

Now, my feeling is that today, when of course ontology is all the rage again – the word, and the concept, and the project of ontology are back in many forms and on many sides, as though there were something very desirable about ontology, as though it were an object of philosophical desire to formulate an ontology, as though the very word “ontology” were irresistibly seductive – my feeling is that those attempts have not registered the force of Derrida’s arguments [...]

– *Geoffrey Bennington (Moreiras 41)*

What does it mean for feminist thought to think of life on Earth according to a discourse of material maternity where the latter is conceived of in terms of facilitative connective filiation? And why should we consider Astrida Neimanis’s volume, *Bodies of Water*, a significant contribution to feminist theory worthy of critical engagement? *Bodies of Water* presents a compelling feminist phenomenological elaboration on a vast textual reservoir of liquid water to construe life’s connection to water as maternal in its materiality. Neimanis’s aim is to urge us to acknowledge that a common (watery) way of being alive is shared in their embodiment by all forms of life in the hope that this would lead us to think and act more responsibly. Relying on the work of Luce Irigaray informed by Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty, Neimanis develops a lexicon of maternal water in terms of “amniotics,” “hydrocommons,” “planetary breastmilk” and “posthuman gestationality.” Also termed as the “onto-logic of amniotics,”

eszter timár

MÈRE MÉTAPHORE ***the maternal materiality of*** ***water in astrida neimanis’s*** **bodies of water**

gestationality is represented in the figure of the amnion, “the innermost membrane that encloses the embryo of a mammal, bird, or reptile” in the safe environment of water (Neimanis 95). Generalized as a basic ontological unit of life not limited to amniotes but including any cell as an enclosed body of water, this generalized maternity will be constitutive of life itself:

My proposition is that specific bodily waters – breast milk here, or amniotic waters [...] – are material metonyms of a planetary watery milieu that interpermeates and connects

ISSN 0969-725X print/ISSN 1469-2899 online/23/010128-11 © 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2023.2167793>

bodies, and bathes new kinds of plural life into being. (39)

While the phrase “planetary gestationality” does not itself appear in the text (separately, however, both terms feature quite frequently), it condenses well the overall project: published in the *Environmental Cultures* series at Bloomsbury, planetariness is as significant a term for the text’s understanding of endangered life on our planet as the sense of gestationality is associated with the waters that provide the means of life on Earth.

My point of departure for this article is that this figuration of water’s maternal materiality seems to be conceived in accordance with what Geoffrey Bennington calls the desire for ontology in my opening epigraph. Without aiming to argue for a general “registry” of the force of deconstruction, I am interested in this article in engagements with sexual difference, materiality and maternity relying on the resources of deconstruction and psychoanalysis. I do this to suggest that the construction of the discourse of maternal connectedness (including a resulting incitement of gratitude) in the name of affirming life is in fact haunted by figures of separation, loss and anxiety concerning the idea of maternity and materiality. While my argument will rely on in part by revisiting relevant scholarly discussions that might be considered “old,” or “outdated,” I suggest we consider the kind of interpretive and critical practices we see in deconstruction or psychoanalysis as approaches interested in the rhetorical and affective reading of texts. When I think of the compelling force of *Bodies of Water*, it is Kant’s dynamic sublime that first comes to my mind in part because of their resonances of imagery and also, and this will be my first act of revisitation, because of Paul de Man’s reading of it in his discussions of the aesthetic ideology of materiality. Simply put, this is important because Kant, in his attempt at placing the sublime as the connective bridge of all his critical work preceding the *Critique of Judgment*, discusses a way of seeing nature that concerns the very

timár

meaning of materiality. In several of his late texts, Paul de Man provided readings of the relevant passages in Kant in order to unpack this discourse of materiality. Let me here indicate the resonances by recalling that Kant’s notion of the dynamic sublime deploys the Western idea of figuring nature as a veiled mother citing the inscription of the Temple of Isis:

Perhaps nothing more sublime has ever been said, or any thought more sublimely expressed, than in the inscription over the temple of Isis (Mother Nature): “I am all that is, that was, and that will be, and my veil no mortal has removed.” (194)

