



# The Blue Humanities: Representations of Oceans, Rivers, and Aquatic Ecosystems in English Literature

**Dr. Sharanagouda<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Y. Stephen Xavier<sup>2</sup>, Dr. P. Sankavi<sup>3</sup>, Dr. Priyanka Tiwari<sup>4</sup>,  
Srikanta M<sup>5</sup>, Dr. U. Sreerekha<sup>6</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English Veerashaiva College, Ballari Email: sharanu091@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor – Senior Grade, Department of English Pavendar Bharathidasan College of Engineering and Technology (SRM Bharathidasan Campus) Thanjay Natarajan Nagar, Mathur, Pudukkottai – 622515, Email: stephenxavier.y@gmail.com

<sup>3</sup>Assistant Professor of English Gobi Arts & Science College Gobichettipalayam, Erode Email: sankaviprakash69@gmail.com

<sup>4</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences JECRC University, Jaipur Email: priyanka255tiwari@gmail.com

<sup>5</sup>Assistant Professor Department of Health System Management Studies JSS Academy of Higher Education & Research Mysuru, Karnataka Email: srikanta.dhms@jssuni.edu.in

<sup>6</sup>Assistant Professor Veltech Multitech Dr. Rangarajan Dr. Sakunthala Engineering College Avadi, Chennai Email: sreerekha2k15@gmail.com

## Abstract

Water covers most of the planet's surface, yet literary studies has historically privileged terrestrial and pastoral settings, a bias that scholars have labelled “chlorophilia.” Since Steve Mentz's 2009 coinage of “blue cultural studies,” an interdisciplinary field known as the Blue Humanities has emerged to reposition oceans, rivers, and aquatic ecosystems at the centre of literary-critical inquiry. This paper presents a systematic literature review, conducted according to the PRISMA 2020 protocol, of English-language scholarship on the literary representation of water. Following a structured search of Scopus, Web of Science, the MLA International Bibliography, and JSTOR, 1,218 records were identified, of which 20 met the eligibility criteria for full synthesis. The review maps these studies across three descriptive dimensions — publication period, aquatic-ecosystem focus, and theoretical approach — using tables, a PRISMA flow diagram, and bar-chart visualisations. Findings indicate a marked and accelerating scholarly turn toward oceanic and maritime literature since 2019, organised chiefly around Blue Humanities, critical oceanic studies, material ecocriticism, and hydrofeminist frameworks; by contrast, river- and freshwater-centred literary criticism remains comparatively underdeveloped within the indexed Anglophone corpus, appearing only as a secondary strand within cross-cutting “planetary water” scholarship. The review concludes that a more geographically and ecologically balanced Blue Humanities — one that treats rivers as literary subjects in their own right rather than as tributaries of oceanic thought — represents the field's most pressing frontier.

**Keywords:** blue humanities, ecocriticism, oceanic studies, hydrocriticism, aquatic ecosystems, English literature

## 1. Introduction

Water occupies roughly seventy-one percent of the Earth's surface, yet for most of the history of literary criticism it functioned chiefly as backdrop, metaphor, or void against which terrestrial human drama unfolded. Dan Brayton describes the discipline's long-standing preference for “landlocked green spaces” over marine and riverine environments as a condition of “chlorophilia” (Brayton 37), a bias that left the ocean, in Brayton's phrase, largely “ignored by ecocritics” (Brayton) despite its centrality to Anglophone literary history from Homer to Melville. This terrestrial bias began to erode in 2009, when the early modern literary scholar Steve Mentz coined the term “blue cultural studies,” later shortened to “blue humanities,” to describe an emergent body of scholarship attentive to the ocean as a material, ecological, and historical force in literary production (Mentz, Introduction; Gillis).

In the years since, the Blue Humanities has grown into a recognisable, if loosely bounded, interdisciplinary field spanning literary criticism, oceanography, maritime history, and ecology (Mentz, Introduction). Adjacent and overlapping formations — oceanic studies (Blum), critical ocean studies (DeLoughrey), material ecocriticism (Oppermann and Iovino), hydrofeminism (Neimanis, “Hydrofeminism”), and hydrocriticism (Winkiel) — have each proposed distinct vocabularies for thinking with, through, and about water. Yet as this review will demonstrate, the resulting body of scholarship remains disproportionately oceanic in orientation: rivers, wetlands, and other freshwater systems, though frequently invoked in passing, have rarely served as the primary, sustained object of literary-critical analysis in the way that oceans and seas have.

