

Transcript for ASLE Spotlight: Water Works

April 16, 2021

Bethany Wiggin:

00:01:28

Welcome everyone, we're recording this session as zoom has let you know. We have also enabled the live transcript for closed captioning, and you may find that option on the control bar that usually appears at the bottom of your zoom screen, we're extending to the warmest welcome to the second ASLE spotlight on new work

00:01:57

I'm Bethany Wiggin director of the Penn Program for Environmental Humanities at the University of Pennsylvania, and I'm proud to be with Laura Barbas-Rhoden the CO-president of ASLE. For those of you joining an ASLE event for the first time we extend an extra hearty welcome. We are so glad for you to join us today and invite you to help sustain and further our work by becoming an ASLE member.

00:02:36

Before we continue, I would like to acknowledge that my university, and I myself today, we are located on the ancestral homelands of millennial and Lenape, sometimes known as Delaware people, who long stewarded the lands waters and life of Manabe hooking the headquarters of the recognized Delaware tribe are presently in Oklahoma and Texas. And yet, Lenape remain here, neighbors, and stewards of this land renamed after English Quaker and settler columnist William Penn.

And while Penn sought to maintain friendly and fair relations with limited pay neighbors. His colonial successors, his children and his agents did not. I want especially to point out that the foundation of the University of Pennsylvania, and the program of its first Provost were predicted particularly pernicious to the fortunes and futures of indigenous neighbors.

00:03:37

It is our great pleasure to host this exciting live event in our spotlight series. Laura and I, and members of ASLE's executive committee have envisioned and designed this new series to elevate ask the members work and creative writing, scholarship, public engagement, and more. And we are excited to foster connections with new public audiences through these virtual events.

00:04:03

As we get started, I want to extend Special thanks to the staff at the Penn program for environmental humanities for co-sponsoring and helping with this event, and to the University of Pennsylvania for supplementing our resources at ASLE. Special thanks to Angela Feranda at Penn, and thanks also to ASLE's own Amy McIntyre are managing director. This event would not be possible without the work of the Spotlight Planning Committee and the selection committee, and we extend gratitude for the many hands who contributed labor expertise and time.

00:04:42

By way of logistical information, we will ask that you remain today on mute. We'll have time for questions later. And we'll ask you to use the chat or the raised hand function or your reaction buttons to

indicate that you have a question. Please try to keep the questions concise since we only have brief minutes together. Amy will staff the controls.

00:05:05

Normally, or I had anticipated now saying to you that it's my great good fortune to introduce our guest moderator, my co moderator Melody Jue. Unfortunately, Melody is really feeling quite atrocious after the second dose of her vaccine. But I have Melody's questions that we formulated together earlier this week. And for that reason, I'd like to introduce Melody even in her absence. Later, as we move past the presentations, I'm going to be "playing Melody here on TV," as well as asking the questions that I formulated myself.

00:05:42

Melody is Associate Professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and her research and teaching interests concern oceans and the environmental humanities, contemporary American literature, media theory, science fiction, science and technology studies, and the relations between theory and practice in both swimming and scuba diving. Professor Jue is the author of *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Sea Water*, which appeared with Duke University Press in 2020. And she is co-editor of two forthcoming volumes, both with Duke UP.

00:06:21

Melody would have now introduced our panelists, so pretend now that I am Melody. I'm delighted to introduce Craig Santos Perez; Craig is an indigenous Chamoru poet from the Pacific Island of Guåhan (Guam). He is the author of five books of poetry, and a professor in the English department at the University of Hawai'i, Mānoa, where he teaches creative writing, eco-poetry, and Pacific literature, and is affiliate faculty with the Center for Pacific Islands Studies and the Indigenous Politics Program.

00:07:00

Steve Mentz, our second presenter today, is professor of English at St John's University in New York City, where he teaches Shakespeare, literary theory, and the blue humanities, a term he coined, and focuses on environmental questions. His most recent books are *Ocean*, which we'll hear about today, as well as *Break Up the Anthropocene*, and author too of *Shipwreck Modernity*.

And thirdly, Brian Russell Roberts is professor of English and director of American Studies at Brigham Young University. In addition to *Border Waters*, his recent publications include the Co-edited collections *Archipelagic American Studies* and *Indonesian Notebook: A Sourcebook on Richard Wright and the Bandung Conference*.

00:07:51

And then finally, Tori Bush is a PhD candidate and instructor at Louisiana State University. Her dissertation "Eco Orientalism: constructing climate migration" is an interdisciplinary investigation into how the very small island of Isle de Jean Charles has been constructed through a white Western lens of literature, media, and other cultural objects as an environmental sacrifice zone, or "eco orientalized", in order to experiment with processes and procedures of climate migration in the United States.

With no further ado, over to you, Craig

Craig Santos Perez

00:08:34

holiday. Aloha. Thank you so much. Bethany and Amy, everyone at ASLE for organizing this event, I'm honored to be part of such a stellar lineup. I'm zooming in from the island of Oahu. So I also want to acknowledge the Kanaka Maoli, or native Hawaiian people. Today I'll be talking about my new book *Habitat Threshold*, which is a collection of climate and eco-poetry, intersecting with poems about being a new parent. My daughter was born in 2014. For my five minutes today I'm going to actually perform one of the poems from the book, it is titled "Chanting the Waters". And it's dedicated to the Standing Rock tribe and water protectors around the world.

