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“Another ocean is possible”: thinking ocean justice beyond mastery

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, scholars have employed the terms ‘marine justice’, ‘ocean justice’, ‘oceanic justice’, or ‘blue justice’ to indicate a distinctly oceanic dimension of global justice. However, at present, the term is used to refer to kindred yet different phenomena. In this article, we distinguish three influential approaches to ocean justice: (1) justice *through* the sea, (2) justice *for* the sea, and (3) justice *at* sea. Discussing these visions of ocean justice through the lens of critiques of colonial modernity, we argue that each still features traces of the logic of mastery. In response, we point to an alternative vision of ocean justice (justice *from* the sea), which decentres the masterful subject and offers an alternative vocabulary capable of reimagining issues of justice *from below*.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, an increasing number of scholars in the ‘blue’ social sciences and humanities have begun to engage with issues of justice in maritime and marine environments. In this context, scholars have employed the term ‘ocean justice’ (Armstrong 2020, 2022, Armstrong and Scharenberg 2023, Reid 2022, 2023), ‘oceanic justice’ (Lobo and Parsons 2023), ‘marine justice’ (Widener 2018, Martin *et al.* 2024), or ‘blue justice’ (Bennett *et al.* 2021, Bueger and Mallin 2023, Blythe *et al.* 2023) to indicate a distinctly oceanic form of, or dimension in, matters of (global) justice. However, at present, the term is used to refer to a variety of different phenomena. The term ‘blue justice,’ for instance, has been used to describe the activities of grassroots and NGO networks struggling against neocolonial attitudes in ocean governance on the one hand (Blythe *et al.* 2023), and of state actors for whom blue justice is a matter of pursuing ‘criminal justice’ and better ‘law enforcement at sea’

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on the other hand (see Norway's ongoing Blue Justice Initiative, which sets out to combat illegal fishing; Bueger and Mallin 2023, 1734).

In this article, we take stock of where ongoing discussions about ocean justice are at – and offer a proposal for how they may evolve further. First, we describe three predominant tendencies in thinking through the challenge of ocean justice, each of which has referents in both theory and practice, and each of which has helped shape our engagement with the ocean during the last few decades. These understand ocean justice to mean: (1) justice *through* the sea, (2) justice *for* the sea, or (3) justice *at* sea. Second, discussing these visions of ocean justice through the lens of critiques of colonial modernity (notably Singh 2018, Ferdinand 2022), we argue that these visions of ocean justice still feature traces of the logic of mastery (Singh 2018). However, since the logic of mastery plays an important role in bringing about ocean-based injustices in the first place, these visions of ocean justice threaten to allow the continuation of 'business as usual'.

We seek to articulate a vision of ocean justice that challenges the logic of mastery. Ultimately, we propose that more radical visions of ocean justice emerge if we imagine ocean justice *from* the sea. By centring the ocean, such an approach may help us go beyond the application of masterful modes of governance to the sea (from the *top down*), in favour of an alternative vocabulary that begins to reimagine issues of justice *from below*, and that resists Western modernity's drive to dominate both people and planet.

2. Reviewing tendencies in existing visions of ocean justice

2.1. Justice through the sea

Our first vision understands ocean justice primarily as a form of *distributive justice* that is facilitated *through* the ocean (see Bueger and Mallin 2023; Martin *et al.* 2024). This vision depicts the ocean as a storehouse of natural wealth, or a 'resource cornucopia' (Hannigan 2017, p. 14), and asks how its resources can be shared between nation-states to promote a more democratic and egalitarian world order. This vision arose in a specific political context: the period of decolonisation, and the accompanying debates about the form a postcolonial world should take. As Getachew notes in her influential discussion of *Worldmaking after Empire* (2019), the leaders of newly independent countries were committed not only to formal independence for those countries, but *also* to radically transforming the world order. Only in a world with a dramatically restructured global economy, and with far more democratic international institutions, could the self-determination of communities emerging from the colonial yoke be considered meaningful.

As Armstrong (2022) observes, one of the key arenas within which this vision was put to the test was the treaty-making process for a new United

Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea – and especially its provisions on seabed mining. Increasingly feverish discussions, during the late 1960s and 1970s, about the potential value of minerals on the deep seabed opened up some stark possibilities. One was that technologically advanced countries might exploit those minerals on a first-come-first-served basis. That scenario would lead to even greater international inequality, and undercut the role of some poorer countries as mineral exporters. This is a possibility the influential Maltese diplomat Arvid Pardo famously wanted to avert, warning of the ‘intolerable injustice of reserving the plurality of the world’s resources for the exclusive benefit of a handful of nations’ (Pardo 1968, pp. 133–134). A radically different possibility was that mineral exploitation would be regulated (or even carried out) by an innovative international organisation, with the proceeds earmarked for global redistribution. For Elisabeth Mann Borgese (1976), a passionate advocate of this alternative approach, the seabed could act as the crucible for a New International Economic Order (NIEO). Rather than the exploitation of seabed minerals sparking a new ‘gold rush’ in which states with greater technological capacity would be the winners, Mann Borgese argued that by fairly distributing the proceeds of seabed mining internationally, newly independent countries could reduce their dependence on international aid, which often came with political strings attached (see p. 590). It would also rid newly independent countries of their reliance on multinational corporations based in the countries they had only just achieved formal independence from (Armstrong 2022).

