

Sensing Seascapes: How Affective Atmospheres Guide City Youths' Encounters With the Ocean's Multivocality

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Abstract

The healing potential of blue spaces in human lives seems to have a universal timbre, yet little research has examined the great diversity of particular individual encounters with waters. To meet the challenge to capture this multivocality of individuals and of the sea, this article offers a perspective of seascapes through the lens of affective atmospheres and person-centered ethnography. Based on 2 years of fieldwork among urban youth in Norway, the material reveals that contradicting atmospheres can coexist and also may be perceived differently. Even though sensing the sea is highly individualized, I argue that deeply anchored psychological processes lie beneath why humans are drawn toward waters.

Keywords

person-centered ethnography, psychological anthropology, outdoor education, youthhood, seascapes

The materiality of landscapes becomes affective through individuals' imaginations evoked through sensory interactions with these materialities. In this article, I use empirical vignettes to show how working- and lower-class youths encountered the various seascape atmospheres. Applying a psychology-oriented anthropological approach, I explore youths' experiences of the ocean, mediated and inspired by Mimo, an outdoor education center situated in Oslo, Norway. Mimo, which offers no-cost

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activities for children and youth in inner-city neighborhoods, operates on the basis that access to nature can promote significant benefits that may be difficult for marginalized urban youth to achieve because of their unequal living conditions.

I argue that long-term person-centered ethnography is essential for capturing the meaning behind individual emotions and empathic relations in the field. Traditional extended ethnography, which the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) established in the early 1990s, as well as its shorter case-study versions, lacks a focus on individuals' feelings and the unconscious. To some, investigations of daydreams, fantasies, and inner feelings are considered unobservable, even unempirical (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015), a study to be left to psychologists (T. B. Broch, 2017).

In 1982, the anthropologist Robert Le Vine (Hollan, 2001) was the first to attack this false divide and to advocate for an ethnography focusing on the individual psyche. With the term person-centered ethnography, he professed an "experience-near" anthropology that develops ways to describe and analyze human actions directed by cultural psychological processes. Central to person-centered ethnography is the idea that an individual's psychology is relevant and necessary to understand human actions and motivations.

The decision to do person-centered ethnography led me to closely follow five girls ages 13 to 16, among the 15 youths whom I saw regularly in my fieldwork that stretched over 2 years. In this article, I seek to understand youths' attraction to blue spaces, drawing from my in-depth and multicontextual knowledge of these five interlocutors, along with additional observations of other children and youth among the approximately 2,000 who participated in Mimo activities. In my fieldwork, I became aware that water, with its transmutability in form, color, and intensity, deeply affected the youths' moods. I often found them staring at the water's sparkling surface, listening to its movements, screaming at its power, and physically and mentally *entering* the water as they were drawn into its deeper unknown.

In previous work (T. B. Broch, 2017, 2018), I argued for the importance of focusing on physical movements, the unspoken, and moments in which facts and words fall short. Here, I continue this exploration as I examine the statements the youths made through movements and bodily reactions. That said, the main interlocutors also used spoken language through conversations and interviews in which they all pointed to waters as their favorite scenery.

To capture the atmospheres shaped by the interaction between the youths and seascapes, I draw on what has emerged as an evocative, sensory ethnography within the affective turn (Stewart, 2011). Kathleen Stewart, a leading figure in the affective turn, has described how "slow ethnography" opens up the (anthropological) field by turning away from describing objects as fixed and thus, as Skoggard and Waterston (2015) argued, provides a way of mapping what is happening that allows for feelings and affect. Therefore, evocative ethnography embraces complexity. Exploring empirical vignettes from my fieldwork, I seek to answer the question: What can the affective turn contribute to understandings of the sea? I argue that person-centered ethnography (Hollan, 2001) allows us to emphasize how inner emotions contribute to our sensory experiences of the sea. Likewise, the affective turn helps facilitate new understandings

of how, and to what degree, the city youths in this study emotionally related to seascapes' multivocality.

The Symbolic Powers of Water

Water, both fresh and salt, serves as a foundation and principal to the social organization of every society. Water and shorelines might be the basis of a quarrel between neighbors or between the state and the people. Water is a carrier of social difference, union, and separation, as the social anthropologist Naguib (2009) illustrates in the introduction to her monograph about the West Bank village of Musharafah, Palestine, *Women, Water and Memory*. Naguib showed how water, in one way or another, is a vital part of being in the world. Following Douglas (1997), certain aspects of nature have a particularly powerful force, and water is one of them. I argue that water's significance to humans, besides its physiological necessity, is connected to its symbolic features. Symbols are powerful, although ambiguous. Their ambiguity allows idiomatic and idiosyncratic interpretations and simultaneously gives individuals concrete points of reference that sometimes exceed the limitations set by time.

