

# Seascapes as a Critical Framework in American Sea Literature

*Shin Yamashiro*

## ABSTRACT

This paper will show that storms have been an important component of seascapes in creating catastrophes on the ocean. By studying some examples of storm representations, I wish to reflect on how storms have been represented, how their representations have changed, and why. Lamenting the lack of ecocritical scholarship in the study of sea literature, I would like to suggest that we need to subject seascape to a critical framework through which to examine how it is composed. More specifically, ecocriticism needs to treat seascape as a critical framework through which to examine how it is composed, what kind of cultural and political perspectives it reflects, and how it reveals our perceptions about, and our relationship to, the oceanic environment.

## KEY WORDS

ecocriticism, sea literature, seascape, storms, American literature, terrestrial and oceanic aesthetics



*Don't expect me to say why storms must be. They just are. Storms in the air; storms in the water; storms of thunder; storms of anger. Storms just are.*

—D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (117)

While the study of literary landscapes has been popular in the field of ecocriticism, there are only a few ecocritical attempts at studying seascapes. In fact, I suspect that the study of sea literature, a broad genre dealing with the oceanic environment and human interactions with it, has not been a popular focus in ecocriticism. What is the relationship between literature and the oceanic environment? What makes ecocritics of us? Those of us who live far from the ocean stand aloof from the oceanic environment and literary expressions and messages about it?

Being born in Okinawa, Japan, a southwestern chain of islands surrounded by many other islands including Taiwan, I have found one of my main foci in the study of American environmental literature originates from my background as an Okinawan. I found myself comparing terrestrial and oceanic experiences/aesthetics and have suggested in the past that we need to be equipped with a more comprehensive view in looking at, and thinking about, the environment and our consideration of it. If sea literature has been neglected simply because our experience as humans has been mostly based on our terrestrial experience, we need to realize that this lack of attention to the ocean may be fatal to the future of the global environment. If we use the term “land ethic” (whether it is consciously or unconsciously)

exclusively as an ethic on the terrestrial ecosystem, I would like to introduce Carl Safina's term "sea ethic" because seascape has been an important part of literary scholarship, and our ecocritical approach should be aware of it.

By referring to catastrophic seascape, I would like to show that storms have been an important component of seascape in creating catastrophes on the ocean. By studying some examples of the storm representations, I wish to explain how storms have been represented, how their representations have changed, and why. Finally, I would like to suggest that we need to subject seascape to a critical framework through which to examine how it is composed, what kind of cultural and political perspectives it reflects, and how it reveals our perceptions about, and our relationship to, the oceanic environment. My analysis of storm representations in American sea literature will progress from the early colonial period to contemporary times in order to view how literary representation of storms, as a meteorological phenomenon, constitute a conventional form in sea literature, analyzing as well how it shows our relationship with the oceanic environment. Then, I shall briefly look at nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature of the sea to study how literary motifs and representations of weather have changed.

### **Literary Seascapes**

Seascape consists of the sun, wind, waves, tides, and the transitions and combinations of these natural phenomena; it is also an important part of a navigation log, recording how and where a ship is proceeding. In seascape, storms have been depicted as actual natural catastrophes as well as used as a literary device, and have been an important component of seascape. Due to their destructive features, storms sometimes have theological meaning such as seeing the powerful presence of God. As Lawrence writes in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, "the sea is a great disintegrative force" in the sea voyage narrative (117); a storm is such an uncontrollable destructive force that it is a major "disintegrative" force of the oceanic environment. As a metaphor for the untamed or chaos in nature, storms are represented as a symbol for the disasters and difficulties in human

lives. While storms physically appear as a destructive force, storms have been a conventional literary device in the way that they give a thematic and structural unity to a work. This formula in the integrative and disintegrating storm metaphors is vividly present in sea literature in which meteorological phenomena compose the most dominant elements of seascape.

As Donald P. Wharton states, “sea-deliverance narratives” constitute an important sub-genre in American literature. The Atlantic was actually “the first American frontier,” and the ocean likewise “occupied a place at least as important as that of the western, terrestrial frontier” (4). Aiming to reach “Providence” — that is, the biblical concept prevailed during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries that everything is created and preserved by God—the Puritans see all events led by the will of God. William Strachey’s account of a shipwreck in *A True Reportory of the Wracke, and Redemption of Sir Thomas Gates Knight* (1610), for instance, talks about an early example of American settlers’ encounter with a storm. Strachey’s account is so powerful and was so popular at that time that it was said to inspire Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. On their way to Jamestown in the new colony of Virginia, the *Sea Venture* is hit by a storm in the Bermudas. “What shall I say?” Strachey asks in the narrative, “Windes and Seas were as mad, as fury and rage could make them” (32). The sea swells and rains pour upon the ship; however, “this was not all. It pleased God to bring a grater affliction yet upon us; for in the beginning of the storme we had received likewise a mighty leake [sic]” (32). As the situation gets worse, the narration becomes more intense; some of the crew start pumping water out of the ship, and the narrator’s speculation gets more to the meaning of life, God, and His will:

