

Anthropology Book Forum

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RASMUS RODINELIUSSEN, 2024, *Underwater Worlds: An Ethnography of Waste, Pollution, and Marine Life*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 248 pp., ISBN 978-3-031-63372-0

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Rasmus Rodineliussen's *Underwater Worlds* is a vivid and thought-provoking ethnography that plunges into the complex entanglements of underwater waste, pollution, marine life, and our recognitions. At a time when oceanic crises are more urgent than ever—especially in light of the 2024 global coral bleaching event—this book offers a timely reflection on how we manage and respond to human-induced changes in marine ecosystems. While it doesn't focus specifically on coral reefs, it sheds light on the practical, multispecies efforts in navigate the broader impacts of climate and oceanic transformation.

Bridging environmental anthropology, political ecology, and science and technology studies (STS), *Underwater Worlds* contributes to critical conversations about waste, contamination, and the multispecies politics of water. Through immersive ethnographic work in scientific expedition and laboratory practices with marine scientists, and interactions with trash divers in Sweden, Brazil and Thailand, Rodineliussen weaves a compelling narrative. He captures the material, emotional, and political dimensions of waste in aquatic environments, showing how scientific practices, technologies, materialities and multispecies engagements with the ocean shape our understanding of marine ecologies. The ultimate aim, he proposed, is to explore 'how waste and pollution in the underwater world can be rendered visible, knowable, and relatable to humans' (p.4).

Reading this book as an anthropologist and diver myself, I found it deeply resonant, especially the experience of submerging oneself into an environment that is both unknown and yet intimately connected to human actions (Sangkhamanee 2024). Rodineliussen captures the paradoxes of the

underwater world—the invisibility, the fragility, and the unsettling evidence of human negligence. The embodied sensation of moving through near-zero visibility, touching objects before seeing them, and the eerie silence of the depths are vividly brought to life in his text.

Rodneliussen’s engagement with “aquabiopolitics” emerges as a central analytical framework, drawing from Foucault’s biopolitics and extending it into the submerged spaces of marine, nonhuman governance. The concept underscores how marine life, from jellyfish to microbes, is enrolled in human projects of environmental management, technological intervention, and ecological conservation and care. This aquabiopolitics, as Rodneliussen argued, is a ‘politization of marine life’ wherein provide a space of legitimization for humans ‘to kill or let some life die in favor of other (human) life’ (p. 30). This conceptual lens enriches broader anthropological debates on human-nonhuman relations by shifting attention to submerged ecologies, challenging terrestrial biases (Jue 2020, Raycraft 2020) in social theory where land-based politics often centered around the governability and exploitation over other, and among, humans.

The book is structured in two parts. The first section focuses on marine scientists’ engagements with underwater ecologies, detailing their methods of technologically mediating the oceanic unknown. This portion is particularly illuminating in its discussion of how scientific instruments and sensor technologies render pollution visible. Chapters on sediment sampling and the “plastisphere” illustrate how scientific knowledge production is itself an intervention in aquatic life-worlds, revealing how contamination is both detected and constituted through material and epistemic practices. Rodneliussen’s argument that these technological mediations not only map pollution but also actively shape the epistemological frameworks through which we understand marine environments is particularly insightful. He suggests that scientific tools and marine materials such as sediments do not merely reveal an already-existing pollution crisis and the process of slow violence (Nixon 2011) of human activities; these human-technological affordances co-produce the very nature of what is considered pollution, making waste legible to governance structures and conservation efforts.

The second part of the book shifts to trash scuba divers—environmental activists who remove waste from Stockholm’s waters, navigating murky and often dangerous conditions. Here, Rodneliussen

offers ethnographic descriptions of these divers' embodied, sensorial engagements with submerged waste. His firsthand accounts of diving in "café latte water"(p. 2-3)—a term referring to the highly polluted, low-visibility conditions—capture the sensory and affective dimensions of underwater labor. The ethnography shines in these moments, detailing how divers and rope pullers physically encounter waste, navigate unseen hazards, and bring discarded objects to the surface. By analyzing the labor of trash divers, Rodineliussen advances a broader argument about the material politics of waste: these divers do not merely extract waste from underwater landscapes but also challenge dominant narratives of environmental responsibility. Their work exposes the contradictions of so-called sustainable societies, revealing the unseen accumulations of industrial and consumer detritus beneath the surface. This, in turn, raises critical scrutiny about the thresholds of toxicity being dumped and accumulated in the water. Aquabiopolitics comes into play here: in Stockholm, waste and toxicity are deemed acceptable as long as specific toxicants remain below harmful levels for humans. However, this standard does not necessarily extend to marine organisms, for whom exposure to hazardous materials may already be altering underwater ecosystems—all to sustain human activities. Another chapter examines how the Rena Mälaren trash-diving group makes underwater waste visible to the public through installations and media campaigns. By engaging sensory experiences—sight, touch, and smell—the chapter highlights how waste in water represents slow violence, accumulating harm over time. Rodineliussen argues that shifting perspectives from land to underwater is essential for rethinking human relationships with marine environments

A particularly compelling chapter juxtaposes trash diving in Sweden with similar initiatives in Brazil and Thailand, highlighting how localized waste ecologies intersect with global circuits of pollution and conservation. Rodineliussen's inclusion of these comparative cases underscores the transnational dynamics of marine pollution and community-led responses, situating his ethnography within broader global debates on environmental practices. The chapter compares trash diving efforts in Sweden, Brazil, and Thailand, emphasizing how waste in water is a global issue. It explores how the Swedish trash-diving group expands its collaborations and international initiatives with Project AWARE and Trash Hero, highlighting the different environmental and social conditions that shape trash-diving practices. Rodineliussen argues that while water pollution

is universal, the materiality and sensory experience of waste differ across locations, influencing how communities engage with conservation efforts

One of the book's strengths is its methodological innovation. By conducting sensorial, embodied "underwater ethnography," Rodineliussen challenges conventional fieldwork practices, demonstrating the possibilities of submersion as an ethnographic technique. This approach resonates with recent anthropological experiments in affective methods in underwater studies (Sangkhamanee 2025), positioning *Underwater Worlds* as a methodological intervention as much as a theoretical one. As someone who has grappled with the methodological challenges of researching underwater environments, I appreciate Rodineliussen's efforts to translate the sensory and affective experiences of diving into ethnographic knowledge. He invites scholars to consider how fieldwork might be transformed when our sensory faculties are reoriented.

Underwater Worlds makes it an essential read for those interested in marine anthropology and the politics of environmental contamination. Rodineliussen's work reminds us that the underwater is not merely a passive receptacle for human waste but a dynamic, contested space where life, matter, sensibility, and politics coalesce in unexpected ways.

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