INTRODUCTION

Since the turn of the century, the stakes inherent in climate change have turned out to be indissoluble from the threats affecting coastal and marine ecosystems. Scientists around the world have provided evidence that global warming is interlinked with rising sea levels, with the warming and acidification of the ocean, with the dwindling of fish populations, the bleaching of coral reefs, and with an increasing number of endangered marine species. As a matter of fact, we have come to realize that the future of our predominantly blue Earth and its myriad co-dwellers hinges in great part on the blueing of our minds. This is manifest in the oceanic turn that has marked the humanities since the turn of the century, and, specifically in France, with a growing number of academic conferences and events in the past couple of years focusing on the relationships between water and literature, or between water and the arts. While the accuracy and implications of choosing the color "blue" to designate the color of water have been subject to much fascinating debate—considering that the color of water as seen through our eyes can range from many shades of blue and green to grey, glaucous, and various other colors, including the famous wine-dark sea in Homer's writing—, the leaders of the research program which this publication is attached to and the larger field of blue ecopoetics which it seeks to promote nevertheless value the catch-phrase quality of "blue" and the poetic resonances it vehicles, precisely with its rich chromatic and prismatic changeability. Hence the polysemy of the deliberately strange name for our research program Sea More Blue, which relies on the homonymic valence of "sea" in a grammatically unstable formula where it can also read as "to see." Troubling comprehension, the queerness of the phrase Sea More Blue implicitly points to the phenomenological intricacies of human perception which is interlaced with the material world it seeks to apprehend, whether in terms of

«Journal of the Short Story in English», Collectif
ISBN 979-10-413-1023-4 Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2026, www.pur-editions.fr

color, shape, or even of sound and via other senses. As a result, the emphasis lies not so much on blue as a color as it does on the conceptual, somatic, psychological, and stylistic displacements that go along with wet matters and perspectives as we think and write with water.

The idea for this publication arose in the wake of discussions in the blue humanities inaugurated by Steve Mentz. Initially, Mentz insisted on the necessity for the blue humanities to braid three different kinds of critical discourse dealing with globalization, postcolonial studies, and environmental studies. As his thinking on the subject developed, Mentz added to the above the history of science and technology as well as ecocriticism, which he encouraged as "a way of looking at terrestrial literary culture from an offshore perspective, as if we could align ourselves with the watery element" (*Bottom* 99). Following this incentive, this special section of *JSSE* seeks to enroll short story studies in a collective effort to correct what Margaret Cohen has called "hydrophasia"—a "syndrome [which] is part of a pervasive twentieth-century attitude that the photographer and theorist Allan Sekula has called 'forgetting the sea'" (Cohen, "Terraqueous" 658). As Cohen argues, focusing on the sea forces us to acknowledge the "terraqueous" nature of the globe which the expansion of European civilization, colonization, and capitalist Modernity have depended on. Besides, Dan Brayton's and Sidney Dobrin's contributions to the blue turn of ecocriticism have considerably spread awareness of the "collective case of ocean deficit disorder" which was rampant in academia (6-7). In arguing for the "oceanic imperative" at the heart of "blue ecocriticism," Sidney Dobrin insists that ocean deficit disorder cannot be accounted for by a dearth of texts dealing with water and the sea, but rather by a lack of academic attention to the watery dimension of literature. This blue thematic section of the *JSSE* thus comes as a response to Sydney Dobrin's invitation to "call attention to this neglect and emphasize the need to expand the ecocritical lens to more attentive inclusions of matters oceanic, given both the tremendous corpus of literary and textual representations of ocean that contribute to cultural imaginaries and the vital role of ocean in global ecologies and environmental crises" (8).

From an ecopoetic standpoint, where we explore the correspondence between the nature and texture of human language and the languages and texture of non-human nature at play in literature, we wish to explore how the watery nature of the bodies of water which we are entangled with may permeate blue writing itself. In a collective effort to turn from "green" to "blue" concerns, the 10th symposium of the European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture and the Environment (EASLCE) was held in 2024 on cross-disciplinary approaches to blue ecopoetics. In parallel, the scientific coordinator of that event, Bénédicte Meillon, was implementing the Sea More Blue research program at the University of Angers, which *JSSE* has always been affiliated with. Within that context, the call for papers for this special issue of *JSSE* arose

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from the awareness that "blue short stories" deserve more attention than they have been getting.

