

*Postcards from
the Shore:*

*Reconsidering
the
Structure of
a View*

/MJ Thompson/

MJ Thompson is a writer and teacher working on performance, dance and the visual arts. She is Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies and Practices in the Faculty of Fine Arts, Concordia University.
–mj.thompson@concordia.ca

Selon les conceptions vernaculaires et disciplinaires, la « vue » est définie comme étant le fait de voir quelque chose depuis un lieu ou une position particulière. Cette définition implique une présence corporelle située au sein d'un paysage. Cet essai examine la vue en tant que structure et cadre théorique permettant de repenser les relations entre les vues, les pratiques visuelles et les corps en mouvement. Un ensemble de cartes postales illustrant le travail des sauveteurs de Cape Cod, datées entre 1905 et 1907 et conservées par la Société historique de Truro, éclairent le rôle des points de vue et des corps en mouvement qu'ils encadrent.

POSTCARDS FROM CAPE COD

National parks are, famously, *scenic*: that is, idealized spaces in which to look out at nature and see a *view*. When the Cape Cod National Seashore was founded in 1961 with a mandate to limit development along the outer shore, scenic values were neatly built into the project. Its originating legislative act called for the preservation of the seashore “in its present state,” including its “unique flora and fauna or the physiographic conditions now prevailing” as well as “its historic sites and structures.”¹ A testament to landscape as a fusion of nature and culture, the document affirmed the rights of public use to be fostered in part through the development of, among other things, “trails, observation points and exhibit,”² a gentle reminder of state investment in the literal (and attendant metaphorical) structuring of views. Part of the ancestral homes of the Nauset and Wampanoag peoples, the land in question is a tiny strip along the eastern coast of the Cape Cod peninsula, which reaches up and out into the Atlantic Ocean / fig. 1 / Today, the park’s foundational mandate lists “beauty, solitude and aesthetic values”³ among its eight core elements of significance. Along the shore, views matter, on grounds of “inspiration” and “protection” of place.

Vernacular and discipline-specific definitions of *the view* define the term as seeing something from a *particular place or position*, with implications for a body situated within a landscape.⁴ Views are often understood as an image, scene or representation; as an effect of framing; and equally as an exercise in power.⁵ And views have been perceived as something “out there,” producing effects of distancing and control.⁶ Instead, this essay searches for the view as something *in here*; that is, *as an embodied practice and significant mode of attention*, requiring a perceiving, labouring body within a landscape, and, more, a body with rights of presence quite apart from capitalist and colonial values. If a body can be understood “as the existential ground of culture” and a critical space for emergent thinking and doing,⁷ it is simultaneously precarious and emergent in its dynamic relation to the world.

Park views neatly underscore the drama of body/land interaction and mark the regulation of park lands by the state since their inception. When, for instance, Congress inaugurates the first national park in the United States at Yellowstone in 1871, Bill H.R. 764 restricts all forms of “settlement,

1 Public Act 87-126 Aug 7, 1961, “An Act to Provide for the Establishment of Cape Cod National Seashore,” 292.

2 “An Act to Provide for the Establishment of Cape Cod National Seashore,” 292.

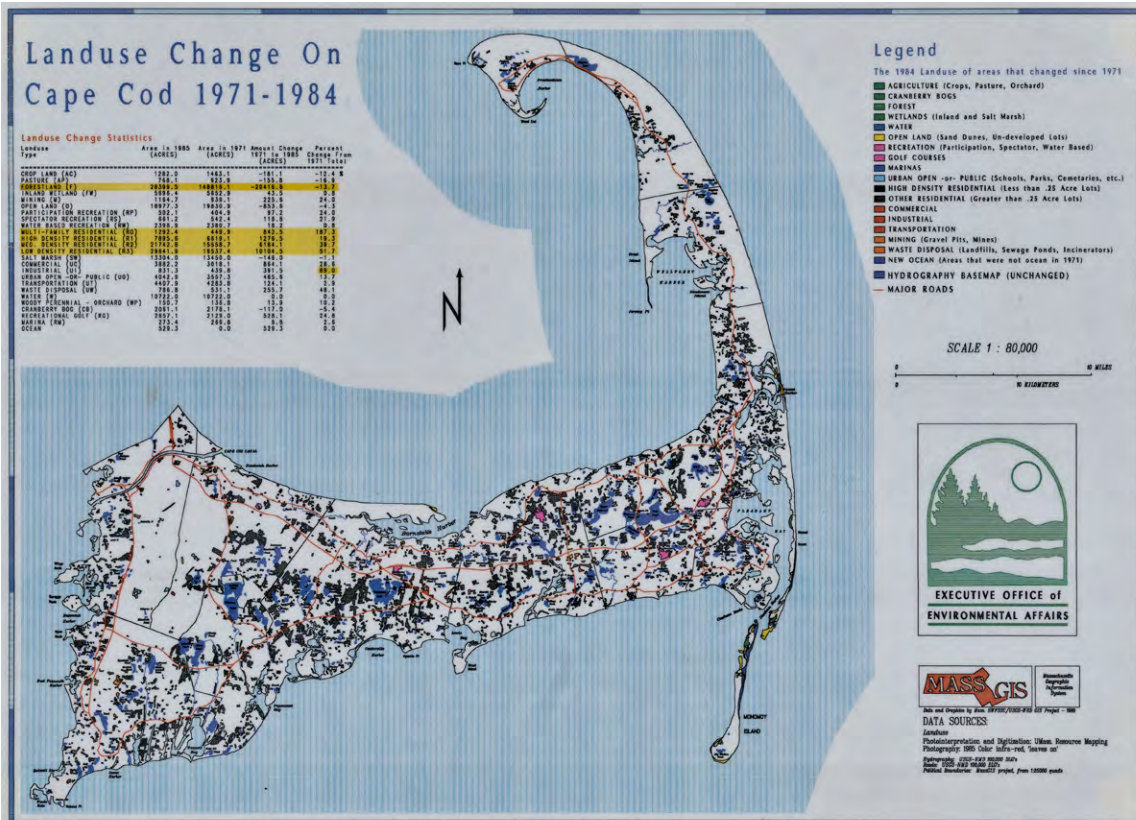
3 *Foundation Document: Cape Cod National Seashore*, National Park Services, July 2018, 5, <https://npshistory.com/publications/foundation-documents/caco-fd-2018.pdf>.

