## Introduction

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# Introduction – Writing Water in Classical American Literature

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In this special issue, we revisit classical American texts through the lens of the Blue Humanities. We made a conscious choice to focus on mostly male, white, and classical authors whose texts are commonly read through land-centered and settler-colonialist notions of America. With Thoreau and Melville, we are concentrating on two canonical authors of the American Renaissance, a period characterized by expansionism, manifest destiny, and nation building, in which literature became a vital medium for turning space into storied places and for defining what it means to be American. By reading these authors through a decidedly water-centered perspective, we want to disrupt the homogeneity and linear teleology of such conceptualizations and show that the period's understanding of race, Indigeneity, and nationalism was a lot more fluid and heterogeneous than land-based conceptions allow for.

As Steve Mentz puts it in his contribution to this special issue, "America itself is a Blue Humanities Experiment […] as the continent […] has been settled and colonized by transoceanic travelers […]." Oceans afforded the sailing of ships and have thus enabled the exploration of territories, the spread of colonial empires, transport of exploited natural resources, human beings, animals, plants, goods, cultures, ideas, bacteria, and viruses. In this sense, oceans have made possible colonial exploration and settlement, enslavement, nation building, extraction of resources, trade, and the circulation of foods, objects, knowledges, and diseases (cf. Knopf et al. 2023, 2–3). Alexandra Ganser and Charne Lavery argue that the sea has appeared in cultural and literary imaginations as "an ambivalent space between a frictionless, connecting pathway and an entrapping void" (2023, 1). The ocean's "non-terrestrial vastness" (Mentz 2023, 24) time and again reminds us of everything that cannot be fully comprehended, conquered, or incorporated.

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A focus on river systems rather than landmasses also significantly changes our perception of America, both as a material continent and an imagined nation. As Manlio Della Marca and Uwe Lübken point out, rivers were vital means of "exploration, conquest, colonization, and settlement" as well (2021, 15). We mostly think of land in defining a nation but, as they point out by quoting Donald Pisani, it would make more sense to think of the US "as a series of rivers separated by land, than as a huge land mass punctuated by rivers" (Della Marca and Lübken 2021, 15). Like oceans, rivers play a vital part in constituting national imaginaries and cultural memories as well as in mapping out routes of hegemony, conquest, and other forms of power. Marshlands or wetlands, on the other hand, were mostly seen as wastelands. 'Useless' for agriculture or industrial development (except for the harvesting of peat and reeds), in the Western hemisphere they have largely been destroyed, drained or filled to 'claim' them according to a capitalist logic (Giblett 1996, 3, 7; Mitsch and Gosselink 2007, 3). Only after their ecological value and propensity for binding carbon dioxide were recognized, conservation and even 'reclaiming' of (former) wetland areas have become paramount in many nations (cf. Mitsch and Gosselink 2007, 3).

In this issue, we explore literary representations of both salt and freshwater bodies, and with wetlands the in-between, to arrive at new understandings of how water, which surrounds us and runs through us, influences our being-in-the world and our way of perceiving the world. Imagination has a vital part in this because, as Gaston Bachelard put it, "imagination invents more than objects and dramas – it invents a new life, a new spirit; it opens eyes which hold new types of visions" (1983, 16). He claimed that material elements in general have inspired traditional philosophies and ancient cosmology but that the imagination of water is special because there always is an ontological correspondence with the human body (Bachelard 1983, 6). Water not only awakens our mind but our being in dense poetic images that are produced through relating sensual experiences. Someone who grasped this ontological correspondence as well as the symbolic and spiritual dimension of water was the American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson.

In an 1834 lecture delivered to the Boston Mechanic's Institution long before the concepts Blue Humanities and planetary water (Mentz 2023, 2–5) were coined, Emerson pointed out the many industrial uses of water, its elemental role in geomorphology, and in giving life in its various planetary forms as dew, vapor, spray, cloud, icicle, snowflake, or wave (1959, 52). As a transcendentalist Emerson believed, as he would explain in his seminal essay *Nature* two years later, that every natural fact corresponds to a spiritual fact. Emerson, like Thoreau, closely observed nature and was very interested in the then fairly new natural sciences, but in the end believed that natural laws could only be grasped holistically through all our faculties,

including poetic imagination. Emerson's natural scientific observations of water are acute and comprehensive, yet to him this does not exhaust the wonder, the miracle, the gift of creation.

