



© 2017 by the author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), allowing third parties to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format and to remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially, provided the original work is properly cited and states its license.

**Citation:** Shotwell, A. 2017. Water and Ocean. *Cultural Studies Review*, 23:2, 183-189. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/csr.v23i2.5827>

ISSN 1837-8692 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrj/index>

BOOK REVIEW

## Water and Ocean

Elsbeth Probyn. 2016, *Eating the Ocean*.  
Durham: Duke University Press.  
ISBN 9780822362357. RRP \$22.95 USD (pb).

Astrida Neimanis. 2017, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*.  
London: Bloomsbury.  
ISBN 9781474275392. RRP £71.99.

### Alexis Shotwell

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Dr, Ottawa, ON K1S 5B6, Canada

**Corresponding author:** Alexis Shotwell, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Dr, Ottawa, ON K1S 5B6, Canada; [Alexis.Shotwell@Carleton.ca](mailto:Alexis.Shotwell@Carleton.ca)

**DOI:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/csr.v23i2.5827>

**Article History:** Received 6/4/2017; Revised 6/16/2017; Accepted 6/24/2017;  
Published 27/11/2017

I was born in Arapahoe and Ute territory, in the arid foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Growing up, the only oysters I had any practical knowledge of were the battered and fried bull-calf testicles called 'prairie oysters'. At fourteen, my family moved to the peninsula of K'jipuktuk, Mi'kma'ki (Nova Scotia), nearly an island. When my dad told me that we would eat nothing but seafood there, I cried. Teenage me would have had so much to learn from Elsbeth Probyn and Astrida Neimanis about the entanglement of water with my body in that high desert, varieties of oysters, the feeling of the ocean, and the colonial politics of immigration and thirst. As I write, I'm living in a small town in Dena'ina Athabaskan territory, Alaska, that is organised around fishing. The local bumpersticker reads, Homer, AK: A Quaint Drinking Village With A Fishing Problem. Half the people I know here are getting ready to spend the summer commercial fishing for salmon, and most of the rest are getting ready to host tourists who come to town for recreational fishing. The house I'm in has no running water, so we get drinking water from a spigot in town and use it sparingly. Water and the ocean are on my mind here, and increasingly I am convinced that they ought to be on all of our minds.

**DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST** The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **FUNDING** The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

These books certainly help us turn our attention water-ward. *Eating the Ocean* is Probyn's fifth sole-authored book. *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* is Neimanis's first. Both writers teach at the University of Sydney, both are generous academic interlocutors and editors of other books, both attend to ubiquitous, suffusive, hard-to-grasp subject matter. These books pair beautifully—I can wholeheartedly recommend both, and in particular recommend reading them together. While they complement one another, these texts also stretch their matters of concern and methods in usefully different directions. And both contribute to growing academic interest in the vast parts of our shared world that is smaller or bigger or more complex than a human frame of reference easily perceives—microbiota, plant and forest sensoria, ecosystems, waterways, oceans and other more-than-humanness.

*Eating the Ocean* begins with a masterful summation of the stakes and openings of taking the ocean as a starting point in understanding the contemporary politics of food. Probyn has been working on iterations of this project for many years. Her 2000 book *Carnal Appetites; Foodsexidentities* set a direction for cultural studies of food as a useful conceptual technology, as a way 'in' to the ethics of eating and being eaten. *Eating the Ocean* is anchored in the 'specificity of how, where, and by whom food was produced, and with what effects'. (6) This book takes fish as its lens, asking how a politics of food organised by material entanglements unthinkable from the point of view of terrestrial food production and consumption shifts our understanding of an ethics sufficient to the real complexity of our eating practices.

