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Thinking with Water: Blue Humanities and the Reorientation of the Humanistic Imagination

Part I: Why Water, Why Now: The Emergence of the Blue Humanities

The early decades of the twenty-first century have witnessed an intensification of scholarly attention to water as both material substance and conceptual force. Oceans rise, coastlines retreat, glaciers calve into warming seas, and rivers swell or disappear with unsettling irregularity. In this moment of hydrological instability, when the rhythms of tides, currents, and monsoons are increasingly disrupted by anthropogenic climate change, water has emerged not merely as an environmental concern but as an epistemological provocation. The humanities, long preoccupied with land-based histories, territorial identities, and terrestrial imaginaries, have begun to turn decisively toward the aquatic. This shift, described under the rubric of the Blue Humanities, marks one of the most significant reorientations in contemporary humanistic inquiry.

The emergence of the Blue Humanities must be understood as both ecological and intellectual: a response to planetary crisis and a reconsideration of long-held disciplinary habits. For centuries, humanistic scholarship has operated within what might be termed a terrestrial bias: a conceptual orientation privileging land as the primary site of history, identity, and knowledge. Maps centre continents; political boundaries follow shorelines; archives preserve documents tied to territorial institutions. The ocean, by contrast, has often been treated as empty space: a void separating meaningful places rather than a domain of meaning in its own right. This terrestrial bias, as maritime historian Hester Blum argues in her foundational essay "The Prospect of Oceanic Studies," has limited scholarly understanding of how cultural and historical processes unfold across watery expanses rather than within bounded territories (670–77). Blum contends that oceanic studies offer a paradigm shift capable of transforming disciplinary assumptions about geography, mobility, and

textual production: the sea should be recognised not as setting but as a formative force shaping literary forms and cultural imaginaries.

Alongside Blum's interventions, the scholarship of Steve Mentz has been decisive in articulating the conceptual architecture of the Blue Humanities. In works including At the *Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean, Ocean,* and most recently *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities*, Mentz develops what he calls "wet thinking"—a mode of interpretation attuned to fluidity, instability, and relationality that challenges the solidity associated with terrestrial metaphors and situates maritime environments as spaces of transformation, risk, and creativity. The Blue Humanities thus emerges not as a singular discipline but as an expansive intellectual field drawing from literary studies, history, geography, anthropology, environmental studies, and philosophy, demanding new vocabularies capable of capturing the dynamics of fluid environments.

The intellectual genealogy of the Blue Humanities is inseparable from the Environmental Humanities, which gained prominence in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries by challenging anthropocentric narratives and foregrounding ecological systems and nonhuman actors. Rachel Carson's work, though often associated with terrestrial ecosystems, was deeply rooted in marine science—a crucial reminder that environmental thought has always been entangled with aquatic knowledge even when disciplinary frameworks emphasised land-based perspectives. The Blue Humanities builds on this legacy by placing water at the centre of analytical inquiry. Stacy Alaimo's work on trans-corporeality, developed in *Bodily Natures*, emphasises the permeability of bodies and environments through material exchanges mediated by water, dissolving boundaries between individual bodies and ecological systems (2010). Astrida Neimanis extends these insights through the concept of hydrofeminism, proposing in *Bodies of Water* that human beings are not discrete entities but dynamic assemblages shaped by watery exchanges: a formulation that foregrounds vulnerability, interdependence, and permeability as the constitutive conditions of embodied existence (2017). Philip E. Steinberg's social constructionist approach to maritime space further enriches this picture, demonstrating in *The Social Construction of the Ocean* how shipping routes, territorial waters, and maritime law structure political power across aquatic environments, challenging the myth of the sea as an ungoverned frontier.

The transition from green to blue humanities also entails a reconsideration of scale. Terrestrial environmental studies often focus on localised ecosystems where boundaries can be delineated with relative clarity. Oceans resist such containment: currents traverse national borders, marine species migrate across hemispheres, and pollutants disperse through global circulation patterns. The Blue Humanities therefore requires analytical frameworks capable of accommodating planetary interconnection. The implications of this reorientation extend beyond academia. Coastal communities confront the immediate realities of sea-level rise; inland populations experience the cascading effects of altered hydrological cycles. To think with water is, increasingly, to think about the conditions of collective survival.

Part II: Oceanic Epistemologies, Tidalectics, and the Fluid Turn

If Part I established the historical emergence and intellectual necessity of the Blue Humanities, this section turns to the theoretical architectures that allow the field to crystallise into a distinctive mode of inquiry. Central among these developments is the articulation of oceanic epistemologies: frameworks that do not simply apply existing theoretical tools to maritime contexts but generate new ways of knowing derived from the properties of water itself. Fluidity, circulation, depth, and unpredictability are not merely descriptive attributes of oceans; they are conceptual resources that transform how scholars think about history, identity, embodiment, and relationality. Much of Western philosophy has been grounded, literally and metaphorically, in terrestrial assumptions: knowledge imagined as stable ground, truth as bedrock, identity as rootedness. Water unsettles these metaphors. It erodes boundaries, dissolves categories, and resists containment. The Blue Humanities therefore represents not only a geographical shift toward oceans and waterways but an ontological shift toward fluidity as a fundamental principle of existence.

Tidalectics and the Rhythms of Relation

Among the most influential conceptual frameworks in Blue Humanities scholarship is tidalectics, a term developed by the Caribbean poet-historian Kamau Brathwaite. Drawing on the cyclical movement of tides, tidalectics offers an alternative to linear models of historical development: where dialectics traditionally implies progression through opposition and synthesis, tidalectics foregrounds recurrence, return, and oscillation. History, in this formulation, does not move forward in a straight line but flows in rhythmic patterns shaped by memory, migration, and environmental change. The Atlantic Ocean, once conceptualised as an abyss separating continents, becomes in Brathwaite's work a medium connecting dispersed communities: waves carrying fragments of culture across distances, enabling forms of continuity that transcend geographic separation.

The concept was elaborated and extended by Elizabeth DeLoughrey, whose *Routes and Roots* situates tidalectics within the broader context of island and postcolonial studies. DeLoughrey argues that island cultures are shaped not by isolation but by circulation—of people, commodities, languages, and ecological processes—and that maritime routes function as dynamic networks linking seemingly disparate locations (2007, 2, 6). By foregrounding cycles rather than endpoints, tidalectics invites scholars to reconsider how temporalities are structured. Environmental processes—tides, monsoons, seasonal floods—operate according to rhythms that defy linear chronology. Cultural memory, likewise, unfolds through repetition and adaptation rather than simple succession. In this sense, tidalectics offers a framework for integrating ecological and cultural temporalities within a unified analytical approach, one with significant methodological implications for any Blue Humanities reading of literary or cultural texts.

Archipelagic Thinking and Relational Geographies

Closely aligned with tidalectics is archipelagic thinking, an approach that reimagines geography through networks of islands and waterways rather than continental landmasses. Its conceptual foundation lies in the work of Édouard Glissant, whose *Poetics of Relation* proposes that islands are not self-contained units but nodes within expansive networks of exchange, their identities emerging through interaction rather than separation (1997, 11). Building on Glissant's insights, DeLoughrey and others have developed archipelagic thinking as a methodological tool capable of addressing the complexities of global interconnection, foregrounding multiplicity and decentralisation over continental perspectives that emphasise centrality and hierarchy. The implications are far-reaching. Rivers, deltas, and coastal regions can all be understood as archipelagic spaces characterised by fragmentation and connectivity, demanding mapping techniques attentive to flux and transformation rather than fixed boundaries. The ocean becomes a conduit for hybridisation, enabling the formation of identities, languages, and artistic traditions that transcend national borders.

Hydrofeminism, Trans-Corporeality, and Wet Ontologies

Neimanis's hydrofeminism challenges traditional feminist frameworks that prioritise autonomy and boundary formation. If bodies are understood as interconnected through shared waters, then environmental degradation becomes not merely an external problem but an intimate one: pollutants released into rivers eventually enter human bodies; toxins discharged into oceans accumulate in marine organisms consumed as food. This reframing transforms ecological responsibility into a matter of bodily care, and water imagery, traditionally associated with femininity in patriarchal discourse, becomes, in Neimanis's reconfiguration, a model for adaptive resistance and collective survival (*Bodies of Water* 1–20).

Parallel to hydrofeminism, Alaimo's trans-corporeality conceptualises embodiment as a dynamic process shaped by continuous material exchange with external forces. Oceans, rivers, and atmospheric moisture become integral components of bodily experience, influencing health, behaviour, and perception. Within the Blue Humanities, trans-corporeality provides a powerful interpretive lens for maritime narratives whose motifs of immersion, drowning, purification, and transformation encode an awareness of ecological interdependence—and for posthumanist scholarship that seeks to decentre the human subject by acknowledging the active agency of water itself: currents carving coastlines, tides redistributing sediments, rainfall sustaining terrestrial life.

These convergences—hydrofeminism, trans-corporeality, archipelagic thinking—contribute to the emergence of wet ontologies, theorised most fully by Steve Mentz and Philip Steinberg. Wet ontology represents a philosophical shift toward understanding existence as fluid and relational rather than stable and discrete, encouraging methodological experimentation and resisting the immobilising tendencies of static representations. A defining feature of oceanic epistemologies, taken broadly, is the acceptance of uncertainty as

an inherent condition of knowledge: vast regions of the deep sea remain unmapped, marine ecosystems often defy prediction, and decisions about coastal development or marine conservation must be made without complete information. The Blue Humanities contributes to these debates by providing the cultural and historical contexts that make such uncertainty navigable rather than paralysing. Taken together, these theoretical developments constitute what might be described as a fluid turn in contemporary humanities scholarship: one that transforms not only the objects of study but the methodologies employed to investigate them, and that reconfigures the relationship between knowledge and responsibility as climate change renders the stakes of scholarly inquiry increasingly tangible.

Part III: Oceanic Archives, Maritime Worlds, and the Cultural Histories of Water

The Blue Humanities is not merely a theoretical abstraction; it is grounded in archives—textual, material, ecological, and embodied—that record humanity's enduring entanglement with water. Ships' logs, sailors' diaries, navigational charts, port records, nautical fiction, maritime folklore, and submerged archaeological remains all constitute what might be termed the oceanic archive. To engage with these materials is to recognise that oceans are not empty expanses but densely inscribed cultural spaces. The idea of the ocean as archive challenges conventional archival practices, which typically privilege land-based repositories such as libraries and state institutions. Water destabilises the permanence associated with traditional archival storage: documents rot, ships sink, coastlines shift, and sediment buries traces of past activity. This apparent fragility demands innovative interpretive strategies attentive to partial evidence, submerged histories, and material transformation. As Blum observes, oceanic archives require scholars to embrace mobility and contingency as methodological principles rather than obstacles (671).

The modern oceanic archive emerged alongside the expansion of maritime trade and imperial exploration. Margaret Cohen's *The Novel and the Sea* demonstrates how maritime narratives played a crucial role in shaping modern literary forms: nautical fiction, often dismissed as a marginal genre, served as a laboratory for narrative experimentation, with techniques such as episodic plotting, shifting perspectives, and detailed environmental description emerging from the demands of representing maritime experience (2010, 1–20). Sailors' accounts also function as early forms of environmental documentation, bridging literary and scientific modes of representation. The material culture of seafaring—shipwrecks, cargo, tools, personal belongings—further complicates conventional archival categories, blurring distinctions between natural and cultural preservation.

Maritime labor constitutes another vital, often occluded component of oceanic archives. Marcus Rediker has documented the experiences of sailors, pirates, and dockworkers whose contributions were frequently excluded from official records. In *The*

Slave Ship, Rediker reconstructs the lived realities of enslaved individuals confined within the spatial architectures of vessels designed to maximise profit at the expense of human life, revealing the violence and exploitation embedded within global trade networks (2007, 9–12). The ocean, in his account, becomes both grave and witness to immense suffering: a point that literary scholars have extended through works such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, whose deployment of river and ocean imagery evokes the persistence of historical violence within contemporary consciousness.

Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* reframes the Atlantic as a space of cultural production rather than separation. His analysis demonstrates how the transatlantic diaspora produced hybrid cultural forms that transcend national boundaries—music, language, and religious practices evolving through continuous interaction among dispersed communities—while ships served as both instruments of oppression and spaces of resistance (1993, 12–17). Subsequent scholarship has extended Gilroy's framework to the Indian Ocean. Sugata Bose's *A Hundred Horizons* traces the interconnected histories of South Asia, East Africa, and Southeast Asia, demonstrating how monsoon-driven trade networks shaped regional identities over centuries and complicating the Eurocentric genealogies that dominated earlier phases of oceanic scholarship (2006, 3–10). Isabel Hofmeyr's *The Portable Bunyan* examines the circulation of texts across the Indian Ocean, revealing the intellectual dimensions of oceanic exchange, while Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* reconstructs the experiences of indentured labourers and traders navigating colonial maritime routes, illustrating how fiction can illuminate archival gaps.

Technological innovation has long shaped maritime experience, from the astrolabe and sextant to the chronometer and, more recently, satellite navigation and sonar imaging. Contemporary digital humanities projects create interactive maps tracing historical voyages and migration routes, enabling users to engage with maritime history in immersive and public-facing ways. These projects exemplify the integration of technological innovation with cultural analysis that defines the Blue Humanities as a dynamic, evolving field, one for which infrastructure studies, as we shall argue in the following section, has become an increasingly critical complement.

Part IV: Rivers, Estuaries, Inland Waters, and the Blue Humanities in the Anthropocene

The Blue Humanities, despite its oceanic emphasis, cannot remain confined to maritime environments alone. Rivers, lakes, wetlands, estuaries, monsoon systems, glaciers, and groundwater networks form equally vital components of the planetary hydrosphere, and the Anthropocene has rendered all of these sites of profound transformation. Dams redirect rivers, aquifers are depleted, wetlands vanish under urban expansion, and glacial melt alters seasonal water availability. By engaging these transformations, the Blue Humanities contributes to a deeper understanding of how water mediates the relationships among

environment, infrastructure, culture, and power.

Richard White's *The Organic Machine* conceptualises the Columbia River as a hybrid entity shaped simultaneously by natural processes and human intervention, demonstrating how industrial development transforms river systems into technological infrastructures that enable economic development while generating ecological disruption (1995, ix–xii). This notion of the river as organic machine resonates with the broader concerns of the Blue Humanities: rivers are neither purely natural nor wholly artificial but exist within networks of dams, irrigation systems, and hydroelectric facilities whose cultural and political dimensions demand sustained critical attention. Within South Asian contexts, sacred rivers such as the Ganges function simultaneously as spiritual entities and heavily polluted waterways, embodying the broader tensions between reverence and exploitation that Blue Humanities scholarship is uniquely positioned to analyse.

Estuaries and wetlands represent some of the most ecologically productive environments on Earth, yet remain among the most vulnerable to environmental degradation. These amphibious landscapes, where freshwater meets saltwater, defy categorical distinctions between land and sea, challenging conventional cartographic practices that rely on fixed boundaries. The Sundarbans region, spanning India and Bangladesh, has become a focal point for Blue Humanities research due to its vulnerability to climate change: the mangrove forests that provide critical protection against cyclones face deforestation and industrial pressure, and literary and ethnographic studies document how local populations interpret these changes through narratives of displacement and adaptation.

In recent years, scholarship has further expanded into the cryohumanities, a subfield examining frozen water systems such as glaciers, ice sheets, and polar regions. Glacial melt contributes significantly to sea-level rise, altering coastal geographies worldwide, while polar exploration narratives, once celebrated as heroic endeavours, are now reinterpreted through critical lenses that foreground imperial ambition and ecological disruption. The interconnectedness of polar and equatorial regions reinforces the importance of planetary-scale thinking: meltwater from distant ice sheets contributes to rising sea levels in tropical coastal zones, linking geographically disparate communities within shared systems of risk.

No concept has influenced contemporary environmental thought more profoundly than the Anthropocene, the era in which human activity has become a dominant geological force, first named by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer in 2000. Oceans play a central role in Anthropocene discourse: they absorb vast quantities of atmospheric carbon dioxide while undergoing chemical transformation; ocean acidification threatens coral reefs and marine organisms; rising temperatures alter currents, intensify storms, and accelerate the melting of polar ice. Blue Humanities scholars engage these phenomena not only as environmental events but as cultural narratives: literature, film, and visual art increasingly depicting dystopian futures shaped by rising seas and collapsing ecosystems. Such

representations function as speculative laboratories, allowing audiences to imagine the consequences of environmental inaction and fostering the empathy and awareness that policymaking alone cannot generate. The concept of slow violence, developed by Rob Nixon to describe the gradual, often invisible damage inflicted on vulnerable communities by environmental degradation, is particularly relevant here, connecting Blue Humanities inquiry to questions of environmental justice, colonial histories of extraction, and the uneven distribution of ecological risk (Nixon 2011, 2–7).

Part V: Futures of the Blue Humanities—Decolonisation, Pedagogy, and Planetary Water Thinking

As the Blue Humanities continues to mature as a field, its future trajectory increasingly depends on its capacity to expand beyond Euro-American academic centres and incorporate diverse epistemological traditions. Earlier phases of oceanic scholarship often relied heavily on Atlantic paradigms emerging from North American and European intellectual traditions. While these contributions remain foundational, contemporary scholarship emphasises the necessity of pluralising oceanic knowledge systems. The future of the Blue Humanities lies not in disciplinary consolidation but in epistemological diversification: an openness to Indigenous, coastal, riverine, and non-Western traditions that have long conceptualised water as relational, animate, and culturally constitutive.

Decolonisation has become one of the defining imperatives of contemporary Blue Humanities scholarship. Oceans were not merely routes of discovery and exchange; they were also instruments of empire. Colonial expansion depended upon maritime technologies, cartographic systems, and naval power that transformed oceans into zones of extraction and domination. DeLoughrey and George B. Handley have emphasised the importance of reading oceanic histories through postcolonial frameworks that foreground Indigenous resilience and resistance (Postcolonial Ecologies 1–10). Most influentially, Epeli Hau'ofa reconceptualised the Pacific Ocean not as a scattering of isolated islands but as a "sea of islands"—a vast network of interconnected communities whose identities are shaped by maritime mobility rather than territorial confinement (148–61). Hau'ofa's formulation has become central to decolonial oceanic thought, challenging colonial narratives that depicted island cultures as marginal and dependent, and it remains an indispensable reference for any critical engagement with the Pacific.

Decolonial approaches also demand attention to the epistemological frameworks embedded within Indigenous water practices. Many Indigenous cultures conceptualise water as animate and sacred, possessing agency and requiring ethical stewardship—perspectives that contrast sharply with industrial models treating water primarily as a resource to be exploited. Integrating Indigenous knowledge into Blue Humanities scholarship therefore requires methodological humility: an acknowledgment that Western scientific paradigms represent only one among many valid modes of understanding aquatic

environments. Recent scholarship has foregrounded the importance of oral traditions as repositories of ecological knowledge — stories, songs, and ritual practices encoding information about seasonal cycles, navigation routes, and environmental hazards that function as living archives complementing written records. Within the Indian subcontinent, traditional water management systems—stepwells, tanks, and canals—demonstrate sophisticated engineering practices reflecting intimate knowledge of local hydrology, whose preservation has become increasingly important in the context of climate change as contemporary societies seek sustainable alternatives to resource-intensive technologies.

The future of the Blue Humanities is also characterised by interdisciplinary expansion and technological integration. Digital mapping technologies enable scholars to reconstruct historical maritime routes, visualise ocean currents, and analyse patterns of ecological change. The study of ocean infrastructure—ports, pipelines, undersea cables, and shipping networks—has emerged as a significant new direction, situating the physical backbone of globalisation within a cultural-ecological framework attentive to the costs and contradictions of oceanic modernity. Debates around the blue economy, emerging scholarship on marine extraction and environmental risk, and collaborations between humanities scholars and marine scientists together reflect the transformative potential of an interdisciplinary ethos that takes water seriously as both subject and method. Pedagogy is equally critical: field-based learning experiences, multimedia materials, and courses integrating maritime literature with environmental case studies foster the kind of relational thinking that the Blue Humanities demands, preparing future scholars to approach water not merely as a topic but as a way of knowing.

The "Blue Humanities" Issue

The present special issue of *The Apollonian* exemplifies the intellectual breadth and interdisciplinary vitality that characterise contemporary Blue Humanities scholarship. The diversity of contributions, spanning academic articles, essays, creative works, translations, visual documentation, and interviews, reflects the inherently hybrid nature of aquatic inquiry. Rather than adhering to narrowly disciplinary boundaries, the contributions gathered here move fluidly across literary analysis, environmental philosophy, performance studies, riverine ethics, historical reconstruction, and creative practice, collectively enacting the relational ethos central to aquatic thought.

Within the section devoted to academic scholarship, the essays foreground a wide array of regional and conceptual orientations. A L Abhirami's essay, "The Oceanic Subversion: Tracing the Reconfigurations and Reorientations Enabled by the Indian Ocean," offers a sustained exploration of the Indian Ocean as a transformative geopolitical and cultural medium, demonstrating how oceanic networks reconfigure historical narratives long anchored to continental paradigms. Owoyemi Deborah Oluwasola, Olagunju Ayomide Ezekiel, and Olaniyan Ajibola Oladayo's "Oceanic Justice: Reimagining the Blue

Humanities through African Environmental Philosophy" situates Blue Humanities discourse within African philosophical traditions, advancing an ethical framework grounded in communal ecological responsibility and foregrounding relationality as a guiding principle of environmental justice.

The performative and cultural dimensions of maritime life receive compelling attention in Dijina Bastin K G's "Performing the Blue: Chavittunadakam and Coastal Life through a Blue Humanities Perspective," which examines the traditional theatrical form Chavittunadakam as an expressive medium shaped by coastal histories and maritime sensibilities. Navya Rose Thomas's "Rasas of the Sea: Navigating Human Life through Select Malayalam Oceanic Songs" explores the emotional and aesthetic registers encoded within regional song traditions, revealing how maritime experience becomes embedded within sonic and poetic structures. Priyank Pravin Patel and Rajarshi Dasgupta's "A 'Human' River? Making the Case for a River's Soul" engages contemporary debates on ecological personhood by proposing that rivers be understood as entities possessing moral and potentially juridical subjectivity. Andrin Albrecht's "For in this Sea What Dreams May Come: Risk and Creativity along the Vertical Axis in Romantic Ocean Narratives" reinterprets Romantic maritime literature through the conceptual lens of verticality, foregrounding depth as a spatial metaphor that invites both imaginative risk and epistemological transformation.

Historical and political dimensions of maritime space are examined in Archie Cornish's "Spenser in Doggerland: Ben Smith's North Sea Allegories of Capital," which situates submerged landscapes within broader narratives of ecological memory and capitalist expansion. Debra Edgerton's "Life Extended: Ecology as Metaphor" reflects on the conceptual power of ecological imagery, demonstrating how metaphorical engagements with water shape philosophical understandings of continuity, adaptation, and survival. Amy Leal's "John Keats: 'Mad as the Vext Sea'" presents a nuanced reading of Keats's maritime imagery as an index of emotional turbulence and creative intensity, illustrating the enduring symbolic potency of oceanic metaphor within Romantic poetics.

The essays extend these scholarly inquiries into experiential and reflective domains. Namkeen Peshawri's "Blue Burqa, Blue River: Notes from the Khyber Confluence" situates personal identity within the shifting geographies of riverine landscapes, weaving together memory and environment in a meditation on belonging. Mangeni Wycliffe Obwoya's "Even the Uneducated Eat foregrounds lived experience as a site of ecological insight, exploring the intimate relationship between sustenance, survival, and aquatic dependency. S. Buse Yıldırım's "Meramet; Weaving the Memory of Living Water, Listening to the Commonality of the Bosphorus" reflects on the Bosphorus as both historical conduit and contemporary urban lifeline, emphasising the sensory and mnemonic dimensions of water. Sun-Robin's "What the Waters Remember: Field Reflections on Ritual, Landscape, and Self in Changthang" integrates ethnographic observation with reflective narrative, offering insight into ritual practices that

sustain reciprocal relationships between communities and high-altitude water systems.

Creative contributions further expand the thematic range of the issue. Tridip Patir's "The Venice of My Heart" explores the interplay between memory and urban waterscapes, presenting aquatic space as both physical environment and emotional archive. Akshaya's "A Cushion on the Head" examines everyday labor shaped by water dependency, revealing the material realities that underlie abstract environmental discourse. Anushka Bharadwaj's "Bride of The River" dramatises the intimate bonds between human life and riverine ecosystems through mythic and symbolic registers.

The book review section reinforces the scholarly depth of the issue. Ar Afreen Fatima's review of *The Forgotten Stepwells of Telangana* highlights the architectural ingenuity and ecological resilience embodied in traditional water-harvesting systems, underscoring the importance of historical knowledge in contemporary sustainability efforts. Neha Yadav's review of Yume Kitasei's *Saltcrop* situates speculative fiction within environmental discourse, illustrating how imaginative literature anticipates ecological crises and technological transformation.

Visual and translational contributions further extend the interdisciplinary scope of the issue. Utpal Mallick's photo essay, "Their Silent Extinction," employs visual documentation to capture vanishing ecological landscapes, transforming photography into a medium of environmental testimony. The translation of Victor Leenus's "A Sea Change (Oru Samudraparinaamam)" by Ambika M S and Dhananjay Rajendran introduces linguistic and cultural perspectives that expand the geographic reach of oceanic discourse, reinforcing the global orientation of the Blue Humanities. The interview section concludes with "Sailing Beyond Ahab: Professor Steve Mentz on the Poetics, Politics, and Futures of the Blue Humanities," conducted by Shaonli Bhowmik—a dialogue that underscores the importance of conversation as a method of intellectual exchange and situates this issue within the ongoing development of the field.

Toward a Water-Conscious Humanities

To think with water, as this editorial has repeatedly suggested, is to confront the instability of categories that once appeared secure. The Blue Humanities does not simply introduce new objects of study into established disciplinary frameworks; it reconfigures the epistemological foundations upon which those frameworks rest. Water erodes boundaries: between disciplines, between cultures, between the human and the nonhuman. It compels scholars to adopt modes of inquiry attuned to motion, relationality, and uncertainty.

Across the preceding sections, this editorial has traced the emergence of the Blue Humanities from its early engagements with maritime literature to its contemporary intersections with environmental ethics, digital mapping, and climate science. It has demonstrated how oceanic epistemologies reshape temporal and spatial understanding; how archipelagic and tidalectic frameworks challenge territorial thinking; how riverine and cryospheric studies extend aquatic inquiry beyond the ocean; and how decolonial and

Indigenous perspectives transform ethical relationships with water. Any scholarly engagement with these questions—any Blue Humanities reading of a literary text, a cultural practice, a spatial formation, or an environmental event—will necessarily engage with the thinkers, frameworks, and debates mapped here. Blum's oceanic materialism, Mentz's wet ontologies, Neimanis's hydrofeminism, Gilroy's Black Atlantic, DeLoughrey's tidalectics, Hau'ofa's sea of islands, Alaimo's trans-corporeality, Glissant's relational poetics, Steinberg's social construction of the ocean, Nixon's slow violence: these constitute the foundational grammar of the field, and no critical analysis operating within Blue Humanities discourse can responsibly proceed without situating itself in relation to them.

The Blue Humanities is also an ethical response to planetary crisis. Rising seas, vanishing wetlands, melting glaciers, and polluted rivers confront humanity with the consequences of unsustainable development. By cultivating historical awareness, ethical reflection, and imaginative engagement, the humanities contribute to the development of water-conscious societies capable of confronting environmental challenges with resilience and creativity. The diversity of genres represented within this issue—scholarly, artistic, experiential—underscores the importance of interdisciplinary dialogue, reminding readers that environmental knowledge emerges not from isolated disciplines but from collaborative, often cross-cultural exchange.

To engage with water is to acknowledge that knowledge itself flows. Ideas circulate across disciplines, languages, and regions, forming currents of thought that reshape intellectual landscapes. The Blue Humanities represents not a fixed destination but an ongoing voyage, one that requires adaptability, collaboration, and openness to change. *The Apollonian* positions itself not merely as a venue for publication but as a site of intellectual confluence, where diverse voices gather to explore the meanings of water in an era of planetary transformation. The essays, stories, images, and reflections contained within this issue testify to the enduring relevance of water as both subject and method, inviting readers to imagine new ways of inhabiting a world defined increasingly by its aquatic dimensions.

To think with water, ultimately, is to think relationally, to recognise that no entity exists in isolation, that all life flows within networks of exchange. The Blue Humanities, by foregrounding these connections, offers a model for future scholarship grounded not in domination but in reciprocity. It encourages humility in the face of uncertainty and creativity in the face of change. In an age defined by rising waters, the humanities must learn to swim.

Subashish Bhattacharjee

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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Article

The Oceanic Subversion

Tracing the Reconfigurations and Reorientations Enabled by the Indian Ocean

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Abstract

This essay will demonstrate the manner in which the Indian Ocean and the transcultural migrations that occurred within this space, particularly during the colonial era, complicate the domains of postcolonialism as well as the blue humanities - the latter being an emerging field which is presently being accused of the presence of a "Northern bias", wherein the Atlantic thrives as the primary locus of cultural academic studies, at the expense of the other oceanic spaces, thereby calling for a need to decolonise the discipline. However, engaging in the process of decolonisation within the blue humanities requires the redefinition of the traditional theoretical perspectives of postcolonialism, which, nowadays, by being too much focused on the concept of a European centre and its peripheral colonies, has a tendency to concentrate most of its attention on the terrestrial spaces, and, in the process, overlooks the blue trajectories through which the event of colonialism actually reached the shores of the colonies. In this regard, every colonialism is also a type of "hydrocolonialism". This essay situates itself in the Indian Ocean space to explore how its waters complicate as well as destabilise the region by transforming it into a hydrocolonial expanse that not only fragments but also connects by hybridising cultures and identities. The aqueous medium not only facilitates circulation and migration but also blurs fixed territorial and cultural boundaries, thereby undermining established postcolonial categories such as the "slave" and the "colonised." Focusing on three important, but academically underexamined events from the colonial history of the region—first, the precoloniality of the Indian Ocean space; second, the transcultural migration of indentured labourers from India to British colonies in Africa, the Caribbean, and Oceania; and third, the Portuguese system of slavery and the cultural implications of the relocation of the kappiris (enslaved Africans) to the oceanic shores of Kerala—the essay examines how water acts as a dynamic agent that shapes as well as redefines the colonial and postcolonial conventions.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, Transcultural Migration, Slavery, Indentured Labourers, *Kappiris*.

Introduction

The second decade of the twenty-first-century witnessed the rise in popularity of the "blue humanities", which evolved as a response to the tendency within ecocriticism to dedicate most of its critical attention to the "green" expanses on the earth at the expense of the blue spaces of the planet. Presently, the practitioners of blue humanities have identified a gap within the field, which they describe as the "Northern bias" (Winkiel 3), wherein the oceans of the Northern Hemisphere, particularly the Atlantic Ocean, serve as the primary loci of academic studies. The reasons for this phenomenon are numerous, the most important one being the colonial and extractive politics of the imperial powers resulting in the present-day hegemony of the Global North. There is, therefore, a need to "decolonise" the blue humanities by bringing to the forefront the oceanic spaces which were hitherto overlooked. In this regard, this essay engages in the larger project of decolonising the blue humanities by situating itself in the much-neglected Indian Ocean space in order to demonstrate the manner in which this expanse complicates as well as undermines the traditionally accepted Euro-centric as well as postcolonial conventions and categories by concentrating on three events–firstly, the precoloniality of the Indian Ocean space, secondly, the system of Portuguese slavery and the cultural implications the colonial relocation of the enslaved from Africa to India had on the oceanic shores of Kerala and, thirdly, the transcultural migration of the indentured labourers from India to the British colonies in Africa, the Caribbean, and Oceania.

The process of decolonizing the blue humanities requires parting ways with the aforementioned Northern bias by paying more attention to the rest of the hitherto under-researched areas of the oceanic world, one such space being that of the Indian Ocean because it has been one of the major expanses through which the institution of colonialism expanded, thereby being referred to as the "British Lake" (Lavery 13) upto a century ago. When we bring the space of the Indian Ocean to the forefront of academic discussions, there is a need to redefine the theoretical perspectives of the larger context of colonialism because postcolonial discourses have a tendency to concentrate more on the terrestrial spaces, and, in the process, overlook the blue trajectories through which the event of colonialism actually reached the shores of the colonies. In this regard, every colonialism is also a case of hydrocolonialism (Hofmeyr "Provisional" 11).

However, limiting the temporal scope of analysis to the colonial era is tantamount to imposing Western frameworks of analysis on an oceanic space that was beaming with transnational commerce way before the politics of the overpowering imperial trade began taking the central stage. According to John Gillis, "The Indian Ocean is 'the oldest shore'"; it "has been traversed by humans for at least five thousand years, as compared to the Pacific's two thousand and the Atlantic's brief five hundred years of repeated passages" (41-42). Therefore, any attempt at decolonisation should drastically reconsider the temporal frame of the oceanic analysis and expand it to include the precolonial history of the Indian Ocean as well.

The Geography and Climate of the Indian Ocean

The geographical features of the Indian Ocean are quite unique in that it is the only one among the three major oceans to have a continental roof bounded by land on three of its sides. This feature of being landlocked from all three sides makes the monsoons of the Indian Ocean peculiar creating monsoon winds which flow in the northeastern direction during the initial half of the year and in the south-west during the latter half (Lavery 2). Interestingly, the initial usage of the word monsoon also has its origins in the Indian Ocean space. Moreover, the ability of the Indian Ocean to store heat for extended periods of time gives it a "long memory" (Pokhrel et al. 8), due to which the monsoons in this space, unlike in the other oceans, can be predicted.

The predictability of monsoons in the Indian Ocean has had a lot of commercial as well as cultural impacts. For Lavery, it is the predictability of monsoons that permitted travel in weak wooden crafts (2) called dhows. This, in fact, "enabled early sail travel across and around its basin while fostering deep and sticky relations between locals and foreigners along its shore" (Samuelson "Coastal" 18). Also, for Michael Pearson, the "monsoon regime" of the Indian Ocean meant that there was a "downtime" for the sailors, enabling them to spend more time in the ports and the mainland (42), hence allowing them to influence and to be influenced by the culture of the mainland. Moreover, within the context of material ecocriticism, the impacts arising from the phenomenon of the predictability of monsoons stand as a testament to the instance of the geographical features of the oceans directly influencing the cultural aspects of a particular space, thereby reinforcing the argument that matter has agency and that any engagement with the oceanic should neither be solely material nor discursive, but should also take into consideration the larger framework of the material-semiotic knot within which it is situated.

The Pre-colonial "Indian Ocean World"

The first step towards understanding the ways in which this oceanic space subverts conventional notions is to look at the Indian Ocean from the temporal frame of the longue durée. As a first step towards decolonisation, what is required is the renunciation of the centrality of the colonial period and the adoption of what the Annales school of history would describe as the longue durée, an approach that not only "extends history further into the past", but also studies in tandem with temporality, the climatology, demography and geology of a particular area (Buchanan).

Even before the advent of the age of colonisation, the Indian Ocean was already a space where trade was extensively carried out amongst Indians, Arabs, and Africans. It is this contextual framework that allows Lavery to claim that "rather than the one-sided monologue of 'tanks and guns and bombs,' the Indian Ocean world may be asked to stand for 'centuries of dialogue'" that "presupposes diverse—rather than exclusively Western, capitalist and Eurocentric—values" (60). The diversity of the Indian Ocean space is reflected in the work *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* that describes the ports of

Muziris and Tyndis in the following manner: "Tundis is in the kingdom of Keprobotos [land of the Chera dynasty], and is a well-known village beside the sea [and] Mouziris, belonging to the same kingdom, is a flourishing place with ships from Ariake coming to it, and also Greeks" (Periplus 50).

Furthermore, the descriptions of the ports of ancient India in *The Rehla* by Ibn Battuta also testify to the extensive trade conducted through the Indian Ocean. In his introduction to *The Rehla*, Mahdi Husain states that Battuta places the ports of Calicut and Quilon amongst the greatest in the world and compares them to the port of Alexandria as follows: "Speaking about Alexandria, which impressed him no less, he says, 'I have not seen among the ports of the whole world any equal to it excepting perhaps the ports of Quilon and Calicut in India'" (xliv). Moreover, in his account of the kingdom of Malabar, the Venetian traveller Marco Polo talks about the extensive cotton trade that was carried out: "In this kingdom, there is a vast abundance of pepper, ginger, cinnamon, and Indian nuts" and "the finest and most beautiful cotton are [is] manufactured that can be found in any part of the world". The historians, therefore, regarded the expanse as a "world" of its own and aptly described it as the "Indian Ocean World" (Lavery 2).

The Complicating Nature of the Indian Ocean

A deeper understanding of the Indian Ocean space will reveal the fact that this arena was also subjected to the implications of power, hegemony, transcultural exchanges, migratory practices, and the consequent hybridity, diversity, and complexities it creates. It is in this context that Isabel Hofmeyr introduces the concept of "cross-cutting diasporas" ("Complicating Sea" 589) because the transcultural migrations that happened across the Indian Ocean led to most diasporic communities co-existing with others sharing the same identity of the colonised, which she describes as the "also-colonised other" (ibid.). Some of the colonised - for instance, the Indian officials employed by the British were also participants in colonising the "also-colonised" other. In this regard, to further understand the manner in which the Indian Ocean complicates the traditionally accepted notions and subverts the coloniser-colonised binary, the latter part of this essay considers two instances—the first one being that of the kappiris, and the second one being the case of the Indian indentured labourers.

The Reasons for the Oceanic Complication

The Indian Ocean complicates the coloniser-colonised relations due to which the expanse cannot be subjected to a simplified analysis. One of the reasons is that the pre-colonial and, to a certain extent, colonial India in itself is considered by several theorists as a "sub-imperial" (Metcalf 6) or "semi-imperial" (Burton 151) nation. This is coupled with the fact that during the colonial period, the British expanded their control to the African countries through the Indians whom they appointed as soldiers, clerks, and collectors. Moreover, as Hofmeyr points out, the hegemonic attitudes of India with respect to Africa can be clearly

seen in Gandhi's early works, wherein he features "India as the part of an empire of the civilised, its boundary marked by the 'native' or African who stood beyond the pale of civilisation" ("Universalising" 725).

Any engagement with the Indian Ocean, therefore, requires parting with the traditionally accepted notions. In it is this light that Hofmeyr's concept of "Bandung revisionism" ("Complicating" 588) becomes pertinent. The Bandung Conference was an anti-colonial gathering held at Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955. For Hofmeyr, "Bandung was an Indian Ocean event", as conveyed by the image of the dove of peace flying above the Indian Ocean, which was printed on its poster ("Universalizing" 722). Furthermore, any discussion related to the Indian Ocean should not just be confined to the notions of peace and unity alone but, as Hofmeyr claims, they should also take into consideration the numerous contradictions that exist within the oceanic space, particularly those that are embedded in the Afro-Asian relations ("Complicating" 589).

The Case of the *Kappiris*

One such instance would be that of the *kappiris* of Fort Kochi. *Kappiri*, a Malayalam word derived from the Arabic word "kafir," meaning a non-believer, is used to refer to the slaves brought by the Portuguese to India during the sixteenth century. When the Portuguese departed from Kerala they left behind the *kappiris*, who were given the charge of guarding the abandoned Portuguese treasures. The *kappiris*, at present, have attained a mythical or deified status, because of which they are referred to as *muthappan* (meaning "revered grandfather" who is also regarded as a protector-deity) by the local people of Fort Kochi. The *kappiri muthappan* has dedicated shrines in Fort Kochi, where they are worshipped by the local people. Within the colonial context of Kerala, the figure of the *kappiri* stands as a symbol of the oppression of colonial rule, of resilience in the face of oppression, and also of the transcultural migrations that happened across the Indian Ocean during the colonial era. Moreover, the *kappiri* is also a perfect totem of the anti-colonial attitudes of the locals because, here, the figure that is venerated is not of the colonial master but that of the oppressed colonised. Furthermore, the instances of people leaving alcohol and cigars at the shrines of the *kappiri* also attribute to them a sense of subversiveness because, during the period of Portuguese colonialism, these commodities were frequently used by the Portuguese masters during their soirees on ships.

Also, for the natives, although the *kappiris* are the "exotic" outsiders, they are not only the "also-colonised other" but also a "familiar stranger" since both of them share a similar position in the colonial hierarchy. Therefore, although the *kappiris* and the locals have the shared identity of being the colonised, the degree to which each category was colonised varied in extent because the former, by being under the control of solely the Portuguese, were subjected to harsh, oppressive treatments, contrary to the latter who were shielded from direct Portuguese subjugation. The *kappiri*, in this regard, is as much a product of the Indian Ocean as that of Portuguese colonisation in itself, since not only were they enslaved

by the Portuguese after being captured from the African shores, but were transported across the Indian Ocean in ships. However, unlike in the case of the relationship between the Indian officials sent by the British to the African nations and the natives of the continent — where, by contributing to the act of colonising the latter, the already colonised Indian officials also, in a way, became a coloniser — the relation between the *kappiris* and the local people of Kerala was vastly different.

In this regard, it can be said that the identity of the *kappiri* captures the fluidity and dynamism associated with the waters of the Indian Ocean. Their journey across the oceanic waters has not only changed the *kappiris*' identity from being the enslaved to being the venerated but also made them hybridised in that they have been rendered neither fully African nor Portuguese nor fully Indian because they were regarded as an "exotic outsider" by the native Indians. Furthermore, the shrines of the *kappiri* can also be considered as an example of trans-continental memorialisation facilitated through the oceanic, wherein an enslaved African is being remembered and worshipped by the people belonging to a different continent as a symbol of colonial politics and resilience. Moreover, it has to be noted that the *kappiris* are not a part of the mainstream history of India, nor are they included in the mainstream historical discourses of Kerala. The memorial, in the form of shrines, then becomes a significant symbol that not only gives a voice to the subaltern who is forgotten but also stands a constant reminder of their absence from mainstream historical discourses.

However, the memorialisation of the *kappiri* as a figure of anti-colonialism also renders the Indian Ocean as a space of reconfiguration, wherein the oppressed *kappiris*, through their journey across the oceans, are able to transform their identities from being the enslaved to being a hero. In this regard, the Indian Ocean becomes a space that not only enables the production of new meanings but, by allowing the sunken histories to resurface, helps in challenging the mainstream colonial discourses by giving a voice to the subaltern. The shrine of the *kappiri* then becomes a memorial, which, rather than providing "a view of the Indian Ocean as constituting a coherent, singular unit — reinforces a view of its plurality and the many dense imbrications that shaped, and in turn were shaped by, the particularities of social geographies mapped along shifting and mutable spaces of interrelation" (Machado 161).

The Case of the *Kala Pani* and the Indentured Labourers

During pre-colonial India, the oceanic waters were regarded as the *kala pani*, or "black water", particularly by the members of the upper caste. In this context, those who undertook the task of crossing the seas "unavoidably caused excommunicating pollution that required ritual purification before they could be accepted back into their home communities". The members of the upper caste attribute the taboo of the *kala pani* to the *dharma shastra* and other Brahminical texts, which prohibit the crossing of the oceanic waters since it "entails a separation of the traveller from the holy Ganges, thereby breaking the reincarnation cycle" (Bates and Carter 37), which results in the loss of their caste.

Any study of colonial as well as postcolonial India should, therefore, also take into consideration the manner in which these pre-existing hegemonic casteist structures engaged with the colonial discourses. For instance, the British jail in the Andaman Islands was named "Kala Pani" since the penal system was built on the basis of the fear of the loss of caste brought about by crossing the oceanic waters to reach the prison. In this regard, Anderson claims, "South Asian convicts were often afraid of transportation, but they did not always register the prospect of their exclusion in relation to loss of caste" (37). However, "[i]n the 1890s, the Government of India tried to reconfigure transportation as a focus of terror, by constructing the Cellular Jail at Port Blair in the Andamans" (ibid.).

Moreover, the discourse of the *kala pani* is deeply entwined with the transcultural migration of the Indian indentured labourers, who also stand as yet another example of Hofmeyr's "cross-cutting diasporas". The indentured labourers were people, primarily from India, who, in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century, were transported in ships across the Indian Ocean, primarily to British colonies in Africa, the Caribbean, and Oceania. The migration of the indentured labourers produced an immense amount of literature, most of which captures the complexity of their mixed identity that was produced as a result of the transcultural movement. A notable example in this regard is the text *Chalo Jahaji - On a Journey through Indenture in Fiji* (2012), written by Brij V Lal, who was an Indo-Fijian historian whose descent is closely tied up with the indentured labour system through his grandfather, who came to Fiji in 1908 to serve five years of indenture. The work, labelled as a "milestone in subaltern studies" (Samaroo vii), contains a collection of essays that not only takes the reader on a journey through the history, literature, and culture of the indentured labourers in Fiji who were transported to the island between 1879 and 1916 but also provides a poignant picture of the hardships faced by them.

However, for Nafisa Essop Sheik, most of what is considered "indenture literature", particularly within the South African context, is not only written from the perspective of colonial masters but also is land-based in that the oceanic elements which are deeply entwined with the history of indentured labourers are completely forgotten to such an extent that the literary site in itself, by submerging them, becomes a *kala pani* (390). The reasons for the absence of literature composed by the indentured labourers could be many, one of them being the fact that most of the labourers who boarded the ship were illiterate and belonged to the oppressed castes, making their literature primarily oral in nature, hence preventing them from being recorded and physically archived. Due to this, even the folk songs, which may have contained the details of their crossing of the oceanic waters, could have gone out of existence. Nevertheless, the primary reason lies in the fact that the indenture literature is looked at from the point of view of the structures formulated by the imperialists, whose relationship to the sea is very different from that of the labourers. For the colonial masters, the land, which was the site on which extractive politics was practised, was more important than the sea since, for them, its waters merely served as a passage to reach the shores where

they could reap profits from. This stood in stark contrast to the situation of indentured labourers, for whom the land, on either side of the ocean, was a site of oppression in that, in their motherland, they were subjected to the brutality of the caste system since most of the labourers belonged to the middle-to-lower castes, and in the lands that they were transported to, the labourers were subjected to the cruelty of colonial masters. Lal writes:

> 'Coolies' all, they were assumed to be children of the lesser gods, men and women of low status and few means, down trodden or down on their luck, for whom the colonies offered brighter prospects of a better future. Even sympathetic friends denied them agency. Their employers and the colonial government used negative images to remind the girmitiyas and their descendants of their proper place in the colonial hierarchy, while their friends used them as ammunition for their own political causes. (x)

However, many of them boarded the ships in the hope of obtaining brighter prospects. In this regard, even though it lasted only for a brief period of time, the oceanic waters, for the indentured labourers who were transported in ships across the Indian Ocean, became a space of anticipated liberation, optimism, and hope for a better future.

Moreover, the Indian Ocean, for the indentured labourers, was not just a space which allowed them to cultivate hope for better prospects but also served as a site of negotiation since their journey in overcrowded cabins of ships through the blue expanse facilitated the subversion of cultural norms, thereby enabling a reconstruction of identity. According to the archives made public by the British government, the origins of indentured labour can be traced in the letter of John Gladstone. The letter included the following message, "Unless a system of regular continuous labour is then adopted, the cultivation of the sugar cane cannot then be carried on to a productive result" (Mahoney).

Furthermore, the institution of indentured labour was quite similar to the slave trade, the only difference being the fact that the indentured labourers, in the eyes of the British, as mentioned in the letter by Gladstone, were "free labourers", who, with "mutual consent", had to voluntarily sign an indenture contract (Mahoney). However, the very fact that indentured labour was made to seem voluntary and consensual does not make them entirely contradictory to or detached from the notion of slavery. This is reflected in the parliamentary statement given by Lord John Russell in 1840, wherein the officer states that he is "not prepared to encounter the responsibility of a measure which may lead to [...] a new system of slavery" (ibid.).

And Lord Russel is not wrong in that the indentured labour system was, in so many ways, an evolution of the oppressive colonial system of the slave trade in itself. This is substantiated by the fact that most of the contracts were framed by the colonial masters themselves according to their demands in English — a language which the labourers were unfamiliar with — hence creating a situation wherein the labourers signed the contracts "unwillingly and unknowingly" (Raikar). The helplessness of the labourers is reflected in

one of the folk songs, which contains the following lines: "Oh recruiter, your heart is deceitful, / Your speech is full of lies!" (Lal 114).

Moreover, the situation of the indentured labourers in the ship, as well as in the colonies, was not very different from that of the enslaved in that not only were the labourers transported in the "confined space of overcrowded cabins" (Lal 29), but there were also reported instances of them dying and falling sick during the journey as is reflected in the following lines taken from another folk song: "Several months on the ship passed with great difficulty, / On the seven dark seas, we suffered unaccustomed problems" (Lal 114). The oppression inflicted upon the indentured labourers is captured in the following lines taken from yet another folksong:

> Having heard the name of the island of Mauritius,
> We arrived here to find gold, to find gold.
> Instead, we got beatings of bamboos,
> Which peeled the skin off the back of the labourers.
> We became kolhu's bullocks to extract cane sugar
> Alas! We left our country to become coolies. (Lal 115)

Furthermore, as mentioned above, most of the people who signed the contract were members belonging to oppressed castes for whom the prospect of being transported to the colonies as indentured labourers presented an opportunity to have a better life. For instance, in his work *Chalo Jahaji*, Lal includes a folk song by an unknown emigrant from Surinam who attributes the social oppression of lower castes by upper castes as the reason for his migration:

> I call India blessed, and the Brahmans and Kshatriyas too
> Who attach untouchability to their subjects.
> They rule by the power of these very subjects,
> While keeping the company of prostitutes.
> The subjects escaped and came to the islands
> And, yes, India turned on her side. (114)

Nevertheless, as mentioned above, for many of the people belonging to the oppressed castes, crossing the *kala pani* meant an opportunity to achieve better prospects, not only financially but in terms of the oppression they faced because of their caste identity in the motherland as well. According to Nafisa Essop Sheik, crossing the *kala pani* facilitated a certain "reinvention" for the people belonging to the oppressed castes because they could part with their caste identity at the time of their embarkation and attain a new name and identity when they reached the plantations (394). In this regard, the *kala pani* becomes a site of "transfiguration, of aspiration and mobility outside of the terrestrial strictures of castes ordained by birth and maintained by village communities" (393). Furthermore, it was not only the embarkation onto the ship that gave them the opportunity to part with

their caste markers. Their journey on the overpacked ship meant that they had to live in close contact with each other. For instance, Lal claims,

> The confined spaces of overcrowded cabins confounded a (sic.) people who had never seen the sea before. Inevitably, the ship became the site of a massive social disruption. All the old rituals and ceremonial observances of village India began to crumble in that crucible. No one could be certain about the true caste of the bhandaries (cooks). They all ate together in a *pangat*, seated single file, drank water from the same container, shared and cleaned the same toilet, and took turns sweeping, hosing, and cleaning the deck. The voyage was a great leveller of hierarchy and status: the immigrants were coolies all in the eyes of the sahibs. (29)

In this regard, the journey across the oceanic waters, for the indentured labourers, meant the disruption of caste hierarchy, which, contrary to the Brahminical belief of "loss of varna", gave them the opportunity to reconstruct and redefine their identity.

The Oceanic Deracialisation

At this juncture, it has to be noted that, unlike in the case of the Atlantic Ocean, where the concept of slavery has strong associations with race and operates between the traditional binaries of the dominant colonial master and the oppressed colonial subject, the Indian Ocean, through the process of deracialisation complicates the category of the enslaved (Hofmeyr "Complicating" 588). Here, because of the aforementioned transcultural migrations carried out within the space of the Indian Ocean, it has become necessary to dissociate the category of the enslaved from being limited to one particular race.

In this regard, rather than confining the concept of colonial slavery to the time period of the transatlantic transport of the enslaved from Africa to the Americas and the Caribbean islands, we should start thinking about not only reconceiving its definition in order to include other races that were subjected to the oppression of the colonial power in whatever shape and form it took but also expanding its time frame to understand the manner in which the structure and notions associated with the concept of colonial slavery have changed.

Yet another instance that challenges the notion of the enslaved and vouches for its deracialisation is the case of the *kappiri*. As mentioned above, even though the *kappiri* is an African by race, his identity is complicated by his journey across the Indian Ocean in imperial ships. Therefore, within the space of the Indian Ocean, as opposed to the Atlantic, the network of transportation of the enslaved from Africa is not triangular or linear but "plot a more tangled, circulating pattern" (Lavery 49) as indicated by the complicated identity of the *kappiri*, who is, in fact, a "record of wandering, drifting itineraries, produced by imperial failure" (ibid.).

Conclusion

As the aforementioned instances indicate, the Indian Ocean is an expanse that complicates the traditional modes of categorisation by being a space wherein several forces operate in

order to facilitate the creation of complex identities through the processes of hybridity, as in the case of the *kappiri*, and reconfiguration, as in the case of the indentured labourers. In this regard, the cultural as well as literary study of the Indian Ocean, therefore, requires the adoption of what Hofmeyr describes as the "desegregating approach" ("Complicating" 587), which, in turn, enables us to have a more informed understanding of the crosscutting interactions that happened within the oceanic space.

In a larger context, embracing the technique of desegregation is yet another approach towards decolonising the blue humanities. The "desegregating approach" broadens the epistemological structure in numerous ways, three of which have been demonstrated: firstly, the dissolution of specific racial attributions within the category of the enslaved, leading to their deracialisation; secondly, the undermining of the strict colonial-colonised binaries; and thirdly, the expansion of the colonial timeframes which are imposed upon the Indian Ocean.

Therefore, in the broader context of the blue humanities, shifting the focus of attention from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indian is not just a decolonial move but also the "desegregation" brought about by this venture to numerous structures allows us to have a more informed understanding of the operations of power within various contextual frameworks. That said, decolonising the blue humanities should neither be a utilitarian nor a tokenistic move, hence proving Somervilles's claim that "oceanic studies began in the Atlantic and now casts its eye around marginal oceans to gain a broader view" (28) right, nor should it culminate in bringing solely the Indian Ocean to the forefront by eclipsing the other oceans of the world. Rather, what has to be implemented here is a framework that is built on the aesthetics of the *mappa mund*i (Samuelson 21), wherein the Indian Ocean, with all of its intricacies, is only seen as a part of the vast oceanic world, which has no singular origin nor end (Somerville 28). Therefore, any study of the blue expanse should not just be an isolated analysis of singular oceanic spaces but an examination that takes into consideration the interconnectedness and interactions that exist between the supposedly furcated oceanic worlds.

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Article

Oceanic Justice
Reimagining the Blue Humanities through African Environmental Philosophy

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Abstract

The Blue Humanities has repositioned the ocean and other waterbodies as vital archives of ecological, cultural, and philosophical meaning. Yet, despite its interdisciplinary scope, much of its discourse remains shaped by Western epistemologies that privilege maritime modernity and anthropocentric aesthetics. This essay reimagines the Blue Humanities through the lens of African environmental philosophy, advancing a decolonial framework grounded in communitarian ethics and indigenous ontologies of water. Drawing on the works of Mogobe Ramose, Godfrey Tangwa, and Munyaradzi Murove, it develops the concept of "oceanic justice", which is a moral vision that recognizes water as a living participant in community life rather than a passive resource. This paper questions how African relational worldviews can redefine the ethical foundations of oceanic thought and contribute to global ecological governance. Through close engagement with African narratives and environmental practices, it demonstrates how oceanic justice offers both theoretical insight and practical pathways toward sustainable water stewardship, ecological solidarity, and postcolonial repair. By integrating African philosophy into the Blue Humanities, this essay expands its ethical and political horizons, situating African water ethics as an indispensable resource for rethinking the moral and ecological futures of aquatic worlds.