The practical life of this vision was much more troubled. The Law of the Sea Convention’s provisions on seabed mining were amended significantly by the 1994 Implementation Agreement (Carlsson 1997). Among other things, this Agreement made it much less likely that the seabed mining regime would produce substantial funds for global redistribution. As seabed mining moves closer, it remains unclear whether it will ever do so (Wilde *et al.* 2023).

Though in many ways inspiring, the limitations of this vision of ocean justice lie with its focus on the ocean as a provider of material resources. According to Pardo (1968), the mineral wealth waiting to be exploited on the seabed was capable of meeting humanity’s needs for hundreds of thousands of years. For Mann Borgese, too, the minerals of the seabed were a means to a wider political end. It would be ‘impossible to build an NIEO without including the oceans’ (1976, p. 584), she argued. But by using the ocean as a crucible, the seabed mining regime could bring about ‘a change in the structure of international relations’ (Mann Borgese 1976, p. 586). This vision treats the ocean’s ecosystems instrumentally, as a useful source of funds with which to engineer a new socio-economic reality between nations. There was precious little engagement at this time, however, with the ecological consequences that might flow from mining the seabed. This was partly because

the likely ecological impacts of seabed mining were little known. Rather, the concern was what seabed mining would do to intensify international inequality if not carefully regulated, and what it could do to promote greater global equality if managed in the right way. Taking the predicted ecological impacts of seabed mining more seriously would likely mean that such funds will never become available (Armstrong 2022).

Rather than being a purely historical phenomenon, the vision of justice *through* the sea is reproduced today in discussions that call for distributive justice in the context of the blue economy, whether related to deep sea mining, oil, marine genetic resources or fair distribution of fish 'stocks' (see, for instance, Ertör and Hadjimichael (2020); Bennett *et al.* (2021)). While these address issues of global justice in terms of the equal distribution of economic benefits, they frequently treat the ocean as a resource cornucopia, ignoring the status of the ocean as an ecosystem in crisis. Another vision of ocean justice that emerged throughout the twentieth century addressed precisely this issue, and put forward an idea of justice *for* the sea.

2.2. Justice for the sea

Our second vision of ocean justice starts from an understanding of the ocean as a 'unique and threatened ecology' that needs to be protected from human impacts (Hannigan 2017, p. 14). This vision emphasises the flourishing of the individual organisms and biological communities found living in the ocean, and the threats posed to them by a variety of potentially destructive economic or security-based activities. The goal of protecting the ocean from excessive human impacts has been an explicit aim of national policy and dedicated international organisations (Harrison 2017). But it has also been an objective of a number of NGOs, which argue that interventions at the national and international level are inadequate, and failing. Since the 1970s, *Sea Shepherd*, for example, has taken direct 'enforcement' actions against whaling and sealing operations in the absence of governments' willingness to do so (Nagtzaam and Lentini 2007).

One of the key features of our second approach to ocean justice – though it may be present more or less strongly in different iterations – is an (ontological or strategic) division between the ocean's ecosystems (which need protecting), and human beings (which are either *in charge of* protection, or, alternatively, which those ecosystems need protecting *from*). According to ethnographic research carried out by Fish, for example, for many of the marine conservationists he worked with, 'biological nature is distinct from human culture' (p. 17). While they may understand humans as deeply connected to and indeed dependent on marine ecosystems, they are also adherents of what Fish calls 'nature realism,' insofar as they 'strategically differentiate nature from culture in distinct marine and political contexts'

out of the urgent and pragmatic need to advocate for animal flourishing and marine ecosystem conservation (pp. 17–19). In this articulation of justice *for* the sea, then, humans are responsible for both ‘nature’s demise and its preservation’ (Fish 2024, p. 18). This maintains a strategic distinction between humans and marine animals, even while acknowledging their ontological entanglement.

