



Tangled coastal connections: ethical tensions in materialities and imaginaries

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Abstract

There is an urgent need to address ethical tensions emerging from intensified connections and materialities among coasts, cities and seas. This essay introduces a collection of papers examining ethical discourses used to make sense of entangled connections and materialities. The studies reveal both a tangle of connections in each set of city-coast-sea relations and an array of ethical tensions in materialities and imaginaries as locals try to make sense of each scene. Each paper finds ethical claims proliferating and entangled, with problems of legitimacy swirling around projects the ethics are meant to support. The collection emphasizes how local situations – in material, social and ecological arenas – are shaping the links between coastal urban areas and the ethical discourses being assembled around them.

Keywords Coastal connections · Ethical tensions · Imaginaries · Materialities · Multi-scalar relations · Urban ethics

Coasts are fundamental to both human settlement and for our plans for the future. In recent years, climate change, new technical capacities and governance structures are transforming connections between coasts and seas. Climate change is transforming the power of natural processes that act on coasts, thus placing many settlements at risk. Heightened circulation of organisms is having dramatic ecosystem effects. Meanwhile, many coastal ecosystems and communities are threatened by pollution stemming from engineering, mining and agriculture. Various coasts are being abandoned either by plan or neglect, while some coastal waters are apparently becoming more land-like, more solid, valuable, productive and orderly, either through the proliferation of oil rigs, wind farms and aquaculture investments or through rewilding projects and conservation zones. At the same time, many coasts and seas are being transformed by

intensified global circulations of finance, trade and tourists. Facilitated by expanding energy and transport infrastructures, these circulations result in coastal gentrification, touristification and port transformation. More intensive use of coastal waters usually involves transfers of ideas, language and practices about land, property and territoriality to the ocean, sea and marine environments. The ongoing transformation of coastal cities is tangled-up in life and matter, and in the complex decisions that are taken regarding them (Kuhl et al. 2021). While coastal plans remain local matters, new policies, for example emerging under marine spatial planning (MSP) as institutionalized in the EU, can mean that coastal and marine planning is now caught-up in entangled planning frameworks (Sutton-Grier et al. 2015; Kay and Alder 2017; Alexander 2018; Winder 2023). Moreover, circulating planning frameworks are often marked by post-political and technocratic planning (Swyngedouw 2009) that foreclose debate. While these tendencies can result in direct conflict among interested stakeholders, they can also manifest as tensions among the ethics espoused by stakeholders and non-participants.

We argue here that focusing on ethical tensions can shed light on approaches to risks and challenges taking place in coastal areas. The complexity of changes taking place – in weather patterns, built infrastructure, or tourism practices – and the increasing awareness of their ecological effects require novel ways of thinking about relations

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and connections. We thus put forth our thinking on negotiations about potential futures in distinct arenas of interaction, where actors share a platform of discourse, action or decision-making. Each of the essays in this collection is devoted to a type of arena: spatial planning, blue economy, environmental management, seaweed farming, or technomolecular governance. In each case, authors identify interests and visions, practices and discourses, that both shape and are shaped by materialities, connectivities and imaginaries, and may be in tension with one another if not in outright conflict.

This collection of essays began in a workshop we held in the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich. Our aim was to seek an interdisciplinary dialogue on coastal regions regarding *urban ethics* (Dürr et al. 2019) that span nature/cultures, cityscapes, chemoscapes, urban planning, seascape and other notions. The overall purpose was to pay attention to the interweaving of ethical discourses and practices through which different actors negotiate what is good for a city and its surroundings (Dürr et al. 2019). This does not mean that we abandon or neglect the work being done on ethics in the social sciences and humanities on good governance of cities, coasts and seas. It does mean that we understand that each arena is a unique constellation of materialities and imaginaries, and a unique site for ethical contestation and tension.

