Marine Encounters as Elemental Resistance: Frederick Douglass's and Charlotte Forten's Ecopoetic Atlantic Prose

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2026.17.1.5920

Abstract

This article explores elemental relations to the Atlantic Ocean and its coastal regions in two mid-nineteenth-century African American writers. While considerable work has been dedicated to African American environmental perspectives, there has been much less ecocritical engagement with relations to the Atlantic Ocean in nineteenth-century African American literature so far. This article addresses this gap by analyzing texts by Frederick Douglass and Charlotte L. Forten. It turns to their ecopoetic Atlantic prose through perspectives of elemental ecocriticism, i.e. approaches that focus on "elemental places, forces, and phenomena of the surrounding and sensuous world" (Macauley 1). After introducing theoretical premises of reading African American texts in the context of blue humanities thinking and through elemental ecocritical frameworks, this article turns to Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) to demonstrate how his slave narrative deploys elemental thinking to make sense of marine encounters and builds on these to articulate Douglass's individual agency. Forten's writing, on the other hand, in the form of her journals and through published letters, presents a host of picturesque images of "Old Ocean" to enact resistance strategies that revolve around the creation of new collectivities. Both writers, this article demonstrates, emphasize their deep experiential, material, and elemental relations with Atlantic waters which significantly shaped their worldviews and helped them develop their own marine narratives as elemental resistance to slavery and racism.

Keywords: African American literature, Atlantic Ocean, elemental ecocriticism, anti-slavery, race, resistance.

Resumen

Este artículo explora las relaciones elementales con el océano Atlántico y sus regiones costeras en dos escritores afroamericanos de mediados del siglo XIX. Si bien se han dedicado numerosos trabajos a las perspectivas medioambientales afroamericanas, hasta ahora ha habido mucho menos compromiso ecocrítico con las relaciones con el océano Atlántico en la literatura afroamericana del siglo XIX. Este artículo aborda esta laguna analizando textos de Frederick Douglass y Charlotte L. Forten. Se centra en su prosa atlántica ecopoética desde la perspectiva de la ecocrítica elemental, es decir, enfoques que se centran en "los lugares, fuerzas y fenómenos elementales del mundo circundante y sensual" (Macauley 1). Tras introducir las premisas teóricas de la lectura de textos afroamericanos en el contexto del pensamiento de las humanidades azules y a través de marcos ecocríticos elementales, este artículo se centra en *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), de Frederick Douglass, para demostrar cómo su narrativa de esclavitud utiliza el pensamiento elemental para dar sentido a los encuentros marinos y se basa en ellos para articular la agencia individual de Douglass. Por otro lado, los escritos de Forten, en forma de diarios y cartas publicadas, presentan una serie de imágenes pintorescas del "Viejo Océano" para poner en práctica estrategias de resistencia que giran en torno a la creación de nuevas colectividades. Este artículo demuestra que ambos escritores enfatizan sus profundas relaciones experienciales, materiales y elementales con las aguas del Atlántico, que moldearon significativamente su visión del mundo y les ayudaron a desarrollar sus propias narrativas marinas como resistencia elemental a la esclavitud y el racismo.

Palabras clave: Literatura afroamericana, océano Atlántico, ecocrítica elemental, antiesclavista, raza, resistencia.

After taking a group vacation in St. Croix in 2010, the founder of Outdoor Afro, Rue Mapp, described experiencing her fellow travelers' reluctance to go snorkeling in an interview as follows:

> [Their] expressions of alarm felt more like a visceral terror that echoed from a past coded in our DNA. In that instant, I considered the Middle Passage, which incidentally trudged over those same Caribbean waters, and in that fleeting moment, remembering the narrative of our past, the panic of my travel mates seemed justified. (qtd. in Glave 27)

Mapp's take on the reactions of her fellow African American travelers resonates with ambivalent relations to water, the sea, and especially the Atlantic Ocean in African American culture. It hints not only at an often-presumed general tendency of African Americans to stay away from water (that links with false stereotypes of African American environmental disinterestedness) but also registers a distinct sense of vulnerability and precarity in relation to the sea and water. Such feelings emerge with good reason, considering water-related histories of environmental racism and injustice. These range from segregation policies that denied access to recreational waters to practices and structures conditioned through racial histories that continue to leave African Americans (and other racialized minorities) on the forefront of environmental disasters and, in Cidney Phillip's words, "disproportionately vulnerable to water's proclivity to take back the land" (311) in a climate-changing world. Moreover, Mapp's "fleeting moment" of recognition is significant for rooting such water-related histories and her fellow traveler's reluctance in this Caribbean region within the foundational trauma of the Middle Passage and enslavement. Expressing what Anissa Janine Wardi describes as an African American "tradition [that] positions bodies of water as haunted by the bodies of those who lost their lives in the currents" (*Water* 227), Mapp draws attention to how the Middle Passage still figures as a lens through which to view relations to water and the sea.

