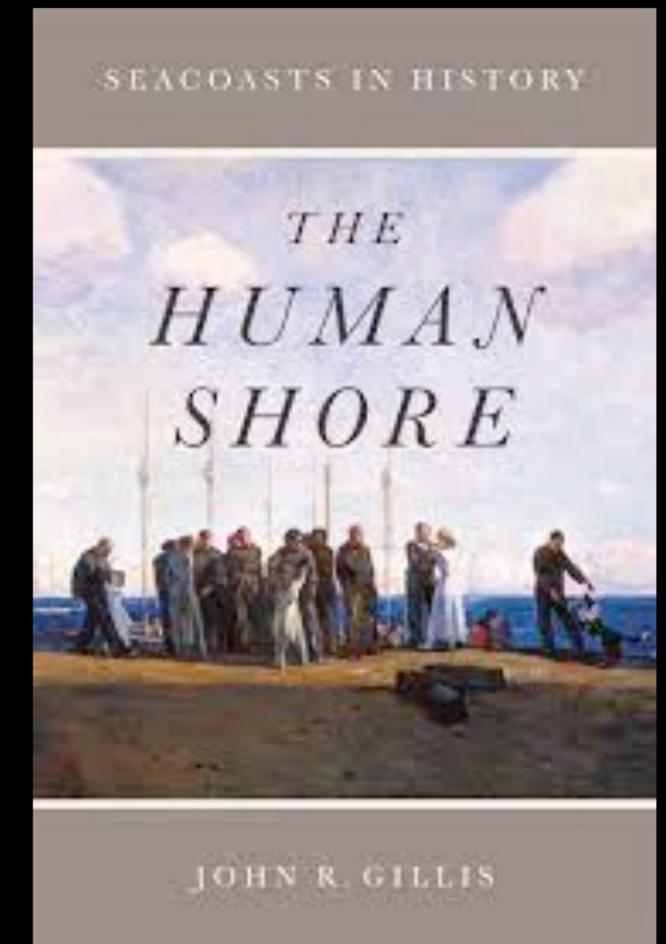


Moby-Dick

ECL 522: American Lit 1800-1860
Professor Jessica Pressman
Fall 2025

Day 6: John Gillis, "The Blue
Humanities" (2013)



ADMIN

- REMINDER; Tuesday— Steve Mentz in class.
- 5 questions for him= extra credit
- 3:30-4:45 extra credit event in DH Center (basement of Love Library)= more extra credit !

Undergrad in an ECL class?
Drop in for free tutoring from
ECL's Writing Fellow!

DROP-IN WRITING TUTORING

Raine Porath
Office AL 232

Wed. 11:00pm – 2:00pm
Thurs. 2:00pm – 4:00pm

No appointment needed!

