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# $H_2$Ocean: The Wet Ontology and Blue Ethics of Sue Goyette's Ocean

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# $H_2$Ocean: The Wet Ontology and Blue Ethics of Sue Goyette's *Ocean*

Pamela Banting

> It's no wonder we don't defend the land where we live. We don't live here. We live in television programs and movies and books and with celebrities and in heaven and by rules and laws and abstractions created by people far away and we live anywhere and everywhere except in our particular bodies on this particular land at this particular moment in these particular circumstances.
>
> — Derrick Jensen, *Endgame, Volume 2* (761)

> Poetry reminds words of their fur and their hoofs, of their seaweed and their hurricanes and, in the same way, reminds us of the more complete version of ourselves. In this way, it's a crucial lifeline and energy source for a variety of kinds of languages: visual, sensual, emotional, political, animal, botanical, aquatic, astronomical. The list is endless and poetry is the host inviting us to a collective conversation where anything is possible.
>
> — Sue Goyette, Interview by Hannah Green (14)

In her Griffin Prize-nominated serial poem *Ocean* (2013), East Coast Canadian poet Sue Goyette crafts a poetic archaeology of coastal humans' relationships with the sea.[1] The brilliant jacket copy playfully and aptly refers to Goyette as the ocean's "biographer" and her book as an "alternate, apocryphal account of our relationship with the ocean," "part cautionary tale, part creation myth and part urban legend," in which the ocean is anthropomorphized yet stubbornly refuses to "explain its moods." If the ocean is anthropomorphized in the poem, for their part the equally moody and capricious humans who inhabit the poem are largely undifferentiated, non-individuated, and (except for their impulses and emotions) far less "anthropomorphized" than we usually give ourselves credit for and far less than we are in most literary texts. Unnamed and unspecified as individuals or even, aside from their occupations, as groups, pronouncing "absurd explana-

tions to both common and uncommon occurrences," the jacket copy notes, they are contemporary — with their pop culture and technological obsessions, their parenting problems and rebellious teenagers, their sleazy bankers and sellout politicians — but they also seem to be ancient hominids. They seem to be just learning, for instance, what bees look like ("miniature flying lions," Eleven), what fish are ("*Those strange contraptions / that don't need air. Little wallets swimming just out of reach*," Prologue),[2] and what being human means.

Throughout the poem, these generic, temporally indeterminate human figures are alternately terrified, bewildered, soothed, and entranced by the gifts, and the take, of the ocean.[3] That they are only just beginning to make tentative sense of the ocean and its ways and rhythms and to craft rituals in response makes them seem like archaic ancestors of our species. Aside from their modern accoutrements, they could be early *Homo sapiens*; equally, they could be us looking around at the Anthroposcenery of loss and devastation and trying hard and fast to relearn what the ocean means to us and often failing or relapsing into fear, incomprehension, and exploitation. Through these liminal figures, Goyette embarks on an astonishing poetic exploration of human emotions, thoughts, gestures, and actions with respect to the ocean and works to retrieve the flotsam and jetsam of our perennial awe and fear of the sea: "The ocean took up the most room // with its tidal pull and tentacled beasts inventing / their own recipes. Some days we knew we were nothing // but ingredients; other days we felt like honoured guests" (Four). As I will argue, it is in this interval or alternation between being ingredients and being guests that the ontology, epistemology, and ethics of the relationship between the ocean and humans emerge in the poem.

I will examine this book-length poem in terms of its construction of a history, a story, and a memory of water and wave and its contribution to the general project of constructing a "wet ontology" (Steinberg and Peters 247) and a blue ethics and etiquette of our relationship not so much with the ecologically compromised land as with the beleaguered ocean, the place, substance, and medium that float and support not only aquatic but also most terrestrial life. As my allusion here to Wallace Stegner's seminal prairie dryland memoir of place *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier* suggests, this poem is a way of exploring the idea of belonging — to the shore, to the ocean, to seawater, to the planet, to one another, and to a community. Just as for the enthusiastic, impulsive, trepidatious, sometimes cowering,

and often confused humans in the poem, so too the sensations, emotions, and ideas of encounter, relationship, and belonging constitute the basis for a new-old blue ethic and etiquette.

