

# Mermaids

ECL 305: Literature and the Environment

Fall 2025. Professor Pressman

Day 17: John Gillis, "The Blue Humanities"



October 29

Arts & Letters

Department of English and Comparative Literature

## Q&A + OPEN HOUSE

Join ECL faculty & learn strategies for grad student success. Get your questions answered! Room AL-266.

**12:00-1:00 PM**

Meet + mix with ECL faculty, students, and organizations. Learn about 2026 courses. Get free candy! A&L Floor 2.

**1:00-2:00 PM**

Interested in tabling? Contact [rporath@sdsu.edu](mailto:rporath@sdsu.edu).

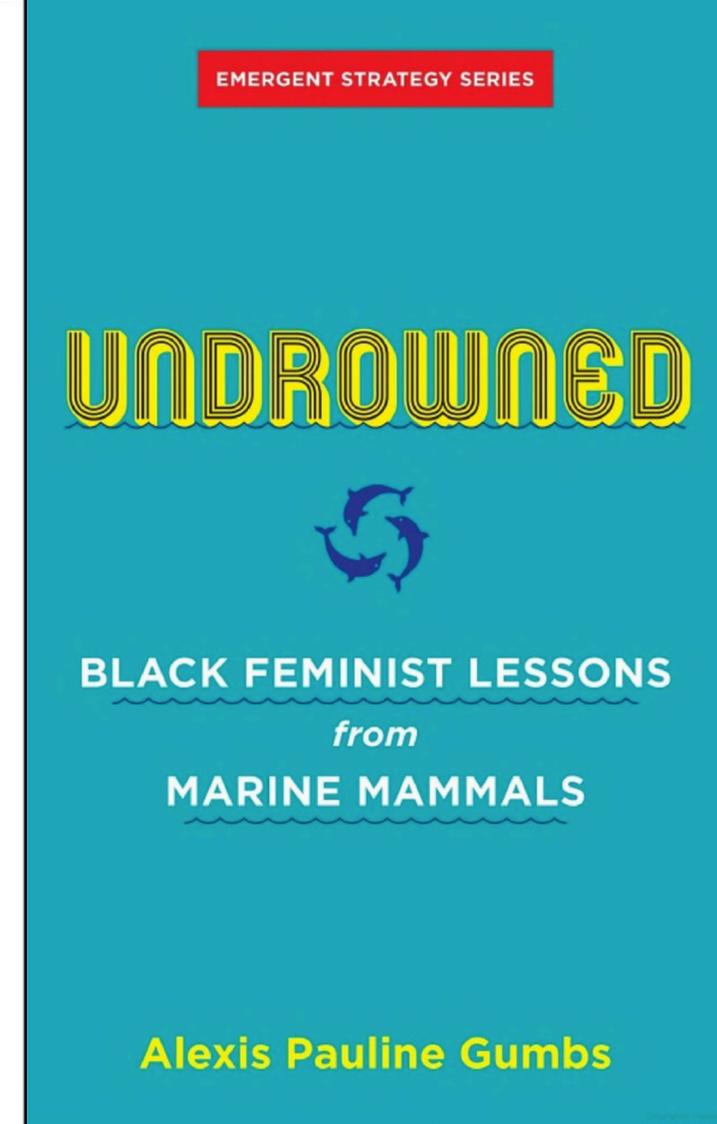
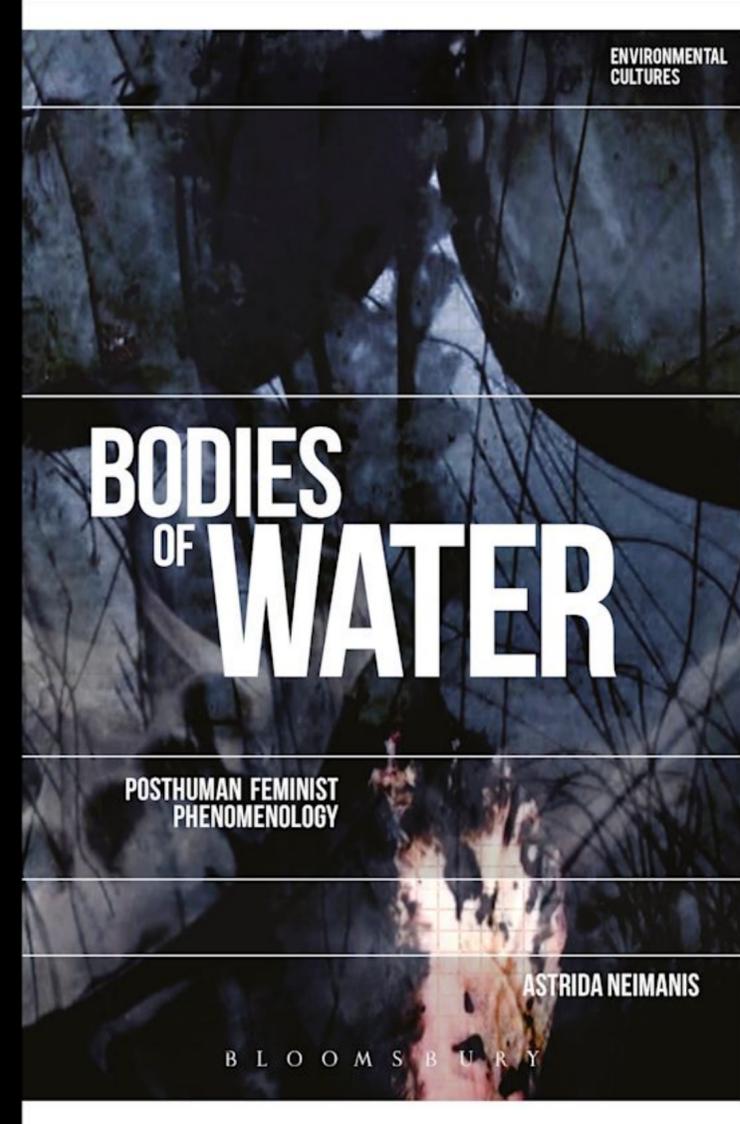
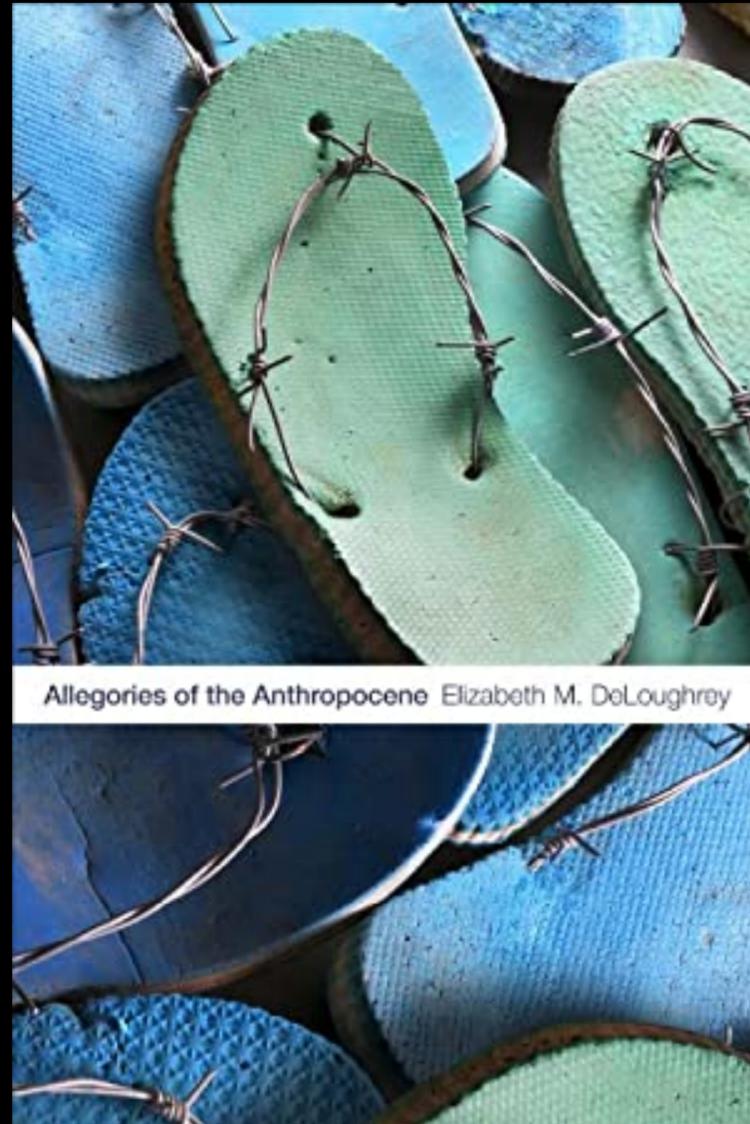
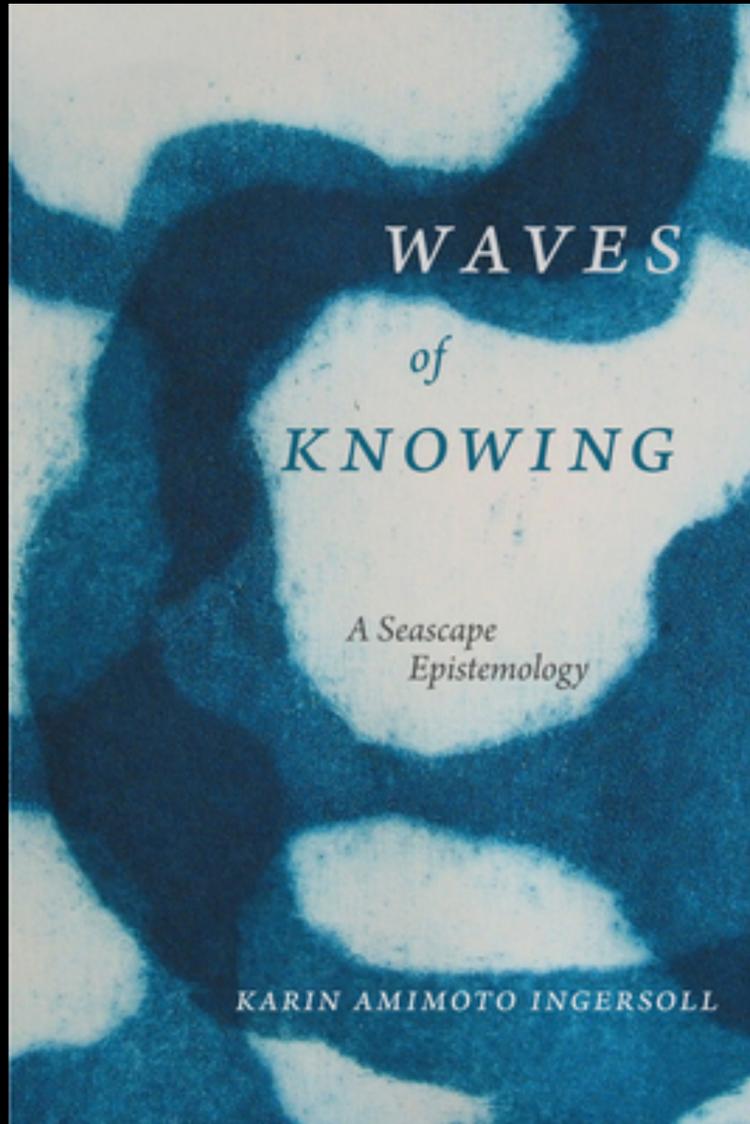
# ADMIN

