

SHIPWRECK MODERNITY AND BLUE ECOLOGY: REVISITING HUMAN-WATER RELATIONSHIPS IN *THE MAN WITH THE COMPOUND EYES*

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Abstract

*Situated within the evolving discourse of the blue humanities, this research offers a nuanced reinterpretation of Wu Ming-Yi's *The Man with the Compound Eyes*, positing the novel as a dynamic meditation on human-ocean entanglements. Through the theoretical lens of Steve Mentz's *Shipwreck Modernity*, this research unveils Wu's narrative as a vision of the ocean not merely as a passive backdrop, but as an agentive and transformative force that reconfigures human subjectivity and ecological awareness, challenging conventional boundaries between human and non-human worlds. *The Man with the Compound Eyes* navigates the interstitial space between pre-modern ecological harmony and the ruptures of contemporary environmental crises, foregrounding the tensions between traditional ecological knowledge and the incursions of global modernity. The narrative unfolds profoundly human tales of vulnerability, resilience, and displacement amidst the aftermath of ecological devastation. This research posits that Wu's text orchestrates a paradigm shift, moving away from terrestrial epistemologies to embrace a fluid, oceanic consciousness. In doing so, it subverts anthropocentric paradigms and offers a compelling vision of ecological co-becoming, urging a reimagined ethical engagement with the non-human world. By intricately weaving climate imaginaries, cultural adaptation, and oceanic ontology, *The Man with the Compound Eyes* transcends conventional narrative forms, emerging as a transformative literary intervention that expands the intellectual frontiers of the Anthropocene and redefines the critical landscape of blue humanities.*

KEYWORDS: Shipwreck Modernity, Blue Ecology, Human-Ocean Relationships, Climate Change, Blue Humanities

Introduction

Situated at the crossroads of Taiwanese literature and global environmental discourse, *The Man with the Compound Eyes* offers an innovative exploration of ecological consciousness, blending narrative storytelling with a profound examination of environmental and cultural themes. Wu Ming-Yi, a multidisciplinary Taiwanese writer and scholar, has garnered international acclaim for his works that seamlessly integrate ecological awareness with magical realism, especially in novels such as *The Stolen Bicycle*, which similarly delves into themes of environmental neglect and indigenous cultural heritage. The central tenets of Wu's literary oeuvre revolve around the delicate interdependence of nature and humanity, confronting the dire consequences of environmental disregard. *The Man with the Compound Eyes* (2011), in particular, interrogates the tensions between modernity and tradition, identity formation, and the quest for belonging in an ever-transforming global context. Of particular interest in this

research is Wu's portrayal of the human relationship with the sea, which resonates deeply with the tenets of *Blue Ecology*, a concept that this study will scrutinize to better understand how environmental values shape human goals and identities within the narrative framework.

The Man with the Compound Eyes traces the journey of Atile'i, a fifteen-year-old boy from the mythical island of Wayo Wayo, who embarks on a traditional coming-of-age ritual, only to be abandoned at sea. After surviving a violent storm, Atile'i washes ashore on the coast of Taiwan, where he meets Alice, a grieving woman who mourns the recent loss of her husband and son. As their lives become inextricably linked, the narrative unfolds as a profound exploration of survival, loss, and the redemptive power of human connection. Struggling to adapt to an unfamiliar land ravaged by ecological crisis, Atile'i seeks to find his place in a world on the brink of collapse. Meanwhile, Alice endeavors to heal from the emotional void left by her family's tragic disappearance. Through their growing relationship, Wu Ming-Yi's narrative illuminates the transformative potential of empathy, resilience, and shared experience as a means of confronting both ecological and personal trauma.

At the core of the novel's thematic exploration lies the menacing garbage vortex, a swirling symbol of ecological decay that looms over both the mythical island of Wayo Wayo and the tangible shores of Taiwan. This symbol of ecological degradation impels the characters to confront not only the consequences of human neglect toward nature, but also the pressing need for resilience and adaptation in an era of environmental catastrophe. The fusion of magical realism with ecological anxiety in Wu's text offers a unique opportunity to explore humanity's entangled relationship with nature, while also interrogating the possibilities of ecological co-becoming in the face of overwhelming loss.