Planetary gestationality is a version of this Mother Nature, a figural construction which greatly helps orchestrate the discussion on materiality in the dynamic sublime for Kant. Paul de Man’s discussion of materiality in relation to the dynamic sublime will not just show that Neimanis’s work is an elaboration of the terms of the Kantian text on the sublime, it will also provide the opportunity to catch a glimpse of what I consider these haunting figures of loss. Another such act of revisitation concerns Neimanis’s reading of Irigaray. When we read *Bodies of Water* bearing in mind the question “How does this text refer to materiality as a kind of uncontested foundational term?,” we find a continuous pulsing discourse of braiding the terms “discourse” and “matter.” On the one hand, the text often assures us that materiality and discourse are inseparable, that discourse is part of materiality; it is implicated within it. On the other hand, though, the text also employs a distinction between metaphor and metonymy that posits them as very different in terms of their relationship to matter. While metonymy has free access to materiality whose oneness with discourse is secured by metonymy’s maternal coursing through matter, metaphor seems to be trapped in language with no access to materiality. To discuss Neimanis’s use of these terms, I will rely on Diana Fuss’s appreciative deconstruction of Irigaray’s own discourse on metaphor and metonymy to

suggest that Neimanis takes on from Irigaray both the gendered construction of these tropes and the particular way this gendered construction breaks down. In my final section I will turn to Elissa Marder's more recent work on what she calls the maternal function. Here, unlike in Neimanis's figure of contained connection, the maternal is discussed in terms of a radical separation and an associated anxiety in which figures of birth and death both mark the idea of maternity. My reading will focus on showing ways in which the Kantian dynamic sublime and Neimanis's discernment of metonymy can be considered as featuring tropes of death within the discourse of nature as facilitative mother.

With one chapter devoted to the imagery of breast milk, another to amniotic waters, this maternity (while acknowledged to be also abyssal) is primarily facilitative. Embodiment is always facilitated by water: bodies beget other bodies by some sort of watery arrangement.¹ Neimanis illustrates this by referring to a wide range of texts relevant for this sense of wateriness: scientific texts on pharmaceuticals influencing the hormones of frogs and fish along with highly contested theories of so-called pseudoscience such as Masaru Emoto's experiments with water or speculative theories of human prehistory such as the aquatic ape hypothesis. Interested in what these texts perform (and not whether they can in fact be considered verified), Neimanis reads these all as belonging to a common reservoir of the imaginary of wateriness and our human belonging to it.

What makes the volume so deserving of a careful reading is that she combines this textual reservoir of water with an important intervention in feminist theory. In order to infuse feminist new materialism with feminist phenomenology, Neimanis carefully cites all major feminist theorists usually associated with new materialism (see, for instance, page 6) while also tracing the legacy of some of the great inspirational figures of poststructuralist feminist theory (e.g., Cixous's *écriture féminine*), weaving the voices of these different domains into its own text it presents a complex feminist chorus, in the wake of which planetary

gestationality may be thought.² The link to new materialism is important because of the specific significance of materiality in *Bodies of Water*: water's maternity is inseparable from its materiality.³ This material aspect of posthumanist lived embodiment is connected to the way the volume is conceived as a proposal for a radical inflection of ontology:

The importance of water for the gestation, maintenance, and proliferation of bodily life is hardly news to anyone with a rudimentary understanding of the life sciences. But water's biological workings also reverberate in an important philosophical proposition – in an onto-logic – that helps us rethink dominant Western ontologies that privilege a static and separated way of bodily being. An onto-logic is a common way of being that is expressed across a difference of beings. As opposed to the way in which “ontology” might be traditionally understood, an onto-logic does not propose to solve the question of “Being,” nor does it purport to reveal or describe all of being's facets or potential expressions. An onto-logic can rather gather or highlight something that helps us understand *a common how, where, when, and thanks to whom that certain seemingly disparate beings share*. (Neimanis 96; italics mine)

