

The Ocean as 'Splendor' in James Prudenciado's Made of Saltwater

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Abstract

When it comes to the ocean in literature, as it is generally used, multiple authors have utilized this body of water to discuss or imply powerful and sometimes incomprehensible messages and meanings that may often contain sublime implications. This paper aims to discuss the vast, inevitable terror and pleasure present in the sublimity of the ocean and how this perception of water is used as a literary device in James Prudenciado's *Made of Saltwater*. While it remains close to Edmund Burke's definition of sublime, the ocean, the sea, and those inhabiting the water themselves evoke powerful emotions that, at the same time, present greater meaning based on how it exists in the text. Rather than simply being sublime, it falls in line with Neferti Tadiar's definition of the Remaindered Life, making the ocean's sublimity an existence that leans away from the concept of disposability. Despite the astonishment and even horror present, Prudenciado's poetry uses sublimity as one transformed; it becomes a 'life-time' outside the realm of waste and value, existing for personal satisfaction yet thoroughly vital despite its lack of contribution to progress. This paper presents the incomprehensible feelings of great magnitude from which no aim or goal is implied and how such things create in themselves a personal goal for the sake of Splendor, a term equated to the Remaindered Life.

Keywords: Ocean, Sublime, Remaindered Life, Life-Times, Disposability

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Introduction

How often has the ocean or the sea made a home in literature? From the top of our heads, at least one novel or poem comes to mind that discusses it, either to pay homage or to speak of its horrors. In the cases of Western Literature, immediate examples such as Herman Merville's 'Moby Dick' and Edgar Allan Poe's 'Manuscript in a Bottle' can come to mind, discussing tales that connect themselves to the body of water prominent within the setting. In The Philippines, poets such as J. Neil Garcia have used water to represent boundless desire. As he describes the first of his seven-poem sequence titled 'Gift', "this poem's utterance is being spurred by the sea's own oscillating gestures of tenderness and cruelty, and by the lyric self's realization of its "permeability" to the other (and therefore, of its own impossibility)" (Garcia, 2016). The ocean and the human are connected. They watch the movement of the water and find it equivalent to their own life. As the narrator says:

And I know my task
for the day
to take in and let go,
to push against land and
pull away, to love you without claims. (Garcia, 2016)

We see here that the ocean becomes a representation of human emotion. Yet this isn't all that takes the form of the ocean. For some, it is not simply a mirror reflecting; it can also be the narrator itself. The human and water are the same as seen in James Prudenciado's book, *Made of Saltwater*. Here, the ocean entwines itself with the people who have suffered, particularly about their identity. One example of this can be found in his poem, 'At the Beach in the Far North, I Lost My Hanafuda Earrings, Lost My Eyeglasses, and in the Blinding Darkness of the Night, I Found a Boy':

All night, we bathed in the shallow shore, bodies
submerged underwater, holding onto each other tight
enough we became one with the water—
shapeless, our heart, beating in unison, causing
fleeting small ripples. (Prudenciado, 2022, p. 91)

Happiness becomes akin to the movement of the sea. Ripples become heartbeats. The nuance lies in the author's intentions, but the ocean, the sea, and any body of water are transformed beyond what it is as it exists within the text. In such circumstances, wouldn't it be possible then to consider the ocean representing something beyond itself? Just as J. Neil Garcia utilizes the ocean's 'boundlessness' to show intense emotions, this greatness too, can be considered in its sublimity to mean another concept. This paper aims to discuss how bodies of water can not only be the narrator, one and the same, but that this coupled with the water's sublimity can also become a representation of a remaindered life, particularly in the work earlier mentioned, James Prudenciado's *Made of Saltwater*.

The Effects Humans Have Made on the Environment

Now, in the new age of man, several scholars have thought to label the current era based on the effects humans have made on the environment. One anthropologist, Anna Tsing, discussed the label in her work, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, and mentioned this to be the age in which human actions have significantly affected the earth in a way that

ensures we have left a strong mark on the planet. Anthropocene, as it is called, is also a term she admits to be rather contradictory. While it is meant to celebrate the effects of man, she points out how the negatives seem to be more noticeable. The message of this term, rather than uplifting, states “without planning or intention, humans have made a mess of our planet” (Tsing 2021). Modern capitalism and its negative effects become equivalent to the concept, and the despair it has caused humans becomes the highlight of the age. The waste-value dialectic begins to persist, and the value of human progress is made a priority at the cost of everything else. With such a time perhaps it is easy to think of the question, how can humans find their brief respite among it all? It’s from here that the idea of the Remaindered Life is formulated.

