


Planetary Water and Oceanic Discourse: Blue Humanities as a New Cultural Turn

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Abstract

The historicization and theorization of human involvement with water led to the development of “water-centric thinking” which provides fresh perspectives to deal with oceanic geographies. This kind of cultural turn from land to sea enhanced the emergence of a new disciplinary realm called the *Blue Humanities*. The scrutiny of the sea in relation to contemporary Western culture transformed the utilitarian notion to an aesthetic perspective in connection with the sea. The designation of a new cultural status to the sea has been depicted by attributing oceanic images and metaphors. The paper discusses the environmental issues. Blue Humanities rejects the practice of anthropocentrism or unnecessary human intervention as a threat to the environment. The historian, Ellen Krefting has rightly observed; “Our oceans are radically changing due to human impact. It is our goal to show how knowledge about the sea is produced” (*Blue Humanities*, 2022). The study makes use of Material Ecocritical theory and qualitative research through analysis and contributions made by Blue Humanities Scholars. Steve Mentz, Dan Brayton, and Hester Blum advocated the need to use the ocean as a powerful lens to shift from watery metaphors to the ocean. Literature, Cultural Studies, and History are critically analysed at length to examine ecological ethics in posthuman critical moments. The paper highlights the fact that human commitment to nature is at stake and needs to be rectified at the earliest.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism, aquatic Wave, blue humanities, ecological ethics

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Introduction

Surging over boundaries and encircling the globe require us to embrace not only each bay and basin but also smaller bodies of fresh water, as well as solid ice and water vapour. The poetics of planetary water does not so much turn its back on the sea as follow ocean logic to its logical conclusions.

(Steve Mentz, *An Introduction to Blue Humanities*, 2024, p.2)

The “Blue Cultural Studies” has promisingly become a new terrain of Oceanic Discourse in the twenty-first century. The term ‘Blue’ in Blue Cultural Studies designates water. Blue Cultural studies critically examines the relationship and role played by human beings and water. It raises a series of questions like: Do humans contribute to the ecological diversity of sea organisms? / humans attribute any threat to sea creatures/ role played by sea creatures in human sustenance and/ ocean as a critical space for ecological stability. The term becomes an extension and comes within the purview of ecology and ecological Studies. The issues related to the environment and ecological crisis are a major concern for Blue Cultural Studies. The term “cultural Turn” coined by Lynette Spillman and Mark Jacobs became an influential trend in Humanities and Social Sciences. Literary and research scholarship about oceans and waterbodies have initiated a new cultural turn which marks culture as the focal point of present-day discourse.

The studies of literary Eco-criticism have made a constant engagement by contributing to rustic and earthly themes. The English tradition of Romantic writers and the philosophical tradition of American Naturalists immensely expanded Green's Literary Scholarship. The instability of the sea countered human existence on land. European culture spread across the globe through oceans in the 15th Century. The ancient meanings of sea shifted as geographic experience and subjects in themselves. Exploration of the sea and Maritime culture extended ecological relationships, and the leading edge of Oceanic discourse emerged out of Atlantic History, and Imperial History. The spectrum of Atlantic history covers the multinational currents of people and cultures from economies to oceanic systems. Imperial history articulates historical vision into overseas power. This paved the way for the phase of multiculturalism in the modern global world. Traditional research into oceans was pioneered by natural scientists. Powerful trends in late capitalism and postmodern culture diminished the maritime world. The ardent attempts to historicize oceans beyond political boundaries and zones of transition amass chroniclers, naturalists, oceanographers, environmental campaigners, anthropologists, media scientists, and activists. Such initiatives shifted seas from peripheries to the core of academic foresight and transfigure terra-centered histories.

The intimate interconnectedness of human civilization and the sea has not been much surfaced in literature. The aesthetic approach towards the sea was overruled by utilitarian perspectives until the nineteenth century. The delineation of the sea as hazardous, hideous, abhorrent, and incompetent for writing, and expressive medium emphasised the literary scenario. Plato (2005) has stated:

had the city been on the sea...no human power could have preserved you from corruption. Even the distance of eleven miles is hardly enough. For the sea, although agreeable is a dangerous companion and a highway of strange morals and manners as well as of Commerce. (*The Laws*)

Geographical connections interlinked oceans with remote places across the globe and water as such did not gain much interest. Scientific and humanistic knowledge of the sea expanded during the 20th century with a focus on three-dimensional living things- history, geography, and life. Modern times accomplished the unearthing of the spatial inclusivity of the sea. The exploitation of unnatural resources continues on a massive scale and adverse effects of tourism accelerate oceanic pollution.