4 *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd ed., ed. Angus Stevenson (Oxford University Press, 2010); Gina Crandel, *Nature Pictorialized: The View in Landscape History* (John Hopkins University Press, 1993). Regarding my understanding of the term “landscape,” anthropologist Tim Ingold distinguishes between land and landscape in the following way: where land is “quantitative and homogenous,” landscape is “qualitative and heterogeneous.” See Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment* (Routledge, 2000), 194–95.

5 See Tracy Valcourt, “Aerial Perspectives, Landscape and Power: Politicized Images in Art and Visual Culture” (PhD diss., Interdisciplinary Humanities, Concordia University, Montreal, 2021); W.J.T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2022); and Trevor Paglen, “Machine Eyes,” in *Trevor Paglen*, ed. Julia Bryan-Wilson (Phaidon, 2018).

6 See Jacques Rancière, *Le temps du paysage* (La fabrique, 2023); Barbara Bender, “Time and Landscape,” *Current Anthropology* 43, no. S4, Supplement (August–October 2002): 103–12; and Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 575–99.

7 Thomas J. Csordas, “Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology,” *Ethos* 18, no. 1 (March 1990): 39.



/fig. 1/ Massachusetts Executive Office of Environmental Affairs and MassGIS, *Landuse Change on Cape Cod 1971-1984* (Massachusetts: Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, 1988), Norman B. Leventhal Map & Education Center, Boston Public Library, <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/8s45vn92x>.

occupancy and sale” on the land, save for structures of “accommodation” for visitors. Park lands are to be:

dedicated and set apart for the benefit and enjoyment of the people... Such regulations provide for the preservation, from injury or spoliation, of all timber, mineral deposits, natural curiosities or wonders, within said park, and their retention in their natural condition.⁸

The bill is brief, notable for its pushback against economic exploitation and for its marking of natural aesthetic beauty as a core value in the park’s creation. At the same time, it goes on to regulate bodies in the landscape, naming as “trespassers” all who would try to settle on park lands, or “capture or destroy” resources for “the purposes of merchandise of profit.”

Revelatory tensions, and foreshadowing ones, too, I think, reading these lines today: people/trespassers, access/restriction, beauty/devastation, and more. Such tensions dilate in 2024, as body and land are increasingly under pressure amid continuing, burdensome forms of capitalism, among them: relentless real-estate development and commodification of the kind the Seashore sought to delimit, often related to the value of the view; as well as nearly limitless resource extraction; toxic industries and their tailings; and climate disruption and the growing extremes of weather.⁹ Diminished access to “landscape”—and the kinds of viewing it engenders—is a reality, not as horrifying as the strategic dispossession of Indigenous peoples in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, yet resonant with the prioritization of wealth and resources over people and environment, as lands and shorelines are increasingly privatized, and industry and/or oligarchic wealth continue to overtake public, collective forms of use.¹⁰ At the same time, recent scholarship on geopolitical restrictions of movement as a significant element of state control mark an increasingly profound suspicion towards and regulation of mobile bodies on land and sea.¹¹

With the emergence of Instagram (founded 2010) and its hyper-circulation of idealized views, the National Seashore, like many parks, has seen a surge in visitation numbers, demonstrating a desire for park landscapes while nonetheless pointing out another kind of pressure. Moving bodies in a park constitute a norm, as unprecedented numbers of visitors walk, hike, swim, and camp, enjoying restorative nature under the signs of conservation, health, tourism, and economic development. Yet human presence in the landscape more generally remains contested, often unwelcome, always contingent—depending on which lands, and which bodies. In this essay, I take up the notion of “the view” as structure and theoretical framework through which to reconsider relations of views to viewing practices, representation to bodies in motion. What to make of a view, I wonder, beyond social media and forms of representation, and beyond the strategic and proprietary practices that have so shaped the term and threaten to end access? A group of postcards depicting the work of Cape Cod lifesavers, dated between 1905 and 1907, held by the

8 42nd Congress, 2nd Session. H.R. 764, December 18, 1871, [https://www.congress.gov/bill/42nd-congress/house-bill/764/text?s=5&r=1&q={\"search\"%3A\"Yellowstone+River\"}](https://www.congress.gov/bill/42nd-congress/house-bill/764/text?s=5&r=1&q={\).