On Fish’s account, the separation between human and non-human nature may be a deliberate and strategic choice. But other iterations of justice *for* the sea construct the ocean as a place without humans, and here the separation is more problematic. This separation resonates in some well-known theoretical and literary reflections on the ocean. Rachel Carson’s famous ocean trilogy (2021), for instance, has a great deal to say about the wonder of the ocean’s ecosystems, and, in parts, about the need to protect it from the destruction wrought by human beings. But the trilogy has relatively little to say about the long history of human engagement with the ocean. Rather than emphasising ongoing and intimate connections between the ocean and society, politics, and culture, the three books foreground individual reflection on the ocean’s sublime nature. Here, the ocean is portrayed as a diverse but largely non-human ecosystem, which risks a problematic construction of the ocean as a space outside of society (see Steinberg 2001). One major worry about this approach is that it obscures the crucial and co-constitutive relationships that many cultures, including various Indigenous cultures, have formed with the sea. References to non-Western experiences of the sea are few and far between in Carson’s work. Even viewed from a purely US context, as Gómez-Barris argues, Carson’s narrative of the ocean ‘writes out the contributions and presences of America’s Indigenous ontologies, critical scholarship, and the theories and practices of its social and environmental justice’ (2019, p. 34). While Carson is rightly recognised for her ‘reverent and lyrical response to the natural world,’ she remained rather incurious about the fact that the scientific knowledge she reported, and its dominant position *as* a way of knowing the ocean, was ‘also in one sense a product of American naval power and invasive technologies’ (Twidle 2013, p. 71).

Consider a more contemporary example, which threatens not only to deny but even to actively *curtail* human relationships with the ocean, in the drive to protect what are presented as pristine ecosystems. In 2010, what was until recently the world’s largest Marine Protected Area (MPA) was declared in the waters surrounding the Chagos Islands in the Indian Ocean. This declaration was heralded as a great environmental success story in the last days of the United Kingdom’s New Labour government. Moreover, while in some places MPAs have triggered conflicts with artisanal fishers, no such worry would arise here, commentators were assured, since the Chagos Islands were uninhabited. This narrative, however, obscures the violent and

colonial relationship between the UK and Chagos (Bhatt 2019). The reason the Chagos Islands could be considered ‘uninhabited’ was that, between 1965 and 1973, Britain illegally forced the original inhabitants from the Islands, abandoning them in Mauritius and the Seychelles (Gifford and Dunne 2014). In 2015, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled that the establishment of the Chagos MPA was an unlawful infringement on the ongoing sovereignty of Mauritius over the islands. This colonial background is not always reckoned with, however, in arguments for marine environmental protection in the area. In his book *Rewilding the Sea* (2022), for example, the marine conservationist Charles Clover picks up the issue. While Clover endorses a right of return for the Chagossian people, he *also* suggests that any eventual settlement between Britain and Mauritius might legitimately be made conditional on Mauritius committing to guarantee the future of the Chagos MPA (see p. 176). It is far from clear, however, that any such conditionality could be lawful, or just, not least since the Permanent Court of Arbitration has already endorsed Mauritius’s claim to the Islands, without any further conditions on the Chagossian people’s right of return. In this case, the drive to ‘rewild’ the ocean risks imposing an MPA on people who were illegally removed from their land, regardless of their thoughts on the matter.

The case illustrates the perils of the second approach to ocean justice, in depicting the challenge of ocean justice as one of protecting the marine environment *from* human beings. Instead, as Gray and colleagues put it: ‘We must think of all oceans as peopled seascapes and all conservation projects as human projects’ (2015, p. 14). Proceeding otherwise, as scholars of environmental justice have warned (see Schlosberg 2013, Widener 2018), risks placing injustices connected to racialised violence, colonial legacies and capitalist exploitation beyond view, and may legitimise ‘solutions’ that actually intensify those injustices. It is where the ocean is presented as a pristine wilderness that this approach to ocean justice reveals its limitations, then. Rather than assuming a non-peopled space which needs to be protected from humans per se, the intimate connections between many cultures and the ocean need to be recognised in any rounded account of ocean justice. At the same time, while it is vital to recognise that the ocean faces serious environmental challenges, to describe ‘humans’ as the problem is to draw a veil over the cleavages constitutive of racial capitalism: not all humans contribute equally to these challenges, and not all humans are equally exposed to the consequences of ecosystem degradation. Rather, what needs to be differentiated is how ocean environments are negatively affected by corporate (Reid 2022) or ‘industrialized humanity’ (Fish 2024, p. 21), and how specific

groups of humans do indeed experience various injustices *at sea* themselves.

2.3. *Justice at sea*

From the Middle Passage to modern slavery in the contemporary fishing industry, the ocean has been a site of injustices ever since humans first took to the sea. The contemporary fishing industry, for instance, has become ‘a major global site for forced labour’ (Armstrong 2022, p. 120). Workers in maritime industries, including cargo and cruise shipping, are also exposed to extreme conditions, low or no pay, and various forms of abuse (see Bennett *et al.* 2021). Nearly half of female maritime workers have reported sexual harassment at sea, according to a recent report (HRAS 2023). Migrants and refugees crossing the English Channel and the Mediterranean are exposed not only to the dangers inherent in using unseaworthy vessels, but also to the violent bordering practices of UK and European border agents, which are entangled in illegal push- and pull-backs and complicit in human rights violations (Mainwaring and DeBono 2021, Scharenberg and Rees 2024).

