

Hydrofeminism

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We are all bodies of water, leaking, sponging, sloshing, dripping, sipping (Neimanis 2017). As watery, we experience ourselves less as isolated entities, and more as oceanic eddies: situated, temporary, relational.

soak up
relinquish
precipitate

Hydrofeminism (Neimanis, 2012) is an action concept that flows from this embodied material imaginary. Following Adrienne Rich, hydrofeminism begins “with the geography closest in—the body” (1986: 212). Understanding our own human bodies as bodies of water invites us into a different kind of relation to other bodies of water, and a feminism of relation. Hydrofeminism asks: if we are all bodies of water, what does this connect us to? What can we give, and what do we owe?

pour
pool
circulate

A hydrofeminist hydrological cycle insists that we relinquish any lingering illusion of separation, as we decant ourselves into one another as an inevitable matter of physics. We are disbursed through both space and time. As Charles Darwin once quipped: “Our ancestor was an animal which breathed water, had a swim bladder, a great swimming tail, an imperfect skull, and was undoubtedly a hermaphrodite!” (cited in Zimmer 1998: n.p.) These fishy beginnings connect us to all life that came from the sea, figuring our own watery bodies as evolutionary “carrier bags,” to use Ursula K. Le Guin’s term (1989). Our bodies hold things, and hold things in relation. Hydrofeminism asks: what do our own sloshy sacks of matter carry in trust for other bodies, still to come?

puddle-jump
time-travel

Hydrofeminism thus confirms that we humans have always been (and always will be) more than our species. Just as Angela Davis confirms that feminism “involves so much more than gender” (2013), hydrofeminism reminds us that feminism involves so much more than humans, too: it is planetary, elemental, multispecies, multibeing. As the oceans warm and struggle to breathe, as rivers no longer make it to the sea, as drinking water is commodified, as the seabed is mined, as all of the multitudes of life forms that depend on these waters are made increasingly precarious, caring better for other bodies of water is a hydrofeminist imperative.

care
carry

Learning from the generations of feminisms that it has ingested, hydrofeminism is also obligated to continually critique the trickles of white supremacy, colonialism, classism, and body normativities that circulate within projects that call themselves feminist. Even as waters hold us together as hydrocommons, aqueous connection is neither assimilation nor universal confluence. Water does not ask us to confirm either the irreducibility of alterity or material connection. Water flows between, as both: a new hydro-logic. Hydrofeminism acknowledges that the unknowability of the other nonetheless courses through me—just as I

do through her. In political terms, this also recognizes the need for tributaries and sovereign waters, for shifting sites of confluence.

*differentiate
channel*

This uncontainable gestational impulse is moreover held in wondrous tension with water's insistent perpetuity: to understand the "always time" of water, even in its circulations of difference and repetition, is also to consider that water remembers. Water is retentive, writes Janine MacLeod: "All of the moments of the past have this same water as their witness" (2013: 48). Toni Morrison parses this a bit differently: "Everything is now. It is all now" (1987: 198).

*hold
hold on*

Water, an archive of matter and feeling, thus reminds us that there is no such thing as "away." Sinking to the seafloor, we discover all manner of our dumped desires: SPAM cans, car tires, chemical traces, carbon takeovers. Indeed, our evolutionary carrier-bag ontology has literalized itself: nonbiodegradable white petroleum hauntings, masquerading as sad two-handled jellyfish, floating on a gyre of deep futures later to be pulled in the form of hundreds of kilos of plastic bag guts from the belly of a whale washed up on a beach. The gifts of our bodies to other bodies of water are not necessarily welcome gestures.

*repeat,
but differently*

Moreover, water's archive holds traces of all the differences that water has made. Christina Sharpe draws our attention to the oceanic archive of the Middle Passage, still animated by the antiblackness that persists in its wake. She writes: "Because nutrients cycle through the ocean, [...] the atoms of the [enslaved] people who were thrown overboard are out there in the ocean even today" (2016:40). Hydrofeminism must also attend to the different manners in which our bodies have been carried, or not. We do not all thirst, or flow, equally. We are not all gestating the same futures.

*suspend
harbour*

Put otherwise, for hydrofeminism care as and for waters is never "only" environmental. Any calls for sustainable futures must consider how issues of pollution, extinction and meteorological change are also questions of social injustice and infrastructures of inequality. Environmental catastrophe must be understood as a symptom—the proper trickle-down—of deformed human relations that flow across the planet.

We are all bodies of water, but as watery, we are not all the same.
And, if we are all bodies of water, then are we all, in some way, already at sea?

untether

In the English language, "to be at sea" is an idiom to suggest discombobulation or confusion. To lose one's bearings. To be alive as bodies of water, in these catastrophic times, might also be to feel tetherless, and at sea.

As a transfer point of queer time, hydrofeminism is also a praxis of speculation—not only for the futures, but for the many presents that we are already imagining otherwise. For hydrofeminism, then, tetherless can be another way of saying: get free.

step up
speak out
say no
let go
lift up
step back.

For hydrofeminism, tetherless can mean refusing the false compass points, and learning new tricks of planetary navigation. Following Alexis Pauline Gumbs, hydrofeminism invites us, “we who would be whales” and “immersed in a substance we could not breathe” (2020:17). to follow other watery beings who have long been swimming, floating, submerging, growing different kinds of worlds.

dive,
deeper

Hydrofeminism helps foster practices of fugitivity and care, not primarily for the sovereign self, but for the hydrocommons of wondrous difference that finds us in this time, and this place, at sea.

dissolve

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