00:09:24

And so I'm going to ask my fellow panelists if they can unmute themselves they're going to help me perform this call and response poem. So when I say "say" they're going to repeat: "Water is life".

00:09:42

Say: "water is life," because our bodies are 60% water, because my wife labored for 24 hours through contracting waves, because water breaks forth from shifting tectonic plates, say: "water is life"

00:09:59

Because amniotic fluid is 90% water because she breathed, and breathed, and breathed because our lungs are 80% water, because our daughter crowns, like a new island, say: "water is life"

00:10:14

Because we tell creation stories about water, because our language flows from water because our words are islands writ on water, because it takes more than three gallons of water to make a single sheet of paper, say: "water is life"

00:10:33

Because water is the next oil, because 180,000 miles of us oil pipelines leak, every day, because our planet is 70% water, because it takes two gallons of water to refine one gallon of gasoline, because it takes 20 gallons of water to make a pound of plastic, say: "water is life"

00:10:54

Because a billion people lack access to drinking water. Because women and children walk for miles every day to gather clean water and deliver it home, because our bones are a 30% water, say: "water is life"

00:11:12

Because corporations privatize, dam, and bottle our waters, because plantations divert our waters, because animal slaughter houses consume our waters, because pesticides, chemicals, lead, and waste poison our waters, say: "water is life"

00:11:34

Because they bring their bulldozers and drills and drones, because we bring our feathers and leis and sage and shells and canoes, and hash tags and totems, because they call us savage and primitive and riot, because we bring our treaties and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples, because they bring their banks and dogs and patriots and pepper spray and bullets, because we bring our songs and schools and prayers and chants and ceremonies. Because we say "stop, keep the oil in the ground."

Because they say “Shut up, and vanish.” Because we are not moving. Because we bring all our relations, and all our generations and all our live streams, say: “water is life”

00:12:22

because our drumming sounds like rain after drought, echoing against taut skin, because our skin is 60% water, say: “water is life”

00:12:36

Because every year millions of children die from waterborne diseases, because every day, thousands of children die from waterborne diseases, because, by the end of this poem, five children will die from waterborne diseases, say: “water is life”

00:12:56

Because our daughter loves playing in the ocean, because someday she'll ask, “Where does the ocean end?”, because we'll point to the dilating horizon. Because our eyes are 95% water, because we'll tell her ocean has no end. Because sky and clouds lift ocean, because mountains embrace ocean into blessings of rain, because ocean sky rain fills aquifers and lakes, because ocean sky rain lake flows into the Missouri River.

Because ocean sky rain lake river returns to the Pacific and connects us to our cousins at Standing Rock, because our blood is 90% water, say: “water is life”

00:13:47

Because our hearts are 75% water, because I'll teach our daughter, our people's word for water hanum, hanum, hanum, o the sound of water will always carry her home.

Say: “water is life”. Say: “water is life”. Say: “water is life”

Thank you. Mahalo. I look forward to our conversation as well. Thank you.

Bethany Wiggin

00:14:27

Thank you, Craig, over to you, Steve.

Steve Mentz

00:14:31

That, thank you so much Craig, that is such a beautiful poem and a wonderful beginning to what I hope will be a really rich conversation. I'm so pleased to see so many people here in in zoom world. I want to thank also, ASLE for convening this forum, and also for inviting me, and especially for Bethany and Amy, and Melody in absentia, for helping to organize and foster these conversations. I'm really excited to be here and really pleased to be speaking and thinking and, you know, sort of playing in the water with, with everybody here.

00:15:07

So, I am very happy to be speaking to you in the weirdness of Zoomtopia from my home in Brantford Connecticut. I'd like briefly to acknowledge the indigenous peoples and nations who have lived with these lands and waters for many generations, including the Mohegan, the Mashantucket Pequot, the Eastern Pequod, the Schaghticoke and Golden Hill Paugussett and Quinnipiac, and other Algonquin speaking peoples. I honor the members of these communities past present and emerging. And as I may talk about a little bit more later on in our conversation, if we get to one of the questions that Melody devised for this project.

00:15:47

This is a deeply local book. I wrote this book right here in this place and in the water down the street from my house, in the constant physical presence of this little piece of Long Island Sound. And I want to honor the human and more than human history of this place as I begin. So, the book I'm talking about today, started as a project to take the ocean and fit it into a small object this size that fits in your pocket.

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That's obviously a difficult project, for some of the ways that I think we've already heard from that gorgeous reinvigoration of the statistics of ocean, OCEAN presence that Craig gave us. But just to rehearse a couple of them about vastness and space. The ocean is vast in space, covering 70% of the Earth's surface, even vaster in volume comprising 99% of our planet's biosphere, and also as Craig showed so powerfully in that poem, vast in terms of its presence in our own bodies making up more than two thirds of our own fleshy existence and different ratios and, and parts of the body. And it's also vast in time. The story that I tell about the ocean in this book begins with the arrival of the Earth's waters, during or soon after planetary creation around 4.5 billion years ago. And so the project of this book is to take all that vastness and make it small. I obviously don't get everything in, but I'm hoping that I got at least some of the shapes more or less right.