A concept properly described and discussed by Neferti Tadiar based on countless research, she once elaborated on the Remaindered Life in an interview upon the release of her book with the same title. She first defined the concept by describing how “human life is ... only just the means of more value creation” (Chatterjee 2022) within the context of the waste-value dialectic. As she describes it, the capitalist environment that has occurred in recent times has focused primarily on how valuable humans can be. It is based on not only their existence but also their actions and their contributions to their communities. Waste too, which was mostly equated to the ones struggling in a capitalist society, becomes an important tool for value. For value, for this system, to continue to exist, waste must be constantly used. It is subjected to violence in which it is “effaced, enrolled, exported, or expunged” (Gidwani et al., 2016). Based on this, she states that waste does not necessarily turn into something valuable. Rather, it becomes valuable based on how waste is utilized. Tadiar provides an example both in the interview and in the book itself, mentioning the extrajudicial killings that occurred during the war on drugs in The Philippines. The slum dwellers who are shot by the police, she explained, are revalued because of what people can do with such waste (Chatterjee 2022).

Returning to the remaindered, it is what falls out of the ideas of the production of value and the irrelevance of waste. In her work, ‘Decolonization, ‘Race,’ And Remaindered Life Under Empire’, Tadiar defines it as “the unabsorbed residue of an epistemic translation and real subsumption of “non-human” forms of life by capitalist production and exchange” (Tadiar 2015). There is a life-making present that does not need to have value for it to exist. The production of value and the exclusion of waste are not primary factors as to why people participate in or develop the Remaindered Life. Here, there are transformed ways of living that people strive for without a need for reason or purpose. Rather than having one out of necessity and whether or not it contributes to anything, people simply create a life-time, the Remaindered, because it brings them happiness regardless of whether it is short-lived or not. For them, the importance of how much enjoyment is felt is what entices people to continue pursuing it, especially since it does not equate to either being waste or being valuable. As her book, *Remaindered Life*, states, it is “life that escapes valorization” and is “a situation bearing possibilities for the radical remaking of “human” social relations” (2022).

While its political and social concerns may seem to be completely separate from the humanities, it is imperative to note that literature can and does play a crucial role in the presence of this remaindered life. Literature assists in the reclaiming of this life-time. What cannot be subsumed is a means to show a person’s freedom, and Tadiar first alludes to this in her work, *Fantasy Production*, wherein one example discusses the poetry created based on domestic helpers. While most of their bodies are treated as feminine beings-for-others (2004), literature created in their name to show their subjectivity presents one that is not commodified. Rather, power is made while reaching beyond the confinements of this

inhumanness. Ruth Elynia S. Mabanglo makes use of this idea in her collection of works, 'Mga Liham ni Pinay' (In English: 'Letters of Pinay'). Here, the woman narrator represents the whole of the DH community, taking the form of different women all at the same time. The idea of them being replaceable items existing only for the use of their masters is at the forefront of the concept of the DH Body being a lesser race, so for Mabanglo to utilize and reclaim this concept as a means to show the inherent 'humanness' of each domestic helper is a means to go against that; to turn around the very image of an inhuman human. As Tadiar puts it in *Fantasy Production* (2004):

Mabanglo takes the substitutability of women, their exploitative exchangeability within a capitalist, sexist and racist socio-economic order, and turns it into a means of partially experiencing the lives of the women for whom she feels. (p. 138)

It intensifies the already existing idea of women being beings-for-others and turns it into a method in which their potential and power are realized rather than made subservient. From here, the remaindered begins to exist as the women's subjective lives are not made to be commodified, and their existence is not considered as a means only to further progress.

