

ENVIRONMENTAL
CULTURES

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Water connects human beings to the world around them. From drying aquifers and polluted oceans to the mostly wet stuff of our own human selves, we are all bodies of water. Exploring the cultural, philosophical and ethical implications of this fact, *Bodies of Water* develops a new mode of posthuman feminist phenomenology that understands our bodies as being fundamentally part of the natural world and not separate from or privileged to it.

Building on works by Luce Irigaray, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gilles Deleuze, Astrida Neimanis's book is a landmark study that brings innovative perspectives in feminist theory to bear on ideas of embodiment in the posthuman critical moment.

'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... Astrida Neimanis's *Bodies of Water* brilliantly synthesizes, illustrates, and continues this feminist ebullition.' *Hypatia*

BODIES OF WATER

ASTRIDA NEIMANIS

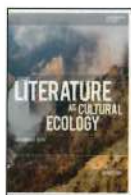
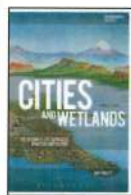
BODIES OF WATER

POSTHUMAN FEMINIST
PHENOMENOLOGY

ASTRIDA NEIMANIS

LITERARY STUDIES

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Bodies of Water

Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology

Astrida Neimanis

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Introduction: Figuring Bodies of Water

Water is what we make of it.

–Jamie Linton (2010: 3)

We are in this together.

–Rosi Braidotti (2006a: 16)

The problem was that we did not know whom we meant when we said 'we'.

–Adrienne Rich (1986: 217)

Blood, bile, intracellular fluid; a small ocean swallowed, a wild wetland in our gut; rivulets forsaken making their way from our insides to out, from watery womb to watery world:

we are bodies of water.

As such, we are not on the one hand *embodied* (with all of the cultural and metaphysical investments of this concept) while on the other hand primarily *comprising water* (with all of the attendant biological, chemical, and ecological implications). We are both of these things, inextricably and at once – made mostly of wet matter, but also aswim in the discursive flocculations of embodiment as an idea. We live at the site of exponential material meaning where embodiment meets water. Given the various interconnected and anthropogenically exacerbated water crises that our planet currently faces – from drought and freshwater shortage to wild weather, floods, and chronic contamination – this meaningful mattering of our bodies is also an urgent question of worldly survival. In this book I reimagine embodiment from the perspective of our bodies' wet constitution, as inseparable from these pressing ecological questions.

To rethink embodiment as watery stirs up considerable trouble for dominant Western and humanist understandings of embodiment, where bodies are figured as discrete and coherent individual subjects, and as fundamentally autonomous. Evidence of this dominant paradigm underpins many if not all of our social, political, economic, and legal frameworks in the Western world. Despite small glimmers of innovation, regimes of human rights, citizenship, and property for the most part all depend upon individualized, stable, and sovereign bodies – those ‘Enlightenment figures of coherent and masterful subjectivity’ (Haraway 2004 [1992]: 48) – as both a norm and a goal. But as bodies of water we leak and seethe, our borders always vulnerable to rupture and renegotiation. With a drop of cliché, I could remind you that our human bodies are at least two-thirds water, but more interesting than these ontological maths is what this water does – where it comes from, where it goes, and what it means along the way. Our wet matters are in constant process of intake, transformation, and exchange – drinking, peeing, sweating, sponging, weeping. Discrete individualism is a rather dry, if convenient, myth.

For us humans, the flow and flush of waters sustain our own bodies, but also connect them to other bodies, to other worlds beyond our human selves. Indeed, bodies of water undo the idea that bodies are necessarily or only human. The bodies from which we siphon and into which we pour ourselves are certainly other human bodies (a kissable lover, a blood transfused stranger, a nursing infant), but they are just as likely a sea, a cistern, an underground reservoir of once-was-rain. Our watery relations within (or more accurately: *as*) a more-than-human hydrocommons thus present a challenge to anthropocentrism, and the privileging of the human as the sole or primary site of embodiment. Referring to the always hybrid assemblage of matters that constitutes watery embodiment, we might say that we have never been (only) human (Braidotti 2013: 1; Haraway 1985, 2008). This is not to forsake our inescapable humanness, but to suggest that the human is always also more-than-human. Our wateriness verifies this, both materially and conceptually.