Probyn situates the question of how to eat the ocean in the broad context of care. She argues for a 'de-simplified' ocean—materially, conceptually, affectively—'if we want to generate care for the ocean and for her inhabitants, we need to work with the deep entanglement that fish, fishers, and ocean have forged over the millennia'. (43) Her first chapter compellingly examines a wide range of ways such care *doesn't* happen—imagining that we could go on fishing the ocean as we have been forever, that we can feed the nine billion people soon to be living and dying on the earth using current forms of land-based agriculture, that 'eating local' or 'eating sustainably' can save us from the complexity of oceanic food politics.

Turning away from simplistic moralism, Probyn turns to ocean critters and their people. Chapter two rhapsodises about oysters—eating them, growing them—as a good site for heightening our felt attention to relatedness with the ocean. Probyn grounds an account of oysters as a keystone species, rooted in their milieu and revelatory of the social relations that constitute their place. One eats an oyster alive, and with it the place it grew, the people who fed it, and the entire context of its production. Probyn's treatment of this node of relations unfurls the specificity of global capital's enactment in a small loch in Scotland, where a foreign oyster feeds the livelihoods (and tastes) of people there and abroad. This is a beautiful treatment of a humble but mattering bivalve, attached to its place in the ocean until it is moved into exchange relations and, eventually, cracked open to spill out its particular 'merrior'; the taste of its being from its place. Probyn shifts from these small filter-feeders to globe-trotting megafauna: southern bluefin tuna. Charismatic, valuable, wild-but-domesticated, bluefin tuna offer a perfect case study in how the fishing industry has transformed in the last forty years. Bluefin tuna have gone from being an abundant pet-food-fish to a super-valuable endangered-species commodity, from the essence of wildness to being sea-farmed in fattening pens. This chapter compellingly argues that we cannot go on organising human–fish relations along the lines of internationally traded quotas for fish at the top of the trophic pyramid held by a select few men.

The fourth chapter tracks back in time to reflect on smaller fish, the herring—notable more for their place in the history of the Atlantic fishery as an abundant schooling fish than for the

kind of individual gravitas that bluefin tuna hold—and cod. Looking at the history of women's place in the fisheries of the past, Probyn deepens her consideration of how gender is entangled in fish–human relations. Alongside interesting ethnographic encounters, this chapter shows how in these fisheries 'gender is not a thing and certainly not one thing. It is a constant force in bringing into being other worlds, and other ways of being-with.' (126) I left this part of the book convinced that a gendered approach to fishing, and especially an approach that listened to the insights of women who processed the bounty of the sea, would co-produce an ocean with more possibility for going on. Chapter five returns to a love of the small and the humble, this time oily schooling fish: sardines, anchovies, menhaden. This chapter resists fixed moralising in favour of 'scalar intricacy and metabolic intimacies'. (130) Prime among its suggestions is the possibility that we could directly eat small fish, instead of rendering them down into fish meal to feed other, larger fish across the globe. Probyn persuasively argues for cultivating new tastes and finer scales of attention.

Probyn is without question complexifying how one might think about eating bivalves or fish, ranging from the tiny to the large, from the ocean. There are several questions that emerge from this fascinating book. The first is, where is the ocean? Probyn repeatedly references integrated marine trophic aquaculture (IMTA) as possibly a better way to eat with the ocean. Cultivated ocean polycultures of this sort are definitely promising, and may have much less harm than fish farming as it has been practiced, which spreads disease and produces what are in effect toxins through over-feeding and medicating farmed fish. But the details matter: some IMTA is in the ocean, some is on land. The ocean is all connected, so IMTA that happens in pens, bays and coves is by necessity not fulfilling its purpose of capturing the waste products of one ocean critter or plant as food for another. Land-based maricultures are more efficient and more fully meet the promise of IMTA, but they carry different problems. Is the ocean in tanks in Chile still the ocean? I would have loved to see Probyn bring similar attention to her suggested solutions that she brings to the complex cases of tuna, oysters and anchovies.