The Lord knoweth, I had as little hope, as desire of life in the storme, & in this, it went beyond my will; because beyond my reason, why we should labour to preserve life; yet we did, either because so deare are a few lingring houres of life in all mankinde, or that our *Christian* knowledges taught us, how much we owed to the rites of Nature, as bound, not to be false to our selves, or to

neglect the meanes of our owne preservation; the most despairefull things amongst men, being matters of no wonder nor moment with him, who is the rich Fountaine and admirable Essence of all mercy [sic]. (33)

Strachey poses “why we should labour to preserve life” and realizes the limitation of human power in the face of the storm. The storm physically disintegrates the ship, but it is more destructive upon his beliefs in the sense that Strachey becomes aware of something beyond his prior experience and knowledge. His phrase the “rite of Nature” emphasizes this point in the way that Strachey sees something far beyond human power, and it leads him to a realization of the presence of “the rich Fountaine and admirable Essence of all mercy.” This realization process is, at the same time, an integrating process within his senses; that is, by attributing the disastrous experience to God’s will, Strachey attributes his experience to God’s providence. This is what Donald P. Wharton calls the essential structure of the “deliverance narrative,” in which the narrator goes through some disastrous experiences upon the ocean, then he/she recounts the experience for others so that they can likewise share the experience. In Strachey’s case, his awakening experience is driven by the destructive storm, which disintegrates the ship and his beliefs but re-integrates again in such a way as to emphasize God’s providence.

As Pamela Lee Thimmes delineates the historical origins and transitions of sea-storm representations in *Studies in the Biblical Sea-Storm Type-Scene: Convention and Invention* (1992), it is worth pressing that the storms as providential representation had been popular prior to American colonial narratives. In order to understand Strachey’s narrative as one of the first American cultural representations of storms, it should be further understood in a larger framework of the Bible as well as Greek and Roman traditions, that storms as well as other meteorological phenomena frequently appear as creations of the gods. The biblical representation of sea-storms “deals with dramatic and heroic moments that serve a theological purpose, whether that be portraying God, dealing with issues of authority and

control, or describing the world as a dangerous and usually exciting place” (vii). In Homer’s *Odyssey*, for instance, there is a scene in which Poseidon creates a storm against Odysseus:

But the glorious Earth-shaker [Poseidon], as he came back from the Ethiopians, beheld him from afar, from the mountains of Solymi: for Odysseus was seen of him sailing over the sea . . . Surely the gods have changed their purpose regarding Odysseus, while I was among the Ethiopians. . . he gathered the clouds, and seizing his trident in his hands troubled the sea, and roused all blasts of all manner of winds, and hid with clouds land and sea alike; and night rushed down from heaven. (143–44)

Later in the story, Ino and Athene help Odysseus’s voyage by creating the North wind; and it is clear that the storm is a creation of God, so are meteorological phenomena. While storms remain an antagonistic force for humans, it seems significant that weather can be both destructive and protective, as is shown by Ino and Athene’s help, depending on the gods’ intentions. Early Roman writers, such as Virgil, frequently represent storms and shipwrecks as Homer does; but the Roman sea-storm story, according to Thummers, seems to be absorbed with details about storms and the weather, emphasizing “detailed meteorological descriptions, clearer geographical designations, knowledge of the techniques of sailing as well as the expertise and incompetence of the sailors, and the intensification of the horrors faced in the midst and aftermath of the storms” (72). As a result, in the Romans’ sea stories, we can still see the gods’ control of weather, disaster, and death followed by the storm. What this archetypal plot suggests is the establishment of the conventional storm narrative that further develops and influences American literary tradition: first, “characterization (to create and sustain heroic types, eliminating others and showing the shifting fortunes of the persons caught in these storms)”; second, “elements of descriptive realism (nautical details and metaphors)”; and third, “the direction and focus of the story while producing social and political commentary” (Thummers 79–80).

