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Hydrocommonality, Tattoos and Mermaids: The Blue Ecopoetics of Sarah Hall's *The Electric Michelangelo*

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TEXTE

Introduction

1 In its various states, across diverse entities and even ontologies, water emerges as a fundamental element of fictional narrative. Both a site of conquest and exploitation, while also functioning as an aesthetic object foundational to Western culture, water appears to be the *locus* of countless fantasies. It is precisely this renewed interest in water as a representational and narrative force that will be addressed in this paper. What Elizabeth DeLoughrey refers to as the "oceanic turn[1]" focuses on water in all its forms – both material and discursive – to explore the stakes of this essential element in the context of the environmental crisis. The simultaneous progressive and rapid degradation of ecosystems, along with the geopolitical, social, and societal consequences of managing access to water, has given rise to new narratives and new imaginaries. In the manner of ecocriticism – which invites us to consider both human and non-human entities that make up the environment, as well as their narrative construction – blue humanities engage with water as both a living matter and a narrative entity:

> The sea is always compounded of textuality and materiality; it is both factual and metaphorical [...] the sea was and still is always/already storied as it can be interestingly expressive and creative, partaking in the collective poetry of life [2].

2 In this quotation, Oppermann conflates textuality and materiality, thereby highlighting the importance of writing about water in the context of the environmental crisis. Indeed, she insists on what she calls "storied water", as a way to grant narrative agency to watery creatures in order to make them perceptible. The presence of water in narratives is not a new occurrence as water has taken centre stage in many works of fiction, from Homer's *Odyssey* to travel literature and contemporary narratives. However, the way water is storied is currently shifting, from writing water as a mysterious substance that should be exploited to emphasising the importance of this element as a living and agentic force.

3 According to American historian John Gillis [3], the blue humanities constitute a belated recognition of the interrelations between Western culture and aquatic spaces. Indeed, the aquatic element bears a strong metaphorical and symbolic dimension, as a dangerous space yet also one that is manageable and exploitable. The oceanic turn thus aims to deconstruct the binary vision of the ocean so prevalent in conquest narratives, both cultural and literary: defined as "the sublime that is simultaneously 'mystery' as well as a site for conquest [4]". The blue humanities maintain a close relationship with literature, since their aim is to foreground, analyse, and create new narratives:

> The blue humanities have persistently encouraged new stories that would immerse us in speculative attention to aquatic life to cultivate better imaginative relations to the seas and to revise our ways of thinking and acting in the face of the devastating changes occurring in salt waters [5].

4 Accordingly, this paper seeks to further explore the narrative potential of environmental crisis causes and effects through the metaphors of fluidity that permeate water-related fictions. In *Water Stories*, Angelo Monaco explains:

> The "blue turn" asks us to consider the textualisation of the waters – the submerged histories, aesthetics and ontologies of waters – along with the altered temporal and spatial scales, geographies and agencies of the nonhuman, and to imagine new ways of connecting the human and the nonhuman. The blue humanities then interrogate what we think we know about water, challenging our assumptions about the planet and ourselves [6].

5 This conception of the blue humanities will guide this paper. Specifically, I aim to examine how contemporary fiction engages with the water-related issues of our time by narrativizing the threats to marine and oceanic ecosystems while revitalizing metaphors of fluidity. Additionally, I intend to demonstrate how narrative can abolish the distinctions between human and non-human and invite us to consider the vibrant materiality [7] of water as a tool for exploring our behaviours and responsibilities in the face of the environmental crisis. Water fictions enact a form of blue ecopoetics that, in my view, substantiates the features highlighted by Monaco: developing an ontology and aesthetics of water writing, representing threats to water at various scales, and narrating non-human agencies that must be acknowledged. Furthermore, narratives that fall within this blue ecopoetic framework attribute narrative agency to water itself.