Moreover, as Virginia Woolf (2000: 124) reminds us, ‘there are tides in the body’. Or in the words of Syilx Okanagan poet Jeanette Armstrong (2006), ‘water is siwlkw’ and *siwlkw* is ‘coursing / to become the body’ – ‘waiting’, ‘over

eons/ sustaining this fragment of now’. Water extends embodiment in time – body, to body, to body. Water in this sense is facilitative and directed towards the becoming of other bodies. Our own embodiment, as already noted, is never really autonomous. Nor is it autochthonous, nor autopoietic: we require other bodies of other waters (that in turn require other bodies and other waters) to bathe us into being. Watery bodies are gestational milieus for another – and for others often not at all like us (Chandler and Neimanis 2013). Our watery bodies’ challenge to individualism is thus also a challenge to phallogocentrism, the masculinist logic of sharp-edged self-sufficiency. Phallogocentrism supports a forgetting of the bodies that have gestated our own, and facilitated their becoming, as some feminist philosophers have long argued (see Irigaray 1991, 1992; Cixous and Clement 1986). But crucially, this watery gestationality is also decidedly posthuman, where human reprosexual wombs are but one expression of a more general aqueous facilitative capacity: pond life, sea monkey, primordial soup, amphibious egg, the moist soil that holds and grows the seed. As *themselves* milieus for other bodies and other lives that they will become as they relinquish their own, our bodies enter complex relations of gift, theft, and debt with all other watery life. We are literally implicated in other animal, vegetable, and planetary bodies that materially course through us, replenish us, and draw upon our own bodies as their wells: human bodies ingest reservoir bodies, while reservoir bodies are slaked by rain bodies, rain bodies absorb ocean bodies, ocean bodies aspirate fish bodies, fish bodies are consumed by whale bodies – which then sink to the seafloor to rot and be swallowed up again by the ocean’s dark belly. This is a different kind of ‘hydrological cycle’.

Watery embodiment thus presents a challenge to three related humanist understandings of corporeality: discrete individualism, anthropocentrism, and phallogocentrism. We also note that these three ‘isms’ are all deeply entangled, mutually enforcing the claims of each other. The work of bodies of water is thus in part to remind us of this still-pervasive ontological Old Boys’ Club. To imagine ourselves as bodies of water is to stage a clubhouse break-and-enter, a direct-action protest that floods up from the basement.

Such a refiguring of our (always more-than-human) embodiment is thus the primary aim of this book. Beginning with our bodies’ mostly watery constitution, these chapters present an understanding of embodiment as both a politics of location, where one’s specific situatedness is acknowledged, and

as simultaneously partaking in a hydrocommons of wet relations. I call this a posthuman politics of location. This version of embodiment draws on feminist theories of subjectivity, but parses them through contemporary feminist and posthuman understandings of agential realism, transcorporeality, and queer temporalities. I unfold these ideas through phenomenological descriptions of the various ontologies of watery bodiedness. Posthuman gestationality – that is, the facilitative logic of our bodily water for gestating new lives and new forms of life, never fully knowable – is, again, fundamental to these logics. This gestationality challenges the primacy of human heteronormative reproductivity as the cornerstone for proliferating life, yet without washing away a feminist commitment to thinking the difference of maternal, feminine, and otherwise gendered and sexed bodies. Posthuman gestationality is expanded by exploring evolutionary science and related stories of embodied indebtedness, where past and future bodies swim through our own. In a rejection of a binary logic of either/or, posthuman gestationality stresses that as bodies of water we are *both* different *and* in common; water calls on us to give an account of our own (very human) politics of location, even as this situatedness will always swim beyond our masterful grasp, finding confluence with other bodies and times. In the end, my wager is that bodies of water as specifically gestational can help us think against current understandings of water as an exchangeable and instrumentalizable resource – what geographer Jamie Linton has called ‘modern water’ and ‘global water’, and what I expand in Chapter 4 as ‘Anthropocene water’. To figure ourselves as bodies of water not only rejects a human separation from Nature ‘out there’; it also torques many of our accepted cartographies of space, time, and species, and implicates a specifically watery movement of difference and repetition (Deleuze 2004). Always aswim in these explorations is a call to consider our ethical responsibility towards the many other bodies of water we are becoming all the time.