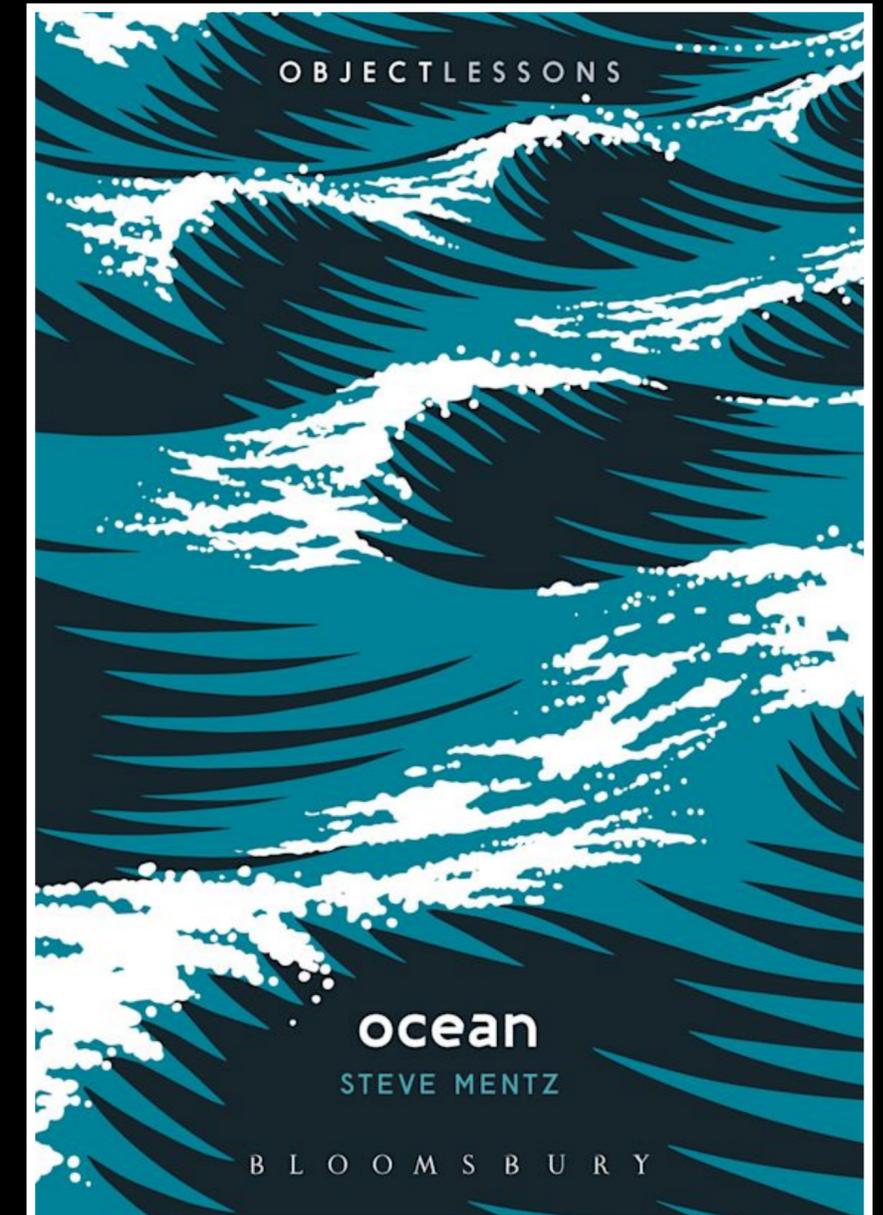


Show Steve Mentz reel

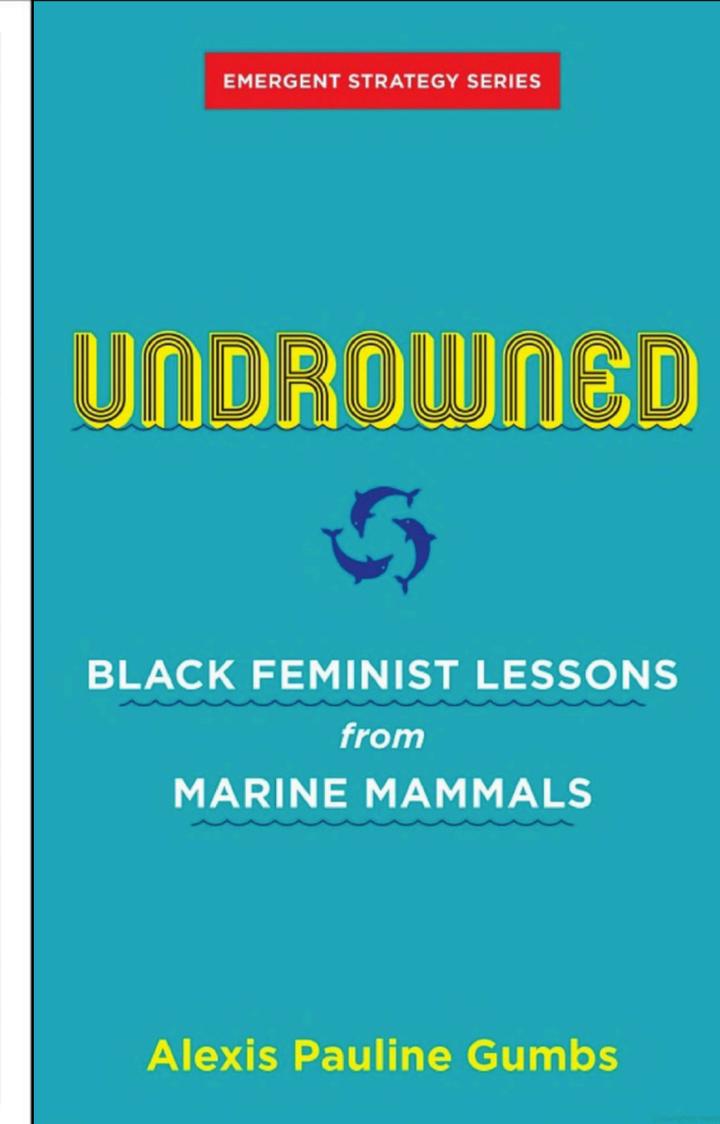