Oceanic studies provide new dimensions and perspectives on the sea. Blue Humanities become a convincing and unmediated platform to foreground the extraterrestrial planetary resources and relations. The discipline clearly sets forth its objectives:

- To establish human history from an oceanic point of view by exploring the intricacies of human relationships with the environment.
- To focus on environmental questions and respond to ecological crises like turbulent weather, defrosting of icecaps, elevating sea levels, aquatic contamination, and loss of marine ecosystems.
- To revive the ocean from a neglected standpoint to a promising area of scholarship.
- The crucial role oceans play in regulating the planet's climate is analysed via literary, cultural, historical and aesthetic articulations.
- To defamiliarize terrestrial (land)knowledge structures in favour of hydro-ecological frameworks.
- To bring humans closer to aquatic environments through narrative representations like *The Old Man and The Sea*, *Life of Pi*.
- To combat(reduce) the romantic ideology that situates the ocean as a waste space, a dumping ground for human fears and fantasies.

Literature Review

The literary contributions made by the writers attributed a new cultural status to the sea. The metaphorical vastness of the oceans seems compelling for literary writers and scholars. Island culture is adequately represented in some of the texts like Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and Homer's *Odyssey* and movies- Warner Brother's *Aquaman* (2018) and Pixar's *Moana* (2016). Some of the notable works that can be related to Blue Humanities include Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870), Arthur Clarke's *The Deep Range* (1957), Rachel Carlson's *The Sea Around Us* (1991), John Peck's *Maritime Fiction* (2000), Philip Steinberg's *The Social Construction of the Ocean* (2001), Steve Mentz's *Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization* (2015) and *Ocean* (2020).

Steve Mentz, a pioneer in literature, History and Cultural theory has authored *Ocean* which becomes a lyrical and scholarly ode to sea. The work chronicles human history from Oceanic perspectives and incorporates the tales of shipwrecked sailors to twenty-first-century commerce. The sea is attributed with aesthetic quality and becomes the space for spiritual and physical recreation. Addison states; "Of all Objects that I have ever seen, there is none which affects imagination so much as the Sea or Ocean" (Gillis, 2013, p. 14). Edmund Burke also preferred the sea to the land as "a tonic for mind and soul" (p. 15). Margaret Cohen talks about the sublimation of the sea i.e., oceans entered the minds of people through the art of seascape and adventure literature. Jules Verne wrote; "The human mind delights in grand visions of

supernatural beings. And the sea is their very best medium, the only environment in which such giants can be produced and developed.” (p. 19). The evolvement of oceans as objects of science located it at the focus of Western thought offering new linkages to writers across generations. Sea was the only viable (surviving) alternative for Joseph Conrad. Ellen Krefting has clearly pointed out the radical change to oceans due to human impact. She insisted on reshaping our goals in line with the role played by oceans in human sustenance. Rachel Carlson proclaimed the sea as the largest element in our natural environment. “Ocean in Rushdie’s formulations constructs an allegory for literary history and literary culture on a global connected scale” (Mentz, 2023).

Methodology

The area of Blue Humanities applies critical tools like cultural Studies and history to oceanic contexts. Blue Humanities Scholars use oceans as a lens to advocate a shift from the frequent use of watery metaphors to focus on the ocean as a material and social entity and connect lives related to and determined by the ocean. Terraqueous (both land and water) labyrinths encompassing the human and marine world in material and discursive contexts are critically connected with an aquatic practice of Material Ecocritical Theory. Aquatic metaphors are not merely romanticized notions but material formations of the sea.

