

## OCEAN MATTERS: IMAGE AND ARTIFACT IN ADALBER SALAS HERNÁNDEZ'S *NUEVAS CARTAS NÁUTICAS* (2022)

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**Resumen:** *Nuevas cartas náuticas* by the Venezuelan poet Adalber Salas Hernández (Pretextos, 2022) is a collection of prose poems related to the ocean. The author approaches this often-written-about topic experimentally, by blending fact and fiction, original and modified citations, languages, and registers. In this article, I focus on what I identify as an archaeological impulse that runs through *Nuevas cartas náuticas*. First, I analyze a selection of poems in which Salas draws the reader's attention to material artifacts, often displayed in specific sites of collection and exhibition. I then show how, parallel to these instances of display, Salas connects his museum objects to the marine oral traditions that also populate the book, and I contrast his treatment of antique documents and relics with his approach toward photographic images. Throughout, I argue that the presence of material objects throughout the book allows us to inscribe *Nuevas cartas náuticas* within the "blue humanities": an interdisciplinary field of inquiry into the cultural, social, and political dimensions of human interactions with the ocean.

**Key Words::** Oceanic turn, archaeology, materiality, blue humanities, Venezuelan poetry

*Nuevas cartas náuticas* is a book of poetry by Venezuelan poet, translator, and scholar Adalber Salas Hernández, published in 2022 by Pre-Textos. As its title reveals, the book is a collection of prose poems related to the sea. This is perhaps one of the most written-about themes in history, yet *Nuevas cartas náuticas* approaches it experimentally, through an amalgamation of registers and languages. Salas appropriates and subtly (and at times boldly) modifies the words of Defoe, Coleridge, Ovid, Pliny the Elder, among other authors who, over millennia, have recorded the enchantment, fear, and perplexity that the ocean evokes. Salas's bibliographic flights co-exist with an oral dimension: he retells indigenous and classical myths about the ocean and recounts the superstitions of fishermen and sailors. And as he reaches outside of his own insight to borrow from the voices of others, he plays with the reader, tweaking, purposefully mistranslating, and sometimes outright inventing the texts that he attributes to certain authors or provenances. "Algunas supersticiones y creencias de los marineros fenicios," for instance, are completely fabricated despite being attributed to Pliny the Elder. The result is a book that straddles fact and fiction, as unpredictable as its subject matter.

In this essay, I address a third register in *Nuevas cartas náuticas* that is present in poems that describe particular objects, where the author draws the readers' attention to relics and artifacts, often displayed in specific sites of collection and exhibition. I will analyze how the distinction between poetic and archaeological discourses becomes blurry in these poems, as Salas abandons his bibliographic-citational experiments and focuses on minute descriptions of the materiality of his objects of choice: votives, reliefs, and documents. With Argentine critic Florencia Garramuño, I will argue that the "exhibition" of objects in the poems manifests a disciplinary porousness that expands literature to an "outside of itself," as it takes on discourses that exceed its own field (45). I will also show how Salas's engagement with submarine photographic imagery connects historical oceanic artifacts with contemporary technologies of vision.

Finally, I will read *Nuevas cartas náuticas* within the wider field of the "blue humanities." The abundance of citations and references throughout the text clearly evinces Salas's awareness of a global oceanic literary corpus in which he firmly inserts this work—seafaring narratives, maritime poetry, etc.—, but his historiographic and archaeological curiosity also situate this book within the corpus of oceanic critical studies in the humanities known as blue humanities. This turn toward the ocean has been linked to the emergence of diaspora and globalization studies in the 1970s, and to a subsequent shift to ways of thinking about capital and space as decoupled from the framework of nation-states. I will argue that *Nuevas cartas náuticas* follows this unbounded logic as it navigates from Greece to the shores of Venezuela, but that its archival impulse makes it depart from what has been described as the "liquid turn" (Blackmore and Gómez 4). I will then seek to answer how this differentiation intervenes in the blue humanities more broadly.