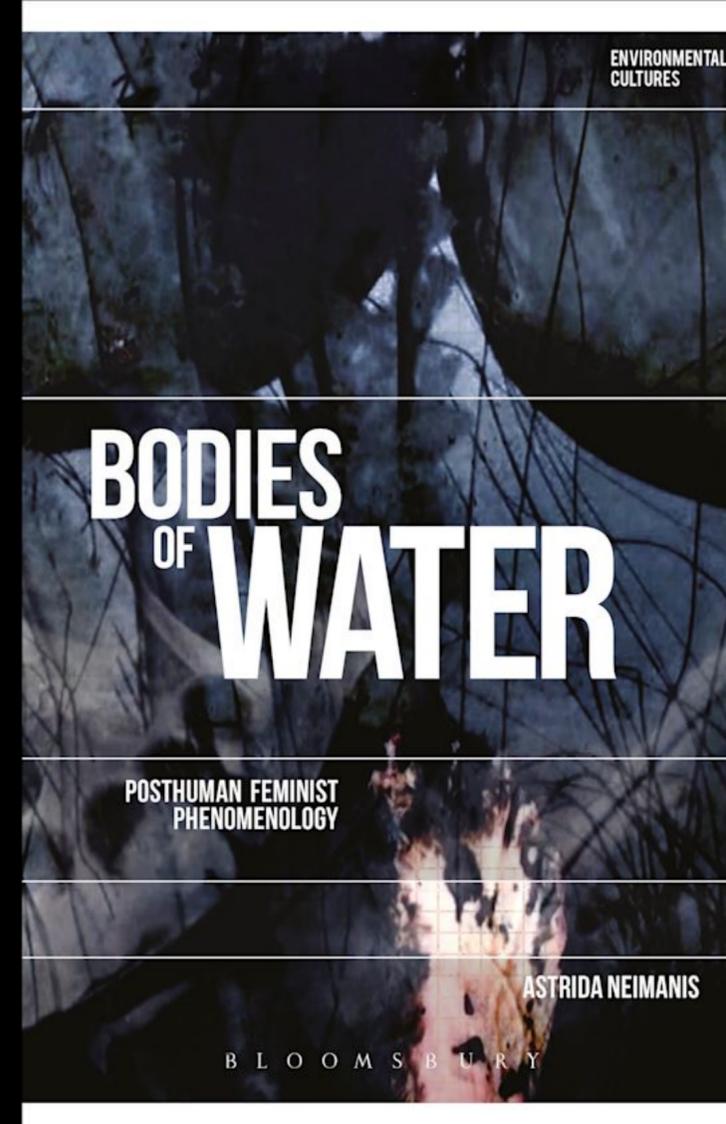
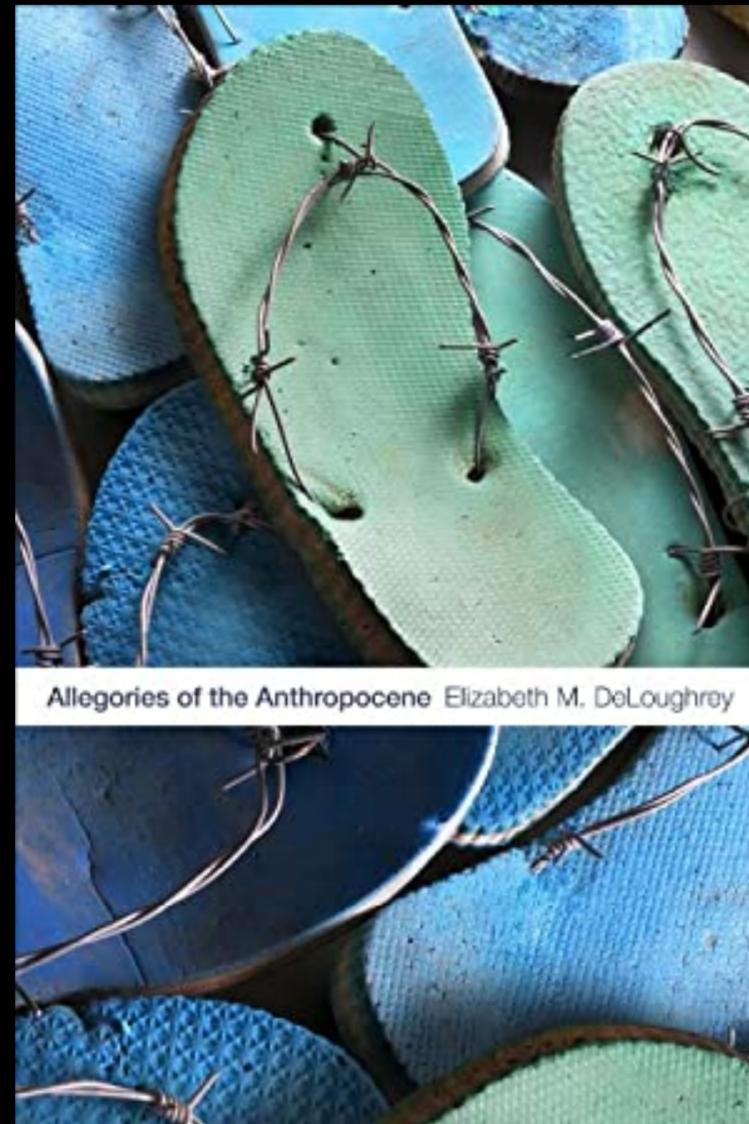
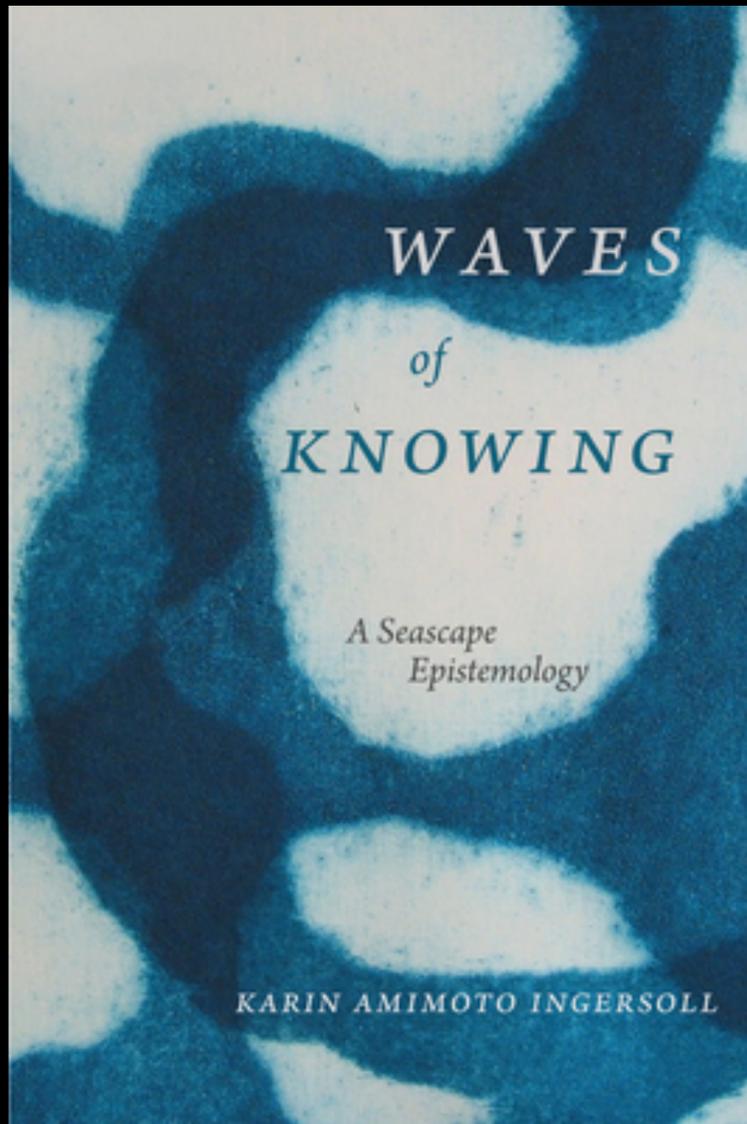
Blue Humanities

