

Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization, 1550–1719. Steve Mentz. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. xxxiv + 226 pp. \$30.

In the conclusion to *Shipwreck Modernity*, Steve Mentz writes: “A central claim of this book has been that shipwreck, the sudden shocking awareness that the vessels that have carried us this far are coming to pieces under our feet, represents an ordinary if painful way to live” (163). For Mentz, shipwreck refers to specific recent disasters—floods, hurricanes, nuclear meltdowns—as well as to accounts of disasters in early modern global travel and exploration. Shipwrecks are metaphors and material events at the same time; but on both levels, the concept of shipwreck can expand to encompass psychology, theory, or options for individual and collective action. Mentz’s discussion is innovative in both form and content, offering miniature interludes like flotsam on the ocean’s surface after a storm, a set of epilogues rather than one, and brief interchapters in which he meditates, often poetically, on aspects of his subject. Mentz also gives us two prefaces: one is theoretical, juxtaposing historical methodologies that exemplify theft—modernity steals from the past to tell a story about itself—with those that act as composture, in which modernity turns out to be fashioned from a “productive and disorienting swirl” (x) where turbulence throws the notion of neat epochs into disarray. Indeed, Mentz invents some new epochs of his own: “homogenocene,” “Thalassocene,” and “naufrogocene.” Out of the overlaps and tensions among these, Mentz develops a unifying theory of ecological being that calls upon us to recognize the importance of oceans and oceanic thinking for any “meaningfully ecological” (xxi) work. A second narrative introduction more predictably lays out the scope and terms of the book, which concerns the “literary microgenre” (xxx) of shipwreck accounts from the mid-sixteenth through the early eighteenth century.

In the first chapter, Mentz introduces the question of what shipwreck narratives are supposed to do for their readers (and often their authors), arguing that the stock providentialist gestures through which they are filtered are part of a process of “drying out” the wet disruptions caused by catastrophic encounters with the hostile inhumanity of the ocean. An account of the Portuguese galleon *S. João*, Anthony Thatcher’s description of a hurricane off the coast of Massachusetts, and a Flemish painting *The Wreck of The Amsterdam* collectively reveal the fraught and incomplete nature of such dryings out, which cannot quite mesh competing interpretive systems involving

maritime expertise, on the one hand, and divine intervention, on the other. A second chapter concerns the nitty-gritty of individual struggles to survive. In it, Jonah's early modern analogues generate variants of thalassic theology, in some cases turning to the sea for cleansing, in others finding in it the promise of preservation, and in still others opting for a "human-ocean alliance" that accepts entanglement with inhuman elements. Chapter 3 returns us to what might feel like familiar territory, namely Bermuda and its tempests, only to set us hopping from one narrative perspective to another in its archipelago of no fewer than nine different tales about the infamous "Devil's Isle." A fourth and fifth chapter both address the question of how *metis*, the skilled labor of sailors and other seafarers, informs accounts of shipwreck. For Mentz, Grotius's notion of the *mare liberum* "falsifies maritime experience by overlooking labor" (77). In the voyages of Jeremy Roch and Edward Barlow, Mentz finds, respectively, an exuberant confidence in the capacity of the talented seaman's agency to triumph, and the possibility that the process of writing itself functions as a form of *metis* to offer stability, "albeit only of a temporary kind" (128).

Mentz's final two chapters breach the book's apparent historical parameters by focusing on Herman Melville, Donne, Thomas Hardy, the film *Titanic* along with Bob Dylan's song about the same disaster, and, finally, wrapping up with Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Poetry, Mentz suggests, "provides a navigable route inside shipwreck's chaos" and "counters maritime dislocation" (131); thus shipwreck poetry transcends period limits, just as the experiences that are embedded in shipwreck narratives resonate so clearly with current anxieties about ecological catastrophe. These last chapters offer examples of both the suffering that arises out of human encounters with the "dynamic environment" (172) of the sea, and the ecstasy shipwreck can also engender, sometimes through sheer survival, other times through discovery of a "swimmer poetics" (175) that accommodates and engages with the environment.

This is a remarkable and valuable scholarly work that offers much beyond its analysis of early modern texts and histories. Mentz's core arguments, as the book's title indicates, challenge a number of historical, theoretical, and ecocritical premises. His arguments offer us insight into the origins and patterns that shape our relationship to the environment, and propose that the paradigm of shipwreck offers an advantageous position from which to launch ourselves into an uncertain ecological future.

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