



## Aberystwyth University

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*Published in:*

Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers

*DOI:*

[10.1111/tran.12074](https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12074)

*Publication date:*

2015

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Peters, K. (2015). Drifting: Towards mobilities at sea. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 40(2), 262-272. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12074>

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## **Drifting: towards mobilities at sea**

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### **Abstract**

This paper advocates a critical analysis of drifting as a particular typology of mobility. Drifting is a commonplace term used across geographical analysis; in physical, urban and psycho-geographic strands of the discipline. However, drifting has not been unpacked within a mobilities framework as a specific trope of moving, nor has it been taken 'to sea' by social scientists. This is surprising given the long standing relationship between drift, drifting and the ocean. Recent years have witnessed a 'filling out' and 'deepening' of mobilities studies in geography and the broader social sciences, wherein mobility is not taken as singular and undifferentiated, but rather can be broken down into more specific parts which constitute particular technologies, experiences, forms and conditions of moving. This study dissects drifting by investigating the intricacies of this mobile quality and quality of mobility. In particular, the paper draws on drifting in the context of the sea in order to demonstrate the new knowledges made possible by moving examinations from city spaces (where drifting has been most readily employed as conceptual tool and method). Indeed, drawing on case studies of drifting at sea, this paper argues that a focus on this distinctive form of mobility raises new insights into the politics of what it means to move in the maritime realm, a space often neglected in studies of mobilities.

**Key words:** drifting, mobilities, sea, politics, speed, force

## Initial wanderings

The Master made an Observation as well as he could ... and began to consult with me what Course he should take, for the Ship was leaky and very much disabled ... With this Design we chang'd our Course and steer'd away N.W. by W. in order to reach some of our English Islands, where I hoped for Relief; but our Voyage was otherwise determined, for being in the Latitude of 12 Deg. 18 Min. a second Storm came upon us, which carry'd us away with the same Impetuosity Westward, and drove us so out of the very Way of all humane Commerce ... In this Distress, the Wind still blowing very hard, one of our Men early in the Morning, cry'd out, *Land*; and we had no sooner run out of the Cabbin to look out in hopes of seeing where abouts in the World we were; but the Ship struck upon a Sand, and in a moment her Motion being so stopp'd, the Sea broke over her in such a manner, that we expected we should all have perish'd immediately, and we were immediately driven into our close Quarters to shelter us from the very Foam and Sprye of the Sea (the narrative of Robinson Crusoe, drifting. Defoe, 37-38).

Daniel Defoe's classic novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, tells the tale of a drifter, the "loose and unguided" Crusoe (2007 [1719], 16), defiant against his parents' wishes, who takes to life at sea. Although for the most part, the book details Crusoe's life on land, the insights provided regarding seafaring culture, navigational knowledge and the dangers of the ocean are notable. In the passage above Crusoe is on his third voyage having escaped enslavement in West Africa. The scene follows a vicious storm which has damaged the Portuguese frigate he is sailing on. Discussions with the ship's master result in a plan to reach safety, where both the vessel and crew can be 'assisted'. However, the plan is scuppered once more by storm conditions. The ship drifts. Despite plotting a route, the voyage is "otherwise determined" by forces beyond the control of the crew (Defoe 2007 [1719] 37). The ship is driven recklessly, uncontrollably, 'westwards'. In spite of the navigational expertise of those on board, the ship becomes lost at sea. As Crusoe states, when morning arrived, he and the crew took to the deck "in hopes of seeing where abouts in the World we were" (Defoe 2007 [1719] 37). Such a statement indicates the ship likely moved somewhere unintentional; that it could now be anywhere.

Over the past year, in the course of conducting research concerning the maritime world past and present, I have drifted time and again to instances of ships veering off course. I have become increasingly interested in processes of drifting and moreover how drifting may be analysed and understood through a mobilities framework. Indeed, 'drift', or 'to drift/be drifting' refers to a deeply geographical and mobile condition. The word 'drifting', and variants of it, 'drift', 'drifter', 'drifted', are commonplace terms used for explaining a variety

of material forms, subjective experiences and cognitive conditions. Phrases such as ‘catch my drift’, ‘drifting along’, ‘drifted in and out of sleep’, and material formations such as ‘snow drift’ or ‘long shore drift’ alert us to the multiple ways in which the words are utilised, acting as both verb and noun, and referring to both the physical and metaphorical. Intrinsically, the word ‘drifting’ (and derivatives of it) describe, encapsulate and embody particular mobilities. Drift is a materiality of motion (for example snow drift), a condition of motion (drifting), and motionful experience of being-in-the-world (drifter).

This paper focuses on the formulation of the word ‘drifting’ as action rather than ‘thing’ and the multifarious mobilities that are enfolded through such a consideration. Drifting as a ‘verb’ (and alternatives of it) allow the potential to explore a particular way in which mobility may be constituted. Indeed, mobility (unlike movement) is concerned with unpacking the meaning embedded within motion (Cresswell 2006, 2). It is not concerned with points A and B; the start or end of a journey; but the space between where movement is experienced and realised (Cresswell 2006; Jensen 2013). Drifting is one specific form of movement along, or ‘wayfaring’ *between* the line A to B (see Ingold 2011) and one with particular cultural connotations, social outcomes and political resonances.