Yet we cannot say that the remaindered life-times can be specific to this sort of genre. While it can show itself as a reclamation of a commodified characteristic by turning it around to show subjectivity, it can also make a home in literature even in the subtlest of forms. Take into consideration Tadiar's statement on the remaindered life:

[It] is not disposable life but is the superfluous effect and performances of life-times made and lived by such disposable life in its social reproduction—the excess of life-making (or “survival”) that does not merely produce disposable life for capitalist serviceability or expenditure. (Tadiar, 2022)

Considering the term 'performances' implies a possibility of it lacking limitations on how this concept can be represented or symbolized. Life-times entail the many lives people go through. While we could say it doesn't equate to every human being, they are still ones that are considered to have disposable lives, humans that are made to experience the effects of the age of Anthropocene consistently. If that is the case, wouldn't it be possible for that subtlety mentioned earlier to make itself present in the text through the ocean, particularly in its sublimity?

Sublimity was a term first heavily discussed by Longinus. It “consists in a certain loftiness and excellence of language” (Longinus 2006). It follows no human reason, instead going beyond that, and this particular characteristic means it can also not align with what we consider reasonable or agreeable. It's a force to be reckoned with to the point where even the one experiencing the sublime does not have any hope of controlling it. It's outside the will and Longinus, adding in his work 'On The Sublime', discussed that it contains a great enough power capable of enticing or even confounding the judgment of the person. Rameshwor Singh, who had discussed Longinus, pointed out that the author also differentiates this Sublime from the false one, with the latter mostly consisting of simple, exaggerated, or inflated use of language with little to no substance (2019). Rather than grandiose, it appears tawdry and completely childish.

This concept was further expounded upon by Edmund Burke in his philosophical inquiry who described it as “productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling”

(2014). He labeled it as the strongest emotion precisely because he didn't define it as either a positive or negative one. It doesn't matter whether it is pain or pleasure. What's important is the "passion" that is produced by the sublime. He goes on to say it is 'astonishment', which he defines as "that state of the soul, in which all motions are suspended, with some degree of horror" (Burke 2014). Leaning on neither good nor bad, it simply inflicts upon the person experiencing the emotion a feeling of great, incomprehensible magnitude. Returning to our idea of the ocean, its nature, and existence can also be equated with this sublimity given how unfathomable and beautiful it could be all at once. Its terrifying nature can evoke powerful emotions in others when it is used in literary works. It is sublime in the same way that it is paradoxical. As McKinstry puts it, "It can bring hope and life, but also can create fear and destruction; it is a realm of possibility and potential, but equally a place of limitation and interruption" (2019).

The Pacific Islands, in particular, have a strong connection with the water given how much resources are derived from these. Take the case of the anthropologist Epeli Hau'ofa, in the year 1993, discussing in his essay, 'Our Sea of Islands', the relation of the people to the water. While many have thought the Pacific to be a place lacking in resources, it is wrongly belittled with its inhabitants being seen as having extreme dependence on other groups for survival and livelihood. His essay urged for the need to go against such a mindset through the idea of 'Oceania'. He encouraged this to be introduced in academic settings to show the richness of the Pacific while also going against the degradation forced upon the people due to their way of life. Hau'ofa's usage of the term is present for most of the text, but it is most apparent how important the word is at the end, as he begins his conclusion with the following lines:

Oceania is vast, Oceania is expanding, Oceania is hospitable and generous, Oceania is humanity rising from the depths of brine and regions of fire deeper still, Oceania is us. We are the sea, we are the ocean. (1993)

Hau'ofa relates the people in the Pacific to the body of water that encompasses their home. Oceania is not simply a means to describe their land, it is also the people. Just as it is belittled, so are the inhabitants. This sort of relationship cannot be so easily severed given how much of their lives have been associated with the water. While his essay only considers the Pacific Islanders, The Philippines as well shows a connection with the water. The sublimity of it can also be equated to a remaindered life-time of the people, and literature plays a role in such a representation. Such is the case of *Made of Saltwater*, which was introduced earlier in this paper.

Published in 2022, *Made of Saltwater* is a collection of poems written by James Prudenciado whose work reverberates this same idea of the ocean being one with people. He connects the ocean with the people whose stories are being told within the lines of his works. Whether it be the narrator such as in the poem, 'Theory of Our Origins,' who states "my head is a house invaded / by flood" or the readers themselves in 'Growing up Queer' who are told, "You are an extension of the sea— / your skin, the seabed alien to the sun" (Prudenciado, 2022, p. 19, p. 29), he makes sure to constantly remind the reader of the speaker's and even the listener's ties to the surrounding saltwater, specifically the ocean connected to the Visayan Sea, which is close to the place he was born in.