As breathers of oxygen, we humans often think of the ocean as a foreign and potentially treacherous zone. Paradoxically, though, as Canadian science journalist Alanna Mitchell explains in her overview of current ocean science, *Seasick: The Global Ocean in Crisis*, it is also the source of "every second breath we take." In Mitchell's conversation with marine biologist Sylvia Earle, Earle states that she became a marine rather than some other type of biologist because "the ocean is where most of the life is." Mitchell reflects that

> I had never looked at it this way. Being a creature of land and a student of the land's life forms, I had never thought a lot about the ocean or the fact that life on land is utterly dependent on the life and chemistry in the ocean.
>
> As I've discovered since, plankton produce half the oxygen we breathe or, put another way, every second breath we take. These microscopic creatures are the real lungs of our planet. (*Seasick* 12)[4]

It is a commonplace, especially among Canadian politicians, to refer to Canada as a nation "from coast to coast to coast" as if the nation merely borders the Atlantic, Arctic, and Pacific Oceans but does not include the offshore waters. The tendency to think of one's country in terms of the land only or as land with accompanying water resources is not that uncommon. As ocean studies scholar Stacy Alaimo writes,

> It is difficult — scientifically and imaginatively — to trace how terrestrial human bodies are accountable to and interconnected with as yet unknown creatures at the bottom of the sea; moreover, even the Western conception of the ocean as "alien," or as so vast as to be utterly impervious to human harm, encourages a happy ignorance about the state of the seas. (283)

In her recent ocean studies book *Eating the Ocean*, Elspeth Probyn, quoting Philip Steinberg, writes that, "From the mid-eighteenth century with the focus on terrestrial industrial development, 'the ocean became discursively constructed as removed from society and the terrestrial places of progress, civilization and development.'" The dominant understanding of the ocean today, Steinberg contends, is as "'annihilated space'" (Probyn 39). In "Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces," Steinberg and

Kimberley Peters borrow Peter Sloterdijk's description of the modern era ocean as the "'entrepreneurial-nautical yonder'" (247).

As a contemporary long poem, poetic descendant of the epic and the modern long poem, *Ocean*, with its fifty-six numbered sections written in couplets, is "the tale of the tribe" (Ezra Pound's phrase)[5] for our neoliberal age in which the global ocean is suffocating from excess dissolved carbon and languishing from climate change, overheating, overfishing, coral bleaching, and plastic and other forms of pollution. In a statement of his poetics in *The Long Poem Anthology*, Robin Blaser attests that he and fellow poet Jack Spicer coined the term "serial poem" for the kind of poetic narrative on which they were both working in the 1960s. He writes that

> The term serial . . . was intended to suggest the diremptions of belief, even in poetry, all around us. . . . Such poems deconstruct meanings and compose a wildness of meaning in which the I of the poet is not the centre but a returning and disappearing note.
>
> The serial poem, then, gives special emphasis to time — poem following poem in sequence of the writing — *often with one dominant musical note or image*, such as the moth, *which is the gift or the dictated*. (323; emphasis added)

Indeed, the structure or narrative sequence of *Ocean*, the seemingly accidental changeableness or moodiness of the ocean (even amid the regular flux of the tides), functions as the impetus (*"the gift or the dictated"*) for the numbered sections of the poem. Sometimes the ocean, "the original mood ring" (Eight), is noncommittal to the point of utter indifference; at other times, it appears to be preparing to consume the people: "Imagine, the ocean *basting* us. But how often // had we walked into its salted air then licked our arms / to taste it later? We were being seasoned. Lightly. Of course we rebelled, // refusing to be in its roasting pan" (Seven). The serial poet, according to Blaser, "chances it to think again as if everything had to be thought anew" (324). The project and content of *Ocean* are nothing less than the wholesale rethinking of our encounters and fundamental relationship with the ocean and how we can "embody a care for the sea and its dependents" (Probyn 37).

As the literary genre most directly affiliated with the breath, poetry — and perhaps in particular the recursive structure of the serial poem — is the ideal medium for our sea and undersea explorations. If plankton produce half of the planet's oxygen, then they underwrite both

our material existence and by extension the lines or breath units of our poetry. In the tradition of the long poem, as far back as Homer and up to and beyond modernists such as Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams to the contemporary Canadian cartographic long poem, the idea of the periplum or periplus appears again and again. According to Leah Culligan Flack, "Adapting the ancient Greek noun *periplous* (meaning a circumnavigation, used to describe lands from the perspective of coastal circumnavigation), Pound used the term 'periplum' as a metaphor for his [long] poem's structure; the poem defines 'periplum' as 'not as land looks on a map / but as sea bord seen by men sailing'" (49-50). Whereas Pound invokes the periplum of *The Cantos* as if from the perspective of the "sea bord seen by men sailing," Goyette treats the ocean as seen from the point of view not of "men sailing" but of women, men, and children mostly on or near the shore. I will return to her inclusion of women and children in her epic; for now, I note that the human figures who seem to be simultaneously prehistoric and contemporary are also figures from literature. They are the people left on shore when Odysseus set sail (both to and from the Trojan War): they are the women and children and men not included in Pound's *Cantos*.

