

Planetary Thinking with New Humanities

An Olga's Cielemecka interview with Cecilia Åsberg

Cecilia Åsberg is Guest Professor in Science and Technology Studies focusing on Gender and Environment at Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) in Stockholm, and Full Professor at Gender Studies at Linköping University in Sweden. In her work she unapologetically pushes the boundaries of disciplines – troubling our conventional and canonized ways of doing research and inspiring the students, readers, and fellow researchers to think out of the box. Profesor Åsberg champions such a radically cross-disciplinary method of thinking, imagining, and writing through her work that inquires into the unruly crossings of gender, technology, environment and which spans from exploring the social imaginaries of scientific discourses and practices, to human-animal companionship, to toxic embodiments and pharmaceutical subjectivities, to investigating water connections of marine life, environmental risks, and military pasts sediment-

ed in the depths of the Baltic Sea. She's made immense contributions to laying the groundwork and invigorating the fields of feminist STS, environmental humanities, new materialisms, posthumanities, medical humanities, and blue humanities, among others. She authored multiple scholarly articles and edited volumes, including most recent ones: *A Feminist Companion to the Posthumanities* (2018) edited with Rosi Braidotti and *Animal Places. Lively Cartographies of Human Animal Relations* (2017), edited with Jacob Bull and Tora Holmberg. Professor Åsberg has also been committed to creating research hubs for lively engagements with these new ways and methods for feminist research, bringing together, in a spirit of collaboration and curiosity, scholars in institutions.

Her work in creating new methods and conceptual devises for gender studies research is oriented towards formulating feminist responses to most pressing contemporary issues, particularly in times of rapid environmental change, that urges new imaginaries and narratives about human and nonhuman agency, embodiment, responsibility, and multispecies communities that we form with our human, cyborgic, animal, microscopic, and other planetary others. We caught up with Professor Åsberg to discuss new trajectories in today's humanities, the potentialities they bring and why we need radically postconventional ways of doing humanities today. We also discuss the interlacement of environmental humanities and feminist theory and why feminist engagements with environmental thought matter.

Today environmental issues are perhaps the single most discussed and pressing global problem. Even though we are living in times when natural environment is so impacted by human actions that it seems impossible to keep a clean-cut separation between nature and culture, this binary opposition seems to be haunting us. In Poland today, it comes back in environmental discussions, e.g. in conflict around the Białowieża Forest, as well as in discussions about reproductive justice (for instance in reference to assisted reproductive technologies) and anti-LGBTQ hate campaigns. How can feminist environmental humanities help us in conceptualising the nature/culture dichotomy?

Feminist environmental humanities draws on many previous scholarly traditions, amongst them feminist science and technology studies and especially the rich works of Donna Haraway. Her concepts work as powerful analytical engines for thinking and practicing research way beyond the divides of nature/culture. Another key source to contemporary feminist environmental humanities is the early ecofeminist philosophical works of Val Plumwood, that gave major attention the construction of this asymmetrical dualism, and how it produces a devalued sphere of otherness. The origin stories of environmental humanities as a field founded on the debunking of a disciplinary division of labour, where science do nature and humanities culture, would of course also be amiss without the major feminist con-

tributions of Deborah Bird Rose as well. Her work range Australian anthropology and indigenous insights on land and country, extinction studies, animal and multispecies studies, and more, and always permeated by a careful ecological ethics and philosophies of justice.

From my own point of view, as someone who has had the privilege of seeing the emergence also of a “postdisciplinary discipline” (Lykke 2010) such as Gender Studies, and its flourishing, in the Swedish context, I would also say that such hauntings (of the nature-culture dichotomy) can have very generative effects. Gender Studies at large have been seriously troubled by this divide in the form of the sex/gender concepts. Inspired by Anglo-American theory, Swedish gender scholars actually inserted a binary nature-culture logic in the early 1990s by adapting the terms sex and gender where it in the Swedish language only previously had been one word (*kön*) for both biological and social aspects. The reinvention of the concept of gender (*genus* in Swedish) for the sociocultural aspects of sexual politics was great for producing new knowledge on societal injustice, but it left “sex” under-theorized and open to all kinds of biological determinisms. Haunted by this divide for long, continental feminist theory (also in its travels across the Atlantic divide) produced the corporeal turn, new materialisms of all kinds, and other more-than-human approaches. No wonder it caught on fast in the Swedish setting of Gender studies! We needed it badly.