Bodies of water (a genealogy of a figuration)

The promise of feminist theory, suggests Elizabeth Grosz (2012: 14), is its ability to generate concepts that allow us ‘to surround ourselves with the

possibilities for being otherwise.’ I am strongly drawn to the idea of the concept as something that makes radical change possible, and enables our own becoming-other (15). Indeed, this torquing of our imaginaries so that matter can matter differently is what I hope ‘bodies of water’ as a concept might do. But in Grosz’s reading (following Deleuze and Guattari) concepts are ‘the production of immaterial forces that line materiality with incorporeals, potentials, latencies’ (14). They are (Deleuzian) ‘virtualities of matter’ (14) and ‘excess over matter’ (15), where ‘materiality does not contain this incorporeal’ (15). Instead of sticking with the Deleuzian concept (see also Deleuze and Guattari 1994), I therefore prefer the posthuman feminist understanding of concepts as ‘figurations’. I suggest we might understand figurations as *embodied concepts*. Donna Haraway (2007: 4–5) calls them ‘material-semiotic’ knots, referring to their conceptual power, but also to their worldliness. Similarly, Rosi Braidotti (2011: 10) refers to figurations as ‘living maps’ that acknowledge ‘concretely situated historical positions’ (90). Figurations are keys for imagining and living otherwise, but unlike a concept unfettered by the world we actually live in or as, figurations are importantly grounded in our material reality (I have never been entirely convinced by theory that frames anything as wholly ‘immaterial’ – more on this in Chapter 1). I like the idea that our best concepts are already here, semi-formed and literally at our fingertips, awaiting activation. Never conceptual fantasy or metaphor, these imaginative ‘interventions’ (Braidotti 2011: 14) describe what we already are, but *amplified*.

Moreover, as Braidotti underlines, figurations are not arbitrary, but arise in response to a particular contemporary question or problem. Clearly, our planetary waters and water systems are wounded in many ways. Worsening droughts and floods, aquifer depletion, groundwater contamination and salination, ocean acidification, as well as commodification and privatization schemes that too narrowly seek to direct water’s flows, all speak to this. My contemporary figuration of bodies of water is a direct response to these issues. Our bodies are also of air, rock, earth – even plastic at a growing rate – but figuring ourselves specifically as bodies of water emphasizes a particular set of planetary assemblages that asks for our response *right now*. Figurations can also be a mode of feminist protest: a ‘literal expression’ of those parts of us that the ‘phallogocentric regime’ has ‘declared off-limits’ and ‘does not want us to

Fishy Beginnings

Our ancestor was an animal which breathed water, had a swim bladder, a great swimming tail, an imperfect skull, and undoubtedly was an hermaphrodite! Here is a pleasant genealogy for mankind.

– Charles Darwin in a letter to Thomas Huxley
(cited in Zimmer 1998: n.p.)

The oceans are where life was born and the salty fluid that courses through our veins is a reminder of our aqueous origins.

– David Suzuki (2006: 11)

When the seas dried, the primitive Fish left its associated milieu to explore land, forced to 'stand on its own legs', now carrying water on the inside, in the amniotic membranes protecting the embryo.

– Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 55)

But just at that time the differences among us were becoming accentuated: there might be a family that had been living on land, say, for several generations, whose young people acted in a way that wasn't even amphibious but almost reptilian already; and there were others who lingered, still living like fish, those who, in fact, became even more fishy than they had been before.

– Italo Calvino (1965: 61)

We are rather fishy, we humans. We pretty much swam our way here, if not on the outside, then at least on the inside. We are all still, necessarily, treading water. As the above four epigraphs, by a naturalist-cum-evolutionary biologist,

an environmentalist, a pair of philosophers, and a fabulist, highlight, we are intimately linked to our evolutionary beginnings through water. Our being as bodies of water has been facilitated by water – that is, by other bodies of water that have preceded us.

