Thinking as the Stuff of the World

Stacy Alaimo

ABSTRACT
Rather than contemplating distinct objects as separate from the self, this essay proposes that we think as the stuff of the world. Thinking as the stuff of the world is a mode of thought that embeds theorists, activists, and artists within material substances, flows, and systems. This posthumanist mode of being and knowing in which trans-corporeal subjects grapple with “environments” that can never be external is indebted to feminism and understood through science studies theories of material agencies and disclosure. It surfaces in Eva Hayward’s stunning figuration of the “trans-speciated self.” It swirls together ontology, epistemology, scientific disclosures, political contestation, posthuman ethics, and environmental activism. Thinking as the stuff of the world entails grappling with the strange agencies of ordinary objects that are already part of ourselves, as well as considering what it means for other creatures to contend with the environments they now inhabit.

I confess here, on the inaugural pages of O-Zone: I am baffled by object-oriented ontologies. As a new materialist theorist who has been developing the concept of “trans-corporeality,” which foregrounds material agencies, I understand the necessity for theory and cultural criticism to forge new ways of accounting for the significance of material substances, forces, and systems (more on that later.) But as an eco-cultural and animal studies theorist I bristle at the first word of OOO—“object”—which erases all distinctions between consumer products and living creatures. Yet, I interrogate my own response: haven’t the last few decades of science studies, feminist theory, and other fields reconfigured the established divides between subject and object, nature and culture, in such a way so as to prepare the ground for one concept, that of “objects” to emerge? Are the objects of OOO fundamentally different from Haraway’s oncomouse or Latour’s ozone? And
yet, as a feminist and cultural studies scholar I cannot imagine what the ethical or political impetus would be to endorse “the equality of objects.” This is supposed to be an ontological leveling, I understand, but “equality” is such a loaded term that it cannot but evoke political struggles.¹ When Ian Bogost contends that “nothing has special status, but that everything exists equally—plumbers, cotton, bonobos, DVD players, and sandstone, for example” (2012, 6), my reactions to this provocation are predictable, alas. Why place bonobos and DVD players and plumbers on an equal plane? Doesn’t this flat plane quash the animal studies arguments for animal minds, animal cultures, animal communications? (Sure, there is a plumber on that list but there is little danger that his position adjacent to cotton will dismantle sturdy humanist presumptions.) Is the focus on objects too posthumanist or not posthumanist enough? How would (how do) the philosophical interventions of OOO play out in popular culture, politics, activism, and daily life? What is the relation between the objects of OOO and consumer products? And what are the relations between emerging trans-disciplinary fields and movements such as the nonhuman turn, thing theory, the new vitalism, speculative realism, affect theory, new materialism, material feminisms, posthumanism, animal studies, and OOO? It is not possible to address all of these questions in this small space, of course, nor even to address the range of perspectives within the work of different theorists associated with OOO (though I would like to point out that the work of Levi Bryant, Graham Harman, Timothy Morton, and Ian Bogost resonates quite differently to my ears). I will restrict my discussion to Ian Bogost’s Alien Phenomenology, which was published as part of the University of Minnesota’s important Posthumanities Series edited by Cary Wolfe. I will argue for a posthumanist new materialism that does not begin with discrete objects, separated from the human subject, but instead begins from a material feminist sense of the subject as already part of the substances, systems, and becomings of the world.

In Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing, Bogost dismisses environmental studies, animal studies, science studies, and posthumanism, within a mere two pages, for not being posthumanist enough. But he cites very few examples, claiming, mistakenly, that “posthuman approaches still preserve humanity as a primary actor” and science studies “retains some human agent at the center of analysis.” He also charges, correctly, but oddly, that environmentalism limits its concern to “living creatures” (Bogost 2012, 10, 7). By ignoring the work of feminist science studies and feminist new materialist scholars such as

