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Transcorporeality: An Interview with Stacy Alaimo

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Abstract

The interview was mainly conducted at Tallinn University in January 2019, when Stacy Alaimo visited the Graduate Winter School “The Humanities and Posthumanities: New Ways of Being Human” and gave a plenary lecture titled “Onto-epistemologies for the Anthropocene, or Who will be the Subject of the Posthumanities?”, and completed in spring 2020, to address immediately unfolding issues.

Alaimo is an internationally recognized scholar of American literature, ecocultural theory, environmental humanities, science studies, gender theory, and new materialism. She is the author of three monographs on environmental theory and ecocultural studies: *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (Cornell University Press, 2000); *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Indiana University Press, 2010); and *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016). Alaimo has edited and co-edited essay collections, including *Science Studies and the Blue Humanities* (essay cluster for SLSA journal, *Configurations*, Fall 2019); *Matter* (MacMillan Interdisciplinary Handbooks, 2017); *Material Feminisms* (with Susan Hekman, Indiana University Press, 2008), and is the author of a significant number of essays and book chapters. She co-edits a book series, “Elements,” at Duke University Press. Her current work focuses on oceans and marine life: she is currently finishing a book tentatively titled, *Composing Blue Ecologies: Science, Aesthetics, and the Creatures of the Abyss*. Alaimo served as co-President of ASLE (The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment), and created and directed the cross-disciplinary minor in Environmental and Sustainability Studies at the University of Texas and Arlington. She joined the faculty of the University of Oregon in 2019, where she is Professor of English and core faculty member in environmental studies.

The interview addresses the evolution of her views as represented in *Undomesticated Ground* (2000), as well as the connections and tensions of feminism and environmentalism; it moves on to *Bodily Natures* (2010), in which she develops her seminal concept of transcorporeality; and looks into her ongoing interest in the deep sea and its representation in culture, the focus of her current book project, *Composing Blue Ecologies*.

The interview discusses the importance of transcorporeality in the Anthropocene, as an alternative to “self-aggrandizing” accounts “in which some transhistorical ‘Man’ acts upon the inert, external matter of the world.” Examples from both science and culture illustrate the concepts discussed, reaching out into important political concerns of the day, such as climate refugees, sustainability as a labour and power issue, divisive dichotomies and understanding difference. The theme of water as an example of transcorporeality and a burning ecological issue is taken up, touching upon the current vulnerability of the Baltic Sea and elaborating on the material and ideas developed in the new book that Stacy Alaimo is working on. The final part of the interview addresses the environmental implications of the COVID-19 crisis.

Keywords: Stacy Alaimo, transcorporeality, new materialism, ocean ecologies, agency, Anthropocene, Baltic sea, COVID-19.

Resumen

Esta entrevista tuvo lugar, principalmente, en la Universidad de Tallín en enero de 2019, coincidiendo con la visita de Stacy Alaimo al módulo “Las Humanidades y las Posthumanidades: Nuevas

Maneras de Ser Humano” de su Escuela de Invierno para Doctorandos, donde impartió una conferencia plenaria titulada “Onto-epistemologías para el Antropoceno, o ¿quién será el Sujeto de las Posthumanidades?”, y se completó durante la primavera de 2020, con el objetivo de abordar los acontecimientos que estaban desarrollándose en ese momento.

Alaimo es una académica reconocida internacionalmente que está especializada en los campos de literatura estadounidense, teoría ecocultural, humanidades ambientales, estudios de ciencias, teoría de género y nuevo materialismo. Es la autora de tres monografías dedicadas a la teoría medioambiental y a los estudios ecoculturales: *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (Cornell University Press, 2000); *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Indiana University Press, 2010); y *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016). Además, coedita “Elements”, una colección de libros de la Duke University Press. Su trabajo actual se centra en los océanos y en la vida marina: está terminando un libro provisionalmente titulado *Composing Blue Ecologies: Science, Aesthetics, and the Creatures of the Abyss*. Alaimo ejerció como co-presidente de ASLE (The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment), y creó y dirigió la carrera interdisciplinar en Estudios Medioambientales y de Sostenibilidad en la Universidad de Texas y Arlington. Se incorporó al claustro de la Universidad de Oregón en 2019, donde ejerce de Catedrática de Estudios Ingleses y es una parte central de la plantilla docente dedicada a los estudios medioambientales.