Indeed all biological life – animals, plants, and fungi, as well as protocists (single-celled organisms including slime moulds and some simple algae) and monera (the simplest forms of life such as blue-green algae and bacteria) – depends on the existence of water. This is why our home planet is, from what we know so far, unique within our own solar system. This is also why discoveries such as ice on Mars carry such monumental implications (Whitehouse 2002). Right back to the first signs of life on earth at least 3.9 billion years ago, when small organic proteins likely interacted with their habitat to produce the first bacterial life forms, water has been necessary for the gestation of all living beings. Our earliest ancestors were all apparently water babies, squirming, scuttling, or swimming around their respective watery worlds.

Yet, between 380 and 360 million years ago, a 'fabulous shape-shifting' occurred, in the words of evolutionary biologist Carl Zimmer (1998: 5). A certain lineage of fish decided to evolve legs and feet, lose their gills, hook their aortas, and venture onto dry land. As Zimmer describes in his detailed account of this terrestrial invasion, such a major transformation demanded countless changes in the bodies of these animals; this was not an overnight phenomenon, but rather a macroevolutionary process that lasted over 100 million years. After musing on an underwater encounter between a snapper (a fish who never left the sea), himself (descended from tetrapods who left the sea perhaps 360 million years ago), and a dolphin (whose ancestors left the sea, only to return there about 30 million years ago), Zimmer remarks, 'we three animals live in separate countries divided by a fatal boundary' (4). He refers here to the boundary between air and water, two elements which Zimmer notes are so different 'that you might as well be comparing life on two different planets' (6). But at the same time, Zimmer also concedes that the three participants in this underwater encounter are not 'complete strangers' (4). In their fundamental difference, he nonetheless catalogues their undeniable similarities: skulls and spines, muscles and eyes, embryos that share a strikingly similar pot-bellied, hunchbacked appearance. Not only does water facilitate the being of all three, but this facilitation is a debt from which none can escape.

In this chapter, I continue to explore the idea that we are all 'bodies of water' and as such, implicated in a common way of being and becoming, in relation to others. In the previous chapter, I described this as an 'ontologic' of amniotics – 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. Philosophically speaking, this ontological proposition joins other feminist and posthuman interventions in challenging the idea that ontology first and foremost interpellates sovereign, self-sufficient beings. Amniotics highlights passages of connection (for better or worse) across membranes of difference. Most importantly, though, amniotics foregrounds the idea of gestationality: we owe ourselves to others, and in various ways, we all eventually pass our watery selves on. As bodies of water, we rely on water for our continued proliferation, but we are also reservoirs for this proliferating force of life-in-the-plural. I described this, drawing on Irigaray and Deleuze, as a watery kind of difference and repetition. Our planetary hydrocommons, in this sense, is not just a network of interconnected geophysical and meteorological waters; it is also made up from all bodies that materialize and transform these waters in their own fur and flesh, and in their celled and cyborg forms. Here, I further this proposition in relation to the tri-species encounter that Zimmer describes. How does water help us think about gestationality across species, in a more-than-human frame? And how can we keep not only Zimmer's 'fatal boundary' of difference, but also our watery commonality, in the picture?

My wager is that evolutionary tales, like the one Zimmer tells, provide a lively illustration of the natural-cultural matters of these debts and differentiations. In evolution as elsewhere, our biological matters are always storied, and our knowledges are always situated and contingent. In thinking along with various accounts and interpretations of evolution, I aim to exemplify posthuman feminist phenomenology at work, where scientific knowledge acts as an amplifier of embodied knowing. Rather than either accepting the Word of Science wholesale or alternatively rejecting these accounts due to an ingrained (yet understandable) feminist scepticism of 'objective data', scientific explanations of our watery debts join other kinds of origin stories in a thick elaboration of bodies of water as figuration, as embodied imaginary. Coming to a deeper understanding

of this figuration, and how we as bodies of water can live out its promise, is the more general project of this book. In reimagining our bodies as indebted to all kinds of bodies that condition our possibility, I hope we might also consider how, and to whom, we pass our own watery bodies on. If evolution is composed of inheritances and exchanges of all kinds, what do water and our watery kin inherit *from us*, in the context of late capitalism and the Anthropocene?