It may be helpful to reflect on Strachey's narrative again; not only can we look at this storm representation in the larger classical Western and biblical traditions that were most popular until the early and mid-nineteenth century, but it can also prepare us to see, in the following discussion, the distinct differences of meteorological representation in the late nineteenth-century of American romanticism and realism as an important departure from the biblical tradition. The important characteristics of storm narrative that Thummers identified in Greek and Roman traditions are: first, theological and didactic values, and second, realism, which later literary figures like Cooper, Melville, London, and Crane further developed in more complex ways. Not only storm narrative, but also other accounts of natural disasters (exploration narrative) and conflicts with Native American people (captivity narrative) were also popular literary forms during early American settlement, and overall "deliverance narrative" seems to adopt the archetype of storm narrative in the way that those "outer forces" are represented as a metaphor for the conflicting and chaotic world.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, as American settlement progressed, the American maritime experience was closely associated not solely with storm experience, but also with more general maritime experience. American literary history in those periods reflects their historical background. For instance, it was sensational that Margaret Fuller drowned in a shipwreck off Fire Island on her way home from Italy in 1850. Henry Thoreau was dispatched by Emerson to look for Fuller's belongings, and his experience is included in *Cape Cod* (1865), which also presents us with his sublime experience evoked by the power of the ocean and storm. Stephen Crane survived a storm in 1896 on a ship called *Commodore*, and his experience helped create "The Open Boat" in 1897. In addition, James Fenimore Cooper, whose work generally centers on American terrestrial frontier experiences, wrote extensively about maritime experience, and *The Pilot* (1824), among his other early novels, is about survival upon the wild ocean. Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years before the Mast* (1840), and Herman

Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) are also important literary works that document the American maritime experience. Especially in late-nineteenth-century America, the sea remained a significant means of transportation, and the seascape had become either more realistic or romantic, sometimes even a combination of both. Also important is that scientific and industrial development contributed to people's systematic understanding of the oceanic environment as well as the declining of Christianity as a primal ideology to understand nature and the world; accordingly, literary realism emerged in these periods as a new way of looking at and describing the world. As James Rodger Fleming writes in his *Meteorology in America, 1800–1870*, America “established a national system of weather ‘telegrams and reports for the benefit of commerce’” (xix), so that it is likely that technology helped predict the weather and prevent people's encounters with storms more quickly than before.

Because of its rich accounts of storms and other meteorological phenomenon, my next analysis will focus on Dana's *Two Years*. This is an important work of sea literature in the sense that Dana is one of the first seamen who described real American seamen's lives upon the sea. Dana's *Two Years* is itself a sort of literary revolution in that it shows some drastic changes in representing the oceanic environment. As a transition between realism and romanticism, Dana's seascape is more complicated than his predecessors'. As it is said to have contributed to the publication of *Moby Dick* with its depiction of the American maritime experience, *Two Years* is a significant literary work in which we can view a new type of seascape in the nineteenth century, not only because it gives readers a sense of the unique environment of the sea, but also because it shows the process of how the author became familiar with the oceanic environment through his interaction with the weather.

In the early chapters of the novel, being exposed to the unfamiliar oceanic environment, Dana often compares the seascape with the inland landscape: “[The sea] lacks the accompaniments of the songs of birds, the awakening hum of humanity, and the glancing of the first beams upon trees, hills, spires, and housetops, to give it life and spirit.



There is no scenery" (14). As an amateur seaman, Dana cannot look at the seascape on its own terms, inevitably representing what aesthetic qualities it lacks, that is, the "accompaniments" noted above. Dana's aesthetic appreciation of the seascape is carried over from his inland experience, and he can neither discern the elements of the seascape nor employ aesthetics or a language to represent it.

Not only is the sea distinctive for its lack of aesthetics comparable with those of a landscape, but it is also a unique environment in which seamen have a different sense of community on the ship. On November 19<sup>th</sup>, for example, Dana contemplates the difference between death on shore and on the sea: "Death is at all times solemn, but never so much so as at sea. A man dies on shore; his body remains with his friends and the 'the mourners go about the streets'; but when a man falls overboard at sea and is lost, there is a suddenness in the event," which gives to it "an air of awful mystery" (39). Moreover, if a man dies at sea, Dana goes on to state, "you miss his form, and the sound of his voice for habit had made them almost necessary to you, and each of your senses feels loss" (39). This "sense of loss" is derived from a unique sense of community on the ship, which is formed differently on land. The physical characteristics of the sea make it a more alien and hostile environment than the inland environment. The vastness of the ocean in particular denies man any hope of conquering it; thus, it requires teamwork and an intimate community for seamen. In chapter three, Dana gives readers a description of "the duties, regulations, and customs of an American merchantman," over which the captain dominates as "lord paramount" (17); he then emphasizes how seamen's lives on the ship are cooperative and hierarchical in order to accomplish seafaring. The sea serves as a symbol of man's isolation from the human world, and the sense of community cultivated on the ship also presents a symbol of the unity of life. As a result, the death of a crewmember on ship reminds Dana of such a strong sense of brotherhood that gives death at sea a suddenness and "an air of awful mystery."

