



MARITIME LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Hydrocriticism and Colonialism in Latin America

Water Marks

Edited by Mabel Moraña



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Maritime Literature and Culture

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Mabel Moraña
Editor

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Texts, Textures, and Water Marks

Mabel Moraña

*Today the mythical Mediterranean is brutally vernacularized in the
fraught journeys of anonymous men, women, and children migrating
across its waters: Caliban returns as an illegal immigrant, and
Prospero's island, midway between Naples and Tunis in the sixteenth-
century drama, becomes modern-day Lampedusa.*

—Iain Chambers

I

This book engages with *hydrocriticism* as a critical and theoretical approach that focuses on social realities and forms of domination in which bodies of water play a fundamental role, as the medium for reaching and controlling people, lands, and/or natural resources. As environmental variables, bodies of water generate specific strategies for the exercise of power and resistance, and for the sustainability of life. Concurrently, collective imaginaries

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integrate in multiple ways liquid and territorial spaces and develop creative ways to articulate these domains both in material and symbolic manners.

As indicated by Isabel Hofmeyr in *Dockside Reading, Hydrocolonialism and the Custom House* (2022):

[*hydrocolonialism*] could include colonization by way of water (various forms of maritime imperialism), colonization of water (occupation of land with water resources, the declaration of territorial waters, the militarization and geopoliticization of oceans), a colony on (or in) water (the ship as a miniature colony or a penal island), colonization through water (flooding of occupied land) and colonization of the idea of water (establishing water as a secular resource). (16)

As this introduction and the following chapters will show, this perspective is particularly relevant for the study of territorial conquests in Early Modern times, and the correlative creation of Luso-Spanish empires in the so-called New World. At the same time, *hydrocritical* perspectives illuminate on aspects related to the development of colonial life; the management of water resources; the technology developed in dealing with irrigation, droughts and flooding; the uses of rivers as natural borders to delimitate territorial possessions, to transport merchandise, travelers, and missionaries, to evade enemies, to express transcendental conceptions, to develop an understanding of nature, and to relate with the world of the dead.¹ As Hofmeyr indicates, the clear separation of land and water only exists in the imagination. Both domains sustain and constitute each other, environmentally as well as socially, politically, and economically to the point of becoming an amphibious, unified totality, in societies determined by their dependency and interactions with maritime space.²

Obviously, the understanding of bodies of water and their material and symbolic significance has changed over the years in close correlation to the advancement of scientific knowledge but also linked to cultural interpretations, religious beliefs, and ways of life that integrated the connection of peoples and seas in different manners and degrees.³ Lindsay Starkey's book *Encountering Water in Early Modern Europe and Beyond: Redefining the Universe through Natural Philosophy, Religious Reformations, and Sea Voyaging* (2020) provides an extensive analysis of the environmental connections between land and the oceans, and their representation in the Bible, among the Greeks and in the Renaissance.

Expansionism, explorations, and the development of mercantilism characterized a world in which previous figurations of time and space radically changed. Particularly after the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, human mobility increased and diversified, covering unseen trajectories on land and sea. Ports and coastal areas intensified their relevance and magnetism as much for merchants and scientific travelers as for religious and political officials. Concurrently, foreign fleets, pirates, smugglers, and buccaneers populated oceanic waters, adding a dose of danger and uncertainty to the natural risks of nautical endeavors.

Many narratives of maritime encounters have been produced in connection to the Spanish and Luso-Brazilian colonies, as analyzed by Nina Gerassi-Navarro and other authors, intrigued by the representation of new characters determined by the peculiarities of a liquid and mysterious environment that invited the emergence of unseen behaviors and intensified emotions. The sea was re-discovered numerous times, from very different perspectives, depending on the provenance of the protagonists, the goals of their actions and the magnitude of their entourage. To give just one example, these elements multiplied the image and significance of the Atlantic Ocean, identified in turn as the Black Atlantic, the Jewish Atlantic, the Catholic Atlantic, the British Atlantic, the Atlantic of the slaves, the missionaries, and the entrepreneurs. Also, the vision of the sea would change according to the positionality of the subject. The images of the castaway and the stowaway constituted for centuries allegorical representations of human beings abandoned by divine and natural forces to the turbulence of life and destiny.⁴