Keywords: Blue Humanities, Communitarian Ethics, Decolonial Ecology, Oceanic Justice, Water Ethics.

Introduction

In recent years, the Blue Humanities has emerged as a significant paradigm in environmental and cultural studies, foregrounding the ocean and other waterbodies as central to understanding ecological crises, historical memory, and cultural imagination. Pioneering scholars such as Steve Mentz (2009; 2015), Hester Blum (2008), and Stacy Alaimo (2016) have illuminated how maritime spaces mediate human experiences of modernity, risk, and ecological entanglement. Their works have shown that oceans are not empty voids separating nations but dynamic archives of human histories, affective relations, and planetary interdependencies. The Blue Humanities thus reorients the humanities toward water as both matter and metaphor, offering new possibilities for rethinking environmental ethics and cultural belonging (Mentz 7–9).

Yet, despite its ecological and philosophical promise, the field remains largely shaped by Euro-American epistemologies that often universalize oceanic experience through Western maritime imaginaries. Foundational works in the field tend to center the Atlantic world, colonial navigation, and capitalist seascapes as dominant referents of the human–water relationship (DeLoughrey 35). This orientation sidelines indigenous and postcolonial perspectives that have long theorized water as a moral, spiritual, and communal force. In particular, African traditions, where rivers, seas, and lakes are imbued with social and ethical meanings, have been largely absent from Blue Humanities scholarship. Such omission perpetuates what Achille Mbembe (14) calls the "epistemic enclosure" of the global South, where local ontologies are overshadowed by imported theoretical frameworks.

This essay responds to that gap by advancing the concept of "oceanic justice." Drawing from African environmental philosophy, especially the communitarian and eco-bio-communitarian ethics developed by Mogobe Ramose (2002), Godfrey Tangwa (1996), and Munyaradzi Murove (2009), it proposes a justice-centered approach to the study of water. Oceanic justice repositions water not merely as a biophysical element but as a living participant in the moral and social life of communities. It embodies the African philosophical understanding that moral responsibility extends beyond human relations to include ecological interdependence and reciprocal care for the environment (Ramose 232–234).

Accordingly, this paper asks: How can African environmental philosophy reshape the ethical foundations of the Blue Humanities and contribute to global practices of ecological justice? The central argument is that integrating African communitarian ethics into Blue Humanities discourse not only decolonizes its epistemological assumptions but also offers practical frameworks for sustainable water governance, community-based conservation, and environmental education. By grounding the oceanic imagination in African relational worldviews, the essay advances both a theoretical reframing and a set of actionable insights for reimagining humanity's moral obligations to aquatic worlds in the Anthropocene.

The Blue Humanities and Its Theoretical Currents

The Blue Humanities has emerged as one of the most imaginative developments in the environmental humanities, inviting scholars to think through water as both material and metaphor. Its conceptual expansion since the mid-2000s has reframed the sea as a dynamic archive of ecological crisis, colonial encounter, and cultural imagination. Rather than treating oceans as inert backdrops, thinkers like Steve Mentz and Hester Blum have urged the humanities to read marine spaces as fluid epistemologies, that is, spaces that shape how humanity perceives motion, history, and survival (Mentz 22–25).

Steve Mentz's Shipwreck Modernity (2015) remains central to this shift. His argument that shipwrecks serve as cultural metaphors for crisis and ecological precarity captures how water mediates human vulnerability and resilience. For Mentz, the ocean's instability mirrors modernity's own fractured consciousness. This insight advances a "blue cultural studies" that foregrounds the sea's narrative agency, that is, its power to destabilize land-based assumptions about knowledge and progress. Yet, as insightful as Mentz's framework is, it often privileges literary modernity over sociohistorical justice, leaving unexamined the colonial economies that produced those maritime crises in the first place.

Hester Blum's The View from the Masthead (2008) extends the discussion by reading maritime labour as an epistemic position. She interprets sailors' perspectives as counter-archives of global capitalism, recovering their embodied knowledge of wind, current, and risk. Her attention to labour and perception adds a vital materialist dimension to the field. Still, Blum's focus on textual recovery occasionally stops short of confronting the asymmetrical moral geographies that underlie maritime modernity, especially how enslaved, indentured, and colonized bodies were rendered as expendable cargoes within the same seascape.

Stacy Alaimo's Exposed (2016) pushes the field toward posthumanist ethics by theorizing trans-corporeality, which is the idea that bodies and environments are mutually permeable. Her argument that the sea dissolves boundaries between human and nonhuman life has enriched ecological theory and feminist thought alike. By situating the ocean as a site of interconnection, Alaimo opens the Blue Humanities to environmental justice questions. Yet her posthumanism, though ethically motivated, sometimes abstracts from historical specificity; it risks overlooking how environmental exposure has been unevenly distributed along lines of race, class, and geography.

Christina Sharpe's In the Wake: On Blackness and Being (2016) introduces a radical moral register into the Blue Humanities. Her notion of "the wake" redefines water as the site of both Black death and Black imagination. The Atlantic, in Sharpe's work, is a necropolitical space haunted by the Middle Passage, but also a site of ongoing resistance and remembrance. This intervention transforms the Blue Humanities by centering Black lived experience and historical trauma. Unlike Mentz or Alaimo, Sharpe grounds the ocean not only in ecology but in ethics, thus, forcing the field to confront its colonial inheritances.

Taken together, these thinkers have made the Blue Humanities a rich and interdisciplinary field that moves between literature, philosophy, and environmental science. Their collective insight lies in reconceptualizing water as an active participant in human and nonhuman histories. Still, as the field matures, its critical energy remains concentrated in Euro-American theoretical genealogies. The ocean, in these accounts, often appears as a universal metaphor rather than a differentiated moral geography shaped by empire and extraction.

This imbalance reveals a crucial gap: the Blue Humanities has yet to systematically integrate justice as a central analytic category. While it attends to fluidity and relationality, it rarely considers relational justice, that is, how communities historically situated along the global South's coastlines understand, negotiate, and contest their oceanic environments. What remains underdeveloped is a philosophical vocabulary capable of linking oceanic imagination to distributive and environmental justice.

The absence of decolonial grounding also limits the field's ethical reach. Indigenous and African philosophies, for instance, conceive water not merely as matter or metaphor but as a living moral entity tied to communal life. The Blue Humanities' current frameworks often overlook this cosmological dimension. Without engaging oceanic knowledge traditions from the Indian Ocean world, the Niger Delta, or the South Pacific, the field risks reproducing the same asymmetry it critiques by centering Western thought while marginalizing subaltern epistemologies.

In this sense, the task ahead is not to discard the Blue Humanities' theoretical advances but to deepen them through a justice-oriented turn. An African philosophical response, grounded in relational ethics and communitarian ontology, can illuminate what we can term oceanic justice: a framework that situates water as a site of both ecological interdependence and moral responsibility. By reimagining oceans as ethical commons rather than abstract spaces of theory, such an approach reclaims the Blue Humanities for the plural worlds it seeks to represent.

African Environmental Philosophy and the Ethics of Water

African philosophy offers a rich moral and ontological vocabulary for reimagining humanity's relationship with the environment. Unlike Western frameworks that often separate nature from culture or subject from object, African thought conceives being as relational and dynamic. Within this worldview, the natural world is not a passive backdrop for human activity but an active participant in the moral community. This relational ontology provides an indispensable corrective to the abstraction of much Blue Humanities scholarship, which tends to privilege theoretical fluidity over ethical embeddedness.

Mogobe Ramose's interpretation of Ubuntu captures this moral ontology with clarity. For Ramose (51–54), Ubuntu expresses a metaphysics of interconnectedness: "I am because we are." Existence is not defined by isolation but by participation in a web of reciprocal care. Extending this principle to the environment implies that rivers, oceans, and

forests are part of this community of being. The sea, in this moral order, is not merely water but a relational entity whose wellbeing is inseparable from that of the human and nonhuman community it sustains. Such a view grounds ecological ethics in lived moral responsibility rather than abstract regulation.

Similarly, Godfrey Tangwa's (197) notion of eco-bio-communitarianism argues that African thought embodies an ethic of live-and-let-live, where all forms of existence possess intrinsic value. He contrasts this with anthropocentric Western modernity, which instrumentalizes nature for human gain. In many African societies, water is not property but presence, that is, a sacred and communal resource rather than a commodity. This view resonates with the Blue Humanities' emphasis on interdependence, yet it surpasses it by embedding ecological consciousness in social morality and everyday practice.

Indigenous cosmologies across the continent further illustrate this relational ethic. In Yoruba thought, 'Omi' (water) is not inert but a divine force linked to 'Ọṣun', the river goddess of fertility, beauty, and justice. Rituals to Ọṣun in Osogbo, Nigeria, affirm the belief that water has agency and must be treated with reverence. Among the Akan of Ghana, rivers such as Tano and Bia are personified as ancestral spirits whose purity reflects communal moral health (Gyekye 41–44). Likewise, the Shona people of Zimbabwe understand 'Mvura' (water) as the life-giving essence of 'Musha' (home and community) whose desecration calls for ritual cleansing (Shoko 60–63). Across these traditions, water functions as a moral interlocutor, a being that mediates between the human, the natural, and the spiritual.

These ontologies offer more than ethnographic insight; they constitute a distinct environmental philosophy. To speak of water as a living moral agent is to affirm that ecological ethics cannot be reduced to utilitarian management or climate governance. It is an ethical stance that foregrounds responsibility, reciprocity, and relational harmony. In this sense, African philosophy does not merely add cultural diversity to the Blue Humanities, that is, it redefines its moral core by integrating environmental care into the very logic of community.

This ethical grounding also has practical implications for contemporary ecological governance. The recognition of rivers and oceans as members of the moral community could reshape environmental policy toward participatory stewardship. For instance, community-led river protection practices in Osogbo, Ghana's Volta Basin, and Kenya's Lake Victoria region exemplify living expressions of oceanic justice. They operationalize Ubuntu and eco-bio-communitarianism by embedding environmental protection in communal rituals, customary laws, and moral education rather than relying solely on bureaucratic control.

By drawing from these indigenous ontologies, we can move beyond the abstract environmentalism of the Anthropocene discourse. The African ethics of water insists that ecological healing begins with moral restoration, which is the renewal of right relationships among beings. Such an approach speaks not only to conservation but to justice: ensuring

equitable access to water resources, protecting vulnerable coastal communities, and acknowledging the historical injustices that have disrupted these moral ecologies through colonial extraction and pollution.

The convergence of African communitarian thought with the Blue Humanities thus yields a transformative synthesis. It translates the fluid metaphors of the latter into an ethics of relational justice grounded in communal life. Oceanic justice, in this light, is not merely a philosophical construct but a living practice of care, one that regards water as a being deserving of moral attention, cultural reverence, and political protection. Through this lens, the sea becomes not a metaphor for crisis, but a mirror for our ethical imagination.

Oceanic Justice: A Conceptual Framework

The idea of oceanic justice emerges from the intersection of African relational ethics and the global debates of the Blue Humanities. It names a moral and philosophical framework that rethinks the ocean not merely as an environmental resource or imaginative symbol, but as a shared ethical space. Oceanic justice insists that the sea and other waterbodies are embedded within human histories of dependence, responsibility, and reciprocity. It integrates environmental justice, relational ontology, and ecological ethics into a unified vision that acknowledges both the material and moral dimensions of aquatic life.

Environmental justice scholarship, particularly in its Western form, has often emphasized distributive fairness, which is the equitable sharing of environmental benefits and burdens (Schlosberg 12–15). While this focus is necessary, it risks overlooking the deeper ontological relations that shape ecological coexistence. Oceanic justice extends this idea by grounding fairness not only in distribution but in relationship. It holds that justice toward the ocean entails more than preventing harm or ensuring access; it demands recognition of the ocean's moral status and the restoration of damaged relationships between humans and water.

In African relational thought, justice is not a juridical abstraction but a lived condition of balance within the community of beings. This view transforms environmental ethics into a philosophy of interdependence. If the Blue Humanities invites us to read the ocean as metaphor and memory, African philosophy invites us to live the ocean as moral kin. Oceanic justice thus represents a synthesis; a framework that translates Ubuntu and eco-bio-communitarianism into a planetary ethic of water. It envisions justice not as an external principle imposed on nature, but as an emergent harmony sustained through right relationships.

This approach directly contrasts with dominant Western paradigms such as the "blue economy" and "hydro-modernity." The blue economy, popularized through global policy frameworks like the United Nations' Sustainable Ocean Economy reports, views oceans primarily through the lens of productivity and growth (Voyer et al. 58–61). Its underlying logic remains anthropocentric and extractive: water is valued for its capacity to generate energy, trade, and tourism. Similarly, hydro-modernity, as discussed by scholars like Philip

Steinberg (155–157), conceptualizes the ocean as a space of circulation and connectivity essential to globalization. While both paradigms recognize water's centrality to human futures, they reduce its ethical and cultural significance to instrumental or geopolitical terms.

Oceanic justice rejects this economistic reduction by restoring the moral and spiritual dimensions of aquatic existence. It insists that the well-being of oceans cannot be separated from the well-being of the communities that depend on them. This vision draws on the African communitarian ethic of being-with, emphasizing that human flourishing is inseparable from ecological balance. Where the blue economy commodifies water, oceanic justice sacralizes it, not in a theological sense, but as a moral act of recognition that water's value exceeds economic calculation.

In practice, the framework of oceanic justice invites a shift from governance to guardianship. It reframes policy from the management of resources to the cultivation of relationships. Initiatives such as the granting of legal personhood to the Whanganui River in New Zealand and similar discussions around the Niger Delta's waterways can be read through this lens: they represent efforts to reimagine ecological law as moral partnership rather than control. In African contexts, this would mean embedding water governance within local cosmologies, community-led decision-making, and moral education rooted in indigenous ethics.

Moreover, oceanic justice challenges the epistemic hierarchies that shape global environmental discourse. It calls for the inclusion of subaltern voices, fishers, coastal dwellers, indigenous women, and traditional custodians, whose lived experiences constitute alternative archives of oceanic knowledge. By valuing these epistemologies, the framework democratizes ecological reasoning and resists the homogenizing tendencies of technocratic policy. This aligns with what Achille Mbembe (42–45) terms the "planetary entanglement" of existence, which is a recognition that human survival depends on restoring reciprocity within the web of life.

Theoretically, oceanic justice stands at the convergence of environmental ethics, decolonial theory, and relational ontology. It refuses the dualism between culture and nature that underpins Western modernity. In doing so, it transforms the Blue Humanities from a field of aesthetic contemplation into a philosophy of responsibility. Its goal is not only to interpret the sea as metaphor but to guide human conduct toward the sea as moral relation. This reorientation, from representation to reciprocity, marks the ethical evolution of the field.

Thus, the framework of oceanic justice aspires to reimagine the future of water beyond crisis narratives. It proposes that sustainable coexistence with the ocean will require more than technological innovation or regulatory reform. It requires moral imagination, that is, the capacity to see water as both mirror and measure of justice. In centering relational ethics, oceanic justice points toward a decolonial environmental philosophy that joins care, accountability, and belonging in the same current.

Case Studies and Applications

The application of oceanic justice becomes clearer when grounded in African cultural and literary narratives that engage rivers, seas, and water as living moral entities. These narratives illuminate how communities understand the ocean not merely as a physical expanse but as a moral geography structured around justice, memory, and belonging.

In Ama Ata Aidoo's Anowa (1970), water imagery symbolizes both freedom and consequence. The ocean becomes the boundary between ancestral ethics and colonial greed, reflecting the moral rupture of a community's disconnection from its spiritual ecology. Similarly, Aidoo's The Dilemma of a Ghost (1965) situates transatlantic return through aquatic metaphors, where the protagonist's dislocation mirrors the fractured moral relationship between Africa and its diasporas. These texts reveal how water mediates histories of displacement, inviting you to reflect on how justice may be conceived as an act of reweaving broken relational ties across geographies.

Ben Okri's The Famished Road (1991) also exemplifies the ecological consciousness embedded in African literary imagination. The river in Okri's narrative operates as a threshold between material and spiritual realms, an axis of renewal through which the human and non-human worlds communicate. This relational cosmology suggests that moral repair requires recognizing water as an interlocutor of justice, not as an inert resource but as a co-constitutive participant in human flourishing.

The praxis of oceanic justice extends beyond fiction into lived resistance. The Ogoni Bill of Rights (1990), drafted by the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), articulates water and land as inseparable moral domains. The Ogoni struggle against oil pollution in the Niger Delta exemplifies a practical application of oceanic justice, which is a demand that environmental stewardship must be grounded in communal ethics and ecological reciprocity. Ken Saro-Wiwa's Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy (1992) makes this explicit, framing ecological degradation as a moral crime against both people and water.

Contemporary environmental scholarship reinforces these insights. Rob Nixon's Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor (2011) exposes how the gradual poisoning of waterways constitutes a form of structural injustice that often eludes global attention. Similarly, Cyril Obi (2010) and Cyril Nwajiaku-Dahou (2012) illustrate that extractive capitalism in Nigeria's oil belt embodies what can be called hydro-colonialism, which is the domination of water spaces through exploitative logics that marginalize local communities. These analyses affirm that oceanic justice demands both theoretical depth and actionable frameworks, including participatory governance, ecological accountability, and indigenous stewardship models.

At the global level, oceanic justice resonates with the principles articulated in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015), especially Goals 14 and 16, which address the conservation of marine ecosystems and the promotion of

inclusive institutions. However, African perspectives contribute a vital moral corrective by emphasizing relational accountability over technocratic management. In this sense, you are invited to rethink the global governance of oceans and water through the ethical vocabulary of interdependence rather than control, a view that aligns with both decolonial and communitarian imperatives.

Conclusion

This essay has reinterpreted the Blue Humanities through the lens of African environmental philosophy, positioning oceanic justice as a decolonial framework for ecological thought and practice. By centering African communitarian ethics and indigenous cosmologies, the discussion has sought to redress the dominance of Western epistemologies that often treat water merely as resource or metaphor. In doing so, it has advanced the view that the ocean, and water more broadly, embodies moral and relational significance that must guide how societies imagine justice, sustainability, and human–non-human coexistence.

The essay's central contribution lies in articulating oceanic justice as a moral and ontological corrective to technocratic discourses such as the "blue economy" or "hydro-modernity." Rather than understanding oceans in economic or posthuman terms alone, the African relational worldview affirms that justice emerges from sustaining ethical reciprocity among humans, non-humans, and the natural world. This approach decolonizes the Blue Humanities by rooting it in philosophies that value interdependence and ecological accountability over extraction or domination.

Practically, the framework of oceanic justice offers new pathways for environmental governance and education. Policymakers can apply this model by embedding indigenous ethical principles into water management laws, emphasizing participatory stewardship and local agency. In education, the integration of African ecological philosophies into environmental curricula would nurture generations that perceive water as a co-agent in moral and communal life rather than a passive element. On the global stage, oceanic justice encourages a rethinking of climate and water governance structures, urging the inclusion of indigenous voices in decision-making processes.

Conclusively, the call is for an epistemic transformation, one that integrates indigenous ethics, ecological humility, and intercultural dialogue into the evolving field of the Blue Humanities. If the future of planetary sustainability depends on reimagining humanity's relationship with water, then African thought provides not merely a regional contribution but a universal ethic of care and coexistence. We are thus invited to consider oceanic justice as a philosophical and practical horizon for the next generation of environmental scholarship: one that restores balance, honors relationality, and reclaims water as a moral ground for global justice.

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Article

Performing the Blue

Chavittunadakam and Coastal Life through a Blue Humanities Perspective

Dijina Bastin K G

Abstract

The fishermen-artists of Chellanam, a coastal village in Kerala, India, sustain a centuries-old Christian folk-opera, Chavittunadakam, whose rhythms, narratives, and theatricality are inseparable from the sea. This study situates the sea as both a material and imaginative force that shapes livelihoods, cultural production, and collective memory, while simultaneously exposing the community to ecological risk. Drawing on the interdisciplinary framework of the Blue Humanities, the research examines how oceanic environments function as archives of transoceanic exchange, colonial encounter, and global circulation of culture. The concept of transoceanic imaginaries is employed to explore how coastal communities narrate, perform, and negotiate histories forged through maritime networks. This study, inspired by the photo-ethnographic documentation by K. R. Sunil provides visual testimony of rising sea levels, submerged homes, and eroded cultural spaces, highlighting the disproportionate burden of climate change borne by communities that have contributed least to global environmental degradation. Ethnographic methods, including participant observation and in-depth interviews, reveal how Chavittunadakam functions as a space of resilience, identity formation, and social cohesion amid environmental, economic, and structural vulnerability. By tracing the intersections of art, ocean, and community, the study demonstrates how transnational and transoceanic histories continue to shape the lived experiences, cultural imagination, and survival strategies of coastal populations in the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Blue Humanities, Chavittunadakam, Coastal Communities, Transoceanic Imaginaries, Climate Vulnerability, Cultural Resilience.

Introduction

The twenty-first century, witnessing rapid climatic transformation, has brought renewed attention to the intertwined relationships between coastal livelihoods, cultural practices, and ecological vulnerability. This paper examines the entanglements of sea, community, and cultural practice in Chellanam, a coastal village in Kerala, India, where the sea is simultaneously a source of life, livelihood, memory, and destruction. At the center of this study are the fishermen-artists of Chellanam, whose historical, cultural, and economic lives are deeply rooted in the sea and who practice the Christian folk-opera known as Chavittunadakam. Their art emerged from the oceanic histories of colonial contact, missionary movements, and transnational cultural exchange. Today, the same sea that shaped their artistic imagination repeatedly destroys their homes, erodes their coast, and threatens the survival of their art.

This study is deeply influenced by the photo ethnographic work of photographer K R Sunil, who documented the life of Chavittunadakam artists in Chellanam. His work showed the artists' houses, which are engulfed by seawater due to climate change. Alaimo argues that human bodies and oceanic environments are materially interconnected, since the sea circulates through human life just as humans shape marine worlds through their actions (Alaimo 476). Chellanam's crisis exemplifies a wider paradox: communities that contribute least to anthropogenic climate change bear its harshest consequences.

Methodologically, this research follows a qualitative case study design, combining ethnographic immersion, participant observation, in-depth interviews, and thematic analysis. Data were collected through extended field visits, informal conversations, and observation of rehearsals and performances. Thematic coding revealed interconnected vulnerabilities shaped by the deprivation of multiple forms of capital, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital. Alongside these sociological insights, the paper adopts the interdisciplinary framework of the Blue Humanities, which foregrounds the sea as a historical archive, an imaginative space, and a dynamic force shaping human life. The concept of transoceanic imaginaries further allows an examination of how ocean-based histories, colonial, cultural, and ecological have shaped the community's artistic and lived experience.

This paper is structured around four thematic sections:

- Sea as womb and a grave— Birth and End of Chavittunadakam.
- Collective memory and lived experience.
- Cultural capital and vulnerability.
- The Rise of Environmental Capital

Together, these sections illuminate how a coastal community negotiates its existence through the convergence of climate precarity, artistic passion, historical memory, and structural marginalization.

Sea as Womb and a Grave – Birth and End of Chavittunadakam

In the Blue Humanities, the sea is not merely a backdrop. It is an archive, a medium of relation, a force shaping culture and consciousness. The sea is described as "a womb and a grave," gesturing to its dual role in generating life and absorbing loss (Glissant 6). This duality profoundly resonates in Chellanam, where the ocean nurtured the rise of Chavittunadakam and now threatens its continuity.

Sebeena Rafi's book called *Chavittu Nadakam* (2010 edition) originally published in 1969 is considered as the bible or the major foundational text about Chavittunadakam. Chavittunadakam is a pure musical dance drama. The actors must sing the songs on stage, and the playback singers can only support the main actors in singing (Rafi 27). It is performed through vigorous foot-stamping, singing, and theatrical dramatization, evolved through colonial encounters. Portuguese missionaries introduced elements of European opera, Renaissance aesthetics, and Biblical narratives during their time on the Kerala coast. Local fishermen communities blended these influences with indigenous performance traditions, creating a hybrid form that embodied the transoceanic nature of cultural exchange. As Sebeena Rafi explains, "the development of Chavittunadakam was accomplished by combining European opera and indigenous forms; the missionaries brought remnants of the European Renaissance" (Rafi 27).

The missionaries, along with Christianity, carried the remnants of the European Renaissance. These influences were institutionalised through changes in architecture, literary production, and the establishment of schools and seminaries that offered systematic training in Latin and Greek alongside Tamil, Sanskrit, and Syriac. This process enabled the assimilation of European cultural forms into everyday social practices as well as into artistic practices. The Synod of Diampor was a milestone in the development of Chavittunadakam as the conference decided to eliminate all Hindu rituals and practices. They were even asked to abandon participating in the Hindu folk art forms. This was a need of the period where they had to build their own art forms and lay the foundation for the emergence of Chavittunadam as the folk art form of the Christians living on the coast of Kerala. For generations, the sea shaped not only the livelihoods of the performers but also the narrative universe of the art itself. A Chavittunadakam teacher (anonymized as Master A) explained:

> "Our plays came from the stories we heard from the missionaries who came by sea. Everything we know, the stories, songs, costumes are came through the ocean."

The sea thus served as both the medium and metaphor for cultural transmission. Yet, in recent decades, coastal erosion and violent monsoon surges have made performance environments fragile. Stages built near the coast have been washed away repeatedly. A senior performer recalled:

> "In my childhood, the sea stayed where it was supposed to. Now, when there is low pressure anywhere, the water rises and rushes into our houses. During one of the cyclones, the stage we prepare for months disappears in one night."

The sea that once brought stories, livelihoods, and community cohesion now act as a destructive force. Blue Humanities scholars emphasize the ocean as an active agent capable of shaping human fate. Elizabeth DeLoughrey argues that the sea is not a static surface but a "dynamic, violent, historical entity" that holds traumas of colonialism and climate catastrophe (DeLoughrey 710). The unpredictability of the sea mirrors the fragility of Chavittunadakam itself. Once flourishing, performed frequently in church festivals and coastal gatherings, the art now struggles for space, time, and safety. As younger generations migrate inland seeking stable livelihoods, the art increasingly loses practitioners. One performer said, "Chavittunadakam came from the sea, and maybe it will end because of the sea."

Thus, the sea becomes both origin and erasure, a womb giving birth to an artform and a grave threatening to bury it. Through this lens, Chavittunadakam stands as an oceanic archive: a cultural form made possible by transoceanic histories and endangered by the new oceanic realities of the Anthropocene.

Collective Memory and Lived Experience

Collective memory plays a central role in sustaining Chavittunadakam. For the people of Chellanam, memory is not abstract reflection but lived, embodied experience. This memory takes shape through everyday labour and shared living conditions. Chavittunadakam songs are sung during fishing journeys at sea, on rocking boats. Performers rehearse and create new songs while they are out fishing. They live in flood-damaged homes shaped by the memory of intergenerational stories shared by elders.

Maurice Halbwachs's concept of collective memory emphasizes that memories are constructed through social frameworks and transmitted across generations (Halbwachs 38). In Chellanam, people remember their experiences in connection with the art form and the sea. The people described how their mother used to sing Chavittunadakam songs while she bathed her child and the songs of the art forms came into their mind and life so effortlessly. There is an attractive force towards Chavittunadakam and to the sea. One of the artists explained that he used to hate Chavittunadakam because his father was an artist and he died because of the debt from this art form. In spite of his hatred for the art form he became a Chavittunadakam artist later. There is an intensive attracting force drawing the artists towards the artform. Similarly those who were not the fishermen started to go to the sea once they joined the Chavittunadakam. The sea and the art form is closely intertwined. These memories work as emotional infrastructures, enabling the art to endure despite structural vulnerabilities.

Collective memory also operates as resistance against erosion, marginalization, and rapid changes that make their environment increasingly unrecognizable. Collective memory also helps the artists cope with fear and loss. After exhausting fishing trips, they gather for rehearsals. Here the art form binds the people together even in the extreme

vulnerability. The performance becomes cathartic, an imaginative refuge. On stage, they play kings, queens, and soldiers and on off stage, they live in damaged homes, struggling with debt and displacement. This duality was described poignantly by an elder performer:

> "On the stage, we are Kings and Queens. When we come back home, we become people who don't know if our house will stand tomorrow."

Beyond collective memory, Chavittunadakam functions as what Mikhail Bakhtin calls a "second life," a performative space where ordinary hierarchies are suspended and daily hardship momentarily recedes (Bakhtin 7–10). When coastal performers step onto the stage as kings, queens, warriors, and divine figures, they inhabit an alternative world of dignity and imagination that counters the uncertainty of their lived reality. Performance becomes a communal act of renewal and a way of binding the community together even as climate pressures threaten the material ground on which the art survives.

Cultural Capital and the Vulnerability Context

Bourdieu (1986) identifies three interrelated forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social. These forms are deeply interconnected: higher economic resources often enable greater accumulation of cultural and social capital, and vice versa. Their uncertainty does not arise solely from climate risk but from structural marginalization rooted in caste, class, geography, and historical exclusion.

Economic Capital

Fishing has become an increasingly unstable livelihood, on some days the catch is sufficient, while on many others it yields little to nothing. Climate-driven shifts in fish availability have further intensified this economic uncertainty. Coastal erosion destroys homes, forcing families into cycles of repair, debt, and displacement. Many households from the coastal ward have already migrated inland, forced out by repeated flooding and erosion. In moving away, they have lost not only their proximity to the sea but also the community networks, shared labour, and artistic practice that once defined their everyday life. The displacement has fractured the social world within which Chavittunadakam was sustained.

Chavittunadakam itself places a considerable financial strain on the community. Preparing for performances demands constant investment in costumes, props, and travel, and the money spent often exceeds whatever small honorarium the artists receive. For many families already facing unstable incomes and rising climate-related expenses, sustaining the art form becomes an added economic burden rather than a source of security

Social Capital

Social capital beyond the village is extremely limited. As coastal Latin Christian fishermen, performers face overlapping social disadvantages: they are a religious and occupational minority, considered socially marginal, with limited education and few privileges. Their access to cultural institutions, sponsors, or government support is minimal, and

economic instability restricts their mobility. Most know only the stages of their churches and villages, unable to reach larger platforms. These constraints reinforce both social and cultural isolation, leaving the art form sustained primarily through tightly bound community networks. Although Chavittunadakam is often dismissed outside the village as "folk," "rural," or "underdeveloped," it carries profound meaning within the community. For performers, the art form provides a sense of dignity, purpose, and emotional strength, shaping their identity and reinforcing social bonds even amid economic and environmental uncertainty.

Cultural Capital

Despite the performers' remarkable skill, Chavittunadakam occupies a marginal place within broader cultural hierarchies. Their artistry, rooted in rhythm, memory, and embodied technique, rarely converts into institutional recognition or cultural legitimacy. Many senior performers have learned entirely through oral transmission, memorising songs and movements without access to formal training or certification. Within Bourdieu's framework, their cultural capital remains embodied but not institutionally validated and therefore undervalued. As Bourdieu notes, embodied cultural capital is acquired through prolonged processes of socialisation and bodily discipline and cannot be instantaneously transmitted or detached from the individual who possesses it (Bourdieu 243–244). In the absence of institutionalised forms such as credentials or formal recognition, this embodied knowledge lacks the legally guaranteed value that enables cultural competence to circulate beyond its immediate context (Bourdieu 248).

This devaluation is inseparable from their social location. The performers are largely from coastal fishing families whose livelihoods are unstable and whose communities are marked by economic precarity. As a result, the art form itself is often perceived through the lens of their marginality. Because the practitioners are poor, coastal, and socially marginal, the art itself is treated as peripheral. Within the community, there is a quiet but persistent awareness that if the same performances were staged by more privileged groups, they would likely attract greater respect, visibility, and institutional support. In Bourdieu's terms, this marginalisation must be understood relationally, in connection with the constraints on economic and social capital already discussed. Bourdieu emphasises that cultural capital derives its value from its convertibility and from the social and economic conditions that sustain it within a given field (Bourdieu 241). Chavittunadakam thus persists as a meaningful and dignified cultural practice within the community, even as it remains structurally vulnerable, shaped by the intersecting limits of economic precarity, localized social capital, and the restricted convertibility of cultural labour

The Rise of Environmental Capital

Building on Bourdieu's concept of capital, Gale and Karol expand the idea of environmental capital beyond environmental concern to include socially acquired

environmental knowledge and an awareness of how social, cultural, political, technological, and economic systems shape environmental outcomes (Gale and Karol 5–6). While this understanding foregrounds knowledge as a central element of environmental capital, this study argues that environmental capital must also be understood in material terms. For the fishermen and Chavittunadakam performers of Chellanam, this environmental capital is rapidly collapsing. Many homes in the area are officially marked as UA (unauthorized) following the introduction of Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) norms in the late 1990s, which retrospectively classified long-established residential structures as illegal. One resident explained, "The rules came around 1998–2000. They say our houses are illegal. But our grandparents lived here. How can this be illegal?" These regulations restrict repair and rebuilding, confining residents to deteriorating structures. This regulatory condition, amid their ongoing struggles with natural forces, further deepens their vulnerability.

These forms of capital including economic, cultural, social, and environmental intersect to create conditions in which economic insecurity amplifies ecological risk. Coastal Latin Christian fishermen face overlapping social disadvantages. They are a religious and occupational minority, considered socially marginalized, with limited education and few privileges. Access to cultural institutions, sponsors, or government support is minimal, and economic instability restricts mobility. Most performers know only the stages of their churches and villages, unable to reach larger platforms. These constraints reinforce both social and cultural isolation, leaving the art form sustained primarily through tightly bound community networks.

Although Chavittunadakam is often dismissed outside the village as "folk," "rural," or "underdeveloped," it carries profound meaning within the community. The art form provides performers with dignity, purpose, and emotional strength, shaping identity and reinforcing social bonds even amid economic and environmental instability. Chavittunadakam also functions as a space of resistance and communal renewal, where ordinary hierarchies are suspended and the hardships of daily life can be set aside.

Fishing, the primary livelihood, is unpredictable and economically unstable. Catch levels fluctuate dramatically, and climate induced changes in fish availability exacerbate this uncertainty. Many households have migrated inland, losing proximity to the sea that shaped both livelihoods and culture. At the same time, the performance of Chavittunadakam drains financial resources, as costumes, props, and travel require constant investment. While performers are highly skilled, their talent rarely translates into recognition beyond the village, leaving them economically and socially vulnerable. Nixon's concept of "slow violence" illuminates how environmental degradation often unfolds invisibly yet devastates communities over time (Slow Violence 3). In Chellanam, this slow violence is evident in the gradual loss of fishing yields, erosion of housing stability, and threats to cultural continuity.

The Anthropocene

The Anthropocene, the epoch defined by human-driven planetary change, has dramatically reshaped oceanic environments. Rising sea levels, intensified cyclones, altered fish patterns, and coastal erosion directly affect Chellanam. The community's lived experience aligns with Amitav Ghosh's reflections in *The Hungry Tide*, where fragile ecologies intersect with human vulnerability (Ghosh 2004).

Performers repeatedly emphasized that the sea's behavior has changed. One fisherman-artist noted, "Earlier, the sea became violent only during the monsoon. Now, whenever there is low pressure anywhere, the water rises and floods our houses." Another described the trauma, "We are tired of going to relief camps. Now people avoid camps and go to relatives' houses. Every time the sea comes, something is lost." The recurring phrase "the sea comes" captures the agency of the ocean in the Anthropocene is an unpredictable force intruding into daily life. Blue Humanities scholars argue that the Anthropocene destabilizes traditional knowledge systems, leaving fishermen who once predicted tides uncertain about the environment. Blue Humanities scholars have noted that Anthropocene oceanic conditions destabilize traditional ecological knowledge, as seas no longer follow inherited rhythms or seasonal logics. Ghosh's depiction of volatile tides in *The Hungry Tide* illustrates how environmental behaviour exceeds experiential knowledge (Ghosh 7), while DeLoughrey argues that climate driven oceanic change fractures generational ways of knowing rooted in repetition and memory (DeLoughrey 133). As Mentz suggests, contemporary oceans are increasingly defined by uncertainty rather than predictability, leaving coastal communities struggling to interpret environments they once understood (Mentz 45).

Chavittunadakam, too, bears the marks of this ecological disruption. Rehearsal spaces flood, costumes are damaged by dampness, stages collapse, and performances are delayed or cancelled. A young performer recalled, "There were days when we went for rehearsal, but the ground was under water. We returned home without performing a single step." Environmental instability erodes not only land but also cultural continuity, making the survival of the art form a constant negotiation with the elements.

The Anthropocene also reshapes intergenerational transmission. Younger members increasingly perceive fishing as economically unviable and risky. As they migrate for stable jobs, the art loses successors. One teacher lamented, "When land goes, culture goes. When people move away, the art doesn't follow them." The recent violence of the sea has initiated a slow erosion of cultural life. Yet, despite these challenges, performers continue with remarkable devotion. Their resilience aligns with oceanic worldviews that embrace unpredictability. As one performer beautifully put it, "Just like the sea gives life and takes life, Chavittunadakam also gives us happiness and takes our energy and money. We love both."

This statement encapsulates the oceanic imagination by accepting chaos, embracing beauty, and surviving loss. In the Anthropocene, the fishermen-artists of Chellanam inhabit a fragile shoreline where ecological destruction and their stories reveal climate change not as distant scientific data but as the lived, everyday erosion of home, identity, and art.

Conclusion

In this paper, the term "blue" carries a cumulative meaning, encompassing both the sea itself and the lived experiences of the people who inhabit its margins. The blue in their world is not metaphorical; it is lived, tasted, and breathed. For the fishermen-artists of Chellanam, the sea shapes daily labor, cultural practice, and collective memory, entwining environmental realities with artistic expression and identity. The "blue" as a material and social force is both sustaining and challenging for life thus illustrating how oceanic environments are inseparable from human experience.

The survival of Chavittunadakam depends on tightly bound community networks, yet these networks alone cannot sustain the art under persistent social, economic, and environmental pressures. Moving beyond documentation, there is an urgent need for dialogue between the community, cultural institutions, and policymakers to recognize and support the lived realities of Chellanam's fishermen-artists. Government programs could prioritize the protection of coastal infrastructure, provide financial and logistical support for performances, and ensure that cultural education and local heritage are integrated into broader development initiatives.

Equally important is social advocacy that amplifies the voices of coastal communities, acknowledging their expertise in navigating environmental and cultural challenges. Collaborative platforms between scholars, NGOs, and local practitioners can help co-create strategies that safeguard both livelihoods and intangible cultural heritage. Education and awareness campaigns can cultivate wider recognition of the value of Chavittunadakam, countering the marginalization of folk arts and fostering community pride.

By framing policy and practice around the experiences and needs of those directly affected, interventions can move beyond tokenistic preservation toward meaningful empowerment. Programs that support intergenerational transmission of the art form, provide accessible training, and facilitate broader performance networks can strengthen resilience, ensuring that Chavittunadakam continues to thrive as a living cultural and social practice.

Ultimately, sustaining Chavittunadakam requires addressing the structural roots of vulnerability while fostering partnerships that bridge cultural, social, and environmental concerns. Recognizing the agency, knowledge, and creativity of Chellanam's performers is crucial not only for preserving an art form but also for promoting justice, equity, and sustainable coastal futures.

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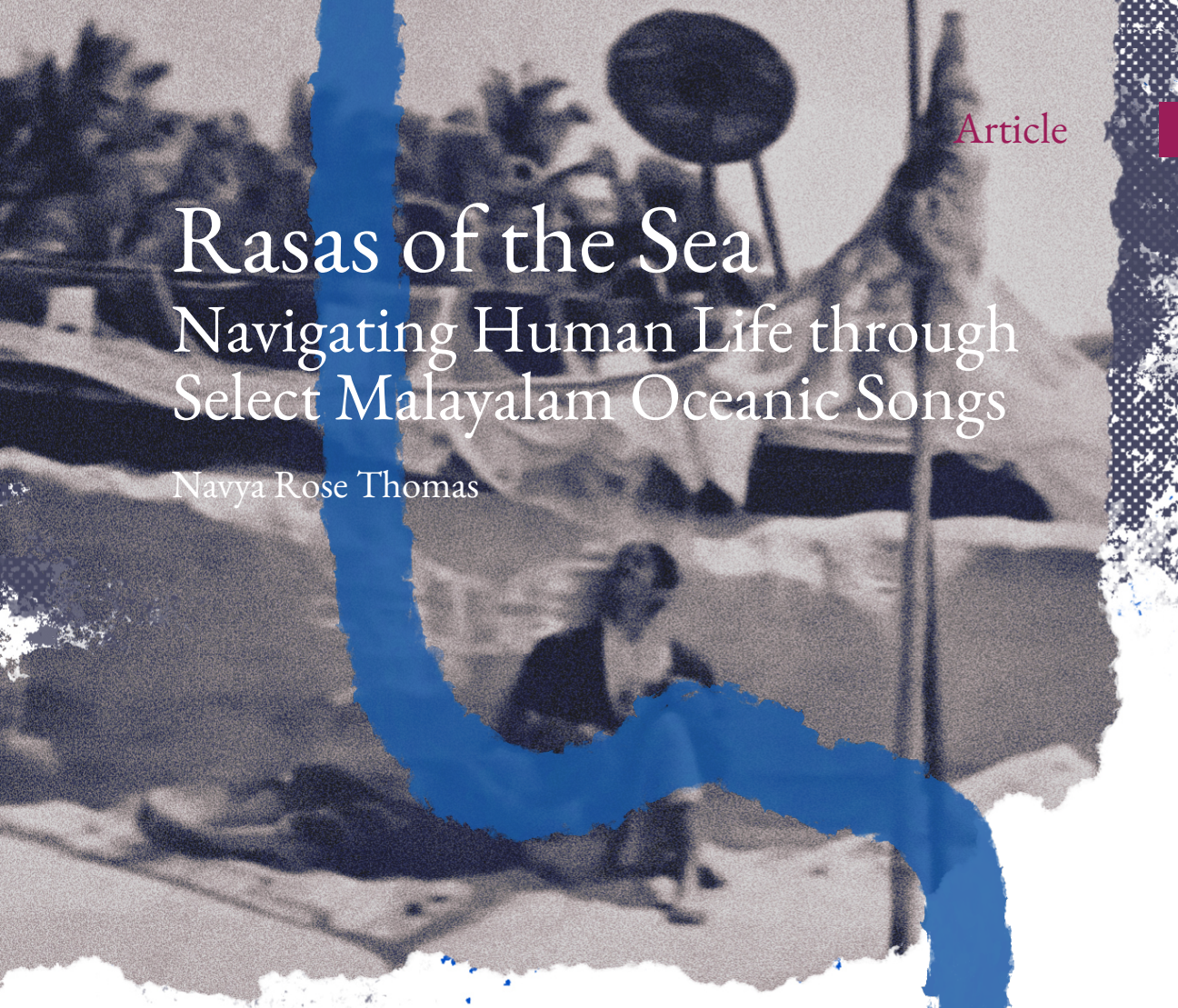

Article

Rasas of the Sea

Navigating Human Life through Select Malayalam Oceanic Songs

Navya Rose Thomas

Abstract

From time immemorial, nature has functioned not merely as a backdrop but as a living, expressive force in the world of songs. The art of painting the vivid emotional saga of human life through the imagery of nature has long fascinated lyricists and composers. Malayalam film and folk songs stand as compelling examples of this artistic synthesis, where the sea, sky and the shore transcend their physicality to mirror the depths of human emotions.

This paper examines the intricate confluence of Blue Humanities and Rasa Theory as reflected in select Malayalam oceanic songs that trace the continuum of the human life cycle, from birth and youth to aging and transcendence. Each song embodies a particular rasa (aesthetic emotion), mapping the emotional and existential currents of life through the metaphoric and rhythmic language of the sea. By interpreting these oceanic soundscapes through a humanistic and ecological lens, the paper seeks to demonstrate how the sea becomes both muse and metaphor, a site where emotion, environment and identity merge in lyrical harmony.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Blue Humanities, Ecology, Emotion, Malayalam Songs, Oceanic Imagery, Rasa Theory, Sea Symbolism.

Introduction

Mother nature has always served as a defining factor for determining the human emotions and approaches to life decisions. Various elements of nature like wind, water, fire etc. have been celebrated as the thematic resonances of human life cycle and of all the above, ocean has occupied a prime position. The oceanic metaphor is widely in usage to evoke the fluidity of human existence, such as describing the sea as a mirror of life's *rasa*s and its waves symbolizing the ebb and flow of emotions from wonder to tranquility.

Here comes the importance of the theory of *rasa* in conjunction with Blue Humanities, where ocean reverberates the multitudes of *rasa*s like *Adbhuta, Hasya, Sringara, Vira, Raudra, Karuna, Bibhatsa, Bhayanaka* and *Shanta* as proposed by Bharata in his eponymous *Natyashastra*.

> Bharata says that there are eight *rasa*s (according to later texts, nine *rasas*). They are respectively *shringara* (erotic), *hasya* (comic), *karuna* (pathetic), *raudra* (angry), *vira* (valour), *bhayanaka* (terrible), *bibhatsha* (disgusting), *adbhuta* (surprise) and *shanta* (calm). (Jana 263)

In this context, oceans are not just as physical spaces but are cultural, emotional and ecological entities that shape human narratives, particularly in Malayalam songs set in coastal landscape. This research article navigates the human life-cycle through select Malayalam oceanic songs, demonstrating how the sea infuses love with *rasa*s, from *adbhuta* in infancy to shanta in old age, thereby enriching Blue Humanities' discourse on ecological kinship and emotional depth.

Nine songs from Malayalam cinema are chosen for analysis: Pulare Poonkodiyil (In the Dawn's Flower Grove), "Azhake Nin Mizhineermaniyee" (Oh Beauty, Let this Pearl of Your Tear), and "Vikaara Noukayumaay" (In the Boat of Emotions) from *Amaram* (1991); "Kaanapponnum Thedi" (Searching for Unfound Gold) from *Chaandpott* (1991); "Chandirane Kayyileduthu" (Holding the Moon in Hand) from *Mahasamudram* (2006); "Nagaram Vidhuram" (The City Lies Afar) from *Oru Kadal* (2007); "En Jeevane Engaano Nee" (My Life, Where Are You) from *Devadoothan* (2000); "Maanasa Maine Varoo" (Come to me, my darling myna) from *Chemmeen* (1965); and "Paattil Ee Paattil" (In This Song, This Song) from *Pranayam* (2011) — each song representing a distinct stage in the human life cycle, from birth to death, and correspondingly embodying one of the *navarasas* (the nine classical emotions).

The Aesthetics of Rasa, Rhythm, and the Sea in Malayalam Oceanic Songs

The human life-cycle, like the Arabian Sea that cradles Kerala's coast, is neither linear nor land-bound but a tidal continuum of emotional *rasas*, each wave cresting in wonder, crashing in fear and receding into peace. In Malayalam cinema's oceanic songs, the sea is no mere backdrop but a sentient co-protagonist; a lover, mother, adversary and finally,

of transcendence and release. Also, "Water is an active agent in shaping planetary history, ecosystems, and all forms of life" (Oppermann 17), a reminder that the sea's vitality is not merely environmental but emotional. It is this agency that entwines the ocean with human *rasa*-cycles, allowing the waves that sculpt coastlines to also sculpt the inner tides of feeling.

Drawing on Bharata's *Natyashastra* and the lens of Blue Humanities, this paper charts nine such songs as *rasa*-markers across life's arc from the infant's first salt-kissed breath to the soul's dissolution in boundless blue. *rasa* ebbs and flows like the emotional tides of human life as,

> The power of a stable emotion slowly swells like the ocean, additional emotions, wavelike, continuously arise and disappear. *rasa* becomes a deep self-savoring born of these transitory waves of feeling. (Pollock 308)

The beginning of this voyage is at the shore of birth, where the ocean itself sings the lullaby of *adbhuta*. The human odyssey begins in water, with the sea figured as the primordial mother from whose depths life emerges and by whose rhythms it is eternally nurtured. In *Amaram*, the song "Pulare Poonkodiyil" (In the Dawn's Flower Grove), unfurls adbhuta *rasa* like a conch unfurling its spiral at first light. Here, the ocean is no mere backdrop but *kadalamma*, Mother Sea, her foam-flecked eyes gleaming with ancient tenderness as she beholds the newborn. This is whispered in the line "Kadalamma velangana kande" (The gleaming rays of Mother Sea was seen) (Namboothiri 01:19), where the sea's white gaze becomes a lullaby of origins.

Even the fish are kin, suggested through the line "poomeen thullaattam" (The milkfish leaps in delight) (01:05) transmutes silver darts into playful siblings, cavorting in the tide's heartbeat. Through the lens of Blue Humanities, this oceanic nativity anchors love in ecological kinship, a reminder that we are not separate from the water's womb, but its perpetual offspring. This idea resonates with Neimanis's insight that water:

> connects us corporeally to all aqueous communities, where... the human infant drinks the mother, the mother ingests the reservoir, the reservoir is replenished by the storm, the storm absorbs the ocean, the ocean sustains the fish, the fish are consumed by the whale (qtd. in. Oppermann 37),

revealing birth as part of an unbroken chain of watery kinship.

Deeper still, maternal nurture flows through the lyric "Kadalamma pōṭunna poṅkunjinuppuḷḷor ammiñjappāl" (Mother Sea suckles her beloved kid with the salt-sweet milk of her waves), (02:20). Here, the ocean's crests become breasts, her spray the first milk, which is white, warm and inexhaustible. This is not metaphor alone but revelation that affection is not confined to human arms but cradled in the sea's undulating embrace, a tidal nursing that rocks the cradle of all life. Thus, the song teaches that our first breath was drawn in brine, our first nourishment drawn from foam. The Sea does not merely surround us rather it mothers us, forever.

The next life-stage being the teenage and early adulthood can be perfectly etched through the song "Kaanapponnum Thedi" (Searching for Unfound Gold). The song erupts as a teenage anthem, a rhythmic, drum-pounded "tiththai tiththai takathai thaalam" (When the drum of waves keeps time — thittai, thakathai) (Varma 0:55) as a declaration of freedom. Here, the ocean transforms into a gigantic playground, its waves syncing with the heartbeat of the kaumara (15–20 years), and the mind, in a defiant somersault of joy, asks itself: "Nee thānthonniyaay manassē choolam kuthulle" (Let your heart flare like fire — wild, original, untamed) (0:58).

The song embodies the vibrant *Hāsya rasa*, where humor and playfulness merge with the ocean's dynamic pulse to evoke the carefree spirit of adolescence and early adulthood. The lyrics brim with the exuberance of youthful freedom, as seen in lines such as "Mei moodān enthum neenthān etthum modern pillere" (The modern youth swim out to sea, unbothered by the waves) (0:40) and "Ee beachil meyil pāyum nāṭan sāyippanmarē" (The local 'westerners' flaunt their style along the beach) (0:48).

Here, laughter and movement become performative gestures of liberation both from societal restraint and from the anxieties of youth. The sea transforms into a living metaphor for this collective exuberance, its waves synchronizing with the playful pulse of human emotion, rendering joy itself an aesthetic experience.

Next in life cycle spectrum is adulthood coupled with *Śṛṅgāra rasa*. The song "Azhake Nin Mizhineermaniyee" (Oh Beauty, Let this Pearl of Your Tear) unfolds as a lyrical ode to love, sensuality and the serene yet intense emotional ripples of adulthood. The opening invocation, "Azhake, nin mizhineermaniyee, kuliril thoovaruthe" (Oh beauty, let this pearl of your tear, do not let them shed their cool dew) (Namboothiri 0:03), evokes the tenderness of love restrained by awareness. The "muthu pozhikkaruthe" (do not let pearls fall) (0:28) metaphor extends this restraint, with the teardrop-as-pearl and sea-as-heart imagery embodying the inner tide of longing. Here, the ocean mirrors adult emotional depth poised between vulnerability and passion as well as desire and decorum.

The *Śṛṅgāra* mood intensifies as the song imagines the beloved's voice blending with the sea's pulse: "Thurayunarumbol meenvalakalulayumbol, tharivalayilakum thirayil nin mozhi kelkke" (When the shore awakens and the fishnets sway, your voice resonates through the waves) (01:47). This merging of human and oceanic rhythm signifies a mature erotic connection rooted in reciprocity and rhythm and here, love becomes a tide that both sustains and submerges.

> Bhoja meant by *śṛṅgāra*... the keen desire for something or someone, which leads to various states of mind... *Śṛṅgāra* forms the foundational emotive impulse, like the Freudian Eros, prompting one to live. (Chandran and Sreenath 59)

This is a notion that resonates with the vitality of the sea and its ceaseless motion mirroring youthful love and sensual energy as an oceanic desire, a tide of living emotion.

Further, lines like "Ponthurayaake chaakarayil muzhukumbol, ponnala choodi paamaravumilakumbol" (When the shore is brimming with the bounty of the great catch, and the palm groves shimmer adorned in golden light) (03:29) transform the seascape into a sacred theatre of union. The sound of "chilambaadunna theerangal" (shores tinkling the anklets) (03:41) extends *Śṛṅgāra* into nature's choreography where the ocean itself dances to the rhythm of human intimacy.

The song culminates in "Neeyen kinaappaalaazhiyil neeraadivaayo" (Come, immerse yourself in the deep, whispering sea of my dreams) (03:47), an explicit metaphor of emotional and physical immersion. The sea, as in many oceanic Malayalam songs, is not merely an external landscape but an erotic extension of the self where love matures into empathy, tenderness and shared being. Thus, adulthood in the song is not marked by renunciation but by the harmonious attunement between body, emotion and nature, rendered vividly through the aesthetics of *Śṛṅgāra rasa*.

The youthful vigour in human beings has, across ages, resonated with Mother Nature and her zestful encouragement. The *Vira rasa* (Heroic sentiment) which "relates to... presence of mind, perseverance, diplomacy, discipline, military strength, aggressiveness, reputation of might... firmness" (Seturaman 28) is encapsulated in the Malayalam song "Chandirane Kayyileduthu" (Holding the Moon in Hand) from *Mahasamudram*. It stands as a cinematic and lyrical embodiment for capturing the fearless energy of youth in communion with the restless ocean. Its spirited rhythm, punctuated by the chorus "Thozha, Thozha, Thozhayo" (Row, row, O rower!) (Namboothiri 0:13) celebrates collective vitality and masculine camaraderie, typifying the *Vīra rasa*, or heroic sentiment.

The song begins with images of defiant creativity, "Chandirane kayyileduth olakudayaki vaikam, olakuda marach vach thoniyumaakkam" (Holding the moon in hand and make it our palm-leaf umbrella; let us build a boat from hidden dreams) (0:20). This fantastical imagery represents youthful audacity and the desire to defy limitation, to construct and to voyage. The ocean becomes both setting and metaphor, a testing ground for courage and self-assertion.

When the lyric continues, "Kilimeenund naadan chemmeenund, varaal, aavoli therandiyum chaalayumunde" (There are pink perch, prawns, snake head fish and pomfret) (01:38), the sea's abundance mirrors the fertility of human energy. Youth is here rendered as oceanic which is abundant, daring and exploratory. The *Arayan* (fisherman) becomes an archetype of the youthful self characterized by labouring, laughing, loving and playing against the fierce pulse of waves.