Ethics, materialities and connectivities

As diverse governments plan, order and govern tangled coastal connectivities, they are doing so in the name of established (for example regional growth or biodiversity conservation) and new (for example marine spatial planning, sustainable blue economies or coastal resilience) frameworks each with their own legitimising discourses. Such discourses are meant to legitimate new governance and investment and necessarily involve ethical claims and responsibilities. Each entails constructions of economy-environment relations and favours specific priorities. To some extent they circulate as mobile policy frameworks that can be adapted to each coastline and polity. Sometimes the adaptation occurs early, other times later, or, on occasions, the framework is rejected. For example, Silver et al. (2015) revealed competing discourses of the Blue Economy in early discussions at the United Nations. Similarly, Flannery et al. (2020) acknowledge that although first envisaged as a rational project meant to be applicable everywhere, critical engagement led to a critical turn in marine spatial planning by 2020. Hansen and Coenen (2015) warned that the sustainability transitions framework had an underdeveloped sense of geographies of sustainability transitions. This matter has since been addressed, not only in Morrissey and

Heidkamp's (2019) collection which applied the transitions framework by investigating resilience and transition making on diverse coasts, but also in a themed section in *The Geographical Journal* (Germond-Duret et al. 2023). Despite disparate outcomes, these collections find that policy frameworks are circulating, for example under EU or UN auspices, with aims to legitimise and stimulate interventions in coastal waters for sustainable development. They are however being adapted, diversified and resisted.

Scientists critiqued emerging discourses and frameworks by outlining what was missing and by revealing contending ethical claims. Calls for 'blue justice' arose from concerns regarding the effects of focussing on 'blue growth': an agenda with its own ethics of technology and infrastructure investment, apparently for resilience and sustainable development. With respect to marine spatial planning and blue economy initiatives, critics complained of inadequate attention to social justice principles (Garland et al. 2019: 11), and no effort to link blue justice to blue growth (Bennett et al. 2021). In a recent review of regional planning for the Baltic Sea as a Blue Economy space, Klein et al. (2023: 144) found that sustainability agendas are missing. Issues of local participation, exclusion and non-participation (Flannery et al. 2018) have surfaced, along with the question 'How to organize effective stakeholder engagement?' (Kelly and Axon 2023). Assembly work around coastal projects can produce scale mismatches (Garland et al. 2019), new power asymmetries, and new governance assemblages (Brassoulis 2019) that disrupt existing governance arrangements. Bennett (2018) called for "a just and inclusive path towards sustainable oceans", and he has since pleaded for political ecology in the ocean and coastal environment (Bennett 2019a) and for "marine social science for the peopled seas" (Bennett 2019b) to address the shortcomings. McKinley (2023) recently called for attention to who benefits from Blue Economy discourses. We take these findings and calls as signs of tensions between blue growth and both sustainability goals and principles of social and environmental justice. Further, we see these as evidence that ethics are crucial when opening up a new political field (Dürr et al. 2019; Mouffe 2005) but cannot always deliver a legitimizing discourse that will enable projects to be pushed through highly contested terrains (Aschenbrenner and Winder 2023).

Scientists have also responded to these new frameworks and discourses by viewing them as opportunities. Winder and Le Heron (2017: 20) conceived of the Blue Economy framework as an "opportunity for assembling separate marine projects in multi-use and multi-user spaces." The framework's flexibility can enable heterogeneous projects on each coast, and it can allow stakeholders to prioritize blue growth over other goals (Klein et al. 2023: 144, 152). Lewis and Le Heron (2023) plotted to shape a blue

economy moment, through a political project of knowledge production (Lewis and Le Heron 2019) in which they create new knowledge infrastructure (Edwards 2017), and conduct enactive research (Carolan 2013; Lewis and Le Heron 2023) and transdisciplinary action research (Heidkamp et al. 2021). They propose cultivating diverse values by rethinking blue economy (Lewis 2019). We take this as further grounds for exploring how diverse ethics are used in urban coastal areas and by whom.