All of this reminds us that the ocean is very much a peopled space. Given these countless human injustices, it seems uncontroversial that, as Armstrong (2022, p. 115) suggests, ‘One of our key principles of ocean justice is that people’s rights should not go unprotected simply because they find themselves at sea.’ Our third approach to ocean justice seeks to provide justice *at sea* for people vulnerable to various abuses of their human rights. Calls for justice at sea seek to extend protections to some of the most precarious workers in the global economy, and better protection for those to whom the ocean represents an escape route. A practical example would be the charity Human Rights At Sea, whose Geneva Declaration of Human Rights at Sea draws together existing legal guidelines which ought to provide security for those working at and traversing the sea, and suggests how they could be better enforced by flag states, port states and coastal states (HRAS 2023).

While the enforcement of existing human rights at sea is urgent and crucial, however, the mere extension of the human rights framework into the marine realm comes with conceptual and political limitations. The example of civil sea rescue is a case in point. Here, the right to be rescued in distress at sea is already enshrined in various legal frameworks, including in UNCLOS, the 1974 SOLAS Convention, and the 1979 SAR Convention. Yet the actions of civil society actors rescuing migrants and refugees crossing the Mediterranean are currently being criminalised by the very European states that are supposed to ensure these rights, thus revealing sea rescue to be very much a *political*, rather than a merely *humanitarian* issue (see, for instance, Mainwaring and DeBono 2021, Scharenberg 2025). In recent

years, critical migration scholars as well as civil society crews – for whom civil sea rescue is a decidedly *political* act against European border violence – have stressed the limitations of applying a humanitarian logic to civil sea rescue. This is not least because states have deployed humanitarian arguments, ‘to support exclusionary policies and practices (Cuttitta 2018, p. 638), leaving systemic border violence and the underlying problematic distinctions between citizens and non-citizens unexamined (see Tazzioli 2023).

What, then, are the drawbacks of this third approach to ocean justice, which seeks to extend better protection to those who find themselves navigating the surface of the sea? Clearly, we do not wish to condemn efforts to better protect the rights of those who work at or traverse the sea. Nevertheless, on its own, demanding human rights for maritime humans limits this vision of ocean justice, where it leaves the conditions that turn people into ‘migrants’ or ‘workers’ in the first place unquestioned; and where the production of categories of people whose lives are considered to be ‘disposable’ (Ferdinand 2022, p. 4) remains unchallenged. What needs challenging, in other words, are the conditions that produce a hierarchical split between humans as citizens and migrants, or workers and ship owners respectively.

Probyn demonstrates this in the case of the forced maritime migration of Senegalese fishing people towards the Canary Islands, arguing for the need ‘to connect the conditions of possibility that render the loss of fish and the loss of human life as intertwined outcomes’ (2020, p. 29). In this case, Probyn points to a combination of factors, including the uneven playing field between small-scale artisanal fishing in Global South countries and European or Chinese fishing fleets, which are heavily subsidized and operate on an industrial scale, and thus ultimately make ‘the difference between staying and leaving in Senegal’ (pp. 37–38). In this case, it is the commercial destruction of local livelihoods by foreign actors that produces ‘migrants’ in the first place.

Likewise, in the case of the abuses and forced labour taking place in the fishing industry, it is not enough to demand that the respective workers’ individual rights are respected. Rather, what we have to understand are the conditions leading to and maintaining exploitative working relations at sea. Armstrong points, here, to the way in which the emergence of nineteenth-century steamships led to ‘truly miserable working conditions’ and an ‘internationalization of the ocean-going labour force’ which was only intensified by the 1970s oil crisis – by which point the imperative ‘to cut labour costs, by employing seafarers from the global South’ driven into these exploitative relations by poverty, had become firmly established within the shipping and fishing industries (2022, pp.119–120).

In sum, what our discussion of calls for justice *at sea* demonstrates is that existing visions of ocean justice may improve the status quo, but do not

always challenge the underlying logics that produce injustices in the first place. In the process of defending human rights, the very production of the categories ‘worker’ and ‘migrant’ often goes unchallenged. In order for a more radical vision of justice at sea to emerge, the conditions that produce hierarchical categories of human beings in the first place must be questioned. Finally, in drawing connections between human injustices (such as enforced migration) and environmental issues (such as overfishing), we are also beginning to challenge the distinction between ‘Man’ and ‘nature,’ and are led to reconsider ocean justice through a critique of masterful ways of governance.

