A SEA OF CHANGE

Ernest Hemingway
and the Gulf Stream

A Contextual Biography

Mark P. Ott

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I believe Ernest Hemingway was a lover of country, a patriot and a naturalist, at once, and I believe he was a deeply spiritual man in his attachment to place. Perhaps the pain he had to endure was in feeling too much. He had to create a mask to his own vulnerable nature. He could move. He could dodge. He could drink blood of Spanish bulls. But the memories of wild nature, the knowledge of wild nature, his need for wild nature never left him. That was his gulf stream, in his blood, on the land, on the page.

—TERRY TEMPEST WILLIAMS

Preface

Arriving at the Stream

IN THE LANGUAGE of geography, the Gulf Stream is a warm ocean current created by the flow of water from the Caribbean Sea through the Yucatan Channel between Mexico and Cuba. From there, it rushes through the Florida Keys into the seven hundred islands of the Bahamas, continuing along the eastern United States, and dissipating near Newfoundland. In the language of American studies, it is a “contested site”: a place of Atlantic intercultural interaction between ethnic and racial groups joined in a community of water.

Within the canon of American literature, the Gulf Stream has long been an imaginary seascape in the minds of writers. James Fenimore Cooper, Richard Henry Dana, Herman Melville, Stephen Crane, and Ernest Hemingway all portrayed the Gulf Stream in their fiction. To the interpreters of these writers, the Gulf Stream functions as an extension of the frontier: it is the meeting point between savagery and civilization where America’s providential mission affirmed itself. To African American writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Paule Marshall, Jamaica Kincaid, Toni Morrison, and Charles Johnson, the Gulf Stream functions as a link to both Africa, through the Middle Passage, and Europe, through centuries of colonization. Yet to figures such as Derek Walcott, V. S. Naipaul, C. L. R. James, and Patrick Chamoiseau, a vaster universal compassion is required of the modern writer. The Gulf Stream acts as the point of intersection and blending of these creative traditions as writers with extraordinarily diverse talents, themes, and viewpoints create fiction portraying this region.

My initial project was to use the Gulf Stream as the unifying lens for a broad exploration of this fiction to create a text that investigated and appreciated the variations of the land and ocean encompassing the Caribbean and the Florida Keys. That work soon shifted to a more specific examination of how canonical American writers—Melville, Crane, and Hemingway—transformed and portrayed the region. Finally, my attention settled on the one writer I knew best: Hemingway.

The decision to focus on Hemingway was a natural one. After moving to Key West in 1928, Hemingway became increasingly enthralled with deep-sea fishing and the Gulf Stream. Of all the writers considered, he knew the Gulf Stream most intimately. As he understood more fully the daily life of the Stream, he became more integrated with it, less separate from it. Hemingway's relationship with the Gulf Stream evolved from one in which he experienced it as a space of conquest to a relationship that allowed him to understand it as a place of personal integration and harmony.

And, as a research project, he provided the most intriguing raw material. In the Ernest Hemingway Collection at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, I was able to read Hemingway's fishing logs from the years 1932, 1933, 1934, 1936, and 1939. Dense in the daily details of Hemingway's fishing excursions from Key West to Cuba and through the Bahamas, the logs had been surprisingly neglected by Hemingway scholars in the past. The more closely I read them, the more I became convinced of their significance as a tool to understanding Hemingway and the transformation of his work.

The logs record mundane details, such as the menu for lunch on July 30, 1934: "macaroni with meat, avacado [*sic*] salad, ham, fruit salad." The logs also contain the more intriguing details of catching a barracuda the next day: "Fish had hit so hard on a tight line that he was hooked in the gills. We noticed sepia black oozing from the wound the gaff made. Carlos opened him and in the belly found a small octopus freshly swallowed and a very large squid that had been sliced in two pieces." The economy and clarity of the description signal a shift in Hemingway's writing style, foreshadowing later work. For example, on May 17, 1932, Hemingway recorded:

hooked Marlin opposite
Cojimar 2 jumps threw hook—930
swam at beach 3pm—saw

first big striped marlin tail at least
 three feet behind teaser deep down
 —Back a foot or more across
 came to surface and when we
 curled boat but [illegible] down before
 we saw baits (sky was very overcast) and had
 strike from another marlin

Hemingway is trying to create a precise account of the moment, capturing objectively his observations through economical phrases—"big striped marlin tail at least three feet"—in order to faithfully present the ecosystem of the Cuban waters. Hemingway links the behavior of the marlin with the overcast sky to understand their interdependence in a way that foreshadows crucial elements of Santiago's narration. For literally hundreds of pages in the fishing logs, Hemingway crafts short, precise, representational descriptions of what he observed on the Gulf Stream. He would of course use that knowledge later in his fiction. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Santiago is aware of what is beneath the surface of the ocean. He has studied the Gulf Stream, and he is aware of the organic unity that exists within nature. In the fishing logs, Hemingway is learning what exists beneath the iceberg.

