

Thinking Ontological (In)Security with Water: The Place of the Ocean in Boat Migration

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Abstract: The article aims to examine how Ocean Studies and Blue Humanities, and especially the concepts of more than wet ontology and bodies of water, can contribute to a more than wet approach to Ontological Security Studies (OSS) that allows us to rethink the ways that migrants and refugees construct their narratives of resistance on a liquid surface. OSS reproduces the territorial ontology and epistemology of the broader field of International Relations, characterized by divisions between Land and Sea, and inside and outside. One of the tenets of the term ‘a body of water’ is to highlight the ontological similarity, not identity, between water and other elements, inside and outside. Through these lenses, it is possible to analyse the wet assemblages formed when migrants/refugees merge with the Ocean, boats, and jackets, producing a complex, fluid, and unstable dynamic of Ontological Security/Insecurity.

Keywords: wet ontology; ontological security/insecurity; migration; ocean; sea; resistance

Introduction

Over the past few decades, we have witnessed migration by boats in various Oceans and the State’s strategies to curtail these movements. To guarantee an Ontological Security based on a stable and monolithic identity, States have pushed out the refugee boats that come to their shores. A second strategy for States to obtain Ontological Security is the practice of wishful sinking (Nakhoul 2011), which consists of not doing anything and waiting for the boat to sink into the sea. Both modes of controlling movement serve the State’s goal of maintaining or achieving its ontological security by creating ontological insecurity for migrants or refugees.

The attempt of the States to paralyse migrants and refugees at the wet border – on-shore and offshore – is part of the politics of controlling the generative power of water. As Carter (2021) explained, water has been consistently problematized in the European tradition as a symbol of doubt and confusion. Consequently, water has been submitted

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to what Deborah Bird Rose defined as the 'death-work of unmaking waters' (Rose 2007: 12), which means 'killing the human capacity to understand water in its living complexity' (Rose 2007: 12). This article examines how Ontological Security Studies (OSS) are embedded in a territorialized way of thinking about identity, subjectivity, and water that prevents us from understanding the agentic power of the Ocean, the formation of wet assemblages, and migrants/refugees' resistance.

This article presents the contributions and limits of Ontological Security Studies regarding the self, identity, securitization, and objects of reference. The literature review does not intend to be exhaustive but to pinpoint how the debate evolved around certain questions that ignored the place of water in our environment and our bodies. OSS contested the realist supposition of security as a physical threat, emphasizing an abstract self disconnected from the material and water bodies.

The second section focuses on Ocean Studies and Blue Humanities, specifically the concepts of more than wet ontology (Peters and Steinberg 2019) and bodies of water (Neimanis 2017). In a World menaced by climate change, ice melting, floods, micro-plastics, and water contamination, research about water's movements and materiality has increased in the Humanities in the last decades. International Relations have been relatively immune to this debate due to its territorial ontology and epistemology based on Schmitt's (2003) description in *The Nomos of the Earth*. The theoretical proposal of this section is to reflect on the possibility of more than wet ontology and bodies of water contributing to thinking of Ontological Security/Insecurity differently.

In the last section, I examine three migrant journeys where the Ocean appears as a fundamental actor in shaping Ontological Security/Insecurity for migrants/refugees, and, consequently, their modes of resistance. The examples do not intend to identify the Ocean as an actor who always contributes to a successful migration. The storms and shipwrecks can attest to the opposite. I examine how migrants and refugees represent the Water and the Ocean as a subject and part of a wet assemblage of resistance that creates Ontological Security and Insecurity for a Self who is a body of water. Putting it differently, the relation between the Ocean and the refugees (two bodies of water) will not necessarily provide physical security (shipwrecks attest to that) but will be present in their narrative about how they, as subjects embedded in water, understand Ontological Security (hope) and Insecurity (fear).

The many possibilities of ontological security

Ontological security has entered the field of international relations with the promise of contributing to understanding security processes irreducible to physical survival. Proponents of this approach deemed the materialist component of the self-help logic present in realism and other theories of international relations insufficient to explain why certain States risked their physical survival to maintain what they perceived as their self-identity. Although it opened a whole new way of thinking about security, it also preserved the idea that security is possible only with stability. Hence, the State is secure since it has a stable identity, is different from others, and is immune to external influence.

That is why one of the critiques of ontological security was that it just switched from the realist self-help to identity but maintained the zero-sum logic, and the object of reference of realism: the State.

In her seminal article 'Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma,' Jennifer Mitzen (2006) draws on the works of Laing (2010) and Giddens (1991) about ontological security on the individual level and scales it up to the state, affirming that 'security is not of the body but of the Self, the subjective sense of who one is' (Mitzen 2006: 344). At this point, she distinguishes between body and Self, which I will discuss later in this section. She also highlights the necessity of the temporal dimension of the Self, as well as its sense of wholeness. The stability of the Being is a precondition for action, as is explicitly stated in the following sentence: 'Ontological security refers to the need to experience oneself as a whole, the continuous person in time – as being rather than constantly changing – to realize a sense of agency' (Giddens 1991; Laing 2010 cited in Mitzen 2006). This continuity of Being also depends on routines based on social interaction with significant others who recognize and reinforce one's sense of Self. For Giddens (1991), the Self can only act if there is stability, routine, and the suspension of disbelief in the social narrative that constitutes our identity. Following Giddens, Mitzen argues that 'agency requires a stable cognitive environment' (Mitzen 2006: 342), created by a routine in social relations with significant others.

New contributions and discussions in this subfield contested the zero-sum logic brought by the first formulations of ontological security. Rumelili (2013) inquiries into the relationship between ontological security, a stable identity, and the securitization of the Other. She asserts that ontological security needs a stable identity, which comes from narratives of differences about Others. However, differences from the Others don't mean the Other is necessarily securitized. (Buzan, Waeber and De Wilde 1998). It is possible to think of the 'non-threatening identity of the Other' (Hansen 2012: 533). In this same vein, Rumelili defends that ontological security does not invariably reproduce the zero-sum game logic in identity-related matters. In her view, the difference between Self and Other is an unavoidable tenet of identity formation, and some kind of ontological security based on a stable identity is necessary to maintain a sustainable process of desecuritization. In other words, desecuritization depends on a stable identity.