La entrevista aborda la evolución de las teorías propuestas en *Undomesticated Ground* (2000), así como las conexiones y las tensiones entre el feminismo y el ecologismo; continúa con *Bodily Natures* (2010), en el que la autora desarrolla su influyente concepto de transcorporealidad, y finalmente termina con una mirada a su actual interés en el mar profundo y sus representaciones culturales, que conforma el núcleo de su actual proyecto literario: *Composing Blue Ecologies*.

La entrevista examina la importancia de la transcorporealidad en el Antropoceno como una alternativa a los relatos de “enaltecimiento propio”, “en los que “un supuesto ‘Hombre’ transhistórico actúa sobre la materia del mundo, que es inerte y externa a él”. Para ilustrar los conceptos tratados se emplean ejemplos provenientes de la ciencia y la cultura, abarcando preocupaciones políticas actuales como los refugiados ambientales, la sostenibilidad como trabajo y como estructura de poder, y las dicotomías divisivas y el entendimiento de la diferencia. Además, se trata el concepto del agua como ejemplo de transcorporealidad y de problema ecológico urgente, mencionando la vulnerabilidad actual del Mar Báltico y detallando el material y las ideas desarrolladas en el nuevo libro en el que Stacy Alaimo está trabajando actualmente. La parte final de la entrevista se entra en la trascendencia medioambiental de la crisis del COVID-19.

Palabras clave: Stacy Alaimo, transcorporealidad, nuevo materialismo, ecologías marinas, agencia, Antropoceno, Mar Báltico, COVID-19.

I: *It is almost axiomatic in current intellectual discussions to refer to our epoch as the “Anthropocene”, although international scientific and geological societies do not unanimously agree on this yet. But even in the humanities, judging by the variety of approaches and the way it is used in the media, it still seems to be a very contested term. What is the Anthropocene to you, and how does it figure in your work?*

Stacy Alaimo: Indeed, in the humanities and social sciences, the Anthropocene has been taken up widely as a shorthand for the magnitude of the effects that humans have had on the planet. While it is good to realize that people have had these effects, the way it’s often represented visually and theoretically is that the transhistorical human agent is separate from the world that “he” has transformed. I think that’s problematic because it gives us the illusion that we’re safely disconnected from the world we have negatively impacted. Some of these depictions of the Anthropocene are self-aggrandizing, taking pride in the magnitude of human force. While it is important to recognize the catastrophic impacts humanity continues to have on other species and planetary ecologies, thinking in terms of “Man” vs. the world may give us a false sense of power that shields us from considering

differential human vulnerability. We are always part of the world we have affected, and many different groups of people, such as climate refugees, are being harmed by “the Anthropocene.”

There’s something almost comforting imagining the world in geological terms—it’s about rocks, after all ... (laughs). But the Anthropocene should not be a comforting or stabilizing notion. Static visual depictions of the Anthropocene position the viewer above and beyond the scene, provide a false sense of separation, while instead, it should be about humans in relation to, and in assemblage with various technologies and other beings. If we shift from a geological frame to a biological one and consider what is now being called the insect apocalypse, for example, we can consider how much human lives depend on the ecosystem work that insects do. The use of pesticides, herbicides, and other chemicals, as well as climate change and habitat loss means that many insect species—which are necessary for ecosystems to function—are going extinct. It is more complicated to think of ourselves as immersed within multi-species agencies and interactions than it is to imagine the cartoonish, popular accounts of the Anthropocene in which some transhistorical “Man” acts upon the inert, external matter of the world.