Cresswell has recently argued for a “more finely developed politics of mobility” (2010, 17), which unpacks these intricate dimensions that constitute a world on the move. This involves critically examining mobility not as a “singular thing” but “breaking mobility down into...its constituent parts” (Cresswell 2010, 17). Such an effort has enriched mobilities studies by considering the specificity of different typologies of motion and their politics (Cresswell 2010, 17). In this paper, I build upon these interventions that open up the distinctive politics of differential mobilities, by focusing on drifting as a particular style of motion. I am concerned with what drifting *is*, *what* drifts and *how*, and what it *means* and how it *feels* to drift. In other words, how does drifting operate within a ‘politics of mobility’ framework? Analysis of drifting has a long history in both physical and human geography – through processes such as longshore drift and the planetary movement of shore zone debris back and forth through a larger assemblage of wind and sea movements (Haslett 2009); and, via urban geographical examinations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century *flâneurie* (as described by Walter Benjamin 1999) and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Situationist movements (see Debord 1981 [1958]). Recently, cultural geographers, drawing on the methodology of psycho-geography, have considered the specificity of drifting as an approach to research (Pinder 2006). Drifting then, is already more than singular in its application in geographical study. However, I contend it

has yet to be adequately unpacked as a specific form of being mobile; a particular style or *typology* of moving that encompasses a particular politics. In short, drifting has not been unpacked within the mobilities paradigm (Sheller and Urry, 2006); an approach which arguably offers much to understanding what it means to move (or not move), how, and under what conditions.

Here, I offer up a study of drifting that moves beyond current urban geographical approaches, which have borrowed the term from the sea, using it as a metaphor for various transgressive subjective states and behaviours. In order to unpack the differential politics of mobilities, I take the term back to the water. It is now widely acknowledged that geography's terra-centric approach has marginalised the sea and its role in processes related to landed life (Lambert et al, 2006; Peters 2010; Steinberg 2001). Yet, as is now increasingly recognised, the sea offers an important spatiality for unlocking knowledge beyond the confines of the nation-state and the grounded materiality of land (Lambert et al 2006 480). Arguably there are distinct mobilities at sea worthy of our attention (see Vannini 2009) and mobilities which are made anew in this context. In order to explore the mobilities of drifting, and drifting as a distinct typology of motion in the context of the maritime, I first outline the etymology of the word, considering thereafter its composition as noun, verb and adjective, and how drifting evokes and encapsulates meaning through the very style of a *drift-ful* mobility. I next trace a plotted history of drifting/drifters, noting how the mobilities of subjects past and present relates to a deeply political condition. Here I show that although studies of drifting and drifters are ever present, drifting as a form of motion has not yet been fully explored through a mobilities framework. Emerging from this section, I open the space for examining drifting anew through a mobilities approach, situating a study of drifting within the mobilities paradigm and the 'politics of mobility' framework set out by Cresswell (2010). Employing these ideas, I then take discussions to sea, drawing on a range of examples of drifting in maritime contexts. I focus on a variety of sources to draw out my examinations: the autobiographical account of Nansen's drifting on board the *Fram* in the Arctic; historical records of drifting relating to the ship of the offshore radio pirates, *Mi Amigo*; and the recent media accounts of the drifting of the missing ship the *MV Lyubov Orlova*. To conclude, I outline the potential of examining drifting in order to further complicate and develop mobilities studies in the twenty-first century.

## **Drifting histories**

The word ‘drift’ is a complex one that has multiple uses, meanings and translations. Firstly the word takes on different resonances depending on its formulation as noun, verb or adjective. Its earliest roots as a noun, can be traced from the 1300s and a Norse/Germanic translation of ‘trift’ relating to the slow movement of cattle (OED, 2013). As a verb, it is related to the French word ‘dériver’ meaning “‘to drain off water’” or “‘to leave the shore’” (following Debord 2002, 206, in Diaconu 2010, 100) or from the English “to drive” – purporting to a forward motion (Diaconu 2010, 100). However, since the 1800s its use has been varied and relates to both a thing (noun); drift as object (leaves, snow, sand, wood); and action (verb); relating to movement that deviates from a fixed point or specified route (OED 2013). As an adjective it is used to exemplify and describe particular characteristics of movement (slow, gradual, aimless, leisurely, smooth, unhurried) (OED 2013). This paper focuses on drifting as verb or action and its qualities (drifting as adjective) – rather than drift as noun. That said, there is further scope for human geographers to explore the qualities of drift in this respect, in relation snowdrift, sand drifts, wood drifts and so on. Physical geography studies have long attended to drift in this respect through studies that chart the movement of oceanic debris and the formation of spits and bars, and sand drifts (dunes), and glacial drifts (drumlins).

As a verb, ‘drifting’ holds particular connotations which exemplify a distinct type of movement. To drift is to be ‘carried along’ by a current external to that which is moved (snow, sand, wood, person, idea). In this sense, drifting is not without systems of agency or force that lead that which is moved, to travel. Yet this travelling is also of a certain speed. It is ‘leisurely’, ‘unhurried’, ‘gradual’ (OED 2013). Drifting then, has a particular temporality as motion. It also has a texture. It lacks friction. To drift is to move “smoothly” – to float or glide passively. It is also a motion that lacks direction. To experience drift is to “wander from a set point”, “to stray” from a designated path (Ibid 2013). Movement is “sporadic”, “from place to place, especially without purpose”. It is generally considered to be “aimless” movement.

It is in the very style of moving encapsulated in drifting, that politics becomes evident. As Diaconu notes, the physical movement that is drifting, also holds a metaphoric meaning,

drifting refers to a double movement: the physical locomotion, sliding or floating, and the metaphorical drifting of an individual whose course of life has deviated from the ordinary track (2010, 101).

The meaning encompassed in acts of drifting often makes evident societal processes of power; of the construction of normative landscapes. In many accounts of the drifter, the style of their motion – aimless, purposeless wandering – is deemed transgressive. Such figures challenge or deviate from the norm; the ‘ordinary track’ that is expected to be followed; the purposeful life good citizens are meant to lead. Such accounts of drifters alert us to the political contestation bound up with drifting.