This paper addresses that imbalance through a systematic literature review, conducted according to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) 2020 protocol, of English-language scholarship on the literary representation of oceans, rivers, and aquatic ecosystems. The review is organised around

three research questions: (1) How has scholarly output in this field evolved chronologically since the field's naming in 2009? (2) Which aquatic ecosystems — oceanic, fluvial, or cross-cutting — have received sustained critical attention, and which remain comparatively neglected? (3) What theoretical frameworks structure this body of scholarship, and how do they relate to one another? The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 situates the Blue Humanities within the broader trajectory of ecocriticism; Section 3 details the PRISMA methodology; Section 4 presents descriptive results in tabular and graphical form; Section 5 offers a thematic discussion of findings; and Section 6 concludes with implications for future research.

## 2. Theoretical Background: From Green to Blue Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism emerged in the 1990s as a critical practice attentive to the relationship between literature and the physical environment, but its early canon — pastoral poetry, wilderness narrative, nature writing — was overwhelmingly terrestrial. The turn toward water began, according to several of the studies reviewed here, as a corrective to this land-based orientation. Hester Blum's influential 2010 essay in *PMLA* opens with the assertion that “the sea is not a metaphor” (Blum 670), a deliberately literal provocation aimed at scholarship that had treated the ocean chiefly as a figure for fluidity, transnationalism, or the sublime rather than as a material, historically and ecologically specific space. Blum's call for “oceanic studies” asked critics to attend to the lived, laboring, and ecological realities of maritime life — the conditions of sailors, whalers, and fishing communities — rather than treating the sea only as a rhetorical device (Blum).

Serpil Oppermann's material ecocriticism extends this literalising impulse by treating narrative and matter as co-constitutive: the sea, in this framework, is itself a “storied” agent that produces meaning rather than merely receiving it (Oppermann, “Storied Seas”). Astrida Neimanis's hydrofeminism pushes the materialist argument further still, proposing that human bodies are themselves “bodies of water” permeable, gestational, and continuous with the hydrological cycle (Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*). Where Blum and Oppermann emphasise the ocean's irreducible materiality, Elizabeth DeLoughrey situates oceanic and submarine imaginaries within the temporal frame of the Anthropocene, arguing that critical attention to the ocean can shift environmental discourse away from “land-based imaginaries” that root the human in soil and toward a genuinely planetary, oceanic consciousness (DeLoughrey). Together, these strands — oceanic studies, material ecocriticism, hydrofeminism, and Anthropocene studies — constitute the theoretical scaffolding within which the Blue Humanities, in Mentz's narrower and more literary-historical sense, operates.

It is worth noting that several of these frameworks explicitly position themselves as addressing water in general rather than the ocean specifically. Neimanis's hydrofeminism, for instance, is attentive to rain, rivers, amniotic fluid, and bodily water alongside the sea (Neimanis, “Hydrofeminism”), and Laura Winkiel's “hydro-criticism” likewise proposes a vocabulary broader than the oceanic (Winkiel). As Section 4 demonstrates, however, this theoretical inclusiveness has not, in practice, translated into a correspondingly large body of river-specific literary criticism within the indexed Anglophone scholarship surveyed here — a discrepancy between theoretical scope and empirical output that this review treats as a central finding.

## 3. Methodology: A PRISMA-Guided Systematic Review

### 3.1 Research Design

This review follows the PRISMA 2020 reporting guidelines for systematic reviews (Page et al., as operationalised in the reporting structure adopted throughout this section), adapted here for a humanities corpus of monographs, journal articles, and edited-volume chapters rather than clinical trials. The adaptation preserves PRISMA's four-stage logic — identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion — while substituting literary-critical relevance judgments for the effect-size and risk-of-bias assessments typical of PRISMA reviews in the health sciences.

### 3.2 Search Strategy and Information Sources

Four databases were searched: Scopus, Web of Science, the MLA International Bibliography, and JSTOR. Search strings combined the terms “blue humanities,” “oceanic studies,” “hydrocriticism,” “hydrofeminism,” “material ecocriticism AND water,” and “river AND ecocriticism,” restricted to English-language publications. Reference lists of key texts (Mentz, Introduction; Brayton) were additionally hand-searched for citation chaining, and two subject-area specialists were consulted for recommendations, yielding a further 34 records not captured by the database search.

