

A poetics of planetary water: The blue humanities after John Gillis

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Abstract

The blue humanities in the early 2020s appears on the cusp of transformation. What has over the past 20 years or so been primarily scholarship about oceans and transoceanic travel has begun to take stock of other kinds of planetary water, including the water in human bodies, glacial ice, and water vapor. This article returns to the influence of one of the sub-discipline's important early figures, the late historian John Gillis. Thinking about Gillis's scholarship, his legacy, and recent work that has emerged recently in dialogue with it, this article charts new courses for blue humanities scholars in coming years.

Keywords

blue humanities, poetics, American literature, environmental humanities

Panting and snorting like a mad battle steed that has lost its rider, the masterless ocean
overruns the globe.

Moby-Dick (Ch 58, "Brit")

Scholarship in the blue humanities, coastal history, and related fields during the early decades of the 21st century has been dazzled by oceanic vastness. As Helen Rozwadowski eloquently frames the subject in *Vast Expanses*, her one-volume history of the ocean, the "world ocean" comprises "the dominant feature of planet Earth."¹ The massive circulating systems that connect all the saltwater basins on the surface of our planet have captured the attention of scholars in multiple fields. As ocean-focused scholarly discourses have been

¹Helen Rozwadowski, *Vast Expanses: A History of the Oceans*, (London: Reaktion, 2018) 7.

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maturing and connecting with each other, attention has radiated out from oceans to include rivers, lakes, glaciers, and many other forms of water.² The rapid growth of blue scholarship across literary studies, environmental history, anthropology, art, and related discourses has produced a riot of intellectual plurality in the early 21st century. As the seas rise, oceanic scholarship has been spilling its bounds. This article proposes that many of these intellectual currents of thought can be conceptualized under the rubric of a “poetics of planetary water.” The flexible and speculative nature of this concept enables it to speak across multiple disciplines, geographies, and human histories. In particular, a focus on planetary water aims to respond to the special concerns of today’s eco-catastrophic times. The aims of watery criticism, to adapt a phrase, include both describing the complex workings of water in our environment and also imagining ways to change our relationships to it. While many neologisms have been proposed, from hydrocriticism to critical ocean studies to ocean history, the sub-disciplinary modes of historical and literary studies often gather themselves together under the banners of “coastal history” and the “blue humanities.”³ This article explores the current relationship between historical and literary water-studies through examining the legacy of a founding voice in these conversations, the late John Gillis. An environmental historian who penned one of the first public essays on the blue humanities, Gillis’s influential work models ways to analyze a range of geographies and physical forms that scholars are now beginning to explore.

The project of describing blue humanities scholarship in the first decades of the 21st century embraces a wide range of academic writing, artistic work, and activism on many continents. In presenting the outlines of this discourse here, I return to some foundational poetic texts for me and my local watery environments, speaking as an American who lives on the northeastern coast of the United States. The two poetic fragments that sit at the center of this analysis, by Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, represent intimate encounters between human bodies and planetary water. They also, not coincidentally, frame my own personal oceanic geography. Whitman’s poem describes swimming off an Atlantic Beach on Long Island or perhaps New Jersey. Dickinson draws on the Massachusetts coastline, just a bit up the ragged edge of the continent to the northeast. My personal daily ocean is in Connecticut, roughly midway between these two poets and poems. I emphasize these specific oceanic margins because of my commitment to linking human-sized encounters to planetary scales. Bringing a little splash of my local Atlantic into a global scholarly conversation will keep these thoughts tangible and direct, even though the poetics I outline operates across planet-sized, human-sized, and other scales.

²On varied types of water in literary history, see Margaret Cohen, “Chronotypes of the Sea,” *The Novel, Vol. 2*, Franco Moretti, ed., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) pp. 647-66. On ice in the global water-system, see Hester Blum, *The News at the Ends of the Earth: The Print Culture of Polar Exploration*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019). For an overview of multiple forms of water in ecocritical studies, see Steve Mentz, “Ice/Water/Vapor,” *The Cambridge Companion to Environmental Humanities*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Stephanie Foote, eds., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) pp. 185-98.

³Origin stories for academic terms are often suspect, but the phrase “coastal history” appears to have been coined by Isaac Land in 2007; along with his fellow editors Land has been advancing this discourse in the new journal *Coastal Studies & Society*. I first used the terms “blue humanities” and “blue cultural studies” in print around 2009. Neither of us, of course, can claim any exclusive rights to these now widely dispersed phrases and ideas.

My analysis of Dickinson and Whitman, along with works by Gillis, scholarship from a variety of water-scholars, and brief consideration of a recent book of an English nature writer, will help me consider connections between different locations, modes of relationship, and human encounters with water. The scholarship of John Gillis links these literary and critical modes while also suggesting possible future directions for coastal history and blue humanities scholarship moving forward.

In moving beyond oceans, blue humanities scholarship follows an impulse that has long been present in oceanic writing. Among the greatest literary explorations of the human attraction to the sea, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, demonstrates this spillover. One of the most widely quoted phrases from the novel holds that "meditation and water are wedded for ever."⁴ This phrase, however, does not exclusively describe the salt sea that is the novel's primary setting. It instead emerges from the narrator Ishmael's contemplation of desert wells, the Hudson estuary, and the god-infused springs of Greek myth. The salt water refrains that populate the novel, including the rousing appeal to the "masterless ocean" that comprises this article's epigraph, emphasize how the great waters "overrun" all boundaries. The ongoing shift in blue humanities scholarship from a largely saltwater and liquid focus to more varied analyses of planetary water reflects the expansive impulse behind Melville's concept of oceanic poetics. To surge over boundaries and encircle the globe requires us to embrace not only each bay and basin but also comparatively smaller bodies of fresh water, including both solid ice and water vapor. A poetics of planetary water does not so much turn its back on the sea as follow ocean-logic to its natural conclusions.