As this quote suggests, this mission takes place in the general idea of ontology: onto-logy seems to be part of the answer to the ethical and ontological obligations mentioned above in proposing a shared commonality that reverberates through difference. Water here is posited as a material guarantee of a commonality that invites, if not prescribes, a sense of gratitude. The referent of this “thanks to whom,” the “who,” is the personified figure of this maternal and material water. What is ontologized in Neimanis's volume through the idea of water in its liquid state is a combination of figures of the feminine side of sexual difference as they appear in the work of Luce Irigaray. Irigaray is being read here as a thinker of materiality; Neimanis leaves Irigaray's discussions of the patriarchal discourse of Western thought including engagements with Lacanian psychoanalysis

unconsidered. It is as if these discourse-oriented aspects of Irigaray's work were simply issued by her specific onto-logy. I suggest that this decision of reading Irigaray without an attention to language or psychoanalysis is aiding Neimanis in her desire to ontologize the figures of maternal embodiment (the amniotic sac and the lactating breast) in order to construe her idea(l) of hydro-commons as a way of being connected. The sense of this commonality infused with gratitude is also affirmed by the gesture of presenting the cited material from feminist theory as overall complementary where theoretical differences are insignificant in light of a more profound agreement. Since water here is something like the mother of life (that which life needs to be possible) and all live bodies are alive because they contain water as it traverses through them, the offspring (life or lived bodies) is never quite separated from the mother.

Given this silence on language and psychoanalysis in Irigaray's work (while implicitly relying on it) makes the task of reading the rhetorical construction of maternal materiality with the help of deconstruction and psychoanalysis all the more promising. The combined effect of this reading will show, I hope on the one hand, that the construction of maternal materiality as something more serious than a mere rhetorical construct is itself constructed via rhetorical means. On the other hand, it will suggest that this rhetorical construction reveals necessarily menacing aspects of maternity at the heart of planetary gestationality. This is all the more important since it is unclear how such a discourse conceiving the essence of the materiality of life in terms of a filial connection infused with gratitude may provide space for the possibility of radical dissent and debate when it comes to our feminist responses to the eco-crisis we have been living in.

the kantian sublime and maternal materiality

Neimanis takes the term "planetary" from Gayatri Spivak who introduces it to resist the sense of unification or political homogenization

of "global" (Neimanis 144–45). "Planetary" in this sense stands for a sense of unlimitable multiplicity of difference. Applied to the terms of gestationality, it denotes the sense that this maternal connection is shared across such multiplicities of embodiment. However, the combination of the concern for life on Earth and the imagery of "amniotics" (as a sense of shared bathing) also evokes the ideas of planet or planets in the term "planetary," and this association is fortified by Neimanis's consistent reliance on the lexicon of "materiality" in terms of the imagery of the watery amnion. The singular and the plural of "planet" might signify considerably different ideas. The singular form includes the iconic image of our "blue planet" representing life as the rare miracle confined to our home (only possible to imagine as a whole from a viewpoint out in space), whereas the plural always refers to at least one other planet, drawing our imagination in the direction of celestial bodies in the sky. The idea of planetariness thus invokes both the figure of our home as a milieu of nature harboring life as well as the idea of what lies outside of this planet, itself made to appear like a precious amnion itself. Gestationality based on the maternally-metonymically conceived idea of water as a medium of life, on the other hand, especially the idea of all water on Earth, invokes vastness and is as such very close to the figure of the ocean: our convention of referring to Earth as the blue planet combines the idea of water with the image of Earth viewed from space.⁴ This linking of ocean and outer space connects planetary gestationality to the Kantian notion of the dynamic sublime (associated with nature). As is well known, the sublime for Kant is a certain mixed affective state of pleasure developing out of unpleasure and emerging as a result of experiencing a sense of vastness represented to us by nature. Kant's discussion of the sublime plays a crucial part in his third *Critique* meant to serve as the bridge between the first two critiques. In doing so, he works an old Western discourse on the sublime into an affect that represents a radical freedom only open to man. Importantly, his discussion on

the dynamic sublime contains two elements also at work in Neimanis: figuring nature as a mother and understanding the dynamic sublime as guided by a discussion of phenomenal materiality. The combination of ocean and sky appears precisely at the moment when, in his reading of Kant, Paul de Man introduces the idea of “material” vision to juxtapose it with the idea of phenomenal materiality. The most important quote from Kant on the sublime selected by de Man is the following:

