## Special Issue Editorial

# Rethinking Literature and Culture through a Maritime Lens: the Coriolis Effect, Oceanic Gyres, and the Black Atlantic

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In this, the second issue of *Coriolis: Interdisciplinary Journal of Maritime Studies,* we present two articles in the Literature, Art, and Music section (the other two sections are Maritime History and Marine Environmental History). These interdisciplinary offerings reflect the editors' conviction that maritime studies should not be constrained by traditional academic boundaries and that the global ocean offers a metaphor for just this kind of intellectual holism. It is perhaps inevitable, then, that we would compare the scholarship presented here with the physical forces of the global ocean itself, that vast body of salt water which both separates and connects the continents, islands, and peoples of this planet. As John Hattendorf wrote in his introductory note to the first issue of this journal, "One would hope that the explicit focus . . . on the historical flow of maritime affairs around the globe can create its own Coriolis Effect for future historical studies by helping to broaden the scholarly perspective on marine affairs" and "promote . . . innovative and comparative approaches." The editors are inspired by the Coriolis effect to promote scholarship that both disperses and collects different academic ingredients, disseminating new forms and ideas while also pulling them towards a common center: the maritime world.

The Coriolis Effect, first systematically described by the French physicist Gaspard-Gustave Coriole in 1835, refers to the physical forces that determine the flow patterns of those fluid media, air and salt water, that cover the surface of the Earth. As the planet spins to the east, inertia causes the ocean and atmosphere to exert a westward force as gravity draws both fluid media towards the equator. This dynamic creates circulatory patterns of air and water known as the oceanic gyres. The major North Atlantic currents, the Canary Current, Antilles Current, and the Gulf Stream, conform to this pattern, as do the prevailing winds (southwesterlies in the Western Atlantic, Northeast Trades in the Caribbean). The North Atlantic and North Pacific Subtropical Gyres transport immense quantities of seawater, marine life, shipping, and—as is increasingly apparent—human debris (particularly plastics) in great spirals between the continents. In the high latitudes of both oceans the sub-polar gyres move opposite to the sub-tropical ones, while in the Indian Ocean the seasonal monsoons predominate over the gyres, particularly towards the north. The Coriolis Effect, then, lies behind an immensely complex oceanographic system with far-reaching implications for the study of human history.

The piecemeal mastery of the oceanic gyres by early modern Europeans constitutes one of history's great navigational achievements. Italian, Catalan, and Portuguese mariners left the confines of the Mediterranean (which has no gyre) with increasing frequency beginning the fourteenth century. Over the course of the fifteenth century Portuguese *marinheiros* gradually worked their way around the African coast by trial and error (at immense human cost), learning to keep winds and currents behind them whenever possible. The voyages of Diaz and Da Gama were contingent on a conceptual

mastery of the effects of the oceanic gyres, for the barrier of southern Africa would have remained insurmountable if these navigators had not realized the importance of finding the westerlies that blew in the higher latitudes. In order to make the voyage home without fighting the winds and currents that wafted them away from Europe the *marinheiros* developed the *Volta do Mar*, the "turn to sea." The *Volta* entailed a counter-intuitive dog leg out to sea in search of fair winds (and sometimes currents), for the optimal cruise track home paradoxically necessitated a turn in the wrong direction. In the North Atlantic, when returning home from the Canaries, Madeiras, or Azores, the navigator would turn north*west* (not northeast) to pick up the westerlies that would push his vessel towards home.[1] In the counter-clockwise gyre of the South Atlantic the situation is reversed: in order to reach the Cape of *Bona Speranza* the navigator leaving the Cape Verdes astern would sail south*west* (not south by east, which would be much more direct) in search of the optimal winds for rounding the southern tip of Africa.

The social, economic, cultural, and environmental history of modernity owes more to the global ocean and its physical forces than scholars have tended to acknowledge. Mastery of the oceanic gyres was a condition of possibility for the development of the imperial infrastructure of "the modern world-system," to use Immanuel Wallerstein's phrase, a historical transformation that, in the context of the oceanic gyres, was part and parcel with the displacement and destruction of countless indigenous peoples around the Atlantic rim. The transformation of maritime space (particularly coasts and harbors) was accompanied by a more subtle transformation of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, which historians following Alfred Crosby have termed "ecological imperialism."[2] The centuries-long European domination over deep-sea navigation caused the massive dispersion of peoples, and the biota that accompanied them, around the Atlantic rim.

