

Reimagining the Ocean: The Blue Humanities in French and Francophone Studies

ISAAC JOSLIN

The Blue Humanities is an emergent academic interdisciplinary that takes water as its fluid force for theorizing interconnections between fields such as ecocriticism, natural mysticism, ethnobotany, indigenous shamanisms, maritime geographies, aquatic poetics, and more. The world of Blue Humanities is comprised of a complex and intelligent web of biological, chemical, and aesthetic interactions in which water serves as the common animating factor. The waters *within* and the waters *without* ebb and flow through the rivers and arteries of earth consciousness. How do the salty wet tears of an animal relate to the ocean waves? How do shorelines provide the containers for aquatic consciousness? The water in plants provides the basis of photosynthetic processes that disperse oxygen into the atmosphere, creating the conditions for aerobic respiration in the cells of other living organisms. Water is the carrier fluid for myriad proteins, amino acids, alkaloids, and other chemical messengers that constitute the building blocks of the organic life of the planet and its diverse ecosystems.¹ This special issue of the *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* brings questions of Oceanic thought to the forefront by investigating relationships between ecology and human civilization through investigating the arts, philosophies, and experiences of both human and non-human actors of the “francophone world,” which is merely the conglomerate regions and territories that have through history and culture been distilled from the vastness of oceanic space and time on our shared and singular planet.

From the dawn of the Age of Exploration to the postcolonial global condition, five centuries of history have transpired upon the ocean waves that link faraway coastlines. Compared to the growing body of diverse academic studies devoted to the Blue Humanities throughout the Anglophone world, there is a dearth of research in this innovative and transdisciplinary field within French and Francophone circles. Consequently, this timely volume affords the opportunity to reexamine the rich tradition of maritime literature in French and Francophone Studies through the lens of aquatic thinking, as well as weave together the diverse literary and cultural legacies of the people and ecosystems that encountered one another along the way. Furthermore, the essays represented here seek to uncover new streams and rivers of consciousness that connect texts and context through the interdisciplinary of the Blue Humanities. This project represents a point of departure for a rich foray into sea stories and nautical fictions written in French from a broad array of theoretical approaches, philosophical perspectives, and critical interventions—including decolonial, ecocritical, phenomenological, and other—that undergird the Blue Humanities.

For instance, canonical writers such as Albert Camus, Jules Verne, and J.M.G. Le Clézio probe the complexity of the relationships between the nautical and the terrestrial on an interconnected planet in their respective works of fiction. Aimé Césaire’s entire *œuvre* is engulfed in the trans-Atlantic channels that linked the trajectories of the continents along its shores. Many French and Francophone authors also remind us of the cosmogonic origins of life that bind *Homo sapiens* and all other sentient beings to the ocean. Moreover, the French philosophers Gaston Bachelard and Michel Serres suggest

that reestablishing a primordial, sensorial connection with water itself is part of an existential, epistemological, and spiritual quest. It is in this sense in which Serres provocatively declares in his essay *Biogée*, “Don’t ever stop making love to Garonne and being born from it, emerging from it, flowing from my maternal abode [...] conjugal bedroom, conjugal bed, beloved woman, birth canal [...] belly from which I was driven out when I became a solitary nomad on this Earth. But my flesh has retained these motherly waters” (34).

The ocean is a vast and ever-present entity, modulating the earth’s temperature fluctuations through its currents and their engagement with the winds, and modifying the land through the erosive effects of its tidal flows. The ocean touches all and is in all. A number of these essays envision the ocean as a relational entity and point of departure for elaborating a decolonial ecological stance toward myriad existential actors in the earth’s biosphere. In our reimagining of the ocean as both a connective and a disruptive space, this volume explores how seas have constructed histories, and how those same seas and histories can be recast differently through human interactions and imaginings. Whether in Fatou Diome’s *Le ventre de l’Atlantique*, or Laurent Gaudé’s *Eldorado*, waters have consistently held a prominent position in francophone literature, whether as the embodiment of the gulf between the continent and its diasporas, or an impediment or obstacle to be overcome in the endless quests for emigration. One might also consider the role of water spirits in many indigenous African, Caribbean, and Polynesian folktales and mythologies, as well as the opportunities afforded by water for human mobility and its necessity for the flourishing of human civilizations throughout history. Waters mark a significant trope in francophone literature, and the twelve essays contained in this volume reflect the diversity of perspectives that Blue Humanities affords.