9 See, for example: Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (University of Chicago Press, 2022); Gilbert M. Gaul, *The Geography of Risk: Epic Storms, Rising Seas, and the Cost of America’s Coasts* (Sarah Crichton Books, 2019); Thom Davies, “Slow Violence and Toxic Geographies: ‘Out of Sight’ to Whom?,” in *EPC: Politics and Space* 40, no. 2 (March 2022): 409–27; and Katherine J. Mach et al., “Climate as a Risk Factor for Armed Conflict,” in *Nature*, no. 571 (June 2019): 193–97.

10 See Ben Ryder-Howe, “Unspoiled Waterways, Unavailable to Some,” *The New York Times*, September 4, 2022; Gail J. Cohen, “Not on My Ranch: US Billionaire Wins Right to Keep Canadians Out,” *Law.Com International*, March 10, 2021, <https://www.law.com/international-edition/2021/03/10/u-s-billionaire-wins-fight-to-restrict-access-to-public-lakes-on-his-canadian-ranch/>; and Nick Hayes, *The Book of Trespass: Crossing the Lines that Divide Us* (Bloomsbury, 2012).

11 See *Geographies of Mobilities: Practices, Spaces, Subjects*, ed. Tim Cresswell and Peter Merrimen (Routledge, 2011); and Ronen Shamir, “Without Borders? Notes on Globalization as a Mobility Regime,” *Sociological Theory*, 23, no. 2 (2005): 197–217; Zygmunt Bauman, *Society Under Siege* (Polity Press, 2002).

Truro Historical Society, offer considerable insight into the work of views and, I hope, the moving bodies at their centre.

“LOOK AT THE VIEW”¹²

I am citing W.J.T. Mitchell, who names the above command the “landscape imperative.” He writes: “The invitation to look at a view is thus a suggestion to look at nothing – or more precisely, to look at looking itself – to engage in a kind of conscious apperception of space as it unfolds itself in a particular place.”¹³ Taking up his challenge to “look at looking,” I turn to set of photo-postcards that depict and frame the working bodies of lifesavers along the shore. In their content and form, these postcards map a relation of body to land, highlighting practices of viewing and developed modes of embodied perception. More, they anticipate the transformation of the shoreline from feared landscape – a place without refuge, exposed to the full throttle of marine weather – to sublime space of contemplation and prized coastal real estate.¹⁴ Dated between 1905 and 1907, the postcards return us to an earlier moment in the history of the shore, one that prefigures this transformation. The set includes a dozen or so unique images with varied colour treatments and approaches, from portraiture to scenes of working life. Attesting to the performed and performative nature of “the view,” they equally offer clues about the status of these working bodies intimately bound to land and sea.

At the turn of the last century, saving lives at sea, it seems, was an agreed-upon priority for the American state. Just off Cape Cod, commercial ships heading to Boston frequently met disaster in rough seas along the sandy shoals of the outermost beach. Things were so bad that a group formed in 1802, calling themselves the Massachusetts Humane Society, raising funds to build fifteen huts between Boston Harbor and Chatham, stocked with blankets and supplies for any shipwrecked survivors who made it to shore. Soon after, following the first appropriation of funds by Congress for this purpose, the United States Life-Saving Service (1848–1915) came in to being – a precursor to the Coast Guard, yet focused exclusively on lifesaving rather than on law enforcement, border security, or property recovery.

I pause here over the juxtaposition of the terms “life” and “property,” which, in relation to American history and the Atlantic ocean, beckon the maritime “demonic,” Taussig’s term for the horrors associated with the sea, and point to the history of slavery and the Middle Passage. Whereas the United States Congress banned the “importation” of people in 1808, illegal trafficking continued, and new research has begun to map the substantial ties between human trafficking, the delivery of goods to and from the West Indies, and the shipping industry in and around Cape Cod.¹⁵ Frequently described as a “flexed arm,” or a “hook,”¹⁶ the geography of the Cape itself is anything but blank, the terms invoking a history of nationhood as brute scheme and suggestive of the

12 Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, vii.

13 Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, viii.

14 Michael Taussig’s essay on the fantasy of the beach is paraphrased here; in it, he describes the displacement of poor people from coastal areas over the last century as developers move in and build real estate for wealthy elites. More, he looks to the shoreline as a liminal, transgressive space and the sea as “testimony to the force of the archaic in the modern.” See Taussig, “The Beach (A Fantasy),” *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 2 (Winter 2000): 256.

15 See, for example, <https://atlanticblackbox.com>. Further reading includes: “The DESIRE and the Beginnings of the Massachusetts Slave Trade,” National Park Service, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/beginnings-of-ma-slave-trade.htm>; and Equal Justice Initiative, “New England” and “Boston, Massachusetts,” in *The Transatlantic Slave Trade* (2022), <https://ejl.org/report/transatlantic-slave-trade/new-england/>. I am indebted, too, to

Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake* for its attention to the sea as material history and critical metaphor for grappling with the legacies of slavery. See Sharpe *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016). Whereas this article aims to think through the significance of embodied perception as a basic, land-based right, I hope to pursue this history with greater depth in a future article focused on practices and metaphors of “saving,” in dialogue with this literature and taking up Judith Butler’s call to examine “what counts as a livable life and a grievable death.” Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso, 2004), xv.

