

Oceanic

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AS Kelly Bushnell highlights in her 2018 *VLC* keyword entry on “oceans,” the rise of the blue humanities prompted a sea change in Victorian studies. When we attend to the “poetic history of the ocean,” we widen the horizons of Victorianist ecocriticism, formalism, and historicism.¹ As we study waterborne circulations, exchanges, and contact zones, we remap our understanding of the nineteenth-century world. In place of traditional, terrestrial boundaries (e.g., the borders of the nation-state, or the infamous “red on the map” of the British Empire), we see a world connected by water—a world of human and nonhuman entanglements.

Such “blue” remapping—shifting from geography to hydrography—follows key interventions that reframe bodies of water as bridges rather than barriers. Studies of the Black and circum-Atlantic; of the Indian Ocean; of the Caribbean, Arctic, and South Seas; and of a broad blue southern hemisphere all work to surface new networks of culture, history, politics, economics, and ecology. Some studies highlight specific maritime contact zones variously humanmade (the dockside, the port, the canal, the passenger ship) and natural (the reef, the atoll, the deep, the littoral).² Other studies imagine new expanses, such as Charne Lavery’s argument for the “southern Indian Ocean” as a distinct zone, one that resists the hegemony of the terrestrial Global North and of anthropocentrism.³

In sum, as Sarah Comyn and Porscha Fermanis explain, oceanic studies “cut[s] across regions and even oceans themselves”; what results is a view of “nineteenth-century literary culture [as] multi-centred.”⁴ Elizabeth DeLoughrey, for instance, in her study of Caribbean and Pacific islands, looks to Kamau Brathwaite’s methodology of “tidialectics” (i.e., “tidal dialectics,” an ever-turning cycle of land-sea entanglement) to

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recenter transoceanic spaces of migration and disrupt imperial ideologies of center/periphery.⁵ In a similar displacement, Carl Schmitt describes Victorian Britain as a fish or a ship: in the nineteenth century, he argues, Britain comes to view itself no longer as part of the Continent but rather as part of the sea. Schmitt terms this a “spatial revolution,” a “new perception of space” via global relations in politics, economics, and culture that remaps the world.⁶ Thinking in terms not of terrestrial enclosure and immobility but rather oceanic networks and mobility, nineteenth-century Britain textually and politically (re)positioned itself as part of the Caribbean, part of the Indian Ocean, part of the South Seas, part of the Suez Canal, etc.—a maritime-centered remapping consistent with British imperial, naval, and commercial hegemony.

Crucially, this oceanic remapping took place through language: the island of Britain never moved, but a whole new set of worldviews and discourses emerged from an imperial, capitalist Britain’s waterborne conquests and ventures. The *oceanic*, then, isn’t just a descriptor of space (hence my revision of Bushnell’s original keyword); it’s also a heuristic: a meaning-making strategy that creates spaces and discourses we recognize as oceanic. This understanding aligns with Sanjay Krishnan’s definition of the “global”: not a neutral perspective but rather an ideologically charged mode of representation.⁷ This is where we come in as literary and cultural critics. With respect to Bushnell, we don’t study oceans; we study representations of oceans—i.e., the *oceanic*. More specifically, we engage in what I call *reading the oceanic*: parsing the overlapping systems of meaning (variously cultural, historical, political, socioeconomic, and ecological) that take shape around bodies of / on / in water.

Consider, for example, how oceanic texts often challenge us to register both literal maritime detail and figurative significance at the same time. Cannon Schmitt, for instance, analyzes the ebb and flow of the Thames in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*: the literal turn of the tides and the physical rotation of the ship, Schmitt argues, figuratively turns the novella’s focus from the Congo to London, from Belgian colony to British imperial metropole.⁸ If we attend only to the literal, then we slip into the dryasdust antiquarianism critiqued by the V21 manifesto.⁹ And if we offer only uncritical, all-too-easy metaphors of “flow” and “fluidity” when describing literary depictions of maritime life, we slip into what Margaret Cohen calls “hydrophasia,” an inability to conceive of the sea as (quite literally) the sea.¹⁰ (Lest we forget Hester Blum’s proclamation, “THE SEA IS NOT A METAPHOR.”)¹¹

