

An underwater sense of place Undersea film in Bahamas history and memory

Erica Carter

The film we feature on the front page of this website, *IN THE TROPICAL SEAS* (1914), is the earliest surviving example of underwater experiments conducted by the brothers John and George Williamson in the Bahamas between 1912 and 1914. The film set the scene for a long history of underwater filmmaking in The Bahamas. Propitious conditions for underwater filmmaking on the archipelago include the absence of river sediment, and shallow waters that inhibit the growth of micro-organisms, allowing natural light reflection from brilliant white sand and coral seafloors (Thompson, 2006: 162). The clarity these conditions afford to Bahamian underwater vision was evident from the very earlier years of the Williamson brothers' experiments. [Sonia Schechet Epstein](#), Associate Curator of Science and Film at the New York Museum of the Moving Image, is one of several twenty-first century commentators for whom the Williamson films testify to the filmmakers' ingenuity; to the beauty of early twentieth-century Bahamian underwater environments; to the delicacy of what are today the archipelago's critically endangered marine ecosystems; and indeed to the fragility of film itself as an archival object subject to fragmentation and decay.

IN THE TROPICAL SEAS is the earliest surviving version of the earliest Williamson brother footage, apparently assembled in 1914, probably for a special Dutch or European release. The film affords an all-too rare glimpse of the moving image marvels shaping the brothers' early twentieth century undersea world. Schechet Epstein cites contemporary commentators who laud the Williamsons' undersea panoramas as "entrancing" (*The Moving Picture World*, October 1914), or proclaim the invention of the photosphere to be a development that "has amazed the scientists and diplomats" (*The Evening Standard*, 23 July 2014). By 1916, these magical images were being used in Hollywood feature film productions. Sequences from Williamson shoots were edited in 1916 into a Universal Pictures Jules Verne adaptation directed by Stuart Paton, *TWENTY THOUSAND LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA*. Though the Bahamas are not mentioned in the narration, Williamson's biography as well as contemporaneous press coverage confirm that the film was shot on the archipelago. The intertitle preceding one

stunning close-up on coral beds also points to the specific qualities of Bahamian underwater locations when it references the reflective qualities of the islands' offshore sands: 'Note how brilliant is the reflection of the sun's rays on these coral beds, fathoms below the surface' (Fig.1).

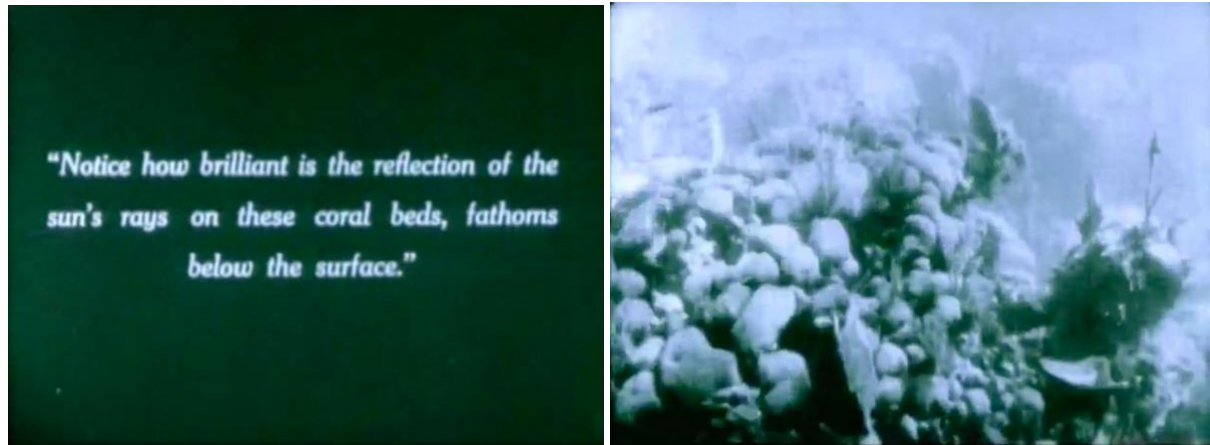


Fig. 1: Source: *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* (Stuart Paton, Universal Studios: 1916).

