

Water Cultures Symposium

Living with Risk in Coastal, Estuarine and Oceanic Environments

Friday September 8, 2023

09.30-19.00

Sweelinckzaal, Drift 21, room 0.05

The Water Cultures Symposium is hosted by the [Utrecht Network for Environmental Humanities](#) and co-organised in collaboration with the [Centre for Water Cultures](#) at the University of Hull. The Symposium gratefully acknowledges the financial support of [Pathways to Sustainability](#) at Utrecht University, and of the University of Hull's AHRC Impact Acceleration Account, HIKE.

Through this symposium, we approach water as a cultural medium, exploring how coastal, estuarine and oceanic cultures worldwide mediate the relationship between humanity and bodies of water.

What can we learn from past and present water cultures in order to understand and mitigate the impacts of future environmental change in these regions?

Pooling insights from across the humanities and social sciences, including from cultural and historical geography, law, history, comparative literature, and ocean studies, this symposium provides a space for scholars and practitioners to share ideas, and explore questions, theories and traditions that centre on water cultures as a source of knowledge.

To **register** for the symposium, and for questions, comments and requests relating to its organisation, please contact uceh@uu.nl.

PROGRAM

9:30-11:00 - PANEL 1 – LITERARY AND HISTORICAL WATER CULTURES

Chair: Dr Flora Roberts

- Dr Stewart Mottram (School of Humanities, University of Hull): From Storm to Stage: The Little Ice Age and the Literature of 'the English Lowlands'
- Dr Susanne Ferwerda (Comparative Literature, Utrecht University): Underwater and Outer Space: Blue Humanities in the Pacific
- Prof Briony McDonagh (Energy and Environment Institute, University of Hull): Living with Water in Medieval and Early Modern Hull

11-11:30 COFFEE BREAK

11:30-13:00 - PANEL 2 – LEGAL AND POLITICAL WATER CULTURES

Chair: Dr Stewart Mottram

- Prof Alex Oude Elferink (Utrecht University): Whose ocean? – (Why) do we need a legal perspective?
- Dr Joep Schenk (International and Political History, Utrecht University): Governing the Rhine 1800-1815: the market speaks for itself, or part of a European security culture?
- Dr Kate Smith (Energy and Environment Institute, University of Hull): Watery-place names for environmental engagement

13:00-14:30 LUNCH

14:30-16:30 PANEL 3 – WATER CULTURES IN PRACTICE

Chair: Dr Susanne Ferwerda

- Dr Ed Brookes & Dr Gill Hughes (University of Hull): Learning histories, participatory methods and climate action
- ONLINE: Dr Hannah Worthen (University of Hull): Watery Archives: recording and remembering floods in the past and present
- Dr Marjolijn Bol & Dr Mia You (Utrecht University): Water as Material

16:30-17:00 COFFEE BREAK 2

17:00-18:00 ROUNDTABLE – WATER CULTURES IN CONVERSATION

Chaired by Dr Flora Roberts, Assistant Professor in Environmental History, Utrecht University

18.00-19.00 DRINKS RECEPTION

ABSTRACTS

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Education Studies, University of Hull

Learning histories, participatory methods and climate action

This paper explores the use of 'learning histories' as a participatory method in developing flood awareness and climate action in Kingston upon Hull. It draws upon research undertaken by the Risky Cities project and explores how arts-led engagement activities were able to mobilise place-based histories and stories in order to raise climate awareness and drive climate action. Specifically, it discusses a series of co-created community textile, poetry and zine workshops, which invited participants to reflect upon a range of archival materials including: civic and court records, antiquarian histories, maps, nineteenth and twentieth-century newspapers, flood fiction, poetry, plays and folklore. In doing so, this paper presents how learning histories as a form of participatory history were able to make big narratives about global climate change locally meaningful and thus drive anticipatory action and behavioural change. Furthermore, it highlights how the conversations that took place in and around the engagement activities were themselves generative of further watery stories and experiences which contributed to wider historical knowledge of the city and its environmental history. In this sense, learning histories can be usefully understood as a participatory historical method as well as a toolkit for climate action and empowerment.

