

Review of the Book: *Exposed. Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (Alaimo, Stacy, 2016)

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Exposed is a collection of six chapters, along with a preface and a concluding section, most of which appeared in earlier versions in various journals in the course of almost ten years before the publication of the book. The chapters are grouped into three sections, entitled “Posthuman Pleasures,” “Insurgent Exposure,” and “Strange Agencies in Anthropocene Seas,” and while the section titles provide a clear indication as to the themes of the chapters within, I would like to focus this review on four aspects of the text that seem to appear throughout it. As in much of New Materialist writing, these themes crisscross boundaries between the style and content of the writing, the internal logic of the argument and the external influences that shaped it, and, perhaps obviously, between “nature” and “culture.” The four aspects are: (1) the key relations that shape Alaimo’s book and manner of argumentation; (2) the ethical aspect of the text (both as an ethics of reading and ethics in general); (3) the multifaceted question of exposure (metaphorical, chemical, physical etc); and (4) the joys and pleasures present in the book and offered by it.

Relations

As Alaimo writes in the Acknowledgements section of the book, “nearly every chapter was sparked by an invitation to speak at an event or write for a collection” (p. 189). This, along with the obvious revisions, rereadings, discussions and editing over the ten years between the initial articles were written and the completion of this collection, makes the book – even before the reader actually gets to approach it – appear as

shaped by a wide number of relations: between Alaimo and other scholars, writers and artists, between Alaimo and the institutions she was invited to speak as and write for, and even between Alaimo and her earlier selves who were the authors of the first version of the chapters.

This initial observation only deepens along with the analysis of the book's six chapters, most of which are framed as reactions to events, pieces of art or readings, spurring further associations, inspirations and confrontations. For example, in chapter six, building on her work in *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Alaimo asks "to what extent trans- corporeality can extend through the seas" (p. 122). In her search for an answer, she moves through meaningful interactions with, among others, William Faulkner, Charles Darwin, *The Island of Dr Moreau*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "the poetry of Linda Hogan; the science writing of Rachel Carson, Neil Shubin, and others; the scholarship of Stefan Helmreich, Mark McMEnamin, and Dianna McMEnamin" (p. 113), artists Katrin Peters or Marina Zurkow, as well as fellow new materialist scholars like Karen Barad and Rosi Braidotti.

The sheer number and variety of sources may at times threaten to cloud Alaimo's own argument, which is often most clearly presented in the last few paragraphs of each chapter, but what it does most of all, is present the author as a careful, insightful and demanding reader, whose relations with the material are guided first and foremost by her posthumanist purpose – the need to find an adequate way to think, write and act in a world where humanist categories and thinking habits are still deeply rooted even in discourses which purportedly reject them (see, e.g., the discussion of "sustainability" in the Conclusion).

Ethics

The demanding nature of the engagements with other authors – as well as artists and activists – is driven first and foremost by an ethical motivation. This is clearly visible, for example, in Alaimo's criticism of Ian Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology* (Bogost, 2012), where the key point (aside from finding a humanist, masculinist residue in his work) is that such a simplified "flat" ontology throws the baby out with the bathwater

by “quash[ing] the animal studies arguments for animal minds, animal cultures, animal communications” (p. 179). In other words, while posthumanism needs to make possible the engagement with all beings – sentient and non-sentient, human and nonhuman, living and otherwise – it also needs a deep appreciation of the enormous differences there are between the beings that we characterise as belonging to these classes. Sometimes a generalised “posthumanism” may be worthless in the practical sense of the term. As Alaimo emphatically puts it, referring to the “alien” phenomenology of a ribbon cable:

I cannot drink the Kool-Aid here and believe that a cable experiences anything at all; nor do I find it useful – personally, intellectually, ethically, politically, or in any other way except for perhaps as some sort of psychedelic koan – to imagine what it is like to “be” a cable (p. 181).

It seems that the most important strategy Alaimo uses to steer clear of such empty exercises in posthumanism is to ground her writing in experience(s). This is clearly visible, for example, in chapter three (“The Naked World”), where she analyses a number of environmental activist movements whose common strategy is to get naked. Obviously conscious and critical of the various connotations of the naked (female) body and the history of its abuses in visual arts and elsewhere, Alaimo nonetheless endeavours to treat such acts as potentially powerful political statements. As she concludes:

While politically effective, (...) the naked protests do something more. (...) Disrobing, they momentarily cast off the boundaries of the human, which allows us to imagine corporeality not as a ground of static substance but as a place of possible connections, interconnections, actions, and ethical becomings. Exposing themselves, they dramatize how the material interchanges between human bodies, geographical places, and vast networks of power provoke ethical and political actions (p. 89).