Steve Mentz, a distinguished scholar in the fields of ecocriticism and maritime studies, provides the theoretical foundation for understanding the intersection of literature and environmental thought, particularly through his exploration of oceanic and aquatic themes. In his seminal work, *Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization, 1550–1719*, Mentz introduces the concept of *Shipwreck Modernity*, an innovative lens through which to examine both early modern ecologies and their relevance to contemporary environmental crises. Through this framework, Mentz argues that the experience of shipwreck serves as a potent metaphor for the vulnerabilities inherent in human engagement with nature, offering a compelling critique of the historical illusion of human mastery over the natural world. In his conceptualization of the *Naufragocene*—a term coined to replace the Anthropocene—Mentz critiques the linear narratives of human progress and ecological determinism, suggesting instead a more chaotic, unpredictable model of historical and ecological change. His *blue ecology* theory, which shifts the focus from terrestrial (green) ecologies to the oceanic realms, positions the sea as a central non-human actor in both historical and ecological discourses. This shift underscores the fundamental role of aquatic environments in shaping human existence, while challenging anthropocentric paradigms that have dominated both cultural and environmental thought.

Mentz broadens the scope of ecocritical discourse by transcending land-centric paradigms, advocating for a more fluid and interconnected approach to understanding humanity's relationship with the planet's diverse ecosystems. Through his concept of *Blue Ecology*, he shifts the focus of environmental thought toward the ocean, acknowledging its central and active role in shaping global processes. In contrast to traditional terrestrial perspectives, *Blue Ecology* positions the ocean as a dynamic force that not only influences human experience but also shapes cultures, challenges established boundaries, and redefines the interactions between human and non-human entities. By moving beyond static conceptions of nature, *Blue Ecology* fosters a more robust understanding of our planetary condition,

encouraging novel forms of engagement with the oceanic world and celebrating the potential for transformative ecological connections in an ever-changing, fluid environment.

Literature Review

In his seminal article, *"Toward a Blue Cultural Studies: The Sea, Maritime Culture, and Early Modern English Literature,"* Steve Mentz examines the evolution of the sea's significance within English literary culture during the era of European maritime expansion in the 15th century. He contends that the meanings of the sea transformed as geographic knowledge advanced, linking maritime exploration with the emerging cultural paradigms of the time. Mentz argues for a reimagined reading of canonical works, suggesting that "re-creating Milton's *'Lycidas'* with an oceanic focus can revise our understanding of the early modern poetics of nature" (Mentz 2). His analysis emphasizes the necessity of studying early modern texts, such as the Bermuda pamphlets and *The Tempest*, through a maritime lens, which offers new insights into colonialism, cultural consequences, and the poetics of the sea. The sea, once perceived as a chaotic and dangerous force, has since been commodified into a recreational space, a shift that has obscured the cultural and historical legacies embedded within maritime experiences. Mentz's work underscores the relevance of the sea in contemporary scholarship across diverse fields, including ecology, history, and cultural studies, suggesting that *blue cultural studies* offers a vital lens through which to engage with ongoing global discourses in globalization, postcolonialism, and environmentalism.

Mentz continues to expand on the *blue humanities* in his later article, *"A Poetics of Planetary Water: The Blue Humanities After John Gillis,"* where he extends the scope of water studies to encompass not just the oceans, but all forms of planetary water, including rivers, glaciers, and even the water within the human body. Building on the work of John Gillis, Mentz advocates for an inclusive understanding of water that transcends the traditional focus on seas and oceans. He asserts, "oceans and transoceanic travel have begun to take stock of other kinds of planetary water, including the water in human bodies, glacial ice, and water vapor" (Mentz 1). Through this broader conception, Mentz encourages scholars to adopt a holistic view of water, examining its role across various environments and its profound impact on global ecosystems. By revisiting the ecological insights provided by Gillis, particularly in works like *Islands of the Mind* and *The Human Shore*, Mentz calls for a more nuanced exploration of the human-nature relationship, especially in the context of climate change. As he posits, "Global climate change defines the central challenge of the current generation, and I turn to water in all its forms during the age of climate change to make sense of our disrupted ecosystem" (Mentz 8). This approach offers an inclusive framework for future directions in coastal history and blue humanities, emphasizing the need for interdisciplinary methodologies to address contemporary eco-catastrophic challenges.