The hot zones of modern imperialism, economic, political, and ecological, were ports and coastlines. Indeed, Mary Louise Pratt has theorized the development of a "contact zone" in coastal regions, characterized by the emergence of new systems of trade as well as new forms of identity determined by what she calls "transculturation"—cultural and linguistic hybridity.[3] In addition to being the nodal points of global trade, the contact zone was a place of intercultural ferment that produced historically new forms of expression (such as sea chanteys—but that is a topic for another day). The maritime contact zone also produced new identities. Cultural theorist Paul Gilroy has traced the history of "the Black Atlantic," a phrase he uses to describe the formation of an Atlantic rim black diaspora, originating in West Africa and eventually spreading from Portugal to the Cape Verdes, Liberia to Brazil, Surinam to Cuba, Florida, the rest of the Caribbean, not to mention the eastern seaboard of North America and to some extent the Canadian maritimes.[4]

The Anglophone literature of the sea obliquely documents the formation of the black Atlantic, yet only in recent decades has literary scholarship become sufficiently

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[1] See Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: the Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), especially pp. 105-131. See also JH Parry, *The Discovery of the Sea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).
[2] Crosby, ibid.
[3] *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 2nd edition 2007).
[4] *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993).

innovative and comparative (as Hattendorf describes the scholarly “Coriolis Effect” espoused by this journal) to demonstrate the degree to which this is so. William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, for example, contains a famous depiction of the master-slave dynamic, in the characters Prospero and Caliban, which has inspired Caribbean writers such as Cesaire and Glissant to identify with Caliban in literary appropriations of their own. This play, then, contains a complex encoding of the historical dynamics of the transformation of the Atlantic rim. Similarly, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” the best-known poem of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, contains passages informed by eighteenth-century descriptions of slave-ships. If Britannia ruled the waves in the late eighteenth century, her dominion was also deeply implicated in the slave trade. Other great works of literature in English, including Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, attest to the cultural hybridity of maritime life. The *Pequod* is populated by mariners from nearly all coasts of the world, contains an African harpooner, an African-American cook, and a black ship’s boy who can be read as the conscience of the narrative. The Black Atlantic thus constitutes the historical unconscious of the novel. More recently, literary masterworks that comment on this diasporic maritime history include Peter Matthiessen’s novel *Far Tortuga*, which tells the story of a Cayman-islands turtle-fishing schooner, and Derek Walcott’s epic of Afro-Caribbean identity, *Omeros*, among others.

The oceanic gyres offer a ready metaphor for the articles contained in this issue. The two articles presented here offer new readings of two highly canonical works of literature in English, “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and *Moby-Dick*, in unusually interdisciplinary ways. Both articles integrate discussions of literary and visual art, and both make connections between disparate literary historical texts. Colin Dewey’s article, “*Annus Mirabilis* to The Ancient Mariner: Oceanic Environments and the Romantic Literary Imagination,” situates literary works by Dryden and Coleridge—poets who book-end a period often referred to by literature scholars as “the long eighteenth century”—in the context of Britain’s maritime imperial project, a project deeply imbricated in the slave trade. What Dewey terms “a densely problematic national engagement with the sea” haunts the “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and reaches a crescendo in the art of the Romantic period. Incorporating discussions of poetry, marine art, maritime history, and popular culture, Dewey argues for the prevalence of significance of a vexed racial and aesthetic history in the early modern and Romantic discourse of Empire. In the second article presented here, Evander Price’s “Foreshadowing Disaster: A Coming Storm,” nineteenth-century landscape art, political history, and poetry, and drama converge at the site of Herman Melville’s poetic response to a painting by Sanford Gifford (*A Coming Storm*), which Price calls “a prophetic painting,” arguing, “Melville saw that Gifford created in a landscape unspeakable darkness that Shakespeare found in Hamlet, and the unimaginable tragedy that was America’s loss of Lincoln.” The inter-art synergy within each article is apparent; the topical synergies between them are equally striking.

Together the two essays cover a great deal of the history and cultural geography of the North Atlantic, exemplifying the intellectual vitality of a scholarly Coriolis Effect. Their scope is decidedly maritime and remarkably interdisciplinary. Our goal is to continue gathering and disseminating such interdisciplinary studies in a widening gyre of oceanic scholarship. As we turn to the sea we rediscover that which we thought we already knew.