The term "poetics" captures the dynamism of blue humanities thinking because in its English form it appears both as singular and plural. The term "poetics" in this article functions as a singular concept: a poetics of planetary water aims to clarify the relationships between humans and water in all its forms and phases. As the OED observes, however, the English word "poetics" has taken both singular and plural verbs in historical usage. The core meaning of the word for my critical purposes takes poetics to name a "theory of form" (OED 1b). This usage takes a singular verb, though hints of plurality cling to the concept. In a broad sense, my use of the term poetics echoes Aristotle's descriptive approach, in which the philosopher describes what poetry is by observing the examples he has to hand. The key term in Aristotle's poetics is *mimesis*, or "modes of imitation."⁵ The particular structures that Aristotle builds out of his reading of Homer and Greek drama are less applicable here than his general sense that poetics must be a system of representations. Aristotle's claim that poetics combines pleasure and pain seems especially noteworthy for a blue humanities focus on the watery parts of the world that both allure and threaten human bodies. Aristotle notes the particular pleasure of representing something that can be painful: "though the objects themselves may be painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them" (227). This pleasure that

⁴Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, Hershel Parker, and Harrison Hayford, eds. (New York: Norton Critical Edition, 2002) p. 39.

⁵Aristotle, *The Rhetoric and The Poetics of Aristotle*, Friedrich Solmsen, ed. and trans., (New York: Modern Library, 1954) p. 223.

emerges from the threat of pain represents an important element in blue aesthetics. A poetics that emerges from an encounter with alienating water always relates itself to the awkward relationship of humans and water; we depend upon it and love it, but it cannot be our home. The human-water relationship occupies the realm Aristotle names “poetics” in that it is not exclusively part of the fully human world that he theorizes as politics, or the science of the *polis*. “[T]here is not the same kind of correctness in poetry,” the philosopher writes, “as in politics” (260). The pleasure-pain of poetic order instead asks humans to touch and engage with more-than-human beings and systems.

This article aims to construct a poetics of planetary water that emphasizes the flexibility and dynamism implicit in the term poetics. It aims to build this poetics atop the intellectual legacy and imagined future trajectories developed by John Gillis. Further, this article builds on the memory of Gillis’s hospitality and generosity as scholar and colleague. My desire to pay tribute to that legacy may generate rather more personal reflections that are typically present in academic articles. I include these reflections alongside my scholarly analysis in order to demonstrate the human as well as the intellectual legacies of Gillis’s life and career. Scholarship includes bodies and spaces as well as ideas and arguments.

Three Phases of Planetary Water

Cultural analysis of the multi-phasic nature of the human encounter with water can begin with a famous phrase from Evangelista Torricelli. The sixteenth-century Italian humanist and scientist, inventor of the barometer, once remarked that humans live “at the bottom of a vast sea of air.”⁶ Torricelli accurately described the surface of our planet as covered by two bodies, a heavy and liquid one above which humans usually float, and a lighter gaseous one to the bottom of which we generally sink. Alongside these two oceans we should also add the global presence of ice, sometimes called the cryosphere. In our current inter-glacial period, the ice-ocean has been fragmented into a few large icecaps near the poles, including those on Antarctica and Greenland, and high-altitude glaciers atop major mountain ranges. Blue humanities and coastal history scholarship tends to oscillate between rigorous materiality and attention to detail, and more expansive or poetic ideas.⁷ For literary writers and scholars, the ocean seems especially attractive because of its metaphorical vastness. The great waters represent a principle of narrative fecundity that Salman Rushdie has described as the “sea of stories.”⁸ This ocean, in Rushdie’s formulation, constructs an allegory for literary history and literary culture on a global, connected scale.

⁶John B. West, “Torricelli and the Ocean of Air: The First Measurements of Barometric Pressure,” 2013: https://journals.physiology.org/doi/full/10.1152/physiol.00053.2012?rfr_dat=cr_pub++0pubmed&url_ver=Z39.88-2003&rfr_id=ori%3Arid%3Aacrossref.org. Accessed 12 May 2022.

⁷Metaphor remains important to blue humanities thinking even though a signature rallying cry for oceanic literary scholarship has long insisted, in Hester Blum’s words, that “the sea is not a metaphor.” Hester Blum, “The Prospect of Oceanic Studies,” *PMLA* 125:3 (2010) 670-77.

⁸Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (New York: Granta, 1991).