However alien and unfamiliar the oceanic environment may initially be, Dana's seascape importantly shows how he comes to

understand how to look at the seascape. The longer his voyage proceeds, the stronger becomes Dana's obsession with providing a factual account of human interaction with the sea along with frequent references to meteorological information. For instance, Dana describes the landscape of California: "California extends along nearly the whole of the western coast of Mexico, between the Gulf of California in the south and the Bay of San Francisco on the north, or between the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 38<sup>th</sup> degree of north latitude" (55). On Friday, September 16, Dana's description is a log-like narrative: "Lat. 38° N., lon. 69° 00' W. A fine southwest wind; every hour carrying us nearer in toward the land. All hands at the dog watch, and nothing talked about but our getting in; where we should arrive before Sunday; going to church; how Boston would look . . ." (333). Here again, Dana's description of the seascape is almost a factual and phenomenological catalogue—a log narrative.

These factual descriptions are parallel to the protagonist's transformation from a young, amateur seaman to an experienced, veteran of the sea. On Sunday, August 28, for instance, the journal entry begins: "lat. 12° N. The Trade-wind clouds had been in sight for a day or two previously, and we expected to take the trades every hour" (320). Typically, in later chapters, an everyday account begins by the recording of latitude and longitude, and his descriptions of weather are increasingly recorded in detail. Earlier descriptions of the sea as unknown and limitless are replaced by Dana's accurate descriptions of latitude and longitude, and each day, he tells us exactly where he is sailing on the sea.

If we look at Dana's descriptions of storms, we can better understand how he has become a keener observer of seascape:

A huge mist capped with black clouds came driving towards us, extending over that quarter of the horizon, and covering the stars, which shone brightly in the other part of the heavens. It came upon us at once with a blast, and a shower of hail and rain, which almost took our breath from us. The hardiest was obliged to turn his back. We let the halyards run, and fortunately were not taken aback the little vessel "paid off" from the wind, and ran on for some time

directly before, tearing through the water with everything flying. Having called all hands, we close reefed the topsails and trysail, furl'd the courses and jib, set the fore-top-mast staysail, and brought her up nearly to her course, with the weather braces hauled in a little, to ease her. (65)

This is the first encounter with a storm for Dana, and he felt it was so powerful that "I thought it something serious, but an older sailor would have thought nothing of it" (64). In describing how the storm approached with black clouds, and how it was with "a blast" and "a shower of hail and rain," and also how the crew handled the ship, one might get the impression that Dana is very meticulous in how the storm appears. But if we compare this depiction of the storm with one that appears later, we can better understand how Dana has changed.

This is the entry for Saturday, the 14<sup>th</sup> of November: "The wind seemed to come with a spite, an edge to it, which threatened to scrape us off the yards. The mere force of the wind was greater than I had ever seen it before; but darkness, cold, and wet are the worst part of a storm, to a sailor" (291). Being accustomed to the tasks on the ship, he is now able to depict the storm both realistically and literarily, and it is certainly done not in the way he used to do it in the earlier examples. The storm depicted here looks more dramatic and violent, simply because of Dana's personification of it. It is with a "spite" to threaten to scrape the sailors off the ship emphasizing how harsh and antagonistic this catastrophic storm is. Being more real in his response, this storm is more than a metrological phenomenon: it is a catastrophic seascape created by Dana in which we can observe what Barry Lopez calls two types of landscapes. According to Lopez, one exists outside the self (exterior), and the other within (interior) (64–65). Dana's seascape here presents his interior landscape, which is composed not only by his descriptive, log-like information of the oceanic environment, but also by his honest response to it. He does so by personifying the storm.

Dana continues to depict the storm as follows:

The force of the wind had never been greater than at this moment.