If, then, we call the sight of the starry heavens *sublime*, we must not place at the foundation of judgment concepts of worlds inhabited by rational beings and regard the bright points, with which we see the space above us filled, as their suns moving in circles purposively fixed with reference to them; but we must regard it, just as we see it [...] as a distant, all-embracing vault [...] Only under such a representation can we range the sublimity that a pure aesthetic judgment ascribes to this object. And in the same way, if we are to call the sight of the ocean sublime, we must not think of it as we ordinarily do [...] For example, we sometimes think of the ocean as a vast kingdom of aquatic creatures, or as the great source of those vapors that fill the air with clouds for the benefit of the land, or again as an element that, though dividing continents from each other, yet promotes the greatest communication between them; all these produce merely teleological judgments. To find the ocean nevertheless sublime we must regard it as poets do [...], merely by what the eye reveals [...] – if it is at rest, as a clear mirror of water only bounded by the heavens; if it is stormy, as an abyss threatening to overwhelm everything. (Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, italics original, qtd in de Man 80)

Writing on phenomenality and reference in Paul de Man’s work, Andrzej Warminski connects de Man’s texts on the Kantian sublime to a quote from the earlier “Resistance to Theory”: “What we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism” (Warminski 14). In Warminski’s interpretation, de Man

here argues that it is in fact tropes that “accomplish the phenomenalization of reference” (Warminski 14), rendering reference a function of language, and ideology the effect of this phenomenalization.⁵ If Kant, in the quote above, develops a “vision that is purely material, devoid of any reflexive or intellectual complication [...] of any semantic depth and reducible to the formal mathematization or geometricization of pure optics” (de Man 83). In other words, the appearance of this peculiar vision introduces a tension between materiality and phenomenology and Paul de Man argues that Kant ends up performing a gesture of disarticulation: what is meant to bridge the previous critiques ends up showing a conflictual heterogeneity (de Man 83). This reading of Kant suggests that the posthuman phenomenology Neimanis develops in the figurations of water would qualify as a gesture of ideological production of maternal materiality.⁶ I will look at the way this phenomenalization is carried out rhetorically by Neimanis in the next section. Equally important for me is that the images associated with this material vision, the sky as a vault, the ocean as either a mirror or as a threatening storm, can be considered as marked by figures of death, loss and anxiety.⁷ I will return to this question in my final section on the maternal function.

the tropes of maternal materiality

For the gesture of the discursive infusion of the maternal into the material, Neimanis relies on the work of Luce Irigaray on sexual difference, in particular her work on Nietzsche, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, in which Irigaray exploits the phonetic isomorphism and gendered agreement of the French words for “sea” and “mother,” *mer* and *mère*. Neimanis’s explicit aim is to braid together this Irigarayan legacy with the thought of Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty. Her text also consistently builds on Irigaray’s work on metaphor and metonymy. These terms are strategically used throughout the volume: across its chapters, “metaphor” signals a kind of linguistic limitedness in sharp distinction to a non-metaphorical

reality of sorts. Let me provide a series of snippets featuring metaphor: “imaginative ‘interventions’ [are] never conceptual fantasy or metaphor” (Neimanis 5); “the wateriness of bodies is always more than metaphorical” (7); “rethinking water demands a position that is never ‘just’ metaphorical” (22); “watery embodiment is neither an abstract concept nor mere metaphor” (49); “the sea is not simply a metaphor for the female mother or the womb” (84). Metonymy, however, seems to be on the side of ontology: we “are the watery world – metonymically, temporarily, partially, and particularly” (27); “PET bottles [...] are the metonyms of Anthropocene water” (177). The basis for this distinction, according to which the essence of metonymy locates its origin in matter rather than language (whereas metaphor is securely lodged in language without the capacity to permeate matter) is provided by a contrasting analogy to continuity or contiguity, and it is only in these terms that Neimanis relies on Irigaray’s work on these tropes without explicitly citing it.