In *"Compost and Sea Change: Ecology and Early Modern Literature,"* Kristine Steenbergh offers a compelling analysis of how early modern literature provides crucial insights into ecological concerns that resonate with today's environmental crises. Situated within the context of Mentz's *Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization, 1550–1719*, Steenbergh discusses how Mentz employs the metaphor of the shipwreck to explore human-nonhuman relations and the ecological disruptions of the early modern period. As she explains, "Mentz lifts his readers out of the immersive experience of shipwreck, bringing them on land and leaving them to dry on beach with seven shipwrecked ecological truths" (Steenbergh 5). Mentz's concept of the shipwreck is not only a historical metaphor but also a profound way of rethinking current ecological crises, serving as a "beacon" that guides our understanding of the Anthropocene. Steenbergh advocates for reading early modern literature as a model for

confronting today's environmental challenges, arguing that it offers innovative ways of relating to the natural world through its depiction of ecological trauma and resilience. As she notes, "Writing against the radical rupture and anthropocentrism entailed in both 'early modernity' and 'the Anthropocene' – the era of human-made impact on the earth's biosphere – he proposes the experience of shipwreck as a trope to rethink our experience of the current time frame as well as our thinking in terms of radical ruptures" (Steenbergh 4). Through this lens, early modern literature becomes an essential tool for understanding the disruptions and disorientations caused by ecological crises.

Alison E. Glassie's review, "*Reviewed Work(s): Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization, 1550-1719 by Steve Mentz*," delves into the central themes of Mentz's *shipwreck modernity*, focusing on the collective nature of shipwrecks and their implications for environmental justice and equity. Glassie argues that while the individual experience of shipwreck is critical, it also raises important questions about survival in the context of global modernity's ecological wreckage. She positions Mentz's work within the broader historical context of English maritime expansion, which placed seafaring, the ocean, and shipwrecks at the heart of cultural imagination during the 16th to 18th centuries. As Glassie notes, "English maritime expansion and empire building that positioned seafaring, the ocean and shipwreck prominently in the period's cultural imagination" (Glassie 2). The shipwreck, both as a literal event and as a metaphor for ecological collapse, connects the historical maritime period to contemporary environmental issues, reflecting the physical and psychological toll of global ecological disruption. Glassie further comments on Mentz's writing style in *Shipwreck Modernity*, describing it as "formally innovative" and immersive, mirroring the experience of shipwreck itself, guiding readers through a narrative that moves from crisis to immersion to salvage. This structure, she argues, reflects the themes of ecological collapse that permeate Mentz's work.

The article "*Landscape in Motion: Wu Ming-Yi's Novels and Translation*" by Pei-yun Chen examines the complex relationship between landscape, nature, and translation in the works of Taiwanese author Wu Ming-Yi, with particular focus on *The Man with the Compound Eyes*. Chen argues that Wu's work exemplifies the interplay between local and global literary landscapes, highlighting how Wu navigates the tensions between Taiwanese cultural specificity and global literary traditions. Wu's use of Western imagery and scientific theories not only enhances the cultural legitimacy of his work but also underscores his ability to position Taiwanese literature within a broader, global ecological discourse. Chen notes that Wu's writing captures the dynamism of landscape, illustrating the fluidity and constant evolution of nature through the rhythms of rivers, oceans, and lakes. This exploration of landscape disrupts static conceptions of place, offering a perspective that is free from historical constraints. Through his use of magical realism, Wu engages readers with a non-individual, sensory experience of the landscape, creating a new, fluid way of perceiving the world.

The article "*Island, Identity, and Trauma: The Three Ecologies of Wu Ming-Yi's The Man with the Compound Eyes*" explores the interconnectedness of human, social, and environmental ecologies using Adrian Ivakhiv's theory of tri-ecological morphisms. The authors examine the impact of industrialization and environmental degradation on Taiwan's Indigenous communities, illustrating how these forces disrupt both the physical landscape and cultural identities. As the authors state, "These elements intersect and engage with one another, propelled by the inexorable forces of Taiwan's eastern coast and the looming specter of the trash island" (Wang, Zhang, and Drummond 14). This ecological trauma is framed not merely as an environmental issue but as a cultural and psychological crisis, emphasizing the ways in which ecological colonization impacts individual and collective identities. The authors

advocate for an ecosophical perspective, which encourages a new humanity attuned to ecological concerns, and argue that literature plays a crucial role in raising awareness of these interconnected issues.

