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Solid and Fluid

Cultural ecology of the beach in literature

The special significance of the seashore for a cultural ecology of literature is linked with its conspicuous in-between status: it is located at the interface between water and land as heterogeneous manifestations of the global ecosystem. It occupies a special zone bordering on the water and still belonging to but also somehow separated from the land. “The beach is an anomalous category between land and sea that is neither one nor the other but has characteristics of both” (Fiske 120). I am using the term beach here, rather than shore or coast, to emphasize its character as an especially intensive contact zone between sea and land, human and nonhuman life, in the evolution of culture.¹ The beach has a certain stability, yet is constantly changing; it is a site of regularly recurring rhythms and irregular morphodynamic shifts and transformations. It was central to the emergence of life, and, as a place of transition between sea and land, has been crucial to the evolution and continuing survival of human cultures. From the point of view of human history and society, the beach appears as a humanly accessible part of the coastal landscape, a visible boundary marker, but also a place of vital interaction between culture and nature, between habitable and uninhabitable spheres. Since the dawn of history, the beach has served as a place of fishing and seafaring, of trade and economic exchange, and thus as a link between regions and cultures. As a boundary between different intersecting biospheres, the beach is a complex liminal ecosystem, whose combination of the solid and the fluid, of recurrence and change, of unity

¹ For a differentiation of these terms, see Fiske (1983: 59), Plumwood (1993: 3), Lockwood (2012).

and diversity seems to correspond to deep-rooted human needs and desires. The beach is a hybrid zone in which different time frames—day and night, the tides, the seasons—and spatial conditions—shallow or deep, narrow or broad, flat or hilly coastal conditions—interact in complex, regular and irregular, chaotic and rhythmical ways.

This ecological, anthropological, and cultural significance of the beach as a boundary and place of transition between sea and land made it a topic in literature long before its modern commercial appropriation. In this chapter, I want to explore some of the ways in which the beach not only features as a setting for literary texts throughout history and across different cultures but also constitutes a particularly productive site of literary creativity. In this respect, the present chapter, even though more concretely focusing on a liminal spatiotemporal ecozone, links up with the other chapters by exemplifying creative processes of texts defined in always shifting tensions between matter and mind, order and chaos, connective patterns and creative energies. The various configurations of the seashore in literature are often implicit or explicit modes of autopoietic reflection on the origins and possibilities of literary creation; at the same time, they offer an ecosemiotic space in which complex interactions between archaic-evolutionary, historical-cultural, and metaphoric-imaginative frames of significance can be staged and explored in almost paradigmatic ways.

Given its significance and recurring presence in literature past and present, the beach has received rather scarce attention in literary and cultural studies. To be sure, coasts and shorelines have been thematized as settings for literary events, as transitional spaces between different states of existence, and as places of disaster and rescue, of exploration and abandonment, and of erotic adventures and intercultural encounters in works from the *Odyssey* to medieval and modern texts. They have also been the subject of cultural-historical scholarship on the shipwreck as a metaphor of human transgression and failure, as in the work of Hans Blumenberg, or as a symptom of the ambiguities of civilizational expansion and of globalization in Ottmar Ette's recent work (Ette 2009). In these studies, however, the beach is primarily seen as a space for the realization of individual or collective human projects. It remains part of a prevailing anthropocentric interpretation of the natural world as a stage for the enactment of human history.

From the beginnings of literature in mythology, the beach has been connoted as a place of origin and of emergence, a place of transformation and metamorphosis, a place where the elements of water, earth, air and fire meet in the co-agency of sea, land, wind, and sun. Indeed, the modern concept of “emergence” as a term for the evolutionary appearance of new forms of life or new cultural phenomena seems to be linked originally to rising out of water, as in the first item in *Webster’s Dictionary* on “emergent”: “1: emerging out of a fluid or something that covers or conceals: issuing forth: rising into notice (like the lovely goddess emergent from the waves, emergent coastal islands, the emergent vegetation along the shore)” (Webster 741). In the liminal space of the beach, heterogeneous phenomena and forces meet, each of which represents necessary but contradictory conditions of human life and culture—the solid and the fluid, the habitable and the uninhabitable, the graspable and the ungraspable, the limited and the unlimited, the historical and the transhistorical.