3. Rethinking ocean justice through a decolonial critique of mastery

Thus far, we have traced three influential iterations of ocean justice, which have resonated both in political theory and in practice. These we have called justice *through*, *for*, and *at sea*. Each has its merits and limitations, insofar as each prioritises a particular form of injustice. Justice *through* the sea understands ocean justice primarily as a matter of distributive justice and fair resource distribution following decolonisation. This vision risks endorsing a conception of the ocean as a resource cornucopia at the service of humanity and downplays ecological pressures on the planetary ocean. Justice *for* the sea understands ocean justice primarily as a matter of ecological protection – at the risk of ignoring legacies of colonisation and other human injustices. Justice *at sea* prioritises important human rights issues but can leave problematic hierarchies between citizens and non-citizens, or workers and ship-owners, unchallenged.

In practice, these visions are sometimes combined. For instance, some theorists and practitioners working to protect the livelihoods of marine animals *also* acknowledge the injustices faced by workers in fishing (for instance, Probyn 2016, Bennett *et al.* 2021, Armstrong 2022). Indeed, ocean justice scholars (like Blythe *et al.* 2023, Lobo and Parsons 2023) as well as environmental justice scholars (like Schlosberg 2013) have highlighted how environmental issues and social injustices influence one another, while others have demonstrated how ‘the subjugation of the environment is intimately linked to the subjugation of people’ (Singh 2018). If pointing out the fact that social and environmental issues intersect is one important step, the next is to attempt a fuller analysis of *how* they do so, which foregrounds the deeper connections between the two, and their shared points of origin (Schlosberg 2013, p. 39). For instance, environmental justice scholars have suggested that turning to a decolonial lens can help us to understand how traditional theories of justice may be ‘permeated by a Western perspective’ (Inoue *et al.* 2023, p. 4, see also Álvarez and Coolsaet 2020), and even carry

‘colonial legacies’ (p. 17), which threaten to perpetuate injustices (see also Celermajer *et al.* 2021).

Applying a similar critique to the case of ocean justice, Reid has argued that calling for ‘more laws and regulations alone misses how underlying cultural values contribute to the production of ecological harm’ (2023, p. 107). Instead, Reid argues, we need to understand ‘how the imaginary of mastery’ is built into and underpins ‘contemporary ocean governance regimes’ (p. 107), such as in the case of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, whose common heritage principle she describes as ‘an example of mastery on steroids’ (p. 118; for further critiques of UNCLOS, see Ranganathan (2019); Constantinou and Hadjimichael (2021); Armstrong (2024)). In her critical reading of UNCLOS, Reid traces ‘[s]ignature values of mastery, such as the dominance and instrumentalization of more-than-human others’ (p. 118), as well as ‘mastery’s criteria of disembodiment, autonomy and detachment’ and its drive to privilege, create hierarchies and normalise exploitation (p. 111). Such values and drivers of mastery, Reid concludes, overlook our ‘material vulnerability’ and the fact that humanity’s ‘well-being is bound inextricably with the seas’ (p. 121). We agree with Reid’s invitation to focus on the underlying cultural logics in the way of ocean justice as well as with her proposal to centre mastery in our understanding of ocean justice. However, we believe that Reid’s discussion of mastery might be expanded and extended. A promising way of doing so is to engage in a closer reading of Julietta Singh’s in-depth theorisation of mastery, which Reid only briefly mentions in passing.

While Singh is certainly not the only decolonial scholar to critique the logic of mastery, her book *Unthinking Mastery* (2019) offers a particularly deep and careful account of ‘how drives towards mastery inform and underlie the major crises of our time’ (p. 3). At the same time, Singh deliberately abstains from offering a final definition or conceptual framework of mastery – so as not to reproduce mastery by ‘mastering’ it. Nevertheless, a key feature of mastery, for her, is its double move to both split and subordinate: ‘First, mastery involves splitting in either the sense of carving a boundary or an infliction of mutilation’ (p. 12), and second, ‘it involves the subjugation of what is on one side of a border to the power of what is on the other’ (p. 13). Sovereignty, in this sense, is one of the most obvious expressions of mastery in that it allows authorities to govern by splitting territory, as a result of which an environment, its people and its ‘Others’ become manageable. But mastery exceeds state-centred, territorial forms of governance; it also includes other dynamics of domination, including humanitarian agents’ mastery over the recipients of aid (p. 26), and dominion, ‘which situates “man” in relation to the natural world’ (p. 12). In each context, a primary conceptual split, or fracture, enables mastery: ‘Whether we desire mastery over a slave, an environment, or a body of texts, we are always returning to

this primordial fracture – to the partial destruction of the object that the would-be master yearns to govern over completely’ (p. 10).