Second, I yearned for Probyn to articulate her ethical stance more. Much of this stance organises itself against the view, which she often characterises as simplistic, that we'll find an ethical way through the problems the ocean offers us by deciding what we will or won't eat. As Probyn says in the introduction: 'I argue strongly against the hubris that passes for a politics of fork waving. The idea that you can resolve such intricate and complicated human-fish relations by voting with your fork is deluded narcissism.' (10) Part of this point comes down to an unconvincing irritation with veganism. To be clear, I'm convinced by the irritation. I eat vegan and I write about the problems of a politics based on purity at least in part because I have had more arguments than I can count with self-righteous and wrong-headed vegans who think they are not implicated in suffering. I hate PETA's racist, anti-Indigenous, ableist politics with the heat of a thousand suns. So I share the critique Probyn expresses when she writes:

As with the condescending attitude toward those who don't choose to eat better, increasingly the choice to proclaim oneself vegan often seems to act as an opting out of the structural complexities of food provisioning, production, and consumption. (3)

It is of course ridiculous for anyone who eats to think that they are not implicated in complexity—if we refrain from eating megafauna, we are certainly participating in killing bugs; if we think bugs matter because they are alive and avoid death, then shouldn't we also worry about microbes? If we make an ethical bright line around a nervous system, how should we respond to the good data coming out now that plants know when they are being eaten and try to avoid it? Probyn's poster-children for wrong-headed, too-simplistic food politics are vegans

and it is surely easy to find lots of easy-target cases of activists who think they are solving suffering by putting themselves naked and bloody in a cage and going to a community rib-fest. But what about eaters like me, who look at the complexity and insolvability of the eaten world and draw a line at a place different from 'small fish good'? Since we can't opt out of structural complexity, what is the normative advice for where to stand in relation to this?

Confusingly, Probyn both repudiates the politics of what's on our plate and returns to it. The last sentences of the book seem certainly to say that voting with our fork matters. She writes:

The more-than-human, if it is to be meaningful as a perspective, makes us confront again and again the relatedness of all entities. And while some may say that the best way of honoring that relatedness is not to eat fish, as I've argued, this is not a solution. I won't force-feed people sardines or anchovies or oysters—what a waste that would be. But keep in mind the pressures of a growing population; be aware of the state of land-based agriculture; be informed of the advances in sustainable systems such as integrated marine trophic aquaculture; be mindful of the millions who work with the sea. This is why this book focuses on noticing detail, relating stories, histories, environments, and tastes. Try to eat the ocean better. Try to eat with the ocean. (163)

This invocation, if it is to have teeth, needs, I think, to move beyond the scope of food politics. This may be an unfair critique of a book about food politics and the question of what humans as the top of earth's trophic system ought to eat. It may reflect my own obsession with the broader scope of embodiment that makes me think about all the other oceans capitalism is currently ravaging than the eaten oceans, and all the other politics than food politics entangled in those oceans. Many of these concerns pop up in *Eating the Ocean* without being taken up more sustainably: microplastics, enslavement and indentured servitude on fishing boats (two 'smiling Filipinos' show up in one sentence in chapter 4), ocean acidification, the cesium-134 pouring out of the Fukushima reactor, the islands going underwater as the planet warms, the floating plastic trash gyre in the Pacific, the oil bubbling up from breached undersea drilling platforms, the fence that goes out into the ocean between the United States and Mexico, the desperate migrants drowning in the Mediterranean, the ocean blockade of Palestine, Australia's off-shore migrant holding facilities, and so on. Thinking about politics with the ocean is so much denser than what we eat from it. How might some of these politics be served by the instruction to *try to eat the ocean better? Try to eat with the ocean?* It is clear to me that if eating is one of the main things we do *with* the ocean it is perhaps the least of the things we do *to* it. I raise these questions here because I can't think of a thinker I would rather have address them. Every reader of *Eating the Ocean* will leave it with a felt sense of the impossible complexity that we confront in taking still-necessary actions. Probyn's invitation to start and start again in meeting that complexity will, I hope, move us all toward unpredictable attentions and actions.

