

The Prosthetic Ocean: Technology, Culture, and Maritime Imagination

Edited Volume Call for Contributions

Felix Behler (University of Paderborn, Germany)
Elisabeth Frank (University of Innsbruck, Austria / Aston University, UK)

Over the past few years, the Blue Humanities have evolved into one of the most compelling areas of emergent interdisciplinary research, informing discourses in the humanities and social sciences, from history and the visual arts to literary, cultural, and environmental studies. Recent work in the field of Blue Humanities reflects a decisive movement away from previous terrestrial-based or metaphorical approaches to the sea toward an understanding of the ocean as a material, social, and historically inhabited space. Challenging what Markus Rediker has termed the ‘terracentric bias’ in Western oceanic discourses – that is, the prevailing perception of the global oceans as merely ‘voids between the real places, which are landed and national’ (2014: 2–3) – the work of scholars such as John Gillis (2004; 2012), Steve Mentz (2009a; 2020; 2023), Sidney Dobrin (2021), Serpil Oppermann (2023), Dilip Menon and Nishat Zaidi (2023) has begun to place greater emphasis on the ocean as a material entity in its own right, its role in shaping human social and economic relations, political structures and ideologies, as well as cultural production. Rather than treating the sea as an abstract, ‘immaterial’ metaphor (Blum, 2010: 670), these recent approaches foreground the material realities of maritime life and practices, adopting the vantage point of those whose histories and identities have been formed through both historical and imaginative engagement with the ocean.

Art and literature have long played a central role in shaping how the ocean has been perceived and imagined throughout human history. Across periods and cultures, the sea has captivated the imagination of poets, artists, writers, and other curious minds, expressing ‘humanity’s complex mytho-poetic relationship with the sea’ (Wilson, 1998: 9): from the *Odyssey* (c. 750–650 BCE) to Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), from Shakespeare to the seascapes of Romantic painters such as Turner, Constable, or Kasper David Friedrich, and from the adventures of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) to the novels of Joseph Conrad, Herman Melville, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Victor Hugo. Other more recent texts – not all by Western writers – also come to mind, such as Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner et al.’s anthology of *Indigenous Pacific Islander Eco-Literatures* (2022), Rebecca Hainnu’s retelling of the Inuit legend of Nulijajuq in *The Spirit of the Sea* (2024), or *Eyes of the Ocean* (2025) by the Taoist author Syaman Rapongan. While, for generations, indigenous communities around the globe have developed relational ways of interacting with nature and the ocean, in the West, as Tricia Cusack argues in *Framing the Ocean* (2014), the ocean was predominantly perceived before the eighteenth century as a repulsive, chaotic void – an ‘empty “uninhabited” space quite distinct from land’ (1). At the same time, it is important not to essentialise such comparisons: neither ‘indigenous’ nor ‘Western’ perspectives are homogenous; rather, different and sometimes contradictory

ideas about the sea have existed in both contexts. For example, as early as the seventeenth century, European maritime artists – influenced by the focus on ship portraiture among painters of the Dutch Golden Age – began incrementally to challenge this view, representing the sea not merely as a large void or vacancy but as a dynamic ‘social space’ integral to the history of human civilisation, which has invariably excited the modern imagination. Against this *longue durée* of human cultural engagement with the ocean, recent scholarship has increasingly turned its attention to the specific ways in which maritime experience has been mediated through artistic and literary forms. Important publications exist, for example, in the fields of art history and media studies, such as the work of Cusack (2012; 2014), Eleanor Hughes (2001; 2016), Christiana Payne (2007), Emma Roberts (2022), and Melody Jue (2020). Equally important is the work of literary scholars on oceanic literacy, including studies by Hester Blum (2008), Dan Brayton (2012), Shin Yamashiro (2024), Søren Frank (2022), and Ekaterina Kobeleva et al. (2019), whose analyses of the sea’s literary representations – from Shakespeare and antebellum American sea narratives to modern maritime literatures across global contexts – demonstrate how literary form and imagination have shaped cultural understandings of the ocean. And it is within this long tradition of cultural representation of human relationships *at* and *with* the sea that the emergence of what Garth Wilson has termed ‘a special maritime culture’ (2001: 71) must be situated.