We find the symbolic power of water in its material qualities, its composition, its transmutability, reflectivity, fluidity, and transparency. Water is symbolically inherent, but also responsive to context. In this vein, Strang (2004) stated that "the most constant 'quality' of water is that it is not constant" (p. 49). A mountain stream may fleetingly dematerialize as it dissolves into still brackish waters and then later turn salty along the shoreline at the beach where it can embrace a swimmer's body. As solid ice, water can bear a person across a fjord, or cause one to slip and fall, depending on factors such as temperature and footwear. Each state is endlessly reversible, a polymorphic range that is always present. In every aspect, water moves between oppositional extremes: It may take the form of a roaring flood or a still pool—invisible and transparent, or reflective and impenetrable, fresh, salt, or brackish. Water is life-giving, providing soothing comfort, but also the opposite, and too much water may be as devastating as too little. Each of these states has its own quality and is imbued with particular meaning. Symbols are generally overdetermined and thereby multivocal. Meaning variations or layers of symbolic meaning are present in the demarcation zone of the idiomatic and idiosyncratic.

Strang's (2004, see also Johnson & Odent, 1994) theorizing claims are presented as universally valid, but they also reflect my observations and understanding of many of the Mimo youths' lived experiences. Steinberg (2016b) made an important claim when he stated that many—perhaps even most—of the stories we tell about our shared world gain power through reproduction of preexisting images. These images, he argued, must be taken seriously. I fully agree. This claim implies that even next-door neighbors can live in different worlds, supported by alternative stories told, acclaimed, and trusted. In the context of this article, stories about how the ocean is perceived are tied to seawater's symbolic features, in all their diversity. One way to grapple with this diversity is through people's stories or, as I argue, through observations of individuals over time.

Brown and Peters (2019) note in their introduction to *Living with the Sea* that we are witnessing an oceanic turn within the humanities and social sciences. Scholars from various disciplines are taking the ocean and seas as a vantage point for understanding the sociocultural and political life. But Brown and Peters (2019) highlight a knowledge gap when it comes to how humans engage with seascapes. Interestingly, contributors to edited volumes (Brown & Humberstone, 2015; Brown & Peters, 2019) have evoked (anthropology of) the senses as a solid, important means to fill this gap. However, studies that focus on emotions and psychological experiences are sparse (see Völker & Kistemann, 2011), and in fact few are included in Brown and Peters (2019). Observing and describing sensory and emotional experiences and reactions is challenging, which leads some to pursue autoethnography.

I find it somewhat worrying that much of the literature in the sport and leisure sciences regarding humans' experiences with the ocean idealizes researchers' own encounters and then assumes general validity. In the preface to the edited volume, *Water Worlds* (Anderson & Peters, 2016), Steinberg (2016a) wrote vividly about water's place in humans' lives. He noted that, to generate new knowledge, we must go beyond viewing the ocean as something objectively different, but rather write about the ocean as experienced, not something to gaze at, but *something we live in*, not something we think about, but *somewhere we think from*.

Although Steinberg's ideas are interesting and inspiring, I wonder if these specific points illuminate some inherent pitfalls in Anderson and Peters' (2016) edited work, specifically that the way to apply this promising theory is strictly through autoethnography. For example, the writings of Anderson and Peters (2016), Brown and Humberstone (2015), and Ingersoll (2016) are all based on personal experiences: The researchers turn to their own notions of becoming one with the water, immersing in the sea, thinking with it and from it. Autoethnography has been criticized as too self-indulgent and with too little interest in theory and theorizing (Delamont, 2009; Olive, 2016); however, I agree with Olive's (2016) conclusion in her review of *Seascapes* (Brown & Humberstone, 2015) that the authors succeed in engaging the reader's mind and evoking senses, memories, and emotions that encourage reflection on broader sociocultural issues. They link the personal to the political.

Nevertheless, autoethnography cannot overcome familiarity (Delamont, 2009). To capture the multivocal ocean, researchers must defamiliarize themselves, that is, alternate between the familiar and unfamiliar encountered in the field. Insights drawn from reflexive writing are an important part of ethnography; however, they must be distinguished from autoethnography. As a critical reader of autoethnographic texts, which often are seductive and beautifully written, I wonder: Whom do they represent? I am convinced that surfers, who often serve as reference points to understand the meaning of water, can recognize themselves in these autoethnographies; however, as Josen (2016) asked, for whom are the stories meant, and do the authors consider that readers are drawn only into stories with which they can empathize? Therefore, can we draw major or universally shared potentialities of water from autoethnographies? Do we all have the same capacity to immerse in water and become one with it, to long for it, to feel at home by and in it, and to live and breathe with it? The question then becomes:

Are humans affected by oceanic landscapes the same way? Does a youth playing on the beach, standing on a paddle board, or dipping in a sailboat feel the same as an experienced surfer or swimmer?