I: *This leads us to your concept of transcorporeality, which has been your most influential contribution to the present-day ecocriticism and new materialism, alongside with Donna Haraway’s notions of natureculture (2003) and Karen Barad’s intra-action (2007). Transcorporeality is extremely useful for understanding ourselves in the world. Could you share the history behind the concept?*

SA: *Transcorporeality* does the opposite of distancing or dividing the human from external nature. It implies that we’re literally enmeshed in the physical material world, so environmentalism cannot be an externalized and optional kind of pursuit, but is always present, always at hand. It’s not about other places, because everything that we do, within global capitalism, has far-reaching planetary impacts. I think I realized something like transcorporeality when I was invited to participate in Greenpeace mercury testing. I had to cut off a piece of my hair and send to Greenpeace in an envelope, which was very odd in itself—sending a piece of my body through the mail to this environmental organization... It came back with a number showing me how much mercury was in my body. I had no idea what that number meant or what I was supposed to do with it. Thinking through that, and then how that mercury got there—was it through air pollution, or eating tuna fish when I was a child, what did that mean—was an unsettling experience that made me think of my own body/self as unraveled across space and time. Greenpeace sent back a report with information about the health effects of mercury and ways to minimize exposure through everyday practices, as well as various political actions, and it was that sense of how science and your body and the political organization are all interconnected across vast distances that led to my conception of *transcorporeality*. It’s important to realize that there’s no nature that we just act upon. Instead, it’s also acting back upon us, as we are always already the very substance and the stuff of the world that we are changing.

I: *In Exposed (2015), your most recent book to date, you dwell on this very “enmeshment of self with place” (1), whereby “bodies extend into places and places affect bodies” and we’re constantly penetrated by often unaccountable for substances and forces” (5). But what about human agency: how much of it is involved in these processes? Is there a human agency to speak of at all or should we rather adapt a position of humility?*

SA: I think humility is important because it alerts us to what we do not know or cannot know, as in Ulrich Beck’s concept of “risk culture” (1992)—we require scientific mediation to realize what chemicals or radioactive substances are around us, to know the risks. But transcorporeality emphasizes that there are a multitude of possibilities for human agency. Making consumer choices, for example not to buy plastic water bottles or drink out of them is a very small thing, but is also very important on the large scale to get plastics out of the ocean, and also to get the by-products of plastics out of the bodies of animals and humans. In the Anthropocene, there’s so much just in terms of daily life that’s connected either to carbon emissions and our carbon or chemical foot-print, or allowing other species to live.

I: *In this discussion you’ve drawn upon examples from biology and science, yet we’re both literary and cultural scholars. In the humanities, I have experienced a degree of skepticism from colleagues and interlocutors in the sciences. What is the role of literature and cultural studies in all these complexities?*

SA: The scientists are often the first people to argue that in terms of environmentalism, scientific facts are not enough, because often when they come up with scientific results and try to publicize them, nothing changes. The science is ignored. Art, literature and popular culture can make scientific facts and data into something much more meaningful for people. In *Bodily Natures*, I wrote about “material memoirs”, which are autobiographies of people seeking to understand who they are through analyzing the geographies and places they had lived, the various chemicals that had come through those places and through their bodies, and affected their psyches and minds, as well as their health. This means trying to understand oneself, but not in isolation, not in the completely abstract way of “I think, therefore I am”, but instead thinking outward, toward being interconnected with a world, thus changing the perception of ethics, politics, communities, and relationships. These material memoirs, then, challenge their readers to consider their own tangible, embodied and emplaced selves as material beings, interconnected with substances and the world, and thus to make the problem of chemicals and pollution something that is entirely personal as well as political and environmental. There can be no divisions between those domains. More generally, I think that we need the human imagination to enliven and contextualize scientific information that discloses otherwise invisible processes and effects. Literature, film, visual arts, and activism can manifest and provoke scientific and philosophical thinking by experts and ordinary citizens, provide frameworks for understanding, and questions to keep pursuing.

I: *And what are the great films or books that would introduce those frameworks, would make us more aware and responsible?*

SA: I would recommend two material memoirs, Audre Lorde's *Cancer Journals* (1980) and Suzanne Antonetta's *Body Toxic* (2001). Ana Castillo's novel, *So Far From God* (2005) is perfect for introducing many environmental justice issues, including gentrification, the loss of land, and industrial exposure to toxins. One of the characters, who works with toxic chemicals, starts wondering where the chemical she has been working with goes when she's done with it. She realizes she has been inhaling it, and in the end she dies from cancer. After the management tells her to pour any extra chemicals down the sink, she realizes she has poisoned her neighbors' water supply and endangered their lives. The novel concludes with a protest at the end, which is structured as a Catholic procession, but focuses on racism and environmental justice issues.

