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The Strange Agencies and the Seaside

(on Stacy Alaimo, *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times*)

Let us start with the following observation: we are immersed in matter, we are invaded by streams of living and technological subjects, and our bodies are exchanged and extended in a thousand ways. Thus they are constituted by a thousand materials within human and nonhuman environments, social and biological. Matter is not a stable substance, localizable and identifiable with clearly defined boundaries, as everything changes, and everything materializes constantly. The new materialism thinkers are thinking this incessant materialization of the world.

That everything becomes means that materiality is in “metamorphosis,” as Rosi Braidotti describes (2002, 2). This implies a time period inserted into material processes (see Grosz 2005, 110–11; Barad 2007, 64) that have their own power, their own autonomy, and their own agency (capacity for action, “agentivity”). That everything becomes means that powers are ascribed to elements of the natural and the built environments. Their agentivity is given as endowed intentions and effects, and are a way of building an embodied bio-physico-chemical story (water, air, etc.). The natural and built environments, in its effect, become an aesthetic intermediary with other agents in time and space.

The “new materialism” supporters (Braidotti, DeLanda, Grosz, and Alaimo, among others) seek to expand and enrich the expression of agency; “new materialism” will distribute the opportunity to act from a plurality of agents, thus becoming the expression of a polycentric capacity to act (Bouvet 2013, 5; Blanc 2015, 117). The argument of a plurality of agencies means to go beyond subjectivity, which eventually reduces for humans the possibility of agency and is thus an expression of anthropocentric thinking. Here, more material also means more connection. First, it is not possible to isolate the human body in its relationship with its external environment, whether it is the natural environment, anthropic (transformed by the action of humans), or purely technological. Second, the human body is itself infested by micro-organisms and by the effects of the technical action of humans on the world. Envisioning polyagencies and their links might require

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1 breaking down the human and material things into communities, bio-
 2 logical, chemical, physical, endowed with interiority and externality. In
 3 Jean-Francois Lyotard's *Postmodern Fables*, for example, "humankind
 4 is taken for a complex material system; consciousness, for an effect of
 5 language; and language for a highly complex material system" (1999,
 6 98). As one of the representatives of the new materialism, Stacy Alaimo
 7 says the substance of the human being is "inseparable" from its envi-
 8 ronment, a condition called "trans-corporeality" — the process by
 9 which "the human is always entangled with a world more-than-
 10 human" (2010, 2).

11 Alaimo's work is primarily concerned with the renewal of an envi-
 12 ronmental vision. Her book *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and*
 13 *the Material Self* (2010) focuses on environmental health issues and
 14 environmental justice. The mixed essays collected in *Exposed: Environ-*
 15 *mental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (2016) extend these
 16 topics, exploring the crossovers between art and environment, nudist
 17 events, the conservation of marine wildlife, and ocean protection.
 18 *Exposed* applies a magnifying kaleidoscope to the expression of transcor-
 19 poreality, providing different perspectives for research into the environ-
 20 ment. Alaimo's work contributes to the creation of an environmental
 21 ethics that gives value to ecosystems, biodiversity, and nonhuman lives.

22 The attention given to material agencies is not limited to an aca-
 23 demic project; the author highlights their emergence in different areas,
 24 be they activists or artistic movements. Alaimo speaks of Lisa Lewenz,
 25 for example (who depicted Pennsylvania's famous Three Mile Island
 26 Nuclear Generating Station, which suffered a partial core meltdown
 27 in 1979, in the calendar Lewenz produced in 1984 [29]); of the thou-
 28 sands of exposed bodies within naked protest movements; of the "Aus-
 29 tintitious Babe" in Austin, Texas, who confronted supporters of open-
 30 carry gun laws by bearing her breasts; as well of the FEMEN and
 31 others (65–66).

32 Politically speaking, Alaimo seeks to highlight the causes and
 33 material consequences of our environmental choices. She quotes Gert
 34 Goeminne, who in 2011 explains in *Once upon a Time I Was a Nuclear*
 35 *Physicist: What the Politics of Sustainability Can Learn from the Nuclear*
 36 *Laboratory* that "expert-focused technological determinism, embed-
 37 ded in a discourse of ecological modernization, now acts to marginal-
 38 ize the issues of human choice involved in putting sustainability into
 39 effect and to downplay deliberation over the socio-cultural practices,
 40 behaviours, and structures such choice involves. As a result of this
 41 techno-scientific focus, the need for accordant social change is

removed from view, which makes sustainability all the less likely to occur in practice” (172).