Not all histories of drifting or drifters are negative or evoke a subaltern politics however. For the travelling troubadours of the Middle Ages (who came from all walks of life, including the nobility), drifting was regarded positively. Bands of poets and musicians travelled far and wide yet were welcomed by the medieval courts of Kings and Queens in Europe, providing entertainment through verses of courtly love, satire and singing (see Harvey 1999). Nonetheless, whilst some mobile forms of drifting have been socially acceptable – in different contexts, at different times – the *style* and *purpose* of drifting has dictated its acceptability. For example, Tim Cresswell argues that in medieval society mobility was transgressive. “For the most part”, he says, people were “tied to the land, movement beyond the local was feared and forbidden” (2006, 10). To have a place socially, people had to be rooted *in place*. As Tuan writes, “[o]ur sense of self depends on ... stability” (2004, 47). In feudal society, mobility was a “luxury” (2006, 10), afforded only by those with the means of travelling, or for political purpose (the Crusades for example). “People stayed pretty much where they were” (Cresswell 2006, 10), unless their status (as pilgrims, monks, troubadours) enabled them to live in socially acceptable manner “outside of the obligations of place and roots” (Ibid 2006, 10-11). Accordingly, at this time, it was those who would have been expected to have roots, who were “looked down upon” in their drifting. Jews, “subject to the fear and loathing of settled folk”, were one such example, exiled and persecuted by the majority (Cresswell 2006, 11-12).

Later, in the globalising world of mercantilist capitalism, certain mobilities were gaining momentum (rural to urban migrations, imperialising sea voyages), whilst others remained transgressive. As the assumptions of bounded, rooted life unravelled, there was no longer a fear of mobility per se, yet a wariness remained in view of those mobilities that were without reason. The movement of the hobo or vagabond saw drifting constructed as a

negative mobile form; one which society had to rein in. The vagrant was a criminal, outside of the wage-labour exchange that typified normative society. As Cresswell notes, the drifter was a “transient person who roamed from place to place and who had no lawful occasion to wander” (1999, 181). Here, such aimless mobility was a threat to order (see Cresswell 2001). Likewise, port cities – full of transient sailors boarding in lodgings whilst they awaited their next voyage – became sites of moral disintegration. Whilst at sea, the sailor was subject to hard labour and harsh disciplinary rules (see Linebaugh and Rediker 2000; Ogborn 2008). Time on shore presented a period of “liberty” for the sailor (Ogborn 2008, 160). This ‘liberty’, however, was often one of disrepute. The sailor, a global nomad without a fixed abode, spent time drifting – from one tavern to the next, from one brothel to the next – engaged in a life of vice that came with their mobility ashore.

Negative associations regarding mobility (versus stasis) persist to this day and can be seen in the resistance of normative society and hegemonic institutions against the drifting nomadic movements of Roma Gypsies and new age travellers (Kabachnik 2009, 2010). Although we live in an ever mobile and mobilised world (Sheller and Urry 2006), it remains the case that certain *types* of mobility are frowned upon. The commuter may have social acceptance (Bissell 2010a); the drifter, traditionally less so (Cresswell 2006). Arguably, the stigma associated with drifting relates to the politics such a *style* of motion evokes. The commuter has a purpose and a destination. The movement of the drifter is aimless in their wanderings, and as such, is outside of the limits of social order and control.

Debord (1981 [1958]), credited with the foundation of the Situationist movement in the twentieth century, demonstrated the political undertones of the drift in a somewhat different way. Here the drifter was not aimless, nor simply observing the city as the flâneur had done – “intoxicated” but resigned to the changing architectural shape of the city (Benjamin 1999, 417). Rather, they actively resisted it. As Diaconu notes,

The [S]ituationist movement emerged as a reaction against the crisis of modern culture, against functionalist architecture and consumerism which had allegedly repressed the instinct of play and stifled creativity (2010, 104).

The mobility of drift became an overtly resistant form of moving in the city as specific routes, pathways and channels were reworked. As Darby explains,



People had become ‘spectators of their own lives’, nothing but consumers of meaning ... To combat the encroachment of boredom on society one needed to disrupt such rigidity and become instead a *producer* of meaning, by making the cityscape a stage – to create situations (2013, 49).

For the Situationists these ‘situations’ rejected the prescribed uses of the city, instead tapping into the varying atmospheres and ambiances of the urban realm (Darby 2013, 50). The unplanned, yet intentional mobile resistance embodied in such movement, challenged the norms of city orientation and with this drifting, represented a larger, more revolutionary, left-wing political project (see also Ferrell in a contemporary context, 2012). In these studies of drifting though, the *style* of drifting – the motion itself – is secondary to the study of what drifting makes knowable: the urban realm, psycho-geographic explorations, power relations and exclusion, and so on. As such, central to many of these studies of drifting is an emphasis on the drifter, rather than the political significance embodied in the very *way* they move. What it is and how it feels to drift and the political registers enlivened through this process take a back seat to the object of study: the city that is revealed through such motion. Mobility studies offer the potential to fully explore what it means to move in such a manner.

### **Mobilising the drift**

Recent years have seen a mobilities ‘turn’ within the social sciences, concerned with unpacking the politics behind mobile persons, practices and technologies (Sheller and Urry 2006). However, in 2010 Cresswell argued the need to further complicate our studies of mobility. Although the politics underscoring mobility and immobility are now well documented, mobility, Cresswell contends, is still spoken of in the singular (2010, 17). In other words, people aren’t just mobile – they are mobile through particular typologies of motion – running, jogging, skipping, sliding, bumping. Each of these are experientially different. There is a need, therefore, to unpack the specificity of particular ways or methods of being mobile as each of these has its own cultural connotations, affective registers and political purposes. Mobility then, is not just about moving in a simplistic, one-dimensional fashion. Rather, we move and are mobile in different ways. These differential mobilities – impacted by force, friction, route, speed and experience – evoke differential politics (Cresswell 2010). Whilst attention has certainly been paid to the ways in which various means of mobility – walking, flying, commuting, driving, cycling – shape and are shaped by

subjects, there has been less attention to the dynamics of the specific styles of motion embedded within these methods of moving.

