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ed. by Steve Mentz and Martha Elena Rojas (review)

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STEVE MENTZ AND MARTHA ELENA ROJAS, EDS.

*The Sea and Nineteenth-Century
Anglophone Literary Culture*

London and New York: Routledge, 2017. xii + 196 pp.

With rising sea levels, global warming, sovereignty issues around the opening of the Northwest Passage, and the probable disappearance of an entire nation, the Maldives, the field of Maritime Studies has new urgency. The 2011 conference at the John Carter Brown Library in Providence, Rhode Island, organized by Steve Mentz, that gave rise to this book is but one example of the spate of seminars, articles, print and online journals, Maritime Studies programs, Marine Science departments, and scholarly works attesting to scholars' increasing attentiveness to the importance of the oceans.

Mentz and Rojas note in their introduction that this collection brings together ten essays "that treat the ocean as invitation, not barrier" (1). True to that spirit, the collection is highly interdisciplinary in its discussions of seaweed, scientific writing, Arctic exploration narratives, underwater paintings, the tools of navigation, and a "life-sized sex doll" dredged up from the bottom of the sea (166). The essays cross genres, periods, and nationalities. Mentz and Rojas, both literary scholars, keep their discipline's claims modest: "Literary studies cannot claim any special privilege in knowing the 'real' ocean, and it does not assert any 'essential truths.' Instead, it offers a variable record of how human beings have imagined themselves interacting with our watery planet" (4).

The ten essays are divided into three categories: "wet globalization," "salt aesthetics," and "blue ecocriticism," terms Mentz introduced in his monograph, *Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization, 1550–1719* (2015). "Wet globalization" emphasizes the role of the ocean in global trade, what Mentz and Rojas call "a wetter, saltier globalism [that] requires a sharper focus on the disorientation of the sea" (6). This section begins with Siobhan Carroll's investigation of William Falconer's 1762 poem *The Shipwreck*, "his critically acclaimed hybridization of the georgic with the nautical manual" (15). I teach this poem every semester and have always been intrigued by Falconer's juxtaposition of

poetic diction and nautical terminology. Carroll writes that the “overt mission” of the 1762 version was indeed “a linguistic one” (15): to educate the British in the language of the sea. She goes on to examine the political resonance of Falconer’s 1764 and 1769 revisions, namely how the ocean’s capacity to challenge sovereign power also challenged British imperialism.

The collection’s second essay, by historian of science Helen Rozwadowski, takes up the writing of voyagers: naturalists, whalers, yachtsmen, passengers, officers’ wives, and especially scientists. She explains that the term “scientist” was coined in 1833 by British physicist William Whewell, who “spent his career articulating what it was to do science and who could practice science—and he did so especially through his studies of tides” (33). Thus the term science was from its inception associated with the maritime world and its writing. She notes that ocean scientists reported their work not only in research journals but also through popular voyage narratives. She gives the example of Lt. Samuel P. Lee, who commanded the USS *Dolphin* during the first transatlantic deep-sea sounding survey: one-third of his 300-page report is a narrative of the voyage.

Hester Blum has long been interested in the Arctic, as evident in her keynote, “Melville in the Arctic,” delivered at the Eleventh International Melville Conference in London and printed in *Leviathan* 20.1. In her essay for this volume, she concentrates on a curious figure, Charles Francis Hall, who went to the Arctic to search for relics of the lost John Franklin Expedition. Hall lived with the Inuit for more than seven years, “an extraordinary act for a white, Western explorer in the mid-nineteenth century” (47). Hall’s story is so lively and engaging that the reader is immediately drawn in, but Blum writes with the larger purpose of showing “how knowledge circulated in the oceanic spaces of the polar regions, whether through autodidactic, empirical, professional, or intercultural channels” (49). Blum examines the narratives Hall produced and emphasizes his respect for and absorption of Inuit knowledge, as, for instance, when he ate raw meat for its anti-scorbutic qualities. She also captures how Hall’s narratives and extensive journals were an attempt to inscribe “permanence” on a landscape “hostile to permanent records” (62).