My concomitant aim is to broach the question of how we know water, and the epistemology of wet. What Zimmer alludes to, after all, in evoking that 'fatal boundary' of species differentiation is a geographical consideration, where our embodied orientation towards water underlines an enduring unknowability. Origin stories, as we saw in the last chapter, have no clear beginning. Similarly, our own embodied limits in relation to living in/with water point to limits of ever knowing, or mastering, water – something I explore by considering our strange kinship with aquatic species and a certain 'fishiness' we all harbour (even though not all of these kin are technically 'fish'). Tales of lungfish, whales, and Aquatic Apes set the stage for thinking about watery embodiment as an epistemological question. How do the stories we tell, and the knowledges we draw on to tell them, work to establish certain kinds of ethical relations with our watery others? How does watery bodiedness demand attention to situated knowledge as an onto-ethico-epistemological matter? This is to say, as we move below the surface, how bodies are *in* water also matters. We cannot survive in the worlds of some of our closest kin, even as they swim within our own deep embodied channels – and we in theirs. *Intimacy is not mastery*. This claim frames the final section of this chapter, where I draw on the postcolonial theory of Gayatri Spivak, and in particular, her theory of planetarity. Here I describe the conceptual apparatus of unknowability as an onto-epistemology and an ethics, which we learn from a feminist posthuman phenomenology of bodies of/in water.

Other evolutions

Into the sea (you) are returned... Why leave the sea?

– (Irigaray 1991: 12)

Feminist transcorporeality reminds us that our amniotic waters are not *like* our planetary waters, but continuous with them. As philosopher Luce Irigaray (1993a: 5, 1993c: 15, 2002a: 5) maintains, and as we explored in the previous chapter, the fecundity of gestation is not limited simply to human gestation and the moment of birth, but is rather an ongoing proliferation of life-in-the-plural. In Chapter 2 our exploration of *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Irigaray's amorous dialogue with the philosopher that chastises him for forgetting the bodies and waters of his birth) suggested that our gestational milieu might thus be understood as the contraction of a greater ocean into a tiny one, and our birth as the passage from a smaller womb back to a larger one. There, I focused on how gestational waters introduce a continuity between planetary and maternal waters, suggesting that bodies of water partake in a relation of amniotics in the most general sense. But in that text, Irigaray (1991: 57) also subtly indicates to us that the abyssal, unknowable depths that gestate us – 'that dark home where you began to be once upon a time. Once and for all' – posit a transcorporeal stretching of species across planetary time. Bodies of water are themselves aqueous milieus for the facilitation of new kinds of life in the proliferation of evolutionary entanglements.

Despite Nietzsche's rejection of Darwinism, the evolutionary tones of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (the text to which Irigaray refers in her own *Marine Lover*) are well noted (see Deutscher 2011). In Nietzsche's text, Zarathustra explicitly invokes his evolutionary ancestry and that of the townspeople he addresses.¹ Picking up on these evolutionary undertones, Irigaray (1991: 12) notes that her interlocutor in *Marine Lover* knows not 'if [he is] descended from a monkey or a worm or if [he] might even be some cross between plant and ghost'. But importantly, Nietzsche (1982: 123) also notes that Zarathustra emerges from the sea. He drags his body ashore, and then immediately disavows these beginnings as he pledges his allegiance to the earth (Nietzsche 1982: 125). This is why Irigaray also underlines that Nietzsche/Zarathustra's 'forgetting' is a specifically watery forgetfulness: just as he forgets his watery maternal gestational element, so too does he disavow his watery evolutionary gestational element – that primordial evolutionary soup that gestated us all. Granted, the evolutionary undertones are subtle in Irigaray's text, and she certainly isn't an 'evolutionist'.² Her references to our evolutionary debts nonetheless invite us again, and in an expanded register, to understand gestationality in Irigaray's