Ecocriticism, a rich aspect within Environmental Humanities is now a site of interdisciplinary influence, which creates flexible boundaries between humanities and natural sciences. The ethics of Ecocriticism consider all factors of environmental degradation material, cultural and legal. Material Ecocriticism, a recent school of thought and a leading development in ecocriticism views things/ nonhumans as not objects but subjects or actors. Two leading proponents and Environmental Philosophers include Serenella Lovino, an Italian cultural theorist and Serpil Oppermann, a European Professor of Environmental Humanities. Material ecocriticism is concerned with “the study of the way material forms – bodies, things, elements, toxic substances, chemicals, organic and inorganic matter, landscapes, and biological entities interact with each other and with the human dimension, producing configurations of meanings and discourses” (Lovina & Oppermann 2014, p. 7). Blue Humanities promotes disanthropocentric discussions about water ecosystems, engages with the immediate water problems and makes significant contributions in the field of material eco-criticism.

Material Eco-Critical Theory focuses on the motifs, themes, concerns and concepts of Blue Humanities and discoveries of marine sciences. It perceives Blue Humanities as a meaningful practice and sees them as narrative agencies. Thomas Van Dooren’s concept of “emergent ethics” upholds individual and collective responsibility, and rational utilization of resources and perceives social agents/systems as life support systems. This kind of ethics “refuses the calculable, refuses to produce a fixed set of rules but rather aims to hold permanently open the questions of the good, to ask again and again, how we might respond well” (Dooren, 2017, p. 63). Eco-centric discourses about water contribute to new conversational practices from material ecocritical perspectives.

Blue Humanities as a Discipline

The disciplinary engagement of humans with water is academically designated with the title “Blue Humanities.” Exploration into the contours of the sea is made possible through Science and Humanities. The phase of terra centrism which connotes the “Cultural turn from

land” has evolved to the sea during the late 18th and 19th centuries. Water-centric thinking, a trend in Blue Humanities has evolved out of the theorization of oceans. It offers innovative, productive and insightful perspectives of major marine regions, saline and freshwater locales. The ecological water spots in marine history are occupied by the studies of fish and marine mammals; this in turn contributes to the rich wealth of Oceanic Literature and Ocean Cultural Studies. American Professor and Scholar in Oceanic Studies, Steve Mentz connected the terminology “Aquatic Wave” with Blue Humanities. Disciplinary fluidity associates Zoology, Botany and Aquaculture with Blue Humanities, which has close interlinkages with environmental studies, oceanography, marine biology, maritime history (study of human interaction and activity at sea) and ecology.

The alternative terms designated to address Blue Humanities include Oceanic Studies (studies related to ocean), Blue –Ecocriticism (primary focus on ocean/water), Hydro-Critical Scholarship (critical studies based on water), Terraqueous Ecocriticism /Blue Cultural Studies (consisting of both land and water), Humanistic Oceanic Studies (connecting with human beings) and Aquatic Environmentalism (water becomes the source of environmental studies). The emerging tenets of Blue Humanities centers on different pivotal concepts. The primary one is “Environmental Humanities” or “Ecological Humanities,” which addresses the meaning, culture, values, ethics, and responsibilities of humans to deal with varied environmental problems. It narrows down the gap that exists between science and humanities, Western and Eastern culture and emphasizes the role of humans within it.

The second one is the “Cornucopian Approach” which denies environmental exploitation and foregrounds the notion that human creativity and technological progress will satisfy the needs of the population. Endless harm against nature is the result of anthropocentrism that supports the irrational argument that human beings are the most significant entities in the world, humans are above nature’s organisms and reject the nature-centered approach or Eco-centrism. The third concept is attributed to “Environmental Ethics” which reinstates the possibility of a harmonious co-existence through principles of sustainability. Recent developments in maritime studies like “New Thalassology,” coined by Nicholas Horden and Peregrine Purcell and “Thalassography” (writing about the sea) contributed cultural meaning and status to the physical environment. Horden and Purcell (2005) emphasize micro-ecologies in maritime trade to close the gap between ecologists and social concerns. Thus, New Maritime Humanities give representation to discourses like globalization, postcolonialism, environmentalism and ecocriticism. Postcolonial scholarship spots transoceanic histories in modern imperialism and colonial resistance. Globalization even today is connected by sea. Oceans become sites of subjectivity rather than mere navigating venues. Notable scholars and theoreticians who have contributed to the realm of Blue Humanities include Steve Mentz’s *An Introduction to Blue Humanities* (2023), Dan Brayton’s *Shakespeare’s Ocean: An Ecocritical Exploration* (2012), Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* (2009) and Hester Blum’s *The View from the Masthead: Maritime Imagination* (2008).