Thus, the hypothesis is that the exact observations in the logs explain the stylistic transformation—the shift in his writing method—that occurred in Hemingway's work between the publication of *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) and *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), a period during which Hemingway moved from desiring to "write like Cezanne [*sic*] painted" to wanting his books about the sea to contain illustrations by Winslow Homer (Murphy, "Hemingway, Winslow Homer" 78).

. . .

Since I first conceived of this project, I have incurred many debts. When I was a high school junior in 1983 at Madison LaFollette High School, Susan Dean, now my friend and then my teacher, gave me a copy of *In Our Time*, and my life has not been the same since. At the University of Wisconsin–Madison, Professors Richard Merelman and Thomas Schaub inspired me to deepen my engagement with literature. At the University of Wyoming, Eric Sandeen, John Dorst, and Lewis Dabney provided moral and intellectual support, encouraging my burgeoning interest in Hemingway. Later, at the University of Hawaii–Manoa, Floyd

Matson inspired me with his tales of lunching with Hemingway in 1941, and Joseph Stanton was unflagging in his support of this project since I first became enthused by affinities between Winslow Homer's work and Hemingway's depictions of the natural world in his seminar "The Sea in Art and Literature." His detailed comments and insights were exceptionally helpful. It would be impossible to overstate my debt to Professor David Stannard, my dissertation director; his suggestions and encouragement remain invaluable.

The Ernest Hemingway Society has provided substantial support for this project. I am grateful for the support of a James Hinkle Travel Grant and the Smith-Reynolds Fellowship. Indeed, this project draws from the knowledge of the scholars I have met through the Ernest Hemingway Society. I met Larry Grimes and Bickford Sylvester in Cuba in 1997, and since then I have benefited from their sage advice. Steve Paul and Robert Trogon kindly shared their insights into the composition of *To Have and Have Not*, and Kirk Curnutt's comments on sections of my manuscript were also very beneficial. James Brasch very kindly answered questions about Hemingway's library. Scott Donaldson and Susan Beegel provided more encouragement than they realize, and Linda Miller, in her shared interest in Hemingway's fishing logs, has been generous in her support of my parallel scholarship. Gerald Kennedy facilitated permissions to publish sections of Hemingway's fishing logs; I am grateful for his assistance.

I have also received generous support from Tyler Tingley at Phillips Exeter Academy, John Gulla at the Blake School in Minneapolis, and Jim Scott at Punahou School in Honolulu. I am also grateful for the support of Margarita Curtis, John Taylor, and Mark Scandling of Deerfield Academy. Grants from the Arts and Sciences Advisory Council at the University of Hawaii-Manoa supported research trips, and the Graduate Student Organization provided funding for travel to conferences.

At the John F. Kennedy Library, Susan Wrynn, Meghan Desnoyers, James Roth, Stephen Plotkin, and Jennifer Wheeler have assisted in my research and allowed me to use photographs from the Hemingway Collection. I am especially grateful for an Ernest Hemingway Research Grant that supported two weeks of research in the Ernest Hemingway Collection. Gail Morchowder and Doug Blodgett at the International Game Fishing Association Museum also provided very generous assistance. The staff of the Ewell Sale Stewart Library of the Academy of Natural Sciences also extended their services several times; to them I am grate-

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And then there is family: my parents, Daniel and Patricia Ott; Kathy and Matt Wehrli; Joe and Kris Ott; Greg and Lisa Ott; and the Ishimarus. Thanks.

And last, for the ever-patient Lori, Claire, and Anne: life will be different now that this is done.