- Essay 1 feedback— clear?
- Essay 2: new, extended deadline.
- Extra Credit: Wednesday open house. Thursday dress up for Halloween related to our class!

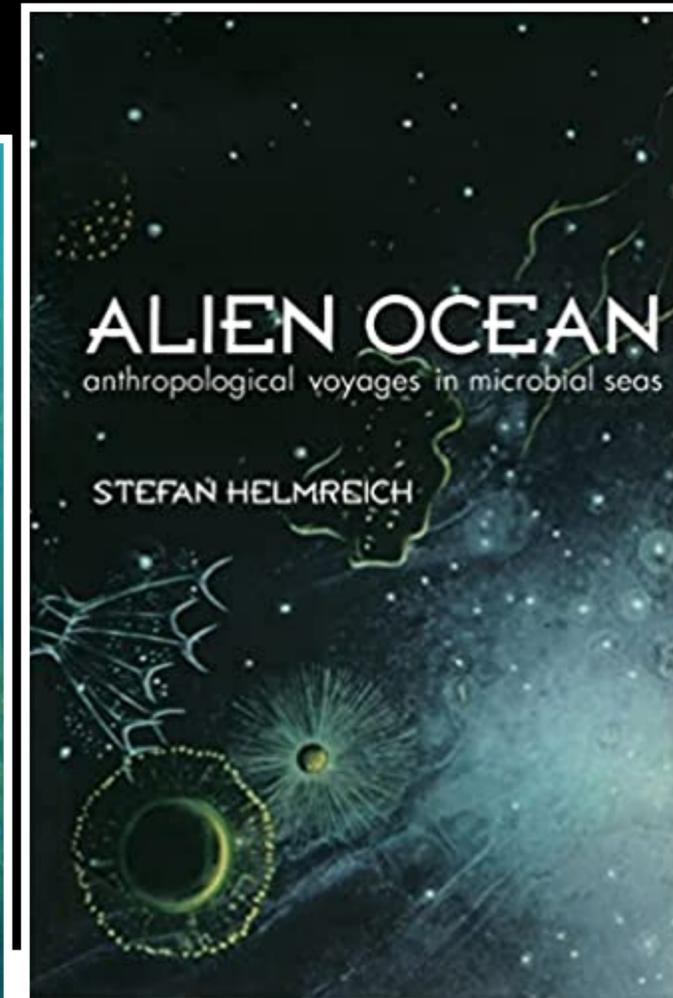
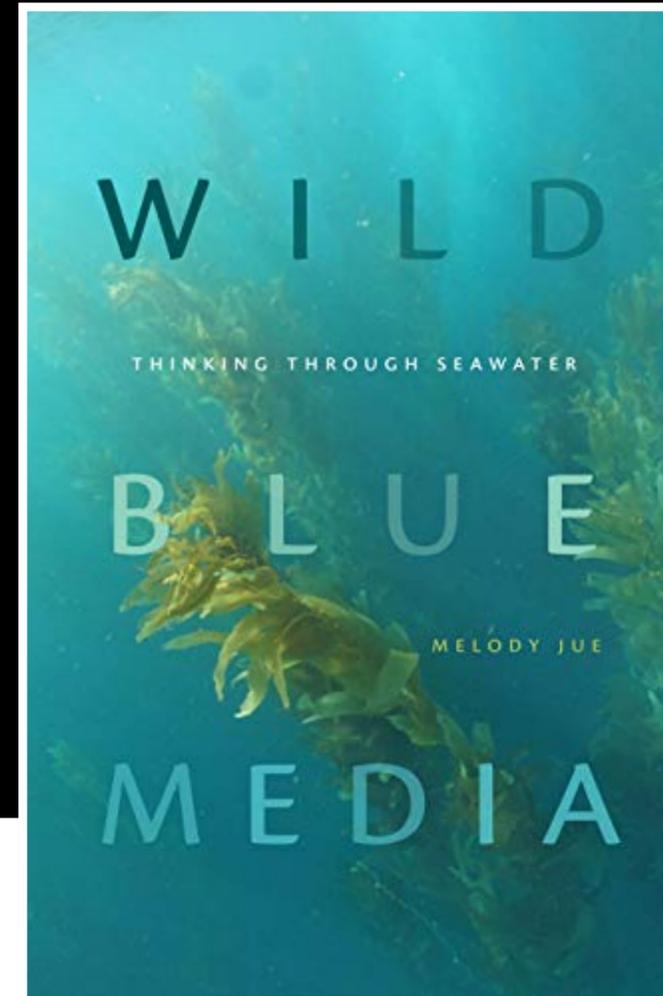
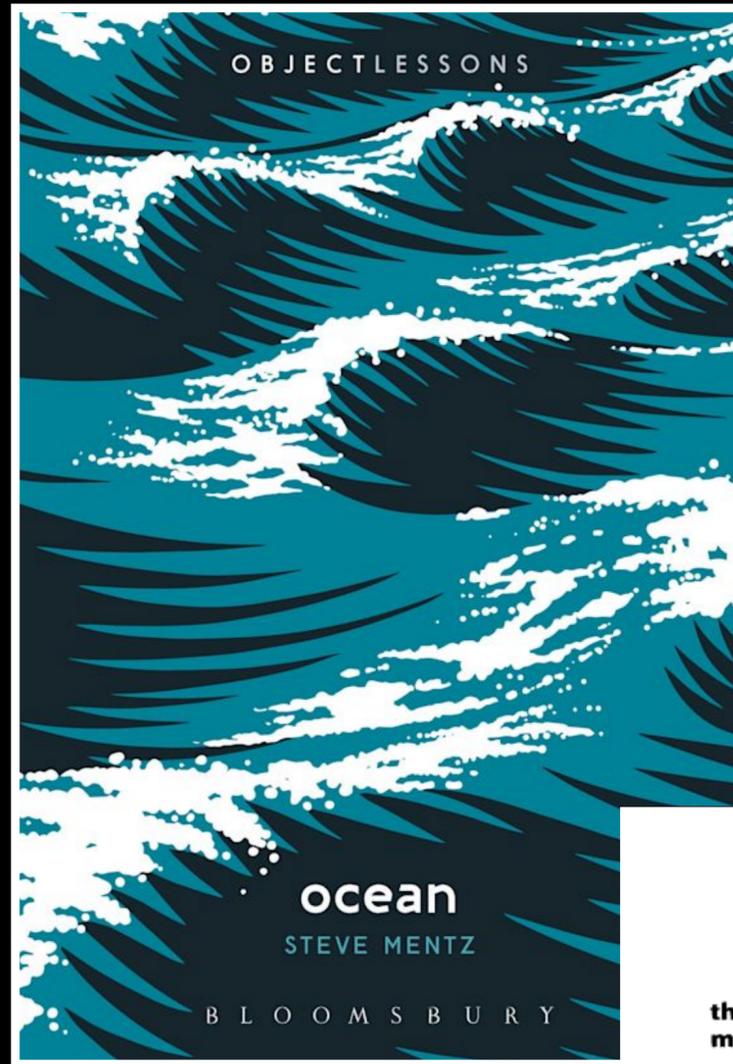
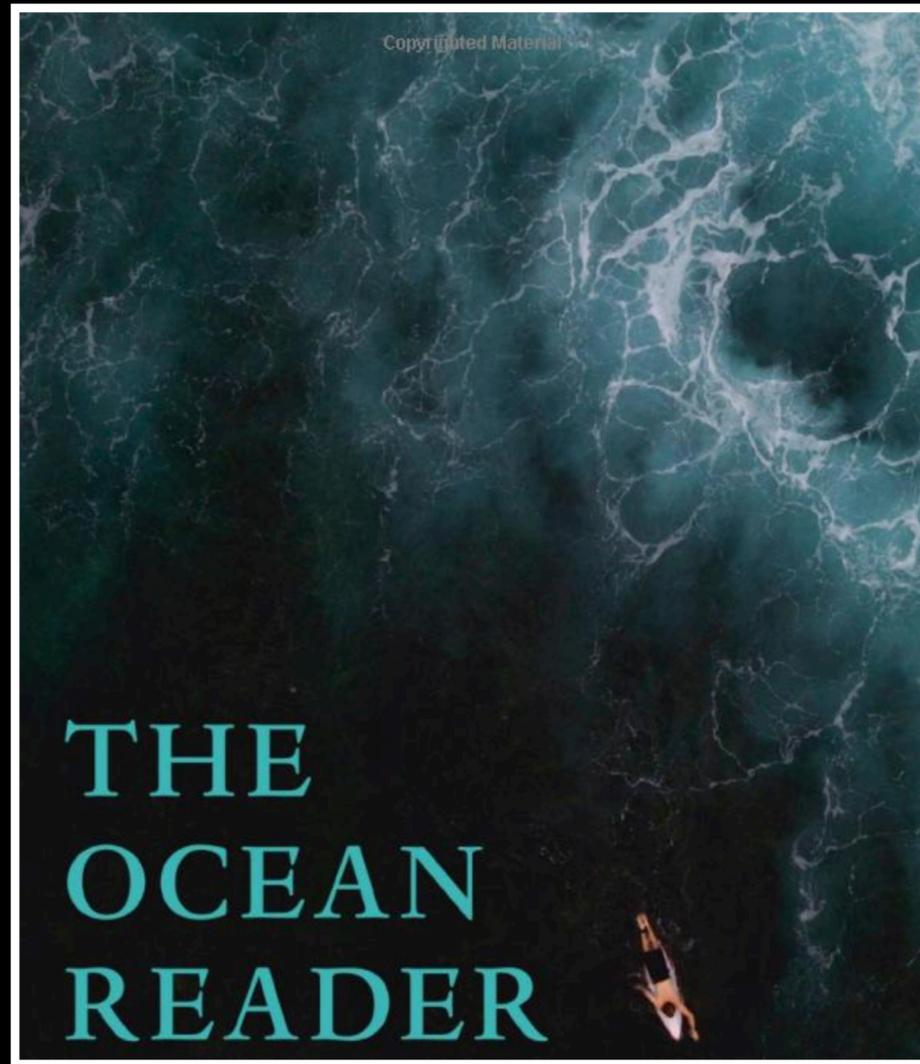
# Essay 2 Pre-Writing