In other words, *Ocean* is a book about the periplum not as land looks on a map but as seaboard seen from the shore, the locus where the ocean constitutes first and foremost the solicitation and invitation of water, the site where the ocean is "slurping" (Fifteen). Whereas, for example, *The Cantos* opens with the lines "And then went down to the ship, / set keel to breakers, forth on the godly seas . . . " (3), *Ocean* begins with the invention, construction, and development of boats — first things first — and the concomitant invention of writing, clocks, ritual, art, music, expeditions, colonization, industry, banking, theatre, and more, all of which seem to proceed from the invention and building of boats:

> *We wrote books*
> *about building boats and then wrote more about the writing*
>
> *of those books. Sure, we digressed but there was always plenty*
> *of wood and a prime-time of hours to trade. A colony of us left*
>
> *to watch how light moved over our boats. This demanded clocks.*
> *We banged on our boats and howled and in this way created*
>
> *the Calling of the Ocean ceremony.* (Prologue)

These boat-obsessed landlubbers are pragmatic tool makers and users, just as our human ancestors are represented in countless archaeological accounts, but they are also portrayed in the prologue as beings who are fascinated by tools and materials (hammers, nails, wood) ("*We traded an accordian of hours for wood. We traded ladles / of sleep for some hammers and nails*"), the act of making, the act of recording making in writing, even the metatextual act of writing about writing. They are also festive, curious, industrious, fashionable, and impractical ("*We eventually even cooked our boats and ate their ash / then dreamt at night of fish*"), and they have an eye for money (fish are "*Little wallets swimming just out of reach*"). The rhythm and tone of Goyette's prologue are epic, the content with its recounting of strange events and the couplets mock-epic:[6]

> *There were expeditions*
>
> *to find the ocean. The reports given upon return always involved leaping animals and thirst. There was first a swamp of skyscrapers*
>
> *to cross, a swarm of bankers.*[7]

The humans of the first page of the prologue create an entire boat-based culture, yet on the second page we read that "*Of course we were nowhere near the ocean*," which raises, among other questions, whether necessity is or is not the mother of invention. In the logic of the poem, the mothers of invention are instead materials, ritual, art, fashion, and sheer curiosity-driven research. One could even go so far as to say not only that Goyette backs up Homer's and Pound's poems from the act of sailing forth to that of first building the necessary boats but also that the focus in her poem is not Odysseus's men and their multiple delays and deferrals en route home, not the trials of war and adjustments of postwar, not the temptations of women or men's temptations to commodify and steal them, not the ambivalence conjured up by heading for the domestic hearth and family after the excitements of being abroad, not the gods either, but the godly sea — the ocean itself. Goyette's ocean is not Homer's wine-dark Aegean but the deep-blue Atlantic of your typical blue enamel roasting pan.[8]

Befitting a poem about the sea, the entire serial poem is written in couplets, a choice of form that provides a sense of both intimacy and spaciousness. The couplets and the space between each stanza act to forestall argument or logical progression and foreground improvisa-

tion. In an interview with Anne Compton, published seven years before *Ocean*, Goyette responds to Compton's question about how she determines the shape that a poem will take by stating, "I generally lean towards couplets. They look good on the page, and I like the idea of long couplets. It is kind of like navigating for me. You navigate to each couplet, like an island, and are able to make a stop and visit. . . . You have the whole world [outside the poem] pressing against the poem. The couplets are important, and so is the space around them" (231). Ten years later, in a 2016 interview for *Contemporary Verse 2*, Hannah Green inquires about the mimetic, "wave-like couplets" of *Ocean*. Goyette responds, in part, that she likes "the landmass of them": "They could be peninsulas/wharves or they could be waves. . . . The poems' respiratory rate was in couplets. . . . Another thing about couplets is the amount of silence or space on the page and that silence felt proper somehow and related to ocean" (12). Goyette states that "The voice of the poems . . . needed me to be willing to step, laterally, into a more fluid way of thinking/making and being."[9] In other words, mimetically, the couplets of *Ocean* are both wave pattern and land, simultaneously water and mooring, a fluid notation system (water) and land-based respiratory rate (breath, oxygen), speech and silence.

