

Astrida Neimanis

*Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*

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Reviewed by Claire Brault, 2017

**Claire Brault** is a political theorist whose interdisciplinary work focuses on environmental and feminist theory, science and technology studies, and environmental humanities. She currently works as a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow at the Cogut Institute for the Humanities and the department of political science in Brown University, where she is finishing her book, *Beyond Utopia: Feminist Eco-Temporalities*. There she is also working on her next research project, focused on Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return and the ecological crises.

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For the last couple of decades, feminist theory has been immersed in a new materialist wave that has produced among the most innovative and capacious ways to think and to respond critically--ontologically, ethically, and politically--within the depths of the ongoing ecological crises. If hardly any field of philosophy, cultural studies, or science studies has been as well-equipped to think the posthuman turn as feminist approaches have, Astrida Neimanis's *Bodies of Water* brilliantly synthesizes, illustrates, and continues this feminist ebullition.

Neimanis invites us to dive into a vast and important task: rethinking embodiment as watery, against conventional understandings of the individual subject as discrete, coherently bounded, and awaiting control. This discrete individualism is indeed washed away as a "dry myth" as Neimanis proposes her notion of "hydrocommons." Her understanding of bodies of water challenges not only individualism, but also the anthropocentrism of which the unitary subject is but a part. Neimanis thus declares from the very opening of her book that "water embodiment presents a challenge to three related humanist understandings of corporeality: discrete individualism, anthropocentrism, and phallogocentrism" (3). She then develops feminist figurations aiming to unsettle all three: her concepts of gestationality, of amniotics, and her posthuman feminist phenomenology build on the work started by Karen Barad, Stacy Alaimo, and many others, which had offered agential realism, transcorporeality, and queer temporalities as their own conceptual figures.

Methodologically, it is worth noting that Neimanis prefers the notion of "figuration" to the Deleuzian "concept," thus stressing the embodied effect and character of concepts, which are repeatedly described, after Elizabeth Grosz, as "movable bridges." Neimanis's figurations are rich enough to resist a number of potential traps: she neither caves to technophilia nor to technophobia; she neither uncritically espouses Science as an expositor of Truth, nor fails to value the sciences as potential sensitizers and amplifiers of experience; finally she neither caves to a potential romanticization of indigenous life, nor

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does she simplistically reject indigenous understandings of women as responsible for water, sometimes too easily cast as essentialist. Instead, Neimanis synthetically draws from decolonial thought, critical race theory, major figures of feminist philosophy, and from Deleuze, Nietzsche, and Merleau-Ponty to develop her feminist posthuman phenomenology. Ultimately, the book reads as great evidence that posthuman studies cannot do without feminism, and that, as Braidotti has claimed, feminism has always been posthuman.

Before diving into how this feminist posthuman phenomenology thinks (with) bodies of water, another important methodological point is of note here, regarding Neimanis's deployment of the first-person plural pronoun. Her "hydrocommons" resists the grand, universalizing narrative of a "we are all in the same waters together," promoted by Anthropocene waters. Thus Neimanis carefully resorts to the nonetheless (consciously) problematic "we." In other words, her mutually implicating ontology of bodies of water stresses hydrocommons, yet it remains attentive to context-specific politics of location. In the author's own words, "a feminist posthuman phenomenology is a methodology that challenges a too-easy 'we,' but won't remain tethered to a bounded 'I,' either" (63). Qualifying carefully her own use of the "we," she deploys Adrienne Rich's feminist figurations of a politics of location to resist a universal reach to representation that may erase difference: Neimanis writes that "we" are bodies of water, in and through bodies of water, affecting bodies of water, sharing this lived experience of flowing amniotically within our hydrocommons rather than merely interacting with one another, as if we were separate and coherent atoms. This "we" resists and defies the flattening "we" involved in the "we humans who have destroyed the planet," of Anthropocenic spectacular discourse, without abandoning the possibility to recognize what we humans and nonhumans share in commonality and difference.

The reader may at first be skeptical about a potential tension: phenomenology, especially as developed by Merleau-Ponty--whom Neimanis draws from--has tended to be tied to the humanist tradition. Yet she argues that "our experience as bodies is not only at the subjectivized human level" (24). Chapter 1 pushes beyond a possible humanist and limited reading of Merleau-Ponty. Here Neimanis suggests that feminist theory may intervene in phenomenology as a corrective to anthropocentrism. She anticipates potential criticisms that have also been made of Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology, according to which the latter wasn't "properly phenomenological" (42). The point is, our bodies, even while wildly imbricated in watery entanglements much beyond our consciousness, are nonetheless lived, and expanding this experience to the posthuman is indeed a phenomenological exercise that may produce a posthuman ethics of difference.