Of late however, mobilities scholars have begun to consider the particular spatialities of motion (horizontal, vertical, and so on, see Adey et al 2011) and the characteristics and *feelings* of motion (see Wylie 2006; Ingold 2010 with regard to walking); exploring their significances for shaping relationships between bodies and spaces, and technologies and everyday life. As Cresswell and Martin (2012) demonstrate, turbulence is a distinctive form of motion that is disruptive of smooth, linear motion; the mobility ideal. They note how turbulence and a breakdown in normative movements bring disorder to logistical flows. Likewise Bissell (2010b) investigates vibrations, as tiny motionful ‘jiggles’ which intervene in daily commuting practices for train travellers.

On the one hand then, there is space to fully investigate drifting within a mobilities framework, placing the mobility of drifting at the centre of the study (not secondary to the focus of investigations – the city, street, and so on). Cresswell’s ‘politics of mobility’ framework is useful here in identifying how mobilities may be broken down in view of force (agency), experience, frictions, speed, routes and rhythms (2010, 17). On the other hand, there is a limitation in thinking through drifting as human practice and experience in the terrestrial, grounded sphere alone. Taking drifting ‘to sea’ I show how our understanding of drifting may be opened up to a new realm of forces, frictions, experiences and speeds, unlocking a rather different politics in the process. My rationale for considering the sea is twofold. On the one hand drift is played out at sea in numerous ways. The sea itself moves as drift (for example longshore drift) and things also move in a drift-like fashion whilst at sea (surfers, fishermen, ships, and so on) because of the elemental motions of water and wind. The sea, a space now widely acknowledged as relevant in human geographic study (see Steinberg 2001, Peters 2010) therefore provides a fruitful space for investigation of drift beyond what we know from examination in the urban realm. I next turn to drifting in the context of the water world.

### **Sea drifts**

In physical terms, drift currents are movements of the ocean or sea that are determined by forces external to the water: the wind, the temperature, the gravitational pull of the sun and

moon, the solid seabed and its depth. Seafarers past and present have an intimate understanding of the liquid material world that they move through, across and under. Understandings of drift currents have been, and remain to this day then, central to the navigational techniques and approaches of mariners. The notion of a drift, as considered in urban and psycho-geographic literatures, determines the drift to be a wandering motion, without a route, destination, or direction. Drifts at sea, on the other hand, follow set patterns and directions, repeatedly. They are reliable, consistent and uniform movements of water (although they do fluctuate with changing conditions).

Accordingly, experienced seafarers encounter drifts often with a knowingness. Callaghan and Fitzpatrick note how seafarers wisely engage with sea drifts in various ways (2008). First a drift may be countered. Here a drift is resisted in order to reach a destination. On-board crews can calculate the drift in relation to the propulsion and speed of their vessel, and move in such a way to contest lateral movement (Farr 2006). Seafarers, as Helen Farr notes, ‘consider’ drift patterns and ‘compensate’ for them in adjusting their direction of travel (2006, 95). As such, through countering drift patterns, ships themselves escape drifting, they stay on course for their destination. Secondly, seafarers can harness drifts. Once a drift current is identified, if that current connects two land masses, seafarers may journey along a drift route to increase the speed and efficiency of their voyage. The so-called ‘Triangular Trade’ route for example, linking the west coast of Africa, east coast of America and British peninsula port cities (such as Bristol), was a direct product of the “circulatory logic”, deriving “from the flow of ocean currents” (Lambert et al 2006, 482, see also Armitage and Braddick 2002; Hignman 1999). This drift route enabled the swift movement of trade that facilitated the growth of empire (see also Ogborn 2008). Seafarers have also exploited other drift routes, such as those linking the Labrador Sea and the Beaufort Sea across the Arctic, and the South Pacific and Southern Oceans. Finally, seafarers can drift unintentionally. In spite of high-tech equipment, GPS monitoring and computerised navigational methods, ships can (and do) get lost, particularly when the force of a drift outweighs the power of the vessel. This is now rare on manned vessels (which can soon return to designated routes if blown off course), but in the past, drift currents would determine the movements of vessels in spite of intended fixed pathways of travel being followed. For example, Heyerdahl, a Norwegian ethnographer, set about proving how South America and Polynesia were connected, as drift currents directed the flow of movement of seafarers unintentionally. Heyerdahl’s theory aimed to prove how

and why some areas of the world were inhabited as they were (see *Kon Tiki*, 2013 [1950]; and *American Indians in the Pacific* 1952).

However, seafarers must also manage their vessels if they should drift within these complex, physical systems. Here seafarers employ specific knowledge about how to either drift with the drift; or to encounter drift. In the past, due to limitations in technology, pre-modern seafarers (and also later imperial captains and crews) would simply “allow the vessel to drift before the wind with no further attempt to navigate in a particular direction. This strategy allows close to the maximum distance to be covered in a given time when there is no clear indication of relative location” (Callaghan and Fitzpatrick 2008, 30). Such an approach would permit the lost traveller the highest percentage chance of meeting land. This was a typical strategy if a position could not otherwise be determined using maps and charts (in view of the sun, stars and moon to identify latitude and longitude), or through processes of dead reckoning (where position is roughly calculated based on direction of travel and time lapsed, see Farr 2006, 95). Such strategies are not usually employed now. Rather, the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) has specific regulations for navigation at sea. Notably, these do not provide guidance for instances of drifting. Rather they provide direction for ships travelling ‘normally’, so that if a vessel encounters another, which is drifting, it can act accordingly to prevent a collision (The International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea 1972 (COLREGS) 1972). These regulations are rules for safe passage at sea. They ensure that all ships have a look-out by sight and hearing (Part B, rule 5), and that all ships travel at a safe speed (Part B, rule 6). COLREGS also stipulate the movement of vessels in relation to one another (in view of the ‘give way’ vessel and the ‘stand-on’ vessel) (Part B, rules 11-18); and the light, sound and shape signals vessels must give when manoeuvring (Part C, rules 20-31, 1972). Moreover, contemporary international maritime regulations stipulate that vessels above a specific tonnage, follow set routes or pathways and do not deviate. Journeys are regularly pre-plotted and determined to ensure efficiency and safety (with specific routes, not others, underwritten by insurers – see Lobo-Guerrero 2012). Smaller craft also pre-plan routes to ensure safe passage. There are particular zones where shipping traffic is especially heavy (the Dover Strait, the Strait of Malacca, the Suez Canal) and mandatory reporting of routes is a legal requirement via Traffic Separation Schemes (TSS), where the ocean is partitioned, much like a motorway, to ensure safe, swift movements (Part B, rule 10). Divergences, on accounts of weather, sea conditions or threats from piracy, are recorded with relevant maritime authorities. If a vessel happens to drift on