While Singh’s analysis helpfully centres the term mastery as an analytical tool with which to critically reflect on modern modes of governance, her work can be read alongside other decolonial scholars, who have similarly critiqued the modern drive to split and fracture (see for instance, Mignolo 2007, Lugones 2010). The term fracture is usefully theorised, for instance, in Malcolm Ferdinand’s *Decolonial Ecology*, in which he diagnoses ‘modernity’s colonial and environmental *double* fracture’ (2022, p. 3, our italics). The ‘environmental’ fracture reflects modernity’s ‘great divide,’ which ‘places “Man” above nature’ (p. 4) and then further categorises ‘nature’ as noble (often invoking the idea of ‘wilderness’) or less noble (e.g. urban nature and ‘livestock’). At the same time, it divides ‘Man’ into hierarchical categories, including ‘men and women, rich and poor, Whites and non-Whites, Christian and non-Christian, sick and healthy’ (p. 5). The ‘colonial’ fracture additionally ‘separates humans and the geographical spaces of the Earth between European colonizers and non-European colonized peoples’; it divides the world’s spaces ‘between the master and the enslaved’ (p. 6).

What does this analysis of modernity’s underlying drive to split and subjugate tell us about the three visions of ocean justice we have outlined? In our view, what is so powerful about reconsidering ocean justice through the lens of mastery is that it not only reveals mastery as a shared obstacle to different iterations of ocean justice, but also as a logic that is so pervasive that, in many cases, it persists even within various modes of resistance. Singh insightfully demonstrates how ‘in their efforts to decolonize, anticolonial thinkers in turn advocated practices of mastery – corporeal, linguistic, and intellectual – towards their own liberation’; they proposed, that is, ‘undoing colonial mastery by producing new masterful subjects’ (2018, p. 2). Similarly, Ferdinand demonstrates that modernity’s double fracture influences – and more importantly limits – the work of both environmental and anti-colonial movements, where they overlook racist violence or environmental domination respectively (see 2022, p. 11).

Rereading our three visions of ocean justice through this lens, we can see how the logic of mastery lingers similarly. The vision of justice *through* the sea maintains a split between ‘humans’ and ‘nature’. While it addresses the colonial fracture in one sense – in that it prioritises issues of unequal distribution of resources following colonization – ‘the ecological issues of the world remain relegated to the background’ (Ferdinand 2022, p. 8). The vision of justice *for* the sea, as expressed in the Chagos Islands case, maintains the same split, albeit prioritising ‘nature’ over colonial inequalities. It remains ‘preoccupied with “nature,” cherishing the sweet illusion that its socio-political conditions of access and its

sciences remain outside the colonial fracture,’ and thus ignores, in Ferdinand’s words, ‘the colonial and slave-making constitution of modernity’ (2022, p. 6). Finally, in the vision of justice *at sea*, a focus on human rights can obscure the splitting of humans into categories of oppressors and oppressed and thus ‘mask the plurality of human beings, featuring men and women, rich and poor, Whites and non-Whites, Christians and non-Christians, sick and healthy’ (2022, p. 5), citizens and non-citizens, workers and ship-owners. What we begin to see, then, is that traces of the logic of mastery, as defined by Singh (2018), run through all three existing visions of ocean justice.

4. Re-imagining ocean justice from the sea

If we acknowledge that the logic of mastery is pervasive not only within modern political thought and practice in general, but also within prominent visions of ocean justice, how might it be possible to re-imagine ocean justice beyond the logic of mastery? Singh is careful not to suggest that mastery could be easily overcome, since mastery is ‘everywhere’ (2018, p. 1). Instead, she suggests that our priority should be to recognise and become attentive to ‘other performances of the human that allow us to begin to practice non-masterful forms of politics’ (p. 15). This might involve learning from ‘forms of humanity envisioned and practiced by those excluded from the domain of Man as “the master-subject”’ (pp. 3–4). Singh proposes a practice of *dehumanism*, which prioritises the perspectives of those – including both human and non-human animals – who have been constructed as *less-than-human* in the context of colonial modernity.

We propose that applying Singh’s critique of mastery and her *dehumanist* practice to the concept of ocean justice points to a need to approach issues of justice *from the sea*, that is from the perspective of oceanic subjects who have been split from or subjugated by ‘the master-subject’ (p. 4). This proposal echoes a wider strand of scholarship across several academic disciplines – including the blue humanities, as well as the blue social and political sciences – which has explicitly employed a view *from the ocean* in order to mitigate modernity’s ‘terracentric normative ideal’ (Peters *et al.* 2018, p. 2, see also Steinberg and Peters 2015). For instance, according to the ocean geographer Philip Steinberg, ‘to think *from the ocean*’ is a way of ‘engaging its waters as an encountered, inhabited, felt, and sensed space of more-than-human livelihoods’ (2025, p. 4, original emphasis), rather than ‘reducing it to a metaphor, or diminishing it to an environment that provides resources’ (p. 2). In legal scholarship, Mann has taken a view *from the sea* in order to revisit from the bottom up the meaning of politics and law in an era of climate change, based on an engagement with maritime customs which precede the ocean’s ‘division into separate bordered entities’ (2024, p. 82). In the political sciences, scholars Scharenberg and Rees

have developed a conceptualisation of solidarity that ‘derives *from* the specific conditions and materiality of *the sea itself*’ rather than taking the sedentary metaphysics that govern contemporary border regimes for granted (Scharenberg and Rees 2024, p. 7, original emphasis; see also Scharenberg 2024, 2025). Similarly, in the blue humanities, Lavery’s work, which ‘explores ways of thinking *from* the Southern Ocean’ (2020, p. 308, emphasis added), demonstrates that thinking from the sea ‘has the power to alter one’s view of the world’ (p. 313).