Exposed contains many articles and discussions previously published but thoroughly revised. Brought together, these essays’ impact is all the more important. Reading at length, the environmental combination of activists, artists, all people cutting through the flesh of the world in order to be visible, audible, edible, becomes all the more forceful. Alaimo argues: “Activists, as well as everyday practitioners of environmental, environmental health, environmental justice, and climate change movements, work to reveal and reshape the flows of material agencies across regions, environments, animal bodies, and human bodies—even as global capitalism and the medical–industrial complex reassert a more convenient ideology of solidly bounded, individual consumers and benign, discrete products” (120).

The first essays in the volume address pleasure (section title, “Posthuman Pleasures”). The concept of pleasure is often absent in environmentalists’ speeches. Frugality and simplicity are keywords frequently used by ecologist activists (such as Le Parti pour la Décroissance, in France), which are not presented by Alaimo in apparent opposition to the idea of enjoyment and pleasure. Such comments aim to remind us of the cultural bias of the word *pleasure* as something related to religious and economic issues, such as the ones brought by the crisis in Europe. Nonetheless, finding ways of living with pleasure in places of quality (art and environment, poetry . . . such is the theme of Alaimo’s essay, “This Is about Pleasure: An Ethics of Inhabiting,” in this section) is a more general theme. The second essay, “Eluding Capture: The Science, Culture, and Pleasure of Queer Animals,” deals with animals’ deviant pleasures that could be called perverse. Thus one could describe the homosexual love of cockroaches in captivity. Both of these essays contribute to the general ideas brought up by new materialist thinkers, as the examples show the force of love (and pleasure and desire) in life’s material agencies. The material loving forces disobey the strict genetic order or fail to conform to the law of the strongest, but they involve contingency, meaning there are no forces guiding evolution other than those specific to these unique living forms—and, more generally, material entities—and their changing decisions. Speciation is ultimately a long and loving diversification event, giving birth to a loving biodiversity (Lodé, 2011). The theoretical approaches of new materialism concern the process of formal colocated emergency. Thus the uniqueness of living environments is highlighted beyond the extreme abstraction and generalization specific to scientific approaches.

1 Alaimo, in addition, recalls the “Ecosexual Manifesto” of artists
 2 Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens, who define ecosexuals as people
 3 who make love with the land: “We caress rocks, are pleased by
 4 waterfalls, and admire the earth’s curves often” (94). Their projects
 5 and performances include “Sexecological Walking Tours,” “Dirty
 6 Sexecology: Ways to Make Love to the Earth,” and many ecosexual
 7 weddings (86). The committed people declare their love for dirt, lakes,
 8 coal, snow, cockroaches, and other earthlings.

9 A second part, titled “Insurgent Exposure,” includes two chap-
 10 ters, “The Naked World: Spelling, Stripping, Lusting as Environmen-
 11 tal Protest” and “Climate Systems, Carbon-Heavy Masculinity, and
 12 Feminist Exposure.” The latter chapter highlights how aggressive and
 13 how high-energy-consuming (oil, wood, coal, shale gas) male bodies
 14 are in their effects on the climate, as opposed to activism that high-
 15 lights the vulnerabilities of Earth by exposing naked bodies in new
 16 situations. The Tigresa, an activist, strips off for the trees, hunts forest
 17 managers, and shouts poetry. One could wonder about the relation-
 18 ship between flesh being exposed and Earth’s frailties: Alaimo states
 19 the obvious with metaphors of the naked flesh.

20 A third part, “Strange Agencies in Anthropocene Seas,” discusses
 21 the strange sea depth and its material flows and layers being impacted
 22 by human actions. Chapter 5, “Oceanic Origins, Plastic Activism, and
 23 New Materialism at Sea,” contrasts supposed marine origins of the
 24 human species—Rachel Carson describes a Darwinian community of
 25 descent—and strange arrangements of humans and other creatures of
 26 the seas in recent decades, such as described in Nick Hayes’s graphic
 27 novel, *The Rime of the Modern Mariner* (2012), in which the mariner
 28 encounters jellyfish and squid with bits of plastic “embedded in their
 29 flesh” (130). Captain Charles Moore, who is known for discovering,
 30 researching, and publicizing the Great Pacific Garbage Patch (143),
 31 juggles science and activism as well as the need to captivate the audi-
 32 ence by dramatizing the agentivity of plastics that end up in the seas.
 33 Chapter 6, “Your Shell on Acid: Material Immersion, Anthropocene
 34 Dissolves,” goes along with the idea of all kinds of material bodies—
 35 human and animal, plastic and chemical—meeting in the seas and
 36 these bodies’ dissolutions in ocean currents or even anthropocenic seas.
 37 We could comment on the fact that scientific ideas played a great role
 38 in the envisioning of contemporary environmentalism and ecological
 39 struggles marking the path for future battles.