The Williamsons took advantage of these special qualities of Bahamian waters in a follow-up cycle of underwater documentaries and marine adventures produced alternately by Williamson's Submarine Film Corporation, and in co-productions with Hollywood studios. According to film historian Jon Crylen, early titles included *THE SUBMARINE EYE* (J. Winthrop Kelley, 1917), featuring a Bahamian diver saving the life of an undersea treasure hunter; the short *A DEEP-SEA TRAGEDY* (aka *A SUBMARINE TRAGEDY*, 1917); *Wet Gold* (Ralph Ince, 1921), about a search for sunken treasure; and *THE UNINVITED GUEST* (Ralph Ince, 1924), featuring the first known underwater colour footage (Crylen 2015: 22).

The only film known to have survived from these early ventures is the desert island melodrama *GIRL OF THE SEA* (J. Winthrop Kelley, 1920). Film and video prints of Winthrop Kelley's film are available in the British Film Institute but are accessible only to researchers visiting the archive in London. More readily available are the numerous print materials assembled over the past several decades by historians and archivists charting the history of the Williamsons' many lost titles. Pictured below for instance are adverts for a 1914 Jules Verne adaptation that uses the Williamson footage but precedes the Universal Pictures version by two years, *THIRTY LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA* (1914).

914

**MOST AMAZING MOTION PICTURES
EVER FLASHED ON A SCREEN**

Absolutely Unbelievable Until You See Them Yourself

TWO daring Virginia boys—the Williamson Brothers of Norfolk—by means of their famous submarine inventions which enable them to descend into the depths of the ocean and remain for days at a time, have actually taken a trip along the floor of the Atlantic in "Thirty Leagues Under the Sea" to view the mysterious wonders of the deep.

No such hazardous venture was ever attempted before, no mortal man ever dreamed of the possibility of such an unheard-of journey excepting the imaginative French novelist, Jules Verne, in his fantastic story, read by every school boy and girl, entitled "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea."

That stirring dream has now come true in the astounding achievement of the Williamson Submarine Expedition to the West Indies. The Williamson brothers have demonstrated that the bottom of the ocean may be visited and explored as safely as the Wright brothers first sailed through the sky.

Not only that, but what is still more surprising, they were able to take motion pictures of their thrilling discoveries and flash on a screen a marvellous panorama of deep sea life and landscape, beautiful beyond words, something no human eye ever gazed on before.

All the hidden romance of ocean depths—mountains, valleys and plains, strange fishes never captured by man, fields of priceless coral, ocean meadows where only the cannibal sharks roam about, dangerous coral reefs with century-old wrecks which Mr. George Williamson as a deep sea diver is seen risking his life to explore an ocean tragedy in which Mr. Ernest Williamson meets a great blue shark, fathoms deep, and slays the ocean tiger in front of the camera—all these are only a few of the thousands of motion pictures brought from the bottom of the ocean.

No man ever took such pictures before. Men of science have tried for years and failed. For the first time in history the secrets of the ocean with its stores of lost treasure, its enchanted forests, its silent woods swart in eternal sleep while cryptic fishes hide and seek among the petrified spars, are unfolded before human gaze as clearly as if photographed in a small studio.

Words cannot express the fascination of these pictures. When they were shown at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, the assembled scientists declared them the most wonderful photographs in the world. They have revolutionized motion picture photography. They are shown in seven reels of continual thrills. Four performances daily were not enough to accommodate the crowds that waited in line during exhibitions in New York. Special Saturday morning matinees had to be given for New York's 2,000,000 school children. Every grown-up person as well as every child clamored to see them.

