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INTERVIEW

Hydrofeminism on the Coastline: An Interview with Astrida Neimanis

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This is an interview conducted with Astrida Neimanis, Canada Research Chair of Feminist Environmental Humanities at University of British Columbia, Okanagan. It examines the “hydro-feminist” turn in critical theory and its potential value for thinking about coastline encounters. Neimanis also comments on critical-creative practices, critiques of the Anthropocene, and how the environmental and blue humanities will meet the demands of environmental crisis.

Keywords: hydro-feminism; blue humanities; environmental humanities; coastal posthumanities

SB:
From your collection, *Thinking with Water* (co-edited with Cecilia Chen and Janine MacLeod, MQUP, 2013), to your own book, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (Bloomsbury, 2017), your work has been firmly situated within a hydrological turn in critical theory. In the coedited introduction to *Thinking with Water*, for instance, you and your co-editors explain how the hydrological turn prompts new ways of thinking about flows of relations, power, and engagement with our watery environs. This includes the body, which you view as a porous and unfixed entity that is always in constant engagement with an open and always circulating planetary recycling of water. It is this turn toward a flow of relations that makes your latest reflections on coastlines so fascinating. Coastlines are, for many of us, a firm and tangible border or boundary line, a definitive marker of tides going in and out, a space where border crossings are imagined to occur between species and communities and across land and sea. But what does the coastline mean to you? Thinking through your own posthuman feminist phenomenological framework, what does an encounter with the coastline look like?

AN:
First, I notice that a coastline is already an abstraction, or a mean, or a norm. The coast is only a ‘line’ if you pull the aperture out; in this way, you artificially fix it as a ‘line’. The line is a snapshot that extracts the coast from the flow of time where it cannot be weathered or eroded. But in a thickness of time, the line is actually a blur. The line is a zone in which things happen. Passage, transition, becoming, transmogrification: these are the labours of the coastal zone.

In other words, to think with coastlines brings to mind two other kinds of thinking that water has taught me. The first is membrane logic. In my essay ‘Hydrofeminism’, I point out that from the perspective of watery embodiment, connection happens via the traversal of water across or through only partially permeable membranes. In an ocularcentric culture, some of these membranes—human skin, for example—give the illusion of impermeability, which is belied by the fact that we perspire, drink, leak, pee, bleed, and so on. We take in the world selectively and then send it flooding back out again. Other worldly membranes are too ephemeral or too monumental to be perceived as such—for example, a gravitational threshold, a weather front, a wall of grief, a winter coat, death. Yet these also function according to a similar membrane logic: selective and partial passage according to whose operations water is always becoming different. Difference happens in the transition. We are transcorporeal (to use Stacy Alaimo’s term) in our embodiment, but we require membranes to keep us from total dissolution.

Second, your question brings to mind ecotonal thinking. Ecotones are transition areas between two adjacent ecosystems. They might be considered markers of connection and/or separation, but in ecological terms, they are zones of fecundity, creativity, transformation, multiplication, divergence, and reassembly. Estuaries, tidal zones, and wetlands, for example, are all liminal spaces where, in the words of Catriona Sandilands, ‘two complex systems meet, embrace, clash, and transform one another’ (2004). So an ecotone is sort of a membrane too. Again, we see how even a line is a zone, a place, or a setting. The liminal ecotone is not only a demarcation of one thing changing into another but also is itself a significant and marvellous watery body. Any difference between ‘thing’ and ‘process’, or ‘verb’ and ‘noun’, or ‘body’ and ‘becoming’ also blurs.

To think with membranes and ecotones is not the same thing as saying there are no borders. We require borders to

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resist annihilation. To be a body of water is quite different than being water, as if proclaiming such a constitution were enough. To be water, in this facile sense, is to be unformed. It is materiality without meaning. To be a body of water, flowing in and out of other bodies of water, however, is to generate meaning from relation. As bodies of water, we resist the lure of abstraction from time, place, and relation. We need some kind of membrane, some kind of carrier bag, or some kind of border zone or boundary line to keep everything from falling apart. To be in the world, water needs a body, and bodies require some kind of containment—however ephemeral, porous, temporary—to be a body, capable of affecting and being affected by others.