The first encounter with ancient artifacts in *Nuevas cartas náuticas* comes early, in poem XI, which situates readers in the Acropolis Museum in Athens. Salas describes a relief kept there that depicts a ship, the Πάραλος, Paralus:

Uno de los fragmentos muestra las siluetas frágiles de los  
remeros, idénticos, en plena actividad. Otro fragmento, en la  
esquina superior derecha,  
contiene el rostro de Páralos, hijo de Poseidón, inventor de la  
marinería (25).

Straightforwardly describing the remaining fragments of the relief, this poem stands in for a photograph of the relief, or for the relief itself. Salas also provides key information about the object that we might encounter next to the piece in a museum context: “trirreme encargado de llevar ofrendas a templos, de transportar embajadores, de encabezar flotas” (25).

In poem XL, the author offers a similarly superficial—in the most literal sense, referring to surface—description of a relief inside a temple in the Medinet Habu archaeological site, near the Egyptian Theban hills:

En él se halla representada una batalla marítima entre las fuerzas del faraón y los llamados Pueblos del Mar.  
Los egipcios portan escudos rectangulares; los invasores, redondos.  
Los egipcios se valen de arcos y flechas; los invasores, de lanzas.  
De arriba abajo, podemos ver la silueta elemental de los personajes contorsionarse en decenas de posturas. Algunas atravesadas por el metal escueto de las armas, otras amontonadas sobre cubierta. Cardúmenes apiñados, espinosos (72).

Though the use of an image like “cardúmenes apiñados” to emphasize the convoluted character of the battle scene and the clutter of bodies is much more ekphrastic than most museum texts would allow, the use of “podemos ver” situates Salas and the readers (us) in the exhibition space, with the poet serving as the guide and interpreter.

Poem LXIII revisits Egyptian archaeological objects, this time more ambiguously:

Los egipcios del Imperio Medio dejaron numerosas naves a escala, pequeñas representaciones hechas de papiro o madera de las barcas que habrían de llevarlos al inframundo. Allí serían juzgados por sus virtudes, por su pericia como navegantes y por su destreza para flotar sobre las aguas como plumas.  
Eran pintadas con colores escuetos pero brillantes, como si quisieran recordarles a los muertos cómo se veía la vida. Las facciones de su tripulación, sin embargo, no son discernibles (113).

Here, again, Salas provides a description of the material aspects—papyrus and wood, painted in plain but bright colors—and the uses—as funerary implements—of the miniature boats, all information we might obtain by observing the artifact—an experience that could only take place in the context of the museum. However, in this poem Salas does not situate the reader in a particular institution, seemingly speaking about a broader class of objects. Yet, by alluding to the specific facial traits of the crew aboard a boat, which he describes as “no discernibles,” worn out by the passage of time, the author directs our attention to a specific artifact, once again grounding us inside of an exhibition space, now indeterminate.

Poem LX finds Salas—who has translated other contemporary Caribbean poets from English, French, and Kreyol—sailing across the Atlantic from Greece for a visit to the National Museum and Art Gallery of Port of Spain, Trinidad. It begins with the display of a small plexiglass box, within which there is “un objeto rectangular, más bien negruzco, aparentemente compuesto de varias capas” (96). This mysterious object is revealed to be

un libro recuperado de entre los restos de las naves españolas destinadas a la isla en 1797, ancladas en la bahía de Chaguaramas, quemadas por orden del contralmirante.

Apodaca para evitar su captura por las fuerzas inglesas.

Un libro ahogado, como el que Próspero arroja al final de *The Tempest*, mientras exclama: *I'll drown my book* (96).