These are the first and only Submarine Motion Pictures ever made. There is a thrill in every foot of these exciting views. The terrific combat between a man and a man-eating shark under the water is a dare-devil feat that makes any other combat pictured in drama or film seem as child's play.

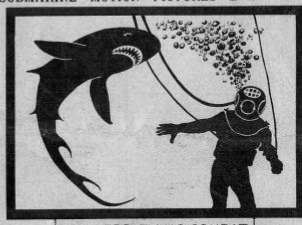
"Mr. Williamson took his life in his hands and accomplished something no daredevil will ever be able to outdo."—N. Y. EVE. SEC.

Touring under the Sole Direction of FRANK C. PAYNE, 1482 Broadway, N. Y.

THE WILLIAMSON SUBMARINE EXPEDITION PRESENTS

THIRTY LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA

FIRST AND ONLY
SUBMARINE MOTION PICTURES EVER MADE



THE TERRIFYING COMBAT
BETWEEN MAN AND SHARK

Jules Verne's Fantastic Dream Come True

NEW NIXON THEATRE
APOLLO THEATRE
ATLANTIC CITY

3 DAYS THURSDAY, OCT. 15

3 PERFORMANCES DAILY—MAT. at 3 P. M. EVENING at
7.30 and 9 O'CLOCK. PRICES 10c., 25c. and 50c.

Address all Communications to FRANK C. PAYNE, 1482 Broadway, N. Y.

Fig 2: Courtesy of Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, Inc.

"The Most Wonderful Photographs in the World"—Dr. Paul Bartsch, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.

"THIRTY LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA" WITH THE WILLIAMSON SUBMARINE EXPEDITION



"OLD GLORY" THE UNNAMED FISH



COMBAT BETWEEN MAN & MAN-EATING SHARK



SCENE IN THE FAMOUS MARINE GARDENS IN WEST INDIES

The Williamson Submarine Expedition to the West Indies PRESENTS

"THIRTY LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA"

In Three Parts
First performance at any stage was given before an audience of scientists at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington on June 18, 1914.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

PART ONE

Reel One.—Leaving New York. Arriving at Nassau, Capital of the Bahama Islands, three days later. First view of a motion picture ever made under water. Native diving for coins. How submarine motion pictures were made in daytime and at midnight. The Williamson invention of the submarine tube and operating chamber on the "Jules Verne". The pilot fish that rides the deep on a shark.

Reel Two.—Jules Verne's dream comes true. A trip under the sea from Nassau to San Salvador (Watling's Island), where Columbus first landed on the Western World. Coral reefs, sunken shipwrecks, living corals, marine gardens, subaqueous forests and the many strange fishes of the tropical Atlantic Ocean.

Reel Three.—Return trip. First under-the-sea view of ocean meadows and the cannibal sharks. Immense cauliflower sponges six feet high, sea whips, sea ferns, corallines. "Old Glory," the strange fish no scientist ever saw before.

PART TWO

Reel One.—Gala day in Nassau. Sponge fleet and sponge fishing on the floor of the ocean.

Reel Two.—Perils of deep-sea diving. Mr. George M. Williamson explores a 100-year-old wreck on a sunken coral reef.

PART THREE

Reel One.—Shark fishing, showing the fury of the ocean monsters when hooked.

Reel Two.—Shark hunting. Combat between a man and a man-eating shark. Mr. J. Ernest Williamson, inventor of the Submarine Photographic Chamber, engages in a life-and-death battle with a four-foot blue shark under the water—the most daring feat ever photographed.



FOREST UNDER THE OCEAN



PARROT-FISH



DEEP SEA DIVER EXPLORING A WRECK



NATIVE BAHAMA BOYS DIVING FOR COINS

"There is Nothing to Equal This Picture of a Man Fighting a Shark in His Natural Element"—Charles Darnton, N. Y. Eve. World.

Fig 3: Courtesy of Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, Inc.