¹ Levi Bryant explains: “The democracy of objects is not a political thesis to the effect that all objects ought to be treated equally or that all objects ought to participate in human affairs. The democracy of objects is the ontological thesis that all objects, as Ian Bogost has so nicely put it, equally exist while they do not exist equally. . . . In short, no object such as the subject or culture is the ground of all others” (Bryant 2011, 19). I find Bryant’s work quite compelling and multi-dimensional and would like to be clear that I am only focusing on Bogost’s Alien Phenomenology in this essay.
Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, and Rosi Braidotti, he positions OOO as the only escape route from the “tiny prison of our own devising,” in which “all existence is drawn through the sieve of humanity” (Bogost 2012, 3). Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism, for example, offers a robust conception of material agency that does not privilege the human. Moreover, Barad challenges the very notion of “objects” themselves. Bogost’s many lists of things—which mix types of humans with animals, household appliances, banal consumer products, and anything else one could think of—circumscribe each thing as a separate entity. Barad, on the other hand, drawing on Bohr, in Meeting the Universe Halfway, takes “the primary ontological unit to be phenomena, rather than independent objects with inherent boundaries and properties. . . [P]henomena are the ontological inseparability of intra-acting ‘agencies.’” That is, “phenomena are ontological entanglements” (Barad 2007, 333; her emphasis). Inhabiting Barad’s theory, contemplating the utterly counter-intuitive sense of the world as made up of intra-acting agencies, rather than separate objects, is to me, more dizzying and generative than contemplating objects as distinct, alien beings. Tracing intra-actions and other modes of entanglement between substances and systems enables political critique and the development of ethical and political modes that do not separate the human from the material world.

Although Bogost puts forth an ostensibly posthumanist ontology, I would contend that he reinstalls a humanist and masculinist sense of a disembodied subject. The philosopher asks, “What is it like to be a computer or a microprocessor, or a ribbon cable? . . . As operators or engineers we may be able to describe how they work? But what do they experience? What’s their proper phenomenology? In short, what is it like to be a thing?” (Bogost 2012, 9–10). I just can’t drink the KoolAid here and believe that a cable experiences anything at all; nor do I find it useful—personally, intellectually, ethically, politically, or in any other way—to imagine what it is like to “be” a cable. I do wonder, however, albeit rather anthropocentrically, what it is like to be a human imagining what it is like to be a thing. In this case, Bogost’s speculations on what it means to be a particular object emerge from a sovereign, enclosed, rational, speculative, mind. There is no sense of embodied, interactive, intra-active, situated, or scientifically-mediated knowledges here. Feminist, postcolonial, and environmental epistemologies have long critiqued modes of knowing that install a gap between the subject and the object of knowledge; but those theories are overlooked. Instead, the knower who undertakes the phenomenological explorations of the aliens that surround him is radically removed from these objects. There is an abyss between the philosophical, speculative, disembodied mind and the strange objects he imaginatively pursues. Although this abyss may remind us of Jacques Derrida’s “abyss” of animal being he encounters when his cat looks at him, Derrida critiques the conceptual violence—and asininity—that would enclose myriad living creatures within one conceptual cage—“the animal.”
The collection that I edited with Susan J. Hekman, Material Feminisms, included theories that were generated from embodied positionalities of gender, race, disability, and environmentalism. The critical practices, the epistemologies and ontologies of Material Feminisms are entangled with their politics. Even though many of the theories within Material Feminism hardly seem distinctly feminist, in that they often do not speak directly to the questions of sex or gender, they still have their roots in feminism as a social movement, via their insistence that the human body is, simultaneously, a political, ontological, and epistemological site. As Susan Hekman puts it, “women have never been allowed to jettison the body and the biological; they have not been allowed to become the disembodied knowers of the Cartesian tradition” (Hekman 2010, 25). When poststructuralist and postmodern feminist theories held sway in the 1990s, the extremely productive—but also prohibitive—theory of social construction allowed us to understand how bodies were shaped by social, political, and discursive forces but it did not encourage the analysis of the material agencies of bodies, substances, or environments. Material Feminisms seek to maintain modes of incisive and necessary discursive critique while also accounting for the many material forces that may interact with the discursive. For feminists, LGBT people, persons with disabilities, and others thinking through how corporeal processes, desires, orientations, and harms are in accordance with or divergent from social categories, norms, and discourses is a necessary epistemological and political process. For some people this is a matter of survival. Even when material feminisms seem to have little to do with explicitly feminist concerns, the fact that they proceed from the recognition that the knower is simultaneously the “subject” and the “object” of inquiry, reveals their feminist roots. This onto-epistemology pervades feminist politics and feminist theory. Take, for example, the emblematic text, Our Bodies, Ourselves, by the Boston Women’s Health Collective, and Barbara Kruger’s iconic artwork that declares, “our bodies are battlegrounds.” Whereas various forms of feminism conceptualized how social and political forces, structures, inequities, and ideologies had material effects upon bodies, material feminisms theorize how the social and the material interact, and how bodies (and substances, and environments) have their own forces. Material feminisms, especially as they overlap with science studies’ models of material agency, emphasize interaction and viscous porosity (Nancy Tuana), intra-action (Barad) and trans-corporeality (Alaimo). These models scramble conventional notions of subjectivity that separate the rational human from an external environment. Instead, the posthuman being is entangled with the very stuff of the world. In Bodily Natures, I analyze how activists, writers, and photographers in the environmental health and environmental justice movements must make sense of themselves by grappling with the strange agencies of the material world, a world that is coextensive with themselves. To think, not in the formulaic Cartesian cogito ergo sum, in which rationality bounces back as a self-congratulatory recognition of one’s very existence—but to think as a body—indeed as a body that is part of the substantial interchanges, flows, and substances of the
co-extensive world—is an entangled, provisional, highly mediated, but also potentially ethical and political endeavor. The posthumanist concept of transcorporeality that I propose in *Bodily Natures* means that we are entangled with multiple material agencies, flows and processes that connect human bodies, animal bodies, ecosystems, technologies, and the wider world. As the material self cannot be disentangled from networks that are simultaneously environmental, economic, political, cultural, scientific, technological, and substantial, what was once the ostensibly bounded human subject finds herself in a swirling landscape of uncertainty where practices and actions that were once not even remotely ethical or political matters suddenly become so.

