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The embodied spatialities of being in nature: encountering the nature/culture binary in green/blue space

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Abstract

The contact with nature provided by urban green and blue space is said to be beneficial for mental health, physical health, social contact and cohesion, and for learning and development among children. Yet the literature identifying these benefits fails to recognise that 'nature', as a category in binary relation with 'culture' (or 'humans'), is a cultural construct. Acknowledging this inevitably raises questions about exactly what 'contact with nature' in such spaces might consist in. Taking inspiration from more-than-representational and more-than-human geographies, this article uses Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to interrogate encounters with 'nature' through small boat sailing. I argue that being on a boat entails different *embodied spatialities of being* from terrestrial urban life, and that this heightens a sense of nature as Other. The nature/culture binary, while a cultural idea, is materially (re)produced through the ordering of space, particularly in dense urban areas. This implies that the significance of urban green/blue space may be not only the presence of non-humans (the green/blue), but also the nature of the *space* in which we encounter nature. There is, then, potential for cultural geography to contribute to a much more nuanced interrogation of how people experience urban green/blue space, foregrounding the cultural conditions that shape such experience.

Keywords

Nature/culture, phenomenology, green/blue space, embodiment, sailing, sea

Encountering Nature

Sometimes you just feel like you need to escape; to get away from the busyness of the city, to a place where nature has greater presence. And so it was that I found myself owning a boat, a means of escape.

A substantial body of literature has developed over the last two decades, across multiple disciplinary fields, asserting that contact with nature is good for us. The implications are clear: in an increasingly urbanised world, there is value in maintaining green and blue space in our cities. Access to such space benefits our mental health and wellbeing¹, restoring us from stress and mental fatigue², increasing our cognitive abilities³, improving our emotions and moods, and increasing life satisfaction⁴. It benefits our physical health, boosting cardiovascular and endocrine systems, and immune function⁵. Healing times are reduced, as are incidences of respiratory illness, allergies and obesity⁶. Access to green space provides social benefits, facilitating social contact and social cohesion, and reducing health inequalities⁷. Among children, access to natural spaces facilitates

learning and development⁸: through exposure to actual and perceived risks⁹; through physical and emotional challenge¹⁰; and through engagement of the senses to encourage movement, developing motor skills in the young¹¹. Such findings have begun to inform policy¹², and to appear in the popular press¹³. Nature is good for us, and that fact is becoming common knowledge.

For some extolling the virtues of green/blue space, at core is EO Wilson's notion of biophilia¹⁴; the idea that humans are inevitably and necessarily attracted to life. However, the majority of this literature refers only to access to green/blue space, 'natural environments' and 'contact with nature'. Nature unexamined; an unproblematic, all-encompassing, non-human Other¹⁵. Yet the concept of 'nature', in its binary relation with the category 'human', is culturally specific, characteristic of Anglo-European thought¹⁶, and perhaps uniquely so¹⁷. A cultural myth. The literature on nature and human wellbeing is biased towards the northern hemisphere, dominated by research in Europe and the United States¹⁸, such that the 'us' in the paragraph above is also culturally specific. Perception of both *separation from* and the need for more *contact with* nature are cultural constructions, functions of a shared *idea* of 'nature'.

And yet separation from, and contact with, nature are also experienced by individuals, perceived as real, illustrated by the opening lines of this paper. There is potential for cultural geographers to interrogate the ways this culturally specific 'separation from' nature is experienced, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of urban green/blue space and the benefits of nature. In this paper I seek to offer an alternative depiction of the experience of 'green/blue' space, via a phenomenological account of small boat sailing.

I take inspiration from a growing body of work exploring embodiment, emotion, affect and the materialities of the world; geographies that emphasise more-than-cognitive knowing in a more-than-human world. A key impulse in this work is a sense that *representation* can never adequately convey a world that is so much more; that disjuncture, an unbridgeable gap, exists "between the *language of the world* and the *language of the word*."¹⁹ The fullness of human experience in the world cannot be captured in words alone. Geographers have drawn on the relational ontologies of theorists such as Deleuze and Latour to better achieve a sense of humans-in-the-world; alongside, combined with, and shaped by non-human others of all kinds.²⁰ Non-representational²¹ and more-than-representational²² geographies have been at the forefront of this drive to rethink the constitution and experience of place, space, politics, environments and events: the *doings* of the world in their multifaceted, tangible and intangible wholeness.