So to consider the coastline from within such watery ontologics means to attune to the way that the line or the border is actually what enables other bodies to hold together—an ocean on the one side, land on the other. But is also reminds us that the line is a zone in which things happen, and that these happenings are recursive and diffractive: the line is an operator of relationality between other bodies, as well as a zone of relationality itself, a body itself.

SB:

In one of your recent collaborative projects with the Power Station of Art (PSA) at the 13th Shanghai Biennale, *Bodies of Water* (2020–2021), you have been considering how flows of water challenge a philosophical tradition in which origins and endings are fixed and static. Your piece of writing and collaborative artwork for this event, titled 'The River Ends as the Ocean', pushes back against this tradition by considering how the mouth of the river destabilises subject positions. Could you explain the impetus behind this project? How are your collaborations contributing to our understanding of the watery infrastructures of places like the Huangpu River, Yangtze Delta, and other bodies of water? And lastly, what is the value, for you, in participating in these kinds of critical-creative collaborations?

AN:

'The River Ends as the Ocean' is a collaboration between Gadigal/Bidgigal/Darug Elder and traditional descendant of the Sydney 'Warrane' Coastal region Aunty Rhonda Dixon Grovenor, Sydney-based artist Clare Britton, and myself that took place in 2020 and 2021 in Sydney, New South Wales, and then (in a different form) in Shanghai as part of the Biennale. Andres Jaque, the curator of the Biennale, had invited me to contribute an essay to the Biennale catalogue, but I suggested that I might offer something practice-based too. Andres's invitation arrived at the beginning of the pandemic, when I was still living in Sydney but already knew that I would be leaving at the end of the year to take up a new job at UBC Okanagan. I was thinking a lot about endings, and I was spending hours a day (under COVID 'soft lockdown' restrictions) walking along the Cooks River, which flowed past the house we were renting at the time. My neighbour, colleague, and now friend Clare was completing a PhD project that involved a slow, practice-based exploration of the Cooks River, so I wondered whether we might create something together. Clare introduced me to her friend and sometimes collaborator Aunty Rhonda, whom I already knew at a distance from her powerful presence at climate change and decolonisation rallies and events.

After many hours walking along the river, sitting in the grass, and sharing what was going on in our respective lives, the idea for the walk emerged. Aunty Rhonda, Clare, and I invited the community to participate in a public walk conducted over one outgoing tide cycle (approximately seven hours), timed to mark the end of the day, the end of the tide, the end of the season, and the end of the decade. On the day, the walk began with a tremendously moving welcome to country by Aunty Rhonda. We then began walking, following a body of water—Sydney's Cooks River—from where it emerges in a nondescript, concrete-channelled drain in an Inner West golf course to its ending in and as another body of water, Botany Bay, and the Pacific Ocean. Our objective was to invite others to contemplate the river's own story (and in particular, how this story is also part of Aunty Rhonda's story of survivance) as it winds through Wangal, Gadigal, and Gameygal Country while also providing an opportunity to contemplate endings and transitions. After all, 2020 and 2021 marked a time when many of us were struggling with all kinds of endings that seemed to be writ particularly large: lives lost to a pandemic, species lost to climate change, and ways of life lost to colonialism. We wondered: What could we learn by slowing down to rhyme with the rhythm of the river as it terminates and becomes something else? Every end is also a beginning; the end of the river is also called the mouth.

Although the walk was the project's main event, 'The River Ends as the Ocean' took many other forms: a plenary talk at the Biennale, where Clare and I read interwoven texts inspired by Clare's research; a risograph book that opened accordion-like to reveal an essay co-authored by Clare, Aunty Rhonda, and me as an echo of the walk and the river itself; a set of small silver cast sculptures derived from seemingly insignificant objects that were found along the riverbank; a series of photographs documenting the walk; and a short film called *Aunty Rhonda's Walk* that was screened at the Biennale and in other venues since. But aside from these outputs, this project was at its heart a conversation between the river, Clare, Aunty Rhonda, and me: a sharing of knowledge, perspectives, teachings, questions, doubts, suspicions, warmth, and beauty. It is difficult for me to put into words.