Rumelili stresses that some proposals of fragmentation of identity (Huysmans 1998)¹ or disidentification (Aradau 2004)² would lead to extreme ontological insecurity that, in turn, poses limits to desecuritization. Although it is possible to discuss the degree of stability Rumelili considers most appropriate to identity and ontological security, the point is that she presupposes ontological insecurity is something intrinsically bad that needs to be overcome. In sum, the author's intervention detaches Ontological Security from the logic of threat to one's identity but maintains the need for a stable identity.

The presupposition of an intrinsic connection between ontological security and a stable identity led some critics of a stable identity to discard ontological security. Rosedale, for example, argues that ontological security is not a helpful theory for thinking about political action and resistance. His argument relies on the notion – the same we find in Rumelili – that ontological security means a stable identity, and resistance cannot

be created out of a stable identity. Ontological security ‘closes down the question of the subject’ (Rossdale 2015: 369) because the search for ontological security presupposes that the Subject will reproduce a coherent narrative.

For Laing (2010), the ontologically secure Self is self-conscious, authentic, consistent, and autonomous. Butler (2007) inverts this thesis by affirming that the Subject’s instability, non-autonomy, and biographical inconsistencies are the terrain where ethical reflection can emerge. Ethics cannot come from an organized, aseptic, abstract, insulated, and sovereign subject. In other words, resistance doesn’t need an organized and autonomous Subject. The opacity – and non-autonomy of the Subject – is where we begin to think about our ethics and responsibility to others.

In 2008, Brent Steele had already questioned the possibility of ontological security by referring to Kierkegaard’s theorization about existential anxiety as an inescapable feature of the human condition. We can impose some routines on this anxiety. However, one can never be ontologically secure or attain ‘healthy ontological security’ (Steele 2008: 63). This intrinsic impossibility of ontological security is also the theme of Catarina Kinnvall’s work, where she suggests we move away from ontological security as something that an individual or State can possess to a focus on ontological security as ‘a process that is constantly in progress, a temporal process of always wanting’ (Kinnvall 2018: 8). It is an endless process of becoming, not Being. Inspired by Jacques Lacan’s formulation of the Real and the symbolic order, Kinnvall defends an antifoundational notion of the Self. It implies no core and authentic Self to return to an ontologically secured place or time. We mobilize images, fantasies, and desires to heal the constant lack of the Self theorized by Lacan. Nevertheless, what is important for our purposes in this article is that the Subject in Lacan does not have to reach ontological security but learn how to live with this permanent constitutive lack.

Another exercise in re-conceptualizing ontological security/insecurity is in the work of Alexandria J. Innes (2017) about everyday ontological security, or ontological security as performance. Contrary to Rossdale, who discards the concept of ontological security, she proposes that we can still stick to it. Ontological security is not condemned to a totalizing bias. It ‘can circumvent the problem of totalizing the state or of totalizing identities and subjectivities’ (Innes 2017: 282). The questioning of autonomous subjects or stable identity does not necessarily imply that we have to abandon ontological security *tout court*. It is possible to bring the critique of a solid Self into ontological security and reformulate it. Performative ontological security, instead of a linear narrative, permits us to understand identity becoming or the becoming of the Subject in cases such as diaspora, migration, race, class, and gender.

The questions and theorizations advanced by Steele (2008), Rossdale (2015), Innes (2017), and Kinnvall (2018) brought new challenges to Ontological Security Studies (OSS) and the subfield had to deal, from then on, with the inherent incompleteness of the Self. However, these studies still seem to lack some points regarding the relation of self/identity and self/body, and recent scholarship on OSS proposed rethinking these dichotomies. Krickel-Choi and Chen (2024) criticize the conceptual conflation of Self

and Identity as if both were interchangeable. As a result, ontological security of the Self is associated with the necessity of preserving identities, which could lead to an essentialism and conservative movement towards the concept of identity. The critique of the second dichotomy – self/body – is that the self is not abstract but materially grounded. Krickel-Choi, Chen, and Bukh (2022) claim that ‘understanding the state as embodied reveals how the particular logic of Westphalian exclusion works in practice, while also illuminating why issues of sovereignty and territory are existentially important for states’ (Krickel-Choi, Chen, and Bukh 2022: 1123). Krickel-Choi and Chen (2024: 307) emphasized that ‘the social environment is profoundly important for the development of a sense of self, and it is partly due to these social dynamics of subject-formation that the pursuit of recognition and ontological security can have relational effects’ (2024: 307). Purnell (2021) also defended an embodied notion of ontological security that would focus neither on the State nor the individuals but rather on a process of constant (re)embodiment. The author refers to the traditional literature that regards States as body politics with properties of embodied subjects, such as organs and limbs.

However, these theoretical interventions suffer from what the scholars from Blue Humanities call sea blindness, meaning the lack of attention directed to climate change and its consequences to the Ocean. The social environment so dear to OSS neglects the physical environment in which we live. The contribution of this paper to the above discussion is to show that the Ocean, the sea, or the water are absent from these formulations and try to bring them to Ontological Security. Even in Purnell’s (2021) consideration of body politics, this body is related to a terrestrial being whose environment is dry (Carter 2021). The sea blindness in Ontological Security prevents us from understanding the formation of wet assemblages that will enable some migrants to resist the extreme conditions of a storm. In addition, ‘sea blindness’ obliterates the fact that the Ocean emerges as an agentic force in wet assemblages.

Water is present in 70% of our body and 70% of our planet. Therefore, ontological security cannot be thought of without considering the movement of this element at individual and world levels. The relation between body and self, or the embodiment of ontological security (Purnell 2021) will be incomplete if we do not consider the importance of water for both body and self. One of the consequences of dehydration is mental confusion (Neimanis 2017), a signal of the intrinsic connection between body, self, and water. Therefore, people without enough water circulating in their bodies face not only physical (dehydration can cause death) threats but also insecurity about who they are. ‘In extreme dehydration, the molar body may altogether recede; we edge towards a desiccated sort of bare life’ (Neimanis 2017: 50). The literature on Ocean Studies and Blue Humanities could contribute to insights into the limits of terrestrial, body-centred, and dry ontological security. I will elaborate more on this way of thinking about Ontological Security in the next section.