The line, "Kadalum kadannang kadalum kadannoru karayunde arayanmaare" (O fishermen, when the sea is crossed, another shore always awaits) (02:45) is the very voice of the heroic journey, suggesting that life's meaning lies not in reaching the shore but in the courage to sail again. The sea becomes a metaphor for perpetual striving, echoing the Indian aesthetic ideal of utsāha (energetic enthusiasm), the dominant emotion of *Vīra rasa.*

Even the playful call to the fisher maiden, "Chippikkullile Muthedukkaan Porunno Nee Ponnarayathi?" (Golden maiden, will you accompany me to find me a pearl from the shell?) (03:11), balances virility with tenderness, grounding heroism in affection. The song thus transforms the coastal landscape into a theatre of youthful exuberance, where friendship, love and adventure merge into one rhythmic tide. In this confluence of sea and spirit, "Chandirane Kayyileduthu" celebrates not just the fisherman's world but the metaphysical youthfulness of humanity and the eternal impulse to challenge, to create and to rejoice within the vast, unending blue.

The midlife crisis is an unfathomable sea of emotional turbulence which leaves human existence in total shambles. The song "Nagaram Vidhuram" (The City Lies Afar) from Ore Kadal (2007) is a searing poetic manifesto of midlife crisis fused with suppressed anger. The qualities like "defiance and violence... (causes) evocation of *Raudra rasa* (Chandran and Sreenath 179) which is echoed in the initial line "Nagaram vidhuram/ eriyum hridayam verpedumennormmakal vedanayaayi" (The city lies afar/ my heart blazes and my memories of parting shall turn into pain) (Puthenchery 0:18). It dramatizes a psychological split between the self and society, between urban alienation and emotional exhaustion. Also, the line "Janmandarangaliloodiniyum Aliyunnuvo!" (Are we still dissolving through cycles of birth!) (0.28) captures the dissolution of self across lifetimes, a hallmark of midlife existential crisis: the realization that decades of striving have left one formless, floating without anchor.

The ocean here is not the Arabian Sea, but a psychological one where memories, desires, and regrets churn like relentless tides. "Charged with emotion and intensity, the sea has historically been a source of poetic recreation, a paradigm of the sublime, an antagonistic force" (Vidal-Pérez 181), and this resonates precisely with the emotional violence surging beneath this song's surface. This antagonistic oceanic force mirrors the midlife struggle for meaning, where accumulated desires clash with fading vitality. This tension is encapsulated through the line, "Kadalinu kuruke paayunna kaattine / karayude nishwaasam veruthe pinthudarunnu" (The wind rushing towards the sea is followed in vain by the shore's sigh) (01:06). This turbulent ocean mirrors the midlife struggle for purpose, a phase where accumulated desires clash with fading vitality. Through its rhythmic undercurrent of despair, the song becomes a portrait of existential crisis, the rage and restlessness that precede renewal, situating Raudra *rasa* as not mere fury but a creative rebellion against meaninglessness.

From *Devadoothan*, "En Jeevane Engaano Nee" (My Life, Where Are You) gently unfolds into *Karuṇa rasa*, that "refers in everyday life to the sense of compassion. It receives the technical designation of karuṇa (with -a), or the tragic *rasa*" (Pollock 119). The song portrays maturity and the acceptance of loss as inevitable currents in life's ocean. The first line "En jeevane engaano nee, iniyennu kaanum veendum!" (My life, where are you, when will I see you again!) (Namboothiri 0:24) flows like a lament addressed to a lost self or

beloved, intertwining grief with self-awareness. The song's sea imagery deepens its emotional texture revealed through the line "Thirayariyilla karayariyilla alakadalinte nombarangal" (The waves know no shore, nor do they know the sorrows of the deep sea) (01:47). Here, the sea becomes the mind's repository of longing, its ceaseless waves embodying the persistence of memory.

As Steve Mentz observes, "Ocean memory creates a 'vast archive of desire' through 'your tidalectics / your migrant routes / and submarine roots'" (29). This notion of oceanic memory enables this song to operate as an emotional repository where longing, loss, and nostalgia are held and released like tides, giving the sea a vital role in shaping the emotional arc of the protagonist.

The sea also contributes to love by absorbing pain, transforming personal loss into universal empathy. When the singer pleads, "Ekaantamen nimishangalil thazhukaan varille veendum?" (In moments of solitude, won't you come again to caress me?) (02:25), the tone shifts from despair to quiet introspection. This song captures mid-to-late adulthood, where passion transforms into empathy and sorrow acquires grace. Through *Karuṇa rasa*, the ocean becomes a metaphor for compassion born of experience, rendering pain as a pathway to inner maturity.

The timeless "Maanasa Maine Varoo" (Come to me, my darling myna) from Chemmeen embodies the *Bībhatsa rasa* (disgust) not in grotesque form, but as spiritual disillusionment arising in the later stages of life. The gentle invocation, "Maanasa maine varoo madhuram nulli tharoo" (Come to me, my darling myna, and bring some sweetness) (Ramavarma 0:25), veils beneath its serenity a plea to the restless mind that has wandered through worldly temptations. The ocean becomes an inward metaphor for restless desire and the soul's weariness with the world. The line "Nilaavinte naattile nishagandhi poothallo" (In the land of moonlight, the bethlehem lilly has bloomed) (01:15) mirrors the beauty of fleeting experience; a fragrance that fades even as it enchants. Beneath this aesthetic tenderness lies a quiet disillusionment revealed through the line, "Kadalile olavum karalile mohavum adangukilla" (The sea's ripples and the heart's desires will never abate) (02:29).

Here, *Bībhatsa rasa* manifests not as disgust toward the external world but as spiritual weariness, as a recognition of life's repetitive patterns of desire and disappointment. The ocean's motion becomes symbolic of the mind's own turbulence, a natural rhythm that refuses calm until wisdom dawns. The song thus marks a threshold between beauty and renunciation, where love, nature and the sea converge into an elegy for human longing, a melancholic awareness that prepares the soul for transcendence.

In "Vikāra Noukayumayi" (In the Boat of Emotions) the *Bhayānaka rasa* (fear) manifests through the imagery of a fragile emotional boat adrift upon turbulent waters, symbolizing the vulnerability of old age. The opening line, "Vikāra noukayumayi thiramalakal aadi ulanju" (With the boat of emotion, the waves swayed and drifted) (Naamboothiri 0:30) presents the sea as both cradle and grave of memory. As the song

laments "Raakkili ponmakale, nin poovili yaathramozhiyaano?" (O golden nightingale, is your song a farewell?) (0:55), the trembling voice of the aged speaker captures the terror of leaving his beloved daughter and entering into he fag end of his life embellished with loneliness.

The imagery of "kannīruppu kalarnnoru manalil vēḷippuṭava virinju" (On sands moistened with tears, the bridal veil unfolds) (0:43) fuses the beauty of the sea with the sorrow of parting, revealing how even nature mirrors human emotion. The ocean is not merely a backdrop; it participates in the speaker's inner decay and longing. The waves whisper as if mourning lost time, and the sea foam, which "veṇnura vannu thalodumpōl taḍaśilayaliyukayāyirunnō?" (Did the stones on the shore stir as the white waves came and caressed them?) (01:51) becomes an emblem of fragile consolation that cannot withstand the erosive pull of time.

Fear in this song does not erupt as terror but unfolds as a quiet, sinking dread. In the Blue Humanities perspective, the ocean here acts as a sentient presence, a one that mirrors the frailty of human consciousness in old age. It is both companion and devourer, nurturing yet indifferent. The undulating seascape embodies the oscillation between memory and oblivion, echoing the inner trembling of the aging self. Thus, this song becomes a poignant articulation of bhayānaka *rasa* where the ocean externalizes the soul's anxiety before dissolution, and the once-celebrated vitality of the sea turns into a reminder of mortality and impermanence.

Finally, the song "Paattil Ee Paattil" (In This Song, This Song) from *Pranayam* unfolds as an ode to oceanic stillness and spiritual release, embodying the essence of*Śāntarasa*, the *rasa* of peace, transcendence and detachment. The sea here is not tempestuous or threatening but expansive, calm and illuminated with the quiet rhythm of eternity. The recurring refrain, "Ozhukum paattil... ee paattil iniyum nee unarille!" (With the songs that soothes, have you not yet awakened!) (Kurup 0:32), situates the listener in a space of dissolution, where the self merges seamlessly with the surrounding sea of consciousness. The ocean, in this lyrical world, is both the song and the singer a boundless continuum of being where individual identity ebbs away into cosmic harmony.

The imagery of "Saagaram maarilettum, kathiroon veenerinju" (The sea reflects sunlight, shimmering like molten gold) (01:47) presents water not as a site of turbulence but as a mirror of enlightenment. The ocean's gleam becomes symbolic of inner awakening, a reflection of the divine light that dispels the illusions of earthly attachment. Similarly, when the singer intones, "Aayiram pon mayooram kadalil nrithamaadum" (A thousand golden peacocks dance upon the sea) (03:05), the scene transcends realism, transforming into a vision of celestial balance a meeting point between nature's beauty and spiritual grace.

As Abhinavagupta suggests,

> The universe functions in precisely the same way... a vast elaboration of

> names and forms...hinting at the supreme, otherworldly human aim of liberation. This becomes an indicator of the peaceful *rasa*. (Pollock 187)

This shows Śānta *rasa* (peace) as the culmination of life merging with the cosmic ocean. It echoes the life cycle's dissolution and return to nature, where the human spirit finds release in unity with the vastness of being. This harmony of sound and sight gestures toward the quiet ecstasy of mokṣa (salvation), where nature and human consciousness are in perfect alignment.

Within a Blue Humanities frame, "meditation and water are wedded for ever" (Mentz 3) and hence the ocean in "Paattil Ee Paattil" is not merely a geographical entity but a meditative force but a symbol of the world's infinite continuity and the human longing to become part of that vastness. The steady flow of waves mirrors the cyclicality of life and the eventual release from its bindings. Here, the Śānta *rasa* finds its purest expression in the merging of music, sea and soul. The ocean therefore becomes the eternal song of existence, and the human self, in listening and dissolving into it, attains serenity. Thus, "Paattil Ee Paattil" serves as a lyrical meditation on the sea as both the origin and the destination of life, a tranquil metaphor for union, silence and the peaceful cessation of desire.

Conclusion

The journey through the *rasa*s across the stages of life reveals the sea not merely as a natural element, but as a living metaphor for the continuum of human emotion. From the tender Adbhuta of birth to the tranquil *Śānta* of death, the ocean becomes both mirror and muse, reflecting the aesthetic and affective depths of existence. Through the melodies of Malayalam cinema the emotional resonances of love, laughter, courage, fear, and peace unfold as tidal movements within the human psyche, suggesting that our relationship with the sea is as much emotional as it is elemental. Thus, the marine expanse becomes an archive of *rasa*, where the personal and the planetary, the poetic and the ecological, flow into one another in rhythmic harmony.

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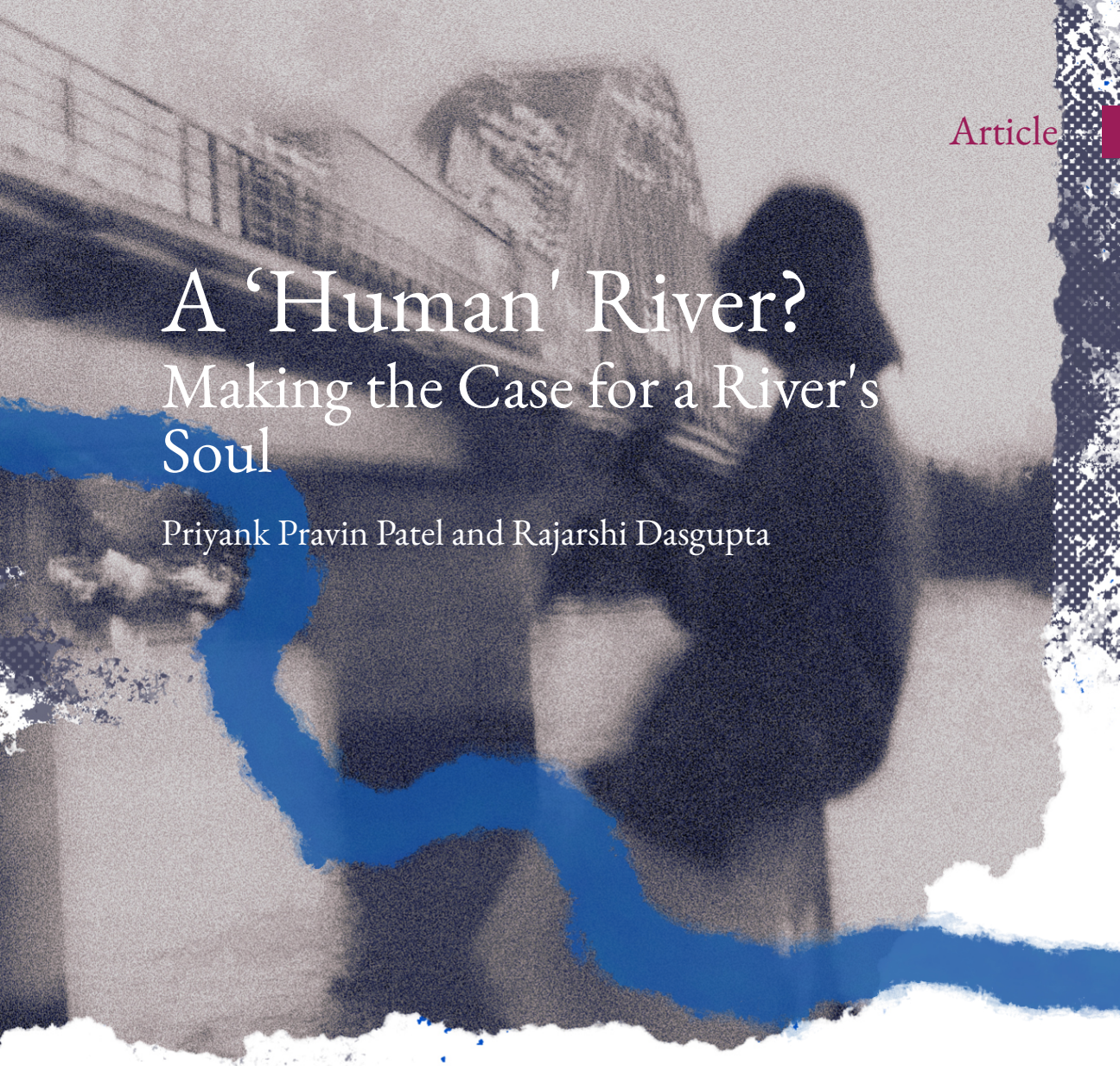

Article

A 'Human' River?
Making the Case for a River's Soul

Priyank Pravin Patel and Rajarshi Dasgupta

Abstract

This essay seeks to examine how a River, through personification, may respond to certain queries, outside its ambit as a geomorphic entity. Firstly, is the River's flow path instinctively determined or a product of random cause-effect relationships? Secondly, even though geomorphic factors undoubtedly govern its flow, do they also indicate the River's "desire or need to flow"? Thirdly, does the River encapsulate Time, through its motion and the changes it brings about in its adjacent riparian tracts? Finally, through erosion, the River opens up confined spaces and modifies existing ones, so what are its spatial interrelationships? Thus the eventual question is, does the River really have a soul, not only by dint of it being an entity of veneration by millions across the world, but also having this anthropomorphic quality which inspires literature and art about them?

Keywords: River, Time, Flow, Space, Anthropomorphism, Geomorphology.

> For a River is "...this sleek, sinuous, full-bodied animal, chasing and chuckling, gripping things with a gurgle and leaving them with a laugh, to fling itself on fresh playmates that shook themselves free, and were caught and held again. All is a-shake and a-shiver, glints and gleams and sparkles, rustle and swirl, chatter and bubble... a babbling procession of the best stories in the world, sent from the heart of the earth to be told to the insatiable sea."
>
> *Wind in the Willows*, Kenneth Grahame (1908: 2)

Most of us have seen a river, maybe waded into one, taken a dip, a leisurely swim or savoured an enchanting boat ride. We might have been in close proximity to this "sleek, sinuous, full-bodied animal" in many other ways too. What is striking, is that the River never fails to arrest our attention. Sitting on its banks, we may envisage where it has come from and formulate an idea about its destination, and still be bemused by how it flows, the way it keeps moving.

Are we (and rivers) part of some grand design? Or, like Forrest Gump reasoned, are we feathers and particles merely floating about in search of destinies, without real rhyme or reason, living for and in each infinitesimal moment, as if that was all that mattered? These are some of the questions that this article intends to ponder over from the perspective of a River — what would its answers be if posed with these queries?

A little thought might arise about all the stories that a River could narrate if it wanted to — of the planet's lifeforce enmeshed in its flow, about civilisations raised and laid to dust, of courses occupied and abandoned. Maybe it is already doing so, if only we realised how to tune into its frequency or decipher its language; and yet unknowingly, without even consciously listening, possibly we do imbibe some of those tales. Often they take the form of subtle suggestions, which inimitably spurs a thought process of our own. No one who has ever sat beside a river will ever get up feeling totally empty; something, albeit intangible, is gained or perceived — maybe nothing more than the sheer sensation of a feeling akin to eternity — for in its flow, the River possibly captures Time, which we cannot otherwise sense.

You may disagree with us but the following statement will probably disarm your arguments:

> Time is an accident consequent upon motion and is necessarily attached to it. Neither of them exists without the other. Motion does not exist except in time, and time cannot be conceived by the intellect except together with motion. And all that with regard to which no motion can be found, does not fall under time.(Rudavsky 2010: 70)

A brilliant insight from Albert Einstein, perhaps? However, these are the words of Maimonides, the great Torah scholar of the twelfth century and Einstein and his fellow scholars were inspired by his thought process. To supplement the above is Shackle's (1978: 47) statement:

> Time is the most stupendous of human works". We "know only the present,... and the present is solitary, a moment with no coexistent moment of its kind. That moment must perish by transformation into another moment before the other moment can exist. If the moment involves movement, if its essential nature is continuous transformation, still it presents itself as an individual thing.

Therefore, the granules of time are singular, yet in joining along one after another, they create continuity, and enable the pinpointing of specific moments whose only temporal identification (i.e. pinpointing memories) arises from the collective of moments that have passed before, and are then hemmed in by the succession of moments that follow them. Is it not so with a River too — wherein millions of droplets coalesce to create the entity now existent, while their histories of movement (palaeohydrological conditions) have together manifested the form and functions presently displayed by the River? Thus, if what now exists comes primarily preordained from the past, and shall thence be contextualised by what occurs hereafter, then is it indeed us who are in full control of our destiny or is that supposed reality merely a function of various decisions we have been preconditioned into making while believing that we are acting independently? Which pill are we holding on to in the Matrix?

This throws up so many questions of uncertainties, choices and chances, taking us into the somewhat murkier realm of probabilities. Of all the opportunities open to a person, why did one choose a particular vocation? Was it because one knew instinctively that one was best suited for that job and not any other? Or was it a higher calling, something that one was drawn to, even though one might have prospered equally well or better in other sectors? Or was it just accepting the hand fate had dealt and then simply getting on with it. Similarly, what does a River do — does it have a choice on whether *it wishes to flow* or *is it bound to flow?* 'The line of least resistance', 'the shortest route downslope' and 'maximum efficiency with minimum effort' — these would seem to be the River's mantras as it carves its way to the sea, or to another bigger river. How does the River decide which route to take from its point of inception? Can it guess that possibly the initial steep slope over which it so swiftly flows towards its ultimate destination, might later give way to a gentle gradient that will render it sluggish downstream? Or does it simply plunge headlong into the unknown along the first path that seems the easiest, the most alluring, and then has to modify its flow according to what it subsequently faces? We are traversing into the realms of probability again — can we actually calculate and tell a River which line to the sea would be the easiest for it (modern-day computer simulations of landscape evolution alongside digital elevation model-based flow routing do provide good estimates), and more importantly, will continue to remain the line of least resistance throughout the journey and over time? If the River could somehow choose an ideal course by itself, encapsulating the above mantras, what might be the nature of that pathway?

Thus the question persists, how much do we control, what amount is already predetermined for us and how inherently are we regulated by our environment? What is indeed the end — or is there ever an end — to our purposes, desires and even lives? Maybe it is simply a question of thermodynamics — conversion of matter and energy from one state to another, when the earlier state becomes redundant, from thence again the phenomenon recommences. Is this how the cycle continues, perpetuated for eternity?

So what makes the River flow? Of course, the hydrological cycle is well known and illustrated beautifully in most geographical texts (Chorley 1969; Critchfield 1966). Similarly, the parameters of basin structure, precipitation, runoff, channel gradient, velocity, volume, sediment and channel bed type, among others, have been delved into, eliciting enlightening relationships between them (Chorley 1969; Morisawa 1968; Schumm 1960; Strahler 1954). Yet, these fail to elucidate on the most fundamental of questions — does the River really want to flow, if given a choice? Is it really alive — is it the epitome of life itself?

To rephrase, does the River have a sixth sense; can it feel the pulse of the landscape over which it moves; can it foretell what is round the next bend; does it plan on how to excavate its valley; does it scheme to accrue and utilize its available tools for this purpose; and how does it perceive what tools to use where and in what proportion? Are all these determined simply by at-a-point, situation-based mass-energy fluxes related to discharge-sediment equations operating within juxtaposed geomorphic thresholds (it's basically just physics, right?!?) — or is there an underlying feel or current of knowledge that governs the River's decision-making and allows it to erode, entrain and transport? In human society, such knowledge (culture) is cultivated, perceived, learnt and then utilized — even instinctively at times, but who 'teaches' the River to perform a particular action in a particular situation? Are words like 'instinct' and 'sixth sense' pertinent to a discussion on channel initiation or does the River, especially during headward erosion and valley lengthening, go knocking about in every direction, blindly 'hoping' that some of the locales in its route will be comparatively more erodible, thus allowing it to prise away bits and keep gnawing on? This again leads us back to the question of how the River perceives itself and its tasks.

We did not ask to be born, conversely we did not ask otherwise. It was something that just happened (a serendipitous happenstance perhaps!) — outside our own control, but now that we are here, we strive to sustain ourselves. May be the River too did not 'wish' to be born — rather, it was simply 'precipitated' onto the Earth and then got 'schooled' by the Land Surface in the many vagaries of its life. Once precipitated, it is seemingly duty-bound to flow — as long as enough runoff reaches it or groundwater seeps in as baseflow (Phillips 2010) — with the question of whether it wants to do so or not apparently paling into insignificance. However, it often garners enough self-independence from the underlying rocks along the way (typically like a young adolescent breaking free of stricter parental controls) to satisfy some whims — creating the River's own Cultural Landscape

(Sauer 1925) possibly, or its particular lebensraum — as identified by the various landforms of fluvial erosional-depositional origin. Since human culture too has certain social constructs that seek to channel, school and regulate the early life of any new offspring, would a parallel between such frameworks and the rock structures guiding a stream initially in its flow path be apt? The River's behaviour, also throws up examples that may be used to mirror human life — a truncated relationship or unwanted object that is best cast aside by us is so similar to a neck cut-off, forming an ox-bow lake; and may be with time when all feelings evaporate, the lake becomes a scar and might just get filled in too. Also palaeochannels serve as reminders of the places once frequented, but not anymore — paths once frequently trodden, now overgrown from disuse; while channel avulsions (Kleinhans et al. 2013) are analogous to a sudden, more permanent change in one's career and life course. Flowing, however, is the River's life, its identity, and it is on this basis alone that we recognize it. Without this movement, would we call it a River; or paraphrasing Heraclitus, no person ever steps into the same river twice, due to this inherent continuous change through movement. A dried-out channel is often referred to as the river that *used to flow*; intermittent and ephemeral rivers seem arrested in their own non-movement, waiting to flow, to transform and live briefly, flashily. Thus, two things are implicit — the presence of water that is channelised, and the motion within it. This is where the River embeds within itself the otherwise intangible construct of Time.

So one is tempted to ask — if Time is supposed to have neither beginning nor end, is it the same for the River? What is being alluded to is not the physical source and mouth of a single River, which are pretty clear from maps or satellite images, but that particular moment of origin or dissolution of all streams everywhere altogether. May be when Rivers cease to flow, Time too ceases to exist or is at least held in abeyance; but again, the terms 'continuous' and 'abeyance' are merely components or functions of Time itself and this complicates the matter even more. Sure, a river that once flowed may run dry or an otherwise dry channel may give forth bankfull discharge during heavy rains or when water is routed into it. We are not talking about these circumstances. We speak of a hypothetical time when all rivers everywhere no longer flow. What does that imply? No difference in slope anymore — a zero-gradient landscape — analogous to an equal in all possible ways society? Is such a world possible? Does the Earth (or humanity) even wish to attain such equilibrium? Perhaps, it is impossible, since then the Laws of Thermodynamics will cease to exist — the whole system will become static, entropy will become unregulated and threaten to overspill, spelling doom for all. Maybe the best argument to be put forward for the continuous existence of rivers is that the Earth, till Doomsday, will always condition itself to be in a state of disequilibrium, with rivers functioning as the regulators, striving to convert the land into a planar surface and yet, never quite getting there. More aptly, without blood flowing in her veins, *Gaia* cannot survive and thus, she will do everything to keep that blood flowing. Our differences are our driving factors; inequality incites industry to

overcome disparities. If the landscape does change in the interim — through tectonics — or surficial process rates alter due to climatic changes, all that transpires is that one geomorphic system in a certain stage of disequilibrium is simply replaced by another in a different state of disequilibrium. Isn't that just what human societies have done throughout history, through multiple revolutions and regime changes — the replacement of one perceived inequality system with another that is hoped to be better, to only be swallowed up by the subsequent wave?

The River is a kaleidoscope of many instances and substances, depending on perceptions. Paradoxes abound in it — ironically quite identical to those within ourselves. Its countenance is apparently simple and yet those pleasantly gurgling waters conceal deeper meanings. The sounds and rhythms of a flowing river, itself a product of air bubble generation and collapse within the water column (Bolghasi et al. 2017), can convey a myriad of information related to variations in velocity and discharge, sediment transport and its associated changes in bedforms, along with human interventions like weirs or dams (Morse et al. 2007; Klaus et al. 2019; Osborne 2022; Gauvain 2023). Contrastingly, the River induces both sympathy and disdain. It is possibly the most headstrong being on the planet; the most persistent brilliant schemer, and yet ironically due to the very things it desires and schemes for (more water, more catchment area), the River becomes an overloaded beast of burden, the most hardworking and underpaid natural regulator on Earth with few job perks, stuck in the same rung of the corporate ladder due to its specializations in one repetitive task, being mercilessly flogged and exploited by its employers, both natural and otherwise. Perhaps it all depends from which viewpoint we examine the River's situation, but in doing so, a whole host of questions arise again.

Is the River's flow and path, throughout its entire length or in reaches, deterministic (preordained by other natural or anthropogenic controls and thus quite predictable), possibilistic (self-fashioned and governed) or stochastic (merrily random to its own self)? Does it have to conform to, say, a higher dictum (may be a resistant strata that will not be easily eroded or a dam blocking its path) or is it free to flow, just as it wants, through where it wants? While river flow is usually considered to be a random (stochastic) process due to the inherent unpredictability associated with the interactions of various parameters like climate, rock type, soil, vegetation and land use change (Yevjevich 1972), not every aspect of the flow is entirely random. There are simple predictable (deterministic) components such as downslope movement of water under the influence of gravity and the occurrence of seasonal/annual flow cycles (Sivakumar 2007). Furthermore, the concept of non-linear determinism or deterministic chaos suggests that complex phenomenon like river flow can be explained in terms of only a few interrelated variables, which behave in a non-linear fashion depending upon the antecedent terrain, climatic and anthrome conditions (Lorenz 1963; Sivakumar 2000; Porporato and Ridolfi 2003; Phillips 2006; Poff 2014). Yet site-specific differences in scale and landscape complexity manifest variations in geomorphic

thresholds and connectivity that result in markedly different outcomes along the same river (Wohl, 2016) — giving rise to an appearance of randomness. Thus there are no 'definites', only 'possibilities', and the highest probability of a situation's occurrence lies in a judicious coming together of its enabling factors for that particular location, infusing an element of randomness overall. This resembles the human life course quite appropriately — where the locational, familial and societal context of children's birthplaces condition their respective neighbourhood attributes, impact upon educational attainments and life choices, and can reflect prominently in the individuals they eventually become. Yet, just as two people from the same homestead may develop markedly differently (physically, emotionally, intellectually and career-wise), rivers from the same location or with similar ambient characteristics differ from each other ever so slightly. Their inherent diversity has thus necessitated the formulation of river classification schemes (cf. Rosgen 1994; Buffington and Montgomery 2013; Fryirs and Brierley 2018), to collate 'similar' streams and reaches for inventory and management, just like the numerous census surveys conducted for human population groups.

Similarly, much has been written on channel braiding, the mechanism by which rivers split around coarse-grained bars deposited when their transportation power is not commensurate with the volume of sediments received (Ashmore 2013; Chalov and Chalov 2020; Leopold and Wolman 1957). However, the more pertinent question in this respect is — does the River *want to braid*? Would it have wasted so much energy, worked so hard if left to its own devices — or is this toil necessarily undertaken to ease and allow further advances downstream? What is also the ideology behind its construction of a floodplain? Is it to be used as a warehouse, to deposit whatever has been brought from the upper courses (Brierley and Hickin 1992) — to hoard, before shifting and re-modifications occur, and move it all away at a later stage? Does a floodplain signify a River's attainment of freedom from the underlying lithological structures (the 'Freedom Space' of Biron et al. 2014), where it can meander as it wishes and not be forced around spurs, with the thickness and extent of its deposits isolating it from these resistances? Much like Davis (1899) propounded, is this where, like a person, a River comes of age, having finally crossed its earlier constrained, youthful adolescence and thereafter choosing its own course in its own way? An interview with a river (as proposed by Ahmad 2026) might bring forth some interesting answers, laying bare the similarities or otherwise with human lives!

Chess strategy involves interplay between Space (how many of the sixty-four squares on the board you control), and Time (how many moves are you ahead or behind your opponent). Only after a beginner understands these dimensions, can he become an advanced player. Combining this with the earlier deterministic-possibilistic query, is it just possible that the River may indulge in a similar game with the landscape? Given time, a River will carve out its own space (thus taking control of the board) and modify its entire basin accordingly. Yet conversely, a River may also let go of basin space in order to keep alive

its flow — viz. turn and change course in the face of structural obstructions, leaving formerly drained areas in order to flow another day, another way. Furthermore, what does 'space' imply to the River? Does it see it as a resource, does it wish to accrue more of it to enhance its 'status' (through larger catchments and river capture processes, even though this may entail more sediment to be borne — paradoxically hanging a larger millstone around its already overburdened neck), since the most venerated rivers are also the largest — e.g. the Nile, the Amazon, the Yangtze, the Ganges-Brahmaputra, the Danube and others of the same ilk? Is public perception and imagination of the River's greatness positively correlated to its volume and basin size, fury of destruction, or factual importance in civilisational histories? As such, drawing a parallel with human society, can there be a separate fluvial and social history of the larger rivers in comparison to those of the smaller, more "subaltern" unnamed, unheralded streams that feed the giants? Is 'river capture' by streams then a processes of increasing dominions and enhancing status, with the remnant channel after such piracy aptly referred to as a 'misfit' — not just geomorphologically in terms of the mismatch between river width and valley size, but more intuitively as one that has been shorn of the basin areal trappings that lend large rivers weightage and credence?

Consider a drop of water that is precipitated or melted at a river's source. How many miles shall it have to cover to the river mouth (presuming it is not lost midway to plant roots, evaporation or human abstraction)? What will it have seen and more importantly, felt? The dizzying, churning, eddying in the potholes; the myriad forces squeezing it around bends in helicoidal paths; the rushing over different lithologies; that great plunge into a waterfall; the forced detours taken due to faults or ridges causing offsets in the river's course; the careful planning behind the entrainment of an unsuspecting sediment grain and the hardships endured while transporting it; the meetings with different types of water drops from tributaries and exchanging the stories and sediments they too bring, and the realization that they are all hurtling together towards that final destination to meet their saltier cousins and may be finally, a tinge of sea-sickness due to the to-and-fro tidal action at the estuary. How does one measure all that; how is it possible to qualify or quantify all this, to really tell the tale of that water drop, which together with others constitutes the river? Do differential equations, mechanics or simulation models suffice in narrating this individualistic tale, albeit in a prosaic form with the Law of Large Numbers dictating that all eventual results shall gather around the expected mean, or should we try and go deeper? Would a study of the River through Time present a better perspective? Again, Shackle's (1978: 47) philosophy might work-

> The present comes from somewhere and vanishes again, somewhere wither. But the new present remembers the just vanished moment and is its child, bearing trace of its likeness without being the same.

Therefore, is it not legitimate to think of a succession of moments in the River's flow, which together, in conjugation, may represent it entire lifespan — a series of overlain

'watermarks' that are individually faint but together fulsome? Such a succession could be in the image of a series of consecutive points that zoomed out represent the whole while individually encapsulating moments (the River's own four-dimensional morphological point-cloud drawing conceptually from art movements like pointillism). Such points would be arranged along an axis, — highlighting temporally varying longitudinal and planform profiles, denoting alterations in the river's thalweg and regime attributes, which remain dynamic along a channel.

Thus time, in imaginative thought, becomes a linear extension of the present — in both ways, backwards and forwards — into both the past and future, and this relates directly with how the River is perceived and indeed studied through the maxim of "The present is the key to the past" (Lyell 1830) — the fundamental underlying principle of gradualistic uniformitarianism and a keystone of present geological investigations. This allows current observations to decipher palaeo-conditions, predict future developments and indeed theorise on the lifespan of landscapes in general, and Rivers, in particular. This extension further allows room to incorporate history, for time by extension is space in the abstract sense (through the ergodic hypothesis — Paine 1985) — i.e. a range of choice of places on which to focus our attention and extract occurrences or observations from, thereafter linking them sequentially. Through this we can, in thought, imitate nature by shifting our focus of thought along the calendar space from point to successive point (Tuan 1978), as the present itself can be supposed to move. "We can as historians participate in history, marching with Xenophon and rejoicing in the sudden apparition of the sea" (Shackle 1978: 47), or move forward along the axis into the unseen future and in true Tolkien-Asimov style, create wondrous worlds of our own with their own histories. Furthermore, this range itself can be contemplated as a unity and also be itself considered as an entity. We can, therefore, as scholars stand outside the calendar axis and look upon it as a whole — glimpsing the entire River at any one instant, from source to mouth or focus on a particular reach and observe how it changes as time ticks by. All its moments are then simultaneously co-valid in our thoughts. Thus, consider the River as a unidirectional (except near the estuary), multi-layered conveyer belt having a succession of water drops, each similar to but not same as the other, all moving forward and simultaneously carrying sediment as well. Maybe then we could more comprehensively compare the water drop near the source to the drop near the mouth, not just their physical and chemical attributes, but also their social aspects, in relation to the other drops around them and the sediment that co-inhabits their space — just as we might do for two citizens living in different parts of a country. Furthermore we could also vary our degree of involvement in the process as required, either submerge right into the River (after all what better way to study a River than having it flow over you to get that added feel of what is actually transpiring!!) or just be an observer and recorder. And just as the River has its own social constructs, similarly are societies structured around and with its waters (Paris arising from the Ile de la Cite from

within the Seine or London morphing around the Thames' meanders and marshes) — the River becomes both stage and actor, setting and protagonist, from raising-to-razing civilisations, as recorded for the mighty Indus (Albinia 2008), the Hooghly (given this apparently small distributary's importance in terms of colonial history in Southeast Asia — Ivermee 2020), and the now disappeared Saraswati (Danino 2010). Indeed, the upstream to downstream connection that the River fosters along its course is emblematic of linking the diverse riparian communities residing beside its waters. Multiple riverine artefacts and river journey narratives are deeply entwined in sustaining the socio-cultural ethos of such residents through folklores, religious beliefs, and traditional practices (the Living Waters Museum (https://www.livingwatersmuseum.org/) collates such tales from across the world while the Blue Papers (https://bluepapers.nl/index.php/bp) collection documents how rivers are vital for both tangible and intangible heritage conservation). Travelogues (whether written or filmed) along its principal rivers are popular approaches of deciphering entire regions (e.g. journeys along the Tsangpo-Brahmaputra as a narrative that encapsulates the Indian Subcontinent's entire North-East — Choudhury 2021, Hazarika 2025; or journeys upstream and downstream along the Ganga — Newby 1966, Veditum India Foundation 2021).

Human personification of rivers has long been in practice, with Human-River interactions in the cultural realm strongly indicative of a region's socio-cultural ethos and religious outlook (Anderson et al., 2020). Particularly in oriental societies and especially in Indian Hindu communities, the River is deified as a Goddess and idolised with shrines and rituals attributed to Her. This symbolisation of a River as a Goddess is well-established (Agarwala 1970; Sharma 2008), with varied iconography that often shows regional variations in depiction and mythological association. The paradoxically dualistic nature of this relationship is also brought to the fore through the use and abuse of the River in the physical realm, while pursuing its veneration and worship in the metaphysical plane. The same River a Hindu would hesitate to drink from for fear of disease, he would willingly bow down to and pay obeisance to in hope of cleansing the soul. This has been aptly encapsulated for the Ganga by Hollick (2007), and again by Banerjee (2020) — the *Ganga*, as Mother and Goddess, is always clean and impossible to defile. It is possibly this inherent separation of the soul and body, the within and without, ingrained within the traditional Hindu psyche, together with the concept of repetitive karma, that further accentuates cultural views that personify the River at a plane above that of mere survival — as the deity that gives life, sustains it and carries forward the soul into the afterlife.

This filial affiliation and anthropomorphisation is extensively reflected in the arts, in songs, prose and poetry that seek to engage with the River as a person, and typify it as a central character in oral histories and folklore (Matsui et al. 2016; Schonach 2017). To offer an extremely limited sample from the Bengal region — Bhupen Hazarika's *Bistirner Dupare* (By the River's wide banks...) questions the Ganga (or the wide

Brahmaputra in the Assamese version *Bistirno Parore͜*) as to how can She can flow whilst watching the subjugated millions by her banks (this song was inspired by Paul Robeson's epochal song *Ol' Man River* that posits the struggles of African-American slaves along a similarly uncaring Mississippi, which provides the setting for tales like *Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn* and *Uncle͜ Tom's Cabin*). Another song by the same singer *Ganga Amar Maa Padma Amar Maa*, literally refers to the Ganga-Padma River as a Mother, while Hemanta Mukhopadhyay's *O Nodi Re͜ Ekti Kotha* (O River, a word...) asks a stream about its course, consciousness and incessant flow. Rabindranath Tagore's endearing lines *Amader Choto Nodi Chole͜ Anke͜ Banke͜* (Our little river, with its twists and turns...) infuses community ownership together with playful caring for the local Kopai River flowing by Shantiniketan. Life, death, enforced migration, zamindari subjugation and unstinted hope — all played out as per the river's rhythm and along its banks and islands — form the central ethos of two great Bengali novels — Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's (1941) *Hansuli Banker Upakatha* (The Tale of Hansuli Turn — along the Kopai River) and Manik Bandyopadhyay's (1936) *Padma Nadir Majhi* (The Boatman of the Padma). Further incorporations of the River in a matrilineal sense as a 'common mother' (who is worshipped each evening with lamps that are lit and floated away (*Sandhya Aarti*) — Mukherjee 2015) reinforces this sense-of-self; and any change in the River's flow, or decline in its health is felt deeply and personally by resident communities, similar to a family member's demise (e.g. Drew (2013) recounts how many riverine communities in northern India use the Hindi word *pehchaan* (identity) to not only denote themselves and their link with the Ganga, but how this utterance makes the River one of their own).

Such imaginations are not without resonance in other cultures (particularly tied to the existence of flow and water movement that encapsulates time and emotions — Feaux de la Crois 2011), where river motifs are commonplace (e.g. the Hellenistic-Roman personification of the River Nile); or in books/cinema where a River may literally have an unstated role as a character — e.g. *Three͜ Men in a Boat* (1956) (flummoxed frolicking on the Thames in the Victorian era), *Bridge͜ on the͜ River Kwai* (1957) (the river as an obstacle and instrument of oppression that helps foster defiance during WWII), *A River Runs Through It* (1992) (how fly-fishing keeps brotherly bonds alive across decades), *Quiet Flows The͜ Don* (2006) (the fates of Cossacks in the Don valley during Soviet repression) or *Embrace͜ of the͜ Serpent* (2015) (where colonial and indigenous beliefs collide on the Amazon). It is in occidental paintings that rivers have received many iconic representations, as either setting or subject — Thomas Cole's *The͜ Oxbow* (1836) capturing a bend on the Connecticut River, Turner's symbolic *The͜ Fighting Temeraire͜* (1839) indicating the passage of time and dilution of legacy, or Van Gogh's famous *Starry Night over the͜ Rhone͜* (1888). *The͜ Four Continents* (1612-1615) by Rubens actually depicts the four known continents at that time (Europe, Asia, America, and Africa) as able-bodied men, each with their most important river as female consorts — the Danube, Ganges, Rio de la Plata and

Nile, respectively (Manioudaki 2023). Indeed, whole pages are dedicated on Pinterest to such notable river paintings (Ocean's Bridge 2002). These art and cinematographic embellishments might further cement the notion that a River can be considered from an existential viewpoint in its own right, or signify important boundaries, both literal (Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon in defiance of the Senate or Washington's icy boat journey across the Delaware to reignite the American Revolution) and metaphysical (coins for Charon to ferry souls over the Styx into Haedes), which exemplify history, rites of passage and human life.

Geomorphological investigations of fluvial landscapes now advocate a riparian corridor-based river restoration approach (Wohl et al. 2005; Mondal and Patel 2018), which consider physical and social implications on channel health and in-stream and along-bank biotic communities within a defined 'space for the river', much like examining a person and their neighbourhood. There is growing advocacy to just 'let the river be', providing 'its own freedom space' (Biron et al. 2014; Buffin-Belanger et al. 2015), that enables self-regulation by balancing natural erosion and deposition, thereby enhancing the River's geomorphic diversity, which in turn provides myriad biotopes (Williams et al. 2020). Fostering this 'stationary equilibrium' (Nanson and Huang 2018) can diminish fluvial disasters, as rivers left to their own exigencies shall erode and accumulate in sustainable measure (Florsheim et al. 2008), largely evolving within preset pathways (e.g. Channel Evolution Models of Schumm et al. 1984), and thus provide viable longer-term ecological benefits. Such an approach also enables better assessment of the River's behavioural changes (be these induced or self-propagated) by documenting fluvial landform response and channel sensitivity (Fryirs 2017; Lisenby et al. 2020) to climatic and anthropogenic stressors, thereby facilitating strategies for enhancing the River's resilience (Parsons and Thoms 2018; Thoms and Fuller 2024) to such events. This is similar to espousing democracy and free will (social, political and economic) for citizens, in the hope that bereft of overbearing and restrictive constraints, inventive individualism and mutual respect shall enable a more equitable and sustainable society to self-form and self-organise, creating what Hayek (1944, 1973) termed as 'spontaneous order' from apparent chaos (Hunt 2007; Luban 2019) — drawing from natural and societal landscape organisation philosophies in the physical sciences and humanities (Phillips 1995, 1999; DeAngelis 2012; Tarnita 2024).

New approaches, termed as *ecohydromorphologies*, now enmesh morphological, hydrological and ecological components of the riparian zone (Mondal and Patel 2022) to gauge their relative importance and health, particularly after promulgation of the European Union Water Framework Directives in the 1990s (being finally adopted in 2000), while hydrosocial and socio-hydrological frameworks designate how river and riparian zone use by resident societies alter their natural character (Mukherjee 2020). And, just as a person needs regular sustenance, focus has steadily veered towards ascertaining and guaranteeing the

requisite environmental flow (or e-flow) for sustaining a healthy River (Acreman 2016; Arthington et al. 2018). This is deemed as the minimal flow required to maintain the River's aquatic integrity and three-dimensional connectivity (longitudinal: upstream to downstream flow; lateral: riverbank to riverbank and floodplain links; and vertical: river and groundwater interchanges in the hyporheic zone), through legislation and international agreements (Grabowski et al. 2014; Harvey and Gooseff 2015), alongside the formulation of new indices that enumerate how *freely* they flow (Grill et al. 2019), across physical terrains and political boundaries. This has, in some instances, led to rivers being accorded river equivalent human rights (e.g. the Whanganui River in New Zealand, Atrato River in Colombia and Narmada River in central India), even though this continues to be legally debated (e.g. the accordance and subsequent repealing of personhood rights to the Ganga and Yamuna Rivers in northern India) (Kothari and Bajpai 2017). There is also growing advocacy to refocus environmental humanities studies towards a more rivercentric (fluid and mobile) approach as opposed to the terracentrism (land-based grounding) that predominates such discourses, through recognition that rivers are entire worlds by themselves and not just an utility to service agricultural or industrial demands, and listening to them through hydropoetics (Ryan 2021). And just as with people and societies, riverscapes are contested worlds (Karpouzoglou and Vij 2017), across the individual (Ghosh 2025) to international scales (Wolf 1998).

Our essay thus concludes and devolves into asking again — does the River really have a soul?

Spirituality mentions five elements — Time, Mass, Space, Light, and Energy, all of which are supposedly a part of the Almighty's creation and a reflection of His attributes. The River has mass; occupies space, nay, even opens up space that was confined within some solid body; it encapsulates time, entraps light and its flow itself is pure energy.

Based on the above, what is your verdict?

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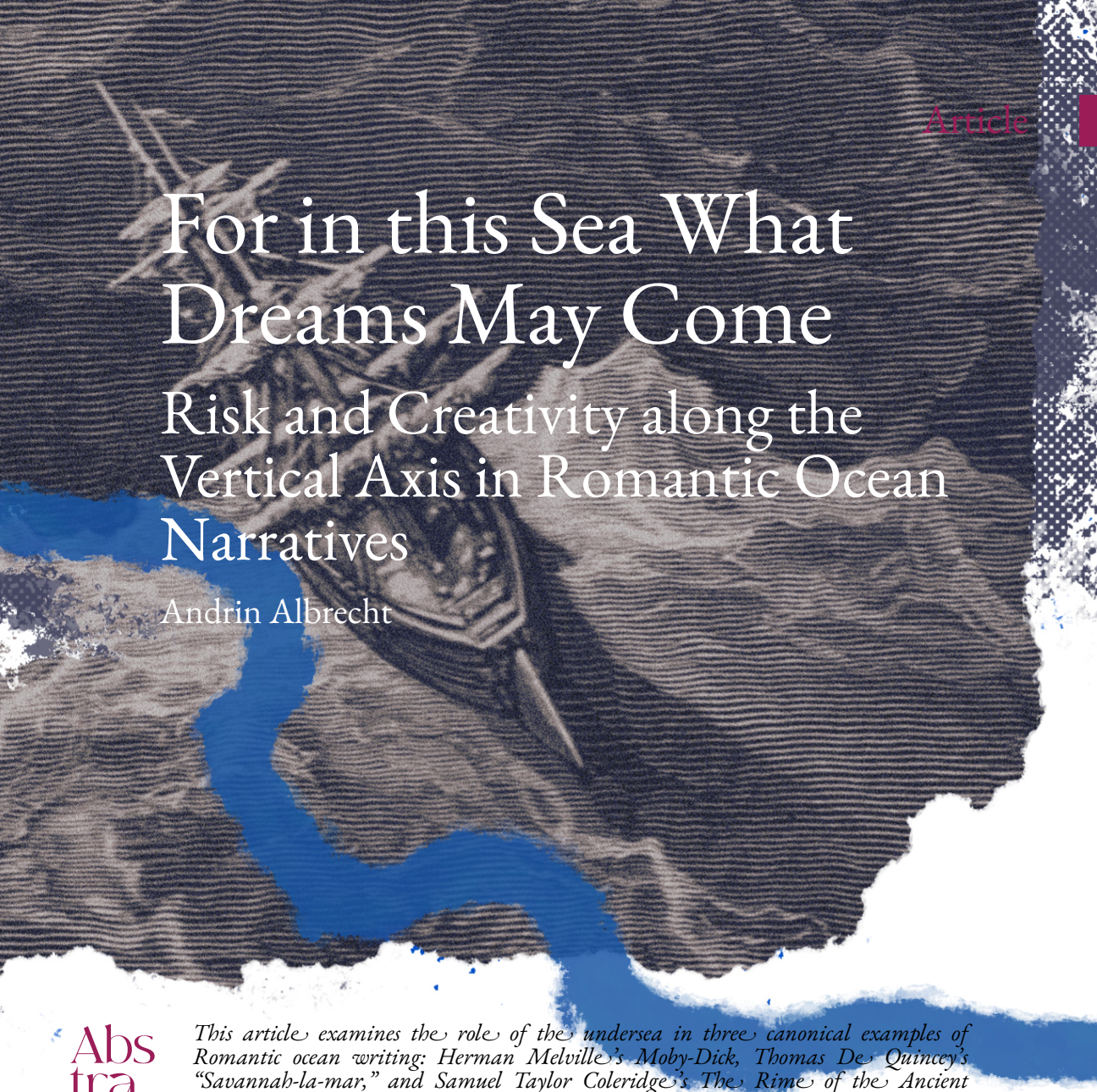

Article

For in this Sea What Dreams May Come

Risk and Creativity along the Vertical Axis in Romantic Ocean Narratives

Andrin Albrecht

Abstract

This article examines the role of the undersea in three canonical examples of Romantic ocean writing: Herman Melville's Moby-Dick, Thomas De Quincey's "Savannah-la-mar," and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. It argues that the conception of the sea in Romanticism was still overwhelmingly horizontal, as anything below the reach of a free diver remained an epistemological black box, but that it is precisely this inaccessibility that allows the discussed writers to configure the undersea as a space of perilous poetic inspiration. In all three texts, there are brief moments when characters breach the surface and engage with the ocean along a vertical rather than merely horizontal axis. These scenes, in all instances, depict diving as a test, and contrast the insanity of those who fail it with the creative spoils of those who re-emerge. The ensuing sea-change from aspirants into either narrative raw material or accomplished poets can be understood as self-stylization of the Romantic creative endeavor.

Keywords: Blue Humanities, Romanticism, Melville, Coleridge, Ocean, Creativity.

Water is possibly the element most familial to both historical Romanticism and its modern reverberations. From Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798; 1834) to Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), Lord Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–1818) and *Don Juan* (1819–1825)—both of which feature abundant depictions of ship travel—Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*; or *Life in the Woods* (1854), Clemens Brentano's (1801) and Heinrich Heine's (1824) respective takes on the river spirit "Lorelei," William Wordsworth's sonnets from the river Duddon (1820), Novalis's vision of a blue flower at the centre of an underground basin in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802) that proved the defining symbol of German Romanticism, the seafaring segments in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Percy Shelley's "A Vision of the Sea" (1820), Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), and Sir Walter Scott's *The Lady of the Lake* (1810), water pervades the canonical literature of the early-nineteenth-century. The biographies of many of its most iconic proponents were likewise closely intertwined with—and often cut short by—the 'blue element': One need only think of Percy Shelley's drowning in the gulf of La Spezia, Margaret Fuller's death by shipwreck off Fire Island, NY, or Byron's penchant for swimming in the canals of Venice. Simply put, the iconic exclamation "water, water every where" (119) by Coleridge's Ancient Mariner might as well be addressed to Romanticism[1] at large.

Many scholars have consequently argued for a special connection between Romanticism and oceans. In a trio of lectures held at the University of Virginia and subsequently published in 1950 as *The Enchafèd Flood*, W. H. Auden hoped "to understand the nature of Romanticism through an examination of its treatment of a single theme, the sea," and ultimately argued that Romanticism all but invented our contemporary conceptions of the ocean (2). Similarly, Steve Mentz suggests that "with Romanticism, the sea changed from horror into truth" (77). In other words, Romanticism was responsible for foregrounding the human connection *with* the sea rather than their weary opposition to it. In this essay, I want to build on these propositions and offer a novel look at the relationship between Romanticism and the ocean that focuses specifically on the vertical axis: I am interested in instances of submergence, considerations of the undersea, and the specific poetological paradigms that are inherent to it. In short, I want to argue that diving — in a selection of key oceanic texts from Anglophone Romanticism— is offered as both a metaphor for, and valuation of, creative production.

My specific interest in the vertical — the relationship between that which is above water and that which is below — stems from the observation that, in the vast majority of cases, the Romantic ocean is nothing but surface. This may, in parts, be for historical reasons, as Romanticism fell into the final decades in which humanity had no idea what the deep sea looked like beyond the reach of a free diver. The first functional submarines were tested around 1800 in France, and were initially designed exclusively for military purposes (Cohen 2). The closed-helmet diving suit, which allowed humans to move somewhat freely beneath the surface, was developed in the 1830s (ibid. 3), but, before the advent of electricity,

divers depended on short-burning, highly hazardous underwater gas lamps to see anything below the reach of natural light. It would take another century until humans had diving gear and submarines that would come anywhere close to the bottom of even a relatively shallow estuary. It took until the middle of the 18th century to even measure the ocean's depth and prove that it was not, in fact, bottomless (Rusoke-Dietrich 10). In the age of Romanticism, therefore, 70 percent of our planet's surface was still an epistemological black box.

It is no surprise, then, that the bulk of Romantic ocean writing imagines even the world's deepest waters as categorically horizontal. In Canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Lord Byron calls the sea a "watery plain" (1606) and "thou glorious mirror" (1639), both metaphors that emphasize two-dimensionality. John Keats, in his sonnet "On the Sea," praises its "wideness" (12) rather than its "depth" or even its "vastness" — which would have been just as feasible — and the German Romantic Joseph von Eichendorff, in his poem "On the Open Sea," emphasizes the quiet "far and high and all around" (6; my translation) but, conspicuously, not below. In other words, there is a marked bias — both in the Romantic imagination of the sea, and in our imagination of the sea in Romanticism — toward the horizontal. It is distance, rather than depth, that jumps to mind first. As Helen Rozwadowski puts it: "By the late eighteenth century, Europeans understood the deep sea as a great void that was empty and featureless, the antithesis of civilization" (6).

At the same time that the ocean's horizontal axis in Romanticism collapsed distances and borders at a hitherto unprecedented scale — this was the era of globe-spanning maritime trade and networks, rapid colonial expansion, and mass migration between continents by way of ship — its third dimension, the vertical axis, remained the most impenetrable border of all, short of that which separates life from death. Even the clouds, the moon, the Arctic, or other such inhospitable favorites of Romanticism, could be looked at, measured, and approached. The wanderer in Caspar David Friedrich's painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, which has become emblematic for the Romantic interplay of perception and obscurity, could at least in theory, simply descend from his vantage, find out what lies below the mist, or climb any of the distant peaks he contemplates. By contrast, the undersea is accessible to the imagination, and the imagination only.

In the following, I therefore want to engage with the tension that arises from Romanticism's intense focus on a space of which it could only ever perceive the surface. As Jimmy Packham and David Punter put it in a recent article: "The deep, in particular, is a space that exceeds common experience of the ocean and yet remains a fundamental dimension of almost every engagement with this space, for taking to sea involves putting oneself in direct proximity to its depth" (16). I am interested particularly in instances when Romantic texts auto-referentially engage with that proximity by not just reflecting on the ocean's potential dead, but entering it. What happens when, to paraphrase Mentz, texts "dare to immerse [their] small bodies in our globe's watery skin" (127)? Given the ocean's

close metaphorical affinity with the inaccessible and the human mind, I propose that scenes of diving can be read as a Romantic journey into imagination itself.