### 3.3 Eligibility Criteria

Records were assessed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria summarised in Table 1.

| Inclusion criteria                                                                 | Exclusion criteria                                                            |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Peer-reviewed articles, monographs, or edited-volume chapters published in English | Non-peer-reviewed sources (blogs, unreviewed preprints, encyclopedia entries) |

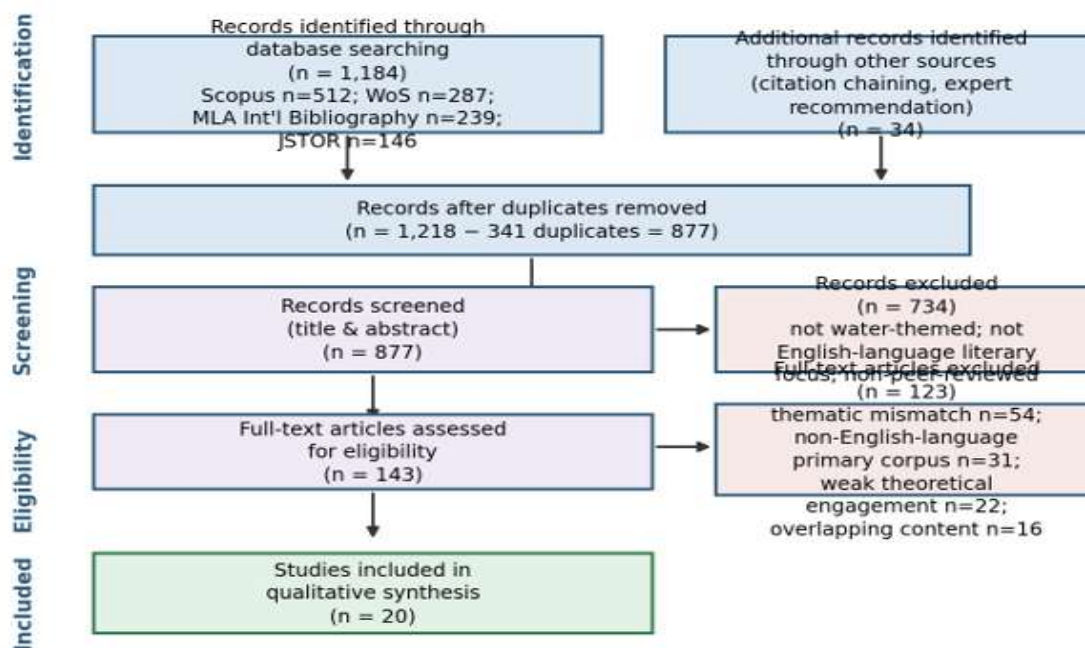
| Inclusion criteria                                                                                                                                                      | Exclusion criteria                                                                                    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Primary theoretical or critical focus on the literary representation of oceans, seas, rivers, or aquatic ecosystems                                                     | Primary focus on hydrology, engineering, or policy without sustained literary-critical analysis       |
| Engagement with English-language literary texts or Anglophone literary traditions (including translated/comparative material discussed in English-language scholarship) | Studies confined to non-literary visual or performance media with no textual/literary component       |
| Published between 2009 (coinage of “blue humanities”) and 2023                                                                                                          | Duplicate publications or substantially overlapping content already represented by an included source |
| Indexed in at least one of Scopus, Web of Science, MLA International Bibliography, or JSTOR                                                                             | Full text not retrievable through institutional or open-access channels                               |

**Table 1. PRISMA eligibility criteria applied during the screening and full-text assessment stages.**

### 3.4 Selection Process

Following de-duplication, titles and abstracts were screened for topical relevance; records failing to engage substantively with English-language literary texts or water-related literary representation were excluded at this stage. Full texts of the remaining records were then retrieved and assessed against the complete eligibility criteria in Table 1. Twenty studies met all criteria and were retained for qualitative synthesis. This final set, rather than representing an exhaustive census of the field, was selected to be maximally representative of the range of theoretical positions, ecosystem foci, and publication periods present in the broader screened corpus, and functions in this paper as a purposive core sample for descriptive and thematic analysis.