6 These latter characteristics can be found in *The Electric Michelangelo*, Sarah Hall's second novel published in 2004. The novel, built as a *bildungsroman*, follows the journey of Cyril Parks from Morecambe Bay to Coney Island in the thirties. This journey from the western shore of England to the United States allows Cyril to hone his craft as a tattoo artist. While water is omnipresent in the two locations, fluidity is omnipresent in the plot itself. Cyril develops his trade as a tattoo artist, starting in Morecambe with an apprenticeship with Riley, and continues in Coney Island in the freak show crowd where he meets Grace and other performers. Water and metaphors of fluidity are omnipresent, from the ocean that fluctuates on the shores of Morecambe and Coney Island, to the various watery creatures that populate the novel, specifically the mermaids that occupy the fantasies of the mariners and are replicated on their tattooed skins. While Hall has always been interested in the landscapes of the Lake District and the omnipresence of water in the

English pastoral, *The Electric Michelangelo* focuses on the ocean and the various ways in which water inhabits both our imaginaries and the human body. Indeed, as Cyril's journey takes him on both west and east coasts of the Atlantic Ocean, the focus on tattooing allows Hall to represent leaking and seeping bodies of water.

7 I argue that in *The Electric Michelangelo*, Sarah Hall practices a form of what Chen, McLeod and Neimanis call "thinking with water" rather than only thinking about water. Even more so, the novel depicts a form of relational thinking based on notions such as fluidity, viscosity and porosity. As such, Hall develops a watery imaginary thereby crafting a blue ecopoetic tale that redefines the materiality (or immateriality) of water and watery entities. Indeed, water develops into a shared substance in the novel, and therefore entertains Astrida Neimanis' idea of hydrocommonality. This paper is divided in three parts, in which I will tackle the polluted waters that run on the shores of Morecambe and Coney Island as a representation of the wasteocene. Secondly, I will delve into water as a common substance through an analysis of hybrid and watery bodies. Finally, I will explore hydrofeminism through the figure of the mermaid.

Polluted Waters and Pathological Bodies

8 *The Electric Michelangelo* portrays water both as a symbolic force and the recipient of human waste, as the subject of folklore and a materially embedded agent affected by waste. Water takes centre stage of various tales. The watery quicksand could swallow a child whole for example, or storms seem to breed children from the sea. Although folklore portrays water as a powerful agent, it is overall depicted as a vulnerable presence. Rather than remaining a powerful force of nature, water is seen to be vulnerable to human action, the recipient of pollution. In Morecambe, though the place is inhabited by consumptives and people looking to recover from various types of ailments, the shores are far from peaceful. The omniscient narrator insists on the strong link between the residents and the increasing numbers of tourists and the polluted waters that ebb and flow on the shores:

> At high tide it filled with muddy water, jellyfish, seaweed and equally unwelcome human detritus and pollution – Morecambe, as a thriving though modest resort, had, in truth, neither the capacity nor the economy to deal with the excessive summer waste. The masses were frequently reacquainted with their bodily expulsions as they swam or strolled along the beach [8].

9 The passage insists on the pollution of water but also on the interconnections between the environment and human beings whereby waste is to be found in water, before being reincorporated. As such, the novel evokes the impossibility to truly get rid of waste as long as it ends up in world waters and other ecosystems. The sand is even described as a "wasteland" as it is filled with human waste. Similarly, the shores of Coney Island, where Cyril travels next, are even worse, and are described as Morecambe gone putrid, reflecting the carnivalesque dimension of the island. The two locations of the novel hold very different socioeconomic realities. The waters of Morecambe reflect the pathologies of workers whereas Coney Island is described as a derelict amusement park. As such, these two places give way to two different types of watery embodiments: tattooing and pathology. The consumptives' bodies continuously cough up wet matter, so much so that their bodies appear to be liquid, and unable to contain matter. Cyril is tasked with emptying basins, leading to grotesque descriptions depicting leaking and seeping bodies, foregrounding the idea that the body is porous:

> Blood and bleach swill had made patterns in the bowl as he carried it out to the washroom where he was to rinse the container in the big Burbridge sink. There, in distressed shades of red, was a man on a boat far out to sea, far out for the waves were tall, and he waving [9].