These theoretical developments lend themselves particularly well to accounts of outdoor places and spaces, and encounters with/in/through non-human nature. Geographers have addressed an increasing array of such situations, from walking (on coastal paths²³ and in cities²⁴), mountain-biking²⁵, rock climbing²⁶ or rescuing²⁷ in mountains and uplands to kayaking ecotours²⁸, bodyboarding²⁹, surfing³⁰ and other geographies of the sea³¹. Social scientists working in sport and physical culture have concurrently developed similar interests³², seeking to access the 'unrepresentable' aspects of triathlon³³ and scuba-diving³⁴ experiences, and to understand experiences of 'nature' through physical activity programmes³⁵ or through river rafting³⁶, canoeing, sea kayaking³⁷ and windsurfing³⁸. I thus intersect with this literature on outdoor activities.

My approach is autoethnographic or 'autophenomenographic'³⁹, attending to my own experience through Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology⁴⁰. Some would say geography has moved beyond

phenomenology; the embodied, affective, non-representational geographies referred to above having been badged 'postphenomenological'⁴¹. Despite the phenomenologists' attempt to dismantle subject/object distinction, phenomenology retains a perceiving subject at its core, the existence of others granted only by this perceiving subject⁴². Yet I wish to (re)state a claim for the value of phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty specifically draws attention to nature's excess over the perceiving subject, always inexhaustible⁴³. Following this through, as I aim to demonstrate, the water environment itself simply will not allow its agency to be disregarded. For some this may not decentre the human subject *enough*. But if we are to understand how human subjects experience the nature/culture binary, human perception is of central concern.

Sundberg⁴⁴ questions the logic of trying to challenge the Anglo-European dualistic nature/culture ontology by continuing to draw on Anglo-European traditions of thought, of which Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is one example. However, Toadvine's reading of Merleau-Ponty emphasises that the sedimented habits of perception always *incorporate* the historical, cultural, economic, gendered, ethnic situation of the phenomenologist. A phenomenological account of nature cannot step outside of this: "if there is any access to nature, even as alterity, it will only be *through* our cultural mediations rather than apart from them"⁴⁵.

The account of nature produced in this paper is very much situated within Anglo-European, and particularly British, culture. I thus try to make minimal use of the universalising terms 'we' and 'our', unless highlighting that they should be read as situated within this cultural context. If sedimented habits of perception are culturally specific, this opens up the possibility that there is still scope for Anglo-Eurocentric theories such as Merleau-Ponty's to *further reveal* the ways in which this culturally specific nature/culture ontology becomes manifest. Rather than presenting a direct challenge to the nature/culture binary, then, I seek here to shine new light on this binary, highlighting the embodied experiences through which 'nature' is encountered.

The next section explains the methodological approach of the paper, and provides some contextual background. A phenomenological account of being on a boat follows, focusing on themes of embodied knowledge, embodied spatial awareness, and encounters with nature as other-than-human. Finally, I return to the nature/culture binary and consideration of urban green/blue space.

Doing boat things

The Rivers Tamar and Plym, in South West England, meet the sea at Plymouth Sound (Figure 1). Geomorphologically this is not a sound but a ria, a river valley drowned by rising sea level after Britain's last glacial phase. Between the two rivers lies the city of Plymouth, a city with enviable access (at least for some⁴⁶) to the water. The submerged river channel offers deep water for naval and commercial vessels within the natural harbour of the Sound. A nineteenth century breakwater provides additional protection from southerly winds. With the rivers either side, the city has something like 16km of waterfront. Alongside military and commercial uses, Plymouth Sound and its rivers provide a setting for a multitude of water-based recreational activities, on (e.g. sailing, water-skiing, kayaking), in (swimming, coastering), under (diving) and around (fishing) the water: a big, 'blue' playground on the city's doorstep.



Figure 1: Looking across Plymouth Sound (from east to west). The city is out of view to the right, the breakwater just left of centre.