Those who care about what critical theory can offer political work aren't typically looking for simplification, which is good since Astrida Neimanis's book doesn't simplify anything. Where Probyn starts with the oyster-eating human, Neimanis starts with the figuration that *we are bodies of water*, arguing that the 'meaningful mattering of our bodies is also an urgent question of worldly survival'. (14) Understanding our bodies as watery implies an understanding of ourselves as part of what Neimanis calls a *hydrocommons*. Conceiving of our bodies as connected to other bodies of water—lakes, rivers, oceans, other bodies, the beings our bodies host—offers a conception of distributed but intimately significant material connections

with political and ethical effects. Neimanis attends throughout the book to how such a figuration can challenge ‘humanist understandings of corporeality: discrete individualism, anthropocentrism, and phallogocentrism’. (16) In quicksilver prose that is technically suited to the task, we are called to reconfigure both our understandings (and perhaps practices) of embodiment as well as our thinking about water—what it is, why it matters, how we should hold it.

*Bodies of Water* contributes to the phenomenological tradition, aiming to bring phenomenological approaches into conversation with posthuman feminism. This will feel audacious to many readers coming from any of these three directions since phenomenology has so often been understood as happening at the scale of and in reference to the human; posthumanism has quite often been rejected as eliding or ignoring intersectional feminist achievements, and feminisms of various sorts have often been seen as too-committed to thinking about the specificities of gendered experience to participate in phenomenological or posthuman departures from our socially situated embodied being. Neimanis does not shy away from these tensions, instead she weaves them together into a soft toolkit made up of otherwise distinct archives. This aspect of the book will, I believe, productively tempt thinkers attached to their particular oyster bays into tasting the waters and histories of other lineages and trajectories.

The first chapter begins with Adrienne Rich’s work on the politics of location, and especially her provocation for us to think about what it means to be, as she put it, ‘of woman born’. Human milk has for a long time been a significant political symbol in relation to nuclear body-burdens transmitted between parent and child and a way to trace the bio-markers of toxicity that concentrate themselves in milk of all kinds. The transcorporeal embodiments signalled by milk production and consumption reveal how we are ‘caught up in one another’s currents’. (49) In this chapter, I wondered how Neimanis’s account of milky transcorporeality would extend beyond human amphimixic transfer points into thinking about, for example, cow, goat, or sheep milk production. Why is human breast milk the main site for thinking about entangled materialisations and the kind of feminist phenomenology that might help us confront our watery problems? Listening to nursing friends talk about their experience of lactation, I suspect that breast-feeding is one way to access what Neimanis calls ‘experiences that are below or beyond human-scaled perception’; that it offers a kind of phenomenological access to the watery transfer points that are hard to name otherwise. This chapter grapples with the difficulty of offering any sensory apparatus and object of perception as a keystone in descriptions that start from bodies in all their particularity.

The second chapter is in conversation with Luce Irigaray about the possibility of ‘posthuman gestationality’. Attending to Irigaray’s engagement with Nietzsche, Neimanis offers the best attempt I’ve seen to focus on the gestationality without reproducing the sex-fixity that so often comes along with thinking of amniotic fluid. Similarly, she avoids the tradition that reads Irigaray’s work as presupposing heteronormative, binary and essential sexual difference. Neimanis writes that ‘this gestationality need not take the form of a human reprosexual womb: we may be gestational as love, as neighbor, as accidental stranger’. (79) This is hopeful, and connects with Neimanis’s earlier thinking on the idea of a ‘gestational milieu’. For readers already inclined toward Irigaray and toward thinking about the maternal as a key site for feminist philosophy, this chapter will be a delight. Those not so inclined may find it a stretch to resituate Irigaray and her gestational way of thought. I found myself wishing for more of Neimanis’s own thinking on fluidity, gender and gestation, in order to be convinced about the potential to ‘untie waters from a limited biological/symbolic feminine’.

(95) In particular, I wanted to hear more specifics about her conception of ‘transcorporeal interpermeation’ as a kind of gestationality and more practical examples of what she calls an ‘onto-logic of amniotics’ (105) as a way of thinking about membranes, connections, and what we pass on and offer to others.