This kind of practice is bodily philosophy. There are things you can only understand because the sensory apparatus also known as your body reveals them to you. Here, I am referring to the rhythms and material details of the river, but also of the relationships that it holds and nurtures, even as we (here I mean the settler 'we') have done such a poor job of holding that river and its responsibilities to those relations. As a public walk, this project was also a practical experiment in feminist and anticolonial social infrastructures as temporary, ephemeral shelter where different bodies can gather, share, hold each other for a

while, and learn something from these exchanges. The walk itself was this kind of infrastructure. (Tessa Zettel, Jennifer Hamilton, and I write about this in a recent article in *Australian Feminist Studies*.) For me, the value of these kinds of critical-creative collaborations is thus the way they can function to test theories that you may offer up as a cultural theorist or philosopher and then develop and refine those theories via the experiments as well. What has been so interesting to me is the resonance I have discovered between my own methodologies and those of many of the artists I work with, for whom an artwork can only emerge in its materiality: the idea is nothing until you start to test it out. Concomitantly, as my own work has increasingly turned to collaborative practice-based research methods, I find it increasingly impossible to hide behind concepts in my writing. Instead, I am compelled to be utterly honest. 'Is this philosophically sophisticated?' as a quality-control question I might have posed to myself ten years ago is replaced with, 'Does this bear out in the world? Is it honest?' *Test it out*. When it comes to cultural theory, being honest is a lot harder than being smart.

SB:
Building further on a discussion of origins and endings, I'm curious to know more about how the hydrological turn contributes to, but might also diverge from, the geological turn in studies of the Anthropocene. The geological turn can be described as a way of thinking about the human as a geomorphic actor across deep time. Yet this geological approach in some ways serves as a continuation of androcentric and colonial thinking. As Richard Grusin has pointed out in his volume *Anthropocene Feminism* (2017, ix), the scientific board responsible for coining the term 'Anthropocene' is largely male; likewise, Kathryn Yusoff's analysis of extraction economies in *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2018, xii) illuminates how a sedimented understanding of extractive capitalism risks obfuscating the continued presence of racial and colonial legacies that undergird the Anthropocene epoch. Donna Haraway's tentacular and aqueous conception of the Cthulucene is one way to combat such sedimented thinking. Similarly, Stacy Alaimo's (2017, 89) work in the emerging field of blue ecologies takes aim at what she calls the 'stark terrestrial figurations of man and rock in which other life-forms and biological processes are strangely absent'. Your ecofeminist and hydrological framework is very much a part of this critique of the geological turn. Given that the coastline is both a terrestrial and aqueous space, what do you think the hydrological turn can add to our understanding of coastal imaginaries?

AN:
Let's back up a bit and consider 'Anthropocenomania', or that time—let's call it the second decade of the new millennium—when you could hardly turn an academic corner without being hit in the face with another conference, another paper, another clever thought that was feverishly grappling with this new proposition of 'the age of man'. (Yes, I was afflicted with that fever for a time too.) Although the reasons for Anthropocene fever were manifold, one particularly intriguing reason concerns the materiality of rock, where the 'geological turn' was as much about a lithic imaginary of solidity and measurement as anything else.

The Anthropocene is fundamentally an index of human relationships to time, situation, and feeling, and as such it demands coming to grips with the new kinds of temporalities that the Age of Humans initiates. As human beings in the so-called modern world, we had already been charged with the difficult task of living not only at the scale of our individual lives but also at the scale of human history, as moral agents larger than ourselves (e.g. Chakrabarty, 2009; Clark, 2012).