This research did not start out as research. In July 2010, having lived in the city for some years, I acquired a boat⁴⁷, with minimal prior experience of sailing. The boat in question is a 27-foot (8.1m) motor sailer. With small sail area and an in-board 36 hp engine, optimum performance is achieved through motor and sail power combined. I rapidly discovered that boat-owning entailed participation in an unfamiliar lifeworld, one that I would adapt to in a multitude of ways. This included conscious and cognitive adaptation: accessing training in a variety of aspects of boating life (from navigation to motor maintenance) to help ensure safety; learning technical terms, yacht parts and actions associated with them. But there was also a less conscious, more-than-cognitive dimension to this lifeworld, and it was this that was the most profoundly different, in the sense of challenging the norms of my terrestrial urban dwelling.

This sense of ‘newness’ led me to want to record the experience, with no particular end goal in mind. I did this through a series of diary entries, written on computer as soon after events as was practicable; usually either once I returned home that day or the next. I wrote whatever came to mind about places, events, feelings and doings, trying to capture as much as I could. ‘Taking the plunge’ and acquiring a boat with little prior experience of sailing offers some justification for the empirical and theoretical approach. A cornerstone of phenomenology lies in epochē and bracketing⁴⁸, attempting to set aside prior assumptions and knowledge about a phenomenon, to approach it anew. Being new to sailing, I had little in the way of preconceptions to set aside. Vannini asserts that “it is precisely during the first one or two years of dwelling in a new place that a certain acuteness of observation and introspection is at its best, before things become too taken for granted”⁴⁹. By extension, it is when new to an activity or a practice that its peculiarities are most evident. My sailing is restricted to April through October each year⁵⁰, a seasonality that places

further constraints on my capacity to become familiar, and for this reason my account draws on my first five summers of sailing, 2010-15.

The focus here on embodied experiences of sailing is undoubtedly a product of developing familiarity with embodied, affective and non-representational geographies through that time period. Analysis involved initial reading(s) of the entire file of diary entries, identifying emerging themes. Paying considered attention to embodied experiences of sailing, identifying a sense of contrast with my urban everyday life, then led me towards literature on urban green and blue space.

This 'experience first' approach raises the charge of autoethnography being no more than introspective indulgence, an 'academic selfie' produced by those privileged to have the time, inclination and education to afford it⁵¹. Such privilege is important to acknowledge. I may not have had many preconceptions about sailing, but my academic interests have always centred around non-human 'nature' in one way or another. Still, this should not entirely negate the value of autoethnographic research. Academics are embedded in, and products of, culture as much as anyone else. My desire to 'get out of the city' reflects a milieu of influences: a mostly rural childhood and early adulthood; social context, working among colleagues who value outdoor experience; intellectual interests; but also a dominant cultural conception of nature as 'out there', away from the urban, free from human interference, sublime. And the sense of any narrative (including self-narrative) is formed in the telling⁵²; in others' responses to, and self-recognition in, the material⁵³. Triangulation thus occurs gradually, through the responses of others⁵⁴, including readers of this paper.

Ultimately, I aim here to demonstrate that understanding experiences of nature requires attention to the character of the space dwelt in, as much as to the presence of non-humans. Now, to the boat:

Being on a boat

Small boats require a particular way of being; cultivating and practicing a certain kind of body⁵⁵.

May 2011: I remember well how useless I felt in those first weeks of owning the boat. How clumsy. I couldn't do anything right – I couldn't do anything at all. I kept banging my head, every time we were on the boat, every time I tried to do something inside the cabin or move from one part of the boat to another. I still bang my head sometimes, but now I am reasonably capable on the boat. It's like I have learnt, but it's not just a cognitive how-to, it's just as much an embodied how-to.

May 2013: Saturday morning, we were on our way down the River Plym towards the Sound. The boat had just gone back into the water after some extended winter maintenance, and we had tied the halyards up to prevent them clanking on the masts while we worked in the cabin. I went on deck to rearrange them. One had become looped around the radar reflector, way up the mast. It looked problematic. I detached the two ends of the halyard from the mast, stepping back with one in each hand. Arms spread, holding the ends apart to make sense of what was where, my eyes followed the lines upwards. I raised my left hand slightly and flicked it, sending a ripple up the line. That unsnagged it. It struck me almost immediately that I hadn't thought at all during that