Although I argue for underlying psychological processes as a reason why humans are pulled toward blue spaces and express a preference for them (Coleman & Kearns, 2015; Johnson & Odent, 1994; Strang, 2004; Völker & Kistemann, 2011), I fully acknowledge “the impact that cultural conditions have on individual phenomenological and psychological experience including how individual assumptions and bodily predispositions alter the experience of the cultural context and transform the outcomes for individuals via their interpretive processes” (Eisenhauer, 2019, pp. 168–169). It is reasonable to suggest the possibility that some people do not feel at one with the ocean, a part of something larger than themselves. As Eisenhauer (2019) pointed out, all human pathways and experiences of well-being are unique, tied to personal histories that transform, interpret, embody, and internalize landscapes in highly individual manners. I will return to this. Now, I turn to scenes from the field.

Landscapes and Seascapes Interrelate

A favorite activity among Mimo participants was cruising on the fjord in one of the center’s two open speedboats, which together can hold 28 people. As they entered the prominent harbor area at the center of Oslo and made their way to the dock, the Mimo youths made quite a sight, representing a wide range of skin colors in their bright orange life jackets, contrasting with the ordinary prominent (mostly White) gathering of people. The harbor district in Norway’s capital city includes a newly established area with expensive apartment buildings out of reach for the average-income citizen (see also Ljunggren, 2017). Several activity leaders often smirked proudly that they contributed to bringing some color to the harbor, as they walked together with the participants toward the Mimo boats.

Oslo’s rather fashionable harbor is where Mimo youths often begin their encounter with the fjord; however, they do not enter an empty blue water space. According to Gupta and Ferguson (1992), any analytical starting point in the investigation of meaning-making related to outdoor social relations should take into account that every landscape has hierarchical connotations. Landscapes are brought to life as people gain knowledge through personal experiences, but also through making and listening to narratives. In other words, personal, relational, and hegemonic narratives, together with diverse experiences, turn space into landscapes and, in turn, to particular places. In a way, this narrative process transforms space into places invested with emotional bonds (H. B. Broch, 2009; Taylor, 2010). Tilley and Cameron-Daum (2017) underscored that “landscape” is a messy term—having no fixed or final definition—that often slips away in the discourse on space and place. I rely on these two scholars’ description of landscape as “being a set of relationships between places in which meaning is grounded in existential consciousness, event, history, and associations” (Tilley & Cameron-Daum, 2017, p. 2).

Regarding the ocean as a seascape, and not merely a blue space, my starting point includes how the places in the Mimo youths' everyday lives connected with the seascape they entered. The interconnection between landscapes and places is evident in how we are affected by our surroundings. We cannot keep landscape and seascapes separate; they are interrelated. We might say that a hierarchical relationship also exists between mainland and *waterland*. We can objectively observe how constant meetings between water and land reshape the landscape (see Brown & Humberstone, 2015). Water slowly digs new pathways, closing in on and devouring the solid ground. In every sense, water also transforms our skin.

Affected by the Sea

With this in mind, as we now see the Mimo youth entering the Oslo harbor, we should see beyond simply the water. We must acknowledge the surrounding landscape, such as the existing public beach that opened in 2012. As crowds of young people visit the beach during the summer months, the neighborhood is filled with a colorful mixture of social backgrounds, age, gender, and class in a seemingly joyful blend. However, to cruise out on the fjord requires another form of access—a boat. The harbor is full of boats, their owners reflecting the area's citizenry, but not the multitude backgrounds of all beach-goers. Therefore, entering the harbor involves crossing a social demarcation that a mere beach experience seemingly does not hold. The beach contributes to erasing some social boundaries, but to step into a boat and cruise out into the fjord is to enter a new, usually inaccessible space—one that the youths continually request as soon as the ice on the fjord melts and they feel the sunshine on their skin.

It was September—no laughter from swimmers near the beach that chilly day. The sky was gray with no playful beams from the sun. The restaurants along the pathway were crowded, people talking and peering out through rows of windows. One of the youngsters' favorite activity leaders had changed her schedule, and, as of that day, she was no longer part of their evening group. At the dock, one of the boys was arguing with a leader: He did not want to pull one of the life vest cords between his legs for protection, something he thought was for little kids and looked stupid. Some of the more experienced girls giggled—they knew the drill and seemingly did not care. No strop, no boat trip.

As the youths came aboard the outdoor education center's boat, the girls moved tightly together, giggling and looking content as Peter, an activity leader, steered the vessel carrying the six youths toward Husebergøya, an island approximately 20 min by speedboat from Oslo's downtown harbor. Sara turned her face into the spindrift, as everyone seemed to find the saltwater spray and the windy conditions pleasant—until Peter sped into a huge wave. I was thrown against a hard edge; Sara and most of the other youths got wet and appeared disconcerted. There was cautious laughter from some, but most participants raised their eyebrows and seemed irritated. So abrupt was this collision that the youths did not respond with their usual laughter, screams of joy, and pleas for more, as they often did when the boat was speeding ahead and bouncing softly, but high and briskly, over the waves.