Urban ethics

This collection is inspired by engagement with *urban ethics* as a research approach (Dürr et al. 2019; Ege and Moser 2020) as pioneered in the multidisciplinary German Research Foundation research group (DFG Research Group Urban Ethics 2022). This research group understands urban ethics as a field of interaction where actors problematize moral and social ideals, principles and norms of living in a city, as they wrestle with the question of “how should one live in the city?” The approach therefore defines ethics as being generated and negotiated in the everyday. While it takes note of (in)justice claims, it makes no justice claim of its own. Instead, it researches ethical claims, practices and discourses used to answer the question of how to live in a city, but also to analyse power relationships at work when those ethical framings are applied. Members of the research group investigated situations in which different ways of urban living were assembled, imagined, promoted, discussed, challenged, contested and critiqued. Following Collier and Lakoff (2005), ethical claims, discourses and practices were seen as centred on human subjects and subject formation (Dürr et al. 2019; Ege and Moser 2020). At the same time, many ethical projects work with and through personal action and conduct, refer to moral orders and link to individual intentionality (Ege and Moser 2020). Generally, the group viewed the ethical as defined by processes of subject formation, of individuals but also of collectives, milieus and groups (Dürr et al. 2019).

The research group investigated both everyday situations and governance practices. Thus, the urban ethics approach can be related to research conducted under the moral geographies banner. Here, researchers investigate the discursive constitution of moral space and (urban) communities by focusing on understanding the relationship between geographical orders and moral or normative ideas about what is good, right or true (Popke 2010; Gandy 2014; Olson 2018). This can involve researching governmentality, including the institutionalisation or enforcement of moral and normative judgements and the legitimisation of urban policies. Similarly, the urban ethics approach speaks to the ‘ethical turn’

in anthropology (Fassin 2014), which has seen a growth in research about moral subjects and their subjectivities (Zigon 2008; Laidlaw 2014) and of collective negotiations over norms and practices (Lambek 2010). The implication is an experiential process of deliberation over what is considered good for a collective.

The approach is also open to diverse possibilities for mutual care that stretch to material things and environments (see Aschenbrenner 2025; Chap. 1). Zigon (2021) called for a more relational perspective on ethics: not so much ‘how should one live’ as ‘how is it between us?’ Urban ethical claims may differ in their ontological assumptions, particularly those made from a human-centred Western ontological perspective (asking ‘how should one live?’) and those linked to alternative worldviews (perhaps asking ‘how is it between us?’). Contests and negotiations may not just be over ideals, principles, or norms, but also about ontological politics and the struggles of coexistence in an ontologically plural world. Here, Puig de la Bellacasa’s (2017) development of the term ‘ethicalities’ to capture differences in ethical ontologies is inspirational. She illustrates ‘ethicalities’ by examining the ethical implications of permaculture practices which she sees as based on a caring relational perception of the world. She thus refers to ‘hegemonic environmental ethics’ that stress individual subjectivity, a nature/culture dualism, and specific ideas and practices of governance. Following this distinction, researchers theorise the urban as a site of collective responsibility, interdependence, affect and care relations, ethics that are at odds with neoliberal discourses of autonomous, individual subjectivity (Zigon 2018). In these ways, the urban ethics approach opens the urban as a field of interaction where diverse conceptualisations of ethics (Aschenbrenner 2023) are assembled and related.

In this collection, our interest is less in cataloguing forms of urban ethics than in investigating how ethics are being assembled and contested in the context of specific urban coastal entanglements and with what effects. Ethical discourses and claims take many forms. Ethics of environmental care and the need to save, protect or rewild environments, or to work to make a community or ecosystem resilient are well known but each takes on a different focus, language, objects, connectivities and materialities in specific locations (Dürr and Fischer 2018; Fischer 2020; Acosta, Aschenbrenner, Dürr and Winder 2022). The research group argued that even economic discourses, ranging from moral economies to blue growth initiatives, involve ethical claims (Dürr et al. 2019; Aschenbrenner and Winder 2023). The manner in which people think about the possibilities of life in coastal areas has direct effects in decisions that alter ecosystems and built environments (Acosta et al. 2022). Urban governance is a challenge in any setting, but in coastal areas

the stakes are particularly high (Pierre 2011; Joss 2015). In our historical present, as we face major environmental and health challenges that have disrupted most institutional relations that we took for granted, novel approaches are necessary to imagine desirable futures.

