

- Freshwater ecosystems
- natural heterotopias
- blue humanities
- *The hungry tide*
- *Where the crawdads sing*

1. Introduction

Bodies, waters, histories, and narratives have been involved in material and symbolic connections that go beyond the simple fascination for the aquatic world. Over the past two decades, the interest in how people and water flow together and shape each other has coalesced into a more complex formation fueled by scientific knowledge, social memories, and cultural imaginaries, thus giving shape to the transdisciplinary field of the “Blue Humanities”.¹ Reflecting “the oceanic turn” in the humanities,² this new epistemology is the result of the combination of marine and social sciences with cultural and literary theories. Through its focus on “wet matter”,³ it aims at bridging the biocultural separation between land and water by proposing new cognitive modes for connecting humans with aqueous life. On the one hand, insisting very much on the “cognitive vibrancy of . . . storied water”,⁴ the emergent ecocritical approach of the Blue Humanities subverts the anthropocentric mode of thinking according to which eloquence, expressivity, and creativity are a human prerogative. On the other hand, it problematises the traditional dichotomic conceptualisation of water (in its various forms) as either a place for aesthetic contemplation or as an unpredictable enemy to be feared and tamed.⁵ Serpil Oppermann observes that coping with the complexities posed by the Anthropocene to global water systems, such as the destructive exploitation of ocean resources,⁶ the devastation of seascapes and the consequent imperilment of aqueous life, and the anthropocentric representational and discursive practices about human-water relations, requires more comprehensive and inclusive methods of scholarship. This approach “enable[s] *thinking with water*”⁷ by prompting a form of relational thinking as well as “recognizing seas, rivers, lakes, and all water bodies as living beings with innate rights”.⁸ In other words, the Blue Humanities challenges traditional paradigms by positing that terrestrial humans and aquatic nonhumans are not separate since they are both participant and generative agents engaged in a relationship of ongoing exchange and reciprocal influence.

Having the sea as its primary site of study, both as a geopolitical and symbolic entity, the Blue Humanities “has retained a distinctly saline focus to date”.⁹ As numerous scholars have underlined,¹⁰ the field has developed from maritime studies and integrated scientific discourses around planetary oceans into cultural and literary theories. However, the “poetics of planetary waters”,¹¹ constituted by narratives engaging with the multifaceted relationship between humans and the aquatic realm, extends beyond the ocean itself and encompasses a wide range of waterscapes, including smaller aquatic ecosystems, that have shaped human bodies and human histories. As John A. Downing – the most recent past President of the Association for the Sciences of Limnology¹² and Oceanography – suggests, inland water is a “strategic resource” and is “essential to life”.¹³ What is significant for the Blue Humanities is to investigate whether its geophysical properties, constitutive of a hybrid entity composed of both solid and fluid matter, also reflect the discursive constructions around them. In other words, a Blue Humanities approach interprets the stories that a body of water tells through its material existence and studies any correspondences with its narrative representations.

Answering Steve Mentz and James Smith’s call for a more inclusive Blue Humanities, a domain that should not overlook freshwaters’ literary depictions, this article aims at exploring the signifying power of wetlands and marshes in two contemporary environmental narratives: *The Hungry Tide* (2004),¹⁴ by Indian writer and anthropologist Amitav Ghosh, and *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2018),¹⁵ by American writer and zoologist Delia Owens. The article seeks to demonstrate that, in spite of the different cultural and geographical settings of their respective books, both authors employ wetlands and marshes to bring to the fore issues of environmental and social justice and promote an ethics of inter – and intra-species relation. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s concept of “heterotopia”,¹⁶ the essay will argue that the hybrid ecosystem of wetlands can be read as a discursive formation that defies colonial logics, challenges patriarchal practices, and denounces individual and collective violations.

2. The Material-Discursive Potential of Wetlands

Reflecting the ontological inseparability of land and liquid realms, wetlands have been the epitome of ambivalence and fluidity. A place of “multiple meanings where sense slips and slides never fixing on a point or a definition”,¹⁷ they have been subject to shifting perceptions and receptions across histories and geographies. Classical discourses around wetlands, for instance, reveal a general disfavor of the marshes, which were often considered as *loca horrida*¹⁸ to avoid and fear. Pejoratively known as swamps, wetlands have been traditionally depicted as dark and fearsome. As Stephen Kellert points out, the prevailing perception of this ecosystem was of a dangerous place where disease spread and mysterious creatures

