

## Trapped in the Quandary of Climate Change: Apocalyptic Garbage in Terraqueous Narratives

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### Abstract

This paper examines how blue humanities responds to calls to reread the visual aquatic space in the epoch of the Anthropocene and climate change and looks for an alternative to green ecocriticism. The gradual escalation in frequency of natural calamities such as coastal floods, droughts, tsunamis, and hailstorms suggests the limitation of water bodies in engulfing garbage thrown into them, which is contrary to the conventional belief of the ocean as an eternal space. Oceans, seas, rivers, and local water bodies that have housed garbage, especially microplastic, are leading to ecodisaster, as depicted in the graphic fiction *The Rime of the Modern Mariner* (2011) written by Nick Hayes. The story invites new understandings of the entangled relationship between humans, the environment, and the non-humans (including nonlife)—what Povinelli defines as geontopower—and reviews the littoral space through a dystopian image in which there is more debris than fish in the sea. The apocalyptic garbage, a non-living material entity, in the story has become uncanny and untameable, operating and exercising its power. This paper analyses the role of visual ocean narratives using blue humanities as a discipline in addressing the impact of garbage on water bodies and subsequent global warming—that pose a looming challenge to littoral space—by traversing beyond green land-locked ecocriticism.

**Keywords:** *blue humanities, climate change, terraqueous literature, geontopower, garbocracy.*

### Introduction

Serpil Oppermann, in her book entitled *Blue Humanities* (2023), lays down the foundation of the field that “critically examines the planet’s troubled seas and distressed freshwaters from various sociocultural, literary, historical, aesthetic, ethical, and theoretical perspectives”

(Oppermann III). While Steve Mentz's *An Introduction to Blue Humanities* (2024) is by a large opens up the domain of blue humanities to the world, Serpil Oppermann narrowed it down by pinpointing some of the important critical issues that addresses "troubled seas and distressed freshwaters" (III). She highlights the twin challenges posed by the water crisis and the pollution of rivers, seas, and oceans, which have led to rising sea levels, resulting in the submersion of numerous archipelagos and islands. The Anthropocene has already inflicted significant and largely irreversible damage. However, achieving a sustainable future demands focused attention on the water bodies that unite the world. These waterways not only serve as connectors but also form the backbone of contemporary globalisation, a phenomenon Steve Mentz aptly called "wet globalization" (Mentzxxix). The continuous flow and interconnectedness of water bodies result not only in the circulation of goods but also the garbage dumped into them, contrary to land separated by these waterways. This article examines the role of blue humanities in addressing the impact of garbage on water bodies and the resulting global warming, which poses a significant threat to littoral spaces. Nick Hayes's *The Rime of the Modern Mariner* (2011) offers a contemporary dystopian reimagining of Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798). In the novel, misdeeds of the mariner lead to their eventual downfall. However, while the ancient mariner experiences an uncanny and deeply personal loss, the modern mariner in the graphic novel symbolises the collective guilt of humanity, whose actions have resulted in a sea where debris outweighs fish. Amitav Ghosh, in his nonfiction book *The Great Derangement* (2016), aptly remarks that "events triggered by climate change... are the mysterious work of our own hands returning to haunt us in unthinkable shapes and forms" (43). This "mysterious work" refers to relentless dumping of waste into water bodies. The same water bodies that once served as womb of humanity are, unfortunately, becoming its tomb due to severe water pollution. This paper explores how blue humanities responds to the urgent need to reinterpret visual aquatic spaces in the Anthropocene as well as Capitalocene era, offering an alternative perspective to green ecocriticism and theory of wilderness. Visual narratives, through images, frames, photographs, and panels, engage our senses more directly and possess a unique ability to raise awareness, as humans often struggle to believe what they cannot see.