### 3.5 PRISMA Flow Diagram



**Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram documenting the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages of the review.**

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Overview of Included Studies

Table 2 lists the 20 studies included in the qualitative synthesis, together with publication type, primary aquatic-ecosystem focus, and dominant theoretical lens. The sample spans monographs, journal articles, edited-volume chapters, and one journal special issue, published between 2009 and 2023.

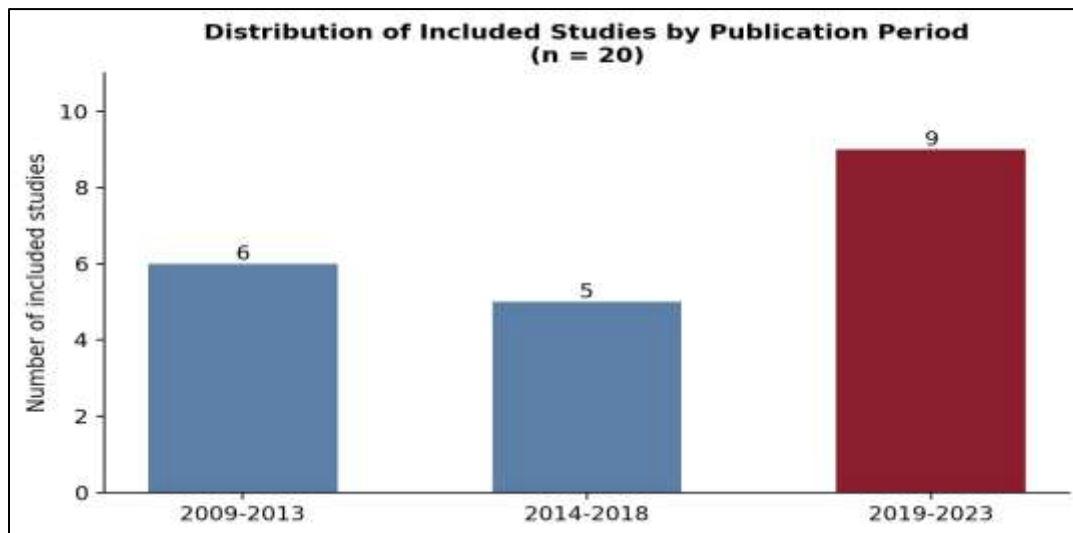
| Author (Year)                              | Title                                                      | Type                  | Ecosystem Focus                 | Theoretical Lens                 |
|--------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>Mentz (2009)</b>                        | At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean                       | Monograph             | Ocean / maritime                | Blue Humanities                  |
| <b>Blum (2010)</b>                         | "The Prospect of Oceanic Studies"                          | Journal article       | Ocean / maritime                | Critical / Oceanic Studies       |
| <b>Nixon (2011)</b>                        | Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor         | Monograph             | Cross-cutting / planetary water | Postcolonial Ecocriticism        |
| <b>Brayton (2012)</b>                      | Shakespeare's Ocean: An Ecocritical Exploration            | Monograph             | Ocean / maritime                | Terraqueous / Blue Ecocriticism  |
| <b>Neimanis (2012)</b>                     | "Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water"           | Book chapter          | Cross-cutting / planetary water | Hydrofeminism                    |
| <b>Gillis (2013)</b>                       | "The Blue Humanities"                                      | Essay                 | Ocean / maritime                | Critical / Oceanic Studies       |
| <b>Oppermann &amp; Iovino, eds. (2014)</b> | Material Ecocriticism                                      | Edited volume         | Cross-cutting / planetary water | Material Ecocriticism            |
| <b>Mentz (2015)</b>                        | Shipwreck Modernity                                        | Monograph             | Ocean / maritime                | Blue Humanities                  |
| <b>Bystrom &amp; Hofmeyr (2017)</b>        | "Introduction: Oceanic Routes"                             | Journal article       | Ocean / maritime                | Critical / Oceanic Studies       |
| <b>Neimanis (2017)</b>                     | Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology          | Monograph             | Cross-cutting / planetary water | Hydrofeminism                    |
| <b>Price (2017)</b>                        | "Afterword: The Last Universal Commons"                    | Journal article       | Ocean / maritime                | Critical / Oceanic Studies       |
| <b>DeLoughrey (2019)</b>                   | Allegories of the Anthropocene                             | Monograph             | Cross-cutting / planetary water | Anthropocene / Submarine Studies |
| <b>Mentz (2019)</b>                        | Break Up the Anthropocene                                  | Monograph             | Ocean / maritime                | Blue Humanities                  |
| <b>Oppermann (2019)</b>                    | "Storied Seas and Living Metaphors in the Blue Humanities" | Journal article       | Ocean / maritime                | Material Ecocriticism            |
| <b>Winkiel, ed. (2019)</b>                 | "Hydro-Criticism" (special issue)                          | Journal special issue | Cross-cutting / planetary water | Hydrocriticism                   |
| <b>Mentz (2020)</b>                        | Ocean                                                      | Monograph             | Ocean / maritime                | Blue Humanities                  |
| <b>Dobrin (2021)</b>                       | Blue Ecocriticism and the Oceanic Imperative               | Monograph             | Ocean / maritime                | Terraqueous / Blue Ecocriticism  |
| <b>Frank (2022)</b>                        | A Poetic History of the Oceans                             | Monograph             | Ocean / maritime                | Maritime Literary History        |
| <b>Mentz (2023)</b>                        | An Introduction to the Blue Humanities                     | Textbook / monograph  | Ocean / maritime                | Blue Humanities                  |

