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Introduction: oceanic studies

Hester Blum*

The ocean has lapped at the margins of the critical courses that literary, historical, and cultural studies have shaped in recent decades. Whether in Atlantic, Black Atlantic, transnational, or hemispheric studies; or in ecocritical, spatial, planetary, or temporal reorientations, the seas have bounded, washed, transported, and whelmed the terms and objects of such inquiries. Oceanic studies, the topic of special focus in this issue of *Atlantic Studies*, proposes that the sea should become central to critical conversations about global movements, relations, and histories. And central not just as a theme or organizing metaphor with which to widen a landlocked critical prospect: in its geophysical, historical, and imaginative properties, the sea instead provides a new epistemology – a new dimension – for thinking about surfaces, depths, and the extra-terrestrial dimensions of planetary resources and relations. Our aim in this special focus section, in other words, is not simply to extend into broader nautical regions the paradigms of Atlantic Studies; instead, the essays in this special focus section take the ocean both as a topical focus and as a methodological model for nonlinear or nonplanar thought. If the sea is “continually being reconstituted by a variety of elements: the non-human and the human, the biological and the geophysical, the historic and the contemporary,” as Philip E. Steinberg argues in his contribution, then modes of oceanic thought are themselves predicated on relations whose unfixed, ungraspable contours are ever in multi-dimensional flux.

Oceanic studies can seem to have much in common with recent transnational and hemispheric turns in literary, historical, and cultural studies; they are mutually invested in assessing and moving beyond the limitations inherent in considering literary and cultural works as national products. But whereas transnational scholarship in literary studies has marked the various forms of exchange that characterize states’ relations with the world, the oceanic regions, with evidently little to offer or to receive within the terms of imperial or capital circulation, have remained on the outskirts of critical models of transnationalism. Even as nation-based scholarship has been extended or overthrown in a reorientation along hemispheric or trans-oceanic axes – as exemplified by the essays published in *Atlantic Studies* in the past decade – the planetary spaces of the seas have generally remained beyond the course of such work. The oceans comprise a realm in which cultural exchange, whether dominant, resistant, or just circulatory, has not been of primary critical concern on its own terms – that is, independent of the seas’ function as a passage for travel. Oceanic studies shares with transnational work an interest in documenting cultural production and movement beyond given political margins

*Email: hester.blum@psu.edu

based on particular, modern demarcations of nation-states and their colonial enterprises. And yet in deriving from the fluidity of its object of study a constitutive position of unboundedness, drift, and solvency, oceanic studies does not heed the global political designations fundamental to transnational work.

By shoving off from land- and nation-based perspectives, we might find new critical locations from which to investigate questions of affiliation, citizenship, economic exchange, mobility, rights, and sovereignty. If our perspectives have been repositioned in recent decades to consider history from the bottom up, or the colonizer as seen by the colonized – to gesture to just two critical reorientations – then what would happen if we take the oceans’ nonhuman scale and depth as a first critical position and principle? While transnational forms of exchange (whether cultural, political, or economic) have historically taken place via the medium of the sea, relatively little literary critical attention has been paid to that medium itself. Oceanic studies finds capacious possibilities for new forms of relationality through attention to the sea’s properties, conditions, and shaping or eroding forces.

As an example of oceanic modes of affiliation and disaffiliation, we might reconsider a familiar chapter in Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, “A Squeeze of the Hand.” Against the sweep of a maritime environment that is indifferent or antithetical to categorical or organizational work, Melville’s sea novel breaks down both the whale’s anatomy and the science of its hunt into scores of component parts. In the face of the titular subject matter’s progressive atomization – and the narrative’s increasing fragmentation – “A Squeeze of the Hand” offers, by contrast, an erotics of connection in its account of whaling crew members whose arms share indiscriminate movement within tubs of the waxy liquid peculiar to sperm whales (called spermaceti or sperm). The substance had been “strangely concreted into lumps,” as Ishmael informs the reader, and “it was our business to squeeze these lumps back into fluid.” In the mutual process by which Ishmael and the men find their fingers beginning to “serpentine and spiralize” among the “soft, gentle globules,” producing a “strange sort of insanity” while bathing in “that inexpressible sperm,” literary critics have seen a vision of queer community and homosociality.¹

And yet an oceanic reading of the memorable passage that follows amplifies and extends the standard understanding of the chapter. If we think not just of the scene’s nautical setting or conditions, but of the epistemological process by which forms of human or extra-human relation are dissolved and reconstituted in the fluid medium, then the modes of relation produced by sperm-squeezing extend into a register impossible to conceive of, much less occupy, while land-bound. As Ishmael records:

I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers’ hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say,—Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of human kindness.