The ads highlight the capacity of underwater images to prompt awe and wonder in early film audiences. One handbill promises 'all the hidden romance of hidden

depths....Words cannot express the fascination of these pictures' (Fig 2). Coverage of a June 1914 presentation of the same film at the Washington Smithsonian Institution echoes the same enthusiasm in comments from the zoologist and underwater film camera inventor, Dr Paul Bartsch. Bartsch describes the film's underwater scenes as simply 'the most wonderful photographs in the world' (Fig.3). The same rhetoric of wonder is repeated in intertitles from Stuart Paton's 1916 Jules Verne adaptation. An extended montage sequence early in the film (Fig. 4) presents a panoply of 'marvelous mysteries of the deep', including the exotic fish species featured in shot 1; the shipwreck in shot 2, purportedly of an American Civil war blockade runner; and the ubiquitous 'ocean tiger'—the shark that recurs as a repeated trope throughout Williamson's early film work, as in the final image in this sequence, when an Atlantic shark glides into view in the background of the shot.



Fig.4: Source: *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* (Stuart Paton, Universal Studios: 1916).

In the century that has passed since the Williamsons' early experiments, filmmakers from countries spanning North and South American, Europe, New Zealand, and of course The Bahamas itself have turned repeatedly for underwater location shooting to the ocean space around the archipelago. A film database compiled by the Bahamas Film Culture Project has so far identified over 130 productions using underwater location footage from the Bahamas since 1912. Some titles from our in-house database are listed in the Bahamas Film and Television Commission (BFTC)'s [online inventory](#) of 'impressive...productions' shot in Bahamian locations. Signature titles listed by the BFTC include the James Bond classics THUNDERBALL (1965) and THE SPY WHO LOVED ME (1977); JAWS: THE REVENGE (1987); the action adventure AROUND THE WORLD UNDER THE SEA (1966); and FLIPPER'S NEW ADVENTURE (1964), the first of several Flipper dolphin films shot on location in The Bahamas.

The global recognition of these iconic titles confirms the Bahamas' significance as an underwater location for entertainment film. Research for our Bahamas Film Culture project points, however, to a more diverse genre history, as well as a postcolonial and activist story that needs to be told of Bahamian underwater film. Our website features work for instance by independent filmmakers whose recent work highlights the centrality of maritime experience for archipelagic cultural and social heritage. Anthropologists and historians of The Bahamas gesture regularly to the archipelago's specific history as one of several maritime Caribbean territories economically and socially 'oriented...toward the sea' (Hannerz, 1974: 20). Writing of the Bahamian nation as the inheritor of a centuries-long history of exploration, slave trading, piracy, wrecking, bootlegging, fishing, migration, maritime trade, and ocean tourism, cultural anthropologist Nicolette Bethel speaks similarly of a 'fundamental Bahamian lesson: that survival depends not on the land but on the sea' (Bethel 2000: 8). This maritime disposition has in recent years fostered an independent film culture that foregrounds narratives of archipelagic and regional marine mobility. Standout examples include Maria Govan's beguiling coming-of-age tale of an adolescent Family Island child who relocates by sea to Nassau, *RAIN* (2008); or Kareem Mortimer's two titles to date dealing with people-trafficking from Haiti via The Bahamas to the US mainland: the short film *PASSAGE* (2013), and the full-length feature *CARGO* (2017), nominated for prizes including the Miami Film Festival Best Film 2017.

Producer-director Lavado Stubbs, who specialises in documentary, music video and promotional film, takes Bahamian undersea film in the different direction of environmental and postcolonial activism. His short film, [BODIES OF WATER](#) (2021), is a poetic meditation on ocean histories of slavery, colonial violence and mass death in the middle passage. The film is a companion piece to further activist and public information films by Stubbs including [CONCH GONE](#) (2017), a music video thematising the overfishing of the islands' iconic shellfish delicacy; and the 2019 documentary [PLASTIC WARRIORS](#), featuring Bahamas Plastic Movement founder and environmental activist Kristal 'Ocean' Ambrose.