I: *I think this awareness through imagination is the ultimate role of the humanities, of literary and cultural scholarship, which has no less potential than the sciences. That is why environmental humanities and ecocriticism are so proliferating at the moment.*

SA: Right. And I think science fiction is particularly useful for imagining new ways of being in the world. One of my favorite works is Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987-1989). She imagines an alien species whose bodily composition, technology, and ethics are based on loving of difference—difference itself as generating life. That species is a counterpoint to the humans who hate and fear difference, resulting in apocalypse.

I: *You have also done significant work in the field of feminist and gender studies. I find very interesting a kind of evolution of your views as regards the connection between feminism and environmentalism. Your book *Undomesticated Ground* (2000) is informed by the connection of women and nature, which you see as "a space of feminist possibility", examining the "range of feminist rearticulations of nature" that underscore "how crucial nature has been for the cultural work of feminism" (22-23). Yet in *Exposed* (2015) you make a U-turn and suggest that women should be cautious about too explicit association with "what used to be called nature" (11) and thus collapsing the two into environmental feminism or ecofeminism. Is ecofeminism so bad? It seems to me that in today's world, bigotry goes hand in hand with ecological denial, so gender is gaining momentum yet again. What is your stance in 2019-2020: how to engage in both feminism and environmentalism, on what ground do they meet or intertwine?*

SA: I have a complicated answer to the relationship between environmentalism and feminism. In my first book, *Undomesticated Ground*, I was trying to look into the possibility of there being a gender-minimizing connection with nature: how could feminisms approach nature without solidifying or cementing gender dichotomies? Could different concepts of nature break down dualisms of male and female? When I was writing it, post-structuralist feminism was very important in the US academy, and the very term *nature* implied bodily, sexual essentialism, and that was exactly what feminism was critiquing. Which makes sense, of course, but as an environmentalist and feminist I wanted to imagine modes of alliance between the two that did not reinforce gender dualisms. So writing about nature and feminism in *Undomesticated Ground* was a risky thing to do at that time, which is ironic now, because so many people are now interested in both

ecofeminism and the environmental humanities more generally. But what I found was that actually, in all sorts of literature and theory and art from the early 19th century to the present, there were alternative visions, in which different women writers and activists and theorists were saying that culture was the place that was static and confining, in terms of strict gender roles, and nature was a liberatory space that allowed for critique of or escape from rigid cultural constructions. Various scientific understandings of nature also allow for a critique of the assumption that nature is static and culture dynamic, as many species change their gender and sexuality, species and organisms change and emerge, making nature very fluid—evolution is all about change, of course. By the time I was writing *Bodily Natures*, I had moved into the conception of new materialism, which allows for the sense that what we call nature or the body is an intra-active materiality. Nothing can be “nature,” in the sense of an inert subject substance that culture shapes—all is in flux, all is permeable. So that allows for more variability and more of a dynamic sense of how nature and culture interact. In fact, robust versions of new materialism, such as that of Karen Barad, put the entire dualism of nature and culture under erasure, since they cannot mean the same things once they cannot be separate from each other.

Problems arise when environmentalism and feminism are conflated. For example, as Val Plumwood used to say, women are not “angels of the eco-system” (9). Women in industrialized western culture are consumers and are just as culpable in environmental destruction on a day-to-day basis as the men—we’re all living in the same culture doing similar things and there’s no sort of innocence there. In intersectional terms, in the U. S., class and race are often more relevant than gender when it comes to determining the extent to which different groups are harming the environment and being harmed by it. Not all feminists are environmentalists certainly, and many people who are not feminists are environmentalists, so it gets very complicated. On the other hand, feminism provides many models for analyzing body politics, how the personal is political, in the sense of Barbara Kruger’s “your body is the battleground.” This is crucial for environmentalism and posthumanism, for critiquing the notion of the human and thinking through various ideologies of dominance and mastery. But it’s always a danger to think there could be one ecofeminism that would resolve all these problems. It’s always a matter of negotiating different intersectionalities at that moment.