“The Blue Humanities name an ocean-infused way to reframe our shared cultural history” (xviii)

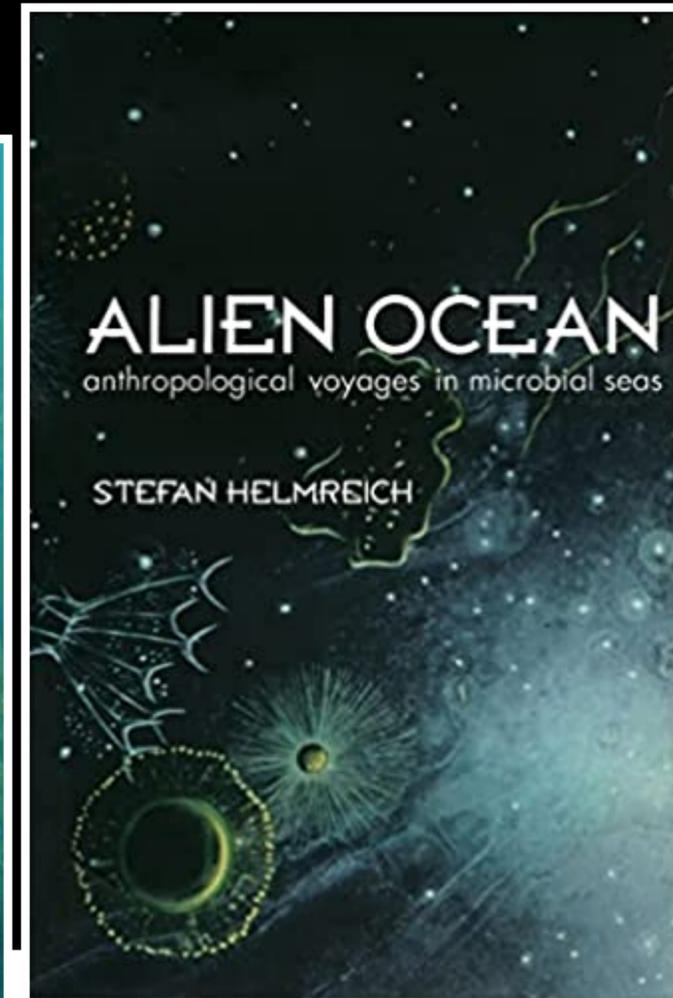
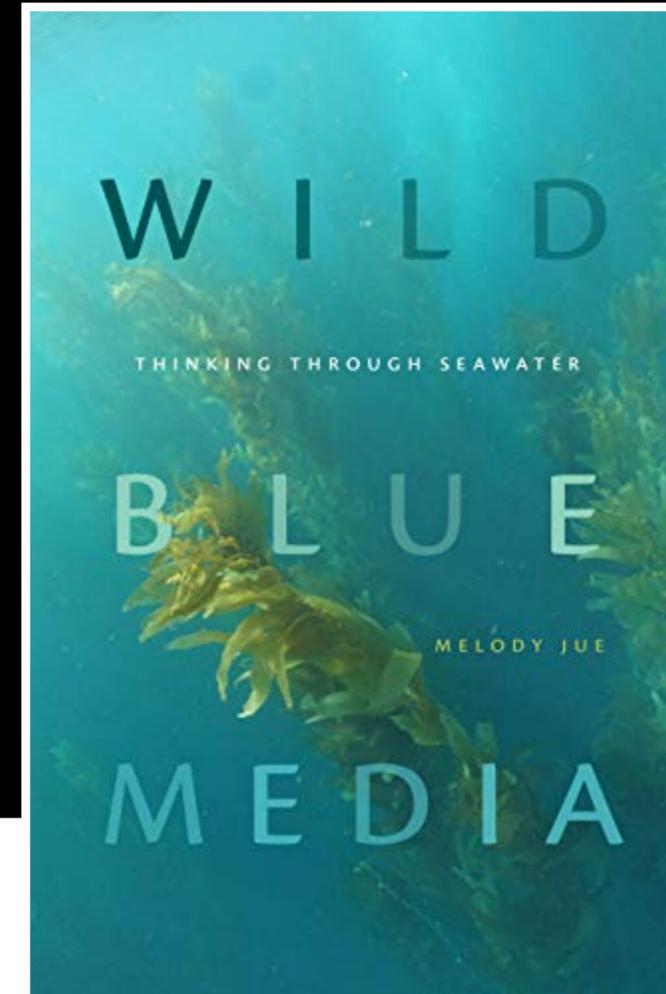
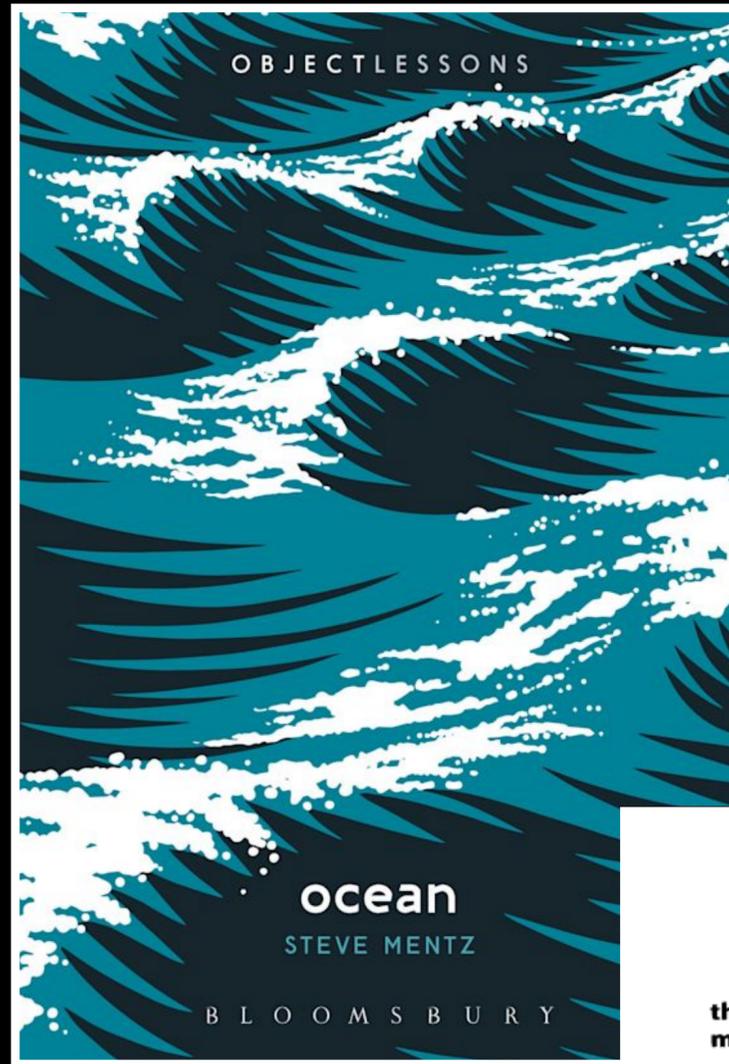
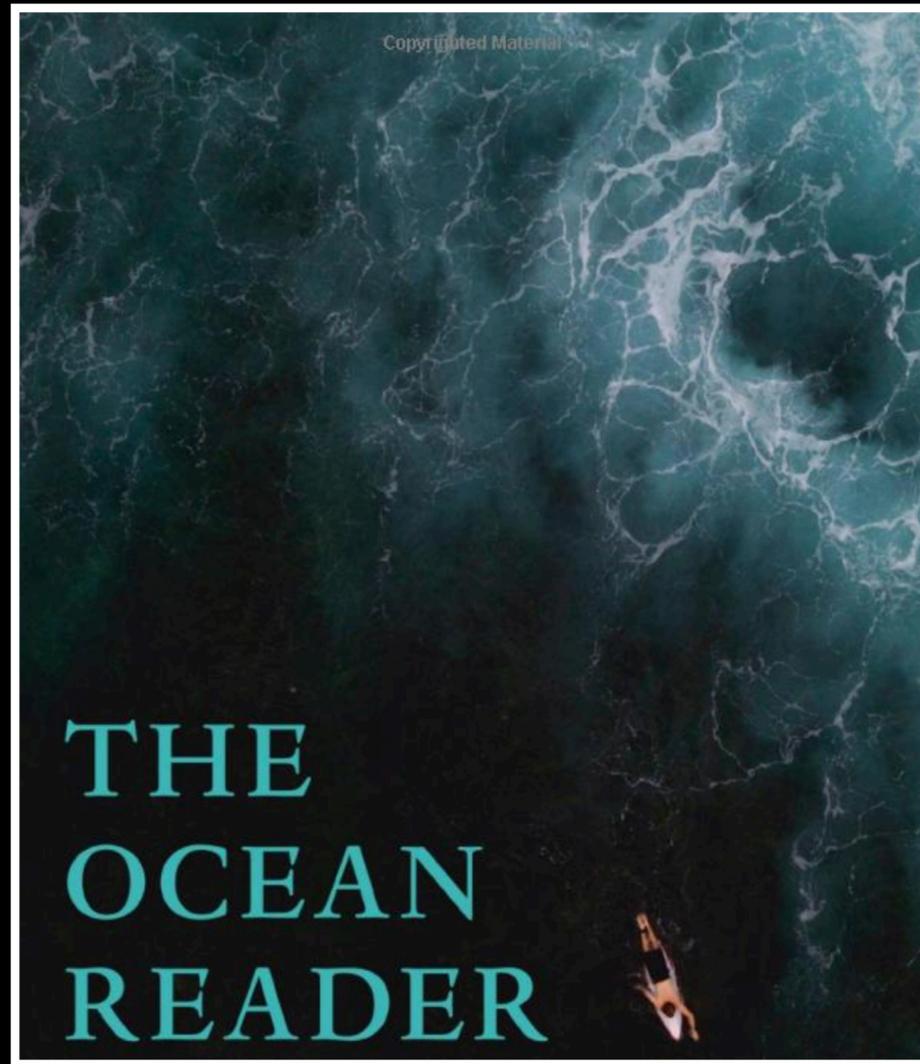
- Steve Mentz, *OCEAN* (Bloomsbury, 2020)



Blue Humanities



Blue Humanities



[PMLA]

theories and methodologies

The Prospect of Oceanic Studies

HESTER BLUM

THE SEA IS NOT A METAPHOR. FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE HAS ITS PLACE IN ANALYSES OF THE MARITIME WORLD, CERTAINLY, BUT OCEANIC studies could be more invested in the uses, and problems, of what is literal in the face of the sea's abyss of representation. The appeal that figures of oscillation and circulation have had is easy to understand, since the sea, in William Boelhower's formulation, "leaves no traces, and has no place names, towns or dwelling places; it cannot be possessed." Boelhower's description of the Atlantic world is representative of characterizations of the ocean in recent critical work: it is "fundamentally a space of dispersion, conjunction, distribution, contingency, heterogeneity, and of intersecting and stratified

John Gillis, “The Blue Humanities” (2013)

A shift in attention from land to sea is under way in several fields simultaneously.