The existence and continuing echoes of such water-related histories has immense relevance for human readings of and being with the ocean, as they have for some time been addressed through the blue humanities. With this article, I want to argue that Black diasporic and African American perspectives have the potential not merely to productively interact with but more fundamentally to help shift the coordinates of this sub-discipline of the environmental humanities that "draws on the ways in which the blue has long been an actant in the trans-oceanic movement of power" (Ferwerda 15). This is true in relation to water in general—as substance, materiality, element, text—as well as regarding relations to the Atlantic Ocean in particular. The latter are the main focus of the following, as I turn to two mid-nineteenth-century African American writers and their ecopoetic Atlantic prose. My use of the term ecopoetics in this article is inspired by Jonathan Skinner's wide definition of ecopoetics as "a house making" where eco signals "the house we share with several million other species, our planet Earth" and poetics "is used as *poesis* or making" (7; emphasis in original). While ecopoetics thusly understood designates the wider analytical framework of my readings, I speak of an "ecopoetic Atlantic prose"

 ISSN 2171-9594

to discuss Frederick Douglass's and Charlotte Forten's writing about the Atlantic in a specifically African American context and with a focus on elemental thinking.[1] To look at, engage with, and experience the Atlantic with these writers means more than addressing this body of water with an 'additional' dimension of what Ian F. Haney López calls "racial fabrication" (196), i.e. the construction of race which in the nineteenth-century U.S. context occurred primarily through the (arbitrary) dichotomy of Black and White. Rather, it demands of us to consider the ontology of Blackness in its entanglement with Blueness, and the reflection of this ontology within these writers' ecopoetic acts of "house making." It requires us to consider as dynamic the effects of what Jonathan Howard has recently described, in one of the first attempts at connecting the blue humanities with African American perspectives, as African diasporic "aqueous genealogy of unsettlement," which to claim and be claimed by means "effectively to come from the ocean twice. Beyond the universal oceanic genesis in which we all share, history has caused the African Diaspora to double back and begin again" (311). The histories of the Middle Passage created conditions that interlinked the invention of Blackness with the experience of Blueness, and the readings in this article are part of taking on the task of better understanding these interlinkages as they shaped African American writing on the Atlantic, thus proposing new potentials for the blue humanities.

My readings suggest that recognizing these entanglements between the making of Blackness and experiencing Blueness through the ways in which "middle passing Africans asked [questions] of a blue planet while in the throes of becoming black" (Howard 320), means dealing with a variety of diverse experiences and representations of the Atlantic by African American writers. Thus, this article demonstrates some of the ways in which nineteenth-century African American literary voices have not only not tried to stay away from these waters but have been shaped by the elemental qualities of coastal regions, deploying such qualities to create an ecopoetic Atlantic prose that resists slavery and racism. By listening to the frequencies of Blackness and Blueness in Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) and Charlotte L. Forten's journals and letters, my aim is to draw attention to the ambivalences of nineteenth-century African American literary engagements with Atlantic waters and to the ways in which these waters figured as an important component of resistance strategies, asking: What are the affordances of Atlantic waters—as medium, materiality, element, text—for these

[1] My broad use of the term reflects how terminology of environmentally oriented scholarship (including foundational terms such as "environmental") often needs to be expanded in the context of African American literature (cf. Hicks 206; Klestil, *Environmental* 10; Wardi, *Water* 12). Ecopoetics, as a "slippery term with no singular definition" (Ferrari 131), is currently being used in a wider sense in African American (feminist) contexts, for example, in Carlyn Ena Ferrari's recent study of Anne Spencer, where, understood "[a]s a theory that explores the relationship between humans and nature, ecopoetics pushes against monolithic visions of the natural world because it necessitates consideration of all intersecting identities that inform human experiences" (11). My use of the term in the broad sense designated above is inspired by Ferrari's suggestion to think ecopoetics as "both descriptive and political" framework (11), which I combine with elemental ecocritical thinking to take on take on Douglass's and Forten's ecopoetic Atlantic prose.

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African American writers? How does the fabrication of racial categories in the antebellum period and of Blackness as an invention entangled with Blueness, shape and interact with the reading, relation to, perception and experience of the ocean? How, if, as Susanne Ferwerda suggests, "thinking with blue foregrounds blue resistance" (15), do writers such as Douglass and Forten find and engage in strategies of resistance, tell narratives of resilience and the human in alternative ways through the sea?

To spotlight some of the potentials of (re)reading African American relations to the waters of the Atlantic in the context of blue humanities discourses, this article will analyze Douglass's and Forten's ecopoetics with a focus on elemental thinking and resistance. I begin with a brief introduction of theoretical premises of combining blue humanities thinking and elemental ecocriticism for readings of African American literature. Subsequently, I consider Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* (1845) and selected writings by Charlotte L. Forten for their engagement with marine surroundings, suggesting that Douglass's fascination with the Atlantic plays into his creation of individual agency, while Forten's picturesque portrayals of the Atlantic support her creation of new collectivities and solidarity.