The dystopian, apocalyptic futures depicted in these visual works urge us to reconsider sustainable futures not only for humanity but also for the natural world, including non-living elements. The graphic novel provides fresh insights into the complex, interwoven relationships between humans, the environment, and non-human entities which Povinelli

refers to as geontopower. They reimagine littoral spaces through a grim dystopian lens, showcasing seas filled with more debris than fish and waters encroaching on land.

### **Living in the Times of Garbocracy**

The term "garbocracy" refers to governance or societal organisation that centres around, or is heavily impacted by, waste and garbage. It emphasises how waste has become an organising force in modern societies, particularly in urban settings. A garbocracy suggests that decisions—economic, social, political—are influenced by the production, accumulation, and disposal of waste. This concept critiques how the contemporary capitalist societies are neglecting environmental issues, where the centuries of waste production are constant and overwhelming, impacting not just landscapes but also social structures, health, and ecosystems. In literature, environmental studies, and urban studies, garbocracy points to a critique of the "throwaway culture," where discarded materials create layers of what some scholars call an "archaeology of the present." It is a concept especially relevant to conversations around environmental justice, as poorer communities and marginalised groups often bear the brunt of waste produced by society. However, it also considers how accumulation of garbage on land as well as in sea goes beyond affecting only poor marginalised section of society by becoming a threat to entire planet and, in turn, humanity.

While garbocracy and the blue humanities might seem separate, there is a notable overlap in how they address human impact on the environment. Plastic pollution and marine waste, for example, are issues that bring the concepts together, as the ocean often becomes a repository for terrestrial waste. This intersection highlights the ocean as a victim of the garbocratic systems on land, illustrating how human waste management practices affect marine ecosystems and vice versa. This shared terrain also underlines the importance of rethinking societal systems and policies to ensure a sustainable coexistence with both land and sea and not land or sea. In blue humanities, water is seen as holding stories of human trauma, colonial histories, and migrations, as well as ecological diversity and climate change. It also calls attention to the threat of rising sea levels, marine pollution, and the often-invisible exploitation of the ocean resources. Blue Humanities scholars argue that understanding the role of the ocean in culture and ecology is crucial in confronting the challenges of the Anthropocene, where human activity reshapes both land and sea. Nick Hayes's graphic fiction, *Rime of the Modern Mariner* (2011), delivers a terrifying visual of garbage overpowering the natural world, leaving humanity at its mercy. Drawing inspiration from Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Hayes envisions a dystopian world

overwhelmed by terrestrial waste dumped into oceans and other water bodies. The imagery of the novel is strikingly poignant; trees shed their leaves until they stand bare, symbolising the relentless transformation caused by Anthropogenic waste (24). The narrative critiques the rise of the blue economy, highlighting its consequences of overfishing and the hunting of endangered marine species (39). The depiction of a ship floating on “soapy lotion” instead of pristine water (46) further underscores the degradation of marine ecosystems. Most striking, however, is the haunting image of a sea filled with debris, where a seaman takes aim at the waste with a gun (48). The barren sea, stripped of fish and natural life due to overexploitation, leaves humanity hunting its own waste—a grim testament to the unsustainable extraction of resources from the marine environment. This accumulation of garbage is what Sayan Dey has called “Garbo-Imperialism” or “garbocracy”:

The politics of garbaging can be understood as a continuous performance of disposing of garbage across selective physical, geographical, and geological spaces so that certain socially, culturally, politically, and economically privileged communities can gain control over others. It is important to note that this performance is not momentary in nature and is a deep historical act, and it has been systematically curated by the “exploitative, garbological and fast capitalistic system.” (04)