So, what happened that autumn evening as the Mimo boat ventured out into the fjord? Was it the rolling waves or the chilly spindrift that caused a murmur of unease? To explore this question, I turn to affect theory, based on the work of philosophers such as Deleuze, Spinoza, and Massumi. Massumi (1995) emphasized the difference between emotions and affect. He noted that affect is carved out as a visceral, raw pre-feeling sensation, whereas feelings are socially constructed distortions of affect. Affect is manifest as the body's internalization of the intensity created by this tension between affect and emotions. More recently, Ahmed (2007; Ahmed & Stacey, 2004) advanced the affective turn by calling out its weaknesses. She claimed that emotions are not "afterthoughts," but shape how bodies are moved by the worlds they inhabit. An experience never happens on an empty background, she asserted. Therefore, the experiences of the youths in my study were colored by their limited knowledge of the ocean, as opposed to their greater familiarity with the beach. Some of their encounters with the water as part of leisure activities were firsthand and raw, and thus provide data for the study of the relationship between affect and emotions.

Here it is useful to consider affect as having an interchangeable, fluent character, which at times avoids or escapes words. Affect embraces the temporal and provides directional, yet unpredictable prospects. I will now explore how affect can be understood as atmospheres with a mood or mood-generating qualities and as an inherent part of the material landscapes the youths entered. Through this exploratory journey, led by my observations of the Mimo youths, I aim to visualize how seascapes affect people in both similar and different ways. I also seek to show how contradicting atmospheres can coexist, or how an atmosphere is inhaled and exhaled differently.

Eager Waves and Their Chilly Spindrift

The way in which Sara experienced the smell of the ocean and felt the wind against her face and the seawater splashing into the boat as it struggled against the waves was never expressed the same way again during the 2 years I spent time with her. It is not always easy to understand why reactions to experiences can be so different. At other times in the open boat, the youths participating in the outdoor education activities would scream with joy and excitement, begging for more as the boat lunged into the waves and water washed over the gunwale, spraying their faces. This time, an apparently similar event led to silence, unease, and raised eyebrows. Perhaps, the cause for their different reaction was the day's particular weather. On that day, autumn had brought a cold breeze over the water. For most people, a late September evening is not the optimal time to be drenched by cold water, at least not by more than a few droplets. Alternatively, the youths' discontent could have been caused by their knowledge that the skipper was new to the job and had just learned to operate and navigate the boat. Had he revealed a weakness, indicating that he was not in full control of the vessel when he encountered a hard jolt and let seawater wash over the deck on that chilly evening?

Looking back on that boat ride to Husebergøya, I wonder, if the skipper had been one of the regular Mimo leaders, the jolt would have brought laughter from most of the

youths, accompanied by cascades of teasing words. To make sense of how and why the youths (re)acted the way they did entails balancing an analysis of how they saw and interpreted the world with the ways they were—and are—positioned in the world as members of families (see Christiansen et al., 2006.), peer groups, and the outdoor education program.

Humberstone (2010) described the surfboard as simultaneously in and on the water, leading surfers on waterways that ordinary roads cannot. So, it was with the boat for our voyage. Entering the boat, we also entered the water and its *waterways* that are inaccessible by foot or other vehicles. Together, seated in the craft, we experienced and felt its movements, its mood and temporality. Strang (2004) believed that there is some universality in how people react to water. They often are pulled toward water for its calming effect. Such appeared to be the case, for a while on that evening, too. However, when Peter sped into the large wave, Sara and most of the other youths appeared disconcerted and instantly expressed their displeasure when saltwater sprayed over them. The anthropologist Basso (1996) pointed out that humans' sense of place is

as natural and straightforward as our fondness for certain colors and culinary tastes [. . .] Until, as sometimes happens, we are deprived of these attachments and find ourselves adrift, literally dislocated, in unfamiliar surroundings we do not comprehend and care for even less. (p. xxii)

When the unfortunate skipper ran the boat too speedily into the wave, the youths were jolted from their image of water as soft, calming, rocking, maybe even comforting. Instantly, the water became rough and cold as it hit their skin, perhaps even an uncontrollable element (for the inexperienced skipper). The seascape is not inherently safe, and symbolic connotations, both luring and intimidating, became alive for the youths. With a more experienced skipper, the boat would most likely have hit the wave differently, and thus the rolling waves could still have been calming, even exhilarating, and the spindrift refreshing. I will return to this episode, but first we meet the same youths 2 weeks later when they were about to spend an evening playing in the woods that surrounded and bordered a smaller beach area.