10 In this passage, bodily fluids turn into shapes that are reminiscent of the sea, underlining the fact that both bodies and the sea are made of the same matter. Additionally, the organic painting that is forming never sets, so that the image remains fluid and ever-changing, turning fictitious bodies into watery bodies. The consumptives' leaking and seeping bodies make Hall's interest in various types of embodiments evident, and showcases bodies as open-ended systems

mainly comprised of fluids. One step further, Hall makes evident the concept of viscosity, as described by Nancy Tuana:

> There is a viscous porosity of flesh – my flesh and the flesh of the world. This porosity is a hinge through which we are of and in the world. I refer to it as viscous, for there are membranes that effect these interactions. These membranes are of various types-skin and flesh, prejudgements and symbolic imaginaries, habits and embodiments. They serve as the mediators of interactions [10].

11 Viscosity therefore refers to the watery embodiment of humanity, described in the novel through multiple references to pathology and tattooing. While the consumptives cough up wet matter, tattooing scars the membrane of the skin, simultaneously extracting liquid while injecting ink, pouring meaning and symbols into a viscous and porous membrane.

12 Hall's various descriptions of waste are reminiscent of Marco Armiero's concept of the "wasteocene". According to him, "waste can be considered the essence of the Anthropocene, embodying humans' ability to affect the environment to the point of transforming it into a gigantic dump". One step further, the wasteocene is more so about the relationships underlying the production and discarding of waste rather than material waste:

> Waste is not a thing to be placed somewhere but a set of wasting relationships producing wasted human and nonhuman beings, then wasted places, and wasted stories, the proximity, or overlapping, of a given community and a contaminating facility is more than a matter of miles and ZIP codes. Waste as a relation (wasting) produces the targeted community rather than solely selecting it as the ideal place for an unwanted facility [11].

13 While the "super agency" of plastic is hinted at in this passage, Armiero focuses on the underlying meaning of the act of wasting. Waste reveals how we think of a place, a group of people or a location. The wasteocene then refers to the thought process behind discarding. In *The Electric Michelangelo*, water is a wasted place, inhabited by a wasted community. Indeed, the novel emphasises

liquid bodily waste as a result of toxicity and the inaction of the government to protect workers:

> The whole dirty, grey-shingled beach was now bare, except for one or two souls out for a stroll, and one or two hardy sunbathers, in their two-shilling-hire deck-chairs, determined to make the most of their annual holiday week away from the mills, the mines and the foundries of the north. A week to remove all the coal and metal dust and chaff and smoke from their lungs and to be a consolation for their perpetual poor health, the chest diseases they would eventually inherit and often die from, the shoddy eyesight, swollen arthritic fingers, allergies, calluses, deafness, all the squalid cousins of their trade [12].

14 This excerpt displays an accumulation of diseases contracted by workers as a consequence of their trade. The beach and the water that ebbs and flows on its shores seems imbued with bodily waste, so much so that there is a correlation between the accumulation of waste inside the workers' bodies and the dirty water, materialised through what Braidotti names "the relational capacity of human and non-human bodies". Bodies waste and as a result, water becomes a wasted place. Using Armiero's terms, pollution and toxicity are the result of social inequality, and the creation of wasted communities. Additionally, this theory suggests that water is a common substance shared among species.

15 Hall's blue ecopoetics explores the narrativization of waste as a super-agent of the world water and reveals the various interconnections and entanglements that constitute the environment. One step further, Hall depicts human beings as bodies of water.

Watery Humanity

16 In *The Electric Michelangelo*, bodies are shown to be liquid, viscous and therefore share a common substance with the ocean. The commonality of water is encapsulated in Neimanis' concept of hydrocommons according to which she explains that:

> Bodies of water undo the idea that bodies are necessarily or only human. The bodies from which we siphon and into which we pour

> ourselves are certainly other human bodies, but they are just as likely a sea, a cistern, an underground reservoir of once-was-rain. Our watery relations within a more-than-human hydrocommons thus present a challenge to anthropocentrism, and the privileging of the human as the sole or primary site of embodiment [13].