account of engine failure, severe weather, hijacking; regulations do not stipulate what that vessel should do, but what is legally required of those vessels which come into proximity of a drifting vessel. Drifting then, is associated with danger – with collisions – and other ships should be prepared for instances of transgressive motion. They should be pre-emptive and controlled in the face of vessels which fail to abide by the ‘rules of the road’.

The presence of these regulations is evidence that drifting at sea is a matter of considerable importance. Indeed, drift-currents and instances of drifting, whilst features of the maritime world are not without politics. The style of motion associated with drifting at sea is suffused with power relations. Having outlined drifting at sea in its various guises, in what follows, I trace the drifts of various vessels and individuals at sea, along differing drift currents. In doing so, I not only counter, harness and wander with these drifts, but demonstrate the politics encapsulating with these drift voyages, unlocking the politics of drifting in maritime settings.

### **Drifting ships**

Fridtjof Nansen, a Norwegian explorer, set about making an exceptional journey to the North Pole that relied on drifting. Nansen was inspired by the story of the ill-fated vessel, the *Jeannette*, which,

...stuck fast in the ice on September 6<sup>th</sup> 1879, in 71° 35’ north latitude and 175° 6’ east longitude south-east of Wrangel’s land – which, however, proved to be a small island – drifted with the ice in a west-north-westerly direction for two years, when it foundered June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1881, north of the New Siberian Islands, in 77° 15’ north latitude and 154° 59’ east longitude (Nansen 1897, 13-4).

For many years, “ice stopped the progress of mankind (sic) to the north” (ibid, 1897, 14). However, through an unintentional and dangerous drift, the *Jeanette* travelled across the Arctic; the drift facilitating exploration where ice had previously been understood as a stable, unmoveable solid, rather than part of a motionful sea, preventing movement for voyages of discovery. The *Jeanette*, a ship ill-suited to two years of ice-pack drifting, broke apart, with segments of the vessel discovered miles from the site of its abandonment. These parts indicated that a drift could be harnessed. In the race for the North Pole and the collection of scientific data in the Arctic, Nansen proposed to follow the *Jeanette*; to construct a ship, the

*Fram*, which he (and his crew) would sail into pack-ice and let drift to the farthest point north, along a natural drift current (1897, 24).

For Nansen, the drift was something calculable and therefore enabling. He saw it as the greatest chance of reaching the North Pole. To fund the project Nansen presented his case to the Norwegian Parliament and to the Royal Geographical Society in London (1897, 41). In spite of much opposition (1897, 45-53), he received funding from both bodies along with other public and private donors. However, the race for the Pole was one of national and personal pride. As Nansen explained,

Foolhardy as the scheme appeared to some, it received powerful support from the Norwegian Government and the King of Norway. A Bill was laid before the Storting (the Norwegian Parliament) for a grant of 200,000 kroner ... On June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1890, the amount demanded was voted by the Storting; which thereby expressed its wish that the expedition should be a Norwegian one (Nansen 1897, 54).

Nansen felt a weight of expectation during his voyage. The expedition was not simply a journey of discovery; it was part of a political race between nations – Norway, Britain, America – to reach the terra incognita of the North Pole. To be the first in history to conquer the elements and reach the Pole was a coveted title; one desired by both individual explorers and nations. Yet once adrift in the ice of the Arctic Ocean, Nansen's journey was laboriously slow. The style of motion – slow, sluggish, and unhurried – was unsatisfactory and failed to meet Nansen's own demands of the project. He felt the burden of the drift acutely, describing daily in his diary the tedium of the movement, and how he had disappointed others in the speed of the drift and in his assurance they would reach the Pole. In 1893, at the end of the first year of the voyage, Nansen wrote,

Friday, October 27<sup>th</sup>. The soundings this morning showed 52 fathoms (95m) of water. According to observations taken yesterday afternoon, we are about 3' farther north, and a little farther west than on the 19<sup>th</sup>. It is disgusting the way we are muddling about here ... the time is passing all to no purpose; and goodness only knows how long this sort of thing may go on (1897, 257).

Sunday, November 5<sup>th</sup> ... So it is Sunday once more. How the days drag past! ... Thought follows thought – you pick the whole to pieces, and it seems so small ... *Why did you take this voyage?* Could I do otherwise? Can a river arrest its course and run up hill? My plan has come to nothing. That palace of theory, which I reared in pride and self-confidence, high above all silly objectives, has fallen like a house of cards ... Was I so very sure? Yes, at times; but that was self-deception, intoxication (1897, 260-3).

Thursday, November 30<sup>th</sup>. The lead showed a depth of exactly 93 fathoms (170m) to-day ... we are almost certainly further north now ... My spirits are like a pendulum ... It is no good trying to take the thing philosophically; I cannot deny that the question whether we are to return successful or unsuccessful affects me very deeply. It is quite easy to convince myself with the most incontrovertible reasoning that what matters is to carry through the expedition, whether successful or not, and get safe home again. I could not undertake it; for my plan was one that I felt I must succeed (1897, 271).