Besides--and this seems to me crucially important--Neimanis hopes that phenomenology might "temper all the language of agency and acting that infuses much new materialist writing, feminist or otherwise (for sometimes bodies are quieter than that)" (42). I would add that this omnipresence of agency indeed often risks reinserting something like the sovereignty of an individual subject in philosophy, precisely when it should rather surpass such imaginaries. Furthermore, agency as the new search-image with which to scrutinize both human and the nonhuman matters rests on a reductive politics of inclusion

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of the nonhuman into the fold of supposedly human waters. Sameness between the human and the more-than-human is (violently) sought after and expected to provide a supposedly necessary foundation for our ethical conduct with respect to the ecological others surrounding, traversing, and constituting us.

Thus while Merleau-Ponty helpfully insisted that "we are in the world through our body" (cited on 44), suggesting that consciousness is embodiment, Neimanis builds on this insight and pushes his phenomenology into uncharted waters. She does so with the help of Deleuzian rhizomatics, as these suggest that embodiment is more-than-human. Although Deleuze and Guattari certainly recognized that some sense of subjectivity is needed to live a human life, they famously emphasized the body without organs, that is, a "site of experimentation populated by 'non-stratified, intense matter'" (46). This understanding resonates with Neimanis's emphasis on how our bodies always already are leaking beyond any apparent boundedness. As she puts it, Deleuze and Guattari showed that the issue, more than the human, was anthropocentrism. Neimanis's water phenomenology thus draws from the two French theorists' distinctions between the molar and the molecular, the actual and the virtual, to stress that our bodies do not stop at our skin, and that membranes apparently separating us from one another in fact are never quite determined.

In the author's words, "a posthuman phenomenology seeks to acknowledge our sense of comfort with . . . proximal distance while at the same time continuing our investigation of our lived experience beyond this point" (51). This is done, among other ways, through the sciences, which Neimanis hopes may amplify our lived experience. Producing yet another sort of "proxy stories" (55), art can also enable us to "access, amplify," and to become "sensitize[d]" (55) to a widened, more-than-human politics of location.

This feminist posthuman perspective, thus challenging conventional phenomenology to use the sciences and the arts as sensory tentacles for an amplified, more-than-human lived experience, creatively generates what Neimanis calls an "onto-logics as amniotics," which she defines as "the logics that entangle bodily waters in both commonality and difference" (68). "Gestationality" becomes one of the central figurations to think (with) bodies of water. However, this notion is not necessarily tied solely to the female, or to heterosexuality. Neimanis proceeds to queer Irigaray (chapter 2), reading her as a precursor of posthuman phenomenology and of new materialism. Neimanis underscores that Irigaray's "woman to come" resonates with Deleuze's stress on the virtual, in spite of the friction that has existed between these two thinkers. This emphasis on Irigaray's use of the term *woman* in reference to both woman's actuality and potentiality enables Neimanis to stretch the French feminist's thought beyond the traps set by a less unforgiving reading that could (in part rightly) portray her as essentialist and heteronormative. In fact, pointing out the way Irigaray speaks of difference as "sexuée," rather than merely sexual or sexed, Neimanis reminds her readers of a richness perhaps insufficiently emphasized in this still provoking thought: Irigaray arguably never was either essentialist or constructivist, insofar as "sexuate" difference is indeed not determined in advance. It is instead both tangible and material, concrete yet also virtual

to-come, deployed strategically and provocatively, not inert, biologically reductive, or unchangeable. Irigaray's thought indeed highlights indeterminacy and limits, all at once.

Though this is of course a generous reading that contestably pays more attention to Irigaray as near-precursor of new materialism, to the detriment of a more accusatory reading that would scrutinize the orientalist and essentialist undertones of the French thinker's later works especially (for instance, in *Between East and West*), Neimanis's explorations of Irigaray's thought is especially inspiring when turning to the latter philosopher's "amorous dialogue" with Nietzsche. Here, where Irigaray had accused Nietzsche of erasing the waters he came from, and where she had stressed difference as a never quite knowable point of origination showing a beginning with no beginning, Neimanis brings in Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche as a corrective to this already rich conversation. More than a denial of originary waters, which would merely seek sameness, Deleuze's interpretation of the Nietzschean eternal return indeed defines the notion as a selecting force that selects for difference: what repeats is difference, and this repetition always already begins in and with water.

This three-way discussion as staged by Neimanis enriches her figuration of gestationality, queering it to highlight its murky depths. The resulting challenge to conventional ontology takes the complex and fluid form of her onto-logic of amniotics, of constitutive difference and repetition. An amnion is defined as "the innermost membrane that encloses the embryo of a mammal, bird, or reptile (animals otherwise known as amniotes)" (95). "[It] contains the amniotic fluid that surrounds the gestating fetuses of these amniotes" (95). The amnion "establishes the watery environment" that is the condition of life, yet it also establishes the nondefinitive separation between one body and its gestating other. The interpermeation and separation at play enables us to see the interconnectedness of many life forms, the "elemental and multispecies hydrocommons of water," "[without] collapsing this interconnectedness into an undifferentiated mass" (99). Ultimately, therefore, Neimanis defines her onto-logics of amniotics as "a mode of embodiment that highlights water as that which both connects us and differentiates us; as that which we both are and which facilitates our becoming . . . highlight[ing] passages of connection (for better or worse) across membranes of difference" (111).