How more than wet ontology introduces a water approach to ontological security

In this section, I first present the debate and scholarship going on in Ocean Studies, Blue Humanities, and particularly, the concepts of more-than-wet ontology, and bodies of water. Then, I develop the argument that more than wet ontology can introduce water into the essentially terrestrial concept of ontological security, and why that is important to understand contemporary processes regarding boat migration.

Traditional theories of international relations take for granted that knowledge comes from Earth, territory, and the State. Concepts like national security, ontological security, national identity, and sovereignty, which are some of the bases of the contemporary debate in the discipline, rely on an epistemic framework that shapes our political imaginaries in a terrestrial mode.

Even when the Ocean enters the landscape, it remains an annex to everything elaborated and thought from the terrestrial platform. The sea ‘remains largely an extension of land, and sea power is limited to being a corollary of land-based military power and a space which must be traversed for states to project their power beyond their narrow shores’ (Carvalho and Leira 2022: 5). When Mearsheimer (2014) refers to the stopping power of water, he is reiterating the subordinate position of the Sea regarding Earth. Power politics happens in a territorial space, and the sea is just an obstacle or a place to be territorialized, as the artificial islands evidence.

The result of these unquestioned beliefs is that International Relations are not able to see (sea blindness) or to hear the Ocean (*la belle noiseuse*) (Serres 1996) in its terms. The prospect of bringing back the Ocean to IR tends to reproduce the terrestrialization of the Ocean by creating regulations to control what is resistant to terrestrial measurements. As pointed out by Stuart Elden (2013), territorialization is a political technology that flattens the World, representing it as horizontal and without volume, thus silencing what is happening on the Ocean. Elden argued that ‘thinking about sea, ice and seabed could be part of a wider project of rethinking geopolitics – as a politics of the earth rather than global politics.’ (Elden 2013b:1) Therefore, the politics of the earth is constituted not only by land but by an assemblage of water, ice, subsoil, and the submarine. Therefore, in contrast to a terrestrial imagination, thinking with water allows us to expand the units of analysis beyond the State, including the Ocean or wet assemblages as actors of international relations and Ontological Security/Insecurity.

In IR literature, the modern construction of the sea also represented it as threatening, monstrous, evil, and treacherous as opposed to the land, seen as a safe harbour and a home. In short, a terrestrial perspective has moulded and judged the sea according to and in contrast to its terms. One example of this construction is the case of an Australian supposed white western identity which has to be protected from those who come in boats to its shores. The Australian imaginary constructs a terrestrial and secured island constantly threatened by the instability of the Ocean and the differences (migrants and refugees) it brings. The supposed modern, rational, and prosperous Australian subjects

seek to attain their ontological security through a routine and a stable identity in opposition to the Others.

Recent studies on the Ocean and the Blue Humanities have begun to change this conventional wisdom of regarding the Ocean as dangerous by highlighting the potential of thinking about the Ocean from the Ocean. Putting it differently, the Ocean can also be a producer of knowledge and not only a recipient of it. It is also an agent, which connects with other subjects and objects, forming a 'maritime assemblage' (Anderson 2012) that is unpredictable. John R. Gillis (2013) detects a shift in interest from land to sea in several fields of study, configuring what Steve Menz (2009) calls Blue Humanity. Archaeologists are studying the offshore, anthropologists are focusing on the Seas, and Maritime History is concerned with life in the Ocean. The blue hole in the Humanities also requires a connection to the natural sciences regarding waves, movement, physics, and biology. One of the objectives of Blue Humanities is the historicization of the oceans from a wet perspective. Therefore, the Ocean is not a passive receiver of an action realized by a sovereign State. On the contrary, it functions as an organizing concept of world order and an actual agent of the international system.

Elizabeth Deloughrey (2017: 1) states that we are 'witnessing an interdisciplinary transition to what might be called 'critical ocean studies,' which is not as much concerned with mobility on the water surfaces as it is with theorizing oceanic submersion. According to Deloughrey, this movement occurs due to three transformations in the second half of the twentieth century. The first was the 1945 Truman Proclamation about two hundred nautical miles, which incited a scramble about the Ocean. The second catalyst was the post-1970 'spatial turn' in studies of globalization and diaspora, including Marxist geographers theorizing about capital, labour, and Oceans. Finally, the disappointment with the Nation-State in post-colonial countries in the nineties led some scholars to turn to more encompassing spaces such as the Ocean.

The influence of Blue Humanities expanded to Geography and Feminist Studies, as we can see in the works of Phillip Steinberg, Kimberly Peters, and Astrida Neimanis. The concept of more than wet ontology (Peters and Steinberg 2019) and bodies of water (Neimanis 2017) provide us with elements that question the terrestrialization of our way of thinking about the international and, particularly, about Ontological Security.

In 'Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume through Oceanic Thinking' (2015), Steinberg and Peters begin their investigation of wet ontology with a critique of Carl Schmitt's (2003) *The Nomos of the Earth*. As is well-known in the IR discipline, this study establishes a division of the planet between land and sea, each with different qualities³. Schmitt grounds his dismissal of the Ocean in its immateriality and lack of substantiality. It is possible to control territory and transform it into a material property, but the same cannot happen in the fluid space of the Ocean. Inscriptions and boundaries do not sustain themselves on a liquid surface. As a terrestrial being, the individual constructs their imaginaries and thinking from the viewpoint of the Earth, not the sea. For Schmitt, the sea can only offer insignificant waves.

Steinberg and Peters (2015: 5) put forth that 'it is precisely these waves that make the ocean productive for enlivening our understanding of space, time, and motion.' In

Steinberg and Peters' (2015) conception, the Ocean has a material and phenomenological distinctiveness that can facilitate the reimagining of a world ever on the move. Waves are not monotonous and repetitive, as Michel Serres (1996: 13) demonstrated, and the surfers know so well from their everyday practice. Waves emerge in a species of natural variation of the same theme. Looking at those professionals who merge with Water, like surfers, sailors, and swimmers, we can see how waves and the assemblage of air, Water, and space produce our subjectivity. As Anderson (2012: 580) puts it: 'Surfers express their involvement with the place of the surfed wave in terms of being "at one" with the amalgam of the sea and swell, of "merging" with this "medium", of being "intimately connected to it"'. There is a sense of the union between the surfer and the wave.