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The basic organizing principle of the book comes from an epigraph from Moby Dick, in which the grizzled seamen feature Father Mapple intones "shipmates, it is a two-stranded lesson." The basic duality and split nature of the ocean, the ocean, always appears to us as two things, it is alien and core, hostile and nurturing, chaos and order becomes across the long span of this short book, the principle of organization. The ocean moves, and each surge splits and divides. These acts of division comprise not so much principles of order, as techniques through which change and disorder can be made to appear orderly, at least for a little while. The ocean that emerges from these entwined strands never simply remains itself. It's always changing shapes and patterns and attributes and relationships.

00:18:22

So, in writing this book and trying to do justice to that two-strandedness of the ocean, I've been inspired and indebted to the two artists whose images appear on the slide that you guys can see right now. And those two images are going to help me say a little bit more about the oceanic duality that is my primary subject. So on the right you can see the image of the cover of the book. This was designed by Alice Marwick, the genius designer who was behind, who's created all the covers for the great Object Lessons series.

00:18:56

After some discussion, we decided to go with a kind of blue-green color for the water on the cover of the book, partly as a kind of a little dig at the blue humanities, which is sort of my refrain, but, as we all know and as the cover shows us the ocean isn't only blue. One of the things I really love about Alice's image is the way it captures texture, depth, and movement in just a few economical lines. The cover is a great representation of ocean as alien, alluring, and inhuman.

00:19:31

And so paired against that, I hope you can make out the images on the slide, paired against that on the other side is the last of the 13 black and white drawings that were done for the book by the Irish swimmer artists Vanessa Dawes. Each of her drawings which appear before each chapter in the book

highlights something from out of the book chapters, from space water crashing onto a bare planet, to image images of Odysseus out of masts or the Port of New York, sailing ships, globalization, and Emily Dickinson splashing into the surf.

00:20:04

The image on this slide, comes from the last chapter in the book which is about ocean swimming. I love the crowded surface of this image, it's dense with bodies and with arcing elbows. I love that most of the faces we can see are half in and half out of the water. The image captures the partial human access to ocean that's at the heart of my big, little, two-stranded book.

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So, bringing together these two images reminds me that the many differences that the book presents are varied ways of getting at what it means to try to think ocean as object and as companion. And the idea that ocean creates human connection also recalls the other one of the two epigraphs that are used at the front of the book. The second epigraph, as I've already said, presents Melville and the two stranded lesson. The first epigraph comes from the poet scientist Rachel Carson, who wrote in *Under the Sea Wind* "I realized that the sea itself must be the central character, whether I wished it or not." Carson shows in that phrase, which I really love, what I also feel, which is that in some ways the ocean chose me and shape my book into the shapes that it takes, whether I wish there or not. Thank you. Look forward to our conversation.

Bethany Wiggin:

00:21:30

Thank you so much, Steve. over to Brian.

Brian Roberts

00:21:46

Thank you so much Bethany, Amy and Melody for putting this together and also to ASLE. I'm thrilled to be with these panelists today, all of them I admire. and I also want to, to acknowledge that I'm here at Brigham Young University in, in Utah, in an area that has been a traditional homelands and home waters of indigenous groups including the Navajo, Ute, the Paiute, the Shoshone, and in making that acknowledgement I also want to say that I strive, imperfectly, oftentimes, but I do strive to, to have that acknowledgement permeate the, the scholarship that I do, and also the living that I do.

00:22:46

So, I'm talking to you today about my book *Borderwaters: Amid the Archipelagic States of America* it's due out from Duke University Press next month, I'm very excited about that. It's been a long process and a fulfilling and meaningful process. I'll start out by just reminding us of the standard story of the United States. The standard story of the United States tells us that the United States is a continental country, we're familiar with this image of the US intent on fulfilling its Manifest Destiny, crossing the vast continents, of prairies mountain and deserts extending as a continental landmass from sea to shining sea.

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Now we can trace this image of the US as a continent, all the way back to Thomas Paine, who in 1776 said that it was absurd for an island--now that is Imperial England--to perpetually govern a continent, and that was the nascent and settler colonial United States. In this conventional story of the United

States founding, an East West expansion, the continent is the nation's founding and foundational geographical form.

00:24:02

But *Border Waters* asks, What would happen if, instead of looking toward the continent, we located the foundational US geography in the island ocean form of the archipelago? Now for most readers the most listeners this will seem like a counterintuitive and even a counterfactual proposition, but *Border Waters* reminds us that while it may be counterintuitive, it's far from counterfactual. In fact, the United States claims more ocean space than it does land space, and more ocean space than perhaps any other country in the world. And this is so by virtue of the many US claims to islands and archipelagos in the Pacific and the Caribbean, and also by virtue of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which in 1982 provided for a nation to claim a territorial sea 12 miles out from a shoreline, and then an exclusive economic zone that extends 200 miles out from its territorial sea.

00:25:00

So this watery version of the United States isn't a secret, it's posted on a current website of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Titled "maritime zones and boundaries", this website hosts a document which states quote: "The US exclusive economic zone is the largest in the world, containing 3.4 million square nautical miles of ocean larger than the combined area of all 50 states." The United States, the document asserts, is an ocean nation.