In this poem, the author dwells less upon the physical conditions of the item in question than in the previous poems I have parsed so far. Instead, he turns his attention to the object's historical context. The "blackened thing" in the box is a book, but its content is both inaccessible and irrelevant: it is the story of its ruin that matters to us. Similar to the Egyptian battle scene in poem XL, Salas's encounter with the drowned and charred book enables him to address a topic much larger than the book itself: the Caribbean Sea as the stage of political and economic power struggles. Finally, the inclusion of a line from *The Tempest* entangles *Nuevas cartas náuticas*' museographic and bibliographic citational threads.

In "De la memoria a la presencia," contained in her book of essays *Mundos en común*, Argentine critic Florencia Garramuño reflects on recent literary works that prominently feature archives and collections. She wonders, for instance, about the relationship between the material presence of the archival object and the practice of memorialization in works like Martín Kohan's *Museo de la revolución*. In her essay, Garramuño takes stock of the abundance of artistic products that increasingly mobilize archives since the turn of the century—the beginning of a trend in the humanities and social sciences referred to as the "archival turn." This turn has not only led to deeper "dives" into archives, but it has ignited an ongoing discussion about archives as subjects of analysis rather than only as source, allowing scholars to address the complex politics of archival work.

While there exists an abundance of cultural products that indeed mobilize archives to reconstruct repressed pasts, Florencia Garramuño is particularly interested in works of literature that choose to exhibit the pure presence of remains:

[Estas obras] insisten en hacer presente, en exhibir, en mostrar la materialidad de esos restos, la obstinada conservación e insistencia conducen al surgimiento de otras historias, de otras realidades construidas con esos fragmentos del pasado e impulsadas por estos, pero que abandonan el pasado e impulsadas por estos, pero que abandonan el pasado en favor de la presencia, la supervivencia de esos restos y el modo en que sus efectos perduran en el presente. (65)

The expository impulse that animates *Nuevas cartas náuticas* inscribes the book within such a framework of archival presence: the archaeological remains between its pages are objects displayed in each poem as if behind a glass, touched only by the poet's descriptive voice. Even the invocation of Prospero in poem LX ends the incantation of the past: as Prospero breaks his staff and discards his magic book, the spell upon the island comes to an end and so does the narrative. A temporal shift, a return to the present, necessarily follows.

### **Ocean Intimacy and Oceanic Objects**

As I indicated, the variety of archaeological objects that I have identified so far in *Nuevas cartas náuticas* are not found in the ocean; the author encounters them in spaces designated for their display as historical artifacts. In these texts, the ocean is not quite a representational referent, as it is separated from the author—and from the reader—by multiple instances of mediation. While it is obvious that the poem can only represent, I have sought to emphasize the double distance in these poems: it is the interpretation of the object that leads to a realization of the sea's presence.

Recent contributions to blue humanities scholarship would seem to favor a quite different approach to representing the ocean, even expressing the desire to think with rather than about water. A noteworthy example is *Liquid Ecologies in Latin American and Caribbean Art*, where editors Lisa Blackmore and Liliana Gómez compile essays that address literary, visual, performance, and filmic works that elaborate notions of liquidity and fluidity as “aesthetic signifiers, metaphors, and/or aesthetic theories” (4). The artistic practices that the book inscribes within the “liquid turn” in the blue humanities center non-linearity, relationality, and even the use of liquids as media; for instance, essays by Esther Moñivas, Adriana Michéle Campos Johnson, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, and Tatiana Flores question what new or alternative epistemologies emerge when one submerges the eye or the body in water. Steve Mentz, who has been credited with coining the term “blue humanities,” also alludes to the generative power of fluidity in his recent *Introduction to the Blue Humanities*. In his text, Mentz compares Shakespeare’s *Tempest* with the work of indigenous Chamorro poet Craig Santos Perez to show readers how blue humanities inquiry has evolved: from focusing mostly on the Early Modern Atlantic to the present-day Pacific, from canonical works to the art of contemporary indigenous authors. In his analysis, Mentz posits that the rhythm of Perez’s poetry emulates the

generative surges and flows” of the sea, oscillating between references to the “physical ocean, which dilutes everything that flows into it, and which is the fluid matrix from which planetary life emerged, and metaphorical capacities such as survival and endurance (26).