The beach in the mythological imagination

The beach is a place where historical time is both present and suspended and where the archaic origins of life and culture can be experienced as coexisting in sensory immediacy with prevailing social conditions. It is a place where deep time and local time concur, merging our civilizational sense of historical linearity and uniqueness with an awareness of the transhistorical co-evolution of human and nonhuman life. This is why the beach has figured so prominently in mythological tales of human origins, which continue to exert a powerful appeal in modern literature. Let me single out one such potent myth, deeply rooted in the imagination of ancient Europe, the myth of Aphrodite. Her birth from the foam of the waves breaking on the beach is preceded by a power struggle between Gaia and Uranos, who is overthrown by Chronos and whose severed genitals’ blood metamorphs into the sea foam from which Aphrodite emerges. The generative powers of heaven and earth are thus symbolically brought together in the medium of the waves of the sea, from whose foam Aphrodite emerges. Aphrodite incarnates the birth of new life from elemental natural energies, the symbiosis of fluid and solid forms, and the beauty and erotic fascination of the human body as the product of the evolution of life and

culture. In this function, Aphrodite or Venus, with her characteristic attributes of waves, seashell, dolphins, flowers, and birds, was an almost omnipresent figure of reference in the literature of classical antiquity and then again from the Renaissance to romanticism and into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Her association with the transitional, metamorphic space of the beach and with the creative process of life itself is expressed in these passages from Rilke's "Geburt der Venus" ("The Birth of Venus"):

Hinter ihr,
die rasch dahinschritt durch die jungen Ufer,
erhoben sich den ganzen Vormittag
die Blumen und die Halme, warm, verwirrt,
wie aus Umarmung. Und sie ging und lief.

Am Mittag aber, in der schwersten Stunde,
hob sich das Meer noch einmal auf und warf
einen Delphin an jene selbe Stelle.
Tot, rot und offen. (Rilke 508; ll.55–64)

Behind her,
as quickly she walked over the young shores,
all the forenoon
the flowers and grasses rose up, warm, confused,
as from an embrace. And she walked and ran.

But at noon, at the heaviest hour,
the sea rose once more and
flung out a dolphin, at that same place.
Dead, red and open. (Rilke, trans. Middleton)

The creative process of the poem encompasses land and sea, plants, animals, and the forms of the human body. It is framed by the tension between eros and thanatos, attraction and violence, becoming and vanishing. On one level, the poem is an intermedial comment on Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and on another a poetic adaptation of the Christian drama of death and resurrection to the dionysian Aphrodite myth. But it is clearly also an autopoietic reflection about its own emergence as a symbolic activity creating unity in diversity and bringing together heterogeneous manifestations of life on the boundary between natural and cultural evolution.

The beach in history and society: Shipwreck and social transformation

In early modern literary history, the beach becomes a site of catastrophe, crisis, and exploration within the project of a globally expanding civilization. In this context, it is perceived as a site of danger and survival rather than a place which is significant in itself. This function is expressed in the recurring motif of the shipwreck, which, as Ottmar Ette, following Blumenberg, has shown, has been a topos in literature since Columbus and through the various stages of western expansion and globalization, involving highly ambivalent intercultural encounters and experiences of failure, conflict, and the gaining of new knowledge (Ette 2009).

Needless to say, I can only mention a few of the many possible examples. In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, the beach appears as a place of shipwreck initiating social change and transformation. Viola and her brother Sebastian are separated by a storm and are washed up on the beach after their ship founders, landing in the unknown country of Illyria, where Viola's appearance in the local community in the disguise of a man results in turbulent events that break up frozen relationships and call into question conventional gender roles. The beach features in two symmetrical scenes only (*Twelfth Night* I, 2 and II, 1), in which each of the siblings has barely survived the catastrophe. They find themselves in a near-death situation, which nevertheless becomes the starting point for the ensuing drama of confusion, multiple role-play, and symbolic rebirth and regeneration of life, in which eros triumphs against emotional stalemate and the siblings meet again at the end of the play. Both Sebastian, whom Viola last saw clinging to a mast "like Orion on the Dolphine's back,/ I saw him hold acquaintance with the waves" (Act I, 2) and more particularly Viola, whom Sebastian deems dead and "drowned with salt water" (Act II, 1), are thus associated with water and with the power of elemental emotions.