Blue Humanities, the Elements, and African American Literature

If human relations to water, as Steven Mentz points out, are marked by fundamental contradictions, since watery elements simultaneously "allure and threaten human bodies" making for an "awkward fit between humans and water" (*Introduction* 4), African American relations to water are characterized by additional ambivalences. Hinting at the ways in which such ambivalences are not simply formative within African American culture, but also part of broader stereotyping and racializing processes, Rinaldo Walcott captures such contradictions in his notion of "the black aquatic" as "the ambiguous and ambivalent relationship that Black people hold to bodies of water. It is a relationship that is not simply held by Black people but one that […] is also assumed by others to be actually constitutive of black subjectivity" (65). Importantly, such ambiguity and ambivalence has not led to African American cultural production refraining from water and the seas. To the contrary, water is in countless forms a persistent presence in African American literature in ways that include revealing water as component within oppressive social structures, systems, and relations (e.g. of slavery and Jim Crow) and claiming water as part of resistance strategies. Scholars have drawn attention to this in a variety of ways, describing African American water-related practices and histories, for example, in maroon traditions, in fishing grounds used by the enslaved (Giltner), or in subversive relations to and usage of rivers and waterways (Bolster; Buchanan; Parry and Yingling). Water, such studies and others (esp. Wardi, *Water*; "Currents") have revealed, while being integral to exploitative practices and enslavement, could also afford forms of autonomy even during slavery and thus be part of resistance strategies—not least the Atlantic Ocean, which served Frederick Douglass and others as means of escape.

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Water thus evokes mixed and contradictory feelings in African American resilience cultures, as bodies of water figure as "texts of both forced and chosen movement" (Wardi, "Currents" 227). Like other parts of the natural world, water expresses what Kimberly Ruffin's calls an "ecological burden-and-beauty paradox" (2).

In light of such scholarship, potential connections with thinking in the blue humanities are obvious, especially if we consider how the latter recently "has radiated out from oceans to include rivers, lakes, glaciers, and many other forms of water" (Mentz, "Poetics" 138) and seeing how the blue humanities are increasingly stressing socio-political criticism in relation to watery materialities. There is fertile common ground in combining perspectives from African American (and postcolonial) studies and the "polyvocal theoretical currents that are thought-with in the blue humanities [that] build on the expansive nature of environmental cultural thought and the genealogies of aquatic scholarship" (Ferwerda 3). Similar interests seem at stake as blue humanities scholars such as Mentz call for an "offshore trajectory" that "should move beyond the Atlantic and beyond Shakespeare" (*Introduction* 17), while, from African American studies perspectives, too, there is a growing awareness that "grappling with the liquid ecologies of transatlantic slavery and identifying how they come to bear on the present means transgressing the saltwater focus that has long dominated that discourse" (Phillip 4-5). Although there are only a handful of recent studies to date arguing explicitly for the significance of postcolonial and African American perspectives within the blue humanities (Ferwerda; Howard; Knopf et al; Phillip), there are good reasons, beyond the important need to increasing the diversity of blue humanities thinking, why African American (studies) perspectives should more thoroughly become part of this transdisciplinary field that, as Melody Jue points out, addresses topics that "usually require expertise from more than one field […] giving rise to a number of interstitial scholars" (16).

The primary potential of a positioning at the interstice of blue humanities thought and African American studies perspectives is precisely the caveat with which the latter comes to readings of Blueness that Mapp's experience hints at. This positioning requires that we deliberately think Blueness as entangled with the invention of Blackness that finds its historical signature in the atrocities of the Middle Passage. To recognize the potentials of this entangled ontology as perspective demands both accepting the Middle Passage as the prolonged trauma of modernity but also recognizing its status as more than trauma. The Middle Passage is, as various scholars in extant African American studies discourse have laid out, what Howard calls the "ground zero of black *ab-jection*" (311, emphasis in original). It marks, in Frank Wilderson's words, "the Black's first ontological instance" (14), and, Howard further explains, "[e]ven if we could or would forget the redoubled genesis of Middle Passage [that means coming from the ocean twice], history remains our reminder" (Howard 311). This is the context in which we need to read the theorizations of a (non-metaphorical) anti-black atmosphere created through a singular water-related experience that meant the production of Blackness, whether read, with Christina Sharpe, as "the weather," or, in Kelli Brown Douglas's concept, as a "climate" that

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"makes the destruction and death of black bodies inevitable and even permissible" (xiii).

Yet, it is crucial for recognizing the fundamental potential that lies in interlinking African American studies perspectives with blue humanities frameworks—a potential that goes beyond merely 'extending' the latter's concerns to include more diverse perspectives through the former—to see how this painful making of Blackness intersects with an experience of Blueness. Consider, in this respect, how Walcott further theorizes his "black aquatic:"

> The black aquatic pursues the relationship Black people have to bodies of water as foundationally formative of blackness, and it seeks to provide an aesthetic narratology and hauntology of contemporary claims of black subjectivity. Therefore, if the sea has been death, it has also been birth. The black aquatic names the claim that blackness itself is birthed in salt water—the Atlantic Ocean as a first instance—and then later becomes a kind of saline embodiment of early modern and late modern new life forms or Black selves. (Walcott 65)

The creation or "birth" of Blackness, in other words, figures also as an experience of Blueness, which leads Howard to suggest that the questions Édouard Glissant's famously imagined abducted Africans asking of the Atlantic in *Poetics of Relation* ("What kind of river […] has not middle? Is nothing there but straight ahead?") should be considered as "the original negro question" (Howard 320). Blueness thus echoes in foundational ways through the invention of Blackness and through African American literary traditions. Its "saline" frequencies are part of how this writing tradition relates to water in general and to the Atlantic Ocean in particular. Beyond what Glave describes as "[s]tories of the horrors and hardships of the Middle Passage, passed from generation to generation through oral tradition" (4), Blueness and Blackness both shape this tradition and its water-related ecopoetics. To acknowledge and think with positions that "assume the ocean, and not the land […] as ground zero for social and ecological thought" (Howard 319) has, in my view, the potential to significantly affect the coordinates of blue humanities perspectives and should be considered more thoroughly.

