

103 | **feminist subjectivity, watered**

Astrida Neimanis

abstract

Responding to Rosi Braidotti's call for more 'conceptual creativity' in thinking through contemporary feminist subjectivity, this paper proposes the figuration of the *body of water*. It begins with a critical materialist enhancement of Adrienne Rich's concept of a politics of location, followed by a schematised description of the various 'hydro-logics' in which our bodies partake. The ways in which these logics already inform diverse modes of feminist scholarship are then explored. The objective of this paper is to locate, at the confluence of these discourses and descriptions, an invigorated figuration of the feminist subject as *body of water*. This subject is posthumanist and material, both real and aspirational. Most importantly, she is responsively attuned to other watery bodies—both human and more-than-human—within global flows of political, social, cultural, economic and colonial planetary power.

keywords

water; subjectivity; figuration; new materialism; posthumanism

feminist subjectivity, watered

My body—like yours—primarily comprises water. My existence as a body of water is a biological fact, but living my embodiment as watery—embedded in a world that I share with other human, animal, vegetable, geophysical and meteorological bodies that also comprise water—has other implications as well. *We are all bodies of water.*

In this paper, I ask about the kind of feminist subject this realisation might inspire. Responding to Rosi Braidotti's call for more 'conceptual creativity' in thinking through contemporary feminist subjectivity, I propose that reimagining oneself as a 'body of water' opens possibilities for a posthumanist feminism that specifically addresses the need to cultivate more ecologically responsible relations to water. I begin with Adrienne Rich's concept of a politics of location, and suggest a critical materialist approach to this cartography that employs Braidotti's method of feminist figurations. Recalling that all figurations respond to specific contemporary issues, I stress the importance of retaining the centrality of water—beyond abstracted notions of fluidity—in unfolding the body of water as figuration. I follow this with a schematised description of the 'hydrologics' in which watery bodies partake. In the final section I illuminate the multivalent ways in which water already swims through various feminist writings, creating an ontological, epistemological and ethico-political space for feminist subjectivity, *watered*. By drawing on these resources, and speculating on their further elaboration, I propose that we can each chart our politics of location in a way that recognises our diverse aqueous implications and responsibilities.

a politics of location, feminist figurations, critical materialisms

In 1984, dissatisfied with labels that presumed to name *who* we are, feminist poet, theorist and activist Adrienne Rich suggested that we could instead pay attention to *where* we are, beginning 'with the geography closest in – *the body*' (1986: 212). Rich called this a politics of location. Rosi Braidotti has referred to such a politics as a 'cartographic method' that produces 'politically informed maps of the present' and acknowledges the changing and potentially contradictory locations in which one can find oneself (Braidotti, 2006: 7). Despite such instability, there is still a precision to these maps: contingent, but never arbitrary; embodied, but never essentialised.

As a form of *politics*, however, these maps are not a neutral cartography. They rather chart a striated terrain where power circulates in multiple ways. A politics of location recognises that just as the feminist subject is produced by her location, so too is she implicated in that location's reproduction—or subversion.

Such a politics thus demands accountability, and can provide a foothold for negotiating questions of privilege and the ways in which one is caught up in forces at the outer limits of one's sphere of influence, particularly in a (post)colonial context (see Frankenberg and Mani, 1993; Kaplan, 1997). As such, a politics of location includes the historical vicissitudes through which our identities have been invested with power and meaning. Any subject's individual cartography cannot elide the more obstinate (even structural) dimensions of power that shape her—such as systematic gender discrimination, racism and the survival of coloniality—even if she negotiates them, and endures their effects, in singular ways. A politics of location is always personal, and political.

Yet, while a politics of location is clearly 'embodied and embedded' (to use Braidotti's phrase), it is also important to consider how we understand embodiment, and the means by which specific bodies become meaningful within communities of other bodies. Taking a cue from emerging work in 'new' or 'critical materialist' feminisms, I propose that our bodies and the networks of power in which they are situated, which together comprise our politics of location, can be understood in complex, productive and nuanced ways if we diffract them through theories that are concerned with the transcorporeal transits of matter. Stacy Alaimo describes transcorporeality as 'the literal contact zone between human and more-than-human nature' (Alaimo, 2010: 2). Her elaborations of transcorporeality capture three dimensions of feminist critical materialist thought that are relevant to my proposal in this paper. First, transcorporeality illuminates an ontological proposition: bodies are neither fully autonomous nor discrete, but rather always becoming in webs of mutual implication. Second, transcorporeality offers expanded epistemologies whereby, as Alaimo puts it, the complexities of transcorporeal embodiment are 'difficult—if not impossible—for individuals to apprehend without access to scientific technology or institutions' (2010: 62). In other words, productive relationships with the natural sciences are necessary in order to map these transits with rigour. Importantly, such engagement does not aspire to an epistemology of scientific certainty, but rather enacts a tentative collaboration of knowledge projects where any final 'truth' is always elusive (Alaimo, 2010: 20). Third, transcorporeality places an ethico-political demand on feminisms to become posthumanist. Because we are not separate from our 'environments' (broadly construed), transcorporeality asks pressing questions about feminisms' obligations to bodies beyond human ones. As Karen Barad implores, we need to take 'account of the entangled materializations of which we are a part' (Barad, 2007: 384).

While it is impossible to do justice to the nuances of feminist critical materialism here, these three dimensions of transcorporeality sketch out the stakes, and the promise, of this rich body of scholarship in relation to thinking feminist figurations in a critical materialist vein. Such approaches ask that feminist thinking unpack with more care the inextricability of the flows of biomatter from

what are arguably contemporary feminisms' more common concerns, namely, the flows of power, in their gendered, racialised and colonial guises. To insist on this mutual imbrication would highlight the coevolution of discursive power and sensible matter, in the ongoing articulation of what Haraway (after Bruno Latour) calls 'natureculture'. In terms of a politics of location, this would lead one to ask: if the body that I am extends through and beyond me in very material ways, how are my obligations to others, as well as my understanding of self and my 'location', both complicated and enriched?

