



Steve Mentz
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Title: Toward a Wetter World: The Blue Humanities in the Anthropocene

Abstract:

Each of us has a personal relationship with water, from the ocean beach or lakefront where we like to spend holidays, to the water we drink on a hot day, to water we used to wash our bodies this morning, to the water that irrigates the crops that become the food that we eat. Each of our nations and cultures also has a historical relationship with water that emerges from water-borne patterns of migration, violence, and trade. The Blue Humanities asks us to engage with water as both substance and idea. We think we know this element, but the more we pursue it, the more we must reimagine how human relationships with water shape our lives, our history, and our future. During the present Anthropocene, the rise in global temperatures and sea levels is giving us a wetter world – which means more water in places we do not want or expect it. In this watery world, human relationships with the blue element assume greater urgency. To understand the Blue Humanities as an Anthropocene Humanities requires us to engage with the changing waterscapes and fluid landscapes of our dynamic present.

This lecture begins by introducing water's alien and intimate faces, as they show themselves in literary culture and in recent Blue Humanities scholarship. The first analytical focus will be the mythic figure of the mermaid, a creature who combines the human and the oceanic. Juxtaposing a brief description in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* of drowning Ophelia as "mermaid-like" with the recent novel *The Mermaid of Black Conch* by Anglo-Caribbean author Monique Roffey will enable a clearer sense of how these figures mediate between humans and water. Allusions in both texts to religious songs further suggest ways in which watery environments, including but not limited to the ocean, connect themselves to spiritual insights.

Taking mermaids as pivotal representations of aquatic-human hybrids, the second half of the talk contains an analysis of watery eco-poetics, with special attention to asymmetries of form and to the experience of buoyancy, in which the force of displaced water supports a body's weight. We

cannot all be mermaids, but we all can, with some practice, float. By taking account of representations of human buoyancy in and beyond poetry, I conclude with an effort to imagine new forms of intimacy between humans and water.

Keywords: Blue Humanities, Anthropocene, mermaid, poetics, buoyancy, Shakespeare, Melville

Bio:

Steve Mentz is Professor of English at St. John's University in New York City. A leading voice in Blue Humanities scholarship, he is the author of seven books, including *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities* (2023), *Ocean* (2020), *Shipwreck Modernity* (2015), and *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean* (2009). His creative-critical eco-poetry has also appeared in the book *Sailing without Ahab* (2024) and two chapbooks, *Swim Poems* (2022) and *Two Crossings* (2025). He has edited or co-edited eight collections of scholarly essays, including most recently *Water and Cognition in Early Modern English Literature* (2024) and the forthcoming *Bloomsbury Handbook to the Blue Humanities* (2026). His research has been supported by the Rachel Carson Center, the Folger Shakespeare Library, the John Carter Brown Library, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the National Maritime Museum in London. He is currently writing a book about ocean swimming as eco-meditation for the Anthropocene. He (still) occasionally blogs at The Bookfish (stevementz.com) and tweets [@stevermentz](https://twitter.com/stevermentz).