

Feminism and Oceans

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Western feminisms arrived in waves (Helmrich 2017: 30).

Underneath the waves, lie ‘myriad silences and ruptures in time, space, history, ethics, research, and method’ (Sharpe 2017: 11): wet ontologies that emerge in feminist posthumanisms and find their sister-brother-sibling unbreathing, ungended, underwater, deep in the oceans. There are traces of these racialised histories in feminist storytelling, welts, just as there is a long re-telling of subjectivity, who is subject, that propels feminisms into stark contrast with the propertied men who wrote landed histories of knowledge in Europe, and the colonies, and now discourses of intervention. This entry engages the ocean as a mechanism for drawing together feminist posthumanism with feminist accounts that complicate gender through exposing racialised histories of subjectivities, while drawing in intersectionality and challenging the persistence of colonial forms.

Feminist analyses of the ocean traverse the Atlantic and the Pacific with histories of slavery, colonialism, militarism and capital. This is an intervention into the waves of Western feminism and into Western subject formations. So that the ‘ungended’ (Spillers, 1987) oceanic flesh, bodies-not, bear witness to understanding that ‘[t]he visual and historical evidence betrays the dominant discourse on the matter as incomplete’ (Spillers, 1987: 73). Feminisms must visualise, listen to, and understand their incompleteness just as feminism theorises the incompleteness of theories of property, histories of conquest and acquisition. The oceans, like feminisms, are simultaneously sites of power and unruly commons. The tentacles of undersea cables mirror the trade routes of empire, joining state capital to state capital, while ignoring the ungended flesh left to take residence in the ocean (Sharpe 2016:18). Feminism arrived at the sovereign state and knocked on the doors of the state in waves, but the waves were carried by the bodies unbreathing in the waters underneath the journeys of colonialism and slavery.

Neimanis questions white feminism, asking ‘What happens if we go deeper?’ (Neimanis 2019: 491). Sharpe writes of all in the Middle Passage as those ‘who passed through the doors of no return [and] did not survive the holding and the sea, they, like us are alive in hydrogen, oxygen; in carbon, in phosphorus and iron, in sodium and chlorine. This is what we know about those Africans thrown, jumped, dumped overboard in the Middle Passage, they are with us still, in the time of the wake, known as residence time’ (Sharpe 2016: 18). For feminist posthumanist Neimanis, the subjectivity that feminisms have interrogated, shaped through Western human and Western state, must also be re-remembered in the body of the ocean, which holds the histories of abjection, the trade routes of empire and the emphatic arrogance of European explorers (Neimanis 2019). Feminisms and the oceans are intertwined - visually, affectively, and embodied - in non-human, interspecies, and the technologies of the High Seas as a global commons (for the enjoyment of all humankind and legally designated a common heritage) that reside with the afterlives of ocean crossings, while pregnant with the legacy of nuclear radiations, in the salty expanses. For Federici (2010) ‘the language of the commons has been appropriated . . . put at the service of privatization’. A feminist posthuman account of the ocean needs an alternative account of watery possibilities.

In the Marshall Islands feminist protest interweaves with histories of nuclear explosions in the oceans (Deloughrey 2013) that not-so-accidentally collide the story of the Anthropocene with the military greed that displaced and diseased indigenous populations, infusing reproductive health with the history of the ocean. Women on Waves (Hodson 2019), are in the waves and the waves are inside them. The ocean, de-territorialised space, fluid, feminised, mastered yet protected, is more than metaphor in feminist thinking: simultaneously gendered; ‘motherly amnion, fluid matrix, seductive siren, and unruly tide’ (Helmrieck 2017: 29), and means to escape from gendered selves;

‘[s]wimming, then, is an opportunity to have a sense of identity detached from others, but the fact that this has to be purposefully sought speaks volumes about the gendered constraints on identity formation’ (Throsby 2013).

Queer feminism/s describe an oceanography of dislocation,

submerged and intersecting diasporas

that reimagine the routes to understanding (Tinsley 2008).

In Europe, today and yesterday, right now, there are migrant bodies that float and sink in the Mediterranean, the ships, also gendered ‘she’, that refuse to rescue or to recognise humanity (Perera 2013). Posthuman feminisms seek to undo the landed histories of Enlightenment and undo their own pernicious centring of humans as origin to search out her unremembered, ungendered ways of doing, ways of seeing, telling differently, hearing for writing, spilling out of categories, dissolving containment, distrusting contentment. Probyn interrogates oceanic consumptions (Probyn 2016) Swimming and crossing Other oceans, indigenous feminisms tell of saltwater swimmers (Stronach et al 2019) and a recognition of the need for how ‘[r]estoration of ancestral knowledges continues to be an important part of enacting alternatives to settler colonial, capitalist enclosures’ (Goodyear-Ka’Poa 2017: 186). These enclosures are intimately connected to stories of territorial enclosure that presuppose land as starting and end point of human relations/ human encounters, while non-human encounters and lore are displaced and rendered primitive, before man, all for not seeing the border between land and sea so effectively conjured by the Captains on the ships.

Federici concludes ‘if commoning has any meaning, it must be the production of ourselves as a common subject’ (Federici 2010: 7), for Kahaleole Hall ‘the ocean becomes the space that connects the people’, while Haraway’s Chthulucene dribbles its tentacles into a consciousness that drifts differently. This is not the global commons that the oceans of popular imagination infiltrates, Federici’s commoning, Neimanis’ weathering, Sharpe’s residence time, Spillers ungended flesh, Tinsley’s transoceanic dislocations, Haraway’s tentacular thinking, are feminisms oceans.

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