Stubbs' films were developed by his production company Conchboy Films in collaboration variously with the [Bahamas National Trust](#), the [Bahamas Plastic](#)

[Movement](#), and [Only One](#), a digital platform whose mission is to provide a ‘new home for stories, solutions and community action to protect the ocean, tackle the climate crisis, and help fuel the movement for a more just, equitable planet.’ These and other collaborative ventures reorient Bahamian filmic vision away from mainstream genre features, using ‘useful films’ (information and public education films, motivational shorts etc.) as well as documentary or experimental film and realist drama to foster engagement instead with Afro-Bahamian maritime histories as well as sustainable marine and human futures.

But the new Bahamian independents also point towards possible future re-purposings of the Bahamian underwater film archive. Fig. 5 is an extract from Bahamas Film Culture Project records showing just sixteen of the ca. 130 titles so far documented in our growing database of Bahamas underwater film. The extract centres on the early silent period and is even here not fully comprehensive. Omitted for instance are early amateur and travel films, as well as films mentioned occasionally in existing literature but whose production and exhibition history remains obscure.

Date	Title	Director	Genre	Runtime
	Native Woman Washing a Negro Baby in Nassau	anon	Documentary	01'41"
1903	Nassau	anon	Documentary	01'41"
1916	A Pineapple Plantation	Carl Gregory	Documentary	unknown
1914	Thirty Leagues under the Sea	Carl Gregory	Adventure	60'
1914	In the Tropical Seas	Carl Gregory	Adventure	15'
1916	20,000 Leagues under the Sea	Stuart Paton	Adventure	105'
1917	The Submarine Eye	J.Winthrop Kelley	Adventure	ca.80'
1917	A Deep-Sea Tragedy	anon	Short	unknown
1920	Girl of the Sea	J.Winthrop Kelley	Melodrama	ca.60'
1920	The Idol Dancer	D.W.Griffith	Drama	104'
1921	Wet Gold	Ralph Ince	Adventure	ca.60'
1922	Wonders of the Sea	J.Ernest Williamson	Documentary	60'
1923	You Can't Fool Your Wife/Celles qui souffrent	George Melfod	Drama	60'
1924	The Uninvited Guest	Ralph Ince	Drama	1h10'
1929	The Mysterious Island/L'île mystérieuse	Lucien Hubbard, Benjamin Christiansen	Adventure, Sci-fi	95'
1935	20th Century Fox Travel Films	various	Non-fiction	n/a
1932	With Williamson Beneath the Sea	J.Ernest Williamson	Non-fiction	unknown
1939	Sea Floor Post Office filming starts	John Ernest Williamson		

Fig. 5: Extract: Underwater Film Database: ©Bahamas Film Culture Project

However truncated it may as yet be, our inventory already highlights the heterogeneity of the undersea film legacy bequeathed to Bahamas film culture by early film. Many of the sixteen titles listed here are lost; but there remain extant copies to which access is

enhanced by digitised collections in national film libraries and museums. The US Library of Congress open access streaming platform hosts our list's earliest water-themed title, the 1903 ethnographic film fragment NEGRO WOMAN WASHING A NEGRO BABY. EYE Filmmuseum, Amsterdam, houses three early Williamson titles, and is the source of our website's Thanouser Corporation digital copy of IN THE TROPICAL SEAS. Video sharing platforms and digital libraries including YouTube, Vimeo, and the Internet Archive host further early titles including Stuart Paton's 1916 20,000 LEAGUES (Internet Archive) and D.W.Griffith's 1920 'story of the southern seas', THE IDOL DANCER (YouTube).

A DVD version still in circulation of Jules Verne adaptation THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND (1929) completes the picture of a digital turn that has enhanced global access to early Bahamian film heritage. There remains work to be done to repatriate digitally and physically analogue copies that remain stranded in European archives, including *Girl of the Sea* (1920), archived at BFI London; or Ralph Ince's THE UNINVITED GUEST (1924), advertised on its release as a 'pulsating love-drama of the South Seas', shot with 'natural color scenes' in Technicolor, but held today out of reach at Russia's Gosfilmofond just outside Moscow.