In going up the rigging, it seemed absolutely to pin us down to the shrouds; and on the yard, there was no such thing as turning a face to windward. Yet here was no driving sleet, and darkness, and wet, and cold, as off Cape Horn; and instead of a stiff oil-cloth suit, south-wester caps, and thick boots, we had on hats, round jackets, duck trowsers, light shoes, and everything light and easy. All these things make a great difference to a sailor. . . . The gale was now at its height, 'blowing like scissors and thumb-screws; the captain was on deck; the ship, which was light, rolling and pitching as though she would shake the long sticks out of her; and the sails gaping open and splitting, in every direction. (292)

Here we can see how his seascape is different from earlier examples in which he emphasizes how alien and strange the seascape looks. Now, as a crewman on the ship, he struggles with the storm and becomes part of the seascape. Not only does he look at and describe it, but further, he gets involved with it. Equally important, he can envision a broader seascape within which he emphasizes catastrophic features of the storm by adding how the gale is blowing like "scissors and thumb-screws" as well as how the ship is affected by the power of the storm. In the following descriptions in the book, he goes on to explain elaborately how they survive the storm, and therefore, we can understand the magnitude of the storm.

The mizzen top-sail, which was a comparatively new sail, and close-reefed, split, from head to foot, in the bunt; the fore top-sail went, in one rent, from clew to earing, and was blowing to tatters; one of the chain bobstays parted; the sprit-sail yard sprung in the slings; the martingale had slued away off to leeward; and, owing to the long dry weather, the lee rigging hung in large bights, at every lurch. (292-93).

Note that Dana does not exactly describe the storm itself; rather, he emphasizes the magnitude of it by explaining what it has done to the ship. Of course, except for the ship and its crew, there is nothing on the

ocean affected by the storm. Therefore, to use Lopez's phrase again, Dana shows us the "exterior landscape" which is another reality of the seascape only available on the ocean. Dana's seascape thus includes both interior and exterior seascape. In it, we can view a more complicated seascape created by Dana than he initially could when he started his voyage.

Dana's later tendency is also characterized by dramatic and lively descriptions of the weather. Obviously, as an experienced seaman, Dana became a keen observer of the oceanic environment; he has to be so in order to live on the ship. As a result, Dana's later seascape is more realistic in that it includes more information on the geography and meteorology of the oceanic environment. Dana's transformation to an experienced seaman means that he has become familiar with the oceanic environment that was once so incomprehensible and indescribable to him without employing terrestrial aesthetics and romantic language. Dana's reaction to meteorological phenomena is, in this sense, a gauge to see how he learns to look at the composition of the seascape. *Two Years* shows us one of the most significant troves of sea literature; that is, the oceanic environment is a place where humans' interactions with the nautical environment can vividly be viewed, and where the components of seascape—such as the sun, wind, waves, and meteorological phenomena generated by their interactions—have a great influence upon human perception.

Whereas Greek and Roman literature show that a storm is a major force or character to interact with the protagonist, nineteenth-century American realism in sea literature looks at overall meteorological phenomena in detail. While a storm remains an important component of the seascape as a powerful and destructive force in nature, it seems to be less a literary device than a natural phenomenon upon the sea. This de-centralization of the storm in sea literature is of course due to the development of technology and science that made the maritime experience easier and safer than before; but its underlying influence upon literary discourse is the democratization of, or more detailed characterization of, the elements of seascape.

Peter Matthiessen's *Far Tortuga* (1975) shows seascape in the

context of twentieth-century American literature, which carries Dana's realism as a seaman further. This novel is about a sea turtle fishing voyage off the coast of Nicaragua. "Tortuga" is the Spanish word for sea turtle, and in this book, it also refers to a bay where green turtles are found. The story starts at dawn, in the harbor of Georgetown, Grand Cayman Island. The sixty-foot schooner *Lillias Eden* is preparing to get under way for the turtling. Like Ahab in *Moby Dick*, the dominant captain Raib Avers's recklessness and authoritarian search for turtles leads to endangering the lives of the entire crew. It was 1975 when Matthiessen worked the beach of Grand Caymen Island, where the novel is set. Motivated partly by the impulse of representing what had been lost on Grand Caymen Island, including wildlife and traditional ways of fishing, Matthiessen set out to write a book about the turtle and turtle fishing in the Caribbean. However, without describing the actions, characters, and aims of the book, Matthiessen moves "away from the conventional realism," and creates the silence of the wild, for instance, that is a constant presence in the book (Plimpton 79–80). It is true that what we can perceive in the seascape is "moods of the winds, spray, skies, waves, birds, and turtles." As Rebecca Raglon states, what he wanted to do is to "examine the experience again," not to "reproduce it," but "to find a way to direct the reader to an apprehension of the unblinking heart of reality" (10).

Like modernist poems, *Far Tortuga* opens the book up to white space, "more air around works," and some pages have only one or two words, and small sentences "sail across the page like flying fish" (Kennedy 28):

Daybreak.