Representing this complexity on a 'map' remains, nonetheless, a difficult task. For this reason, Braidotti has proposed that feminists adopt a method of 'figurations' as 'living maps' (2011: 10) or 'markers of concretely situated historical positions' (2006: 90). While never merely metaphor, nor are figurations neutral descriptions. They are imaginative 'interventions' (2011: 14), enacting what Braidotti calls 'political fictions'—what I interpret as an amplification of what we already are, whereby oriented perspective and deep attunement make new things possible. The figuration is both already there *and* waiting to be tapped. It is descriptive *and* aspirational. Responding to the contradictory nature of contemporary subjectivity, figurations are also both intimately local and always plugged into the global, with a capacity to underline what is both dangerous and affirmative about any location. Finally, a figuration is also a feminist protest: it is a 'literal expression' of those parts of our subjectivity that the 'phallogocentric regime' has 'declared off-limits' and 'does not want us to become' (Braidotti, 2006: 170). I quote Braidotti extensively on this matter, as these are the precise terms and stakes of my own proposal, namely, the feminist subject as *body of water*. But before unfolding this proposition, it is worth examining first why this *specific* figuration—*the body of water*—is necessary, in my estimation, at this particular juncture.

why bodies of water?

While not explicitly indebted to Rich, the past three decades of feminist thinking have already produced various figurations, or cartographic accounts of feminist subjectivity: Donna Haraway's 'cyborg' (1985) and her more recent 'companion species' (1993), Maria Lugones' 'world-traveller' (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa's 'Mestiza' (1987) and Braidotti's own 'nomadic subject' (2002, 2006, 2011) have all been helpful ways of imagining the overlaid, contradictory and ambivalent mappings of our belonging and accountability as subjects. For me, the appeal of these figurations is precisely the way in which they powerfully incite an imaginative political space, while at the same time refusing to be cast as mere metaphor. Each is fraught with tensions and dangers, and rooted in the sweaty work of real life, which serves to resist the overdetermination of the figuration as a utopian ideal. The double-edged sword of biotechnology in relation to

gendered, raced and colonial bodies, for instance, is vividly apparent in Haraway's cyborg, while Braidotti's nomad hails the contradictory locations of multiply placed existence.

Some of these figurations are also pioneering in their attention to the literal, biologically oriented 'matter' of our subjectivity, and as such can be important tools for feminist critical materialists seeking to rethink the cleavage between 'nature' and 'culture'. In drawing our attention to the more-than-human, 'natural' and material aspects of our subjectivity, such figurations are revelatory statements of fact. For example, by asking us to consider ourselves as companion species, Haraway reminds us that we share large parts of our DNA with household pets, but also with 'rice, bees, tulips, and intestinal flora' (Haraway, 2003: 15); in an evolutionary sense, we carry other life forms with us, inscribed in our own movements, expressions and capacities. Such a description of our embodiment denaturalises the 'agential cut' (Barad, 2007: 140) we too often make between the human and the more-than-human worlds. But, in asking us to consider our own situation as bodies in these unfamiliar or uncustomary terms, such description is as radical as it is banal; it engenders a new onto-ethical imaginary. When we figure ourselves as human, it is fairly easy to consider our politics and ethics within a human community. If, however, we figure ourselves as 'companion species'—not as metaphor but as description of our material, animal facticity—might we also reconsider our responsibility, as feminists, towards other, non-human species?

In other words, a figuration must attend to its obligation towards the materiality—the *matter*—from which it draws its metaphorical heft, and that within a critical materialist vein, evokes *specific* sets of contemporary questions. The cyborg was articulated in a context where the brave new world of biotechnologies, and their attendant ethical quandaries, was prominent within our social imaginary; the nomad was (and is) concerned with questions of global mobility; the companion species enters into a space where transgenic species have become viable, at the same time as ethical considerations towards non-human animals (amidst factory farming and habitat depletion) come increasingly to the fore. My own proposal of the *body of water* specifically engages the matter of water. As with these other figurations, its ontological proposition is a somewhat banal statement of fact (we are indeed mostly watery), while the epistemological and ethico-political implications of this description—as I begin to sketch out below—are more challenging.

The body of water is thus not intended as a better figuration than the cyborg, the nomad or the companion species, but rather as one that responds to a particular problematic. In purely descriptive terms, we *are* bodies of water, but we also reside within and as part of a fragile global hydrocommons, where water—the lifeblood of humans and all other bodies on this planet—is increasingly contaminated, commodified and dangerously reorganised. In some

cases, water's capacity to sustain life is seriously imperilled. It is this hydro-ecological context in which I am inextricably embedded that draws me, with a heightened sense of urgency, to the figuration of the body of water right now. I hope the body of water, as figuration, will not only denaturalise the cut we make between our human waters and ecological ones, but will also ask us to pay more attention to the waters that are too often relegated to the passive backdrop of our lives. Perhaps by imagining ourselves as irreducibly watery, as literally part of a global hydrocommons, we might locate new creative resources for engaging in more just and thoughtful relations with the myriad bodies of water with whom we share this planet.

Even a cursory swim through the latest global environmental reports specifies the extent of threat to our planet's water resources. According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, 'water use has been growing at more than twice the rate of population increase in the last century'. As a result, 'by 2025, 1800 million people will be living in countries or regions with absolute water scarcity, and two-thirds of the world population could be under stress conditions'.¹ Not only does our thirst seem unquenchable, but we humans are doing little to protect the freshwater that we have. The so-called developing world, where 70 per cent of industrial waste is dumped, untreated, into the freshwater supply, is regularly reported as a major culprit. Yet industrialised countries are often just better at hiding their messes: in the United States, 60 per cent of liquid hazardous waste is injected directly into the ground. Although these injections occur below the drinking water table, contaminants nonetheless persistently surface in drinking water supplies (Miller and Spoolman, 2010: 261). In the Canadian Athabasca watershed—the third largest in the world, and home to one of the planet's largest staging areas for waterfowl—the Alberta Tar Sands megaproject irrevocably pollutes three barrels of freshwater for every barrel of oil that it produces. Tar sands tailings ponds, located along the Athabasca River, leak into the groundwater, and send their contaminants downstream to Fort Chipewyan, where indigenous communities report record numbers of rare cancers in the last decade (Nikiforuk, 2010). In addition to these slow-motion disasters, we can also expect an intensification of catastrophic storms, floods and droughts over the next decades,² exacerbated by anthropogenic intervention (Protevi, 2006; Tuana, 2008).