Here, we find that the ocean can be “brought closer” in an embodied sense by deploying the aesthetics of flow: reading Perez’s words “returns” Mentz to his own “personal and physical engagement” with waters —though Atlantic rather than Pacific, Mentz’s waters are the same “global fluid” as Perez’s (26). In this sense, one of the keys aspects of current blue humanities scholarship is the ability to harness liquidity and flow, moving from land to sea in what Mentz deems the “offshore trajectory” that defines the field (29).

Other scholars have emphasized what fluidity enables between the human and the non- or more-than- human. In a co-authored article, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and Tatiana Flores analyze a corpus of works by Caribbean artists that not only represent the ocean, but bring the artist, the work, and the ocean into relation (139): installations of waste brought to the shore, maps featuring diffracted perspectives, immersive photographic assemblages, and experimental videos that superimpose moving seawater on aboveground footage —all constitute attempts to visually and symbolically merge the body and the ocean. DeLoughrey and Flores’s analysis is inspired by “tidalectics,” a notion introduced by Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite (and expanded upon in DeLoughrey’s own scholarship) that refers to Caribbean “psychology” as “the movement of the ocean [...] coming from one continent/continuum, touching another, and then receding from the island(s) into the perhaps creative chaos of the(ir) future” (Brathwaite and Mackey 32). This entails that DeLoughrey and Flores are attentive to the multiple scales and connectedness of the ocean — an ocean that is both particular and planetary, transformed and transformative.

After this brief overview of the methods and topics of recent blue humanities scholarship, we might ask: how do Salas’s descriptions of archival objects fit into the “liquid turn”? I venture that, to the scholars and practitioners I have mentioned, an ocean implied by an object encased in a museum would be insufficient to activate the engagement that they seek between the human and the ocean. How is it possible, then, to reconcile “archival presence” with the mutability and ocean

intimacy that the blue humanities aspire to? A poem by Neo Zealand poet Ian Wedde, analyzed by Teresa Shewry in *Hope at Sea: Possible Ecologies in Oceanic Literature*, illustrates the tension between submersion and observation:

From the scenic lookout  
I view from above  
What's best understood from below (Wedde in Shewry, p. 94)

In this stanza, Shewry explains, Wedde speaks about a forest expanse, yet its argument may also be made about the ocean: what is lost when viewing the ocean from outside or from afar, whether from the elevation of a scenic lookout or across the distance of an expository device, rather than from within? As I have shown so far, blue humanities or “hydrocriticism” scholars and arts practitioners tend to understand the ocean as fundamentally hybrid and polyvalent, moveable, with indeterminate frontiers and an “elusive materiality” (Moraña 7). Thus, a museum object would be difficult to interpret by means of what Steinberg and Peters call “wet ontologies” that “destabilize the static, bordered, and linear framings that typify human geographical studies of place, territory, and time” (247). On the contrary, the artifacts of Salas’s poems appear to him already labelled, dated, and contextualized by an authoritative institution.

If body-to-body, fluid intimacy is not available in the museum space, what type of alternative critical engagement is possible? I offer as a tentative response that, despite the robust “archival presence” of Salas’s objects, *Nuevas cartas náuticas* as a whole involves a characteristically tidalectical reading. If tidalectics constitute a regime of ebb and flow between territories and temporalities, then *Nuevas cartas náuticas* creates a tidalectical itinerary for the reader: every poem is tonally distinct, and we may be reading Ovid’s (attributed) words as we envision the ancient Mediterranean only to sail to the Caribbean in the following page, exchanging a canonical voice for the retelling of an oral tradition.