- WHAT object/text do you want to close read?
- WHY that object/text? What do you want to say about it? How does it operate?

# Blue Humanities



# Blue Humanities



[ PMLA

**theories and methodologies**

## The Prospect of Oceanic Studies

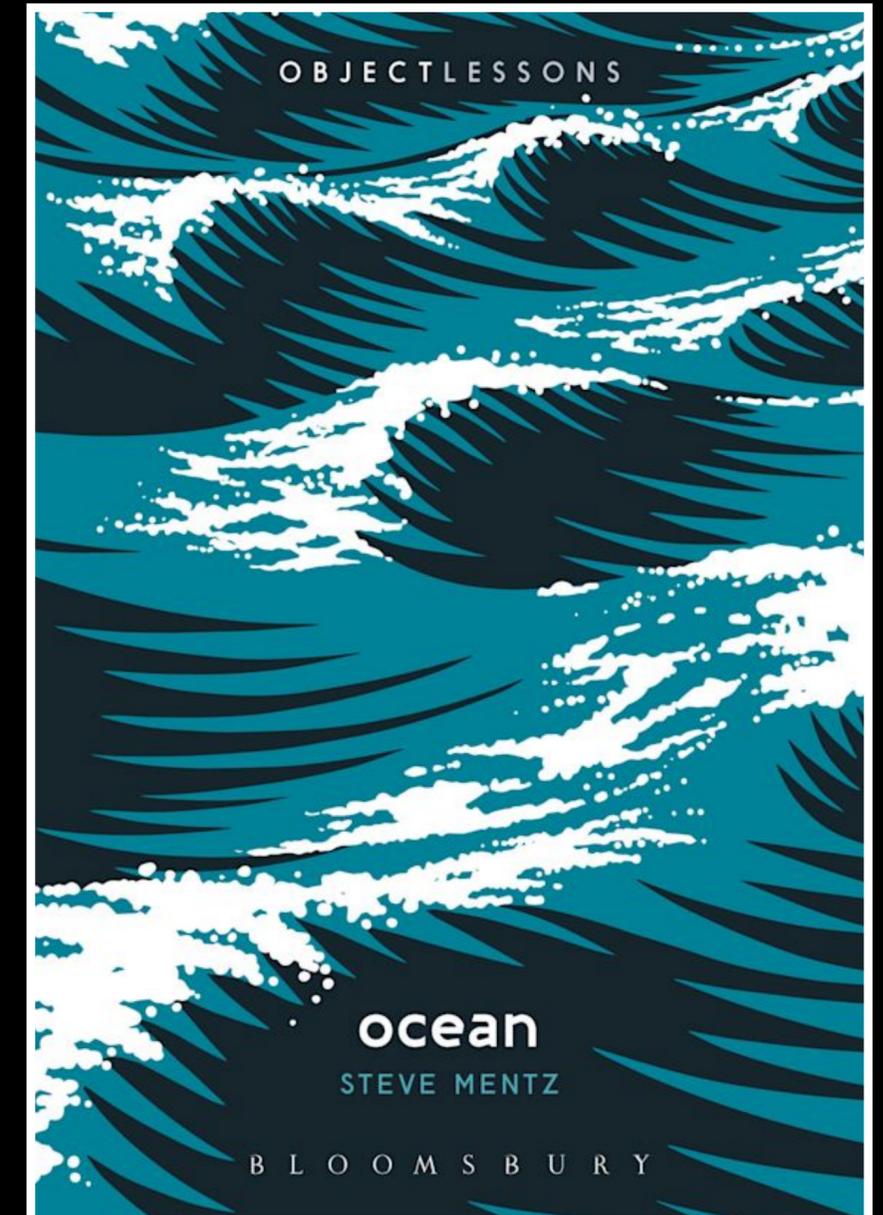
HESTER BLUM

THE SEA IS NOT A METAPHOR. FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE HAS ITS PLACE IN ANALYSES OF THE MARITIME WORLD, CERTAINLY, BUT OCEANIC studies could be more invested in the uses, and problems, of what is literal in the face of the sea's abyss of representation. The appeal that figures of oscillation and circulation have had is easy to understand, since the sea, in William Boelhower's formulation, "leaves no traces, and has no place names, towns or dwelling places; it cannot be possessed." Boelhower's description of the Atlantic world is representative of characterizations of the ocean in recent critical work: it is "fundamentally a space of dispersion, conjunction, distribution, contingency, heterogeneity, and of intersecting and stratified

# Blue Humanities

“The Blue Humanities name an ocean-infused way to reframe our shared cultural history” (xviii)

- Steve Mentz, *OCEAN* (Bloomsbury, 2020)





- “The Blue Marble”: photograph taken on December 7, 1972, by Harrison Schmitt aboard the Apollo 17 spacecraft on its way to the Moon

