

Reviewed by Ann Elias

Wild Blue Media: Thinking through Seawater

by Melody Jue.

Duke University Press. Elements Series.

2020. 240 pages.

\$99.95 hardcover; \$25.95 paper; also available in e-book.

The image on the cover of Melody Jue's book *Wild Blue Media: Thinking through Seawater* intimates many of the book's themes: views from inside the ocean that put media scholarship in the cool blue-green light of the underwater, representations of sensory immersion and intimacy that demonstrate the value of learning from unfamiliar realms, and milieu-specific planetary understandings enabled by scuba diving and the "cognitive estrangement" it engenders.¹

Jue's exciting book advances ecological ethics by exploring oceans as environments for thinking beyond the conventions and habits of human experience on land. It argues that by experiencing the buoyancy of oceans, the limitations of human-centered perspectives, acculturated by gravity on land, are critically challenged. An interest in attuning to planetary entanglements is identified early on when Jue evokes Jacques Cousteau's curiosity as a diver for his "flesh feeling what the fish scales know."² But the book is also about rethinking media theory through an embodied perspective in the fluidity of ocean water. Consequently, the first three chapters are divided into "interface," "inscription," and "database," media concepts that become defamiliarized when submerged in the materiality of the pressure, fluidity, and salinity of oceans, while the fourth chapter on "underwater museums"

1 Darko Suvin, quoted in Melody Jue, *Wild Blue Media: Thinking through Seawater* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 7.

2 Cousteau quoted in Jue, *Wild Blue Media*, 6.

brings eco-criticism to artistic practice, revealing the underwater as a site and condition for activism. Therefore, while Jue's book reexamines scholarly assumptions about familiar concepts in media studies, it also helps the reader think anew about aesthetics and environmental politics.

The analysis that unfolds throughout the chapters of the book is interwoven with personal descriptions and recollections of diving. It is from the position of being inside the ocean that Jue can think and philosophize about the differences between oceanic and terrestrial experiences of space, time, meaning, aesthetics, and embodiment. Submersion, buoyancy, and pressure, for example, are among the many effects of "saltwatery materiality" that estrange the human diver from terrestrial habits of perception and movement.³ Combining literary and media theory with ocean diving, the book brings the unique properties and qualities of oceanic environments to bear on the concepts of interface, inscription, and database. These terms, which have shaped us as subjects, have been determined by terrestrial ways of thinking, yet they were conceived on a planet dominated by fresh water and seawater.⁴

As an ocean-oriented practice that investigates how immersion in water acts on the human body and mediates thought, Jue's writing sits alongside contemporary feminist and post-humanist theorists including Stacy Alaimo, Astrida Neimanis, and Nicole Starosielski.⁵ Their collective scholarship advances the area of environmental politics through attention to trans-corporeality and the material forces that determine new ways of conceiving relations between human and nonhuman bodies and environments, especially bodies and water. By interweaving theoretical and empirical approaches, Jue explores how her underwater body's relation to seawater's materiality reveals terrestrial presumptions regarding gravity, planar space, and reliance on vision.⁶ For Jue, the undersea gives rise to a planetary self who is more aware of the affective dimension of relations with the nonhuman and whose ethical engagement with environmental futures is based in care.⁷ Jue also compares Western terrestrial bias with the epistemologies of islander and First Nations peoples. Their theories of environmental situatedness in the oceanic milieu are helpfully summarized by the Tongan and Fijian writer Epeli Hau'ofa, who once declared about the maritime peoples of Oceania, "We are the Ocean."⁸

There is also a sense of the fantastic about this book that stems from an enduring public fascination with the underwater regions of oceans. Few ideas capture the imagination more than the idea of being undersea. The estranging effect of the undersea and the depths of the planet's bodies of water have

3 Jue, 36.

4 Jue, 5.

5 Stacy Alaimo, "States of Suspension: Trans-corporeality at Sea," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 19, no. 3 (2012): 476–493; Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); and Nicole Starosielski, "Beyond Fluidity: A Cultural History of Cinema under Water," in *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, ed. Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt (New York: Routledge, 2012), 149–168.