Emerson, as later Thoreau, already addressed many aspects of what is central to the Environmental Humanities, Material Ecocriticism, and Blue Humanities today, namely that water has agency – water acts, Emerson says in his essay – and that it is the central force in every ecosystem:

> For, he preserves the temperature of the globe in a fit condition for human life; he modifies the atmosphere; he washes away the filth of cities and continents; he plucks down the old Alps and Andes to make the habitable land of the plains; he makes new soil to repair the continual waste he occasions; he is present and active in every function of vegetable and animal structures; and he is the circulating medium having communication with every part of the earth through the rivers which ultimately pour their waters into the sea. (Emerson 1959, 51–2)

Water here is not only regarded as a material resource but as an actant in its own right. Such a recognition ultimately leads to less control and more appreciation and feeds right into the central ideas of the Blue Humanities which want to recreate our relationship to water by becoming more kin than Anthropos, by less mastering its flows than appreciating its creative energies. This changed attitude or new water literacy puts literary imagination and the creative knowledge of the humanities side by side with scientific research in forging a water consciousness and hence making a significant contribution to understanding eminent water crises. And maybe, the contributions in this volume ask, there is water knowledge in classic American texts that we overlooked by being firmly entangled in land-centered perspectives, paradigms, and methodologies and that a Blue Humanities perspective can help to reveal.

The Blue Humanities are a subdivision of the Environmental Humanities and receive a lot of their input from Material Ecocriticism, but they are unique in putting water front and center, both in the literary imagination and as a signifying matter itself. Water-centered studies began to emerge in the first decade of the twenty-first century when Steve Mentz, who is commonly attributed with having coined the term in 2009, suggested that blue cultural studies create new discourses and stories by, firstly, putting water where land used to be and, secondly, by reexamining what it means to be human (2023, 17). In their decisive focus on water the Blue Humanities perspective "poses a blue counterchallenge to the obsessively green visions of ecocriticism" (Mentz 2023, 24). Water emerges no longer as an accessory to and resource of land and settlement but as an actant in its own right and as a fluid and evasive natural entity that deserves respect and preservation. For far too long water has been used for cleaning our waste, for producing energy at the cost of channeled, dammed, and thus dead waters, has been polluted and dredged, controlled and violated for human use. Western cultures, in this regard, usually see water as an

object and resource, while Indigenous cultures often understand water as a relative that provides for humans, who are perceived as part of an entangled web of beings creating life. The Blue Humanities thus also question anthropocentrism and the nature-culture divide and ask to rethink human-water relations in ways that attribute agency and rights to different bodies of water.

In *Thinking with Water*, Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis in 2013 already demanded that in the face of global water crises "[w]e need to rethink our material, ontological, connection to the waters around us" (2013, 4). Likewise, Serpil Oppermann claims, "since our perceptions and ideas of water bodies are culturally shaped, […] the best way to change the way people behave is to change the way they think" (2023, 1). This new water consciousness or water literacy comes into being by stressing the culture-constitutive power of water and its "spiritual significance: water gathers stories, identities, and memories" (Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis 2013, 5). The material and spiritual-symbolic qualities of water have to be thought as one in order to fully understand our entanglement with and treatment of water, as kin rather than resource, as Oppermann suggests (2023, 1). Such a new water consciousness is not only forged through scientific data and research but through critical and creative discourses in the humanities which offer new tools and perspectives for analyzing human-water relations. As Mentz argues in this volume, "the Blue Humanities tendency toward creative-critical approaches to literary and environmental thinking can enliven our approaches to canonical literary texts." As this issue shows, a blue lens can indeed eddy up fresh storied outlooks in old narratives.

In the Blue Humanities water becomes an epistemic tool because, as the editors of *Thinking with Water* claim, it has the "capacity to challenge our ways of knowing, both by crossing conventional disciplinary boundaries and by revealing the ways in which 'nature' and 'culture' are always co-constituted" (Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis 2013, 5). Water has been put to use by humans in myriad ways which often reversed the 'natural' state of water, turning it instead into a means of industrialization, colonization, and capitalism. The Blue Humanities look at producing new narratives and artistic figurations which "help deconstruct [these] capitalist, neocolonialist, and imperialistic practices" (Oppermann 2023, 9). The Blue Humanities want to "craft new vocabularies and critical methods that enable a richer connection between humans and water in all its forms" (Mentz 2023, 24).

Water is connected to social, economic, and political power because it is always situated and used, albeit often in less clear-cut ways than land, and it is always historical and storied. Philip Steinberg argues that all periods in the history of colonialism and capitalism had complementary spatialities of land and sea, with specific interest groups promoting specific constructions of ocean-space intertwined with political-economic structures (2001, 4–6). Likewise, Bernhard Klein and Gesa

Mackenthun hold that oceans need to be "analyzed as deeply historical location[s] whose transformative power is not merely psychological or metaphorical […] but material and very real" (2004, 2). Issues of hegemony and power circulate around the question of who does the situating, using, historicizing, and story-ing, or in other words, who has the right and sovereignty to benefit and represent? These questions are addressed by all essays in this volume in various ways by looking at the role water plays in constructing – often conflicting and overlapping – identities and narratives of being, belonging, and beholding.