But that ocean is not all the water that humans encounter. Above the ocean, clouds circulate as ephemeral fragments of water vapor and water droplets. The sea of air contains massive amounts of water—roughly 142 million-billion liters in total—but that vapor hangs mostly unseen, occasionally forming into the visible patterns of clouds. While much could be said about the poetics of humidity, I will explore clouds today as the most visible representations of water in the atmosphere.⁹ I take my cue from a famous exchange in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. The prince, in mockery and in jest, attempts to interpret clouds. “Do you see yonder cloud,” he says to the counselor Polonius, “that’s almost in shape of a camel?” (3.2.367-68).¹⁰ His interlocutor, good subject to the royal throne, concurs: “By th’ mass and ‘tis like a camel indeed” (3.369). The counselor goes on to agree, as Hamlet’s mind changes, that the cloud is “backed like a weasel” (3.2.371) and “Very like a whale” (3.2.373). The joke that camels are unlike weasels are unlike whales somewhat obscures the more complex interpretive issue. The hybridization that Polonius accomplishes as cloud-reader, in which he starts with an initial identification, camel, then bends it into two new forms, weasel and whale, essentially follows a hybridizing theory of interpreting forms of water. Clouds appear as many different things to prince and advisor. Hamlet and Polonius may only be pretending to read cloud shapes—the scene takes place indoors and at night, though perhaps the playwright is imagining outdoor views from the open-air Globe Theater—but the two characters are on some level theorizing about how vaporous forms assume multiple meanings. The prince’s efforts to appear smarter than the old man he will murder in their next scene together do not fully cut through the interpretive problems that clouds pose. Hamlet’s building aggression toward Polonius does, however, obscure the imaginative flexibility of the older man. Clouds are camels, weasels, whales, and other shapes. The challenge is devising a language to understand their forms.

Often with reference to this passage in *Hamlet*, clouds are sometimes taken to represent a prototypical problem for hermeneutics. John Durham Peters, in his brilliant book *The Marvelous Clouds* (2015), notes that “clouds are often thought of as the thing par excellence without inherent meaning.”¹¹ Peters further suggests that clouds represent “a crucial step in the prehistory of recording media” (259), and he notes that they “resist ontology” (260). Lorraine Daston, in a 2016 analysis of nineteenth-century scientific and artistic efforts to categorize cloud shapes, suggests that this project demonstrates the limits of categorization itself. “All classification,” she observes, “depends on some degree of abstraction from the blooming, buzzing world of particulars.”¹² Clouds, she continues, challenge all projects of classifying Nature. Bringing clouds, as Daston describes the process, from “Ovidian fluidity to Linnaean fixity” (48) represents a key task of the cloud atlas makers she explores. Her contrast implies a structural opposition between the Enlightenment scientist and the classical

⁹For some brief remarks on humidity in William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and elsewhere, see Mentz, “Ice/Water/Vapor,” pp. 187-88.

¹⁰William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, eds., (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006) p. 323. Further citations in the text by act, scene, and line numbers.

¹¹John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016) 254.

¹²Lorraine Daston, “Cloud Physiognomy: Describing the Indescribable,” *Representations* 135 (Summer 2016) 45-71, 48.

poet. Ovid, unlike Linneaus, invites a poetic interpretive frame. Combining Daston's exploration of scientific practices with Peters's media analysis suggests that the connection in *Hamlet* between Polonius as naïve cloud-gazer and Polonius as goofy media theorist is not accidental. Neither static nor visible in the same aspect over time, clouds coalesce into forms briefly, fragmentarily, impermanently. Mobile water-in-air structures present all form and no substance, no clear lines of descent or connection but a tantalizing possibility of partial repetition over time. The critical water-thinker's task today distinguishes itself from the cataloging projects of 19th century cloud morphologies. The project now asks us to assimilate fleeting clouds to robust if still dynamic forms.

The third, and for many humans the rarest, form of planetary water comprises the ice-ocean or cryosphere. Ice is the least mobile phase of planetary water, but as explorers and writers from John Davis to John Muir to Barry Lopez have emphasized, glacial ice feels alive.¹³ The paradoxical qualities of living ice have motivated recent blue humanities scholarship on the polar regions. Hester Blum has recently noted, in scholarship informed by her personal voyages to ice-filled latitudes, "Ice in the Arctic and Antarctic appears both silent and still and yet is spectacularly on the move, and not just in epochs of climate crisis: in its vibrance ice carves valleys, levels mountains, and deposits moraines over hundreds of miles."¹⁴ In an ecocritical analysis of early modern Arctic narratives, Lowell Duckert asserts that the "ice age is never over."¹⁵ Christopher Heuer's art historical study *Into the White: The Renaissance Arctic and the End of the Image* describes the recovery of a frozen cache of engravings from the doomed expedition of Willem Barents to Novaya Zemlya in 1596-97 as representing the "frozen words" of premodern explorers.¹⁶ These and other scholars of planetary ice, from adventure writers such as Bill Streever to Indigenous activists such as Sheila Watt-Cloutier, demonstrate that the ice-ocean is as dynamic and humanly present as the liquid and vaporous oceans, even if ice is not very accessible for the human populations that live in temperate and tropical regions.¹⁷ The celebrated opening sentence of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, figures ice as unimaginable for a young boy growing up on the northern coast of Colombia. "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad," the novel opens, "Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice."¹⁸ Solid water represents the impossible

¹³See, for example, *The Voyages and Works of John Davis the Navigator*, Albert Hastings Markham, ed., (London: Routledge, 2016); *John Muir: Nature Writings*, William Cronon, ed. (New York: Library of America, 1997); Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in an Arctic Landscape*, (New York: Vintage, 2001).

¹⁴Hester Blum, *The News at the Ends of the Earth: The Print Culture of Polar Exploration*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019) 9.

¹⁵Lowell Duckert, *For All Waters: Finding Ourselves in Early Modern Wetscapes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017) 146.

¹⁶Christopher Huer, *Into the White: The Renaissance Arctic and the End of the Image*, (New York: Zone Books, 2019) 164.

¹⁷Bill Streever, *Cold: Adventures in the World's Frozen Places* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009); Sheila Watt-Cloutier, *The Right to Be Cold: One Woman's Fight to Protect the Arctic and Save the Planet from Climate Change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

¹⁸Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gregory Rabassa, trans. (New York: Harper, 1970) 1.

magic of the world outside for the young boy, a distant glimpse of oceans far beyond his own Caribbean.