process. I looked up the line, saw, and moved. That was it. Somewhere my brain must have processed what I saw and turned it into action⁵⁶, but I wasn't conscious of that. There were certainly no words, no "If I...". See: Move.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology foregrounds embodiment. Our being-in-the-world is an embodied being. The body is the means by and through which the world is perceived and, equally, the world is our means of understanding our bodies. Perception and understanding thus inhere in the body-world intersection, our knowledge of the world predicated upon our bodily capacity to act in it. "Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of 'I think that' but of 'I can'."⁵⁷ I did not 'think that' the halyard could be unsnagged from the radar reflector if the line were moved in the right way; I understood that I could do it, experienced the "harmony...between the intention and the performance"⁵⁸. Understanding is embodied, and Merleau-Ponty thus challenges the Cartesian dualist ontology of body/mind, which situates the body as 'object' against a cognitive 'subject'.

He similarly challenges dualist notions of body/environment separation. The body-subject experiences the world and changes in response, primed to experience the world again – and so we develop 'habit', an understanding of *how to*, through the sedimentation of experience in our bodies. Not being used to sailing, my normal state of being was as a mobile entity in static spaces. Being in/on any form of transport changes that, but living⁵⁹ (rather than solely traveling) on the boat is a bit different. On the boat I am doing everything one might do in a caravan – cooking, eating, drinking, washing dishes, putting things in cupboards – as well as boat-specific functions such as getting fenders out of lockers or putting sails up or down. Being a mobile body in a restricted *and moving* space requires different corporeal knowledge. I initially did not understand *how to be* on a boat, and so my capacity for 'I can' was limited. I was clumsy, unable to function. That changed over time, as the constant motion of the boat and the movements through which I could function in/on it became sedimented into my body, became habit.

This is not to deny the role of cognitive, 'scientific' knowledge. Such knowledge helps to make sense of, and anticipate, the water environment:

August 2012: We head upstream in the afternoon and drop anchor in one of our favourite places, a big meander. We sit at the back of the boat, looking around, always slightly unsettled when first anchored. A successful anchorage is a coming-together of so many things: anchor placement; chain length; water depth; bedforms; tide changes; current; wind. If we want a good night's sleep we need to be confident that it is right. I look up- and down-river, taking in the meander, then comment: "We're too close to the edge". When the tide drops we will bottom out on the steeply sloped edge of the currently submerged channel. We need to be nearer the middle. We were starting to drag the anchor any way. So we move further into the river, set anchor, drag, set anchor again – got it this time. When the tide fell we could see that we had been right to move.

A depth-sounder is an essential piece of technology, revealing changing depths of water beneath the boat. But it shows changes in depth only in the direction in which the boat is moving. If we happen to be following a contour, the slope across that contour is invisible. Interpretation is thus necessary and, in the vignette above, it was my prior cognitive knowledge of fluvial geomorphology that gave me some sense of where the thalweg would be. But the implications return to embodiment: bottoming out on a steep slope would mean an uncomfortable night, at best. At worst the boat could end up on

its side. Similarly, scientific knowledge in the form of weather and tide forecasts are central in sailing. Knowing that wind and tide are in opposing directions means anticipating choppy waves, a much bumpier journey than when the two are aligned. *Understanding* scientific knowledge entails understanding corporeal implications. Meaning and materiality are inseparable⁶⁰.

Boat spaces

Being on the boat is to be in a confined space that is almost always in motion⁶¹. Coming to understand how to be on the boat, developing the habit of being on the boat, the body must take up both the motion and the space – or, rather, the space-in-motion. It is this that becomes sedimented into conscious and unconscious actions. Rather than being *in* space, our body *inhabits* space⁶². But at the same time as inhabiting this space-in-motion, through that very motion the body responds to space beyond the boat:

May 2011: A brilliantly sunny weekend in Salcombe, we are on a visitor mooring in the area known as 'The Bag', out of sight of the town. The place is busy, visitor moorings full. It's evening and I am in the cockpit cooking dinner. Sitting on the motor housing, which offers a convenient seat from which to use the hob, I have two saucepans on, rice bubbling in one and a chilli underway in the other. Another boat approaches. The man at the helm clearly realised that I was cooking: he slowed down to pass us, minimising the wash from his boat. I had seen him coming and so already had my hands on the pans to steady them, but I smile and wave thanks, appreciating his consideration. We rock gently from side to side – boat, people, saucepans – with the familiar clanking of the open cabin door rattling on its hook.

