their earlier distancing function. The margins and peripheries that had once assured distance evaporated, the spaces between regions of once-autonomous development collapsed, and even the self-contained mental worlds of the various regions gave way to “new global imaginations.”

The contributions in this volume, if put into conversation with Geyer and Bright’s geo-history of globalization and Steinberg’s models of maritime interaction, can be used to flesh out periodization schema both for individual seas and for interocean history on a global scale. Tai and Gould, for example, document important moments in the forging of transmarine ties across individual basins (the Mediterranean and Atlantic, respectively). Gillis’s chapter, for its part, elaborates on the role of islands in the mercantilist era’s “empires of access,” while Gaynor’s narrative documents the erosion of seafaring peoples’ control over the littoral zone under the modern nation-state. Clearly, however, much pioneering work remains to be done in this area. In a sense, charting the historical contours of maritime sociocultural development is as complex an undertaking as charting the geographical contours of the seas themselves.

While many more issues are raised by the chapters in this book, the last one I will address here is the question of knowledge. The history of the sea is not only a material story; it is an intellectual story as well. In the context of the current project, issues of knowing are raised in at least two discrete ways, for oceans come into play here both as objects of knowledge and as sites where knowledge is produced and circulated.

Oceans as objects of knowledge figure prominently in the contributions by Casale, on Ottoman exploration and geographical writing, and by Gaynor, on Indonesian ideas of sea space. Where Casale emphasizes the accumulation of objective knowledge of particular currents and coasts, Gaynor stresses the ideological nature of oceanic constructs. Seeing maritime “unity” as itself an ideological notion, Gaynor focuses on how social divisions are ef-
faced within this language, and on how political visions are, in effect, political imaginaries that “use different versions of the space of Southeast Asian seas—different seascapes—as their vehicle.” Strikingly, the force of cultural ideas is no less evident in Casale’s story of Ottoman exploration. After pointing out the parallels between European and Ottoman cartography in the sixteenth century, Casale closes by ruminating on a signal difference: the decision of the Ottomans not to adopt the printing press (a decision that was itself rooted in religious belief). Over time, the absence of printing would be felt to a greater and greater extent, for as European geographical works grew exponentially through the seventeenth century, Ottoman production of discovery literature began to taper off. Intriguingly, Casale assimilates this development into a trans-Mediterranean “intellectual division of labor”: one in which Ottomans and Portuguese alike—as expansive frontier states—produced new geographical knowledge, while the task of compiling and publishing was left to more developed printing centers in Italy and Germany. In tandem with Gillis’s observations on the signal importance of print media in diffusing island images during the early modern period, these findings draw attention to the role of media in shaping not only oceanic knowledge but maritime ideologies as well.

The second agenda for an intellectual history of maritime worlds is to consider the sea as a site of intellection. Important here is the role of oceans not only as highways or conduits for the movement of ideas, but equally as spaces of imaginative projection. The highway or conduit function is highlighted in the second half of this volume in the half-dozen studies that illuminate the social and political networks of the maritime working class. Both Cobley and Faussette depict Caribbean seamen and dockworkers as fully plugged in to far-flung information networks, confirming Gilroy’s characterization of the African diaspora as an “internment” demarcated less by its roots in the African continent than by a living tissue of ties across the Atlantic Ocean. Likewise, Karras and Rediker reveal a similar web of information and strategies as circulating in the Atlantic underworld of smugglers and pirates. Little wonder that the sea and the seaboard have often been cast as places of license, heresy, and sedition. Indeed, all of these contributions resonate with a central theme in maritime studies: the notion of the sea as a heterotopia. As many scholars have noted, marine-based social formations have long served as models for social change in landed societies. Islands in particular—as Gillis so vividly documents—have served as sites where new modes of freedom (and control) can be imagined and implemented. But as Rediker’s concluding chapter reminds us, it is crucial not to romanticize the
results. To borrow Steinberg’s formulation, maritime worlds have historically been arenas where modernity’s control-freedom dialectic is played out, rather than arenas where that dialectic is overthrown.⁹

Last but not least, it is worth considering the relationship between oceanic perspectives and scholarly knowledge. Most current categories of social analysis were initially developed to understand land-based societies. How those categories need to be transformed by perspectives from the sea—and how far they can be stretched, bent, and reworked to accommodate ocean-centered realities—is perhaps the most important unresolved agenda hanging over this collection. Balachandran’s description of lascar sailors would equally fit many of the other people who figure in these texts. “Neither peasants nor proletarians, palpably committed neither to ship nor harbor, sea nor land, port nor hinterland, town nor village, urban nor rural, industry nor agriculture, Asia nor Europe, ‘modern’ nor ‘traditional,’ [they are] distant stragglers after the neat categories that have helped to frame our social imaginations.” Whether this means that maritime scholarship can and should give rise to an alternative set of social categories is another question. Is it possible, as both Gaynor and Tai speculate, that common experiences at sea enabled sailors, merchants, and even pirates to develop a distinct subjectivity—one that resonated within their communities and their own life stories beyond their careers at sea? If so, will ocean histories yield new constructs and new metanarratives to frame our social imaginations? Or will their value lie rather in replacing such fixed categories in favor of discrepant temporalities and amphibious identities (both inside and outside modernity, as well as on and off the sea)? The answer to that question, like so many others raised in this rich collection, lies in the offing. May such questions prompt wider participation in this exciting project of scholarly exploration.

NOTES

1. Compare Steinberg’s insight that “three perspectives form the basis for most studies of human-marine interactions: the ocean as resource provider, the ocean as transport surface, and the ocean as battleground or ‘force-field.’” Steinberg accordingly prefers a tripartite model of the social construction of ocean space, one that simultaneously involves uses (political economy), regulations (territoriality), and representations (discourse). See Philip E. Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 11, 32.

2. For useful entry points into this “new thalassology,” see the lively review essays by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell (on the Mediterranean), Alison Games (on the


5. Steinberg, Social Construction of the Ocean; for a summary, see pp. 207–209.