Indeed, while recent *JSSE* issues have increasingly included pieces tying in with ecocriticism, not much attention has been paid to the ways in which wet matters trickle down into the writing of a short story as a specifically blue—i.e. aquatic, marine, or oceanic—piece of *ecopoiesis*. Important headway has been made however by ecocritic and Pacific studies specialist Theresa Shewry who devotes part of one chapter in her book on Oceanic literature, *Hope at Sea*, to a few short stories by Hawai'ian writer Gary Pak. Shewry thus "[explores] the force that water exerts on literary writing's efforts to illuminate hope" (61), within an amphibious area where "conditions of water upheaval, diminishment, and injustice have . . . shadowed life for many years [and] are a force in physical precariousness, economic impoverishment, and political conflict" (60). Blue Humanities scholar and postcolonial ecocritic Elizabeth Deloughrey has similarly contributed a chapter in *Allegories of the Anthropocene* dealing with blue short stories, this time by New Zealand Maori writer Keri Hulme, where she focuses on the "ontological entanglement between human bodies and nonhuman figures such as the shore, stone, boulders and ocean," as well as its political and narrative reverberation (143). Deloughrey specifically looks at the "fluid waterworld of queer kinship" captured by Hulme's short stories, where she experiments with different forms of realism and other-than-human point of view and sentience (151). Elsewhere, she also expounds on her reservations as to the notion of "blue" studies, as she dives into the science fiction ocean anthology *Current Futures*, which she criticizes overall as catering to "a conceptual, spatial, and neoliberal fix" (147). As Deloughrey demonstrates, except for three short stories that "are profoundly transformative of both genre and the subject that open possibilities of alterity that challenge the extractivist imaginary through affect, the body, and ontology," the collection—which was commissioned by XPRIZE, itself an organization funded by Royal Dutch Shell PLC (Shell)—mostly ends up providing "an altogether neoliberal vision of the 'depth imagination' as it merges petrocapitalist extraction narratives with speculative fiction" (158, 150). With a similar critical attention, Emilie Walezak has also paved the way for new materialistic readings of blue short stories, with an article on A. S. Byatt's short stories where she investigates the poetics of ocean and plastic pollution in "Sea Story"—a story that helped launch a series of water short stories published in *The Guardian* in 2013.

With the aim to develop blue short story scholarship further, this special section of *JSSE* consequently focuses on short stories dealing with marine matters and, more largely, with aquatic and terraqueous beings and places in ways that depart from anthropocentric, land-based studies and frameworks. The overall aim is to explore short stories that help us venture into largely uncharted dimensions of experience and knowledge and that may thus promote urgently needed ways of blueing our perception, worldviews, and ways of life.

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Moreover, a central area of investigation lies in the reverberation, diffraction, and rippling of watery lifeforms and milieux into the dialogic and poetic fabric of short stories.

The contributions included here analyze short stories dealing with the complex, wonderful, but also awful ways in which marine matter and forms may be animate, agential, and enmeshed with our human activities, bodies, and discourses. Each article taps into the blue currents of the earth that run all the way through our own veins and lachrymal glands, to consider how the permeability and fluidity, the pull and lability of bodies of water might percolate into a blue poetics of the short story. Many of the contributions share a specific focus on cross-species encounters and communication. As the authors show, such interspecies moments may help counter the alienation from our lives which marvelous marine beings and milieux suffer from—in part because they too often seem unfamiliar and strange, and in part because they are mostly inaccessible to us. Moreover, material approaches of humans as evolved from, made of, and dependent on salt water and beings are confronted with mythical stories of sea worlds that have long shaped our perception, representations, and ways of life as land-dwelling and story-telling mammals. Finally, special attention has been paid to the epiphanic dimensions of the short story genre, bringing us to ponder how the short story form may be of specific value when it comes to shifting paradigms and bringing about blue moments of truth. As a result, this section demonstrates how blue short stories can creatively challenge and reinvent our imaginaries and our narratives of becoming with the sea.

