

**[Review] Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, 230pp.**

MARION MAY CAMPBELL

Deakin University

To read Astrida Neimanis's *Bodies of Water* is to immerse oneself in a fluid poetics, contemplating the teeming, virtual infinity of lifeforms for which water, in its myriad incarnations, supplies the medium of connection and dispersal; of gestation and differentiation through space-time. Through its feminist posthuman phenomenological lens, this work recasts the intertextual net eloquently and generously, re-inflecting a polyphony of feminist, philosophical, poetic, and scientific voices to address our planetary emergency in the wake of ecocidal extractionist and consumerist practices. Neimanis's project seeks to 'inaugurate' new 'ontologies [that...] are not only about correcting a phallologocentric understanding of bodies, but also about developing imaginaries that might allow us to relate differently' (Neimanis 11). She cuts straight to the urgency of her undertaking:

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. (1)

Correcting the supremacy attributed to the individual consciousness with much phenomenological practice, and citing as exemplary Merleau-Ponty's descriptive approach, Neimanis foregrounds an attentiveness to the encounter with other lifeforms, other bodies of water, yet also, like Luce Irigaray, she eschews the oculocentrism characterising many phenomenological studies. Through our watery dispositions, across our water-facilitated membranes (Neimanis 39, 53, 95), we, as a collective, recognise our hydrocommunalities, whereby we are all enmeshed through the amniotic medium that also gestates our differences. We leak, seethe, suppurate, ejaculate, salivate; we connect amorously, and spread toxins through our shared—but always differing-from-itself—watery medium. However, against the reflex charge that could be triggered from the title, *Bodies of Water*, there is throughout the book a recognition of the danger formulated in Adrienne Rich's reflection: 'The problem was we did not know whom we meant when we said we' (cit. Neimanis 14). We are all differently water-coloured and in constant, differential mutation through our discrete experiences of trans-corporeal exchange.

Poetically astute philosophers have always recognised thinking as a material practice, dependent for its explorations on the metaphoric vectors of language. The posthuman feminist phenomenology, an eco-ethical inflection of the new materialism that Neimanis articulates here, seeks to register the dynamics of interaction, of ‘worlding’, to mobilise with a new inflection the Heideggerian term, attending to the ‘material-semiotic knots’ (Haraway cit. Neimanis 5), whereby we apprehend the world. Neimanis argues that this practice does not have to entail a single sovereign consciousness with its grasping intentionality, but an interrogative attentiveness, ‘that can loosen what we know and open to what we do not’ (Neimanis 42).

Neimanis takes the cue from Irigaray’s question of Nietzsche in her *Marine Lover* and its forgetting of both sea and mother, as the French homophone suggests (*mère/mer*), of bodies of water that have gestated human and more-than-human beings, and facilitated the yet-to-come, as some feminist philosophers have long argued (30).

For a posthuman feminism, embodiment is therefore not just about more biologically robust detail. It is about paying attention to the complication of scale, where a familiar deictics of ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘mine’ and ‘ours’, even ‘local’ and ‘global’, or ‘now’ and ‘then’, which might have once seemed relatively securable, are not queerly torqued. Time, place, and bodies are all caught up in the warp and woof of planetary colonialities that are naturalcultural and diffracted, but still racialized and gendered, all the same. (Neimanis 37)

Our ideology, our imaginary relation to the real, as Althusser (121-176) suggests, is performed through our figurations that, according to Braidotti (cit. Neimanis 15), are ‘living maps’ which in turn affect and even effect the real—*where [your] words knock, I bruise, I really bruise* (Campbell 122). Poet-philosophers such as Francis Ponge, Gilles Deleuze, Irigaray and Neimanis all work to find a mode of *figuration* whereby ethically we humans might co-operate with other lifeforms and recognise that to *figure* is to be in non-hierarchical dia-logue, ie a *logos across and through* the hydrocommons or the life-world, in which water mediates the gestation of difference.

For many feminists, Irigaray’s insistence on there being only two (human) sexes is a serious problem (see Irigaray *Ethics/Éthique*), but in her posthuman perspective, which takes scientific studies of a huge variety of lifeforms into account, Neimanis seriously *queers* the apparently almost infinite spectrum of ‘sexuate’ difference and ‘reprosexualities’ and focuses on the ‘yet-to-come’ and the *unknowable* whether in the egg or the oceanic depths, the benthos. In the early days of her reception via English translation, crucial aspects of Irigaray’s work were dismissed by some feminist theorists like Toril Moi for biological essentialism. But through more subtle rereading of Irigaray’s ludic mimicry, this

charge has been challenged by such as Jane Gallop, Elizabeth Grosz, and Ping Xu. As Grosz argues more recently of Irigaray: 'Sexual difference is indeterminable difference, the difference between two beings who do not yet exist, who are in the process of becoming. It is a difference that is always in the process of differentiating itself' ('Nature' 72). It is this always-yet-to-come that enables Neimanis to bring Deleuze and Irigaray productively together, with an emphasis on the fact that gestational potential always *exceeds* what is gestated; that the yet-to-be is beyond the limits of our knowing, and a recognition of not-knowing suggests an ethical modality for our explorations as planetary subjects.