Sunday, December 24<sup>th</sup>. Christmas Eve. 67° of cold (-37°C). Glittering moonlight and the endless stillness of the Arctic night. There is no drift; 2° farther south than six days ago ...

Monday, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1894...What if I have been mistaken, and am leading them (the crew, the sponsors) astray? And Norway our fatherland, what has the old year brought to thee, and what is the New Year bringing? (1897, 302, 319-20).

Nansen's, voyage, however slow, was highly controlled form of drifting – purposeful, decided, and determined. Yet the style of drifting encapsulated in the *Fram* voyage was depressing and disappointing for Nansen (in indeed for those 'at home' in Norway). As Cresswell (2012) has noted recently, stillness or slowness, is a particular (im)mobility, which embodies a politics. He contends that “[s]tillness ... is often seen as a wasted moment or a kind of emptiness and inactivity – all coded negatively” (2012, 648). Although Cresswell demonstrates the potential of stillness as part-and-parcel of processes of movement, there are always “less comfortable forms of stillness” (Ibid 2012, 648). The slowness, and at times, stillness, of the *Fram's* drift – the meaning contained within the very style of movement itself – was charged with political resonances. Such a speed (Cresswell 2010, 17) was political in contrasting, adversely, the aim of the 'race' for the Pole – the goal of getting there quickest.

In spite of the dawdling speed of the drift, the voyage was, at every stage, calculated. Although unable to hurry the movement along, the experienced group of seafarers and scientists had a thorough knowledge throughout, of their whereabouts (as indicated by the longitude and latitude measurements that feature in Nansen's account, 1897). This was in part, because the drift had been planned. It was an intentional strategy of harnessing a drift and trusting its regularity. Its politics arose because of speed (one of Cresswell's constituent 'parts' of mobility, 2010, 17). The case of the unintentional drifting presents a somewhat different politics. The *Mi Amigo*, a converted radio ship (Humphries 2002, 22) drifted inadvertently in January 1966. The ship housed the broadcasting station 'Radio Caroline'. The station operated from the high seas, outside of the space of UK jurisdiction, in order to evade tight transmission regulations that existed *inside* state boundaries (Harris 2007, 8). On-

board the radio ship was a crew of disc-jockeys and radio engineers, with a small Dutch contingent servicing the vessel itself.

Whilst the crew of the *Fram* had a rich seafaring knowledge and were able to measure and record their position along the drift path (and the deviations from it), the crew of the *Mi Amigo* lacked this seafaring know-how. As the governor of Radio Caroline told me during an interview, “the boat was incidental – we wanted a radio station, (and) that was the only way of having a radio station” (Peter Moore, 2008). The crew of the *Mi Amigo* were not mariners. The ships therefore stayed anchored in the same position. This relative stability was also to help ensure a consistent signal to the shore for the delivery of radio shows, and to enable the tender boats that supplied the ship to find the vessels easily. Radio Caroline used the ‘Knock Deep’ anchorage in the English Channel because this particular zone had a physical geography that was beneficial to the stable running of the ship. Knock Deep was an area littered with sand banks. The shallower conditions meant that the ships were not subjected to the full effects of a deep sea where the vessel would be enfolded with currents, swell and waves to a greater degree (Walker 2007, 88). However, in poor weather conditions, even with a sheltered anchorage, the threat of breaking anchor was a very real possibility.

On January 19<sup>th</sup>, operations would cease. Around 8pm in the evening, amidst stormy conditions, the ship broke from its anchorage and began to drift. When this occurred, there was no intention to drift. The decision making of the crew on a day to day basis was to stay firmly fixed in place. Drifting was nothing short of disastrous. It prevented the steady running of the ship and, more importantly, drifting would cause the ship to stray from the safety of international waters where it was legally protected in view of its broadcasting activities (Robertson 1982). Moreover, drifting at sea was dangerous to the life of the crew. Accordingly, in the hours before the ship broke anchor in 1966, the chain had been checked by the ‘duty crewman’ to ensure it was secure. He had “thought that all was well” (Humphries 2003, 41). The chain was later checked again as the weather deteriorated and sea conditions worsened. It was difficult to ascertain the integrity of the chain however. Visibly, it looked attached. As Harris notes, “[t]he anchor watch believed, from the angle of the cable, somewhat obscured by the blinding snow, that the anchor was holding” (2007, 48).

However the anchor chain was not attached. The ship had broken free from the Knock Deep mooring and was, with the south-westerly wind and the incoming tide, heading inshore towards the Essex coast. It was the uncontrolled nature of this drift, and the danger it posed



that was politically charged. The erratic drifting motion of the vessel represented the uncontrollable, anarchic, dangerous nature of the pirate radio enterprise. This was a ship, operated by a motely group of rebels, which failed to abide to the rules of ocean safety or navigation. Whilst all drifting at sea is arguably uncontrollable (even Nansen's), it was the transgressive acts of 'seafaring' in generating dangerous situations that was unacceptable. The 'politics' to this drift was the force of movement and the crew's inability to counter, harness or follow it, but rather to descend into chaos.

Indeed, once aware of their plight, the inexperienced crew tried and failed to regain control of the vessel (Lodge 2003, 70). At first the crew could not restart the ship's engines. When the *Mi Amigo* had first begun to drift, the ship was without any power or friction to counteract the forces which drove its movement. It was usual, when anchored, to conserve fuel by not running the ship's engine (as Carl, a radio engineer during the Sixties, on the *Mi Amigo* informed me, Interview 2008). Due to the wintery conditions and because the vessel was anchored for long periods, the engines were difficult to start for the crew, who were "desperately" (Humphries 2003, 43) trying to respond to the forces pushing them towards the shore. Even once the engines had regained power, this was to little affect. As Skues' comments "The *Mi Amigo* was only a few hundred yards offshore, using her engines, but making no headway in the gale force winds and heavy seas" (2007, 145). It was the crew's inability to control, or add friction to this wayward mobility, that characterised the motion as hazardous and wild. Such motion was the very style of movement that seafaring regulations attempted to curtail. Yet the *Mi Amigo*'s drift embodied this blatant disregard for policy. In the early hours of January 20<sup>th</sup> the drifting was over. The ship had run aground at Frinton-on-Sea; a 135ft, 156 tonne ship, washed ashore on the beach.