Already in the beginning of my academic career, when my research focused on topic of genes, genetics, and gender in the, at the time very public, cultural imaginary of the life sciences and popular science media I dove into the depths of the aged feminist issue of what gets to count as natural (and presumably unchanging, much as genes then was imagined at the time) and what gets to count as cultural (and presumably changeable, as gender power relations and heteronormativity in institutions).

Today we are more prone to talk about a postnatural world?

Today, in our envisioned environmental situation of climate warming, species extinctions and ubiquitous pollution, nothing can any longer be said to be purely natural. Instead we are keenly aware of how nature changes from ecological devastations at the macro level to in vitro fertilization or synthetic biology at the molecular level. We live in a through-and-through postnatural world as both our ideas of nature and the world of real and relational matters transforms dramatically. The human touch, or rather the driving ideas of progress and profit have met and mixed with all of the planet's ecological support systems at the micro and macro levels of life. Masses of satellites surveil closely any remote planetary area (and have co-produced an extra-atmospheric waste belt of space junk around the globe), and CRSPR technologies can easily edit genetic expressions in organisms. In the age some scientists call the Anthropocene, nature

seems man-made, trademarked, and bio-accumulating to toxic effects in all of us. We find ourselves in a post-natural situation, and feminist and queer scholars are often especially well adapted to thinking with what goes way beyond the natural and its sociohistorical confines.

What role does feminist new materialist and posthumanist thought play in practicing this new environmental thinking?

Consider for instance postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's understanding of "planetarity."¹ It calls for an end to the division of the planet through what she calls a cartographer's gaze, aiming to divide and control all at once through simple categorizations such as national borders, disciplinary borders, or human differences in the derogatory social power registers of race, gender, etc. In *The Death of a Discipline*, Spivak broadens the scope for her argument on the annihilation of the borders between fields of academic study, say, that the sciences do nature and the humanities do culture, to the entire humanist mindset. There is no "one-world" view to be had, no all-seeing eye, despite the best efforts of satellite technologies and iconic NASA imagery. Donna J. Haraway would refer to such illusions of a one-world view as "god tricks,"² the hubris perspective of a totalizing view, omnipresent and god-like.

1 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Death of a Discipline*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

2 Haraway, Simians, *Cyborgs, and Women*.

Haraway's feminist target of critique was objectivity imagined as neutrality from whatever instrument or social technique that made the knowledge known. A social technique in this case may well be gendered processes such as the active exclusion of women from science and higher academic ranks. She had no truck with a scientific epistemology imagined as neutral, omnipresent and yet innocent, especially in the face of the history of science and scientific ways of knowing and what such knowledges had enabled in terms of racism and sexism in society. Haraway charged both the epistemologies of relativism and totalizing positivism with being "god tricks" and suggested instead "situated knowledges," while Spivak's argument scales this up considerably. Such totalizing views of a one-world, argues Spivak, allow for a detrimental compound of colonization, globalization, and consumerism.

What kind of images of the planetary emerge from here?

The "pale blue dot" figuration of Carl Sagan, or the Earth image from space, can be used for many political purposes, yet it often hides the economic, social, and technological apparatuses behind the image. The alternative mindset for Spivak is instead "planetary," in which we consider our involvement on Earth as first and foremost being planetary creatures, and we embrace – not exhaust – the innumerable differences that have the potential

to separate us.³ A kindred analysis to the decolonizing insights of Spivak and Haraway on situated planetarity can be found with Mette Bryld and Nina Lykke in for instance their book *Cosmodolphins*.⁴ They argued for how the expensive and high-tech photography, shot from space of the “pale blue planet,” indulged the cannibalistic imaginary of consumption as much as the idea of the planet as vulnerable, defenseless, and in need of our human stewardship in times of climate change.

You talk about the, so to speak, ‘feminist art’ of crossing established disciplinary boundaries! What is the role of remembering these feminist transdisciplinary genealogies and legacies in times of what some call the Anthropocene?

Influential thinkers such as the already mentioned Donna Haraway, Gyatari Spivak, Nina Lykke and Mette Bryld, and there are many more than I managed to credit here, come from traditions of within post-continental, and/or feminist thought. Their books and articles are staple readings for scholars within new materialist theory or posthumanities and its postdisciplinary practices. Such scholars are also often, especially those that draw on feminist and collaborative (non-individualist) traditions, forgotten or even actively dismissed in some strains of environmental humanities today. I see it as part of my mission to refuse to forget that

3 Spivak, *The Death of a Discipline*, 77.

4 Mette Bryld and Nina Lykke, *Cosmodolphins: Feminist Cultural Studies of Technology, Animals, and the Sacred*, London: Zed Books, 2000.

environmental humanities started out as eco-feminist philosophy, indigenous studies, human animal ethics, and interdisciplinary ecological humanities in for instance Australia as much as environmental history, eco-critique and bio-feminist science and technology studies in the transversal and transnational veins of Donna Haraway. It came from many sources, but the feminist scholars have always driven the inter-, cross- or even postdisciplinary moves of the humanities as they had to (and still do) wrestle with, on the one hand, academic obstacles, and hence are forced to network and invent new career paths, and, on the other hand, the nature/biological/sex-issues of various feminisms.