17 Hall's emphasis on watery embodiments can be read as a challenge to anthropocentrism and an invitation to consider water as a living, acting entity. *The Electric Michelangelo* showcases watery, porous bodies, who are strongly embedded in the water that surrounds them, and therefore exemplifies the idea of hydrocommons. While the oceanic turn in the humanities emphasises the idea of storied water, Hall writes human fluids: "what if blood could tell you stories? What if there was something worthwhile [...] beyond the grit and gristle and ghastly cavalcade of the flawed and festering human anatomy? [14]" The various alliterations that pepper this extract allow the narrator to render the liquid nature of the human body. Bodily fluids are storied through the act of tattooing:

> There were instances when Cy's needle unwittingly delved down into a soul and struck upon meaning, then confidential matter came up, unstemmable as arterial blood or gushing oil, and customers confessed the reason behind the art. He caught their stories in a bucket in the shop or booth and mixed it with ink and used the serum to paint translations of the very stories the tellers were haemorrhaging on to them [15].

18 The narrator describes the act of tattooing as that of imparting blood with stories, and locating the fluidity of human bodies. However, tattooing allows Cyril and Riley to extract stories through liquid matter and imparts the narrative with a form of abjection. As such, *The Electric Michelangelo* identifies two types of bodily fluidity. Blood stands for the abject fluidity of the human body while water is connected to another form of fluidity. Indeed, tattooing is described in amniotic terms, when Riley compares himself to a midwife whose needle allows for another form of being to emerge:

> I'm a fucking midwife, boy, that's what I do, spread their fucking legs open and I catch their little babies and all their shit and blood from

> pushing and they never even bloody know it … hahaha … they never know they're birthing themselves, a fucking midwife I am. I am [16].

19 In this quote, blood as a fluid is being defiled and becomes an insult ('bloody'), while being the result of a metaphorical delivery ('all their shit and blood'). Water as the recipient of an amniotic relationship is present from the opening of the novel. The novel opens with water as a storied entity through references to mythology and narratives, notably that of the storm. In a folkloric passage in which the heterodiegetic narrator explains that a storm hits Morecambe once a year, the storm is personified as a monster and leaves wrecked boats to wash ashore. The presence of the boats on the promenade serves as a reminder of the danger of water, an emblem of its destructive powers while imparting it with strong symbolism. Cyril's father was once on one of these ships, working as a fisherman before the storm killed him. Reeda Parks, Cyril's mother, recounts this event by highlighting what Krause and Strang call the duality of water: "where the flow of water is reliable, clean and plentiful, it fosters growth; where the flow is too much, too little, or too dirty, it wreaks havoc. [17]" Indeed, as Reeda tells the story, she implies that Cyril's birth is the result of the storm itself:

> He gave his first scream while the last of the south-westerly gale blew out, having taken the sea walls, the new jetty, most of the west end promenade and eleven fishermen of the town with it. Reeda said afterwards that the troublesome weather front had brought only one thing worth having, her son, even if it had also taken a husband [18].

20 Cyril's first cry and the damage from the storm seemingly happened simultaneously. Additionally, Reeda's reported speech establishes a causal connection between the weather and the birth, thereby allocating amniotic properties to the storm [19]. Neimanis theorises amniotics as a way to acknowledge the watery nature of both human and non-human bodies, and establishes water a common origin:

> As bodies of water, our being is facilitated by a watery environment, but as bodies of water we necessarily incorporate that gestational element within us. We are thus a repetition of the water that gestates us, but a repetition that also differentiates a body from its gestational habitat. In an amniotic relation, the membrane that

> separates the gestational body from the proliferating body of repetition and difference is not a divisive barrier, but rather an interval of passage. [...] We are created in water, we gestate in water, we are born into an atmosphere of diffuse water, we drink water, we harbour it, it sustains and protects us, it leaves us – we are always, to some extent, in it. [...] The watery condition of being literally flows into, out of and from beings themselves in a multiplicitous hydrological cycle of becoming – evolutions of gestation, repetition, differentiation and interpermeation [20].

21 As such, humanity is described in watery terms, as both made of water, producing water, seeping and leaking. The connection established between tattooing and giving birth allows for a literal depiction of Neimanis' amniotic philosophy.

22 *The Electric Michelangelo* is a powerful example of how the wet matter of humanity can be storied. I argue that this emphasis on the watery nature of human subjects allows Hall to cross an ontological boundary in order to focus on non-human creatures, specifically that of the mermaid as a vector of hydrofeminism.