Just as the body/environment binary is problematic, the boat/environment binary breaks down. The lived space-in-motion of the boat is never bounded from its surroundings. The example above acknowledges human agency, but the motion experienced derives from a combination of the ways these two particular boats move in, disturb, and respond to, the water, along with the state of the water itself. Always the water. The constant movement of the boat ensures that non-human agency is ever-present, dominant. Sea: Move.

This extension of body to boat is also significant in the boat's mobility through space, its functioning as a mode of travel. Here the boat demands a different spatial awareness than I was used to. I was familiar with the spatially restricted territory of car or bus, constrained (mostly) to lanes, a narrow ribbon of permitted travel rendering the space of passing encounters with other vehicles largely predictable. The space of boats – the water space – is different. Other boats approach from all angles, varying in speed and intention. While there are rules, not everyone is familiar (or has regard for) them. Every encounter requires interpretation. Constant checks through 360° quickly become the norm as the possibilities for encounters are less bounded than in grounded motorised travel. A different lifeworld makes different spatial demands.

And then there is the 'invisible beneath'. The attention required of the car driver is predominantly two-dimensional: in front and behind; left and right at junctions. On a boat, the third dimension of 'below' becomes much more important, yet is largely hidden from view⁶³. In the immediate vicinity, the space beneath is rendered visible by the digital display of the echo sounder, and when this space is limited, the instrument becomes an obsession: *0.9m, 0.8m, turn one way, 0.6m – turn the other*

way quickly...The possibilities of movement across the visible two dimensions are constrained by the invisible beneath. Beyond the immediate location of the boat the chart encodes the terrain, revealing routes that may be possible, places accessible, at certain times only, dependent upon the tide. But whatever is below the boat can never be fully conveyed by such technologies. Just occasionally the water yields glimpses, hints of the unknown:

May 2013: The river was becoming a slow upstream flow, the tide having turned just an hour or so before. We were now travelling upstream with it. We passed the first of the huge naval ships, docked on the city side of the river to our right, alongside the enormous sheds of the dockyard. Cruised between the ferries that cross the river on their clanking chains, shuttling people from Devon to Cornwall, Cornwall to Devon, day and night. More naval vessels, more dockyard sheds and cranes to our right (Figure 2), the river to our left littered with small boats on their moorings. Suddenly I hear "Woah!" and our engine is dropped out of gear. "A dolphin! It was dead in front of us!" We let the boat drift as we scan the water, looking, looking, looking. Sure enough, it appeared off to our port side, maybe 15-20 metres away. The curved back, the dorsal fin, its tip ragged, damaged. Slowly, so slowly, it arched through the water and disappeared, then reappeared in another slow arch, its long nose just breaking the surface momentarily. Another arch, and another. I resisted the urge to jump in the water⁶⁴. It seemed to turn back towards us and I hoped, hoped it was going to come closer again. But it disappeared. Gone. It seems odd that such a large animal is in the river here. This busy river, here at its most industrial, always full of boats, full of noise, full of people. And that slow arch of the dolphin, slipping silently out of view. Incongruous. We were still smiling half an hour later.



Figure 2: Industrial River Tamar.

June 2013: Suddenly there was a sickening 'thunk' and a lurch as we hit something beneath the water. Knock the engine out of gear, check over the stern: nothing there. In gear again, and the propeller was still working, nothing tangled around it. We circled, scanning the water, searching for any sign of what we might have hit, any explanation. We saw nothing. As we continued on our way, I checked inside the cabins, inside all the lockers, for water ingress, but all were dry.

Moments like these – momentary sightings of dolphins, seals or jellyfish, or the scrape of anchor chain shifting on riverbed, reverberating through the hull in the silence of night – reinforce a sense of the water environment as a “different world”⁶⁵. This is nature as ‘Other’ in terms of unknown, and that which we can never know; the “impenetrability of non-human interiority”⁶⁶.