I will approach this journey through three exemplar case studies by canonical Romantic authors, two of which feature outright depictions of the undersea, and one in which the subnautical only becomes apparent when read in conjunction with these more explicit examples. These case studies are Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Thomas De Quincey's "Savannah-la-mar," and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

Herman Melville's so-called 'Great American Novel' (cf. Buell 358–388) features both inaccessible and accessible imaginaries of the ocean. For the most part, it is set on the dry surface of a ship, and when that ship sinks at the iconic climax of *Moby-Dick*, it does so for good, continuing the aforementioned paradigm of the undersea as an impenetrable void. Here, if something crosses the vertical border, it is irretrievably lost:

> For an instant, the tranced boat's crew stood still; then turned. "The ship? Great God, where is the ship?" Soon they through dim, bewildering mediums saw her sidelong fading phantom, as in the gaseous Fata Morgana; only the uppermost masts out of water; while fixed by infatuation, or fidelity, or fate, to their once lofty perches, the pagan harpooneers still maintained their sinking lookouts on the sea. And now, concentric circles seized the lone boat itself, and all its crew, and each floating oar, and every lance-pole, and spinning, animate and inanimate, all round and round in one vortex, carried the smallest chip of the Pequod out of sight. [...]
>
> Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago. (Melville 623–624)

This passage at no point considers — let alone depicts — what lies beneath the ocean's surface. Instead, the undersea is rendered an aporia and the boundary between above and under water is re-established as quickly and definitively as possible after it is breached. Anything that is submerged immediately turns from presence into absence. Tellingly, the crew calls out "Where is the ship?" rather than "The ship is sinking," or "The ship is down there." It is carried "out of sight" and, more importantly, the location where it just vanished is taken over by an opaque white, which, throughout *Moby-Dick*, is associated with the epistemologically inaccessible, the absolutely impenetrable, and the "visible absence of color" (Melville 212). The text emphasizes that nothing at all remains of the *Pequod*, that the surface of the sea is unchanged and has remained so for longer than the oldest known edifices of men. Not even a ripple attests to the fact that there is a ship, a crew, and thousands of barrels of whale oil a few fathoms down in this very spot.

Such instances of the violent and inexorable re-assertion of the vertical oceanic border make the second kind of breach — where something moves beneath the surface and nevertheless remains epistemologically accessible — the more remarkable. Perhaps the most notable instance of that can be found in Chapter 93, titled "The Castaway," where the

African-American cabin boy Pip falls overboard during the frantic pursuit of a whale and is accidentally left behind by the speeding boats. Suddenly finding himself the only living being in the middle "of such a heartless immensity" of open ocean (Melville 453), Pip goes mad, and by the time the rest of the crew notices his absence and returns to retrieve him, has become an idiot.

Crucially, as a plot element, this would have been sufficient in and of itself. The scene could have been constructed entirely based on the emblematic depiction of a horizontal ocean emphasized by the single elevation of the swimming boy's head. The novel offers sublime loneliness as a plausible explanation for Pip's insanity, and it could have moved on from there without losing much by way of poignancy. After all, Pip is ultimately rescued. Being a good swimmer, he manages to stay on the surface until the boats return and save him. Despite this, however, the narration continues and turns the axis 90 degrees:

> The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God. (Melville 453)

Some of the most important aspects to unpack from this paragraph are, first, a split of Pip from one into two entities, second, his confrontation with celestial knowledge, and, third, his transformation thereby. Pip's insanity is explained in terms of a Cartesian severance, with his body staying behind on the two-dimensional surface but his soul sinking into three-dimensional depths. However, rather than constructing those depths as an annihilating void, the narration actually follows Pip down and populates them with primordial shapes, corals, the origin of celestial bodies, with mermen and, most importantly, the very absolute that Romanticism so strives to reach and yet posits as categorically inaccessible. Underwater, Pip is able to behold the raw materials of creation and God's plan for them; he understands the weave of the world, a knowledge too much to bear for his feeble mind. It is this insight that removes Pip irretrievably from his fellow humans. He glimpses the weave of the world, becomes indifferent and god-like, but pays for that insight with his sanity. In other words: He carries the oceanic border that he breached with him forevermore. Now, this border separates him from his fellow human beings. The cost of breach is leaving humanity behind. The passage, in essence, thus suggests that there is much to be gained in the subconscious world, but that it comes at a steep price — or, rather, that it only comes to those who are worthy.

After all, upon closer inspection, there are actually not one but two divers in this scene. While this fateful plunge is focalized through Pip, it is ultimately narrated from Ishmael's perspective. Ishmael, famously, constitutes a lot more than his persona of a bookish background observer lets on. Throughout the novel, he is a kind of all-seeing eye on board of the Pequod, often describing events that he could not conceivably have been privy to. Such is the case here, too. Like Pip, Ishmael is also split into a body that stays up on the surface and a soul that descends into the depth; he sees the same strange creatures and celestial orbs and God's foot upon the loom, only he does not go mad, but rather uses what he has glimpsed productively: He writes it down and publishes it as text, his own worldly weave, his god-like creation inspired by what Pip was too weak to bear. Diving into the subconscious, in other words, becomes a contest: artistic triumph for the winner, insanity for the defeated.

Although it is never again imagined in such vivid detail, this same pattern of entering the undersea leading to insight, transformation, and irreversible distance from the world above, can be observed on multiple instances throughout Moby-Dick. From the whalers glimpsing "another and still stranger world" (Melville 425) inhabited by sperm whales and their young in the chapter "The Grand Armada" to Ahab seeming to glean his own past and the life he could have led if he decided against a course of monomaniacal vengeance as he "leaned over the side and watched how his shadow in the water sank and sank to his gaze" (ibid. 589) in "The Symphony," to descend into the depths means to "suffer a sea change" throughout Melville's novel, to quote the spirit Ariel from one of Shakespeare's most Romantic plays (i.2.478).

However, to conceptualize more thoroughly what this sea change actually consists of, it is warranted to look beyond Melville. British Romanticism, too, has produced some highly illustrative texts that glance beneath the surface and imagine the ensuing transformation in detail. One of the most poignant ones is Thomas De Quincey's "Savannah-la-mar," an ode of sorts to a sunken city first published in 1845 in his fittingly titled collection *Suspiria de Profundis* [sighs from the deep]. As the part in "Savannah-la-mar" concerned with oceanic imagery is relatively short—after these initial paragraphs, the piece segues into more abstract contemplations of the fleetingness of the present moment—it makes sense to quote it at length.

> God smote Savannah-la-mar, and in one night, by earthquake, removed her, with all her towers standing and population sleeping, from the steadfast foundations of the shore to the coral floors of ocean. [...] This city, therefore, like a mighty galleon with all her apparel mounted, streamers flying, and tackling perfect, seems floating along the noiseless depths of ocean; and oftentimes in glassy calms, through the translucid atmosphere of water that now stretches like an air-woven awning above the silent encampment, mariners from every clime look down into her courts and terraces, count her gates, and number the spires of her churches. [...]

> Thither, lured by the loveliness of cerulean depths, by the peace of human dwellings privileged from molestation, by the gleam of marble altars sleeping in everlasting sanctity, oftentimes in dreams did I and the Dark Interpreter cleave the watery veil that divided us from her streets. We looked into the belfries, where the pendulous bells were waiting in vain for the summons which should awaken their marriage peals; together we touched the mighty organ-keys, that sang no jubilates for the ear of Heaven, that sang no requiems for the ear of human sorrow; together we searched the silent nurseries, where the children were all asleep, and had been asleep through five generations. (De Quincey 157–158)

This passage does not even contain a trace of the aforementioned conception of the undersea as an impenetrable void. Rather, its surface is a mere "watery veil" to be cleaved and looked beneath. In fact, the transparency of water plays a pivotal role, since—instead of burying the sunken city of Savannah-la-mar—it exposes it to everybody's sight. However, there are more parallels between this passage and Pip's dive in *Moby-Dick* than might initially meet the eye. First, even though it is subtler than in the case of Pip, Savannah-la-mar similarly gets split, or, rather, doubled. God submerges the city as "a monument of mysterious anger," but to the narrator, it is an emblem of "the peace of human dwellings privileged from molestation." For Pip, the split occurred between body and soul, or between idiot and savant. Here, we are offered a double-vision of divine wrath and harmony. Second, the aforementioned sea change—the transformation any submerged object or person undergoes—is clearly directed towards the divine. Savannah-la-mar turns from a city of living humans to a resting place of the immortals. Its inhabitants do not age, but sleep "in everlasting sanctity." While De Quincey never provides an explanation of why exactly God decided to smite this city, the parallels to Biblical cities like Sodom, Gomorrah, and Nineveh are obvious. Such divine acts of destruction are usually the punishment for exceptional sinfulness—in other words, sanctity was presumably the least of its inhabitants features when they were still dwelling on dry land. In a 2012 article on temporality and chronological constraints in De Quincey's writing, Leila Walker ventures that, in "Savannah-la-mar," "the bodies of the children [...] form the material objects marking in ruin a specific moment, the moment of the earthquake, that is simultaneously a single instant and a part of the infinite future that is God's present" (690–691). In other words, the children of Savannah-la-mar—and, more generally, anyone who inhabits the space of this sunken city — are severed from the temporality of the world above water, moved closer to god but thereby removed from ordinary human beings. They are transmogrified from flesh and blood into symbols. The undersea, then, thirdly becomes indicative of a rift, a separation from that which dwells above and that which was before. This is underscored in De Quincey's writing by a looking-glass inversion of landbound paradigms. For example, bells and church organs are silent, awnings are stretched by water instead of air, and the children, instead of outgrowing their nurseries, remain young for generations.

Rather than constituting an impenetrable border, the very permeability of the ocean's surface here becomes essential. Not just the dreaming narrator, but also the "mariners from every clime" can effortlessly look down at the city through translucent waters. This might at first appear to set De Quincey's vision apart Pip's half-drowning in *Moby-Dick*, but, upon closer examination, the parallels are evident. As I have argued above, in Melville's novel, Ishmael[2] follows Pip's descent into the underwater world as effortlessly as if there, too, the surface of the ocean was just a translucent veil. In both cases, the respective narrators re-emerge from the depths with stories in tow, whereas others—Pip's soul, the inhabitants of Savannah-la-mar—stay submerged forever. This, for one, underscores the perils of diving and position's the narrator's as an exceptional feat, a testament to their acumen. Put differently, their creative genius is proven through diving. For another, it turns those who do not re-emerge from the ocean into the foundation of the stories that triumphant divers like Ishmael or De Quincey bring back from their sojourn. The sea change they suffer means that they are turned into the raw material for art: "Of [their] bones are corals made / Those are pearls that were [their] eyes" (Shakespeare i.2.475–476). It is for a privileged few, in those narratives, to retrieve and flaunt those corals and pearls.

In order to illustrate how this process manifests in more abstract fashion, I would like to finally discuss a third canonical Romantic ocean narrative: Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. This comparison is particularly interesting not just because Coleridge's poem was a prominent influence on Melville's *Moby-Dick* (cf. Howard 171; Gravil 2), but also because its engagement with the undersea is largely subliminal. This prompts us to apply the observations made heretofore in a more abstract way and look how similar patterns of productive submersion operate in a subtler manner.

In Coleridge's entire poem, there are seven instances where the possibility that there is anything beneath the surface is even considered. With one exception — a passing mention of the harbour bay of the Mariner's homeland being called "clear as glass" (Coleridge 472), which echoes the transparent sea that engulfs Savannah-la-mar — they all come in pairs. They create mirror images, triumphant and threatening, of the same Romantic notion. For instance, the following horrific image

> The very deep [that] did rot: O Christ!
> [...]
> Yea, slimy thing did crawl with legs
> Upon the slimy sea.
> (Coleridge 123–126)

is offset by the image of colorful water snakes:

> Within the shadow of the ship
> I watched their rich attire:
> Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,
> They coiled and swam; and every track

Was a flash of golden fire." (ibid. 277–281)

In both cases, the deep is productive, and its productions inspire either horror or divine joy in human beings, quite like they inspired insight and insanity in poor Pip. Similarly, in one instance, spirits "from the land of mist and snow" (ibid. 278) in one verse drift beneath the surface and drive the mariner's ship forward, whereas, in another, an unspecified "it" that "rumbled on" under the water (ibid. 546) splits and ultimately sinks that ship. Propulsion and devastation, hope and defeat, both emerge from the undersea. The most notable double-image, however, are two verses near the beginnings of parts I and II, respectively:

The Sun came up upon the left,
Out of the sea came he!
And he shone bright, and on the right
Went down into the sea. (Coleridge. 25–28)

The Sun now rose upon the right:
Out of the sea came he,
Still hid in mist, and on the left
Went down into the sea. (ibid. 83–86)

Like Ishmael's colossal orbs, the sun here is born from the deep and returns to the deep, which again indicates the productivity of the undersea, its conception as a locus of genesis. However, these two mentions of the sun rising "out of the sea" are not merely ornamental, from the frame narrative—where the wedding guest gets stopped by the Mariner—to the Mariner's account of his ill-fated ship journey. This signals an intrinsic connection between oceanic submergence and re-emergence and storytelling. Moving along the vertical axis through the ocean's surface, in other words, is taken to mean moving between factual reality and the fantastic. The ordinary, the present day, the wedding ceremony and bustle of the modern city is interrupted by an image of oceanic submersion, and what follows is the exceptional, the Romantic, the artistically impressive. The fact that Coleridge's Mariner is presented as an emaciated figure on the brink of insanity, whose "beard with age is hoar" (619) once again serves to underscore the peril of such a narrative dive. Inspiration through submersion, his character shows—just like Pip, just like the smitten inhabitants of Savannah-la-mar—can come at a terrible price, but the potential reward is "something rich and strange" (Shakespeare i.2.479) beyond compare.

With this in mind, we may one last time return to *Moby-Dick*. At the very end of Melville's novel, after the *Pequod* is swallowed by the void, there is one single thing that resurfaces: Ishmael, who "did survive the wreck" (Melville 625) by clinging to an empty wooden coffin and gets rescued by a passing ship to tell the tale. In the novel's very first chapter, conversely, Ishmael talks at length about how all human beings, including him, are drawn to water, and all roads ultimately lead to the sea:

> Inlanders all, they come from lanes and alleys, streets and avenues – north, east, south, and west. Yet here they all unite. [...] But look! here come more crowds, pacing straight for the water, and seemingly bound for a dive. (Melville 4)

In this, we once again encounter submersion as a frame, a transition between the mundane and the Romantic. The story proper begins with an image of plunging into the water, and it ends with the narrator resurfacing, having suffered all manners of tribulations but gained a story for them. In effect, *Moby-Dick*, "Savannah-la-mar," and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* are all structured long, testing dives. They frame their own creative genesis as a form of aqueous katabasis: a perilous competition from which only the worthy will emerge—but those who are worthy will return with god-like insights and great artistic treasure from the bottom of their unconscious sea. Romanticism has a longstanding tradition of "conceiv[ing] inspiration as self-sacrifice" (Clark 135), and the ocean — seemingly flat, and yet so horribly profound, promising riches that cannot be obtained without risk— offers itself as an ideal metaphor for that conception. Diving, in Romanticism, is much like dreaming — with the additional benefit that there is genuine danger implicit in it.

End Notes

[1]'Romanticism' is, of course, a notoriously vague and heterogeneous denomination. In this essay, I am not interested in historical demarcations and differentiations, but rather in that miscellany of artists, texts, and philosophical movements that has been subsumed under the term 'Romanticism' in later periods and thus come to retroactively define it. I therefore employ it in its most liberal sense, following Christoph Bode's definition of Romanticism as "a set of responses, highly differentiated and at times downright contradictory, to a historically specific challenge: the challenge of the ever-accelerating modernization of European [and North American] society" (126; original emphasis).

[2] I have written elsewhere about the role water plays in the characterization of Ishmael and how his own elusiveness, adaptability, and his permanence even throughout repeated cataclysms are quintessentially aquatic (Albrecht).

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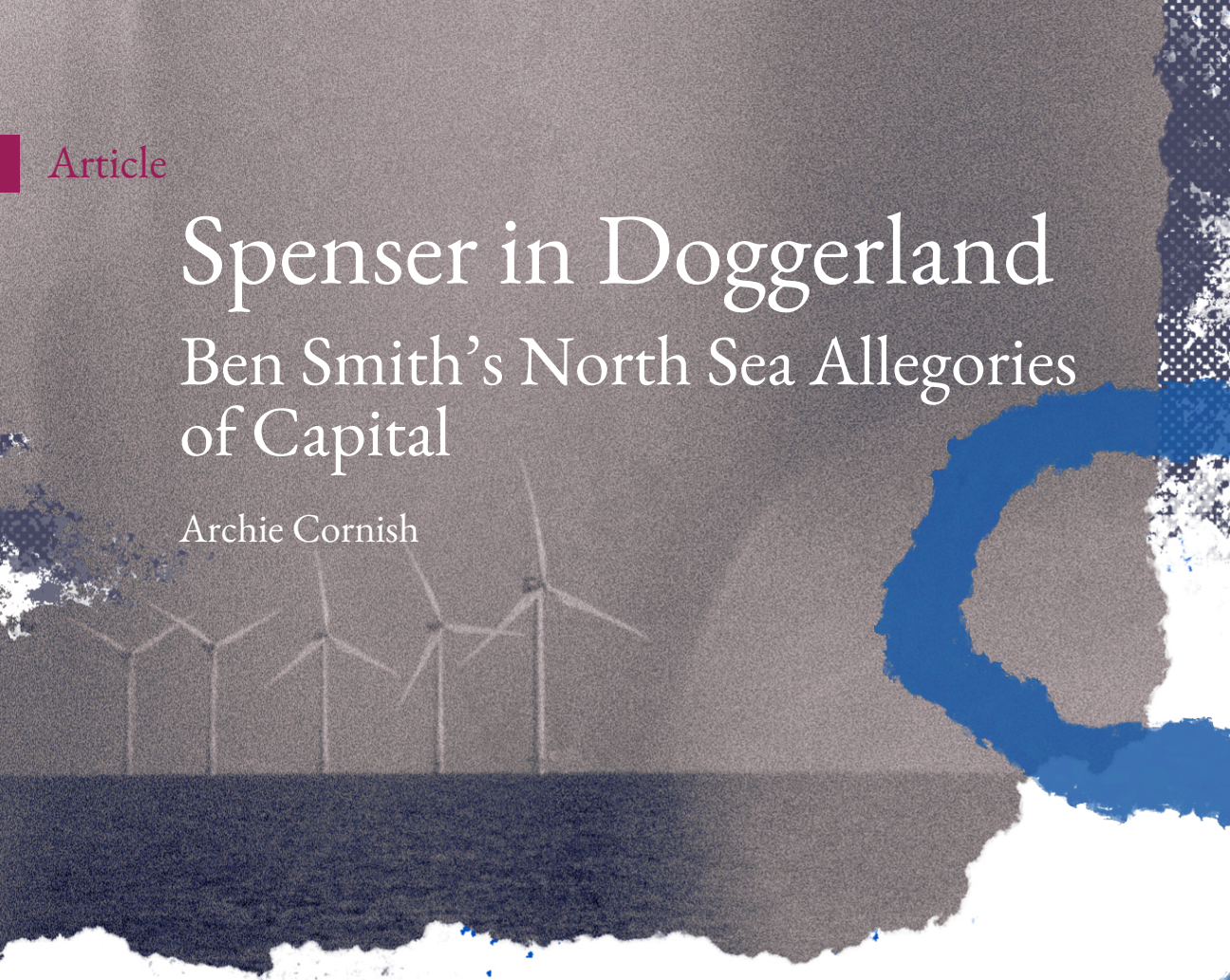
Article

Spenser in Doggerland

Ben Smith's North Sea Allegories of Capital

Archie Cornish



Abstract

Ben Smith's Doggerland (2019) is a dystopian novel set on the North Sea in the near future. Two characters, a boy and an old man, maintain a wind farm run by the organisation which has taken over the world, called simply the Company. The farm is failing, and the ecosystem has almost collapsed. Recent materialist criticism on Doggerland has foregrounded the presence in the novel of nonhuman stuff. This approach disguises Smith's portrayal of social relations. Doggerland is better understood as an anatomy of maritime capitalism, whose dominance extends over conventional narrative strategies. Yet in making such a claim, this article also moves beyond a realist interpretive mode, suggesting instead that Doggerland is fruitfully understood as an allegory. Spenser's The Faerie Queene supplies not only maritime allegory, but also an early modern reference to Doggerland itself – the Mesolithic kingdom, now submerged, between eastern England and the European continent. At the dawn of European maritime colonialism, the sea appears as a site of excess, a trigger for hermeneutic flurry. Spenser's allegorical poetics reveals a resemblance with the equally totalising system of maritime capitalism; both forms of totality tend equally to fluidity and glaciation. Finally, the article draws on recent work in the blue humanities to ask how we might centre the ocean as metaphor without, as Steve Mentz puts it, drying the ocean out.

Keywords: Doggerland, Ben Smith, Edmund Spenser, Allegory, Maritime Capitalism.

At the beginning of *Time Song* Julia Blackburn stands on the Suffolk coast, the eastern edge of England. The North Sea seems to breathe, rising and falling "like a covering of grey skin." (Blackburn 3). In a sped-up momentary fantasy the water withdraws, revealing a landscape of rivers and valleys; then, imperceptibly at first, it inundates the land once more, creating precarious islands only to drown them. A process that began about 12,000 years ago with the retreat of ice after the Last Glacial Maximum, and ended 4,200 years later, probably when the land flooded again after the Storegga landslide, takes place within a single flight of fancy, *Time Song*'sopening page.

What is to be found out there? Blackburn's fantastical landscape once existed. It connected the landmass of Britain to the European continent and supported a rich ecosystem, from woolly mammoths to Mesolithic humans. In the 1990s the archaeologist Bryony Coles christened it Doggerland, after the hills in its northern uplands known today as Dogger Bank. The existence of a once-inhabited land had been posited in 1913—just before Britain's epochal war with one of its neighbours around the German Ocean, triggering its renaming as the North Sea—by the geographer Clement Reid. His thesis landed indifferently but gained belated credit in 1931, when the Lowestoft trawler *SS Colinda* dredged up a bone harpoon in its nets. In the twenty-first century Doggerland has become the focus of major archaeological research. British and Dutch universities have spearheaded efforts to reconstruct its submerged territory in maps, while on the shoreline archaeologists carry out more detailed studies of particular Mesolithic sites such as Happisburgh in Norfolk.

Doggerland archaeology has always had an uneasily complex relationship with the North Sea's industries. The trawlers that dredge up precious finds also scar the seabed; data for mapping Doggerland's hidden contours comes from oil companies who use it to drill. In recent decades oil rigs have given way to extractive structures of a "greener"—and bluer—kind. On its completion the Dogger Bank Wind Farm, operated by a British-Norwegian consortium called Forewind, will be the world's largest offshore site for generating wind power.

Like extractive industry, archaeology is always in search of material stuff—though for a different end. But its origins lie in dreams of lost worlds, fantasies like Reid's and Blackburn's. Ben Smith's *Doggerland* (2019) draws deeply from this entwinement of fact and fantasy, the material realities of North Sea extraction and speculative dreams of the lost world beneath the waves. Smith sets his novel on a vast decaying wind farm in the North Sea, in the middle space between unspecified territories. Approaching *Doggerland* as an "environmentally oriented" text (Borlik 6), and applying insights from the blue humanities as to the significance of the sea, this article steers a course broadly similar to recent criticism.[1] But it departs from existing studies by situating capitalism at the heart of its analysis, and by introducing allegory as an interpretive prism. To demonstrate that these two categories of analysis might emanate from the same source, I tack at around halfway, from Smith's twenty-first century dystopia to a Renaissance text, *The Faerie Queene*

(1590-96). Edmund Spenser's poem, a vast allegorical epic romance, appears at a critical juncture in the history of western conceptions of the sea. Yet it also features floods, drowned worlds and — fleetingly but significantly — Doggerland itself.

Repairing Commodities: Life over Doggerland

Smith's protagonists are Jem, a young man known as "the boy," and an old man called Greil. They use each other's names sparingly; their life together is similarly sparse. Something terrible has befallen the world: sea levels have risen, and biodiversity has collapsed. But Smith's protagonists must carry on working. Their job is to scour the wind farm in a maintenance boat and keep it running: to steward the turbines, file reports on output, and conduct repairs. Jem's contract is hereditary. His father worked in the same position but deserted the farm — Jem hazily remembers his departure for the North Sea and his promise to return. The old man has long given up on such promises. He takes solace in the drowned world beneath them, installing makeshift nets all over the farm for dredging up prehistoric treasure. He speaks dreamily of Doggerland, reciting a litany of its features: "riverbeds, forests, open plains. Villages, fire-pits" (Smith 14).

For Marco Caracciolo, *Doggerland* charts the unacknowledged "vitality of the nonhuman world" (Caracciolo 12). At the outset Jem is confined to a rigidly anthropocentric attitude to his surroundings, a Heideggerian "dichotomy of equipment versus junk" (Caracciolo 17). The novel, Caracciolo argues, describes an arc towards a richer appreciation of things, a stance closer to the old man's way of seeing. Angelo Monaco, similarly, traces in Smith's novel the emergence of "a sense of responsibility and care towards the nonhuman" (Monaco 141). The world of *Doggerland* is certainly full of stuff: above water, a virtually endless archive of electrical parts; below the surface, a truly infinite drift of detritus from the recent to the ancient past. In the absence of a healthy ecosystem things acquire pseudo-organic vitality: watching rain descend on the turbines, the boy imagines the "rust" that will "bloom out of chipped paint" (Smith 33). Yet one thing that hasn't completely eroded is the distinction between literal and figurative language. A central interpretive focus on the "nonhuman" risks over-essentialising its "vitality," eliding organic and inorganic forms of life into a single category. Monaco emphasises that "plastic and rubbish are in rich health" (Monaco 97), but neither he nor Caracciolo acknowledge the poetic scene towards the novel's end when the water clarifies and a flock of jellyfish shoal through the farm: "vast, clear globes, like planets, with pale stems, or legs, or something, trailing down from them" (Smith 177). [2]

The determined focus on inorganic material stuff, flotsam and jetsam, makes the miraculous living jellyfish disappear. It also pulls critical attention from the more-than-human sea itself to the anthropological waste floating through it. Yet though my reading of *Doggerland* seeks to refocus attention on its representation of the sea, it also seeks to avoid

trapping the novel in a realist paradigm, in which — like its contents — the sea is only ever the repository of a Real rigorously divided from the human sphere, and from human signification.

Caracciolo's human-nonhuman dichotomy has a flattening effect, I want to suggest, on both its sides. This is not to reject, in doctrinaire Marxist fashion, the basic universalism inherent in the notion of the human. But *Doggerland* is about systems of relations — the social relations between humans, and the human relation to the surroundings — and in readings like Caracciolo's social relations fade from view. Reviewing the novel in *The Guardian*, Stuart Evers notes that Smith's world is dominated by a single organisation, "rather hokily called 'the Corporation" (Evers, "Doggerland"). Evers's imprecision is indicative of a failure to appreciate the centrality of the organisation, in truth called the *Company*, in Smith's novel. The Company's logo is stamped not just on the farm's electrical parts, but also on the tins of artificial food brought by the Pilot (the only other present-frame character) on his supply boat. It has survived the collapse of finely balanced climate systems, as well as the eclipse of nation states: chancing on an old map, the boy recognises the "eastern mainland" (Smith 84), but the merging of English slang with Frisian and Mandarin throughout the novel suggests that national identities have worn away, dissolving into the Company's control; the "eastern mainland" could as easily refer to Friesland as to Suffolk.

Yet the totality of the Company transcends its material extent. More than the sum of its physical sites, capitalism is a configuration of social relations. As Mark Fisher observes, capital "seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable"; in *Doggerland*, its reach stretches beyond the farm, beyond the open sea (Fisher 8). The plot of Smith's novel turns on the boy's discovery of a second maintenance boat, the trace of his father's attempt to escape the farm and get them both out. But after capitalism's apparent final triumph over the degraded climate, there is — as Greil tells the boy — "no out" (Smith 90). The Company is a double monopoly: an organisation of monstrous extent, hegemonic over the planet's land and seas, which has also monstered its functionaries in their minds. Jem ignores Greil's advice: inspired by his father, he starts kitting out the abandoned boat, hiding it from the old man even as he prepares to liberate them both. But a storm splits them apart, marooning Jem on a turbine at the farm's edge. Returning to the rig, he finds Greil badly unwell, but the Pilot will only consider supplying them medicine in exchange for something. Accepting defeat, Jem trades in his boat. The Pilot's triumph is really the Company's: cultivating their self-interest, capital lets its workers split themselves apart.

Jem's heroic self-sacrifice, however, his active decision not to act, illustrates an ambivalence of passivity and resistance at the heart of the everyday life to which he is resigned. Jem's job demands the recursive, Sisyphean work of repair, but his instinct to restore things goes beyond his contract: on sleepless nights he roams the rig's corridors with "his toolbag, his welding torch and a bucket of rustproof paint" (Smith 36) in search of

cracks to fill. As we saw, Caracciolo reads this compulsive repairing as evidence for a rigid attitude to material, the outlook of the anthropocentric craftsman who appreciates only that which is, in Heidegger's terms, *zuhand* ('ready-to-hand'). Suggesting subsequently that by the novel's end Jem displays a less "utilitarian" outlook, Caracciolo underestimates the rootedness of the boy's habit. Even his wonder at the jellyfish is expressed in machinic metaphors: the purple rings of their veins turn into a spilt "line of paint" (Smith 177); the "purple and orange wires" of their innards become "circuits" (Smith 178). At the same time, Caracciolo's materialist account misses repair's radical potential as a form of critique. "Neoliberal economic ideologies," note Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift, necessitate "a complete rebuttal" to the "subtle cultures of repair" (Graham and Thrift 14). We might trace this observation to its source: Marx's theory of the self-reifying fetish whereby a commodity gains its exchange value from the occlusion of the productive and reparative labour on which it depends. Capital discourages repair, thrusting forward new commodities whose spectacular novelty hinges on the labour that capital must — so as to achieve the spectacle of fetish — also occlude.

The boy's adeptness at repair does nothing to challenge the Company; his contract allows no assertion of labour power, and by fixing the farm he is merely shoring capital up. The use of tools does, however, open surroundings to the understanding. The very precarity of their situation, the extremity of the degraded climate, has afforded Greil and Jem a strange mixture of everyday autonomy within long-term subjection. For the boy, this takes the form of self-directed work, to the organic rhythm of the improvisatory artisan. He chances on a miniature turbine in the back of a cupboard, "made by hand" (Smith 32) from the sheared metal of a tin — his father's, he thinks. Later he detects his father's hand again, in the more paradoxical form of a good repair, a replacement latch "hand-cut from a piece of blue plastic" (Smith 75) but fitted more neatly than the standard-issue latches: the art that hides the art; the repair that both conceals and discloses the repairing father. Each man (devoid of women, this world contains only the barest hints of social or sexual reproduction) occupies a place in a historical fellowship of tool-users in or above Doggerland, stretching back thousands of years before the advent of capitalism, to the Mesolithic hunter-gatherers who left behind their stone axes, and to whom Greil provides the link. In a "small semicircle" on his chest of drawers he displays choice finds, laying out "miniature picks, chisels and pliers... like expensive cutlery" (Smith 50).

Doggerland's abortive trajectory, however, suggests that capital will tolerate these acts of fixing and making only as private, consoling pleasures. For Gigi Argyropoulou and Hypatia Vourloumis, repair therefore achieves its radical potential when it refuses the fix — when, instead, it celebrates "incompleteness and brokenness" as spaces within which ideas of labour and solidarity might be re-imagined (Argyropoulou and Vorloumnis 413). Jem condemns himself to a life of maintaining a system which in return will expose and occlude him. The repairs his position demands, though, also allow him to see through this

system's cracks, to the relations and breakdowns the system disguises. Crisis is baked into capitalism, with its compulsive need to mine the planet's resources in order to keep producing. Capitalism turns on a dialectic of equilibrium and chaos, constructing its hegemony from the disorder it creates. Jem's plan of action, his proposal to sail beyond the farm but also beyond capital, seems symptomatic in its ambitiousness of what Timothy Clark calls "derangement of scale" — the tendency to lose proportion when confronted by the vastness of the more-than-human (Clark 150).

Yet capitalism itself, imagining its occupation of the horizons of the possible as "seamlessly" eternal, is also a derangement of scale. There once was a time, the novel reminds us, before the advent of the system symbolised by the Company — before Doggerland sank beneath the waves. *Doggerland*'s narrative frame is interspersed with short interludes about the formation and submergence of the landscape. Smith's voice shifts from Beckettian black comedy to prose poem. Paragraphs are short and elliptical, and verbs have unindividuated subjects: trees taking root, coastlines emerging, and most of all, water accomplishing its work. Monaco observes a disparity of reaction to these interludes between mostly indifferent reviewers and enthusiastic academic critics. He quotes Alan Warner's verdict, in his review for *The Guardia*n, that the interludes "add little to the narrative" (Monaco 141). Yet this is the point: the interludes permit readers to think beyond the narrative's human scale, to which the overthrow of extractive capitalism seems unthinkable. One day, partly in response to capitalism's degradation of weather systems, the water will return, covering everything with "an even surface" (Smith 53). Recent human history will have been the real interlude, a blip "barely worth mentioning in the lifetime of water" (Smith 54).

A divergence is resolving into view, between two ways of reading Smith's novel: with its narrative grain, and against it. The failure of Jem's plot, the novel's failure to escape its initial equilibrium, asks us to think of the rig not as the setting for a story, but as a map, an affective anatomy of an enduring system. Smith's interludes, meanwhile, take us beyond the scale of human narrative in the opposite direction, to a macroscopic imagined future in which capitalism is washed away, taking us with it. Yet having cautioned against materialist readings which assume the realness of Smith's stuff, its resistance to symbolic signification, I must ask the same question of water. Is the "even surface" of Smith's interlude an irrupting Real, bursting in to sweep away existing human systems? Or could it be read allegorically, for the stubborn endurance of those systems in all their ambivalence? To answer that question we must head deeper, to the partially submerged kingdom of allegory.

Paysd: Spenser's Lost World

Towards the end of Book II of The Faerie Queene, Guyon and Arthur discover a chronicle of the history of Britain. Right at the beginning they find a surprising passage:

> The land, which warlike Britons now possesse,
> And therein haue their mighty empire raysd,
> In antique times was saluage wildernesse,
> Vnpeopled, vnmannnurd, vnproud, vnpraysd,
> Ne was it Island then, ne was it paysd
> Amid the Ocean waues, ne was it sought
> Of merchants farre, for profits therein praysd,
> But was all desolate, and of some thought
> By sea to haue bene from the Celticke mayn-land brought.
> (Spenser 248, II.x.5)

Two stanzas later, the chronicle qualifies its claim that 'antique' Britain was 'vnpeopled'. A race of "hideous Giaunts" (7.2) lives there, descended from "*Britannia* fifty daughters" (8.4). Exiled for the murder of their husbands, the daughters drifted into present-day Britain and copulated with its native "feends" (8.6). Their giant progeny are itinerant, "flying fast as Roebucke through the fen" (7.4), and survive "by hunting and by spoiling" (7.7); they are (Mesolithic) hunter-gatherers. Their way of life disqualifies the land from designation as "mannurd," a cultivated place whose cultivation rubs off on the "manners" of its inhabitants. For Spenser the giants live too barbarously to count as significant people.

Nevertheless, he considers how their mariticidal mothers ended up here, and in doing so — extraordinarily — admits the existence of Doggerland, the country connecting Europe to Britain in a period when it "ne was... Island." Spenser is alluding to contemporary antiquarians such as Raphael Holinshed, in whose account ancient Britain is first a "parcell of the continent... joined without any separation of sea to the maine land" (Holinshed 1). At some point, the sea encircled the land to give it a Goldilocks relation to the continent: not too close, not too far, but just temperately right. The channel is "so streited," says William Camden in his *Britannia* (1586), that "some think the land there was pierced thorow," by the creator, and thus "received the seas" (Camden 1). The new island, named Albion by Spenser, is "paysd / Amid the Ocean waves": to "peise" is to "weigh, measure the weight of, weigh out," but also "to weigh in the mind; to deliberate upon, consider, ponder" ("Peise"). Turned into an island, Albion is brought into focus by the sea's counterpoise, lent figural form by its apparent formlessness. Spenser's spelling also glances at the French word for "country," conjuring a link of inherence between islands and nations, coasts and borders. Acquiring geographical coherence, historical weight, Albion is on its way to becoming Britannia.

For Camden, the divine carving of the channel left the island "fitted with commodious and open havens, for traffique with the universal world" (Camden 1). Maritime trade is an older and more general category than the specific capitalist system with which it's often

associated. In the sixteenth century, however, it's true that mercantilism and capitalism intertwined, as European nations began to exploit colonial (dis)possessions, and new technologies of navigation, to extend their commercial networks around the planet. Spenser's "merchants farre" were associated, often pejoratively, with novel instruments of financial speculation. Harbingers of global capitalism, these merchants started to organise, to incorporate their concerns. They became Companies: plural ancestors of the single corporation, and legal person, that governs Smith's dystopia.[6]

The Fairyland of Spenser's epic romance is a liquid landscape, in which water is imbued with multiple moral qualities. Fighting the dragon in Book I, Redcrosse stumbles by good fortune into the "sacred waues" (I.xi.29.8) of the well of life. A book later Phaedria ferries Guyon through the "slouthfull" (II.vi.18.7) waters of a "wide Inland sea" (10.1) to her island of indolence. The land is under constant threat of inundation, and bears the traces of prehistoric floods, as in the Cantos of Mutabilitie, where the river Molanna "doth drowne" (VII.vi.41.9) the once-visible valleys of an Irish plain. In Book V, meanwhile, Artegall deals out justice in a dispute between two brothers, Amidas and Bracidas. Each lives on an inherited island, once equal in size — but the sea has drawn land from one and deposited it on the other. Justice means more than axiomatic, symmetrical equity on these shifting, eroded coasts.

Sixteenth-century European cultures confronted with new intensity the sea's capacity to infiltrate and undermine fictions of fixity. Often this fixity assumes the form of ownership, but it also manifested intellectually in attempts to confine what Steve Mentz calls "marine excess" (Mentz xix). Mentz describes a culture grappling with the new oceanic vastness revealed by its own navigational technology and commercial desire. Periodically the sea rebounded on the cultures attempting to master it, and the result was hermeneutic flurry. A disastrous flood on All Saints' Day, 1 November, 1570, inundated the entire Dutch coast. With opposition to Spanish rule swelling in the Protestant provinces, the flood was subjected to polarised interpretations: for Catholics, it signified God's condemnation of heretical disloyalty; for Calvinists such as the poet Johan Fruytiers, evidence of insufficient godliness (Van Egeraat 153). Edward Grimeston, narrating the same flood in his translation of a French history of the Netherlands, dwells first on its material consequences: within Antwerp alone, says Grimeston, "the damage receiued by merchandise that was as then wet" exceeded "1000 gulderns" (Grimeston 463).

Vaster and increasingly mercantile, the sixteenth-century sea outstripped the classical mythology by which it had been made comprehensible, however terrifyingly. Discussing theological interpretations of marine disaster, Mentz diagnoses a cultural impulse which "seeks to dry out the immersion of shipwreck" (Mentz 26). Sermons, such as John King's on the Book of Jonah (1594), tidy away its wetness and randomness in terms of sin and contingency. Yet in Renaissance poetry this drying out takes a subtler form. By harnessing "marine excess" as "the ultimate groundless ground of poetic metaphor," Renaissance poets sublimated the ocean's wetness rather than simply drying it into theological fixity

(Mentz xix). For Luis Vaz de Camões in the Lusíads (1572), this meant the creation of new personages: narrating his journey down Africa's west coast, Camões's Vasco da Gama recalls an encounter with an immense spirit rearing up from Table Mountain. Adamastor rebukes the crew for their recklessness, before telling the story of his own exile: he loved the nymph Tethys, but when he tried to embrace her found himself "com um penedo fronte a fronte" ("cheek to cheek with a boulder") (Camões 109, v.56.5). An invented genius for an uncharted *locus*, seemingly if not actually blank, Adamastor embodies the confusion of European culture straying beyond its bounds.

The liquid, "groundless ground" of Fairyland has no fixed co-ordinates; we are in allegorical territory. For Spenser, allegory becomes a way to sublimate the marine-like infinity, stimulating but overwhelming, of ideas. Allegory gathers ethical states into bounded centres from which their essences can emanate; it peises them in insular form. Arthur and Guyon read their chronicle in the "stately Turret" (II.ix.44.8) of the House of Temperance, whose three "chiefest" (47.7) chambers represent the three faculties of fantasy, reason and memory. The House is under siege by a "troublous rout" (17.1) of undesirables, "deformd" (4) by their intemperance, who "assayle" (14.1) the House in waves, swarming forward and retreating. When Arthur sets out to fight them, in the canto following the chronicle, they "round about him flocke impetuously, / Like a great water flood" (xi.18.3-4). The stakes are high: as the allegorical concentration of temperance, the House stands to lose not just its material wealth but also its meaning. The imperative to shore itself up against essential deformation leads the forces of Temperance to behave, with intriguing irony, very intemperately. Resisting quasi-oceanic erosion, allegory's islands insist with extreme, proto-modern strictness on the separation of solid and liquid, land and sea.

Turbines, Ice, Fluid Systems

Let's return to Doggerland. In the (anti-)climactic final third of Smith's novel we find the boy floating on the farm's periphery, clinging to his battered secret vessel. The storm has swept the maintenance boat, and Greil, from sight. Jem drifts, recovering, and then recoils in the shadow of "the biggest turbine he'd ever seen" (Smith 141).

If a wind farm's layout is "appropriate and responsive to the particular landscape," Yuriko Saito argues in an exploration of turbine aesthetics, and if the turbines themselves are "uniform in their appearance and movement," it should be possible to create "an aesthetically pleasing effect" (Saito, "Machines in the Ocean"). Saito is thinking of marine turbines glimpsed from the shore. But for Jem no such appreciation, mixing the decorum of particularity with the "uniform" pleasures of the grid, is available; he is among the turbines, not standing at disinterested remove. The dominant effect is not of beauty, but sublimity. Close-up, the turbine dwarfs him, the tips of its turning blades vanishing "in haze" (Smith 141). Jem has read about these giant structures in the manual: they are connected to the grid but were "never finished" (Smith 141). Jem goes inside, and climbs "a hundred and fifty metres" (Smith 141) to the control room, called a "nacelle" (Smith 149).

Everything is pristinely new: in a second room, he finds a boardroom table surrounded by "six black chairs wrapped in cellophane"; on the wall there's a screen "covered by a layer of bubble-wrap" (Smith 151), and behind the door — something rich and strange, to Jem — a coffee machine. Here are things as capitalism packages them: commodities, sealed off from the intimate use that necessitates repair.

Compared to the House of Temperance's "turret," this space looks much blanker. The booklined room where Arthur and Guyon read the chronicle is inhabited by Eumnestes, an "old man" (II.ix.58.9) who personifies remembering, and his assistant, a "litle boy" (4) called Anamestes, who personifies retrieval. Contrastingly bare of life, the nacelle at first sight represents nothing but the impersonal system of which it is part. Yet even as corporate capitalism effaces itself of signification, it adopts allegory's structural tendency to isolate things in bounded places. A nacelle is a "streamlined casing... housing a motor or machinery," but its original and etymological meaning is of "a small boat" ("Nacelle"). This sense of 'nacelle' first appears in a 1483 translation of Voragine's *Golden Legend* by William Caxton. In Caxton's translation the infant Judas is "abandoned" at sea by his parents, afraid of having foreseen his evil nature. He drifts to the island of Scaryoth — variously identified as Ischia or Crete — whose queen, having gone "to playe on the ryuage of the see," spies a "lytel nacelle and the chyld therein" (Caxton fol. Cxli). The nacelle of this monstrous turbine, contrastingly, is anything but "lytel" — but it cannot move.

Rooted by the rootless system of which it is part, the boardroom is locked in place. From its "hatch" Jem can see the whole farm, and even "the open sea" (Smith 153). He has swapped the cowed sublimity of the turbine's base for the macroscopic perspective of the surveyor. But the view of this whole discloses no information, practical or narrative, as to its parts: as to Greil's whereabouts, and what happened to his father, the boy remains stuck. Allegory and capitalism share a glaciating tendency: they freeze their components, demanding of them the ceaseless production of significance and labour. Water in *Doggerland* is always about to harden into ice: if he doesn't climb quickly to the nacelle, Jem thinks, he will "freeze" (Smith 147), and on the Pilot's first supply visit Greil trades turbine parts for a fur hat. The interludes, too, remind the reader that Doggerland's existence is an interval in a "simple history — of water turned to ice, returning to water" (Smith 54). Northern Europe was once "frozen and covered over by ice" (Smith 215), which retreated to reveal a habitable land. Yet as the final interlude tells us, "solidity is nothing but an interruption to continuous flow" (Smith 245): the formation of "arc and icicle" shows water "remembering the waves it used to be and the waves it would become again" (Smith 54).

"All fluid systems," the boy reads in his manual, are "fundamentally similar" (Smith 132). According to Cicero's treatise Orator, metaphors become allegory "cum fluxerunt" ("when they flow") (Cicero 374, 27.94). Allegory is about more than bounded reifications

of ideas: the ideas must link up, each metaphor illuminating the next. In other words, allegory is — like maritime capitalism — a system of linked parts. But Cicero's idea of continuous flow strikes, Angus Fletcher, one of allegory's modern archaeologists, as wrong: even as allegory connects them, says Fletcher, it "puts the metaphors in jail" (Fletcher 94). A totalising system, Renaissance allegory seeks the liquidity of continuous flow and at the same time the discrete solidity of glaciation. This aspiration to have it both ways also characterises the totalising socio-economic system by which Renaissance systems of knowledge, like allegory, are both replaced and imitated. Maritime capitalism's ocean is as glacial as it is fluid. It is not the indigenous "sea of islands" Epeli Hau'ofa describes in a celebrated essay on Oceania, an assemblage of sea and land "in which peoples and cultures moved and mingled" (Hau'ofa 201). Maritime capitalism's resemblance is with the newer, western colonial conception: "isolated dots in a vast ocean" (Hau'ofa 202).

Conclusion

"Homogenized and contained," says Irene Klaver, modern water is "cut off from stories, from relations" (Klaver 88). At the heart of the climate crisis, the blue humanities have shown us, is a refusal to relate to water: a denial of its centrality to our culture as well as nature. Materialist readings of *Doggerland* usefully push us beyond the perspective of the humanist landlubber, out to an ocean of nonhuman stuff. In doing so, however, they risk trapping literature in the nets of realist hermeneutics, however ecological, in which the ocean is always the repository of a meaningless anti-symbolic Real, a wave of material flooding human signification. If, as Klaver urges, we are to re-relate to water, we must allow these new forms of relation to include metaphor, the fundamental means by which language makes things flow. As Serpil Oppermann argues, the sea's fascination is that its meanings "always remain in the interstice between the *discursive* and the *real*" (Oppermann 446).

Ben Smith's *Doggerland*, I have argued, finds this interstice. Smith depicts the reality of the North Sea in evocative detail, but he also explores the symbolic resonances of the conceptual and physical structures imposed on it, and constructs an allegory for maritime capitalism. Pointing — with Spenser's help — to allegory's presence in *Doggerland*, I have also suggested the allegorical character of maritime capitalism, which freezes things in place even as it connects them up, and which is less a physical structure than a way of imagining social relations. Capitalism's eternity is a mirage: as the novel's interludes remind us, one day the system will flood. Yet Smith's novel also supports a more dystopian reading of that returning water — as a metaphor for the ability of capitalism, the fluid-glacial system we live by, to endure in conditions of precarity it has helped to create. Read this way, the novel denies us even the consolation of capitalism's erosion. But this allegorical approach also illuminates the promise implicit in the novel's ending. Exchanging his customised boat for Greil's medicine, Jem condemns himself to the rig: a lifetime of endless work and minor

consolations. On a narrative level the ending illustrates the Company's victory over Smith's protagonists. Read allegorically, however, it suggests the extraordinary endurance not only of maritime capitalism but also of human solidarity: forms of mutual aid, resilience and repair which bloom from a ruinous system's cracks.

End Notes

[1] Todd Borlik usefully discussed how we might apply to Renaissance texts Lawrence's Buell's four tests that a text must pass to qualify for this designation (Borlik 6).

[2] In her meditation on jellyfish aesthetics, Stacy Alaimo notes 'the diaphanous beauty of the plastic bag', and its capacity to be mistaken for a jellyfish by humans and animals alike. But as Alaimo also notes, this resemblance is 'treacherous' – and therefore, I would argue, an ontological red herring (Alaimo 152).

[3]These include "tsjoch," Frisian for "cheers," and "*huài diào*," Mandarin Chinese for "spoiled."

[4]The commodity, says Georg Lukács in his analysis of Marx's theory, "ceases to be the object of the work-process." Always-already the "finished article," the commodity turns into the "objective synthesis of rationalised special systems," which seem "arbitrarily connected with one another" (Lukács 88).

[5]Among Greil's prehistoric finds are works of art, sculptures of "headless torsos with jutting breasts and smooth fat thighs" which stir in the boy "strange thoughts he didn't know he possessed" (Smith 51).

[6]The Spanish sack of Antwerp in 1576, and the loss of that city's status as commercial hub of northern Europe, prompted English merchants to look further afield. Robert Brenner stresses the last decades of the sixteenth century as especially significant for the Companies' rise to ascendancy (Brenner 52-91).

[7]"[C]um fluxerunt continuae plures tralationes, alia plane fit oratio; itaque genus hoc Graeci appellant allegorian" ("when there is a continuous stream of metaphors, a wholly different style of speech is produced; consequently the Greeks call it *allegoria*").

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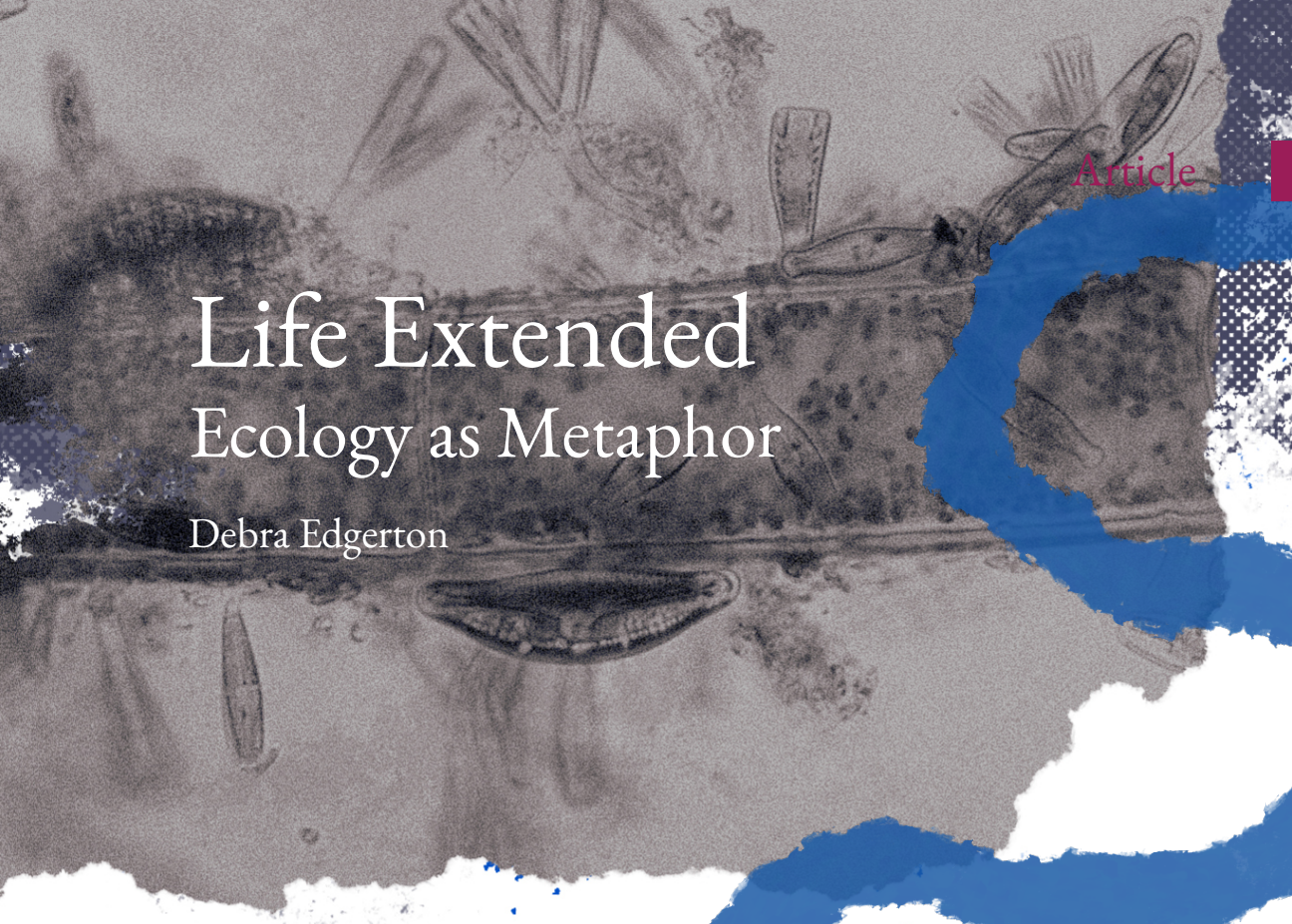

Article

Life Extended
Ecology as Metaphor

Debra Edgerton

Abstract

An ecological community is a group of actually or potentially interacting species living in the same place. A community is bound together by the network of influences the species have on one another. Ecologists describe types of interactions that depict interconnection among species. Primary interactions include mutualism (whereby both species benefit), commensalism (when one benefits, one is unaffected), competition (when each affects the other negatively), and parasitism/predation (when one benefits, one is disadvantaged). Using this scientific ecological system of understanding community, I reference these categories to examine the complex relationship between the contributions of African Americans towards the building of America and the benefits and disadvantages caused by this affiliation. Through a series of my own paintings and collected images from freshwater ecosystems, I create a body of visual imagery that maps how human social structures mirror those of ecological communities using a specific point in our history.

This article compares parallel interactions amongst microscopic organisms with human relationships, specifically, ecosystem definitions of interaction used to examine African Americans' connections with power structures within the United States. These definitions demonstrate how humans reflect the types of associations we find in nature. I juxtapose the concepts used to describe ecological interactions as a framework to illustrate and depict, through visual media, the hypothesis of possible "mutualism" occurring between Abraham Lincoln, the United States Union, and enslaved African Americans during the time of the Emancipation Proclamation. Ecological interactions within this matrix span the range from mutualistic to parasitic and can change throughout seasons. Will we see the same parallel shifts within the time surrounding this event in history?

Introduction

I am fascinated by the dissimilar. I look at things through a lens of disparity, making connections between two things in opposition. My creative process has taken two parallel paths since 2005. My focus has been on my own multicultural identity and also on water and freshwater ecosystems.