In the meantime, researchers, students, filmmakers or island visitors exploring already digitally accessible titles will encounter footage that brings vividly to life the marine experiences shaping Bahamian cultural memory. Those memories will be as ambivalent and often troubling as are the histories from which they emerge. IN THE TROPICAL SEAS, for instance, is notable for its crude colonial stereotyping of the hapless black diver and his heroic white companion. The film centres narratively on a native diver (not named in the credits) who tries and fails to kill a shark. He is replaced by a heroic white fisherman (J.E.Williamson), who dives for the shark and emerges victorious. Visually, too the film establishes conventions for a long-lasting touristic cult of Bahamian racial spectacle. Thompson for instance names IN THE TROPICAL SEAS as an early example of a tourist visual culture organized around spectacular performances of black Bahamian ethnicity (Thompson 2006: 166-9). The exotic native diver is ubiquitous in this visual landscape—as in Fig. 6, when a muscular fisherman poses to camera with a turtle he has effortlessly plucked from teeming Bahamian waters.



Fig 6: IN THE TROPICAL SEAS (Carl Gregory, 1914)

Characters in blackface lend a further tropical frisson to adventure narratives shot in The Bahamas: actor Allen Holubar, for instance, performs his Captain Nemo in blackface in Stuart Paton's 1916 20,000 LEAGUES (Fig.7).



Fig. 7: Allen Holubar in blackface as Captain Nemo: 20,000 LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA (Stuart Paton, 1916)

Yet there are aspects of the films that pull against racial narratives of black exoticism and white physical supremacy. In all these early films, long observational sequences chart underwater journeys through worlds that are never unequivocally dominated by colonial masters or a tourist white elite. The divers who figure in the Williamsons' films were recruited from cohorts of young black Bahamians who made their living diving for coins for the entertainment of tourists (Fig. 8 and 9).



Fig. 8. From *Moving Picture World*, n.d. Source: Thanhouser Film Corporation, Inc.

Staging spectacular underwater performances for the Williamsons' camera, the divers showcase underwater and maritime skills (swimming, diving, navigating, fishing) acquired through long histories of black maritime labour as well as expert knowledge of marine environments. The Williamsons' dependence on that knowledge is evident from sequences in the films where the 'native diver' takes charge, hauling marine hunting trophies into view for the camera (Fig.10), or working on the sea floor, where the Williamsons set Bahamian divers to work clearing ground for underwater sets.