My readings of Douglass and Forten, in this context, come as an intervention in two senses. First, in relation to the current tendencies in blue humanities discourse to move with an "offshore trajectory" (Mentz, *Introduction* 17) and towards including a larger diversity of perspectives, they present both departure and return. They return by staying with the Atlantic, but also depart from being "limited to canonical writers" (31), and, more importantly, by seeking to highlight the invention of Blackness as integral part of thinking Blueness. Second, my rereading of Douglass and Forten intervenes in blue humanities thinking by illustrating potentials of an analysis carried out through an "elemental" lens. Such a lens builds on insights of the emergent sub-field of material ecocriticism called "elemental ecocriticism," which suggests, according to Macauley, a perspective driven by the conviction "that environmental dilemmas are, in part, a result of our historical, cultural, and experiential relationships with earth, fire, air, and water" and turns to "elemental places, forces, and phenomena of the surrounding and sensuous world" (1). While this article is not the place for

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discussing extensively how an elemental focus might be productive for the blue humanities more broadly, the reason for choosing such an elemental focus for the present context emerges from its particular potential regarding African American cultural practices that often engage in elemental thinking. As I have pointed out elsewhere, to look after the elements "is particularly promising in relation to African American literature and environmental thought, where a forgetfulness about the elements often lamented by scholars of the elemental turn seems less pronounced" (Klestil 41). The elements, in other words, have "a distinct life in African American traditions" (42).

For the present purpose, elemental thinking is particularly helpful for my readings of Douglass and Forten in three ways. Firstly, a focus on the elements is well suited for describing these writers' ecopoetic Atlantic prose because their representational strategies frequently perceive and translate the sea by using the elements as what Cohen and Duckert term "metaphor magnets" (10-11). Douglass and Forten deploy elemental language as they mobilize the elements' "ability to bond materiality and narrative" (11). Secondly, an elemental reading helps to analyze these writers' relations to marine surroundings more comprehensively, as it expands a focus on (oceanic) water to include relations among diverse elements as 'building blocks' of human experience. This not just in the sense of enabling a turn to "promiscuous combinations" into which the elements enter (7), since they "are constituent parts, defined by their role in composition" (Starosielski 1). Rather, an elemental lens also facilitates descriptions of trans-corporeal linkages with (human) bodies, in recognition that "[t]he human bodies that serve as temporary hosts for itinerant tales are themselves elemental, every mind, soul, eye, or book a recording device to give local habitation as story proliferates, mutates, moves along" (Cohen and Duckert 11). Thirdly, analyzing Douglass's and Forten's ecopoetic Atlantic prose through elemental thinking sheds light on how these writers gain agency. It reveals how "speaking of the elements as if we could know the elements, allying with air, water, fire, and earth to comprehend what exceeds us in scale" (11-12), bears the potential to enact what I call elemental resistance: acts of writing through the elements against enslavement and racism, as the material (and "saline") echoes of the invention Blackness.

Frederick Douglass's Watery Body and the Elements of Individual Resistance

Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, first published by the Boston Anti-Slavery Society in 1845, has been recognized as a significant environmental text. While the *Narrative* from ecocritical perspectives was initially read as representing broader "anti-pastoral" tendencies of African American literature (Bennett), others have by now taken Douglass's text as an expression of African American "strategic pastoral" (Klestil, *Environmental* 107-115) or have argued that the *Narrative* calls for an alternative form of humanism (Johnson 42-66). More generally, Douglass's writings have been identified as raising

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environmental questions, for example, by expressing a Free-Soil doctrine (Newman 43-72) or alternative agricultural models (Ellis; Goddu; Finseth 272-291), whereas the genre of the slave narrative as such, despite having been viewed as marked by an "anti-nature writing tendency" (Outka 172), has increasingly been explored as environmentally oriented literature (Gerhardt).

At the same time, however, questions of water and blue humanities perspectives have remained underrepresented so far, whether in broader generic terms, seeing with Phillip that "scarce attention […] is paid to how the slave narrative emerged as a waterlogged genre" (5), or with respect to Douglass's *Narrative* more specifically. With regard to its representation of watery nature and as a first example of nineteenth-century African American literary engagements with Atlantic coastal spaces and materialities, Douglass's *Narrative* is both topically representative and exceptional with respect to the quality and power of its rhetoric. The text pointedly expresses the ambivalence of water as material component of violent carceral landscapes of enslavement and simultaneously as means of recognizing, conceptualizing, and securing freedom. On the one hand, water is involved as part of oppressive systems of slavery: rivers are places where violent murders can be committed without punishment, as "blood and brains marked the water" where an enslaved person named Demby had been brutally killed by his master (Douglass 24). (Drinking) water is also part of the heartbreaking image Douglass draws of his grandmother who, being too old to work productively, is turned "out to die" by her master and sent to live in a cabin in the woods where she "gropes her way in the darkness of age, for a drink of water" (37-38). On the other hand, depictions of water in the *Narrative* reveal the promise to break the bonds of enslavement. This is visible not only in Douglass's eventual escape by smuggling himself into New York using the papers of a free African American seaman, which signals the practical potentials of coastal regions and marine knowledge he gained working in a shipyard (61-63), but also in the ways in which "taking the water route" was where fugitives "were less liable to be suspected as runaways" (58).