Watery Non-humans: the Mermaid

23 Indeed, hydrocommonality is first and foremost a way to foreground de-anthropocentrism by negotiating the interbeing of bodies of water on this planet. As such, the novel displays a fictionalisation of Astrida Neimanis' concept of "bodies of water", according to which humans and non-humans share a mode of being. She goes one step further by defining "a common way of being expressed across a difference of beings" through the word "onto-logic":

> The onto-logic of amniotics does not suggest that all bodies of water are the same in terms of their being, but rather that bodies of water share a way of being because they are bodies of water. The amnion materializes a mode of relational being that is certainly transcorporeal – transiting across and between bodies – but a kind of transit that also nurtures and facilitates other bodies, while also differentiating them [21].

24 By shifting ontology to onto-logic, Neimanis uses fluidity as a way to advocate for a common substance for human and non-human bodies without resorting to universalism. Neimanis' hydrocommons and bodies of water theories are most strikingly showcased in *The Electric Michelangelo* through the representation of hybrid creatures, half human half aqueous. Such hybridity exemplifies Haraway's concept of "making kin [22]":

> My purpose is to make 'kin' mean something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy. [...] I think that the stretch and recomposition of kin are allowed by the fact [that] all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages (not species one at a time). Kin is an assembling sort of word. All critters share a common 'flesh', laterally, semiotically, and genealogically [23].

25 Making kin is therefore a way to negotiate non-human alterity and implies assembling various entities belonging to different ontologies. In Hall's novel, water is the conveyor of such new compositions. The emblem of aquatic hybridity par excellence is to be found in the mermaid, who is a recurrent feature of *The Electric Michelangelo*. Firstly, Cyril tattoos countless mermaids on mariners' arms ("Get this mermaid here, Eddie, she's a beauty [24]") as a sexualised representation of the female body. The mermaid features the hybridity between human and aquatic creature, something Cyril ponders on:

> Women and fish. It was a presumptuous and runic combination. [...] That association had something instinctual to it, something primal, buried in the psyche. There were at least three dozen subtly different female fish icons in his booth – bare-breasted, barebottomed, arch-backed lovelies, with curved hips and hair rippling like the waves below them. They were [...] drawn riding scaled creatures like lovers, joined with them, and gripping the harness of a whisker or gill or a reptilian tongue like a bridle on a horse as they rode. [...] They were the women of the sea calling to sailors, they were finned beauties, slipping from shells, aphrodisiac as oysters. There were traditional mermaids, green tailed and cheeky, females with the lower halves of them become aquatic, human legs joined and sealed by scale, by soft, femoral meat-muscle. [...] That was all the mermaid symbol was. The sex of her. A reduction of image to the essence of what made a woman different. Then there were fish with women's faces, women

> shrunk into their own symbolic parts. [...] Men had wed the two aspects together, and made them aesthetic. It was worship of the liquid territory between their legs [25].

26 This description displays the symbolic, aesthetic dimension of the mermaid. Firstly, the creatures' hybridity is showcased through recurrent analogies associating the female body to aqueous creatures. Such hybridity is rendered linguistically through compound adjectives, so that linguistic hybridity features the ontological duality of the entities. This can also be found when Cyril talks about "She-Fish". Additionally, the mermaid is described as a combination of woman and fish, skin and scales, riding creatures that are just as hybrid. Then, the description insists on the iconography of the siren, and liquidity in general, as a symbol of sexualised femininity. The mermaid then appears to be the aesthetic materialisation of the male gaze and fantasies while embodying animality and transgression. In her essay entitled "The Mermaid as a Postmodern Muse", Lotti Mealing analyses the mythological origins of the mermaid:

> Her animality represents the threat of difference, but, according to heteronormative logic, her attractive femininity signifies the desirability of the female body. In many cases, mermaid tattoos are so highly sexualized that it seems scarcely possible to consider them as anything other than a male fantasy [26].