More explicitly, *The Tempest* not only presents a sociopolitical counterworld but stages the transformative power of art in connection with the hybrid space of the beach. Again, the play begins with a storm and an impending shipwreck, accompanied by chaos and aggression among the ship's crew, who jump overboard and are dispersed on Prospero's island. But as it turns out, storm and shipwreck have been orchestrated, with the help of the island spirit

Ariel, by Prospero, the ruler of the island and exiled former duke of Milan, who is taking revenge on the usurpers of his former power but also teaches them a lesson in loss, suffering, and forgiveness. Prospero uses his knowledge gained from the study of books and of the “liberal arts” (Act II, 2, l. 73), to which he has dedicated himself, to play an educational power game with his former enemies; he is assisted in this project by Ariel, the island spirit who has “performed” the tempest for him (Act I, 2, l. 194) and who has plunged his enemies into a near-death experience of shock, despair, and madness before he turns their anticipation of imminent death into an unexpected rebirth on the island’s beach. The liminal, transitory space of the beach is not only the location but a semiotically important site of this transformation, which involves a crossing back and forth between sea and land, solid and fluid forms of being. The beach is a site of both catastrophe and survival, of a “sea-change” that the characters have to go through (Act I, 2, l. 402–403), of their encounter with new people in a “brave new world,” and a place where Ariel, changing his shape into a “water nymph” only visible to Prospero and himself (Act I, 2, 317 ff.), enchants the strangers with his magical music. The power of art staged in the play is thus not restricted to a cultural level but results instead from a vital reconnection of cultural and natural energies. If the aim of Prospero’s civilizational project is to sublimate and domesticate nature, its realization remains dependent on the natural forces which are personified in Ariel. The magical power of Ariel is an indispensable part of Prospero’s project, and after the spirit’s helpful assistance in the service of human evolution, this power is finally set free, implying recognition of the limits of man’s anthropocentric control over nature.

The role of Caliban is also interesting in this context. As a native and son of the former matriarchal ruler of the island, Sycorax, he represents, on the one hand, a grotesquely deformed, negative projection of the colonial subject in the framework of Prospero’s supremacist ideology, in which the colonial other is devalued by both demonization and satiric contempt. For this reason, the postcolonial critique and revisionist rewritings of *The Tempest* are responding to a dimension of the play that is symptomatic of the larger project of western colonialism. At the same time, the figure of Caliban also embodies a subversive counter-energy to the “white magic” of Prospero’s purported humanist rule of reason. For all his malicious, cunning, and uncouth behavior and appearance,

Caliban is a strange transitional figure living in an undefined nomadic border-zone between archaic and modern world, instinctual desire and linguistic order, anarchy and discipline. With his body-centered, upside-down perspective on systemic hierarchies, he assumes features of the Bakhtinian grotesque and carnivalesque. In his amphibian hybridity between human shape and fish-like appearance (“What have we here? a man or a fish? . . . Legg’d like a man, and his fins like arms.” Act II, 2, l. 26, 38), he reflects the hybrid zone between sea and land in which he lives, displaying a native knowledge and special sensorium for the ecosystem of the island that enabled Prospero to gain control of it in the first place. “And then I loved thee,/And show’d thee all the qualities o’ th’ isle,/The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile” (Act I, 2, l. 397–405). He also has an acute sensitivity to the island’s deeper “wavelengths,” for not only can he alone hear the music of the spheres—which represents the highest form of cosmic and aesthetic order in Western philosophy—but he also is exceptionally receptive to the living soundscape of the island. “. . . the isle is full of noises,/Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not./Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments/Will hum about mine ears. . .” (Act III, 2, l. 148–153) The figure of Caliban is thus much more complex than it seems. As a transgressive force beyond all binaries, he is an indispensable, dissonant, counterdiscursive voice in the (trans-)cultural knowledge exchange and part of the ecosemiotic interactivity between culture and nature that energizes the artistic productivity of the play and that is closely tied to the beach as a transitional, elemental contact zone between solid and fluid, land and sea.