CHAPTER 4

Literary Naturalism on the Stream

To Have and Have Not

WHEN DID HEMINGWAY begin writing “One Trip Across,” the first section of *To Have and Have Not*, which would be published in 1937? Available evidence is inconclusive. On February 23, 1933, he wrote Max Perkins: “Am on Chapter 4 of the novel—going well. See my way all the way to the end. Don’t know whether we ever talked about this one” (*Only Thing* 183). In a March 13 letter, Hemingway asks Perkins for a letter “certify[ing] that Ernest Hemingway is at work on a book dealing with the migratory fish of the Gulf Stream, their habits and capture with special reference to the fishing in Cuban Waters from a sporting standpoint” in order to get him out of any possible “jams” in Cuba (*Only Thing* 184). The chronology of locations is straightforward: from April 13 to July 20, Hemingway was in Havana fishing for marlin from the *Anita* (Baker, *Life* 244). He then spent July 21 to August 3 in Key West, preparing for his departure to Europe and Africa. He returned to Havana on August 4, and on the seventh, he left Havana for Spain, where he would be through October. Carlos Baker asserts that Hemingway began the story sometime in April (Baker, *Life* 607), but Michael Reynolds believes that the story was begun in Madrid on September 22 (Reynolds, *The 1930s* 146). From Madrid on October 16, Hemingway wrote his mother-in-law a long report on his new fiction:

It is almost a third as long as the average novel. It may be a very good story. It is almost entirely action and takes place in Cuba and on the sea. Plenty of action. It is exactly the story that this present book

needs i.e. Winner Take Nothing. But it will be as well or better in another book. You can't very well put a story that you know will sell like hotcakes in a book called Winner Take Nothing. I don't expect anyone to like the present book of stories and don't think you have to make an effort to—or even be polite about them. *I am trying to make, before I get through, a picture of the whole world—or as much of it as I have seen. Boiling it down always, rather than spreading it thin.* These stories are about things and people that people won't care about—or will actively dislike. All right. Sooner or later as the wheel keeps turning I will have ones they will like. (*Selected Letters* 397, emphasis added)

Especially noteworthy is the language that he uses to describe his method at this point: “mak[ing] . . . a picture of the whole world,” “boiling it down always.” More directly than anywhere else in his writing, this is Hemingway's declaration of a writing method that was an approximation of literary naturalism. There is the documentary impulse to “make . . . a picture of the whole world,” yet also the imperative that he “boil” down that picture to its most primitive, essential elements. Clearly, the story Hemingway refers to here is “One Trip Across,” which would be finished in mid-September and published in *Cosmopolitan* the following April (Baker, *Life* 607).

And although two questions can never fully be resolved—on what day did Hemingway begin “One Trip Across,” and did he have his fishing log from the *Anita* beside him to spur his imagination?—what is certain is that Hemingway almost instantly began fictionalizing his personal experience fishing the Gulf Stream. While it had taken nearly ten years for the events that formed the core of *A Farewell to Arms* to gestate in his imagination and resurface in fiction, Hemingway was wasting no time in reimagining and transforming his initiation into big game fishing into the realist narrative of Harry Morgan, a fishing guide witnessing Cuba on the brink of revolution.

There has always been the tendency to read Hemingway's fiction autobiographically and to understand his characters as surrogates for Hemingway the writer. As Rose Marie Burwell writes, “Hemingway's heroes had always been fictional visions of himself, but they were also demonstrably other than himself, so that fictional distance protected the author” (5). No other Hemingway character demonstrates this impulse toward negative autobiographical interpretations better than Harry

Morgan, the protagonist of *To Have and Have Not*. There is much to dislike about Morgan, and if you attribute his racism, cruelty, and selfishness to Hemingway, then the writer becomes a despicable person.¹ However, Hemingway is trying to create the world as experienced by Morgan, and all the ugliness in that character should be understood as an attempt to portray authentically a narrative point of view.²

In the first pages of the novel, it becomes clear that Morgan must respond heroically to the challenges of his environment. Opening with a frontier-style shootout in a Havana café, Hemingway establishes three distinct stages for Morgan, his proletarian hero. Havana is a wide-open town, devoid of law and order; shootouts are common, and retribution is swift. Key West is a despoiled Eden, a microcosm of America during the Depression, where distasteful tourism is a palliative for deeper economic and moral troubles. In *The Idea of Florida in the American Literary Imagination*, Anne Rowe writes: "The land is raped in the sense that a pastoral setting will now be exploited as hordes of greedy profit seekers pour in" (24). Key West has been a holdout against bourgeois American life. Once Key West is contaminated by the bourgeois mentality, Morgan is forced out into the Gulf Stream. The Gulf Stream between Key West and Havana thus becomes a no-man's-land, a contested space where violence settles disputes in the midst of an indifferent natural world.