Thus, in Alaimo’s reading of these protests, they not only seek to use the body as an effective political tool, but in doing so, they also shift many of our theoretical and practical presuppositions concerning the relationship between the body and the world, (female) nakedness and nature, the human subject and the place in which it acts.

Through learning from those “eccentric” (p. 89) practices, Alaimo seeks to find new ethico-political theories that would take those shifts into account, resulting in a more thorough link between theory and experience.

Exposure

This strategy – starting from experience, and having theory follow it to avoid the pitfalls of a top-down approach – is also visible in how Alaimo approaches a particularly problematic type of exposure, namely the exposure to criticism. In what I read as a moment of both professional (as an academic) and personal (as a person who seeks to think and act in meaningful ways) exposure, Alaimo addresses a particularly stinging question raised by Claire Colebrook in her essay “Not Symbiosis, Not Now: Why Anthropogenic Climate Change Is Not Really Human” (Colebrook, 2012). Colebrook asks if

all the current counter- Cartesian, post- Cartesian or anti- Cartesian figures of living systems (along with a living order that is one interconnected and complex mesh) were a way of avoiding the extent to which man is a theoretical animal, a myopically and malevolently self- enclosed machine whose world he will always view as present for his own edification?” (Colebrook, 2012, p. 198-199).

In other words, Colebrook suggests that the theories which seek to upend the Cartesian understanding of subjectivity and paint a more symbiotic understanding of the relationship between the human and other subjects (and objects) in the world, actually reinforce Cartesianism by refusing to see its lingering presence in their theories. This is particularly stinging to Alaimo, who counts herself among those who do see the world as a “complex mesh.” Exposing herself to this line of criticism, Alaimo answers that maybe it is through a direct engagement with the world – or more precisely, through the starting of our theorising from this direct engagement – that we can find alternatives to such theoretical myopia. The particular example she gives in the book is problematic, since her argument focuses on multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS), an illness unrecognised by science-based medicine. However, the stakes of her writing are quite clear: the strongest defence she has for her anti-Cartesian thinking is rooting it in experiences of concrete people and tracing “both an experiential and theoretical grappling with the precise ways in which self and world

are intermeshed” (p. 159). Theory, thus, should focus on seeking out and elucidating already-existing experiences rather than on normative wishful-thinking that Colebrook unmasks.

The titular motif of exposure does not come only in the theoretical variety (exposure to counterarguments) and the chemical variety discussed in the case of MCS; it permeates the book as a whole, again, in a practical rather than a theoretical way. Of course, Alaimo does provide some discussion of the concept itself – for example, in the introduction, she refers it to the problem of the untenability of the notion of the “impermeable Western human subject” (p. 5), or in the conclusion, where she discusses the different meanings and stakes of exposure depending on a given subject’s race, class, ethnicity, political circumstances etc. But most importantly, she exposes exposure in its numerous dimensions, from the simple practice of nakedness to pondering how suffering from gall bladder or kidney stones can make us question the integrity of our own bodies.

Joy

It is perhaps in these fragments that the book is at its best – not when the relative merits and downsides of theories or concepts are discussed, but when the focus is set on the material practices of the artists, activists and protesters, or simply observations of the cultural environment. Alaimo has a keen eye not only for textual subtleties, but also – in this context, especially – for the everyday intricacies of life itself, sometimes in their most whimsical aspects. The book’s highlights include the descriptions of the complicated power (and specular) relations between the activist-poet La Tigresa and the puzzled loggers in front of whom she is stripping in order to protest their actions, assessing the environmentalist and emancipatory value of the “Fuck for forest” movement (whose name succinctly describes their *modus operandi*) or “parodically hypermasculine modes of consumerism” (p. 95) which include, among others, the hanging of metal testicles from car trailer hitches.

Obviously, not all of the practices Alaimo analyses are those of exuberant joy, and although the book's subtitle contains the word "pleasure," there seems to be fewer and fewer pleasures as it goes on. But it seems that the idea behind this collection – a linkage of exposure, politics and pleasures – does shine through even the darker parts of the text. What *Exposed* seems to propose is an ethical incentive to seek pleasure out – not in a Freudian sense of "pleasure principle", and especially not in an egoist, masculinist way whose metonymy is Bogost's *Playboy* bunny story (p. 236) – to appreciate it theoretically and practically, and to include it in our array of political actions. And in this aspect the book largely succeeds.

Bibliography

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