In this and other papers, they were attentive to the fact that the Ocean is not only liquid, but also ice, vapor, and mist. However, it is only in their article 'The Ocean in Excess' (2019) that Steinberg and Peters will refine the argument and advance the concept of a more than wet ontology as more appropriate to capture the diversity of water materiality. The consequence of this elaboration is not only that water has many states, but also that solidity is not exclusive to Land nor liquidity to the Ocean. Land and water are more enmeshed with each other than is currently supposed. In their elaboration of the concept of wet ontology, Steinberg and Peters proposed that 'the liquid materiality, motion, and temporality allows for new ways of thinking that are not possible when only thinking with the land' (Peters and Steinberg 2019). Therefore, the more than wet ontology goes beyond the hierarchy between Land and Sea and opens up the possibility of considering the Sea as a source of ways of thinking about politics, a way of intervening in structures built on the primacy of terrestrial sovereignty, and to destabilize the ontological and epistemological foundations of the IR discipline.

The watering approach to subjectivity brings back the discussion of the ontological and epistemological tenets of the IR discipline. The wet assemblage blurs the distinction between a subject and an object encrusted in IR's territorial epistemological stance. The idea of being intimately connected to Water breaks the premise of a distance between the subject and the object of knowledge. It is now from inside the wave that knowledge emerges.

The interconnectedness between body and water becomes more evident in Neimanis's work. She affirms that '[t]o define a human being as a body of water is to ask a radical question about what we mean when we call ourselves "bodies"' (Neimanis 2009: 83). It is not only the physiological aspect that is at stake here but all the imbrication between this material body and social, political and philosophical matters. Neimanis (2009: 83) reminds us that water is indispensable for 'our thoughtful, emotional, and imaginative selves as well.' In this sense, it might be productive to question how water influences the emotional and imaginative selves in their search for ontological security.

When some authors call attention to the unstable self (Steele 2008; Rosedale 2015; Kinnvall 2018), they do so at an abstract level or consider a solid dry body. Notwithstanding, Neimanis asserts that water and other fluids are the elements that break with the supposed autonomy of the subject which comes from our Humanistic and Illuministic traditions. The embodiment of ontological security proposed by Purnell

(2021) fails to discuss that embodiment and subjectivity are contingent upon an excess related to water: leakages, floods, and overflows. The expulsion of water from our bodies takes different – and sometimes disgusting – forms, which the subject cannot control. ‘In extreme dehydration, our cognitive understanding of self may recede altogether’ (Neimanis 2009: 85). Therefore, Neimanis (2012: 1) defends an ontological similarity, although not absolute, between water and other elements, constituting an ontologic of amniotics: ‘experience ourselves less as isolated entities, and more as oceanic eddies.’ Being a body of water connects us to other bodies of water, such as rivers, oceans, seas, ice, humus, and land. However, the ontological similarity is not absolute, since it works in parallel to membranes of differentiation (Neimanis 2009: 88), which explains why we are not one with the Ocean and the ‘material and phenomenological distinctiveness’ (Steinberg and Peters 2015) persists. Contrary to Schmitt’s immateriality and lack of substantiality of the Ocean, these authors conceptualize Water as a material element (vapor, ice, liquid, water bodies) with social, environmental, and political agency.

Another aspect of the wet ontology perspective that helps us to rethink OSS is the transition between the states of matter and the consequent change of volume and waves. The Ocean is not only a liquid surface but also ice, vapor, mist, snow, etc. ‘[T]hese properties can be ascribed to land as well (land too has depth, underlying mobility, and transformation across physical states), but in water, these properties are distinct in the speed and rhythm of mobility’ (Steinberg and Peters 2015: 252). Because of this characteristic, each state of water will have a different impact on the kind of maritime assemblage and its mobility. The liquid state allows the formation of an assemblage of boats, migrants, and the Ocean, which will be the focus of my third section. Mobility in the water depends on the state of the matter, the volume, and the fluid dynamics of the waves. Had it been ice instead of liquid, the frozen water would have immobilized the boat, and the migrants, as happened historically in the Arctic Pole, would have preferred to walk on ice.

The ontological security of the migrant/refugees will change according to the state of the water not only in their body (thirst, hyperthermia) but also in the Ocean. What I am trying to state is that wet ontology can provide us with an alternative imagination that connects two levels of analysis (the Ocean and the individual) through water. Ontological security doesn’t lack only opaque and vulnerable selves (Butler 2007; Rossadale 2015), or bodies and processes between State and individual levels of analysis (Purnell 2021; Krickel-Choi and Chen 2024). It lacks a more than wet ontology approach to think about the Ocean and the individual as subjects of security soaked in a fluid and mobile environment (both are bodies of water).

Resistance embedded in a watery ontological security/insecurity

As we have seen so far, ontological security needs to include bodies of water and the states of water to think about the inherent vulnerability of the body that migrates on boats. In this section, I argue that the watery approach to ontological security can provide an understanding of certain dynamics of migrant resistance on water. That could not be attained through the traditional concept of ontological security or the anchoring of that

concept on a stable identity. In this sense, we agree with Rossdale when he states that resistance comes from vulnerability (Butler 2007) and instability. Going further, Innes (2017) stressed that ontological security should be thought of as performance, everyday practices that continuously shape identity, which is, in consequence, an unstable identity. Purnell (2021) and Krikel-Choi and Chen (2022) have criticized the abstract theory of the Self in Ontological Security, bringing back the body but this body was a dry entity. However, none of the above articulations considered the ontological security/insecurity of bodies of water, which is the contribution of this article to the debate.

In the case of boat migrants, the hegemonic narrative in the media and specialized literature will focus on how they are exposed to the dangerousness of the Ocean, to turbulent waters, and the deadliest probabilities when crossing the sea. This is certainly true, and shipwrecks must be condemned and discussed in the media. The problem is when this is the only narrative and one that reinforces a specific representation of the Ocean and migration on waters as something to be avoided because of its intrinsic and unavoidable dangerousness. These discourses propagate the idea that Water is dangerous, and as dry bodies and terrestrial beings, we should avoid that. In these explanations, Ontological security is indirectly connected to staying in a ground, solid, and dry space.