Sensory Experiences

Leaving the Mimo van in a parking lot, the participants and leaders headed for Paradise Bay [Paradisbukta] along the coastal pathway, girls and boys dividing into groups. The boys ran ahead, one of them immediately seeking the shoreline and balancing on the rocky slope. Another ran down the path in front of the others, the chilly wind blowing through his light brown hair. Three of the girls walked close together, and a fourth seemed to seek to enter this clique without noticeable success. A little east of Paradise Bay on the borderline between land and sea, most of the youths gathered together as they paused at the stone memorial to the Norwegian victims of the December 26th, 2004 South-East Asian tsunami and their families. The memorial stone is square, with

an engraved spiral running from the middle to the outer edges, so that waves roll or break over it, often filling the grooves with water. Both boys and girls climbed on the memorial stone, balancing and walking in circles. They ran their hands along the dark, wet stone, following the flutes, feeling the water and the stone's slick, smooth surface.

Approaching the beach, most of the youths sprinted toward the water, stopping just at the waterline separating the wet and dry sand. Aleksandra carved a large heart in the dry sand, and Sara made another beside it. Aleksandra began to write something, hurrying to complete her work before a wave erased it. Curiously looking at the big bold letters, Sara said, "Ah, now I see what you are doing" and helped to finish the word: MIMO.

Meanwhile, four kayaks broke through the waves, the paddlers only silhouettes, too far away for eye contact or facial or verbal communication. Aleksandra leapt into the shallow water and more Mimo participants joined her. The girls and boys screamed as they ran and jumped away from the waves breaking on the shore. After a while, most youths retreated to the camp area where the Mimo leaders were preparing a bonfire to be lit later. But Aleksandra stayed behind, walking into the sea, the water reaching almost to the top of her knee-high rubber boots. Stretching her arms toward the sky and tilting back her head, she screamed and howled across the fjord. She seemed to seek to drown out the sounds of the living sea, to try to determine how far her voice would travel. The activity leader Iver looked at Aleksandra, then at me, and said, "Which philosopher was it that filled his mouth with pebbles and tried to outdo the sound of the ocean?"

So much happened at once that evening. Although sunset was imminent, no one seemed to notice, as the sun was hidden in a gray sky. The landscape—devoid of humans only minutes before—was filled with running feet, voices, a bonfire, and the smell of hotdogs and warm beverage. I was intrigued to see how the youth left the van and entered this open landscape, finding their way through different trajectories that in one way or another led to and merged with the waterfront. They did not intend to swim: It was much too cold and there was a chilly breeze. They were drawn to the water for different reasons, most likely not entirely conscious ones. They engaged the waterfront without hesitation, continuing to move as they played tag with the water, running, jumping, tiptoeing as the sea approached. They tried to avoid the waves even as they sought them out. The youths chose the water rather than the surrounding forest where the evening activity would take place, and only the leaders walked straight to that prearranged site. As darkness closed in softly, it gently dragged the youth to the bonfire to eat and prepare for hide and seek in the forest. They complained though: It was not getting dark enough; the darkest spot in the landscape was the blue, moving space from where they had just come.

When the group first arrived that day, the first one to leave peers and leaders behind on the trail toward the tiny bay was the boy who had hastened down a rocky hillside toward the sea. He did not look back or respond when others called his name as he balanced on stones of various sizes, risking getting his thin sneakers drenched in salt-water. He proceeded on his own trail toward his destination—the beach. Occasionally, I spotted him staring out at the seascape, but he mostly moved slowly in the same direction.

The group of girls who had walked closely together dissolved when they reached the memorial stone, as their giggles and small talk faded. Then unfolding scene was like a clip from a silent movie: bodies moving, balancing atop the stone, following each other in a rhythmic circle, some with arms outstretched to avoid falling from the slick stone. There was no scuffling, and they appeared to be in calm concentration. Some took a moment to face the seascape and to inhale the scenery: a blue space, wind carrying the smell of the sea, and a far-off boy bounding between the wet stones as he challenged the boundaries between wet and dry, sometimes with one foot on dry land and the other almost slipping into the water world that claimed territory as the waves rolled in.

Much of the same balancing act occurred when Sara and Aleksandra had carved out letters in the sand, their letters crossing the line between two worlds—wet and dry. Their letters and the boy's movements are visualizations of the fragility of time, of being, of how life on the mainland can be submissive to the *wetland*. In this sense, water symbolizes change, unforeseen moments, and antistructures.

Imagined Water Worlds

According to Steinberg (2016a), the ocean represents a space in nature that humans often fetishize or romanticize, a space humans imagine to exist beyond society, and, I would specify, beyond land-based societies. Of course, some societies are closely connected to and defined by the ocean (Djohani, 1995; Nimmo, 1994; Schneider, 2012); however, in a land–water binary, the ocean often becomes a symbolic other, an object, a substance, and a surface of difference. Steinberg (2016a) urged moving beyond this symbolic bind that restricts our understanding of water (see also Bowring et al., 2019). To a certain degree I agree, but I am also attracted to his writings on the symbolic powers of water (Steinberg, 2016b). The land–water binary frames water as having mystical, unknown, beneficial, threatening, and luring potential. This otherness harkens back to the water that surrounds every human being in the womb. No matter how much we learn about what occurs between conception and our release from that water world, some mystery remains. I will return to this at the end.