Amy Parsons’s essay, the final one in the “wet globalization” section, concerns Benjamin Morrell’s *A Narrative of Four Voyages* (1832) and his wife Abby Jane Morrell’s *Narrative of a Voyage to the Ethiopic and South Atlantic Oceans* (1833). Both works were very popular in their day (Herman Melville owned a copy of Benjamin’s narrative) and have long fascinated maritime scholars, partly because of the early date of Abby’s narrative and partly because of questions about their factuality. Parsons explores how Benjamin Morrell’s narrative rewrites his character for the antebellum literary marketplace: whereas

history has him as “a rough customer, a self-confessed brawler and drinker with a penchant for violence and Polynesian women” (70), the narrative represents him as a self-possessed family man. The fact that Benjamin was married helped remove certain fears on the part of nineteenth-century readers about his interactions with islanders and other non-whites: “his libidinal energies [were] safely contained in the structure of heterosexual marriage” (73). Abby married Benjamin when she was 15, then left her infant with her parents to accompany her husband to sea. Her narrative supports the “heroic” image of her husband (76), yet it also betrays her fear that sailors might become unruly subjects, threats to rather than supporters of land-based society. Parsons places these two narratives within larger constructs of race, class, and maritime labor. Much as the two narratives try to portray mariners, especially officers, as heroic, neither can fully conceal the violence and exploitation of the seafaring world.

The next three essays constitute the “salt aesthetics” section. The term, applicable to literature as well as to non-literary forms such as art and material culture, speaks to how increased interest in maritime subjects influenced aesthetic norms. The section begins with Sophie Gilmartin’s analysis of how two authors rarely associated with the sea, Charlotte Brontë and Charles Dickens, integrated navigational instruments into their plots. Gilmartin begins by re-rendering navigation, discussing the women who went to sea as the wives of captains and noting that in the second half of the nineteenth century, roughly one-quarter of American whalships had women aboard. Gilmartin uses the navigational skills that these women mastered to contextualize metaphors of navigation in two Victorian novels, Brontë’s *Villette* (1853) and Dickens’s *Dombey and Son* (1848). That neither is about the sea suggests how “the material and poetic are intertwined, symbiotically dependent” (85). She reads the story of Lucy Snowe’s childhood at the beginning of chapter 4 of *Villette* as a maritime allegory, focusing on the line “neither sun nor stars appeared”: without these guides, Lucy cannot navigate, cannot fix her position. With *Dombey and Son*, Gilmartin analyzes how Florence Dombey is abducted as a child then sent alone into London’s streets, eventually finding her way to her uncle’s navigational instrument shop, which becomes her “point of reference, emotionally and spatially, in the city” (95).

Whereas Mentz and Rojas aptly call Margaret Cohen’s *The Novel and the Sea* (2010) a “brilliant evocation of the centrality of maritime ‘craft’” (6), Cohen here takes a different tack on maritime culture by exploring the underwater paintings of Zarh Pritchard. A series of color plates immediately before the essay allows the reader to view the paintings she describes. Executed *en plaine mer*, the paintings are eerily accurate portrayals of underwater life. What is striking is how washed-out they are, a realistic result of underwater light loss

as opposed to the artificial lighting of underwater photography. When humans view the world beneath the sea unaided, it is hazy and pastel-colored. Underwater optics in Pritchard's disorienting dreamscapes "are hence the portal to a different version of scientifically inspired enchantment" (115). Cohen argues that "the proximity between the reality of human perception, notably vision, underwater and an alluring, disorienting submarine fantasyscape is quite different from the bizarre elegance conveyed in text or image by [Philip Henry] Gosse, [Ernst] Haeckel and [Jules] Verne" (106). Cohen's essay is the most visually arresting in the collection, and the disorientation she describes can illuminate texts far beyond those of Gosse, Haeckel, or Verne.