Weather events, water scarcity, pollution and contamination are interconnected. But more to the point, they are never 'only' about the environment. Human and wildlife health are also at stake. As Alanna Mitchell points out in her book-length diagnosis of the health of the oceans, changes in ocean chemistry are massively impacting the health of plankton—and plankton produce the oxygen necessary for *every second breath* inhaled by humans (Mitchell, 2009: 12). But the connections reach further still. Military tensions, particularly in drought-prone regions such as the Middle East, all have their eye on freshwater access.

1 <http://www.unwater.org/statistics.html>, last accessed 30 October 2012.

2 *ibid.*

New ways to colonise human and other ecological bodies are also constantly emerging. Rights to water are bought and sold, ancient aquifer resources are commodified, and major investments are diverted to fund complex technological schemes to address the problem by increasing supply. The transcorporeal transit of toxins through watercourses and weather patterns exhibits, moreover, a specific biopolitics, where pollutions generated for the profits of corporations are most devastating to already marginalised communities—the Canadian tar sands project mentioned above is just one example. Meanwhile, new biocolonial territory is staked in expanding markets in bodily fluids such as semen and blood, and their amniotic rental within colonised uteruses, in the context of gestational and other biotourisms. In these ways and others, the means by which profits and power can be siphoned from water's myriad ecobodily forms complexify and proliferate.

The body of water as feminist figuration is thus firmly embedded in the urgent but diverse water-related concerns of our twenty-first century. While resonant with other feminist terms (such as companion species and transcorporeality), its critical force comes from retaining this specificity, and a debt to the actual (widely imperilled) waters from which it sources its figurative power. The body of water is not simply the 'fluid' subject, and indeed, we should be wary of the ubiquity of fluid metaphors within contemporary theory, and ask constantly after their motivations and effects.³ We do not have to care about fluidity as a conceptual trope, and invocations of fluidity can be indifferent to water. Fluidity is an abstracted quality, but *water* is a living substance that sustains this earth, to which we have obligations. It belongs to specific places, and transforms in specific ways across various membranes. Water has phase states (only one of which is dominantly fluid), a specific chemistry and physical rules that apply to it uniquely. Water is vulnerable in specific ways to anthropogenic assault, but can still wipe out hundreds of thousands of humans with a single rogue wave. For these reasons, 'water' and 'fluidity' are not simply interchangeable terms. It is such specificity to which I now turn to examine in more detail. Close attention to the scientifically informed logics of water reveals a series of ways, beyond the abstractly 'fluid', in which thinking with water can open possibilities for thinking about—and embodying—feminist subjectivity.

3 This line of thinking is deeply indebted to Janine MacLeod (forthcoming 2013), who has urged me to be critical of fluid metaphors that fail to address the well-being of the actual waters that make such thinking possible. As MacLeod explains in relation to the language of capitalism, fluid metaphors can also be pernicious.

the matter of water: hydro-logics

Critical materialist approaches engage scientific information as part of 'syncretic assemblages' (Di Chiro, 2004: 129) of knowledge that can help us understand how materiality matters in ways not limited to scientific discourse. This holds for scientific understandings of watery matter as well, where a deep and detailed attention to the material capacities, or the specific logics, of water can inspire us to reimagine how we emerge as subjects. Like the myriad other bodies of water

with which we coexist, we humans live according to these logics. Such logics can be understood as the specific capacities of certain bodies to *affect* other bodies. They are *ways* of being—movements or modes of relationality, sociality, endurance, becoming. We might describe water's logics as *hydro*-logics. While to place a human-rendered taxonomy upon such movements is an epistemological containment of water that will always exceed my human understanding, I nonetheless propose that hydro-logics can be described in a schematised way: gestation, dissolution, communication, differentiation, archive, unknowability. Such a schematisation helps us grasp the multivalent ways in which watery bodies are more than just 'fluid'.

Perhaps first and foremost, water gives us life, in both the most banal and sacred of terms. In this sense water is *gestational*. At the level of a single mammalian body, water is a gestational medium, bathing new life into being in an amniotic milieu. But crucially, water's gestationality precedes and exceeds dimorphically gendered and human reproductively based gestation. All life—beginning with its first appearance over four billion years ago, in a steaming primordial soup—requires a watered milieu in which to proliferate: bacteria in our gut, a seed in the soil, coral in the sea (McMenamin and McMenamin, 1994). The scale of water's gestational capacity also impressively expands beyond the individual body, once we consider that each species—made up of watery bodies—is itself an aqueous gestational milieu for the proliferation of the next species, and the next. The ocean, moreover, supports the greatest diversity of major phyla and classes of living beings on our planet (Groombridge and Jenkins, 2002: 117). This teeming proliferation of life is owed to full aqueous immersion. Chemistry would have it this way: thanks to the specificities of molecular polarity and covalent bonding, the chemical reactions that support and facilitate all organic life require a watery medium (Schulze-Makuch and Irwin, 2008). Not necessarily only human, then, nor only sexually dimorphic, water speaks to a certain sexuality that underwrites the proliferation, sustenance and diversification of life.