Any consideration of good governance must take into account established power configurations. Webs of interests and favours stemming from colonial relations still dominate across much of our planet. Efforts to decolonialize decision-making processes face not only opposition but also long-established bureaucratic synergies. In his recent monograph *Natura Urbana*, Gandy (2022) points out that even the scientific language used to justify certain environmental protection schemes perpetuates some of the inequalities that persisted since colonial times.

Multiple frameworks and discourses are touted as solutions to emerging problems in different corners of our globe. As recent debates about the need to take better care of environments show, the question arises: ‘Whose visions, ideas and ethics should be included in transformation processes?’ The manner in which visions, ideas and ethics collide with one another in specific settings and the results from such collisions are equally important. For these reasons, we insist on exploring in more detail the multiple forms of connectivity and materiality that coastal cities are enmeshed in, and the ethics being produced to (de)legitimate particular actions or actors. In what follows, we develop these two key entangled dimensions of cities and coasts by considering their ethical dimensions: connectivities and materialities.

Materialities and connectivities

Almost a third of humanity, 29 per cent, lives within 50 km of coasts, while 44% live within 150 km of seashores (Cosby et al. 2024). Historically, humans have sought these areas out because of the ease of connection, as places of settlement and arrival, of trade and travel. Such settlements have evolved within their coastal environments. This is why ‘urban coasts can be regarded as interwoven networks of nonhuman and human actors, matter and discourses – from the land to the sea (and vice versa)’ (Aschenbrenner 2025: 103). The resulting relationships and interactions, in their material and immaterial aspects, are thus co-shaped by nature-cultures, by practices and weather, by infrastructure and migrating species, by pollution and sea currents. In recent years, scientific advances in understanding environmental interactions have led to an increased drive to reduce elements and practices that harm various lifeforms and seek to use some such lifeforms as building blocks for improved infrastructures or structures (Acosta and Ley 2023). This drive is part of a wider consensus to seek a comprehensive

overhaul of inter-species relations in order to avoid problems (Lorimer 2020).

In this context, political deliberations and grassroots considerations about what changes are needed or desirable engage at least partly in ethical negotiations. For example, debates about how experts should identify and mediate problems of coastal squeeze (Doody 2013; Pontee 2013) have emerged. In the process, competing ideas about how to manage coastal materialities and connectivities were voiced. Action plans to combat coastal squeeze continued to be publicly and politically contested (Sutton-Greer et al. 2015). In such circumstances, we refer to materialities to denote the effect that the biophysical properties of objects, lifeforms, and human-made structures have on the way they are used or experienced (Miller 2005). Coasts and the many lives that crisscross them are thus entangled by emerging interests, new infrastructures and technologies, as well as changing practices and weather patterns. The tensions between conflicting views and paths result in friction and potential conflicts. In order to find configurations to reduce the likelihood of problems, stakeholders need to pay attention to the characteristics of the things involved. An example is Laura Otto’s analysis of *Sargassum* and seagrasses in the Riviera Maya in Mexico (this collection). The fact that seagrasses help repair degraded ecosystems has convinced stakeholders to support scientific projects in this direction.

By connectivities, on the other hand, we mean not the connections themselves but the arrangements or configurations that enhance or facilitate connections. Thus, connectivity is directly related to materiality (Schorch et al. 2020), as it is the characteristics of the things and elements at play that allow for particular ways of connecting. A case in point is Albrecht’s investigation on seaweed farming in Norway (this collection), where industrial production defines a mass production-approach to bioeconomic practice. The planned expansion of massive seaweed farming in Europe lays out a predominantly techno-innovative approach to the blue economy. This comes at the expense of small-scale farmers who wish to maintain their own projects. Our interest, therefore, lies in the fact that changes in seashores have meant that new elements’ characteristics – regarding matter and connections – are key in collective decisions that will further alter the regions. The complexity of materialities and connectivities, thus, sheds light on decision-making processes that incorporate rapidly changing environments.