Reading the literal and figurative dimensions of the oceanic together expands our very definition of maritime fiction. Even “terrestrial” narratives (i.e., stories set wholly on terra firma) can invoke maritime history and culture just as readily as those set at sea. As John Peck explains, a text “does not need to include a sea voyage in order to have something interesting to say about a country’s maritime economy and culture.”¹² Maritime fiction encompasses more than just tales of white whales and ancient mariners; it is likewise the purview of more than just male authors and characters. We need to recognize the diverse ways in which “terrestrial” authors and women authors engage with wider networks of oceanic history and culture.¹³ What results is an oceanic contrapuntal reading (à la Edward Said’s analysis of Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*), tracing the historically specific maritime discourses of migration, mobility, exchange, circulation, and ecology that underwrite the everyday life of nineteenth-century British narratives.

This approach would also widen our Victorian(ist) horizons to include a whole archive of oceanic fiction written, read, and set beyond the geographical bounds of Britain. The challenge for us here—especially when engaging with Indigenous texts and culture—is to be responsible guests to those forms of oceanic knowledge, not reproducing imperial ideologies of extraction and exploitation.

NOTES

1. Kelly P. Bushnell, “Oceans,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 46, nos. 3/4 (2018): 790.
2. See, for example, Isabel Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading: Hydrocolonialism and the Custom House* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022); Humberto Garcia, “The Strangers’ Home for Asiatics: Africans and South Sea Islanders Inaugurating a Hospitable World Order in Mid-Victorian Britain,” *Global Nineteenth-Century Studies* 1, no. 1 (2022): 81–90; Jacqueline Barrios, *London’s Pacific Rim: East Asian Emplacements of the British Capital* (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2021); Jimmy Packham and David Punter, “Oceanic Studies and the Gothic Deep,” *Gothic Studies* 19, no. 2 (2017): 16–29; and Meg Samuelson, “Rendering the Cape-as-Port: Sea-Mountain, Cape of Storms / Good Hope, Adamastor, and Local-World Literary Formations,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 42, no. 3 (2016): 523–37.

3. See Charne Lavery, "The Southern Indian Ocean and the Oceanic South," *Global Nineteenth-Century Studies* 1, no. 1 (2022): 63–72.
4. Sarah Comyn and Porscha Fermanis, "Rethinking Nineteenth-Century Literary Culture: British Worlds, Southern Latitudes, and Hemispheric Methods," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, OnlineFirst (2021): 8, 3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989420982013>.
5. See Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 51; and Kamau Brathwaite, *ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey* (Staten Island: We Press, 1999), 34.
6. See Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, translated by Simona Draghici (Corvallis: Plutarch Press, 1997), 50, 29.
7. See Sanjay Krishnan, *Reading the Global: Troubling Perspectives on Britain's Empire in Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
8. Cannon Schmitt, "Tidal Conrad (Literally)," *Victorian Studies* 55, no. 1 (2012): 7–29.
9. See the "Manifesto of the V21 Collective" (2015), V21: Victorian Studies for the 21st Century, <http://v21collective.org/manifesto-of-the-v21-collective-ten-theses>.
10. Margaret Cohen, *The Novel and the Sea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 14.
11. Hester Blum, "The Prospect of Oceanic Studies," *PMLA* 125, no. 3 (2010): 670 (capitalization original).
12. John Peck, *Maritime Fiction: Sailors and the Sea in British and American Novels, 1719–1917* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 3.
13. See, for example, Mark Celeste, "Metonymic Chains: Shipwreck, Slavery, and Networks in *Villette*," in "The Brontës and Critical Interventions in Victorian Studies," edited by Lauren Hoffer and Elizabeth Meadows, special issue, *Victorian Review* 42, no. 2 (2016): 343–60.