Anthropocene onset further compounded this double demand: humans steeped in Western cosmologies needed to figure ourselves on a more than human timescale too. Other 'we's of course had figured this out long ago; an understanding of temporality beyond human time is a part of other non-Western cosmologies, but Western moderns had mostly missed that lesson (although the revelation of Darwinian evolution did important work in helping us to understand ourselves beyond human time). The collision of the historical with the individual was already a kind scalar vertigo; now we had to add the challenge of the Anthropocene, that is, the contradiction of our species' utter insignificance from the vantage point of deep time, against its inauguration of an entire geological epoch. Our affective relation to time is rendered insecure; are we really that small, and that large? How are we supposed to feel?

Part of the unsettling of the Anthropocene, in other words, is a temporal unmooring. We lose our grip on the scale of our mattering in the world. After all, in an imagined post-Anthropocene future, we still want to find that we were here, that our mark perseveres. Feminist philosopher and cultural theorist Claire Colebrook has written about this desire as a gesture of 'narcissistic proto-mourning' in which we 'imagine the tragedy of the post-human future as one in which death and absence will be figured through the unreadability of our own fragments' (Colebrook 40–41). Although the Anthropocene may be an invitation to humility, it is accompanied by a frantic desire to persist, to be legible. In bringing this up, my point is not to indict our human narcissism; some interest in one's own persistence is neither uncommon nor ethically problematic. More interesting is how this desire underscores the way in which such temporal upheaval is also affective. We were here, we want that impossible future reader to tell us, and with both longing and regret, we want our archive to insist that in this way, at least, we still are. Anthropocene trauma, in other words, is both about feeling out of sync with time as we knew it, but also about the 'bad feeling' of what this out-of-sync-ness might herald.

So this is the backdrop upon which the geological turn becomes salient—because although the Anthropocene is consequential for the biosphere, the atmosphere, and the hydrosphere (not to mention for a multitude

of sociocultural worlds), its reading and interpretation has emerged as the proper object of the geosciences, and stratigraphy more specifically; it is the International Commission on Stratigraphy, after all, that hosts the Anthropocene Working Group, charged with finding that contested Golden Spike.

This makes me curious: Why stratigraphy, and why now? Could it be that, given our Anthropocenic temporal discombobulation, geology gives us a comforting way to manage time and our relation to it? We have all seen those stratigraphic visualisations, in which each geologic epoch or '-cene' is allotted its own breadth on a planetary layer cake: a record of all the '-cenes' that have ever been, stacked proportionally upon one another: Archean, Proterozoic, Cambrian, all the way up to Paloecene, Eocene, Oligocene, Miocene … Even if our own insertion into those leaves of deep time might underscore our human smallness, it is at the same time a relief to reverse that cosmic indifference by capturing all the time in the world in a single stratigraphic snapshot. If the lithosphere will be the medium of record, then rock, we seem to think, will give us a tablet that will endure, and the measure in which our precise place will nonetheless be marked. When one's own durability is called into question, it should not be surprising that we look for any rocky outcrop to cling to. In other words, in the context of the Anthropocene as a temporal dilemma, we might understand stratigraphy and the geologic turn as our way of trying to order this temporal torquing, as well as the angst it engenders.

Although this kind of geomanagerial imaginary may help us come to grips with time—rendered measurable, progressive, and containable—we might also ask what this containment, and this effort to memorialise a certain kind of legibility, also occludes. Perhaps we need a different kind of archive. This is where all of the 'alter-cenes' come in, as different means of reading the geohistorical record. For me, this also invites a turn to thinking with water. Water remembers (archive), but it also forgets (dissolution). What might it mean to seek understanding of our relationship to time and feeling in the Anthropocene not through stony inscription, not through lithophilic attachments, but instead immersed, submerged, untethering?

One problem with this proposition is its suggestion that the lithic and the aquatic are separate from each other, as though we could choose one and reject the other. In our lifeworlds, rock and water are entwined in intra-active relations. Moreover, the lithic is far more affective and changeable than an Anthropocenic imaginary sometimes augurs; this is partly what Yusoff is on to in *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* in her turn to Black poetics as a counter to 'white geology'. She denaturalises colonial white supremacist engagements with the lithic as hardly the only option. So a critical appraisal of the geological turn is not the same as a turning away from stone, or from the earth. It is rather opening up new possibilities for elemental feeling, and thinking with water can be a catalyst for this.