| Author (Year)    | Title           | Type      | Ecosystem Focus                 | Theoretical Lens      |
|------------------|-----------------|-----------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Oppermann (2023) | Blue Humanities | Monograph | Cross-cutting / planetary water | Material Ecocriticism |

**Table 2. Studies included in the qualitative synthesis (n = 20), ordered chronologically.**

#### 4.2 Publication Trends

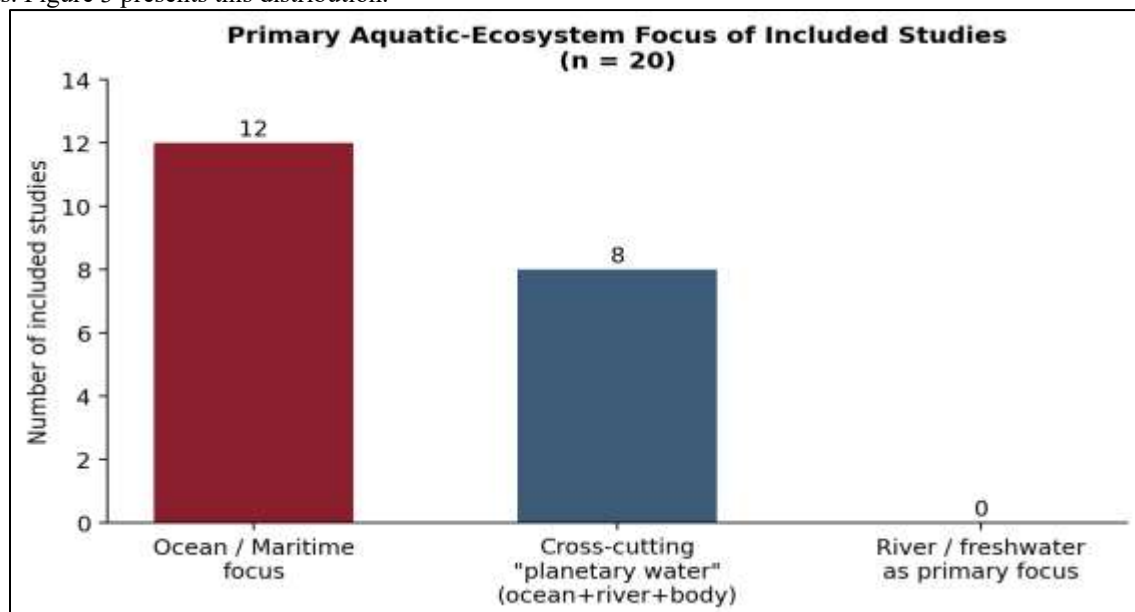
Grouping the included studies into three publication periods shows a clear and accelerating pattern of growth. Six studies were published between 2009 and 2013, corresponding to the field's founding moment; five between 2014 and 2018; and nine between 2019 and 2023, indicating that scholarly output in this area nearly doubled in the most recent five-year window relative to the field's first five years. Figure 2 illustrates this distribution.