How, then, does our understanding of ocean justice shift if we prioritise calls for justice that develop *from* the ocean? Even if they do not always explicitly employ the term *ocean justice*, or engage with Singh’s theorisation of mastery and dehumanism, there are at least three strands of scholarship and practice that offer a model for approaching ocean justice *from* the sea. We can call these (1) justice from the hold, (2) justice from Indigenous perspectives, and (3) justice from non-human perspectives.

The first example is illustrated perhaps most vividly in Ferdinand’s *Decolonial Ecology* (2022). Here, Ferdinand’s answer to modernity’s double fracture – defined by the splitting of ‘Man’ and nature and of the world into ‘colonizers’ and ‘colonized’ – is to rethink modernity from the hold of slave ships. For Ferdinand, slave ships like the *Zong* epitomise modernity’s drive of ‘abandoning, enslaving, or throwing overboard a part of the Earth and humanity’ (p. 242). At the same time (insofar as it focusses precisely on where and how modern injustices originate) ‘the extended metaphor of the slave ship gives voice to the ambition of going beyond the double fracture’ (p. 22) and functions as a form of ‘world-making’ which facilitates a ‘bridge of justice’ (p. 242) across modernity’s drive to split people and planet into classes and categories for subordination. Other scholars, like Sharpe, demonstrate how a perspective from the hold of slave ships can help us link justice claims across history: ‘Two hundred thirty years after the crew on board the slave ship *Zong* threw overboard those living Africans, that word *cargo* repeats, and so do the horrors of the holding, the throwing and the beating’ (2016, p. 55, original emphasis). Sharpe draws connections between the violence of the Middle Passage and contemporary border violence against migrants crossing the Mediterranean. Consequently, various scholars have stressed the urgent need to rethink justice from the perspective of those who have experienced the ocean as a space of colonial and racialised violence (see e.g. The Black Mediterranean Collective 2021, Swan 2022, Steinberg 2025) or those practising solidarity with maritime migrants (Scharenberg and Rees 2024, Scharenberg 2025). Finally, if we understand thinking from the hold as a form of thinking from *below* deck, we may also rethink ocean justice from the perspective of those working in the machine rooms of contemporary

capitalism – on cargo, fishing or cruise vessels, which, as Khalili (2024) has shown, continue to operate based on racialised hierarchies (see also Steinberg 2025, p. 6).

The second example of how ocean justice may be re-imagined *from the sea* can be found in scholarship and practices of resistance prioritising Indigenous knowledges of the ocean. As ocean justice scholars have pointed out, while there are increasing attempts to include Indigenous knowledges in ocean-related policy making and scholarship, it is crucial to recognise that forms of ‘saltwater co-belonging’ have not simply emerged as a response to more recent discussions of ocean justice, but ‘have always existed alongside white, western Euro-American ontologies of the ocean’ and ‘the racial, colonial and capitalist logics that continues to suffocate people and planet’ (Lobo and Parsons 2023, p. 128, see also Champion and Strand 2025). This has inspired proposals for ‘oceanic justice’ which are defined by a ‘privileging of ontologies of the ocean’ that modern logics of governance have overshadowed: namely ‘Indigenous, Black, Brown, and southern intellectual traditions of belonging and responsibility’ (p. 128). In distinction to colonial modernity’s governance through the logic of splitting, but in a kindred spirit to several of the aforementioned approaches deriving from the hold (see Ferdinand 2022, Steinberg 2025), such visions often refrain from making sharp distinctions between ‘Man’ and ‘nature’ or human and non-human animals and are defined, instead, by an ‘embedded sense of being with or a part of the sea’ (Widener 2018, p. 408). For instance, for ‘Indigenous Māori, the sea is not simply a body of saltwater, but the home and marae (ancestral meeting house) of Tangaroa (the god of the sea), and the source of mauri (life force) and the wairua (spiritual integrity) of many human and more-than-human beings’ (Lobo and Parsons 2023, p. 131). As a result, the announcement of offshore oil exploration through seismic testing in Aotearoa New Zealand, for example, was experienced by the local Indigenous communities not merely as a threat to their own livelihood, but a disruption of crucial cultural connections facilitated through the local Kaikoura underwater canyon *and* to the population of resident sperm whales (Widener 2018).