Although I do not wish to meander away from ocean, water, and wave curl to focus on the human figures, it is only via their interactions with the ocean that we can derive insights into the ontology, epistemology, and ethics proposed by the poem. They are *curious* beings in every sense of the word. They are definitely not Homer's or Pound's warriors embarking on the wine-dark sea, gravid with gore and death of the bloody battlefield, fearful of the weight of their terrible deeds and the dispositions and moods of the gods, but citizens, skilled workers and craftspersons (carpenters, cooks, lifeguards, psychologists, poets, and others), lovers, parents, and children. The human figures are impossible to place temporally, historically, or even anthropologically because, on the one hand, they have only just invented, along with the items listed above, running, chairs, the chase, and, inadvertently in the process of inventing the chase, robbery (Four), and, on the other hand, they have also just invented international resort tourism: "[W]e decided the ocean was a daring but / equally fashionable accessory for our vacation wardrobe" (Two). Because of their recent inventions, those temporal markers, and even while being fully conscious of the fact that teenagers, technologies of various kinds, and corrupt politicians have always been with us,

the naive, vulnerable, fallible shore dwellers of the poem conjure early humans of the kind that one might see walking in various stages of uprightness in a teleological line of evolution across two pages of an old back issue of *National Geographic*.

This continual alternation in *Ocean* between reading the figures as archaic versus contemporary has the eventual effect of precipitating out from the poem a reflection on our epochal arrogance. Our restless desire to categorize them anthropologically or archaeologically is illustrative of many things, including our love of categories, hierarchies, and teleologies, our belief that *we* represent an advance or progression from our ancestors, and the contradictory fact that — despite the popularity of tracing family ancestry and sending away for DNA kits — those of us of non-Indigenous, colonial origins and affiliations often do not really have a genuine concept of accountability to our ancestors. *We* know what bees and fish are (though we are simultaneously beguiled by Goyette's metaphors). *We*, after all, are not Neanderthals. That is, despite all of our deconstructions over the past forty-plus years (such that, when we hear or spot the word *progress*, we reflexively put it under erasure), we still believe in progress as an impersonal historico-teleological force, and we believe not only that we are the rightful beneficiaries of progress but also that we *are* it. We believe that we ourselves *embody* progress: we are its representatives and its neoliberal sales personnel. (Yet we are mesmerized by those tiny lion-like bees, those fishy little wallets. . . .) In other words, following in the tradition of the long poem as containing epic catalogues,[10] Goyette catalogues — from an ironic yet compassionate stance — human invention and "progress."

*Ocean* is a kind of biography of the ocean, but it is equally an exuberantly playful history, a story, and a memory of human civilization with exciting highlights such as the era when Halifax was the centre of the medieval fog trade (Three); the discovery of bees (Eleven); the establishment of proof of the existence of "the hard candy of the soul" (Thirty-Seven); and the moment "when we learned to comb / the moonlight off the pasture of an evening ocean / and harvest it for the married couples" (Forty-Five). At the same time, by scrambling anthropological and historical time frames, Goyette skewers our humanist arrogance and raises questions about how far we have come really. The poem compels us to ask ourselves a number of questions. Can we live without a thriving ocean or not? Are we here (in time), or are we there (in time)? Have we learned anything? According to Blaser, "The serial poem is not simply a

sequence. It is meant to be a narrative that transfigures time, our limit, mine" (324). In transfiguring our sense of time, *Ocean* opens us up to questioning the supposed security of our perceived historico-temporal placement here in the Anthropocene. Are we the very representation, culmination, and fulfillment of progress? Is history a wall, and can it keep us safe from inundation? If we cling to our chairs and hug our clocks and books to our chests, will they shore us up against the ravages that we have committed against planetary ecosystems in general and the ocean in particular?

Pre-, early, human, or posthuman: lacking names, character, depth, roundedness, or individuality, described as experiencing emotions in groups rather than as individuals, the humans of the poem are really just figures in and of language: they are gestures, pronouns, strokes of a pen or keyboard. Ciphers even. They are merely pronominal subjects, and occasionally objects, of the ocean, which "won every staring contest. Would laugh / at our jokes. It was the original god of hypnosis // and made us all feel sleepy" (Two). The entire poem is written in the first-person plural "we." As such, not only is the "I" of the poet almost entirely absent aside from its implicit inclusion in the "we" (there are only three instances of the pronoun "I" in the poem, all of them within the same couplet),[11] but also the whole construct of individual, European, post-Enlightenment human subjectivity is eschewed, bracketed, or simply neglected throughout the poem. Although the figures exhibit a wide range and frequency of affects, paradoxically they appear to have little interiority and therefore do not seem to possess unitary selves. The indeterminate "I" pops up in the poem in the final lines of the prologue, but it might or might not refer to the poet herself. Throughout the poem, the figures are referred to simply as "we," "us," "some of us," and "others." The "we" of the poem are generic, no-name people, not without quirks, foibles, faults, whims, good intentions, and all that goes into the makeup of personal or social identity, but Goyette seldom particularizes them. Rather, they are known by their jobs or roles in the community: poets, lifeguards, carpenters, barbers, politicians, parents, and children. The jacket copy refers to them as an "offbeat cast of archetypes," but the figures are not universals: these are not Jungian archetypes but simply types. In fact, it is more accurate to say that they are occupations rather than archetypes. They appear to behave less like humans and more like schools of fish, or perhaps like consumers, swayed this way and that by shininess and advertising.[12]