I: *There’s never one feminism or environmentalism—it all comes in a wide range.*

SA: Exactly. Also, there’s a real danger in “domestic” versions of environmentalism, in which women are still doing more than their fair share of domestic work. We need to look at who’s doing the labor. Sustainability can be a labor issue—and if there’s unequal distribution of labor on gender grounds, that’s a problem. Also, in the U.S., it is often dangerous for women to walk alone, which could mean more driving, impacting women’s health, causing air pollution and climate change. So, all these issues in gender criss-cross, each requiring a separate analysis.

I: *Your new book is on the sea and water in the Anthropocene. I personally find the theme of water very fascinating, maybe because of living by the sea in Estonia all my life. There’re*

burning issues with the Baltic sea which, being an inland sea, is slow to clean and thus especially vulnerable to all the pollution from cruise ships and industrial farming, which cause dead zones and fish extinction, all eventually feeding back to us. I understood it best while on a hike along the Käsnu peninsula. A phone app outlined our hike along the shore, showing us walking on water, but we were actually walking on land, it was a google maps version of a few years back, and the sea had subsided since because of human activities and climate change, shrinking at such a visible and alarming rate, and technology showed it, really in a way you illustrated with your Greenpeace experience, all the connections being there. Because we are seventy per cent water, water is a perfect example to understand transcorporeality. What will be in focus in your new book?

SA: The book I'm currently working on is about deep sea creatures and the limits of human concern, whether it possible to develop some kind of an environmental ethos that would extend to the depths of the sea, to creatures that we haven't discovered yet, but probably already going extinct. One of the things that interest me about this is our strange, anachronistic position regarding the deep sea. On the one hand, mining, industrialized fishing and trawling are destroying deep sea habitats rapidly, before the science even has a chance to discover what there is at the bottom of the sea and how it works. The life forms there live extremely slow lives—so there is a huge temporal disjunction between capitalist human time that is extracting, taking, destroying, and the lives of those creatures who develop and live very slowly in their own worlds, yet these worlds could be quickly wiped out.

I'm also very interested in how images of deep-sea creatures are circulating in social media, or magazines like *National Geographic* as astonishingly weird or beautiful, and I'm thinking about how the aesthetic functions in environmental politics and science. How should we understand the aesthetic in terms of the actual creatures? And what are the limits of how we understand what an animal can be, because some of the creatures like the salps or the gelatinous creatures are so "inhuman" and "strange", with modes of knowing and being so different from ours. And then, in terms of ocean ecologies, it is essential to develop a global environmental vision, because these places are usually not under any particular nation-state, or region, or indigenous territory, and they're extremely mediated by big science.

The book will start with William Beebe, who in the 1930s dived in his "bathysphere" to record the images of creatures he saw through the window. He couldn't collect specimens from within the bathysphere of course, nor even clear photographs or film. He described what he saw verbally and his accounts were critiqued for being sensationalistic rather than scientific, while he was trying to be taken seriously as a scientist and naturalist. So I'm interested in how science and aesthetics play out in these accounts of deep sea life. Beebe's deep-sea dives were happening at the moment when science was becoming more objective and disconnected from the humanities. But he admired both Darwin and *Alice in Wonderland*, and promoted the naturalist tradition of people telling stories along with doing the science—not making it colorless and arid and boring, but enlivened by the arts and the humanities. The book concludes with *The Census of Marine Life*, a huge global scientific quest to count and identify all the creatures in all

the oceans. Interesting, this massive scientific undertaking devotes much attention to highly aestheticized photographs, videos, and other art works.