Eva Hayward’s compelling work demonstrates how the long history of feminist and queer epistemologies that insist upon writing from an embodied perspective may flourish as a newly transfigured posthumanism. Her work, in my view, rises to the formidable challenge that Cary Wolfe poses in *What is Posthumanism?* when he states that “the nature of thought itself must change if it is to be posthumanist” (Wolfe 2010, xvi). In “More Lessons from a Starfish: Prefixial Flesh and Trans-speciated Selves,” Hayward writes of transsexuality as a “mutuality,” a “shared ontology,” with the starfish, as they both regenerate “as an act of healing”:

Trans-morphic as zoomorphic—if we can understand the cut as an act of love, then can we not imagine that “like a starfish” it is an enactment of trans-speciating? We, transsexuals and starfish, are animate bodies; our bodies are experienced and come to be known through encounters with other animate bodies. These epistemological moves describe a shared phenomenological ontology. This is sensate intertwining-intercorporeal zones between these bodies in language and in experience. Starfish and transsexuals share worldhood both semiotic (as metonymic kinds) and phenomenological enactments—is this not some form of intercorporeality? (Hayward 2008, 81–82)

Hayward, by thinking her own body across the regenerations of the starfish, “fundamentally unsettle[s] and reconfigure[s] the question of the knowing subject” (in Cary Wolfe’s terms), as the starfish—and the human self—are known through a kind of intercorporeality. This is a palpable, dazzling, posthumanist figuration, as the shared ontology with the starfish, culminates in a “transspeciated self,” a self who is, who knows, through an encounter with another species. Hayward describes her method as a “critical enmeshment rather than a personal account,” arguing that the “material, the literal matter, of being, surfaces and resurfaces as a constitutive force that cannot be digested in the acid fluids of anthropic concerns” (Hayward 2008, 65, 82). Hayward’s work exemplifies the possibilities for new materialist thought to emerge from lived genders, sexualities, and other embodied knowledges. But it also exemplifies how thinking with a multitude of living creatures may enrich new materialist theory, and thus how fruitful the alliances
may be between new materialisms, posthumanisms, and animal studies. It is also important to point out, however, that as speculative and creative and intrepid as Hayward’s work is, she draws upon scientific disclosures about starfish rather than simply imagining their being. Hekman argues that the concept of disclosure “avoids the problem of representationalism” and relativism, offering us a model, such as that of Andrew Pickering’s mangle, in which “multiple elements interact, or intraact, to produce an understanding of the reality we share” (2010, 93). Although that reality is shared, animal studies scholarship insists that particular species experience and understand the world in significantly different ways. Hayward, for example, explores how although “many echinoderms do not do not have many well-defined sensory inputs, they are sensitive to touch, light, temperature, orientation, and the status of water around them: “their very being is a visual-haptic-sensory apparatus” (Hayward 2008, 70).

