



Mermaids

ECL 305: Literature and the Environment

Spring 2025. Professor Pressman

Day 16: Environmental Humanities

ADMIN

Essays: Done grading! — will send feedback and grades tonight or tomorrow — revisions due on 11/9, when Essay 2 is due.

-Please review your comments carefully before emailing me.

-Happy to hold Zoom office hours on Monday to discuss.

- Strong example essays:
Kelly, Leon, Sierra

ADMIN

Grading Rubric for essays (similar to blog posts)

A= Essay contains a strong, focused thesis and close reading that supports it in a lucid, compelling manner

B= Essay contains a thesis and some close reading, demonstrating understanding and insight

C= Essay contains little analysis of the text (close reading) and/or lacks a coherent thesis, contains mostly summary, generalizations, and unconnected ideas

D=Essay contains little substantive thinking

ADMIN

- You can and should revise—
- Common issues:
- Lack of thesis— *-debatable* claim about/from the text
- Lack of explication/close reading— really need to be explicating to prove your points.
-need to build from ground up
- Unclear writing (read aloud and revise)
- Generalizations (across time, “we,” all “societies,” etc.)
-

ADMIN

- Common issues:
- Get rid of ‘ I found this detail to be extremely telling” or “I believe”
- Get rid of “throughout time” “all women” etc

- Strong example essays:
Kelly, Leon

Environmental Humanities

- An academic field of study
- An intellectual intersection

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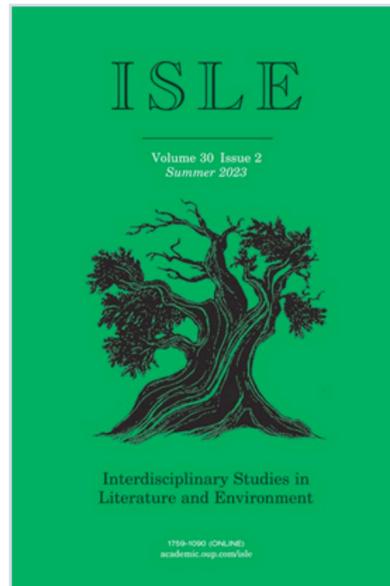
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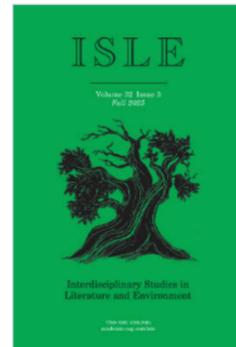
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About the journal

ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE) is the peer-reviewed, international, and transdisciplinary journal of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), published quarterly by Oxford University Press (OUP).

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Volume 32, Issue 3
Fall 2025

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Siren

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JOURNAL ARTICLE

Siren: An Allegory for the Anthropocene and Example of the Contemporary Mermaid Craze

Jessica Pressman ✉

ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment, Volume 32, Issue 3, Fall 2025, Pages 766–787, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isae008>

Published: 24 May 2024 **Article history** ▾



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Issue Section: [Scholarly Article](#)

We are in the midst of a mermaid craze. Everywhere you look—from literature to film, fashion to social media—mermaids are omnipresent. Disney’s live-action *The Little Mermaid* (2023) was just the latest in a decade-long global phenomenon, evidence of which spans a tidal wave of books and films, the opening of two museums in the US claiming to be the world’s first mermaid museums (both in 2021, in WA and MD), the publication of *The Penguin Book of Mermaids* (2019),¹ “mermaiding” as a growing amateur activity and entrepreneurial movement,² the exploding popularity of mermaid

Discussion

- Main points from the reading?
- What do you want to discuss?

Environmental Humanities— what & when?

“The environmental humanities has become a global intellectual movement that reconceives the relationship between scientific and technical disciplines and the humanities, which are essential to understanding and resolving dilemmas that have been created by industrial society” (4).

“The environmental humanities did not simply evolve from earlier Western thinkers, however. In fundamental ways, the field has been shaped by postcolonial and feminist studies and by scholars working outside of Europe and the United States. These scholars critiqued the limited focus of earlier environmental histories and the literary canon of “nature writing.” They challenged the persistent anthropocentric (and at times imperial) bias of dominant ethical and political theories....There was often an implicitly racialized conception of the natural world that depended on a restricted, historical Anthropos that was conceived as white, male, and European” (4).

Environmental Humanities — why/so what?