Coasts and seas have ecological materialities that require relational thinking (Garland et al. 2019). Here we are encouraged by Phillip Steinberg’s and Kimberly Peters’ (2019) proposal of ‘ocean thinking’. This is a perspective that highlights the liquidity of the ocean, so that the sea is seen not just as a space that facilitates movement between a region’s nodes but as one that, through its essential,

dynamic mobility and continual reformation, gives us a new perspective from which to encounter a world increasingly characterized by connections and flows. In such a framing, “the ocean must be engaged as a *material space* characterized by movement and continual reformation across all of its dimensions” (Steinberg 2013: 156–169). Sea level rise and inundation make land more integrated into the ocean, and give it a liquid state (Steinberg 2013).

This is where imaginaries play a crucial role. It is no wonder that - as in Ireland (Allen 2021) – coasts have played a pivotal role in literature and art. The dynamic horizons that encounters of matter and climate shape, feed creative imaginings through which humans envision exploration, conquest and dreams. Ideas and narratives about the sea and the coasts have for centuries helped shape the manner in which humans have inhabited and used coastal areas (Adler 2023). Yet, recent literature argues for an end to sea blindness, and articulation of ocean geographies (Peters 2010) and histories (Abulafia 2019). But the liminal spaces that coasts occupy make them hard to pin down, in a similar way to what happens with tidal flats (Choi 2020). The ebbs and flows of trade, migration patterns (of humans and other species), and other materialities, constantly alter the priorities of certain places and their populations.

It is no surprise that port cities host some of the most open-minded outlooks among the world’s population (Mega 2016). This is due to a combination of the landscape being open to the seascape, the flows of waves and winds that bring seeds and animals from far away, and the ongoing travel and trade that humans engage in. Exposure to difference, thus, opens up possibilities of change, of doing things differently. This entails risks. Coastal cities are oftentimes prone to receiving new pathogens and foreign species (of plants, fungi, or animals) that come with travellers or visitors. But visitors themselves are also increasingly considered a form of social pest. As tourism has become one of the major industries in our time, its massive scale has produced backlashes in many places. Tourism has altered shorelines and coastal cities as entrepreneurs seek to cash out on visitors. One effect of the tourism tsunami is that of gentrification, which communities are seeking to contain with innovative policies (Heidkamp and Lucas 2006).

Perhaps the most important form of connection among coastal cities and areas is due to trade. Maritime transport plays a pivotal role in the exchange of goods across the planet. Ports and the facilities that cater to them have re-shaped vast areas to make way for the thousands of deliveries that come and go. Massive investments and disinvestments continue to reshape coasts and seaways, but are often contested using diverse ethics (Aschenbrenner and Winder 2023). Changes in port infrastructures also affect tides and sea ecosystems. When planning such developments, authorities and experts

must take long time-spans into account (Walker 2024) but exactly how remains a matter of concern. Climate change and other environmental emergencies highlight the need to think beyond the human life span (Rose 2012) to deal with the stability of ecosystems in the lifetimes of future generations. With all this in mind, we argue that the ethical tensions at play can be considered within bounded arenas, which we expand on below.

Ethics in and out of Arenas

This collection investigates ethical tensions that emerge in novel configurations in coastal areas within what we call *arenas*. These arenas are contexts where stakeholders – or actors having an interest in what takes place in a collective – share a platform of discourse, action or decision-making to deal with claims, imaginaries or materialities regarding coastal areas. Each article in this collection is dedicated to a specific arena. Two of these arenas are well established: Marie Aschenbrenner (this collection) investigates an official though creatively managed marine spatial planning process, and Gordon Winder (this collection) researches newspaper coverage of an official term ‘blue economy’. Two other papers explore emerging arenas where attempts at governance are only starting: Laura Otto (this collection) explores the making of new alliances among biologists and tourism entrepreneurs in a coastal community reacting to an invasive species, and Moritz Albrecht (this collection) identifies stakeholder perspectives on the potential of reassembling seaweed farming. One paper highlights the need for an arena that is not yet there: Raúl Acosta (this collection) identifies the absence of an effective arena for inter-institutional governance of flows of microscopic chemical-, mineral- and bio-materials. In each case, specific configurations of ethics operate discursively, helping to assemble or contest imagined projects. All cases reveal ethical tensions in materialities and imaginaries.