Indeed, two poems in the series directly problematize the mind-body or more accurately the soul-body relationship, that major binary underpinning of the humanist subject:

> According to our scholars, the newly birthed Milky Way
> was rhinestoned with souls, which proved the soul's
>
> existence. The lifeguards, when asked, said they'd tasted
> the hard candy of the soul when they tried reviving
>
> an ocean victim. But we'd always been suspicious of souls.
> We knew they could escape because we often heard
>
> their hooves, the slap of their tails. They'd wander off
> at night and when we'd wake, we'd feel emptier,
>
> our great finned souls swimming against the current
> and further away. We'd cover our mouths when we laughed,
>
> when we yawned. Once they broke out, souls were just a nuisance
> to coax back. There was a trap of words the poets had sugared
>
> and we'd take classes to learn how to enunciate without sounding
> desperate. When they returned, we'd have to swallow our souls
>
> like the pit of a plum or a vitamin. It could take several days
> to feel enriched, to see the sky in the puddles again. (Thirty-Seven)

Interestingly, souls are finned — like fish, those little wallets — and periodically swim against the current upstream and away from us. It is only once they return and we pop them back inside us like vitamins that we can see the sky reflected in water puddles again. Clearly, souls and water have an affinity.

Although the human figures might not be as *anthropos* as they think they are, the most prominent aspect of the anthropomorphization of the ocean in the poem is that the ocean and the human figures, as we say on Facebook, are "in a relationship": "We had to drink spilled moon from the lake for courage / to face the ocean with our request. We had tried many times // to speak to it but the ocean was part landlord, part wolf / and rarely took us seriously" (Thirty-One). Part of the poem's vigour along with its humour derives from Goyette's use of pop culture

associations and metaphors, some of which are drawn from the self-help, relationship counselling, and popular psychology movements. It is primarily in the dialogue and interaction between themselves and the ocean that the humans begin to figure out how to be. In becoming "*oceanated*" (Prologue), they become more human.

One prominent effect that the ocean has on the human figures is to induce them to make grand gestures — of placation, admiration and respect, gratitude, confraternity, and even neglect:[13]

> The incline to our streets was first invented
> as an easy way to feed the ocean tethered
>
> to the end of them. We'd roll down bottles
> of the caught breath of our gifted sermons.
>
> We'd drag skeins of dream talk. Little hoofed
> arguments. The ocean was a beast left in our care
>
> and it was in our best interest to keep it fed. (Five)

The metaphor of the ocean as a predatory beast alternates with its other aspects throughout the poem. It is a calculating, forward-thinking beast "*basting* us" for subsequent devouring (Seven): "It ate boats and children, // the occasional shoe. Pants. A diamond ring. / Hammers. It ate promises and rants. It snatched up // names like peanuts" (Eight). It has a ravenous, albeit intermittent, appetite: "The more it ate of us, the less we liked it. / It wasn't rocket science. It was loss" (Twenty-Three). Not only is the ocean a hungry "beast," but it is full of "tentacled beasts inventing / their own recipes" (Four), and some of these recipes, it is implied, call for human beings. What do the people do? They offer it gifts: shoes, false teeth, "fancy earrings because, / so often, we treated it like an ear. We brought it // coins for the jukebox it sometimes was" (Thirty-Three). Either the appetite of the ocean is enormous or that of the people to liaise with the ocean is — or both.

The hunger and eating at the centre of a number of the poems in the series may be correlated with the traditional metaphorical and symbolic personifications of the ocean as an open maw that periodically swallows boats and human beings and conversely with the perhaps guilty knowledge that humans have been gulping up oceanic creatures for eons and continue to consume them at ever-accelerating rates. Just as