In Poem V, for example, Salas details the beliefs of the indigenous Kariña, inhabitants of the Orinoco Delta, about the origins of the sea:

En tiempos pretéritos, sólo había tierra, extensa llanura o selva, suelo sin costa azotado por una claridad rapaz. Un kaputano, ser divino, trajo el agua desde el cielo, pues el cielo era su represa, su odre transparente.  
Trajo sólo una pizza de mar. La trajo en una tapara (18).

Later on, in poem LXXIV, Salas describes funerary rites of other Deltan people, the indigenous Warao, combining poetic, anthropological, and mythographic discourse:

Para los warao  
—cuyo nombre quiere decir gente de las curiaras—  
Bajo el mundo se encuentra Hahuba, inmensa serpiente cuya respiración regula las mareas. Sístole y dístole del agua.  
Las arenas y las piedras que sobresalen de las olas son su lomo, sus dientes. De ella dependía la navegación hasta el cerro Naparima, en Trinidad, donde cada tanto los warao iban en peregrinación.  
Los cuerpos de sus muertos eran depositados en canoas, escasos vientres sin techo (114).

These texts express Salas’s interest in juxtaposing his erudite experimentation with canonical texts and his interest in compiling oral traditions related to the sea. For the most part, these oral repertoires remain separate from the author’s treatment of archaeological objects;

the two merge only in the sequence of reading. Yet by alternating material, written, and oral sources of diverse provenance, *Nuevas cartas náuticas* espouses a “liquid” methodology that accounts for the “altered temporal and spatial scales, geographies, and agencies” that the maritime turn seeks to vindicate (Moraña, 7).

In poem LXXI, however, Salas is able to create a space of contact between oral tradition and artifact. The starting point here is the Brighter Hoard, a group of gold items from the Iron Age discovered in Northern Ireland in 1896. Salas begins by minutely describing a small boat that was found among the treasure:

De unos diecinueve centímetros de largo, equipado con dos hileras de nueve remos flacos,  
con bancos para los remeros, un timón y un mástil fino como un hilo o una arteria.  
En su interior también había un ancla y una lanza minúscula. La forma del casco es almendrada, como un ojo hecho para estar cerrado.  
Es un modelo a escala de barcos usados durante la edad de hierro: osamentas curvas de madera cubiertas por cuero impermeable. Pesa casi cien gramos (109).

After providing this vivid image of the ship—allowing the reader to see its shapes—the author proceeds to provide some mythographic information:

Algunos especulan que se trataba de una ofrenda votiva, vinculada a Manannán mac Lir, viejo dios de los celtas irlandeses que velaba por los mares.  
Manannán atravesaba las olas en un barco que era una navaja, dicen. O en una yegua hecha de espuma. También poseía un manto  
que era pura niebla, como los días de invierno en el norte, y un yelmo que se encendía en  
llamas: faro, pupila distante (109).

Unlike in other pieces mentioned so far, here the archaeological object does not anchor the voice to the present; instead, it serves as vehicle for the author to dive into Irish mythological imagery, lyrically describing the attributes of Manannán as he displaces the reader toward the “misty past” of folklore (Conrad 326). With this movement, Salas demonstrates more didactically how his material archive indexes an oral archive, thus taking a step further toward merging modalities of oceanic inquiry.

Salas’s book, then, does not purport to give a totalizing vision of the ocean; if in some poems the “sea” is amorphous or indeterminate, every artifact he describes confronts us with a fragment of a sea that is distinct. In this sense, *Nuevas cartas náuticas* establishes a balanced position that pushes against what Astrida Neimanis calls “the abstraction and interchangeability of water” produced by modernity; this paradigm absorbs hydric histories and problems into a “disembodied and displaced global water” (158-159). According to Neimanis, the impulse to render water isomorphic and exchangeable results necessarily in a simultaneous homogenization of the humans that affect it: a problematic assumption of equal responsibility for planetary destruction that glosses over power differentials (163). While he may not be concerned with climate impact in this book, Salas’s archival impulses make it indeed impossible to de-historicize or de-humanize the sea, as the artifacts ground the reader firmly in sites and times inhabited by specific groups with embodied relationships—of ritual, sustenance, transportation, war—with water. We might think, then, that the attention given to discrete and often unrelated artifacts reclaims a water that is far from neutral, but teeming with artifacts and

their narratives.

