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Stacy Alaimo, *The Abyss Stares Back: Encounters with Deep-Sea Life* (University of Minnesota Press, 2025), ix+256 pp.

Environmental aesthetics has often assumed that the nonhuman must first be seen to be cared for. The deep ocean, however, challenges this premise through its opacity and elusiveness. It is precisely this tension that lies at the heart of *The Abyss Stares Back*.

This volume offers a critical intervention in Kantian aesthetic judgment, particularly its emphasis on disinterested contemplation and the separation of aesthetic experience from practical interest. In contrast to such distance, Alaimo argues that contemporary crises of environmental degradation and oceanic destruction require a more affective engagement. For her, images and visual production about oceanic life can summon a kind of ethical commitment to protect both benthic and pelagic organisms. Alaimo suggests that encounters with abyssal life can unsettle our assumptions about the ocean, provoking wonder while reminding us of the limits of human knowledge. This sense of humility, Alaimo suggests, may inspire more responsible environmental practices. To trace the shifting relationship between human perception and abyssal life, Alaimo situates this theoretical intervention within a broader history of deep-sea exploration and representation.

Alaimo traces a historical shift from the scientific wonder of early twentieth-century expeditions to contemporary forms of digital representation. She contrasts William Beebe's pioneering Bathysphere expeditions with the postwar militarization and industrialization of oceanography. In Beebe's accounts, poetic description and scientific inquiry converged to acknowledge the alterity of abyssal organisms. Later voyages, in turn, represented by the Alvin submersible and bioprospecting, increasingly reconceptualized marine life as mere objects of scientific extraction. Turning to contemporary visual culture, the book explores the contradictory effects of projects such as the Census of Marine Life and the use of remotely operated underwater vehicles. Although these mediated technologies cultivate a sense of biophilic connection, according to Alaimo, they also risk reducing benthic organisms to objects of digital consumption and visual spectacle. She reveals how dominant representational frameworks, particularly in documentaries like *Blue Planet II*, frequently portray the abyss as a threatening "black void" (182) that can reproduce cultural narratives shaped by colonial logics of domination and racialized associations of darkness. In response, drawing on Afrofuturist and Black feminist scholarship, especially the work of Nnedi Okorafor and Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Alaimo envisions a

decolonial marine biology that considers the deep ocean not as an alien space awaiting human mastery, but as a complex site of multispecies kinship and relational entanglement.

Throughout the volume, Alaimo wonders whether images of the deep sea can inspire ethical concern without turning marine life into spectacle. This contradiction, however, generates significant tension within Alaimo's broader aesthetic project. Although the volume criticizes the commodification of marine life, it still relies on vision as the dominant pathway of ethical relations with nonhumans. For this reason, Alaimo's framework leaves less room for alternative forms of embodied and multisensory engagement with oceanic environments. I find this tension particularly striking in the book's final chapter, where Alaimo prioritizes the potential of images and documentaries to foster environmental sensitivity by bringing to light the deep-sea organisms in all their "shimmering, glowing, gliding, darting, undulating, pulsing, and fluttering" (197). What strikes me most, however, is the way Alaimo treats touch primarily as a form of domination in her discussion of deep-sea creatures in aquariums, targeting touch tanks in particular. Reflecting on her experience at Monterey Bay Aquarium, her analysis casts light on the suffering and dislocation of organisms like giant isopods, which are reduced to captive novelties for human touch. For Alaimo, this forced "haptic immediacy" (189) fails to establish an ethical relation. Surprisingly, she places greater trust in mediated images than in direct physical encounters, arguing that remote representations foster intimate aesthetic encounters and ecological concern without disturbing the creatures in their abyssal lifeworlds. However, her analysis pays insufficient attention to the material infrastructures that make such encounters possible in the first place, particularly the artificial lighting technologies required to render abyssal life visible. Artificial light in marine studies is not just a neutral instrument of observation but a form of environmental intervention that can alter the very ecosystems it seeks to reveal. Thus, the technologies that produce these images offer seemingly harmless access to deep-sea life while obscuring the ecological costs of visibility itself. At its core, though, Alaimo's discussion of tactile encounters highlights their exploitative dimensions, framing haptic interactions as a "cruel love" (189). Indeed, captivity and commodification remain undeniable ethical concerns in aquariums, but the weight she gives to the violence of physical contact risks collapsing affective engagements into a singular narrative of exploitation.

By framing touch mainly in terms of captivity, Alaimo underestimates how mutual tactile encounters can dismantle the binary between observer and observed, opening up a shared affective space that also helps resist the anti-Black and colonial logics embedded in visual spectacles of the abyss. Moving beyond mediated aesthetic encounters, I suggest that reclaiming and queering the haptic experience offers a vital alternative to ocularcentric modes of perception. Rather than relying on Brian Massumi's concept of "haptic visuality" (172), which conceptualizes vision as acquiring tactile capacities to produce a sensation of touch through sight, I propose *skin-sight* as a perceptual formation in which touch itself becomes a primary mode of

seeing, sensing, and knowing. By touching and being touched, both physically and emotionally, the skin becomes a site of affective sensation. Sedgwick's notion of "besideness" (23) opens a different way of imagining human relations with marine life, not as a relation between observer and object, but as a form of coexistence grounded in proximity and reciprocity. Touch, then, does not always imply control. It can foster care and mutual understanding.

Even so, *The Abyss Stares Back* opens toward a broader ethics of opacity and alterity. What remains tacit in Alaimo's project is its resonance with critical disability studies, particularly its critique of the assumption that ethical recognition requires full accessibility and visibility. Alaimo argues that some aspects of abyssal life must remain inaccessible, questioning the idea that ethical relations depend on human knowledge or visibility. This insight quietly outgrows its own ocularcentric framework, making room for oceanic ethics grounded in darkness and vulnerability.

Works Cited

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