But while the romance of this life-giving logic is seductive, water has other logics too. With its extraordinary ability to dissolve both acids and bases, water is sometimes (mistakenly) called a universal solvent. Paradoxically, it is the weak bonds of water's molecular structure that give it such power (Schulze-Makuch and Irwin, 2008). And water's second hydro-logic, this *capacity to dissolve* is not only a question of chemistry. Translated into meteorology, we can also understand this power to transform, and wash away, in terms of flood, monsoon, hurricane or tsunami, whereby organic life is dissolved back into the womb of planetarity. In meteorological terms, chemistry becomes wind, wave and rising tide. As transformational yet also cyclical, water is complicit in death, or what we might in ecological terms simply call recycling—which does not soften its blow. Ashes to ashes, water to water.

Third, circulation between biospheric and geophysical aqueous bodies evidences water not only as a 'thing in itself' (lake, snowcap, drainage ditch), nor only as that which primarily comprises other bodies (swamp cabbage, human, beluga whale—all mostly water), but also as a material *medium of communication*. For humans, the flow and flush of waters sustain our bodies, but also connect them to other bodies, the lifeworld and our environment—drinking, urinating, sweating, transfusing, ejaculating, siphoning, sponging, weeping. Human bodies are thus very literally implicated in other animal, vegetable and planetary bodies that in a material sense course through us, replenish us, and draw upon our own bodies as their wells. This circulation inaugurates us into complex relations of gift, theft and debt with all other life. The communicative logic of water is moreover made plain in what oceanographers call the Great Ocean Conveyor Belt (Murray, 2000: 243). This patterning of currents brings not only salt and heat, but also shipping vessels, marine mammals, commerce, disease and 'discovery' from one corner of the globe to another. We find rivulets of contact in other transcorporeal transits too: bacteria, but also hormone treatments, antibiotics and anti-depressants, drift from our human waterways into the lakes and rivers that in turn serve as receptacles for much of our refuse. These compounds are then further communicated into the bodies of aquatic fauna, only to travel back up the food chain (Berland, 2005; Simms, 2009; Alaimo, 2010). This complex communication establishes the planetary hydrocommons.

But within such circulations, water moves neither at a uniform speed nor as a coherent mass. It is differentiated in material instantiation, space and time, at every turn. For in one sense, water is a 'closed' system: our planet neither gains nor relinquishes the water it harbours, but only witnesses its continual reorganisation and redistribution. The water that temporarily composes and sustains any body brings with it a history that is at least 3.9 billion years old and will continue far beyond the span of any body's lifetime—be that body a sandpiper, a starfish or the Aral Sea. Yet just as bodies are located in this closed system of water, these same bodies are constantly emerging as difference, shaped by different rates, speeds and pathways of flow, but also by the different mixtures of particulate matter, chemical compounds or entire colonies of other bodies, along for the watery ride. In fact, water can only serve as a connector because it expresses difference. In other words, even as the planetary water in circulation is, in one sense, closed, finite and all 'the same', each materialisation produces something new. Gestation and communication collide, in a manner of speaking, to produce a fourth hydro-logic: *differentiation*.

Moreover, in considering the speeds and slownesses that differentiation requires, we note that in some cases, material communication can grind to an almost-halt, creating the conditions for repositories of memory, or archives. The great Pacific garbage patches—tons of rubbish consolidated at certain persistent sites of stillness—exist precisely because they eventually come to elude the

communication of the oceanic conveyances that brought these patches into being in the first place (Price, 2010). The insistently non-degradable plastic of the gathering garbage loses its way, diverging from the road most travelled. Water here facilitates an archive of human consumption. In a different sort of watery storage, we know that the seafloor is still home to currents comprising water that sank from the surface during the Little Ice Age over 300 years ago. This settled water carries traces of that climate, and those times (Kandel, 2003: 124, 132). Here, deep oceanic pockets—like glaciers, deep lakes and other stagnancies—become material repositories of the past. Water remembers. This is the hydro-logic of *archive*.

Finally, we should also note water's logic of unknowability—its capacity to safeguard infinity, and serve as a limit to mastery. This is related in the first place to the evolutionary becoming of all watery bodies. Water's creative fecundity—evidenced in the watery sexuality already noted above—results in the continual proliferation of the new: four-legged pakicetus becomes whale; prehistoric plesiosaur becomes swan. In such developments, heredity and genealogy can only ever be read backwards. The inability to anticipate what will come next is at the very heart of Darwinian evolution (Grosz, 2004), and water's proliferative capacity. This recalls the logic of differentiation, where water's 'closed' cycle is always already 'open': water returns, and repeats—always different. Since the plurality of future watery bodies is inexhaustible, water is also ultimately *unknowable*. Importantly, this unknowability is not an abstract concept, but part of our watery, fleshy matter. Unknowability infuses the water that we are, and that we take up and endlessly pass on, with an end that eludes calculation. Moreover, water's unknowability is also a geographical question, as what is knowable is connected to what any body can withstand. Just as even the most sophisticated deepwater submersibles and assisted-breathing apparatuses will only ever take a human body so far, and for so long, a fish out of water also simply suffocates, and dies. Each body responds to water's mixtures, weight, depth and pressure according to its own perimeters of survival, and thus water as habitat serves as a limit for all living bodies. We cannot master that which we cannot bear. In this way, the grammar of water necessarily rejects total knowledge or full control by any body.