For the New World, crucial historical developments such as those of conquest, colonization, Christianization, enslavement, monopolist mercantilism, Westernization and, later on, modernization, nationalism, republicanism, and so on, would be unthinkable without the comprehension of colonialism and the role of transatlantic ventures, transpacific migrations, and inter-Caribbean fluxes of human beings, ideas, and commodities.⁵ This highly politicized dynamics considerably enriches, in my opinion, the critical space opened by *hydrocriticism*, by adding to the ontological reading of bodies of water, the elements of economic interest and profit that were key for colonialist endeavors and also crucial for the early emergence of peripheral capitalism. At the same time, both the colonial(ist) and the imperial(ist) perspectives illuminate on the differential significance of water in a variety of geo-cultural and political contexts, where strategic locations, modes of domination, and forms of resistance

shape environmental connections and collective subjectivities. Of course, in the context of the world wars, the oceans will become battlefields, and their significance change depending on the political standpoint of the observer.⁶

In postcolonial times, the conceptual appropriation of the ocean is, then, inseparable from the notions of domination, submission, enslavement, territorial devastation, and genocide. For this reason, the ocean has always been approached with ambiguity and caution, thus becoming the source of anxiety and the inspiration of fantastic figurations. Hofmeyr observes that in a postcolonial context:

[I]and is favored both as an automatic platform of knowledge and as a locus of the colonial and anticolonial nation. The ocean, by contrast, has been forgotten, first by the emerging settler colonial nation attempting to erase its origins and then by anticolonial nationalism turning its back on the ocean as a source of imperialism. In a postnational age, the rich and creolized meanings of the ocean, both precolonially and colonially, are starting to be more systematically explored. (*Dockside Reading*19)

However, in specific geo-cultural contexts, such as the Caribbean, the relevance and omnipresence of the seas is so notorious that maritime reality is an essential element for the understanding of both the history of the region and the configuration of collective imaginaries. Together with the conceptualization of oceanic surroundings, notions associated to archipelagic formations and islandic interconnections have been continuously analyzed by historians and cultural critics. In his classic book *The Repeating Island. The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (1996, published originally in Spanish in 1989) Antonio Benítez-Rojo emphasizes the variegated nature of the region: “its fragmentation, its instability; its reciprocal isolation; its uprootedness; its cultural heterogeneity; its lack of historiography and historical continuity; its contingency and impermanence; its syncretism” (1). For him,

the Antilles are an island bridge connecting, in “another way”, North and South America. This geographical accident gives the entire area, including its continental foci, the character of an archipelago, that is, a discontinuous conjunction (the question of what?) unstable condensations, turbulences, whirlpools, clumps of bubbles, frayed seaweed, sunken galleons, crashing breakers, flying fish, seagull squawks, downpours, nighttime phosphorescence, eddies and pools, uncertain voyages of signification; in short, a field of observation quite in tune with the objectives of Chaos. (2)

Ontological dimensions become interpretive strategies, perceptions give way to ambiguous impressions, and natural and cultural elements constitute new realities, or new dreams of the real. Fragmentation incorporates the fluidity of meanings into the processes of knowledge acquisition, as if the liquid condition of the Caribbean region had been interiorized in its history and its temperament (2). Benítez-Rojo defines his literary and cultural critique (which spans from Christopher Columbus and Bartolomé de Las Casas, to Nicolás Guillén, Fernando Ortiz, and Alejo Carpentier) as an incursion into Chaos. The author attempts to find “passages into the labyrinth,” “processes, dynamics and rhythms that show themselves within the marginal, the regional, the incoherent, the heterogeneous, or, if you like, the unpredictable, that coexists with us in our everyday world.” According to the critic, the emphasis on *repetition* incorporates, in the discourse of Chaos, the idea of a constant insertion of *difference*, “a step toward nothingness” (3).

Other critics have developed studies on the Caribbean that establish a productive dialogue with Benítez-Rojo’s book, expanding their scope to other areas of contemporary culture in which migration plays a fundamental role.

Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel has significantly contributed to new interpretations of the region. Her book *Coloniality of Diasporas. Rethinking Intra-Colonial Migrations in a Pan-Caribbean Context* (2014) analyzes inter-islandic migrations and other forms of human displacement that take place across “fragmented borders.” For centuries, these ventures have been registered in multiple testimonial and fictional narratives where the sea seems to be the main character and, at the same time, the inescapably complex and deep scenario of human mobilizations. As mentioned by Paul Gilroy, the sea promotes the development of a *double consciousness* of belonging and foreignness, identity and alterity that chronicles and fictional texts represent through a number of aesthetic strategies.