Would that I could keep squeezing that sperm for ever! For now, since by many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the

intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country; now that I have perceived all this, I am ready to squeeze case eternally.²

In Ishmael's "unwitting" misperception of the state of his own bodily sovereignty – the loss of his recognition of and control over his own appendages while bathing in sperm – we see more than just a model of fluid forms of social or political behavior, the homosocialism or situational homosexuality of life at sea. The liquidity of the medium in fact bears a conceptual or theoretical charge, as the novel's vision of the crew members "squeezing [them]selves into each other" imagines oceanic forms of relation that burst the boundaries and fixed terms of land-based, heterosexual expectations encoded in stable, rigid categories such as "the wife" or "the bed, the table, the saddle" – which Ishmael will come to find stifling and inadequate. An oceanic reading of "A Squeeze of the Hand," in other words, finds free play for the "intellect" and "fancy" alike in the universalizing sea – a "space characterized by movement and continual re-formation across all of its dimensions," in Steinberg's terms in this issue. Ishmael's achievement of an oceanic state exemplifies Vilém Flusser's theory of the abyss of the sea in his treatise on vampire squid, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*: "Both the environment and the organism are abstract extrapolations from the actuality of their entwined relations."³ Ishmael cannot imagine kindness (in the sense of kinship) in a return to terrestrial categories of sex and sociality after having surrendered himself to the perspective- and self-dissolving aqueous world; this knowledge is constituted by, but not limited to, the material and ontological flux of the ocean.

The four essays that follow in this special focus section of *Atlantic Studies* model theoretical, historical, and literary critical approaches to oceanic critical practices. Philip E. Steinberg's "Of Other Seas: Metaphors and Materialities in Maritime Regions" lays out a series of provocative theoretical terms from which to generate oceanic meaning, while Adriana Craciun explores a fascinating history of changing modes of authorship and textual production in response to nautical voyaging and exploration in "Oceanic Voyages, Maritime Books, and Eccentric Inscriptions." In "Insurrection at Sea: Violence, the Slave Trade, and the Rhetoric of Abolition" Lenora Warren uncovers for us the significant role played by shipboard insurrection in the abolitionist movement, even as violent methods of liberation were suppressed by abolitionist rhetoric. Our section closes with Gretchen J. Woertendyke's "Geography, Genre, and Hemispheric Regionalism," which examines the genre of popular romance in US–Cuban fictions in order to advance a sophisticated argument identifying a "hemispheric regionalism" in the sea.

If, as Steinberg posits, human encounters with the ocean have been "of necessity, distant and partial," then such contingencies produce conceptual "gaps" by which "the unrepresentable becomes the unacknowledged and the unacknowledged becomes the unthinkable." The valuable overview of critical histories of the seas with which he begins his essay underscores the need for new methodological and theoretical perspectives, and for Steinberg, oceanographic models provide a way of moving beyond regional studies of the ocean. He proposes a Lagrangian approach to the terraqueous globe, by which "movement, instead of being subsequent to geography, *is* geography" – every unit of analysis in Lagrangian fluid dynamics is itself in motion. This is opposed to Eulerian oceanographic models – and, we might say, much transnational work – that tracks movement with reference to a fixed term.

(To apply these terms to our example of Ishmael's sperm-squeezing experience above: the distinction between the domestic confinements of "the wife" or "the saddle" and the sperm's expansive dissolution is figured in a Eulerian register, instead of the Lagrangian relation that Ishmael finds the height of "attainable felicity.") An ontology that accounts for movement as the "essence" of the ocean – "a space of circulation because it is constituted through its very geophysical mobility" – might provide no less than a new conception of "relations between space and time, between stasis and mobility, and between human and non-human actants like ships, navigational aids, and water molecules."

