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BOOK REVIEW

Animate Intimacies

Astrida Neimanis

University of Sydney

Corresponding author: Astrida Neimanis, Department of Gender and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Studies, University of Sydney NSW 2006 Australia. astrida.neimanis@sydney.edu.au

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While the kookaburras are having a good early morning laugh, a group of women on a hill across from the eastern ridge are writing on their bodies. ‘Sometimes hot’ gets scrawled across two exposed kneecaps. ‘Safe haven’ is tucked away under a fleshy chin. The soft dip above someone’s suprasternal notch receives the word ‘catchment’. Members of the Sydney-based Weathering Collective are in the Blue Mountains to conduct experiments on how our bodies register and measure weather: in this case, how might language amplify a nuance that the rise and fall of the mercury misses?

In the collective, we describe such experiments as ‘activating ourselves as weather-bodies’ in order to interrupt the abstractness of climate change via sensory, embodied means (for more information see www.weatheringstation.net). Our attunement is not unlike the description anthropologist Kath Weston gives of her great aunt Elsie who would forecast the oncoming rain by ‘feeling it in her bones’. (106) Indeed, Weston’s latest book *Animate Planet* is about how people across the planet are ‘trying to make visceral and political sense of the damaged ecologies that late capitalism has bequeathed them’. (11) Importantly, this is no passive inheritance. *Animate Planet* is ‘an attempt to begin to describe a range of ecological intimacies through which people have co-constituted a world in which their finest technological achievements are implicated in habitat destruction. (10) In short, Weston asks: how do we embody the ecological situation that we are also making?’

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You could say that for our collective, this means figuring out how our knees and throats and scapulae materially incorporate the weather that our cars and jobs and computers generate in order to make that Blue Mountains excursion possible in the first place. For Weston, the ‘animate planet’ is not something we live on, but something we are. We are bodily implicated in both its wonders and its wounds. Here, ‘people (but not always people) throw their bodies into the mix by viscerally engaging with a socially manufactured, recursively constituted ‘environment’ that is also, crucially, them’. (8) High-tech metaphors like ‘closed circuit’ and ‘feedback loop’ not only describe Weston’s quarry (and what we ‘weatherers’ are tuning in to); they also underscore her point that any gap between the natural and the technological left the campsite long ago. If the human/environment separation is no longer tenable (even imaginatively), nor should we hold out hope for a ‘natural’ purity into which we might retreat from technological ruin. On this animate planet, bio-intimacies are also techno-intimacies; a tongue or a fingerpad—or the *technē* of a ballpoint pen on bare skin—are sensors of the same order as a weathervane or a barometer. All perception is prosthetic, as Donna Haraway taught us long ago.

Animate Planet is rich in detail, both empirical and conceptual. As always, Weston’s prose offers itself easily to readers new to these ideas, but will also enlighten veterans from anthropology, cultural studies, sociology and environmental studies, and those who work across questions of urbanism, social movements, human–animal relations, STS and political economy. Globetrotting through India, Japan and the United States, each chapter of *Animate Planet* focuses on a single case study; crucially, this grounds the book in ways that admit both contradiction and surprise. The opening chapter discusses technosurveillance of animals destined to be food. Perhaps unexpectedly, it reveals how sophisticated surveillance technologies, specifically the US National Animal Identification System, can actually forge relations of intimacy between humans and other animals even at a distance. Her objective is not, however, to claim these intimacies are better, worse or on par with milking a cow by hand or looking your steak in the eye. Rather than romanticising a harried farmer or ethical consumer, she says, we need to focus on the important question of the conditions of food production.

The next chapter brings us to different intimacies in post-Fukushima Japan, where inhabitants struggle with unreliable official knowledges about radiation contamination. The intimacies that Weston outlines between bodies and radiation again remind us that intimacy is not necessarily warm and fuzzy. These intimacies could lead bodies to ‘their untimely destruction’. (80) Yet, because this intimacy was largely imperceptible to human sense organs, technology such as DIY Geiger counters had to be embraced in order for regular folk to ‘seize the means of perception’. (81) This chapter offers an illuminating and deeply nuanced discussion of citizen science and the politics of technostruggle, where invisibility, uncontainability and ultimate unknowability mean that off-the-shelf models of policy, politics and ethics no longer serve.

The third chapter brings us back to Weston’s great aunt Elsie and the science of climate change. Again, Weston surprises us by asking a question few environmentalists dare: might there be good reasons why climate change generates scepticism? Weston describes the centuries-old tradition of ‘embodied empiricism’ whereby scientists literally used their bodies to know things. Skipping ahead to the present moment, Weston muses that if some bodies aren’t feeling the heat, perhaps it is not surprising that climate change is a hard sell. If climate scepticism has sadly become entrenched in partisan politics, Weston suggests that remembering some of this doubt is rooted in ‘lay expertise’ might help us bridge that

partisanship. While this claim might itself evoke a bit of scepticism in readers, Weston's attention to the various ways in which different kinds of bodies come to know climate and weather does important work. Not least, it reminds us that on a warming planet, finding common ground (for example, in an appeal to bodies that have their own systems of knowledge) may be more urgent than winning an argument.