In the third chapter, Neimanis turns towards the question of significant storytelling about wateriness as a part of our evolutionary unfolding, opening a non-linear, surprisingly exuberant approach to how we come to be connected with water as part of our being. This chapter offers origin stories and ongoingness stories that usefully connect kinship practices with waters. This is a paradigm-shifting accomplishment that helps us think about our being as oceanic wherever we are—and helps us perceive the watery adaptations of many different critters who seem to be landlocked. Aquatic environments, Neimanis shows, on land and off it, infuse and shape beings, and provide a material connection to ‘watery pasts’. (143) The final chapter turns from watery pasts to the watery present and the uneven distribution of watery harms to Indigenous people—toxins, poisons, bad water—in the Canadian context. Here Neimanis attends to renowned Anishinaabekwe Rebecca Belmore’s artistic engagement with water. Neimanis elucidates Belmore’s evocative and politically nuanced work so as to reveal how water can be central to redressing historic and ongoing harms, and how current colonial politics of water materialise the importance of thinking better about water. Neimanis takes up the challenging call for decolonial work in specific contexts, starting from the figuration ‘kwe’. I have lived in unceded Anishinaabe places for years and in that context am familiar with the use of ‘kwe’ as both a modifier that signals ‘Anishinaabe woman’ and as an opening toward broader politics of water, femaleness, femininity and care for the world. In a series of footnotes signalling some trepidation about ‘using “Kwe” to name an orientation to the world that [Belmore’s] work offers’ (211), Neimanis writes that she recognises that her ‘use of this word “Kwe” here is suspect’ but that she wants nonetheless to ‘accept the consequences of taking this risk’. (212) As a white settler woman, immigrant to Canada, reading another white settler woman, immigrant to Australia, Neimanis’s hesitation around this use of ‘kwe’ resonates with me. However, I am less sure about her decision to situate that hesitation in the footnotes to her book, rather than as a central problematic to investigate. *Haudenosaunee (Kanienkehaka)* scholar Laura Hall has pointed out, for instance, that not all Indigenous women are Anishinaabeg. Métis scholar Zoe Todd, who I am lucky to have as a colleague, has elsewhere argued that the figuration of ‘the Anthropocene’ is itself a flattening concept that evacuates the political responsibility for settlers harming the world, imagining that we’re all in this together. How might the specific histories, ontologies, ways of making sense of the world and ways of being in the world matter to our watery beings? There may be a ‘kwe’ worldview, but there isn’t *an* Indigenous worldview. Neimanis knows this well. She writes in another footnote that ‘working in the sweaty and impossible space of the cultural interface is necessary despite its inevitable failure’. (212) I agree with her—we settlers inevitably get it wrong but that doesn’t mean that we oughtn’t try to be in relation. Coming to the end of her book, Neimanis writes that the ‘answer will always be a question’ and that the central question might well be ‘What is water?’ (189) I finished this book wondering what it would mean for us settlers to ask that question *not* taking a ‘kwe’ or other Indigenous worldview, but standing in relation to it carrying all our colonising buckets of history, all the burdens of unjust deaths dealt, all the responsibility for poisoning the waters that we inherit and must meet. What would a settler orientation towards decolonising water politics, ethics and knowing be? I would encourage Neimanis to bring that trepidation out of the footnotes and into the body text of her writing.

---

Both these books make generative openings for future thinking about watery sites of complicity and implication. I look forward to the continuing conversations they invite.

### About the author

Alexis Shotwell is an associate professor at Carleton University, on unceded Algonquin territory. Her academic work addresses impurity, environmental justice, racial formation, disability, unspeakable and unspoken knowledge, sexuality, gender and political transformation. She also gives workshops on reducing suffering in our academic writing and teaching practices. She is the author of *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender, and Implicit Understanding* (2011) and *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (2016).