A related, third example of how ocean justice may be re-imagined from the sea thus engages the question of what ocean justice looks like from the perspective of marine animals. This question resonates with discussions about multi-species justice and how animals may become subjects of justice (see Schlosberg 2013, Celermajor *et al.* 2021). In the context of ocean justice, feminist scholars in particular have embraced multi-species perspectives that challenge sharp distinctions between humans and marine animals, including fish (Probyn 2016) or marine mammals (Gumbs 2020), and even deep-sea organisms such as Xenophyophores, molluscs and brittle stars (Reid 2022). To consider ocean justice from the perspective of marine animals may be a radical,

yet necessary step, not least given that while comparatively few human beings live or even work at sea, the ocean is 'the *only* home for trillions of animals' (Armstrong 2025, p. 1). Re-considering Pacific deep sea mining plans from the perspective of deep sea organisms, Reid demonstrates why the prioritisation of corporate interests in existing governance frameworks like the Common Heritage of Mankind principle (CHM) over the interest of non-human organisms is problematic: while deep sea mining may benefit corporate humanity in the short run, their impacts will likely 'last well beyond human time scales' because of the slow growth rate and long life expectancy of seabed organisms (2022, p. 70). For Reid, what thus needs revisiting is the idea of 'mankind' in the CHM principle, to incorporate human and non-human interdependence with the ocean. Armstrong (2025) has taken this a step further, making the case for the 'Common Heritage of Animalkind' - which involves including animals not only as *objects*, but also *subjects* of the ocean's heritage.

To sum up, what unites these perspectives from the sea is that they do not engage with the sea from the kind of 'distanced, "God's eye"' view from which the sea can appear as a 'vast, blue nothingness' (Steinberg 2025, p. 3) capable of being mastered or tamed. Rather, they prioritise the views 'of those who experience water - whether near-shore or distant; proximate, historical, or aspirational, as a tactile moment and as a historical memory' - whose perspectives demonstrate 'the ways in which livelihoods are entangled with the sea' (p. 7). It is in this sense of prioritising entanglements rather than divisions, then, that thinking *from* the sea may be considered as a way of *unthinking mastery* (Singh 2018): situating ourselves *in the sea* allows us to reimagine politics from a less masterful perspective that resists the drive to split and subjugate and may allow us to overcome respective divisions.

Finally, Indigenous perspectives, more-than-human perspectives, or the perspectives of modernity's hold, all invite us to take a critical distance from the current shape of political institutions and processes. For instance, political theorists 'typically treat politics as something that is done to animals, not something that animals themselves engage in' (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2023, p. 624). But including perspectives from the ocean has to be a transformative, and not simply an additive process. It has to keep open the possibility that politics - including our ideas of democracy, territory and sovereignty - might look very different once non-human animals are included. As Champion and Strand (2025) argue with regard to moves aiming to include Indigenous perspectives into the hegemonic models of ocean governance, the very idea of inclusion might be problematic on many levels. For insofar as they seek to institutionalise modes of masterful governance, these very concepts and modes of governance may be part of the problem, rather than means of achieving ocean justice.

5. Beyond 'business as usual': 'another ocean is possible'

Our aim in this article was to offer neither a final definition of ocean justice that would close off debate, nor a comprehensive overview of all the different ways in which ocean justice has been articulated to date. Rather, our argument originated from the observation that 'ocean justice', and kindred terms, is a concept that is currently being harnessed to wildly different meanings, ranging from grassroots approaches with emancipatory, decolonial potential to state-driven initiatives that merely perpetuate masterful forms of governance. We aimed to identify dominant tendencies, both in terms of how visions of ocean justice are frequently articulated (as justice *through*, *for* and *at* sea) and in terms of the problematic traces of mastery and masterful governance that they may entail. In offering a critique of mastery via the work of Singh (2018) and Ferdinand (2022), as well as an orientation towards already existing ways of thinking justice *from* the sea, we aimed to begin to establish a shared vocabulary that may allow us to continue conversations about what ocean justice can achieve.

Crucial, for us, was to develop a kind of compass that helps us to steer through the ongoing debate about ocean justice and test the radical potential of how the term is used to move us beyond 'business as usual'. We believe that iterations of ocean justice are most powerful where they do not merely apply ideals of sovereignty into ocean space, but manage to grasp and challenge colonial modernity's underlying logic of mastery. Hence, we understand ocean justice to be a continuation of global justice scholarship and movements, whose slogan 'Another World is Possible' is echoed here (see, for instance, de Sousa Santos 2006). What our conception of ocean justice shares with these discussions of global justice is the ambition to not only produce a slightly better version of the status quo, but to trouble the underlying values and concepts that govern this planet today. In this sense, progressive accounts of ocean justice can not only help us address the ocean-shaped hole in global justice discussions (see Armstrong and Scharenberg, 2023), but also contribute to ongoing debates on the meaning of climate, environmental and multi-species justice (see, for instance, Schlosberg 2013, Celermajer *et al.* 2021; Inoue *et al.* 2023). Rather than the ocean being an afterthought within these discussions, we propose to recast global and environmental justice debates *from* the sea.

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