Hemingway's first description of the Gulf Stream appears as Morgan is taking a tourist, Mr. Johnson, out fishing for marlin:

The stream was in almost to soundings and as we came toward the edge you could see her running purple with regular whirlpools. There was a slight east breeze coming up and we put up plenty of flying fish, those big ones with the black wings that look like the picture of Lindbergh crossing the Atlantic when they sail off. Those big flying fish are the best sign there is. As far as you could see, there was that faded gulf-weed in small patches that means the stream is well in and there are birds ahead working over a school of little tuna. You could see them jumping; just little ones weighing a couple of pounds a piece. (12)

Hemingway is writing in the voice of Morgan, a member of the working class, and his observations are matter of fact, creating not a lyrical, literary description but instead an extension of a fishing log. Locations, wind direction, tide color, and animal life are all worth commenting on, and the most descriptive moment—the picture of Lindbergh crossing the

Atlantic—seems an appropriate popular culture reference from the mind of a narrator nurtured on the mass media. Even in noting the weight of the tuna, Morgan is making a practical rather than lyrical observation; the tuna exist as an economic resource for him, and these small ones are not worth harvesting.

Scenes with enormous fighting marlin appear twice early in the novel, allowing Hemingway to reveal Morgan's expertise as a fisherman. Hemingway's descriptions are direct, rich in color, and active. Johnson, Morgan's customer, is fishing for marlin along the Cuban coast near Havana. Hemingway writes:

I opened the bottle and was reaching it toward him when I saw this big brown bugger with a spear on him longer than your arm burst head and shoulders out of the water and smash that mackerel. He looked as big around as a saw log. . . . You could see his fins out wide like purple wings and the purple stripes across the brown. He came on like a submarine and his top fin came out and you could see it slice the water. . . . He hit him pretty hard a couple times more, and then the rod bent double and the reel commenced to screech and out he came, boom, in a long straight jump, shining silver in the sun and making a splash like throwing a horse off a cliff. . . . He was a fine fish bright silver now, barred with purple, and as big around as a log. . . . Then once, twice, he came out stiff as a post, the whole length of him jumping straight toward us, throwing the water high each time he landed. The line came taut and I saw he was headed inshore again and I could see he was turning. . . . The old marlin headed out to the nor'west like all the big ones go, and brother, did he hook up. . . . I kept yelling to Johnson to keep his drag light and reel fast. All of the sudden I see his rod jerk and the line go slack. . . . "He's gone," I told him. (15-17)

The colors of the fish ("bright silver"), the dynamism of the movements, the excitement of the battle—Hemingway is letting the reader know that he is an expert fisherman. Deep-sea fishing, like herding cattle or hunting big game, is an endeavor that needs to be trusted to seasoned experts who know the Gulf Stream.

Hemingway lets his urban outsider get another chance at a marlin, as several pages later, Johnson hooks into the "biggest black marlin [Morgan] ever saw" (19). Morgan, an expert watching a novice blunder, continues his narration:

I was at the wheel and was working the edge of the stream opposite that old cement factory where it makes deep so close in to shore and where it makes a sort of eddy where there is always lots of bait. Then I saw a splash like a depth bomb, and the sword, and eye, and open lower-jaw and huge purple-black head of a black marlin. The whole top fin was up out of the water looking as high as a full rigged ship, and the whole scythe tail was out as he smashed at that tuna. The bill was as big around as a baseball bat and slanted up, and as he grabbed the bait he sliced the ocean wide open. He was solid purple-black and he had an eye as big as a soup bowl. He was huge. I bet he'd go a thousand pounds. I yelled to Johnson to let him have line but before I could say a word, I saw Johnson rise up in the air off the chair as though he was being derricked, and him holding just for a second onto that rod and the rod bending like a bow, and then the butt caught him in the belly and the whole works went overboard. He'd screwed the drag tight, and when the fish struck, it lifted Johnson right out of the chair and he couldn't hold it. . . . "What was it?" he said to me. "Black marlin," I said. (20-21)

Johnson's incompetence, his ignorance of the remarkable fish, and his remorseless loss of the fishing rod all signal him as a naive urban outsider in a frontier world. The clipped two-word reply of Morgan to Johnson's question underscores the disgust he feels at Johnson's behavior, as well as his anger at a universe that is so unfair as to let Johnson hook a spectacular thousand-pound marlin. Notable, too, is the passive observation of Morgan in this scene, and the one before it. Morgan offers advice; Johnson ignores it, disrespecting his expertise. As men from separate worlds—Morgan, a man of the outdoors and the Gulf Stream, and Johnson, a man of the city—they are separated by a boundary that prevents them from effectively communicating. Morgan derives a certain satisfaction in watching Johnson's humiliation.