The historicization of the oceans is one of the most striking trends in the blue humanities.

We have come to know the sea as much through the humanities as through science.

John Gillis, “The Blue Humanities” (2013)

As one historian puts it, “During the nineteenth century . . . the ocean entered the minds, homes, dreams, and conversations of ordinary people.” It did so through the art of seascape, adventure literature, and, in a much more mundane way, in the collections of tropical fish, seashells, corals, and scrimshaw. “

Discussion

- Top points to bring to class for discussion

From your blogs— different ways of viewing

- AURORA: Gillis points out that for much of Western history, writers and artists hardly looked at the water at all. Instead, it was just the gap between coasts. A space one had to cross in order to reach land...Gillis's point helped me see that the sea is not just a physical reality but also a vessel for what we may have lost on land. The need for untouched beauty and mystery seems to stay with the ocean.

From your blogs— different ways of viewing

- OMAR: One of the most striking points in John R. Gillis's essay *The Blue Humanities* is how recently we began to imagine the ocean as something more than a void. For much of human history, the sea was feared, crossed, and used, but rarely admired. It was simply a highway to somewhere else, a space you had to endure on the way to land. Art, both painting and literature, transformed the sea from a background setting into a powerful presence in human imagination....**What I find most powerful about Gillis's argument is that art didn't just change how we look at the sea, but it changed what the sea *means*. Once painters and writers showed us that the ocean had depth, power, and beauty, it became part of culture. It became visible.**
-

Oscar Wilde, "The Decay Of Lying – An Observation" (1891)

VIVIAN: "Paradox though it may seem—and paradoxes are always dangerous things—it is none the less true that **Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life.**"

....**Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs** that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows?Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. **Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us.** To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and then only, does it come into existence. **At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them** the mysterious loveliness of such effects. **There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till Art had invented them"**

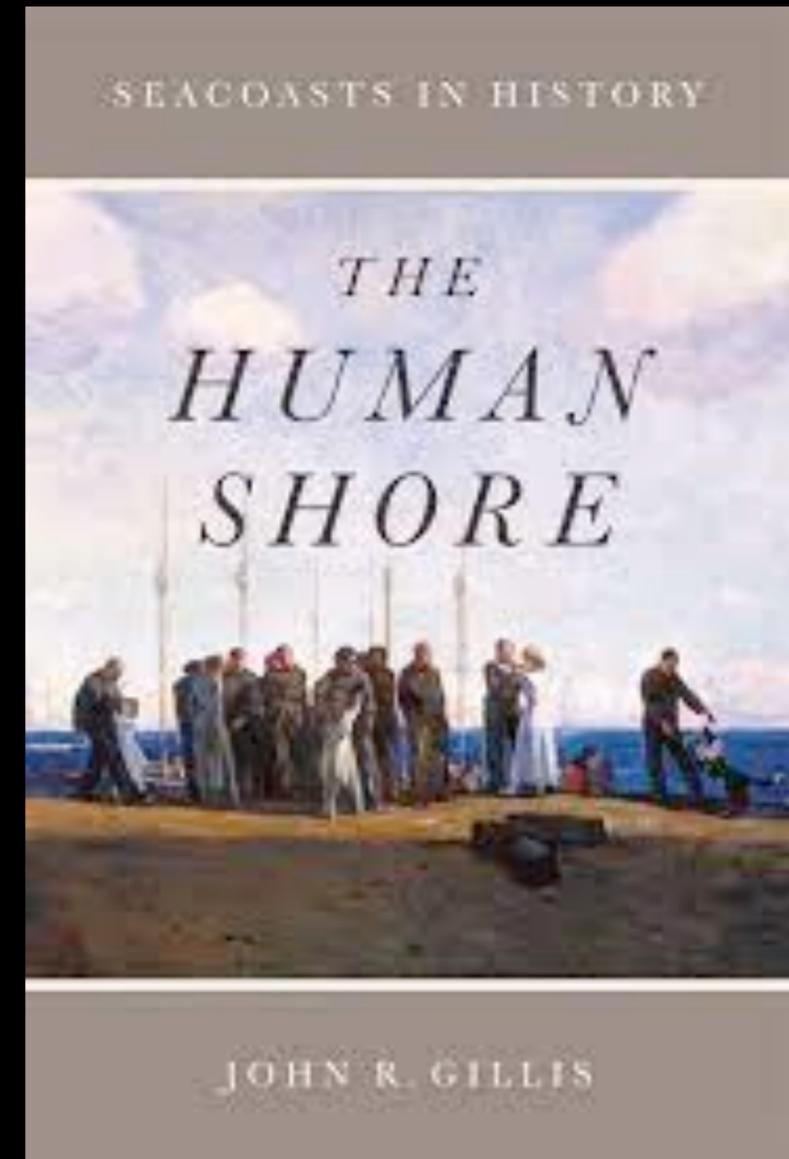


Claude Monet,
"Impression, Sunrise"
(1872)

The Invention of the Beach

“The beach was an invention of the modern age, a wholly new landscape culturally as well as physically” (143)