On the other hand, boat migrants might view the Ocean as the place of dream, adventure, and the resumption of a new life, in contrast to the oppressive and unjust State from which they fled. As a result, the State – not the Ocean – is a threat to this group, and the Ocean represents the hope of Ontological Security. From the point of view of the State, the Ocean is a threat, but that might not be migrants' unique perceptions of the water. According to Kevin (2004), 97.3% of boat migrants arrive safely on the shores, and they do so because they trust and, sometimes, merge with the Ocean. Certainly, there is a problem trying to access data about boat migration due to 'the issue of "grey numbers"' (Last and Spijkerboer 2014: 16), that is people who died in the Mediterranean Sea but whose bodies could not be recovered and counted. Last and Spijkerboer (2014: 15) consider that 'All data sources on border deaths are limited in one way or another, so all statistics are inevitably incomplete.' Despite these difficulties, reports show an approximate relation between the number of people who crossed the Mediterranean and those who died in this attempt. A 2024 report from The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimated that 199 400 people arrived in Europe through the Mediterranean Sea, while 2844 died, which accounts for 1,4% of the total, proving that, although risky, migration by boat still has a great chance of success.

A watery approach to ontological security/insecurity brings to the fore the fluid dynamics of ontological security/insecurity in migrant/refugee resistance. To illustrate this point, I present three episodes where the connection between the body of water of the Ocean and the body of water of the individual or a collective (a watery assemblage) produced resistance through a complex entanglement of ontological securities and insecurities. I bring the cases of Asmal Basry, an Iraqi woman who survived the drowning of the SIEV X on the Australian coast in 2001; Yusra and Sara Mardini, the two Syrian sisters whose journey through the Mediterranean in 2015 was narrated in the film *The Swimmers* (2022), directed by Sally El Hosaini; and a Vietnamese Boat Journey in 1982.

Asmal Basry survived a shipwreck on the coasts of Australia and dedicated her life to denouncing the harsh conditions the Australian government creates for migrants. The Ocean appears in her narrative as an agent in favour of migration or, at least, as a hope for migrants. What I want to stress is that the Ocean is not always a threat, even for those who survived a shipwreck. The relationship between the two bodies of water – migrants and the Ocean – will constantly swift from Ontological security to Ontological insecurity, and vice-versa. Australia represented the Ocean as a threat, a place from which invaders would come. After the Tampa case in 2001, the country adopted the Pacific Solution legislation, which permits the interception of boats in the sea and offshore asylum processing. The writer Ghassan Nakhoul (2011) coined the term ‘fantasy of wishful sinking’ to define this policy toward boat people who try to come to Australia but are obliged to return to Water. This policy reveals what the Australian government enshrines as the best solution: sinking pacifically in the Pacific Ocean. If it happens on the high seas, it is not Australia’s fault or responsibility. And if it happens peacefully and silently, it is better for Australia. The ‘wishful sinking’ strategy is thus premised on the idea that the Ocean has agency, which can be problematic if we consider the claim made by Doty (2011) regarding the desert: the geography of the desert provides a ‘moral alibi’ for States trying to negate responsibility for migrant’s deaths. In the case of the Ocean, water would respond to the shipwreck. Dickson (2021) has identified this strategy in the representations of the Mediterranean as perilous and ungovernable. The moral alibi used by States after shipwrecks serves two functions: it reiterates the metaphor of the Ocean as a dangerous space that should be avoided by migrants, and it recognizes the agentic element of water for guaranteeing the ontological security of the State. Putting it differently: the Ocean is a threat to Australia, but it is also a protector of Australia’s identity when it produces the drowning of migrants. The wishful sinking depends on the action of the Ocean, which cannot be controlled by the Australian government. Hence, the Ocean has an unstable place in Australian construction of ontological security since it is dangerous when it brings boats to the shore, and an ally in shipwrecks.

The same happens with migrants/refugees who see the agency of the Ocean both as threatening and protective. Suvendrini Perera (2013) remembers the story narrated by Arnold Zable (2012) about Amal Brasry, a survivor of a sinking boat that revealed the attempt of people to resist on and through the Water. She reports the case of five people – a man and four women – who wrote a letter to the ‘angel of the ocean’ and threw it into the water. The letter exhorted the Ocean to participate in the act of resistance. ‘Angel of the ocean, please help us. Angel of the ocean, do not be angry. Angel of the ocean, do not leave us. Angel of the ocean, please save us’ (Basry cited in Zable 2012: 173). In opposition to the Australian government’s figuration of the Ocean as dangerous, this group on the SIEV X saw the Ocean as a protector, which later proved to be a mistake. The wishful sinking politics of the Australian government delayed rescue and only 47 out of 400 people on the boat survived. The group of five drowned while Brasry survived by clinging herself to a dead body for over 20 hours.

The letter ratifies the decision to leave the dry land and trust the Water, even if the result is not guaranteed. Refugees ‘entrust their lives to the oceans’ (Perera 2012). The

letter to the Ocean, says Perera, reminds us of Deborah Bird Rose's term water business (2007), which means 'finding ways to protect and defend the fullness of water in itself and its relations with other things' (Rose 2007: 12). In contrast to the water business, Rose refers to the death-work of unmaking waters, which means 'killing the human capacity to understand water in its living complexity' (Rose 2007: 12). Some examples of this death work are production, economic advantage, and national security (Rose 2007: 12). In this sense, I argue that the traditional ontological security theory, based on a terrestrial mode of thinking about national security, can also be figured on the list of the technologies of unmaking waters.

The story narrated by Basry occurred under extreme instability: ontological insecurity and vulnerability created a connection between five individuals, corroborating the idea that the non-autonomous subject in existential contingency creates spaces of relationality and responsibility (Butler 2007). As we have seen with Rossdale, vulnerability can nurture resistance. Furthermore, this space of relationality includes the Ocean as an agent that could have pushed the boat to the coast. The group observed by Basry did not see the Ocean as an object of knowledge but as a body of water (Neimanis 2017) in connection to their bodies of water, forming a wet assemblage of resistance and solidarity among those five people. What is at stake here is not the result – the shipwreck – but the possibility of people connecting with the Ocean, trusting water, doing what Rose (2007) calls the 'water business': understanding water in itself and its relations with other things.