As a case in point, in his *Introduction to the Blue Humanities* (2023), Steve Mentz – who first coined the term Blue Humanities in his essay ‘Toward a Blue Cultural Studies’ (2009b) – returns time and again to Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851) as ‘the urtext of the human encounter with the global ocean’ (17), with its haunting evocations of the ocean’s beauty, violence, and mystery. Indeed, *Moby Dick* is one of the very few novels in English that takes place almost entirely at sea. At the same time, Melville’s novel has also become central in discourses concerning another relatively recent strand of thought in the humanities: the prosthetic (see also Hayles, 1999; Landsberg, 2004; Sobchack, 2006). The novel has been described as a quintessential example of ‘narrative prosthesis’ (Michell and Snyder, 2000: 119), and it contains, as Peter Boxall writes in *The Prosthetic Imagination* (2020), ‘in Ahab’s whalebone leg, one of the most famous prostheses in the history of prose fiction’ (186). So how, then, can these discourses be thought together? In one sense, humanity’s relationship with the sea has always been necessarily prosthetic, for the ocean, as Mentz says, remains fundamentally ‘inhospitable’ to human life (Albrecht, 2025: 207). And it becomes only partially and temporarily accessible through artificial extensions of the body: from diving or fishing equipment to drones, submarines, and, in the most elemental form, boats and ships. In another sense, Captain Ahab’s leg carved out of whalebone also establishes a more material link between human ‘prosthetic’ life *on* and *with* the sea around which much of the novel revolves. In this way, *Moby Dick* stages the ocean not merely as a symbolic or narrative space, but as a site in which human economy, agency, and meaning are inseparable from technological mediation: not only in the way, as David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have argued, that ‘Melville’s captain alters himself and the maritime world around him to better accommodate his disability’ (2000: 121), but also in how the novel, in its gross materiality, condenses at the level of Ahab’s individual body a much wider historical pattern in which human engagement with the ocean has essentially been conditioned and structured by forms of technological adaptation and extension. Indeed, as Lincoln Paine argues in his landmark retelling of world history through the lens of the sea, ‘mankind’s technological and social adaptation to life on the

water – whether for commerce, warfare, exploration – has been a driving force in human history’ (2013: 8).

As the ‘blue turn’ (Kluwick, 2025: 3) in the humanities comes into sharper focus, this edited volume seeks to deepen the discussion on how maritime cultures and epistemologies have shaped – and have in turn been shaped by – technological perceptions of the ocean, especially in an age when, as Ellen Krefting rightly observes, ‘our oceans are radically changing due to human impact’ (qtd. in Pieleberg, 2022: par. 12). The legacies of humanity’s essentially technological engagement with the oceans – whether in the more material shapes of ships, shipwrecks, submerged cities, and other artifacts, or the more intangible cultural and literary practices associated with these sites – hold significant meaning for contemporary communities, both Western and indigenous, and serve, as Elena Perez-Alvaro and Rose Boswell have argued, ‘as a hidden reservoir of knowledge that reflects the shared history and interconnectedness of human civilizations through their relationship with water’ (2025: 1). By concentrating on these elements of maritime heritage, the volume investigates the ‘prosthetic’ relationship between human culture and the ocean, which, in turn, may allow us to gain a better understanding of the profound interdependencies of human social and technological practices and ecological health. As Søren Frank argues in *A Poetic History of the Oceans* (2022), the domains of culture and technology have long been treated as separate or even opposing spheres, but ‘if there is one world in which this dichotomy between culture and technology makes little sense, it is the maritime world’ (205–206). Technology, this is to say, is integral to almost every aspect of maritime culture. Much existing research in the Blue Humanities has focused on the ‘cultural, historical, and ecological significance of oceans, seas, and other bodies of water in connection to human cultures and the environment’ (Das and Manjusha, 2025: 526); that said, comparatively little attention has been given to the extent to which both human material relationships with the ocean, as well as their cultural representations, have been mediated by and rendered through technology. Notable exceptions include Frank’s chapter on ‘Technology’ in *A Poetic History*, as well as Steve Mentz’s discussion of sailors in *Oceans* (2020), in which he writes about sailors as cyborgs in the sense that Donna Haraway described in ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’ (1984): as ‘couplings between organism and machine’, whose survival at sea depends on an intimate, embodied knowledge of both marine technology and oceanic conditions, acquired through the physical operations of their bodies as they engage with that technology (Mentz, 2020: 55ff.). And yet, as Mentz further concedes, this ‘powerful romance between man and technology’ that underpins these ‘man-machine hybrid identities of sailors’ depends as much on ‘sailcloth, ropes, and hull’ as it does on ‘stories, shanties, cant terms, and many forms of writing’ (56). Building on these interventions, the concept of prosthesis, as both a material and an imaginative form of mediation, offers a productive framework for bridging the gap between human perceptions of the ocean, their fundamentally technology-based existence at sea, and the mediating roles of maritime art, literature, and media, allowing us to conceive of the human psycho-physical relationship with the ocean – to appropriate Mentz’s terminology – as simultaneously ‘embodied’ and ‘technological’ (2020: 62).