My creative research surrounding multicultural identity compares the intersectionality of my African American and Japanese heritage and the ramifications of having parents who met during the occupation of Japan after World War II. I use narratives and visual identity tropes that express intergenerational history/trauma to deconstruct how culture informs stereotypes and how those patterns may be broken through personal stories. Finding connections between my two cultures and building the bridges that link commonalities fuels the stories I tell with my art. The word "story" is an important part of my creative process. Literature, history, non-fiction, and critical theory inform my artwork as much as visual vocabulary. I love to read. Reading informs the art I create and the connections I make through my art. I have books by authors like James Baldwin, bell hooks, Langston Hughes, Toni Morrison, and Zora Neale Hurston. I have books on Japanese and African folklore, manga, haiku, and storytelling based on Noh, Bunraku, and Kamishibai theater. I consider myself a visual storyteller and to make that claim I need to understand, through the written word, how stories can translate into the visual.

I became interested in water issues after hurricane Katrina. The power, destruction, and direct impact on human life, especially for African Americans, demonstrates how privilege can determine and redirect potential recovery from natural disasters. I collected newspaper articles documenting the event through overlaps, exposing hierarchy, time lapse, and despair on communities of color. These articles informed my creative writings. This theme resurfaced during my fellowship to Japan two months after the Fukushima disaster. I compared the impact of the power of water on these distinctly different communities and what that looked like as an interdisciplinary and intersectional art form. I juxtaposed water and its destructive capability with human control of water through policies on water appropriation.

More recently, I have been exploring how environments intersect with cultural histories to influence how people define themselves. While introducing place to the description of self, issues surrounding Arizona and the Colorado Plateau launched the second tract of my work. I began to look at water through the perspective of freshwater ecosystems and the structure of freshwater food webs. I focused on algae, which form the base of freshwater food webs. The bottom-up approach to understanding natural ecosystems reveals an organic connectiveness that is vital to every level spanning protection of native fish to human consumption. My art and research have focused on the lowest level of the food web through algae and microorganisms.

I have navigated between finding connection between dissimilar cultural distinctions

and water issues manipulated by humankind, but I hadn't found a way to connect my bodies of work until transitioning between the power and destruction of water to the beneficial qualities of freshwater ecosystems. While doing an art-based project related to water and the Southwest, I was collecting images of algae and microorganisms from under a microscope and found a single image of a *Cymbella* diatom. Isolated, the image was reminiscent of images of the overview diagrams of slave ships (Figures 4.1 and 4.2). Viewed side by side, it brought to my attention a parallel between the structural relationship between enslaved labor and New America and the research led by my mentor, Dr. Jane Marks (Professor of Biological Sciences at Northern Arizona University), on the relationship between *Cladophora* (green algae) and its potential symbiotic relationship with *Cocconeis* (diatoms that utilizes resources from the *Cladophora*). This parallel and my realization of my love for the dissimilar provided a new direction for my research that would connect tracts of race, identity, and hierarchical class systems with ecological communities. When I saw these images, I reached for W. E.B. Du Bois' (1935) publication, Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880, as I knew in what direction my creative research would take me.

Defining and Connecting the Dissimilar

An ecological community is a group of actually or potentially interacting species living in the same place. A community is bound together by the network of influences that species have on one another. Ecologists describe types of interactions that depict interconnection among species. Primary interactions include *mutualism* (both species benefit), *commensalism* (one benefits, one is unaffected), *competition* (each affects the other negatively), and *parasitism/predation* (one benefits, one is disadvantaged). In order to fully capture the parallels between distinctly different things, I select an ecosystem relationship and show the connection between its definition and a notable event that shaped the identity of people of African descent in America, both past and present. My writing compares the idea of mutualism with the Emancipation Proclamation (National Archives) through the use of historical references and microscopic images and paintings.

Mutualism, Diatoms, and the Civil War Dilemma

Mutualism, as it relates to freshwater ecosystems, is when both active participants find a benefit in what the other has to offer. According to Cain, Bowman, and Hacker :

> In mutualism..., the growth, survival, or reproduction of individuals of one or both species is increased by their interaction with the other species. Such benefits can take a variety of forms. A species may provide its partner with food, shelter, or a substrate to grow on; it may transport its partner's pollen or seeds; it may reduce heat or water stress; or it may decrease the negative effects of competitors, herbivores, predators, or parasites. (p.307)

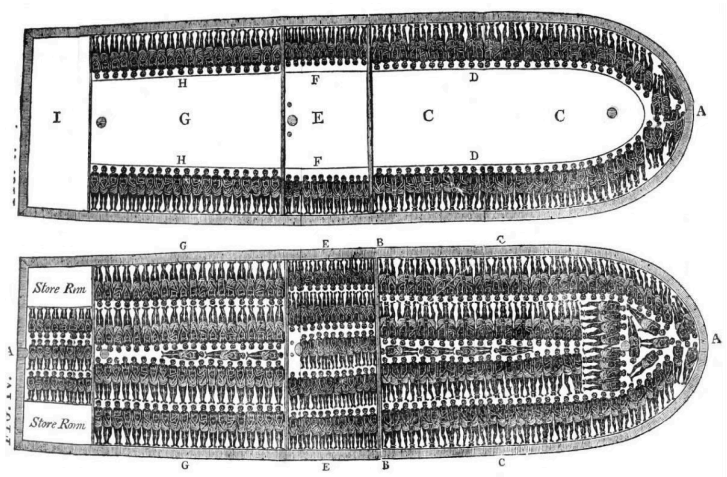

Fig. 4.1: Interior layout of a slave ship, 1791 (Source: Wikimedia Commons, 2023)

Fig. 4.2: Microscopic image of Cymbella.

Note: Compare the overview image of an historical slave ship with a *Cymbella* diatom.
(Photograph Source: Debra Edgerton)

There can be a cost to an organism that provides support for their partner. But, it still falls into the category of benefiting both in the support that they provide. In examining the Emancipation Proclamation within the framework of mutualism, I set out to find a point in history where there could be a relationship that would demonstrate a necessity by both parties to work towards their own survival. What could each party gain by entering into an unspoken pact? As there was a disproportionate power balance between enslaved people and free citizens of the United States, can there be a mutualistic relationship? To understand my choice, there must first be recognition of what led up to the agreement to assist each other.

Pre-Civil War history

The South had a law called the "3/5 Compromise". It stated that, for every five slaves, three could be counted as additional residents of their state population (Du Bois). The sheer number of enslaved people owned by Southerners allowed the South to control elections of presidents, judges, speakers of the house, and other government officials. With the South's control over the government and the North's control of manufacturing of raw materials from the South, both sides appeared to have a workable relationship between the states.

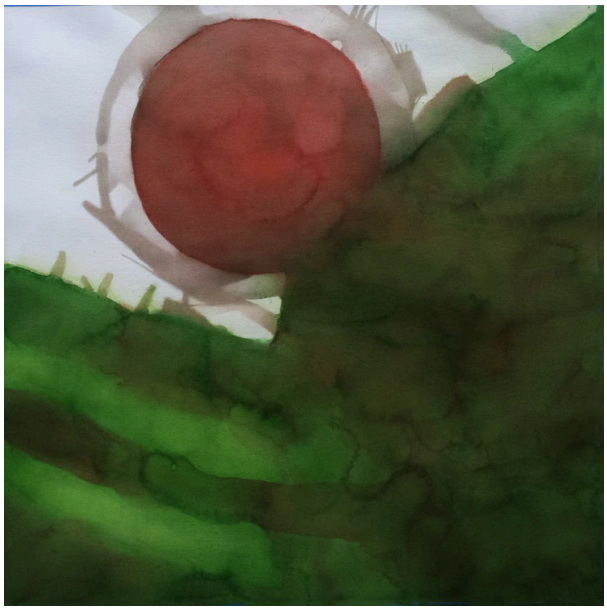

Fig. 4.3: Mutualism acting within itself

Note: Painting of *Chara* algae and attached male reproductive antheridium.Discussed later in this chapter is the ability of green algae to reproduce and protect itself, allowing it to manage both reproduction and shelter independently. (Painting Source: Debra Edgerton)

However, the election of Abraham Lincoln (Pres.1861–1865) was the catalyst that split the Union. Southerners believed that not only would Lincoln abolish slavery but that he would also remove states' rights. Southern states believed that they had the resources to maintain and sustain their own existence outside of the Union, including their own raw materials, the land that produced these materials, and enslaved people. The South understood the power that enslaved people had on their political and economic systems. As Du Bois states:

> [The] political power [of planters] was based on slavery. With four million slaves, [the planter]... could balance the votes of 2,400,00 Northern votes, while in the inconceivable event of their becoming free, their votes would outnumber those of his Northern opponents.... Holding his industrial system secure by this political domination, the planter turned to the more systematic exploitation of his black slaves. One method called for more land and the other for more slaves. Both meant not only increased crops but increased political power. (p.41)

These beliefs of the South parallel the function of green algae and their own ability to reproduce and continue its own existence. Green algae have both female (oogonium) and male (antheridium) reproductive parts (Fig. 4.3). If conditions are right, they continue to reproduce and provide benefits for other organisms. Southern states believed that seceding from the Union to form their own government would benefit themselves through maintenance of their lifestyle and production of raw materials in demand by European countries. Could we postulate that the land is synonymous with green algae?

American Civil War

The key to winning the Civil War rested in the hands of the workers. Both North and South relied on the poor to fight the battles and these workers assumed that the war would end quickly, so there was initial enthusiasm to join the fight. Although disenfranchised white laborers provided the manpower, they were not the key to winning the war. "The Southern workers, black and white, held the key to the war; and of the two groups, the black worker raised food and raw materials held an even more strategic place than the white" (Du Bois p.63).

In the early stages of both the war and the attachment of diatoms to green algae, there appears to be at least a benefit to one side of the partnerships. However, the lines begin to blur regarding the benefit to both parties under the definition of mutualism. In the case of the Civil War, there was a clear advantage for the governments of the North and South in trying to maintain their pre-war existence. But the laborers fighting the war saw little to no change that benefited their lives. Within the freshwater ecosystem, an early hypothesis suggested that green algae and diatoms provided each other with relationship benefits. However, diatoms' usage of the green algae as a port/anchor kept them from floating downstream. For the green algae, being used as a resting spot provided no clear benefit for them (Fig. 4.4). The indication that could be postulated is that mutualism, in this case, could be looked at as commensalism (one benefits, one is unaffected).

Fig. 4.4: Microscopic image⌣ of Cladophora with Rhoicosphenia and

Note⌣: Early stages of the biological hypothesis speculated that there could be a mutualistic relationship between green algae and diatoms. I imagined the various diatoms representing white laborers and enslaved people and their relationship with the restrictive nature of living in the South and off the land. (Photograph Source: Debra Edgerton)

What the Union understood about the war

Lincoln was initially not interested in abolishing slavery. His goal was to preserve the Union at all costs. He understood the complex nature of the situation and the waning interest of laborers to continue fighting in the war. Lincoln understood he needed the help of enslaved people to win the war. Enslaved people offered two things to the Union armies:

> [S]laves had enormous power in their hands. Simply by stopping work, they could threaten the Confederacy with starvation. By walking into the Federal camps, they showed to doubting Northerners the easy possibility of using them as workers and as servants, as farmers, and as spies, and finally, as fighting soldiers. And not only using them thus, but by the same gesture, depriving their enemies of their use in just these fields. It was the fugitive slave who made the slaveholders face the alternative of surrendering to the North, or to the Negroes. (Du Bois p.121)

However, to create a mutually beneficial relationship with what enslaved people offered the Union in assistance in winning the war, Lincoln had to consider what incentives the enslaved people needed. He had to consider the emancipation of the enslaved who were willing to assist in the war effort. Du Blois affirms:

> [E]ither the power which slaves put into the hands of the South was to be taken from it, or the North could not win the war. Either the Negro was to be allowed to fight, or the draft itself would not bring enough white men into the army to keep up

the war. (p.82)

Lincoln also understood that European connections were leaning towards the Confederacy becoming an independent nation. England's upper class, which included the Church and universities, were attracted to the possibility of free trade that the Confederacy offered them. If they recognized the South as an independent nation, they could then bypass the higher tariff from the North:

> The failure or success of the war hung by a thread. If England and France should recognize the Confederacy, there was little doubt that the Union cause would be beaten; and they were disposed to recognize it. Or did Lincoln realize that since a draft law was needed to make unwilling Northern soldiers fight, black soldiers were the last refuge of the Union? (Du Bois p.86)

The turning point of the war rested in Lincoln's ability to navigate the Union's survival with the volume of enslaved people that would populate the land as freedmen (Fig. 4.5).

Fig.4.5: Diatom clusters on green algae

Note: How I imagine Lincoln's concerns: *Epithemia* diatoms breaking down and overrunning its host, *Cladophora*. (Painting Source: Debra Edgerton)

The Mutualistic Importance of Diatoms to the Structural Relationship of their Communities

A recent discovery by Dr. Jane Marks and her research team is that, within the *Epithemia* diatoms, there grows a separate cyanobacteria. Both the *Epithemia* diatom and

the cyanobacteria are forms of algae. The cyanobacteria live within the diatom and they both contribute to each other in symbiotic ways (Fig. 4.6).

Fig. 4.6: Microscopic image⌣ of Epithemia diatoms with internal cyanobacteria.
Note⌣: The symbiotic relationship between the *Epithemia* diatom and its internal cyanobacteria provides a glimpse of a true mutualistic relationship. Would Lincoln be able to weigh the benefits the enslaved had to offer the union in this vision versus the relationship between the *Epithemia* diatom and *Cladophora*? (Photograph Source: Rex Lowe)

However, when comparing diatoms and their hosts (either *Cladophora* or *Chara* green algae), progressive changes in relationships between green algae and diatoms can be observed. Ongoing research shows that green algae provide resting areas for diatoms as diatoms float untethered downstream. They attach to the green algae, and, over time, a buildup of diatoms overwhelms the green algae and causes an inability to photosynthesize (Fig. 4.7). The green algae, for their own survival, respond by sending out new shoots to create new versions of themselves. Species need to find a way to survive. So, they adapt to their circumstances, having their own ability to transform to their environment. How would that work on a human level?

Lincoln's path to repairing the Union was also fraught with the potential of upending the very thing he wished to repair. In order to win the war, he needed to entertain the notion of freeing enslaves people. But even Lincoln was not keen on the idea of freed black citizens living among white people as equals under the law. To achieve his goal of a reunited country, Lincoln had to see his best option much like the *Epithemia* diatom and cyanobacteria and unlike the *Epithemia* and *Cladophora* relationships.

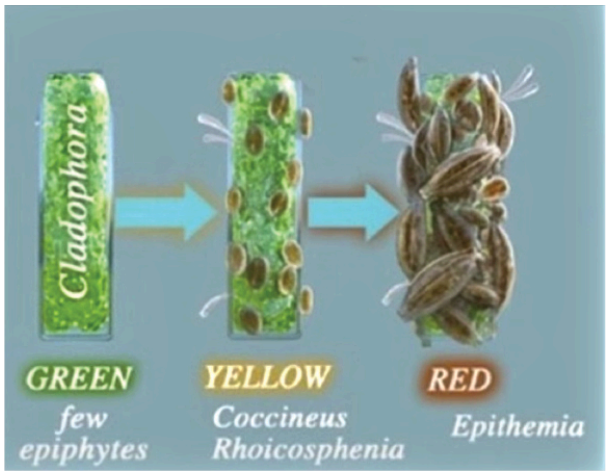

Fig.4.7: Clustering of diatoms on Cladophora

Note: The three predictable stages of *Cladophora* microbiome: Green in the Spring, with few epiphytes; As diatoms colonize (*Cocconeis* spp. and *Rhoicosphenia curvata*), *Cladophora* turns yellow; *Cladophora* turns red by early Summer, covered with thick growths of *Epithemia* spp., which harbor cyanobacterial endosymbionts that fix N. (Image Source: Victor Leshyk)

Mutualism and the Emancipation Proclamation

The Emancipation Proclamation, issued by President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863, "declared that 'all persons held as slaves' within the rebellious states 'are, and henceforward shall be free'" (National Archives). However, the document had its limitations. Freedom was only extended to those enslaved people who fought in the war and only in those states that had seceded from the United States. Freedom was also dependent on the Union (United States) winning the war.

From Lincoln's Perspective

Lincoln had to consider the long-term effect of bringing the Union back together. How would the newly freedmen be assimilated once the war was won? What would that look like for those with a vested interest? Like a scientific hypothesis, Lincoln could only postulate about the outcome and the future. The complex layering of thought and circumstances spoke to the organic nature of the war and how each component could alter the entire makeup of the interdependent structure of the government. He had to take into consideration the result of vastly different communities existing under a new Union, much like the circumstances of diatoms on green algae (Fig. 4.8). When Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, English workers held meetings across the country in support of this action. These countrywide meetings curtailed any thoughts of England's intervention in the US war and allowed for domestic fighting to decide the outcome.

From the Slaves' Perspective

The position of the Negro was strategic. His was the only appeal which would

> bring sympathy from Europe, despite strong economic bonds with the South, and prevent recognition of a Southern nation built on slavery. The free Negroes in the North, together with the Abolitionists, were clamoring. To them a war against the South simply had to be a war against slavery. (Du Bois p.79)

Enslaved people understood what they offered the North in the way of potential soldiers, servants, farmers, and spies. They hoped that their service would lead to freedom,

Fig. 4.8: Microscopic image of Cladophora and the various communities of diatoms
Note: (Photograph Source: Debra Edgerton)

Defining Mutualism through the Emancipation Proclamation

Mutualism can be categorized as *trophic mutualism* (providing food), *habitat mutualism* (providing shelter), or *service mutualism* (performing a service). The affiliation between the runaway slaves and the Union armies can be seen as a mutualistic relationship in all categories. When the Union armies invaded the South, enslaved people started showing up to their camps. Those camps offered habitat mutualism for enslaved people as safe havens from the plantation. But this was not a mutually exclusive connection. Enslaved people then provided trophic mutualism by giving access to food for the soldiers. Although it was not one-to-one assistance, both parties benefited from the exchange.

However, it was service mutualism that offered the greatest benefit to both the enslaved and the government. The Emancipation Proclamation presented a symbiotic platform for the Union and enslaved people to benefit through what is defined as a positive interaction for their respective communities. Blacks wanted the chance to live their lives as free people. Lincoln and by proxy the Union wanted the Nation to be whole again. Each understood their task. Enslaved people were allowed to fight in the war. This replenished the numbers of soldiers for the Union armies to counter the waning interest by poorer white laborers. These actions eventually led to the North's victory.

Does Mutualism Stay Mutualism?

The Shift from Mutualism into Race as a Construct

"Mutualism has costs as well as benefits, and if the costs exceed the benefits for one or both partners, their interaction will change" (Cain et al. p.313). Organisms within an ecosystem can evolve as their circumstances change. Not all mutualistic relationships remain in that state and could develop into any of the other categories listed in the definitions of community relationships. "Neither partner in mutualism is in it for altruistic reasons.... Should environmental conditions change so as to reduce the benefits or increase the costs for one of the partners, the outcome of the interaction may change" (Cain et al. p.314).

Although Congress tried to pass a law holding the South accountable for their actions during the war, giving enslaved people equal rights under the law, Lincoln vetoed the bill. He was thinking about a fluid path that would be inclusive of the South's ability to return to the Union. However, on April 1, 1865, six days after General Lee surrendered to General Grant, effectively ending the Civil War, President Lincoln was assassinated.

During the critical time of war, enslaved people held a strategic upper hand over white laborers because they had more bargaining power in the outcome of the war. But, once the war was over, the power shifted to the white laborers. White planters were able to instill the concept in the minds of poor white laborers that, although they were poor, they were white and, therefore, still above the Blacks in any capacity. Citing A. B. Moore's (1924) *Conscription and Conflict in the Confederacy*, Du Bois claims:

> "The poor would occupy the position in society that the slaves do — as the poor in the North and in Europe do", for there must be a menial class in society and in "every civilized country on the globe, besides the Confederate states, the poor are the inferiors and menials of the rich". Slavery was a greater blessing to the non-slaveholding poor than to the owners of slaves, and since it gave the poor a start in society that it would take them generations to work out, they should thank God for it and fight and die for it as they would for their "own liberty and the dearest birthright of freedom". (p.81)

The poor white laborers had the choice of either siding with black laborers because of shared economic conditions or with the white planter because of their shared distinction of race. White laborers understood the hierarchical standards of the class system. They understood that someone must be at the bottom. Although their poor conditions were because of the landowners, they chose to cling to those who would elevate their status. They believed that uniting Whites against Blacks benefited them more than laborers against their exploiters. Once white laborers became committed to the belief that there was a difference between Blacks and Whites, and that the white race was superior, they would steadfastly work at continuing to establish laws that would keep black people in a subjugated state.

Overexploitation of the Mutualism Model: Repercussions from the Past

Organisms partner with other organisms for their best interest. "When one of the partners in a mutualism overexploits the other, it becomes less likely that the mutualism will persist" (Cain et al. p.315). Ways to maintain some form of mutualism are for "penalties" to be imposed on those who overexploit their partner. If the penalties are great enough, they can counter the advantage made.

Reconstruction happened in 1865 after Lincoln's assassination and under President Andrew Johnson's term (Pres. 1865–1869). Johnson was a firm believer of states' rights and did allow each state to create their way back into the Union. Even as the war was ending, some Southern states were already putting various laws in place to make sure black subjugation was maintained. These laws were known as Black Codes. From vagrancy to labor regulations, these laws were set up to continue cheap or free labor for the white planters with little to no mobility for the Freedmen to move to other areas to provide a living for themselves and their families (Meredith; History) (Fig. 4.9). The balance provided to counter the overexploitation of the Freedmen by the Black Codes was the implementation of the Reconstruction Act of 1867. Southern states were required to ratify the 14th Amendment (equal protection under the law for those born or naturalized in the United States) (History).

Fig. 4.9: Microscopic image of Epithemia diatom in the red stage of colonization of Cladophora

Note: The image shows the contrast of red and yellow stages to supply a contrast between imagined outcomes of the impact of freedmen on the United States at the end of the Civil War and their lack of mobility through Black Codes. (Photograph Source: Debra Edgerton)

The ratification of both the 14th and 15th Amendment (granting African American men the right to vote) did not deter the South from enacting other forms of subjugation on free Blacks and former enslaved people. White Southerners continued their commitment to their belief of white superiority. They joined secret organizations like the Ku Klux Klan that allowed them to enact vigilante warfare that went unchecked and without repercussions. At the end of reconstruction in 1877, Blacks saw very little change in their social and economic conditions. Discrimination continued with the enacted Jim Crow laws (History). The Jim Crow laws marginalized African Americans through the premise of "separate but equal" statutes. These laws were rooted in the continuation of the Black Codes but, with the migration of African Americans into cities and urban areas, white Americans across the country demanded extensions and enforcement of limits to full opportunities for Blacks. By using the statement "separate but equal", segregation could continue to be enforced through claims of equal access under the law. Segregation meant Blacks could not share public facilities such as restrooms, parks, water fountains, pools, restaurants, or cemeteries. They were not allowed to attend schools with Whites, live in the same neighborhoods, or use the same hospitals or jail facilities (History).

African Americans made attempts to balance the relationship with the nation. They fought injustice through activism, leadership, and protests. And they understood that working within a collective would increase the magnitude of their voice. The Jim Crow laws existed for approx. 100 years. But the collective efforts of the African American community repositioned the balancing of power through the ratification of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (History).

Repercussions Seen in the Present

In science models, we understand that ideas are postulated, and research is done, based on hypotheses. And as ideas are examined, concepts shift and change as discoveries are made. Science, itself, is an organic and changing entity that is constantly moving and reevaluating itself. Although freshwater ecosystem community relationships seem distinct and separate in their interaction at times, these relationships are fluid in how they can transition as relationships and as needs change. Just like ecosystem relationships are affected by the changing nature of environmental factors, the timeline mapped out in the lead up to the Emancipation Proclamation, and its aftermath, indicate multiple factors can affect a partnership.

Bryan Stevenson, social justice activist and author of *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, is interviewed by Jon Stewart (2022) for his podcast, *The problem with Jon Stewart*. Stevenson speaks about the enslavement of the "other" and what that could mean in the long term to our power structure:

> So, they created this narrative that black people aren't as good as white people, black people aren't fully evolved, black people are less capable, less worthy,

> less deserving. And that narrative of racial difference, that was the true evil of American enslavement. And we fought the civil war, and the North won the civil war, but the South won the narrative war because of the idea of racial difference, of racial hierarchy, of white supremacy. (Stewart & Stevenson)

Stevenson suggests that the long-term effects of the racial construct continue to have an effect on how African Americans navigate their worth, and their contributions to the systems that the United States have in place, through relationships with other groups/communities. We have seen in the past that mutualism doesn't always stay in that beneficial partnership space in either ecosystem, or within the partnership that existed during the Civil War between the Union and Southern enslaved people. The past has provided examples of the evolution of a partnership, from mutualism into overexploitation, with balance checks that allowed swings between benefits and deficits. It also gives us examples of shifts between mutualism, commensalism, and parasitism (Fig. 4.10).

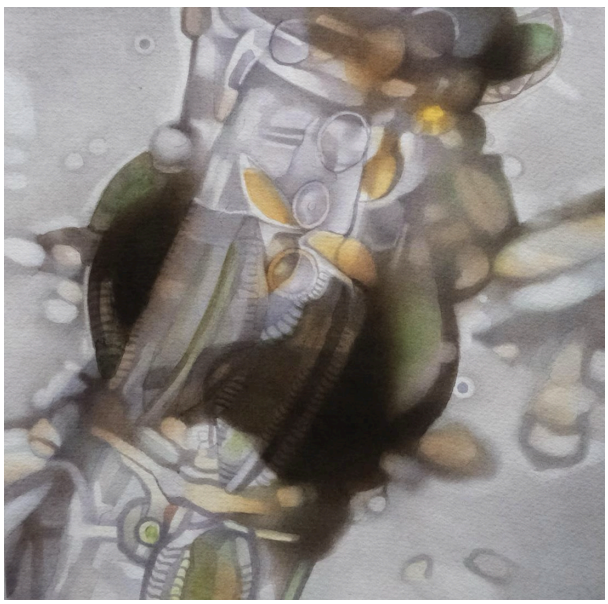

Fig. 4.10 Diatoms on Cladophora

Note⌣: The environmental appearance of the relationship of *Cladophora* and diatoms evolves in seasonal time. African Americans' relationship with communities within the United States is also an ever-evolving situation. What other layers can be added to this conversation to better understand community dynamics? (Painting Source: Debra Edgerton)

The United States has since seen the effect of the first African American President, Barack Obama (Pres. 2009–2017), and what equity and inclusion can look like for people on the fringe of power structures. Along with this glimpse, there have also been steps backwards, including rollbacks on key legislations that remove rights from those not in the majority. As we have seen through our ecosystem, as power and benefits begin to display

equity for all parties, additional factors can cause a shift in balance and new methods must be put in place to counter the balance.

What the Future Holds

Science teaches us that there is no definitive answer when it comes to the future. We can hypothesize based on our past, but we cannot predict the nature of future relations. In defining mutualism, we know that concerned parties do not act altruistically. Partnerships are chosen according to the provision of benefits for survival. Ecosystem relationships show us that organisms work to protect themselves. They also work with others only to find benefits for themselves. And some take advantage in order to receive more than their share. When we think about the future of relations between African Americans and other groups in the United States, we can postulate like the Scientist. Is the cup half empty or half full (Figure 4.11)?

Fig. 4.11: Single cell regeneration of algae

Note: Is our hope for the future? Can our human communities learn from our ecosystems and regenerate for our own survival? (Painting Source: Debra Edgerton)

I would suggest that, as interrelationships are organic, and continue to shift, postulation provides no clear answer. In choosing the Emancipation Proclamation as a vehicle for my comparative investigation and expression, my intention is to highlight a time in history when working partnerships for interactions between African Americans and free citizens of America were dependent on the success of each other. The structure of the fleeting relationship between Lincoln and enslaved people demonstrated power that shifted between the two parties and came the closest to the concept of mutualism in a finite period

of time, between the ending of the Civil War and Reconstruction. My inquiry also illustrates that both the notion of slavery and the shifts between community relationships are part of an ever-evolving layered microcosm of life in all forms of communities, one that is continually adapting and changing even if there are hints of perceived overexploitation.

Most wars are centered on the male perspective. In the construction of America's foundations, no value was recognized regarding a woman's place. It is not only, therefore, perspectives of racial constructs that concern me, but also the female perspective, specifically as a Black/Japanese woman. In choosing this period, I have, so far, neglected a vital part of my own identity, which would be to look at things through the female lens. Layering future inquiries through the contributions of Black, Japanese, and biracial women in shaping global ideals will further speak to these intersections of race, history, science and art.

For now, however, I conclude with a quotation by Stevenson from Stewart's podcast: "I argue that slavery doesn't end, it just evolved" (Stewart & Stevenson).

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Article

John Keats
"Mad as the Vext Sea"

Amy Leal

Abstract

On the evening of April seventeenth, 1817, John Keats sat writing a letter beneath a portrait of Shakespeare. This was his first night in his seaside lodgings in Carisbrooke, and he was uneasy; he had been reading King Lear since arriving in Southampton, and so intensely had it acted upon his imagination that it seemed as though Edgar's visionary sea had risen up and flooded the darkness around him. "From want of regular rest," he wrote to his friend Reynolds, "I have been rather narvus—and the passage in Lear—'Do you not hear the sea?'—has haunted me intensely." Lines of poetry began to come to him without effort, as though given to him by a shadowy Presider whose voice was also that of the murmuring surge. Sitting alone during a wild storm with the disembodied head of Shakespeare rising above him, Keats composed "On the Sea," a sonnet that was half incantation and half exorcism. This literary haunting enacted a sea-change in Keats's verse into his mature poetry and his concept of Negative Capability. Indeed, so intensely did Shakespeare's sea influence his imagination that it continued to resound for him until the close of his short life, when he composed his epitaph by the murmur of the Barcaccia fountain in Rome: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water." "Mad as the Vext Sea" explores this oceanic induction and lasting influence on the work of John Keats.

Keywords: Oceanic Induction, Shakespeare's Literary Sea, and Keats's Negative Capability.

On the evening of April seventeenth, 1817, John Keats sat writing a letter beneath a portrait of Shakespeare. This was his first night in his new lodgings in Carisbrooke, and he was uneasy; he thought that writing to Reynolds might relieve him of the loneliness that had seized him in Southampton and persisted over the next two days. Keats had been reading *King Lear* since arriving in Southampton, and so intensely had it acted upon his imagination that it seemed as though Edgar's visionary sea had risen up and flooded the darkness around him. While visiting Shanklin to write *Endymion*, Keats described how the actual cliffs yawning before him "of the depth of nearly 300 feet at least" (*Letters I*: 130) became the virtual Dover Beach in a literary transmogrification reminiscent of his axiom that "Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream: he awoke and found it truth."
"Shanklin is a most beautiful place," he wrote to Reynolds, describing its

> cleft between the Cliffs of the depth of nearly 300 feet at least. This cleft is filled with trees & bushes in the narrow part; and as it widens becomes bare, if it were not for primroses on one side, which spread to the very verge of the Sea, and some fishermen's huts on the other, perched midway in the Ballustrades of beautiful green Hedges along their steps down to the sands.—But the sea, Jack, the sea.... From want of regular rest, I have been rather narvus—and the passage in Lear—'Do you not hear the sea?'—has haunted me intensely. (Letters I: 130-131)

Keats had traveled to the Isle of Wight to compose *Endymion* and to "right Jack Health" (*Letters I*: 125), but neither had come readily to him. He was in that time of life, he would explain in his preface to Endymion, between the healthy imagination of childhood and the mature imagination of a man, a time "in which the soul is in a ferment, the character undecided, the way of life uncertain" (*Complete Poems* 63), and he had been having bad dreams. The poetic induction he had hoped for had become a species of dream incubation, for "any organic derangement," he later noted, "always occasions a Phantasmagoria" (*Letters II*: 277). The Isle of Wight was a famed health spot, but for Keats, its reputedly healthful air had not dispelled the dark vapours of either body or soul, but rather seemed to increase them. They gathered about him now in the evening mist as he sought relief in writing to his friend. In the distance, he could hear a tempest rising on the sea.

The room grew cold as he wrote. "The wind is in a sulky fit," he continued, "and I feel that it would be no bad thing to be the favorite of some fairy, who would give one the power of seeing how our friends go on, at a distance." He seemed to see the faces of Reynolds, his brothers, and Haydon rise up and fade before him as though he had become a specter watching over them from a great distance. "You must warn them," he told his brothers, "not to be afraid should my Ghost visit them on Wednesday" (*Letters I*: 129). Years later, Keats would suggest to George Keats in America how they might experience "a direct communication of spirit" despite vast distance between them: "I shall read a passage of

Shakspeare every Sunday at ten o Clock—you read one a{t} the same time and we shall be as near each other as blind bodies can be in the same room" (*Letters I*: 5). Shakespeare seemed to have a similar effect on him in Carisbrooke, giving him "power of enormous ken." "Ever since I wrote to my Brothers from Southampton," he told Reynolds, "I have been in a taking" (*Letters I*: 130).

Indeed, so vividly did Keats imagine the scene conjured up by Edgar that he became haunted by its figurative sea and entered into the scene himself. He became the samphire-gatherer from *King Lear*, crawling up the side of "the Cliff of Poesy" with Shakespeare towering above him and Pope scurrying along the shore beneath him: "I am 'one that gathers Samphire dreadful trade'" (*Letters I*: 141-142). It is a curious metaphor to use—poetry as a "dreadful trade"—and bespeaks of the depth of oceanic haunting Keats felt at the time.

The line kept beating in his mind like a heartbeat. It kept him awake at night. He longed to make room among the portraits of Milton, Mary Queen of Scots, and Shakespeare for one more picture. "I should like, of all Loves," he admitted to Reynolds, "a sketch of you and Tom and George in ink which Haydon will do if you tell him how I want them." He was alone, and turned to Shakespeare for comfort, and found Shakespeare staring back at him. He remembered the "sacred secret" Haydon had imparted to him a month earlier:

> Often have I sat by my fire after a day's effort, as the dusk approached, and a gauzey veil seemed dimming all things—and mused on what I had done and with a burning glow on what I would do till filled with fury I have seen the faces of the mighty dead crowd into my room, and have sunk down & prayed [to] the great Spirit that I might be worthy to accompany these immortal beings in their immortal glories, and then I have seen each smile as it passed over me, and each shake their hands in awful encouragement. (*Letters I*: 124)

Ever since he had found that uncanny portrait of Shakespeare in the passageway, Keats had sensed a "High Power" watching him. "I remember your saying you had notions of a good Genius presiding over you," he later wrote to Haydon. "I have of late had the same thought, for things which {I} do have at Random are afterwards confirmed in my judgment in a dozen features of Propriety—Is it too daring to Fancy Shakspeare this Presider? When in the Isle of Wight I met with a Shakspeare in the Passage of the house at which I lodged" (*Letters I*: 141-142). That April 1817 night as Keats wrote to Reynolds, lines of poetry came to him without effort, "from strange influence" (*Complete⌣ Poems* 69-71), as though given to him by a shadowy Presider whose voice was also that of the murmuring surge. He saw the way open before him; the way seemed inexorably vast. Sitting alone during a wild storm with the disembodied head of Shakespeare rising out of the shadows above him, Keats composed a sonnet for Reynolds that was half incantation and half exorcism:

> On the Sea.
>
> It keeps eternal Whisperings around

> Desolate shores, and with its mighty swell
> Gluts twice ten thousand Caverns; till the spell
> Of Hecate leaves them their old shadowy sound.
> Often 'tis in such gentle temper found
> That scarcely will the very smallest shell
> Be moved for days from whence it sometime fell
> When the last winds of Heaven were unbound.
> O ye who have your eyeballs vext and tir'd
> Feast them upon the wideness of the Sea
> O ye whose Ears are dinned with uproar rude
> Or fed too much with cloying melody —
> Sit ye near some old Cavern's Mouth and brood
> Until ye start as if the Sea Nymphs quired —

Edgar's query—"Do you hear the sea?"—resonates throughout Keats's sonnet, keeping "eternal whisperings round." Gloucester's visionary, visionless eyes suffer a sea change into the "eyeballs vex'd and tired" of "the wideness of the sea" in the sonnet and thence into Cynthia in *Endymion* shining on Glaucus's eyes "seeming not to see" the ocean's "hollow vast." The image reappears throughout Keats's verse, as in *Hyperion: A Dream*. Moneta's eyes "visionless entire seem'd / Of all external things—they saw me not / But in blank splendor beam'd like the mild moon." Like Glaucus, doomed to "live and wither" for "ten hundred years," Moneta is "deathwards progressing to no death." Gloucester, who falls into the visionary surge only to arise anew, perhaps served as a prototype for Keats's patterns of "[dying] into life." Keats's "On the Sea" sonnet is an invocation of Shakespeare as well as an internalization of the watery poetics of *King Lear*, and like Act IV.vi of the play, the sonnet's "real subject is the poetic process" itself, "the natural creativity of the unconscious mind" (Sperry 75).

Composing *Endymion* was an awful and awe-inspiring task, and Keats did not feel wholly up to it. It was not simply a lack of inspiration that hampered him, but a sense of the immensity of his task. "The high Idea I have of poetical fame makes me think I see it towering to[o] high above me," he wrote to his brothers that spring, but added, "God forbid I should be without such a task!" To Hunt, he admitted feeling "down in the Mouth lately" about his work:

> I have asked myself so often why I should be a Poet more than other Men,—seeing how great a thing it is,—how great things are to be gained by it—What a thing to be in the Mouth of Fame—that at last the Idea has grown so monstrously beyond my seeming Power of attainment that the other day I nearly consented with myself to drop into a Phaeton...I see...nothing but uphill Journeying.

Like Edgar's samphire-gatherer, Keats found the trade dreadful indeed. He had experienced something similar after viewing the Elgin Marbles, a sense of being in

"the shadow of a magnitude" that frightened him more than he cared to let on:

> My spirit is weak—mortality
> Weighs heavily upon me like unwilling sleep,
> And each imagined pinnacle and steep
> Of Godlike hardship tells me I must die
> Like a sick eagle looking at the sky...

It was three years before Keats began to succumb to his final illness, but he already felt a sense of time running out. "Does Shelley go on telling strange Stories of the Death of kings?" he asked Hunt. "Tell him there are strange stories of the death of Poets—some have died before they were conceived." And fearing that his own epic might turn out to be stillborn, Keats fled the Isle of Wight five or six days after finishing his April 1817 letter to Reynolds:

> I went to the Isle of Wight –thought so much about Poetry so long together that I could not get to sleep at night—and moreover, I know not how it was, I could not get wholesome food—By this means in a Week or so I became not over capable in my upper Stories, and set off pell mell for Margate, at least 150 Miles....I was too much in Solitude, and consequently was obliged to be in continual burning of thought as an only resource.

Like Lear, he had grown "as Mad as the vext Sea" in the Isle of Wight, unsettled in mind no less than body. "Instead of Poetry," Keats wrote to his publisher from his new lodgings, "I have a swimming in my head—And feel all the effects of a Mental Debauch" (*Letters I*: 138). Apart from a few scattered remarks on "forebodings" and a "Brain so overwrought" from composition that he "had neither Rhyme nor reason in it," Keats never afterwards explained what made him flee without giving his landlady notice or securing new lodgings elsewhere.

Perhaps a hint of what happened to him in the Isle of Wight might be found, however, in the request he made of Reynolds toward the end of his April 1817 letter. Keats asked him to write a letter on Shakespeare's birthday that was also a portent, as though there was something occult in the date:

> I'll tell you what. On the 23rd was Shakespeare born—now If I should receive a Letter from you and another from my Brothers on that day 'twould be a parlous good thing. (*Letters I:* 146)

As far as we know, Reynolds did not send him a letter on the twenty-third, though Keats apparently received a communication of a powerfully uncanny sort that day that drove him from Carisbrooke in a panic.

Much of his early verse had been concerned with mapping out the future of his poetry and questioning the source of inspiration. He had heard of trance-like moments of inspiration that transform the visible world into the visionary. "And should I ever see them," he promised his brother George, "I will tell you." In the Isle of Wight, however, he

did see them and almost became overwhelmed by them. "I was at home, and should have been most happy," he would later tell Reynolds, "but I saw / Too far into the sea." On the anniversary of Shakespeare's birth and death, Keats "died into life" and "felt / What 'tis to die and live again before" his "fated time." This was the inspiration he had long sought; yet on that day he left the Isle of Wight "more like a man / Flying from something that he dreads, than one / Who sought the thing he loved" (Wordsworth 109). He had planned to stay a month or more. Despite his abrupt departure, Keats's landlady was sufficiently impressed to let him keep the head of Shakespeare he had found in the passageway. "Do you not think," he asked Haydon (*Letters I*: 142), "this is ominous of good?"

The haunting of Keats by *King Lear* continued long after he returned from the Isle of Wight and Margate. Even into September 1817, Keats wrote of still hearing "the ocean's music,...though 'inland far I be," and Severn in later years recalled Keats exclaiming while looking at grass rippling in the wind, "The tide! The tide!" (Sharp 20). In his 14 September 1817 letter to Jane and Mariane Reynolds, Keats asked strangely, "Which is best of Shakespeare's Plays?—I mean in what mood and with what accompenament [sic] do you like the Sea best?" (Major Works 385). Perhaps Keats was punning on the etymological connection between "sea" and "soul," as Wordsworth did in his "Intimations" ode: "Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea / Which brought us hither" (190). It is as if the sea of *King Lear* and *The Tempest* became a synecdoche for Keats of Shakespeare's protean genius, and Keats's poetry at this time was particularly drenched in Shakespearean water imagery.

Part of the reason the scene continued to haunt Keats was its depiction of the artist in the act of conjuring a world out of airy nothing. Shakespeare's metapoetically intense description of an imagined Dover Beach is a description of composition itself and thereby held an abiding interest for Keats. Shakespeare stages the liminal scene at the edge of England and the limits of imagination, and it exemplifies his creatio *ex nihilo*, his Negative Capability that creates something out of nothing. Keats became fascinated with King Lear during this time in part because of its depiction of Edgar as a surrogate poet who is able to suggest an entire landscape out of a few "fine isolated verisimilitudes," thereby reversing the laws of Newton and hoodwinking his father to "die into life." R.S. White notes,

> Just as the function of Edgar's verbal trick is to restore Gloucester's faith in living on, so its wider function is to compel faith in the power of poetry to create something which is not physically before the eyes of the audience—a primary aim of much dramatic poetry. (188)

Keats himself was "desirous of doing the world some good," toyed with the idea of becoming a ship surgeon in 1819, and wondered in *The Fall of Hyperion*, "sure a poet is a sage, / A humanist, physician to all men." Indeed, Moneta's staging of the poet's oneiric death only to have him "die into life" is a version of Edgar's hoodwinking of his father into an imagined resurrection. Poetry can be—as Wallace Stevens phrases it—"a health,"

and *King Lear* is both a text through which Keats must "burn" as well as "capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from [its] being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth."

In the Dover Beach scene, Edgar makes cosmos out of chaos and shows how poetry can become passage. Keats himself was struggling through such a transformation into a negatively capable poetry, and writing the sea-haunted *Endymion* helped to enact this change in him in the coming months: "In *Endymion*," he described to Hessey in October 1818, "I leaped headlong into the Sea, and thereby have become better acquainted with the Soundings, the quicksands, and the rocks" of composition "than if I had stayed upon the green shore, and piped a silly pipe, and took tea and comfortable advice" (*Letters I*: 374). After all, "a long Poem is a test of invention," he told Bailey, "which I take to be the Polar Star of Poetry, as Fancy is the Sails, and Imagination the rudder" (*Letters I*: 170).

By the winter of 1817-1818, Keats had projected his own position amid the mighty dead and begun the transformation from his early poetic bowers into poetic intensity. In his Negative Capability letter, he used *Lear* as an exemplar of how intensity arising out of Beauty and Truth can make "all disagreeables evaporate"—for the intensity of language and situation redeem the bitterness of Lear's curses, Edmund's cruelty, the Fool's caustic wit as well as Keats's own sorrow at the death of his brother Tom (while nursing him, Keats underlined "Poore Tom!" in *Lear* and dated it). The beauty and truth of the play seem to reside in "fine phrases" upon which Keats looks "like a lover" as well as such figures as Cordelia who, in her beauty, truth, and speaking silence, generates much of the action of the play out of inaction and–like Edgar in his Dover Beach description–shows "nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." These are the "fine isolated verisimilitudes caught from the Penetralium of Mystery" that Keats claimed Coleridge would "let go by"—suggestive appearances of truth that leave the reader in "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts" and heightened speculation.

For Keats, Shakespeare was the exemplar of the threshold poet. While Keats sat writing on the edge of the sea on the Isle of Wight, he felt palpably haunted by Edgar's imaginary cliffs at the edge of England and at the limits of the imagination. Keats learned from this surrogate poet figure how to scale the sides of the *mysterium* and gather "all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign" halfway down the cliff of poesy. The samphire Edgar's imagined harvester garners is St. Peter's Herb, the briny plant that grows on rocks half in and half out of the sea, a plant of gateways and thresholds. Keats, too, learned to scale the heights at the edge of chaos and the unknowable. This scene in *King Lear* seemed to him to be a staging of Shakespeare's poetics in general, employing half knowledge to entice the mind into speculation without giving too much away or holding too much back– a mise en scène of his Negative Capability. The unanswered questions Shakespeare wrote into his text, the telling silences and motiveless malignities and intentional gaps and suggestive hieroglyphics, provided Keats with a liminal model for his own mature verse.

King Lear and its imaginary sea later inspired, tormented, and consoled him by turns. He read himself so much into the text that he saw it commenting on his brother's death, his own position amid the mighty dead, and even his perpetual lack of funds: "if my name had been Edmund," he told his brother and sister-in-law, "I should have been more fortunate" (*Letters II*: 242). The play influenced his first accomplished verses and his last words and became the measure for evaluating other works—from West's paintings to Coleridge's poetry. Its hieroglyphics of beauty became for Keats an allegory for reading life and living texts. Though Keats's assessment of Shakespeare transformed over time, his veneration of *King Lear* remained constant and its poetic intensity, beauty, and truth resonated throughout his own verse like the echoes of its virtual sea. It continued to do so until he composed his epitaph by the murmur of the Barcaccia fountain in Rome: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water." For Keats, Edgar's visionary sea was the sound of a mind lingering at the edge of thought and at the Penetralium of mystery—the sound of Negative Capability.

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The Apollonian

PERSONAL ESSAYS

Personal Essay

Meramet

Weaving the memory of living water, listening to the commonality of the Bosphorus

S. Buse Yıldırım

It was a time when belonging itself was shifting forms around me, a time when we looked for a certain form of hope and meaning. After years of tracing living patterns in mobility, researching the patterns of migration and belonging...a self-quest was deepening, slowly taking root. It has been a non-stop self-journey yet it was getting there to embody and root itself. What has kept us in this city, Istanbul, what has kept pulling us away? Neither here nor there, there has always been only one place where I could find inner peace, no matter what unfolds around me. A place where the liminality of these senses has become once embodied. A place that does not need to hold an answer, yet one that incarnates inner peace is the Bosphorus.

While we were enjoying the summer breeze of the Bosphorus once, a friend of mine uttered all of a sudden "if there is a Bosphorus, then there is always a hope". I smiled and it sparked in my mind; there has been more than a strait, more than a body of water... It sometimes secretly reveals its boundlessness, with this strange feeling of being alone in the vastness. Yet it offers an unexpected sense of togetherness at a moment within a fear of darkness, an infinitude. While the grandeur of the water sometimes seems as if it will completely draw us in and swallow us up, it also makes us feel the hidden sense of shared connection that keeps somewhere within... Perhaps a familiarity through the layers of memory. Much like the feeling of rushing through Istanbul's streets, losing ourselves within its crowds, this fleeting sense of belonging that we sometimes lose, sometimes ache for, and sometimes cease to search for altogether.

In this boundless city, where the values of life touch and drift apart, silence itself struggles to find a place. We are neither entirely alone nor truly together. Still, we go on reading the city through its shifting faces, its transforming textures, its layered veils. We see ourselves reflected in disappearing fish species, in the fading rituals of daily life, and in the shared longing beneath every search for hope.

As waves of migration reshape its people and pulse, we often fail to notice the one enduring communion at the heart of this city. The Bosphorus, as a vessel of shared pleasure and remembrance, allows our stories to intertwine and our listening to deepen. It flows through the city's heart, quietly carrying the memory of all that connects us. This inner

journey of thought led me back to the sources of sensation, to echoes of water, and to the place where I met with *Meramet*[1].

Meramet reminds us of our shared values and gently reweaves them within our collective memory, this fluidity and constant drift. Meramet mirrors our present state of being and our collective state of mind through its patterns. It mends the small ruptures between us, sustaining resilience for a while longer as if quietly repairing us. In its narratives, it turns toward both the personal and the communal, restoring memory itself: remembering while renewing, recalling while mending what has torn apart.

On this ground, *Meramet* becomes more than a framework for artistic practice drawn from different disciplines and methods. It grows into a living, social, and experiential space — one that gathers and revives the emotions of the past. It invites us into new stories, and into the rediscovery of that essential human need: to belong to something larger than ourselves. In its literal sense, meramet is a humble, provisional act of repair, a technique that allows something to hold a little longer, to endure a bit more. In the world of seafarers and fishermen, it is the practice of mending torn fishing nets: weaving the broken mesh with a needle of wood or plastic, restoring its strength and purpose. For us, *Meramet* has become the conceptual weave of an artistic and research-based practice that draws on multiple methods, a practice of care and a gesture of remembrance.

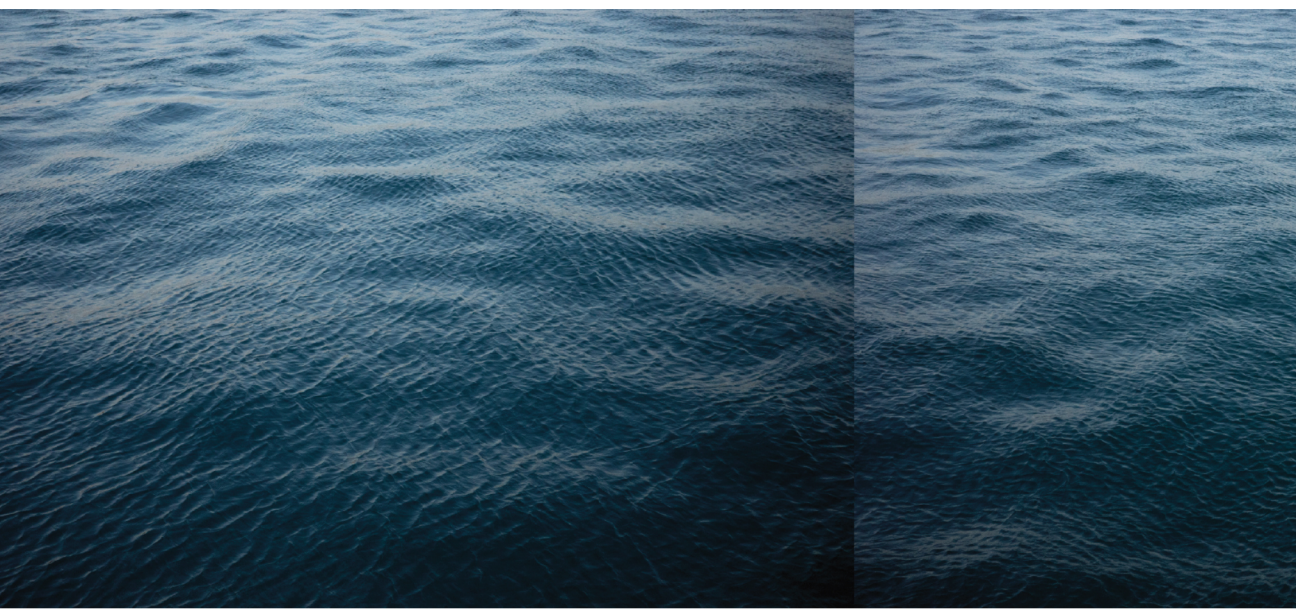
Tracing the absence and presence of certain species through the layers of memory in each encounter lay at the very heart of my fieldwork. Every word uttered by my interlocutors became a fragment of a living archive. Every silence, every sigh opened a depth in which memory itself breathed. I began by asking about their first encounter with the sea. Together we drifted back to childhood, then returned to the present; tracing the tides of change, uncovering how reminiscence flows across generations in the memory of the Bosphorus. I sought to reveal the hidden patterns between the lines, the words; listening to elderly fishermen and net-makers on both sides of the Bosphorus, in the northern stretch where the living current breathes in and out.

A resistance to time itself, or perhaps an ache, a quiet inadequacy felt in the way the water's scent no longer resembles what it once was. It carries the shifts of marine life and

everything that surrounds it.... as one of the fishermen says "You know, when we were kids, around this time of year, the seaweed used to smell so beautiful. Now... I can't really feel that smell anymore, you know?" There is an ecological intimacy within marine literacy. Yet this is an instinctive and existential way of living as a fisherman and when it comes to question how they learn this literacy, the answer is mostly faded away, it is given to a hidden silent wisdom. They have been told the language of nature through generations; oral culture builds in environmental intuition that gives life to fishing culture.

– What kind of fish did you catch back then?

– All kinds; *torik, palamut*... you name it. Our fish used to rest in the strait during winter, when it was not migration season. When the sea grew cold, they'd settle down; we called them *sleeping fish*. We knew their times, which ones they were,



when they'd move, we knew all that, and cast our nets accordingly. When the fish began to move, we could tell from the gulls; when thirty or forty of them circled above, we knew the fish were on the move, swimming from one place to another. Usually they'd head south, so we'd drop our nets a bit further down.

– So you read the sea that way through the birds and...

– Of course, of course... and through the smell too.

The *torik* has a strong scent; oily, heavy, when it rises from the sea, you can smell it in the air.

We could feel it.

The sea is like text to read, like a dough to mould out to find out the balance of ecosystem and delicacy of different forms of Bosphorus. It is a whole texture entirely; the brightness of fireflies, saturation in seaweed, thinness of waves, the movements, lightness of seagulls' fly... the fishermen's wisdom was like an endangered language to fade away. It reveals another layer of cultural loss, something that struggles to pass from one generation to the next in Bosphorus living culture; this is an ecological displacement, but also a cultural loss, perhaps another kind of noise or another pollution in mind.

– Is there anything from the old days you wish had lasted in fishing, or in the Bosphorus?
– Old fishing was better. Fishermen were better, too.

– Was it better here, in the Bosphorus?
– Of course it was. There used to be every kind of fish here; lüfer, kofana4, mackerel, horse mackerel. Back then, fish would rest in the Bosphorus; now they don't stay.
– Why did they disappear?
– Pollution.
– Pollution?
– All the sewage, all the filth flows into the Bosphorus. The population has grown.

– More people in the city...

– Yes, and the shores have been filled in. And the noise, there's too much noise now. In the old days you'd see maybe one cargo ship passing by, and a single ferry crossing from the other side. Now there are a thousand ships; traffic everywhere, noise everywhere. That's why the fish are gone.

– The traffic affects them?

– Traffic, yes, and the sound, the lights... The fish migrate away.

Would traffic oppress the change of smell, would it restore the behaviours of Bosphorus inhabitants, could it replace the texture of water? It represents the excess of life, the heaviness, the unnecessary layer of living... life would be carried on without any hitch, what would traffic benefit for a city life, for a marine life. The excess is the burden for the present and future of Bosphorus. The noise of our ears, the lights in the water, the feeling of crowds are like a sewage of unplanned city life, the smell is getting heavier...

But please let's not allow this profession to die out.