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So, this is conventional US geography turned on its head. The United States becomes visible as a country made up predominantly of oceanic and archipelagic spaces, with just a minority claim to the North American continent. Further, and just as surprising, the United States does simply border two countries like canonical borders with Mexico and Canada, but it borders some 21 countries scattered across the globe, and astoundingly this watery map of the United States reminds us that the US and world borders today are preponderantly oceanic, and their border waters I would add, are archipelagic. Drawing on oceanic and archipelagic thinkers including Édouard Glissant, Zora Neale Hurston, Florence Johnny Frisbie, Epele Hau'ofa, and Craig Santos Perez, the chapters of this book re-describe the United States and its planetary embeddedness, in a way that finds touchstones in a series of cultural ecological events.

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These include the ways that massive Pacific, and Caribbean hurricanes cause inundations and remake fundamental US ecological narratives, the way nuclear testing in New Mexico borderlands and Marshall Islands border waters evokes interrelated testimonies and testimonials against the invisibility of desert and ocean island spaces. The way Japanese American artists, unconstitutionally imprisoned in Utah, in the Utah desert during World War II, engaged in beachcombing 10,000 years or even half a billion years after the fact, making sense of asymmetrical human ecology during World War II, by contemplating mollusk shells from an ice age lake, and fossils from the Cambrian ocean.

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It further addresses the way that albatrosses in the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, in feeding plastic bottle caps to their chicks, are actually curating evidence that the beverage industry has convinced humans that we are 60% Cola, rather than 60% water.

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So, *Border Waters*, was born out of my own experiences growing up in Hawaii, Indonesia and Tennessee, these are archipelagic and continental spaces that a settler colonial and imperial United States has claimed their bordered. This watery map of the United States may seem like common sense to those have lived in the border waters and the archipelagos, but for a majority of us citizens and US watchers throughout the world, a border waters map turns the country's geography and ecological relationship to itself upside down, and inside out.

Bethany Wiggin:

00:28:31

Thank you. Over to you Tori.

Tori Bush:

00:28:41

Thank you. Thank you so much for inviting me here today, I have long admired everyone on this panel's work, so it's an honor for me. Also thank you so much to the facilitators and organizers and for everyone who's listening. I wanted to start by sharing a photo of how I start most of my mornings, if you can see this really small image on the bottom right hand corner of my PowerPoint slide you'll see my two pups Max and Ada. We begin each morning, often around sunrise, although this is their decision more than mine, with a long walk along the Mississippi River.

00:29:24

I live very close to where the mouth of the Mississippi expands itself out into the depths of the Gulf of Mexico and watch its movements, each morning. Because of this, I'm ever aware of the fluctuations of the water around me, its ability to sustain my home, but also the possibility of destruction; water moves inside and around us constantly. Myself and my co-editor, Richard Goodman, who's a professor of creative nonfiction at the University of New Orleans, began to discuss how this last century has scraped, and marked our environment physically, but also in terms of language, how our thinking and imagining of the Gulf has changed.

00:30:02

When Katherine Cole, who was the first female journalist for the New Orleans Times Picayune, described her trip to the Last Islands through Oyster Bayou in 1888, she said it was "a winding uncertain oyster-reefed lane, where on either side are marshes of rotting porous Fiddler-eating crusts of half earth, half sand, sown thick with a rank coarse growth of see rushes. This decomposing richness is not the same language one would use if you visited today. If you visit Oyster Bayou, or even look at it on Google Maps, you can see an oil pipeline cutting through, and the winding waterways now widened due to the rising seas and land subsidence.

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The parameters of this anthology are marked by time, their works from about the last century by space, we focus on the Gulf South, specifically the coastal areas and its waterways. By genre, we include poetry, prose, nonfiction, scholarly works, graphic texts, and journalism, as well as an aim to present multiracial, multi-generational, and multi-species narratives. We began this anthology by reaching out to over 60 journalists, writers, scholars, scientists, and activists to see what books informed their understanding of their work. From there are Bibliography grew exponentially, and over quite an amount of time we eventually whittled it down to the 44 writers and artists that we've included in this book.

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A few things that I just want to mention that I feel are important parts or parameters of this book as well, is while this anthology is defined by human borders, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, are sort of focus, I really imagine this collection as being defined by the shared ecologies of this region, much more so than the social political boundaries. I also want to think about how settler colonial and plantation strategies have lingered in how we think and live with the ecologies of the Gulf South.

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Steve Lerner's *Diamond* is one of the texts in this anthology that points to how the petrochemical industry, which fuels our nation, is built literally on top of the plantation sites. I was also interested in seeing how different genres can enrich our vocabulary about climate change. What can poets offer, what language can they offer to journalists about this ongoing ecological change, but also vice versa. I think putting them in the same room together as has offered some surprising results at times.

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And then I also wanted to point to the long history of environmental activism. Marjorie Stoneman Douglass's *River of Grass*, Robert Bullard's *Dumping in Dixie*, and more recently Peggy Franklin's book *Women Pioneers of the Louisiana Environmental Movement*, are all sort of signposts to how I see a narrative that is not as well discussed, talking about how the environmental movement has deep roots in the south.