We invite contributions from scholars at all career stages working in fields including literature and cultural studies, environmental humanities, sociology, maritime and art history, indigenous studies, media studies, cultural anthropology, and related disciplines. Topics may include but are not limited to:

- The role of maritime technologies in shaping human social, economic, or political engagement with the ocean
- Human-technological interactions in historical and contemporary maritime contexts
- Technological extensions enabling human life and mobility at sea (ships, diving suits, submarines, navigational tools, etc.)
- Literary and artistic representations of prosthetic or technologically mediated bodies at sea
- Affective and embodied experiences of maritime technologies
- Affordances of maritime technologies and environments (ships, currents, cables, platforms, etc.)
- Shipwrecks, accidents, and technological breakdowns at sea
- Literary representations of oceanic life, adventure, and technological mediation (e.g., Melville, Stevenson, Conrad, etc.)
- Boats, ships, submarines, and digital technologies as cultural and artistic motifs in maritime literature and art
- Non-human actors in maritime contexts (wind, currents, tides, weather systems, etc.)
- Indigenous epistemologies of the sea
- Historical and contemporary studies of the role of technology and oceanic knowledge in Polynesian, Mediterranean, Asian, African and other maritime cultures
- Cross-cultural or comparative approaches to oceanic life, materiality, and technology
- Historical and contemporary analysis of oceanic labour, trade, and migration
- The ocean as a site of ecological, political, or martial conflict
- Maritime infrastructures: borderscapes as sites of power, governance, and imperial entanglements
- Climate change, maritime environments, and human impact on oceans
- Maritime life through the perspective of films, photography, digital media, and virtual (prosthetic) representations
- Pop-cultural representations of the oceans and maritime life
- Intersections between technology, media, and oceanic imaginations
- Storytelling, archives, and maritime cultural memory
- Prosthesis, cyborg theory, and techno-cultural analysis of oceanic life
- New Materialist, feminist materialist, and post-humanist readings of oceanic matter
- Philosophical reflections on human dependence on technological mediation in maritime contexts

Submission Guidelines

Please submit chapter proposals of up to 500 words, together with a brief chapter outline and a short bio of up to 200 words as a single .docx or .pdf file to both editors, Felix Behler (fbehler@mail.uni-paderborn.de) and Elisabeth Frank (elisabeth.frank@uibk.ac.at) by **15 April 2026**. Notification of abstract acceptance will be sent out in May 2026. Full-length articles (6,000–7,000 words, including references) are due by 15 October 2026, with publication expected in 2027 (tentative).