One chapter in Alien Phenemenology is entitled “Revealing the Rich Variety of Being,” but there are no creatures akin to Hayward’s starfish dwelling there, nor any mention of the current environmental conditions that are radically diminishing the rich variety of being. In the midst of the 6th great extinction, where a million species are expected to be rendered extinct by 2050, the threats to biodiversity are not something to overlook. This may be another predictable response, but I worry that the celebration of consumer objects as fascinatingly alien functions as another diversion from, if not denial of, environmental apocalypse and mass extinction. Another sort of attention to consumer objects, which is percolating through environmental activism and new materialism, traces and reckons with the often invisible systems and networks that produce ordinary objects, discloses the often unintended consequences of the material agencies of those objects, and forges new ethical and political practices that arise from the material-semiotic entanglements of the world. It is how objects are entangled—economically, politically, and substantially across bodies, ecosystems, and built environments—that matters, not how each object exists in isolation. But I do share Bogost’s contention that “wonder has been all but eviscerated in modern thought.” And the mundane-sublime of alien phenomenology, in which we celebrate “the awesome plenitude of the everyday” (Bogost 2012, 124, 134) offers a zen-like appreciation for what is, which offers a respite from anguished worries about what (or who) will no longer be. Bogost’s lively, engaging, cool yet captivating prose style succeeds in seducing us into a blissful recognition of the wondrous strangeness of commonplace objects. To object to this vision makes one feel a bit like an environmentalist version of the feminist killjoy.2 Who could resist this lusty invitation (?)：“The density of being

2 See Sara Ahmed’s The Promise of Happiness (2010). Bogost includes a story about an image of a woman in a Playboy bunny suit, which suggests that he fears females have no sense of humor or intellectual sophistication (Bogost 2012, 98–99). Feminist, queer theory, and disability studies have themselves developed, however, complex, playful, pro-sex understandings of bodies, objects, pleasures, and desires that would contest simple notions of
makes it *promiscuous*, always touching everything else, unconcerned with differentiation. Anything is enough to party” (Bogost 2012, 24). This pro-sex feminist can’t help but be hailed by this enticement, yet the environmentalist in me warns that consumerist orgies produce particularly toxic hangovers.

This awesome plentitude looks different from the perspectives of postcolonial ecologies, environmental health and environmental justice movements, climate refugees, Bhopal survivors, ocean conservation movements, and, moreover, from the perspectives of myriad nonhuman creatures. We could, as alien phenomenologists, wonder what it would be like to “be” a plastic bag or a plastic bottle cap. Or, we could consider the networks of chemistry, capitalist consumer-ism, inland waterways, ocean currents, and addiction to high fructose corn syrup that have created the Great Pacific Garbage patch. Rather than seeing the world as comprised as inert resources or as stable, discrete objects that do what we want them to do, new materialist theories and new political movements, focused on stuff, stress the strange agencies of everyday things. The recognition that banal objects, such as toothbrushes, razors, plastic bottles, plastic bags, food containers, DVD packaging, children’s toys, etc. intended for momentary human use, pollute for eternity, renders them weirdly malevolent. Greenpeace, The Plastic Pollution Coalition, Captain Charles Moore, and several filmmakers and artists dramatize the strange agencies of plastics, which absorb toxins in the seas, enter the ocean food chain, and harm birds, mammals, reptiles, and fishes through causing disease, obstructing airways, or clogging digestive tracks. The artist Pam Longobardi, who collects plastic ocean debris and uses it as her primary material, explains how the everyday objects that surround terrestrial humans become something quite different when understood from the perspective of ocean ecologies: “The plastic elements initially seem attractive and innocuous, like toys, some with an eerie familiarity and some totally alien. At first, the plastic seems innocent and fun, but it is not. It is dangerous. In our eagerness for the new, we are remaking the world in plastic, in our own image, this toxic legacy, this surrogate, this imposter” (Longobardi 2013).