Some recurring themes in this volume include envisioning the Ocean as historical actor and also as archive of imperial conquest, human migrations, which then flows into notions of other intelligences and modes of relationality between human and non-human entities. These ideas are further explored in terms of the abundant life forms that find sustenance in the ocean’s embrace, from coral reefs to great aquatic birds, as well as the plants and seaweeds that travel from depths to distant shores. A second major thematic vein that emerges in this volume is the migrant’s journey across maritime spaces and the depths of the aquatic graves, from the trans-Atlantic slave trade to more recent waves of migrants across the waters of the Mediterranean. Archipelagic thought and island consciousness are also significant points of entry into the kinds of thought processes that can only be described as oceanic in scope. A third integral theme of this volume is an insistence on opening up the discursive field through “Blue thinking” or other philosophical articulations of the imperative to relate to the ocean in a profound manner. These are the threads that link Victor Hugo’s “Le phare” or Baudelaire’s “L’Albatros” to Polynesian mythologies or indigenous African civilizations along a thousand plateaus of potential interconnections. Therefore, the contributions in this volume outlined below invite us also to think blue about the connections between the worlds we have constructed, to read the signs in the waters, and to develop new ways of understanding humanity and the beautiful aquatic earth it shares.

This volume opens with Julia Frengs’s essay “Coral Souls: Think-Feeling with the Ocean in Denis Pourawa’s *Ton âme corail*,” which brilliantly captures the motif of a sensitive natural world through her concept of “think-feeling with.” Frengs’ “think-feeling with” recalls the Glissantian idea of “donner-avec” from *Poétique de la Relation*, as she accentuates the metaphor of the coral reef as a decolonial philosophical image for archipelagic peoples and cultures. Invoking Malcolm Ferdinand’s decolonial ecocriticism, Frengs analyses both the visual and the verbal poetics in Denis Pourawa’s *œuvre*, recognizing the value of the oceans’ life-giving force for the multiple coral reefs that beautifully express the delicate diversity of cultural systems in the Polynesian archipelago.

Continuing in the same geographical region, in his essay “A Call for Justice in Ma’ohi Nui [French Polynesia]: The Post-Climate Change Imaginary of Mourareau’s *Méridien Zéro* and *Maeva nulle part*,” John Walsh articulates the ways in which Tahitian writer Mourareau echoes some of the ideals

of Hau'ofa's "New Oceania" with its emphasis on reviving the relationality between humans and the oceanic spaces of the Pacific archipelago. For an indigenous population that has experienced centuries of post/colonial policies designed to disconnect populations from a sustainable relationship with the natural environment (water) in order to create the necessary preconditions for dependence and control, the contemporary politics of climate catastrophe resonate particularly loudly. Walsh's comparative analysis of these two novels that defy the generic rules of purely dystopian climate fiction, offers glimpses into a not-so-distant future where the thought systems that once governed human interactions are called into question by rising tides and ocean waves.

A third essay that investigates the notion of archipelagic thinking is Chadia Chambers-Samadi's article "A Seabird's Messages to the Blue Humanities: The Frigatebird, Steward of Water, Land and Cultures." Chambers-Samadi identifies the salient trope of the giant frigatebird or "le malfini" in the Atlantic Caribbean and its relative species in the Pacific Island archipelagos as both a cultural and poetic figure. Through concerted analysis of the various cults and beliefs surrounding these birds as messengers between worlds, either land and sea, or living and dead, Chambers-Samadi examines the role of the frigatebird in works by Aimé Césaire and Patrick Chamoiseau, among other francophone literary figures, positioning the frigatebird as a relational entity whose presence as an intermediary can create a harmonic balance between the various lands touched by colonialism and the seas that both lock and liberate their potential.

Jonathan Krell's essay "*Le Dernier des siens* [The last of its kind] Human-driven Extinction in the North Atlantic" continues the theme of the maritime bird as he discusses the particular inter-species relationship between an anthropologist and a member of the extinct species of Great Awk in Sybille Grimbert's novel. Invoking the notion of "hybrid communities" where inter-species relationships contribute to the richness of communal bonds and overall wellbeing, Krell draws comparisons between *Le dernier des siens* and other narratives of maritime solitude, such as *Robinson Crusoe* in which the lines between human and other-than-human actors becomes blurred in the absence of the collective judgments of a uniquely human community. By invoking the Great Awk, Krell seems to suggest a similar blurring of the lines between life and death, reality and fantasy, as the relationship between a man and an extinct bird reveals some deep insights into the animal and human relationship and its potential to transcend the limitations of purely human logics.

The ecological and human catastrophes that resulted from the legacies of conquest and colonial expansion are ongoing. Through an interesting approach to the genre of the ship logbook, Filippo Menozzi and Emily Cuming decolonize and deconstruct the genre in their essay "Fanon's Ship's Journals: The Logbook of Decolonisation," which examines in erudite fashion two of Franz Fanon's logbooks or "journal de bord" that record his ideas and experiences: first between 1953 and 1956 while working at the psychiatric hospital in Blida-Joinville, and second from 1960 during a diplomatic mission to Mali. Linking Fanon's logbooks to the historical archive of the ship's logbook and its role in colonial capitalist expansion and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Menozzi and Cuming propose a decolonial reading of Fanon's logbooks that challenges the dominant colonial hierarchies that are implicit in the genre by recasting the narrative of a Eurocentric Atlantic history.