In her monography, *Saltwater Sociality*, the anthropologist Katharina Schneider (2012) described a much more hands-on example of the importance of this conception of the ocean as *other to land*, drawing upon her in-depth knowledge of the inhabitants of Papua New Guinea in the Melanesia islands. The islanders are roughly divided between land/bush people and saltwater people. The latter have little access to land, and their social relations are intimately connected to fishing and the marine environment. Therefore, they should be a population that could provide the perspectives Steinberg (2016a) has prompted: knowledge of the ocean that can contribute to an understanding of *water as something we live in and think from*. What unfolds in Schneider's monography is quite similar to the symbolic notion of the ocean as opposing the land. For instance, the saltwater people of Papua New Guinea do not have fishing territories or fixed or restricted movements. Although they may mark good fishing spots to which they can return, boundaries are for bush people, a bush habit. The fish in the ocean roam freely, and therefore saltwater people do the same.

Life at sea is clearly distinguished from life on land. This particular saltwater society does not own a lot of land, so the location they do hold is packed with people, the hamlet full of children. The ocean becomes a free space, an antistructure with unpredictable forces. Schneider (2012) described how the sea, with its constant and rapid changeability, makes room for humans to follow its flow, expressing or living out these same features while at sea. Saltwater people may not return home at a given time and do not report their movements, which are related to sudden wind, rain, or spirits—an unpredictability that may be unacceptable among bush-dwellers. Schneider related an incident in which a woman from the sea-oriented village had had enough of people and crying children, including one of her own. The woman handed the screaming child to the elder sister to care for and then walked determinedly to her canoe and rowed away to sea. She later explained that she would go crazy without such an opportunity to escape and rest: “At sea, I can be on my own; nobody is directing my movements . . . I can go around wherever I want, and nobody can make me come back. It’s all up to me. I am free” (Schneider, 2012, p. 29).

Northern Norwegian fishermen have used similar arguments to explain their attachment to the sea. Aboard 15-m-long vessels operated by one or two persons, they explain how it allows a feeling of freedom and a highly appreciated quality of life (H. B. Broch, 2013). Their words echo the Mimo youths and belie the need to theorize *from the sea*, as long as people experience it as an element they enter into, leaving behind solid ground.

Symbolically and literally, solid ground binds our feet and bodies through gravity, but water does not have the same effect. We sink into it; it devours us, embraces us, keeps our vessels floating, or sinks them. Human imaginations shape the sea and our experiences and ways of talking about it—if not how we are taught to express water-related statements. As researchers, we must defamiliarize ourselves as we try to figure out how our interlocutors act as individuals as they sense, experience, and speak about land and water.

Alluring Seascapes

After 2 years in the field, I got to know Aleksandra well. She had a turbulent everyday life, and her home was not her safest place. Although Aleksandra lived in a low income area, she attended school in a wealthier part of town. Her neighborhood friends from childhood attended other schools closer to their homes downtown. Her preferred scenery was blue spaces, which offered laughter with peers, as well as tranquility and solitude.

According to our conversations and my observations, Mimo was her safe haven. She explicitly told me this, emphasizing that she had felt that way for several years. But soon this safe haven would disappear like her letters in the sand as she reached the program’s age limit a year later. In her everyday life, she told me, she constantly had to think about who she was, how she behaved, and what she said. At Mimo, she found friends among girls or boys she would not necessarily befriend elsewhere. Within the program, they felt some attachment to each other, shared similar stories, and, most importantly, Aleksandra said she felt she could *just be*.

Mimo provided Aleksandra and the other youths an escape from the ordinary—the mainland, city streets filled with authoritative voices and the gazes of peers. The ocean and water landscapes were set as opposites, although not automatically: Water in and of itself is not a safe haven free from all everyday hassles.

Let us review the first empirical vignette which illustrates how experiences at sea do not always play out in connections to felt oneness or wholeness. The description of the youths making their way to the boat dock depicts the participants' mood affected by the scene of empty streets, an empty beach, and economically privileged people chatting over their meals as they looked out on the Mimo participants. Still, most of the youths seemed content as they came aboard and left the harbor, soon feeling the rocking of the boat and the spray of saltwater on bare skin. Not until the inexperienced skipper hit the wave was the atmosphere in the boat disrupted. At that moment, the youth were not in control of how to encounter the sea. The trip's destination was a familiar island where all had previously attended weekend trips and summer camps. But when the skipper did not make the right move, according to his passengers, they encountered an angry sea.