“The global environmental crisis demands new ways of thinking and new communities that produce environmental solutions as a form of civic knowledge. The crisis cannot be addressed solely by finding technological solutions to particular problems that are delivered “downstream” to a population of passive consumers. The crisis has been caused by human behavior and by institutions that externalize environmental costs and cordon off regimes of violent extraction and waste from view. Relying for solutions on the scientific and engineering specialists who served these very institutions and vested interests seems a maladaptive response” (7).

Environmental Humanities— key points

- “Rather, every object and being is defined by its relationships. It is part of networks and only has meaning in relation to its surroundings.” (9)
- “Human beings are not independent of the natural world, but are part of it.” (9)
- “Human beings do not have special rights relative to other species” (11)
- “The environmental humanities reject the notion that Western cultures are superior to other cultures, and recognize that much knowledge is place-specific” (11)

“Anthropocene”

“A great deal of the discussion about the human agents of environmental change over the last decade has revolved around atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and ecologist Eugene Stoermer’s concept of the Anthropocene. Stoermer coined the term in the 1980s, but it gained public attention in the early 2000s when Crutzen and Stoermer published articles arguing that human impacts on the planet had become so pervasive and enduring that they would leave permanent traces in the Earth’s geological strata, which justified postulating the onset of a new geological epoch distinct from the Holocene (Crutzen; Crutzen and Stoermer).” (3)

Discussion

- How is this about narrative and literature?

The role of Narrative

“Narratives of decline and extinction or, conversely, of resilience and improvement in nature always intertwine ecological facts with cultural histories and value judgments” (6)

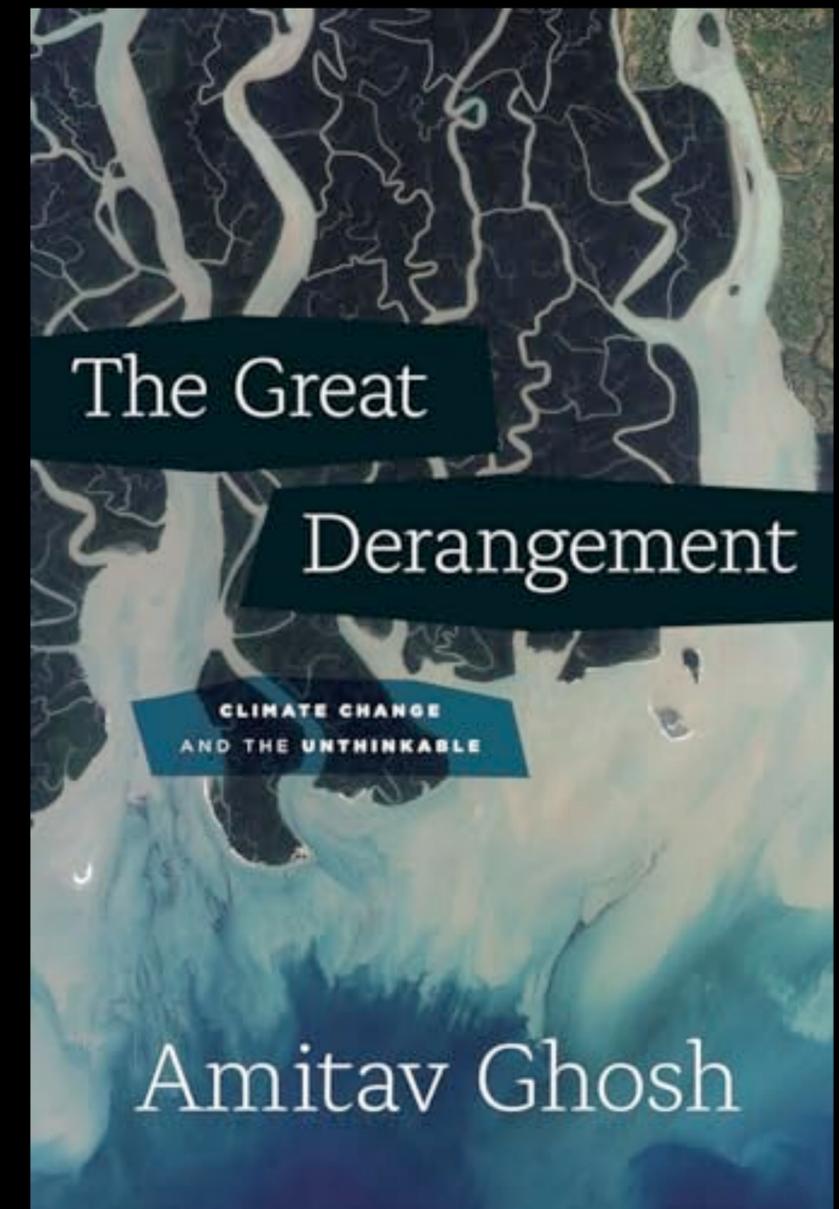
“In this context, decline narratives are often a powerful means of expressing political resistance to modernization and colonization” (7)

Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (University of Chicago Press, 2016)

-“the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (9)

“is it possible that the arts and literature of this time will one day remember not for the daring or the champion of freedom but for their complicity in the great derangement? As a former collusion?” (121)

-“in short, the great, irreplaceable potentiality of fiction is that it makes possible the imagining of possibilities. And to imagine other forms of human existence is exactly the challenge that is posed by the climate crisis” (128)



“Posthumanism”

“Against the background of these new theoretical frameworks, the environmental humanities have emerged at a moment when the humanities and qualitative social sciences are reinventing what being human means— and by extension, what it means to study human cultures and societies.” (4)

“Posthumanism”

"In the ocean, a space on Earth that remains profoundly alien to human knowledge and experience, alternative conceptions of what it means to be human can be artistically articulated, whether it be through dancing with dolphins (Chaudhuri) or the encounter with species that we have not had a chance to name, let alone to form cultural connections with (Alaimo)" (5)

“The posthumanist questioning of the human subject similarly needs to situate itself in this context of pervasive inequalities, even as indigenous and anti-colonial perspectives offer new avenues for thinking beyond the human” (5)

-“colonialism, racism, and xenophobia have all too often relied on the strategy of declaring as universal certain historical and cultural ways of being human, and relegating all those who cannot or do not conform to these standards to the subhuman or animal sphere outside the human species.” (5)

From your blogs— STEM/STEAM artificial divisions

- SALINAS: the article introduces us to the idea that science may provide us solutions to environmental problems, but it is the humanities that pushes people to practice such solutions. As the reading says, “The crisis cannot be addressed solely by finding technological solutions to particular problems that are delivered “downstream” to a population of passive consumers.”

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Timothy Morton's "hyper-object"

-the "hyperobject" of climate change – "being the "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (1).

- "hyperobjects force us to rethink what we mean by *object*." (24)

— Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013)

Discussion

- What does this reading add/change about our learning? How does our mermaid reading matter?

How does this connect to mermaid stories?

- From an interview by me with the editors of the *Penguin Book of Mermaids*:
- QUESTION: Are there certain narrative tropes or aesthetics that you saw as being shared across that mermaid stories in The Penguin Book of Mermaids that seem of particular interest or importance?
 - a. Alohalani: In my research on Indigenous mer-beings, I especially noticed cross-cultural themes of power, punishment, protecting watery or damp environments (bodies of water but also forests), and seduction. Indigenous stories about mermaids and other water spirits are often cautionary tales about the power of nature and that humans need to remember their humble place in that natural world.
 - b. Cristina: When I think of mermaid stories, it strikes me how many feature a mermaid being abducted from her water world. Captivity and domestication seem to be a fairly common, and gendered, response to being attracted to a being who is different. Interestingly, these stories are—as Alohalani mentioned—cautioning us against such hubris or human supremacy. What also stayed with me is how many older stories located knowledge and power in the water realms and took the apparition of merfolk and other water spirits to be a sign, for instance of a storm or a death to come. Humans have a lot learn from the elements, from the flow of life & death in the natural world, from its relationality. Mermaid stories do not address ocean mining, pollution of aquifers, of the island of plastic in the Pacific ocean, but these stories—especially the Indigenous ones as Alohalani says—can seriously impact how we relate to our environment and consider human-nonhuman relations.

“Activist swims Bristol channel dressed as a mermaid for cleaner rivers” (August, 2023)

- “Lindsey Cole is an environment activist and children’s author who recently swam the UK’s Bristol channel, from Penarth in Wales to Clevedon in England, dressed as a mermaid accompanied by a giant, inflatable poo.”



LINDSEY COLE

Lindsey Cole said she used to get a lot of "environmental anxiety"

By Clara Bullock

BBC News

A woman wearing a mermaid's tail will swim across the Bristol Channel to raise awareness of pollution.

Lindsey Cole, from Bristol, will swim the 12 miles from Penarth, on the outskirts of Cardiff, to Clevedon on Wednesday morning.

She said she used to get a lot of "environmental anxiety", but doing this swim makes her feel like she is "doing something".

Take aways?