While the blue humanities are commonly associated with oceanic concerns, the scope of a blue ecopoetics encompasses all kinds of bodies of water. This is reflected in articles that zoom in on the value of an *ecopoiesis* anchored in liminal places such as swamps or other coastal areas forming ecotones, or contact zones, between water and land. Others have looked at stories set near rivers or within watersheds, to reveal how those terraqueous places flow into the poetics of the short story. Moreover, the contributors were encouraged to analyze the ways in which short stories accommodate the specificities of seascapes as underwater geographies, soundscapes, odorscapes, and feelscapes generating ways of perceiving, moving, and communicating that are properly outlandish and hence hard for humans to imagine. One of the aims of this volume is indeed to probe to what extent ecopoetic experiments with blue short stories are designed to speak worlds about underwater ways of dwelling.

The first two contributions in this section are devoted to Stephen Crane's 1897 short story "The Open Boat." The first, Guillaume Tanguy's article, "'They took the boat farther out to sea': Seamanship and Agency in 'The Open Boat,'" examines the notions of seamanship and agency through close analyses of the story's representations of the interactions between the sea, technology, and the role of men, or, as he ingeniously puts it, "between the natural nonhuman (sea), the human (man), and the material nonhuman (ship), or *sea-man-ship*."

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Tanguy first scrutinizes the sailors' resourceful praxis through tinkering, as their embodied relationship with water is enhanced by the shipwreck they have survived and their urge to reach the coast. The second section of his article shifts to aesthetic considerations as the vision of the shark at the core of the story marks one protagonist's turn to a decentered, contemplative connection with the ocean. In the last section, Tanguy offers a challenging reading of the unexpected and much-commented death of the oiler.

In "The Sea Around Them: A Blue Reading of Ecological Coexistence in Stephen Crane's 'The Open Boat,'" Inger-Anne Søfting offers another reading of Crane's canonical short story through the lens of new materialism (Morton, Alaimo), which promotes "a flat ontology that underlines the reciprocal interdependency of all matter." She argues that, together with their tireless struggle against the waves, the small size of the shipwrecked sailors' dinghy literally brings them much closer to the physical materiality of the ocean. Søfting first contends that their situation is a way for Crane to explore and represent the sailors' uncanny experience with a physical environment they thought they knew and mastered, but mostly took for granted. She then observes how "The Open Boat" consists of a *mélange* of anthropomorphism and picturesque perspectives together with rather unexpected meta-discursive observations of and experimentations with the perception of the non-human world. In the process, she considers the story as one of ecological embeddedness. She in turn offers her own thought-provoking reading of the death of the oiler, thus pursuing the conversation started by Guillaume Tanguy.

With "W. S. Merwin's Fabled Waters," Françoise Palleau-Papin's contribution explores Merwin's approach to the short form as a specific way to create ecological parables in the wake of Rachel Carson's *Sea Trilogy*. Each brief section, a poetic fragment of its own, offers close readings of a selection of Merwin's fables and stories, many of which are rewritings of myths. Each section emphasizes Merwin's concern with finding "a form and a way to express the power of water's memory, thus decentering the focus from our human viewpoint and agency . . . to the perception of nature." Palleau-Papin demonstrates how the constant play of Merwin's writing with sound effects and synesthesia, which, according to David Abram, contributes to "disclosing the things and elements that surround us not as inert objects but as expressive subjects, entities, powers, potencies" (*The Spell of the Sensuous* 130), endows his short prose pieces with a poetic dimension that emphasizes the way human and non-human life are embedded. Brought to the fore, Merwin's rendering of the sounds of waters decenters the human sense of hegemony over the natural world and miraculously highlights complex interactions between human and non-human forms of life.

In "'Every water has its own rules and offering': An Amphibious Interpretation of Anne Carson's Blue-Green Short Story '1 = 1,'" Monika Class turns to an experimental 2016 short story by the author. She explores how

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Carson tests her readers by resorting to baffling narrative, intertextual, and intermedial strategies in order to represent her main character's trans-corporeal ambition to swim smoothly and without a splash in the lake where she practices. She contends that Carson's character's obsessive urge underscores the material demands that water makes on swimming human bodies, as opposed to most animals. Class's reading of "1 = 1" defines itself as amphibious, insofar as it "combines dry semiotics and wet ecofeminism."