dwelled.¹⁹ Furthermore, although early-modern western societies regarded the marshes as a reservoir of exploitable resources, including fish and wildfowl,²⁰ industrious pioneers realised that wetlands could not sustain late nineteenth-century agricultural demands, thus concluding that marshes had to be drained²¹ and used to host new constructions related to housing development and transportation.²² For more than a century, in the U.S. as well as in most developed countries, the destruction of this threatening environment became a social imperative. In fact, by the end of the twentieth century, “more than a half of the 220 million acres of pre-European settlement wetlands”²³ were eliminated from American soil. However, during the latter part of the twentieth century, a significant change in public attitudes towards wetlands can be witnessed. On an ecological level, environmental experts increasingly acknowledged them as one of the most important ecosystems on Earth²⁴ for their capacity to transfer, settle, filter, and recharge the mingled elements of soil and water,²⁵ stabilise water supplies, thus ameliorating both floods and drought, and protect shorelines. As for the social perception, wetlands started being appreciated for the recreational opportunities they provided (such as boating, fishing, and hunting) as well as their “great beauty, aesthetic appeal, and even spiritual power”.²⁶ On a cultural level, several fictional and nonfictional works, including Aldo Leopold’s “Marshland Elegy” (1949), Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), and Richard Adams’ *Watership Down* (1972), foregrounded marshes as vital ecosystems under constant threat from human activities, acting as a call to action for conservation and environmental protection.

From an ecocritical viewpoint, wetlands serve as an interesting area of investigation not just for their material qualities but also for their capacity to act as discursive formations. As ecological sites where apparently incompatible elements coexist (land mingles with water, terrestrial and aquatic animals live together, plants have adapted to the periodical insurgence of floods), they can express their signifying potential acting as locations where differences are embraced and identities are validated. These sites can be identified through Michel Foucault’s concept of “heterotopias”;²⁷ that is, spatial configurations instating liminality and juxtapositions. Defined by “relations of proximity”²⁸ among humans, nonhuman beings, and environments, they function as “counter-sites”²⁹ where borders are blurred, normative ways of living are challenged, and identities are confused. Cemeteries, prisons, theaters, brothels, museums, libraries, and fairgrounds are instances of heterotopic sites that relate to larger cultural structures of crisis, deviation, incompatibility, juxtaposition, repetition, or exclusion. Their heterogeneous nature is emblematised by the fact that they are both real and symbolic, factual and socially and culturally constructed, inside and outside the social order. Due to their liminality, wetlands and marshes can be included in the list of sites where differences clash and blend and borders are transgressed.

The discursive potential for variation, defiance, and transformation of wetlands is thoroughly explored in two contemporary novels that are analyzed in this article. Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and Delia Owens’ *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2018) emphasise the mutual impact between marshy environments and marginalised individuals, showcasing how certain places accommodate behaviours that deviate from societal norms and facilitate the resolution of crises.

3. Wetlands as Triggers of a Collective Identity: Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*

People and water have traditionally flown together and shaped each other. In the same way as human behaviour influences water, water shapes humans’ bodies, lives, and cultures. This new materialist perspective,³⁰ based on a relational ontology that sees people and things as inextricably connected, is particularly evident in the novel *The Hungry Tide*, published in 2004 by the award-winning Indian author Amitav Ghosh. Set in the fascinating “tide country”³¹ in the archipelago of the Sundarbans, between the vast plains of Bengal and the Indian Ocean, the book tells the story of Piya, a marine biologist from the U.S. who visits the archipelagic region to study an endangered species of river dolphin, and Kanai, a successful businessman from Calcutta who is visiting his aunt Nilima in the island of Lusibari. The present is intertwined with digressions from the past both through passages tracing the colonial history of the Sundarbans and the remarks featured in the 1979 journal owned by Kanai’s uncle, Nirmal, who reports a detailed account of the massacre of the Morichjhāpi island’s refugees.

The setting of the novel reproduces meticulously the typography of the actual location. Geographically speaking, the Sundarbans stretch through a network of estuaries, tidal rivers, and creeks intersected by numerous channels for almost three hundred kilometers. The pools and basins created by floods and tides are intertwined with flat, densely forested, marshy islands. In the Sundarbans, the boundaries between land and water are unpredictable, constantly erased and redefined by the ebb and flow of the tides. The ever-changing nature of this ecosystem is revealed by the fact that “rivers, along with their allies, the tides and storms, continually redesign island topographies”.³² As the largest delta region in the world, the Sundarbans are animated by two opposing water flows: the saline waters of the Bay and the muddy fresh waters of subcontinental rivers. This peculiar composition contributes to increasing the complexity and heterogeneity of this ecosystem³³ composed of “micro-environments”.³⁴ Due to the challenges posed by a constantly changing environment and

for the high risk of being devoured by tigers or crocodiles, the Sundarbans are one of the most inhospitable regions on the globe and are inhabited by approximately five million people, distributed unevenly between the northern islands – which have an elevated ground level and are rather protected from storms and tides – and the southern areas – which are increasingly susceptible to environmental fluctuations. According to local legends,³⁵ this territory has been settled, abandoned, and then resettled, for thousands of years. Interestingly, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Sundarbans were known as “the pirates’ homeland”³⁶ due to the violence and anarchy of the fishermen, woodcutters, pirates, and salt-makers who inhabited them. The history of this peculiar region reveals its intrinsic liminality and portrays it as a literal and metaphorical threshold where life and death, humans and nonhuman animals, terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems are enmeshed, and where the laws of humans and the laws of nature collide.