# Language matters

## 1) -current—formerly *field*

“What if instead we redescribe the adventures of thinking (xiii) as currents, as rates of flow and change? Why not emphasize movements and connections between or through difference?.. Currents flow. We need flow to know Ocean”(xvi)

## 2) water— formerly *ground*

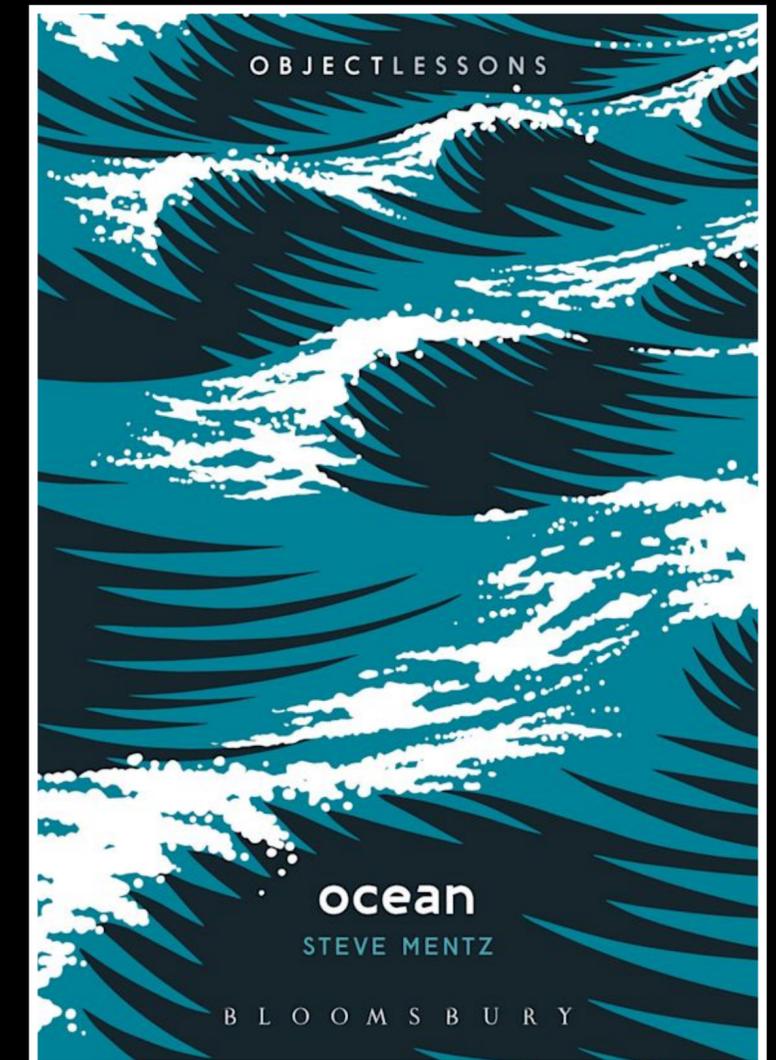
## 3) flow—formerly *progress*

## 4) Ship—formerly *state*

## 5) seascape— formerly *landscape*

## 6) distortion— formerly *clarity*

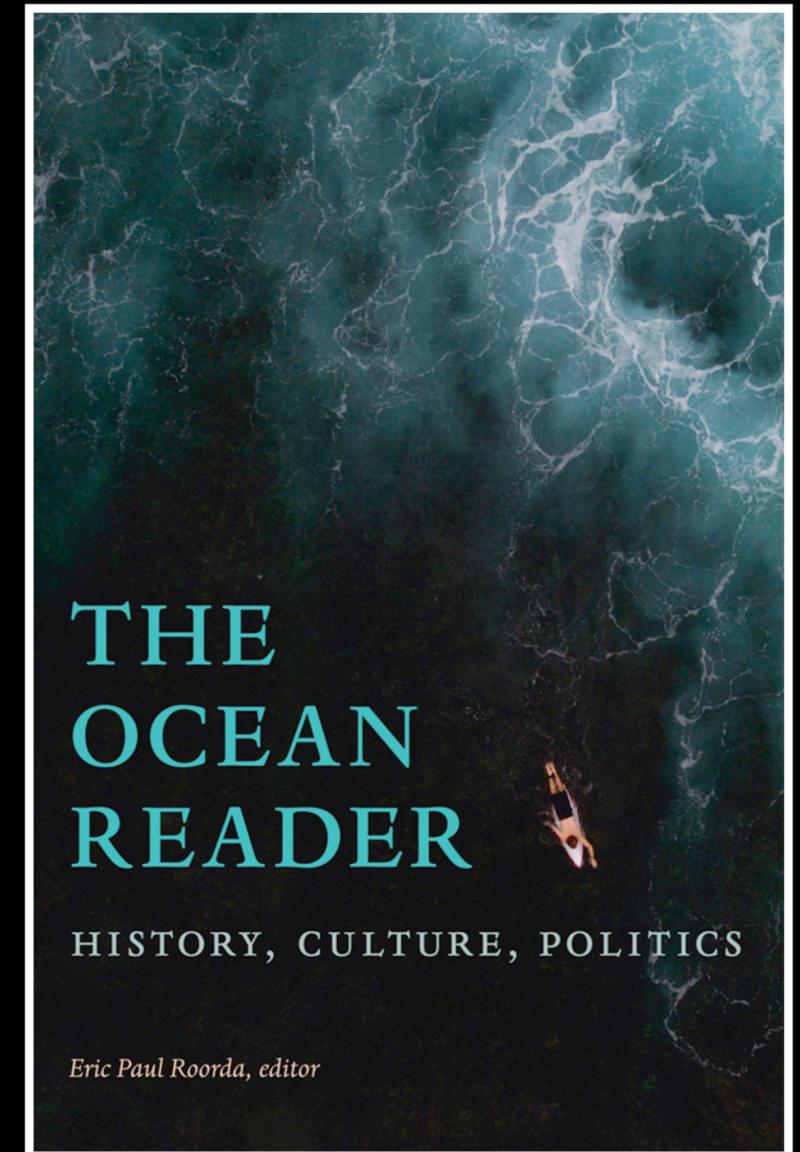
- Steve Mentz, *OCEAN* (Bloomsbury, 2020)



Eric P. Roorda, ed. *The Ocean Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Duke UP, 2020)

“There is one big Ocean, and while its regions have been conceptualized as separate bodies of water and named as different Oceans, the fact is, they are all connected, and seawater travels widely and endlessly across these artificial geographic markers” (1-2)

“Ocean is capitalized in this book. This deviation from conventional style is intended to claim a formal name for that vast place within the realm of World History, as if it were a country or a continent” (3)