Even as my turn toward poetic texts will guide me toward human-scaled beach scenes, I want to keep all three of these world-seas in mind. My hope is to devise a way of interpreting oceanic poetry that embraces all aspects of planetary water. Poetry and poetics seem powerful tools for this project because poems originate in and are directed to individual humans while also imagining vaster scales. The pressure of human-sized encounters generates mobile reminders that water permeates our planetary existence across multiple contexts: roughly 70% of the planet's surface is covered by liquid and solid water, human bodies are composed of approximately 60% liquid water, and the gaseous atmosphere contains around 4% water vapor. Human bodies and cultures form themselves in encounters with water in all three physical phases, liquid, solid, and gas. Water is, in fact, the only substance commonly present in all three phases, though by applying heat and pressure all compounds can be liquefied or boiled.

These multiple forms of planetary water can be integrated into what I recently called an inclusive blue humanities.¹⁹ While I previously used the term inclusive to indicate openness to multiple human cultures and their ways of conceptualizing the waters, I am also committed to exploring how multiple forms of water shape human bodies, and human histories. Different narratives become legible through our depictions of liquid salt and fresh water, gaseous vapor, and solid ice.²⁰ The globe-embracing ocean of stories contains and constrains the circulation of literary narratives, texts, cultures, and traditions. Above the great waters, invisible but also circulating, the semi-translucent sea of air overflows with ephemeral fragments, forms without substance, lacking clear lines of descent but hanging heavy in the air like fog. To reconcile these forms of circulation into a flexible and interwoven theory of planetary water as subject and driver of human culture remains an unfinished task of 21st century ecocritical literary studies.

The Example of John Gillis: “The Blue Humanities” (2013)

In placing recent humanities scholarship about water in context, I will engage centrally with the works of John Gillis, who died at the end of 2021 in California. The final decades of Gillis's career saw him publish two influential books in maritime environmental history, *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World* in 2004, and *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History* in 2012. I will introduce Gillis's legacy, however, through a short open-access essay that he wrote for the online magazine of the National Endowment of the Humanities in 2013, entitled “The Blue Humanities.”²¹

¹⁹See Steve Mentz and James Smith, “Learning an Inclusive Blue Humanities: Oceania and Academia through the Lens of Cinema,” *Humanities* 9, 67 (2020). <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/9/3/67>. Accessed 12 May 2022.

²⁰See Steve Mentz, “Ice/Water/Vapor,” *The Cambridge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Stephanie Foote, eds., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) 185-98.

²¹John Gillis, “The Blue Humanities” *Humanities: The Journal of the National Endowment for the Humanities*. Unpaginated web publication. <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2013/mayjune/feature/the-blue-humanities>. Accessed 12 May 2022.

The current oceanic turn in historical and literary scholarship was already very much underway by that time, in part through Gillis's own efforts, and I had been testing the terms "blue humanities" or "blue cultural studies" in publications since around 2009.²² In a generous summation of recent and ongoing work, Gillis's short article contextualizes the "cultural turn to the sea" as part of a trend he calls the "historicization of the oceans." Drawing on disciplines from archeology, anthropology, maritime history, biology, and environmental history, as well as widely on poetry, painting, narrative fiction, and other arts, Gillis frames human cultural history around a series of discoveries of new global oceans, including the discovery by European mariners of transoceanic trade routes in the 15th century and the fictional discoveries of writers such as Herman Melville, Richard Henry Dana, Daniel Defoe, and others in the 18th and 19th centuries. Beyond his focus on Romantic and modern ideas about the sea, which he reads as being intertwined with the progressive alienation of industrial societies from a former "working knowledge of the sea," Gillis treats the great waters as a resource for the imagination. Engaging with literary critic Margaret Cohen's ideas about the "sublimation of the sea," Gillis puts forward a paradoxical dual motion.²³ As the sea receded from the everyday working life of non-professional sailors, it increasingly grew to be more and more central to the cultural imagination. "We have come to know the sea," he concludes, "as much through the humanities as through science." Artistic, poetic, and humanistic knowledge, he insists, define the sea's centrality to modern Western culture.

I first read this article in 2013, two years after meeting Gillis at a conference and later visiting him with my son on the remote island on the Maine coast where he often spent the summer months. I remember feeling particularly pleased that he cited me as the coiner of the phrase "blue humanities," because reading my name in his article reflected my ideas back to me, in the way that a reader's response can convince a writer that all this thinking is not happening in isolation. The animating idea of Gillis's article, that in returning to the ocean "we are returning to our beginnings," seems both demonstrably true and also a partial deflection away from the challenges of the environmental present. Since the early 2010s I have been phrasing the project a bit differently. The reason to study the water today, as I would phrase the point now, is that we are going to be seeing more of it, closer up, in the future. Rising sea levels and high-intensity rainstorms are making our environment wetter. Higher temperatures produce heavier rains, since warm air holds more moisture. I have witnessed disorientingly tropical rainstorms locally in my non-tropical neighborhood in Connecticut. Even in high elevation areas such as Switzerland, glacial melt and retreat will fracture long-established waterscapes. Global climate change defines the central challenge of the current generation, and I turn to water in all its forms during the age of climate change to make sense of our disrupted ecosystems.