Consider the following snippets in which the distinction between metaphor and metonymy provides a guarantee of ontology through the idea of contiguity: “always more than metaphorical, we can trace in Irigaray’s work a contiguity or continuity (rather than analogy) with the elemental” (Neimanis 77); “maternal origins are rather *contiguous* with deeper and wider seas” (84). The underlying, tacit suggestion here seems to be that maternal materiality is materially metonymical. In other words, metonymy’s figurative, discursive force is in continuity with what Neimanis calls the “onto-logics” of life. In this schema of the metonymical maternal materiality of planetary life, then, metonymy is tasked with securing the ontological status of wateriness based on contiguity.

In her chapter on Irigaray in *Essentially Speaking*, Diana Fuss examined closely Irigaray’s engagement with sexual difference, psychoanalysis and analogical figures of speech. Carefully reviewing scholarship engaging with this question, including several works suggesting that it is wrong to try to simply

expose a defining essentialism in the texts, Fuss here argues that our reading of Irigaray should not be limited to settling the question whether she essentializes sexual difference. Instead, she wants to examine this oeuvre as an intervention into the intertextual realm of philosophy and psychoanalysis. This includes the reading of Irigaray’s combined deployment of sexual difference, femininity, a rhetoric of fluidity, and the relationship between metaphor and metonymy.

Fuss connects Irigaray’s preference for liquids over solids as part of her critical engagement with the discourse of the phallus. “According to Irigaray,” Fuss tells us citing *This Sex Which is Not One*, “Western culture privileges a mechanics of solids over a mechanics of fluids because man’s sexual imaginary is isomorphic: ‘production, property [...], order, form, unity, visibility, erection’” (58–59). And femininity will be associated with a language of liquids, represented by the series “continuous, compressible, dilatable, viscous, conductible, diffusable” (Irigaray in Fuss 59). A similar tendency to counter her interpretation of the Lacanian phallus in order to carve out discursive space, in Fuss’s reading, where the feminine subject can speak her pleasure (articulated around her well-known figure of the “two lips”), concerns her critique of Lacan’s use of metaphor and metonymy. Here Fuss gives a helpful account of the way Lacan adopted Roman Jakobson’s conceptualization of metaphor and metonymy as the two rhetorical poles constitutive of language as system of signs: metaphor as substitution by similarity is seen as the selective aspect of signification, while metonymy, substitution by proximity or contiguity, is seen as the sequential order of linguistic meaning-making. Lacan adopts this theory to psychoanalysis in accordance with general theories of language such that metaphor “dominates” over metonymy, and the phallus, for Lacan is a metaphor that gives meaning to sexual difference in general (Fuss 64–65). The important point for my purposes here is that, as Fuss quickly shows, “the relation between the penis and the phallus is as much one of association or metonymy as similarity or

metaphor” (65). This deconstruction of the distinction between metaphor and metonymy also holds for Irigaray privileging metonymy. As Fuss puts it:

Irigaray has this to say about a woman’s historical relation to metaphoricity: a woman is “stifled beneath all those eulogistic or denigratory metaphors” (*Speculum*, 142–43); she is “hemmed in, cathected by tropes” (*Speculum*, 143) and “rolled up in metaphors” (*Speculum*, 144). One wonders to what extent it is truly possible to think of the “two lips” as something other than a metaphor. I would argue that, despite Irigaray’s protestations to the contrary, the figure of the “two lips” never stops functioning metaphorically. Her insistence that the two lips escape metaphoricity provides us with a particularly clear example of what Paul de Man identifies as the inevitability of “centering a system of tropes at the very moment we claim to escape from it” (1984, 72). But, what is important about Irigaray’s conception of this particular figure is that the “two lips” operate as a metaphor for metonymy; through this collapse of boundaries, Irigaray gestures toward the deconstruction of the classic metaphor/metonymy binarism. In fact, her work persistently attempts to effect a historical displacement of metaphor’s dominance over metonymy; she “impugns the privilege granted to metaphor (a quasi solid) over metonymy (which is much more closely allied to fluids)” (*This Sex*, 110). (66)

In other words, Irigaray’s deployment of the metaphor of metonymy is part of a feminist project of superimposing the distinctions between liquid and solid, metonymy and metaphor on the distinction between femininity and masculinity in order to not simply “impugn the privilege granted to metaphor,” but also to grant the privilege she jerked out of phallocentrism to the metonymy of liquid femininity. However, as Fuss shows, the deconstruction of the distinction between metaphor and metonymy frustrates Irigaray’s aim to fasten metonymy to femininity as much as Lacan’s aim to fasten metaphor to masculinity. Importantly for the implications for Neimanis’s use of these

tropes, Fuss shows that at the moment when Irigaray thinks she escapes metaphoricity, she in fact introduces in the sexuated and embodied image a metaphor for metonymy. Embodied materiality does not escape metaphoricity but is brought into relief thanks to it.