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Finally, I want to add that this is the first anthology of this region, and hopefully there will be many more. There are certainly many more approaches that should be taken. However, it does make sense that it comes out in this moment, because of the very unique material reality in which the Gulf South is existing. Our coastlines are disappearing, especially in Louisiana at a faster rate than anywhere in the nation. The first US Federal climate migrants are found here, as well as Alaska. And this is also home to a third of the oil and gas industry in the United States, which suggests how these industries both implicate themselves and our uncertain ecological, as well as energy futures. And thank you so much. Thanks Bethany.

Bethany Wiggin:

00:34:16

Thank you. Thank you, Tori thanks to all four of our presenters and authors today, I'm going to dive right into the questions, beginning with one authored by Melody. So, this is from Melody to you: My question to start is about what we might call waters, or oceans, in the particular, borrowing from anthropologist Tim Choy's discussion of ecologies in the particular. Sometimes it can be easy to think of the water abstractly, as a homogenous body with material properties, such as salinity, or depth. Yet in each of your works, there are moments that focus on phenomena specific to particular aquatic habitats. Coral spawning in Craig's poem "A Sonnet at the Edge of a Reef" or Tori's thinking about the confluence of ocean, delta, river in the Gulf South, Steve's discussion of getting to know place through swimming, and at a bit larger scale, Brian's articulation of archipelagic thought in relation to economic territoriality in the Pacific and Caribbean.

Could each of you reflect on how particular waters and the history of those waters have informed your work? Feel free to respond in any order there are four of you.

Brian Russell Roberts:

00:35:54

I'll go ahead and jump in. The water in particular, or sea in particular that influenced my work, probably the most would be the, I mean the figure of the archipelago, the geographical form of the archipelago. Oftentimes we think of the archipelago as made up, as being a series of islands, when we think of the archipelago, we think, okay, it's a series of islands. But one of the things that in archipelagic thinking, in archipelagic studies, scholars have reminded us of, is that the archipelago has a specific genealogy, and it's not simply the islands. It's an island ocean complex. Archipelago, it arose in, in Italian and it has kind of Greek borrowings, so the *archi* signifies "chief" and *pelago* signifies sea, so the archipelago was the "chief sea" referring to the Aegean Sea.

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And because the Aegean Sea had many islands, by transference, archipelago came to refer to a group of islands. As the, during the era of colonial modernity, as Europeans went throughout the world they would see other groups of islands and say oh, archipelago, archipelago, archipelago. And so, the archipelago trope, which is islands mostly, with this forgotten ocean component, has expanded throughout the world. But what you got in the mid-20th century was post-colonial states like the Philippines, like Indonesia, loudly reminding the West as they were negotiating the emergence of their own post-colonial archipelagic states, that archipelago includes water.

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And so, the way we use archipelago now internationally winds up having affixed to it, some land-ocean definitions that are inspired by Indonesian relations to water. For instance, Tanah Air, and Ednu Santara. And so, the water in the archipelago has been restored, post colonialized. I guess I would also say the focusing on this land-island-water complex of the archipelago helps to, to, and taking that as something in particular, helps to overturn hundreds of years of continental baggage that we have through people like Friederich Hegel, who told the entire history of the world through the continent. And then said "history cannot happen on a desert island." And so, when we tell stories about water and islands together, we're, we're rewriting the history of the world through a water in particular.

Bethany Wiggin:

Tori, Craig, Steve?

Tori Bush:

00:38:57

Yeah, I'll add on to that, because I sort of had some, had something very similar to say about sort of the, the narratives that we speak about waters often, sort of how it shapes that specificity, in terms of ecologies but also, as well as culturally and politically. So I think I lean on the writers in this anthology who, together, collaborate on making their own specific meaning of the Gulf South. They create this discursive meaning simply by being placed together, by being read together.

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But also I would point to the, when thinking about a regional space, I think there's, there has to be a spectrum of specificity to consider, right. Diane Wilson, who is one of the authors in the text, her Seadrift, Texas has its own distinct ecological and political crises, while Natasha Trethewey's Mississippi Gulf Coast sees in the aftermath of Katrina, the impact of denuding the mangrove forests and building man made white sand beaches and casinos.

00:40:02

So, there is a shared, shared ecological spaces of course, but within that, there is always a spectrum of that specificity. And then further, I think that there's also the specificity of a single place. I think about Eddie Harris, who's a black writer who kayaks down the entire Mississippi, and he saw very different things in those waters than Joy Harjo, who's in her poem, "New Orleans", which looks into the waters of the Mississippi. By all this, I guess what I mean is that specificity of place is a spectrum, which is sort of toggled by history, and narrative, and materiality, and, and subject position.

Bethany Wiggin:

00:40:54

Thank you.

Craig Santos Perez

00:40:55

I was just going to add a, you know my book was entirely written while I was living here in Hawaii, and so many of the poems are grounded in the waters here, as well as the larger Pacific, so I have poems about coral bleaching, The Great Pacific Garbage plastic patch, overfishing and the endangerment of marine life, toxic contamination by militarism, nuclearism, and other colonial forces, and of course sea level rise.