Yet, when one looks at the poems contained in his book, Prudenciado doesn't generalize in the same way Hau'ofa related all Pacific Islanders to the ocean. For him, the ocean is more closely tied to a specific group of marginalized people. He does so not just by using the ocean

but also the water's inhabitants. Multiple poems have related queer people to mermaids or fish, and in the poem, 'The Anthropology of Our Queerness', with the title already a clear giveaway, he even begins with this particular line in his numbered list: "we are small bodies of water, our skin changes with the / waxing and waning of the moon" (Prudenciado, 2022, p. 35). For Prudenciado, while he does once mention that the people in Samar which he discusses heavily in his works are "children of the sea" (2022, p. 96), the ocean is more closely equivalent to those who have experienced a long history of trauma and violence due to either queerness or gender.

One could say that this representation is all there is, and while he specifies what the ocean is and who it is supposed to represent, it does not at all remove it from its concept of sublimity. Rather, the terror and the pleasure usually equated with the sublime are clearly represented in his work, albeit with further implications.

To begin with, *Made of Saltwater* introduces the reader to two sections. First is 'The Bruising', which remembers the past, mainly the pain associated with grief, heartbreak, and hate. Most of the poems are rife with such feelings, especially helplessness. The first poem, for instance, implies the lack of free will as the speaker talks of a child given the chance to choose between two things. The poem, which is entitled 'Rites of Passage', simply ends with a choice forced upon them: "you chose the doll / you were handed / a gun" (Prudenciado, 2022, p. 15). There is nothing here but conformity, the poem implies, and it being the first introduces the reader to the feelings contained within this section. There is no hope here, almost as if only the terror of being unable to adjust according to the will of society remains. Pain is what this is in the context of the sublime.

The second section is entitled 'The Loving', which James called "a love letter" to himself and to those who experienced helplessness but are now longing for a better tomorrow. Similar to The Bruising, the first poem, 'On Loving a Son of Manila, in Waray,' starts well with "I love you clear and indiscriminate as the daytime sky" (Prudenciado, 2022, p. 71). It introduces us to Prudenciado's ways of conveying the growing hope in the incoming works. Here, as we can all see, there is love, possibly happiness. It is a stark contrast to the former that's riddled with pain. We could understand that this is the book's pleasure in line with sublimity.

The book clearly depicts the two important aspects of the sublime. It becomes incomprehensible in a way because the pain and pleasure are present within the text as two different yet inseparable parts of one whole. Yet how he utilizes the ocean in this manner also implies another idea: the transition of 'The Bruising' to 'The Loving', the pain intertwined with pleasure, giving way to an emotion far greater than what we can expect, echoes in some way the possibility of achieving survival based on previously experienced violence. Here the Sublime mingles with the concept first suggested by Neferti Tadiar: the idea of the remaindered life achieved as a result of removing oneself from the concept of waste and value.

As implied earlier, Tadiar speaks of the remaindered life as a place that escapes commodification, removing itself from the throes of capitalism. Lying outside of this area of disposability, the beauty of its existence is that it "reminds us of times of living that long for a place of belonging, which shared and mutual being beyond the dominant ontologies and ecologies of global life might allow, even nourish" (Tadiar, 2022). They are moments of fleeting splendor, going beyond the value-making order by helping us realize other

perspectives that are not only for the sake of progress. This particular splendor also exists within Prudenciado's words, and in particular, raises the importance of the sublimity within it.

Rather than simply remaining as sublime, which, as mentioned, evokes strong, powerful emotions in a reader, Prudenciado's use of the ocean in his poetry, as it transitions from 'The Bruising' to 'The Loving,' turns the sublime into an object of splendor. It becomes, in itself, a remaindered life now reclaimed and completely separate from the purpose of value-making. The terror of the ocean's sublimity exists within his works such as in 'Kadayaw' (in English: The Full Moon):

you watch us cry as we ache
our bodies are water
we are made of tears
pull our sadness in
and let it drift away with the ebbing sea (Prudenciado, 2022, p. 60)

The ocean is personified in the human in a manner that leans toward pain. Yet as we continue with the rest of the book, the idea of the human as the ocean invokes a notion of the sublime that now leans toward pleasure. Let's return to the poem first introduced, 'At the Beach in the Far North, I Lost My Hanafuda Earrings, Lost My Eyeglasses, and in the Blinding Darkness of the Night, I Found a Boy':