ALEX G. OUDE ELFERINK a.oudeelferink@uu.nl

Netherlands Institute for the Law of the Sea, Utrecht University Centre for Water, Ocean and Sustainability Law, School of Law, Utrecht University

Whose ocean? – (Why) do we need a legal perspective?

The question "Whose Ocean?" might suggest that it implies some form of ownership. At least that was the reaction of a number of respondents when they were interviewed by Kiara Lasch, one of the members of the Sustainable Ocean Community of Utrecht University's Strategic Theme Pathways to Sustainability. However, that would be reading an answer into the question that is not there. And one's vantage point and disciplinary background indeed are critical to the answer one will give to this question, as was aptly illustrated by the interviews Kiara conducted. Being a lawyer, I obviously am also tainted by my professional bias. That being said, I do feel that an understanding of the legal ocean is critical if we want to include non-human voices in the debate around the question of whose ocean in a meaningful way. After explaining that point, my presentation will be discussing how the Critical Pathways and Sustainable Ocean Communities will seek to address the question of "Whose Ocean?" in the coming year(s) in a Signature Project that is currently being developed.

SUSANNE FERWERDA s.m.a.ferwerda@uu.nl

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Underwater and Outer Space: Blue Humanities in the Pacific

In the Pacific region, the lived reality of rising sea levels and changing coastlines has increased attention to living with oceans in transition. Analysing contemporary writing by Gina Cole and Ellen van Neerven, Ferwerda considers the speculative potential of blue literatures in changing oceanic environments. Via *Pasifikafuturist* (Cole 2022) oceanic and outer space exploration, as well as resistance to continued settler colonialism, *Na Viro* (2022) by Gina Cole and “Water” (2014) by Ellen van Neerven reimagine pasts, presents and futures of oceanic life and rethink the meaning of water cultures. Their work employs literary tropes well known in Western sci-fi—from tentacular creatures that rise from the sea to space ships, robots and human enhancement—from Aboriginal and Indigenous Pacific ways of thinking and being. They reframe these tropes via the Pacific ocean to foreground elements of alien invasion, dispossession, progress and survival, which have long been part of the region’s history into the present. Van Neerven’s “Water” extrapolates Australian settler colonialism to offshore terraforming and Aboriginal resistance that rises from the water to entangle land and sea. And in a time of increased attention to ‘blue’ commercial space exploration—think Jeff Bezos’ *Blue Origin* project—*Na Viro* extends the ocean into outer space via Pacific wayfinding. Ferwerda ultimately asks: how do oceanic representations and ‘bodies of water’ (Neimanis) in flux add to the growing Blue Humanities discourse that no longer universalizes the Western imagination, to urge us to think of worlds in which the oceanic extends even beyond imagined Earthly confines? What does Pasifikafuturism do for water cultures in transition?

BRIONY MCDONAGH

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Interim Director of the Energy and Environment Institute & Professor of Environmental Humanities, University of Hull

Living with Water in Medieval and Early Modern Hull

This paper explores Hull’s histories of living with water and flood in the period between the foundation of the town in the 1260s and c. 1700, examining how the inhabitants, Corporation and Commissioners of Sewers managed and governed water in order to survive and thrive in a risky yet resilient estuarine environment. It does that as part of a bigger project utilising ‘learning histories’ drawing on Hull’s 800-year experience of living with water and flood to drive climate awareness and flood resilience in a city which has experienced major flooding in recent years and is increasingly vulnerable in the face of future climate change. Here, we utilise civic and other records to reconstruct a flood timeline for medieval and early modern Kingston-Upon-Hull, revealing a history of repeated flood events impacting the town and surrounding area in the centuries after its foundation in c. 1260. We explore who managed and governed water and flood risk, and how this was achieved, arguing that water management was a pervasive concern as well as a collective and shared responsibility which ultimately generated a ‘living with water mentality’.