After the albatross is killed, the curse upon the “modern mariner” is revealed, not through supernatural intervention like in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” but as a consequence of destructive action of humanity against the ocean. The mariner gazes across the sea (71) only to witness a grim tableau: a “wash of polythene,” “swathes of polystyrene” (72), “boobed with tonnes of neoprene” (73), and littered with “polymethyl methacrylate,” “Tupperware,” “bottled bleach,” and “tyres” (74). Hayes masterfully intertwines myth with reality of oceanic pollution, likening the garbage in the sea to the monstrous Medusa, which “still refuses to rot,” symbolising resistance of plastic to decomposition over centuries (79). The ocean floor becomes a graveyard, filled with dead marlin, whales, and other marine life “compressed within this writhing nest that trawled the ocean floor” (81). In the third part of the novel, the modern mariner carries the albatross around his neck, embodying his guilt and responsibility. A frightening “ghoulish apparition” emerges from the sea, a spectral woman who declares, “I’m no figment of your frontal lobe... no children’s story ghost... I am the real repercussion of your hubristic boast!” (108). This haunting figure serves as a stark reminder of hubris of humanity and the dire consequences of its ecological inaction. Here, the author has wisely entangled climate change, Capitalocene, and

Anthropocene that has resulted in drastic change on land as well as ocean. The woman further cautions that the Anthropocene and Capitalocene have recklessly gambled with “chaos,” ignoring its consequences or perhaps blinded by the allure of profit and desire derived from their exploitative practices. Ultimately, she declares, the era of the Capitalocene has lost its battle against nature (113).

Ghosh has presented a similar case about Sundarbans in his fictional works, *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019), as well as non-fictional work *The Great Derangement* (2016). In part one of *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh mentions an altered world where:

...sea-level rise has swallowed the Sundarbans and made cities like Kolkata, New York and Bangkok uninhabitable, when readers and museumgoers turn to the art and literature of our time, will they not look, first, and most urgently, for traces and portents of the altered world of their inheritance? And when they fail to find them, what should they—what can they—do other than to conclude that ours was a time when most forms of art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight? Quite possibly then, this era, which so congratulates itself on its self-awareness, will come to be known as the time of the Great Derangement. (14)

### **Possibility of Theory of Wilderness in Blue Ecocriticism**

The theory of wilderness has its root in green ecocriticism that deals with untouched pieces of land which comprises of forests, jungles, etc. The idea behind this theory is to save natural habitat for sustainable future and to counter increasing polluted areas. George Cragg in his book *Ecocriticism* (2004) defined the wilderness as,

...signifying nature in a state uncontaminated by civilisation, is the most potent construction of nature available to New World environmentalism. It is a construction mobilised to protect particular habitats and species... If pastoral is the distinctive Old World construction of nature, suited to long-settled and domesticated landscapes, wilderness fits the settler experience in the New Worlds – particularly the United States, Canada and Australia—with their apparently untamed landscapes and the sharp distinction between the forces of culture and nature. (59)

Wilderness ecocriticism divides into two branches: Old World and New World. The Old-World perspective depicts wilderness as a frightening, dangerous realm beyond the reach of civilisation, often seen as a place of exile. In case of ocean and sea, the unexplored vast ocean full of mystery often symbolises wilderness. In contrast, the New World perspective views



wilderness as a sanctuary offering relaxation and contemplation, aligning closely with classical pastoral ecocriticism. Water bodies—rivers, seas, oceans—are often considered as a place of therapy, relaxation, and cleansing that further binds blue humanities with medical humanities. By drawing on medical humanities and the environmental humanities, the field of the blue humanities critically examines how the troubled water bodies, in contemporary times, bear a resemblance to troubled life of human from various literary, historical, sociocultural, aesthetic, and theoretical perspectives. The concept of "blue space," in this context, refers to natural aquatic environments like oceans, lakes, and rivers, which have been shown to reduce stress and improve mental well-being. The sight and sound of water can create a sense of calm and promote a meditative state. The rhythmic sound of waves, often described as white noise, can help individuals find inner peace and reduce anxiety. The physical properties of saltwater are also believed to have healing effects.