A paradigmatic case in the emerging genre of the novel for the ways in which the beach figured prominently in the process of western expansion, colonization, and early globalization is Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. Defoe’s novel is an influential illustration of the ways in which the beach has been imagined as a site of repeated shipwrecks and hairsbreadth escapes but also of the confrontation with an exotic pagan world of “wilderness,” which is seen not as an enriching ecocultural contact zone but as a life-threatening inferior realm inhabited by human and nonhuman aliens that have to be subjected to social discipline and civilizational control. This encounter challenges the protagonist to mobilize his technical and economic inventiveness and moral discipline in a modern individualist work ethic, which instructs him to cultivate the “raw material” of nature profitably and that way provides a

model of human mastery of the world and of the alleged superiority of western culture over other, non-western cultures that served as a central ideological underpinning of the project of colonialism.

The beach between the romantic sublime and elemental nature

While this religious-pragmatic, economic, and instrumentalizing view of the beach as part of a larger project of the appropriation of nature as well as of other cultures remains prominent in subsequent travel literature, novels of adventure, and island literature, it undergoes a major change in romanticism. The beach is subject to a radical reappraisal in romantic poetry and is focused upon as a place of natural value and meaning in its own right. As a boundary between culture and nature, between the human and nonhuman spheres, the beach becomes a site of the sublime. In Wordsworth's *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*, it marks an enchanted place of childhood memories in a disenchanted world, a place redolent of the immortal origins and the final destination of human life:

Hence in a season of calm weather
 Though inland far we be,
 Our souls have sight of that immortal sea
 Which brought us hither,
 Can in a moment travel thither,
 And see the children sport upon the shore,
 And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore. (l. 165–171)

The transcendental origins and the destination of human life are no longer located vertically in a sphere above nature but horizontally within elemental nature itself.

The beach is also the site of the gothic sublime in famous romantic texts such as Edgar Allan Poe's "Annabel Lee." The poem unites eros and thanatos in the "kingdom by the sea" (l. 2) that the poetic speaker shares with his youthful bride, who died young but lives on in the imaginary borderland of their shared passion. This finds expression in the sound and rhythm of the elemental waters on the beach and also inspires the sound and rhythm of the poem itself:

And so, all the night tide, I lie down by the side
 Of my darling – my darling – my life and my bride,
 In her sepulchre there by the sea –
 In her tomb by the sounding sea. (l. 38–41)

In the course of the nineteenth century, the relationship between man and elemental nature embodied in the beach is even more explicitly foregrounded as a source of artistic creativity. One text in which the interfusion between the experience of the beach and the poetic mind becomes especially productive is Walt Whitman's poem *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*. In the poem, the adult speaker revisits a place on the Long Island seashore where, as a young boy, he had experienced the kinship between human and nonhuman nature, which awakened him to his poetic calling. The speaker seems to be undergoing a crisis, he is "[a] man, yet by these tears a little boy again,/ Throwing myself on the sand, confronting the waves ..." (l. 18–19). As a boy, he used to visit the beach at night to listen to the love song of two mocking-birds, and, after one of them has disappeared, to the passionate song of sorrow and mourning of the remaining solitary bird. The poet translates the birdsong into human language, and this "aria" (l. 130), as he calls it, inspires him to his own flow of sounds, memories, and words out of which the poem is composed. The text unfolds in a syntactically fluid, undulating rhythm characterized by long, elliptical sentences, the frequent use of continuous forms, and by alternately advancing and retreating sequences of longer and shorter lines. The "fitful risings and fallings" (l. 9) of the bird's voice, the rocking movements of a child's cradle, and the back and forth movement of the constantly changing yet endlessly repetitive rhythm of the waves on the shore are interrelated in the "oceanic" style of the poem, re-enacting in language the fundamental cycle of life, death, and rebirth as the matrix of poetic creativity. The sounds of the waters breaking on the shore are like the "moans" of a "fierce old mother incessantly moaning" (l. 133); they signify the birth pangs of ever new life but also the inevitable knowledge of death, which is precisely the answer the poet receives from the waves in his quest for "the word final, the word superior to all" (l. 161):