40 As sympathetic as is it possible to be to Alaimo’s deliberate
 41 rejection of any intellectual extracting of material exchanges between

living beings and the nonanimated, it is important to consider the
 role of aesthetics, as understood with the general sense of *aesthesis*.
 Alaimo states:

I agree, as many environmentalists would, with Timothy Morton's contention that what "ecological thought must do, then, is to unground the human by forcing it back onto the ground," but disagree with what follows, "which is to say, standing on a gigantic object called Earth inside a gigantic entity called biosphere." Defamiliarization affords aesthetic pleasure, of course, but the scalar leap from the ground inhabited by the human to the earth as "gigantic object" obscures the sort of entanglements that are the very stuff of ethical and political relations. Morton distinguishes his position from "ecophenomenology, which insists on regressing to fantasies of embeddedness." But embeddedness need not be phenomenological, nor a regressive fantasy. Rather, the embeddedness of trans-corporeality involves grappling with data, information, scientific captures, and political modes of mapping interactions and relations across different scales. (191)

The aesthetic is certainly a mode of transcorporeal figuration as shown in reference to art and images in Alaimo's text, to the extent that aesthetics is defined in the terms of communication between living beings. The aesthetic theories and experiments she addresses further bring together the synthetic visions of the world, such as a photography of Earth, landscapes visions, contributing greatly to communication between living beings (Grevsmühl 2014).

As much as I enjoyed this book full of ideas and examples, I would comment critically on one issue. If the aesthetic issue is a development of an ethical relationship to reality (Barad 2007), Alaimo's book never directly addresses this issue. The embeddedness of trans-corporeality to which Alaimo refers throughout applies to data, information, scientific visions, and political modes of mapping the relationships and interactions of matter at different scales. Faithful to poststructuralism, new materialism refuses to totalize materialities in a single story. That is, each time, micronarratives are embedded in technical and natural systems, human bodies and nonhuman bodies, that will be interpreted as taking up a position. These micronarratives seek above all to give forms to concrete and dynamic differences that make up the world. This project means that the position of preeminence is

1 impossible and that Earth as a totality exists only to the extent of our
 2 various embeddings. The ethics of transcorporeality requires all things
 3 to be accountable to each other (the human being at my side as well as
 4 the stones at the other end of the globe), continuously responsive to
 5 any intra-actions. This conceptual expression suggests that we beings
 6 should be held responsible for each material transformation and the
 7 exchanges with bodies, substances, and places.

8 Additionally, I strongly believe that the critical scope of Alaimo's
 9 work should not forget the modes of representation of the marginal-
 10 ized, of the poor. As important as Alaimo's reflections are, if only for
 11 their pioneering nature, their intellectual nature may be difficult to
 12 grasp for an audience wider than the academic spheres. The use of the
 13 conceptual expression of environmental forms (Blanc and Benish
 14 2016) amplifies the transformations and metamorphoses of materials,
 15 collectives, and material processes beyond bodies, and it accounts for
 16 the plurality and diversity of them as well as their various embeddings.
 17 Such a conceptual expression would perhaps be more readily under-
 18 stood by a broad audience. This expression, inspired by Louis Althus-
 19 ser's *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investi-
 20 gation)* in the 1960s and by the aesthetician Luigi Pareyson (2007)
 21 accompanies the idea that materiality is a world of practices and
 22 becoming. The attention to environmental forms gives us to under-
 23 stand the thousands of meaningful connections that guide daily deci-
 24 sions. Articulating why it is so in intelligible words and formulating it
 25 into a narrative is not for everyone, and asymmetries in the discussions
 26 are often denounced as obstacles to the sharing of people's worlds.

27 Such an orientation, of course, goes beyond the anthropocentric
 28 visions and sees the world as a series of forms, of various arrangements,
 29 deformations, and metamorphoses. Therefore, where is the ecological
 30 subject? There would be, as Braidotti suggests, a prelinguistic dimen-
 31 sion to subjectivity. Zoe would be Jacques Lacan's prediscursive
 32 dimension, Julia Kristeva's *chora*, and the maternal feminine of Luce
 33 Irigaray. The subject is then the echo chamber of *zoe*. Life is half ani-
 34 mal (*zoe*) and half discursive (*bios*) (Braidotti 2010, 202).

35 A caring popular ecology of commons must shift its perspective
 36 on these new environmental forms, from various landscapes and
 37 hybrid forms to plastic islands in the sea, and their terms of intra-
 38 action. Karen Barad insists that humans "Humans are part of the
 39 world-body space in its dynamic structuration" (Barad, 2007, 341).
 40 What is an environmental form? It is an expression that helps us with
 41 an understanding of the entities formed by biological, chemical, phys-

ical collectives and enables a tracing of their intra-agentive emergence, where every form and every element of this form can emerge only to the extent of others.

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