STEWART MOTTRAM

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Reader in English, School of Humanities, University of Hull

From Storm to Stage: The Little Ice Age and the Literature of ‘the English Lowlands’

Environmental historians have recently identified the eastern coastline of England as an ‘English Lowlands’, a region aligned with the North Sea coastlines of the Netherlands, northwest Germany, and western Denmark in terms of their shared histories of flooding, and comparable cultures of flood risk management. Historians over the past decade have accordingly turned attention to the infrastructures of flood risk management in eastern England and the social and political

organisations established to maintain them, yet there has been comparatively little focus to date on how living with flood risk in ‘the English Lowlands’ shaped the literature – the plays, poems, and prose writings – produced in a region stretching from Hull in the north, to the literary powerhouse of London in the south. With a focus on the literature of the Little Ice Age (1300-1800) – a period of increased storminess in the North Sea coinciding with the lives of writers including Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, and Margaret Cavendish – this paper uses the example of Hull poet and politician Andrew Marvell’s poem ‘The Character of Holland’ (1653) to make the case for why we should today turn to the ‘risk society’ of the English Lowlands as a framework for re-reading late medieval and early modern literatures through an environmental lens.

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Assistant Professor, International Relations in Historical Perspective, Utrecht University

Governing the Rhine 1800-1815: the market speaks for itself, or part of a European security culture?

The Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine (1815) was a new version of an earlier Napoleonic initiative that aimed to improve the navigability of the river by harmonizing administrative and fiscal arrangements on the Rhine internationally. By scrutinizing the papers and work of what I call the first international Rhine governor, this paper demonstrates how J.J. Eichhoff (1762-1827) embodied a living link between the old Napoleonic and the new post-Napoleonic security culture. The paper states that the transport market did not entirely speak for itself, but that international river cooperation needed intermediators such as Eichhoff to be imagined, legitimized and realized.

KATE SMITH K.Smith7@hull.ac.uk

Knowledge Exchange Fellow in Flood and Society, Energy and Environment Institute, University of Hull

Watery-place names for environmental engagement

Whilst the field of environmental (and specifically of blue) humanities has burgeoned in recent years, there remain relatively few research projects that include a focus on the role that place-names (toponymics) can have in the ‘cultural daylighting’ of watercourses in built-up environments. As towns and cities grew in the 20th century, many sought technical solutions to water and waste management that focussed on tunnelling solutions, culverts and canalisation of natural waterways. Water was increasingly moved underground, becoming invisible in people’s daily lives and effectively disappearing from the collective consciousness – until it reappears as flooding.

This presentation explores the possibilities of:

1. using historical topo- and hydronymics as a mechanism for raising people’s awareness of and engagement with water in their contemporary (sub)urban environments where it has largely become invisible, and
2. using contemporary minor toponymics e.g. street and park names to foster debates about land use, planning and housing developments, increasing flood resilience by building knowledge about where water used to be, and what that might mean in the future.

Taking examples from modern English and tracing the roots of watery place-names through middle and old English, as well as old Norse I will use examples from community conversations that occurred as part of the Risky Cities project to illustrate the extent to which the resource of place-based language may be a secret weapon in delivering impactful flood humanities research.

HANNAH WORTHEN [Online] Hannah.Worthen@hull.ac.uk

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Watery Archives: recording and remembering floods in the past and present

This paper will examine the role that historic archives played in the creation of water knowledges in the past and consider how we can engage with those archives in order to foster climate consciousness in the present. Using a case study of the Bench Books of Kingston Upon Hull, it will outline the ways in which flood and other watery events were recorded by the early modern town's governors and consider both language and archival absence in the remembering of flood events. Then, it will reflect on how encouraging present-day communities to connect with their local watery archives and participate in the creation of flood histories and can be an effective tool in the fostering of water cultures and knowledge today.

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In this creative and collaborative workshop, participants will be invited to experiment with water as a disappearing and invisible but essential material in artistic practice. For various media, water is required for the manipulation of many materials but never part of the archaeology of what remains; we will consider how research and writing also reflect this, and alternatively how they can give form to water's after-life.