At Windward Passage, four hundred miles due east,  
the sun is rising. Wind east-northeast, thirty-eight  
knots, with gusts to forty-five: a gale.

Black waves, wind-feathered. White birds, dark birds.

The trade winds freshen at first light, and the sea  
rises in long ridge, rolling west. (4)

Each sentence pictures some natural phenomena; there is a list of literal things such as the sun, wind, waves, and birds. All the things are so descriptive that readers cannot easily find the author's psychological projection that we saw in Dana's seascape. But the similarity is that Matthiessen's seascape captures the movements of weather, as is shown in sentences such as: "the sun is rising" and "The trade winds freshen at first light, and the sea rises in long ridge, rolling west." In an interview in *Paris Review*, Matthiessen mentions in this regard that he was moved by the stark quality of the Caribbean voyage that he made before:

everything worn bare by wind and sea—the reefs, the faded schooner, the turtle men themselves—everything so pared down and so simple that metaphors, stream-of-consciousness, even such ordinary conventions of the novel as "he said" or "he thought," seemed intrusive, even offensive, and a great impediment, besides.  
(340)

Thus, the realistic seascape in *Far Tortuga* is in part Matthiessen's attempt to recreate how he initially interpreted the reality of the Caribbean turtlers' seascape. In fact, as Dana's later realistic representation of the seascape shows, there is basically nothing but the narrator's impressions about the oceanic environment. As Matthiessen puts it, "everything [is] so pared down and so simple" that the narrator's psychological projections upon the seascape seem to prevent the seascape from being realistic. What Matthiessen then achieves is a seascape in which only meteorological facts and characters—not only humans and animals, but also the sun, wind, and waves—exist on their own terms, serving to the seascape as part of the reality.

The narrative in *Far Tortuga* also reminds us of a log narrative, which focuses on meteorological facts and navigational information, not by using the reality of the oceanic environment as metaphors and similes, but by letting them just be in the seascape: the weather in *Far Tortuga* is present as a character in the novel. Matthiessen's seascape is, as John Conron puts it in *The American Landscape*, a "symbiotic

landscape—an affirmation of man’s ancient connections to the earth” (477). This symbiotic relation is also shown in the ways that the characters in *Far Tortuga* see meteorological phenomena in relation to turtling and their way of life. Raib, the captain of the *Lilas Eden*, for instance, understands the weather in terms of navigation and turtling:

When de sun’s goin down on de horizon, a turtler must look out to de sunset. Supposin you havin a red sunset, and when you look back into de east, you see red above de blue. Well, dat is good weather: moderate weather or calm. Blue above de red means blusterous weather, prob’ly squally or plenty of breeze, and if you see it real gray, dat means blueserous weather, too. Red evenin sky and underneath is dark—well, dat is good red weather. (53)

Furthermore, the seascape in *Far Tortuga* appears not merely as a realistic meteorological phenomenon but also as pragmatic text through which to discern how to find and catch turtles. As a symbiotic seascape, the meteorological phenomena become interconnected with the characters’ lives and turtling; fishing is a vulnerable business in the sense that it is in great part subject to the weather. Seamen have to be able to read acutely the weather on the ocean in order to obtain a beneficial outcome; also important is that Raib’s seascape is composed not in navigational terms but with simpler words such as colors—blue, red, gray. His dialect seems to provide us with a perspective through which to view his seascape, that is, one that is more rural and regional than urban, and more based on hands-on experience than scientific knowledge. As Bert Bender argues, he is also “an ‘everyman’ captain driven onto the rocks of circumstance by the Darwinian biological reality that has sustained him; by the cutting winds that blow constantly through the novel,” “by the forces of ‘progress,’” and “by time—the wild sun itself” (218).

This point leads us to consideration of an environmental perspective that is inherent in *Far Tortuga*. John Conron talks about the symbiotic landscape as a vision of “harmony which does exist and which is eminently possible rather than wistfully, unobtainably