00:41:23

And so you know try to write about our local waters, but also thinking about water in the ocean as a metaphor for fluidity, and flow, and and connection, you know, so also trying to connect some of the water rights struggles here in the Pacific to other parts of North America and around the world. And so that's kind of how I try to write poems that are both place-based and planetary and connected through water.

Steve Mentz

00:41:55

Yeah, and I would just maybe chime in to support all of these comments, about the value of this sort of intense particularity in our relationships with individual bodies of water, and I'm thinking obviously of the body of water that I, you know, down the street from me and my local part of Long Island Sound, where the water is still right now too cold for me to go swimming in for another month or so.

00:42:24

But I also want to think a little bit about just about the relationship between that particular and the active abstraction, and maybe even stick up a little bit for abstraction as an intellectual process, a speculative process. That it seems to me, and maybe this is just my kind of two-strandedness obsession, that it's, it's sort of been toggling back and forth that I think I was saying, probably about local poems that are also global poems, that that, like, the deep dive into a particular also enables that kind of surfacing into abstraction, or maybe I've got the, you know, which one is surfacing and which one is diving backwards, but you know, that like it is moving back and forth between an act of particularism and an act of abstraction that I think it's like, that's the, like that's it seems to me the really fun and generative part of water studies or, you know, the kinds of creative and critical writing that I think many of us are thinking about and practicing here.

Bethany Wiggin:

00:43:21

Thanks for those really rich responses, and they really lead so nicely into our next broad question. This one is from me:

In your work variously, in Craig's poetry, or the object *Ocean*, or Brian's archipelagic history and thinking, and Tori's Gulf, waters seem to enable writerly agency, or abstraction, or planetarity. While we must always think waters in the plural, let's consider it just for a moment, elementally here, across its cultured particularity and layered histories, across the river, gulf, and ocean that is the Gulf South. For Craig, and Craig you already alluded to this, ocean water provides a medium for poesis and connection. And for Steve, it's an object for theory creation, and for Brian, it's a crucial correction to both ocean or continental nationalism, and for Tori and your co-editor and writers it's a gathering, a geo cultural formation. But I'm curious about moments in your work, where water might push back against writerly agency. Is water always a good collaborator? Can you share some experiences when water thwarts your intentions, resists flags or dare I say, liquidates your plans?

Just jump in and any order you like.

Steve Mentz

00:45:05

I'll jump in really quickly, just because this is the time of year when I feel most frustratingly alienated from the water around me, and probably because, you know, I, I'm a relatively warm-water swimmer and living in a cold water climate so I don't swim very much between say December and the end of April beginning of May, so I like, in this time period I feel like that particular kind of physical and intimate connection with the water which is so generated for me is like temporarily excluded from it. And you know, I know I could get wetsuits and stuff, but, but the way in which water is for is both alluring and frustrating seems to be part of the, part of the relationship, I'd say. So in that sense it is both frustrating and, I guess I would say tempting.

Craig Santos Perez:

00:46:09

I love this question of pushing, it seems like a poem waiting to happen. And there are definitely two moments in the "Chanting the Waters" poem I read where water itself seemed to flood in, and one was when I started thinking about hidden water, or embedded water, especially when I talk about how many gallons of water takes just to make a single piece of paper. And that was a moment where it felt like water had thwarted my intentions, and had come into to the poem to remind me that the page I'm writing on itself is composed of water as well.

00:46:47

There was a second moment when, when I started learning about how many children around the world are impacted by waterborne diseases, and somehow the, you know, the water came into to tell me that by the end of this poem this many children will have been impacted by, by these diseases. So those are just two moments where it felt, you know, it wasn't conscious intention, but it seemed the water itself coming in to kind of teach me these lessons.

Tori Bush:

00:47:21

Yeah. I had a very strong response to this question too, perhaps because I felt very divided about it. I feel very of two perspectives, one certainly like, thinking like narratologically. There's so many great texts in this book by so many great writers who employ water as sort of a character, clearly. One of the texts is by Jesamyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, there's a moment where her, her family from this book is stuck in the attic, as a hurricane is coming. And the waters are rising, and they're trying to find a way to escape. So she sort of personifies or, honestly, I think she animalizes the water. She writes, "there's a lake growing in the yard, it moves under the broken trees like a creeping animal, a wide-nosed snake, its head disappears under the house where we stand, its tail's wider and wider like it has eaten something greater than itself."

00:48:29

And I would say that, you know, Jesamyn Ward is a resident of the Mississippi coast and now Louisiana as well. She knows very intimately that water has its own agency. It moves, it changes things, it has power. In many ways, water is an excellent collaborator for writer because it offers so much non-human agency.

00:48:52

I also think of two photographers, Keith and Shondra McCormick, who are from New Orleans and in a sense collaborated with water when they came home to find their studio inundated, but went on to show those prints as completed works. Water was part collaborator, as well as part of the process of that art. However, my other reaction to that is a very somatic response, where I think it is also essential to acknowledge the collaboration of, with water is a dangerous and potentially fickle thing. I, you know, live in a place where there have been many lives lost to the water, and so that is a very real part of that response that I always try to keep in mind.