One of the most revealing passages in Douglass's *Narrative* with respect to conceptualizing an elemental resistance comes with those famous contemplative moments on the Atlantic shore that convey a sense of "blue" disorientation that, the composition of the narrative suggests, ultimately enables Douglass to gain freedom. Demonstrating the literary potentials of marine Atlantic regions from African American antebellum perspectives, the author-narrator, in one of the most iconic scenes of the *Narrative*, standing on the banks of the Chesapeake Bay, addresses its

> […] broad bosom [which] was ever white with sails from every quarter of the habitable globe. Those beautiful vessels, robed in purest white, so delightful to the eye of freemen, were to me so many shrouded ghosts, to terrify and torment me with thoughts of my wretched condition. I have often, in the deep stillness of a summer's Sabbath, stood all alone upon the lofty banks of that noble bay, and traced, with saddened heart and tearful eye, the countless number of sails moving off to the mighty ocean. The sight of these always affected me powerfully. (46)

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The image of Douglass standing on the shore dreaming of the sails seen in the distance has been part of the African American literary tradition ever since, being echoed, for instance, in the beginning of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). The passage inspires Douglass's narrator to seek freedom through taking flight as it interlinks the Atlantic coast with the "habitable globe" and represents a material encounter with a coastal setting. This encounter with the waters of the Atlantic, which ultimately disorients the narrator's perspective in ways that enable resistance, figures, at first sight, primarily as a visual encounter, as the choice of words in the scenes above ("eye"; "sight") highlights. Yet, Douglass's narrator also engages with his Atlantic surroundings through elemental thinking, as his apostrophe to the ocean that follows suggests:

> You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave! You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip! You are freedom's swift-winged angels, that fly round the world; I am confined in bands of iron! O that I were free! Oh, that I were on one of your gallant decks, and under your protecting wing! Alas! betwixt me and you, the turbid waters roll. Go on, go on. O that I could also go! Could I but swim! If I could fly! […] It cannot be that I shall live and die a slave. I will take to the water. This very bay shall yet bear me into freedom. (46)

These lines, drawing much of their rhetorical power from Douglass's creation of strong binaries, also do so by engaging in the creation of elemental 'building blocks.' The coastal image that the narrator conveys emerges through an elemental language of slavery: he refers to the classical elements of wind ("gentle gale") and water ("turbid waters"), yet also emphasizes 'metallic' components that materially link the presented scene with his social position, by referencing the "chains" and "bands of iron" as fixating elements of slavery (46). Douglass thus inserts elements of his world as an enslaved person into his portrayal of the Chesapeake Bay, providing an example of what Stacy Alaimo describes as "elemental entanglements that make the dualisms of the moderns seem dull indeed" (300)—dualisms such as the grand "dualities between God and nature, matter and spirit, body and soul" (300) are secondary to an elemental encounter with the Atlantic through the perspective of an enslaved person. Douglass visually engages but also portrays himself as elementally being bound to the coastal waters meeting the human eye and, when claiming that "[he] will take to the water" (46), highlights the Atlantic waters as a powerful reminder of the foundational fluidity that an enslaved being is denied.

Crucially, Douglass further stresses the materiality of his Atlantic encounter by representing himself as a being of a watery nature. In the scenes on the Chesapeake Bay, this becomes visible when Douglass speaks through the materiality of an enslaved observer's eye that is "tearful" (46), becoming a materially altered visual organ. Douglass's recognition of the meanings and values of freedom in this scene is therefore not simply inspired by a scenery that allows him to contrast his own position against "the countless number of sails moving off to the mighty ocean" (46). Instead, the narrator also underscores the fact that humans are water-based beings—members of what Astrida Neimanis has called a "hydrocommons" (161)—while

 ISSN 2171-9594

drawing attention to how the invention of Blackness (as metaphysical as it is) changes materialities. The materiality of his tears is altered as his racially justified enslavement produces these tears. Douglass's proposal of humans as entities of watery trans-corporeality thus addresses what Steve Mentz calls the "core intellectual challenge of the blue humanities [that] explores how water functions in and across multiple scales" within and beyond entities designated as human bodies (*Introduction*, xxi-xiv). In addition, it reveals these as conditioned by the making of Blackness that emerged as entangled with a foundational experience of Blueness and whose "saline embodiment" (65), to use Walcott's term, continues to have material effects, even for those who, like Douglass, did not experience first-hand the Blueness of the Middle Passage.