The geography of this place intersects with an infamous historical event known as the “Morichjhāpi massacre”.³⁷ As if exerting a centripetal force on society’s marginalised people, from the 1950s to 1970s, the Sundarbans became the destination of a large number of Bengali Hindu migrants who sought refuge in the aftermath of the partition of Bengal and India and the Bangladesh war of independence. However, the refugees were scattered into various inhospitable areas outside West Bengal with the promise that they would be relocated as soon as the Left Front came to power. These conditions were met only in 1978, when the refugees believed that they could finally set sail to Morichjhāpi, one of the northern-most forested islands of the Sundarbans, and settle down there. Nevertheless, one year later the government brutally evicted them for violating the Forest Preservation Acts and creating “ecological imbalance”.³⁸

In the novel, this episode is told from the viewpoint of Nirmal, the male protagonist’s uncle, who through his diary conveys the crucial role that the mangrove forest’s marshes play in the formation of a collective identity. Sharing the story of Kusum, a young woman refugee living on the island, the man explains the circumstances that brought the refugees there, revealing a deep connection between them and the marshy lands of the Sundarbans.³⁹ The refugees, who had “rivers . . . in [their] heads” and “tides . . . in [their] blood”,⁴⁰ find cultural and identity sustenance in these areas, overcoming severe hardships in their determined attempts to reach the tide country. These people’s connection to water and waterscapes is deeply rooted in their history of migration. As historical records report,⁴¹ they originally came from the mangrove wetlands, from where they departed after the partition of Bengal at independence, in 1947. The semi-arid regions where they were relocated not only failed to provide adequate sustenance but also starkly contrasted with the fertile, water-rich homeland they had known. When it came time for them to choose a homeland to return to, they saw the Sundarbans as the place where they could rebuild their fractured identity, as depicted in the novel. The wetlands of the Sundarbans – where constant environmental changes occurred, interspecies borders were blurred, and boundaries between landscape and waterscape were crossed – might be considered as the objective correlative of the refugees’ unstable past. Paradoxically, in spite of their ever-changing nature, wetlands represent a stable point of reference for those who could not circumscribe their identity into fixed categories, but rather in a mesh of different origins and languages. As outcasts of history, moving “like ghosts, covered in dust, strung out in a line, shuffling beside the rail tracks”⁴², the refugees had reached Morichjhāpi like a wave, mirroring the erratic nature of water. Arguably, they appointed the Sundarbans as their homeland not much because they saw it as an idyllic location where to live a utopian dream as because their liminal qualities made them a hospitable environment for “the outcasts of colonial society and the surplus populations of statist politics”.⁴³ Constantly sustaining and nurturing displaced people, water plays the role of a “buffer, [a] vital conduit, . . . and a gestational medium”.⁴⁴ Symbolically speaking, water, in its many forms as it appears in the tide country, infuses them with strength and determination to continue their journey: “Walking on iron, we longed for the touch of mud; encircled by rails, we dreamed of the Raimangal in flood. We dreamed of storm-tossed islands By night we remembered, we talked, and we dreamed”.⁴⁵ On a literal level, when they finally reach Morichjhāpi and establish a village there, it is water that offers them physical sustenance, providing them with the means to survive.

After a first period of adaptation and peaceful living in the island of Morichjhāpi, however, the refugees are framed by the government that is determined to evict them from the island. In spite of the government’s threats, they are adamant in their decision to stay and a phase of fierce resistance begins. An episode described in the novel’s chapter entitled “Besieged” tells about the displaced people’s cry of anguish but also of determination: “Amra kara? Bastuhara *Who are we? We are the dispossessed*”,⁴⁶ followed by “Morichjhāpi chharbona. *We’ll not leave Morichjhāpi, do what you may*”.⁴⁷ Nirmal, who is witnessing the scene, acknowledges the solemnity of that moment: “How strange it was to hear this plaintive cry wafting across the water. . . . Standing on the deck. . . I was struck by the beauty of this”.⁴⁸ The refugees and their waters are one in their act of resistance and share the same instinct to escape control and containment. From a new materialist perspective, the restive attitude of the Morichjhāpi displaced is induced by the element that has mostly influenced their lives. As both Teresa Shewry⁴⁹ and Astrida Neimanis⁵⁰ contend, water shapes human responses directly by imbuing the human with water’s own characteristics of temperamental tempestuousness.