– Let this craft not die.

– It won't, it won't.

– Won't it?

– It won't, it won't.

– But if the fish are gone, it will die too.

– We say there are no fish left, but still... Since the bans began, the sea has started to breathe again.

– It's recovering.

– Yes, spawning again, freely now, you see? In the old days...

– Will the mackerel ever come back?

– Fifteen years ago, maybe more, if things had gone on as before, there wouldn't be a single fish left in the sea.

These bans saved it, truly.

Mackerel — that was our fish, you know, the Black Sea's fish.

For twelve months a year, fishermen lived on it.

They'd catch it with lines, with nets, with whatever they had; it fed us all year round.

It was that abundant, and the taste, you'd squeeze lemon on it, grill it... nothing compares, believe me.

But now, you ask what I miss.

the smell of seaweed, yes, but also the smell of mackerel itself.

Those scents... they're gone.

Fifty years now, and *gone*.

Will they ever come back? You feel the tide in between hope and mourning through the lines through the sighs... while listening to him I felt the heaviness on my chest. It is there that we see, and yet remain unable to act. During the fieldwork, I have been looking for how we can heal our memory, restore our water, recall our fishes, revive our algae, could we shape our ecological hope for the legacy of Bosphorus, that has been leaving in a huff... it has a resilience there to repair the souls while giving up their losses. We keep our belief in weaving, to repair the memory of living water that breathes life into the city.

Endnotes

[1]In fishing terminology, meramet denotes a traditional net-mending technique in which torn sections of a net are manually rewoven using a wooden or plastic needle, allowing the net to be temporarily repaired and returned to use.

[2]The term marine literacy is used here to describe an embodied and culturally transmitted knowledge of the sea, grounded in sensory perception, oral tradition, and everyday practice, rather than formal scientific frameworks.

[3]Palamut and Torik (Atlantic bonito at different stages of maturity)

[4]lüfer and kofana (bluefish at different stages of maturity)

Personal Essay

Blue Burqa, Blue River

Notes from the Khyber Confluence

Namkeen Peshawri

The first color I learned was river-blue. Not from paint, but from a cloth: my aunt's burqa, drying on a line that ran like a taut horizon between two cracked walls in Peshawar. On windy days, the burqa ballooned, a small sea rafted by desert air. On rainy days, it darkened to silt-blue, the same shade the Kabul River carries when it comes, exhausted and urgent, through the Khyber Gate.

The Blue Humanities asks us to listen to water as archive and oracle. In the borderlands, water remembers more than our governments do: names scratched off ration cards, houses erased from cadastral maps, the incidental address given by a tent. What the Indus writes in flood season is a long, shaking sentence about everything we have built on its back and everything it swallows as payment. In 2025, we counted loss not in numbers but in colors: wheat-fields gone the color of khaki, mules washed to a pale bone-gray, the river itself black-blue, carrying diesel and grief.

In Pashto, when we ask, "Where are you from?" we sometimes answer with a river: "I am from where the Kabul loosens its braid." The river is a woman in our idioms — braided, veiled, disciplined by barrage and dam. But water refuses to be obedient; it keeps public time. It makes and unmakes borders with the patience of silt. It also makes us relatives. In my neighborhood, the tap stutters like an old singer. Water arrives in a performance of stops and starts — state scarcity met with community invention: blue drums, tin buckets, shared hoses. We become each other's aqueducts. The poorest households learn to be hydrologists — timing, rationing, reading cloud-edge as if scripture.

For a transgender person here, water is also a ceremony and a risk. Ablution and harassment meet at the public handpump. You learn to carry your water like a secret. In the summers, I turn my scarf into a sail and walk toward the river, where there is always a small parliament: boys diving, men arguing politics, women rinsing chilies in the shallows, widows washing grief from threadbare shawls. I try to become small enough to listen. Water makes confidences audible — the kind no microphone can hold.

I keep a flood diary, but it won't stay dry. In August, a girl from the low embankment brings me a handful of broken bangles that the river returned — blue glass like bits of sky. "These were in my mother's trunk," she says. "The water took the trunk." Blue carries both the cost and the keepsake. In our relief work, we packed dignity kits for trans people: soap, cloth pads, a toothbrush, a thin comb that learned our hair's stubborn alphabet. What do you pack for a person who has been un-homed by both flood and family? The kit was humble, but the message was not: you are accounted for. Your life will not be left in brackets.

At the confluence where the Kabul pours toward the Indus, I once watched a strip of blue tarp snag on a thorn tree. It flapped like a flag for a displaced nation. The wind was fierce; the river, louder. I thought of Christina Sharpe's wake, of how water keeps the shape of ships long after they pass, and of our own boats — rubber, borrowed, reluctant — bearing families across streets where fish swam between doorways. If shipwreck

is a trope, it is because we have learned to narrate catastrophe. But among the poor, shipwright is the daily art: mending vessels from whatever floats — tin, words, kinship.

In the houses along the river, women keep oceanic knowledge in bowls: how rice swells, how lentils bloom, how salt dissolves to save a fainting child. This is a hydro-pedagogy that does not call itself a discipline. Yet the logic holds: water is the first infrastructure; care, the second. When the pumps fail and the papers say "intermittent supply," women become valves and reservoirs. Ecofeminism reached our kitchens long before our classrooms.

I used to think the burqa's blue was an imposed sky. Then my aunt told me: "It is also shade." On the hottest days, she would lift the hem to make a roof for a child. The garment was a tent; the body, a house; the color, a climate. Somewhere between shelter and surveillance, we negotiate with heat, with stares, with laws that prefer their people standardized like pipes. Water refuses standardization. It seeks every crack and, in seeking, tells us where our structures lie.

In border regions, rumor travels faster than flood. During the deportations, we met Afghan trans women who had learned to read the river's mood better than any bureaucrat's. "If the water rises," one said, "we move to the higher mosque." When I asked how she knew the water would rise, she shrugged: "Listen to goats." Hydro-humanities is sometimes a school of listening to what the state does not measure.

Teaching with water means teaching with delay. In the Anthropocene, our calendars are already wet — holidays postponed, schools closed, clinics moved to drier ground. We began, in our collective, to map puddles: cartographies of inconvenience turned into evidence for council meetings. A puddle that never dries is a river waiting for a budget line. When a journalist called these "minor floods," a grandmother laughed: "Nothing is minor to an ankle." It was an epistemology: scale from the body outward.

Once, a boy offered to show me his favorite sound. He led me under the bridge where the river swallowed echoes and gave them back salted with silt. "Here," he said, "your voice learns to swim." I stood there and recited the names of women who had lost papers, of trans friends who had lost rooms, of cousins who had lost wages, and the river returned them un-lost for a heartbeat. There is no proof of this, only the sensation of being briefly buoyed by a medium that does not care who you are but insists you are material.

What can a blue issue do? Perhaps it can complicate our thirst for clarity. Water is clear until it isn't. Blue is clarity's bruise. The Blue Humanities teaches that oceans connect more than they divide; rivers too. Kabul to Attock, Attock to Sindh, Sindh to the estuary, and onward to the sea that forgets no one. In our workshops, young people write letters to the river: apologies, petitions, jokes. One girl wrote, "Dear River, please keep a secret for me." I asked which secret. She said, "That I want to be a captain."

sI like to imagine a navy of the uncounted: boats with names like Mercy, Ledger,

Sisterhood. I like to imagine blue as a union card, an amulet, a voting right. I like to imagine that when a government closes its files, the river opens one more mouth.

At dusk, the burqa on the line becomes indigo. Somewhere someone is praying; somewhere else, negotiating a fare; somewhere, the river is dragging a lost shoe through reeds. I want to say that water is a witness, but witnesses can be coerced. Water is a chorus. It drowns out our neat conclusions. It asks us to learn drowning as an analytic and buoyancy as a politics. To stand at the confluence is to be instructed in both.

When the flood diary dries, the pages buckle: a wrinkled geography. Run a finger over it and you can read the contour of last season. That is the future's texture, too — already warped by what has passed through it. The burqa dries. The aunt lifts it from the rope. The boy returns home with a pocket of echoes. The Kabul unbraids. The Indus carries a rumor to the sea. We walk back across a dirt path we call a bank. Above us, a thin thread. Blue, between two walls, holding.

Personal Essay

Even the Uneducated Eat

Mangeni Wycliffe Obwoya

Namufuta, my mother, really wanted me to study. For her, education was not some grand ladder to wealth or prestige. For her, it was a light, borne from a small flickering flame she hoped would help me read signposts if I ever travelled to faraway places, or write a letter back to her if life separated ever separated me from her and home, that the local chairperson would read for her. She also wanted me to count my own money and do business without trembling before the sly tricks of those who preyed on the ignorant. To her, knowing how to read, write, and count was a form of armor in a world that had little mercy for the uninformed.

To achieve this, she went all in, and all hands-on deck. She enrolled me in school not once, not twice, but several times. Each attempt, a small act of faith. Each failure, a quiet heartbreak she never spoke of.

The first few times, I wasn't allowed to enter class. The reason still makes me smile today. I couldn't pass the enrolment interview. In those days, some schools used a curious test to decide whether a child was ready for Primary One. It had nothing to do with reading or counting. It was purely physical. You had to touch your opposite ear by reaching over your head. If you could easily touch your left ear with your right hand, you were "old enough." If you strained, you were sent back home to grow a little taller. Twice or thrice, I walked with her hand in hand to school headmaster's office, full of hope, only to be sent home the same morning, my small arm too short to earn me a seat on the floor in class that was under the tree shade. I was finally admitted at seven.

But even then, I didn't make it easy for my mother. There were days I simply refused to go to school. I preferred the wild freedom of the bush; chasing monkeys from people's gardens, hunting weaverbirds and wagtails, trapping quail, qulea-qulea, or molding clay cattle and warriors from the soft soil of anthills. I loved the smell of the earth made by termites, the laughter of friends under mango trees, the simple joy of being unbothered by lessons or punishments.

Around midday, I would start my slow walk home, content and proud of my day's "work." By the time I reached the compound, I had already rehearsed a story about what had supposedly happened at school, a straight-faced lie made perfect with just enough detail to sound believable. My mother, tired but hopeful for her son, would listen with a smile, serve me food, and for a brief moment, believed that her dream for me was still alive.

But luck, like clay in the sun, eventually dries up. How she discovered my mischief, I will leave for another story.

My father, on the other hand, had no strong feelings about schooling. He didn't interfere with my mother's efforts, but neither did he share her zeal. He was a hands-off man, practical to the bone. As long as the children ate their fill and slept soundly, he considered his duty complete. His philosophy was simple and unwavering; "Even the uneducated eat."

To him, life was about survival, not ambition. He had seen educated men beg for food, and uneducated men build homes. He valued peace more than progress, and contentment more than competition. He was not wrong entirely, many have lived and died by that creed.

But my mother's dream was different. She saw in letters and numbers not just survival, but dignity. And though I fought her tooth and nail in those early days, I now know that her stubbornness was love in its purest form, a love that insisted I rise above the clay, even when I was happiest shaping it.

And so, it has been eleven years since I finished formal schooling, and it has been twenty-seven years since that day my mother walked me to that little primary school that lay seven kilometers away from Busiro landing site. It has been Eleven long, winding years spent in the trenches of the hustle world, pushing, pulling, surviving, and sometimes just holding on since the day I hang up my boots, dropped the gown, school and that all glorious University ID.

In those eleven years, I have been in offices and workshops, construction sites and boardrooms, consulates, embassies, government departments and private companies. I have sat in waiting rooms, negotiated contracts, and chased payments across this country, and above all met and made friends with so many great souls and humble personages. But in all those places, I have not met a single classmate from any of the schools I attended. Not even one.

Not a single primary school classmate from my P7 class of 2004, where we were thirty-four candidates. Not an O' Level classmate from a group of about one hundred and seventy who sat the Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE) in 2008. Not an A' Level mate from a crowd of two hundred and fifty who sat Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE) in 2010. Not even one of my sixty university classmates who studied the same course as I did in 2014. Combined, that makes over five hundred people. Five hundred young souls with whom I once shared desks, dreams, and the same starchy beans and plates of posho during lunch breaks. Yet somehow, in all the places I have gone in Uganda, it feels like they disappeared into thin air. Sometimes I joke that perhaps they all died and I am the only one who survived the apocalypse of our generation.

But joking aside, I often wonder what this silence says, not just about me, but about the system that shaped us.

To tell the truth, some of the schools I attended could easily be classified as "butt-end" schools. The kind of institutions you were sent to when the world had given up on you, when you had failed to win the ruffle ticket of destiny. These were places where the walls sweated hopelessness and the teachers themselves were survivors of earlier educational disappointments. You didn't go there because you were promising. You went there because there was nowhere else left to go for an education. For many, those schools were the end of the road, not a detour.

Still, I have met people who attended similar schools and somehow made it. I have met boys who once hawked sugarcane at taxi stages and are now in Parliament. I have met girls who dropped out after Senior Two and now run successful businesses that employ university graduates. So, my puzzle is not entirely about which school one attended, but about what kind of relationships we built, or failed to build, during our years in school.

You see, in today's world, survival is not only about talent or education; it is about networks. The bigger your network, the better your chances of being noticed, recommended, or remembered. Those who rise fastest often do so not because they are the most qualified, but because someone somewhere mentioned their name in a room, they were not in. Yet for me, in ten years of working life, not once has a classmate called to say, "I recommended you for a project." Not once have I entered an office and found a familiar face to make my path lighter.

It makes me question the entire idea of education as it is structured in Uganda. We spend roughly sixteen to twenty years [for those who repeated classes] in school, depending on what course you take at university. That is nearly a quarter of a person's life. And during that time, we sit in classrooms with hundreds of others who, like us, are supposed to be preparing for the future. But what exactly are we preparing for? We cram definitions, pass exams, and move from one level to another without learning how to build meaningful relationships, how to collaborate, how to sustain friendships beyond term three. We are told to focus on grades, not people. We compete against each other instead of growing with one another.

In the end, school produces isolated achievers who walk into the world alone, unconnected, and emotionally tone-deaf. We carry certificates, not relationships. If education were a boat, then we were trained only to row harder, never to notice who sits beside us.

I sometimes look at how other societies approach this issue. In the United States, for example, universities like Harvard and Stanford pride themselves not only on the quality of their teaching but on their alumni networks. Many people who study there understand that the degree is only half the treasure; the other half lies in the relationships they build. That is why you find two former classmates starting a company together years later, or one calling another to join a government commission.

Meanwhile, in Uganda, many of us walk out of school like orphans of the system, disconnected from one another and from opportunity. Our old boys' associations exist mostly in name, meeting once in a while to collect burial contributions rather than discuss economic empowerment or mentorship.

Now that I am a parent myself, these thoughts weigh heavier on my mind. When I see my children in their uniforms, heading to school every morning with their small bags and big dreams, I ask myself: what exactly should I tell them to prioritize? Should I tell

them to focus on grades? Yes, grades matter. But grades alone do not guarantee a future. Should I tell them to make friends? Yes, but friendships built only on laughter during break time often fade once life's real challenges begin.

So perhaps what I should tell them is this; education is a scam, but even that is not salvation either. Maybe, it is a simply a tool. Yes, it is a tool. And like any tool, it is only as useful as the hand that wields it. A machete or an ax can clear a garden, or fell a tree but it can also gather rust if left resting against a tree, or lying around in the garden.

I want my children to understand that school is not only about learning subjects; it is about learning people. It is about understanding how to coexist, how to support others and be supported in turn. I want them to know that relationships, when built with sincerity, can become lifelines in the adult world. That a classmate today might be the doctor who saves you tomorrow, or the employer who gives you a chance when all doors seem closed.

I also want to remind them that life outside school is not a fair playing field. Some will start at the top, others from the mud. But the difference will not always be in how much they know; often it will be in who they know and how they treat people.

Finally, I think we parents need to unlearn some of the lessons we inherited. We were raised to believe that success was an individual race, that you had to outshine everyone else. Yet the world today rewards collaboration. The days of Commando or that one lone hero is gone; now, teams build empires.

If I could sit with my younger self in that dusty classroom of 1998, or later in 2004, I would tell him to lift his head from the books once in a while and look around. To learn the names of his classmates, to ask about their dreams, to stay in touch. Because someday, in the wide and unpredictable world, those faces might matter more than the marks on his report card.

So, no, education is not a scam. The real scam is how we go through it without learning what truly matters: connection, empathy, and purpose. And perhaps that is what I will tell my children to prioritize, not just knowledge, but the wisdom to use it with and for others.

Even the uneducated eat, don't they?

Personal Essay

What the Waters Remember

Field Reflections on Ritual, Landscape, and Self in Changthang

Sun-Robin

I did not travel to Changthang expecting water to unsettle me. The reflections that follow emerge from three days of fieldwork in Phobrang, Changthang (13–15 August 2025), employing participant observation, informal interviews, and a visual-anthropological approach that integrates painting as a form of ethnographic and epistemological engagement. The stories I carried with me spoke of something else altogether, of a cold that seeps into your bones, of heights that make you aware of every breath, and of the quiet endurance of the pashmina herders. These stories had been narrated to me by Ladakhi friends during my fellowship, shaping my mental picture of the plateau long before I ever set foot there. Some spoke of a silence so complete that it felt elemental, while others described the vast, unbroken skies that dwarf human presence. Yet almost nobody mentioned water, at least not in the way I would come to experience it, as a pulse, a tug, a quiet ache that stirred both my academic and intuitive understanding of this element I had studied for years.

Seven water bowls (yonchap) offered inside a rebo tent of a yak herder family in Durbuk, symbolizing purity and abundance in Ladakhi Buddhist practice. Photo by Diring Takam, August 16, 2025.

Our journey into the region began under a curtain of dust and wind. The road to Phobrang required a quiet yielding, a willingness to let go of the illusion that landscapes must conform to human plans. We arrived a day before the pashmina herders were preparing to ascend to the higher grazing grounds, a seasonal movement that shapes both

their livelihoods and the quality of the fibre they tend. When they heard of our visit, they agreed, without hesitation, to delay their departure by a day so we could meet them. Their generosity, offered so casually, introduced me to the kind of humility this region cultivates. As we approached the settlement and the vast, treeless wetlands stretched out before us, I felt something loosening within me, a subtle unravelling of the quiet assumptions of significance that cling to you unnoticed.

In that expanse, it was water that drew my attention inward.

Day One: A Rebo Tent and the Shape of Reverence

The first sound I registered in Phobrang was neither wind nor distant footsteps. It was the delicate movement of water passing beneath the uneven surface of the wetland, a terrain rising and dipping in soft, dune-like curves. The sound was faint, almost self-effacing, yet it felt like the valley's quiet heartbeat. We were visiting the only family still living in a traditional rebo tent, its yak-hair weave holding the memory of older lifeways, while the rest of the village had moved into government-constructed PUF houses.

Inside the tent, seven bowls of water rested on a small wooden altar, the choktse, arranged for the daily ritual of yonchap. I had encountered such offerings before, but here they felt different, heavier with significance. In a landscape where every usable drop comes from distant glacial melt and must be carried, conserved, and respected, offering it to the divine felt like an act of profound generosity. The woman of the household filled each bowl with a slow, attentive motion that revealed how valuable the water truly was.

"Purity," she replied, and after a contemplative pause, "and protection."

I almost asked her what kind of protection she had in mind, but the question faded as we stood outside the rebo, watching the rhythms of their afternoon unfold. The elderly woman (approximately in her 80s, a senior pastoral matriarch) was dressed in her traditional goncha, its folds catching the light, while her daughter (approximately in her 30s, actively engaged in herding labour) sat nearby, steadily twisting strands of yak wool into the sturdy cord used to guide and control the yaks and pashmina goats during grazing. The wetland glimmered behind them under the muted afternoon sun, and the scene held a kind of quiet coherence that made my question feel unnecessary. She told me that the water had grown sandy in recent years, its clarity shifting. Something, she felt, had disturbed it, and she attributed the change to lu, the water spirits.

Her certainty made me pause. I had entered the valley equipped with scientific explanations such as sedimentation, climate stress, and shifts in hydrological flow. Yet her narrative unsettled the hierarchy I had carried with me. Science explains processes, and stories articulate meaning. In this place, I was beginning to understand that meaning held its own form of truth.

Day Two: Froth and Forgetting

The next day revealed a different side of Changthang, one I was not prepared for. Walking near the herbarium garden, I saw froth in the ravine stream, likely the residue of detergent from washing upstream, a small but telling trace of everyday use intensified by tourism and settlement activity. It looked like a minor disturbance at first, but something about it unsettled me deeply. It felt like a crack in a belief system I had barely begun to understand.

The Amchi we met later, a healer in his late fifties, with a calm voice and weathered hands, said, "People forget. Even in sacred places, people forget."

There was no judgement in his tone, only a quiet acceptance of human inconsistency. The sentence stayed with me. It made me think of how easily reverence can be lost, how even the most sacred rituals can become routine when the world around them shifts.

Watching that froth drift slowly down the stream felt like witnessing a small rupture, an erosion not of land, but of memory. I wondered then whether sacredness survives through belief, or through practice, or through something more fragile: attention.

Day Three: The Lake That Refused Stillness

Pangong Tso was where everything came together: my confusion, my admiration, my discomfort, my longing to understand something I kept missing. It rained that evening, soft at first, then with a determined steadiness that blurred the mountains. Rain clouds gathered above the snowcapped peaks, and the air carried that fragile, metallic scent that always comes before precipitation. Every form of water seemed present at once, suspended in the shifting evening atmosphere, each one shaping how the landscape revealed itself. Without thinking, I took out my watercolours. It was not planned, but the lake, shifting through shades of teal, steel, and translucent grey, demanded a different kind of witnessing. As I painted, the sun lowered behind the mountains, casting uneven light across the water and making it impossible to hold on to a single sense of the scene.

Painting in the cold was clumsy, almost embarrassing. The colours refused to stay where I wanted them. The water on my brush kept merging with the raindrops that fell onto the page. The lake seemed to mock my attempt to hold it still.

But it also taught me something: water does not exist to be captured. It exists to move, to shapeshift, to refuse confinement.

When I looked at the finished painting, I knew it was inadequate. But the inadequacy no longer bothered me. I had not painted the lake, I had painted my failure to hold it. Somehow, that felt true.

Conversations with Water

Everywhere we went, water appeared not just as a natural feature, but as a presence. Springs fenced off with reverence. Rituals performed before approaching certain water

bodies. Stories of lu: capricious, protective, dangerous; woven into daily life.

One elder told me, "Water remembers. It does not forget disrespect."

Whether or not I believed in lu felt less important than the fact that such beliefs shaped careful, respectful behaviour. In a fragile ecosystem, mythology becomes ecological wisdom dressed in poetry.

And yet, contradictions persisted:

Tourists bathing in ponds.

Plastic bottles where bronze vessels once stood.

PUF houses replacing tents evolved over centuries of adaptation.

I found myself torn between admiration for tradition and recognition of how complicated survival is. People change, landscapes change, water changes. Sacredness exists in tension with necessity.

Water as Mirror

Somewhere between Phobrang and Durbuk, I realized the trip had stopped being "fieldwork." It had become a kind of personal excavation. Water, especially scarce water,

High-altitude wetland ecosystem at Phobrang, supporting herds of yaks and pashmina goats.
Photo by the Sun-Robin, August 15, 2025.

Painting at Pangong Tso as part of the field study. Photo by Jatin Shah, August 15, 2025.

reveals things, not just about land, but about the self.

I have always carried a quiet gratitude for water, for it has been a thread weaving through the textures of my life. Childhood afternoons beside rivers, lakes, and ravines, the rain that stirred both chaos and comfort, the simple relief of taps running after long water shortages, all of it etched a closeness I could feel, not just in body but in spirit. I am very attuned to the feeling of water: how it drifts over skin, how it shifts the air, how it carries memory and mood. Water does not merely exist around me; it moves through me, shaping the rhythms of my senses and the contours of my recollections, and in that intimate presence, I have found both awe and gratitude.

In Changthang, gratitude was stitched into every gesture.

The seven bowls.

The cautious approach to springs.

The stories of spirits.

The simple act of melting snow in winter.

It humbled me to realize how carelessly I had lived with abundance.

Where the Human and the Sacred Touch

On the last evening, I returned to the rebo tent family. The valley was wrapped in evening light, soft and mysterious. Inside the tent, the water bowls glowed faintly in the warmth of butter lamps.

I asked the woman why she stayed in the rebo when everyone else had moved.

"Because here," she said, "I can hear water."

I still don't fully understand what she meant. But I felt the truth of it. Some truths are understood not with the mind, but with some quieter part of the body that listens in ways we are rarely taught.

As I stepped outside, I felt the damp earth beneath my feet as if it held a memory older than the valley itself.

Leaving, Carrying

Driving away from Changthang, I tried to hold everything inside me: the wetlands, the rituals, the contradictions, the painting ruined by rain yet somehow perfect. I felt like I was carrying a lesson I had not yet deciphered.

Perhaps I still haven't.

But I know this:

In Changthang, water is not simply water. It is a teacher.

A witness. A warning. A memory.A story told through glaciers and bowls and springs and the hands that fill them.And perhaps what unsettled me most was the realization that water had been asking something of me long before I reached Changthang:

To pay attention.

To remember.

To listen.

I went to Changthang to study water.

But it was water that studied me.

Visual field note‿making in the‿form of painting at Pangong Tso.
Photo by Sun-Robin, August 15, 2025.

The Apollonian

SHORT FICTIONS

Short Fiction

The Venice of My Heart

T. U. Patir

Mid-year always brought about devastation. Rivers flood, and crops dissipate into the vast engulfing of nature. Houses are wiped aside. Many of these houses were usually built close to the ground, out of bamboo, sticks, and other such raw materials. The stilt houses, also made of bamboo, had a better chance, however. Numbering also in the many, their ingenuity lay in the fact that they stood some distance higher than the ground, some two or three feet above the surface. This made sure that the river and its ire could not harm them. However, this did not mean there were no other tragedies. That is life in Assam.

Such, you see, is the poetic convergence of contrasts. The duality of strength and suffering. For no smooth seas, in the history of this world, ever made a fine sailor.

This year, too, the season of death and water was drawing near. Oinam and Miro sat quietly in their stilt houses, waiting for the rain to stop. They hadn't been outside the whole morning and were getting restless.

“When do you think it will stop, mem?”. Miro asked his mem - his older sister.

“It will soon. I prayed to the rain God. He will switch off the rain very very soon. Then we can go play outside, alright?”. Oinam was simply one year older than Miro, who was a mere eight-year-old boy.

“Mem, let’s draw suns outside! Arun told me this is how the rain will stop. Like magic!”.

It was once a commonly held belief that drawing pictures of suns on the ground during rainy weather would stop the downpour.

“Arun says a lot of things, you know? You shouldn't believe everything he tells you”. Oinam shook her head.

Just then, Miro took his older sister by the hand and tugged her outside their stilt house. They climbed down the stair-ladder, built out of hollow wood, and they got to work on drawing tiny impressions of the sun on the ground, complete with rays. Sometime later, the rain actually stopped, as if the rain God had answered their prayers. The two children were overjoyed, now affirmed with the belief that their sand suns worked!

They ran outside their compound to play. The soil sparkled with water, making it slippery. It didn’t matter to the children. They loved the fall and the sliding. Darting through their mother's pigsty, which smelled exactly as you would expect, they made their way to a small stilt house on the far end of their neighbourhood. The village was situated on the banks of the Brahmaputra- a commonality amongst Assamese villages. There lived an older man, whose name nobody knew. He would often sit in the evenings, on a plastic chair, smoking his pipe. Miro and Oinam would watch from afar and tease him by putting small twigs in their mouth, mimicking his smoking. They would dance and holler at him before being chased away, to a row of giggles from the two kids.

They passed by their friend Ritu, who would often speak of running away to Venice once

he had earned enough money. On one of his trips to the big city, he saw the architectural splendour of Venice flickering through the radioman's television - gondolas rowing through the canals and boats on what should have been concrete streets! Fascinating! Ever since, he had become obsessed with the idea of moving there. Meanwhile, the people of the village would tease him every so often, asking if he had earned enough to go there yet. But Ritu didn't care. He just kept holding on to his dream.

Soon, whilst playing, the children came across the riverbank. They both stood and stared at the staggering, intimidating breadth of the Brahmaputra. To the untrained eye, it seemed like a sea. Standing on one side of the riverbank, the milky white waters seemed to stretch far away, while the other side of the riverbank remained invisible, owing to its wide berth. A scary sight.

"Miro, look. The river is calm now, but soon, it will be angry.", Oinam told her younger brother.

"Mem, is...is our old house inside it? Can we find Grandma there, also?". Miro asked.

Oinam knew the answer, despite her young age. But she didn't know how to reply.

"I don't know, Miro. I hope we don't lose our house again", she said, with an unexpressed sigh.

The floods had taken the children's first home, and their parents had to relocate to this area. Their grandma, too old to be mobile, had drowned one year ago, when the waters came calling. Seeing his sister gradually well up, Miro came up with an idea. He grabbed her hand, then took her back to their home, and from the kitchen, he grabbed two big bowls meant for stews and ran back to the bank.

"What if we take out all the water from the river? Perhaps we can stop the flood, mem!". Miro excitedly declared to his sister.

"Do you think it will work?". Oinam asked, scrunching her little nose.

"Let's try, na!"

They took their bowls and began to scoop up water from the Brahmaputra, scooping and throwing it aside. Hard work. They did it from morning till late afternoon, trying to take out enough to prevent overflowing. Wiping the sweat off their brows at every odd interval, they kept to their work. A determination like no other had possessed them. Little kids, as such, always have the biggest dreams. Their tiny hands and equally tiny bowls worked twice as hard to drain the river of its water!

Then evening came, and as fate would have it, the rain poured again. This time, heavy, like crumbling rocks out of the sky. Miro and Oinam, horrified that their progress would be for nothing, started drawing suns on the ground vigorously, determined to make the rain stop. It didn't, however.

"Mem! Why is the rain not stopping?!". Miro asked, crying. Oinam's eyes, too, welled up.

They saw the river's level now higher than ever before. Soon, the milky white waters would tumble over and spread its vast presence across the village. Seeing this, Miro started shaking. He yelled a loud scream and knelt down in anger, hitting the soft, moist ground with hardened fists. Oinam, on the other hand, just stared at the horizon blankly, worrying about how their new home might also face the same dour fate as their old one. Perhaps mother's pigsty would be destroyed. What about the farmer who would always sing to his wife while grazing his cows? What happens to him? And their mother and father? Her warm tears mixed with the softly falling rain. She began to think about other lives that may be lost to the water. It seemed hopeless. The rain made the world turn aptly bleak and grey. Miro and Oinam stared plainly at the sight of the river. No expression escaped their tiny faces. They had nothing to say- for there was nothing to say.

Just then, they felt a hand on both their shoulders. It was the old man who loved to smoke. He faced the kids. This time they didn't run away from him, like they usually do.

"Don't be scared. I simply saw what you two were doing with the river. You know it also hurts the fishes, right?". The old man asked.

"...hurts the fishes?". Oinam questioned.

"Yes. The river houses fish, too. If you take out water, you are also destroying their homes, no? Every drop of water has life inside it. Do you want to take that away?"

The children shook their heads.

"But...my grandmother may be inside the water. I just wanted to find her", Miro said meekly, remembering his dear old grandma.

The old man let out a resigned sigh. He, too, knew this feeling.

"Sometimes, you must accept some things. Your grandma is now part of the river. She has her home there now. I think we should let her rest, no? She will be fine".

Miro and Oinam looked at the old man's eyes, wanting some reassurance.

"Grandma will be fine, then?". Oinam asked.

"The river will take care of her. Just as it takes care of all life. You don't have to fear it". The old man calmly gave the kids what they were longing to hear.

Just then, Oinam and Miro saw a fish plopping about on the riverbank, desperately struggling to get back to the water, to its home. They now knew their actions of attempting to drain the river also had consequences.

The old man simply smiled and nudged them towards it. The children walked up slowly, as if not to scare the little fish. They cupped it softly in their hands, slowly letting it back to the depths of the river.

"Good".

The old man put his arms on both their shoulders. Finally, they had understood.

“Do you think grandma misses us?”. Oinam asked.

“Of course she does. You know, you will always have her in your heart”.

Saying this, the old man hugged the two children.

“Now let us go home, and we can play something, alright?”. The old man smiled at them.

The children nodded their little heads.

“Bye Grandma!”. They both waved to the river, as they walked away.

Some weeks later, the flood season began, and all the roads filled up with chest-high water. The people were using rafts made from banana trunks and rowing across the neighbourhood, stopping by each house to check if their friends and families were doing fine. Even young children would join in to row through the village, helping the elderly out of their dilapidated houses.

The great people of this region would have their lives upended every coming year. Yet, this did not deter them. For the very next season, after the river and its anger vanish, they plainly take down their broken stilt houses, as one would take off a dirty piece of garment, and move away elsewhere, with renewed purpose, and a quiet disposition.

That morning, Miro and Oinam walked out of their bamboo house and stood outside the door, making sure to not fall into the water that now reached up to their balcony. A fish popped its head out of the water, as if to greet them. The world seemed full of life, and for the first time, Miro and Oinam were not scared of the water. They saw nature and its true character. The river was life. Miro and Oinam smiled at each other, seeing their house still intact.

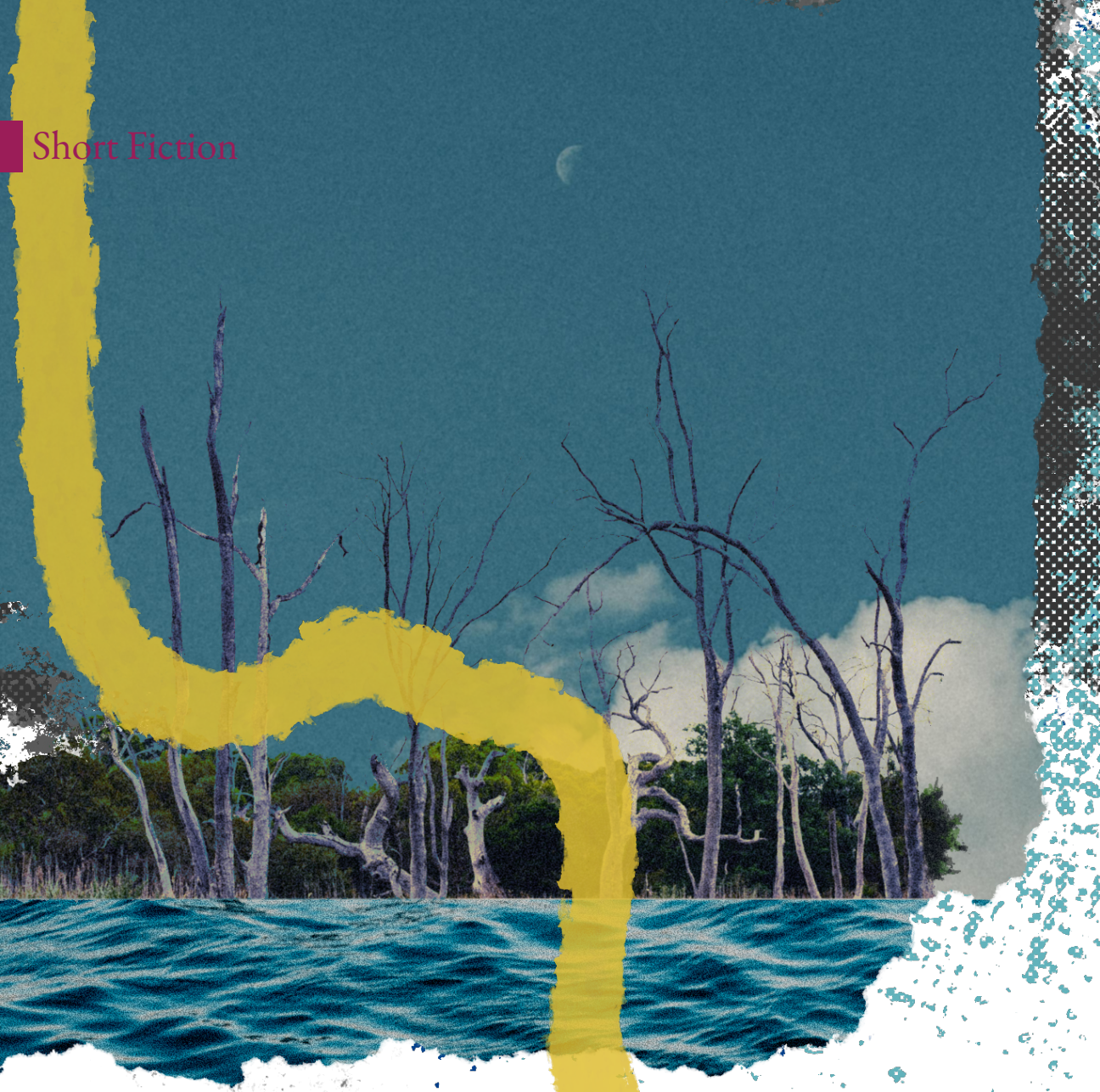
Suddenly, they spotted their friend Ritu rowing a homemade raft, the old man sitting on it, too, with a pipe in hand, as usual, and although his own bamboo-hut had not been strong enough to withstand the floods, his eyes lit up as he noticed the children’s house was still standing, and he let out a huge smile. The children returned the smile.

“Oi Ritu! Have you saved enough to go to Venice yet?!”. Miro yelled, teasing Ritu, as he would always do.

“Ha! Don't you see? I am already there!”. Ritu stopped rowing and waved his hand all around him. “I have my own Venice here. This banana-raft is my gondola, and I am rowing through the canals! And just you wait, Miro, till I start singing like the famous gondoliers!”. He howled with a loud chuckle.

Seeing Ritu's unwavering optimism, the children broke into laughter, and going down their stair-ladder made of hollowed wood, they hopped onto their own banana-raft. Then they slowly rowed away, through their village, through life all around, eager to explore the water-laden “canals” of the Venice of Ritu's heart.

Short Fiction



A Cushion on the Head

Akshaya

"All this drama for nothing, do not hype too much", Raji said as her nails turned magenta with each precise stroke from the *Kaali Nail* polish bottle. Vino, Anitha, Venilla, and a few girls from the neighbouring village were stranded in each corner of the paddy field, looking for the perfectly sunbaked cow dung cakes. The sun was at its peak, and the palm trees, the only high-rises of Ramanathapuram district, were flaunting their tallness but being stingy when it came to shade. "What good are trees if not for their O_2 and cosy shade?", perhaps a human mind would wonder.

Raji seemed to have found a rare spot with shade on the Varappu, the ridge that compartmentalises the fields, the ownable and sellable ones. "Never pin your hopes on the oldies. No festival, no *gistival* this time", Raji insisted, her eyes still glued to the art in progress. The cow dung troupe did not seem to lose hope.

"When have you ever bent and strained your body? Finding reasons not to work...", Vino finally lost patience.

"Oh... really? How do you think I have given birth to 2 kids then? And why do you think my husband is giggly all the time?"

The girls started giggling, whispering into each other's ears.

"She always talks dirty like this..."

"But it's actually true... have you ever seen Pandi *Anne's* unhappy face?"

"*Adiye*, that's because Venky *Anne* gets him liquor from Madras all the time..."

"Have you ever seen him sober?"

The giggles resumed.

"Maybe he pours some for her also". The whispers resided, and the troupe resumed their business.

The palm leaf woven baskets were half-filled with dried cow dung cakes.

"But *Akka*, do you really think they will agree to have the festival this year?" asked Anitha, counting the number of cakes in her basket.

"Appa said the village council will agree to comply this year. Let's see..." Vino replied.

"I just hope this doesn't end up in a fight like last year. One fight a day is tightening enough", Venilla sighed. The troupe has walked past the field and has reached the *Kammakarai*, in the northern part of the village.

"No, no, *Akka*, this year the young boys from the Colony are not part of these meetings. The Colony elders themselves stopped them since they created a ruckus last time", Anitha tried hard to rush her words into Venilla's ears, reassuring herself and Venilla.

"Whatever it is, let this be over... So that the council could hear my *Amma's* plea and let the nights pass without the stink of alcohol", Venilla's thoughts pondered between her house and the *Kammai* they reached.

"Akkkaa... where is Raji?", one of the girls panicked.

"*Adiye*, she did not come with us; she must have returned home from the fields", came the reply. "Forget

the council and their decisions, look at the ground here... I don't think a few days of rain could fill this land", Vino said, her eyes pointed to the ground.

The *Kammai* and the cow dung cakes in the basket were no different, both finely sun-dried. There were myriad dry cracks on the ground, leaving the land wrinkled and flaky. The Mesquite trees were all around the *Kammai*, as far as one's eyes could conquer sight. "What did they say in the news?" someone asked.

"Can't trust all that, we need at least knee-deep level water here...", Venilla replied.

Vino agreed, "Yes, even if the council decides to make peace with the Colony people, how will they conduct the festival when the *Kammai* is as dry as a desert?"

"Look at it, last year, it was flooding...We could fish in the fields. No trace of wetness now", Anitha said.

"*Akkaaa*", the youngest in the troupe came running, all excited towards Vino and Venilla.

"We can get water in those tank lorries as they did in *Kalapatti*, right?"

"*Dii...* those people have a lot of money. Besides, those water lorries will only be enough for our house chores and cooking, not to fill the entire *Kammai*. Okay, you go home, it's getting late. Don't let your mom scold us", Vino explained. "Let us all return then. Let's go", the young one commanded.

The troupe complied. Even the words that reassured and instilled hope, drowned as the ground reality hit them. They effortlessly climbed the stairs at the *Kammai* shore, the palm-woven baskets swaying on their heads. Some had both their hands on the basket, and the veterans none. As they climbed the final step, the streets that divide the people and their history, their food, could now be comfortably seen.

Valli, who was cutting wood for her kitchen from a mesquite tree, stopped them.

"Where are you girls coming from?"

The youngest one volunteered, "*Aatha*, look how much cow dung we have got!! Look, all of them are so nicely dried, come look..."

"Ada *Kirukiingla...* Who are you collecting all this for? Are all your eyes on your head to not see the flaky land before you?"

"*Aatha*, forget that. What did the village council decide?"

"Yes, yes, tell us that, did they agree?" The rest of the girls joined in chorus.

Valli sat down, unbothered on the thorn-filled ground, and started gathering all the broken sticks, twigs, and wood together. Her full-grown, wrinkled hands and fingers tied all the sticks together in a bundle. The girls stood there waiting for her to finish. Because they knew that until she finished, she wouldn't give a damn about the girls' queries. She got up, pressing her left hand on the ground for support.

"What village council? What will they say? Why are you girls acting as if you landed from Dubai this morning?"

"*Aaa Kelavi*, don't test our patience. What did they decide? Is the *Maariyamman* festival happening this year or not?"

"*Ponga di*... No festival, nothing... An argument broke out between the two groups. And they decided to postpone it."

"Postpone ah?", the girls replied in unison.

"I have my work to do, leave way". Valli took the bundle of firewood, placed it on her head, and started walking down the street.

"Nothing has changed. Raji was right. Never trust the oldies", Vino said, her voice sank, and so did the sun, down the horizon.

"Okay, let's keep these baskets here and take our waterpots. It's almost time for the Kaveri water."

"Yes, yes, let's hurry up. Otherwise, it will get crowded". Vino, Vennila, and others kept their baskets beside the staircase and started walking down the street. The youngest one was still standing there.

"*Akkaaa*, what is this? Is that all? What do we do now?"

"What?"

"Don't we have to do something for the festival? I have got all my clothes and accessories ready for all ten days of the festival. I have even invited my friends from my school. This time, Appa even agreed to bring my guy friends home for the feast".

Venilla lost patience. She turned back and snapped at the little girl.

"What is the big deal about it? See... even if the village council had agreed, the *Kammai* is not full enough to perform the festival rituals!"

"So... as Raji said... don't pin your hopes to anything", Anitha joined.

"*Akkaa*... but we can carry water pots in our cycles and your scooters from the nearby rice mill. My Uncle said they get water from the pipes all day. Please, *Akka*, let's do that."

"Listen, the last time we needed more water when Akila Akka gave birth, they did not budge. They wouldn't budge for this".

"*Akka*, if you say it's for *Maariyamman,* they will give for sure, *Akka*. Those people are scared of *Maariyamma*," the little girl pleaded her case to her best.

"Vino, let's go. It will get crowded at the water pump," Venilla lost patience and got them all to move.

Vino held the little girl's hands, and they all walked down the streets.

The sound from the hand pump, the giggles, laughter, and loud whispers filled the evening sky. The sky, for its part, let out its drama – purple, orange, blue, and pink.

"Nothing has changed. All these years, they cancelled. This year, they call it postponed".

"That's what I thought, that I can invite my parents this time for the festival. Every time, I need to find some reason to have them home".

"I don't understand *Athaachi*, are these men going to lose their heads if the Colony people participate in the ritual?"

"*Adiye*, they will even slice their heads off, such is their pride".

"What pride *Athaachi*? I saw these same men in front of Keshav Iyer that day... they acted all humbled and respectful... Who knows, if need be, these same men would go lick his feet".

"HEY... Who's that? Who is licking whose feet? What do you people even know about the village, the festival, and our *Maariyamma*? Bloody...filth."

"*Akka*, calm down. These women are new to this place. They don't know".

"What, calm down? That is why we shouldn't get our sons married to such people".

"Now, they have a say in everything! And claim a share in everything!"

Loud whispers subsided into murmurs.

"Look at my hands. This hand pump will be the death of me..."

"If it is so hard, you should have gotten married to a place where toilet pipes give water at a flick of the wrist".

All the women – married, unmarried, with kids, without kids, with bathroom, without bathroom, young, old, all started laughing at a high pitch.

"Look at these girls... all worn out", one of the women pointed at the girls walking towards the water pump, empty plastic water pots – orange, light blue, dark green swaying to the rhythm of their hands.

"Poor ones...", says someone from the crowd.

"Why go wander all around in the hot sun for nothing?" Raji smirked.

The girls looked at each other, conveying nothing but tiredness, yet the zeal to get into the crowd to fill their empty pots stayed.

One of the newer brides in the water pump crew asked Vino, "Where did you girls go?"

"We went to collect some dried cow dung for the *Maariyamman* Festival."

"Oh... but why cow dung?"

"Oh, right, you don't have *Mola Paari* back in your place. We break these cow dung cakes into pieces of different sizes and use them as manure to grow *Mola Paari* for the festival. It is grown in a kind of flower pot which is ritually meant for the festival ", Vino explained.

Venilla added, "Yes. Every house has these pots in different materials and sizes. Different kinds of millets, beans are grown in these pots".

"Yes, *Akka*, it looks like a mini field. Looks very beautiful", the little girl's eyes beamed with excitement.

"But we need more water for it. And at the end of the 10th day, the fully grown sprout pots will be carried by all of us, the entire village. We walk together carrying the pot on our heads towards our *Kammai*, emptying the pots in the water." Anitha joined too, her hands acting out the whole procession.

"The plants will be gone in the water?" The new bride was clueless yet curious.

"Yes, yes, the *Kammai* will turn into shades of green, the sprouts floating all over the water; just like a

carpet", the little girl cannot contain her excitement.

"It's our turn, get our pots", Venilla got them back to reality.

As and when the pots were getting filled, the girls rolled their towels like a bun and kept them on their heads. They took one pot on their heads, another on their waists. When the new bride tried lifting her steel pot on her waist, it kept sliding down.

"See, look at our girls... look how the pots sit on their waists", a middle-aged woman whispered into the ears of the same kind.

"This is why we should raise our girls well... teach them everything. Else, their bodies won't bend for anything", the other woman whispered back, but loud enough to reach everyone else's ears, including the new bride's.

The new bride pulled out her phone, tucked inside the saree folds near her waist. She started dialling her husband's number. She asked her husband to stop by the water pump on his scooter so that both the water pots could be taken home. Listening to her conversation, there was a burst of whispers and giggles. The girls who were about to leave stopped at the new bride.

Vino said, "*Akka*, men are not supposed to come near the hand pump. I mean, this area".

"Why?"

Vino kept both her pots on the ground.

"*Akka*, this hand pump belonged to the Colony area a few years ago. A few years ago, the main water tank went dry, and the village council tried everything to fix it, but in vain. Later, they decided to fetch water from the Colony", Vino explained.

Venilla jumped in, "And guess what? The men decided not to enter this area, citing their *Manangatti* Caste pride."

"But sent their women?" asked the new bride.

Venilla replied, "Yes, that's what it is. Just see what these women do when they walk back to their houses," Venilla giggled. "They would all sprinkle water on their heads and feet before entering their houses", she continued.

"This is again the rule of the village elders", Anitha mocked.

"They can purify all of us with the sprinkles of water, but only *Maariyamma* knows which water they will get to purify the water in these pots!"

"Who knows, they might even bring in Gomutra to purify this water as they show on our televisions!" A bunch of laughter and giggles echoed through the Mesquite trees once again.

"Okay, let's get going... Be it the main water tank or this hand pump, at the end of the day, the water pots end up on our heads..." one of the older women said as she folded her towel into a bun.

Cultural Notes and Glossary

Akka: Sister
Athaachi: Sister-in-law
Kammai: A lake-like waterbody meant for irrigation purposes found commonly in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu.
Maariyamma/Maariyamman: A regional female deity.
Aatha: Colloquial term for grandmother.
Kelavi: An informal term to refer to older women.
Anna/Anne: Brother
Ada Kirukingla: Translates to 'Hey fools!'
Manangatti: Literally translates to 'a lump of dirt/mud'. It is used as an insult.
Adiye: An informal expression to call out a girl or a woman.
Ponga di: Literally translates to 'get away from here' (addressing the girls)
Mola Paari: A ritual practice in temple festivals where sprouts of different kinds are grown in a vessel in every household.

Short Fiction

Bride of the River

Anushka Bharadwaj

In the back of Chunni's head, a river is flowing. Urgent, loud, slowly turning orange with the raging madness of million foetuses growing in the womb of the river. The unborn are afraid they will die by the hands of people they're meant to kill. The river is trying to protect them. There is still some time, my children. Grazing her way into the night, she has swallowed a few snakes and has started resembling one. Her curves are meant to lure the humans who will come close, hypnotized by her supple, fertile body, take her redness for the blush of a newlywed bride. That is when she must act. Fiercely, the water will charge. The surviving fish will slam open their windows and let out a war cry. A debris of plastic, twice the size of the longest building in the world, will launch towards the world, having spilled from the throats of the fish. The sun is a co-conspirator. Giggling, he would remain in his bed with his army, heating up their arrows for later. He has been promised an early retirement from serving the silly humans. An old fish will whisper lullabies to the womb. These children are not like children of the land. The lullabies will wake them from long ancient sleep. And they shall not be born out of a bang but a whisper — sharpened by the electrochemical dump in the old fish's gut — it will rip the centre of the water.

But what has Chunni got to do with it? She does not have time to think. Soon, the morning light will arrive and wash away — even for a while — the uncanny silhouettes who are always there like an invisible halo around Chunni, whispering to her the secrets of this ugly world. Mother will wake up too and convince her daughter that everything ugly is either a story or a dream. The world is lovely as it is, beautified by Chunni's deer-gaze. But for some time now, her mother has been hardly staying at home. Collecting firewood keeps her away till the forest swallows the sun and when the night comes, the incessant groans of unborn creatures start slicing through Chunni's bones. Childhood is always expecting the worst of fears to come true. Maybe they do come true but where do they come from? Blood beats against her head with this question again.

Where will they come from?

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The room is so dark Chunni cannot tell whether her eyes are open or shut. But she can hear the rattling sound coming from the other room, punctuated by the two women's sweaty snores next to her. Chunni lifts the hem of the mosquito net and untangles her long skirt from it before stepping out of the cot. She wants to sing loudly, lest the ghosts think she is bothered by their presence but she is not afraid of ghosts. They are friends of this village where nights are not bleached yet and dreams roam around freely, unlike in the cities where they are interrupted by the foamy skyline. But this is not a dream. No. Each breath is a verification of reality. Chunni is walking. Drawn by the white noise coming from the

other room, guided by the yellow light of the wick in the kitchen. Her long braid on her back experiences a gravitational pull it hasn't felt before. She feels alone, angry at grandmother for telling her the story of the bride of the river. *Shehzadi aur tilasmi nadi*. Stories familiarize the unfamiliar and turn the familiar into strange creatures. Like a dog who cannot help but run her tongue over the wounds that hurt her the most, Chuniya muniya keeps returning to that story. A lot of this world is strange for the girl who has only been around for a decade or so. Why is there hair under her mother's arms but not under hers or grandma's or Katrina kaif's? Why don't we gather all the waste of the world and throw it down somewhere from the edge of the earth? How long has the moon been in the sky for people to feel so ordinary about it? If floods are bad, why can't we stop them from happening?

Chunni has entered the room now. So strange, that room which feels familiar in the daylight. She is startled by a crackling sound coming from the television throned on the stool by the window. On it is displayed, a technicolour video of a woman sleeping in a grave filled with floating liquid colours. The liquid has taken the place of her torso, and she is one beautiful trembling picture on the verge of fading. Her eyes are dead but open and sad. Life seems reluctant to yet leave her tongue, which is lustrous, pink and falling out of her mouth, smacking every time it tastes the colours around her. The sight of the woman clings like grease on Chunni's eyelids. She cannot look away. The television is a myriad of nightmares that keep rolling out on the screen, momentarily disrupted by monochromatic lines trembling on the black screen, like trails of black ants dancing against the night. News flashes about the recent landslide in the mountains. Chunni cannot tell if the news reporter is shouting inside the television or inside her brain. Now, the dancing ants are back. Chunni dreads what will appear next. A fish — emerald in colour and as long as Chunni's favourite tree in the forest. The creature is lying on the shore, staring at the sun and moaning softly to scare the hungry hands away. Her mouth reminds Chunnni of the opening of a chimney, plopping uncomfortably and releasing a stinking gas that slowly fills the entire city sky. People are dying. Chunni is too young to understand death, but she can tell by the look on their faces that they will never wake up again. The dancing ants are back, indicating a signal loss. Chunni's feet are frozen, but she is headed towards a visual and sonic pilgrimage on this night. The noise on the television screen is penetrated by the soft but incessant whirring of the insects dissolved in the air. Slowly, these insects — who had been hypnotizing the little girl with their loud songs — begin to take form. Chunni's gaze follows a soft humming sound and finds the source latched to the T.V. screen. The dancing ants are replaced by that video of the dead woman in her psychedelic grave, smacking her tongue sinisterly. A red winged insect hovers above the screen before sitting on the eyes of the woman.

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Another insect follows and sits next to its friend, jabbing the T.V. screen repeatedly.

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Soon, a hundred tiny red-winged insects begin to drone violently around the stool on which the television sits and assault the screen with their stings and sounds. The grave starts turning crimson. The woman's tongue pulsates with all that collective fluttering of the insects on its surface. Urgent. Loud. Like a nightmare reaching its climax. Chunni can no longer feel the physical boundaries of her existence because the wailing insects have permeated her body, tore its boundary and assimilated her into their own kind. Now, as Chunni stands seven feet away from the television, with her anklets vibrating from the piercing shrill, she can see herself amongst the insects. They are all glued to the screen — which has become the shade of the setting sun — a horde of mourners wailing and embracing the corpse of their mother.

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Once upon a time — back when trees walked on the earth and the universe was one big but colourless ambrosia — there lived a *Shehzadi* who discovered colours. It was said that she fetched them from her dreams. Nobody knew where they came from. The dreams, the colours, the bride...