Whereto answering, the sea
 Delaying not, hurrying not,
 Whisper'd me through the night, and very plainly before daybreak,
 Lisp'd to me the low and delicious word death,

And again death, death, death, death, death, (l. 165–169)

...

Which I do not forget,

But fuse the song of my dusky demon and brother,

That he sang to me in the moonlight on Paumanok's gray beach,

With the thousand responsive songs at random,

My own songs awakened from that hour,

And with them the key, the word up from the waves ... (l. 174–179)

Poetry is the translation of the language of nature into the language of culture, and the beach is a particularly rich ecosemiotic site of poetic emergence and creativity.

In the Anglo-American novel of the *fin de siècle*, the beach figures most prominently in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. The novel begins and ends there, and in addition several of its climactic scenes and turning points are set on the beach. It is the first American novel to be set in a holiday resort; for the female protagonist, Edna Pontellier, the beach becomes a counterworld and heterotopia to her life as the wife of a successful Creole stockbroker in New Orleans. To Edna, the sea is a source of the life-enhancing intensity that is lacking in Victorian society. The sea is also, as has been seen above, the source of the dionysian power of art, as becomes evident in Edna's passionate response to Mme. Reisz' piano concert. At the end of their novel, Edna breaks off all social relations and stands alone on the beach, looking out toward the sea, which is "gleaming with the million lights of the sun" (Chopin 136), in an experience that is marked both as a moment of imminent death and as her final awakening. Standing naked at the edge of the water before swimming out into the infinity of the gulf, she "felt like some newborn creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world she had never known" (136). In this final scene, different strands of the literary discourse of the beach intermingle. Edna is like Aphrodite, newborn from the foam of the waves, but she also resembles a mermaid or Undine figure, a half-human, half-aquatic being, who is about to return to her true element. She is, moreover, an intertextual version of Whitman's *Out of the Cradle*, in which the sea exerts an irresistible pull with its elemental cycle of life, death, and rebirth. The mournful aria of Whitman's mocking-bird mingles, at the end of *The Awakening*, with the voice of the sea in a scene that recalls the infinite melody of love in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. This is clearly inscribed in the

novel's ending, which translates the concluding lines of Isolde's *Liebestod* song into the narrative plot—"Ertrinken, versinken, unbewusst, höchste Lust." ("To drown, to founder, unconscious, utmost rapture," Wagner) Edna's swimming out into the open sea, which recalls her dreamlike childhood memories of a meadow she had once traversed "that seemed as big as the ocean," making her feel "as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water" (35), is also a symbolic act of love, not however as in the case of Isolde with a human other but with the nonhuman other of elemental nature: "The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (136). The novel does not simply end with the conventional suicide of a woman victimized by society but with a symbolic merging of the contradictory forces that determine Edna's existence. The novel's conflicts between conscious and unconscious self, between civilizational control and elemental nature, between biophobic and biophilic energies are staged in the ecosemiotic space of the beach, which is a central site of the novel's artistic creativity.