Ariane Ngabeu's essay "Migration, Water, and the Human Condition in Laurent Gaudé's *Eldorado*" similarly deploys a body of water as the stage for a narrative reversal, although this time it is the Mediterranean Sea that maintains the rigid boundary between worlds. Through detailed analysis of the characters in this 2006 novel, specifically, the pair of Soleiman the migrant and Piracci the immigration agent, Ngabeu reveals the ways in which the waters of the Mediterranean operate as both an immigration corridor and a dangerous impediment to safe crossing, thereby opening up a metaphorical space to interrogate the limits of human empathy in the absence of sustained structural critique and collective action. Through the work of theorists such as Fanon, Didier Fassin, Achille Mbembe, and Gayatri Spivak, Ngabeu underscores the delicate nature of the human condition in a world both connected and divided by waters, as well as the peoples and histories that are born and die in its wake.

Anne-Sabine Nicolas further elaborates the situatedness of the migrant condition in her essay “Fatou Diome’s *Belly of the Atlantic: A Chronotope at Sea*” in which she uses the concept of the chronotope to describe the temporal disjuncture contained within what Paul Gilroy has termed “The Black Atlantic.” Through a (re-) centering of the ocean, Nicolas analyses the characters, brother and sister: Salie in France and her brother Madické in Senegal who are separated by the sea and all of the historically constructed barriers that it represents. For Nicolas, the Atlantic Ocean’s belly is interpreted as an incarnation and living body, which also constitutes a *lieu de mémoire* for those other living bodies that have engaged with its close proximity through either intent or accident. The Atlantic Ocean is its own fluid dynamic force that renders clearly the limits of civilizations and histories with its waters.

A second essay that focuses on the maritime migration routes between Senegal and the European Union is Anne Quinney’s contribution “Rolling in the Deep: Mati Diop’s Atlantic Histories.” This essay cogently outlines the Blue Humanities and its relation to French and Francophone literature, while underscoring Mati Diop’s recent feature film, which portrays the Atlantic Ocean, not merely as a backdrop or setting, but as an actor and character whose presence necessarily engages and interacts with the other characters in the film. In a way that recalls the dark, timeless, and mysterious oceanic spaces depicted in Rivers Solomon’s book *The Deep*, the Atlantic Ocean in Diop’s film is portrayed as a focal point, an ever-present force that speaks of other times and spaces. Quinney’s analysis of Diop’s film is well contextualized in the larger body of migrant narratives from Senegal and suggests an interesting parallel that the migrants’ bodies become a similar sea of unindividuated dehumanized entities, which like the Atlantic itself are filled with stories of loss and stories of hope.

In her essay “Maritime Resistance and Island Identity in *Asterix in Corsica: A Blue Humanities Perspective*,” Sigy Ghosh offers a reading of the celebrated *bande dessinée* that highlights the anti-imperialist resistance of Corsican narratives, not only in the face of the Roman Empire, but also against neoliberal eco-cidal practices of late-stage capitalism. Situating the island in the context of the Mediterranean, Ghosh links *Asterix in Corsica* to other island narratives from Alexandre Dumas to Jules Verne, illustrating the ways in which maritime autonomy can be invoked as an act of resistance. Given the very real parameters of islands and archipelagoes, it should go without saying that these areas are perhaps the most sensitive to water’s whims, due in part to their isolation. Situating the island as a site of ecological resistance serves to both underscore this vulnerability and highlight its resistant potential as an isolated bastion of anti-imperialist struggles.

Continuing within the liminal space where ocean and land meet, Peter Russella’s essay “The Lighthouses on Victor Hugo’s Sea/Shore” identifies three light-house texts from Hugo’s poetry and prose, which demonstrate the ocean’s timelessness. Beyond merely a romantic trope, Russella marshals critical theories to argue for the literary and cultural significance of the lighthouse as a place in Hugo’s *oeuvre*. As a liminal place along the sea/shore, the lighthouse functions as both a beacon of security and an indicator of danger and potential shipwreck. The suggestion is that danger lies not in the ocean itself but in its zones of encounter with land (islands, shores, etc.) representing true peril. As a result of its inherent liminality, the lighthouse stands as a timeless place, much like the sea and shore that it attempts to illuminate, beckoning and inviting reflection of refracted light into the depths of the human imagination.