The seafront has been at the forefront of urban transformation in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, and recently the government experimented with its first effort at MSP in Auckland, as Marie Aschenbrenner (this collection) explains. What makes this case study significant is that “The process differed considerably from other – technocratic – processes of MSP worldwide (Aschenbrenner and Winder 2019; Flannery and McAteer 2020).” (Aschenbrenner 2025: 104). The planning process involved extensive participation of governmental agencies, Indigenous partners, business stakeholders and civil society. It introduced new spaces of participation, round tables and practices of consensus and collaboration in decision-making. It was itself a result of recognition of Māori rights and delivered efforts to shape

the planning process using Māori knowledge, practices and sense of care. Consequently, participants in the planning process questioned conventional spatial behaviour, management and use of city waters. Further, they built ethical claims, and narratives of care, responsibility and stewardship into the plan, with the aims to transform behaviour and lifestyles, by reimagining and remaking city dwellers' relating to the adjacent Gulf waters. Thus, the case reveals an arena where ethical claims, tensions and visions were negotiated in the making of MSP in Auckland.

Since this was an official planning process, a new governmental rationality emerged in the participatory spaces of the MSP process, one that aimed to improve the environmental state of the Gulf by making residents into 'good' coastal citizens, while ending unethical and environmentally harmful behaviours. Nongovernmental actors emerged with new roles. 'Good' citizenship and planning were cast as 'motivated ethical reflection' or 'self-governance' within a new imaginary of the Gulf. Therefore, Marie Aschenbrenner reads Auckland's MSP "as a process of neoliberal, depoliticising governmentality" (Aschenbrenner 2025: 105). Nevertheless, she highlights the tensions that emerged between, for example, regeneration agendas, ideas of belonging, environmental protection, and competing visions of what constitutes a healthy form of nature, productive nature, or citizen rights to fish. Her contribution highlights the way ethics are "being problematized and (re)claimed in Marine Spatial Planning, and their role in remapping the land/seascape, its socionature and power relations" (Aschenbrenner, this collection). In doing so, she shows how ethics present as an important and, in this case, destabilizing environmental bargaining tool within a largely neoliberal urban context. It is worth noting that since her research was completed, the political conditions for MSP in Aotearoa New Zealand have dramatically changed with the election of a new government proclaiming settler ethics. What this will mean for MSP there remains to be seen.

Laura Otto (this collection) shows in her paper that the spread of sargasso is challenging the idea of coastal stability by altering a popular coastal seascape. This phenomenon has direct consequences for an area that lives from its touristic appeal. How should tourists and local officials deal with the invasive material? But also, crucially, how are other non-human life forms reacting towards the invasive sargasso? Otto examines the manner in which biologists are promoting seagrasses as an alternative to seek coastal stability. The perceived urgency for hoteliers and tourism stakeholders to deal with sargasso has led to several attempts at technological fixes that simply do not work. Some hoteliers have therefore paid increased attention to biologists who advocate for projects to repair a coastline that had been heavily damaged even before the massive arrival of sargasso.

In this context, a new ethic is emerging that is informed by scientific research. As in other negotiation arenas, the fact that some stakeholders are mostly focused on their narrow set of interests has not undermined efforts to think of a bigger picture. The careful deliberations that have ensued are thus more attuned to multi-species temporalities due to the accumulated failures of previous efforts. Despite the fact that a few sites and species tend to gain most attention of visitors and policymakers due to their charismatic character, biologists have successfully communicated the relevance of ecosystemic thinking to address the invasion of Sargasso. While it is still too early to know how the situation will develop, it is relevant to notice how the ethical tensions at play have been dealt with through more scientific research and experimentation.

Raúl Acosta (this collection) proposes an approach to new materialist ethics in order to address urban technomolecular flows. He argues that the many different anthropogenically induced microscopic elements circulating in cities require novel approaches of monitoring and control. In his view, existing governmental institutional architectures lag innovations in industrial processes and urban growth. Although this occurs in all urban areas, coastal cities are particularly prone to flows of microscopic chemical-, mineral- and bio-materials because of their location between sea and land. Acosta suggests that an analysis of current forms of urban governance of technomolecular flows with a new materialist ethics may yield ideas for novel institutional arrangements that better address emerging challenges. He contends that 'one health' (Zinsstag et al. 2020) does not yet provide an alternative ethics that is up to the tasks at hand.