The beach as a matrix of post-traumatic narratives

In contemporary literature as well, the beach continues to remain significant as a place of decisive encounters, existential turning points, and liminal experiences between civilizational order and transgressive fantasies. In novels such as Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* (2007), the beach is the central location of potential meaning and failure in the protagonists' lives. McEwan's novel is told in retrospect; it deals with the wedding night of the young couple Edward and Florence in mid-twentieth century England, on Chesil beach. The night ends in an embarrassing sexual disaster and in the separation of the newly married pair. While Florence sublimates the shock through the passionate emotionality of her music and becomes a famous violinist, Edward's life disintegrates into a series of inconsequential relationships. The turning point of their lives, on Chesil beach, however, remains an imaginary presence in the narrator's mind, providing the core scene and fueling the melancholic energy of his post-traumatic story-telling:

On Chesil Beach he could have called out to Florence, he could have gone after her. He did not know, or would not have cared to know, that as she ran

away from him, certain in her distress that she was about to lose him, she had never loved him more, or more hopelessly, and that the sound of his voice would have been a deliverance, and she would have turned back. Instead, he stood in cold and righteous silence in the summer's dusk, watching her hurry along the shore, the sound of her difficult progress lost to the breaking of small waves, until she was a blurred, receding point against the immense road of shingle gleaming in the pallid light. (McEwan 203)

Charles Simmons' *Salt Water* (1998) is even more of a post-traumatic narrative: about thirty years after the event it relates a summer holiday in the narrator's youth in the early 1960s during which the confusions of his first love coincide with or, rather, culminate in the death of his father. The novel is an intertextual adaptation of the tale "First Love" by Ivan Turgenev, but is transferred in its setting from the Russian countryside to the New England seaboard. During the family vacation at a seaside resort in New England, fifteen-year-old Michael falls in love with a twenty-year-old girl, Zina. He first encounters her on the beach after his father has swum out with him almost too far and he lies exhausted, falling in love with Zina "upside down" (Simmons 18). Zina alternately flirts with him, takes photographs, seeks his company and kisses him, but also keeps her distance and withdraws from him. All the events leading up to the final crisis are set on or in the vicinity of the beach, as Michael is torn between innocence and eros, between desire and uncertainty, unable to make sense of Zina's contradictory behavior until he finds out that she has begun a relationship with his father Peter. When he discovers their affair, Michael is shocked and confused, and blackmails Zina into having sex with him on the family boat. Having gone out on the boat with his father, Michael challenges him with this fact in a verbal confrontation during which the father is hit by the boom of the boat and disappears into the water, never to be found again. This is the tragic trauma which Michael has still not come to terms with, as the ending of the novel indicates: "I am now older than father was when he drowned. I don't know why I still feel like a child" (175).

The title of the novel already establishes water and the beach as the central theme and metaphorical source domain of the fictional events: It combines the element from which Michael's first love emerged and in which his father disappeared, with his own emotional reaction: "Waves sent up spray from the oceanside. I suppose I was crying. Tears and salt water taste the same" (171). It is thus a novel about

the relationship of man and the sea, both on a real and on a symbolic level—on a real level it is about sailing, fishing, swimming, and walking along the beach, activities associated with a tourist attitude to nature, typical of modern seaside resorts; on a symbolic level it is about the vital inner relationship of human beings to sea water as an elemental emotional life force. Zina, like Michael's father, is closely associated with water in her open, fluid, unpredictable character and her unknown and uncontrollable depths. Both Zina and Michael's father Peter are likened to porpoises (17, 25), a subspecies of dolphin which evolved from land animals that reentered the water. And while the advancing Zina is described as "Venus rising" (43), his father's birthplace is Neptune, New Jersey, clearly an allusion to the ancient sea god, whose element is salt water, in which Peter likes to sail and swim, and in which he disappears at the end. It is significant that his body is never found, that he has in a way merged with the salt water of the seas, and of his son's tears. On the one hand, the tears of the narrator, emotionally paralyzed for decades, have turned him into a pillar of salt: he has been unable to overcome his trauma. On the other hand, perhaps the fact that he is finally recounting the events of that summer and bringing them back to life again, in a narrative full of pain and play, of joy and mourning, of laughter and tears, is the first step in a therapeutic process of opening himself up to his deeper self.

If this is a post-traumatic narrative, it is also a narrative in which the anthropocentric perspective on and appropriation of the beach—by personal desire but also by tourism, fishing, and the military—is complemented and undermined by a non-anthropocentric perspective. This latter perspective is indicated, on the one hand, in the humanizing description of the two dogs which accompany the young protagonists, and on the other hand, in the unfeeling and unnecessary slaughter of stingrays described at the novel's beginning. The human characters are presented simultaneously as modern individuals and as natural creatures sharing the ecotope of the beach with other creatures in a both destructive and symbiotic way.