Interestingly, anthropologist Ammu Jalais also highlights that the people of the Sundarbans are “environmental determinists”,⁵¹ so profoundly are they influenced by their environment. As local people explained to her, the permanent threat of losing land and homestead at high tide, the devastating cyclonic storms, and the lack of potable water transform them into “short-tempered, irritable and aggressive people”.⁵² In Ghosh’s literary representation, the metonymic relationship between the island’s waterscapes and its dispossessed inhabitants is evident in their “entanglement”⁵³ during a moment of crisis. The sheer persistence of water’s flow, which is “limitless [and] patient” to the extent that “just to look at [it] is to know why the waters must prevail, later if sooner”⁵⁴, is reflected in the determination shown by the refugees and enclosed in Kusum’s words: “There’s no other place I want to be”.⁵⁵ The Sundarbans’ waters give refugees the symbolic sustenance to formulate an identity based on flux, whereas land literally gives them the possibility of finding shelter, drawing physical sustenance, and establishing roots on the place where they settled.

The literal and symbolic refuge that the displaced initially found in the wetlands proves to be temporary. The depletion of resources led to their downfall both as individuals and as a community. After government eviction, those in Morichjhāpi were prohibited from contacting other islands, becoming trapped as “refugees in place”.⁵⁶ Facing a desperate situation, they were immobilised and cut off from their living knowledge. With essential resources destroyed, including tubewells, the settlers resorted to drinking from puddles, leading to a cholera epidemic. Eventually, they were excluded from the civilised world and treated like despicable surplus. A parallel can be drawn between the environmental characteristics of wetlands and the social perceptions constructed around the displaced people who inhabit them. Materializing impurity and the proximity of the human and the nonhuman, wetlands serve as the objective correlative of the Morichjhāpi refugees, who embody a threat to the social order, living in between the categories of humans and sub-humans, home and homelessness. Their life on the margins (of social order, geography, law), oppressed by dominant external forces, such as politics and imperialist power, makes them what Gayatri Spivak calls “subaltern”.⁵⁷ Clearly, they deviate from an ideal, communicate through acts of insurgence, and embody the “heterogeneous Other”⁵⁸ silenced by systematic imperialist practices. As Ghosh’s novel poignantly points out, however, the subalterns that populate Morichjhāpi reject the condition of mutism to which society condemned them by problematizing the rhetoric that attempts to separate environmental politics from the political as such. In fact, through their acts of rebellion, the fact that neoliberal postcolonial state’s rhetoric of environmental conservation cannot cope with the human cost it entails is deliberately exposed. In this respect, Kusum bitterly observes: “It seemed to me that this whole world had become a place of animals, and our fault, our crime, was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have, from water and soil”.⁵⁹ The massacre of the refugees becomes the signifier of governments’ inability to balance environmental protection and social wellbeing, especially when subalterns are involved. Tragically, neither of the two factions stepped back from their position and the evacuation of the island in the name of wildlife protection ends up with a hideous massacre during which, according to local sources, seventy-five percent of the inhabitants go killed.⁶⁰ On the one hand, the wetlands and marshes of the Sundarbans represented in *The Hungry Tide* function metonymically as heterotopic places that bring into focus the social, cultural, and political contradictions that characterised neoliberal postcolonial India. On the other, however, they have enabled the formation, albeit temporarily, of a collective identity based on relational rather than oppositional principles, such as the necessary coexistence of humans and nonhumans, the assumption that borders are permeable, and the awareness that “transformation is the rule of life”.⁶¹

4. Empowering Connections Within the Liminal Space of the Marsh: Delia Owen’s *Where the Crawdads Sing*

Intertwining the richness of its storytelling with profound contemporary relevance, *Where the Crawdads Sing* is set against the backdrop of the marshes of North Carolina.⁶² Being both a biologist and nature writer, Owens imbues her debut novel with deep ecocritical awareness of the Southern wetlands.⁶³ Indeed, the book stands out for its ecological poignancy, drawing attention to the delicate balance between the complex interrelationships between human and nonhuman beings. Serving as a central character, the marsh symbolises a sanctuary for the protagonist Kya Clark and underscores the novel’s exploration of human states of being, including isolation and resilience. Owens offers a Janian representation of the marsh through its representation as both a safe haven that Kya must preserve at all costs and an inhospitable environment to avoid for the rest of her family and the inhabitants of the fictional town of Barkley Cove. This duality encapsulates the essence of the marsh, providing solace while also highlighting the isolating nature of Kya’s circumstances.