The trope of the hydrocommons is also fertile in articulating a postcolonial ethics: unlike modern water, generalised and abstracted as H<sub>2</sub>O (Neimanis 157), this differential water draws attention to the egregious imbalance between different planetary sites: the blubber of whales, for instance, crucial for Inuit culture, magnifies toxins circulated northwards by ocean currents towards arctic regions from sites of consumer privilege.

Questions of the hydrocommons alert us to the traps of new brands of feminist orientalism and white saviourism (Neimanis 179): the recruitment of a neo-colonial imaginary still characterising well-meaning drives for the global democratisation of water, as in a poster depicting a ghostly water pistol aimed at a cherubic white baby (Neimanis 181). Neimanis cites Jamie Linton's work on 'modernist water', recognising that abstracted H<sub>2</sub>O, as same-unto-itself, still drives what she terms the 'Anthropocene water' of poster entries submitted to a UN campaign for universal access to fresh water, in drought-stricken Africa for instance, in which the transparent bluish element is delivered in a dream mirage to a naked black baby:

[W]e also see how this abstraction of water connects us to an imagined sense of purity. Where other colours (brown, black) are used, the deployment is mostly predictable: a black-lipped mouth is filled with parched and cracked dirt; brown children scrounging the last drops of water from broken earthen vessels. One print titled 'the global unconscious' features an unclothed black child sipping directly from a dream-like pool. (Neimanis 180)

One measure of a text's impact is the degree to which it re-inflects the reader's specific cultural repertoire, and potentially, their own practices. *Bodies of Water* does this for me in an uncanny way, rendering plangent previously muted motifs in artworks and texts. In particular, 'The water of our tears', a prose poem of Francis Ponge (77-78), swam into mind. This work mobilises, in striking prescience, key tropes of Neimanis's posthuman feminist phenomenology. Ponge's poem is a ludic take on a Levinassian ethics of respect for the ultimate unknowability of the other, and, via both Irigaray (*Speculum*) and Neimanis, can be read as a witty challenge to predominant post-Enlightenment epistemology, privileging vision and grounded as much on the forgetting of 'the liquid

ground' (Irigaray cit. Neimanis 67) as on the positive alignment of solid ground with masculinist privilege and power. Ponge's persona probes the tears which fall *between* the act of watching another weeping and the act of weeping and leaves open the question of whether affectivity—and 'humanity' itself—might be situated in the interval, that is, in the *difference* between the water of our tears and the water of the sea. The watcher cannot ever really know what goes on in the weeper's head but 'sees' there, as he takes the head in his hands, a tiny and 'appealing' octopus clinging to the 'rock' of the cranium, who chooses to remain a mute informant about 'what goes on' in that water-facilitated realm, the brain, with its pronounced olfactory traces of fish. Ironically again, given the octopus's cryptic silence, the question of 'what goes on' is finally referred to the speaker's 'scientific comrades' in their laboratories.

I cite Ponge's text here, not simply because it exemplifies the material practice of language that is the poet's task, working the medium *as* material, but because Neimanis equips me to read its surreal shifts as plausible. Not only does she stress that lineage and evolutionary trajectories are neither teleologically driven, nor linear, but also, along with such cultural theorists as Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and Vicki Kirby, she eschews social constructivism in her insistence on *natureculture* as intimate entwinement of the two, rather than a framing of nature through cultural grids.

*Language*, etymologically calling forth *what the tongue does*, is, after all, impregnated with the mnemonic traces of endlessly *embodied* material practices. To pastiche Neimanis's watery tropes, Ponge's poem semiotically charges the meniscus or 'membrane' between different bodies of water, probing with delicacy the traffic of emission and absorption, of impression and expression, of gift and debt between them. It makes poetic effect speak to affect, inscribing embodied meaning-making as a matter of *worlding*, a gerund, as mentioned, deployed anew by such feminist thinkers as Haraway and Kirby. In the *New Materialism Almanac*, Helen Palmer and Vicky Hunter invoke the shift from the noun 'world' to the 'gerundive as generative':

Worlding is a particular blending of the material and the semiotic that removes the boundaries between subject and environment, or perhaps between persona and *topos*. [...] Worlding therefore is an active, ontological process.... ("Worlding")

Again, with Neimanis, *worlding* insists on matter and semiosis as intimately entangled: matter *means* (Butler). Like Neimanis, and philosophers characterised as 'new materialists', Ponge also allies poetics with the scientific enquiry into sensory phenomena, albeit with irony, refusing any binary opposition between the two. Ponge's poem gives me the cue to inscribe *Bodies of Water* as belonging as much to a collective work in elaboration, always in progress, of a phenomenologically elaborated *eco-poetics*, to which Irigaray's work (*Marine*

*Lover/Amante marine; Speculum of the Other/Speculum de l'autre; This Sex/Ce sexe*), opened out by Neimanis for further possibilities, has proven such a germinative example.

Such is Neimanis' fertile intervention: it recognises that the figurations through which humans approach worlding also point to the way they might nourish and cherish the *difference* of lifeforms. They might then eschew parlous abstractions, whereby, *indifferently*, they have contrived techniques of disfigurement, of poisoning and destruction for the more-than-human. In this beautiful exploration, Neimanis has articulated an open-ended ethics for figuring becoming with and through other bodies of water, given that this element is the medium through which all beings connect, amniotically gestate and differ from each other and from themselves.

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