The next contribution by Sylvia Mieszkowski centers on a 2017 post-Brexit short story by Zadie Smith. In "Disavowal and 'the depth of a metaphor': Problematic Waters in Zadie Smith's 'The Lazy River,'" Mieszkowski first examines how "The Lazy River," which takes place in an Andalusian resort mostly frequented by British tourists, is told by a noncommittal homodiegetic, nameless, and non-gendered narrator who mostly resorts to the first-person plural. As a critical tool, her argument combines the blue humanities (Neimanis) with the psychoanalytic concept of "disavowal," as pointing to the dominant lethargic attitude that underpins the slow violence, a notion also used by Léna Kervran, with which "we" keep destroying our habitats. Then Mieszkowski successively analyzes the three watery metaphors used in Smith's story, each of which corresponds to an identifiable place: water footprint / the polytunnels; sullied sea / the Mediterranean; dangerous drifting / The Lazy River, which is the name of the eponymous circular hotel pool sporting an artificial current. Mieszkowski's close reading challengingly focuses on Smith's use of color, which offers a sarcastic, if not utterly comical, take on "green," "blue," and "grey" water.

With her parallel examination of two short stories by emerging British female writers—"Smack" (2019) by Julia Armfield and "Flotsam, Jetsam, Lagan, Derelict" (2018) by Lucy Wood—, Léna Kervran's "Sick Waters, Hybrid Bodies, Ghosts of Pollution: the Ecogothic Blue Short Story," takes us next to very different shores. Her reading of both stories, which focus on the pollution of marine ecosystems, aims at emphasizing the devasting consequences of uninterrupted industrialization on beaches and their human and non-human residents as an often overlooked, yet unescapable form of slow violence (Nixon). Kervran argues that the blue ecogothic as a literary mode reappropriating the nineteenth-century gothic imagery of ghosts, hybrids, and sickness constitutes "one way to represent the *unrepresentability* of the slow violence of pollution," and more particularly of plastic pollution. Kervran first examines the blue ecogothic imagery used in both stories, including ecospectrality, hybridity, and the motif of sickness. In the second section of her article, she focuses on both authors' use of the uncanny, the weird, and the eerie with a view to defamiliarizing their readers' ordinary perceptions of the seaside. She finally contends that the blue ecogothic allows for an ecocentric reappraisal of humans' place within marine ecosystems. As negotiations during Geneva UN summit over the summer were trammeled by the disproportionate attendance of

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chemical and fossil fuel industry lobbyists, so much so that the summit has consequently failed to lead to the international UN Plastics Treaty that was meant to bring an end, or at least curb, plastic pollution, Kervran's timely article draws precious attention to the burning issue of plastic Ocean pollution on both local and global levels.

Wishing to make room in the issue for a piece of creative writing that hybridizes narrative scholarship and the short story, this special section ends with "Staying Afloat," by Bénédicte Meillon. The piece meanders along a stream of reflections brought about by fieldwork in the Pacific Northwest over two summers, where the author combined terrain exploration with surveys on imaginaries of the sea, while launching a tentacular, transatlantic multimedia project called "Dancing Bodies of Water" and involving ecopoetic dance, photography, and writing. The piece is partly inspired by meditations on the meaning of two idiomatic expressions which the author started questioning. She indeed noticed how expressions charged with negative water imagery increasingly permeated many of her exchanges with fellow academics, who were constantly reporting stress related to feelings of "being swamped" and being "under water" (*être sous l'eau* in French). While both expressions generally refer to the sensation of being overwhelmed by heavy workloads and accelerated cadences which are typical of our times, their sudden ubiquity in professional correspondence between academics working in the environmental humanities struck her as symptomatic of a widespread, more or less conscious ecoanxiety tied to the rising of sea levels and to our feeling of helplessness in the face of the global changes underway. As such, these expressions raise questions for Meillon about the meaning and power of academic and creative work in the face of the urgency of the ecological crisis.

The guest editors are thankful for the help of Dr. Noémie Moutel who has worked alongside them as assistant and has as such handled most of the communication with the contributors, file keeping, and some of the copy editing.

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