The novel unfolds in the cultural setting of the racially divided and socially stratified South of the 1950s and 1960s. Owens’s description of the marginality of the nearby town of Barkley Cove suggests the narrow-mindedness of its inhabitants: “Together the marsh and sea separated the village from the rest of the world, the only connection being the single-lane highway that limped into town on cracked cement and potholes”.⁶⁴ The book mixes mystery with nature writing as the story

begins with the discovery of the dead body of a popular member of the community, Chase Andrews, in the swamp. Despite being the main suspect in Chase's murder, after a two-month trial Kya is found not guilty since the evidence – a missing shell necklace that Kya had gifted Chase and which he always wore – is circumstantial. The phases of the trial are intertwined with flashbacks from Kya's childhood and adolescence describing her lonely life spent in close communion with the marsh. Abandoned by her family, Kya is left "to survive a swamp".⁶⁵ As a result, she drew love and protection from nature, to the extent that "whenever she stumbled, it was the land that caught her. . . . [A]nd the marsh became her mother".⁶⁶ Far from her family, she grew attached to the herons and gulls that populated the beaches by her shack, cherished the fireflies and frogs that lulled her to sleep every night, and rejoiced in collecting myriads of shells, bugs, and insects. Kya feels like an outcast and is considered one by the local community; only fourteen-year-old Tate Walker accepts and respects her otherness. He understands that Kya is in tune with the marshy surroundings and teaches her to read through biology books. After being abandoned by Tate, too, Kya is seduced by the popular quarterback Chase Andrews and his empty promise of marriage. Chase refuses to accept Kya's decision to terminate their relationship and tries to rape her in the marsh. She realises that he is infringing upon her psychological, physical, and ecological wellbeing and decides to kill him; almost in collusion, the natural environment obscures any evidence of Kya's presence on the murder site. Decades later, following Kya's passing at sixty-four, Tate discovers Chase's shell necklace covertly tucked away among her possessions, unveiling the truth that she had indeed taken Chase Andrews' life, deceiving everyone during her trial and steadfastly guarding this secret throughout her life.

In spite of its widespread success, Owen's novel has still been underexplored in cultural studies. Articles such as "The Crowds Sing in Poe's Country", by John Gruesser, and "An Ecocritical Reading of the Marsh as a Liminal Space in Delia Owens's *Where the Crawdads Sing*", by Corin Kraft, are among the few essays that examine the novel's literary potential, especially due to its skillful depiction of the natural setting. However, what is missing from existing studies of the novel is a gender perspective on Kya's relationship with her surroundings. The analysis of the correspondances between the marshy environments and the protagonist as a gendered subject sheds light on the impact that "in-between" locations, such as wetlands, can have on the validation of non-normative identities and ways of life. Looking at the story through a gender lens, the liminal qualities of the marsh⁶⁷ are osmotically transferred to Kya, the "Marsh Girl",⁶⁸ thus contributing to her identity formation as an individual who defies categories and definitions. In other words, the marsh represented in *Where the Crawdads Sing* can be considered a gendered heterotopia where a full correspondence between nature and the woman protagonist takes place. Leading a life "at the edges of the system"⁶⁹ and emblemizing liminality, juxtapositions, and contradictory forces, Kya embodies the marshy environment she inhabits.

The material-symbolic relationship between Kya and the marsh lies in the fluidity they embody, at both a literal and metaphorical level. Historically, that which cannot be contained within dominant, mainstream perceptions arises heterosexual and patriarchal anxieties. The woman protagonist and the marsh where she lives share what Jeremi Chow and Brandi Bushman define as "queer kinship",⁷⁰ thus threatening the established social order that thrives on purity, control, and clear-cut boundaries.