Circulation is also the topic of Adriana Craciun's essay, and she too provides us with an arresting and vital reconfiguration of accepted routes of thought – in this instance, transforming our understanding of the maritime book and its movements. Her contribution opens with the premise that the history of exploration should be retold as a history of the books and other textual material produced by exploration. Rather than thinking of an expedition's Captain as its author, as the literary history of exploration might hold, Craciun configures for us "alternative orders, in which the business of exploration could assume a more contingent, less inevitable, relationship to the accumulation of its publications, their authors, media, and audiences." It is no more accurate to see a voyage commander as a proprietary figure independent of collective action, or the printed book as the sole textual output of exploration, Craciun argues, than it is to see a book as a product of a solitary author. She delineates an unexpected trajectory for the publication histories of the voyage narratives of William Dampier, James Cook, William Parry, and John Ross. Perhaps most provocatively, "Oceanic Voyages, Maritime Books, and Eccentric Inscriptions" finds iterations of "fugitive writings that circulated far outside metropolitan centers" in expedition writings on ice, rocks, and mission objects. Her essay brings an oceanic dimension to book history in its shifting, contingent relations, while providing an important account of the transmission of the nautical voyage narrative.

A more pernicious mode of circulation orients our third essay. The slave trade has been an enduring topic in Black Atlantic and Atlantic studies, and yet Lenora Warren's powerful contribution demonstrates how much we still might learn about its contours and history if we locate our critical perspective aboard ship, at sea. Warren argues that the origins of slave insurrection may be found in the history of the transatlantic slave trade. "The space of the ocean," she proposes, "makes these acts of rebellion more elusive than plantation insurrection and therefore more easily elided." Her readings of the narrative of Olaudah Equiano, as well as of the sailor testimony collected in Thomas Clarkson's *The Substance of the Evidence of Sundry Persons on the Slave-Trade* (1788), reveal how the abolitionist movement absorbed evidence of shipboard slave insurrection. "In portraying the slave as a victim of the slave trade," Warren writes persuasively, "the longer history of the shipboard insurrection is lost." Her essay does us the service of salvaging from the history of the Middle Passage the centrality of the ocean as a site for resistance.

We close with Gretchen J. Woertendyke's call for a "hemispheric regionalism" which mediates between – and provides exploratory power for – the critical categories from which Atlantic studies and oceanic studies emerge. Analyzing the form of the nautical romance as practiced by Maturin Murray Ballou within the context of US–Cuban relations, Woertendyke finds that the "contours of genre, in this case popular romance, bring the hemispheric, regional, and oceanic into relief."

Her essay crucially situates the ocean as a site of play or potential, which allows for both a mobility and motility of forms of relation. “The sea’s material and psychic vastness,” Woertendyke acutely observes, “saturates virtually every sphere; and romance is the genre singularly capable of maintaining a poetics of relation *both* on its surface and within its deeper structures of language and history.” Her contribution recasts the critical history of the genre of nautical romance within the context both of its ocean setting and its constitutive expansiveness. In a similar fashion, it is our broader aim in this special focus on Oceanic Studies to reorient our critical perspective from the vantage point of the sea, while ontologically embracing the impossibility of coming to rest on any given point within the oceanic world of relational thought.

Notes on contributor

Hester Blum is an Associate Professor of English and Associate Director of the Institute for the Arts and Humanities at The Pennsylvania State University. Her book *The View from the Masthead: Maritime Imagination and Antebellum American Sea Narratives* (UNC Press, 2008) received the John Gardner Maritime Research Award. Her critical edition of *Horrors of Slavery*, William Ray’s 1808 Barbary captivity narrative, appeared from Rutgers in 2008. Her current book project is titled “Polar Imprints: The Print Culture of Arctic and Antarctic Exploration.”

Notes

1. Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 415–6.
2. Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 416.
3. Flusser, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, 31.

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