I: *Do you think it is a kind of delusion, like the way the female body had been aestheticized in classical painting, all these reclining nudes and we don't think of what it cost them, or the beautiful models on the podium and you don't think of how they're starving themselves and so on?*

SA: Right—that's a great question! One of the things I looked at in the Beebe archives were Else Bostelman's gorgeous, surreal paintings of the deep-sea creatures and photographs of the "samples" that had been taken. The paintings are stunning, but how many fish and other sea-creatures did they collect and kill in huge piles, in order to arrive at these aesthetically pleasing images? We end up seeing a beautiful, mesmerizing image, but that image hides so much death and destruction... And yet, in our current moment, I believe that aesthetic images of ocean creatures are invaluable for motivating people to care about ocean conservation.

I: *My final question naturally addresses the current situation with COVID-19, which to my mind is directly related to transcorporeality, risk culture and, above all, animal rights and human-animal relations, with human supremacy and excesses leading to this catastrophe. As is prophetically depicted in Steven Soderbergh's then science fictional film Contagion (2011), a zoonotic virus killing half a planet starts in the kitchen of a Hong Kong casino, but is in fact the result of human destruction of bats' natural habitat for the sake of large-scale construction and industrial animal farming. What are the lessons we are to learn from this pandemic, in environmentalist terms?*

SA: Writing this in May 2020, I would start by stressing that basic information about Covid 19 is still emerging—so much is unknown. I am wary of origin stories for the virus, even as they may convey environmental cautionary tales. In the U.S. the news that the virus could have originated in Chinese wet markets and the wildlife trade did not result in a surge of support for environmental protections or animal welfare but instead, in increased racism and xenophobia against Asians and Asian Americans.¹ Meanwhile industrial meat production in the U.S. is an ongoing environmental disaster, which contributes to climate change, pollution of vast regions of the country, dangerous working conditions, and extreme cruelty and violence toward millions of animals. Moreover, the colossal scale of industrial production of meat is extremely concerning in terms of zoonotic diseases and widespread antibiotic resistance. But to answer your question more directly, I have been thinking about COVID-19 in terms of transcorporeality and exposure, since the virus dramatically underscores both of those concepts, as our bodily interconnection with other people, air, and even inert objects, is suddenly rendered invisibly hazardous. The experience of living with COVID-19 is not unlike the experience

¹ To clarify, some environmental organizations have opposed the wildlife trade after COVID-19, such as the Center for Biological Diversity. I don't think such initiatives gained wide support, however, especially when contrasted with the immediate racist and xenophobic response of a particular sector of the U.S. public, spurred on by the President's racist slurs against China.

I had when thinking about the prevalence of xenobiotic chemicals while writing *Bodily Natures*. An unsettling weirdness reigns when you recognize that invisible dangers lurk within the most banal aspects of ordinary life! (The ‘double shock’ and the ‘loss of intellectual sovereignty’ that Ulrich Beck writes about.) Ironically, just as many of us are considering the Anthropocene, and theorizing the immense temporal and geographical scale of human impact on “the planet,” something miniscule suddenly topples life as we know it. But, *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*—even as the virus does not discriminate, the embodied effects of race and class inequality—the way social hierarchies materially affect people’s physical health and financial resilience—means that the pandemic is hitting certain groups of people much harder than others. Social inequalities are intensified by a “natural” phenomenon. And while ecofascist memes circulate, celebrating the idea that the virus is giving “Nature” a chance to “recover,” the current administration in the U.S. is demolishing environmental protections. And the hand sanitizer, wipes, masks, chemical cleaners, etc. are creating more toxicity and pollution. Against the “nature can recover” memes I would say that an unexpected pandemic does not qualify as an environmental policy, practice, or vision. This historic moment can, however, provide an opportunity for people to consider what it means to be embedded within, and never entirely separated from, the material world that capitalism, colonialism, and extractivism have radically transformed, and at the same time, to undertake the somewhat paradoxical work, in the Anthropocene, of making boundaries—as Donna Haraway put it in the “Manifesto for Cyborgs” (150), taking “responsibility in their construction,” in such a way as to promote abundant ecologies, animal agencies, and the wellbeing of human and nonhuman creatures. I would extend what Rosemary-Claire Collard, Jessica Dempsey, and Juanita Sundberg argue in “A Manifesto for Abundant Futures,” regarding the Anthropocene more generally to this historic moment of the novel coronavirus—now is the time to envision “how to live in a multispecies world” (1).

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