In these multiple translations and transformations, a sixfold schematisation of water's complex hydro-logics thus emerges: gestation, dissolution, communication, differentiation, archive, unknowability. In one sense, these descriptions just restate the banal facticity of aqueous material existence. And, because the logics of water precede the logic of science and the language of this text, we recall that these movements are in no sense essentially given: the movements of this taxonomy could be named otherwise or nuanced differently, and they certainly overflow any definitive demarcations. Moreover, these logics belong to other matters as well: the soil is an archive, just as air

is medium of communication too. The point of this taxonomy is neither to simply restate these 'facts', nor to assert that water is *only* these movements, nor that these movements belong to water *only*. It is rather to draw us deeply into the matter of water, deeper than the ubiquity of 'fluidity' as an abstract conceptual trope. Let us pay attention—really pay attention—to water, and see what it does, and how it does it. It is only in such attunement that we might draw upon these logics to compose a complex figuration of the body of water that, first, opens up an innovative conceptual space for reimagining what might behove the feminist subject, and second, gives back to the actual waters that inspire the figuration in the first place.

feminist wellsprings: sourcing a new subjectivity

I want to suggest how these hydro-logics—these multivalent ways in which water comes to meaning, and affects other bodies—already swim through various veins of feminist thought. As my aim is to identify a space where the ontological, epistemological and ethico-political potential of feminist subjectivity, *watered*, can be amplified, we can begin by acknowledging some of the ways this space is already being configured.

The French philosophical school of *écriture féminine* is notable for its elaboration of the fluid feminine. Irigaray's essay on 'The Mechanics of Fluids' (1985), for example, suggests an ontology and epistemology that counter the phallogocentric privileging of the solid, discrete, autonomous entity. In *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1991), Irigaray's feminine narrator references the gestational waters of the mother's womb, but also of the evolutionary seas, as she castigates Nietzsche for forgetting those 'first waters' that birthed him, and which now enable his lofty flights (1991: 28). In a similar move, Hélène Cixous and her co-author Catherine Clément in 'Sorties' (1986) link the mother's body (*mère*) to the sea (*mer*), figuring both as gestational and creative milieus. Cixous again foregrounds the liquid body—breast milk as the feminine writer's 'white ink'—in 'The laugh of the Medusa' (1976). Postcolonial critic Trinh T. Minh-Ha similarly relates 'women's writing' to corporeal fluidity and images of water—'a deep, subterranean water that trickles in the womb, a meandering river, a flow of life, or words, running over or slowly dripping down the pages ... the writer's ink, the mother's milk, the woman's blood and menstruation' (1989: 38).

While powerfully lyrical, these watery-bodily descriptions also importantly underline the materiality of water as *literally* creative and gestational. We can glean from these phenomenological texts, then, one source of a watered subjectivity where the body is neither purely discursive nor solely biological, but rather an 'open materiality' (Grosz, 1994: 191). A figuration of the body of water

that recognises its watery matter as an important resource—a literal wellspring—for new ontological and ethical paradigms, begins to emerge.

What is mostly missing from these feminist accounts, though, is attention to the planetary waters from and into which these bodily waters flow. Invocations of the seas in 'Sorties' and *Marine Lover* prepare a certain imaginary, but display no explicit interest in the well-being of our actual oceans. For a supplement here, we might turn to the work of feminist critical geographers who elaborate the ways in which gendered subjectivities are produced not only by social configurations of power, but also by the material configurations of their environment—which are determined in part by the health of everyday waters. For example, Margreet Zwarteveen documents the links between water management and the (re)production of gendered subjectivities, for both women and men (e.g. 2008, 2010a, b). Similarly, Farhana Sultana's (2011, 2009) ethnographic research in rural Bangladesh explores how gendered subjectivities are both reinforced and challenged, as villagers negotiate access to safe drinking water amidst an escalating crisis of arsenic contamination in underground aquifers. This work in critical geography insists on gendered subjectivity's material basis in relation to water—in terms of 'physical location, hydrogeological conditions and spatial relations' (Sultana, 2009: 428)—but also locates this potential within water's specific material logics. For example, Ahlers and Zwarteveen (2009) are concerned with how neo-liberal regimes 'reify and reproduce boundaries ... between the natural and the social, nature and human, or between the private and the public' (Ahlers and Zwarteveen, 2009: 410), which water's logic of communication otherwise challenges. Attention to water's material capacities informs a new way of thinking about subjectivity in collective rather than individualist terms. And importantly, this insight into subjectivity is also concerned for the well-being of water under neo-liberal capitalist regimes.

This scholarship builds an important bridge to feminist work that is expressly concerned with environmental justice. Stacy Alaimo's work is again notable in this regard. In *Bodily Natures* (2010), transcorporeal hydro-logics emerge as salient in Alaimo's discussions of the 'material memoirs' of Susan Antonetta and Sandra Steingraber. For both of these women, their bodily waters link them to communities beyond their own selves. Antonetta, watching her blood being collected for yet another battery of tests, begins to see in these vials 'salt water, red cells, ancestors braided and escaping' (Antonetta quoted in Alaimo, 2010: 102). As both communicative conduit and archive, Steingraber's watery body similarly extends into a more-than-human community during 'fluid harvesting'/amniocentesis: 'I drink water and it becomes blood plasma ... Before it is drinking water, amniotic fluid is the creeks and rivers that fill reservoirs ... The blood of cows and chickens is in this tube. The nectar gathered by bees and hummingbirds is in this tube. Whatever is inside the hummingbird eggs is also inside my womb' (Steingraber quoted in Alaimo, 2010: 104).

These different strands of feminist thinking—phenomenological, geographical, ecological—display important differences, but I bring them together here to emphasise their resonances. They shape the contours of a map of a feminist subject who calls on the specificity of water to help her understand her situation in a watery world. But we should also recall that figurations are not romantic utopias: they are fraught with dangers, and help us expose the double-edged quality of the tropes we literally embody. Alaimo's work on transcorporeality is particularly instructive in unpacking these risks. One risk is certainly the material danger of contaminated communications, passing from one body, or generation, or location, to the next. But Alaimo's work also helps us understand another more conceptual sort of risk, concerned with how we configure subjectivity in relation to identity. In relation to Antonetta and Steingraber, Alaimo argues that in embedding one's subjectivity into an ancestral present-past and an ecologically extended present-future, our sense of subjectivity becomes complicated: within this 'vast, coextensive materiality' the 'self becomes unrecognizable'. This does not mean the self disappears, but rather that she is dispersed through waterways of mutual imbrications. While the risk of such a transcorporeal politics of location is the complication of a feminism's traditional focus on human bodies, the reward is both an expanded ontological understanding of the subject and a new ethics of accountability—to ourselves, but also to more-than-human communities (Alaimo, 2010: 23–24).