the fifty-six sections of the poem are luxuriant with metaphors, so too the poem as a whole unfolds from the extended metaphor of the ocean as mouth, maw, gorge, gullet, belly, and slurping tongue. Sometimes we are guests at the ocean's table; sometimes we are on the menu. At our present historical juncture, of course, we are engaged in a standoff with the ocean to see who will utterly devour the other first. Certainly, we are failing to keep the ocean healthy and well fed. In a chapter of *Eating the Ocean*, Probyn surveys a number of documentary films about the current state of the ocean, and she highlights a moment in one of them in which marine biologist Daniel Pauly looks straight into the camera and says, "All the fish are gone. Where are they? We have eaten them" (27). As Goyette remarks in her interview with Green, "I think we're famished now for humanity, for dignity, for preservation, for restitution, [for] restoration and for care. Our planet is famished for the same things" (15). Out of this shared state of famishment, a new ethic and a new etiquette — a new hospitality — emerge in this poem. *Ocean* works by cultivating what Jim Cheney and Anthony Weston call for when they write that "'the kind of practice asked of us is to venture something, to offer an invitation . . . and see what comes of it. We are called, in fact, to a kind of etiquette . . . in an experimental key: the task is to create the space within which a response can emerge or an exchange coevolve'" (qtd. in Van Dooren and Bird Rose 258-59). The poem is an invitation to reconsider our mutual relationship with the ocean. In this larger sense, the couplets of the poem might then be islands and/or waves, or they might be gestures, offerings, invitation and acceptance, call and response. This poem — *Ocean* — hails the ocean. Its title is not just a description. The word *ocean* is onomatopoeic, and the book's title functions as an apostrophe: it directly addresses the ocean.

The human figures make strange gestures and offerings, commit odd acts, and possess many foibles and faults. However, it is not their imperfections, oddities, or archetypical characteristics that make them human: it is that — however much they are just "figures" as opposed to psychologically rounded human characters — they seem to be so vividly alive in their constant eagerness to attempt new forms of encounter and relation:

> We recruited sturdy lawn chairs and consulted
> an architect before placing them on the shore.

> Our aim was simple, we wanted to welcome
> what the ocean had to tell us and make amends
>
> with it. We wanted the chairs to display our willingness
> but also our resolve. We would not be pushed around. (Twenty-Eight)

In the interview with Compton, Goyette remarks that "We often forget to be in our bodies and worry about what we should be doing. . . . The human condition is fraught with loneliness, and if we learn to live with it, instead of shutting down to it, then we can be alive" (232). This is what the restless figures in the poem do: on the one hand, they are just figures of affect, rough drafts, sketches, notations, flourishes even; on the other hand, they refuse to shut down. They are perpetually and avidly approaching, trying, risking, attending, attempting, going for it, failing, retreating, and rationalizing: whatever they are, they are figures of aliveness. They are mere textual flourishes, but they do flourish. They are perhaps, to borrow Compton's phrase about Goyette's books prior to the publication of *Ocean*, "emotions as figures" (248).[14] In my reading, the figures are almost like contemporary pictographic figures, going about their business of making a living and doing what is necessary, including ceremonial practices, while inventing and reinventing a world in which to live. The figures affect the reader not unlike the way that Robert Macfarlane, in his final chapter of *The Old Ways*, "Print," describes how it felt to follow a set of Mesolithic footprints uncovered by the ocean. He particularizes the experience in this way:

> Like the daubed handprints on the cave walls at Lascaux, they are the marks of exact and unrepeatable acts — the skin of that palm or this sole was pressed to this cave wall or that beach on this occasion — and in their shape and spacing they remind us of a kinship of motion that stretches back as far as 3.6 million years ago. . . .
>
> To track these tracks, to leave your own prints beside them, is to sense nothing so simple as time travel, a sudden whisking back to the Mesolithic. No, the uncanniness of the experience involves a feeling of co-presence: the prehistoric and the present matching up such that it is unclear who walks in whose tracks. It's this combination of intimacy and remoteness that gives these trails their unsettling power. (362)

It is this sense of an uncanny co-presence — a dizzying sense of loss of historical (or even prehistorical) period and place, of losing one's temporal and spatial place — that makes *Ocean* such an astonishing poem. We feel a "kinship of motion" with the many gesticulations, movements, and actions of the hapless yet exuberant figures in the poem.