Trending toward the philosophical, Jacqueline Moulton’s essay “Becoming Ocean: Mourning-with as Multiplicitous Weaving and Becoming-with In-trouble Oceans” offers critical insights into other modes of thinking in order to become-ocean. Invoking Deleuze and Guattari’s *Mille plateaux*, Moulton explores the fluid connections that exist between the multiple actors and agents that together, from the most miniscule phytoplankton to the largest or marine mammals, comprise the vibrant biotic network of the ocean. Becoming-ocean when the ocean exists as an in-trouble entity necessarily involves an element of mourning and loss, sharing both in the responsibility and the consequences. Yet the potential of diverging from the singular human-centric mode of thinking

toward a multiplicitous and interrelated web of cooperative knowledge production and dissemination that is both ethical and aesthetic cannot be ignored. In the interstices between haunting and hospitality, becoming-ocean marks a critical turn for Blue Humanities, carving out a philosophical space to experience and express the oceans' radical planetary embrace.

To conclude this volume, Keith Moser further elaborates in his essay "*Thinking Blue Through Somatic Encounters with the Universe in Michel Serres's Philosophy*" how thinking blue necessarily involves a connection with the living environment and the Self. This relational connectivity is key to understanding the vitality of the earth as a blue planet teeming with participants, including but not limited to humans, whose blue thinking can contribute to the overall wellbeing of the entire system. These epistemological shifts that will allow for humanity to engage with the planet on a level of mutual respectability for the communicative and conscious capacities of human and other-than-human entities are encapsulated by Moser's notion of thinking blue, or blue thought.

In an era defined by an anthropogenic, ecological crisis of epic proportions, this collection of essays not only investigates how widespread maritime pollution, biodiversity loss, and rising sea levels threaten the continued existence of all species; it also suggests potential remedies for these conditions, mainly a shift in consciousness toward and awareness of other modes of thinking and feeling. Furthermore, recognizing that oceanic destruction is linked to an inherently capitalist, colonialist economic paradigm that is predicated upon the notion of unfettered growth and expansion, affords opportunities to intervene in these paradigms with decolonial, ecological, and other critical modes of contestation that call into question their fundamental premises. French and Francophone authors and artists, for example, undermine this destructive neoliberal ideology that has been exported to all corners of the globe by asking the same fundamental questions as prosperous degrowth theorists like André Gorz, Serge Latouche, and Ivan Illich in their sea narratives: how can this be thought differently? As late-stage capitalism appears destined to continue to erode the very foundation of life itself, French and Francophone authors from Fanon to Malcolm Ferdinand decry the privatization of the commons and the ecocidal destruction of natural orders that invariably accompanies it.

As the twenty-first century marches on toward its midway point, thinking blue, as Moser and others have suggested, may represent a new modality for engaging with the environmental complexity of society and its interdependent relation with the larger planetary and cosmic environmental systems and their sentience. To think-feel with the ocean, as Julia Frengs puts it, may help restore an equilibrium between human generated systems and those systems generated by other intelligences, including that of the ocean's embrace of both earth and sky. Perhaps if humans were to develop the capacity to listen to the water speak, or arrive at an understanding that the stream whispers sweetly in a language like water washing over rocks saying something about the eternal flow of time that no human mind can fully understand in the contours of its linguistic framework; or if humans could perceive the whole process of water rising from the sea to the clouds and then rushing back down as rain through washes and gullies back to the lakes and rivers that eventually lead back to the oceanic womb as a communicative process that involves so many other terrestrial, aquatic, aerial, mineral, fungal, faunal, and floral entities; maybe then humanity will be able to listen to the waters' secrets rushing through its own biological and cultural systems and find new ways of reimagining itself as an oceanic, life-sustaining, relational part of a still greater cosmic unfolding. The essays contained in this special issue of the *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* represent just a small gesture toward that ultimate end.

Notes

¹ For more on this idea, see my recent essay, “Silencing the Forest: Development, Urbanization and Globalization in Koli Jean Bofane’s *Congo Inc.*” *Ecotexts in the Postcolonial Francosphere*, edited by Nsah Mala and Nicki Hitchcott, Liverpool University Press, 2025, pp. 135–149.

Works Cited

- Glissant, Édouard. *Poétique de la Relation*. Éditions Gallimard, 1990.
- Joslin, Isaac. “Silencing the Forest: Development, Urbanization and Globalization in Koli Jean Bofane’s *Congo Inc.*” *Ecotexts in the Postcolonial Francosphere*, edited by Nsah Mala and Nicki Hitchcott, Liverpool University Press, 2025, pp. 135–149.
- Serres, Michel. *Biogée*. Éditions Le Pommier, 2010.
- Solomon, Rivers. *The Deep*. S&S/Saga Press, 2019.