Upon arrival at the island, the youths usually would seek to get in the water, even when the weather was chilly and the water cold. This September evening, they did not, except for Aleksandra and Sara who put on wetsuits and jumped in. Aleksandra said she felt free, safe. I rarely detected any discontent from her during activities, but I dried her tears once, as she explained, "Trips make it go away. While out with Mimo, I can forget." Those were the words I remembered when I saw her jump into the fjord alone and later as she held Sara's hand. What happened on the boat ride was washed away for her. Others had different stories. They did not enter the sea, and they found their places by the bonfire. Some stared into the flames, others at the seascape.

Two weeks later on a trip to Paradise Bay, the same youths who sat by the bonfire sought out the sea, illustrating an urge for the water that I also observed during summer months at the island. Together, they might go swimming or use paddle boards. Most important in this context is that they individually—and sometimes in twosomes—sought solitude. They would take small sailboats, canoes, or rowboats and go wherever the water and their effort took them. At times, I could observe a conversation going on in these vessels; other times, the youths appeared to be just hanging out together, drifting in silence, sharing the moment as they stared up at the sky or out across the fjord. Leaning back, they might dip one hand in the water, the other holding onto an oar, the steering pin in the sailboat, or just resting on their chest. Occasionally, a leader would call out to someone who had drifted too far from land. On late summer evenings, I often found youths at the end of the island's dock, staring at the sunset, the light mirrored in the fjord. Such moments occurred independent of the surrounding landscapes. As the youths hiked the woods, they discovered ponds and lakes and stopped to feel wet, mushy surfaces. On mountaintops and hilltops, they sought overlooks of lakes or fjords, and their body movements and postures changed with the view or as they felt wet surfaces. Moments of tranquility and awakening can occur when no water is in sight; however, I argue that different psychological processes come into play, depending on the context and scenery.

The moments of tranquility described above, I argue, bear witness to how water contributed to experiences in which these youths found new ways of being—moments in which the seascape affected both boys and girls through its symbolic powers, even dreamscapes connected to a mystical and at times comforting liquid blue, gray, green, orange—an ever-shifting colored space. But for this to happen, there had to be a context of felt safety.

In my previous writing (T. B. Broch, 2018), I argued that an established safe attachment existed between most Mimo leaders and participants. But this safe attachment could be weakened, for example, when the new skipper slammed the boat into a wave, when non-Mimo peers interrupted an activity, or when the youths were confronted with otherness in similar ways.

To illustrate, on a midsummer's eve, two boats left with Mimo youths to explore the fjord, look for bonfires, and enjoy the fjord's bustling boat life. At first, the youths were full of laughter and energy; however, the festive mood seemed to evaporate as we joined a stream of boats. The setting had changed: too many glancing strangers, too many boats too close. The Mimo youth had become the "other" on the fjord as most other boats seemed so extravagant in their eyes. Suddenly, they began to comment on their life vests, as if rediscovering them—bright orange, clumpy, and not cool at all. The vests had never been an issue at sea before, and it never was again. But at that moment, the sense of otherness took over, and what they usually felt as they were rocked by lazy waves, dipping a hand in the water, did not affect them in this setting as their perceived "otherness" was suddenly forced upon them.

To be affected in a good way, Ahmed (2010) claimed, involves an orientation toward something as being good. In addition, she criticized the everyday notion of affect as something passed between bodies, for instance, the idea of being able to feel the atmosphere as we enter a room. Ahmed would turn that idea around: How we feel when entering a room will have something to do with how we are affected. I concur and point to a weakness in affect theory: that affect is *something out there*. We must take into consideration that something is always felt from a specific angle (Ahmed, 2010), position, and previous experiences. As Le Breton (2017) noted, sensations are immediately submerged in perception, and knowledge arises between the two; human beings are meaning-makers and not just biological creatures. Perception is not attentive, Le Breton (2017) argued, but rather absorbs in the evidence of experience. Existing feelings, symbolical knowledge, and the specific context all contribute to how individuals are affected by the sea. The atmospheres offered by the sea are cocreated by the saltwater smell, wind, light, and darkness, all contributing to movements on the surface that trigger our imagining of the sea's depths. To perceive, if we follow Le Breton (2017) "is to take possession of the world," which means that the world "arises in the relation between the individual and the world" (pp. 11–12). Humans' perceptions then are not reality, but are ways of sensing reality (see also Sparkes, 2009). Even though sensing the sea is highly individual, I argue that there are some deeply anchored psychological processes behind the general assumptions about why humans are drawn to water.