The marsh portrayed by Owens is a "site of narrativity",⁷¹ telling stories of discrimination, exclusion and violence. Historically inhabited by the society's outcasts, such as enslaved people, outlaws, and Native Americans,⁷² "this infamous marsh became a net, scooping up a mishmash of mutinous sailors, castaways, debtors, and fugitives dodging wars, taxes, or laws that they didn't take to".⁷³ Since wet matter is never separable from the social relationships and the cultural practices that unfold around it, as Oppermann observes,⁷⁴ the intricate North Carolina wetlands are places where the racist and classist practices of the mid-twentieth century's South are systematically enacted. Kya's family, for instance, were ghettoised to the marsh for their class status of poor "white trash",⁷⁵ whereas the black community lived in "Colored Town",⁷⁶ on the edge of the swampy lands, at the margins of Barkley Cove. In Owen's literary space, the marsh arises ambivalent feelings in people. On the one hand, it evokes fear and repulsion for the risk of contamination and entrapment it presents. As the author points out, "[t]he marsh was guarded by a torn shoreline, labeled by any explorer as the "Graveyard of the Atlantic""⁷⁷ because of its unpredictable conditions that could easily cause shipwrecks and "swallow"⁷⁸ men. On the other hand, the marsh is a place of abundance, desire, and adventure. As a "sacred ground",⁷⁹ it is a "space of light, where grass grows in water, and water flows into sky"⁸⁰ and where "layers of life . . . [are] piled on the land or in the water".⁸¹ For its capacity of containing human and nonhuman beings in a condition of close proximity, the marsh enables queer and plural intimacies, thus serving as a site of queer community. A case in point is represented by the motherly role it plays in Kya's life. When any other human presence has abandoned the young girl, thus condemning her to a life of hardships and solitude, "Kya laid her hand upon the breathing, wet earth, and the marsh became her mother".⁸² Being the herons, gulls, and shells "all the family [Kya has] got",⁸³ the marsh serves as a place of comfort as well as physical and spiritual healing. This is confirmed by the episode in which Kya steps over a nail and her foot gets badly hurt. Having no one that could offer her

comfort or cure, she finds solace in the marsh: “[T]he tide receded enough for her to dig a hole in the black mud . . . and she eased her foot gently into the silky earth. The air was cool here, and eagle cries gave her bearing”.⁸⁴ However, as a place where queer intimacies are celebrated, the marsh cannot only be a place of love. Inevitably, it also hosts the violence typically surrounding the contexts in which normative borders are transgressed. Indeed, it is within the murky terrain of the marsh that Kya is nearly assaulted by Chase Andrews, who ultimately meets his death there. Covered in mud and thought of as places of immutable stillness, where floodplains passively wait to be claimed by “the river’s wings”,⁸⁵ marshlands are apparently non agentive, inert, and therefore exploitable locations. On the contrary, as their relationship with Kya shows, the marsh is a lively, active force that mediates interactions between humans and between humans and nonhuman species. For instance, it enables Kya to explore the different facets of love for men, overcome deceptions, and protect her own space with fierce determination. When she realises that her life in the marsh was put at risk by Chase Andrews’ sudden and violent intrusions, for instance, Kya does not hesitate to kill the man and have him swallowed by the muddy land. In other words, the marsh exercises its performative power as vital matter by eliciting the woman protagonist’s individual agency and independence from patriarchal control.

Just like the marsh that nurtures her body and soul, Kya defies categories and definitions on many levels. Physically speaking, she embodies a non-normative form of femininity: “She was tall, thin, giving her a fragile lithesome look as though molded wild by the wind. Yet young, strapping muscles showed through quiet power”.⁸⁶ Her behaviour also departs from what is typically expected of a young civilised girl. Proving that her interspecies competences are more developed than her intraspecies ones, when she meets other people, “[h]er impulse . . . [is] to run”.⁸⁷ While she looks insecure and clumsy during her rare visits to the town – when she behaves like “a wild thing ashamed of her own freakish ways”⁸⁸ – she is completely at ease in the wild: “Out here, in the real remote, she was free to wander, collect, read the words, read the wild. Not waiting for the sounds of someone was a release. And a strength”.⁸⁹ Living amidst the marsh, Kya assimilates its traits and adapts to life by mimicking behaviours observed in wildlife. This is evident when she faces a rape attempt by Chase. Initially, she hides and observes, akin to nonhuman animals. When the opportune moment arises, Kya displays an impressive ability to launch a lethal counterattack, safeguarding herself and her territory. In a poem she wrote, entitled “The Firefly”, the description of the moment in which she pushes Chase down the fire tower underlines her cold determination of eliminating the one who threatens her territory:

A final touch,
Unfinished;
The last step, a trap.
Down, down he falls,
His eyes still holding mine
Until they see another world.⁹⁰