Brian Russell Roberts:

00:49:46

I live, I live in Utah Valley, which is just south of the Salt Lake Valley, the Salt Lake Valley is where the Great Salt Lake is. I live in an endorheic region, where water from the rivers does not make it to the seas. One of the interesting things that that's done for the region is, you know, 10,000 years ago, if you were here, my building--the building that I'm in currently--would be maybe 300 feet under the water. There was a massive fluvial lake, the lake Bonneville, that was here. And Lake Bonneville has been, I would say, in some ways a collaborator with me as I've written the book *Border Waters*. Lake Bonneville fostered the, the mollusk shells that then were used by Japanese American prisoners in the Utah desert to make jewelry. And, in collaboration with the Japanese American prisoners, in collaboration with the mollusk shells, in collaboration with Lake Bonneville, I wrote a chapter on the art that emerged from the Topaz internment camp. And so, I've looked to water as a collaborator, it's also been disruptor.

00:51:13

And that same the same Bonneville basin has been a disrupter for me. Where the fifth chapter of my book starts out taking the Spiral Jetty by Robert Smithson, which extends out into the Great Salt Lake, one of the preeminent pieces of land art during the efflorescence, during the 1960s and 70s. And I wanted to go to see the Spiral Jetty and see what it was like, to see this jetty which is normally straight. I mean, normally a jetty would be straight, right but then you, you go and look at a Spiral Jetty spiraling out into the water. But the basin didn't cooperate with me in my intention to see a jetty spiraling into the water. Instead the water was low, as the Salt Lake fluctuates and so it may have been three feet

below, I mean the jetty was three feet above water level. And so, I needed a hike an additional 200 yards to get out to the water, it didn't give me the picture of the Spiral Jetty that I was hoping for, but kind of the difficultness of interacting with water, and the unpredictability is something that I've tried to collaborate, even as water doesn't want to collaborate with me, I tried to take that and learn from water

Bethany Wiggin:

00:52:34

All really rich answers, thank you all. There are some questions now coming in on the chat I thought in the interest of time, that we would open the questions now to the audience.

Gary Reger had posed a really interesting question about deep time and sort of prehistoric waters, that Brian I think you have touched on in the answer you just offered. And the question posed by Primrose also bears on timescales and temporality. Prim, would you unmute yourself please?

Primrose Primrose:

00:53:10

Thank you so much for the wonderful talks. I was just wondering like if the speakers can elaborate more on how their conceptualizations of water, in relation to a mediation of temporalities in the text that they examine, especially in our globalist conjuncture, that tends to emphasize on the kind of ideology of presentism, and also given what is mythical connotations or associations with ideas of infinitude, and inexhaustability. Thank you very much.

Bethany Wiggin:

00:53:45

Thanks for that question. Who would like to respond?

Steve Mentz:

00:53:55

I can jump in quickly and just to say I mean, thank you for that's a really wonderful and rich, rich question. I think that the tradition which holds the ocean to the outside of history and outside of time is one of the things that the sort of current moment in ocean scholarship, ocean history, ocean writing, is like, that's one of the things we're, I think collectively, or at least maybe I could speak for myself, I think it's something that we need to fix.

00:54:25

I think that there are, you know, feelings of something that much larger than ourselves, are important to the human relationship with the ocean. But the ocean is a historical entity, it is bounded by time, it changes by time, it changes from human and nonhuman influences, and I think it's really important to do, in some sense, rescue the ocean from this sense of timelessness. I actually think it gets more interesting when we put it back into history.

Brian Russell Roberts:

00:54:58.000

Thanks, Steve, I really like that answer. One of the things that it made me reflect on--and thank you also Prim for your question, which I really enjoy thinking about--it makes me think about the fractal mathematics of Benoit Mandelbrot, which Edouard Glissant took up also. Mandelbrot, you may know, is I mean, is famous for having a scene in which he says, "How do you measure the coast of an island?" You start off with a human walking along the coast, but then you need to get into smaller sub peninsulas

sub sub base, sub sub peninsula, sub sub base. And so you might harness an ant he says, and then you might harness, or you might harness a mouse and you might harness an ant, and the human, the mouse the ant each have a different length between their footsteps. As you keep shortening the length, Mandelbrot says, you get to an infinite coastline, as the, as the length of measurement decreases the length of the coastline increases with no bound.

00:56:06

And it's an interesting moment, because it touches on that infinity that you're talking about, how the ocean collaborates with Edouard Glissant, with Mandelbrot, in thinking through infinity, but it's not an infinity of the unbounded, like traditional ocean thought is, where you've got this ocean is vast, ocean is vast, it's inexhaustible. This is an infinity of the bounded, an infinity that is exhaustible on human scales, even as it's inexhaustible on other scales that we're not even aware of. I think this works for space, fractal space, as the ocean instructs us on fractal space. I think the ocean also instructs us on fractal temporality as we watch nested times, become nested in each other.

00:57:08

I mean, one of the things that I've thought about with the Bonneville Lake, that's here is the idea of the foreshore, and traditionally you think of the foreshore is between the high and the low tide, but if you could abstract that it could be between any two water levels. And so the, the metaphorical tide might be 10,000 years, it might be between two waves and 20 seconds. And so I think that fractal mathematics and the way the ocean collaborates with us in that realm is a useful way for thinking about some of the things that you were asking about Prim.