One might object here that this amniotics remains zoocentric, foregrounding animals to the detriment of plants, fungi, or bacteria, which lack such gestationality in quite this form. And Neimanis's efforts, while asserting gestationality as also potentially transgender, transsexual, queer, and as manifesting in myriad forms in the posthuman world, does not entirely overcome this zoocentrism to open up all the way to the vegetal and fungal kingdoms, or to the microbiome. She does underscore, after Myra Hird's work on the naturally queer, that fungi too are inescapably in excess compared to how any essentialist or binary account of sex would have it, reminding us that schizophillum fungi have 28,000 sexes. Yet the gestational remains animalistic, and gestures to understand virtually all watery living bodies as gestational reduce bios to zoe, even when plants are so fundamentally involved in hydrological cycles, while animals could disappear entirely without bringing these to an end.

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This reduction is partly compensated in the third chapter, however. In "Fishy Beginnings," Neimanis draws from evolutionary stories: some Western-scientific, some indigenous, and some fictional--we are told, for instance, about the fishy characters in an Italo Calvino story leaving or remaining in the seas. Here Neimanis starts from Nietzsche's Zarathustran affirmation of the Earth, though she arguably overemphasizes it as a forgetting of the seas: one could object that the oceans can, perhaps should, be read as an integral part of the object/subject of Nietzsche's affirmation: volcanoes, underneath both oceans and land, certainly are protagonists of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Furthermore, Nietzsche does offer his own evolutionary story in the *Genealogy of Morals*, where he speculates that consciousness (for better and for worse, and including "bad conscience") arose from the trauma (human and nonhuman) land animals experienced in evolving out of the sea.

No matter, Neimanis's meanderings through the complex waters of evolution narratives, from Deleuze's egg to Alister Hardy's aquatic apes hypothesis as popularized by Elaine Morgan, along with the McMenamins' notion of "Hypersea" ("the interconnected system of terrestrial life that has extended the sea and taken it along for the ride" [123]), successfully push materialism further than Irigaray or Grosz had, challenging their shared tendency to emphasize sexual dimorphism. Neimanis does, overall, reach her book's goal of "expand[ing] [the figuration of] gestationality into posthuman waters" (119). But again, one wonders why many of us humans, even the feminist among us, so often feel compelled to "extend" the experience "we" supposedly live through so as to ground our ethics and/or onto-logics: do we need such extension or such ground for a more generous eco-ethics?

Emphasizing planetarity after Gayatri Spivak's recent work, Neimanis's stress on epistemological limits is nonetheless a vital contribution in an ocean of concessions to grand narratives reacting (rather than responding) to the ecological crises--such as the Anthropocene discourse. Neimanis takes on this issue in her concluding chapter, which draws from indigenous art works in Canada, critically discussing the commodification of the notion that "water is life" by large NGOs and so-called (greenwashed, whitewashed) "ethical water" corporations. She resists Anthropocene rhetorics by problematizing modern and global discursive-material understandings of water. "Modern water," she argues, is dangerously abstract, from its inception as the formulaic "H<sub>2</sub>O" critiqued by precursor of postdevelopmentalist and degrowth philosophy Ivan Illich (who is erroneously and reductively described in the book as a "water historian" [157]), to today's "Anthropocene waters." Neimanis shows how this rhetoric, which renders "global water" homogeneous, uniform, and transparent, is ultimately unworkable. It fails to address the eco-crises at stake, while perpetuating racialized and colonial regimes, with their injustice and inequalities.

Neimanis argues that Anthropocene waters are caught up in a logic of control, paradoxically condemned to react to a perceived "out of control" quality of, say, the sea levels' rise, with more (will to) control. This logic is contrasted with the promising alternative of hydrocommons: rather than understanding our condition in global terms, Neimanis sees the current crises in terms of planetarity. She rightly assumes that no

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guarantees exist, but that figurations like her notion of hydrocommons, along with the arts and sciences she discusses, do and will matter--insofar as they are inevitably both material and discursive.

However, the temptation of control is always looming: even in the depths of this inspiring and much needed critique, some unfortunate formulas slip in, when, for instance, Neimanis claims that "we are [the planet's] curious custodians rather than its masters. Intimacy is not mastery" (145). Perhaps Neimanis's book demonstrates most strongly that in fact, it is high time (tide) to dive into a sort of intimacy that, because it is so infinitely partial and so partially conscious, does not even position humans as "curious custodians" at all.