Significance and Scope

Human-based intervention produces catastrophe to nature and here lies the significance of Blue Humanities which speaks about the terrain (here water) and not the territory(boundary). The History of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans looms large in contemporary studies, marine

stories and paintings have become subject to academic scrutiny, the ocean has become the fountain of images and metaphors and the new millennium is bringing humanities scholarship back to sea. The domain of blue humanities like the sea is open to further exploration. Research is instrumental in increasing our understanding of the ocean's history by offering fresh perspectives to deal with oceanic geographies. Blue Humanities, which has become an integral part of current consciousness challenges the hegemony of Terracentrism (land-oriented discourse) and triggers significant transdisciplinary research. Interdisciplinary Programs like HMAP (History of Marine Animal Population) and Duke University's 'Ocean Connect' initiatives. Historian, Jeff Bolster, notes "The ocean may be the next frontier for environmental historians" (p. 25).

The intellectual currents in Oceanic scholarship are theorized as the "Poetics of Planetary Water." The shift from maritime vastness to ecological concerns of current times traces the expansive realm of Blue Scholarship incorporating Blue Humanities in literary studies. The artistic contributions of Walt Whitman ('Paumanok' and 'Proud Music of the Seastorm') and Emily Dickinson ('Water is Taught by Thirst' and 'Water Makes Many Beds') effectively explicate the inextricable link between humans and water. The endangered seas and contaminated freshwaters are scientifically handled by Blue Humanities within the framework of socio, cultural, literary, historical, aesthetic, ethical and theoretical perspectives.

Transdisciplinary collaboration to safeguard the endangered waterscapes moves beyond the conventions of anthropocentric thought. Oceans become the locale for the making and unmaking of social relations and identity. Ocean Studies provide new epistemology and new dimensions of planetary resources and relations. More research into oceanic discourse will mitigate the adverse effects of negligence by probing deep insights into its inevitability. Blue Humanities hinges on oceanography, limnology, social sciences and environmental humanities to investigate troubled seas from sociocultural, historical, theoretical, literary and ethical perspectives. To mitigate threatened and desecrated waterscapes, the discipline calls for a transdisciplinary network by dismantling anthropocentric conventions and ideologies. Mentz (2023) observes "To surge over boundaries and encircle the globe requires us to embrace not only each bay and basin but also smaller bodies of fresh water, as well as solid ice and water vapour. A poetics of planetary water does not so much turn its back on the sea as follow ocean-logic to its logical conclusions" (p. 23).

Conclusion

Our life in a world of environmental fragility, posing a constant threat to the environment calls for an urgent response to protect nature. Sailors, navigators, and oceanic people like Polynesians consider the sea as their prime locale and instruct others about the uncertainties of the sea and its unlimited potential resources. Maritime history has made significant orientation from the water's surface to life in the ocean. Anthropocene perils have begun to disrupt the heterogeneity of aquatic existence. Today we witness the acidification of oceans, the rising of seawater, the destruction of coral reefs and contaminated groundwater.

Our involvement through watery interactions and circulations is highlighted by Blue Humanities and demands a speedy rectification. This discipline rejects anthropocentrism and emancipates human subjects from the stronghold of anthropocentricity. The sea is no longer a metaphor but provides new vistas for modern literary studies. Oceanic margins are relocated to the critical comprehension of modern culture. As such the contemporary cultural discourse has considered environmentalism, ecocriticism, and maritime concerns and made a significant

impact on ecological studies in literature. Humanities scholarship has elevated the role of the sea, which was once alien to humans but now reflects human life; much more as the origin of all life. Drawing linkages with cultural and philosophical implications, Blue Humanities probes into the idea that our bodies are inextricably connected to the natural world and not separate or privileged to it.

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