In a further complication of identity and subjectivity, Alaimo points out that transits of toxins do not necessarily recognise the divisions of bodies according to race, class or gender (2010: 117)—a challenging insight that again demands thinking about subjectivity beyond the bounds of identity politics and traditional vectors of vulnerability. Here, however, the body of water as figuration risks becoming complicit in the erasure of certain subjectivities and oppressions. We might worry that *too much* conceptual fluidity will elide important differences in an uncritical, amorphous confluence of all waters. Does the figure of the body of water risk diving too deep, as a way to evade the politics literally written on the surfaces of our bodies—those systematic processes that a politics of location was supposed to help us name? But perhaps close attention to water's specific hydro-logics also helps us temper this danger. First, we should recall that water is not only fluid; it works according to a logic of differentiation. There is no such thing as water in the abstract; all water is embodied. Water always requires some sort of boundedness (as weather front, bayou, barnacle, woman), to give it some kind of intelligibility. So we must reject the impulse to think that the fluid aspect of this figuration could ever dissolve our specificity altogether. Second, we need to undo the binary of 'surface' and 'depth', which, like so many other binary oppositions, turns out to be more of mutual entanglement. Racial and colonial oppression, which could be read as 'surface' phenomena, are certainly subdermal phenomena too. Their effects channel through our bodies, and write

themselves not only in cultural discourse, but in the languages of biology, physiology, chemistry. This is not meant to imply a biological essentialism or determinism—in fact, quite the opposite. It is rather an acknowledgement of feminist work in Science and Technology Studies and environmental justice that traces racialised, colonial and other oppressive incursions into the very (watery) depths of our bodies. Narratives and materialities of oppressions are pulled beneath the surface of our skins in a persistent undertow. To refer again to the example of the Alberta Tar Sands, we note that colonialism in this case travels through the contaminated tailings ponds of the tar mining operations, downstream to the indigenous communities that rely on this water to literally nourish their flesh, and that of the moose, duck and fish that they regularly consume. As a result, alarmingly high rates of bile duct cancer have appeared (in humans and fish), along with growing rates of renal failure, lupus and hyperthyroidism. While the Alberta and Canadian governments insist that 'there is nothing wrong with the water', none of the bodies upstream of the energy project exhibit these rates of disease (Nikiforuk, 2010: 97–98). In this case, charting the flows of the river can amplify, rather than dilute, attention to the ongoing history of the flows of global power, and their consequences for *particular* bodies. In Fort Chipewyan, colonialist incursion and petroculturalism are experienced in the settling of the Athabaskan riparian waters into specific bodies as cancerous flesh. Clearly, as bodies of water, we are still always charged with the currents of ideology, culture, history, politics and economics.

As a body of water, then, I can cultivate attention to the archival hydro-logic at work in Northern Alberta, as watery bodies (human and more-than-human) become the gathering places for stories of racism and colonial oppression. And again, I note the urgent ethico-political considerations that emerge within a hydro-logic of communication. (What messages do we send? And who, systematically, receives them?) But differentiation, as a hydro-logic, reminds me that we do not all bear these consequences equally. Even as *we are all bodies of water*, we are watery bodies (to paraphrase Adrienne Rich) that are not all the same. As a Canadian, sitting at my desk in the United Kingdom, I do not drink directly from the rivers of the Athabasca. But I am still responsible for the government that keeps these bitumen extraction operations solvent. And I am currently a guest in a nation whose government has declared its support of this 'dirty fuel', regardless of the tar sands' well-documented environmental devastation.⁴ My politics of location, watered, recalls my accountability to the way I am specifically situated in relation to specific waters. Understanding my subjectivity through the figuration of the body of water is thus a cultivation of an ecological consciousness, but clearly in ways that cannot be dissociated from politics, economics, coloniality and privilege—and my embeddedness therein.

A final risk that surfaces in regard to the body of water concerns the hydro-logic of unknowability. Because 'where we are' as materially watery is necessarily

4 Leaked memos reveal UK support for Canada's bid to block an EU proposal that would label oil from the Canadian tar sands as 'dirty', likely resulting in lower sales to European fuel suppliers (*The Guardian*, 2011). Weeks later, Canada withdraws from the Kyoto Protocol at the Durban summit.

diffuse (flowing, congealing, open to capture, siphoning, replenishing), accounting for an aqueous politics of location is always a process with an uncertain end, rather than a finished project. In this context, knowledge of self and world always resists full knowability. Here, the danger is more a discomfort, where the bounds of one's own subjectivity are never secure. In Alaimo's words, we are situated in an ever-changing 'material environment [that] is a realm of often incalculable, interconnected agencies' in which we nonetheless must make 'political, regulatory and even personal decisions' (2010: 21). Knowledge does not have the false comfort of mastery, but nor does ethico-political action have the comfort of certainty.