All night, we bathed in the shallow shore, bodies
submerged underwater, holding onto each other tight
enough we became one with the water—
shapeless, our heart, beating in unison, causing
fleeting small ripples. (Prudenciado, 2022, p. 91)

While Burke's description of the sublime never equated it to only either the positive or the negative emotions, Prudenciado makes a clear distinction between the two as the ocean's sublimity moves from one emotion invoked to the other, thereby becoming strongly tied to Splendor. Here, there is no more need to care about the presence of necessity in the actions a person commits. Now, there is only the thought of becoming 'human' "who continue to seek pathways to escape the order of their fate (a fate of perpetual, because immanently failing, becoming)" (Tadiar, 2022). With love as a focus, James Prudenciado has created a response to the ongoing intergenerational trauma and othering caused by society continuing to prioritize progress and the notion of value. No longer must a person focus only on whether or not they contribute something. What matters now is the remaindered life-times that were created from such struggle.

Yet, just as was mentioned earlier, this does not necessarily mean that the remaindered life exists completely outside of this dialectic. Tadiar admits it is impossible to completely separate the remaindered life due to its very existence having been caused by the two in the first place. It is inseparable from it because there wouldn't have been a life that exists outside of something if the very thing was nonexistent. In the same way, the ocean's sublimity and the emotions created due to them also coexist even if they contradict. 'The Loving,' while a section that was clearly written with love, echoes of pain still present and not forgotten, littered with it as if persisting. An example of this is the poem entitled 'Water.' The mention of the ocean relates itself to the pleasure of the utmost degree:

The night you first met
you were both lost and
wet of the moment,
both so primeval;
his incandescent body
was the moon, pulling you by your waist,
teaching you how to rise and ebb like the tide. (Prudenciado, 2022, p. 85)

Yet the poem itself does not at all only depict happiness. The tone of the poem, despite being contained in ‘The Loving,’ is dire. There is sadness present as the narrator tells the story of the two lovers within the poem. The two lovers are close to the idea of love but not quite there, because there is an awareness of how the feeling is still incomplete or imperfect. After all, despite the heat of the moment and the pleasure induced, it cannot avoid the fact that it began still with this:

When lonely, he tells you he loves you like rain, and you,
lonely enough too to convince yourself he loves
you the way he needed clean water back in his days in the slum.
(Prudenciado, 2022, p. 85)

James Prudenciado is aware that the current pleasure and hope that grows from ‘The Loving’ could not also completely separate itself from what caused it. Survival and coping with trauma can never truly be devoid of violence in the same way Splendor is a life-time born from disposability. Sublime, in all aspects of its astonishment from the good to the bad, will be intrinsically tied to splendor’s moments of happiness, but not in a manner that feels hopeless. Rather, Prudenciado chooses to still side with the idea that there is hope for healing, even if the past cannot truly be forgotten. In his book’s final poem, ‘Name,’ he implies the same sentiment in the final stanza:

Decades later, I was a whole new colony
of corals. Meaning sometime in the distant
past, was a disaster—
but at least to the fishes, I was the most
beautiful disaster
to have ever descended to the seafloor. (Prudenciado, 2022, p. 104)

Conclusion

Prudenciado uses the presence of the ocean in his poetry similar to how water comes upon land. It appears in his poems like waves, crashing in lines and disappearing in others. Despite the title, *Made of Saltwater*, being a direct implication of the importance of the ocean for both him and all of his works, the clear mention of the ocean does not often occur in all of his lines. Instead, it lingers within the characters, with the narrators, or even the readers. The ocean is us, the ones that felt helpless, the ones that Prudenciado wished would love themselves a little better in some way or another. The sublimity of the ocean then becomes a piece of every person too. Pain and pleasure coexist and cannot be fully separated, similar to the idea of splendor. The presence of the ocean as both sublime and splendor seems to be a reminder of how healing does not necessarily mean all is forgotten. There was helplessness, and it cannot be cut out and buried within the water never to be seen again, not completely. What matters is that the sublime continues as splendor, moving forward, living within the

Anthropocene with hope. Giving us a place wherein we move towards each other, as Tadiar puts it, “in ever more generous worlds of mutual being and shared living” (2022).

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