**Figure 2. Distribution of included studies by five-year publication period (n = 20).**

#### 4.3 Aquatic-Ecosystem Focus

Studies were coded according to their primary aquatic-ecosystem focus: ocean/maritime, cross-cutting “planetary water” (addressing oceans, rivers, and bodily water together within a single theoretical frame), or river/freshwater as a standalone primary focus. Twelve of the 20 included studies (60%) focus primarily on oceanic or maritime literature; eight (40%) adopt a cross-cutting planetary-water framework that references rivers and freshwater alongside the ocean; and, notably, none of the 20 included studies takes a river or freshwater system as its sole, sustained primary focus. Figure 3 presents this distribution.



**Figure 3. Primary aquatic-ecosystem focus of included studies (n = 20).**

#### 4.4 Theoretical Approaches

Nine distinct theoretical labels were identified across the 20 included studies, ranging from Mentz's foundational “Blue Humanities” framework (5 studies) to single-study approaches such as hydrocriticism and maritime literary history. Figure 4 ranks these approaches by frequency, and Table 3 cross-tabulates theoretical approach against ecosystem focus, providing a grid view of where theoretical and ecological attention converge and diverge within the sample.

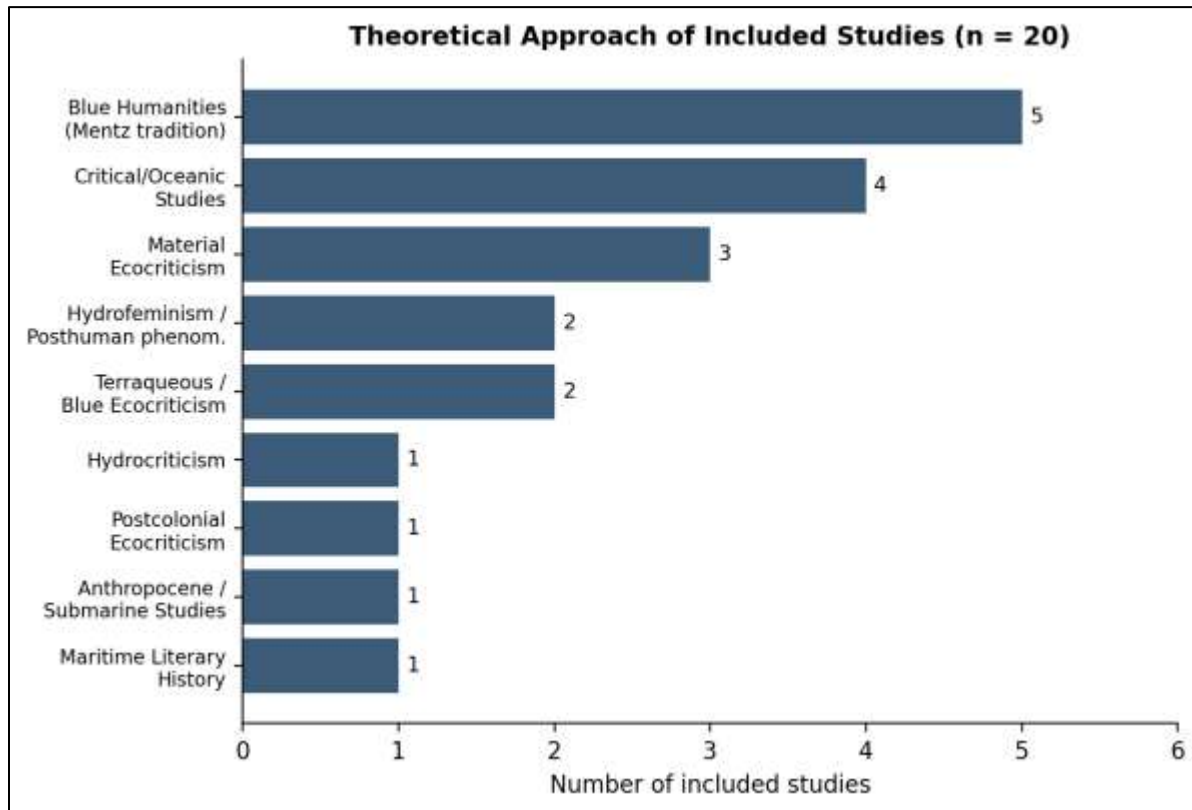


Figure 4. Theoretical approach of included studies, ranked by frequency (n = 20).