The fact that she pleads not guilty throughout the trial suggests that she does not consider herself a criminal as she simply followed the law of nature. Once more, Kya demonstrates how she escapes any classifications, inhabiting the threshold between good and evil, innocence and guilt, human conscience and animal instinct. On a biological level, Kya does not fulfill the ultimate expectations a woman is supposed to meet, that is, to become a mother. Yet, she expresses her generative force through a different form of creativity embodied by her art works. Becoming a writer and illustrator of nature books – a male prerogative at the time – Kya gives eternal life to the feathers, shells, and other species from the marsh, thus “weaving a masterpiece of knowledge and beauty”,⁹¹ “a family album”⁹² that could be passed on to the next generations. As is the case with the marsh, her borderline qualities trigger ambivalent feelings among people. On the one hand, her diversity evokes fear and repulsion. People fetishise her as “the Marsh Girl”⁹³ and “the Shell Girl”,⁹⁴ a wicked being, dirty, diseased, and “crazy as a three-eyed rat”.⁹⁵ On the other hand, she is a source of fascination and a prohibited object of desire. Serving as an emblem of female savage sexuality, she is seen as a prize to win through sexual subjugation. This is how Chase Andrews sees her, calling her “my Marsh Girl”⁹⁶ and telling her “[I]ike it or not, you’re mine!”⁹⁷ while he is trying to assault her. This episode awakens Kya’s savage side, recalling the female firefly’s habit of eating the male after mating. Living in wildlife and learning from it, Kya discovers that eventually “females got what they wanted – first a mate, then a meal – just by changing their signals”.⁹⁸ In fact, she will use this lesson to lure Chase into a trap and kill him. By leaving Chase’s body to the marsh, Kya allows it to speak the unspeakable, contain life and death, and embody entrapment and freedom at once.

The marsh proves to be a heterotopic place that welcomes queer intimacies and elicits the formation of a non-normative

gender identity. It enables Kya to find her own way of thinking about and interacting with the human and nonhuman realm, regardless of dominant and restrictive methods of thinking.

5. Conclusion

This article examined the marsh as a heterotopic space in two contemporary environmental narratives. In *The Hungry Tide*, wetlands and marshes in the island of Morichjāpi are a counter-space where deviations, juxtapositions, and transitions occur. They are inhabited by deviant subjects who escape categories and traditional social norms. Functioning as repositories of the nation's outcasts, the marshy territories of the Sundarbans host a microcosm where differences not only coexist, but are the very principle on which life is built. Thanks to the liminality that they instantiate, the wetlands depicted by Ghosh trigger the collective identity formation of a people dispossessed and disenfranchised both by the state and history and expose the contradictions of neoliberal discourse of sustainability and conservation of nature, which gloss over lived human experiences of nature.

In *Where the Crawdads Sing* the biophilic attitude of the woman protagonist, who loves and nurtures the marsh where she lives, confirms that the correspondences between women and nature can pave the way for individual identity formation as well as gender emancipation. Even though nature has been a treacherous terrain for women⁹⁹, it might be redefined as a place where "otherworldly conversations" take place¹⁰⁰ between human and nonhuman entities through productive relations that respect difference and enable mutual transformation. From a gender perspective, the liminality of the marsh shaped Kya's personality and had a strong impact on the way she inhabited the world: freely and on her own terms. As an individual who rejects categories and definitions, Kya eventually defends her own difference, drawing inspiration from nature and its boundless force. The marsh represented in *Where the Crawdads Sing* is ultimately a gendered heterotopia where, thanks to the hybrid qualities it possesses, reciprocally empowering connections between nature and the woman protagonist take place.

The two novels examined in this article highlight the material and symbolic power of wetlands to enact change, resistance, and identity formation. On a literal level, marshy environments make it possible for marginalised individuals to enact forms of queer relationships by enabling close proximity between the human and nonhuman realm. Those who do not align with mainstream norms find both physical and emotional refuge in the marsh, where they are free to express their identities without restrictions or moral judgment. As Owens notes in her novel, "the marsh did not confine them but defined them".¹⁰¹ As a discursive formation, the marsh triggers behaviours that deviate from societal norms and catalyze individual and collective metamorphoses as well as processes of resilience, adaptation, and self-discovery.

Footnotes

- 1 Mentz, "Toward a Blue Cultural Studies"; Gillis, "The Blue Humanities"; Oppermann, *Blue Humanities*. ✗
- 2 DeLoughrey, "Mining the Seas". ✗
- 3 Steinberg and Peters, "Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces", 247. ✗
- 4 Oppermann, *Blue Humanities*, 13. ✗
- 5 Ibid., Introduction. ✗
- 6 Hau"ofa, *We are the Ocean: Selected Works*. ✗
- 7 Oppermann, *Blue Humanities*, 12. ✗
- 8 Ibid. ✗
- 9 Campbell and Paye, "Water Enclosure and World-Literature", 1. ✗
- 10 Dobrin, *Blue Ecocriticism and the Oceanic Imperative*; Mentz, *Ocean*; DeLoughrey "Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene". ✗
- 11 Mentz, *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities*, 1. ✗
- 12 Limnology is a subsystem of hydrology studying inland bodies of water, including lakes, ponds, rivers, springs, streams, and wetlands. ✗
- 13 Downing, "Limnology and Oceanography". ✗
- 14 Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*. ✗
- 15 Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*. ✗
- 16 Foucault, "Of Other Spaces". ✗

