

# The Poetics of Water in a World in Crisis

Valerie Tosi

Università di Pisa, Italia

**Review of** Monaco, A. (2025). *Water Stories in the Anthropocene. Anglophone Climate-Change Fiction*. London; New York: Routledge, 191 pp.

In recent years, the role of water and aquatic environments in cultural discourse on climate change and the Anthropocene has gained such prominence that a distinct transdisciplinary field of studies has emerged under various labels ranging from ‘Blue Cultural Studies’ to ‘Blue Humanities’, ‘Aquatic Humanities’, ‘Hydrohumanities’, ‘Hydro-Criticism’, and ‘Blue Ecocriticism’. Blue Humanities scholars like Steve Mentz, Serpil Oppermann, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and Astrida Neimanis have argued for both the material and symbolic centrality of water, highlighting not only its ecological value, but also its social, cultural, and political implications and meanings.

Placing itself within this broad critical debate, Angelo Monaco’s *Water Stories in the Anthropocene. Anglophone Climate-Change Fiction* discusses contemporary narratives in English that foreground water not merely as a hydrological resource or a fictional backdrop, but as a material and symbolic element bringing into play local and global politics, scientific knowledge, ethics, cultural heritage, identity formation and sense of belonging in an era of climate crisis.

The book’s first chapter, “Water Scarcity and Drought”, addresses a relatively under-explored issue within the thematic realm of the Blue Humanities, which has mainly focused on excess water phenomena such as sea level rise, floodings, and tsunamis. In his discussion of Karen Jayes’s *For the Mercy of Water* (2012), Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Water Knife* (2015) and Cynan Jones’s *Stillicide*



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(2019), Monaco highlights how the three novels thematise the social, economic, and political causes and implications of water scarcity in different parts of the world, unveiling the relationship between water shortage and “processes of hydrocolonialism, capital accumulation and technological advancement” (28). Monaco combines different theoretical perspectives to illustrate the complex entanglements of climate change, (neo)coloniality, resource inequality, and gender issues in the case studies examined in this section. He uses the paradigm of intersectionality and Stacey Alaimo’s concept of transcorporeality to explore Jayes’s representation of the interconnectedness of human bodies and landscapes in a wasteland afflicted by drought, neocolonial violence, and gendered oppression. Furthermore, he draws on Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen-Walker’s notion of *weathering*, and Irene J. Klaver’s idea of water as a relational entity, to investigate *The Water Knife*, a novel that deals with ecological collapse, climate migration, and power inequality. Discussing the ethical and sociopolitical meanings of arcologies, an emblem of the ideology of “technosalvation” (Gifford 2011, 293), Monaco points out how Bagicalupi’s work “blur[s] the border between utopia and dystopia” (Monaco 2025, 46). His analysis of *Stillicide* focuses on Jones’s use of rhythm, onomatopoeias, repetitions, assonances, personifications and polysemy to create transcorporeal sensory patterns and express “a fusion of the human and the nonhuman” (51).

The second chapter, “Flooding and Deluge” revolves around Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019), and Sarah Moss’s *Summerwater* (2020), identifying the theme of vulnerability as a common thread in the three novels. In his reading of *The Hungry Tide*, informed by Sten Pultz Moslund’s notion of *landguage*, Monaco underlines how Ghosh uses language to evoke the changeable qualities of places shaped by the alternation of ebb and flow, and to represent cultural encounters resulting in hybrid and fluid identities. *Gun Island*, a novel that dramatizes climate migration and uncanny environmental disruptions, is interpreted as an example of Ghosh’s representation of the planetary and multi-species scale of flooding phenomena. In his investigation of *Summerwater*, which is based on Jane Bennet’s view of the natural world as *vibrant matter*, Monaco discusses the relationship between the human and the geological time scales, and the polyphonic coexistence of human and animal voices in a microcosm eroded by incessant rain.

In the third chapter, Monaco reads fictional wetlands as hybrid and unstable landscapes disrupting binaries like life/death and nature/culture, and interprets them as ideal metaphors for geological transformations, palimpsestic historiographies, traumatic memories, and fluid subjectivities. Exploring Graham Swift’s *Waterland* (1983) through a psycho-geographical lens and using Karen Barad’s notion of *intra-action*, he highlights “the association between wetlands and

melancholia" (105), and the influence of water on the "human capacity to narrate stories" (107). In his reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2013), he focuses on the themes of diaspora, loss, displacement and trauma – both environmental and personal, linking the water cycle of the marshy lowland to fluctuating identities, grief, and recovery. Discussing Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013), Monaco deals with postcolonial trauma, slow violence, Aboriginal cosmologies and Indigenous futurism; drawing on Barad's relational ontology, he explains how the polluted swamp depicted in the novel is not only a place marked by historical violence and ecological vulnerability, but also a site of "biocultural values" (120) that supports life, collective memory and intra-species connections.

Chapter 4 explores seas and oceans as relational and storied spaces. In this section, Monaco examines three novels in which seas are portrayed as metamorphic living beings that, like human beings, undergo ecological transformation and trauma. His axiological perspective seems to align with Oppermann's idea of a "coextensivity of human realms and the seas" (2023, 3). In his analysis of Ben Smith's *Doggerland* (2019), informed by Pramod K. Nayar's concept of *ecoprecarity* and Rob Shield's notion of *bare nature*, Monaco maintains that the North Sea is represented as an archive of ruins and memories, "a physical site and a domain of imagination [where] various forms of precariousness materialise and converge" (139). Combining Glissant's archipelagic thought with Bennet's idea of nature as *vibrant matter* in his reading of Monique Roffey's *Archipelago* (2012), he underlines how this novel turns a journey across a seascape marked by the scars of (neo)colonialism and globalisation into a process of self-discovery, identity formation, and emotional healing. Finally, his investigation of Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014), sheds light on the interplay of Africanfuturism and Blue Eco-fiction in the representation of the seascape as a "fertile ground for the emergence of fluid identities" (162) and multispecies agency.

*Water Stories* focuses on the eco-political, cultural, and aesthetic values of literary waterscapes and aquatic bodies. Based on Blue Humanities, Cultural Studies, Material Ecocriticism, Trauma Studies, and Ecofeminism, Monaco's thought-provoking book investigates works of literature that feature water-related events and waterbodies to analyse the relationship of these phenomena and entities with climate change, and the ontological crisis of the Anthropocene. Furthermore, drawing on Eco-Narratology, Monaco demonstrates how the thematization of water imageries in times of ecological crisis often results in narrative fragmentation, linguistic erosion, shifting focalisation, and non-linear temporality. In his view, these formal devices contribute to disrupting the anthropocentric and deterministic paradigms embedded in Western epistemologies and

metanarratives. Addressing issues such as nonhuman otherness, the interplay of planetary and local scales, and the transcorporeal entanglements shaped by fictional waterscapes and waterbodies, *Water Stories* unveils the potential of literature to contribute to what Oppermann defines a “relational aqueous ontology” (2023, 10). This eco-ontology embraces democratic, anti-speciesist principles, and envisions pathways towards positive ecological change.

## **Bibliography**

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