The changes in planetary water emerging from climate instability are not best represented by distant polar bears or the threatened Thwaites Glacier in Antarctica. Water

²²See Steve Mentz, "Toward a Blue Cultural Studies: The Sea, Maritime Culture, and Early Modern English Literature," *Literature Compass* 6/5 (2009): 997-1013, and *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009).

²³Margaret Cohen, *The Novel and the Sea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012) pp. 106-08.

changes appear intimately and tangibly. We feel them on our skin. One of the closing details in Gillis's "Blue Humanities" essay takes up the heroic case of Rachel Carson, perhaps the greatest and most influential American writer about the sea during the 20th century. Carson, who like Gillis spent much of her professional life on the Atlantic seaboard of the United States, focused her scientific and poetic attention on tide pools and beaches, as well as writing powerfully about the ecosystems of the deep oceans. It appears, however, as Gillis notes, that she "never really learned to swim." For an everyday swimmer like me whose understanding of water is inseparable from immersing my body in oceans, pools, rivers, and lakes, I find that a shocking fact. How would it feel to be Carson, gifted with a poet's eye and a biologist's training, while also being excluded from water's embrace? What insights are available from the beach? To explore that question, I will turn now to Emily Dickinson.

"An everywhere of silver"

There may be no more finely observed portrait of the beach than Emily Dickinson's tiny lyric, "An everywhere of silver." Written in 1865, the final year of the American Civil War, this poem miniaturizes the conflict of sea and land into an esthetic of barely contained rupture. In Dickinson's framing we stand on sand facing an alien sea:

An Everywhere of Silver,
 With Ropes of Sand
 To keep it from effacing
 The Track called Land.²⁴

The poem structures itself through three echoing lines, each of which has two strong stresses and two capitalized nouns. The first line features Everywhere of Silver, the second Ropes of Sand, the fourth the Track called Land. These three aurally repetitive lines encircle the weakly stressed and uncapitalized third line, with its central verb, "effacing." The action of effacing, which the poem both presents and disavows, communicates the vulnerability of sand and land to watery violence. The Silver does not efface the Land in this poem, but we all know what high tides do to marks upon the strand. Dickinson may well be thinking of Edmund Spenser's famous Elizabethan sonnet, "One day I wrote her name upon the strand," but the association of the beach with impermanence was and remains familiar.²⁵ As so often in Dickinson's poetry, the tiny space of this poem captures objects in motion, the silver ocean spreading itself "Everywhere," the Sand twisted into Ropes, the Land humanized into Tracks. Our bodies do not get wet, as they do in some of

²⁴Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Ralph W. Franklin, ed., (Cambridge: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1999) 398.

²⁵Edmund Spenser, "One day I wrote her name..." *Amoretti 75*, *The New Oxford Book of Sixteenth-Century Verse*, Emrys Jones, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 282.

her other sea poems. The waterline conjures an alien space, a lure, and a temptation. Its surges will not efface the dry worlds on which humans walk, and yet we cannot help being drawn, perhaps by ropes of sand, toward the water. The sea-silver the poet presents feels like a cloud when you walk through it on an alpine hike—soft, wet, intangible, insistently present. Like Hamlet’s camel-weasel-whale clouds, Dickinson’s poem assumes new forms as we observe it. The lyric exercises our capacity to think multiply, a valuable technique for the blue humanities and other environmental critical modes.

Reading Dickinson’s poetry in the context of ecological crisis has led the literary ecocritic Anne-Lise Francois, in her extraordinary essay, “Ungiving Time: Reading Lyric by the Light of the Anthropocene,” to assert that the tensile instability of lyric make these poems especially well-suited to respond to environmental shifts in scale. “[I]n the suddenness with which they can shift gears without it feeling like a shock,” she writes, “poems can help make palpable the contradictions of the simultaneously slow and fast times of the Anthropocene.”²⁶ Francois demonstrates that Dickinson’s intricate formal tensions and releases, the animating music of her lines, moves her poetry in ecological directions. I will extend Francois’s reading in a watery direction by suggesting that the “Everywhere” of the nonhuman sea bears a distinctive environmental meaning for the poet. Salt water overwrites beaches and human bodies. Its “Silver” leaves us no dry place for our feet. But the formal pressure within the poetry, which Francois defines as “those delicate practices of transmission inseparable from the work of release and abandonment” (256), creates the poem as a beach of partial legibility, a blankness onto which human meaning can, for a time, make marks. Poems thus enable two slightly opposed human responses to rising seas and watery overflows: we accommodate ourselves to inevitable effacements, and we align ourselves to the Ropes and Tracks that, for now, keep us on human courses. In this sense, Dickinson’s beach is a cloud—one that has not yet rained down on us.

Standing at the water’s edge every year in late spring, I murmur Dickinson’s sea poems to myself. Each year, I recite “An Everywhere of Silver,” or sometimes the more famous “Exultation is the going,” to myself before my first swim of the season. I know no more inspiring environmental art than Dickinson’s poems. Her lines bring my body back into the cold water from which I have been excluded over a long winter. With my toes on wet sand, I think of Rachel Carson, who knew so much and wrote so insightfully but did not swim. This year in particular I will think of my departed friend John Gillis. And into that silver Everywhere I will plunge my body, shudder with cold, and meditate on how to endure in inhospitable environments. To support both my physical experiences and my thinking, poetry helps.