How might all of this add to our understanding of coastal imaginaries? This response returns us to the first question: We are back in the ecotone, in the littoral zone where things meet, transition, become something different.

SB:

To go back to that littoral zone of happenings and transitions, and to move somewhat away from the abstract temporalities of 'Anthropocenomania', I wonder if we might reflect on the waters of coastal flooding that are imminently approaching as a result of unmitigated climate change. I'm thinking in particular of coastal flooding now in Durban, a coastal city in eastern South Africa's KwaZuluNatal province, or rising sea levels along the Indian coast, which are outpacing the global rate of sea-level rise. A number of artists have begun to tap into the climate refugee crisis spurred on by coastal flooding through their depictions of sunken cities (for example, in the undersea digital paintings of Yulia Dotsenko's *Sunken Cities 2100* or in Jason de Caires Taylor's underwater sculpture parks located in coastal sites like Ayia Napa, Cyprus). These examples of posthuman aqueous imaginaries along the coastline could be seen as a bleak forecasting of the disproportionately negative impact of climate change on coastal communities (especially in the Global South), but it could perhaps also be seen, particularly in the works of de Caires Taylor, as a creative experiment in the hydrological dissolution of the human that gives way to the flourishing of marine life. How do you see it?

AN:

First and foremost, we should see it as an anthropogenic catastrophe that is already claiming lives and lifeworlds and will continue to claim many more. In theorising about these things, we have to hold in view the fact that we are talking material devastation and trauma, experienced (as you point out) by some communities at far greater rates than others. As climate change continues to erode, or 'weather', coastal hydro-geomorphologies, we need to understand this 'weather' as always more than meteorological. Jennifer Hamilton and I explain this in our short essay 'Weathering' (*Feminist Review*, 2018). Even if we are tempted to understand colonial, heteropatriarchal, or other social violences as 'weather' only in the metaphoric sense, these political structures and forces contribute to the 'atmospheric conditions' that dictate the ease with which we will get through the day, and even whether we will survive, as much as any meteorological weather event might do. In other words, to talk about coastal flooding in terms of 'unmitigated climate change' makes sense only if we understand climate change as inextricable from social, cultural, and economic structures of power. I sometimes say that the best way to understand (and then address) climate change is as symptom of deformed human relations. It is the symptom, not the thing itself. We cannot address climate change—including coastal flooding, erosion, and sea-level rise—unless we are concomitantly addressing the violent power structures and bad relations that brought us to this place. Elite geoengineering will not be the thing that saves us!

Of course, the objective of 'saving us' is also open to question. What is our end goal in climate change adaptation and mitigation? Is it simply survival, or are we also interested in how we survive—as whom, to become what, and into what kind of different or changed world? This is where the artistic imaginaries that you invoke in your question come into play. I am not sure that Dotsenko or de Caires Taylor are the imaginaries I necessarily reach for, especially if we read De Caires Taylor to be about the hydrological dissolution of the human. I think that's a cop-out. The ocean is not giving up. The forests are not giving up. The animals are not giving up. Who are we humans, then, to give up, to give into our own dissolution? It is no better than colonising Mars. But I definitely agree that we have to reimagine who we are and who we need to become, as humans both as a species and as very differently situated individuals, with different obligations and accountabilities. And without a doubt, the job of the artist in the present is crucial: their job is not merely to diagnose the present but to help us imagine new ways of living, and even flourishing, in changed circumstances. In this sense, I am a bit suspicious of the world 'sustainability': What do we want to sustain? What are we holding on to? What if instead we imagined something entirely better, healthier, more just, and more joyful for more of us? This is why I love the working title of marine biologist Ayanna Elizabeth Johnson's forthcoming book, *What if We Got This Right?* (see Tippett and Johnson, 2021). I love this invitation to imagine that bare survival out of catastrophe is not the best-case scenario. There is something so much more amazing we can dream of. Then, as Johnson tells us, we look around and discover that everything we need to proliferate that best-case option is actually already here. And then we live it.