16 Early references include John Smith (Admiral/Captain), who refers to the Cape as a “sickle,” *A Description of New England* (University of Nebraska-Lincoln Digital Publication, 1616), 38; and Henry David Thoreau describes the Cape as “a barred and banded arm...[with] a sandy fist.” In *Cape Cod* (1865; repr., Penguin Books, 1987).

asymmetries of value in labour, land, and life that underwrote the founding of the United States.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the shoreline as a place of precarity was familiar to many. Images of the Cape Cod lifesavers proliferated in paintings, photographs and postcards—a testament to the significance of their labour in coastal life and in the public imaginary of the time. With their unique knowledge of boating, sea, and rescue operations, lifesavers functioned at the border between the mundane and the disaster, a combination of daily routine and emergency response. With huge numbers of shipwrecks happening annually along the outer beach—the Park notes over 3000 in 300 years of record—the area was known as the “graveyard of the Atlantic,”¹⁷ and public interest in the lifesavers was high.

The postcard “Boat Drill,” for example, shows five men in the United States Life Saving Services’ summer uniforms encircling a rescue boat, standing at the ready. The men appear upright, their stances strangely paused, detached from the signs of physical effort required to launch the heavy boat into the smooth sea. Two men look directly at the camera, the others look out to sea or else down at ropes in hand, as if waiting to start, as if marking a relation between head and hand, sight and kinesthetics, intent and action. They appear as if posing for the camera, perhaps following a tradition of labour portraits that tended towards frontal, rigid postures.¹⁸ Shot at a distance, the image models a quasi-military form of male labour—competent, prepared, united in light of the epic scale of sandy beach and Atlantic horizon / fig. 2 /.

Another postcard image, “The Return from the Wreck,” shows a rescue boat landing on the shore, its crew carrying a prone body / fig. 3 /.

The ocean is very close and rough, elaborated in a painterly way. At right, a shadowy shipwreck appears, its shape an occasionally recurring motif across this set of images. It looks to my eyes as if drawn into the photographic image, revealing the compositional eye behind the image, and accelerating the narrative of heroic life in the face of death along the shore. These are fantasy views, of course, imagery that resituates the “real” work of the lifeguard into the two-dimensional proscenium of the postcard. At once inexpensive souvenirs and analogue messaging devices, the postcards are commodities—delirious ones at that—displacing the idealized image of the lifesaver into one’s prized collection or else telescoping one’s proximity to the drama. Is the image a document of a real event, or was it staged for the camera? Were the postcards commissioned by the United States Life-Saving Services, or made by local or itinerant photographers, hoping to sell their images to newspapers and postcard companies? With little information available yet on the immediate context of their production,¹⁹ the surface meaning of the imagery is nonetheless telling.

The postcards make literal the problem of the view: framed, aestheticized, manipulated to reflect a particular viewpoint or perspective. Echoing art historian John Barrell’s remarkable study of nineteenth century landscape painting, the imagery seems at first glance to mask all sense of the material conditions faced by the lifeguards as workers in a difficult environment in order to flatter the patron/consumer.²⁰ Worse yet, the postcards circulate visions of male heroism aligned with nation building, a point whose stakes are carefully unpacked by Aileen Moreton-Robinson in her work on Australian

17 The phrase is a popular reference, its original source unclear. See, for example, the National Parks Service’s website on shipwrecks and lifesavers: <https://www.nps.gov/caco/learn/historyculture/maritime-history-at-cape-cod-national-seashore.htm>.

18 See Peter K. Andersson, *Silent History: Body Language and Nonverbal Identity, 1860–1914* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2018).

19 Further research is needed to develop an article focused on the specificity of the photographer’s view (note that many of the postcards do not name the photographer). The two named postcard companies are: CO Tucker, Boston (B&W series); and Illustrated Postal Card Company, New York and Germany (colour series).

20 John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730–1840* (Cambridge University Press, 1980).



/fig. 2/ "Boat drill - U.S. Life Saving Service," postcard, ca. 1905. Cobb Archive 021 Lifesaving, Massachusetts Historical Postcard Collection from the Truro Historical Society, Truro, MA, <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/kh04mt66b>.



/fig. 3/ "The Return from the Wreck, Cape Cod," postcard, C.O. Tucker, Boston, ca. 1905. Cobb Archive 021 Lifesaving, Massachusetts Historical Postcard Collection from the Truro Historical Society, Truro, MA, <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/kh04mt63h>.

surf bathers, recounting how white male surf bathers—whose fun in the waves drew criticism for its time-wasting, nearly-naked decadence—took up “lifesaving” as a way to sanitize their leisure play before a skeptical public *and* lay claim to the landscape. She argues:

The production of the beach as a white possession is both fantasy and reality within the Australian imagination and is tied to a beach culture encompassing pleasure, leisure, and national pride that developed during modernity through the embodied performance of white masculinity.²¹

Her analysis of how the muscled, virtuosic body of the surf lifesaver signified the qualities of a white national identity in Australia²² helps account for the popular uptake of the Cape Cod lifesavers into postcard imagery in the United States. Created and proliferating into the early twentieth century, the lifesaver images and the actions they depict appear to model a collective competence and valour that dovetailed with the aspirations of a post-Civil War nation state.

And yet, a few important distinctions remain: the Cape Cod lifesavers' relation to the land and surf was not grounded in recreational practices or tourism, nor were their images mobilized for reasons of sanitization or propaganda. The impetus for their hire was, ca. 1905–1907, quite pragmatic and rooted in material labour. The job was to save lives in the storm waters off the Cape in light of proliferating shipping accidents disrupting trade and migration. Their foundational knowledge lay in the fishing industry rather than in acts of leisure. Many were from the Portuguese communities that settled along the Cape Cod peninsula in the 1800s, when whaling and fishing industries peaked, and European whaling ships stopped in the Azores and Madeira to pick up crews. Whereas these images are easily read as participating in what critic David Campany has called “the rhetoric of heroic toil,”²³ wherein work is alternately idealized and *put to work* in the service of political narratives, the postcards simultaneously offer a gestural archive that shows the intricacies of embodied perception while suggesting what might be at stake in a popular understanding thereof.