But such uncertainty and unknowability are not—can never be—an abdication of accountability. In considering how feminist scholarship invokes the specific lineaments of water to open up a space for such subjectivity, I end by suggestively turning to the work of Gayatri Spivak. In an essay from 1994, Spivak examines a development project in Bangladesh that involved a major rerouting of deltaic watercourses—a translation of the rivers' weaving threads into 'straightened up' concrete channels—in an effort to mitigate flood hazards. For Spivak, these 'stupendous drains' are a violence done to the rivers—an attempt at mastery that is akin to 'the violence of Reason itself' (1994: 62). Such enterprises fail to pay attention to the river's alterity. As subsequent decades of 'flood management' in Bangladesh have shown, this arrogance—the belief that we 'know better' than water, and can thus know and control it—does not produce a good result, neither for the land-water nor the human and more-than-human populations that dwell with it. As an alternative, Spivak points to the ways in which landless farmers engage in responsive relations with the water, planting their crops according to the rhythms of the river (1994: 64–65). Spivak's discussion of water as uncontrollable and unknowable thus adds an important dimension to the cartography of the feminist subject as body of water: there are certain things that we do know *well enough* (such as cancer rates in Fort Chipewyan), and other things about which we must know more. A feminist subject as body of water is thus called to the difficult task of balancing the continued demand to be accountable to what we do know, and what we know sufficiently, with a humility towards an element much older and far more clever than she, and towards what cannot be fully known or controlled. Taking a cue from the farmers in Spivak's account, the feminist subject can cultivate a knowing-*with* and knowing-*alongside*, instead of a colonial drive to mastery. Such a responsiveness is implied in the title of Spivak's essay: 'Responsibility'. Attuning ourselves to these hydro-logics, and adopting an attitude of humility and curiosity towards water, is also the demand of this figuration. As bodies of water, we need to cultivate the ability to respond, rather than master.

There is still much to be done—theoretically and practically—to tap the potential relation between water's manifold logics and the implications they hold

for bodies of all kinds. But even in this brief mapping of feminist ideas, we begin to trace how these logics resonate within feminist thinking. We glimpse how these resonances open a space for rethinking feminist subjectivity through the lineaments of these same hydro-logics, particularly as our own watery bodies are also replete with these movements and capacities.

And as we embark upon this work, let us remember that for some, becoming a body of water is an urgent act of survival. If we look to the scholarly, activist and creative work of many indigenous women, we find a relation to water that expresses a vital alternative to the resource-based, instrumentalised view that dominates thinking and acting in white European and Western contemporary contexts. This includes the poetry of Jeanette Armstrong, for whom water is 'a welling spring', 'awakening cells' and 'to remember' (Armstrong, 2006); the writing of Dorothy Christian, for whom 'Earth' should be called 'Ocean' (Christian and Wong, forthcoming 2013); the performance art of Rebecca Belmore, whose video 'Fountain' connects colonial incursions into a country's waterways to the blood of that land's first peoples;⁵ the activism of Katsi Cook, whose 'mother's milk' project made powerful connections between industrial wastes dumped into waterways and toxic breast milk;⁶ and of Melina Laboucan Massimo whose international campaigning connects the incursions of the Alberta Tar Sands into the traditional territory of the Lubicon Cree to issues of global economic and social justice;⁷ and the stamina of Grandmother Josephine Mandamin and the other grandmother water walkers, whose arduous journeys around the Great Lakes pay homage to the freshwater that sustains us all.⁸ These women may or may not identify as feminist, and my intention is not to attribute this identification to them. Their work nonetheless enacts the kind of subjectivity that I described earlier in this paper—one that can counter what the 'phallogocentric regime' has 'declared off-limits' and 'does not want us become' (Braidotti, 2006: 170). My call for the body of water as feminist figuration would mean that we would each be required to map our singular politics of locations in response to the waters in which we are implicated. But it would also be an act of solidarity with these women who are at the vanguard of insisting we change our relationship to water on a planetary scale, and who cannot afford not to lead the way.

conclusion: becoming a body of water

Water flows through feminist enquiry in many diverse ways, taking up questions related not only to environmental degradation, but also to philosophical and epistemological frameworks, language, coloniality, biotechnology, labour mobility, sexuality and racism. Yet what we sometimes want for are nodes or pivots where overlapping issues can be gathered, in their relation to one another. In figuring oneself as a body of water, one can embody these pivots and become the confluence of these questions. And this deliberate embodying of oneself as

⁵ <http://www.rebeccabelmore.com/exhibit/Fountain.html>, last accessed on 30 October 2012.

⁶ Katsi Cook papers 1997–2008: <http://asteria.fivecolleges.edu/findaids/sophiasmith/mnsss432.html>, last accessed on 30 October 2012.

⁷ Briarpatch (2012) 'Awaiting Justice: The Ceaseless Struggle of the Lubicon Cree', <http://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/awaiting-justice>, last accessed 30 October 2012.

⁸ <http://sacredwatercircle.ca/grandmother-josephine-mandamin/>, last accessed on 30 October 2012.

watery, within a water-infused political and ecological context, can have direct bearing on how one charts one's own politics of location: I realise that not only am I affected by all of these issues, but that the capacity to both support and subvert these flows of power courses through me as well. Sources within current feminist thought can help us map the many different ways in which water's hydro-logics configure us in relation to other bodies, in an aqueous politics of location that is about more than abstracted 'fluidity'. What bodies do we gestate? What rogue waves are our own complacent bodies enacting on a quiet, everyday basis? Which watery-bodily archives do we need to trawl to enact more accurate mappings? Which unknowable bodies of water are we striving, impossibly, to master? With whom are we materially communicating, and to whom are we refusing to listen?

Becoming a body of water as feminist figuration, inspired by a more aqueous politics of location, would contribute to the renegotiation of the relationship between nature and culture within feminist thinking, and demand attention to the ways in which we as feminist subjects can also be posthumanist, obligated to more-than-human bodies. It would also continue to pay unflinching attention to the systematic oppressions that still affect some humans more than others. But to become a body of water as feminist figuration can also help us reimagine water itself—as more than metaphorical vehicle for postmodern fluidity, as more than instrumentalised resource to be commodified and managed, and as more than passive receptacle for our human excretions and anthropogenic wastes. Might we imagine water instead as a responsibility—a *responsibility*—asking us to respond?

acknowledgements

My collaborators on the *Thinking with Water* project, Cecilia Chen and Janine MacLeod, have inspired many of these reflections through our extended conversations. I would also like to thank Cecilia Åsberg and the *Posthumanities Hub* at the University of Linköping, where, as a Visiting Scholar in 2011, I undertook much of the work related to this paper. Thanks also to the *Feminist Review* collective for their helpful comments.