Perhaps the most striking example of Salas's deployment of archival presence appears in poem XXXVI, in which he carefully describes the layout of the *Marie Séraphique*, an 18th-century French slave ship. The reader might imagine the author arched over the plan, relaying to the visitor the details that "grab his attention":

los dos pisos de la bodega, donde birrales quietamente  
alineados servirán para transportar provisiones de todo tipo:  
bizcochos, cecina, agua potable, ron o aguardiente  
combustible para el fogón  
y mercancías varias  
la cubierta, también punteada de barriles y largos cofres, como  
corresponde a una nave mercante, donde el espacio vale oro y  
sangre (67).

Once more, like a museum interpreter, Salas describes the uses of the artifact, in this case not a miniature or a relief but a utilitarian representation—or, rather, a pre-presentation—of a specific object. He continues:

y la región en medio, el entre-pont, suerte de lámina  
donde se hallan pulcramente ordenados unos trescientos  
seres humanos  
acostados con precisión geométrica, desplegados,  
sin rostros visibles, piernas y brazos deshilvanados casi  
como garabatos, reducidos a ser el prójimo de los barriles (67).

Salas describes the depiction of the bodies of enslaved people being trafficked to America as neatly and geometrically ordered objects that are outlined in the plan as if they were simply elements of the ship itself: inert and faceless. To borrow from Garramuño, the object is not used here to reconstruct history or deploy a narrative, as there is nothing that the plan itself can contest or recover; the purpose of writing about it, or writing it, is none other than "el puro presente de su exposición" (60). This surface-level account, lingering upon the presence of these inhuman "garabatos," underlines the matter-of-fact, banal character of such atrocity—the *Marie Séraphique* completed six voyages from Nantes to the Saint-Domingue. The mere exhibition of the plan interrogates the reader in regard to the continuation of what it indexes, and it renders visible the Caribbean sea's distinguishing traumatic histories of crossing: following Mabel Moraña, we may argue that paying attention to the few existing representations of the Transatlantic journeys of enslaved people expands our understanding of the colonization and modernization of the Americas (Moraña 8).

Finally, we may turn to another class of objects that Salas includes in his maritime collection: technically-produced images, namely films and photographs. The way the author approaches these objects is considerably more whimsical, less distant and methodical, than his descriptions of ancient artifacts. Perhaps paradoxically, it is with these photographic captures—presumably the most "realistic" depictions of the ocean in his archive—that Salas plays the most with oneiric associations with the ocean.

Poem LVII is an ode to submarine photography:

Evidencia de ese mundo ingrávigo bajo el mundo, donde los  
cuerpos se desplazan en un dormir sin párpados, donde el  
sonido solo existe en tiempo pasado.  
(...) La fotografía submarina como otra forma de arqueología  
de los sueños.  
Los fotógrafos marinos son los sucesores directos de los  
pescadores de perlas (93).



In a book full of archaeological objects, the author only once mentions archaeology explicitly: the archaeology of dreams. Salas casts the discipline as both the operation of photographic technology and as a process possible in the psyche. Being able to capture scenes of the ocean is like being able to not only capture images of dreams, but to excavate them, to retrieve from them relics of the past; this association evokes the Jungian analogy between the ocean and the unconscious, with photography somehow comparable to insight or analysis. The comparison between underwater photography and pearl fishing reinforces this idea: in the two cases, diving into the sea—with all the risks and restrictions that it implies—yields treasure. Furthermore, to return to the importance of materiality on a purely aesthetic dimension, though Salas does not describe the photograph but the concept of submarine photography, his words evoke the affinity between the iridescence of pearls and the iridescence (or “pearlescence”) of water-damaged photographic paper.