She was the only creature in the entire universe who could dream because she was the only one unhappy amongst them. Her dreaming ability was a cosmic accident, but it led to the creation of beautiful colours in the world. She painted the sun yellow and moss, green and purple. Then, she fell in love with a human who came too close to her and discovered Shehzadi's dreams. The truth confounded him. He had expected to see God but all he saw was a white light inside her soul. The man stole it all, the soul, the dreams, the colours.

"Since then," said grandmother, blowing her nostrils in a theatrical rage, "Shehzadi's spirit has been sleeping in the bed of the *tilasmi* river, preparing her children for the war against the man."

Chunni felt the halo closing in on her crouched knees, pulling her freshly oiled strands to put the coward silhouettes at ease. She leaned back at her grandmother's thighs and looked up to meet her gaze. It was difficult to understand the expressions on her face as she poured more oil on Chunni's head.

"What did the human do with the *Shehzadi*?"

"Killed her."

"What did he do with her dreams?"

"Reproduced them."

"What did he do with the colours?"

"Made them fight amongst each other."

"What do her children look like, dadi?"

The old woman squinted sharply at the comb, picking lice one by one and killing them on her nails with a godlike-childlike grin.

"Like these insects" she said, laughing at the glistening red on her nails, "but bigger, fiercer and darker."

Chunni and Asha slip away from the class after realizing that madam is not going to wake up before noon. Most of the children stayed back for the midday meal. Sitting on the mound by the river, the girls fix their props quietly. All the important words have been exchanged, all evidence declared to be true. There will be more floods and lesser moons. The force of the water will unroot the trees who will once again, walk on the earth, trampling us like tadpoles in their way. And with them will come the children of Shehzadi. Chunni had seen a glimpse of them when she was five years old. She has memories of her grandmother putting water filled plates near flickering kerosene lamps and showing Chunni how insects unglued themselves from the flame and jumped into the water.

"Dadi, why do they jump into the water?"

"They are learning how to swim," dadi would whisper and tease her beloved granddaughter, "say, chuniya muniya, do you want to hear a story?"

Chunni and Asha are ready with their makeshift nets. They have torn and then stitched together some ragged pieces of a mosquito net, fended with bamboo sticks from the four sides and upholstered with dry leaves of grass. The nets are small and rickety, but they would do. The sun is hot above their heads and dropping its tiny soldiers in the river to protect the Shehzadi's children. Tiny, golden warriors dancing in the water. They are so beautiful, Chunni observes and wonders how beautiful the children that they are protecting must be. But when they dip their nets in the water and pull them up, the girls are shocked. Mother had lied to Chunni. Ugly things exist beyond grandmother's stories. The insects caught in their nets are wriggling helplessly, fighting with their broken sounds coming from their throats scraped by bamboo splinters. Unlike in Chunni's dream, their

wings are clipped and under-bellies, colourless and dense, like smoke. The girls look at each other. Each knows what the other is thinking.

"Should we not help them instead?" Asha mumbles sadly.

The silhouettes of the past evoke the ones from the future who flutter in panic.

Help them in stealing the colours?!

Chunni shakes her head, "they will kill everyone."

"What if we try to stop them gently?"

Now Chunni has heard a thing or two about gentleness from elders. That apparently it never works, especially not on children.

Chunni shakes her head again, "they will not listen to us."

"Why?"

The golden warriors have become stronger on the waves. Chunni watches the river flowing and imagines a hundred little children of the Shehzadi gyrating in this strange tilasmi soup that she always thought of as her personal favourite thing about the village. Stories familiarize the unfamiliar and turn the familiar into strange creatures. Soon, these strange creatures will be inside her and Chunni herself will become an unfamiliar being.

"They can't hear us. Their ears must be filled with their own noise."

"Should we ask the elders for help?"

"Their ears too."

The girls look at each other and begin eating the insects one after another. They dip the empty net in the river again. It gobbled up a few sun-soldiers and burped into the water. To passersby, it looks like the girls are baiting insects for laughs. They walk off before realizing that what seem to be insects from a distance are in fact, children up at close. Real children who we keep thinking of as fictional characters from a fictional land.

With each insect that Chunni feeds on, she is losing parts of herself to become part of the river bride. For now, she is only Shehzadi's veil. With a broken and fearful heart, she eats the insects, hoping they and their mother will leave from the face of the earth. She — and her silhouettes — have forgotten the most important thing about the Shehzadi. She is a spirit, a gust of anger and hope that can always change bodies. Soon, Chunni will become Shehzadi of the tilasmi river with a hundred unborn inside her, waiting for the humans to come close, hypnotized by the river's supple, fertile body, take her redness for the blush of a newlywed bride. That is when they must act. Fiercely, the water will charge.

The Apollonian

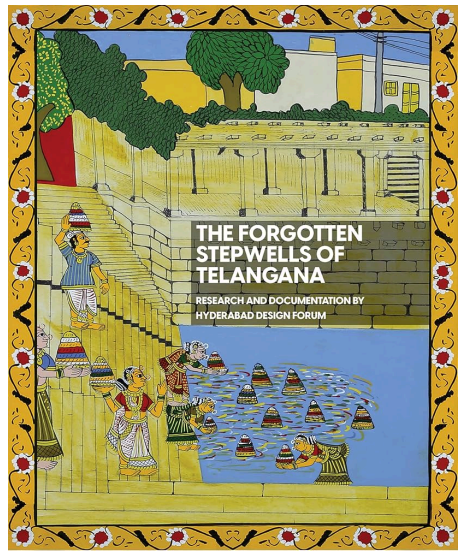
BOOK REVIEWS

The Forgotten Stepwells of Telangana: Hyderabad Design Forum

Ar Afreen Fatima

The Forgotten Stepwells of Telangana — Remembering Water in the Semi-Arid Deccan

Across the world's drylands, from the Sahel to Rajasthan, the slow rediscovery of ancestral water wisdom has become both a policy imperative and a cultural awakening (Gies 34–36). In an age of climate uncertainty, governments and communities are once again investing in the documentation and revival of ancient hydrological architectures — qanats, aflaj, foggaras, and, in India's case, stepwells (Strang 112–15). These subterranean monuments, long forgotten beneath urban sprawl, are re-emerging as symbols of ecological resilience and identity acknowledgment (Jain-Neubauer, *Stepwells* 22). Within India's semi-arid heartland, the new state of Telangana has positioned itself at the forefront of this renaissance: public–private partnerships now fund the restoration of baolis (stepwells) not merely as heritage objects but as living infrastructures of water equity (Ramamurthy, "Government" 156).[1] *The Forgotten Stepwells of Telangana* enters this global conversation as both archive and manifesto — an act of cultural restitution and scientific curiosity (Ramamurthy, "Footsteps" 15).[2]



Reclaiming the Deccan's Subterranean Memory

The book, researched and compiled by the Hyderabad Design Forum under the stewardship of architect Yeshwant Ramamurthy, is the first systematic attempt to document over 175 stepwells scattered across Telangana's parched landscape (Ramamurthy, "Introduction" 12).[3] Published with grants from the Kakatiya Heritage Trust and the state's Municipal Administration and Urban Development Department, it stands as tangible evidence of how local governments can translate identity politics into heritage stewardship (Parthasarathy, "Preface" 9).[4] The project's inception, as Ramamurthy recounts in his Prologue titled *Footsteps to History*, was almost accidental: a field trip to study a landlord's fort in Medak revealed a colossal, hidden baoli in Kichannapalli (Ramamurthy, "Footsteps" 16).[2] That moment of

astonishment — "an epiphanous experience," in his words — catalyzed a statewide quest to unearth Telangana's buried aquifers and their architectural vessels (Ramamurthy, "Footsteps" 17).[2]

Ramamurthy's narrative captures the quintessential tension of contemporary heritage work: untrained architects turned field historians, navigating between the rigour of documentation and the humility of wonder (Ramamurthy, "Footsteps" 18).[2] With no archival maps or departmental records to guide them, the team relied on satellite imagery, oral memory, and the "dark blobs" of terrain maps to locate forgotten wells (Ramamurthy, "Footsteps" 19).[2] Their enterprise echoes the citizen-science movements that have revived stepwells in Gujarat and lakes in Bengaluru, demonstrating how participatory mapping can bridge modern technology with vernacular knowledge (Livingston 89–91). The prologue situates this labour within the moral urgency of water scarcity. Stepwells, Ramamurthy reminds us, once synchronized agrarian cycles, religious festivals, and community life; their neglect mirrors society's disconnection from water ethics (Ramamurthy, "Footsteps" 20).[2] Telangana's stepwells, though less ornate than Gujarat's, embody "humility in functionality" — a phrase that reframes aesthetic value through ecological purpose (Ramamurthy, "Footsteps" 21).[2] By identifying these wells as archaeological, historical, social, and spiritual assets, the book transforms regional architecture into a lens for understanding the human–water relationship itself (Jain-Neubauer, Foreword 7).[5]

For an international audience engaged with the "Blue Humanities," this work offers an Indian counterpart to the oceanic turn in environmental thought (Mentor 45). Where maritime scholars of the Atlantic and Pacific worlds speak of fluidity, migration, and memory, *The Forgotten Stepwells of Telangana* explores their inland analogue: descent, stillness, and renewal (Strang 78). The stepwell, inverted architecture of light and shadow, becomes a metaphor for both ecological depth and cultural introspection (Parthasarathy, "Ode" 24).[6] It is in this sense that Ramamurthy's project converses with the global realization that water is life — not a resource to be consumed but a relationship to be restored (Gies 102).

Telangana's semi-arid ecology heightens this relevance. Straddling the Deccan plateau "south of North and north of South," as the Preface notes, the region embodies climatic extremity and cultural hybridity (Parthasarathy, "Preface" 10).[4] Its medieval dynasties — the Kakatiyas, Qutb Shahis, and Asaf Jahis — engineered intricate water systems of tanks, canals, and baolis that fused Hindu temple cosmology with Islamic garden geometry (Eaton 134–37). The book thus positions stepwells as the architectural expression of a "dynamic matrix of syncretism," contesting the purity narratives that once marginalized Deccani art (Ramamurthy,

"Syncretism" 46).[7] In our era of cultural polarization, this argument for hybridity acquires global resonance: it suggests that environmental resilience, like cultural identity, thrives on interdependence (Wagner 56).

The volume's architecture mirrors the layered complexity of its subject. Following a Foreword by eminent historian Dr. Jutta Jain-Neubauer — whose seminal *Stepwells of Gujarat* (1981) remains the field's cornerstone — the book unfolds through essays that traverse mythology, hydrology, construction technology, iconography, and contemporary conservation (Jain-Neubauer, Stepwells 12). Neubauer's foreword situates Telangana within India's broader water-architecture tradition, identifying the work as "a commendable years-long effort... the first such to deal with water monuments in the southern part of India" (Jain-Neubauer, Foreword 5).[5] She connects the region's wells to the Vedic and Puranic cosmology of water — from *Agni Purana*'s rituals of consecrating tanks to the Chhandogya Upanishad's proclamation that "Water indeed assumes all these forms. Meditate on water" (Jain-Neubauer, Foreword 7).[5] Her essay frames the study within eco-philosophical and art-historical discourse, emphasizing that water monuments, far from peripheral utilities, "rival the most elaborate temples or mosques... in their complex architectural and spatial figuration" (Jain-Neubauer, Foreword 8).[5]

This intertextual breadth allows the book to transcend the limits of architectural survey. Its twelve thematic essays and extensive appendices interlace scientific observation with cultural phenomenology (Ramamurthy, "Introduction" 14).[3] *An Ode to Water* by Ar. Sneha Parthasarathy reads almost as a planetary meditation — moving from Sumerian and Vedic creation myths to the Indus Valley's Great Bath and the hydraulics of Mohenjo-Daro (Parthasarathy, "Ode" 23).[6] She interprets stepwells as products of the "hydrological and hydro-social cycles working in tandem" — a formulation that anticipates contemporary sustainability theory (Parthasarathy, "Ode" 25).[6] Other essays decode construction technologies, examine the geomorphology of Telangana, and explore tantric abstraction as a dialogue between earth and water (Rao 67–69). The volume's latter sections document case studies — from the Janakampet Ashtamukhi Stepwell to the Bansilalpet restoration — demonstrating how heritage revival can regenerate neighbourhood economies (Murthy 178).[8]

What distinguishes *The Forgotten Stepwells of Telangana* from conventional heritage inventories is its narrative sensitivity. The authors are self-confessed "uninitiated investigators... merely seeking to tell a simple story with the same freshness as its message" (Ramamurthy, "Footsteps" 14).[2] This candour yields a prose that oscillates between ethnography and reverie, allowing readers to sense both the material precision of measurements and the metaphysical pull of descent (Bidarkar 112).[9] Each stepwell is mapped, photographed, and rendered, yet what

lingers is not data but atmosphere: the smell of algae, the cool echo of stone, the spiral of light at noon (Parthasarathy, "Ode" 26).[6] In this way the book performs what the Blue Humanities call "immersive knowledge" — an embodied engagement with water as medium, archive, and affect (Mentor 78).

The editors' decision to juxtapose academic essays with poetic reflections (for instance, "Life in the Bagh: Remembering Stepwells Nostalgically") transforms the compendium into a polyphonic text (Srikanth 98).[10] Through these shifts in tone, the stepwell emerges as both object and metaphor: a descent into memory, a reservoir of collective identity, and a mirror to the ecological anxieties of our age. The inclusion of female authors like Parthasarathy, Aparna Bidarkar, and Deepika Srikanth Murthy foregrounds gendered relationships with water — themes echoed in global eco-feminist discourse (Shiva 44–46). Essays such as "WWW: Women | Well | Water" and "Bodies of Liquid Life" extend the conversation from architecture to ethics, showing how wells once mediated the labour, ritual, and emancipation of women (Bidarkar 113; Murthy 135).[98]

Government, Community, and the Politics of Revival

The chapter "The Government Steps In" narrates a rare success story of state intervention in heritage. Telangana's Municipal Administration has not only financed the documentation project but initiated restorations at Mozamjahi Market, Qutb Shahi Tombs, Paigah Tombs, and several urban stepwells (Ramamurthy, "Government" 157).[1] The rejuvenation of Bansilalpet Baoli, once a garbage pit, now a public plaza, exemplifies how water heritage can catalyze socio-economic renewal (Ramamurthy, "Government" 158).[1] In the global South, where heritage often competes with urban development, such examples demonstrate that conservation and modernization need not be opposites (Appadurai 201). The state's ambition to obtain a UNESCO World Heritage Site tag underscores the shifting perception of stepwells from parochial relics to global commons (Jain-Neubauer, Foreword 10).[5]

Ramamurthy's acknowledgment of political will is balanced by gratitude toward local communities — villagers whose oral histories guided the team, women who remembered seasonal festivals at the wells, and volunteers who cleared debris (Ramamurthy, "Footsteps" 22).[2] This collaborative ethic aligns with current paradigms of community-based conservation and "living heritage" (Smith 134). The book, therefore, is not merely about architectural rescue but about reclaiming agency: allowing citizens to re-enter the narrative of their own waters (Gupta 89).

Water as Cultural Intelligence

At its intellectual core, *The Forgotten Stepwells of Telangana* proposes that water is a form of intelligence — a cultural, ecological, and aesthetic intelligence accumulated over centuries (Strang 145). Neubauer's foreword articulates this

when she describes the book as "a praiseworthy approach to the investigation of how water is given a form and spatial expression... curated and negotiated in the defined geographical and cultural region of Telangana" (Jain-Neubauer, Foreword 6).[5] By reading stepwells as embodiments of hydro-technical knowledge, artistic vision, and social order, the authors restore to Indian architecture a dimension often eclipsed by temple and palace studies (Michell 56).

The essays reveal how stepwells encoded complex hydro-geomorphic understanding — the alignment with aquifers, the use of granite and laterite for percolation, and the modulation of temperature through subterranean chambers (Rao 70). They were climate devices avant la lettre, achieving what modern engineers call passive cooling and groundwater recharge (Gies 189). Yet they were also theatres of ritual and myth. The stairways choreographed processions, transforming the act of fetching water into a rite of communion between human and element (Parthasarathy, "Ode" 27).[6] Such insights invite a rethinking of sustainability not as a technical metric but as a cultural practice (Wagner 78).

Intersections with Ritual and Aesthetics

One of the book's major contributions lies in recovering the ritual dimension of stepwells within the Deccan context. Essays link the wells to festivals such as Bathukamma, where women honour the Mother Goddess through floral offerings (Murthy 136).[8] This connection between feminine divinity and hydrological cycles parallels traditions across semi-arid Asia — from Iran's Anahita temples to Morocco's zawiyas — reinforcing the global anthropological thesis that water worship emerges from aridity (Strang 167). In tracing these continuities, *The Forgotten Stepwells of Telangana* transforms local folklore into comparative religion.

Artistically, the documentation highlights Telangana's distinctive aesthetic — restrained geometry, basalt masonry, and the integration of sculpture with structure (Jain-Neubauer, Foreword 9).[5] Unlike the exuberant ornamentation of Rani ki Vav in Gujarat, the Deccan wells achieve sublimity through proportion and depth (Jain-Neubauer, *Stepwells* 134). Neubauer observes that their "immense art-historical significance" derives from this synthesis of engineering and poetics (Jain-Neubauer, Foreword 9).[5] Her reading invites further comparative research on how regional materials and dynastic politics shaped hydrological art forms across India's ecological zones (Michell 78).

From a scholarly perspective, the book bridges disciplinary divides. It synthesizes textual analysis (of *Manasara, Mayamatam, Aparajitaprccha*), hydrological science, and ethnographic observation — an approach consonant with the "two-eyed seeing" advocated in contemporary Indigenous and ecological studies

(Bartlett 45). The field methodology, combining GIS mapping with local storytelling, anticipates what future heritage documentation must become: multi-scalar, participatory, and digitally accessible (Livingston 112). Although Ramamurthy humbly admits to "academic imperfections," the outcome is methodologically avant-garde (Ramamurthy, "Footsteps" 20).[2] Its fusion of empirical and experiential knowledge situates it alongside works like Erica Gies's Water Always Wins and Veronica Strang's Water: Nature and Culture (Gies 201; Strang 189).

For global researchers, Telangana now offers a comparative dataset to complement Gujarat's and Rajasthan's well-studied typologies. The inclusion of maps, comparative tables, and coordinates enables integration with international heritage databases such as UNESCO's World Water Heritage Atlas (UNESCO 56). Furthermore, the book's implicit argument — that stepwells should be read as infrastructural palimpsests linking hydrology, gender, and governance — provides a conceptual model transferable to other semi-arid regions in Africa, West Asia, and Latin America (Appadurai 234).

The Politics of Memory

The title's adjective "Forgotten" is not rhetorical; it indexes a colonial and postcolonial amnesia. British gazetteers catalogued Telangana's forts and temples but ignored its wells, viewing them as utilitarian rather than monumental (Eaton 156). Post-independence modernization compounded this neglect, replacing communal wells with borewells and piped networks that erased collective custodianship (Gupta 101). By resurrecting these architectures, the book also resurrects a moral geography — one where water was common, sacred, and shared (Shiva 67).

This recovery has implications beyond heritage. It challenges the epistemic hierarchy that privileges written archives over built ones, and state narratives over vernacular memory (Smith 156). In doing so, it aligns with decolonial scholarship that seeks to "provincialize" modern infrastructure studies (Chakrabarty 45). The stepwell, as reinterpreted here, is a decolonial archive: a subterranean text authored by anonymous masons, women, and villagers whose names rarely enter history (Bidarkar 114).[9]

If the book has a limitation, it lies in its celebratory tone; the methodological reflection could be further deepened with quantitative hydrological data or community-use assessments post-restoration (Rao 72). Nevertheless, such lacunae are secondary to its achievement in establishing Telangana within the cartography of global water heritage. As Neubauer notes, "none of the built heritage is created in a vacuum," and this compendium succeeds precisely because it situates wells within living ecologies of ritual, labour, and art (Jain-Neubauer, Foreword 10).[5]

The work also raises critical questions for future policy. How might the

revitalization of stepwells intersect with contemporary water-governance frameworks such as India's Jal Shakti Abhiyan or the UN SDG 6 agenda? (GoI 34). Can these ancient systems inform urban groundwater management in rapidly growing cities like Hyderabad? The Bansilalpet project suggests that heritage can be infrastructural, but long-term sustainability will depend on embedding these sites within community stewardship programs (Ramamurthy, "Government" 159).[1] The authors' emphasis on participatory engagement provides an ethical blueprint for such integration (Smith 178).

For readers beyond India, *The Forgotten Stepwells of Telangana* offers more than regional documentation; it is a meditation on how humanity relates to water under conditions of scarcity. In the semi-arid tropics, where climate change intensifies drought cycles, the rediscovery of ancestral aquifer systems provides both technical and philosophical guidance (Gies 234). The stepwell, by design, reconciles extraction with reverence — a lesson urgently relevant to global water policy (Strang 201). Its descending geometry teaches that sustainability begins with humility: one must go down to draw water, to remember dependence before consumption (Parthasarathy, "Ode" 28).[6]

This ethos resonates with Indigenous cosmologies worldwide — from the Hopi sipapu, the spiral of emergence, to the African concept of Ubuntu that links communal life to shared wells (Bartlett 67). Telangana's stepwells thus join a planetary narrative of "blue archives," reminding us that civilizations endure not by conquering water but by conversing with it (Mentor 89).

Conclusion: Toward a New Hydro-Humanism

The Forgotten Stepwells of Telangana arrives at a moment when heritage, ecology, and identity are converging. Its 350-page corpus, dense with drawings, essays, and photographs, is more than a coffee-table book; it is a declaration that architecture can heal ecological amnesia (Ramamurthy, "Introduction" 15).[3] By weaving mythology with measurement, the authors restore to the Deccan its rightful place in India's hydraulic imagination and, by extension, invite the world to reconsider its own water legacies (Jain-Neubauer, Foreword 11).[5]

As nations struggle with aquifer depletion and urban heat, Telangana's model — integrating government initiative, academic inquiry, and civic pride — offers a replicable framework (GoI 56). The book stands not only as documentation but as diplomacy: a message from a semi-arid region to a warming planet, asserting that heritage and sustainability are inseparable. In its pages, water speaks — as memory, as medium, and as moral compass — reminding us, in the simplest and most profound sense, that to forget our wells is to forget ourselves (Ramamurthy, "Footsteps" 23).[2]

Endnotes

[1] Yeshwant Ramamurthy, "The Government Steps In," in The Forgotten Stepwells of Telangana, edited by Yeshwant Ramamurthy, Hyderabad Design Forum, 2023, pp. 156–59.

[2] Yeshwant Ramamurthy, "Footsteps to History," in The Forgotten Stepwells of Telangana, pp. 14–23.

[3] Yeshwant Ramamurthy, "Introduction," in The Forgotten Stepwells of Telangana, pp. 12–15.

[4] Sneha Parthasarathy, "Preface," in The Forgotten Stepwells of Telangana, pp. 9–10.

[5] Jutta Jain-Neubauer, Foreword. The Forgotten Stepwells of Telangana, pp. 5–11.

[6] Sneha Parthasarathy, "An Ode to Water," in The Forgotten Stepwells of Telangana, pp. 23–28.

[7] Yeshwant Ramamurthy, "Syncretism in Deccani Hydrology," in The Forgotten Stepwells of Telangana, pp. 45–46.

[8] Deepika Srikanth Murthy, "Bodies of Liquid Life," in The Forgotten Stepwells of Telangana, pp. 134–36, 178.

[9] Aparna Bidarkar, "WWW: Women | Well | Water," in The Forgotten Stepwells of Telangana, pp. 112–14.

[10] Deepika Srikanth, "Life in the Bagh," in The Forgotten Stepwells of Telangana, p. 98.

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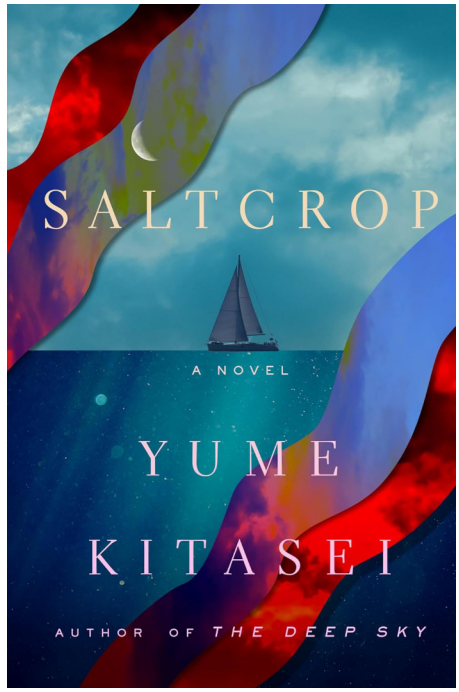
Saltcrop: Yume Kitasei

Neha Yadav

In an interview upon her novel Saltcrop's release, Yume Kitasei elaborated on her writing style, with a focus on the character arc and thereby immersive worldbuilding of an apocalyptic world through their trials and tribulations. It aligns with the author's personal dedicated credit "for my sisters," (Kitasei) a thematic sisterhood that resonates with her interview statement and the book's narration punctuated by all three Shimizu sisters' points of view. By tackling sisterhood with shifting temporal and spatial dimensions, the sisters acclimatize to a dystopic odyssey. Kitasei's writing explores identity and belonging while balancing family dynamics. In their world, the psychological disablement arises from the stress that climate change places on lifestyle, agricultural, and food practices. The topographical landscape of their "ugly" pink house on Magnolia Lane is their emotional anchor in a crumbling world. It is an ecological allegory of fluidity, control, and survival in which crisis becomes a commodified weapon to exercise control, largely by agro-corporations like Renewal and EarthWorks. The novel examines this psychological drive through its stationed lives, moving bodies, and displaced and resettled bodies. The sisters' distinct personalities enable the communication of ecological decline and resilience in situations where destruction has been used as leverage for control.



The primary ecological collapse of rising ocean water levels and the blight-affected crops and seeds has led to a world of displaced settlements. The land is further submerged, and the salt and weeds hinder crop production, creating new realities such as underwater forests, offshore platform communities, inaccessible health systems, and food insecurity. Additionally, the mutant flora and fauna add to the hybridity of climatic identity. The novel speculates on the multidimensional deprivation through sisterhood conflict of livelihood and well-being. The Shimizu sisters' interaction as "cognitive partners" and individual narration indicate an intergenerational cycle of psycho-emotional patterns. Their conflicts place them in the zone of proximal development against the broader environment issues.

The Shimizu family, consisting of the eldest Nora, practical Carmen, and half-sister Skipper "Rosa," is at the heart of this dystopic narrative. The household includes their dead mother, aging grandmother Mara Craven, Uncle Tot, and a physically distant father. The sisters' relationship dynamics and their family roles often clash. Yet each sister compromises with their passions in order to survive. Ultimately, the entire household is tethered to the trauma of their mother's death in their childhood. When they receive a message from Nora to rescue her, their concern for her safety serves as a catalyst for transformation. They set sail on understanding their own self-concept and learning to place their mortality within the broader framework of crisis. An endangered sense of security stems from the knowledge of the settlements they pass, the food they eat, and the flora and fauna they encounter in a world touched by man-made changes.

The sea and crop are two thematic elements of mirror ecologies, which sprang from decay and revival. They intersect here to question whether healthy life can germinate from a damaged self-regulating biosphere, especially where communication is a barrier. Starting with Skipper's perspective, one realizes the promptness to explore in order to understand nature's message; with Carmen, the need to remember our roots; and with Nora, the urgency to make a change. Their narrative timeline highlights each sister's strengths. For example, reliance solely on Skipper's sailing skills aboard their boat Bumblebee would have hindered their progress without Carmen's socializing skills in order to extract information about Nora's whereabouts. The construction and maintenance of the boat were largely due to Carmen's persistence and Skipper's fascination. Their agency paves the first steps towards owning a place in a turbulent ecological crisis.

The festering generational trauma as well as ecological trauma reveal a state of stagnation. The ill grandmother's dissolving consciousness and memories of a lifestyle decline since the rapidly expanding ecological decay. The ecological trauma of seeds unable to grow and the catalyst of their mother's death by overdosing. This event leads to Nora's guilt, anxiety, and paranoia; Carmen's coping mechanism through social acceptance and order; and Skipper's sense of alienation. This causes miscommunication and distrust between the sisters. The secret police and corporate spies take advantage of this distrust to divide the sisters. The trauma further festers into medical issues in characters like Carmen, the little girl Hilda, and the waiter at the beach town's restaurant with Ama-rash.

Both the aspects of ecosystems and agricultural practices clash with one another, with underwater forests and hills becoming islands. While the sea level rises, it engulfs land, and crops can no longer grow as they did above the brine water level. The advancing calamity of land space shortage and increasing unsuitable arable land has given rise to food scarcity. A mediation between both ecological

problems is shown through Nora, who seeks to develop the salt-resistant seed. She takes on a Promethean role in the overt narrative of resistance. She desires to help humanity by searching for unaltered soybeans in order to study their survival rate to blight, in contrast to Renewal's genetically engineered soybeans and its overdependence on Amaranthine, even if it means stealing the pre-Renewal seeds from Vault City and revealing it to the public. She is psychologically driven towards Promethean resolution of pre-Renewal soybeans due to her childhood. Her mother's gardening attempts without dependency on Amaranthine proved futile. Instead, it was replaced by the spraying of chemicals to eradicate invasive weeds and complete cleansing upon her tragic end.

Kitasei examines whether the consumption attitudes towards food and information replenish or decay the community and world health. The agro-corporation with the political machinery has spread the propaganda of contamination, inhibiting communication between people and the land. Renewal blames the plight on people's non-adherence to their standardized seeds. It not only supplies chemically engineered produce but also carefully curated propaganda on food edibility. The susceptibility to misinformation influences compliance towards Renewal as the only solution to infected crops. Access to consumable goods further reveals the social inequity.

The food is a vocal character. The subjugation of the consumers starts with the elimination of Mr. Farrow's blueberries, Prometheus' soybeans, and further by the surveillance of Nora's letter in order to stop her from finding the pre-Renewal soybeans. It is through the food that ends up on their plate and ultimately in their stomach that the wrongfulness of its cultivation and consumption practices is revealed. Their mother's refusal to use chemicals in their food extends to the thinly illusive freedom to grow and harvest healthy food, largely due to the limited availability of information after the pre-blight years. Food pervades throughout their journey from the garbage heap, cities, Renewal workers unloading crates, and the new country's restaurant with crimson-clad Amaranthine plant workers. On the journey to Vault City, Skipper's observation of the crimson water upon which Bumblebee sails is another reminder of Amaranthine. Skipper's description of Bumblebee as an island reiterates that the danger she found back home still follows them.

The further effects of these post-Renewal food consumption encounters on the physical body are indicated through Nora's fever and digestive issues, Carmen's and the little girl Hilda's bodily fungal growth, and being prescribed pills to protect their bodies against Amaranthine exposure. Kitasei describes Carmen's growing fungal infection as a mushroom across the novel. Skipper describes the stained glass at their home with the image of mushrooms. This image of blooming mushrooms at the

bottom of the tree reflects the symbiotic response, rather than the cause, to life and decay of organic matter. This creation of life extends to communication between plants through the wood wide web. The mushrooms stand for the blight's initial impression on Nora's childhood in the forest, as well as Hilda and her father's distrust in Renewal that was fed to make the workers more productive and less hungry at Vault City.

It is established that Renewal has a hegemonic hold over the food and crops. The carrying capacity of the environment across geographies has also become largely commodified by Renewal. The topographical landscape also indicates the "luxury emissions" and "survival emissions," such as the cannibals and Sisterland residents. When Carmen, Skipper, and Jackson Barker dock at the sea, they encounter the village huts of platformers upon the floating platform of oil rigs. This is an indicator of human displacement, where people resort to cannibalism and piracy for sustenance.

Amaranthine is packaged as a choice between health and decay. However, Renewal's act of withholding information about the chemical, the settlers' duplicitous hospitality in the floating village, and Jackson's deliberate manipulation to not sail towards Vault City are all sites of conflict. Jackson hoarding the stolen egg from Carmen and Skipper on the boat is a direct concealment of communication channels and information. The aspect of communication and choice is constant just as much as seeds and women's bodies are sites of regeneration. By hiding and erasing blight-tolerant seeds, the Renewal seeks to control the autonomy of its reproduction quality. The sisters have to overcome Renewals' desire for ownership over the seeds and Jackson's pursuit of a claim over Carmen's mobility and body. In their proactive decision to search for and rescue Nora, they seize their own independence.

Renewal's strategic modulation is used to cull countermovement. Its advertisement and promotion of produce, policies, and propaganda are under the guise of combatting the blight of crops. Through Nora and her boss Rafael Agguire, and Prometheus, Kitasei shows how corporate warfare becomes a barrier in the dissemination of information for social equity. Carmen's compliance and resolute belief in the Renewal gradually fade away as she is compelled to question the inconsistency in its engineered narrative. This shows how rehabilitation and regrowth through an engagement with nested anxieties of bioecological environments is an intense task. By grounding it in the intrapersonal and interpersonal communication among the Shimizu sisters, the compounding factors inhibiting their progress are placed in the wider lens of the food justice that Nora advocates.

One wonders if the tidal occurings have also been impacted by the novel's climate-altered reality. However, the novel's inclusion of Mori Yuzan's artwork to depict the ebb and flow of the currents,

waves, and ripples compels its inherent beauty to be recollected by the readers' sensory receptors in its empathetic pedagogy. The sisters' multi-perspectives each cover internal conflicts and ideas of exploration, rooted in community, and the urge to construct a better future for the world while understanding what survival means.

The Apollonian

LITERARY TRANSLATION

Literary Translation

A Sea Change

Victor Leenus

Translated from Malayalam
by Ambika M S and Dhananjay Rajendran

I got up and opened the door.

It was Rony. He was wearing a chequered mundu[2] and crumpled shirt, both damp in patches, but not from sweat. I had never seen him step out in clothes like these. He was always well-dressed. I squinted at him through sleepy eyes.

"How do you sleep like this? I've been knocking for a long time now!" Rony said.

I checked my watch. It was half past one. A cold wind forced its way in through the open door. I cast a wistful glance at my bed and the warm, rumpled blanket.

Rony entered and pulled the door shut. "You're not going back to sleep any time soon. Put on a shirt. I need you for something."

I slouched towards the clothes-rack.

"Cigarettes?" he asked.

"Whatever's left in that packet."

By the time I put on a shirt and turned around, he was lighting the last Charminar left in the packet.

Rony took a long pull. "You want a puff?"

I reached for the cigarette, inhaled deeply, and returned it. As the smoke spread inside me, I began to feel awake.

Rony stepped outside. I switched off the lights, locked the door, and followed him.

His new car was parked near the gate. He started the engine even before I got in.

When the car began to move, I asked, "What's the matter?"

He told me. It was about this girl whom he had broken out of a hotel room in Bombay. The lad who had taken her there was someone I knew. A lanky, light-complexioned fellow with the sultry beauty of an art nouveau sketch.

"Five days ... five men ...," the girl had said as she travelled back with Rony, before breaking into sobs. "I loved him so!"

Rony continued speaking in a detached tone. He had learned from a common friend that this guy had run away with a girl. Knowing the guy, he had sensed trouble. So he went to Bombay.

The car took a bend in the road.

MG Road lay sleepless, flanked by twin columns of mercury lamps. We passed two policemen on beat patrol.

"Why did you go to all that trouble? It's not as if you don't get enough girls around here."

Flicking the cigarette butt out through the window, he said, "Live dangerously...who said that?"

"I don't know," I replied.

He continued the story.

It wasn't hard for him to locate her. He had many friends, others like him, everywhere he went. Pick a moment when the girl would be left alone, reach the hotel room that she was locked up in, gain her trust.

It must have been easy for him, I know. He is irresistible. What bourgeois girl wouldn't see in him a dheerodatta nayaka.

She hadn't even asked his name, he said.

I could imagine all of it. The brave, and therefore vulnerable, girl glimpses a hypnotic promise of new life in the warmth of his eyes. Unsurprising.

In the flight, she leaned on his shoulder and slept.

They took a taxi from the aerodrome. He sat close to her. She kept her eyes wide open, taking in each sight on the way, as if she were seeing them all afresh. As they passed a junction, she said, "Ayyo, we should have taken a turn here."

That is when he said it. "I know. But we're not going to your home straightaway. Spend the night with me. One more night, one more person. Doesn't make a huge difference, does it?"

Rony fell silent.

I could picture how her eyes had glazed over, instantly.

After a long pause, I said, "Then?"

Stirring out of a daze, Rony spoke. "It was half past seven when we got home. All this while, she hadn't uttered a word. Even after we got there, she remained silent. I showed her into her room. Why don't you have a nice shower, I said. She didn't reply or even raise her head in response. I stayed there till she entered the bathroom and closed the door behind her. Once I heard the bathtub filling with water, I came away.

"I switched on the radio, gulped down half a pint, and began strolling around the room. Damn it, I was whistling to myself! I was in such spirits!"

He paused for a while, then resumed speaking. "It was ten or fifteen minutes later that I went back to the room.

"There was no sound coming from the bathroom. I knocked on the door, still whistling. No response from the other side. Suddenly I remembered the razor-set I keep in the bathroom."

The car took another turn and entered an alleyway. At the end of the road, the entrance to Rony's "headquarters" lay closed, its windows dark. It was a house that he had rented solely for his pleasure-activities.

Rony got out and opened the gate. He then parked the car in a garage adjoining the left side of the house. A door that led into the house from the garage was closed now.

We got down and walked towards the front of the house. Rony opened the door with the key and turned on the lights. I followed him inside and closed the door.

Rony said, "Sit down. I really need a drink. Got a god almighty thirst! What will you have?"

"Whatever. Just a sip."

He came pushing the trolley. He poured me some Scotch with water and downed half a glass, neat.

I took a sip. "You didn't finish what you were saying."

Rony sat down next to me. He lit a 555, and handed me one as well. He stocked those by the carton.

He continued. "I smashed the door down. She was lying on the floor. The blood had started to clot. The slash was on the left side of her neck. The Gillette blade that lay next to her right hand — I'd used it only once."

Releasing swirls of smoke, he said, "I don't understand."

"What?"

"Why did she do that? I wouldn't have been her first. And I would have taken her to her home tomorrow." He shook his head and repeated, "I don't understand."

I had an inkling. I could imagine the sudden resolve that steeled her hand to draw a blade across one of her own blood vessels. But I remained silent.

With his gallant eyes shining on her, only her, he had said, "You must think now that your life is over. But in fact, this is only the beginning. You will have someone in your life again. A very fortunate man..." He would never be able to imagine what had transpired in her mind at that moment.

I asked myself, over and over: on whom had she avenged herself? Was it on Rony? Or was it on herself, for succumbing once again to the promise of life?

He put his glass down and took a long drag on his cigarette. Then he got up, stamping the butt out on the floor. "Come, we don't have time."

I emptied my glass and followed him. He opened the door and switched on the light. The room was boarded up on all sides.

Rolled up in a coverlet, the body of this woman whom I have never seen, was laid out on the floor in the middle of the room. Rony had said that she was beautiful, extremely beautiful. But now she was nothing. Leftovers, scraps to be discarded in secret. A word, a touch was all it took to annihilate whatever had made it so priceless.

I cursed myself: Damn you, words! Just words!

"Can't just stand around," Rony said. "We have to start immediately. But go to the bathroom first, look for a missed spot, a stain, anything."

I checked the bathroom out. Quite spotless. Freshly vacant, as if someone had just stepped out of it after a bath.

Rony came back into the house through the garage door after opening the car's dickey.

He had knotted the roll with steel wires around the head, middle and legs.

I stood near the feet and he at the head. As we hefted the load, it felt heavier than I had anticipated. I looked at him questioningly.

"I've weighted it with iron panels," Rony replied.

She was taller than average. The roll had to be bent a little in order to fit it in the dickey. He had secured the panels in such a way that they could be adjusted.

I sat in the passenger seat. Rony went back inside to switch off the lights and lock the doors. Then he returned and started the car.

We took the same road again, headed south this time.

MG Road, still bathed in light. Chilly winds rushed past our window. There were few vehicles and fewer people on the road. A couple of times we spotted beat policemen, patrolling in pairs. A blue-coloured police control van went past us.

Neither of us spoke.

We crossed the junction where a road forked towards her home.

Rony's eyes were fixed on the road ahead.

Without realising it, my eyes sought out the sights on the roadside, trying to pierce through the haze of light falling on the road. I tried to imagine what had gone through her mind when she saw them all again.

The shipyard that is always under construction.

The colossal bridge that stands astride the backwater.

The Naval base.

The aerodrome. From this gate Mathayi's taxi had turned north.

And she had seen all of these, as if for the first time. For the final time.

At the aerodrome's gate, the car turned left, crossed the railway track and rushed south.

Another bridge. The liftable middle span, designed to allow ships to cross under the bridge, creaked as the vehicle passed over it.

Endless, narrow lanes. Then at last, through the darkness amidst the fortress-like warehouses.

Then the sound. Of waves, and of flowing water that spilled westward through the estuary.

Stopping the car in front of the boathouse, Rony got down and opened its tall tin door. He then drove the car in and latched the door from inside.

In the dark, I could just make out a boat, rocking gently in the water.

Rony opened the car's dickey. We transferred the bundle to the boat, laying it down on the left side of the cabin.

Rony turned on the lights. Then he started the boat and said, "You can handle it alone, no? Customs officers might trail us. If that happens, I will shield the left side of the boat from their searchlight. You have to lift it up and drop it in the water as gently as possible."

The boat drifted backwards. I propped up my hands against the boat's edge and kept my eyes on the water. The boat's propeller shattered the water into flames. It seemed to burn chaotically like millions of golden fibres.

"Salt," Rony said.

"No," I said, as forgotten lessons in marine science regurgitated within me. "Bioluminescence. It is a consequence of biochemical processes in certain microorganisms."

Even small fish, with their every movement, stirred up fiery streaks in the water that flowed through the estuary. And the tiny waves grasping at the rocks in Kamaalakkadav had edges brocaded with gold.

Rony shifted gears. The boat sliced ahead, raising flaming sprays of water at both ends.

One by one, we passed the light buoys bordering the ship lanes. On our left, to the south, the lamps of the Naval Battery. On the western horizon, stationary shapes of ships moving towards unknown destinations. Over them, Venus setting.

"Be ready," Rony said. He looked over his shoulder. I couldn't see anything at first. But I heard the sound of a racing boat. Soon, from behind a ridge, the headlight of a speed launch appeared.

Without reducing the speed of the boat, Rony tilted its head slightly so that the portside fell into shadow.

I moved to the front and propped the head of the shroud against the frame. Then I lifted the middle so that all of it was balanced atop the gunwale.

"Alright," Rony said.

I slipped the bundle overboard.

It slid into the water, its splash drowned out by the sounds of the boat's progress. For an instant, the flaming waves in the boat's wake parted as it plunged to the bottom.

The boat behind us was approaching rapidly. After travelling a hundred yards further,

Rony killed the engine. The other boat's roar swelled terrifyingly in the silence, and our vessel lurched in its wash.

Rony stepped into the cabin and emerged with a half-full bottle and two glasses. He handed me a glass. Then he opened the bottle and poured whiskey in both the glasses. Chivas Regal. We leaned side by side against the gunwale.

The Customs boat slowed down. Their searchlight scanned through our boat.

Rony raised his glass and took a sip. I did the same. The whiskey seared its way down my throat. I had to struggle to stop myself from coughing.

The Customs boat pulled up next to ours. A few men were standing on the deck. The one in front examined our faces carefully. When he recognized Rony, his face lit up. "Oh, it was you, sir," he said.

"Hello, James!" Rony responded.

Moving closer to us along the deck, James remarked, "It's late to be out, sir!"

Rony gestured at me. "He couldn't sleep. Said he wanted a taste of the open sea at night."

James's eyes flitted between the bottle and the glass. Rony offered the bottle to him. "Fine stuff. Try it."

James brought the bottle to his mouth and took a generous swig. He smacked his lips and let out a contented sigh. He extended the bottle back, but Rony waved it away. "Keep it. There is plenty more where it comes from."

James beamed. "Thank you. It is fine stuff indeed ... We shall be on our way then. Better not head out very far!"

"No, we won't," Rony said.

"Good morning, sir!" James called out.

"Good morning!" Rony called back.

I looked at my watch. It was three-thirty.

The Customs boat made a turn and ploughed away into the distance.

I flung out the remaining whiskey in my glass. It dissolved in the water in a pool of luminescence. Rony swilled his drink down.

He returned the glasses to their place.

Once the Customs boat had disappeared from view, Rony turned the boat around. Slowly, around the place where I had dropped the bundle, he powered down the engine. I stood with my hands on the gunwale. Thousands of sparklets crackled in the sea.

My thoughts travelled. It would have begun. The separation of one atom from another. The dissolution of electric impulses. A resumption of the endless quest for bondings and

connections — first as bacteria, perhaps, or creatures like fish. Evolutions of flesh. Nitrogen, phosphorus, and who knows what. And the bones? Perhaps someday, worn down to their constituent calcium, they will live polypous or nacreous lives. No, this shore does not have mother-of-pearl. But, it is not unlikely that it will happen on some other shore. Boundless sea.

I did not realise when Rony came close. He crooned:

"*Full fathom five, my love lies.*

Of her bones are coral made..."

My hands gripped tighter on the gunwale.

"*My love has suffered a sea change...*"[3]

I hit him. Suddenly, furiously, unexpectedly. Yet I was careful not to bring my hand close to his face. Rony rocked back from the impact. I landed another punch. He hit the cabin's wall and fell to the floor.

I was panting heavily.

Rony slowly got up and stood in front of me. He was seven inches taller than me. I mustered all my strength and struck him hard again. He took the hit.

Rony rose to his feet again. I turned and leaned against the boat's side, looking at the water.

Rony stood next to me. "You feel better now?"

I did not say anything.

Water blazed here and there. On the borders of the ship lane, light buoys blinked out silent messages over and over again. Venus was slipping away on the horizon. The dark contours of ships continued their stationary voyage.

The wind picked up. I became aware of the cold for the first time.

"Let us go," I said.

I coughed hoarsely, twice.

Rony said, "I completely forgot. You might have caught a cold."

He entered the cabin. Inside, a locker opened and closed.

I felt something warm and rough touching my shoulders, and turned around. Rony had draped a woollen blanket over me, covering the top of my ears. "Hold the edges together. Do you want something to drink?"

I grunted a no.

"Once we're back, then," Rony said, turning to start the engine.

I looked back. The surface of the sea was empty — except for the furrows of light turned

over by the boat. They too faded away behind us.

The sea that hides all its scars.

Endnotes

[1]Dheerodatta Nayaka: one of the four classes of hero described by Bharata Muni in the Natyashastra, characterized as self-controlled, exalted, noble, and courageous in nature.

[2]Mundu: a traditional unstitched garment worn by men in parts of South India, especially Kerala, typically wrapped around the waist and used in both everyday and ceremonial contexts.

[3]This is a distortion of Ariel's song in William Shakespeare's The Tempest, Act I Scene ii, which is widely recorded as the first usage of the phrase "sea change".

The Apollonian

INTERVIEW

Interview

Sailing Beyond Ahab

Professor Steve Mentz on the Poetics, Politics, and Futures of the Blue Humanities

Shaonli Bowmik

Description

I chose to interview Prof.essor Steve Mentz for this particular issue. His work has been foundational to the emergence and expansion of the Blue Humanities. A Prof.essor of English at St. John's University in New York, Prof.essor Mentz is the author of seminal texts, including *Shipwreck Modernity, Ocean, Break Up the Anthropocene, An Introduction to the Blue Humanities,* and *Sailing Without Ahab.* His scholarship bridges literary studies, ecological theory, and the poetics of water, offering new ways to think with and through oceans and planetary fluidities. This conversation explores his evolving thoughts on ecopoetics, resilience, and the future currents of the Blue Humanities.

This interview was conducted remotely via Google Meet.

Shaonli : How are you, Prof. Mentz? How is the weather?

Prof. Mentz : It's raining this morning, but it's still a nice time of the year. It's not too cold yet. What about you?

Shaonli : I am all right. Thank you for asking. In India, it has started getting colder, so it's very pleasant nowadays. Your work has been foundational to the field of Blue Humanities, and I feel it also opens up entirely new ways of thinking with and through oceans and water. When I saw the Call for Submissions for this special issue of *The Apollonian*, you were immediately the first person who came to mind. So, thank you for agreeing to this conversation. I'm genuinely grateful.

Prof. Mentz : Thank you. It's my pleasure. I'm looking forward to it as well.

Shaonli : To begin, this special issue of The Apollonian emphasises water bodies as archives of memory and trauma. How do you understand water functioning as an archive, not only in terms of ecological memory, but also in relation to human and posthuman affect?

Prof. Mentz : Thank you. I really appreciate this question as a starting point for considering human relationships with water in a broad and evolving sense. There are obvious ways in which physical bodies of water can serve as repositories of information, such as records of climate history and events that have taken place on or beneath the surface, including ships that have sunk in that area or human bodies that have descended into the depths. But what I find especially compelling in the way you frame this question is the emphasis on emotion. Across time and geography, humans have held profound emotional investments in bodies of water. These are waters we associate with our homes, with our specific regions, with national histories, and with deeply personal, individual memories. And I'm interested in

developing both a critical language and a creative language to articulate that physical and emotional intimacy between humans and water, which is a relationship shaped not only by what we take from water, whether in terms of commerce, aesthetic pleasure, or agricultural value in the case of freshwater, but also through the blend of threat and promise that water provides. There is also always the threat of danger, disruption, or radical change, which is something I've been wrestling with for a long time. I think that is really central: water is a two-sided substance in its relationship to humans.

Shaonli : I think you've spoken beautifully about this simultaneous allure and estrangement of water, the pull and the peril, which, as you've shown, runs throughout your work. So, that question is wonderfully addressed. Let me move to the second question. From *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean* to *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities*, your work has been foundational in shaping the evolution of Blue Humanities from oceanic poetics to planetary water thinking. In your 2022 essay "A Poetics of Planetary Water," you expand this framework to include glacial ice, clouds, and freshwater ecologies and even drizzles and vapours. What prompted this move beyond saltwater-focused studies, and how has it reshaped your understanding of the Blue Humanities today?

Prof. Mentz : I would say that this has really been the most important development, or the most significant shift, in my thinking over the past five years. Like many others working within this discourse and critical conversation, I initially approached the ocean as the largest water body on the planet with all of its massive historical, imaginative and literary components. And that remains true. Much of my teaching, writing, and thinking continues to be deeply engaged with the ocean. But as I thought more carefully about the contours of the discussion in the Blue Humanities. I began to notice the tremendous tension between freshwater and saltwater, especially in the ways human bodies and communities rely on freshwater for agriculture, washing, and nourishment. That tension, between the salt and the fresh, started to seem extremely important in how we understand the broader and often contested relationships between water and human bodies. And so, as I thought about that, it made me realise that there's not just fresh and salt water, but also liquid, solid, and gaseous water. Water is unusual; it's not quite unique, but it is the most widespread substance that appears in all three forms. And that struck me as something with real cultural, historical, and poetic resonance. We encounter water not only in rivers and oceans, but also in clouds,

humidity, glaciers, and ice sheets. So, how has this reshaped my understanding of the humanities? I think it's still reshaping it. One of the practices I'm trying to develop in my own work is that whenever it feels obvious to default to my usual oceanic frameworks, I ask myself how might these same modes of thinking apply to the vapour in the atmosphere, or to glacial ice, or to other solid forms of water we encounter in the world.

Shaonli : Yes, and I think that really comes through in your recent book, *Sailing Without Ahab*. In your earlier work, you were already pointing toward the need to move beyond the ocean and attend to other forms of water. But in *Sailing Without Ahab*, while you are still very much engaged with the ocean and the sea, you also bring in these other water forms in a way that feels natural and seamless. The shift does not feel forced at all. It is swift, subtle, and very skillfully done. And I found that incredibly commendable.

Prof. Mentz : Thank you. I appreciate that. I think part of the project in *Sailing Without Ahab* is also about personalising my relationship with that great American novel, that literary classic, and also my own ongoing engagement with Melville. But beyond that, it's about my own human relationship with water. It is not just the bit of saltwater down the street from me in the Long Island Sound, but also other forms of water: freshwater, vapour, all of it.

Shaonli : Your recent book *Sailing without Ahab* reimagines *Moby-Dick* as an ecopoetic voyage stripped of Ahab's patriarchal and imperial compulsions. What does 'sailing without Ahab' mean in our current moment of ecological grief, postcolonial reckoning, and imaginative reorientation?

Prof. Mentz : This is a question I've been thinking about quite a bit. Because *Moby-Dick* is an epic. It is the American epic. And each time we return to it, we bring new perspectives: postcolonial modernity, ecological consciousness, all these different interpretive lenses. So when I approach this figure of Ahab, especially having done so much work in global humanities, I'm really trying to reposition him. To re-situate this figure and what he represents. And I suppose, especially speaking as an American living through a particularly complex and troubling historical moment, the central project of *Sailing Without Ahab* is to ask for a reimagining of our epic story, one that refuses tyranny. One that calls for a plural rather than a monomaniacal voyage. One that asks us to rethink our relationship to authority, especially forms of masculine, acquisitive, extractive authority. But it is also a very difficult project. One of the intended structural ironies of *Sailing Without Ahab*, and I'll spell this out, is that the poems in the book correspond to each chapter of *Moby-Dick*, and yet I refuse to name the captain. In some poems,

there are even brackets where that name might be. And yet, of course, the name "Ahab" is right there in the title of the book! So I am both trying to move away from this figure of tyranny and simultaneously acknowledging that he is already present, inescapably so. And that's really the dilemma I'm grappling with: how do we imagine ourselves outside the confines of a certain tyrannical idea of masculinity, of authority, of capitalism, of colonialism, while knowing we cannot fully escape it? We are the inheritors of this system. And yet we continue to try, persistently, to imagine our way beyond it.

Shaonli : And I think you really do justice to reimagining the figure of Ahab. So kudos to you for that.

Prof. Mentz : Thank you. I appreciate that.

Shaonli : The fourth question is about how the field engages Indigenous oceanic knowledge, hydrofeminism, or other non-Western traditions while resisting extractive modes of knowledge-making? How inclusive is the discipline's trajectory?

Prof. Mentz : I think this is really one of the great challenges of this conversation of this critical current, which is the term I prefer over the terrestrial "field". I consider this one of our greatest challenges in the present. It is difficult, especially for someone like me, educated within established American and Anglo-American institutions, to fully step out from under the forms of authority that shaped me. I remain who I am, formed by the education I received. And yet, the desire is to move toward a more open field. And the obvious way to do that, I think, is through dialogue and exchange. I have learned a great deal from Indigenous poets in Oceania, from Black American scholarship on the Caribbean, and from global studies more broadly. These bodies of work have fundamentally reshaped my understanding of human, literary, and political history. But I'm also very aware that this kind of work cannot be done by individuals alone. It has to happen collectively. So one of the projects I'm currently working on is to help support and cultivate a truly global network of scholarship and conversation around the relationships between humans and water. And, of course, it feels almost impossible. But all the worthwhile things do. Everything looks impossible at the beginning until it is done.

Shaonli : Most definitely! So the next question is: in *Break Up the Anthropocene*, you argue for "fluid thinking" rather than fixed categories. You also introduce several neologisms, such as "dry narratives" and "wet narratives".

Here, I want to focus particularly on the idea of fluid thinking over fixed forms. Could you expand on how "wetness" becomes an epistemological stance against extractive capitalism and Anthropocenic dryness?