Weston's claims in the following chapter might similarly raise a few eyebrows. Here, she describes a 'Venetian' shopping mall of canals and piped, crystal clear waters on the outskirts of Delhi in some of the most parched lands of India. While acknowledging the absurdity of such water displays when many people who live in the Indian metropolis have no access to clean water, Weston also asks whether 'there might be room for embodiment, play, and aesthetics in a sea of utilitarian water treatments'. (22) Her writing conveys an infectious joy for this aqueous spectacle and makes a good argument against 'filtering out the fun' (151) when it comes to water struggles. Although Weston is right to assert 'water quenches many things, only one of which is thirst', (155) I nonetheless had some trouble swallowing this unfiltered mouthful. I am all for play, but perhaps I craved more attention to the difficulties, tensions and structural inequalities that condition any impulse to 'choose' play.

Such difficulties form a key part of Weston's conclusion, which provides a more convincing argument for the intimacies of affect, ethics and politics when it comes to environmental matters. Beginning with the story of 'that new car smell' and the manufacturing of affect, Weston leaves us with the important reminder that 'closely reasoned argument alone cannot dislodge affective paradoxes'. (182) In contexts of climate change, waste, consumerism and other social-environmental ills, 'carefully reasoned critiques make valued contributions' (185) yet, if they do not engage us viscerally and emotionally, we will remain stuck in this Anthropocene downpour for sure. Ultimately, this is the best gift of the book: to really address what some will call the environmental crisis, we need to think with our bodies and talk about our feelings.

The case study approach underscores one of Weston's key theoretical insights, namely, that intimacy requires animacy. For Weston, 'intimacies do not automatically spring forth from relationships unless they are animated, not least by relations of production'; (40) they 'must be animated and so may emerge anywhere under the right conditions'. (20) Intimacies for Weston are situated and compositional: 'the animating factors in a town filled with refugees from a massive hydro project are likely to differ from the animating factors in a village where second-generation bonded laborers fire bricks in a kiln or in a village engulfed by an expanding metropolis'. (20) This is not an object-oriented ontology or posthumanist brief but an ethnography: curious, playful and surprising. Importantly, this means that intimacy might not be found where we expect it—in the relations of a married human couple, for example—but might show up in the strangest of places. The example she gives is of the intimacy struck between a body and invisible radiation which ironically leads to 'radiation divorce' when a couple cannot agree on how to handle the incalculable risks posed to themselves and their children.

In this example, and others, the lineaments stretched between *Animate Planet* and Weston's earlier work become legible. Weston has been writing books for over two decades but *Animate Planet* is the first to specifically focus on environmental questions (even though she notes in a recent interview that ecological connections have been a mainstay in her teaching for over a decade). Readers, who may know Weston best for her 1991 book on queer kinship, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinships*, might be surprised by this turn. Yet, the extension of the concerns that undergirded that first ethnography on the emergence of discourses of

family among gays and lesbians in 1980s San Francisco, into this time and place we call the Anthropocene, is one factor that makes *Animate Planet* such a rich read. Back then, Weston was compelled to explore the changes in how gays and lesbians invoked and enacted ideas of family as part of broader social and political changes, opportunities and tensions. This meticulous charting of new forms of relation also grounds *Animate Planet*, but now in an expanded more-than-human sense that allows Weston to respond to a different set of predicaments ushered in by technological development and anthropogenic interference in 'nature'. In both cases, the presumption of 'choice' is richly qualified by the larger contexts and conditions that support, engender or thwart our various intimacies.

Although *Animate Planet* continues Weston's longstanding attentiveness to the particular via an anthropological sensibility, its tether to her earlier book on queer kinship is more than methodological. Both books are deeply attuned to how, as Donna Haraway would say, we might make 'oddkin' in situations that disavow and disparage certain relationships, and how persisting in those relational experiments (sweaty and precarious as they may sometimes be) might actually be part of making better—or at least different—kinds of worlds. In many ways, *Animate Planet* can be rightly placed beside other recent titles in the emerging field of queer ecologies, a subfield of the environmental humanities that counts among its top queries: how do we make good relations in damaged worlds and what might it mean to find desire and loss in those relations? It is because of Weston's queer anthropological pedigree that certain nuances, like locating passion in the play of water, or desire in that new car smell, or bodily intimacy with the weather, can be presented believably alongside other more specifically human affairs and commitments that make up our lives. Rather than facetiously importing queer studies theories into an ecological frame, Weston's queer frame responds to the ineluctable demands of what she observes around her and then expands to accommodate the more-than-human. This is a very different move.

As someone committed to a feminist politics of citation which requires us to cite those thinkers whose work helps create a context and readership for our own, I am a little disappointed that Weston barely mentions other important feminist environmental humanities and queer ecological scholarship that has innovatively travelled similar ground. Concepts circulating within feminist and queer environmental humanities, from intra-action, to trans-corporeality, to weathering, are as invisible in this book as air, and no less crucial to its liveliness.

Ultimately, though, across her career Weston has taught us that no connection or relation can be simply posited, assumed, or taken for granted. The meaning of any relation can only emerge in its doing. If on this animate planet, our intimacies may appear to offer *both* more choice (say, gay marriage) *and* less choice (say, off-gas poisoning), then Weston convinces that we must take up the challenge of this contradiction. What those intimacies mean, and who we welcome as our queer kin and why, still needs to be continually discovered.

About the author

Astrida Neimanis is Senior Lecturer in Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney. Her book *Bodies of Water: Feminist Posthuman Phenomenology* was published in 2017.