In *Bodies of Water*, the tension between metaphor and metonymy is linked to the idea of materiality in a double gesture. Metonymy is freely and organically flowing from matter through discourse, while metaphor is confined to language. This confinement guarantees a clear boundary between matter and discourse, which in turn allows for valuing the former as originary and present in its materiality. Conceding Fuss’s point that Irigaray’s two lips is a metaphor of metonymy, we may consider Neimanis’s discursive figure of planetary gestationality as a variation of the Irigarayan legacy of associating metonymy and femininity: a metaphorical representation of maternal materiality. The explicitly avowed imagery of maternal materiality as profoundly nourishing rests in part on tying this gendered discourse of metaphor and metonymy to the idea of access to materiality. As a result, the feminine metonymical has access to materiality whereas metaphor whose agency is too limited to access materiality is confined to mere language thereby appearing as secondary and deprived of its phallocratic privileges.⁸ In the metaphor of maternal materiality (where materiality includes language and discourse), metaphor’s confinement to language appears like a figure of containment not unlike an amniotic sac. In my final section, I will show that the undecidability between this imagery of containment – facilitative amnion or etiolation through confinement – will correspond to a similar undecidability between birth and death in the imagery of the maternal function.

mère métaphore: planetary gestationality and the maternal function

In *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Elissa Marder argues that the figure of the mother is always marked by a

constitutive, traumatic anxiety of having been born without “being present” at one’s birth (at least as a subject) and this profound loss of missing one’s birth figures in the imagery of mourning (including the distinctions of mourning and melancholia or introjection vs. incorporation). Instead of considering it as a paralyzing force arresting life, this anxiety is consistently interpreted as a source that propels us to the future: it is a force of life by being a force in part always marked by death. Clearly then, for Marder the maternal is associated more with separation than with connection or containment. Marder distills three specific figures in which this anxiety of the maternal appears and I suggest that these figures all inform the figural construction of planetary gestationality.

One of these is the “womb-tomb.” Psychoanalytic theory posits failed mourning as the psychic incorporation of the lost other into an internal object that refuses to be given up. Marder’s main source here is Abraham and Torok’s contribution on the crypt (including Derrida’s reading of it). The crypt is a figure of a contained preservation of the lost object. The figure of the womb-tomb connects Neimanis’s amniotic maternity to the haunting imagery of the crypt in metaphor’s containment in language. In light of Fuss’s deconstruction of Irigaray, we may recall that the amnion is also a metaphor, the metaphor of maternal metonymy. In the end we have a series of figures that, far from separating maternity from metaphor, in fact ensure that this distinction is set up through an interplay of maternity and metaphor in both the image of the amnion and the gesture of enclosing metaphor. In one instance we have the amnion and life, in the other we have the enshrined “mummy.” We could think of this figure as *Mère Métaphore*: if the wateriness coursing through planetary gestationality produces a composite image of material amnionics enshrining “mere” metaphor, it is because it itself is a metaphor of a maternity that is no more sustaining than threatening.

Another figure of the maternal function is the “photographic” memory of the primal