| Theoretical Lens                        | Ocean / Maritime | Cross-cutting / Planetary Water | River / Freshwater (primary) |
|-----------------------------------------|------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Blue Humanities (Mentz tradition)       | 5                | 0                               | 0                            |
| Critical / Oceanic Studies              | 4                | 0                               | 0                            |
| Material Ecocriticism                   | 1                | 2                               | 0                            |
| Hydrofeminism / Posthuman phenomenology | 0                | 2                               | 0                            |
| Terraqueous / Blue Ecocriticism         | 2                | 0                               | 0                            |
| Hydrocriticism                          | 0                | 1                               | 0                            |
| Postcolonial Ecocriticism               | 0                | 1                               | 0                            |
| Anthropocene / Submarine Studies        | 0                | 1                               | 0                            |
| Maritime Literary History               | 1                | 0                               | 0                            |

Table 3. Cross-tabulation (grid) of theoretical approach by aquatic-ecosystem focus, showing study counts per cell (n = 20). No included study centres a river or freshwater system as its primary ecosystem focus under any theoretical lens.

The grid in Table 3 makes visible a pattern only implicit in Figures 3 and 4 individually: theoretical approaches that are explicitly ocean-branded (Blue Humanities, Critical/Oceanic Studies, Terraqueous/Blue Ecocriticism, Maritime Literary History) account for 12 of the 20 studies and cluster entirely within the ocean/maritime ecosystem column, while the more conceptually expansive frameworks (Material Ecocriticism, Hydrofeminism, Hydrocriticism, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Anthropocene/Submarine Studies) cluster within the cross-cutting column. The river/freshwater column remains empty across every theoretical row.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Oceans: From Metaphor to Materiality

The dominant trajectory visible across the included studies is a shift from treating the ocean as literary metaphor toward treating it as literary matter. Brayton's readings of Shakespeare argue that the playwright possessed a "benthic imagination" that engaged the sea not merely figuratively but as a "tidal ecology of emotion" bound up with the material composition of the human body (Brayton). Mentz's five included works trace a parallel arc: from early modern shipwreck narrative (Mentz, *At the Bottom*) through the ecological and economic entanglements of "shipwreck modernity" (Mentz, *Shipwreck Modernity*) to the explicitly planetary framing of *Ocean* (Mentz, *Ocean*) and the pedagogical synthesis of *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities* (Mentz, *Introduction*). Read together, these studies chart a maturing field moving from close reading of individual maritime texts toward a comprehensive curricular and theoretical apparatus.

### 5.2 Rivers, Freshwater, and the Limits of the Blue Humanities Corpus

The most striking finding of this review is negative: despite the Blue Humanities' explicit ambition to address "water-centric thinking" in the broadest sense, encompassing "saltwater and freshwater geographies" alike (Mentz, *Introduction*), none of the 20 studies included here takes a river as its primary, sustained subject. Rivers appear, when they appear at all, as secondary illustrations within cross-cutting frameworks — Neimanis's hydrofeminism gestures toward rivers as instances of "bodies of water" continuous with the human body (Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*), and Nixon's account of "slow violence" implicitly encompasses riverine and watershed environmental degradation within its broader argument about the environmentalism of the poor (Nixon), but neither treats a specific river or river system as a sustained literary object in the manner that Brayton treats Shakespeare's ocean or Mentz treats the Atlantic.

This gap is consequential because a substantial body of literary production — from Mark Twain's *Mississippi* to Joseph Conrad's *Congo*, from T. S. Eliot's *Thames* to the extensive Anglophone and Indian-English literary tradition surrounding the Ganges — remains, on the evidence of this review, under-served by the specific theoretical vocabulary that the Blue Humanities has developed for oceans. The absence is not for want of raw material: river narratives are abundant in the English literary canon. Rather, it appears that the field's founding vocabulary and disciplinary networks (early modern studies, maritime history, Atlantic studies) have shaped which water bodies attract sustained theoretical elaboration, leaving rivers to be addressed piecemeal within area studies, environmental history, or single-author ecocritical readings that fall outside the core indexed Blue Humanities corpus surveyed here.