Here we have an initial call for assembling ethicalities around rarely identified objects. Attention to current institutional architectures highlights the difficulty for bureaucracies to adapt to changing situations and contexts. By pinpointing the absence of an arena of ethical tensions, furthermore, Acosta sheds light on current parallel processes of regulation and commercialisation of substances and elements – for example, paints and insecticides – that are regulated only to a limited degree. This is where the value of considering emerging arenas of ethical tension lies: in inviting policymakers and scholars to think about future governance models and what steps need to be taken to move into that direction. Moritz Albrecht (this collection) critically examines the case of Norwegian seaweed farming, which he conceptualises as an assembling process with a focus on (policy) narratives as a means for governmental spatial interventions. Based on qualitative data including active Norwegian seaweed farmers' perspectives on the sector's current practices and future developments, the paper assesses the relations and contradictions between the optimistic key policy narratives, current sector developments

and the entrepreneur positionalities that shape the reproduction processes of this Norwegian seaweed assemblage. The paper shows that strong beliefs in extensive growth and technological solutions to tackle the fluid materialities of seaweed production are widespread among entrepreneurs. Paired with policy strategies rooted in similar narratives, this creates a current development approach that, however, neglects the (local) socio-economic and sustainability potential vested in alternative, small-scale approaches.

Moritz Albrecht's paper testifies to the potential channelling effects of policy. Seaweed entrepreneurs align their activities to policy narratives based on a shared belief in entrepreneurship, strong growth, and technical solutions to achieve coastal development. In doing so, they aim to assemble their projects under the legitimacy of government agencies, and largely hidden from public contestation or debates about alternatives. Yet their projects are routinely confounded by fluid materialities in their seaweed harvesting operations. What is framed as a bioeconomy sector is set out as an exercise of large-scale macro-algae aquaculture in order to compete with Asian producers. This means that whereas narratives of sustainability place a high value in small-scale communal enterprises, policymakers in this field prioritise industrial-scale producers. The implications for coastal futures are, thus, comparable to seaborne monocultures.

Gordon Winder (this collection) revisits print media coverage of the UK's experience of the Blue Economy 2012–2020. While confirming Germond-Duret and Germond's (2022) findings – positive and opportunistic embrace of Blue growth initiatives, little acknowledgement of risks, and sure signs of sea blindness – Winder identifies two discourses of Blue Economy, each associated with a set of actors, ethics and geography of reporting. Newspapers reported a buzz of activity as local enterprise partnerships (LEP) competed to secure investments by producing local growth plans. LEP actors used business ethics to legitimize their plans to build what they called a 'blue economy' even though this looked more like 'blue growth'. A second group of actors announced plans to build what they called a 'sustainable blue economy'. Here actors used the ethics of regional development, achieving net zero and protecting, enhancing or restoring ocean environments. Journalists reported critical views on these 'sustainable blue economy' plans: inadequate attention to environmental protection, investment in activities seen as environmentally unsustainable or investments with limited regional development. Despite the UK's dynamic and fragmented media landscape, Winder reveals a discursive field featuring a confusion of contested ethical claims and their geographies. Thus, the paper highlights the ethical contestation of marine governance at work in UK society.

A key contribution of Winder's paper is the mapping of the ways in which 'blue economy' manifested in a specific arena: the UK's dynamic and fragmented media landscape. Media constitute an arena for information sharing, investigative reporting and comment, and are vital to public awareness and collective action. Winder's research reveals announcements of diverse projects most of which were uncontested. He confirms that business ethics dominated news of the UK's blue economy. There was little sign of public participation or negotiations. Instead, professional experts articulated their stances and findings. Even so, the goals of regional development, achieving net zero, and protecting, enhancing and restoring coastal environments were reported in some, notably Scottish, newspapers. Thus, the analysis reveals geographies of media attention to blue economy within the UK: there are specific arenas for reporting, with different reporting styles and different ideas about the ethics of blue economy. This compounds the limited coverage offered to the term, and further constrains dialogue on blue economy outside of expert circles.