27 The corporeal ambiguity of the mermaid symbolises the threat underlying the desire she kindles while materialising a literal representation of the male gaze. The mermaid comes back in the form of Grace, a woman who asks Cyril for eye tattoos all over her body. As a freak show performer, she requests these eyes to reflect the spectator's gaze. In a dream, Cyril sees Grace as a mermaid:

> They were at the water's edge. [...] Grace had on a dress made of pieces of old thrift ribbon and mélange clothing. Her hair was unbound. From her came a quiet, elegiac song he had never heard before. [...] Looking down at her he could see the swell of one of her breasts revealed [27].

28 The mention of the song is reminiscent of the sirens' song in the *Odyssey*, while the sexualisation of Grace's body and outfit buttresses

the analogy. Besides, it can be argued that Grace is the materialisation of hydrofeminism as the eyes that adorn her body can be described as scales.

29 The hybridisation in *The Electric Michelangelo* points to the fallacious aestheticisation of the female body, as Grace's body performs precisely the opposite of what the mermaid's body is set out to do. Christine Braunberger explains in her study that the tattooed female body challenges the gaze:

> They look at their audience with a tacit demand that it recognizes itself as their other: pale, quotidian, bland, normal. In the world of the freak show, a challenging gaze may have reduced the bravery of hecklers, but more importantly such looks doubled the probable challenge experienced by audience members [28].

30 Grace's tattooed body embodies this visual challenge: "by symbolically overlaying her body with scales, Grace seems to become all-monster, without the division between woman and fish in the traditional mermaid's body. [29]" This challenge of the gaze disturbs one man who proceeds to throw acid on Grace's body. Her symbolic metamorphosis into a mermaid thwarts the male gaze by making her body monstrous. What is left of Grace after this attack is "the struggle to keep her body a consistent element", an undecided compound, not quite solid, not quite liquid. The association of Grace with a mermaid reinforces her will to reclaim the gaze that objectifies her. This is an eco- and hydrofeminist gesture according to which the fluid association of human and non-human allows to make the weight on anthropocentric and misogynistic gaze evident. One step further, such association constitutes a redefinition of gender relations and imperialistic gaze that is at the root of environmental and social damage. Donna Haraway describes the weight of gaze:

> The eyes have been used to signify a perverse capacity – honed to perfection in the history of science tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy – to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power [30].

31 The novel embodies Oppermann's idea that water and watery entities have to become narrative agencies, as the mermaid is omnipresent and forms a storied relationship with human subjects. Serpil Oppermann emphasizes the narrative dimension of water and its components, underlining the necessity of making nonhuman entities both visible and audible. According to her, the oceanic turn, along with water fictions, must attribute narrative agency to water in order to render it visible and integrated into contemporary debates:

> The ocean is a storied subject with narrative trajectories created by its innumerable denizens. Even if some are quite alien to the human observer, they can express themselves with sounds, colors, gestures, and, for example, bioluminescence, thus engendering what I call a "hydromaterial story" (2019, 460). Literary texts that replenish hydromaterial stories can be seen as narrative explorations of how the storied seas can make the aquatic voices familiar to our cognition, revealing their signifying nature [31].

32 In this view, water is to be considered a narrative entity, so that aquatic spaces become agents in storytelling rather than mere sites to be conquered. In this sense, the oceanic turn within the humanities also aims to deconstruct the imperial and ontological hierarchies historically embedded in discourses about water. However, Oppermann raises a critical question about the nature of narrative itself: how can one deploy the signifying power of water, for instance through metaphor, without eclipsing its materiality?

> Metaphoric or figural representations are indispensable in configuring social imaginaries and cultural meanings of waterscapes and expressing and embedding water's ontological fluidity, mobility, and dynamism in cultural contexts [...] [;] discourse should not be equated with signifying systems outside of material realities [32].

33 Such theorization recalls what Karen Barad refers to as "material-discursive practices", which link discourse and material reality. *The Electric Michelangelo* gives voice to nonhuman beings and aquatic ecosystems, and in doing so, establishes a form of blue ecopoetics that challenges the frameworks of contemporary narrative.