For Merleau-Ponty, space is central to being, embedded in existence. Perception of space is shaped by this existence, by our corporeal means of inhabiting space⁶⁷. Here lies the connection between the space-in-motion of the boat, the spatial awareness demanded by mobility of the boat, and the sense of otherness of what may lie beneath. As a means of travel, the boat extends the body’s potentiality of volume, the “demand for a certain amount of space”⁶⁸, just as a car or other vehicle does⁶⁹. But the restrictive potentialities, delimiting the space available, are very different in/on the water from on the road. On the surface, there is less restriction (Figure 3) – and hence less predictability of interactions – on the water than on the linear space of a road. But the restrictive potentialities of the water environment are resolutely three-dimensional, the presence of that additional dimension being reinforced by the relative unknowability of the underwater environment. And this *difference* in spatial awareness demanded by the water is compounded by the vagueness of motility on/through water. The boat does not respond with the linear determinism of a motor vehicle, which you can point in the direction you want to travel. The boat crabs sideways with the tide, slews suddenly with a change in current, lurches in the waves. Steering and stopping are more vague, less precise: negotiation-with, rather than control-over. This renders the potentiality of volume, the corporeal demand for space, uncertain – again reinforcing the demand for a different kind of spatial awareness. The space-in-motion of the boat, the spatial awareness demanded for mobility on the water, and the sense of otherness of what may lie beneath, all contrast with my ‘normal’ means of inhabiting the world, and so give a sense of Otherness.



Figure 3: Plymouth Sound, early morning. The only hints here of underwater restrictions are the buoys.

Changing space

June 2011: A sunny day, sitting at the back of the boat, the endless, lazy sea stretches to the horizon. The waves can be traced from a distance, coming closer, closer, closer and then the rise and fall of the boat over this one, while my eyes begin to trace another. I'm aware of other boats on the water, all some distance off. I'm aware of the cliffs in the distance. I know where the navigation buoys are in relation to them, if I think about it. But the dominant feeling is of big, endless space.

Time to raise or drop a sail, and I'm up on deck. There is only me, the task at hand, and the moving surface of the boat, rising, dropping, rocking one way and then the other. Loosen the halyard from the mast (rising, dropping, rocking); lurch to the front and drop the sail, guiding it to the deck (rocking, rising); stagger back to the mast to tie the halyard off (dropping, tilting); stumble forwards and onto my knees to undo the knots attaching the sheets to the sail (rising, rocking)... For these moments, nothing exists beyond the edge of the boat. The horizon, other boats, the cliffs, all gone. The physicality of the job to be done reigns in my vision, my attention, my awareness of the space around me.

July 2012, Salcombe to Plymouth: the swell was coming up the estuary, so we knew it would be bouncy once past the sand bar. And how bouncy! But the little boat was fine, heading straight into those rollers. Around Bolt Head, heading westwards, the waves were not quite as high but still a 'moderate' sea. It rained. Wipers on. This was our first time at sea in the rain. No other boats were in sight. Three miles from land. Just the two of us and the boat. Our boat. I felt safe, insulated, despite the motion. Up, down, up, down, with the

whir of the wipers filling the wheelhouse. Then a wiper blade fell off. It was the one directly in front of the wheel. We knew we had a spare in the cabin. Neither of us spoke for a few seconds. Like we were avoiding it. Then, "Are you OK to go up on deck?" I nodded. We agreed that I should wear a safety harness this time, go up through the front hatch, and hook on before I climbed out. As always in this kind of sea, once I am on deck nothing else exists. Up, down, side to side, I slowly lurch along the wet, moving surface of the boat. On my knees on deck, directly in front of the windscreen, wiper blade in hand. How many attempts to line it up to the wiper arm? Everything is moving. One, two, three – nearly that time – eventually I get it there. It takes some effort to click it into place, to get the 'push' in the right direction, given the motion of the boat. Then retreat back along the boat – still on my knees, it's easier – towards the hatch. It is not until I am back in the safety of the wheelhouse that I realise how wet I am.

Psychologists have a concept of 'attentional narrowing'⁷⁰, whereby emotional arousal – often interpreted as stress, fear or anxiety⁷¹ – impacts on cognitive performance. This can have opposing effects⁷²: arousal may slow down performance of intellectual tasks; or may result in reduced processing of task-irrelevant information, the person becoming more focused on what they need to do. The latter seems to correspond to my experiences here. However, two points are of note. Firstly, the psychological literature emphasises emotion⁷³. Phenomenologically, what dominates these experiences for me is not emotion (still less, fear) but the corporeal challenge of negotiating the task in a space-in-motion. Perhaps the psychological processes of my brain's functioning are associated with emotions of which I am less conscious, but if that is the case, they are rooted in the materiality of the situation. Secondly, this shift in my attention is inherently spatial⁷⁴. Perception of space, as a function of our embodied inherence in the world⁷⁵, changes with bodily circumstances. The water affords a particular perception of space at any one time, just as much as being on the water demands it.