scene. Based on a close reading of Freud’s texts on birth and anxiety, in her account of the trauma of the primal scene Marder emphasizes that the unconscious memory of witnessing copulating parents is recorded at such an early time that the mental apparatus capturing the event lacks any frame of interpretive reference. It is like a snapshot, “the *mechanical reproduction* of an impossible image” (Marder 170; original emphasis). According to Marder, the primal scene is templated on the maternal function, that is, the anxiety of birth. This shifts Freud’s emphasis on Oedipal threats of castration to the maternal function, a gesture that seems somewhat similar but is also affectively significantly different from Irigaray’s “impugnation.” This image of the presubjective snapshot precipitated by the maternal function corresponds to what de Man identifies as Kant’s disarticulation of phenomenal materiality and material vision. What Kant designated as teleological ways of conceiving of these appearances of nature (the various kinds of phenomenalization of materiality) tend to suggest a sense of admiration or gratitude because of a certain facilitative appraisal of the sky and the ocean: as spaces and means of life. The way poets see the sky and the ocean, on the other hand, creates a view of these natural phenomena as if it could strip them of the conventional conceptual ways of making sense of them, thus letting go of this rhetoric of facilitative maternity. What remains in Kant’s text is a series of figures: the starry sky as an “all-embracing vault,” the placid ocean as a perfectly still surface with no depth, mirroring air and finally the stormy ocean as murderous. All three images have a strong chilling effect. If Marder’s snapshot resonates with the Kantian sublime, it is not only because of the conceptual resonance between the crucial significance of the lack of interpretative mediation for Kant’s sublime and for the maternal function organizing the primal scene in Marder via Freud, it is also because conceiving nature as maternal seems to entail figures of loss, anxiety and death.

I would like to end on a note about the sense of obligatory gratitude I heard in the quote on

onto-logy in my introduction. As I mentioned, instilling a sense of gratitude for Neimanis motivates a renewed posthuman responsibility towards our fellows in the hydrocommons (Neimanis 16–17). In closing, let me recall what Marder calls the maternal prosthetic, the third figure of the maternal function in discussing the question of collectivity and demands of responsibility. Just like in our readings of the Kantian sublime and of Irigaray, we will find Irigaray’s imagery of the ever-connected facilitation of life complemented by the figure of maternity as distantly and hauntingly menacing. Here Marder relies on Avital Ronell’s *Telephone Book* to argue that our conventional imagery of Western technology is a manifestation of the maternal function by manifesting the wish to be connected to the ghost haunting from presubjective life. Taking her cue from Ronell’s remark that “[t]here is always a remnant of the persecuting, accusatory mother in the telephone system” (Ronell 144), Marder writes:

And, because there can be no telephone without another telephone, the telephonic matrix binds all its units together through a techno-maternal network in which each individual number loses its singularity by becoming answerable to a symbolic collectivity. This collectivity, furthermore, reproduces itself by transmitting voices that dictate orders into the ear. The first such order of the telephone is the demand to answer its call. The call from the other that comes to us through the telephone retains something of the voice of the (undead) mother who returns, with a vengeance, to issue imperatives and regulate compliance. (118)

This image of technicity may appear as the exact opposite of Neimanis’s Irigarayan vitalist-organicist marine mother. Since so far maternal figures have tended to duplicate themselves according to organicity, facilitation and life on the one hand, technicity, death and anxiety on the other, the quote above sounds almost as if the horrifying image of the compulsion to pick up the phone to listen to the persecuting voice of the “mummified mummy”

(Marder 119) were a negative flipside of an image of *Bodies of Water* in which feminist posthuman phenomenology picks up a conch to listen to the oceanic chorus of feminist theory on live embodiment. Reading Neimanis with the help of Kant, de Man, Fuss and Marder suggests that figuring the maternal as exclusively nurturing and life-affirming cannot fail to be haunted by figures of some foundational anxiety over life and death. Marder’s work is rooted in figures of loss and mourning while at the same time conceiving of anxiety as what propels us into futurity. In combination with de Man’s difficult work on language, reference and materiality, it may open us to the task of coming to terms with the idea of life and materiality as always marked by separation, anxiety and death. This would perhaps enable us to respond differently to our feminist desire for ontology and to render our responsibility concerning the current man-made waning of Holocene bliss less bound by the looming figure of an ever-present ancestral material maternity.



disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

notes

1 The abyssal aspect of this maternity is emphasized as what renders it radically unknowable by a generalized masculinist gaze. Masculinity, in turn, is rendered into images of solids, as if antithetical to water figured as essentially fluid. For instance, bitumen is considered masculine (Neimanis 27). At the same time, nonliquid states of water are not really considered and when they appear, they are associated with masculinity. Consider semen: “semen is not female mucus [...] masculine waters tend to freeze, harden, and evaporate” (89).