Returning to Mitchell's work, with its incentive to *look at looking* at nature, I aim to take up the unmarked ways in which the body/landscape intersection might function as a “medium of exchange” and “cultural practice.”²⁴ If the postcards provide a lens on the notion of the view as flattened, abstracted, and “an aesthetic framing of the real proprieties of space and place,” they equally show us something of the landscape as practice—bound to a phenomenology of the body and suggestive of how land-based forms of movement shape perception in quiet, yet critical ways. There are other ways to argue for the rights of bodies to be in a landscape: cultural heritage and survival, for example. Indigenous presence since time immemorial. And more. What attention to the gestural archive through movement and performance studies offers is a critical centring of the body in the body/land intersection, wherein bodies hold distinctive material knowledge in a repertoire produced and compelled by the landscape—with an attendant ethics of respect and responsibility.

“HOURS OF RACKING LABOUR”

Early accounts of the service describe, in telling ways, the work of lifesaving along the shore. Writing in 1904, in what is the only full-length, coterminous publication dedicated to the “surfmen,” J.W. Dalton writes:

21 Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power and Indigenous Sovereignty* (University of Minnesota, 2015), 46.

22 Robinson, *The White Possessive*, 38.

23 David Campany, “The Working Life: Photography and the Depiction of Labor,” *Aperture*, no. 226 (2017), 66.

24 Campany, “The Working Life,” 2.

The life savers work is always arduous, often terrible. Quicksands, the blinding snow, and cutting sand storms, the fearful blasts of winter gales, are more often than not to be encountered on their journeys; storm tides, flooding the beaches, drive them to the tops or back of the sand dunes, where they plod along their solitary patrol with great peril.... When a ship is in distress, whatever way the crew is rescued by the life savers, the task involves great hazard to their lives, hours of racking labour, protracted exposure to the roughest weather conditions, and a mental and bodily strain under the spur of exigency and the curb of discipline that exhaust even these hardy fearless coast guardians.²⁵

Charged, heroic language, to be sure. Yet, what I like in this passage is its description of weather and work, wherein the lifesaver labours at the intersection of land, sea, and sky. Their work began annually on August 1, at the start of hurricane season (and notably at the end of a nascent tourist season), and continued through winter Nor'Easters and spring storms, ending in June, when they took two months break. Paid sixty-five dollars a month, according to Dalton, their primary tasks were threefold: observation, beach patrol, sea rescue. That is, their labour involved a seamless, entwined performance of looking and doing: physical labour intimately linked to seeing within the shoreline environment.

The postcards give image to this material effort. "Off to the Rescue" shows a group of men pulling a lifeboat over the sand, apparently away from the water—perhaps suggestive again of the staged nature of the imagery / fig. 4 /. Six men stride towards the camera, their hands gripping ropes attached to the boat and wrapped around their bodies for leverage, feet apart and torsos leaning forward to bear the weight. Dressed in rain gear, their eyes hidden by the brow of their hats, with heads down, they seem to watch the terrain in order to land each step. The captain of the crew directs their movement with a raised arm, his posture stiff, awkward, perhaps posed. Whether staged or rooted in utility, his gesture signals relations of spatial awareness, while the postures of the crew members begin to show the labour of bearing weight on a sandy dune.

Another postcard, entitled "On the Way to the Wreck, Cape Cod," shows a six-member crew rowing a boat through rough surf / fig. 5 /. Their bodies are seated and crouched low, they appear to be pulling at oars, with some of their faces slightly turned towards the figure of a shadowy ship at right. The captain stands and steers, his body braced against the elements, leaning into the oar he manipulates. The crew's heads are low, the gazes inward. Their fists are in sight, taughtly gripping the oars, a vision of effort and concentration. Taken together, the two cards portray the dynamic material relation between body and landscape, powered by a palpable sense of effort rendered both by everyday understandings of the task depicted and via bodily line and gesture.

Working bodies are hard to see, bound in practice to everyday movement, with representations thereof often romanticized or tainted by vested interests. A key figure in the field of dance studies, movement theorist Rudolf Laban, has described something called "effort-thinking": that is, a methodology for the development of the body's capacity to move efficiently. He writes, "A person's efforts are visible in the rhythms of bodily motion... Human effort is a compound of several elements mixed together in an almost infinite number of combinations."²⁶ Those elements, in brief, are weight, space,

25 J.W. Dalton, *The Life Savers of Cape Cod* (Barta Press/Chatham Press, 1902), 5.

26 Rudolf Laban, *Effort: Economy of Human Movement* (Boston: Plays Inc., 1947; repr., 1979), 2.



/fig. 4/ "Off to the Rescue, Cape Cod," postcard, C.O. Tucker, Boston, ca. 1905. Cobb Archive 021 Lifesaving, Massachusetts Historical Postcard Collection from the Truro Historical Society, Truro, MA, <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/kh04mt007>.



