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Open Access Book Reviews

Melody Jue. 2020. *Wild Blue Media. Thinking through Seawater*. Duke University Press, 240 pp., ISBN: 978-1-4780-0612-1

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If you have immersed yourself in underwater worlds through scuba diving, you will probably find that Luc Besson's classic film *Le Grand Bleu* (The Big Blue, 1988) resonates with you, reconnecting you with that exhilarating feeling of otherness. In *Le Grand Bleu* free-divers dive deep on one breath of air. And in the more recent Netflix film, *Sous Emprise* (No Limit, 2022), a woman also enters this competitive sport, thus breaking the male dominance in cinematic representations of free-diving. Although free-diving relies on divers holding their breath, they also use various techniques and technologies to control their immersion. And if you want to stay under the surface for longer than a few minutes, you also need air supply. The deeper and longer you are submerged in the ocean, the more sophisticated the technology. As humans are increasingly exploiting and extracting marine resources, more advanced technologies are being developed. Driven by the greedy quest for profit, the infrastructure that enables commercial saturation diving is quite remarkable, as captured in the recent Netflix documentary *Last Breath* (2019). While the film shows the dangers of deep sea diving, it is silent on the devastating environmental effects of deep sea mining. Such anthropocentric portrayals of the ocean are by no means exceptional, but in the Anthropocene they become particularly problematic. I am reflecting on these films to situate this review in some media representations of diving, which bring out the risks and dangers involved, while evoking feelings of fear as well as fascination. These films also show the otherworldliness of human immersion in the ocean. Because humans cannot live underwater. We are terrestrial creatures.

In *Wild Blue Media*, Melody Jue relocates theory building into the ocean, using seawater to think through some epistemic foundations in media and literary studies. Through her methodology of conceptual displacement, she theorizes *milieu-specific analysis*, emphasizing the importance of considering how the observer's milieu influences his/her orientation to the world, along with culture, class, gender, race, ability, age etc. Thinking through seawater, Jue elucidates the terrestrial bias in media theory, not as something false or incorrect, but building

on Donna Haraway, she shows that the terrestrial milieu constitutes a situated perspective, which can be quite different from knowledge situated in the ocean. “The milieu of the ocean offers an epistemological check on human knowledge formation, presenting entirely different conditions for perception, sensation, and life than terrestrial environments” (p. 11).

Through oceanic immersion of some key concepts in media theory, Jue shows the difference that milieu-specific analysis brings to terrestrial-based theories. The three core chapters of the book are each devoted to one concept: interface, inscription and database. This is followed by a chapter on underwater museums, which also summarises the main arguments. The chapters draw on close readings of texts and visual analysis, combined with scholarly engagements with theoretical work from a wide range of disciplines, as carefully explained in the introductory chapter that conscientiously situates the author and the book.

For instance, in Chapter One, Jue takes breathing underwater as an analytical key for a phenomenological reading of the interface. While interface is typically thought of as a physical thing (computer screen, game console) in media studies, emphasising surfaces of interactive visual iconography, Jue starts with the human lung in scuba diving, extending her analysis to critical bodily experiences underwater, from pressure and proprioception, to nitrogen narcosis and tissue saturation. The analysis draws on the work of Jacques Cousteau, including his development of the aqualung, which he reflected on in terms of “our flesh feeling what the fish scales know,” thus formulating a sensuous epistemic (p. 45).

After discussing interface in the context of media studies, Jue turns to literary theory, and the spatial metaphors of surface reading and depth. Here she uses the writings of Dr Sylvia Earle, a world-renowned oceanographer and ocean advocate. In Jue’s analysis, Earle’s experiences highlight gendered differences in the predominantly male world of early ocean explorers, while nuancing oceanic epistemics. In the Tektite II project in 1970, Earle led the first all-female team of aquanauts. The underwater Tektite habitat enabled them to spend much more time diving, since they did not need to worry about pressure and decompression. Earle’s reflections on saturation diving in terms of having an extended passport into an alien world is extended to an analysis of differences between land and sea. Jue uses the media concept of excommunication to describe what she calls an ontological condition of amphibiousness: “In diving, the human is excommunicated from the surface world the longer they reside at depth” (p. 63). She elaborates on the human-as-alien in the ocean in terms of liminality “the human figure is the liminal trespasser that can only temporarily belong to the ocean” (p. 64). To Earle, this sense of unbelonging instilled an epistemic humility that inspired her lifelong care for the oceanic

other, her deep insights of ocean life compelling her to share her knowledge and protect the ocean, as depicted in the Netflix documentary *Mission Blue* (2014).

Melody Jue argues for diving as a humanities methodology, and throughout the text, the reader is exposed to the ocean, through imaginary or literary diving. Whether through the words and images of early explorers such as Jacques Cousteau and Sylvia Earle, or Jue's recollections of her own diving experiences, from her initial reflections when learning to dive in North Carolina to her epistemic insights when diving in Jason deClaire Taylor's *Underwater Museum* in Mexico, Jue brings the reader into the ocean. In her concluding chapter, Jue elaborates on diving as a method of cognitive estrangement, arguing that diving makes visible terrestrial biases in theory making, offers a means of witnessing environmental change, and can function as an ethnographic practice. The methodological advantages of scuba diving are evident in emerging anthropological scholarship, as exemplified by current work on trash diving in Stockholm (Rodineliussen 2021). If anything, Jue's sophisticated theorizing on diving as a method of cognitive estrangement and conceptual displacement should inspire more scholars to immerse themselves in the ocean.

For anthropologists, the book's subtitle *Thinking through Seawater* recalls Stefan Helmreich's pathbreaking work on seawater as a theory machine (2011). In this foundational text, Helmreich advances theorizing of the ocean well beyond the nature/culture divide, concluding that "[s]eawater is both good to think with and here to live with, in multifarious actuality" (2011, 138). Melody Jue's interdisciplinary approach builds on Helmreich's work and he is acknowledged for having "generously read every inch of my writings about the ocean" (p. xiii). Indeed, her engagements with anthropological work, including Haraway, Helmreich, and Ingold, along with other disciplines, from ocean humanities to STS, make Jue's scholarly efforts stand out, an impressively interdisciplinary work that is of great value across various disciplines.

Jue's sophisticated theorizing is combined with an ethical commitment to care for the ocean, and she refers to *Wild Blue Media* as a pre-activist book. Written at a time of climate change and environmental crisis, she draws on critical scholarship to underline the urgency of thinking through seawater. Jue's book will hopefully inspire scholars and activists to immerse themselves into underwater worlds, and show people above the surface what a wonderful world of many worlds our pluriversal blue planet is. Water is Life.

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