# From your blogs- the power of names and language (Wilderness & Ocean)

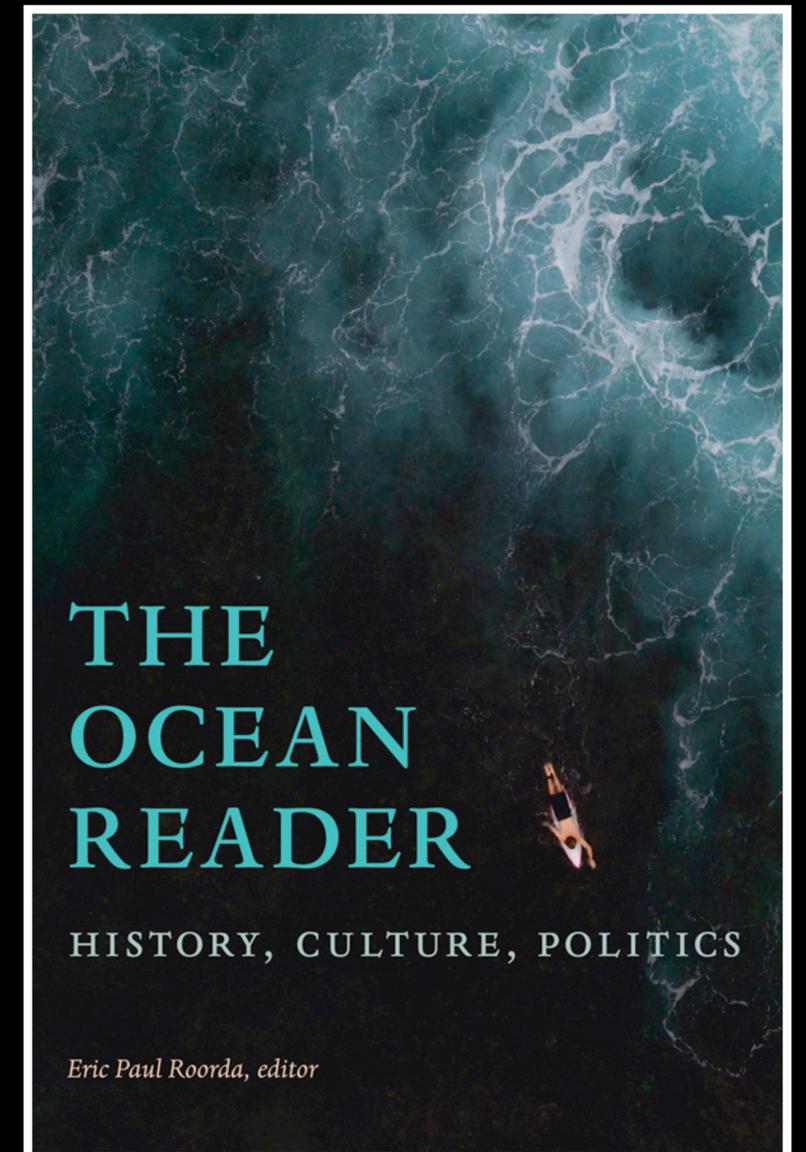
- EMILY: Writing the name as “Ocean” is not a way of a human individual giving the Ocean an identity, as we have no individual rights to name the natural world. It is a way of showing recognition to what has always been present. ... Roordan reorganizes our thinking in regards to human ownership, what we conceive to be within our own domain of influence and what is actually out of our control. Ocean is the world and environment.
- JENNA: The change from the usual lowercase “ocean” to the capitalized “Ocean” shows an effort to “challenge the conventional wisdom that the seas can be taken for granted” (pg.3-4). Using the lowercase word “ocean” makes the sea sound like something humans can define or own. Such naming leads people to believe that the sea belongs to them. However, by changing just one letter, it reminds us that the Ocean is an independent being with its own history and ecosystems.

# From your blogs- rethinking the Ocean

- **ADRIAN:** Ultimately, this passage calls for a shift in how we see the world. The ocean is not the empty space we tend to think it as, rather, it is a living interconnected system that is facing an unprecedented crisis. Acknowledging the ocean as a place is the first step to take in protecting the future we share with it.
- **AIDAN:** By capitalizing “Ocean,” the book confers political and historical stature, dismantling cartographic partitions and the fiction of inexhaustible abundance; as the text declares, “there is only one interconnected global Ocean,” a circulatory body binding the Pacific to the Atlantic, the Arctic to the Southern.

Eric P. Roorda, ed. *The Ocean Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Duke UP, 2020)

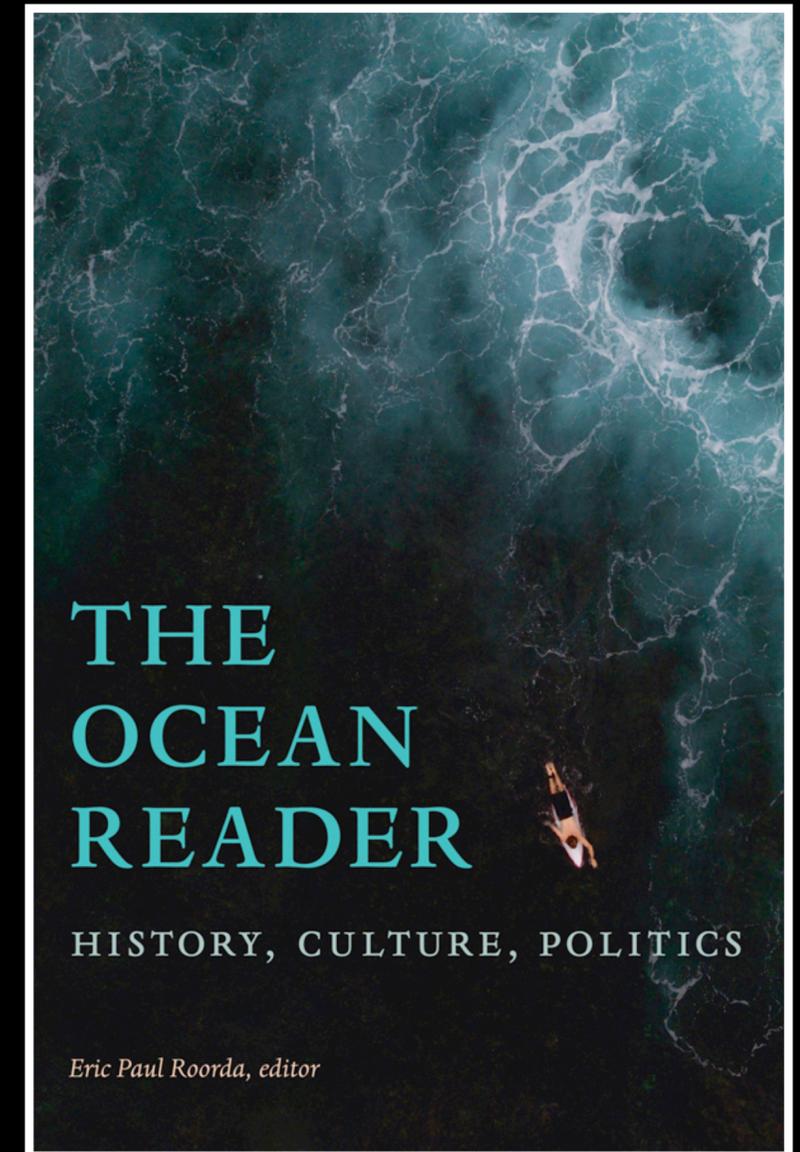
“The largest of the regions is the Pacific Ocean, which is an expanse of 64 million square miles (about 165 million square kilometers [km]). It is difficult to grasp such enormous dimensions. By contrast, the landmass of Asia, the largest continent, is only about 17 million square miles (44 million square km), while North America covers just 9.5 million (24.6 million square km), of which the United States represents less than half, with 3.8 million square miles (9.8 million square km)” (Roorda, 2)