In other words, just as we feel a kinship of motion with the human figures, so too we feel a kinship of motion and emotion with the ocean. In a variation of Gertrude Stein's famous statement that "I am I because my little dog knows me," taken as a whole Goyette's serial poem announces that I am I because the ocean has basted and tasted me, and in turn I have licked and tasted the ocean on my skin. I am of the ocean: I am oceanic. As Mitchell reminds us in her TEDx talk ("Seasick"), the amniotic fluid in which human babies bathe for the nine months of their gestation is a chemical replica of an ancient sea. In this sense, too, the ocean troubles our categories of interior and exterior. I am alive because I have bathed in an amniotic sea. I breathe at the behest of oceanic plankton; I eat courtesy of the ocean and its creatures: I am I because the ocean knows me inside and out. All of this raises a complex question: is the ocean anthropomorphized in the poem, and, if so, is it the only one, or are the human figures of the poem also anthropomorphized? That is, does the poem attribute traits that we normally ascribe to ourselves to the ocean, or does the ocean literally give us life, desires, urges, method, culture, poetry, moods, emotions, jobs, beauty, mystery, and other gifts and thereby make us who we are? Are we self-made men and women, or are humanism and neoliberal individualism just the arrogant self-talk of our species, a story that we tell ourselves to soothe the ancient insecurities that still plague us? If Goyette's poem is the ocean's biography — its worker history, its ability to inspire the poets, its role in cooking up ceremonies and rituals (mostly of appeasement) — then *Ocean*, like any good biography, is mostly a biography of its aliveness or liveliness. If, viewed in terms of the history of marine orature and literature (the catalogue, the mnemonic device, the word map, the saga, the ballad, the sea shanty, the epic, the fish story, the whale of a tale, and so on), Goyette's *Ocean* can be categorized as a poetic logbook or periplus full not only of saltwater, wind, and waves but also of life on shore, then it is a poem about, to use Owain Jones's term, "hydrocitizenry" and the duties and responsibilities (response-abilities) of hydrocitizenship.[15]

So what happens when (spoiler alert!) "We woke up one morning and the ocean was gone" (Fifty-Two). The ocean packed up and left what had become a co-dependent relationship. The humans try all kinds of responses, from jealous resentment ("We imagined it vacationing at some resort / while we were stuck here with a restless moon that refused // to settle on anything" [Fifty-Two]) and blaming certain groups of people (gamblers, priests, choirs) to drumming on their dreams to magic potions to instructing the children to use their crayons to make welcome banners, all to no avail. In retrospect,

> When we looked at pictures
>
> we'd taken with the ocean behind us, we were startled by how unhappy
> it appeared, how stricken. We were left with a heavy feeling
>
> that we had, somehow, let it down. When it wanted to sing,
> we had insisted it keep doing its work. Our hunger had many mouths
>
> and there were fish to clean. (Fifty-Four)

The pathetic fallacy is the attribution of human feelings and responses to inanimate things and animals, especially in art and literature. However, pathetic fallacy in many ways is indeed a fallacy — perhaps several fallacies but for sure the humanist or species-ist fallacy that only humans have thoughts, feelings, and responses and that the rest of the world is composed of nothing but *automata*. In *Ocean*, Goyette takes as her very premise the pathetic fallacy — the idea that the other forms of vitality have feelings — and explores where that leads beyond mere rhetorical ornament. One of the poem's major effects is that one gradually begins to see the human figures, paradoxically, as anthropomorphized. It turns out that the flip side — or should I say the hidden secret — of the pathetic fallacy is that we anthropomorphize ourselves. Most obviously, who but Western humans attribute to ourselves a complex range of intellectual abilities and feelings and maintain that everything else is inert or just barely there? Like the human figures in the poem, we are not as complex as we think we are, whereas the ocean, just possibly, is. When the human figures realize that the ocean truly is gone for good, they respond like good capitalist subjects by monetizing people's memories of it (making 3-D films, creating scratch-and-sniff cards, designing ocean fashions), but finally they amortize its loss the way that

one finally comes around to the loss of a love relationship. In language strikingly reminiscent of a quotation from her interview with Compton, Goyette closes the poem as follows: "Wasn't that all right? That it left you? That we all will?" (Fifty-Six).[16] The ocean as lover. If we invested a fraction of the amount of attention and care in the ocean that we do in romance, then the ocean would be in better shape. We need to fall in love with the ocean. If interpersonal love, at times, can make one feel downright oceanic, then just think what falling in love with the ocean might feel like.

*Ocean*, the poem, finally, is a gift to the ocean, a gift akin to the many other offerings — shoes, earrings, false teeth, giant pots of "green broth" infused with "teaspoons // of the stories behind our tears" and "the dew / from the morning mist" (Fifty-Three) — tossed into the sea throughout the pages of the book. It is a gift in recognition of our literal and littoral debt to the ocean in inspiring our boat building, our journeys, our books, and our books "*about the writing of those books*" (Prologue). *Ocean*, the poem, reclaims and restores some of the original terror and wonder of the ocean that we have sacrificed to our capitalist rampage. Through its restless pattern of discovering and rediscovering the multiplicity of our engagements with and debts to the ocean, Goyette's serial poem urges us to concoct a wet ontology and a blue ethics, etiquette, and epistemology. Or, to put it another way, *Ocean* relocates for us the periplus, the shoreline, of both our loss and our bliss in being "*oceanated*" (Prologue). *Ocean* calls us back into a right relationship with the sea and the shore. It is the poem as the Calling of the Ocean ceremony.