/fig. 5/ "On the way to the Wreck, Cape Cod," postcard, C.O. Tucker, Boston, ca. 1905. Cobb Archive 021 Lifesaving, Massachusetts Historical Postcard Collection from the Truro Historical Society, Truro, MA, <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/kh04mt121>.

time, and flow. Whereas the drive to “efficiency” is surely problematic at this point, Laban’s observations nonetheless invite readings of how effort resides in the body in perceivable ways. In the postcard imagery above, postural bodies indicate the intensity of work through strength, direction, volume, shape and more. But these are only legible relationally, alongside other bodies, objects, and orientations. There is no effort, *sans* gravity and ground.

Embodied movement, then, is a function of its environment, the responsive, sensorial body perceiving its way: kinesthetic, proprioceptive, haptic. Perhaps obvious, and yet, performance studies scholar Laura Levin has described the often-unmarked status of environments asserting their presence as “the environmental unconscious.” In her study on site-specific performance, she notes, “the site emerges in a mode of perception open to the sensuous self-showing of the physical world and which, due to the limits of human language, exceeds the spectator’s ability to fully grasp it.”²⁷ Her work builds on, among others, Richard Schechner’s concept of environmental theatre, wherein “all elements or parts making up the performance are recognized as alive.”²⁸ In the *mise-en-scène* of the lifesaver, land and sea are primary actors, their contingencies part of the critical challenge faced by the worker. For the person buying a postcard, the intersection of body/land/sea is part of the visual drama of the image. For the lifesaver, that intersection critically underwrites traditional forms of knowledge as well as emergent skill. Which of those comes first depends where one stands in the gap between lived experience and representation.

Or, as Michael Taussig observes, “it is by virtue of separation and loss that the sea acquires a new magnificence.”²⁹ For the lifesaver, the sea afforded little abstraction. Their work involved intimate knowledge and daily contact with the sea, borne from experience as fishermen and renewed daily during prolonged watches from the lifesaving station’s observation deck and on rigorous beach “patrols” or miles-long walks to watch for ships in trouble. The lifesavers developed an acute sensitivity to the Cape Cod shoreline, developed as they peered through fog and flashed lights to communicate; found balance on uneven terrain, taking note of the resistance of distinctive kinds of sands; felt the pelt of sand long before the storm and smelled the tang of ozone in humid pre-storm air and the briny algae at storm’s end. The knowledge contained in the landscape was vast, despite the word’s earliest use to refer to the elusive and the eluding, to forms of extrication—from the fourteenth-century Old North French *escaper* and the fifteenth-century Latin *excappare*—underscoring conceptions of the landscape as *terra nullius* and foreshadowing fantasies of the beach as a site for escape from the burdens of city life.³⁰

Instead of this vision of land as empty and the beach as escape, the landscape shown here is very much *peopled*. I see the lifesavers as transitional figures: working-class bodies, moving steadily through magnificent, terrible landscapes, poised between the sea as livelihood and the sea as death, bound to histories (and futures) of colonial occupation and real estate encroachment. If the *raison d’être* of the beach is “to reveal,”³¹ as per Taussig’s reading, the scenes of lifesavers on the shore begin to evoke what it means for a body to see, or rather *to be*, in its environment.

FROM VIEWS TO VIEWING

Whether scanning the horizon from the lookout towers of the life-stations or on daily beach “watches”—throughout each night, and during fogged or stormy

27 Laura Levin, *Performing Ground: Space, Camouflage and the Art of Blending In* (Palgrave/MacMillan, 2014), 110.

28 Schechner in Levin, *Performing Ground*, 103.

29 Taussig, “The Beach (A Fantasy),” 258.

30 Taussig, “The Beach (A Fantasy),” 258.

31 Taussig, “The Beach (A Fantasy),” 258.



Flashing the Coston Signal, Cape Cod

/fig. 6/ "Flashing the Coston Signal, Cape Cod," postcard, C.O. Tucker, Boston, ca. 1905. Cobb Archive 021 Lifesaving, Massachusetts Historical Postcard Collection from the Truro Historical Society, Truro, MA, <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/kh04mt15v>.



~ Going on Watch - U.S.L.S. ~

/fig. 7/ "Going on Watch, Cape Cod," postcard, ca. 1905. Cobb Archive 021 Lifesaving, Massachusetts Historical Postcard Collection from the Truro Historical Society, Truro, MA. Author photograph.

conditions, throughout each day—heightened skills of observation were central to the role, and a number of postcards index this element. “Flashing the Coston Signal,” for instance, shows two surfmen, one pointing as if identifying a ship in trouble, the other flashing the red-light flare to signal to the ship in distress that it’s been seen and to alert the team at the lifesaving station / fig. 6 /. The image marks a relation of hand to eye, body to mind, as if rehearsing the very question of where perception itself resides. Calling to mind Merleau-Ponty’s critique of a “magical theory of vision,” wherein “the mind goes out through the eye to wander among objects,”³² the gestural vocabulary of the postcard sutures sight to embodied action, as opposed to a stricter framing of the eyes or head.

To return to Mitchell’s earlier point, in images such as these, looking itself appears to be on view. But it’s a different kind of looking, one that links vision to movement and prioritizes the body/environment, as per Merleau-Ponty’s mysterious “carnal formula,” that proliferates correspondences between the external and the internal, the visible and the invisible.³³ In “Going on Watch,” two lifesavers appear oceanside, their shoulders rounded, heads bent, gaze down / fig. 7 /. Rather than looking to shore, or sky, they proceed by walking and watching the ground. The global comportment of these bodies is revealing: the sense of measuredness, feet carefully placed, gear at the ready, shoulders relaxed, gazes down. A sandy foreground gives way to beach grass and the steeper pitch of the dune. The rhythm of the walkers as they tune in to ground and horizon is palpable. Here looking is watching is walking: a form of doing, not strictly bound to the eyes but opened up to a full and active embodied sensorium.