- 17 Gillell, *Postmodern Wetlands*, 20. ✗
- 18 Hettinger, "The Past is a Foreign Environment", 50. ✗
- 19 Kellert, *Birthright*, 192. ✗
- 20 Aston, *Interpreting the Landscape*, 27. ✗
- 21 Flader, "Aldo Leopold's Sand County", 48. ✗
- 22 Kellert, *Birthright*, 192. ✗
- 23 Ibid., 193. ✗
- 24 Mitsch and Gosselink, *Wetlands*, 4. ✗
- 25 Howarth, "Imagined Territory: The Writing of Wetlands", 520. ✗
- 26 Kellert, *Birthright*, 194. ✗
- 27 Ibid., 22. ✗
- 28 Ibid., 23. ✗
- 29 Ibid., 24. ✗
- 30 Attala, *How Water Makes us Human*. ✗
- 31 Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 8. ✗
- 32 Jalais, *Forest of Tigers*, 1. ✗
- 33 According to UNESCO, the Sundarbans host a wide range of biodiversity including 260 bird species, the Bengal tiger, and other threatened species such as the estuarine crocodile and the Indian python. ✗
- 34 Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 125. ✗
- 35 Eaton, "Human Settlement and Colonization in the Sundarbans, 1200–1750". ✗
- 36 Jalais, *Forest of Tigers*, 4. ✗
- 37 Mallik, "Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves", 101. ✗
- 38 Ibid., 100–101. ✗
- 39 Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 165. ✗
- 40 Ibid. All the passages in italics reported in this article are extracts from the fictional journal included in the book and are also italicized in the novel. ✗
- 41 Mallick, *Development Policy of a Communist Government: West Bengal Since 1977*. ✗
- 42 Ibid., 164. ✗
- 43 Sen, "Sovereignty at the Margins. The Oceanic Future of the Subaltern", 179. ✗
- 44 Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 86. ✗
- 45 Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 164. ✗
- 46 Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 254. ✗
- 47 Ibid. ✗
- 48 Ibid. ✗
- 49 Shewry, *Hope at Sea*. ✗
- 50 Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*. ✗
- 51 Jalais, *Forest of Tigers*, 8. ✗
- 52 Ibid. ✗
- 53 Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 44. ✗
- 54 Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 205. ✗
- 55 Ibid., 277. ✗
- 56 Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 36. ✗
- 57 Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", 78. ✗
- 58 Ibid., 84. ✗
- 59 Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 262. ✗

- 60 Jalais, "Dwelling on Morichjhanpi When Tigers Became "Citizens", Refugees "Tiger-Food". ✗
- 61 Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 224. ✗
- 62 *Where the Crawdads Sing*, which to date has sold more than five million copies worldwide, was made into a movie adaptation written by Lucy Alibar and produced by Reese Witherspoon in July 2022. ✗
- 63 "About the Author", Delia Owen's Website, <https://www.deliaowens.com/about-the-author>. ✗
- 64 Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 16. ✗
- 65 Ibid., 94. ✗
- 66 Ibid., 34. ✗
- 67 Kraft, "An Ecocritical Reading of the Marsh as a Liminal Space". ✗
- 68 Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 91. ✗
- 69 Wilson, *Shadow and Shelter*, 15. ✗
- 70 Chow and Bushman, "Hydro-Eroticism", 97. ✗
- 71 Iovino and Oppermann, "Material Ecocriticism", 83. ✗
- 72 Kraft, "An Ecocritical Reading of the Marsh as a Liminal Space". ✗
- 73 Owens, *Where the Cradads Sing*, 7. ✗
- 74 Opperman, *Blue Humanities*. ✗
- 75 Owens, *Where the Cradads Sing*, 57. ✗
- 76 Ibid., 100 ✗
- 77 Ibid., 7. ✗
- 78 Ibid. ✗
- 79 Ibid., 8. ✗
- 80 Ibid., Prologue. ✗
- 81 Ibid., 8. ✗
- 82 Ibid., 34. ✗
- 83 Ibid., 75. ✗
- 84 Ibid., 33. ✗
- 85 Ibid., 113. ✗
- 86 Ibid., 98. ✗
- 87 Ibid. ✗
- 88 Ibid., 149 ✗
- 89 Ibid., 181. ✗
- 90 Ibid., 367. ✗
- 91 Ibid., 146. ✗
- 92 Ibid., 217. ✗
- 93 Ibid., 160. ✗
- 94 Ibid. ✗
- 95 Ibid., 244. ✗
- 96 Ibid., 263. ✗
- 97 Ibid., 265. ✗
- 98 Ibid., 142. ✗
- 99 Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*; Sandilands, *Good-Natured Feminist*; Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*. ✗
- 100 Haraway, "Otherworldly Conversations, Terran Topics, Local Terms". ✗
- 101 Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 8. ✗

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