The dry theory of ontological security cannot explain the relation between ontological insecurity/security and resistance permeated by water because it is too attached to the idea that security is provided by solid ground. Reading ontological security through wet ontology somehow disrupts these assumptions. Firstly, ontological security/insecurity can emerge from vulnerability in the waters. Secondly, when applied to ontological security, the dynamic state of water shows that the difference between me and others, land and water, national and migrants, security and insecurity are not strict opposites but, like water, they change their status all the time. The ontological insecurity experienced by the Australian government through the vision of boat migrants can quickly change to the ontological security provided by the wishful sinking.

On the other hand, the ontological insecurity that haunts boat migrants can be transformed into a wet assemblage formed by boats, lifesavers, water, and bodies that can produce ontological security for migrants. Boat people construct their resistance through the ontological insecurity/security created by the entanglement between their vulnerable bodies of water and the Ocean. Five refugees of SIEV X entrusted their lives to the sea, affirming the living complexity of water with their own stories and bodies.

My second example of how wet ontology disrupts traditional concepts of ontological security also draws on the merging of stories and water bodies. The film *The Swimmers* was based on the story of two sisters who fled the war in Syria and took the route to Germany. They are the daughters of a swimming coach who dreams of taking their children to the Olympic Games. The war in Syria disrupts the routine of training in the swimming pool. At the first moment, the father resists the idea of migration put forth by

the older daughter and tells the youngster, Yusra, to unfollow her sister because ‘swimming is home.’ (The Swimmers 2023) Later, on a flight to Istanbul, the girl reacts to her cousin’s reference to their identities as refugees by saying ‘We are not refugees. We have a home’ (The Swimmers 2023).

The movie reviews correctly highlighted the perils and challenges of the refugees, the cruelty of the wishful sinking, and the difficulties in getting a residence authority in the European Union (UE). However, they have neglected the wet assemblage formed by the two sisters, the boat, the Ocean, the sea, and the act of swimming to survive physically and psychologically. The girl who doesn’t see herself as a refugee because she has a home will briefly find out that ‘swimming is home’ (The Swimmers 2023) in many aspects. She is one with the Ocean when her original home, Syria, turns out unsafe. And she is one with swimming when the EU does not recognize her citizenship. The only element that connects Yusra’s past and present is the water and the practice of swimming.

In this case, ontological security was given by the watery assemblage that the girl could maintain before, during, and after migrating. It is interesting to remember another sentence from Yusra when trying to convince her father about the migration plan. She says ‘I will swim there, I will not stop’ (The Swimmers 2023). Swimming here works as a condition for migration. It is supposed that her father would let her go if she promised to continue swimming. Unfortunately, she will have to swim much earlier than she thought: swim to survive and arrive in Europe. When swimming to survive, she was exposed to physical insecurity, but she was ontologically secure in her melting with the sea. Therefore, as water itself goes through different and changing states of matter, ontological security/insecurity are always fluid states, one continuously becoming the other. The line between ‘wet ontological security’ and ‘wet ontological insecurity’ is unstable and fluid.

The case of the Syrian sisters reminded me of the article from Zarabadi (2022) about a Muslim British-Algerian girl called Maha, who used a hijab in certain family and public spaces and moments, but swan in the sea to get rid of all those restrains and was able to speak her voice. She finds the burkini ridiculous. While migrating to Germany, a refugee friend from Eritrea told Yusra: ‘You don’t wear a hijab. You swim. I have never met a girl like you before’ (The Swimmers 2023). Similar to the case of the Muslim girl in Zarabadi’s research, Yusra could express herself fully only in water.

Zarabadi brings to the fore the idea of a watery assemblage, where the material agency of the sea mingles with human agency. I will go back to this point later. The assemblage creates a ‘force field of differentiation’ (Alaimo 2010: 14), where ‘stories, flesh, and sea become discrete no longer, where the ground is not solid but watery, the movement is not walking or speaking but swimming’ (Zarabadi 2022: 451). Yusra’s story is also about a movement of resistance in which swimming, and its silence, overcomes the speech and enables a kind of watery ontological security. The question of Zarabadi’s article, inspired by Spivak, is pertinent for the Syrian swimmer: What does water do to a subaltern who can or cannot speak? (Zarabadi 2022) It is possible to ask how water gives voice and a watery subjectivity (Neimanis 2013) to Yusra.

The first water-body assemblage (Renold and Ivinson 2015) in the film is composed of the boat, the refugees, the sea, and the life jackets. When the boat engine stops and the water comes in, the refugees face physical/ontological insecurity. However, as Butler (2007) and Rosedale (2015) theorized, resistance comes from vulnerability. The Mardini sisters will swim beside the boat, driving it safely to the shore of the Greek island of Lesbos. The first act after arrival is drinking water, an urgency for their psychological and physical-hydrological survival. The water bodies stuck in the boat needed drinkable water. The scene is a reminder of the tragedy of being thirsty while surrounded by water but at the same time, it evidences how water defines the transition between ontological security and insecurity. Water (represented by the Ocean) was hope at the beginning of the journey, became a threat during the travel, and emerged as the primal element for survival.

However, it is important to add another layer to the water-body assemblage. As Krause and Strang (2016: 633) affirmed, 'the materiality of water enables an understanding of water not as neutral rather as agentic co-constituents of relational meaning within society'. It means that the assemblages will constitute a political agency that materializes relations of power, control, and belonging. Not every water body is allowed to cross the Ocean; not every water body can swim in the Olympics. The older sister, Sara Mardini, is not qualified for that, and the Mardini's cousin doesn't know how to swim. The sentence 'I cannot swim' pervades the film and marks the moment of despair of those who pronounce it.