Mitchell says that “landscape is already artifice at the moment of its beholding,”³⁴ following a longer critical history of vision as distancing and isolating, and the view as objectifying, yet within the vernacular, somehow trifling, insignificant.³⁵ For Mitchell, postcards mirror the parsing of land as real estate, wherein views are seen, taken, and sold as cheap souvenirs for the tourist crowds. Here, Heidegger’s biting notion of *gestell*—that is, enframing—as a phenomenon of gathering and “setting upon” in order to exploit for some future gain is exemplary. Following his example of the power plant on the Rhine, which dams up the river, turning its energy into stored power, Heidegger writes, “the rule of enframing... demands that nature be orderable as standing reserve.”³⁶ Enframing, then, as the mode of being compelled by modern technology, constitutes a perpetual kind of deferred experience.

A postcard, of course, is a kind of enframing, as is a view understood as a structured perspective: both may be seen as artifacts that capture, exploit, and defer relations to the real. But such thinking risks valuing action over representation as somehow more real, eliding the power of images to shape the world while simultaneously masking the significance of the living bodies engaged in viewing practices. To reconsider the structure of the view is not to dismiss the power of representation but to return attention to precarious bodies and perceptual acts. Reading the gestural archive of the lifesavers allows for a shift of attention from the performativity of views to the performativity of viewing practices, a critical aspect of their job.

Mainly fishermen by trade, the daily routines of the lifesavers involved protocols of effort and training, practice and repetition whose material performance produced a form of highly skilled labour. As an early historian of

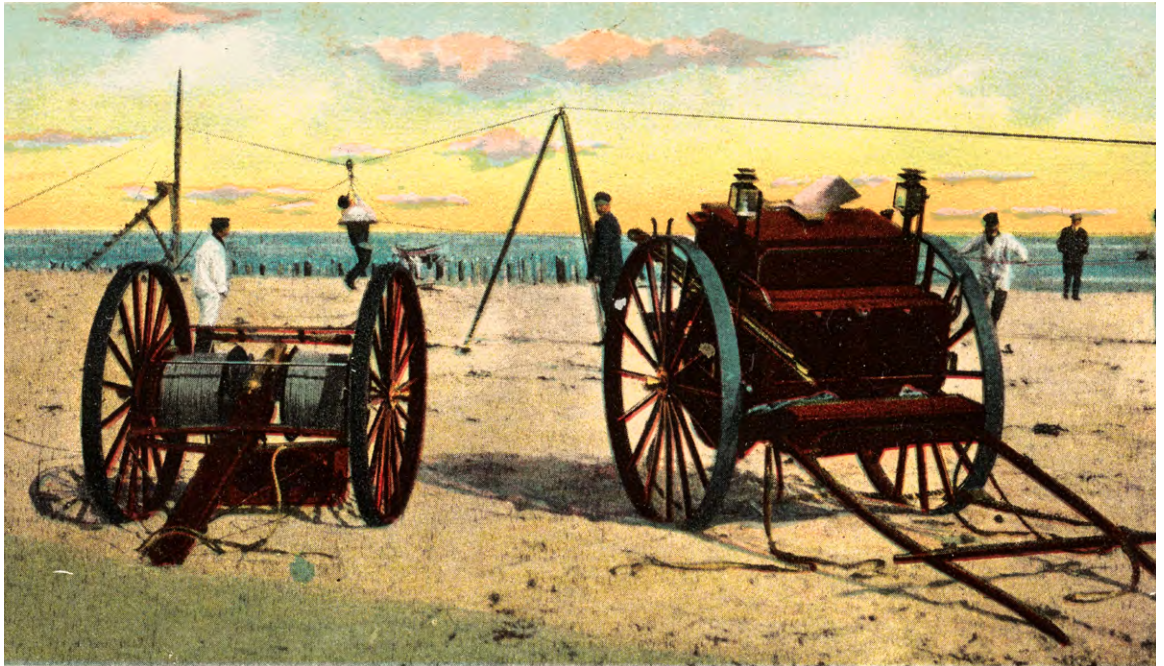
32 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie, trans. Carleton Dallery (Northwestern University Press, 1964). Revised by Michael Smith in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Galen A. Johnson (Northwestern University Press, 1993), 5.

33 Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 4.

34 Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, 14.

35 See Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, 246–53.

36 Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (Garland Publishing, 1977), 23.



The Breeches Buoy in Action

71-10

/fig. 8/ "The Breeches Buoy in Action," postcard, ca. 1905. Cobb Archive 021 Lifesaving, Massachusetts Historical Postcard Collection from the Truro Historical Society, Truro, MA, <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/kh04ms796>.



Loading the Gun.