Molly Duggins asks us to reassess another form of underwater art: seaweed albums, which were collected and preserved throughout the British Empire during the Victorian era. Duggins, like Rozwadowski, discusses the seashore's evolution as a place of leisure. The Victorian collecting of seaweed combined aesthetic sensibility, the rigor of classification, the moral correctness of an educational leisure pursuit, and "the material *voluptas* of decorative arts" (119). The collectors carefully mounted and identified each piece of seaweed. These albums, "intergender, intergenerational, and international" (129), attest to the centrality of the seascape to the British empire and to the Victorian interest in the sea that Gilmartin also discusses. They create a "visual dialogue" between the decorative arts and science (120), one central to Victorian maritime fiction.

The final section, "blue ecocriticism," is the form of scholarship most often associated with maritime literature; it examines "the place of the ocean in the now-thriving discourse of literary ecocriticism" (10). Both Mentz and Daniel Brayton (*Shakespeare's Ocean: An Ecocritical Exploration* [2011]) have introduced "blue ecocriticism" to Shakespeare studies. In this section's first essay, Frank Mabee reconsiders the pastoral, a form seemingly inextricable from the land, in terms of the sea. He looks specifically at William Wordsworth's "The Brothers" (1800), especially its footnote on the peculiar disease calenture, which affects sailors too long at sea who hallucinate that the ocean is a green field and yearn to leap into it. Mabee argues that calenture "structures and shapes the poetic vision of 'The Brothers,'" even as Wordsworth designated it as the final poem in a series of pastorals, and notes that the "final word of the 'concluding pastoral' poem, tellingly, is 'Mariner'" (143). Mabee concentrates on loss: the loss of Wordsworth's series of pastorals, which never materialized, the loss of the pastoral as a genre, the loss of economic gain from maritime trade, and the loss of Wordsworth's younger brother John, who drowned in a storm off the English coast. He ends with a reflection on the misfortune of those who exchange rural for maritime labor. Going to sea did not offer the

economic opportunity envisioned by shepherds such as those of the Ewbanks family; it resulted instead in more loss.

Richard King's essay, subtitled "An etymological and ecocritical chomp into *Moby-Dick*," is the only piece in this collection to focus on Melville. At the time of this book's publication, King was Lecturer in Literature of the Sea for the Williams College-Mystic Seaport Maritime Studies Program, and he credits a student's confusion about the meaning of Melville's term "brit"—was it krill?—as the impetus for his investigation of this topic. King ponders the fact that scholars do not know precisely what Melville means by brit: the word has been glossed in various editions of *Moby-Dick* as krill, crustaceans, copepods, and plankton. His investigation, illustrated with images, into this one small word and one small chapter is compelling. King argues that scholars and readers need to understand "more about the ocean, its organisms, and the weather that drives Ahab and his crew" to fully appreciate Melville's work (148).

Patricia Yaeger, author of the final essay, passed away while the book was in process, and the collection is dedicated to her. She begins with the startling image of the sex doll mentioned above, which was pulled up in a fishing net full of by-catch, trash, and paint drums filled with toxic sludge. Yaeger argues that the theories of Karl Marx and Bruno Latour are inadequate for discussing the ocean: "Ultimately, it may take poets to show the way" (168). She looks to the poems of Mark Doty and the photographs of Bryant Austin to "stir this quasi-ocean into a speaking entity" (176).

The breadth and richness of these ten essays speak to the ocean's importance aesthetically and morally as well as economically and politically. My one quibble with the book is the "Nineteenth-Century" in the title. Although Mentz and Rojas mention "the long nineteenth century" several times, this collection suggests that it is very long indeed: from the 1762 of Falconer's *The Shipwreck*, or even earlier if one takes into account all the discussions of Shakespeare, through the 2011 of Austin's photographs. The nineteenth-century scholars at the "Hungry Ocean" conference, they argue, "seemed to turn more overtly oceanic than the specialists in earlier and later" periods did (1), yet this collection might suggest otherwise. This is a minor criticism, however, of a major book in Maritime Studies. The diverse and interdisciplinary approaches to the ocean set forth here broaden our understanding of the maritime world and suggest new ways to confront the urgency of the threats to that world.

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