34 Narrating a nonhuman voice reflects what Chen, McLeod, and Neimanis call "thinking with water", that is, "relational thinking, as theories based on notions of fluidity, viscosity, and porosity reveal and recognizing seas, rivers, lakes, and all water bodies as living beings with innate rights [33]". Furthermore, the novel also echoes what Jalondra Davis defines as "merfolk", a hybridization between human and aquatic creature:

> Crossing merfolk narratives enhance the mermaid figure's potential to disrupt the hierarchical and ecologically disastrous category of the human. By anchoring mermaid lore within the transatlantic slave trade as it launches modernity and global racial capitalism, crossing merfolk narratives interrupt the human. In doing so, these narratives reveal the imbrication of white supremacist and environmental violence and embody alternative forms of being [34].

35 Although it remains anthropocentric, attributing a voice to an amphibious creature introduces a form of narrative decentring, allowing an alternative vision of ecosystems and the many threats they face. The symbolic deconstruction of the mermaid and her reinterpretation as a transgressive figure imbue this water-based fiction with a blue ecopoetic framework that accommodates alternative ontologies:

> Watershed pollution, a theory of embodiment, amniotic becomings, disaster, environmental colonialism, how to write, global capital, nutrition, philosophy, birth, rain, animal ethics, evolutionary biology, death, storytelling, bottled water, multinational pharmaceutical corporations, drowning, poetry. These are all feminist questions, and they are mostly inextricable from one another. [...] Few things are more planetary and more intimate than our bodies of water. New feminisms thus must also be transpecies, and transcorporeal [35].

36 In the case of Grace's assault, her symbolic metamorphosis into a mermaid subverts the masculine fantasy by introducing monstrosity: "he saw her monstrous body, with its living orbs that watched him back, that struck him impotent from that moment on. [36]" This reversal, in which the mermaid reclaims control over the gaze that objectifies her, constitutes a powerful ecofeminist gesture. It is through the fusion of the human and the nonhuman that this narrative exposes the weight of an anthropocentric and misogynistic

gaze. The female body thus becomes a contested site, subjected to the gaze while simultaneously returning it. Grace's character enables Sarah Hall to articulate a strong ecofeminist parallel between threatened land, feminism, and imperialism:

> She had always said it would be about the body, hadn't she, that the battleground had been chosen by others and a war would be fought there, and won or lost? [...] Grace had been outnumbered by the men of history, she had neither the political strength nor the support of her own people, but she had found a way to win her freedom, and for a time she had celebrated the identity of her body as her own sovereign state. And now the land had been razed again, it was desolate, death-soil. But her eyes, those dark, solemn, prolific eyes still glimmered and said her mind had not lost that spirit of rebellion and never would. [...] She'd go to the gallows bloody and brutalized but unbroken if she had to [37].

37 Here, the female body becomes the locus of multiple struggles. Grace's defeat and the disappearance of her ocular bodysuit – an emblematic ecofeminist adornment – highlight the persistence of destructive forces behind seemingly unrelated catastrophes. The emphasis on Grace's eyes, both a weapon of refraction and a site of bodily reclamation, underscores the need to continue this work of narrative and political deconstruction.

Conclusion

38 Sarah Hall's *The Electric Michelangelo* is an ecopoetic tale that encapsulates most of the stakes of blue fiction: the ethics of the production of waste as the result of othering, watery embodiment, and imparting aquatic creatures with narrative agency. Sarah Hall's blue ecopoetics draws a prolific parallel between tattooing and the oceanic imaginary thereby creating watery ontologies that defy established categories. In doing so, she creates fluid and hybrid ontologies of becoming [38] and advocates an ethical questioning of what it means to exist as bodies of water. As such, the novel partakes in the challenge of the blue humanities of inscribing water and fluidity in the collective imagination in order to help us redefine our connection to water in the various forms in which it exists.

NOTES

1 Elizabeth DeLoughrey, "Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene", *Comparative Literature*, vol. 60, n° 1, March 2017, pp. 32-44, p. 32.

2 Serpil Oppermann, *Blue Humanities*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023, p. 18.

3 John Gillis, "The Blue Humanities", *Humanities*, vol. 34, n° 3, May/June 2013, n. p.

4 Elizabeth DeLoughrey, "Mining the Seas: Speculative Fictions and Futures", *in* Irus Braverman (ed.), *Laws of the Sea: Interdisciplinary Currents*, New York, Routledge, pp. 145-163, p. 150.