Prof. Mentz : I've been thinking about this for a long time. This prompts me to revisit the book *Shipwreck Modernity*, which I published in 2015. There, I began exploring the contrast between a wet experience and a dry narration or in some ways, a dry summation. Here, by "wetness" I mean the wetness of experience, or to be more precise, the radical immediacy of an encounter with water. Any encounter with a disaster is followed by a moment of kind of cerebral extraction. Similarly and inevitably, that wet encounter is also followed by a moment of cerebral extraction; we draw from the wetness of experience something like the dryness of knowledge. There is a wonderful line from the French mariner Samuel de Champlain, who says, "Experience is better than knowledge". I think of experience as the wet thing, like the thing that is about the encounter, immersion, contact or being in the thing. The knowledge (and the French word here is *science*) becomes the dry thing. And I don't mean that knowledge is bad. Knowledge is good. Science is good. But there is always this oscillation between the wet and the dry. We cannot live only in the wetness of the catastrophic experience. But interestingly, what we want to always be thinking about is how the wet turns into the dry, how the dry can return to the wet, and how they remain in a state of dialogue. The relationship is both contrastive and interdependent: the two modes push against each other, yet they also rely on each other. In that sense, the analogy holds, even in its slightly oxymoronic nature. Wetness and dryness remain bound together in a continual exchange.

Shaonli : That is a brilliant answer. I was genuinely very interested in this particular question before, and you've addressed it really well.

Prof. Mentz : And I would say, the idea of fluidity is also about plurality. It's about opening up into multiple kinds of explorations. One of the other working titles for that short book was "Pluralise the Anthropocene," which is a phrase I do use in the text. The idea is that we don't want to pin the Anthropocene to a single date, whether 1945, 1823, 1610, 10,000 BCE, or whenever. We have all these different proposed beginnings, all these multiple timelines, and each one carries its own significant story about the trajectories of human history.

Shaonli : Absolutely, we need to embrace the plurality of Anthropocene narratives rather than treating them as competing claims. Moving to the next question, the Blue Humanities often intersect with Indigenous and postcolonial epistemologies. How might we read Epeli Hau'ofa's 'sea of islands' or South Asian and African 'rivers of memory' alongside your vision of planetary water?

Prof. Mentz : I find Hau'ofa's Sea of Islands incredibly inspiring. And he was a gateway for me into a broader, more human vision of Oceanic cultures. I mentioned Craig Santos Perez, a contemporary poet who writes very much in this mode. There are many others, including scholars, creative writers, and artists, who work along similar lines. People like Perez, Hau'ofa, and Albert Wendt, among many others, have really encouraged me with their work to think beyond my own largely transatlantic, Northern Hemisphere education and experience. And I would say, this question of rivers of memory, these river cultures, these river histories is something that I've been drawn to more recently. It is not an area where I would claim deep expertise, although of course, there are North American histories of rivers as well. But I'm very interested in how long traditions of riverine civilisation and riverine thought might intersect with some of the insights of the Blue Humanities. So that is really a work in progress, I'd say. And I'm hoping, as I suggested earlier, that this is very much a collective project. I'm hoping to see the legacy of Rivers of Memory intersecting with some of the more recent works in Blue Humanities thinking.

Shaonli : That is an incredibly encouraging and humble response. Moving on to the next question, and this is actually one of my personal favourites. So, you are a swimmer yourself. While your poem "Swimming a Long Way Together evokes collectivity and kinship through immersion, the preface of your "Bodies of Water" opens with the intimate rhythm of tides entering a Connecticut street. What role does the embodied act of swimming play in your scholarship, as a method, metaphor, or mode of thinking, and how has the experience of swimming or "being in" the water reshaped the way you think about art, pedagogy, and planetary ethics?

Prof. Mentz : I really love this question as well, because it gets right to the heart of what I'm working on at the moment. I always have a number of projects going at once, as usual, but this is the one that's most active right now. I've written quite a bit already about swimming as an embodied, active, ecological meditation, which is also a way of encountering and negotiating a dynamic environment that is at once supportive and also potentially threatening. I've been thinking about swimming as, in some ways, an Anthropocene practice. So this is the next book, really. I'm trying to bring together some of my earlier thoughts in this area and also move them forward. The idea is to understand the practice of swimming as a way of thinking about what it means to be a human body that thinks, breathes and moves, in a time of disruptive climate change inside an increasingly hostile environment. And so, when you ask

about pedagogy and planetary ethics, I do find myself thinking about something as simple as walking down the street to the shore of Long Island Sound here in Branford, Connecticut and realising that I am, in that moment, entering into contact with global currents and the planetary ocean system. But there is also a very particular intellectual and physical pleasure in swimming itself. It is both metaphor and practice. On the one hand, I am literally placing my terrestrial mammalian body into saltwater or freshwater or, now that it's winter in Connecticut, increasingly into indoor pools. But the practice of swimming, of training the body to manoeuvre, to work with the affordances and constraints of water, really matters. I think a lot about buoyancy. I think a lot about what it means to be an air-breathing creature immersed in a medium that is not designed for that. And that, I think, is the larger project: to connect the individual experience of the swimmer with the planetary experience of living in an environment that is becoming increasingly less hospitable as the world warms.

Shaonli : I also feel that when you speak about water, and particularly the Blue Humanities, the discourse becomes far more compelling, precisely because of the way you engage with water critically, creatively, and physically. Across your books, the personal anecdotes of being in the water make the work feel lived rather than distant. It moves the field away from something purely conceptual or mechanical and opens it up as something deeply creative, embodied, and meaningful.

Prof. Mentz : That's definitely something I've been thinking about for over twenty years now. Since I started writing in this discourse, I have been trying to bring together some of the critical practices and insights that we, as academics, are trained to employ, with personal experience. And the idea isn't just to indulge something I happen to enjoy, but to figure out a way to communicate, one that speaks to the value of literature or poetry, as well as the value of experience. To really think about those things in dialogue with each other.

Shaonli : Moving on to the next question, in *Shipwreck Modernity*, you describe the shipwreck as both an ecological and an aesthetic form. How might the motif of shipwreck illuminate contemporary crises of migration, displacement, and climate catastrophe?

Prof. Mentz : I love this question too. I mean, the distinctive thing about shipwreck, it seems to me, is that it's a catastrophe that is sometimes survivable. Which, in a way, feels very much like the state of the world right now, environmentally. Maybe it's survivable, we don't actually know.

And it's both a real catastrophe and something that might be endured, something one might move through toward a moment of, you know, arrival on a shore. So, I've been thinking about this in relation to the migrations of people in open boats for decades now. And, of course, that has very long historical roots. I think about historical tragedies, such as the Middle Passage and other forms of forced migration by water. So shipwreck becomes both the culmination or the most intense possible point of the voyage that goes awry and also something almost normative. It sits at the centre of so many historical experiences: the experience of transported enslaved persons, desperate migrants crossing the Mediterranean today, or, ten thousand years ago, the early oceanic settlements of the Pacific Islands. Some of those voyages ended in wrecks, some did not. And some events that might appear as wrecks from the outside could also be, in some sense, redeemed or reimagined by those who survived them.

Shaonli : That's actually incredibly fascinating, and also such a deeply historically conscious way to frame it. Because when I've been reading, I've felt, and this is my personal take, that people working in creative fields sometimes avoid engaging too directly with the political dimensions. And that becomes a problem. You end up decontextualising the art, decontextualising the literature. It can't be non-political. It can't be stripped away from the historical world in which it's situated. So when you talk about this and when we talk about Blue Humanities more broadly, people often assume it's primarily about poetry. For instance, in *Introduction to the Blue Humanities*, where you discuss Emily Dickinson, Whitman and others so richly, there's this impression that the discipline is primarily literature-centric. But, increasingly, we're seeing it become more political; we're seeing it engage more deeply with history, anthropology, and lived experience. And I think that's precisely what draws me to the field, making my faith in the discipline stronger, because it refuses to isolate the aesthetic from the material and historical worlds that shape it.

Prof. Mentz : I think that it's right. I mean, there is this, again; we've already discussed a couple of these tensions: between wetness and dryness, between different kinds of water. And I think this tension between what we might call the lyrical or the purely creative on the one hand, and the politically engaged or structured on the other, is another really important animating tension in Blue Humanities, in critical writing and critical practice. And I think of political history as a kind of discipline we're always situated within. We might want to escape it but we can't, really. And so it becomes a kind of

structuring context, one in which even our most creative efforts have to be continually re-situated and recontextualised.

Shaonli : This question is also somewhat linked to the previous one. So, "shipwreck" and "salvage" come across as recurring tropes in your body of work. Do you think literary and cultural studies themselves are engaged in an act of salvage vis-à-vis retrieving meaning from the debris of modernity?

Prof. Mentz : Absolutely, yes. Additionally, it's essential to acknowledge that there are certain aspects that the salvage project cannot interpret. I wrote a short essay a few years ago about objects that wash up on the beach for a book collection compiled by theoretical archaeologists, people who conduct underwater archaeology, which I think is incredible work. And one of the things you realise when you're dealing with, for instance, lists of objects that turn up on the shore after a shipwreck, is that these items are incredibly resonant and powerful. I was talking in particular about a seven-teenth-century shipwreck in New England, in what would eventually become the Northeastern United States. And one of the things the father finds on the beach is his son Will's coat. His son Will drowned in the disaster. And so the absence of the body in that coat is, of course, overwhelmingly emotional. The salvaged object becomes this deeply charged memorial to what was not salvaged, to the child himself. So, I think of salvage as this inherently incomplete project, both intellectually and emotionally. And that makes sense, because the point is not to impose meaning onto the object, but to allow it to remain what it is.

Shaonli : In recent times, we have also seen you collaborating with the artists and talking about creative arts. Even in your recent works, such as *Swim Poems* and *Sailing without Ahab*, there seems to be a distinct turn toward more lyrical and ecopoetic forms. In what ways do you envision creative practice contributing to scholarly recovery and resilience?

Prof. Mentz : This is something I've really committed to, both personally and in whatever influence I have within this broader critical conversation, in making Blue Humanities a genuinely welcoming space for the creative arts. For me, poetry is the central art I work in. However, I also collaborate with painters, sculptors, conceptual artists, digital artists, and performance artists. There are many ways in which that creative spark can manifest. And I think it's really important that this animating creative energy continues to thrive within Blue Humanities. So I try to support that however I can, whether that means collaborating with visual artists, filmmakers, performers, actors, or others working in adjacent creative fields.

And I also believe there's a great deal that literary criticism, literary history, and political history can offer to the performing and creative arts. It's not a one-way street where we simply draw inspiration from artists and give nothing back. I see that exchange as very much reciprocal.

Because to the extent that a discipline cuts itself off from the lyrical, the ecstatic, the generative, we lose something vital.

Shaonli : I've really seen that generosity in the way you interact with early-career scholars like us from India and elsewhere. I've also noticed it in how you engage with artists on your Facebook, giving shout-outs, sharing new work, highlighting emerging voices, and genuinely supporting new artistic practices.

Prof. Mentz : Yes, and I'll also say that one of the things I've been involved in for the past several years is co-editing the Blue Humanities book series at Bloomsbury, which is a major global academic press. And something that has been really important to me, as we've reviewed proposals and thought about which books will become part of the series, is making sure that creative work is included in that conversation. Not exclusively, of course. It is more of a hybrid creative-critical approach, but I want the creative dimension to be present in as many of the institutional building blocks of Blue Humanities as I have any influence over. And I do think very much about conversations with you and with other younger scholars around the world. Part of my job, as I understand it, is to cultivate and support different, creative, and imaginative ways of engaging with this material, especially from places far from where I am here in North America.

Shaonli : Thank you so much. This kind of intellectual hospitality feels very rare and very valuable. This particular issue gestures toward theoretical futures of the Blue Humanities. What directions excite you most now, especially as the field has been moving more toward digital and decolonial methodologies?

Prof. Mentz : I like this question because there's just so much exciting work happening in this discourse right now. I might point, for instance, to people working on ice in the Arctic. There's a recent book called *Arcticologies* by my friend and collaborator Lowell Duckert, who's based in the U.S. There's also the edited volume *Ice Humanities* by a couple of European scholars. I'd also gesture toward ongoing developments in the material eco-humanities—people like Stacy Alaimo, Melody Jue, or Oscar de la Torre, whose work continues to push the field in really dynamic ways. I would also say that, as we've already touched on, the influence of Indigenous creators has become incredibly important. For me, that especially means poets, although it also extends to

visual artists, narrative artists, and others. I think there's been a real surge of awareness among more traditionally trained Anglophone academics, an effort to learn from Indigenous artistic forms and to take seriously the claims and insights they offer, rather than filtering them through older, inherited modes of interpretation. So, I think a lot about the value of the creative broadly, but particularly the value of Indigenous creative and intellectual traditions, in a wide, global sense. First Nations communities in North America are closer to me, geographically and culturally, but also thinkers and artists in Oceania, Aboriginal Australian communities, and other non-Western knowledge systems that offer alternative ways of understanding the world.

Shaonli : Moving to the final question of our conversation, this is something I think many young readers will be especially eager to hear. If you could leave the readers of The Apollonian with one invitation, or one image, for thinking oceanically, what would it be?

Prof. Mentz : This returns to the project I mentioned earlier, the solo book I'm currently working on, which is about swimming in the Anthropocene. And the image I keep circling around is the human body in the world ocean. On one level, it's an image of smallness. For instance, my own body, when I'm swimming in Long Island Sound or elsewhere, is set against the vast expanse of the water that covers more than two-thirds of the planet. However, I'm also considering the relationship between these two water bodies: the ocean and the human body, which is itself composed of water. Each body contains its own complexities, and they are constantly in exchange with one another. Water is both circulating within and moving out. There's a tension there, a movement between disruption and harmony, between the swimmer's body and the oceanic body that holds it. There's an image I wrote about in a poem some years ago, about night swimming. I imagined myself diving down, maybe ten feet and then opening my mouth underwater. And when you do that, the water doesn't immediately rush in, not at that depth, anyway. There's this brief moment of homeostasis, a balance between the air in my lungs and throat, and the water surrounding me. It's temporary, of course, because I have to return to the surface to breathe, but that moment of poised equilibrium is something I've been using to think through the relationship between the swimmer and the ocean. So that's the image I offer here. It may feel very different if one is swimming off the coast of southern India, or in the Pacific, or elsewhere. Some experiences of being a human body in the ocean are shared, but access to water, to swimming, to different

relationships with oceans and coasts, is shaped by huge historical, cultural, and political forces and that access is unevenly distributed, certainly in the U.S., and in many other places as well. That's the image I'm wrestling with at this moment. And I'm curious to see how others might think with it, or think through it, in their own contexts.

Shaonli : I think that's a beautifully vivid image to end with. I could really picture that moment of descending into the water and opening the mouth, and I think it will spark the reader's imagination as well. It invites us to think more oceanically, which is precisely the aim of this issue and the broader Blue Humanities project. Thank you so much, Prof.essor, for this conversation. It was truly wonderful speaking with you.

Prof. Mentz : Thank you. It was a pleasure speaking with you.

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The Apollonian

POETRY

Two Poems for Ocean

Hoshang Merchant

Poem I

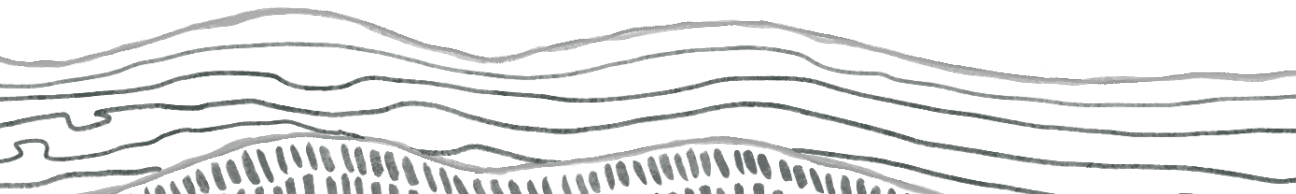
I want to make a poem to the sea
The sea by which I was born
The sea of blood which broke from the broken umbilicus
So I knew early the sea can kill, too
The sea we heard as children within shells
Was actually the sound of our own blood
(another connection between blood and sea)
I do not remember seeing the sea until
we went to live by it
And then I felt the house to be a boat
Walking the world with seasick feet
I wasn't allowed to swim in the sea
but the first time I did, the monsoon broke over me
And the man with me in the water
Nearly drowned with me ...
In childhood there was another seduction by the seashore:
Veiled Moslem women drinking from broken
coconut-heads

like three Fates at the Portuguese Fort
And piously facing West to Mecca at the evening-call
to prayer
So the connection with Arabia was established early
So that when I returned from Palestine leaving
behind a lover
I piously burnt each sunset like some Dido
On seeing her Aeneas' receding black sail
Was it not the sea we searched each time
We found the house open and mother absent
Father's guilt made us repair there
where we'd part the waves like Moses
(after Cecil B. de Mille)
Of course, we didn't wish to be the drowned pharaoh
The connection between sea love and death established
by the surge in our loins
that our lovers' mouth at death...
And babies weren't brought by storks
but in washerman's bags. Again, baby Moses
floated in a reed-basket
(the laundry did dry royally on sea-rocks)
And the one time I tried to drown myself

the seabed slipping from under my feet
the tide pulling me in
the waveslap tugging at my trunks
Me opening my eyes on an impulse: Blue death...
So the smaller drawings began
First the houseboat Then the ship of career
last, the launch of fame
One after another, all water-borne
Water rubbing out all names
Parents' lovers' friends' oneself's
What's left then to tame?
There is a glorious myth
of a drowned continent
Resurrecting which
isn't life's endeavour
but the after-life's...

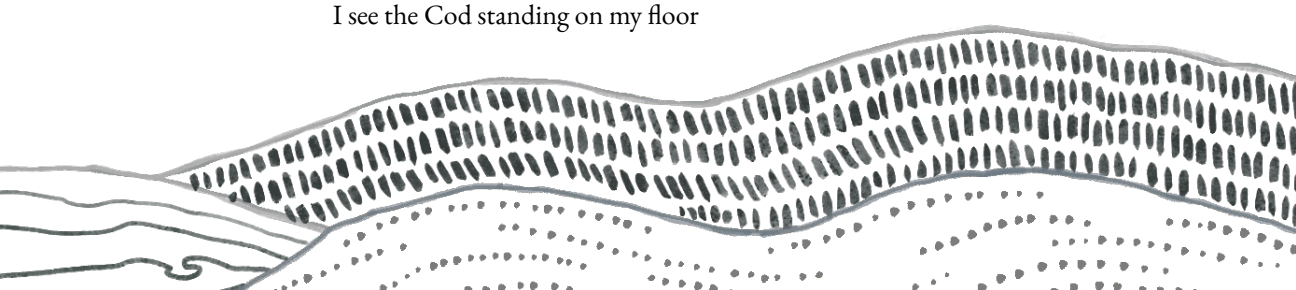
Poem II

The world is not round
It is merely long
I have been bounced between
The Biblical promised land
and Newfoundland
I have run aground
My sleep is sound on Cape Cod
I'm going to miss Brodsky because of
jet-lag
Brodsky is going to write his great poem
on Cape Cod tonight
Fish dance in my head
A great big cod
The sea comes to land



The city is drowned
Or alternately, the city
Comes out of the sea
I wake to see a city
through the wall of log
The house-balcony hung with birdcages
could be an aviary or a boat
Nothing is derivative
Everything tonight is original, newborn
My script could be Cyrillic or hieroglyphics or Hebraic
My voice could be drowned by the sea
Or the sky where two fish dance
side by side and upside down
fish come inside nets in constellations
One seems to be dancing on the floor
Without water in the corridor

Water of a sea of a lake of a river
of a poem: is always the same water
Colourless odourless liquid
It runs aground
And I think of the death
of the Cod
The Cod of Lake Como
It's easy to think of death
But to close one's eyes and think
of Nothing!
I see the waves
Run fluorescent to the shore
I feel the great Cod trying the door
I open my eyes on nothing
I see the Cod standing on my floor



Alone on the Big Sea

Daniel Chinedu Fidelis

The island is sitting alone on the big sea.
Peace and quiet life are its daybooks.
It enjoys the warm talk and calm smirking
Of the wind, not the angry voices in the city.

It wakes up happily and gaze at the sun's face
That wakes up and smiles at the beautiful life
Of the island; living a ring-life, not a pyramid life
As in the hard soil; rats and cats fight for supremacy.

I and I weren't the foundation of the island.
It was sitting in circle, that is, the heart of surviving,
Until binoculars imprint its footprints on the island;
New life in bad blood was introduced.

Uncontrollable temperate sits on reason,
Sophisticated lies became a breakfast,
Irrationality beautified the island's life,
And the daybook was thrown to the sea.

She as in he were opened to predation,
Defacement, Language; the Island doesn't know.
She, like he was taught to be a dagger in the island.
Even though it was for omnivores; not for bloodbath.
The island saw incivility and ate civility raw.
It saw versions of unfriendly civilizations beating
The sensible life of the island and the sea was cold.
It lost its life and became the blue shadows
That gives birth to rat-like city stomping.

Dilnasheen Zarreen

On the Drifting Shore

A river carries faces not its own,
their dreams like lilies bruised by passing oars.
Each drop remembers cities overthrown,
each tide retells the ache of leaving shores.

The sea forgets no footprint, no farewell,
it is a salty heart like a dusty archive.
Across its skin the migrant stories swell,
their maps redraw their anchors tossed by tempests.

The rain returns with refugees of cloud,
it knocks on roofs with holes in and out.
It weeps for lands where borders speak too loud,
for homes that drift like foam and castles of sand.

And still the waves repeat what none utter,
we all began, and ended upon some shore.

(W)Hole

A river pierces me through
its salt veins run beneath my skin
Sweats are my silent estuaries
each tear an inlet seeking home
Drop wipe drop wipe
a tempest chokes my calm
and I slip, swept by my own undertow
This body, eroded coral, chipped shell
they call it beauty
but it consoles me not
Beneath the crust, unseen tides strain
currents of ache and pressure unseen
No diagnosis, no storm warning
As a perennial smile always flow
Then what exhausts
What needles thought like a reef unseen
Darkness dims, damps, devours fire
yet this burn brings no light

Foam, froth, freeze
moments tide and untide, ageless
All tests fail, all success faints
“jerk it off,” they say
but the sea inside me stays
swelling, whispering
refusing shore

Nguyễn Huy Hoàng

A dream dies of thirst

Circa, circa, circa,
rains of dream swirling in the air.
“A river was here
and it had two banks
and a heavenly mother who nursed it on drops from the clouds”
(Darwish 36)

The lost anthropologist walks both banks with her gift
make concrete each page of collected water
lines sealing dreams tight in a bottle.
In its quiet turning, the river stiffens into silence
only the mother and her children
still murmur in broken lapses
Swirl, swirl, swirl,
a circle tightening into lies.

Lost as though by choice,
he who treads confessed naively:
Can I choose my dream without drinking the milk of the clouds
remain fluid in her cradle

while fixed behind the shelter of words
How then his pen lends a line beyond
the dark gulf now poisoning her living edges
“kidnapped its mother
so it run short of water
And died, slowly, of thirst.” (Darwish 36)

And what of drowning only to wake up
a sleepwalker running to keep both banks alive?
The pen, held at the threshold,
sinks again:
circa, circa, circa
dropping toward the riverbed,
searching its source.
two banks-anthro
a-pology-one dream

now that a dream dies of thirst.

Life on boat

Bare feet
They told me to go to sleep
as the cold salt embraces the sea
as I try to grip
the fish of my dream.

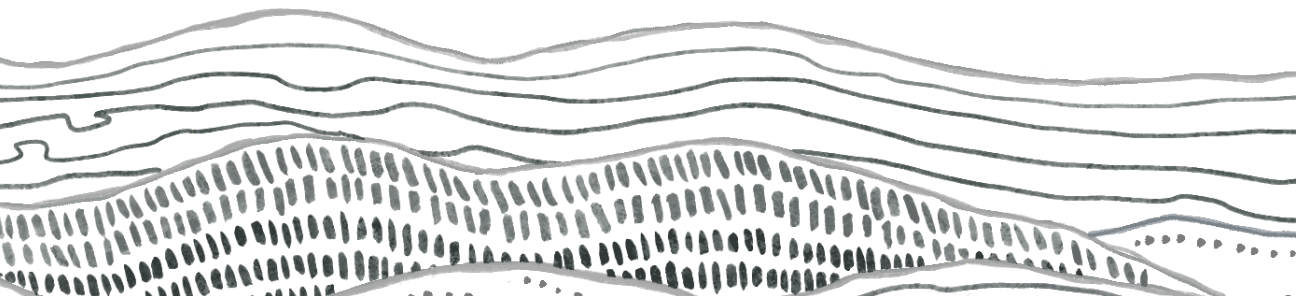
One toe
Outside the kennel of light
Side by side with
a squid spinning its darkness
They told me to tread lightly
mind the thick smoke column
radiating heat
in brief pockets of air.

One hand
Against the cold concrete
absorbed in the skin
with blue-bruised wooden panels
They told me to untangle the nets
lest it trip the mackerels
to be free.

One mouth
Counting rice on a ladder
Biting the echo in passing bowls
Sauced with laughers sitting in a circle
They told me to dig deep with my teeth
Until the bones lie fossil-still
the ocean floor.

One eye
Finding everything but the static signal
from a phone
Heavy eyelids rest
in the wind's brief caress.
They told me to go to sleep
before the beep flares up
from the fish censor.

Bare feet
They told me to go to sleep
as the cold salt embraces the sea
not knowing I stretch my eye
tie my hand
grip my toe
spit out my mouth
as this pilgrimage finds
his way across divine parts of body
to finally wake up and be with the sea
as they told me
six fish-er-men.



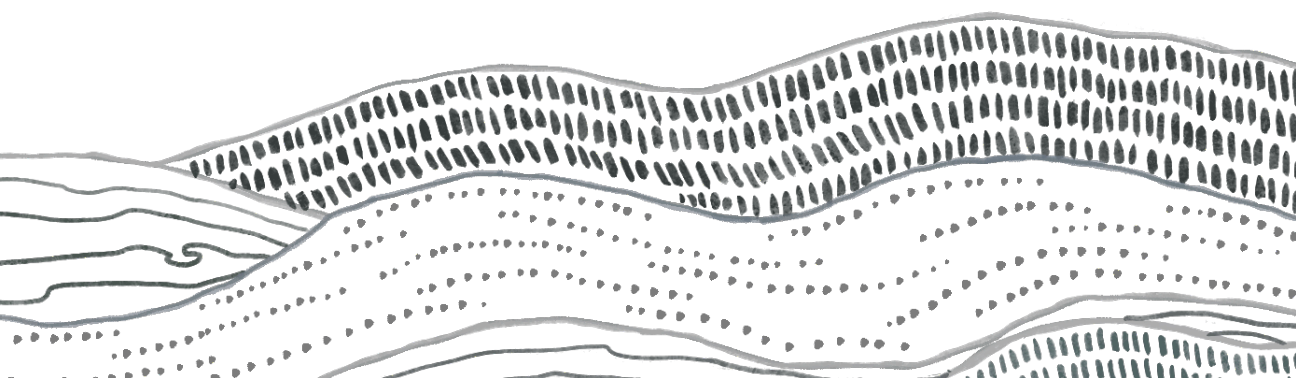
Song of the whale

A note of silence
carried
muffled
in a shapeless mouth
What whispers collide
beneath
the crashing waves?
mounting
intense
yet lost.

Cost me an eternal dream
to wake up,
muffled still, I ask:
Why are you not speaking?
Your blueish, slackened face
heavier than
my closing lids
You cry without opening my sea
two notes drifting past
never touching.

Drowned aloud in silence
here we look up a wall
of salt
bitter
This time, we listen
moments trickle down
time cast aside
set afloat
into another dream
more of you
more of me.

One whale, two whale
moving through the rift
human carved.
We paste our voices
into the whooshing sound
as worlds collide
waves skinned alive
dream mined for salt
silence mistaken
for a sea
of no songs.



The Apollonian

PHOTO ESSAY

Photo Essay

The Silent Extinction

Utpal Mallick

For the past few years, my journey has carried me along the beautiful and complex coastlines of Odisha and West Bengal, where the land, sea, and people are deeply intertwined. Here, beneath the rhythmic crash of waves, I discovered the story of an ancient survivor, “the horseshoe crab.” These fascinating, slow-moving creatures, with their armored shells and blue blood, have walked the Earth for more than 450 million years. Long before the age of dinosaurs, they endured ice ages and mass extinctions, earning the title of living fossils. Their blue blood, rich in Tachypleus Amebocyte Lysate (TAL), plays a vital role in modern medicine. It helps detect dangerous bacterial endotoxins in vaccines and medical devices, silently safeguarding human health. In a cruel irony, the very creature that protects us is now in need of protection. Yet despite this crucial role, the horseshoe crab remains largely unknown to most people. Discussions about their decline often focus on the biomedical industry or their use as bait for the fishing industry. However, during my travels along the eastern coast of India, I discovered a different and more personal story, one closely tied to the lives of coastal fishing communities.

I spent long days with the fishermen, whose lives rise and fall with the tides. Their days mostly begin before dawn, repairing nets by hand and setting out with quiet hope for a good catch. To them, the horseshoe crab is neither a symbol of ancient resilience nor something useful; instead, for them, it is just an unwanted bycatch that gets tangled in their nets. Unaware of their ecological importance, fishermen often discard trapped crabs either by throwing them away after removing them from nets or, in many cases, by not freeing them at all, leaving them to dry out and die in the sun. Witnessing this desiccation is deeply painful- it feels like watching time itself come to a standstill, a prehistoric legacy evaporating in the heat. The danger for these living fossils, however, does not end there. A more persistent threat comes from abandoned or lost fishing nets (often termed "ghost nets") that drift unseen through coastal waters. Made of durable synthetic material that resists degradation, these nets continue to trap marine life for years to come. For slow-moving animals like horseshoe crabs, they become deadly snares, wrapping around their appendages and tails, restricting movement, and eventually leading to death. Along several beaches, I found ghost nets half-buried in sand or floating near the shore, silently continuing their destructive work. The spread of set nets and fixed stake nets adds another

layer of danger. These stationary fishing systems, anchored firmly in the sediment, block natural tidal pathways and migration routes. For horseshoe crabs that follow precise lunar and tidal cues to reach nesting sites, such nets become physical walls across their breeding grounds. During spawning peaks, when numerous crabs gather along the shore, these barriers can cause mass entrapments. In India, horseshoe crabs spawn almost year-round, with higher activity occurring during specific months of the year. This continuous spawning behaviour means that they remain vulnerable for most of the year. Wherever nets remain in intertidal zones, the risk persists, turning each tide into a potential hazard.

Beyond fishing pressures lies the quieter but equally damaging issue of coastal development. The sandy beaches that have served as nesting grounds for thousands of years are being reshaped by human development and anthropogenic alteration. Seawalls and construction projects alter the natural texture and slope of the shore, making it difficult for females to dig nests or for eggs to survive. Each new structure or stretch of reclaimed land pushes the horseshoe crab further from the spaces it needs to reproduce. Walking along these coasts reveals a paradox. The same development that provides livelihoods and progress also erodes the fragile ecosystems that sustain life. For the fishermen, the sea remains a source of survival. For the horseshoe crab, it is their home. Far from the ocean, it is easy to forget these creatures even exist. However, allowing a species that has endured for hundreds of millions of years to disappear due to human neglect would be more than a loss of biodiversity; it would be a failure of compassion.

India is one of the few countries in the world fortunate enough to host two of the four existing species of horseshoe crabs (Tachypleus gigas and Carcinoscorpius rotundicauda). Their continued presence along our eastern shores is both a privilege and a responsibility. Losing them to indifference or unmanaged human impact would not only erase a part of India's natural heritage but also sever a living link to Earth's deep evolutionary past. The same crabs whose blood helps save human lives deserve a chance to live their own. Their story is not only about survival but about coexistence. As I look back at the eastern shores, I am reminded that protecting these "living fossils" is not merely about conserving a specific animal; it is about preserving the ancient, delicate equilibrium between land and sea. The creature that bleeds blue to save us deserves, at the very least, the right to exist.

Below: Spawning migration and substrate selection in horseshoe crabs. A mating pair, with the female bearing the male on her opisthosoma. Pictured at low tide, this mating pair has left a visible impression in the sand flat, documenting their movement during high tide. The trail reflects the female's trajectory as she navigates the intertidal zone to locate appropriate sediment for nesting.

Above: High-density spawning event. I refer to this image as the "Happy Frame" due to the fortuitous capture of four mating pairs in a single frame, a density rarely observed during our field surveys. The image illustrates synchronous site selection; such sites become very important for the growth of the upcoming generation of horseshoe crabs. Their destruction would result in catastrophic consequences for the species' persistence in this region.

Opposite Page Top: Anthropogenic encroachment near horseshoe crab nesting habitat. A desiccated exoskeleton lies in the foreground, contrasted against active coastal construction in the immediate background. The proximity of such development to the shoreline poses a threat to the estuarine ecosystem by disrupting natural sediment dynamics. Over time, these activities can alter the composition and grain size of the sand, potentially degrading the quality of critical nesting grounds.

Opposite Page Centre: Entanglement risk associated with morphology. A pair of horseshoe crabs is shown entrapped in a ghost net. The species' rigid exoskeleton, characterized by protruding marginal spines and a sharp telson, renders them highly susceptible to becoming ensnared in monofilament mesh. In this instance, both specimens were successfully disentangled and released back into the environment.

Opposite Page Bottom: Discarded horseshoe crab following net retrieval. Pictured here is a horseshoe crab separated from the primary catch after a fishing boat came ashore. While this specific individual was successfully released back into the estuary, incidental capture remains a significant threat. Many discarded crabs suffer from desiccation or carapace damage, resulting in low survival rates.

Opposite Page: Lethal impact of abandoned, lost, or otherwise discarded fishing nets. This image depicts a male horseshoe crab that succumbed to entanglement in a ghost net. Such interactions represent a significant source of anthropogenic mortality. Recent site assessments revealed that deceased individuals outnumbered live survivors.

Next Spread Left: This picture was taken at a location that once had the highest number of horseshoe crabs coming to spawn. However, the area is now covered with numerous underwater nets designed to catch fish during high tide. Once the horseshoe crabs swim near these nets, it becomes nearly impossible for them to escape from the heavy entanglements.

Next Spread Right Top: Habitat degradation via substrate alteration. The deposition of dense, cohesive clay along the shoreline is shown to disrupt the natural sandy profile required for nesting. This shift in sediment composition creates an impermeable barrier that inhibits successful burrowing and oviposition. Such habitat modification often forces local populations to migrate.

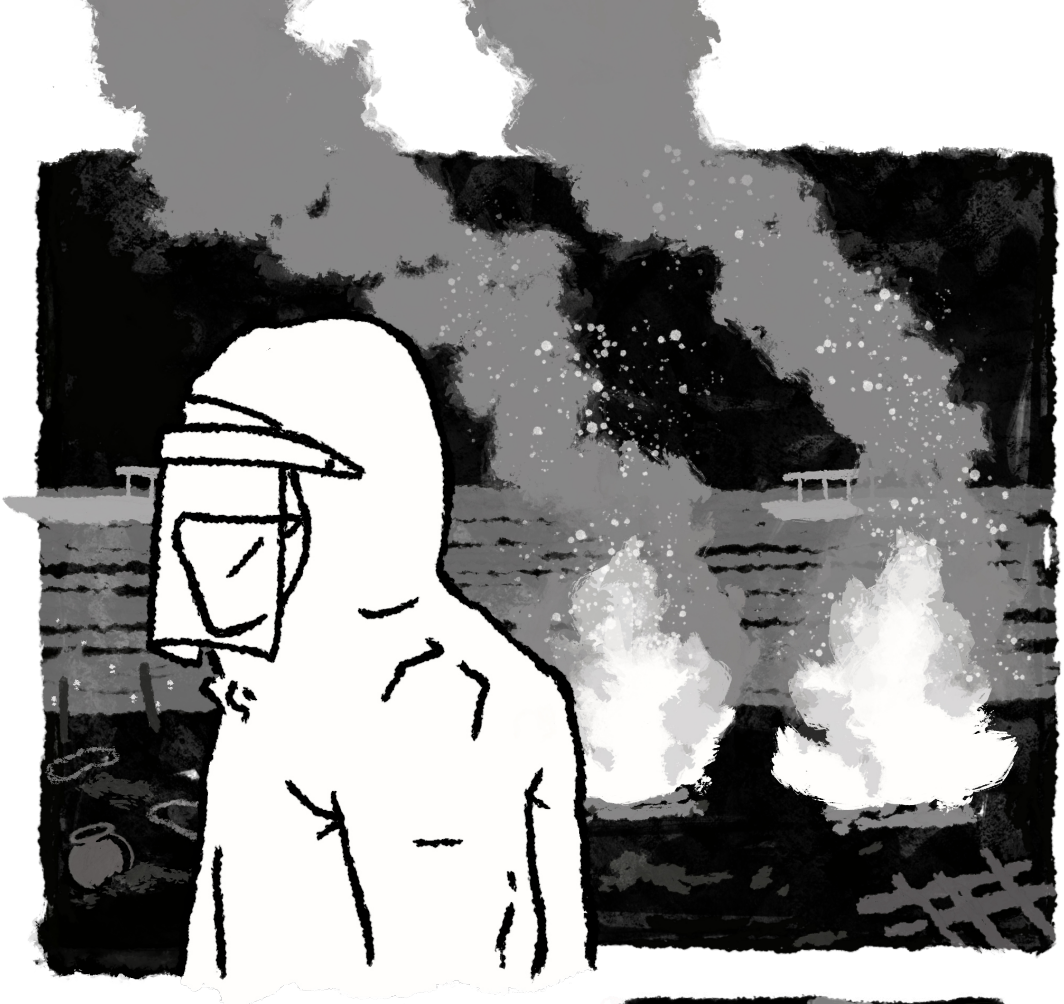
Next Spread Right Bottom: Displacement of spawning populations by fishing infrastructure. Excessive numbers of fishing trawlers are shown encroaching upon shallow water breeding zones. As vessels bank along the shore, they damage the nesting beaches and create physical barriers, effectively displacing horseshoe crabs from their native spawning grounds.

Bottom: This image documents a male horseshoe crab entangled in a ghost net anchored by mangrove vegetation. The specimen was intercepted while attempting to retreat to deeper water. The intervention involved the successful release of the animal and the subsequent removal of the net.

Cover Image Background: High-density deployment of fishing gear in the nearshore zone. The image illustrates an extensive network of nets spanning the intertidal migration corridor. While these fisheries target finfish, the saturation of the shoreline with gear creates a physical barrier during the horseshoe crab spawning season, significantly increasing the probability of incidental capture and mortality.

The Apollonian

GRAPHIC STORY



***Father, when will we get a spot?**
***Where will you take mother?**


আমাকে কেউ চেনে না!
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Contributors

Academic Articles

A L Abhirami is a research scholar currently pursuing her PhD from the Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay. After receiving her master's degree in English from the University of Hyderabad, she worked as a communications analyst at Deloitte. Her research interests include ecocriticism, blue humanities, plant and animal studies, narratology, gender, and memory studies.

Dr. Owoyemi Deborah Oluwasola is a Nigerian scholar and Lecturer. Her research interests span social and political philosophy, African identity, democratic theory, migration, philosophical education, and the intersection of technology and ethics. She has published extensively in both national and international indexed journals, with recent contributions addressing democratic governance in Africa, historical narratives in state formation, and philosophical implications of global crises. She has co-authored influential studies on African democracy, philosophy of science, and language mobility in academic discourse. Dr. Owoyemi has presented papers at several scholarly conferences, where she addressed themes like Africa and war.

Olagunju Ayomide Ezekiel is a research assistant and academic researcher in the field of Philosophy. His current Research engagement lies within the broader field of Social and Political Philosophy, where he continues to explore deeper philosophical questions through collaborative and independent research projects. He maintains a deep interest in interdisciplinary approaches to philosophy, especially those that address real-world ethical, political, cultural issueWWs. His academic work is grounded in critical thinking, textual analysis, and practical engagement with contemporary debates.

Olaniyan Ajibola Oladayo is a research assistant and academic researcher specializing in Ethics within the field of Philosophy. His work examines fundamental moral questions and their application to contemporary human experience, with a focus on bridging theory and practice. He maintains strong interests in interdisciplinary approaches that connect philosophy with real-world ethical, cultural, and political concerns. Through collaborative and independent research projects, he continues to develop critical perspectives that address pressing debates in contemporary Ethical issues. His scholarship is grounded in critical reasoning, textual analysis, and applied philosophical reflection.

Dijina Bastin K. G. holds a postgraduate degree from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Guwahati Campus, and a bachelor's degree in Sociology from Hindu College, University of Delhi. Her research adopts an intersectional lens covering culture, community, livelihood, and the agency of marginalized populations. She currently works as a Program Manager at Ignis Careers Private Limited, Hyderabad, where she leads school-based educational initiatives. Throughout her professional and academic journey, Dijina has developed a deep engagement with community representation,

advocating for quality education and the agency of underserved groups.

Navya Rose Thomas serves as an Assistant Professor of English at St Thomas College Palai Autonomous and has been teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate level for the past three years. Her areas of academic interest include Cultural Studies, Music and Humanities. Her research engages with the intersections of culture, art and society, with a particular focus on how aesthetic expressions reflect and reshape human experience.

Priyank Pravin Patel is faculty member at the Department of Geography, Presidency University, Kolkata. His research interests lie in maps and map-making, studying rivers and their landforms, and how city landscapes are shaped over time.

Rajarshi Dasgupta is faculty member at the Department of Geography, East Calcutta Girls' College, Kolkata. His is presently pursuing his doctoral research from Presidency University. His interests lie in analysing how physical landscapes change over time examining these through different laboratory methods.

Andrin Albrecht is a writer, composer, and associated postdoctoral researcher in anglophone literature at Friedrich Schiller University Jena, Germany, where they received their Ph.D. for a thesis on performances of 'genius' in the works of Herman Melville, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, and Mark Z. Danielewski in 2025. They have published widely in the field of the Blue Humanities, as well as on Mark Z. Danielewski, Stanley Kubrick, Nathanial Hawthorne, and progressive rock musician Steven Wilson. Further research interests include Artificial Intelligence, speculative fiction, and the intersection of music and literature.

Dr Archie Cornish's research concentrates on landscape and architecture in contemporary and early modern literature. His DPhil at Oxford (2020) addressed the spatiality of allegory in Spenser and other Renaissance poets. He is currently completing a monograph entitled *Spenser's Dwelling Places* (Manchester, 2026), and has published several articles and chapters on landscape, architecture and ecology in Renaissance and contemporary literature. From 2022-23 he was a postdoctoral Research Associate at the University of Sheffield for a project on Thomas Nashe. In addition to a lectureship at Goldsmiths College, University of London, he has taught at the universities of Oxford (2017-19) and Cambridge (2020). He has published non-academic reviews and freelance journalism in a range of publications.

Debra Edgerton is an Associate Professor in the School of Art at Northern Arizona University. Achievements include as Master Status with the National Watercolor Society with Edgar A Whitney Memorial and High Wind awards, and group exhibitions internationally. Edgerton holds MFA degrees from the San Francisco Art Institute in Painting, and Vermont College in Interdisciplinary Art.

Amy Leal received her doctorate in English at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Her dissertation, *Negative⌣Capabilities: Keatsian Thresholds from King Lear to Vampyr*, was supported by a Writing Lives Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellowship. Her own life experienced a sea-change when her son was

diagnosed with nonverbal autism and epilepsy, subjects that she has covered in The Chronicle of Higher Education. Currently, she teaches at Lehman College.

Personal Essays

S. Buse Yıldırım is a documentary artist, curator, and cultural manager working at the intersection of visual anthropology, memory, and cultural placemaking. She is the Artistic Director of Beykoz Kundura, leading its transformation from an Ottoman-era factory into a multidisciplinary platform for cinema, performance, and heritage dialogue, and the founder of Kundura Hafiza, an archive and research center dedicated to memory and cultural heritage. Her artistic practice is grounded in research and shaped by a commitment to collaborative and interdisciplinary methods. Drawing on her background in History of Art (Goldsmiths), Documentary Filmmaking (ESEC Paris), and Visual & Media Anthropology (Freie Universität Berlin), she creates films and curatorial projects that explore the boundaries of documentary art through cultural performance, biocultural heritage, intergenerational memory, and oral-history narratives.

Namkeen Peshawri is a Pashtun transgender poet and human rights advocate from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, working at the intersections of gender justice, climate resilience, and borderland memory. Her work has been featured through global advocacy platforms including UN Human Rights Council side events and Trans Advocacy Week in Geneva. She is the founder of a trans-led collective in Peshawar, facilitating safe spaces and digital safety trainings for gender-diverse communities, especially Afghan refugees. Her poetry and essays draw from the Kabul and Indus rivers as living archives of migration, flood, and survival—braiding oral histories, ritual textiles, and grassroots peace work.

Mangeni Wycliffe Obwoya is a Ugandan writer, poet, historian, and technologist. His works weave personal memory, history, and social commentary into reflective storytelling. He serves as CTO of Dell Wall Technologies and mentors' youth under the YALI program.

Sun-Robin is an interdisciplinary artist, researcher, and practice-based scholar currently serving as a HILLS Fellow at the Himalayan Institute of Alternatives, Ladakh, while pursuing his doctoral research in Visual Arts at Himachal Pradesh University. He received his Master of Fine Arts from Visva-Bharati University and his Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Government College of Art, Chandigarh. Working across painting, moving image, installation, and interactive sculptural practices, his research explores the intersections of ecology, embodied experience, material inquiry, and scientific observation. Drawing from sustained field engagement, sketchbook studies, and interdisciplinary methodologies, his current work investigates water as both a physical phenomenon and a cultural, psychological, and philosophical presence. His practice has been recognized through awards, scholarships, and participation in national and international exhibitions, reflecting an ongoing commitment to art as a site of research, dialogue, and lived inquiry.

Short Stories

Tridip Patir is an academic, poet and writer based in Delhi, India. He works at the forefront of philosophy, AI, public policy, and is currently a Research Assistant at the Centre for Policy Research and Governance in New Delhi, India. He is working at the intersection of caste-based discrimination and water inaccessibility of rural women in the remote villages in Madhya Pradesh, India. He also is a published poet, with his book, *On Eventide's Coattails* available globally on various platforms.

Akshaya is from the suburbs of Chennai. She has a bachelor's and master's in sociology from Stella Maris College and Manipal University, respectively. She is currently pursuing her doctoral studies at the Indian Institute of Technology, Palakkad, in Sociology. Poetry and fiction have found cosy corners in her personal diaries, which primarily helped her express, think, and rethink emotions and thoughts. Her academic areas of interest include development studies, sociology of tribes, pedagogy, and medical sociology, among others.

Anushka Bharadwaj is a writer from Bihar. She is currently working as an assistant editor at Hachette India. Her short stories have been published in *The Bombay Literary Magazine*, *MeanPepperVine*, *The Blahcksheep* and *Blue Cashmere*. She loves films, animation and reading everything about food, folktales, dreams and magic realism.

Book Reviews

Ar. Afreen Fatima is an architect and conservationist by day and an artist by heart, weaving her love for water, heritage, and drawing into her multifaceted career. With over two decades in architecture, she graduated from Jawaharlal Nehru Architecture and Fine Arts University (JNAFAU), Hyderabad, where her passion for art and design led her to the field. Currently, as a PhD scholar in the Department of Conservation at SPA Bhopal, Afreen explores the intricate connections between traditional water systems, ecology, and cultural heritage, with a focus on Telangana's Baolis. She loves children's literature, crafting stories that spark young imaginations. Her creative spirit shines through her illustrations for *Montessori* story books, where her art nurtures young minds. Affiliated with the Council of Architecture (COA), ICOMOS India, the Indian Institute of Interior Designers (IIID) Hyderabad, and the Indian Institute of Architects (IIA), Afreen's work bridges tangible and intangible heritage, fostering community-driven design.

Neha Yadav has completed her Master of Arts in English from Jadavpur University. She is interested in documenting the intersectionalities arising from regional movement through creative writing.

Literary Translation

Victor Leenus (author) was born in 1946 in Kochi, Kerala. He worked as a journalist and dabbled in writing for cinema, but left behind the trail of tumult that

marked his life in a vanishingly small but extremely memorable literary output of twelve short stories. He died at the young age of 46 under dubious circumstances.

Ambika M S (translator) is a doctoral research scholar working in Blue Humanities, focusing on the Indian Ocean World writings. Besides a few published academic papers, she writes for magazines, translates from the native Malayalam to English, and vice-versa.

Dhananjay Rajendran (translator) is a PhD scholar working on film, television and video cultures in Malayalam.

Interview

Shaonli Bhowmik is a Doctoral Research Scholar at the Centre for English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, where she also completed her Master's in English Literature. She has presented papers at several international conferences and has published her work with reputed publishers. Her research interests include Blue Humanities, Ecocriticism, Vernacular Literature, Philosophy, Art History, Posthumanism, and Psychoanalysis.

Poetry

Hoshang Merchant has written poetry since the age of 16, spanning some 60 years of writing. He is the author of 20 books of poetry and five books of prose on gay theory as a basis for a new gay theory in India. He taught post-colonial literatures and Shakespeare for 26 years before retiring in 2012.

Daniel Chinedu Fidelis, whose penname is Davy Fidel, is a creative writer, poet, novelist, essayist, and an author. In Davy's name, he has two published books on poetry and they are *Street Tears* and *The Tomb Will Tell You A Story*. The author lives in Lagos and he is from the dual natives of Imo and Delta. He studied Creative Writing in NBA and he is a member of Pen-Nigeria and also Association of Nigeria Authors. Davy's short story, "Ekwensu Left Behind a Note" was selected for Nigeria Contemporary Writers Anthology 2025. More so, his poems have been featured in Peace Anthology hosted in International World Peace Anthology in Canada. Apart from this, Davy has also been featured on Radio Nigeria programs.

Dilnasheen Zarreen is a Postgraduate student in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Calcutta. She has two poetry books to her credit: Lalazar and Elysian and Other Poems, the former released by the former Governor of West Bengal. Her work features in Sahitya Akademi's Literature journal and various national and international anthologies. She has recited her poems at ICCR Kolkata, Alliance Française du Bengale, and Barabazar Library. Dilnasheen has also presented research papers at national seminars hosted by Jadavpur University, EFLU Shillong to name a few.

Nguyễn Huy Hoàng is an anthropologist in training, his research focuses on fishermen-whales' process of worlding or building world(s), and its implications for

disrupting anthropocentric forms of thought. As a thinker, Hoàng's practices are located in(-between) a space of indistinct forms, between theory and practice, anthropology and philosophy, including but not limited to: Indigenous cosmopolitics, political ecology, semiotic entanglement, phenomenology of consciousness, aesthetics theory, anthropology of ontologies, and finally, what he calls "anthropology of thought." Hoàng's modality of expression first and foremost finds its outlet in ethnographic writing, but traverses also in the world of poetry, photography and ethnographic filmmaking. Hoàng has presented his works at many international conferences in the US, including Society for the Anthropology of Religion (SAR) Biennial Conference 2025, and published in Anthways 2024 (UK) and The Wrong Biennale 7th 2025 (Vietnam).

Photo Story

Utpal Mallick is a research scholar in Marine Biology at BITS Pilani, K. K. Birla Goa Campus. Since joining a project on horseshoe crabs in 2021, his work has focused on understanding and conserving these ancient marine species. As a member of the IUCN Horseshoe Crab Specialist group, it's a privilege for him to contribute to research aimed at protecting and raising awareness about these species. Through his research and field documentation, he attempts to highlight the ecological importance of these often-overlooked species and promote greater public awareness about marine conservation. He strongly believes that the conservation of every organism is a shared scientific and moral responsibility, a commitment to coexistence that reminds us to live and let them live.

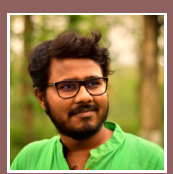
Graphic Story

Atmadeep Das is an artist, researcher, translator, and interpreter with research interests in film studies, visual culture, translation studies, and postcolonial literatures. He completed his graduation and post-graduation from the Department of English, Banaras Hindu University. He served as a project fellow at the Translation Cell, NCERT, and designed the book cover for *A Sense of Magnolias* by Niyogi Books. Currently, he is pursuing a PhD in Cultural Studies at Tezpur University, while working as an interpreter at Loksabha, Parliament of India.

EDITORS

Subashish Bhattacharjee is an Assistant Professor at Munshi Premchand Mahavidyalaya, India. His PhD, on the interstices of architecture, continental philosophy, and visual media, was awarded by the Centre for English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. His recent publications include the co-edited volumes, *Horror and Philosophy* (McFarland), *The City Speaks* (Routledge), and *Japanese Horror Cultures* (Lexington) among others. His research interests include French philosophy, visual media and new media studies, digital and STEM Humanities. Email: subashishbhattacharjee@gmail.com

Arghyadip Dewan is a Research Scholar and teaches at the Department Of English, University of North Bengal, Jalpaiguri Campus. His areas of interest include Anime Studies, Manga Studies, Film Culture, Magic Realism, Comic Studies and Postcolonial Literature. He has presented academic papers in various national and international conferences. His articles have been published in journals such as Journal of Women's Studies. Email: arghyadipdewannbu@gmail.com.



Arkabrata Chaudhury is pursuing his Ph.D. in Digital Humanities from Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta. He received his M. A. and M. Phil. degree from the University of North Bengal, and his dissertation was on the literary representation of the urban space of 20th century Delhi. He is currently serving as a State Aided College Teacher in Ananda Chandra College, Jalpaiguri. Alongside, his areas of interest include urban studies, game studies, philosophies of space, and postcolonial discourse. Email: helios.prakhar@gmail.com

Rohit Saha is an Interpreter, Translator, Film Reviewer and Occasional Writer. He is an Interpreter working in the lower house of the Indian Parliament. He is currently pursuing his PhD in Translation Studies from The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad. His interests lie in the area of translation studies popular culture, film studies, memory studies, postcolonial studies. He reviews movies for distinguished websites like "High On Films" and "Humans of Cinema". His works and writings have been widely published in many online journals. He is the recipient of the "Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Award for Best Film Criticism-2021" by FIPRESCI-INDIA. Email: rohitphdtrs24@efluniversity.ac.in

Rajat Subhra Roy is an independent researcher who has done his graduation and post-graduation from the Department of English, University of North Bengal with first class. He has research interests in the areas of visual and popular culture, film Studies, and postcolonial studies. Currently, he is working as a editorial staff under the publication division of NCERT, New Delhi.
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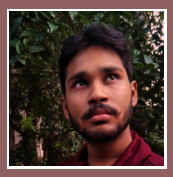
Atmadeep Das is an artist, researcher, translator, and interpreter with research interests in film studies, visual culture, translation studies, and postcolonial literatures. He completed his graduation and post-graduation from the Department of English, Banaras Hindu University. He served as a project fellow at the Translation Cell, NCERT, and designed the book cover for *A Sense of Magnolias* by Niyogi Books. Currently, he is pursuing a PhD in Cultural Studies at Tezpur University, while working as an interpreter at Loksabha, Parliament of India. Email: atmadeep07@gmail.com

Arunoday Chaudhuri is an independent researcher trained in history. He received his M.A. degree from Visva Bharati University. His areas of interest include cultural history, memoirs and game studies. Email: arunoday.history@gmail.com



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