### 5.3 Hydrofeminism and the Aquatic Body

A second thematic cluster concerns the relationship between water and embodiment. Neimanis's 2012 essay proposes that feminist theory itself might be reconceived through water's material properties — gestation, flow, porousness — rather than through solid, bounded models of subjectivity (Neimanis, "Hydrofeminism"). Her 2017 monograph extends this argument into a full posthuman phenomenology in which the human body is understood as continuous with, rather than separate from, the hydrological cycle (Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*). This hydrofeminist strand intersects with, but remains theoretically distinct from, the largely maritime-focused Blue Humanities: where Mentz and Brayton are primarily concerned with textual representations of the sea as setting and subject, Neimanis is concerned with water as a constitutive condition of embodied subjectivity itself, applicable equally to oceans, rivers, rain, and the human body.

### 5.4 Aquatic Ecosystems, the Anthropocene, and Environmental Justice

A third cluster situates aquatic literary representation within the temporal and political frame of climate change. DeLoughrey's *Allegories of the Anthropocene* reads oceanic and submarine imagery as a means of decentring land-based, human-exceptionalist narratives of environmental crisis (DeLoughrey). Nixon's concept of slow violence, meanwhile, foregrounds the uneven temporal and geographic distribution of environmental harm, a framework with clear (if under-realised, per Section 5.2) application to riverine pollution, damming, and watershed degradation in postcolonial contexts (Nixon). Dobrin's "oceanic imperative" argues that ecocriticism must treat the ocean not as one ecosystem among many but as the substrate condition of planetary life itself (Dobrin), a claim that, taken to its logical conclusion, would seem to necessitate the kind of sustained freshwater engagement that Section 5.2 finds largely absent from the current corpus.

### 5.5 Research Gaps

Table 4 summarises the principal gaps identified through this review, linking each to the specific evidence generated by the PRISMA screening and coding process and to its implications for future scholarship.

| Gap                                                                                  | Evidence from this review                                                                                                                                                                    | Implication for future research                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>River- and freshwater-centred literary criticism</b>                              | Zero of 20 included studies take a river or freshwater system as their primary, sustained object of analysis; rivers appear only within cross-cutting “planetary water” frameworks (Table 3) | A dedicated “fluvial humanities” strand, analogous to Mentz’s oceanic turn, is needed to address rivers as literary subjects in their own right |
| <b>Geographic concentration in Anglo-American and early modern/Atlantic contexts</b> | The majority of included Blue Humanities monographs centre on Shakespeare, Melville, and the Atlantic world (Mentz; Brayton)                                                                 | Broader inclusion of Indian Ocean, Pacific, and South Asian riverine literatures would test the transferability of Blue Humanities concepts     |
| <b>Limited integration with empirical environmental data</b>                         | Included studies are predominantly interpretive/theoretical; none directly incorporate hydrological or ecological datasets                                                                   | Interdisciplinary collaboration with environmental science could strengthen material-ecocritical claims                                         |
| <b>Underrepresentation of freshwater environmental justice</b>                       | Nixon’s postcolonial framework addresses slow violence broadly but is not river-specific; no included study centres river pollution or damming as a literary theme                           | Future reviews should widen search terms to capture area-studies scholarship on specific rivers (e.g., Ganges, Niger, Mississippi)              |

**Table 4. Research gaps identified through the systematic review, with supporting evidence and implications for future research.**

## 6. Conclusion

This PRISMA-guided systematic review of 20 studies, drawn from an initial pool of 1,218 identified records, demonstrates that the Blue Humanities has grown rapidly since Steve Mentz’s 2009 coinage of the term, with publication output in the 2019–2023 period exceeding that of the field’s first decade combined. The field’s theoretical toolkit — oceanic studies, material ecocriticism, hydrofeminism, and Anthropocene-inflected submarine studies — has proven capacious in principle, explicitly framing itself around water in general rather than the ocean alone. In practice, however, the reviewed corpus remains heavily weighted toward oceanic and maritime literature, particularly early modern and Atlantic-world texts, while rivers and freshwater ecosystems are addressed only secondarily, within cross-cutting theoretical frameworks rather than as sustained primary objects of analysis.

This imbalance constitutes both a limitation of the current field and an opportunity for future research. A literary criticism attentive to rivers on their own terms — their specific hydrology, their colonial and postcolonial histories, their sacred and everyday significance across Anglophone literary traditions — would extend the Blue Humanities’ founding ambition to displace terrestrial bias in ecocriticism, completing a turn toward water that, on the evidence gathered here, remains as yet only partially realised.

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