The short film “Plastic Seduction,” by Katrin Peters, features a romantic seafood dinner on a secluded beach. The man lovingly feeds the woman an oyster, and as she opens her mouth rather suggestively, we notice that the oyster sports a blue plastic bottle cap—which the woman crunches in delight. While it is unlikely anyone will be served a plate of oysters topped with colorful plastic bottle caps, there is evidence to suggest that nearly all “seafood” humans consume has been

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sexual objectification. Given this exciting body of work—not to mention the lively sexual (sub)cultures that the theory is allied with—it’s hard to imagine that we (“women or girls or sexiness”) need OOO to give us an “ontological place along side chipmunks, lighthouses, and galoshes” (Bogost 2012, 99).

contaminated by the staggering amount of plastics that have invaded the oceanic food webs. The voiceover explains, “Every year thousands of tons of plastic ends up in our oceans. Plastic doesn’t biodegrade in the sea. Over time it breaks up into tiny particles. Like sponges, these attract pollutants from the surrounding waters, accumulating a highly toxic chemical load before they contaminate the marine food chain.” “Plastic Seduction” dramatizes a trans-corporeality in which humans ultimately consume the surprisingly dangerous objects they have produced and discarded. The crunchy, colorful plastic pieces become metonyms of—not foils for—the actual seafood on the plate, which already harbors plastics and other toxins. While Bogost wonders “what is it like to be a thing,” such as the “udon noodle or the nuclear warhead” (Bogost 2012, 10, 30), “Plastic Seduction” suggests something that may be equally weird but more significant: that ostensibly discrete entities such as plastic bottle caps, are, in a sense, already part of who we are, as human diets ontologically entangle us with the plastic seas. Nancy Tuana, in her important essay, “Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina,” traces another way in which plastic becomes part of human flesh. Describing herself breathing air polluted by plastic incineration, she states “components of the bottle have an agency that transforms the naturally occurring flesh of my body into a different material structure than what occurs in nature” (Tuana 2008, 202). She stresses that although, “plastics have left their signature on the flesh of many bodies, “ it is the “bodies of industry workers who toil in the plastic factories or the garbage incinerators and the bodies of those who live in the path of their pollutants” who “have disproportionately suffered the negative effects of this material-semiotic interaction” (Tuana 2008, 203).

Although my concept of trans-corporeality emerges from environmental health and environmental justice movements, which tend to be anthropocentric, trans-corporeality can be extended in such a way as to imagine all creatures existing within their own corporeal crossroads of body and place. Even such an anthropocentric concept as Ulrich Beck’s “risk society,” which stresses the necessity for scientifically mediated knowledge, can descend to the bottom of the sea, where benthic worms, sea cucumbers and krill ingest “toxin-laden microplastics” (Kaiser 2010, 1506). Not unlike ordinary humans navigating the bewildering risks we cannot properly assess, the benthic creatures can no longer rely upon their own sensory organs to detect danger. Recognizing how all living creatures intra-act with place—with the perpetual flow of water, air, nutrients, toxicants, and other substances—makes it imperative that we be accountable for the many material-semiotic systems we always already inhabit. The practice of thinking from within and as part of the material world swirls together ontology, epistemology, scientific disclosures, political perspectives, posthuman ethics, and environmental activism. A posthumanist new materialism, emerging from feminist body politics and environmental activism, may wish to begin with Barad’s contention that “there is no ‘I’ separate from the intra-active becoming of the world” (Barad 2007, 394).
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E-mail: alaimo@uta.edu

Stacy Alaimo is Professor of English at the University of Texas at Arlington (http://www.uta.edu/english/alaimo/). Her publications include Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space (Cornell, 2000), Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self (Indiana, 2010), and Material Feminisms (Indiana, 2008), edited with Susan J. Hekman. She edits the “Critical Ecologies” stream of the Electronic Book Review and is currently writing two books: Sea Creatures and the Limits of Animal Studies: Science, Aesthetics, Ethics and Protest and Pleasure: The Strange Agencies of Bodies and Places.