In poem LIV, Salas takes us from glass encasements to a screening room—more like a dark compartment inside a gallery or museum setting than in a commercial theater. The appearance of the cinematic image in this book is significant insofar as it was the submarine film—initially made possible by J. E. Williamson’s submersible “photosphere”, invented in 1912—that inaugurated a “new era of” consciousness and curiosity about the ocean in a public that had only visualized the ocean floor through the medium of aquaria (Cohen 6-7). In this way, Salas accounts for an eminently modern relationship with the ocean that differs from the experience of contemplation of archaeological artifacts.

Salas’s choice of film is *Par 18 mètres de fond*, Jacques Cousteau’s first documentary, made in 1942. The author first relays the material conditions of the film’s production: “[...] filmado con una cámara protegida por una cubierta especial, diseñada para aguantar la presión de las profundidades” (88). Here, he is not only attentive to the materiality of the medium but indeed to the conditions of production of the artifact he describes: by alluding first to the technical advances that make possible underwater filming, he tethers his descriptions to the development of imaging technologies that have enabled human exploitation of the seas. The underwater moving image is not neutral, let alone natural: it is possible thanks to what film and media scholar Jonathan Crylen calls “machines of indirect vision”—strobe cameras, floodlights, sonar imaging—deployed to render an opaque, mostly lightless environment transparent, knowable, and useful for human ends (101). In this way, the submarine dreamscape Salas describes in the poem is in fact emblematic—as is Cousteau’s output before his turn to conservationism—of the human desire to “conquer” the oceans (66).

The poem continues:

Cazadores submarinos rodean la costa mediterránea. Los peces, en blanco y negro, parecen manchas remotas, seres de movimientos espasmódicos, adelgazados por el film. Las rocas parecen a punto de desmoronarse. El sol se empoza arriba, temeroso de sumergirse.

Las medusas pasan como girasoles cabizbajos.

Llevamos con nosotros el lenguaje de la superficie. Para Cousteau, un cardumen parece un enjambre de moscas; una colonia de anémonas, un campo de trigo (88).

In order to record underwater, in low light, the film used must be highly sensitive and therefore extremely grainy after processing. Thus, for Salas, the materiality of celluloid transforms the fish around Cousteau into remote blurs, their movements appearing discontinuous. We sense here, as literary scholar Margaret Cohen argues in *The Underwater Eye*,

that the medium fits the message, as the fraught proportions and hazy visibility of Cousteau's film reproduce the distinctive disorientation that characterizes submarine visibility due to the density of water. Cohen explains:

When we look through water, we perceive a pervasive haze, because the atmosphere of water slows down light, absorbs it, and scatters it. The density of water also explains the different color spectrum underwater. This atmosphere absorbs light quickly, making colors with weaker, faster light waves imperceptible as the diver descends away from the sun [...] Our depth perception is further confused because phenomena are magnified by about 33 percent, and stereoscopic vision does not work well (40).

Immersed vision, therefore, involves the distortion of one's "normal" perception—an experience we might associate with altered or dream states. Notably, scholars interested in undersea aesthetics have highlighted the surrealist avant-garde's inclination to compare the altered vision enabled by dreams or automatism—including practices like hypnosis, free association, and trance states—to a diver's underwater perception. According to Sean O' Hanlan, the poet, writer, and theorist of surrealism André Breton would describe both states—dream or automatism and water immersion—as forms of accessing the "never seen" (141). Margaret Cohen also makes reference to surrealist filmmaker Jean Cocteau's description of his experience filming *Le sang d'un poète* in 1930, where he draws a parallel between extracting images from the unconscious and capturing images underwater: "I try to make poetry like the Williamson brothers make films under the sea. It was a question of lowering in myself the bell that they lower into the sea, to great depths" (Cocteau in Cohen 61). Comparably, in Salas's previously mentioned poem LVII, underwater image-making is nothing less than the archaeology of dreams—the extraction of perhaps never-seen, perhaps long-forgotten artifacts.