Darryl Sterk's *"Responsible Primitivism: Wu Ming-yi's The Man with the Compound Eyes as Indigenous-Themed Environmental World Literature"* explores Wu's use of primitivism to address modern environmental concerns. Sterk suggests that Wu's portrayal of Indigenous cultures offers a critique of modernity's alienation from nature, positing that "his primitivism is tempered by knowledge of Indigenous cultures and histories and acquaintance with Indigenous individuals and lifeways in Taiwan" (Sterk 2). Wu's blending of magical realism with environmental themes, combined with his deep engagement with Indigenous knowledge, allows his work to transcend cultural boundaries, establishing him as a significant figure in global environmental literature. His novel's success, according to Sterk, lies in its ability to bridge local and global narratives through its eco-cosmopolitanism, offering a critique of modern environmental degradation and the alienation of contemporary societies from nature.

Analysis/Discussion

Steve Mentz's concept of "shipwreck modernity" serves as a dynamic lens for examining early modern globalization—not as a fixed definition but as a metaphorical framework that highlights the tumultuous and disorienting nature of historical and ecological change. In *The Man with the Compound Eyes* by Wu Ming-Yi, this metaphor is vividly brought to life through the novel's structure and thematic concerns. Much like Mentz's "wet catastrophes," which evoke the unpredictable and chaotic disruptions of global expansion (Mentz 1), Wu's narrative mirrors the destabilizing forces of contemporary globalization, initiating with an overwhelming sense of transformation. As the novel opens, a seismic event drowns out the "trickling of water through the fissures in the subterranean rock," symbolizing the overwhelming disruptions to life both natural and human-made (Sterk 9). This event sets the stage for the broader upheavals that follow, aligning with Mentz's characterization of shipwrecks as disorienting experiences that challenge human agency.

Wu's portrayal of the struggle to bring order to this chaotic environment aligns with Mentz's conceptualization of shipwrecks. In Wu's narrative, the island of Wayo Wayo represents an ancient and fragile harmony between human and nature, a balance disrupted by the invasive forces of globalization. The inhabitants of Wayo Wayo, unable to afford modern tools, rely on simple yet profound agricultural practices: "The island was small and the people lacked farming tools, so pebbles were piled around the plots, to keep the soil moist and to serve as a windbreak" (Sterk 11). This image of a pre-modern, self-sustaining ecosystem juxtaposed against the arrival of external forces underscores the destabilizing effects of modernity. Similarly, the thematic contrast between the peaceful existence on Wayo Wayo and the encroaching development on Haven reveals the destructive impact of external forces on both the natural and cultural landscapes.

Wu's narrative structure, with its interwoven timelines and parallel plots, further reinforces Mentz's notion of "composture." This idea, which suggests that history is a layering of past and present, not a clean break, is embodied in the novel's fragmented storytelling. The convergence of temporalities, much like the global networks discussed by Mentz, is a hallmark of the disorienting experience of modernity. The novel's unresolved ending, which leaves characters like Alice, Atile'i, and Toto in limbo, mirrors Mentz's concept of "catastrophic futurity"—the uncertain, often disorienting future that is a direct consequence of both human and natural forces. Alice's resignation and her subsequent anticipation of a new beginning are abruptly interrupted by the arrival of the trash vortex, an event that throws her life into further

chaos: “Alice had tendered her resignation, returned her faculty ID. She could finally let out a big sigh of relief: now the torment of this life would end and she could try her luck in the next” (Sterk 16). The lingering uncertainty in Alice’s fate—alongside the unresolved futures of Atili and Toto—emphasizes the “catastrophic futurity” that Mentz identifies in his analysis of shipwrecks, where the forces of nature and globalization intersect to render the future unpredictable and transformative.