Yet the politics of drifting emerges also through the absence of routes; the lack of destination encompassed in processes of moving. In the novel *Life of Pi*, the central protagonist, Pi Patel, is a castaway on the Pacific Ocean following the demise of the ship, *Tsimtsum*, voyaging east to west, Pondicherry to Toronto, carrying his family and their zoo of animals (including a zebra, hyena, orang-utan and a Bengal tiger). Like the crew of the *Mi Amigo*, Pi was no seafarer. Adrift, he was lost in the ocean:

I spend hours trying to decipher the lines in the survival manual on navigation ... Winds and currents were a mystery to me. The stars meant nothing to me ... How could the stars, sparkle as they might, help me find my way if they kept moving? I gave up trying to find out. Any knowledge I might gain was useless. I had no means of controlling where I was going – no rudder, no sails, no motor, some

oars but insufficient brawn ... So I drifted ... I found out later that I travelled a narrow road, the Pacific equatorial counter-current (Pi Patel, in Martel's *The Life of Pi*, 2002, 194).

In the passage above, Pi, reflecting on his fate, describes his attempts at locating himself on the ocean. It conveys how seafaring knowledge is based on an intimate understanding of the natural properties of the planet, winds and ocean currents, and markers that lay beyond; the stars. Without such knowledge, and indeed, in misunderstand what is moving (the lifeboat he is trapped in, or the stars above) – Pi is propelled only by the forces external to him; determining his passage across the ocean. He is lost. Yet his experience as lost is of no consequence, except to himself.

In January 2014 British media attention turned to a problem that was, apparently, slowly drifting towards its shore; the lost ship, *MV Lyubov Orlova*. The ship, a 4,250-ton former cruise vessel –without crew, without power and without a flag to tether it to a nation-state – was, according to sources, moving with sea currents towards the coast of Ireland. The vessel was reported to be a ‘ghost ship’ (the name historically given in circumstances where a ship is without a crew, drifting aimlessly. A classic example is the *Mary Celeste*). The ship came to be adrift when the Russian company which owned the vessel failed to pay port fees, leading to the ship’s impoundment in St Johns, Newfoundland in 2010. Following its sale in 2012 (for \$275,000) the ship was to be towed to the Dominican Republic where it was to be broken apart for scrap. “Within a day the towline snapped, and the *Lyubov Orlova* went adrift” (Synnot 2014). Concerned that the vessel may drift and collide with oil rigs, and with the environmental and economic costs that would ensue, Transport Canada (the government department for transportation affairs), secured the vessel. However, rather than continue on its journey, it was towed into international waters where,

Confident that prevailing winds and currents would direct the *Lyubov Orlova* into the open ocean, where it could do no immediate harm; Canadian authorities ordered the ship released. It hasn’t been seen since (Synnot 2014).

The search for the ship began almost immediately by salvagers seeking reward, and concerned government agencies (The US and Ireland). The status of being ‘lost’ or moving ‘astray’ is an undesirable characteristic of a drifting motion. Although released by the authorities (avoiding an ethics of responsibility) efforts soon began to find the missing vessel. The ship soon made evident the problems of locating vessels at sea. In spite of new technological advances such AIS (Automatic Identification Systems) – which are legally

required on all ships – signal range is limited and many areas of sea and ocean are “still far too immense to scan without first knowing the search area” (Synnot 2014, see also Peters 2014). To be lost is to be outside or beyond control and without a set route or destination. This is a major concern for those who seek to ensure safety at sea and on land. A drifting ship may be understood as transgressive as it fails to follow channels or conduits in space. “Smooth space” writes Cresswell “is a field without conduits or channels” (2010, 24). The sea is often regarded as a smooth space *par excellence* (see Deleuze and Guattari 2004). In other words, it is not regarded to have conduits or fixed pathways in the first instance. Mobilities here then, may always be of a more unpredictable or disorderly nature. Yet, ships do follow paths. Although the ocean is often said to be the ‘great void’ in the modern Western imagination (Steinberg 2001) charts of the sea contest this construction. Sea-goers would assert, very strongly, that the sea has as many paths, roads, routes as the land (Raban 1999, 92-3). The drifting ship then, is one which strays from these oceanic conduits. As Muston writes, “the notion of a phantom vessel, disconnected from the world, is discomfiting” (2014). Ebbesmeyer, an oceanographer, noted in reference to the *Orlova*,

“it could have circled the Viking Gyre and headed back to Newfoundland, or gone south toward New York or Bermuda, or it could even be down off Africa or somewhere in the Southern Hemisphere ... At this point it could be almost anywhere in the world” (quoted in Synnot 2014).

Whilst the *Lyubov Orlova* presents little threat (other than that prompted in its very status as ‘lost’), the anxiety of coastguards and authorities lays in the knowledge that if a ship as large of the *Orlova* can ‘just disappear’, so too can ships involved in piracy, smuggling and illegal immigration (Synnot 2014). Such maritime motions – unanticipated, wandering, “vagrant” (Muston 2014) – are difficult to police and make evident weaknesses in global security.

## **Full circle**

But things do reappear. Although the *Lyubov Orlova* failed to materialise off the coast of Ireland, things cast drift at sea – debris, rubbish, trainers, rubber ducks, scientific drift casks – do return (often miles from the spot where they were lost), carried by the regularity of ocean currents. As the poet and author Jean Sprackland observes,

On a remote threshold at the top of the beach, I find a door ... A door is a very particular and functional thing, rarely encountered anywhere except hinged to a frame in a building. You might see doors stacked in a timber yard or DIY shop ... They are seen too in skips and rubbish dumps. But to find one

here is strange unexpected, a reminder of the indiscriminate way the sea takes things in and then throws them back (2012, 129).