nostalgic" (477). As Matthiessen said in the above-cited interview, he was so intrigued by "everything worn bare by wind and sea," which is in a way, a nostalgic yearning for simplicity, separate from modern technology and machinery. It is almost a biblical "lost garden" in which Matthiessen's characters, including both humans and meteorological phenomena, exist independently and equally. Though their ship represents a technological machine, it is also close to nature in the sense that it is not eminently modern, but rather an anachronistic old sailing vessel. Raib, the captain of the *Lilas Eden*, despises technological progress: "You fellas wantin dis goddom progress cause you are lazy. I never wanted it some way, but I got to get on with life, so I make my peace with it" (55). Maneuvering such a small, sixty-foot schooner, looking for a better but dangerous fishing place, their sailing is doomed to death; in the story, in an attempt to escape from pirates, their ship crashes into a ragged rock. Declining fisheries, surviving fishermen in the midst of technological development, trying to get better benefits out of the commercial competition—their direct relationship with the earth, an ancient way of looking at the seascape through interaction with such meteorological phenomena as the sun, wind, and waves, is also disappearing. Thus, the symbiotic seascape in *Far Tortuga* deals with environmentalism, not only through its realistic representation of the elements that compose it, but also through its implication of the disappearance of humans' direct and earthy relations with nature.

Nonetheless, by employing the term symbiotic, I don't mean that the overall seascape in *Far Tortuga* shows a peaceful or harmonious relationship between humans and physical nature. In fact, readers should be aware of biblical and paradisiacal implications throughout the novel. As I suggested earlier, the characters' earthy relationship with the oceanic environment is doomed, and the ship, "*Lilas Eden*"—bearing a biblical connotation—is also doomed. This overall implication of paradise lost is the most important motif in all of Matthiessen's work, but especially in this novel. It is interesting to see how a catastrophic storm plays a crucial role in indicating how this paradisiacal harmony is going to begin to collapse:

The Captain nods.

One telltale thing for a hurricane, you feel de wind putting toward de north or de northwest. Course dere are regular northwest storms, but dat is in de winter time. Usually from July, August, September, October, anytime dat wind goes to de north, dere trouble comin.

Yah, mon. A north wind in September, mon, you better not stop dere askin questions, cause dat is hurricane. (216)

A few pages later, by referring to the storm, it becomes an omen of their doomed life.

Nice weather, y'know, but a heavy roll of sea, and down around sout'-ou'west was awful coward overcast, all from de horizon, a very heavy-lookin mass of sky. So I told de fellas dat could be was a hurricane approachin, cause de barometer was fallin in de time of her risin, and we would try to scud along to de northward, Cuba way. . . . (255)

It is a popular trope in sea literature that storms play a decisive role in the story. As I discussed in the earlier examples, biblical use of storms in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century American sea literature connotes it as a device to show divine providence, while as in the case of the nineteenth-century writer Richard Henry Dana, Jr., storms are more than images or metaphors; they appear as actual catastrophic natural phenomenon that have significant impact on the characters. In *Far Tortuga*, the storms are not actual natural phenomena, but are just ideas about the storms. As indicated in the crew's references to the storm, in *Far Tortuga*, storms remain a menace on the ocean; however, storms don't overturn the story this time. Instead, the real catastrophic ending comes later in the story when all the crew except Speedy are killed in the shipwreck in an attempt to escape from the Jamaicans. On their way to run, the ship hits a rock in the "bleak ocean."

It is interesting to see how natural and human interactions compose here the catastrophic ending. Although it is a man-made calamity in the sense that the crew are killed because the Jamaicans

take the crew into custody, and they accidentally hit the rock on the ocean, overall, nature in this book is described as something bare, impersonal, and untamed. It is the rock in the dark ocean that wrecked the ship and forced the crew's death. The storm, contrary to the examples that I have discussed so far, is now another literary device to suggest the crew is doomed, as if to suggest that the real catastrophe is in essence man-made. Or, it may be safe to state that the ill-fated demise of the crew is initially man-made, and a natural phenomenon makes it a catastrophe. Of course, I don't mean that Matthiessen is the first writer who makes this literary turn of storm representations away from earlier examples, but rather I would like to suggest that he has done it in the most radical way in depicting the oceanic environment and people living there. Matthiessen makes an effort to represent the hard reality of the oceanic environment as it is. Like Dana's example, the storm is a real presence to humans on the ocean; but unlike Dana's, Matthiessen's storm remains a second threat next to humans'. As is shown in the characters' references to the storm in the above quotation, the crew knows how to predict the storm and avoid the risk of being hit by it. The crew is killed in the shipwreck because they follow the captain's order. It is a catastrophic ending because the crew cannot predict what is ahead. As William Dowie phrases it, this is a book in which we can see "a poetic vision of the starkness and beauty of life lived on the border between the wild sea and man's wild desires." Likewise, we can also see Matthiessen suggest that humans, in combination with the force of nature, create a catastrophe, and the storm in this book plays a key role in understanding this.