However, water can generate new subjectivities. '[W]ater had the agentic and affective capacity to enable Maja to become otherwise' (Zarabadi 2022: 454). The same happens to Yusra when swimming in the Olympics becomes a way of not being a refugee anymore. That is why she is so disappointed to know that her only possibility in the Olympics in Rio would have to be under the Refugee Team. She had to accept the condition of not representing her Nation to be in the water, indirectly confirming the sentence which opened the journey, 'swimming is home', and creating a water subjectivity that will coexist with the Syrian and refugee identities. The water-body assemblage of sea, refugees, jackets, and boats will be displaced by an assemblage of swimming pools, water bodies, bath suits, coaches, scores, and rules, creating a subjectivity and ontological security more attuned to the water and the whole community of refugees than to the dry and terrestrial ontology of the Nation-State.

The third example I choose to analyse from the perspective of wet ontological security is the Vietnamese refugee boat rescue in 1982, which was studied by Damousi et al. (2021) through a combination of historical archival research, ocean engineering, and oral history. They tried to show the complexity of the Ocean 'as both a site of danger and savior' (Damousi et al. 2021: 1), which has been observed by Oceanic Humanitarianism literature. Although agreeing with this perspective, I will push it further and connect it to what I define as wet ontological security.

The Vietnamese boat with 101 people on board departed Vung Tàu, a town in Southern Vietnam on 20 June 1982, toward the Philippines. The plan was to go outside

the national territorial waters and be rescued by a commercial vessel, according to the law of sea solidarity⁴. The boat faced a storm, the engine stopped, and the refugees survived three nights at sea before being rescued in the South China Sea by *Le Goëlo*, a humanitarian vessel organized by the group *Médecin du Monde* (MdM). According to the Oceanic Humanitarianism approach, this rescue is not only a product of human agency but also of sea intervention. For these authors, the sea is not only a humanitarian space but also a humanitarian agent. ‘We consider the ocean itself as a humanitarian agent that significantly influenced the fate of the Vietnamese refugee boat’ (Damousi 2021: 2-3). As such, the Ocean ‘has the potential to either save the lives of refugees or destroy them’ (Damousi 2021: 3) In other words, the Ocean will provide Ontological security and insecurity to boat migrants, it will merge with a water body assemblage that can carry the boat to the shore or sink it. As I argued before, it is the instability of water, its many states of matter, its noises (Serres 1996), and its cascade that allows us to reframe ontological security/insecurity as a fluid and constant wet process. Water will always be involved when it comes to embodied ontological security. This wet approach to ontological security/insecurity opens the question of the Subject (a water body), which was pointed out by Rossdale as a problem for the theory of Ontological Security. In a wet assemblage where the Ocean has agentic power, the Subject of Ontological Security/Insecurity, be it the migrant or the State, is not sovereign and autonomous because water can disrupt the supposed autonomy of the subject. It will depend for its survival on the weather circumstances and the state of the matter.

Moreover, the resistance comes from a liquid surface, from the instability and vulnerabilities of connected water bodies. As happened in Basry’s narrative, the Vietnamese refugees focused ‘on hazards and guardianship provided by the Ocean’ (Damousi et al. 2021: 13). What is striking here is the representation of the Ocean as a guardianship under God’s command that led the boat to the rescue area.

According to the refugees’ narrative, it could have been otherwise. A survivor, Ann Tran, revealed that ‘God created the storms so as to put 101 of us into the cradle of the *Le Goëlo* ship’ (Tran cited in Damousi et al. 2021: 14). The Vietnamese refugee Facebook page remembers the journey as a safe passage (Damousi et al. 2021). The refugees were thirsty because of the storm but it was also the storm that pushed the boat to the humanitarian space. The paradoxical nature of the Ocean, and its ambiguous representations by the refugees, evidence the fluid dynamic of ontological security/insecurity in water assemblages. The storm produces wet ontological insecurity (the thirsty bodies) for those on the boat but it rapidly changes the course of the journey towards the wet ontological security provided by the vessel. Contrary to what happened to the SIEV X, which resulted in a shipwreck and ontological insecurity for the refugees, *Le Goëlo* could arrive safely, reinforcing in refugees a sense of a wet ontological security.

The conceptualization of the Ocean as a material agent in the Vietnamese refugee boat journey is not a denial of human agency. The rescuers were there and did hard work saving the Vietnamese. The more than wet ontology approach, and especially Neimanis’ emphasis on water bodies, brings the possibility of thinking about ontological security/

insecurity with water, taking into account both human and non-human agency. The water body assemblage is a mixture of different agents and can also be associated with the agentic materialism proposed by Karen Barad (2003). The physicist offers a theory of material agency that contests the separability of objects with boundaries and their exclusive characteristics. Rather, the world is composed of intra-acting agencies. This kind of materiality is 'never an external, blank, or inert space but the active, emergent substance of ourselves and others' (Alaimo 2016: 563-564), and it is different from the terrestrial ontology and epistemology in which a human subject studies the objectiveness of the Ocean, an external and blank space. Therefore, the proposal of 'thinking with water' blurs the materiality of distinction by considering that humans, Oceans, boats, waves, and subject-object combinations form a whole that is at once the subject and the object of knowledge. The Ocean is not outside there; it is part of us, and we are part of its dynamics, conforming bodies of water in constant relation.

Regarding this section's discussion, migration resistance is not a product of autonomous and sovereign subjects trying to preserve or attain some ontological security on solid ground. The dynamics of ontological security/insecurity in boat migration on the Oceans and seas are more complex than that. The Vietnamese refugees who left their country didn't feel ontological security on the solid ground of Vietnam. The construction of resistance began with the building of the vessel and the imagination and hope that water could bring a better life. Despite their vulnerability while migrating on the liquid and turbulent surface, they created a kind of resistance based on intra-acting agencies composed of human and non-human water bodies. As we have seen in the cases of Basry and the Mardini sisters, the rescue of the Vietnamese was not a guarantee of ontological security in the new environment of the host country. After arrival, the Vietnamese maintained the narrative of a safe passage, and of an agency of Ocean/God as elements of their wet ontological security in the new country.

Conclusion

In this article, I have brought to the fore the possibility of thinking about the discipline of International relations with water and, more specifically, discussing the wet gap in Ontological Security and Insecurity literature. As a terrestrial discipline that has given primacy to the Land to the detriment of the sea, International Relations incorporated the representations of the Ocean, water, and sea as a space where nothing relevant to human life happens and which is essentially dangerous. Schmitt (2003) referred to the immateriality and lack of substantiality of the Ocean, which remains unproblematic in IR.