Small boat sailing, then, in coastal and estuarine waters, renders present a sense of nature as 'Other' in terms of agency and (non)affordance. Echoing Hollenberg's⁷⁶ analysis of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*⁷⁷, the sea irrupts into consciousness to point out human limitations. It does not allow human freedom to 'master' nature.

The Other of green and blue spaces

Taking to the water certainly did offer a means of getting out of the city, to places where 'nature' has greater presence. Nature is ever-present in many different ways, including some I would never have anticipated. The mysterious Other of the 'invisible beneath' is the most obvious and predictable; the presence of a lifeworld, a mode of being that, as human body-subjects, we cannot know. The invisible beneath always exceeds perception and yet must be attended to. But being on the water, coming to understand the space-in-motion of the boat-in-environment, means the presence of an Other can always be *felt*. The agency of water and weather is always there, in the unending motion, communicated through the boat and thus through the body. And these *embodied spatialities of being*, the lived perceptions of space, are central to this sense of Otherness. This encompasses visual, and haptic, somatic sensations of space⁷⁸ *with* cognitive; the perceiving subject's combined, multidimensional understanding of *being in space*. The lived space-in-motion, the vagueness of motility through the water (and associated restrictive potentialities), the different

spatial awareness demanded by mobility on the water, and shifts in spatial awareness resulting from the water/boat motion; all are different from terrestrial urban living. To encounter nature on the water is to experience space differently.

As Merleau-Ponty illustrated, the extraordinary (in this case, being on a boat) can reveal something of the everyday. Returning to the homogenising-yet-culturally-specific 'we': it can be argued that normal daily experience, perhaps particularly for urban residents (as I was at the time), is of linear space; mobility constrained by the material and social structures of roads and streets, and rules associated with them⁷⁹. Even our field of vision is often constrained into linear pathways by buildings, walls and other boundaries. In the midst of a city, Euclidean geometric space is largely invisible. In leisure, the places we encounter and enjoy nature most powerfully are often open spaces, in the form of parks, National Parks, lakes; places where vision and motion is mostly not constrained in such a linear way⁸⁰. Our civilised lives have been linearised, contrasting with the unlinearised spaces of recreational and (at least some) therapeutic places. If our separation from nature is a cultural construct, it is not just an *idea*. It is materially constructed in the fabric of our towns and cities, not only in the artefacts of bricks and mortar, but in the way we order space. Separation from nature is embedded in how we experience space.

Returning to the benefits of nature, the past decade has seen a move towards relational perspectives to understand therapeutic landscapes and spaces. This entails recognition that therapeutic space is an emergent outcome of "a complex set of transactions between a person and their broader socio-environmental setting"⁸¹. Some of this literature⁸² offers echoes of the arguments presented here, research participants describing their experiences of coastal spaces as contrasting with enclosed, linear, urban and artificial spaces. Within this therapeutic spaces literature, Gorman⁸³ highlights a need to consider what constitutes the 'wild' of the wild spaces. His focus is non-human participants, and I wish to extend this further: we also need to pay attention to *space*. Not just the two-dimensional, mappable space often assumed, but to the lived experiences of space, the embodied spatialities of being. We encounter 'nature' through our bodies, and embodiment is inherently spatial.

Foley and Kistemann⁸⁴ argue that the incorporation of nature into health policy is hampered by "limited understanding of which components of nature deliver which health benefits". Such reductionist thinking seems to dominate the 'benefits of nature' literature, but the encounters I describe here suggest that *experiences* of 'nature' are complex, diffuse and holistic. The key point is that the Western cultural idea of human separation from nature has become sedimented into our habits of perception, part of our embodied experience of the world. To understand green or blue space as 'natural', we may need to understand dwelt perception of the *space* as much as of the 'green' or 'blue'. Cultural geographers surely have much to offer.

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Notes

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- ⁷⁵ See p327, M. Merleau-Ponty, '*Phenomenology of Perception*', trans. C. Smith, (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).
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