In a more recent collection of studies, Martínez-San Miguel and Michelle Stephens have explored *Contemporary Archipelagic Thinking* (2020), where the notion of archipelago expands as a productive metaphor of disciplinary formations illustrated by the image of apparently self-contained critical and theoretical approaches that, like the Antilles, are “isolated above but connected below.”⁷

Iván de la Nuez in *La balsa perpetua. Soledad y conexiones de la cultura cubana* (1998) [*The Perpetual Boat. Loneliness and Connections in Cuban Culture*] refers to the constant flux of migrants that followed the

implementation of the American blockade on Cuba, and that also resulted from internal social conditions such as repression of non-traditional sexualities and the like, which motivated the *sexile*.

In these heavy-traffic routes between the islands and continental lands, the threats and the promises of Caribbean waters produced a complex imagery, where history and imagination interweave. Time and again, the Caribbean is the scenario of necropolitical strategies and also a repository of strategies for survival through real and/or imaginary trips.

II

Mysterious and unpredictable, endowed at the same time with colossal material—aqueous—force and immense symbolic strength, oceanic bodies of water communicate the notions of monstrosity and sublimity, confronting humanity with the fragility of life, the incontrollable passage of time, and the futility of earthly matters. The liquid extensions of oceans and seas not only establish their own temporal and spatial dimensions but also determine the conditions of life in the surrounding territorial regions. Harbors, littoral zones, coastlines, riverbanks, seafronts, and beaches, as well as intermediate formations such as archipelagoes, islands, isthmuses, and peninsulas, are characterized by hybrid features and indeterminate borders, and owe to water at least half of their properties. Bodies of water define lifestyles (forms of settlement, physical displacements, commercial and cultural exchanges) as much as attitudes, preferences, and activities. They also generate particular genres of writing such as chronicles, diaries, logbooks, charts of navigation, maritime cartographies, and the like.

Shores give new meaning to the notion of limit because they signal the end and the beginning of complementary life spaces that expose, each in its own right, the diversity and richness of nature. Ports and coastal areas function as open doors for intercultural and cosmopolitan relations and are, at the same time, thresholds violently trespassed by imperial enterprises. Foreign intruders, invaders, colonizers, and plunderers of natural resources are the transgressors that both in land and water dismiss the notion of limit and redefine the concept of frontier. The actors on display in oceanic scenarios are uniquely linked to the liquidity of time/space coordinates: fishermen, sailors, passengers, buccaneers, stowaways, corsairs, pirates, castaways, smugglers, and marine merchants are transitory presences that intersect the permanent instability of seascapes.⁸ Many of them have archaic resonances today; others still traverse, one way or another, the oceanic spaces of globalization.

As the scholars of maritime and oceanic studies recognize, seas and oceans are more than mere metaphors to express grandiosity, fate, and passion, or to make reference to the notions of transcendence and eternal mobility. While oceanic spaces are, to a great extent, cultural constructs, we are directly confronted with their concrete existence and ontological dimension. Oceanic reality mobilizes forms of cognition and feeling that differ from those usually applied to territorial experiences. At the same time, the study of oceanic and maritime dynamics relates to a great variety of disciplinary domains, whose methods and agendas overlap: ecological studies, oceanography, scientific explorations of oceanic life, maritime borderization, and so on. In addition, connections are being made between Atlantic and (trans) Pacific histories, without reducing the importance of these oceanic immensities to the relations between these two bodies of water. Rather, current studies emphasize the disparities that characterize them in terms of scale, demography, indigenous populations, commercial development, and other processes such as the militarization and nuclearization of the Pacific and the impact of climate change (Poppenhagen and Temmen 150).⁹

The knowledge of oceans' elusive materiality requires an understanding of their particular epistemology. The oceanic *mode* of being is captured by categories that, most of the time, would not apply to territorial occurrences. A myriad of actions, relations, and affective responses are only possible in the specific space of incessant movement, liquid immensity, and loneliness. However, the nature and qualities of the sea are often approached with territorial concepts that cannot grasp the singularity of maritime domains. According to Laura Winkiel, "the maritime turn, asks us to consider the textualization of the waters—the submerged histories, aesthetics, and ontologies of 'heavy waters' (DeLoughrey)—along with the altered temporal and spatial scales, geographies, and agencies of the nonhuman seas, and to imagine new ways of connecting the two" ("Hydro-criticism").

What Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters suggestively called "wet ontologies" has both cognitive and methodological implications. Firstly, this notion allows to recognize the singularity of *liquid* perspectives and to theorize change and mobility as permanent qualities of living creatures and nature's intricate constituents.¹⁰ Secondly, and, in my opinion, more importantly, the concept supports the attempts "to destabilize the static, bordered, and linear framings that typify human geographical studies of place, territory, and time" ("Wet ontologies" 247). The critics emphasize