# Eric P. Roorda, ed. *The Ocean Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Duke UP, 2020)

“It has always been difficult for humans to think of the Ocean as a place. Those who have considered the watery majority of the planet on its own terms have often seen it as a changeless space, one without a history. Because the Ocean can’t be plowed, paved, or shaped in ways the eye is able to discern, it has seemed to be a constant, while the land has changed drastically over the centuries.”

“Terracentrism, a term that is rapidly gaining currency, refers to people’s tendency to consider the world and human activity mainly in the context of the land and events that take place on land.”



# *The Social Construction of the Ocean*

Philip E. Steinberg  
Cambridge UP, 2001

## PRE-ROMANTICISM (18thC)

“the ocean is not merely a space used by society; it is one component of the space of society” (20)

The construction of the ocean as a spaceless void was evidenced in the cartography of the era (49)

“The ocean was perceived as distance, not territory” (52)

“The sea was an arena for collecting and projecting social power but it was not treated as a space of value (a place) in its own right” (69)

*The Social Construction of the Ocean*

Philip E. Steinberg

Cambridge UP, 2001

POST-ROMANTICISM (18th-19th C)

“The ocean discursively became constructed as outside society and the terrestrial places of progress, civilization, and development” (114)

# Discussion

- Top points to bring to class for discussion ?

# Role of art in inventing the Sea & Seashore

-up to the 18<sup>th</sup> C, the sea itself was largely invisible; rarely appearing in the foreground of art of literature until the romantic movement of 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> C (132)

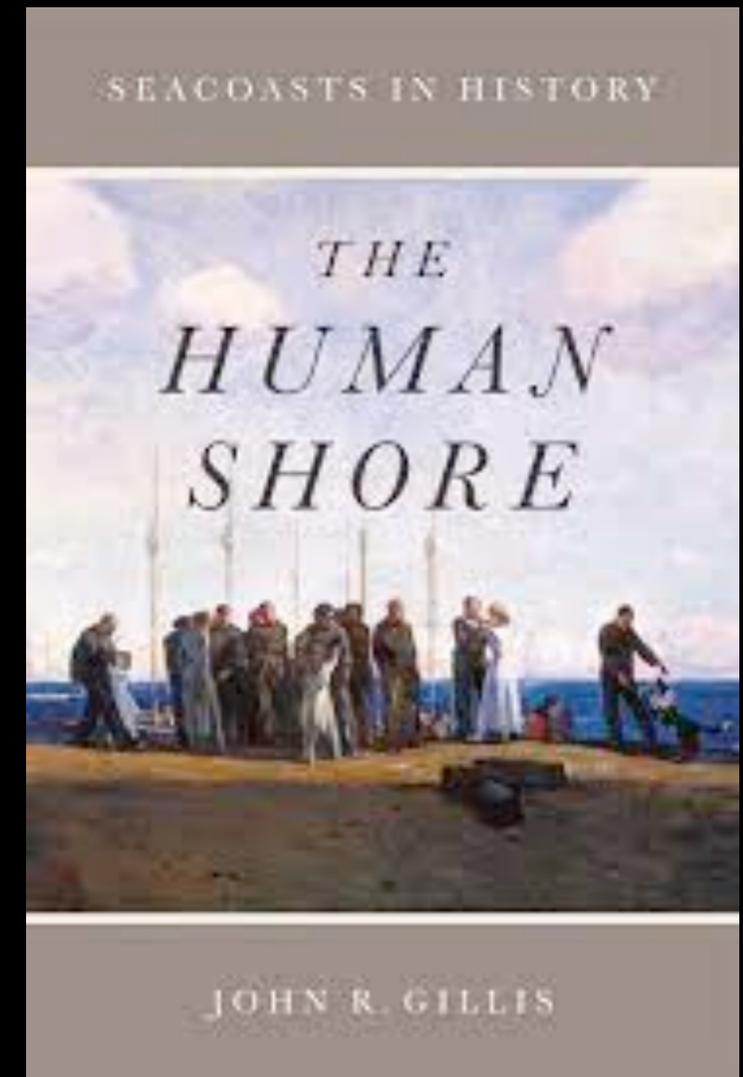
-“Once marginal to Western culture, the sea has now gravitated to the center of its collective consciousness” (133)

“The seascape, once a minor artistic genre, became a major one in the course of the nineteenth century, bringing images of marine life into the parlors of those who had never been near a coast, much less at sea” (134)

-“The sea became the new wilderness and the new frontier” (136)

“In the course of the nineteenth century, wilderness cases to be something feared and avoided to become a place to be enjoyed and protected” (137)