As you just said, while the field of environmental humanities is expanding and growing, its feminist commitments and roots are sometimes being obscured or forgotten. Astrida Neimanis and Jennifer Hamilton called this phenomenon ,naming without claiming.’

I think that the real feminist pioneers of environmental humanities all too often get marginalized in historiographical accounts of the field nowadays, which is something a colleague of mine, Lauren Lafauci and me have discovered in a research project. Not seldom was these early path-finding feminist environmental humanities scholars water- or animal oriented. They were theorizing and thinking through matters, entities or elements such as water, forests, cells, fetus-

es, dogs, primates, or mountains, like Val Plumwood. The book *Cosmodolphins* by Metter Bryld and Nina Lykke (2000) is my main case in point as it is such a full-fledged cultural study of the Cold War period and the space race, on how the militarized sciences of both USA and USSR deployed dolphins and dolphin imaginaries to chilling ends in lakes, seas and world oceans - and, as it turned out, in New Age-blissed out water tanks, as well. *Cosmodolphins* also brings me back to your question on the planetary, and why planetarity in our thinking is important amidst local and situated knowledge claims. Thinking planetarity is something quite at odds with both New Age holism and seemingly “science-y”, totalizing technoviews to world domination, ie to the planet overlooked at a glance, seen and controlled as from a God-like nowhere position. We need to rethink planetarity, I say, especially in this day and age, call it the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Wasteocene or something else to describe the scandalous human impact on the planet’s transnational ecologies and atmosphere.

Your own work is a perfect example of such creative mixing and mingling of various discourses, narratives, and disciplines bringing together science and feminist struggles. Where did such unorthodox method come from for you?

My research is very interdisciplinary, if not downright postdisciplinary, emerging from the multiple and meandering feminist or otherwise critically

creative traditions. The postdisciplinarity of mine harkens back to my 1990s training in, (yes really!), interdisciplinary humanities, combining history, philosophy, art history/visual culture, and literature.

I am a bit proud that I did the first PhD degree in Gender Studies in Scandinavia, but I think it might have been regarded as an odd one in Sweden where we have a lot of research on (the lack of) gender equality. I was instead focusing on the topic of genes, genetics and gender in the, at the time very public, cultural imaginary of the life sciences and popular science media. This choice of topic was of course pertinent for the intermingling of feminist theory with cultural studies and science and technology studies (STS).

I would like to talk a bit about your more recent work in which you focus, in very exciting ways, on watery relations and depths. You're one of the pioneers of blue humanities that take serious water as a feminist issue – water is inscribed and storied also with power relations and millions of histories sedimented at the bottom of the sea in which humans play a significant role. Can you tell us more about it?

Standing on the shoulders of pioneering water-enthusiasts of feminist environmental humanities such as Stacey Alaimo, Eva Hayward, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, I would hardly be able to claim any kind of blue or oceanic humanities pioneer status, really. We were just

early movers on thinking with water from within the more pioneering strands of environmental humanities in the 2010s. Yet, I was in fact very close to a really early pioneering work on water and multispecies relationships, namely the early dolphin work of Nina Lykke and Mette Bryld that I got during PhD-training in the 1990s. As always there is so much wonderful work that already has been made, like the amazing marine ecological writings of Rachel Carson that I and my co-researchers read and discover more and more now. Carson is of course most famous for her trailblazing book, *Silent Spring*, from 1962 on the effects of widespread environmental toxins, on the pesticides and insecticides including DDT. However, she was really a marine biologist with a penchant for the intertidal zones and marine ecologies, and her other works, beautifully written, testify to a passionate scholar of oceanic life. So, while I am no rooky in research now after twenty-two years as a feminist scholar with passion for the natural, biological and ecological, there has been so much already done – so much of which I am still discovering! And of course this is one reason why I love my job, and feel so privileged as I get to be curious about and research things for a living (laughs).