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

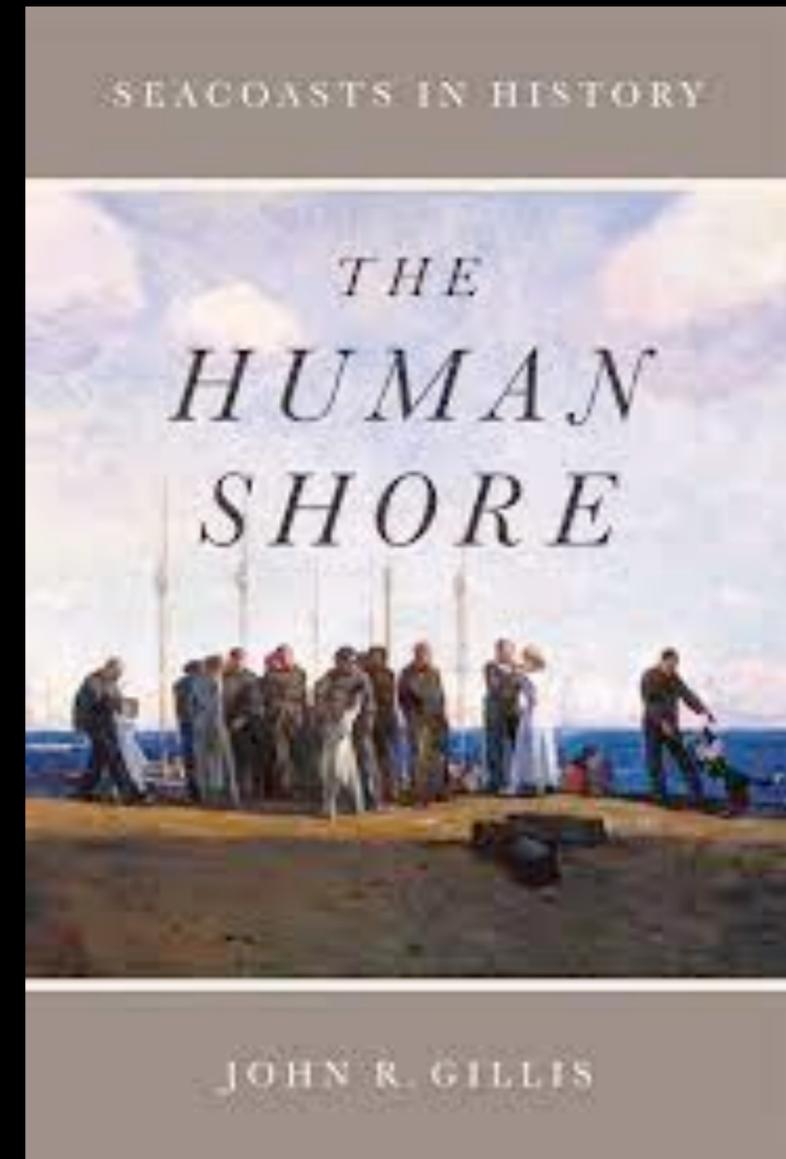


The Invention of the Shore/Coastlines

“The idea of a shore as a continuous, linear border between land and sea did not arrive until the nation-building efforts of a newly independent territorial state, based on a new kind of capitalism that was less based on trade than on agrarian and industrial production, had begun. Then, for the first time, coasts were reimagined as continuous, the edges of something greater, namely, continents.” (101)

“Coastlines were products of the political imperatives of nation-states busily consolidating themselves” (107)

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



History of colonizing Ocean

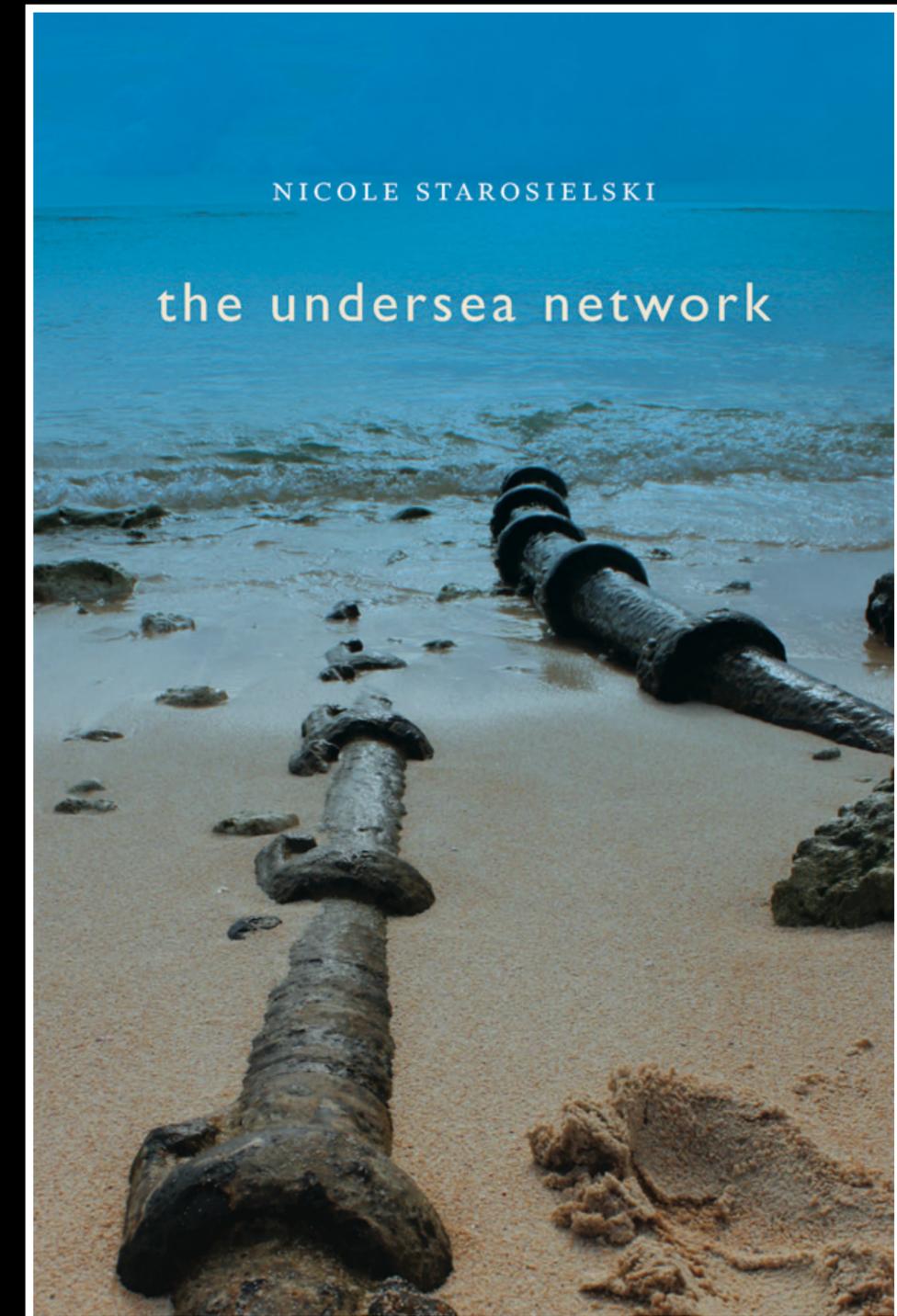
1851: Marine cables laid across English Channel

