

International Symposium

VIE AQUATIQUE AQUATIC LIFE



23-24-25 SEPTEMBER 2025

Maison des Sciences de l'Homme
4, rue Ledru - Clermont-Ferrand



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<http://celis.uca.fr/>

Call for Papers

This international symposium will explore representations of aquatic life in literature, the arts and the humanities in general. While rivers, lakes and the sea have been the focus of many literary works, aquatic life – which seems turbid from the shore – remains little studied from sociopoetic, eco-poetic or zoopoetic perspectives. The symposium thus investigates the writing of aquatic life through multidisciplinary papers and invitations to artists and writers who contribute to what we call "aquapoetics", or writing about water. These encounters between diverse profiles will enable us to reflect on ways of propagating, playing with, creating and writing about aquatic life. Our historical scope is vast, stretching from deep planetary time to the contemporary.

We would like to build on recent thinking such as writing the ocean through "thalassopoetics", a concept coined by Isabelle de Vendevre[1], or following on from the EASLCE "Sea More Blue" congress[2] held in Perpignan from June 17 to 20, 2024. Images associated with the maritime world will also be considered, particularly in terms of representations of the seabed and interactions between the human and non-human waterworlds. Similarly, the relationship between human and aquatic spaces echoes the emerging field of the Blue Humanities. These representations and these relationships make it possible to question the literary and artistic forms[3] that they espouse: for instance, Odile Gannier defines the "maritime novel" as a literary "genre"[4]. While maritime spaces are often limited to their surface, it is equally important to study works that plunge beneath the waves, in search of aquatic life or an uncharted space in which to project artistic fantasies. Transdisciplinary and intermedial approaches are encouraged and the papers may explore the seabed in science fiction, film, theater or video games.

Furthermore, the sociopoetic approach also enables us to highlight the cultural and societal specificities of representations of aquatic life. Comparative approaches are encouraged, as are studies adopting a historical and geographical perspective. It may also be useful to consider representations of aquatic life through mythology, or by bringing together different disciplines. Although aquatic life can be read in a contemplative or emotive way, we can't neglect the control exercised over it by the human world, which seeks to enjoy and extract its resources. How is this domination of the underwater world written? Papers may also address the place of the human body within the aquatic universe. Just think of the traditional women divers in Japan[5] and Korea who cultivate the seabed. It would be interesting, for example, to look at algoculture or pearl farming from a feminine angle[6].

This sociopoetic approach could thus be complemented by an eco-poetic perspective. For example, papers may focus on the invisible plant world, because it is microscopic (such as diatoms) or hidden in the depths, or, on the contrary, the marine life of larger animals such as cetaceans, with the fascination for dolphins and whales also aspiring literature and cinema. Underwater life is not only enigmatic because it is hidden but also because it troubles our taxonomic understanding of the world; creatures such as corals and diatoms do not fit tidily into either the vegetable or the animal kingdoms. Water is also a place of transformation – the larval stage of dragonflies and damselflies occurs underwater and the influential writing of Astrida Neimanis reminds us that our own watery bodies are more fluid than solid[7]. The disruption of a heteronormative, heterodox anthropocentricity by a deeper understanding of water is another possible path of investigation, in line with the work of Cleo Wölfle Hazard[8] and Jeremy Chow[9]. Investigating a literary ecology of the oceans[10] is another possibility, in particular by shifting the gaze away from anthropocentrism.

The zoopoetic approach, by combining scientific advances and literary sensibility, would also facilitate this decentring, while renewing the imagination associated with marine species or corals. The aquatic world is no longer just a strange and terrifying unknown, but a fascinating one. In *La Mer*[11], the poetic writing of Jules Michelet marvels at it, while in the work of Wajdi Mouawad[12], the goldfish, reputedly amnesiac, is transformed into a valiant conqueror of its territory. The human world is nonetheless faced with a certain cognitive aporia when it comes to aquatic animal life: how can we transcend the boundaries between species, whether in research or creation? Shouldn't we, like the young protagonist of *Corps des bêtes*[13], abandon ourselves to a kind of shamanic trance in order to integrate the spirit and body of otters and thus experience their life? Or interweaving fiction and essay, experimental, unstructured and reflective writing to transcribe the *Autobiographie d'un poulpe*[14]? Could it raise awareness of the selfish and bloody plundering of the seabed, as Alice Ferney aspires to do in *Le Règne du vivant*? Indeed, wouldn't this empathy[15] be one of the keys to a better understanding of living aquatic creatures who, although far removed from us, remain sentient beings[16] with their own language and intelligence?

Notes

- [1] Vendevre, Isabelle (de), « Séminaire Thalassopoétique : Revisiter la place de l'Océan dans la littérature », organized by CRRLPM, 2023/2024.
- [2] 10th EASLCE Symposium, "Sea More Blue: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Blue Eco-poetics", Perpignan, June 17-20 2024, Scientific Coordinator : Bénédicte Meillon.
- [3] We will consider a plethora of underwater artistic practices, from dance and sculpture to painting. See Arts maritimes: 'Pursuit of Beauty, Art Beneath the Waves' <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m00013nr>
- [4] Odile Gannier, *Le Roman maritime. Émergence d'un genre en Occident*, Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, collection Imago Mundi n°19, 2011.
- [5] The ama (海女), underwater fisherwomen, are represented in Japanese literature from Man'yōshū 万葉集 until the works of Yukio Mishima (*The Sound of Waves*, 1954).
- [6] Hunt, Stephen E. "Free, Bold, Joyous": The Love of Seaweed in Margaret Gatty and Other Mid-Victorian Writers". *Environment and History*, 11(1), 5-34.
- [7] Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthumanist Feminist Phenomenology*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017.
- [8] Cleo Wölfle Hazard, *Underflows: Queer Trans Ecologies and River Justice*, University of Washington Press, 2022.
- [9] Jeremy Chow, *The Queerness of Water: Troubled Ecologies in the Eighteenth Century*, University of Virginia Press, 2023.
- [10] Hofmeyr, I. (2019). "Literary Ecologies of the Indian Ocean". *English Studies in Africa*, 62(1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00138398.2019.1629677>
- [11] Michelet, Jules, *La Mer*, Paris, Michel Lévy Frères, 1875.
- [12] Mouawad, Wajdi, *Anima*, Arles, Actes Sud, « Romans, nouvelles, récits », 2012.
- [13] Wilhelmy, Audrée, *Le corps des bêtes*, Montréal, Léméac, 2017.
- [14] Despret, Vinciane, *Autobiographie d'un poulpe et autres récits d'anticipation*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2021.
- [15] Voir Darnbrough, Leanne Rae (2021). "On the Empathic Possibilities of a Multispecies Ethnopoetics". *Pulse: the Journal of Science and Culture*, 7, 1-22.
- [16] Guillaume, Astrid, « Le mot sentience entre dans le dictionnaire Larousse 2020 », dans *Revue trimestrielle de la Fondation Droit Animal, Ethique et Sciences*, n°102, juillet 2019, p.25.

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International symposium

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Support: Pôle de recherches sur l'eau, Ecole doctorale LLSHS, CELIS, GEOLAB, University of Leuven (KU Leuven)

Proposals for papers (in French or English) of **around 300 words**, accompanied by a **bio-bibliographical note** (5 lines), should be sent **by February 7, 2025** to the following address:

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The papers will be published as a collective work in 2026.

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