Theoretical Legacies: Islands and Shores

The scholarly work of John Gillis that most influences the blue humanities appeared primarily in his books *Islands of the Mind* and *The Human Shore*. These wide-ranging global histories have been especially inspiring because of the efforts Gillis made to focus

²⁶Anne-Lise Francois, “Ungiving Time: Reading Lyric by the Light of the Anthropocene,” *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times*, Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor, eds. (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2017) 239-58; 251.

on the imagination. He notes early in *Islands of the Mind* that the condition he explores, “isolomania” or obsession with islands, represents “in its many different guises a central feature of Western culture.”²⁷ He draws ideas about islands and oceans from many sources, but it seems revealing the first two quotations in the book are from the English novelist Lawrence Durrell and the American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan. The project, as Gillis presents it, combines creativity with geography. The more comprehensive *Human Shore* begins with the demographics of the global human population’s “unprecedented surge to the sea,” but it also turns to poetry on the next page, in this case a local Maine poet who lived near Gillis’s summer home on Great Gott Island.²⁸ These two books initiate an ocean-centric historiography that includes personal experiences, poetry, and fiction, as well as assorted methodologies in the social sciences, arts, and humanities.

In *Islands of the Mind*, the bridges that connect islands into archipelagos include literature. The island-centered world-making that, in Gillis’s work, focuses on transatlantic movements, has become in subsequent scholarship a principle of global connection with special relevance for our age of environmental disruption. In Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler’s recent book *Anthropocene Islands*, perhaps the most direct extension of Gillis’s early work, islands have become both “a figure for thought” and “key sites of ‘relational entanglements’ in the Anthropocene.”²⁹ Employing sophisticated eco-materialist theoretical vocabulary, including such terms as “correlation” and “storiation,” Pugh and Chandler present islands as key geographical concepts for an anxious age. “[T]he island,” they write, “has regularly been employed as a key figure which explicitly disrupts the grasp of modernist, linear and reductionist ‘mainland’ thinking” (5). Drawing especially on the post-colonial Caribbean writings of Édouard Glissant and Kamau Brathwaite, Pugh and Chandler half-perceive and half-create the island as both figure and reality. Like Gillis, they engage with historical realities through the lens of poetry.

Both their work and Gillis’s island-thinking connects, in an underwater context, to a recent book by the marine archeologist Sara Rich, who animates the presumed-dead spaces of wrecks in her book *Shipwreck Hauntography*. Rich’s ecotheoretical project enlivens the wreck and views it as assemblage and “gathering.”³⁰ To bring together the once-living and now-living objects that one encounters in the exploration of undersea shipwrecks entails creating what Pugh and Chandler would call “entanglement,” but which Rich terms “the autonomy that comes with brokenness” (231). She suggests that “the broken thing, the wrecked ship, refuses the *telos* imposed from beyond, and in *gathering* forces, it opens up to new becomings” (231, emphasis in original). These scholars employ eco-materialist and high theoretical terms that the more traditional

²⁷John Gillis, *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World*, (London: Palgrave, 2004) 1.

²⁸John Gillis, *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012) 1.

²⁹Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler, *Anthropocene Islands, Entangled Worlds*, (London: Westminster University Press, 2021) x-xi.

³⁰Sara Rich, *Shipwreck Hauntography: Underwater Ruins and the Uncanny*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021) 228.

historian Gillis mostly eschewed. But his model of global water-poetics infuses this new work.

The “alternative account of global history” (4) that Gillis presents in *The Human Shore* is vaster in geographic and chronological scale than *Islands of the Mind*. In identifying the coastline as “humankind’s first Eden” (38), Gillis gestures toward a deep cultural and biophysical affinity between humans and watery borders. Considering the expansion of beachfront real estate in the 21st century, he emphasizes that the beach is “the least natural place on earth” (172), despite its cultural affinity with the “pristine.” His insights about the connection between human bodies and water have been extended recently by eco-theoretical feminist scholarship. Melody Jue, who includes scuba diving in the kelp beds of southern California in her research practice, emphasizes in her book *Wild Blue Media* that she aims for “conceptual displacement as a method of defamiliarization to make our terrestrial origins visible.”³¹ What she calls a “science fictional method of thinking with the ocean” (6) seeks to interrogate the great waters as both “medium of change” and also “storage medium for the preservation of sunken objects” (112-13). “Seawater,” Jue emphasizes, “changes how we think about the porosity of embodiment” (19). Jue extends Gillis’s insights about human connections to water and coastal ecotones by engaging directly with undersea experience.

Jue’s analysis draws significantly on the feminist eco-materialist scholar Astrida Neimanis, who emphasizes with the title of her monograph that we humans are all *Bodies of Water*. This ecofeminist work also builds on Gillis’s foundational insights about humans and watery margins. Neimanis takes seriously the waters within and without human forms. She has recently provided a glimpse into the future of literary water-studies in dialogue with Black studies in a brilliant re-reading of Adrienne Rich’s celebrated poem of queer liberation, “Diving into the Wreck.” Neimanis’s analysis challenges us, by entangling Adrienne Rich’s queer feminist poetics with Christina Sharpe’s analysis of the “weather of antiblackness,” to read the mythic structures of descent in new ways, including ways that challenge racially innocent conceptions of white feminism and queerness.³² As Neimanis noted earlier in *Bodies of Water*, bodily water “can only serve as a connector *because* it expresses or facilitates difference.”³³ Expanding her notions of connection and distinction, she writes, “*Intimacy is not mastery*” (112, italics in original). Neimanis’s scholarship miniaturizes Gillis’s global oceanic history while it also informs Jue’s and Sara Rich’s underwater analyses. These works of embodied water-scholarship represent a theoretical far shore of responses to the pioneering work of Gillis and other ocean historians.