## Notes

[1] See Kroetsch for elaboration on the metaphor of the poet of the long poem as archaeologist and how in the long poem "archaeology supplants history" (119), as we will see in *Ocean*.

[2] The book is unpaginated, but each individual section is numbered consecutively, so I will refer to the sections by their numbers.

[3] In his review of the book, Chad Weidner also refers to the humans of the poem as "figures," writing that "The figures that appear in the collection, traders and fishermen, might occasionally seem predictable, but they nevertheless remain powerful images of the human relationship to the water" (1).

[4] Even Earle has confessed that, "'Since I am by nature an air-breathing sun-loving

mammal, it has taken some time for the awareness to seep into the cracks of my brain that most of the biosphere is ocean'" (qtd. in Brant 119-20).

[5] See Bernstein (7).

[6] Whereas Pound plays with textual fragments, languages, and writing systems, Goyette plays with temporality, history, anthropology, and contemporary popular culture.

[7] It is beyond the scope of this essay to perform a reading of *The Cantos* as intertext to *Ocean*. For my purposes here, it might suffice to compare Pound's "Canto 1" with its mention of preparations for a journey, including the ritual of appeasement of the dead.

[8] In *Wild Blue Media: Thinking through Seawater*, Melody Jue writes that, "from a historical perspective, the ocean has not always been blue. . . . Homer's *Odyssey* repeatedly refers to the ocean as 'the wine-dark sea,' in part because ancient Greek — like many older languages — did not have a word for what we would today call 'blue'" (x).

[9] Of her own relationship with the ocean, in an interview with Kerri Cull, Goyette muses that

> I think the ocean has always been at the edge of my thinking, lurking the way it does. It's a master class on humility and wildness for me, the long look and beauty, and has become essential. I was living in Montreal in my early twenties and was experiencing this longing, this wistfulness that I didn't understand until I moved to Nova Scotia a couple of years later. There's something about standing at the shore and looking out at a horizon of ocean that I find both tremendously grounding and expansive. When I first got here [Halifax], I felt myself breathe in a way I hadn't been breathing before, I also felt something in me relax, adjust to a level of comfort that is kin [sic] to a homecoming. I felt that I had somehow arrived.

[10] In *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot*, Robert Macfarlane writes that

> Such knowledge [navigation routes and how to read the ocean] became codified over time in the form of rudimentary charts and *peripli*, and then as route books in which sea paths were recorded as narratives and poems: the catalogue of ships in the *Iliad* is a pilot's mnemonic, for instance, as is the *Massioliote Periplus* (possibly sixth-century BC). Word-maps of sea routes occur in skaldic poetry, and are also folded into the Icelandic sagas (some of which offer directions for sailing from Norway to Iceland, with details of way stations, sighting points and other key *landtoninger*, or landmarks), as well as into more functional medieval Icelandic texts such as the extraordinary fourteenth-century *Landnámabók* (*The Book of Settlements*) whose hundred chapters and five parts tell the story of the takeover of Iceland by the Vikings, and include guides to the *verstrveger* — the western roads of the Atlantic that led from Norway to the Orkneys, Scotland, the Hebrides and Ireland, as well as to the Faeroes, Iceland and Greenland. All of these documents are, in Kenneth White's resonant phrase, "poetic logbooks, full of salt, wind and waves," and they eventually developed into the pilot books known variously as *routiers*, *rutters*, and *portolani* (the latter offering directions for coastwise rather than trans-oceanic passage crossings, whereby progress was measured by marking off headlands). (92)

[11] "*I played a skyscraper / but my arms got tired so I was replaced. Once I played a tree. / You're not praying hard enough, the audience heckled*" (Prologue). This single instance of "I" occurs in the context of acting out in dramatic (even school play) form the "*expeditions / to*

*find the ocean*," not in the context of the "I" of the poet or her persona (though it is hard to say for certain since we cannot know whether or not the poet has performed such roles in her past).

[12] In drawing this observation, I am not denigrating the human figures of the poem but suggesting that we might not be as remarkable in our human distinctiveness as we like to think, and that that might not be a bad thing.

[13] It might be these grand gestures that led the writer of the jacket copy to refer to them as "Goyette's offbeat cast of archetypes."

[14] *Ocean* could easily become a choreography.

[15] See the hydrocitizenship project web page at www.hydrocitizenship.com.

[16] Goyette comments in the interview with Compton on the feeling of surprise that can happen during the act of composition: "Or when you have been dumped by a man, and you walk out and the sun is still shining and the birds are still singing. At first you think, *Bastard!* but then you think, *It goes fine, doesn't it?*" (247).

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