As a subfield of IR, Ontological Security Studies (OSS) have inherited this terrestrial thinking that depends on a division – and hierarchy – between subject and object, Land and Ocean, human and non-human, State and Ocean, the place of politics and the space of non-politics. OSS was originally thought of as a preoccupation of the State with its identity and psychological stability (Mitzen 2006) in contrast to the outer space, represented by other States in the international system. The Ocean was not there. It wasn't a problem for a discussion that took for granted Ontological Security/Insecurity

as something created in a territorial, grounded, and solid space. The attempts to reformulate ontological security/insecurity included the constitutive lack of the Self (Kinnvall 2018) and the inescapable instability of identity (Rossdale 2015; Innes 2017). They also moved the debate to other objects of reference such as the individual or the community. (Purnell 2021) However, all these re-elaborations occurred within what Paul Carter (2021) called dry thinking.

The ontology that underscores this terrestrial thinking relies on the idea of ontologically distinct entities (Land/ Sea, Subject/Object, human/non-human, Individual/Ocean) that hierarchically encounter each other. The result is a terrestrial epistemology in which the agentic superiority of Land, Subject, human, and individual gives them the privilege of knowing and understanding what is taken as the object of knowledge. Contrary to Schmitt's argument about the 'immateriality and lack of substantiality' of the Ocean, more than wet ontology and Oceanic Studies literature offer a view of the materiality and agentic properties of water in general and the Ocean in particular. Therefore, the concept of 'wet assemblage' (and the intra-agential combination of human and non-human) challenges the tenets of a concept of ontological security and insecurity that inherits the terrestrial positivist ontology and epistemology of IR. Krickel-Choi and Chen (2024) stated that the social environment is essential for the development of a sense of self and ontological security but without considering the wet environment we cannot access contemporary processes like climate change, ice melting, or boat migration, and think how this have an impact on the sense of ontological security/insecurity of individuals and States.

The three examples of boat migration examined in this article – Basry, the Mardini sisters, and the Vietnamese refugees – can only be thought of with water. Other analyses have reinforced the resilience of migrants from an individualistic methodology. In this sense, migrant resistance comes from the Self, the autonomous Subject. 'More than wet ontology' and 'wet assemblages' provide us with another possibility for theorizing ontological security/insecurity and resistance on waters. Basry narrates the refugees' solidarity and their thrust into the Ocean, the Mardini sisters merge with the Ocean to survive, and the Vietnamese memorialize the journey as a safe passage. In all three cases, the refugees go from ontological security to ontological insecurity, and resistance is constructed on this movement, back and forth, mirroring the fluidity of Water. My intention is not to overlook the shipwrecks and the deaths in the Mediterranean and other seas. However, the reproduction of the Ocean and the Waters as essentially dangerous can serve the purposes of those eager to discourage any kind of migration on boats. The reproduction of the Ocean as a mere producer of ontological insecurity is insufficient to understand the wet assemblages implied in this movement of migration on waters.

The resistances of boat people disrupt our conceptions about where politics resides. Since our ideas of sovereignty, citizenship, and rights depend on a territorial imaginary, many conclude that any resistance needs stable soil. States adopt immobilization (interdiction) and mobilization (return to water) practices to guarantee their ontological security premised on a fixed identity. In this process, they create ontological insecurity

for migrants. Critics of traditional ontological security have argued that post-positivist conceptions of the subject (Rossdale 2015) and identity (Innes 2017) highlight its openness to the Other.

Moreover, the instability of the subject enables resistance. However, how is it possible to think of resistance in troubled waters? As we turn our attention to Critical Ocean Studies and Blue Humanities, we can think with water to question the tenets of a concept of ontological security and insecurity that inherits the terrestrial positivist ontology and epistemology of IR. While the terrestrial epistemology places political resistance in territories, Blue Humanities Studies recognize the Ocean as a point of departure for reaction. Paradoxically, the highly vulnerable oceanic space appears as a locus where resistance can emerge, and boat migrants/refugees construct a specific kind of ontological security through the fluid epistemology of the Ocean.

Notes

- 1 Huysmans admits that extreme fragmentation is counterproductive since we can have a situation of no identity and no belonging.
- 2 Aradau affirms that it is necessary for a process of disidentification from the assigned identity (migrant for example) and the adoption of a more universal category (residents with rights). The distinction between Self (national) and Other (migrant) is blurred, according to Rumelili.
- 3 In *Land and Sea*, Schmitt gives some depth to this theorization about the Ocean. However, he never returned to those philosophical considerations of the Ocean. His political theory, here illustrated by *The Nomos of the Earth*, is marked by a dismissal of the Ocean.
- 4 For solidarity at sea as a duty, see Irini Papanicopolulu, 'The duty to rescue at sea, in peacetime, and in war: a general overview', *International Review of the Red Cross*, 98 (2016), pp. 491–514.

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Data Availability

Do not apply.

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Pensando a (In)Segurança Ontológica com a Água: O Lugar do Oceano na Migração por Barco

Resumo: O artigo tem como objetivo examinar como os Estudos do Oceano (*Ocean Studies*) e as Humanidades Azuis (*Blue Humanities*), especialmente os conceitos de ontologia mais do que úmida (*more than wet ontology*) e corpos d'água (*bodies of water*), podem contribuir para uma abordagem mais do que úmida dos Estudos de Segurança Ontológica (ESO), permitindo repensar as formas pelas quais migrantes e refugiados constroem suas narrativas de resistência em uma superfície líquida. Os ESO reproduzem a ontologia e a epistemologia territoriais do campo mais amplo das Relações Internacionais, caracterizadas por divisões entre Terra e Mar, e entre dentro e fora. Um dos fundamentos do termo “corpo d'água” é destacar a semelhança ontológica — e não a identidade — entre a água e outros elementos, internos e externos. Por meio dessas lentes, é possível analisar os arranjos úmidos (*wet assemblages*) formados quando migrantes/refugiados se fundem com o oceano, barcos e coletes, produzindo uma dinâmica complexa, fluida e instável de (In)Segurança Ontológica.

Palavras-chave: ontologia úmida; segurança/insegurança ontológica; migração; oceano; mar; resistência

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