I distinctly remember reading *The Human Shore* for the first time. It was Monday 29th October 2012, the night that hurricane Sandy came onshore near New York City. Though the storm ended up doing most of its damage to the south and west of my home in Connecticut, the evening before the storm I gathered the family together on the living

³¹Melody Jue, *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Seawater*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020) 6.

³²Astrida Neimanis, “The Weather Underwater: Blackness, White Feminism, and the Breathless Sea,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 34:102 (2019) 490-508, 498.

³³Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2017) 67.

room floor, me and my wife and our two not-yet teenage children. While the kids tried to sleep, I was reading by a headlamp and anticipating a week without electricity. Hurricanes like Sandy were one of the features of the American weather system that most terrified and baffled early European travelers.³⁴ The hurricane season in the western Atlantic, which has become increasingly destructive in the Anthropocene, represents one of the most visceral reminders of human dependence on the seas of water and air that circulate around our planet's surface. Sometimes I think back to that moment on the living room floor, trying to hide my fear from my family while my imagination was afire with global forces, as an allegory of my intellectual and physical engagement with planetary waters. They are awesome, and always a bit frightening.

Song of Myself

The second poem that I will interpret here in an effort to span personal and planetary waters is an ecstatic and immersive fragment from Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*. I have written about it before, and as a child of the Jersey shore I never fail to be moved by its urgent and inviting physicality.³⁵ When reading Whitman's sea poetry, as Jeffrey Yang notes in his introduction to *The Sea is a Continual Miracle: Sea Poems and Other Writings by Walt Whitman*, "it's easy to feel that [the sea's] primordial waters permeated his whole unconsciousness, its briny air smelt everywhere in his work, breaking the surface of all content."³⁶ In these lines, the poet pulls us under the surf with him:

You sea! I resign myself to you also....I guess what you mean,
 I behold from the beach your crooked inviting fingers,
 I believe you refuse to go back without feeling of me;
 We must have a turn together....I undress....hurry me out of sight of the land,
 Cushion me soft, rock me with billowy drowse
 Dash me with amorous wet....I can repay you. (10)³⁷

The surf surges into view with the physical energy of these lines, the invitation, refusal, turning, undressing, hurrying out of sight. If Dickinson drops precise droplets, Whitman floods like a wave. The poem assaults the ear with its relentless attention to tactile sensation, the cushioning feel of wetness and amorousness. The bravado of the line, "I can repay you," represents the poet's egotism at its most titanic, most outward-facing, and most uncompromising. What would it mean to repay the sea? Sometimes I think of the white surf surrounding Whitman as if it were an iceberg, alien and threatening. But his

³⁴See Steve Mentz, "Hurricanes, Tempests, and the Meteorological Globe," *The Palgrave Handbook of Early Modern Literature and Science*, Howard Marchitello and Evelyn Tribble, eds., (London: Palgrave, 2017) 257-76.

³⁵Steve Mentz, "After Sustainability," *PMLA* 127:3 (2012) 586-92; 588-89.

³⁶Jeffrey Yang, "Introduction: Apologia for the Sea," *The Sea is a Continual Miracle: Sea Poems and Other Writings by Walt Whitman*, (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2017) xxxii.

³⁷Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," *The Sea is a Continual Miracle*, 10.

cryosphere refuses to stay isolated at high altitudes or latitudes. Whitman insists on a sea he can repay. His waters always touch human flesh.

In the context of Gillis's world-encircling scholarship, I consider the naked male poet in the Atlantic surf as an image of global forces, even of the Anthropocene itself. Waves that break on the east-facing coast of New Jersey and New York roll in from the north Atlantic. The ocean beach where I have been swimming since I was a boy, close enough to Whitman's beach, faces the ocean at about 40° north, the latitude of Madrid, Sardinia, and northern Greece. When Whitman plunges into that water—or when I dive into those waves—we each receive a measure of planetary force on our skin. The waves may cushion or dash, in the poet's words, but in order not to be tumbled about by its force, I usually tuck my head and dive under. Locally, in that space and time, I can join briefly with waves, as long as I do not resist them.

As anyone who reads the environmental news or who has lived through a storm like Sandy knows, human forces motivate oceanic transgressions in the Anthropocene. The agent here is the figure I like to call Old Man Anthropos. This giant, his vast and collective body full of carbon and smoke, has become, as geologists have recognized, a planet-sized force.³⁸ Whitman's pale body, and my own, frolicking in the waves, carry on our skin the guilt and violence of ecological catastrophe. I would like to believe, and sometimes I do believe, that inside the chaos of the surf we can derive succor and some pleasure from the buoyancy that poetry creates. But it is hard not to recall the other creatures who depend upon the ocean, the fish and crabs and microscopic plankton, that will pay a harsher price.