As chapter 3 begins, Morgan is leaving Havana to pick up Chinese refugees to smuggle into Key West. The description of the departure is noteworthy as an example of the concrete, matter-of-fact vision appropriate to a naturalistic novel. Morgan narrates:

I went out the harbor and past the Morro and put her on the course for Key West due north. . . . I dropped the Morro out of sight after a while and then the National Hotel and finally I could just see the dome of

the Capitol. There wasn't much current compared to the last day we had fished and there was only a light breeze. I saw a couple of smacks headed toward Havana and they were coming from the westward, so I knew the current was light. I cut the switch and killed the motor. There wasn't any sense in wasting gas. I let her drift. When it got dark I could always pick up the light of the Morro or, if she drifted too far, the lights of Cojimar, and steer in and run along to Barcuranao. I figured the way the current looked she would drift the twelve miles up to Barcuranao by dark and I'd see the lights of Baracoa. . . . All there was to see was the two smacks off to the westward headed in, and way back the dome of the Capitol standing up white out of the edge of the sea. . . . I sat up there awhile on top of the house and watched but the only fish I saw were those little brown ones that use around [*sic*] the gulfweed. Brother, don't let anybody tell you there isn't plenty of water between Havana and Key West. I was just on the edge of it. (42-43)

This long passage describing the activity of the Gulf Stream stands in opposition to the long passage in *Green Hills of Africa* describing the same stretch of coastline, explored earlier. Here the emphasis is on the visible world, what can be seen by Morgan, and landmarks of the Havana coastline are listed. The effects of the weather, the stars, the clouds, and the marine life go unmentioned. The Gulf Stream, for Morgan, is a highway and a resource, not a symbol, and Hemingway, like his narrator, is just beginning to learn about its complexity.

When Morgan arrives in Key West a day later, a confrontation worthy of a John Ford Western has taken place. After picking up the Chinese refugees, Morgan brutally kills the smuggler, Mr. Sing, breaking his neck as he "flopped like a fish" (53). Morgan forces the twelve Chinese refugees to jump overboard in the cove of Bacuranao, still in Cuba. Pleased and remorseless, Morgan savors the \$1,200 he has pocketed as he arrives in Key West:

Then we came to the edge of the stream and the water quit being blue and was light and greenish inside I could see the stakes on the Eastern and Western Dry Rocks and the wireless masts at Key West and La Concha hotel up high out of all the low houses and plenty smoke from where they're burning garbage. Sand Key light was plenty close now and you could see the boathouse and the little dock alongside the light

and I knew we were only forty minutes away now and I felt good to be getting back and I had a good stake now for the summertime. (61)

As Morgan and Eddie, his alcoholic mate, travel this distance in silence, Jane Tompkins notes not talking is a demonstration of masculine control over emotion, their silence symbolizing a massive suppression of their inner life (66). The landscape of the Western, silent, impenetrable, allows the John Wayne heroes to be silent as well. Thus, the silence of Morgan and the uncomplicated nature of his "good" feeling can be understood as an extension of this silent seascape.

As the victor of the gunfight of part 1, Morgan's luck would turn in part 2 when he loses his arm while smuggling liquor. In part 3 he would be found lying on the deck of his boat, shot in the stomach by Cuban revolutionaries. The narrative point of view has shifted to third-person omniscient. Although the passage is long, it will be quoted in its entirety in order to demonstrate Hemingway's attempt to use the Gulf Stream symbolically in a way that foreshadows *The Old Man and the Sea*. Placing Morgan ten miles out in the Gulf Stream water, Hemingway writes:

There was no sign of life on her although the body of a man showed, rather inflated looking, above the gunwale, lying on a bench over the port gasoline tank and from the long seat alongside the starboard gunwale, a man seemed to be leaning over to dip his hand into the sea. His head and arms were in the sun and at the point where his fingers almost touched the water there was a school of small fish, about two inches long, oval-shaped, golden-colored, with faint purple stripes, that had deserted the gulf weed to take shelter in the shade the bottom of the drifting launch made in the water, and each time anything dripped down into the sea, these fish rushed at the drop and pushed and milled until it was gone. . . . They were reluctant now to leave a place where they had fed so well and unexpectedly. . . . The launch had been drifting since 10 o'clock of the night before and it was now getting late in the afternoon. There was nothing else in sight across the surface of the Gulf Stream but the gulf weed, a few pink, inflated membranous bubbles of Portuguese men-of-war cocked jauntily on the surface, and the distant smoke of a loaded tanker bound north from Tampico. (179-81)