6 Jue, *Wild Blue Media*, 86.

7 Jue, 74.

8 Epeli Hau'ofa, *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).

always produced excitement for Westerners. The book therefore belongs to a broader context of writing on the underwater. The link with Jules Verne and science fiction is important, although seeking “conceptual displacement” underwater was also a strategy of Surrealist artists, who valued its defamiliarizing qualities and suggestive escape from the geometries of the city and the rationalizations of everyday life on land.⁹

The way the book philosophizes through diving aligns Jue’s project with those of the American author, nature writer, and environmentalist Barry Lopez and the philosopher Alphonso Lingis. Like Lopez and Lingis, Jue expands the consciousness of her readers by refusing the confines and boundaries of thinking and feeling that land and its metaphors of stability and verticality engender. In chapter 2, for instance, she takes to the undersea to “escape the particular constraints of our human embodiment in a terrestrial environment” while considering the philosopher Vilém Flusser and a tale about a vampire squid.¹⁰ Her method recalls Lopez’s 1999 observation that “something, most certainly, happens to a diver’s emotions underwater,” an effect he accounted for as a combination of pressure on the body, the feeling of weightlessness, proximity to wildlife and terror, loss of orientation as the body moves through three spatial planes, the unfamiliarity and intensity of exposure in the vastness of the ocean, and “a state of rapture with the bottomless blue.”¹¹ In 1985, Lingis described diving as the sensation of drifting suspended in a sensory space unlike land and air, a sensation of “depth without orientation” created in part by the loss of vertical axis.¹² Lingis recounts how human beings underwater quickly give up any sense of self-importance and instead succumb to flows, currents, and bodily encounters with marine life.

Wild Blue Media can also be set in the broader context of the histories of early media figures of the twentieth century who harbored fantasies about exploring the underwater but, in the days before scuba, often went there in imagination only. The explorer and filmmaker Frank Hurley, for example, saw his project as mastery of air, land, and undersea through mobility in travel and through image-making. He took advantage of the globalizing media industry comprising photo agencies, press agencies, and film agencies to send images worldwide showing underwater scenes produced with aquariums. It was also an era interested in testing the limits of media by investigating whether cameras could work underwater, if radio transmission was possible in the depths, and what modifications were needed to enable human bodies to exist inside the sea and linger there. In Hurley’s day the very idea of a diver, or an underwater camera, was somewhere in the realm of magic, but he was similar to Jue because he wanted to take his audiences away from their habitual thinking cultivated in terrestrial settings by armchairs and office desks.¹³

9 See Margaret Cohen, “Underwater Optics as Symbolic Form,” *French Politics, Culture & Society* 32, no. 3 (2014): 1–23.

10 Jue, *Wild Blue Media*, 77.

11 Barry Lopez, *About This Life: Journeys on the Threshold of Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 27–28.

12 Alphonso Lingis, “The Rapture of the Deep,” in *Excesses: Eros and Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 6.

13 Information in this paragraph is from Ann Elias, *Coral Empire: Underwater Oceans*,

However, Jue's book is not focused on media products or objects, such as underwater films, but rather on concepts of "media" that seem to have few boundaries in a field that is constantly shifting. Even in 2008 it was said that "scholars today are caught by the impossibility of finding common ground for what they mean by *media*."¹⁴ Clearly Jue's intention is to destabilize the land-based conceptions of media expressed by the German philosopher Friedrich Kittler.¹⁵ Contra Kittler, she sets out to show how it is possible to gain new perspectives on media studies and epistemological questions by thinking through the distinctive nonhuman environmental milieu of seawater.¹⁶ To think from inside seawater allows the author to bring the oceanic qualities of pressure, light refraction, and 3D movement to media studies.¹⁷

Wild Blue Media helps dissolve nature–society distinctions and advance ideas of connectivity while also respecting the alterity of the oceanic realm. In a climate-changed planet, the book argues for a more ethical way of living with and relating to nonhuman life. Yet it helpfully focuses not just on oceans but on atmospheres as well. Jussi Parikka writes that "our environments are complex and constituted of multiple scales of reference, agency and time"; he notes that there are many places—undersea, underground, and in the air—to practice planetary relations and train the mind to "cultivate an understanding of the structural complexity and agency of our environment and its various layers of activity."¹⁸ I found that *Wild Blue Media* also helped me think more deeply about the sky and to practice environmental thinking in relation to the element of air, where bodies and objects—humans and birds, insects and colors, moisture and gases—are also connected across social and natural worlds.

Ann Elias is a professor of art history and visual culture at Sydney University. Her books include *Camouflage Australia: Art, Nature, Science and War* (2011); *Useless Beauty: Flowers and Australian Art* (2015); and *Coral Empire: Underwater Oceans, Colonial Tropics, Visual Modernity* (2019). Her current work investigates the underwater of Sydney Harbour.

Colonial Tropics, Visual Modernity (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

14 Eva Horn, "Editor's Introduction: 'There Are No Media,'" *Grey Room* 29 (2008): 7.

15 The book Jue refers to is Friedrich Kittler, *Draculas Vermächtnis: Technische Schriften* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1993).

16 Jue, *Wild Blue Media*, 22.

17 Jue, 13.

18 Jussi Parikka, "Cartographies of Environmental Arts," in *Posthuman Ecologies: Complexity and Process after Deleuze*, ed. Rosi Braidotti and Simone Bignall (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 42.