Heraclitus at the Shore

The micro-focus of lyric poetry shows how human bodies experiences encounters with liquid water. Reading Dickinson and Whitman enables blue humanities scholarship to pass through the doors that John Gillis has opened for us. But since the scale of that encounter always shifts, we also need to think about systems. One further image of the Anthropocene beach that combines Gillis's global view with local experiences comes from the contemporary English naturalist and writer, Adam Nicolson. In his recent book, with the wonderful title *The Sea is Not Made of Water*, Nicolson describes building by hand a set of concrete tide pools near his coastal home in the Scottish Highlands. Observing life in these artificial spaces, he learns what kinds of biotic worlds thrive on the margins of sea and land. His engagements with poetry, history, and marine biology reach a pitch of intensity in the book's central chapter, "Heraclitus at the Shore."³⁹ Meditating on his father-in-law, a classical scholar, Nicolson connects the Greek philosopher Heraclitus's theories of change with the evidence he has found in his tide pools. The Heraclitan vision, Nicolson avers, is "not static or closed but dynamic and open" (148). "There is no sense of calm in Heraclitus" (149), Nicolson continues, but only a world in

³⁸Steve Mentz, *Break Up the Anthropocene*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

³⁹Adam Nicolson, *The Sea is Not Made of Water: Life Between the Tides*, (London: William Collins, 2021) 144-62. Further citations by page numbers in the text. The American edition, published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in 2022, employs the simpler title, *Life Between the Tides*.

which “strife is justice” (150). The central functions of disequilibrium and partial stability—both strife and justice—connects Nicolson’s reading of Heraclitus to the fundamental insights of ecological and oceanic biology. “Nothing is stable,” he writes in joint paraphrase of both Heraclitus and the coastal biologist Bob Paine, “and yet everything coheres” (159). In fact, it is only through instability and disequilibrium that systems arrive at any coherence, however temporary. In these tense, vibrating systems, tide pools and Greek philosophy both resemble poems.

To understand a shoreline, a ship under sail, a poem, or a human community requires us to recognize that “its strife is its order” (158). This position represents a shift away from traditional “green” ecological ideas that center on stasis and sustainability, but it also represents an insight especially visible from a water-centric point of view. The argument that all ecologies are “dynamic” and all stable mixtures potentially unstable, has been emerging in the ecological sciences since the work of Daniel Botkin in the 1990s.⁴⁰ As Nicolson describes this change, “It is a paradigm of nature opposite to the idea that living things hang happily and stably together in a set of mutually accommodated niches” (158). In place of stability, the tide pools and the world become “yet another theatre in which Heraclitan strife-and-justice held sway” (162). That vision of ecological dynamism has been central to the way I see poetry responding to ecological disruption since I first used Botkin’s ideas to make sense of *King Lear* in 2010.⁴¹ In extending this vision of strife and justice to all the planet’s waters, the blue humanities aims to craft critical languages for dynamic partial orders that responds to strife while also seeking justice for humans and nonhumans alike.

Conclusions: Encounters, Moments of Transition, and Methods

In concluding these thoughts about the legacy of John Gillis and the planetary and multi-phasic turn in blue humanities scholarship, I will consider relationships among different kinds and locations of planetary water through a trio of human-focused terms: encounters, transitions, and methods. Exploring these terms through a lens both poetic and Heraclitan, I will suggest that the logical future of the scholarly turn that Gillis helped initiate will take a flexible and posthuman approach to the experiences of humans in our watery planet. The assimilation of dynamic ecologies and the accommodation of watery environments turn out to resemble each other, and also to resemble the complex forms and turns characteristic of poetry. As Anne-Lise Francois has demonstrated, poetry represents one of the best and most representative tools we have for communicating across different scales simultaneously. The holding-together of multiple registers of thinking and interpretation within a single poetic image represents the way poets forge meaning. When Emily Dickinson describes a beach, it is both place and alien symbol. When we dash our bodies in the surf with Walt Whitman, we feel the world on our flesh, while knowing that our collective human actions are marring and marking that world.

⁴⁰Daniel Botkin, *Discordant Harmonies: A New Ecology for the Twenty-First Century*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). I engaged with Botkin’s ideas in “Strange Weather in *King Lear*,” *Shakespeare* 6:2 (2010) 139-52.

⁴¹Steve Mentz, “Strange Weather in *King Lear*,” *Shakespeare* 6:2 (2010) pp.139-62.

Encounters

Touch brings objects together, with pain or pleasure or both. When poets write about encounters, they animate an environment that in some modern scientific or even historical discourses can feel lifeless. The models of Astrida Neimanis, Melody Jue, Sara Rich, and others about the animacy of water enable encounters to become visceral. The pan-historical vision of John Gillis describes the longstanding physical and imaginative integration of humans and oceans in order to locate these encounters in the widest possible contexts. These responses to encounters with planetary water challenge us to engage the world as it is, not as we would like it to be.

Transitions

But as soon as we encounter water it changes. Dickinson's calm silver becomes Whitman's amorous churn becomes Nicolson's strife-filled tide pools. The sea's liquid evaporates into water vapor in the heat and freezes into ice crystals in the cold. Transition seems a weak word to describe processes that are more universal than occasional. Phases change, always. The project of blue humanities thinking, across oceans, seas, islands, and beaches, asks us to recognize and celebrate transitions across scales and encounters. In cold water, on ice, when hiking through clouds or fog, our bodies crave water and are water. To feel that and to know it may enable us to endure uncertain times ahead.

Methods

The thoughts and interpretations this article hazards in the wake of the scholarship of John Gillis amount to something less direct than a set of methods for blue humanities scholarship. The most productive methods, it seems to me, require scholars and writers to seek out plural poetics rather than a singular theory. In a broad sense, blue humanities scholars should follow the groves laid down by Aristotle's descriptive theory of poetic genres and Heraclitus's creative understanding of tension and strife. Variation for both these classical thinkers becomes the essential fact of human life; change is both a phenomenon to be explained and an engine to drive further inquiry. Poems and other products of creative thinking thus become exemplary representations of how humans respond to dynamic environments while also being themselves representations of that dynamism. The intimacy between humans and water, an element that surrounds our planet and permeates our bodies, provides a rich reservoir for ideas about change, resilience, and the possibilities for new ways of thinking and living.

Author Biography

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