/fig. 9/ "Loading the Gun," 1905. postcard, ca. 1905. Cobb Archive 021 Lifesaving, Massachusetts Historical Postcard Collection from the Truro Historical Society, Truro, MA, <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/kh04mt36m>.

the lifesavers, J.W. Dalton noted the consistency and regimentation of their daily schedule. Monday: “putting the station in order”; Tuesday: “drilled in launching and landing in the life-boat through the surf”; Wednesday: “drilled in the International and General code of signals”; Thursday: “drilled with the beach apparatus and Breeches Buoy”; Friday: “practices the resuscitation drill for restoring the apparently drowned”; Saturday: “washday”; and Sunday: “devoted to religious practices.”³⁷

Several colorized postcards depict these training routines. “The Breeches Buoy in Action,” for instance, shows lifesavers practice-rigging a line between a ship in trouble and rescuers on land that allows crewmembers to be pulled to safety over the waves / fig. 8 /. Or “Loading the Gun,” which shows six men working on a projectile apparatus that launches the line, as two un-uniformed pedestrians look on / fig. 9 /. Photographed from a distance, capturing the scene unfolding around the task, the images suggest the detailed and engrossing nature of the work, both for the surfmen and their audiences, and mark a technical capacity developed in response to crises at land and sea. Whereas manual labour has long been understood as “handwork,” associated with the lower classes and opposed to intellectual labour, the images of the surfmen appear to emphasize a thinking body in the grip of a skill emergent in relation to the landscape.

The dance scholar Sally Anne Ness argues for the relation between land and labour in her remarkable account of the free-climbers of 1970s Joshua Tree. Whereas such climbing has primarily been understood as high-risk and macho, she tempers such perceptions to document regimes of practice on particular rockfaces that, over time, work to mitigate risk through detailed knowledge. Gathering oral histories that testify to the climbers’ disciplined study of the terrain, Ness finds that “the combined work of practicing a route to near absolute level of familiarity and achieving a level of self-controlled execution... virtually eliminated the risk of taking a fall.”³⁸ What’s more, she describes “a distinctive eco-motricity, a characteristic style of motor interaction and skilled movement closely linked to the natural environment in which it took place.”³⁹ From another disciplinary perspective, this is what anthropologist Tim Ingold might refer to as a “dwelling perspective,”⁴⁰ wherein skill and technique emerge through practice in particular environments.

Ness and Ingold offer material accounts of how bodies labour and come to know in, with, and through their environments, underscoring the profundity of the relation. If the Cape Cod lifesaver postcards document highly technical forms of ordinary movement, bound to acts of labour and embodied perception, analysis of the imagery may help centre working bodies in the production of the scenic, complicate the binary of seeing/doing, and underscore a critical significance of the body/land relation—that is, perception, with implications for considering who has access to natural environments and towards what end.

BODIES WASHED UP ON THE BEACH

In feminist scholar Sara Ahmed’s queer phenomenology, she notes the ways in which the objects and groundings that orient us are never neutral, shaped by histories and conditions not easily apprehended. She writes:

Some things are relegated to the background to sustain a certain direction; in other words, to keep attention on what is faced.

37 Dalton, *The Life Savers of Cape Cod*, 32.

38 Sally Ann Ness, “Like a Shark in the Ocean: The Semiotics of Extreme Precarity in Joshua Tree Rock Climbing,” *Semiotica* (August 2022): 224.

39 Ness, “Like a Shark in the Ocean,” 211.

40 Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, 5.

Perception involves such acts of relegation that are forgotten in the very preoccupation with what is that we face.⁴¹

What comes into view is a function of, among other things, enculturation and habit, access and experience. Just as there are no neutral bodies—made through lived experience, and immersed in categories of race, gender, nation and more—there are no neutral views. In shifting from views to viewing in order to consider the status of human bodies as actors in a landscape, the question is: which bodies may view, under what conditions, with what forms of knowledge and what forms of access?

Looking back in time, a short excerpt from Thoreau's Cape Cod travel writings offers a terrible glimpse of nineteenth lifersavers and the lives they attempted to save. Recounting his visit to the wreck of the *St. John*, a so-called "famine ship," that had left Galway in September 1849, Thoreau meets a lifersaver who tells him that his crew rowed passed the *St. John* towards another ship in trouble, wrongly thinking in the turmoil of rough waves that a nearby lifeboat had already rescued those onboard.⁴² Many bodies "washed up on the beach" in the days that followed, the phrasing itself "demonic" and hinting at the erasure of the poor and of those between nations using the language of hygiene: washed away by the state-driven policies and corporate muscle that fuel economic precarity and war.⁴³ Thoreau writes, chillingly, "On the whole, it was not so impressive a scene as I might have expected. The sight of one body affects us deeply but the sight of so many bodies blunted the sensibilities."⁴⁴ Read generously, Thoreau's words point to the ways in which horrific sights can make us turn away. Sight fails us, and the view as a form of representation may at times usefully press in at the limits of embodied perception.

Yet, whereas views are structured and tend towards more singular interpretations, viewing bodies proliferate knowledge in multiples. For the lifersavers employed along the shoreline, *seeing* meant embodied action: a web of effort and acquired skill, residing in bodies made through labour at land and sea, with good results never guaranteed. For the Irish passengers of the *St. John*, sailing out of Galway and the travesty of a famine fueled by British land policies—passengers reportedly up late the night before the catastrophe, dancing for joy at the sight of land—I imagine the views afforded considerable hope, at least until the winds picked up, and the skies darkened.

41 Sara Ahmed, "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 4 (2006): 547.

42 For more on famine ships, see: <https://jeaniejohnston.ie/history/the-famine/>.

43 Henry David Thoreau, *Cape Cod* (1865; repr., Penguin Books, 1987), 9.

44 Thoreau, *Cape Cod*, 9.