The beach in the postcolonial imagination

Of the numerous examples from contemporary literature outside the western tradition, in which this ecosemiotic potential of the beach has been used as a site

and source of imaginative literature, I refer to only three here from postcolonial literatures. In spite of their various cultural-historical contexts, these examples share a cross-cultural generative matrix which marks the beach as the place of a coevolutionary symbiosis between human and nonhuman life that provides a source of artistic imagination and cultural self-renewal. In the New Zealand writer Witi Ihimaera's novel *Whale Rider*, the adolescent heroine Kahu defiantly struggles against the patriarchal restrictions of Maori traditions represented by her grandfather but nevertheless helps Maori culture to survive by renewing its mythic connections to the sea embodied in its deep-rooted relationship to whales. Kahu overcomes the internal paralysis of over-conventionalized traditions by actively revitalizing the ritualized communication and bodily encounter with the whales that is symbolically brought to a crisis and acted out in the riding of the whale on the beach, which helps the whole group of stranded whales to find their way back to the open sea and thus momentarily restores the lost balance between culture and nature. The underlying interpretation of the relationship between tradition and modernity is similar in this novel to that in Silko's *Ceremony*: only by their continuing self-renewal can traditional forms of culture-nature symbiosis be maintained. In *Whale Rider*, the place of this self-renewal is the beach as the life-sustaining contact zone between land and sea.

In First Nations Canadian writer Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*, the mythopoetic potential of the beach is explored in the indigenous context of Haisla culture on the North Coast of British Columbia. Again, it is an unruly adolescent girl who becomes the central agency of the narrative and a medium of rediscovering the beach as a heterotope to the everyday tragicomedy and modern fragmentation of life in the coastal village of Kitamaat. In short chapters switching between her first person narrator's voice and multiple other voices, the novel follows an irregular narrative pace moving between inside and outside, dreams and reality, the living and the dead. In her erratic search for her lost brother, the narrator is led to Monkey Beach, where she catches glimpses of ghostlike superhuman creatures, the Sasquatch, shadowy monsters haunting the beach but, as human-animal hybrids, also embodying the radical ambiguities and deeper connections of self and other she is experiencing. Even though figuring only as a sporadically visited background rather than a central setting of the plot, the beach nevertheless forms a vital part of the imaginative story of modern adolescent awakening that the novel narrates.

Whereas *Whale Rider* and *Monkey Beach* adapt mythic elements of the beach into stories of female initiation and thus recycle collective cultural narratives in new forms of contemporary interpretation, South African writer Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller* (2005) more decidedly turns away from received traditions, inventing its own, radically individualized and eroticized code of the beach. The novel is set in South Africa in the Hermanus region on the Western Cape, and unfolds in the relationship between the whale caller and a whale, whom he names Sharisha. This relationship develops into a powerful erotic attraction to the whale that competes with the nameless narrator-protagonist's relationship to Saluni, an outsider woman and village drunk, who has fallen in love with him as unconditionally as he has fallen in love with the whale. As central imaginative energy and core phantasy of the narrative, the intense zoophilic attachment between whale caller and whale transgresses the boundary between human and nonhuman life and challenges established civilizational self-concepts. What is especially foregrounded in the narrative is the musical instrument of the whale caller, the kelp horn, which is made from sea weed and is usually blown by the real whale crier of Hermanus to indicate the location of whales, but in the fictional context of Mda's novel serves as a medium of direct mutual communication between whale caller and whale. Already in the protagonist's youth, the kelp horn became the central symbol in the ceremonial rites of a religious community, the Church of the Sacred Kelphorn, which split off from the established congregation because of this nature worship, and in which the protagonist, on account of his special abilities, was promoted to Chief Horn Player. Associated with both biosemiotic and religious significance, the kelp horn represents a creative force of renewing human culture by reconnecting it to its natural origins:

A kelp horn ... was a natural musical instrument that took the congregation back to its roots. It was an instrument that celebrated the essence of creation. God would lend a sharper ear to the prayers of those who praised him to the accompaniment of an instrument that was shaped by His own hands through the agency of the seas. (8)

Later in his life, under the increasing pressures of tourism, commercialism, and social alienation, the whale caller leaves the congregation to pursue his own individual version of culture-nature communion in his special, almost

magical relationship to the whale Sharisha, who seems to reciprocate his love by responding to the sounds of his kelp horn. Viewed from the triadic model of cultural ecology, the kelp horn embodies an ecosemiotic counterdiscourse to alienated life in modern South African society but also a reintegrative interdiscourse that brings together cultural and natural ecologies through the medium of “nature-as-art.” As a trans-species form of affection, this asymmetrical love relationship is put under severe pressure in the conflict with the insurmountable boundaries that remain, in spite of all zoophilic desire for border-crossing, between beach and sea, civilization and nature, human and nonhuman life. There is always the danger of the whale caller’s “love” of Sharisha being an anthropocentric projection of his own unfulfilled desires and that the intensely imagined responsiveness of the whale remains within the wish-fulfilling fantasy world of the narrator-protagonist. This is illustrated in his pathetically exaggerated sexual jealousy when he observes a mating scene between Sharisha and a number of male whales, which he experiences as an act of betrayal and violation of narcissistic feelings rather than as a natural event:

A persistent male is in hot pursuit while others seem to give up hope. She flees into shallow waters, hoping that the male will give up the chase. But the male is eager to have her even at the risk of stranding himself. She rolls onto her back, and the male reaches her. She submits. They lie belly to belly and copulate. The Whale Caller tries to save Sharisha from this rape by blowing his horn and creating havoc in a discordant tune. The other males are not deterred by the discord; they charge towards the mating couple. The mating is brief and each of the males has her, then sails away. By the time the fourth male is lying belly to belly with her the Whale Caller has given up in exasperation. In no time the feast is over and Sharisha sails away; only her flukes can be seen above the water ... sailing further and further away from him. (48)

The whale caller is full of despair at first, then comforts himself by differentiating between humans and whales: “Unlike humans, whales don’t indulge in such acts for recreation but for procreation” (48). He subsequently forgets this differentiation again when he imagines Sharisha to be pregnant and to “have a calf next time she returns from the southern seas” (48). As a witness to the scene of conception, he feels “blessed,” since he “was a participant with his

horn. He feels like a father already” (48). Indeed, when he walks to the shore at night in his usual, ceremonial tuxedo with black tie, Sharisha is there again near the beach and the whale caller “joins in the music” of her whale song with his kelp horn, feeling an emotional unity with the whale that supplants all human relations. “Sharisha has indeed managed to make him forget Saluni” (49). The repeated shifts in interpreting his zoophilic attachment to the whale both reveal and conceal the contradictory implications of this attachment between trans-species unity and generic difference, between ecocentric and anthropocentric perspectives in which the character and story are entangled. Like Orpheus, the whale caller with his kelp horn is an artist translating the sounds of nature into a shared language between the human and nonhuman world, while simultaneously being left with the recognition that this nonhuman other remains finally ungraspable to human understanding and control. This is the condition for the tragic ending of the novel, in which both the whale caller’s love for the whale, who is stranded on the beach and has to be killed by scientists, and his love for the woman, who dies an accidental violent death as a result of her undecided life between passion and society, do not survive the insuperable contradictions of their liminal existence.

Postcolonial narratives such as these mark the most recent stage in the evolution of the beach in literature as a contact zone between culture and nature that represents a source of complex human self-exploration and literary creativity. Like other tropes and topographies of liminality between civilization and “wild” spaces—such as forests, mountains, or deserts—the beach provides a rich ecosemiotic site for imaginative literature as a medium of cultural ecology, in which anthropocentric forms of human sense-making and ecocentric forms of nonhuman nature collide and coalesce in manifold and highly productive ways.