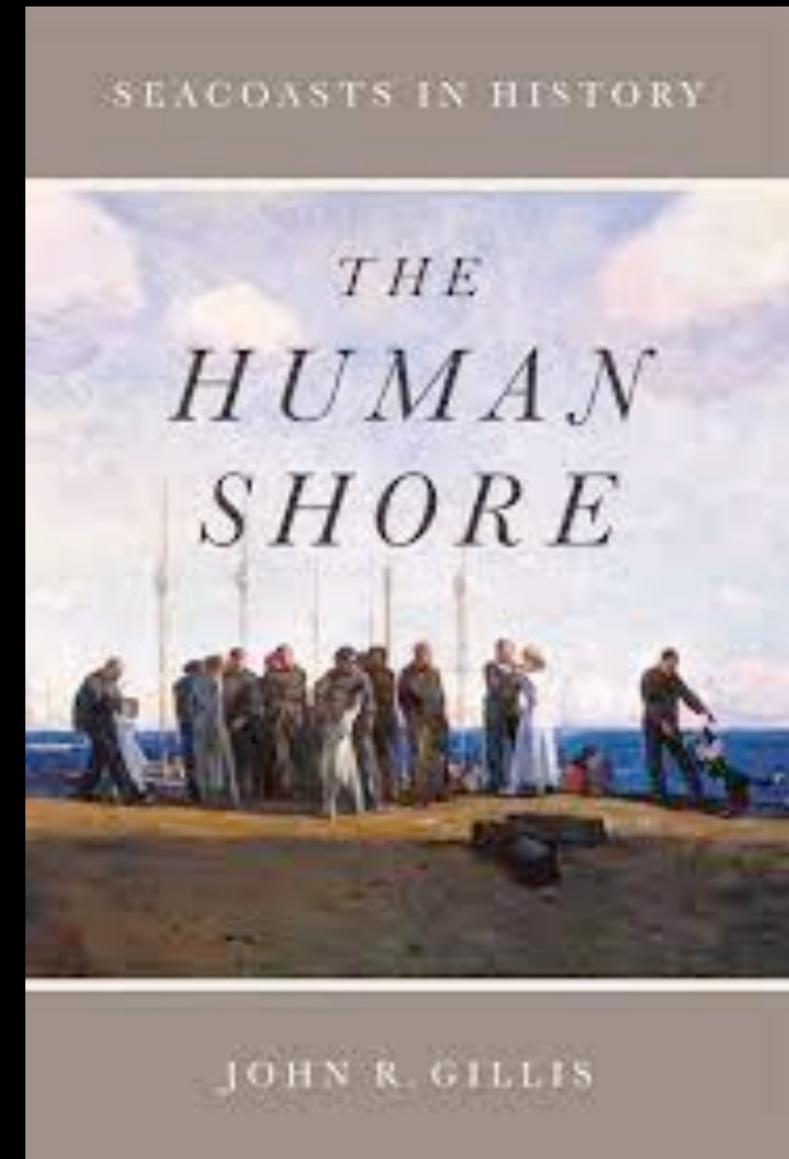
-John R. Gillis, *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History* (University of Chicago Press, 2012)



# The Invention of the Beach

“The beach was an invention of the modern age, a wholly new landscape culturally as well as physically” (143)

-John R. Gillis, *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History* (University of Chicago Press, 2012)



# Inventing the Ocean as playground

“In the modern era, the Ocean has become a recreational space, which it never really was for most of human history. In less than two centuries, many areas of the sea have turned into playgrounds” (377)

-Eric Paul Roorda, ed. *The Ocean Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Duke UP, 2020)

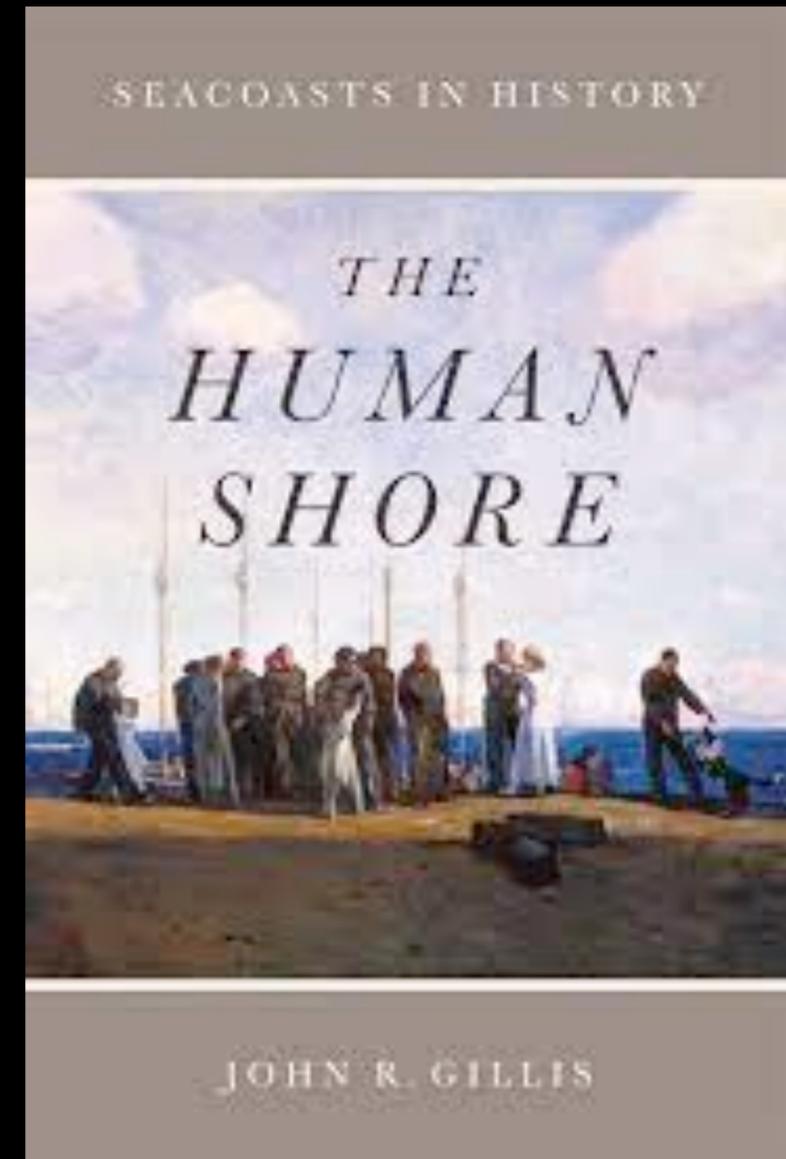


# The Invention of the Shore/Coastlines

“The idea of a shore as a continuous, linear border between land and sea did not arrive until the nation-building efforts of a newly independent territorial state, based on a new kind of capitalism that was less based on trade than on agrarian and industrial production, had begun. Then, for the first time, coasts were reimagined as continuous, the edges of something greater, namely, continents.” (101)

“Coastlines were products of the political imperatives of nation-states busily consolidating themselves” (107)

-John R. Gillis, *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History* (University of Chicago Press, 2012)



# Inventing the Beach

- “Wilderness”
- Medical cure
- Social and class-related
- Swimming: gender and race



"On the Beach at Trouville" by Claude Monet

**At the beach painting 1800s Stock Photos and Images** (223) [See at the beach painting 1800s stock video clips](#)

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**Take aways?**