SB:
You have written on the natural-cultural phenomena of undersea weather, drawing upon the scholarship of Christina Sharpe (2016) and Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2020), to consider the 'partial dissolution' of white feminism (Neimanis, 2019). You assert that the work of Sharpe, Gumbs, and other Black feminist thinkers reveals the extent to which, as you say, maritime relations 'cannot be measured according to the tools of the White Anthropocene' (Neimanis, 2019: 503). Although the undersea, rather than the coast, is the focal point of your article, I wonder whether these insights could become generative for coastal thinking as well. For instance, your work in this area is pertinent to Ayasha Guerin's *Submerged*, a film in progress that traces histories of Black and Indigenous whalers and their displacement from coastal and shoreline regions. In my review of Guerin's film (see 'Coastal Methodologies', an essay in this special issue), I argue that audiovisual workbooking results in an anti-hydrostatic cinema: an audiovisual narrative that resists 'settling' or hydrostatically equilibrilising the racialised and speciesist histories of whaling enterprises. Works by Ayasha Guerin and other scholars and artists are modelling innovative and responsive theoretical framings and creative-critical practices that meet the demands of engaging with the slippery edges of the coastline. But the environmental and blue humanities still has work to do to meet these demands. I wonder: In what ways do you see the white Anthropocene still looming large in discussions of the coastline?

AN:
This is a wonderful question that brings to mind so many connections and considerations. In the first place, it is a fitting follow-up to the previous one. Christina Sharpe's work has been instrumental to my own most recent thinking on weather (one of the chapters in *In the Wake* is called 'The Weather' and describes anti-Blackness as the 'total climate' in a way that deeply informs my discussion of weathering above.) Similarly, Alexis Pauline Gumbs's work offers precisely the kind of imaginary that we need right now—one beyond mere survival or apocalypse, that instead imagines a different kind of future. Importantly, as you note, I read Gumbs as inviting the partial dissolution of white feminism you refer to; this is not the 'humans giving up on themselves' that I critique in my response to the previous question, but rather the understanding that something must be relinquished. In the 'after and with the end of the world' story I learn from Gumbs, there is something I have to give up, something that is related to the naturalisation of white privilege and whiteness as the measure of the 'human'—but not humanity wholesale. In this relinquishing, I can become a part of something amazing, something beautiful, something I have never been a part of before. This is a different conception of the human, one that we learn instead from people like Sylvia Wynter. Certain worlds have to end for different ones to flourish. Gumbs writes these possibilities into being.

Thank you for bringing up Ayasha Guerin's work, which I recently learned of. Your description of this work as 'anti-hydrostatic' is compelling. To me, this is very much in line with how I see Gumbs's project, which works against a linear conception of time. For Gumbs, the past is what enables the future; the past is present, and the future is present too. The ocean is a time machine that enables intimacies between different times: they touch, they shape each other. The way that Guerin draws different histories and places and bodies and times into forms of intimacy in her audiovisual workbooking is another way to keep our understanding of the past, and our possibilities for the future, open. Let me be clear: this is not an invitation to revisionist histories of colonial and other violences. It is rather to say, What comes next is still being decided. Intimacy with other people in other times, ostensibly past, will help to compose those always unfolding stories.

The white Anthropocene still dominates the present and future of the coastline when we talk about water (or wetlands, or particular plant or animal species) only in terms of ecosystem services. When we talk about loss solely as financial or economic. When we value property over relationships. When we say human and mean only one thing. You get the picture. What if, instead, we considered shifting coastlines as part of a much larger ecotone of land and water, always in flux? And what if instead of being 'hydrostatically' controlled, this ecotone were there to

teach us about transition, about change, about time, about balance, about relationship, about not always being the cleverest being in the room, about different ways of living together, about the intimacy of past and future, about the need to give up the will to mastery, about looking out for each other? And what if we got it right?

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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