Tori Bush:

00:57:47

That's fascinating. I think one of the, sort of like inheritances of thinking about a place regionally is oftentimes there's always a question of scaling, scaling, whether it's very specific issues or like scaling to like planetary size questions, and so I guess one of the things that I take with me in terms of the conceptualization of waters. I see it fundamentally as like a question of scales from thinking about like the sedimentation, that arrives, through the Mississippi Delta, to create than some of the newest lands, to sort of like the, the depths of the Gulf, which seemed to hold different times. And I guess that's sort of akin to what Brian was saying, I think, thinking about it, not in terms of linear times, but how that there's certain, there's different spaces of time within this ecology. I guess it's how I've been thinking about it. Thank you for that question.

Craig Santos Perez:

00:58:54

I'll just add quickly that the last poem in my book is called "Praise Song for Oceania." And the last lines of that poem go: "praise our transoceanic, past, present, future, flowing through our blood."

And so it's just, I think you know, that those lines for me kind of encapsulate how water in the ocean, you know, can flow throughout history present and the future and bring those senses together through our own bodies.

Bethany Wiggin:

00:59:28

Inevitably, we're coming short on time and just as questions are really starting to percolate through. I would like to hear the speakers respond to the question posed by Tina Gerhardt in the chat,

asking, or really commanding you, if you would please comment on the lessons of the past for navigating present sea level rise, and future sea level rise.

Tori Bush:

01:00:10

This is something I feel like I deal with, and I live with a lot. I think there's a lot of responses to this question. One thing that I think I'm in good company here in this room, is that I do think that language, creates new space, new ways, new ways of living, and so I do fundamentally believe that like by thinking and making and creating art, we will continue to evolve ways of living with water. I also think there's just fundamental like living with water policies that can be put in place, with really recognizing the fact that like humans are not the center of an ecology, that we have to think as a network, and how water informs and move through that network.

01:01:02

Concrete needs to be totally rethought, at least, at least in New Orleans living here, where people are just pulling up concrete because they've realized that's what maintains the water and floods ground, and makes it dangerous. So gardens, more soil, more, you know, decomposing things. So I think all of these are part of that answer.

Brian Russell Roberts:

01:01:30

Thanks for this question. One of the things that it makes me think about is the closing section of Zora Neale Hurston famous novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* which, of course, a hurricane shows up. And the levee on Lake Okeechobee collapses and floods Palm Beach County, and it transforms this continental space into a set of island spaces that Janie and TK are alternately wading and swimming through. You go back and read that final section, I think there's a lot of wisdom that Hurston packed into it, that, that we can then take and use us as templates, as a template for how to think about sea level rise.

01:02:27

We've got indigenous characters, how are they given attention in that novel? We've got black folk. We've got white folk, what are the different power asymmetrical roles that they're playing? We've got animals that show up. How are humans interacting with these animals and how are the different demographics of humans interacting with these animals? Hurston's novel ends in kind of ambiguous tragedy and yet ambiguous liberation.

01:02:46

And one of the things that I like most about the end of Hurston's novel is it ends with a I guess what you would say a non-monological version of love, and Janie says "love is like the sea. It's a moving thing, but it's different with every shore it meets". And I think that that novel, and especially the end is it offers a template for the types of love and concern and care that we need to offer to fellow humans, to the environment, to animals, to plants, to indigenous elders.

Bethany Wiggin:

01:03:35

Thank you, Brian. Steve or Craig, would you like to respond.

Steve Mentz:

01:03:42

I'll drop in real quick, I know that we're, we're tight on time. I mean I love the question, and I think it's the, it's like the fundamental reason why I'm drawn to this work is to think about what happens as the ocean, it becomes increasingly intimate with our lives and our cities and our houses and our air. You know, all the, in the places in which we live.

01:04:08

One of the things that I like to give, just a little tiny nugget out of my book, I talk about the difference in literary history, between a literary history, focused on the great hero Achilles, and a literary history focused on Odysseus. That the one is a, is a tragic warrior who fights against his environment and his enemies, and the other is a wily mariner who, you know, invents tools and trickery, and I think about the difference between a world based on Achilles values and one based on Odysseus values.

01:04:44

It's not that this is, like Odysseus has problems too. But I think that there are habits of thought and cultural creation that are amenable to maritime circumstances that are not always the ones that that the existing tradition that we inherit, you know, based in some sense, I think of Brian's work, Brian's work shows so clearly, on the sort of continental terrestrial Imperial models. I think we just need different models. And I actually think we have them, we just have to sort of de-earth and, if you will, and focus on the, on the water inheritance.

Craig Santos Perez:

01:05:22

I'll just add quickly that, you know, in the Pacific for the past 50 years our wayfinding and seafaring traditions are being revitalized. And so much of Pacific navigation involves reading the stars, or the ocean currents and other natural phenomena, in order to safely navigate archipelago spaces. And so I feel like, you know, being attuned to the earth, and to its changing signs, and being able to, you know, develop our environmental and marine literacy, these will help us navigate the changing climate and the precarious days that we face ahead.

01:06:01

Thank you.