Marine Wilderness (MW) represents an approach, much similar to that of wilderness on land, aimed at elevating public awareness and standards to address the critical depletion of marine life. The concept of wilderness in the blue humanities extends the notion of wilderness beyond terrestrial landscapes to include the vast, often unknowable depths of the sea. This shift challenges traditional conceptions of wilderness as land-based, emphasising the role of the ocean as a wilderness of its own, marked by remoteness, unpredictability, and inaccessibility to human experience. Blue humanities studies wilderness not only as a physical space but also as a conceptual space, one that resists human control and embodies elements of mystery and danger. The sheer scale of the ocean, its changing currents, and its depth resist human mastery, symbolising an untamed wilderness that parallels the romanticised landscapes in traditional wilderness studies. This aquatic wilderness, however, is layered with additional cultural and historical complexities—such as colonial exploitation and maritime trade routes—which also frame the ocean as a site of human loss, survival, and ecological tension. The theory of wilderness within this context acknowledges that while the ocean can be an object of scientific study, it also harbours unknowns that cause awe and fear. The sea, seen through this lens, becomes a wilderness teeming with life forms, ecosystems, and historical debris—remnants of shipwrecks, artifacts, and biological diversity—that collectively evoke what scholars in blue humanities describe as “the sublime.” This approach considers the wilderness of the ocean as a space that reflects both human longing and ecological interdependence. But all these ideas of wilderness, on land and water, remains intact to Europe only and we hardly see such project in South Asia. Following the theory of wilderness in South Asian context could be challenging. That is why, I argue that protecting small regional water bodies such as

ponds, rivers, lakes, should be the priority in South Asian countries where population is increasing at a rapid pace. Merely following the European model will not solve the issue of water crisis or submergence in a largely populated country like India.

The vast oceanic space provides a challenge because of its continuous dynamic movement. A land-based forest, a two-dimensional space, is fixed to a certain area which remained untouched of any human intervention but continuous circulation of ocean and its three-dimensional space circulates everything that we throw into it. For instance, a heap of garbage thrown into Pacific Ocean will float all the way to Indian Ocean creating a similar amount of damage to the oceanic space. Thus, theory of wilderness becomes difficult in such heterotopic site. However, theory of wilderness could be an interesting framework for rivers as it follows certain path that can remain untouched under conservation acts. Rivers are also the source of freshwater in many villages as well as cities, especially in South Asian countries which are still underway its development phase.

## Conclusion

Visual narratives like films and graphic fiction are powerful tools for conveying the climate crisis and ocean pollution due to their ability to combine emotional resonance with compelling imagery. Both mediums can juxtapose past, present, and future, showing the cumulative effects of pollution. By showing the suffering of animals, humans, and ecosystems, these narratives foster empathy. For instance, in *Plastic Ocean*, visuals of marine animals tangled in debris leave a lasting impression, while graphic novels like *The Tragedy of the Commons* depict individual struggles against ecological destruction. Cinematic techniques like close-ups, sweeping landscapes, and underwater shots emphasise the beauty of marine ecosystems and the devastating effects of pollution. For example, *The Rime of the Modern Mariner* creates an emotional connection to marine life and visualises large-scale climate disasters to evoke fear and urgency. *The Rime of the Modern Mariner* depicts the dire consequences of unregulated waste management and the persistent delay in implementing effective measures to safeguard natural habitats on land and in water bodies. These visual narratives emphasise the critical impact of human negligence on the environment, illustrating a bleak future shaped by inaction. The environmental focus aligns with the blue humanities studies which emphasise on understanding human and ecological histories through water-centric narratives. Moreover, the minimalist storytelling and using visual and sound design to evoke horror in *The Rime of the Modern Mariner* transcends traditional narrative forms, amplifying the raw emotional and ecological tensions of its world. This aligns with blue

humanities studies that imagines water and its crises as central to human stories, blending the sociopolitical with the ecological. Thus, the story can be seen as a call to action, intertwining environmental concerns with cultural narratives, and it provides a powerful entry point for discussions about the Anthropocene within blue humanities studies.

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