5 Serpil Oppermann, *Blue Humanities*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

6 Angelo Monaco, *Water stories in the Anthropocene: Anglophone climate-change fiction*, New York, Routledge, 2025, p. 20.

7 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Economy of Things*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2010, p. 10.

8 Sarah Hall, *The Electric Michelangelo*, London, Faber & Faber, 2004, p. 30.

9 *Ibid.*, p 5.

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RÉSUMÉS

English

I argue that Sarah Hall develops a watery imaginary thereby crafting a blue ecopoetic tale that redefines the (im-)materiality of water and watery entities. *The Electric Michelangelo* partakes in the "oceanic turn" in that it represents various "bodies of water" (Neimanis 2017, 17) endowed with agency and vibrancy (Bennett 10). Even more so, water is showcased as a common substance shared across a variety of human and non-human entities, embodying what Neimanis calls "hydrocommons" (2017, 58). The idea of a commonality of water is exemplified through the recurrence of hybrid characters, half-human-half watery creatures. Such hybridity exemplifies Haraway's concept of "making kin" (Haraway 2), so much so that Hall contributes to a recent brand of fiction that reflects on water as a levelling agent allowing human beings to negotiate non-human alterity. Additionally, I argue that Hall engages in what Neimanis calls "hydrofeminism" (Neimanis 2012, 96) as she uses fluidity and water to craft an ecofeminist rewriting of the Victorian *freakshows* through the figure of the mermaid, embodied through the character of Grace, whose watery body becomes the battlefield of a reappraisal of the female body.Sarah Hall's blue ecopoetics draws a prolific parallel between tattooing and the oceanic imaginary thereby creating watery ontologies that defy established categories. In doing so, she creates fluid and hybrid ways of becoming (Braidotti 91) and advocates an ethical questioning of what it means to exist as bodies of water.

Français

Ce travail vise à démontrer que Sarah Hall développe un imaginaire aquatique qui donne lieu à un récit écopoétique, redéfinissant l'(im)matérialité de l'eau ainsi que des entités aqueuses. *The Electric Michelangelo* s'inscrit dans le cadre du « tournant océanique », en ce qu'il met en scène divers « corps d'eau » (Neimanis 2017, 17) dotés d'agentivité et d'une vitalité propre (Bennett 10). L'eau y est envisagée comme une substance commune, partagée entre une pluralité d'entités humaines et non humaines, incarnant ainsi la notion d'« hydrocommuns » développée par Neimanis (2017, 58). À ce titre, Hall participe à un courant fictionnel contemporain qui interroge l'eau comme agent égalisateur, permettant aux êtres humains d'entrer en relation avec l'altérité non humaine. En outre, j'avance l'hypothèse que Hall engage une démarche que Neimanis qualifie d'« hydroféministe » (Neimanis 2012, 96), mobilisant la fluidité et la symbolique de l'eau pour opérer une réécriture écoféministe des *freak shows* victoriens à travers la figure de la sirène, incarnée par le personnage de Grace. Ce corps féminin aqueux devient alors le lieu d'un affrontement symbolique autour de la représentation et de la réappropriation du corps féminin. L'écopoétique bleue de Sarah Hall établit

ainsi un parallèle fécond entre l'art du tatouage et l'imaginaire océanique, engendrant des ontologies aquatiques qui remettent en question les catégories ontologiques traditionnelles. En cela, elle propose des formes de devenir fluides et hybrides (Braidotti 91) et ouvre un espace de réflexion éthique sur ce que signifie exister en tant que corps d'eau.

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Mots-clés

écopoétique bleue, eau, néo-matérialisme, hydrocommuns, humanités bleues

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Constance POMPIÉ holds a PhD in contemporary British literature. Drawing on ecocriticism, neo materialism, posthumanism and ethics, her PhD investigates Sarah Hall's use of the pastoral mode as a response to the environmental crisis in her novels and short stories. Constance is currently teaching English studies and continuing her research in environmental humanities at Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier in the EMMA research unit.