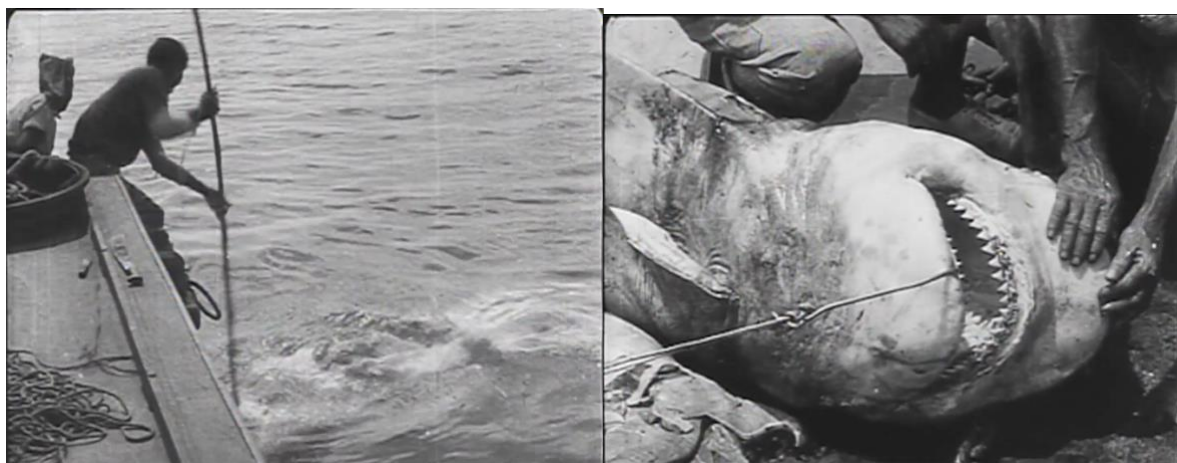


Fig. 10: IN THE TROPICAL SEAS (Carl Gregory, 1914)

We might think also, finally, of the marine locations so beautifully captured in Williamson's early twentieth-century films. This lost world of submarine abundance has since been degraded or destroyed by systematic overfishing, habitat destruction, and pollution, including from the mass tourism that paradoxically sustains the Bahamas economy, while also posing unique threats to natural habitats. For film scholar Jon Crylen, movies of the sea become in this context 'the ocean's amber, preserving, for a time.....life forms that have vanished' (Crylen, 2015: 196). But as Lavado Stubbs' much later BODIES OF WATER (2021) suggests, underwater film gives us more than traces of lost pasts. It is a storehouse also for stories of different futures. Stubbs' film is studded with stunning underwater sequences, offering the ocean, in [the filmmakers' words](#), as a resource that 'links...worlds—past and present, suffering and restoration, exploitation and preservation.' As this essay has suggested, revisitings of early underwater film may perhaps match the spirit evoked by BODIES OF WATER of a search for viable futures in

ocean pasts. We certainly hope to have whetted your appetite through our work on this website for just such a journey in time through Bahamian archive film.

All hyperlinks were active at the time of publication.

© Erica Carter. October 9, 2022

Recommended films

[*Native Woman Washing a Negro Baby in Nassau*](#) (anon, 1903)

In the Tropical Seas (Carl Gregory, 1914)

20,000 Leagues under the Sea (Stuart Paton, 1916)

[*The Idol Dancer*](#) (D.W.Griffith, 1920)

The Mysterious Island (Lucien Hubbard & Benjamin Christiansen, 1929) (DVD available from Warner Archives)

Rain (Maria Govan, 2008) (DVD available from [trigon-film](#))

[*Passage*](#) (Kareem Mortimer, 2013)

Cargo (Kareem Mortimer, 2019)

[*Conch Gone*](#) (Lavado Stubbs, 2017)

[*Plastic Warriors*](#) (Lavado Stubbs, 2019)

[*Bodies of Water*](#) (Lavado Stubbs, 2021)

Reading and links

[Nicolette Bethel, *Navigations. The Fluidity of Identity in the Post-Colonial Bahamas*](#). D.Phil diss., University of Cambridge, 2000.

Jon Crylen, 'Aquariums, Diving Equipment, and the Undersea Films of John Ernest Williamson,' in James Leo Cahill & Luca Caminati, eds., *Cinema of Exploration. Essays on an Adventurous Film Practice*. London & New York: Routledge, 2020, Ch.9.

Jonathan Christopher Crylen, *The cinematic aquarium: a history of undersea film*, PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) thesis, University of Iowa, 2015. Available at [Iowa Research Online](#).

Ann Elias, *Coral Empire. Underwater Oceans, Colonial Tropics, Visual Modernity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019

Ulf Hannerz, *Caymanian Politics: structure and style in a changing island society*. Stockholm: Stockholm Studies in Social Anthropology, 1974.

Sonia Schechet Epstein and Sam Benezra, '[Nautical Film](#)', *Sloan Science and Film*, July 13, 2018.

Nicole Starosielski, 'Beyond fluidity: A cultural history of cinema under water', in Stephen Rust, Salma Monani & Sean Cubitt, eds., *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*. Taylor and Francis, pp. 149-168.

Krista A. Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics. Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006