author biography

Astrida Neimanis is a feminist writer and academic who is currently a Visiting Scholar with the Posthumanities Hub at Linköping University, Sweden. She is co-organizer of the *Thinking with Water* project (thinkingwithwater.net) and most recently taught at the Gender Institute of the LSE.

references

- Ahlers, R. and Zwarteven, M.** (2009) 'The water question in feminism: water control and gender inequities in a neo-liberal era' *Gender, Place and Culture*, Vol. 16, No. 4: 409–426.
- Alaimo, S.** (2010) *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Anzaldúa, G.** (1987) *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Armstrong, J.** (2006) 'Water is Siwlkw' in Boelens, R., Chiba M. and Nakashima D. (2006) editors, *Water and Indigenous Peoples*, Paris: UNESCO.
- Barad, K.** (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Berland, J.** (2005) 'Walkerton: the matter of memory' *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 14: 93–108.
- Braidotti, R.** (2002) *Metamorphoses*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Braidotti, R.** (2006) *Transpositions*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Braidotti, R.** (2011) *Nomadic Subjects*, 2nd edition, New York: Columbia.
- Christian, D. and Wong, R.** (forthcoming 2013) 'Untapping watershed mind' in Chen, C., MacLeod, J. and Neimanis, A. (forthcoming 2013) editors, *Thinking with Water*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Cixous, H.** (1976) 'The laugh of the Medusa' *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4: 875–893, Trans. Cohen, K. and Cohen, P.
- Cixous, H. and Clément, C.** (1986) editors, 'Sorties: out and out: attacks/ways out/forays' *The Newly Born Woman*, Trans. Wing, B., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Di Chiro, G.** (2004) "'Living is for everyone": border crossings for community, environment and health' *Osiris*, 2nd Series, Vol. 19: 112–130.
- Frankenberg, R. and Mani, L.** (1993) 'Crosscurrents, crosstalk—race, "postcoloniality," and the politics of location' *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2: 292–310.
- Goodbridge, B. and Jenkins, M.** (2002) *World Atlas of Biodiversity*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Grosz, E.** (1994) *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Grosz, E.** (2004) *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution and the Untimely*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- The Guardian** (2011) 'UK secretly helping Canada push its oil sands project' 27 November.
- Haraway, D.** (1985) 'A manifesto for cyborgs: science, technology and socialist feminism in the late twentieth century' *Socialist Review*, Vol. 80: 65–108.
- Haraway, D.** (2003) *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.
- Irigaray, L.** (1985) *This Sex which is Not One*, Trans. Porter, C., Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Irigaray, L.** (1991) *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Trans. Gill, G., New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kandel, R.** (2003) *Water from Heaven*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kaplan, C.** (1997) 'The politics of location as transnational feminist critical practice' in Grewal, I. and Kaplan, C. (1997) editors, *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Critical Practice*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 137–152.
- Lugones, M.** (1987) 'Playfulness, "world" travelling, and loving perception' *Hypatia*, Vol. 2, No. 2: 3–21.
- MacLeod, J.** (forthcoming 2013) 'Water and the material imagination' in Chen, C., MacLeod, J. and Neimanis, A. (forthcoming 2013) editors, *Thinking with Water*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

- McMenamin, M. and McMenamin, D.** (1994) *Hypersea*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Miller, G.T. and Spoolman, S.** (2010) *Environmental Science*, Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Mitchell, A.** (2009) *Seasick: The Global Ocean in Crisis*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.
- Murray, J.W.** (2000) 'Oceans' in Jacobson, M., Charlson, R., Rodhe, H. and Orians, G. (2000) editors, *Earth Systems Science*, London: Elsevier Academic Press.
- Nikiforuk, A.** (2010) *Tar Sands: Dirty Oil and the Future of a Continent*, 2nd edition, Vancouver: Greystone Books.
- Price, C.** (2010) *101 Places Not to See before You Die*, New York: HarperCollins.
- Protevi, J.** (2006) 'Katrina' *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy*, Vol. 10, No. 1: 363–381.
- Rich, A.** (1986) 'Notes toward a politics of location (1984)' in Rich, A. (1986) editor, *Blood, Bread, & Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979–85*, New York: Virago Press.
- Schulze-Makuch, D. and Irwin, L.** (2008) *Life in the Universe*, Berlin: Springer Verlag.
- Simms, E.-M.** (2009) 'Eating one's mother: female embodiment in a toxic world' *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 31, No. 3: 263–277.
- Spivak, G.C.** (1994) 'Responsibility' *Boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture*, Vol. 21, No. 3: 19–64.
- Sultana, F.** (2009) 'Fluid lives: subjectivity, gender and water management in Bangladesh' *Gender, Place, and Culture*, Vol. 16, No. 4: 427–444.
- Sultana, F.** (2011) 'Water, culture and gender: an analysis from Bangladesh' in Johnston, B.R. (2011) editor, *Water, Cultural Diversity & Global Environmental Change: Emerging Trends, Sustainable Futures?*, The Netherlands: Springer, 237–252.
- Tuana, N.** (2008) 'Viscous porosity: on witnessing Katrina' *Material Feminisms*, in Alaimo, S. and Hekman, S. (2008) editors, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Trinh, T. Minh-ha** (1989) *Women, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Zwarteveen, M.** (2008) 'Men, masculinities and water powers in irrigation' *Water Alternatives*, Vol. 1, No. 1: 111–130.
- Zwarteveen, M.** (2010a) 'A masculine water world: the politics of gender and identity in irrigation expert thinking' in Boelens, R., Getches, D. and Guevara-Gil, A. (2010) editors, *Out of the Mainstream. Water Rights, Politics and Identity*, London: Earthscan.
- Zwarteveen, M.** (2010b) 'The politics of gender in water and the gender of water politics' in Wegerich, K. and Warner, J.F. (2010) editors, *The Politics of Water. A Survey*, London: Routledge.

doi:10.1057/fr.2012.25