A central quality of water is its "reservoir of unknowability" (Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis 2013, 8) which makes it a rich habitat for the literary imagination. We cannot entirely know, control, predict, or even own water. Different from land it consistently transforms, changes shape, circulates, eludes our grasp, and occasionally returns the violence we commit against it. Water cannot be ultimately defined and fixed and as such questions our very methods and theorems as well as forms of narrative. Water stores its own cultural memories of travel, conquest, slave trade, shipwrecks, deluges, and floods, of stories of belonging and settlement and it tells its own material stories of aquatic life that we know so little about. Water, as Serenella Iovino and Oppermann claim, has "narrative agency" (2014, 9) so that in the vein of Material Ecocriticism, the Blue Humanities are

> acknowledging planetary waters as living, agentic entities with lively powers of expression. Using water-based imaginaries, in this sense, we become more attentive to the meaningfully articulate aquatic habitats and their inhabitants, and thus can attune to wet matter mostly by means of its storied dimension, recognizing water as a densely storied signifying subject and a site of narrativity. (Oppermann 2023, 40)

A focus on water's narrativity is two-fold: it looks at stories of water, at how we have imagined and narrated waters as well as how water has aesthetically shaped the means and manner of representation in narrative texts. Yet, it also looks at material water as text, as a matter that spells out its own aquatic "onto-tales" (Bennett 2010, 117).

While the Blue Humanities first focused on the Atlantic and then oceans in general, fresh water, as the 'new gold,' received more and more attention recently. Other bodies of water such as wetlands, lakes, glaciers, groundwater, and humidity are also increasingly the subject of Blue Humanities' creative and critical discourses (Mentz 2023, 17) as all planetary water is in circulation and has found manifold echoes in literature and art. In this volume, we examine two iconic writers of American Romanticism, Herman Melville and Henry David Thoreau, who have both been read as profoundly contributing to American literary and national consciousness. The fact that both put water bodies at the center of their narratives, Melville the ocean and Thoreau a river and a pond, demanded a re-reading of their texts through

a Blue Humanities lens. Steve Mentz brings Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) into dialogue with Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* (1997) through the concepts of submersion and buoyancy, while also engaging *Moby-Dick*'s submersive force with his own creative critical response centering on 'buoyant refiguring.' Employing the method of 'aquatic crossmapping' to *Moby-Dick* and Emma Cline's *The Guest* (2023), Andrin Albrecht explores the affordances of oceans and water paradigms, such as water as sanctuary, capital, and identity, that his water-centered perspective reveals in the two texts. As much as oceans, rivers are deeply interwoven with human life and have an epistemological as well as ontological function; they are matter and metaphor, resource and symbol for humanity at the same time. Through the lens of the Blue Humanities, however, rivers also have their own being and existence beyond human use, interpretation, and appropriation. Caroline Rosenthal's contribution shows how Henry David Thoreau's *A Journey on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) – like a river – meanders, pauses, and gathers speed; it is fraught with the flotsam and jetsam of storied rivers in the bible, in myths, poetry, natural history, and local lore. Besides producing knowledge, through its unique materiality, the river in Thoreau's text also becomes a creative engine for new aesthetic and narrative means. Wetlands create hybrid places at the intersection of oceans, deltas, rivers, and land and as such constitute an "anomaly in a classificatory order" based on the distinction of land versus water (Giblett 1996, 4). This might have caused their long-time vilification in Western cultural traditions, in which they have often been depicted as unknown, uncanny, and horrific places, "associated with death and disease, the monstrous and the melancholic, […] a threat to health and sanity, to the clean and proper body, and mind" (Giblett 1996, 3). As 'Black waters,' they might be picturesque but never sublime as oceans or mountains, they might be settings for murder (Giblett 1996, 7, 9), and, specifically in the American South, contain palimpsestic colonial and enslavement histories. Kylie Crane's article investigates Attica Locke's wetland murder novels *Black Water Rising* (2009) and *Bluebird, Bluebird* (2017), bringing to the surface the ontological and epistemological ambivalences of wetland regions, as well as the South's history of enslavement and racialized discourses. Although Locke's novels might not (yet) be classical American texts, they have made important contributions to understanding wetlands and revealing them as spaces where paradigms of the Blue Humanities apply. Likewise, this issue looks at a rather neglected text by John Steinbeck, whose seminal fiction is largely land-based and set in the rural farm areas of Oklahoma and California. Kerstin Knopf looks at how his book *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (1951) reports on his expedition into the Gulf of California. She discusses how he weaves into his text early ecological observations that were instrumental in shaping America's environmental studies and consciousness. The volume concludes with a conversation between Steve Mentz and Andrin Albrecht on how the Blue Humanities can enrich discourses on Romanticism and the Anthropocene.

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