Mentz’s exploration of shipwreck modernity focuses on the “disorderly rupture” that characterizes historical change, advocating for a flexible historical language to account for the unpredictable systems that govern human societies and ecological systems (Mentz 9). Wu’s novel illustrates this concept through the eruption of the trash vortex, a sudden wave of pollution that disrupts the carefully balanced ecosystem of Wayo Wayo. The island, once symbolizing a pre-modern harmony with nature, is now overwhelmed by the forces of globalization. The resulting chaos forces the characters, adrift at sea, to confront the limitations of human control over the environment. As Mentz notes, “Inside the catastrophe, bodies feel disorder on their skin” (Mentz 12). This sensory immersion is vividly reflected in Wu’s descriptions, such as the ocean’s omnipresence in the characters’ lives: “His speech carried the smell of the sea, and there was salt on his every breath” (Sterk 10). These sensory details underscore the physical and emotional impact of the environment, making the characters’ experiences palpable and real.

Mentz’s concept of a “blue ecology” expands traditional ecocriticism, urging scholars to attend to the ocean’s profound influence on global histories and ecosystems. The ocean, as he notes, is a vast, powerful nonhuman actor that has shaped the trajectory of world history (Mentz 2). In Wu’s novel, the ocean is central to the existence of Wayo Wayo, which “followed the tides, floating around in the ocean” (Sterk 10). The island’s precarious existence—dependent on the rhythms and resources of the ocean—echoes Mentz’s argument that ecologies must move beyond land-based perspectives to fully appreciate the interconnectedness of the world’s ecosystems. Wayo Wayo’s relationship with the sea is not merely utilitarian but also spiritual, as the ocean informs the islanders’ worldview, rituals, and even their understanding of the divine.

Mentz’s advocacy for a “blue ecology,” one that foregrounds the ocean’s centrality in global ecological discourse, finds resonance in Wu Ming-Yi’s portrayal of the sea’s agency in *The Man with the Compound Eyes*. Mentz argues that the ocean has been greatly overlooked in ecocriticism, despite covering over two-thirds of the earth and being “the most powerful nonhuman actor in world history” (Mentz 2). In Wu’s novel, the ocean is not a mere backdrop but an active, shaping force, central to both the islanders’ existence and their cultural worldview. “The island followed the tides, floating around in the ocean, which was a source of sustenance for the people” (Sterk 10). This depiction aligns with Mentz’s call for an expanded ecocritical framework that includes the ocean as a key player in the global ecology: “Any global ecology worthy of the name must include the ocean and recognize that world history emerges through land-sea hybrids” (Mentz 14). *The Man with the Compound Eyes* illustrates the concept of “shipwreck modernity” through its portrayal of environmental and social disintegration. Wu’s novel resonates with Mentz’s ideas of a chaotic, unpredictable world shaped by global forces, where the sensory immersion and disorientation of catastrophe become central to understanding both past and present ecological crises. Through its depiction of the ocean, the land, and the intertwining of temporalities, the novel offers a powerful meditation on the transformative and often catastrophic effects of globalization—an essential theme in both *Shipwreck Modernity* and the evolving field of “blue cultural studies.”

Conclusion

This research has explored Wu Ming-Yi's *The Man with the Compound Eyes* as a reconfiguration of the human-ocean relationship, drawing on Steve Mentz's concepts of *Shipwreck Modernity* and *Blue Ecology* to foreground the ocean as an active, nonhuman force within the narrative. By de-centering human agency and embracing the fluid, interconnected dynamics between land and sea, Wu's novel challenges the terrestrial biases that often dominate ecocritical discourse. It urges a reimagining of global ecologies that acknowledges the agency of the ocean and its profound impact on both human and nonhuman histories. Through its depiction of ecological catastrophe, cultural dislocation, and human resilience, the novel vividly illustrates Mentz's theory of *shipwreck modernity*—a framework that underscores the disorienting forces of globalization—and the transformative power of the ocean, as envisioned in *blue ecology*. The narrative's emphasis on sensory immersion and its rejection of anthropocentrism offers a compelling contribution to the field of blue humanities, while expanding the boundaries of Asian ecocriticism.

This research highlights the novel's pivotal role in confronting the existential challenges posed by climate change and ecological degradation. It demonstrates literature's capacity to inspire fresh interpretative frameworks that not only deepen our understanding of environmental crises but also suggest pathways for meaningful engagement with the global ecological future. Through its nuanced portrayal of the ocean as both a literal and metaphorical force, *The Man with the Compound Eyes* invites readers to reconsider the intersections of human existence and the natural world—urging an approach to global ecology that is as expansive, unpredictable, and interconnected as the ocean itself.

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