A study of drifting takes us full circle then. Drifting at sea is a conflicting, contradictory style of moving. Drift-currents, a feature of seas and oceans are in many respects a regularised, consistent, circular flow of motion. Yet for those who drift within these huge, complex natural systems, drifting can feel slow and lack direction. Drifting can be uncontrollable, and persons, objects, and vessels can (and do) get lost.

The specific character of drifting has not been fully unpicked within a mobilities framework whose tools better allow us to ‘get at’ the peculiarities of specific methods of moving and the politics emergent through such *styles* of motion (Cresswell 2010). In this paper I have advocated that drifting is unpacked as a particular typology of moving with its own distinctive qualities relating to force, friction, route and experience. Accordingly, as Cresswell and Martin (2012) demonstrate with regard to turbulence, or Bissell (2010) in view of vibration, there may be other ways of moving and being mobile that allow us to expand mobilities studies beyond the singular. For example, what of these methods of moving: gliding, bouncing, slipping, sticking, floating, skidding? And what of other mobilities at sea? Listing, pitching, or lying stagnated in the doldrums as described famously in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*:

...  
Day after day, day after day,  
We stuck, no breath no motion;  
As idle as a painted ship  
Upon a painted ocean (Coleridge 1834)  
...

In unpacking drifting as form of moving, I have contended that what we may learn can be expanded if moved from the urban realm (where most human geographical interventions on the ‘drift’ have occurred) to the sea. Drifting is not merely a singular transgressive movement political in respect of a deviation or resistance against an expected, acceptable route. By breaking down the very style of drifting – in view of speed, route, friction, and experience (to follow Cresswell 2010) – a more complex understanding of the politics of this type of motion emerges. The style of drifting at sea; its speed; its lack of friction; the uncontrolled movement of those ships caught within it; the eventual absence of those ships which disappear in a drift; alert us to the ways in which the very character of

movement elicits a politics as such drifts relate to expectations between ships; between ships and crews; and between ships, crews and the shore.

Moreover, the character of drifting is more complex than dictionary definition would lead us to believe. Drifting is not always a mobility that it is ‘smooth’ or ‘leisurely’ – there are differences in such smoothness and the pace of motion between sea and land; drifting ashore and at sea. These cannot be easily categorised (nor should they be) – but they relate to the forces that drive drift and the conditions under which drift occurs. At sea, the nature of any instance of drift is variable, but rarely ‘smooth’ and ‘consistent’ – but rather, driven by a range of forces that alter the power and nature of drift daily, seasonally, in view of weather and climate. There is the potential to explore variations of drift at sea, to better grasp actions and reactions to these mobilities that may link to insights in how ships’ crews deal with these moments, often inevitable in the open ocean. Indeed, as Langewiesche explores in his volume *The Outlaw Ocean*, even ships on a fixed path, with great power and speed, can drift if conditions engulf them (2004). Accordingly, much more might be unearthed as to how we secure life in view of the insecurities that arise due to watery natures and mobilities.

There also remains a need for drift to be explored not only as verb, but also as noun. What of longshore drift as a particular object of study? How is force, friction, speed, route, experience operationalized, recognised, felt and contested in view of this process? Indeed, unlike the unintentional experience of drifting at sea recounted in the case of the *Mi Amigo* here, drift as process, can conversely be intentionally harnessed by fisherman coming ashore, or migrants seeking to reach the coast, to use for advantageous mobilities (as was also the case with Nansen’s *Fram* voyage). Such an employment of drift (or failure of such employment) comes from a knowledge (or lack thereof) of reading the elements and nature and being in tune with the movement of the sea. For fishermen in particular, such is the time spent at sea, that the land/sea dualism which heightens the position of the land over sea as the space of “permanent sedentary habitation” (Steinberg 1999, 369) is reversed, with the sea being the central space of existence. Within such spheres, the sea, its contours, its motion, is as *known* as the land (Malinowski 1922). In this case we see a particular use of drift for economic and social purpose – and a way in which “vital connections between the *geo* (earth) and *bio* (life)” come together (Whatmore 2006, 601). There may be other instances of this ‘reading’ of drift by humans at sea (surfers, divers, and traders) that warrant further attention. How is such motion ‘read’; in corporeal and scientific terms, and what are the ramifications

(political, social, economic and practical) of misreadings? And what happens if we extend this beyond the sea to other forms of drift (snow, sand, glacial)?

As urban studies, psycho-geography and physical geographic examinations demonstrate, drifting is by no means an under-examined phenomenon. What is key to each of these areas of investigation is that drifting is productively unpacked as a particular form of motion; be it the motion of earth's elements to the motion of the human subject. Drifting pertains, in both of these manifestations, as a particular type of motion; often smooth, slow, aimless and in the case of physical geography, regular (Haslett 2009). However, as I have shown, there is space to take such examinations further. Here I have unpacked drifting in an effort to firstly bring this type of mobility into focus within a mobilities framework that better allows the constitutive qualities of this style of mobility to be explored, and secondly to demonstrate how we may push such understanding further if we drift, or transgress, the boundaries of the terrestrial world, outwards to the water world. Such an effort has also aimed to identify the specific politics of this mobility – the power relations that drive drifting and its ramifications, to deepen therefore, our understandings of motion making in the world.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful for the insightful and encouraging feedback I received from Gareth Hoskins and Jennifer Turner as I developed ideas for this piece. This paper has also benefited from conversations with Jon Anderson and Peter Merriman about the 'drift' and drifting, and the discussion opened up at the University of Nottingham, where this paper was first presented at an interdisciplinary conference on 'Friction'. I would also like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and detailed engagement with the paper. Their input was pivotal in helping me to clarify and strengthen my points.

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