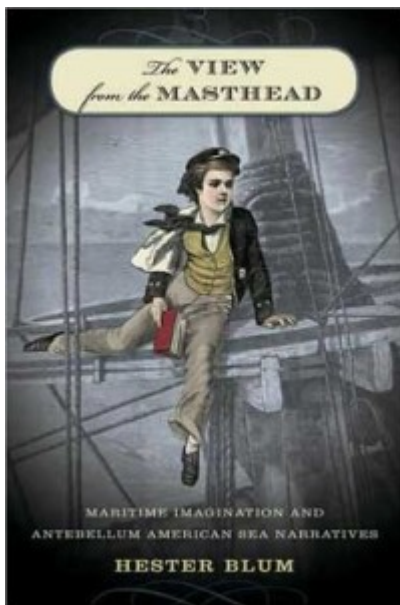
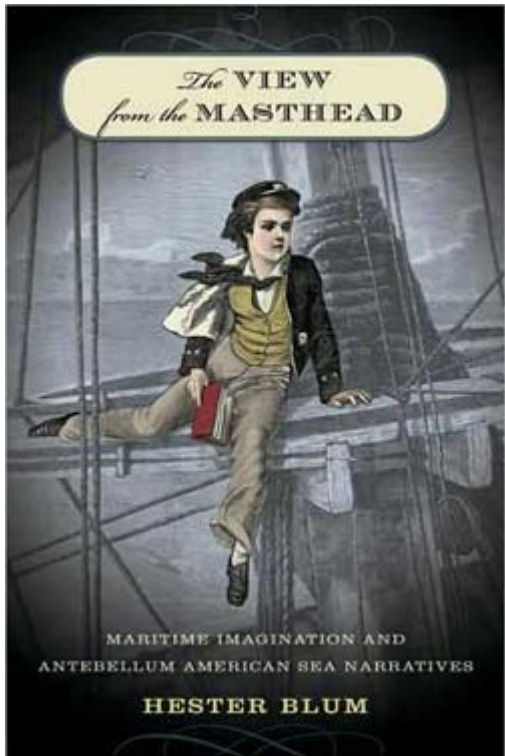


# Reading the Ocean with a Mariner's Eye



Hester Blum, *The View from the Masthead: Maritime Imagination and Antebellum American Sea Narratives*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. xi, 271 pp., cloth, \$59.95, paperback, \$22.95.

"Call me Ishmael." Ask students to identify that line and most will tell you with certainty that it is the first sentence of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. So will many scholars and teachers of antebellum U.S. literature. However, the first character to appear in *Moby-Dick* is not Ishmael but a grammar-school usher offering an etymology for the word "whale." The first sentence describes

him: "The pale Usher—threadbare in coat, heart, and brain; I see him now." By the time Hester Blum offers a reading of *Moby-Dick* in *The View from the Masthead*, she has taught her readers how to see with a mariner's eye. She directs us back to the novel to look more closely at "Etymology" and "Extracts," the puzzling miscellany of cetacean language and lore that precedes Ishmael's famous declaration. Blum suggests we read these early pages as we would entries in a common-place book, one dedicated to passages about whales and whaling that also offers its readers a literary archive. Here in the novel's early pages is a veritable trove of writing about the sea, from the Bible to popular nineteenth-century sea narratives.

Blum is the first to pay particular attention to the genre of American sailor narratives as literary texts and artifacts. *The View from the Masthead* analyzes seamen's libraries, Barbary captivity narratives, sailor writing, naval memoirs, Melville's sea vision, writings about the Galapagos Islands, and the crisis of death and burial at sea. Her deep familiarity with the genre of sailor narratives enables Blum to offer many acute and innovative readings of texts by James Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry Dana, and Melville, writers who have long made up the canon of maritime literature. However, Blum's most significant contributions come in the form of the critical attention she gives to writing by and about sailors and the account she provides of their rich participation in print culture as consumers, disseminators, and producers of texts. This is a body of works Blum not only uncovers or recovers but also makes vibrantly visible.

Blum initiates her readers into the literary culture available to seamen by offering a description of the types of libraries found aboard ships and on shore, examples of reading lists, and an anatomy of the literary conventions of nonfiction sea narratives. Blum persuasively argues that the level of literacy among common sailors was high, certainly above average for laborers in antebellum America. The extent of that literacy, the wide range of their reading along with the collective experience provided by a library of shared and limited texts on any given voyage, leads to numerous scenes, wonderfully recounted by Blum, of debate among sailors on deck about literary and aesthetic value. Sailors consumed and discussed novels, travel narratives, conduct books, pamphlets, and reform tracts, along with technical treatises about seamanship and navigation. This array of texts demonstrates, as Blum does throughout her book, that manual, intellectual, and imaginative labors are intertwined and interdependent in sea narratives. What she calls a "materialist epistemology" insists that the practices of labor become the basis for knowledge; it is "a recognition of the physical work that enables moments of reflection and speculation" (109). Coming at the beginning of the second part of *The View from the Masthead*, this formulation makes evident the ways in which Blum's text extends work begun in Marcus Rediker's *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* (1987), which first sketched the contours of American maritime culture. Blum considers the literary aspects of maritime culture in a way that compellingly demonstrates the extent to which the contributions of maritime culture to U.S. politics, the antebellum economy, and the project of national

formation are predicated on this culture's very literariness.

The concept of the "sea eye" (3), a phrase that originates in sailor writing, emerges in Blum's writing as a way to describe the particular perspective of the sailor on the maritime world, the literal view from the masthead. Descriptive *and* analytical, the sea eye serves also as a metaphor and a theory of representation, making legible the reciprocal and symbiotic relationship of contemplation and physical labor. Like the producers of scientific knowledge in Helen Rozwadowski's *Fathoming the Ocean* (2005), who come to that knowledge by working in the ocean (and likewise disseminate their findings in nonfictional texts about the sea), Blum's mariners imagine precisely because they work. The sea eye, grounded in labor and in the material, opens up multiple opportunities for further scholarship for those interested in literary and print culture more generally, as well as in maritime culture, literature, and history.

Blum tells us that her thinking about maritime literature traverses the fields of Atlantic and Black Atlantic studies, globalism, transatlantic print culture, and Pacific studies (12). Sailors emerge in Blum's text as international, the crews of ships as multinational. It is curious then that their narratives stubbornly remain "American," or rather that Blum introduces the body of texts she examines in *The View from the Masthead* collectively as "Antebellum American Sea Narratives." At the intersection of the American and the oceanic, the sea narratives herein so brilliantly contextualized and interpreted by Blum exemplify the larger difficulty of unmooring categories of analysis from national structures as an increasing number of American studies scholars embrace the transnational turn.

Thanks to this fascinating and informative study, it is as difficult to conceive of maritime literature without sailor narratives as it is to remember that the contributions of sailors to literary culture have until this moment gone unrecognized in literary history. No less remarkable is the fact that, by offering us an archive of neglected texts, Blum also provides us sea eyes with which to read texts like Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* or Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*, texts we thought we knew as well as that first sentence in *Moby-Dick*.

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