With respect to Douglass's overall strategy, it is crucial to see how his visual as well as material encounter with Atlantic waters and Douglass's elemental articulation of this experience afford a productive disorientation within the structure of the *Narrative*. The Chesapeake Bay scene and apostrophe, with its focus on the atrocities of being enslaved and being "naturalized" as non-person through the invention of Blackness, also represents a disorienting recognition through Blueness that holds the potential to disintegrate systems of slavery. This disorientation stems from Douglass's reading of his world through an elemental lens, through the 'building blocks' of which it consists, which leads to a disruptive clarification of an unbearable discrepancy between his assigned position as an enslaved person and his inhabited position as an experiencing and material being. Moreover, Douglass's placement of the marine encounter in the *Narrative* highlights the essential function of its elemental resistance within Douglass's overall strategy of gaining a form of (in his case strongly masculinist) selfhood: the experience of the Atlantic comes immediately before the author-narrator's famous chiasmic announcement "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (47), which is followed shortly by the depiction of Douglass's pivotal fight with the "first-rate overseer and negro-breaker" Mr. Covey, which results in him ceasing to be whipped and "remain[ing] a slave in form" only (50-51). That Douglass composed his narrative with this clear succession of core events suggests the pivotal importance of his encounter with the Atlantic as a transformative moment that both disorients Douglass to recognize the stupor of enslavement yet also reorients him by creating the chiasmic recognition that enables the narrator to act for gaining his manhood (in a dual sense). Douglass thus stresses a disorienting encounter with Blueness, which he interlinks with both pointing out its entanglement with his own position as created by the invention of Blackness and articulating a concept of individual resistance that he reads as a revived "sense of my own manhood" (50).

Charlotte Forten's Picturesque Ocean and the Elements of Collective Resistance

In many ways, differences between Douglass and the second writer I turn to for her literary representations of her Atlantic experience could hardly be greater.

 ISSN 2171-9594

Charlotte Forten, born in 1837, was never enslaved, being the granddaughter of the wealthy Philadelphian sailmaker James Forten, and extraordinarily privileged as a member of a social group historian Joel Williamson once described as a "free mulatto elite" (xiv). She grew up within abolitionism, coming into contact with anti-slavery and feminist sentiments throughout her childhood and her youth, and gained an education that gave her an exceptional knowledge of the arts and literature of her age. Among her acquaintances were a host of well-known figures such as William Lloyd Garrison and William Wells Brown as well as the poet John Greenleaf Whittier who was instrumental in securing her participation in the "Port Royal Experiment," which sought to educate freedmen in the North Carolina Sea Islands during the Civil War. Her fame and literary output are humble in comparison to Douglass's eminence, consisting of poems, a few shorter published pieces, letters, translations, and her journals (Braxton 218). The latter are the best-known part of her work and particularly important from a literary historical perspective as one of only a handful of nineteenth-century African American women's diaries recovered so far.

At the same time, there are also similarities and links between Douglass and Forten. Forten's ecocritical potential, like Douglass's, is increasingly being recognized and her journals in particular have been identified as important environmental texts by now (Barnes; Klestil, *Environmental* 174-193). The most important connection between both writers for the present context lies in their vivid representations of watery nature and Atlantic coastal environments, as for both Douglass and Forten water figures as an object of fascination, an element that, in Oppermann and Iovino's words, "signifies reflections and images, and—embodied in rivers, lakes, and seas—[…] undeniably evokes 'reverie'" (311). Moreover, they share an impulse to mobilize their encounters with the Atlantic as part of their strategies of criticizing U.S. racial slavery and racial prejudice, from which Forten, too, despite her privileged position in the North, suffered, learning what she describes in her *Journals* as "lesson[s] of suspicion and distrust" that apparently contributed to her rather timid character (140). Although thus sharing common ground by addressing the ambivalences of watery nature from African American perspectives, their texts also represent different strategic potentials of engagement with Atlantic coastal surroundings for mid-nineteenth-century Black writers. While Douglass's encounter with Atlantic waters feeds into his narrative of gaining individual agency, Forten's representations of the Atlantic coastal regions, both in New England and on the Sea Islands, create the ocean as multifaceted refuge that provides her with an emotional and spiritual belonging, while also offering forms of elemental resistance that sustain her anti-slavery activism by creating new collectives. Thus, her strategy is an example of what Mentz identifies as one of the "fundamental features of blue humanities thinking," namely the "emergence of new collectivities" through marine relations (*Introduction* xvi).

Besides her general love of nature, Forten's writings betray a particular fascination with the Atlantic Ocean and marine life. In an early journal entry written while residing in Salem, Massachusetts, of July 18, 1854, for example, she describes:

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> I shall never forget my emotions on first beholding the glorious ocean. I stood on the shore, listening to the wild sounds of the waves. They were of the richest emerald as they rose in grandeur, then suddenly falling broke into foam white as the drifting snow. Many mingled feelings rose to my mind. But above all others was that of perfect happiness. For liberty, glorious, boundless liberty reigned there supreme! How very grand were those immense rocks overhanging the sea! They seemed like guardian spirits of the waves. (*Journals* 88)