Attraction Toward Water

Water constitutes 71% of Earth, the blue planet, and 70% of the human body (Steinberg, 2016a). In fact, humans begin life in a water space. Steinberg pondered whether this powerful fact might have an unintended effect. Within the uterus, the fetus floats in a clear, watery fluid with a composition very similar to seawater (Johnson & Odent, 1994; Strang, 2004). The art therapist Barbara Wittels (1982) interpreted themes found in patients' artwork and interviews and found a pattern of symbols and metaphors. She claimed that the symbolic meaning of water is fundamental and profound to all people. Life, sex, mother, birth, death, and the unconscious are frequently brought forth as symbolic meanings of water in her material. Psychoanalytic notions of parental security and unconscious associations with the womb resemble conscious experiences of landscape, place, and movement (see T. B. Broch, 2018). Therefore, it is possible that the Mimo youths may have experienced such unconscious associations as they languished in solitude in vessels on the water. Within a secure context, the vessel emerges as a contextually significant object that contributes to or affects human encounters with the ocean.

Returning to the dualistic view of land and ocean, I argue that the opposition—seen, smelled, and felt—between steady ground and moving waters is important. The ocean is a part of the earth that holds many a secret. No matter how much time you spend in it, deep waters will surprise you. As we are attracted to the ocean, we are drawn to the mystery of how we came to be. In a way, the salty waters are simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar not only visually, but also in motion and sound. How humans can unconsciously or imaginatively remember the sounds, motions, smells, or tastes of a time in utero—even how that time might be inscribed in our bodies—matters. Youth can experience constant and overwhelming feelings of being judged, and therefore it was no coincidence that Aleksandra waited until she was alone on the beach before walking into the fjord. With water on the verge of filling her rubber boots, she lifted her arms into the air as she screamed at the top of her lungs—the expression of her momentary feeling of being “free to just be.”

Aleksandra stood there experiencing nature with all her senses—the wind, the sounds of playing waves, the smell of saltwater and wet sand—all wrapped in a persistent hum that drowns human voices. Persistent nature sounds can become a lullaby that gives humans a respite—a moment in between to just be human (see Thorheim, 2009). The Norwegian philosopher Thorheim (2009) clarified the different kinds of turnings points in our lives: the dramatic *onetime events* and those *repeated happenings* that define rhythms and safety, those processes that do not have a distinct beginning or end. To capture such moments and to gain insight into the meaning of water in humans' lives, we need more person-centered ethnography that can describe and analyze human actions, subjective experiences, and psychological processes (Hollan, 2001). Such ethnography entails following individuals over time and getting to know them as they encounter water and various water worlds. We must know them as they walk through city streets, sit at their desks in their offices, and brave the elements in small fishing vessels or sailboats.

Evocative ethnography provides an important means to grapple with what happens between individuals and the world, thick descriptions filled with information about encountered atmospheres that usually are difficult to put into words—moods, smells, sounds, and materialities that may be liquid, mushy, or pebbled. However, to interpret such atmospheric scenes, the researcher needs knowledge of her interlocutors, gained over time through person-centered ethnography. As the empirical material in this article illustrates, the youths related to the seascape in diverse ways within the same atmosphere, depending on their individual overall experiences as well as those that occurred that specific day, such as Aleksandra's choice to swim or to scream out at the fjord as the others gathered by the bonfire. In addition, we can see how the sea unites people—on a summer's day by the beach in downtown Oslo—and how it divides them—as the youths reached the dock and as they sailed out on the fjord on a midsummer's night. All of these encounters shed additional light on the instances in which the youths sought out the waters in solitude. This search for emotional belonging and safe attachments may be a consistent element in humans' attraction toward water. Knowing Aleksandra and other Mimo youths over time, I was able to analyze their encounters with water in contrast with how they experienced and talked about their everyday lives (see T. B. Broch, 2018). This finding moves beyond the time of youth.

An urge for secure attachment begins in the womb and is highly universal. Attachment behavior is most obvious in early childhood, but can be observed throughout the life cycle (Bowlby, 1958). Thus, the fetus in the womb, an enclosed space, surrounded by rhythmic and circulatory sounds, in a state of weightlessness, becomes the very essence of attachment. Therefore, water as materiality in given contexts might trigger imaginaries of safety and attachment. The affective turn contributes to an understanding of how and when youths in this study related to the seascape by focusing on material and sensed surroundings and atmospheres. Steinberg (2013) noted that any story of encounters with the sea captures only a fraction of the sea's potentialities. Affect theory—together with psychological theory—can help us to take these potentialities seriously and to discover how and why the seascape, and other landscapes, can trigger different deeply psychological structures.

If we follow Steinberg's (2016b) argument, researchers can take the imagined ocean seriously, and I believe we can find the idiomatic and idiosyncratic meanings behind people's relationship to the ocean. We can discover the multiple ways humans are affected by the ocean, the contradicting atmospheres that can coexist, and the different ways in which an atmosphere is inhaled and exhaled. These discoveries will support and reinforce Naguib (2009) who wrote "water touches everyone."

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