1866: first transatlantic cable laid

- “Undersea fiber-optic cables are critical infrastructures that support our critical network society” (1)

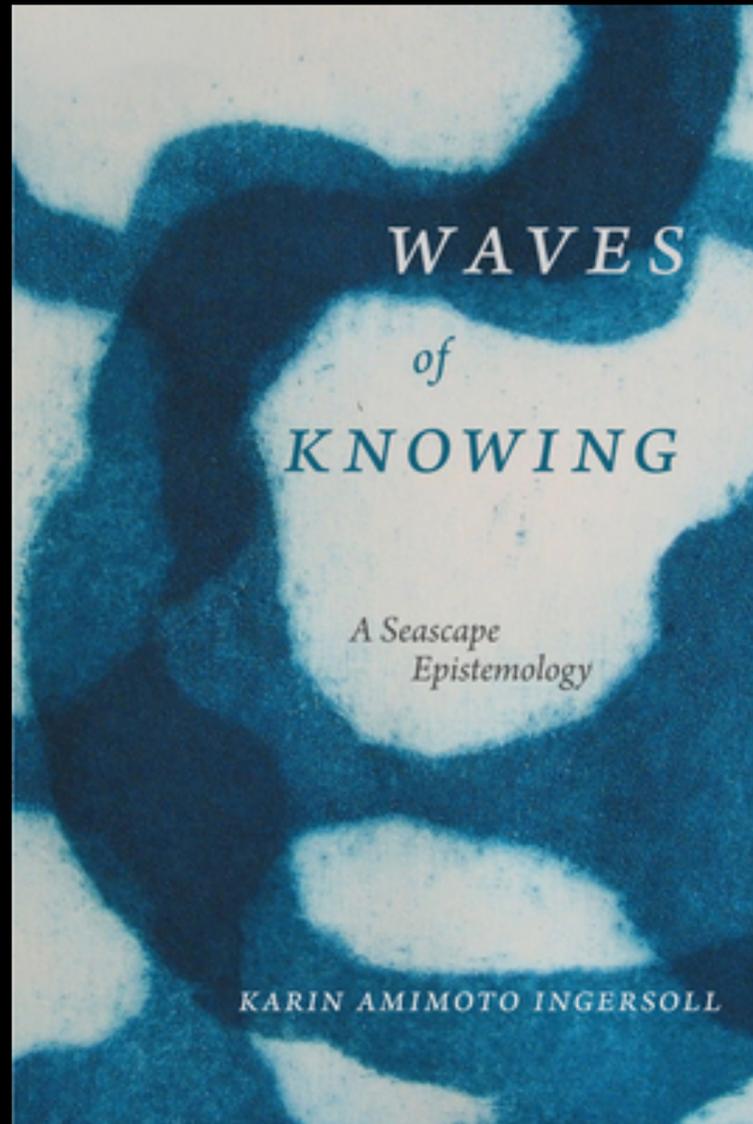
“Despite the rhetoric of wirelessness, we exist in a world that is more wired than ever” (9)

“The colonial network established a set of contours that would affect cabling thought the next century” (37)



Q: What might an Oceanic perspective offer?

A: rethinking of indigenous perspectives and philosophies



“Seascape epistemology also allows us to produce our own bodies of scholarship in a colonial reality that has rendered Native Hawaiian knowledge ‘cultural’ rather than intellectual or academic” (6)

“Seascape epistemology dives into the ocean, splashing alternatives to the Western-dominant and linear mind-set that has led the world toward realities of mass industrialization and cultural and individual assimilation” (15)

Steve Mentz, “A Poetics of Planetary Water: The Blue Humanities after John Gillis” (2023)

- “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.**
- 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.”

Take aways?