Representative of the exalting vocabulary Forten frequently brings to her ocean-related writing, the passage reveals fundamental differences between the Atlantic prose found in Forten's journals and Douglass's *Narrative*. For example, Forten's encounters with the Atlantic are usually much more immersive, as she literally walks by shores, is in close proximity to Atlantic waters whether on sea journeys or on land, and sometimes literally touches these waters. Moreover, this closeness often translates into a more sensuous (sometimes synesthetic) encounter with Atlantic environs ("the wild sounds of waves;" "mingled feelings"), which also shows in her frequent focus on colors ("emerald;" "foam white"). Forten, in her prose, is therefore often much closer physically to her "glorious ocean" than Douglass is to his "mighty ocean" which he experiences primarily visually during his apostrophe (46). This discrepancy hints at how fundamentally access to ocean surroundings as such depends on (and needs to be viewed as) social privilege, as we note two of the most important affordances of marine encounters for Forten: providing a refuge from the racial prejudice prevalent in her home country and epitomizing notions of freedom that are currently unavailable for many through the effects of the invention of Blackness. As "perfect happiness" reigns and "glorious, boundless liberty" (88) is perceived by the waters she encounters, communion with the Atlantic offers Forten a sanctuary from racism and a guidance for her soul, as well as a source of ethics and a means through which to understand and criticize society.

As her portrayals of the Atlantic thus often demonstrate how skillfully she navigates some of the (nature) aesthetics of her day, such as the conventions of the pastoral, the picturesque, and the sublime, Forten's relations to marine surroundings are not merely picturesque descriptions but also, I argue, represent a form of elemental thinking through her sense-focused language. Although using regular picturesque vocabulary that characteristically speaks of how "wild and strange" the "Old Ocean" seems or of how "the sky too is beautiful—a deep, delicious blue, with soft, white, fleecy clouds floating over it" (Forten, *Journals* 139-140), it is hardly adequate to read her numerous depictions of the ocean as merely conventional picturesque landscape descriptions or, as Billington once put it, as passages that "describe the weather, family affairs, the landscape, and other matters of purely local interest" (40). Rather, I suggest that Forten's sensuous marine experience, like Douglass's primarily visual one, bears important elemental qualities: classic elements are central to the journals' language, as the "air is so pure and balmy" (Forten, *Journals* 59), or when coastal winds and the "breeze was stirring, laden with fragrance of locust and sweetbriar" (74), and Forten repeatedly connects the "deep blue water of the bay" with "the azure sky" (80). Moreover, she depicts immersing herself through various

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sensual and cognitive experiences (unavailable not only to Douglass but to many other contemporaries without Forten's class privilege) in marine elementalities. In one of her few published essays, for example, titled "Glimpses of New England" (1858), she describes "gathering shells and seaweed on the beach, or sitting on the rocks, listening to the wild music of the waves, and watching the clouds of spray as they sprang high up in the air, then fell again in snowy wreaths at our feet" (qtd. Billington 25). Also, Forten describes her visits to botanical institutions where she sees "many curiosities," telling readers, for example, how "we saw a very small portion of the green slime found in impure water; when seen through the microscope, it appeared like a large piece of seaweed and looked very beautiful" (*Journals* 78). Such moments reveal an innocent encounter of Atlantic coastal surroundings that is significantly shaped by her privileged social position, which enables the sensuous experience and enthusiasm for "Old Ocean" (39) regularly articulated in her diaries.

At the same time, Forten's writing leaves no doubt that the invention of Blackness shapes her life and her sense of self in indirect yet powerful ways as the root cause of the racism from which she suffers. Concepts of race produce the parameters and coordinate system of both the unfolding of Forten's life and of her marine experience: not only via the overt racial prejudice which she personally experiences in Philadelphia, New England, and even while on the Sea Islands, but also through the abolitionist circles that form her world in response to the reality of a slave system built on the fabrication of Blackness. Her being in Salem to avoid Philadelphia's segregated schooling system, her relation to the events that unfold as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 is enacted, and the war as the historical event that shapes her life like no other occurrence, by having her take on the duties of a schoolmarm on the North Carolina Sea Islands, are all ultimately rooted in the haunting invention of Blackness.

Here, in the South, specifically in the most famous portion of her journal chronicling what has gone down in history as the "Port Royal Experiment," Forten's broader resistance strategies through marine encounters are most clearly visible. What Lisa A. Long has called her "war work" at the Sea Islands has been remembered as Forten's primary achievement and "was attractive because it gave political force to work traditionally performed by women in pseudo-domestic settings, such as teaching" (41). It is also important, however, when read through a blue humanities lens, because it demonstrates how Forten deploys representations of Atlantic waters strategically as a means to create new collectivities. In one of the first entries describing her experience of the ocean on the islands, of October 28, 1862, Forten's writing suggests additional dimensions of relating to Atlantic waters:

> The row was delightful. It was just at sunset—a grand Southern sunset; and the glamorous clouds of crimson and gold were reflected in the waters below, which were as smooth and calm as a mirror. Then as we glided along, the rich sonorous tones of the boatmen broke upon the evening stillness. The singing impressed me very much. It was so sweet and strange and somber. (*Journals* 390)