Contribution

This collection reports the results of an interdisciplinary engagement with (everyday) environmental-economic-social-political ethical tensions in addressing key issues in hotspots of the Anthropocene. The collection raises the profile of urban ethics as object of study. The authors are sensitive to evidence of post-political and technocratic planning at work (Swyngedouw 2009), that combines with consensus-based decision-making legitimised by limited participation processes, to marginalise opposition and foreclose debate about the purpose of planning. Nevertheless, by opening an inquiry into urban ethics, they report that diverse actors are proposing new forms of engaging with one another. The collected case studies reveal not only a tangle of coastal connections in each set of city-coast-sea relations but also a surprising array of ethical tensions in materialities and imaginaries entangled in local efforts to make sense of these dynamic connections. Each paper finds ethical claims proliferating around city-coast-sea connections, limitations and weaknesses to the proposed ethics, and problems of legitimacy swirling around projects that require agreements in what is the best – in the eyes of those involved – path forward.

The authors understand that ethics can have varied roles in city-coast-sea relations. Marie Aschenbrenner (this collection) finds actors using ethics as an environmental bargaining tool. For Laura Otto (this collection), biologists use an ethics of coastal repair to galvanise efforts now that invasive material has demonstrated the instability of the coast's

condition. Raúl Acosta (this collection) contends that the appropriate ethics are missing. He calls for new ethical configurations of humans and non-humans as communities try to come to terms with dynamic technomolecular situations. Moritz Albrecht (this collection) recognises the dominant entrepreneurial and policy discourse on seaweed production in Norway but points out that its emphasis on growth and technology obscures the counter ethics that promise local, socio-economic and sustainability potentials of small-scale seaweed production. Gordon Winder (this collection) maps Blue Economy as a discursive field in the fragmented UK media landscape, revealing some contested ethical claims, but also geographies of reporting that constrain coastal communities' participation in making blue economy.

By researching ethics within and without established arenas, the authors scope the implications of such presences and absences. Raúl Acosta calls for a new ethics of care and attention to flows of microscopic chemical-, mineral- and bio-materials that can facilitate inter-institutional governance. Without such an ethics, action will be further delayed because there is no relevant arena to deal with such emerging phenomena. Laura Otto provides evidence of an unlikely alliance that is assembling local projects in a collaborative fashion, by working to adapt a new ethics of ecological care, via seagrasses. Here, a new ethics of restorative care is helping assemble local actors from the seabed and foreshore up. Social innovation is possible without an established arena. Moritz Albrecht identifies entrepreneurs investing in seaweed farming in response to policy incentives, by aligning their projects to policy ethics. However, existing small-scale seaweed harvesters cannot align their practices and ethics to the policy. In effect, the policy ethics are out of line with coastal livelihoods, communities and environments. Gordon Winder reveals that UK newspapers, an established arena, offered not only limited coverage of blue economy, but largely reported views on it from experts, each with their own specialization and ethicalities of the coast. Here the effect of the established arena was to constrain knowledge, discussion and collaborative action by anyone other than an authorized agent. Marie Aschenbrenner reports a case where alternative and relational ethics were used to repurpose an official marine spatial planning process. This resulted in the generation of agreed proposals for collaborative management for the health of (urban) coastal waters including restoration of ecosystems and limitations on resource use. The results were a shock to many actors more comfortable with the ethicalities of settler society. Here the potential from transforming the ethicalities of a new arena can be glimpsed. In each case, specific configurations of ethics operate discursively, helping to assemble or contest imagined projects, but conditioned by their relation

to arenas. That is why attention to (urban) ethics in arenas is useful.

Together, these papers demonstrate the need to address ethics not merely as a practical tool to engage in policymaking but as an essential element to address imaginings about potential futures. As our contributors show, ethical negotiations are not themselves an immediate solution to risks or problems, but create arenas where decisions can be taken in collectives. This is already political, but at its heart lies the need to build a sense of (coastal) community that is coherent with the diversity that characterizes each coastal region. We are certain that more attention to ethics and its practices will help build momentum and opportunities to (re)think and plan seas, coasts and cities differently.

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Declarations

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