## **Conclusion**

First of all, what my survey of seascape representations in American literature from early settlement to contemporary times reveals is that storms, a significant component of seascape, play an important role in showing us the relationship between characters, viewers, and the natural environment. Early settlement narratives theologically look at the weather. As a disintegrative power and recognizable phenomenon, storms are often represented as God's

providence. Storms in early narratives accordingly present us with a conventional structure in which a storm appears as a destructive force as well as with the purpose of integrating ideological momentum to build the characters' sense of community. As science and technology developed, academics and the government more systematically observed and studied the weather. Frederick Hall edited and published *Literary and Philosophical Repertory*, which was circulated in New England during the early nineteenth century. *North American Review* and *American Journal of Science* also contributed to the early studies of meteorological research during the nineteenth century, and the Smithsonian developed a meteorological project during the late nineteenth century (Fleming 10–93).

Then, what Richard Henry Dana's seascape shows is a departure with a new type of seascape, mixing romanticism and realism. Dana's growing sensibility toward meteorological phenomena is one gauge to understand his transformation from an amateur seaman to an experienced sailor. Because of Dana's honest response to the nautical environment, *Two Years* documents realistically what he does and witnesses in the course of the voyage but also shows how he reacts and changes through his interaction with some elements of the seascape: storms, people, and the oceanic environment. The storms here are integrative because they are a necessary component for Dana to grow as an experienced seaman.

In Peter Matthiessen's *Far Tortuga*, we can see a "symbiotic seascape" in which storms, humans, and the oceanic environment become equal entities in the novel. The interconnected relations between seamen and nature are represented in such a way that Matthiessen eliminates all similes and metaphors, and everything is meant to be bare reality. Compared to works during early settlement, for example, Matthiessen's seascape does not remain harmonious; rather, it is catastrophic. It is also doomed to be lost, as is shown in the crew's fate. The storm this time plays a significant role in making us understand that nature is not always the main force in creating humans' death: humans create catastrophes; nature is just there. In *Far Tortuga*, the storm becomes integrative in the sense that it remains another

important component of the seascape. Moreover, it is not even equipped with disintegrative force; the disintegrative force comes from humans.

My brief survey of the representation of weather in American sea literature is intended to remind us of two things. In sea literature, humans are more vulnerable to the influence of the weather than they are on terrestrial terrain; thus, humans' reaction to meteorological phenomena in sea literature reveals human interaction with nature in a most visible way. Tracing the representation of weather and the seascape help us understand, first of all, how the seascape is composed of meteorological phenomena and how its composition shows American cultural and historical perspectives. Though the seascape is not studied as much as the terrestrial landscape, it is an important perspective to discern how we shape our aesthetics and perceptions through our mental and physical interactions with it. I have focused on storm representations and shown that they have been changed significantly over time, but in looking at sea literature more comprehensively, our study of environmental literature will become more profound.

### Works Cited

- Bender, Bert. *Sea-Brothers: The Tradition of American Sea Fiction from Moby-Dick to the Present*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1988.
- Conron, John. *The American Landscape: A Critical Anthology of Prose and Poetry*. New York: Oxford UP, 1973.
- Dana, Richard Henry, Jr. *Two Years before the Mast: A Personal Narrative of Life at Sea*. 1840. New York: Penguin, 1981.
- Dowie, William. "Peter Matthiessen." Literature Resource Center. July 15, 2001.
- Fleming, James Rodger. *Meteorology in America, 1800–1870*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990.
- Homer. *The Odyssey*. Vol. 1. Trans. A. T. Murray. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1919.

- Lopez, Barry. *Crossing Open Ground*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- Matthiessen, Peter. *Far Tortuga*. New York: Bantam, 1975.
- Raglon, Rebecca. "Fact and Fiction: The Development of Ecological Form in Peter Matthiessen's *Far Tortuga*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 35 (1994): 245–59.
- Strachey, William. *A True Reportory of the Wracke, and Redemption of Sir Thomas Gates Knight; upon, and from the Lands of the Bermudas: his Coming to Virginia, and the Estate of That Colonie then, and after, under the Government of the Lord La Warre, July 15, 1610*. In *In the Trough of the Sea: Selected American Sea-Deliverance Narratives, 1610–1766*. 1615. Ed. Donald P. Wharton. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1979. 28–55.
- Thimmes, Pamela Lee. *Studies in the Biblical Sea-Storm Type-Scene: Convention and Invention*. San Francisco: Mellen Research UP, 1992.
- Wharton, Donald P., ed. *In the Trough of the Sea: Selected American Sea-Deliverance Narratives, 1610–1766*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood P, 1979.