How to do research with such a slippery object like water? Who could be a good companion in such work?

In my research practices, I still often start from a very specific empirical case or a charismatic object, like chemical weapons dumped at sea after WW2, something (a thinking object) curiously condensed in time, rich in social meaning and on a limited location, yet with repercussions beyond such confines. Also, my research often still starts from what might be regarded as classical, contested issues in feminist theory such as the body, the biological and what ever gets to count as natural. The works of Donna Haraway have been eye-opening for me over the years, but her oeuvre functions to me and to many others, more like a thinking technology: you have to make it work analytically yourself and figure out – along with other harawayian or post-continental scholars – how to follow the strings of the charismatic object out into its wider context and world. To try to pin down Haraway's influence in two concepts, I would mention the cyborg and situated knowledges. The process ontology of the cyborg-figuration, an ontology of naturecultures (where material nature is regarded as a coyote figure, a nonhuman trickster, and witty agent outside humanistic control and largely ungraspable), and the epistemology of situated knowledges have shaped my thinking tremendously. As has the STS dictum of taking the nonhuman seriously, be it genes, lab animals, kelp-human relationships or submerged chemical weapons in the Baltic Sea.

In an essay 'Four Problems, Four Directions For Environmental Humanities: Toward A Critical

Posthumanities For the Anthropocene' (2015), you and your co-authors diagnose an urgent 'need for critical reflection on the state of our environment, on human subjectivity and actions, but most importantly, on their inextricable entanglement and how to then research this.' How do we do that? How can research in the humanities complement sciences, like earth science, climatology, or biology whose possible contribution to mitigating climate change seems more obvious?

Environmental humanities, as many other forms of biofeminist scholarship or posthumanities, draw a lot on for instance climate science - and aim to provide a more culturally meaningful frame to the numbers, graphs and degrees we are scientifically presented with (in ie IPCC reports) - give science the story telling clout to be a transformative agent in society. Myself I find it both utterly important to support science now - and to do it as a way to support the transformative role of the humanities, and somewhat ironic too since in last decade one of the worst critiques internally within Gender Studies versus feminist STS was to be regarded as too scientist (too pro science) or too pro biological knowledge. Nowadays, I strongly believe we need the feminist and queer interpretations of ecologies and biologies more than ever... Of course I am thinking about the research we have done on ubiquitous toxic embodiment of present day life for humans as well as nonhumans, and what DiChiro problematized as „polluted politics”. That is,

when we hear alarmistic new reports on hormone-disrupting effects of plastics, or other synthetic and very elusive chemical compounds, such as PCB or bisphenol A (BPA) in baby bottles, so called endocrine disruptive substances, they all too often come along with alarms on disturbing the “natural order” of (read: heteronormative view to) sex and gender. They come with scares of fish being feminized, and tap into cultural anxieties around trans-phobia and maleness under threat, which speak to a toxic social regime of gender apartheid. There are of course ways and modes of addressing the very real threats to species, human and nonhuman, and to sexual bodies without tapping into trans-phobia or heteronormativity. In fact, the more I learn about animal sex and the many amazing rainbow varieties of biological sex there exist out there (and in our own bodies), and how little that pertains to present, anthropocentric notions of sex and gender – the more I think feminist scholars should engage with biology and ecology. What we used to call nature provides no ground what so ever for the present, still prevailing, discourse on how people should live their lives. Variation and diversity is instead key to survival, from an evolutionary point of view of course, but probably also from an ecological point of view. For the future, I hope planetary humanities and/or feminist ecological humanities, under what-ever name or heading, goes on to explore such biodiversity. And that we continue to do this in conversation with marine biologists, scientists, sustainability engineers and environmental real-life stake holders, like people living along

coastlines, fishers and local activists. Collaboration, not competition, and getting many insights and suggestions onboard, is also key to our planetary futures. After all, feminist and other postconventional thinkers and activists, like Greta Thunberg, the Fridays for Future-movement, and Extinction Rebellion, have proven to have the ability to rather quickly expand our much too limited humanistic imaginary on what's possible to do, that society's mindsets can change – and sometimes fast. Non-academic and academic activisms, like the ones I have talked about, have linked causes, and provide ample platforms for exploring best practices of conviviality, of living and dying better together across human and nonhuman communities. We do not need academic degrees or disciplinary standing to rethink planetary practices with care, concern and curiosity. But the academic landscape is a fast changing scene, and scientists, critical scholars and non-academic activists are clearly in a good position now to strategically join forces, for the futures we want to see together.

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