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When Theories Meet

***Exposed: Environmental Politics & Pleasures in Posthuman Times* by STACY ALAIMO**

University of Minnesota Press, 2016
\$27.00USD

Reviewed by **NATHAN TEBOKKEL**

Stacy Alaimo's latest book is theoretically ambitious—bringing together feminism, materialism, posthumanism, and environmentalism—and, with the exception of its last chapter, published elsewhere. Both qualities afford it a loose coherence: its chapters range from discussions about architectural permeability to discussions about ocean plastic, and these two examples indicate some of the burls in the grain of Alaimo's theoretical scaffolding—why should a home be permeable if the environment is toxic, and why should “exposure” fix posthumanist ethics and politics?

Alaimo claims that “the public sphere needs to be reckoned with as if it were a landfill” (10), and her scavenging style corroborates this thought, formally demonstrating her book's theses, which cluster around *trans-corporeality* and pleasure, against *carbon-heavy masculinities* and traditional environmental-ethical asceticism, and alongside *sustainable becoming* and interdependence (2-11). It is to Alaimo's credit that her bricolage of scholars, times, and places—at one point rummaging through decades to read poetry, science fiction, film, and theory in the span of three pages (24–26), and at others citing scientific articles (48), pop science (43), *Wikipedia* (165), and *Urban Dictionary* (86)—is so readable. Her pith advances her theses and her readers'

understanding of her thinkers and their terms.

In the first chapter, she theorizes the home as a permeable place of multispecies becoming; in the second, she theorizes nature as queer, non-reductionist, and full of “deviant” sexual pleasures, cataloguing animals such as the white-throated sparrow, which has four genders and mates according to stripe colour (57), in order to destabilize anthropocentric appeals to a supposedly heteronormative and singular nature that either fixes human sexuality or acts as a staid backdrop for human cultural-sexual diversity.

Alaimo moves to thinking about naked protest, such as that of La Tigresa and of alpha-bodies (naked humans spelling out words). Chapters three and four perhaps superficially align nakedness with openness and truth, denuding with disanthropocentrizing, and analyse the invulnerable consumerist body, a fantasy dependent on carbon-heavy masculinities, universalizing claims, and a reductive scientific view from nowhere.

The fifth and sixth chapters turn to the ocean, where Alaimo figures human materiality, disfigures teleology, and pushes her idea of “exposure” to its extreme in the idea of “dissolution,” embodied in the dissolving of a pteropod shell by carbon-acidified ocean water (165). Dissolution allows her to critique theories of the Anthropocene as reliant on aestheticized distances, reductive orderings, and a conception of human agency as a disembodied, abstract force rather than as a material collective. Her conclusion follows with an exposure of “sustainability,” incisively defined as “the ability to somehow keep things going” despite looming economic and ecological catastrophe (170), as the harried heir to the

class-, gender-, and race-charged early 20th-century idea of conservation, and it ends with an exposure of object-oriented ontology's consumerism and commodity-fetishist effacement of labour and relations.

Heavy on citations and allusions, this book is a who's who of various theories and theorists. But the problems, including paradoxes and kettle logic, that result from its grab-bag style should be self-evident to any reader, who can hopefully overlook them and, with Alaimo, attempt to "fail better" (6). However, a defense of failure, like a defense of exposure, is ambivalent, and it can only go so far before it looks like a rhetorical veneer for complacency and complacency's academic cousin, the trendspotting in vogue today among cultural theorists, which fosters a critique that settles for allusiveness at the expense of rigorous argument (though these are not necessarily internecine) and for assessing the fidelity of certain concepts to the ideas of favoured thinkers (e.g. Latour, Haraway, Barad, Deleuze and Guattari) instead of historicizing, analyzing, and testing both concepts and thinkers. For example, Alaimo critiques the Group on Earth Observations' logo, because it is "not an image consonant with Bruno Latour's sense of the 'circulating reference'" (102), rather than inquiring into the logo, the Group, who they are, and what they do.

Two corollary problems emerge in this kind of critique: cheap dichotomies and dismissive claims. Alaimo's dichotomies include the following: immersive practices are better than detached assertions (12); pleasurable passion is better than scientific reason (59); and diversity is better than singularity (108). For Alaimo, these three dichotomies are crucial, especially the last, which builds an idol out of the idea of "diversity," an idea that could itself be

viewed as a means to monetize nature, like "biomass." But none of them ought to be considered wholly dichotomous, for none is mutually exclusive and each part can strengthen each other part—a point Alaimo's own turn toward inclusive concepts like trans-corporeality should indicate.

Light on argument, many of Alaimo's ripostes are simply dismissive. She uses her identification of possible linear narratives, categorizations, and scientific vision in opposing claims as *prima facie* reasons why these claims are wrong (e.g. 53, 170), a kind of rhetorical *ad hominem*, which holds that if a claim could hang out with some so-called bad words, then the claim is bad by association; she uses "agency" and "thing-power" as unexplained *explanans* in her arguments (e.g. 61, 132-133), which, as Richard Lewontin says, mystifies science, its social processes, and its ideologies; she rests several contentions on puns, such as Barad's argument about "mattering" (115) and the equation of the blackness of the smoke produced from "rolling coal" with racial blackness in America (96); and finally, she indicts arguments or concepts as failures when they fall short of some abstract perfection (e.g. 149), reifying an assumption identified by Hilary Putnam and troubling her own assertions about failure.

These problems are not necessarily fatal, because the tensions from which they arise could be generative, and the questions that arise from them could be instructive. Ultimately, Alaimo exposes us to moments when theories meet, to challenging ideas and current debates, and her book could serve as a compendium for contemporary cultural theory with respect to the environment and feminist-materialist posthumanism.

NATHAN TEBOKKEL is pursuing his PhD in English at UBC, where he studies poet-farmers from Robert Burns to Gary Soto. Drawing on this lineage and on his background in poetics, genetics, melon farming, and food safety audits, he examines aesthetic motivations behind biotechnological research, agricultural practice, and government legislation.