Faced with the estranging vision of the seafloor in *Par 18 mètres de fond*, Salas resorts to the "language of the surface" in order to make sense of what he sees. In this sense, poem LIV manifests the insufficiency of the written word to describe the submarine—a lack that only the image can redress (Cohen 7). Similarly, Salas's poem cannot faithfully disseminate the sensorial experience of the film. As a result, the author opts for re-presenting his chosen submarine scene in the terms of an uncanny valley, similar but not quite equal to its above-sea counterparts (the "lenguaje de la superficie"): medusas that resemble sunflowers, fields of anemones like fields of wheat, and schools of fish that could be confused with swarms of flies. Thus, poems LIV and LVII signal the allure and otherworldliness of the submarine image while simultaneously evincing representational limits of both the submarine image and the "submarine" poem.

### Conclusion

With its openness to other voices and other matters, *Nuevas cartas náuticas* constitutes what Florencia Garramuño calls a "fruto extraño": a difficult-to-categorize work of art that, by encompassing a variety of forms, creates for itself conditions of dis-belonging. On the one hand, the book constantly questions its own specificity as an original work, as it often conceals the true authorship of the text and misattributes poems to Ovid or Pliny, to name a few—in this way, it tentatively places itself in the public domain. On the other hand, as I have shown, it puts into question its own belonging to the category of "poetry," insofar as it frequently reaches beyond disciplinary boundaries and outside of itself, toward other books, films, antiques, moving and still photographic images, and oral traditions. The ebb and flow between the oral, the written, and the material, and the dream state and the "objective"

reality of archival presence, are representative of the overall structure of *Nuevas cartas náuticas*: Salas leads us across oceans, between fact and fiction, object and tale, direct quotes and relayed accounts.

Today, critical engagements with the ocean are virtually inseparable of humanistic and artistic perspectives that respond to ever-rising sea levels and a future for the Earth that looks increasingly oceanic—in spite of this, the ocean continues to be a “great unknown,” less explored by humans than the surface of the moon. This unknowability has had geopolitical, biopolitical, and environmental effects: as Elizabeth DeLoughrey argues, the vastness and inaccessibility of the ocean render it an ever-expanding frontier for capital and simultaneously make it easy for the intersections of capital, colonialism, and environmental devastation to go unseen by most of us (245). In *Nuevas cartas náuticas*, Adalber Salas pushes against the notion of an unknowable sea, and, through his treatment of an oceanic archive of objects, he tackles humanity’s marine entanglement. Salas’s engagement with material objects like gold statues, votives, plans, reliefs, and documents, make visible the flows of capital, the networks of power, and the circulation of ideas and bodies that constitute oceanic history. The ocean here is not merely the object of the poet’s perplexity, but a space “choked” with history.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, submarine photographic and cinematic imagery in *Nuevas cartas náuticas* bind together Salas’s interest in historical artifacts with the technologies of visualization and dissemination that have shaped contemporary oceanic imaginaries, deploying what Margaret Cohen calls the “aquatic perspective as symbolic form”: the aesthetics, knowledge, and emotions “prompted by the underwater realm’s displacement of human mastery” (53). Salas’s poems about these other artifacts—technically-produced images—posit the undersea landscape as a rich terrain for the intersection of history, technology, and human imagination.

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1. From Derek Walcott’s “The Schooner ‘Flight’”:  
but this Caribbean so choke with the  
dead  
that when I would melt in emerald  
water,  
whose ceiling rippled like a silk tent,  
I saw them corals: brain, fire, sea fans,  
dead-men's-fingers, and then, the dead  
men.  
I saw that the powdery sand was their  
bones  
ground white from Senegal to San  
Salvador,  
so, I panic third dive, and surface for a  
month  
in the Seamen’s Hostel.

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