 ISSN 2171-9594

Passages such as these, representative of the journal entries depicting Forten's participation in the educational experiment on the Sea Islands, add to her generally enthusiastic, sensuous portrayals of the ocean a fascination with the Southern culture of the freedmen of the Sea Islands, in particular their songs, which become a key component of her Atlantic prose from the South. In addition to her typical foregrounding of colors ("crimson and gold") to convey a sensuous experience of the sea and thus a tendency to focus meaning and elemental substance into 'building blocks' ("sunset;" "clouds"), Forten here inserts the "rich and sonorous tones" of the freedmen as crucial part of her experience. The sounds they produce become an additional layer of her encounter with the sea that enhances its numinous qualities (in another journal entry of November 2, 1962, she describes her experience of these sounds as "a kind of trance") and functions as an element of the landscape. Crucially, this strategy allows Forten to play with collective identities: the "we" in these episodes of the journals, as in the passage above, signals collectivities of both being an educator (as a "schoolmarm") and being a Northerner (as representing a section of the country at war with another over slavery), someone who looks at (and hears, feels) the portrayed world as a visitor with a touristy and partially a quasi-ethnographic gaze that is separated from the freedmen. While problematic insofar as Forten's depictions are sometimes on the verge of turning the formerly enslaved population into picturesque parts of the landscape (thus echoing racializing strategies of plantation pastoral traditions), she thus effectively uses her marine experience of the Atlantic to create new collectivities and alliances with Northern readers against slavery.

This potential of Forten's ecopoetic Atlantic prose is particularly visible in the few published accounts of her Southern experience, such as the essay "Life on the Sea Islands" (1864). Though a controversial piece that is considered by some as "Forten's most significant publication during her lifetime" (Rodier 108) and by others as "a travelogue of little historical significance" (Peterson 188), the essay represents another insightful example of Forten's marine encounters, for instance, when it gives her impressions of the New Year's Day celebrations. Depicting a ride home from the celebrations at Camp Saxton, Forten describes the scenery in the following words: "The moonlight on the water, the perfect stillness around, the wildness and solitude of the ruins, all seemed to give new pathos to that ever dear and beautiful old song [played by a band on a boat]. It came very near to all of us,—strangers in that strange Southern land." ("Life" 181) While in some ways fulfilling the promise of Whittier's announcement of the piece as a "graceful and picturesque description of the new condition of things on the Sea Islands of South Carolina" (qtd. in Forten, "Life" 163), Forten thereby also uses her representation of Atlantic waters as an opportunity for creating collectivity and asking for solidarity in ways that extend beyond the strategies found in her journal-writing. Her sitting on the "ruined wall of the old fort" for the celebrations she describes in her essay signals her alliance with Northern forces and (military) victory while at the same time seeking to emotionally align Northern audiences with the work of the "strangers in that strange Southern land"

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(181). Forten's "us" ("Life" 181) in this passage and in "Life on the Sea Islands" again seeks inclusion in the group of Northern schoolmarms, yet it also expresses a desire for solidarity across racialized social groups in Northern audiences. Forten's *us*, in contrast to Douglass's individualism, which revolves around the ocean's reviving "within *me* a sense of *my* manhood" (Douglass 50; my emphasis), thus suggests another form of resistance that is rooted in collectivism.

Conclusions

To conclude, I wish to make two broader propositions as to the potential of exploring nineteenth-century African American literary encounters with the Atlantic in relation to blue humanities thinking. First, it is important to recognize that considering African American historical and literary engagements with the waters of the Atlantic is of vital importance for creating genealogies of African American environmental and, in particular, aqueous histories. The latter, Douglass and Forten's ecopoetic Atlantic prose suggests, offer an alternative perspective on what Margaret Cohen calls "hydrophasia," i.e., the general disregard of the sea, which Cohen diagnoses as a "pervasive twentieth-century attitude" (14). Attending to divergent histories of hydrophasia by recovering blue frequencies in African American culture, for example, through writers such as Douglass and Forten helps address questions of Black relations to the Atlantic anew. It suggests a long African American tradition of being with the sea (beyond the history of the Middle Passage) from which to learn and which may also help challenge persisting stereotypes of African American environmental disinterestedness today.

Second, one should thus also stress what could be gained for blue humanities thinking more broadly: reading texts such as those by Douglass and Forten adds to the diversity of narratives around Atlantic waters and coastal regions, bringing in (racialized) perspectives that think the Atlantic, for example, through empowering reflections of freedom or as refuge. Additionally, it is vital for blue humanities discourse to look more consciously through perspectives that acknowledge how the experience of Blueness has also continuously been shaped by histories and legacies of powerful social constructions such as Blackness. To consider how deeply entangled the invention of Blackness (still) is in when, where, and how Blueness can be experienced needs to be at the center of attention if the blue humanities seek to address what it means to "consider the blue not just as symbol but as material-semiotic actant or figuration" (Ferwerda 4). It is clear that to think about and with an African American literary and cultural tradition about Blueness requires specific frameworks and parameters (a focus on elemental thinking may be one productive way of interlinking with blue humanities discourses), but this tradition and African diasporic discourses generally also speak to the most fundamental questions of thinking about Blueness. Such discourses demand to be addressed if we are to make the ocean visible as a multi-layered text and wish, in Mentz' words, to "write in collaboration and co-conspiracy with planetary waters" (*Introduction* 32).

 ISSN 2171-9594

Submission received 28 July 2025 Revised version accepted 1 March 2026

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