Works Cited

- Albrecht, Andrin (2025). 'Water and Romanticism: A Conversation with Steve Mentz'. *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 73, no. 2: pp. 207–216. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2025-2021>.
- Blum, Hester (2008). *The View from the Masthead: Maritime Imagination and Antebellum American Sea Narratives*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- (2010). 'The Prospect of Oceanic Studies'. *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 125, no. 3: pp. 670–677. doi:10.1632/pmla.2010.125.3.670.
- Boxall, Peter (2020). *The Prosthetic Imagination: A History of the Novel as Artificial Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brayton, Dan (2012). *Shakespeare's Ocean: An Ecocritical Exploration*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Cusack, Tricia (2014). 'Introduction: Framing the Ocean, 1700 to the Present: Envisaging the Sea as Social Space'. In: *Framing the Ocean, 1700 to the Present*, edited by Tricia Cusack. Abingdon: Routledge/Ashgate Publications, pp. 1–21.
- (ed.) (2012). *Art and Identity at the Water's Edge*. Abingdon: Routledge/Ashgate Publications.
- Das, Arnab, and C. B. Manjusha (2025). 'Tracing the Depths: A Narrative Review on Blue Humanities and Oceanic Studies'. *The Anthropocene Review* 12, no. 3: pp. 526–541. doi.org/10.1177/20530196251372128.
- Defoe, Daniel (2007 [1719]). *Robinson Crusoe*. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics.
- Dobrin, Sidney (2021). *Blue Ecocriticism and the Oceanic Imperative*. London: Routledge.
- Frank, Søren (2022). *A Poetic History of the Oceans: Literature and Maritime Modernity*. Leiden: Brill.
- Hainnu, Rebecca (2024). *The Spirit of the Sea*. Iqaluit, Canada: Inhabit Media.
- Haraway, Donna (2011 [1984]). 'A Cyborg Manifesto'. In: *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Imre Szeman and Timothy Kaposy. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 454–470.
- Hayles, N. Katherine (1999). *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press.
- Homer (2004 [c. 750–650 BCE]). *The Odyssey*. Translated by George Herbert Palmer. New York: Barnes & Noble.
- Hughes, Eleanor (2016). *Spreading Canvas: eighteenth Cen. British Maritime Painting*. New Haven: Yale Center for British Art.
- (2001). *Vessels of Empire: Eighteenth-Century British Marine Paintings*. Doctoral Dissertation (University of California, Berkeley). Available at: <https://www.proquest.com/openview/69154d7f30a72326349a19177e058f7a/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>.
- Jetñil-Kijiner, Kathy; Kava, Leora; and Craig Santos Perez (2022). *Indigenous Pacific Islander Eco-Literatures*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Jue, Melody (2020). *Wild Blue Media: Thinking through Seawater*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- John Gillis (2004). *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- (2012). *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kluwick, Ursula (2025). 'Blue Humanities'. In: *Handbook Environmental Humanities*, edited by Evi Zemanek and Timo Müller. Berlin/Heidelberg: J. B. Metzler, pp.1–6. doi.org/10.1007/978-3-662-70886-6_14-1.
- Kobeleva, Ekaterina; Robertson, Ben; and Shannon Thompson (eds.) (2019). *The Sea in the Literary Imagination*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Landsberg, Alison (2004). *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Melville, Herman (2022 [1851]). *Moby Dick or The Whale*. Stansted: Wordsworth Editions Limited.
- Menon, Dilip, and Nishat Zaidi (2023). *Cosmopolitan Cultures and Oceanic Thought*. London: Routledge.
- Mentz, Steve (2023). *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities*. New York: Routledge.
- (2009a). *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean*. London: Continuum.
- (2020). *Ocean*. New York/London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- (2009b). 'Toward a Blue Cultural Studies: The Sea, Maritime Culture, and Early Modern English Literature'. *Literature Compass* 6, no 5: pp. 997–1013.
- Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder (2000). *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- More, Thomas (2020 [1516]). *Utopia*. Translated by Dominic Baker-Smith. London: Penguin Classics.
- Oppermann, Serpil (2023). *Blue Humanities: Storied Waterscapes in the Anthropocene*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Paine, Lincoln (2023). *The Sea and Civilization: A Maritime History of the World*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Payne, Christiana (2007). *Where the Sea Meets the Land: Artists on the Coast in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Bristol: Sansom & Company.
- Perez-Alvaro, Elena, and Rose Boswell (2025). 'Integral oceans heritage of indigenous communities: Its value for good health and well-being'. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* 11: pp. 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2024.101245>.
- Pileberg, Silje (2022). 'Blue Humanities: Mankind has conquered the seas using charts and models'. Available at: <https://www.hf.uio.no/ifikk/english/research/news-and-events/news/2022/blue-humanities.html>.
- Rapongan, Syaman (2025). *Eyes of the Ocean*. Translated by Darryl Sterk. New York: Columbia University Press
- Rediker, Marcus (2014). *Outlaws of the Atlantic: Sailors, Pirates, and Motley Crews in the Age of Sail*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press.
- Roberts, Emma (ed.) (2022). *Art and the Sea*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Sobchack, Vivian (2006). 'A Leg To Stand On: Prosthetics, Metaphor, and Materiality'. In: *The Prosthetic Impulse: From A Posthuman Present To A Biocultural Future*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, pp. 17–41.
- Wilson, Garth (1998). 'Editorial'. *Material History Review/Revue d'histoire de la culture matérielle* 48: pp. 1–12.

- (2001). ‘Shiver My Timbers: Images, Objects and Ideas in the Popular Culture of Seafaring’. *Material History Review/Revue d’histoire de la culture matérielle* 54: pp. 71–83.
- Yamashiro, Shin (2014). *American Sea Literature: Seascapes, Beach Narratives, and Underwater Explorations*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.