2 The volume presents an intervention in several domains of feminist theory: phenomenology, post-humanism and new materialism. As for the first two, the focus on the wateriness of lived embodiment, “an ontological and ethical imperative” (Neimanis 42), provides an opportunity to forge

a posthuman, “different kind of phenomenology – one that can divest itself from some of its implied and explicit humanist commitment” (31). This posthuman phenomenology then aids feminist new materialism in having its language of agency “tempered” by “attunement, listening, and observation” (42).

3 Since much of the theoretical gist is provided by the Deleuzian reading of Irigaray, the project will resonate especially well with parts of new materialism that also share this Deleuzian orientation (considered as vitalist by Gamble et al.). It is because of this resonance that I consider my deconstruction-motivated argument to be joining the work also discussing the ontological projects in new materialism which rely on deconstruction (see Basile, and especially Mercier for his discussion on the relationship between the material turn and the linguistic turn).

4 On imaging Earth from space, see the first chapter of Kelly Oliver’s *Earth and World*.

5 Importantly, Warminski offers his interpretation while warning against a typical misreading of the quote that would still posit a knowable and clear separation between natural reality and language based on an assumed knowledge of what language indeed is (9–10).

6 After all, any organicist reading of Kant, according to de Man, pledges allegiance to a “Schillerization” of Kant (de Man 131), a legacy of interpretation that considers phenomenality as reference and thereby adding force of ontologizing interpretations (of nature).

7 Relatedly, for an interpretation of Paul de Man’s oeuvre on rhetoric as a work of mourning, see Siebers.

8 Something strange happens to synecdoche such that it finds itself more closely related to metaphor than metonymy when Neimanis says that the “passage from body of water to body of water (always as body of water) is never synecdochal or metaphoric; it is radically material” (86). I call this strange not because the conceptualization of synecdoche is erroneous since it has traditionally been always classified as a kind of metonymy. This idea would affirm a sense that we should always be able to apply a rhetorical taxonomy based on the idea of the “proper” meaning of terms such as metaphor or

synecdoche. It is crucial for my purposes in this article to recall that deconstruction, in discussions on metaphoricity, has cast a critical light on such a policing of proper meanings (see Derrida and Moore as well as Gasché 307–18). However, synecdoche’s ambivalent placement is significant for understanding the construction of materiality as maternal in Neimanis’s work. For in a passage on political and ethical action drawing on Haraway, Neimanis asserts the following: “These actions [...] are never in themselves a perfect metonym of an imaginary (i.e. a part that faithfully and felicitously condenses the whole) because this would imply that the imaginary comes first, before the work required to enact it” (176). Here, unlike above, “perfect metonymy” is understood in terms of synecdoche (since conventionally, synecdoche is understood as a figure showing either part for the whole or whole for the part). These quotes show that while the text wants to rely on the properly differentiated meanings of these figures in order to posit a clear distinction between matter and language, these tropes can’t be securely bounded off; they flow and seep through one another.

bibliography

Basile, Jonathan. “The New Novelty: Corralation as Quarantine in Speculative Realism and New Materialism.” *Derrida Today*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2018, pp. 211–29.

De Man, Paul. *Aesthetic Ideology*. U of Minnesota P, 1996.

Derrida, Jacques, and F.C.T. Moore. “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy.” *New Literary History*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1974, pp. 5–74.

Fuss, Diana. *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference*. Routledge, 1989.

Gamble, Christopher N., et al. “What Is New Materialism?” *Angelaki*, vol. 24, no. 6, 2019, pp. 111–34.

Gasché, Rodolphe. *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*. Harvard UP, 1986.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, Cambridge UP, 2000.

mère métaphore

Marder, Elissa. *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Psychoanalysis, Photography, Deconstruction*. Fordham UP, 2013.

Mercier, Thomas Clement. "Old and New Matters." *Síntesis. Revista de Filosofía*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2021, pp. 1–18.

Moreiras, Alberto. "On Scatter, the Trace Structure, and the Opening of Politics: An Interview with Geoffrey Bennington." *Diacritics*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2017, pp. 34–51.

Neimanis, Astrida. *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. Bloomsbury, 2017.

Oliver, Kelly. *Earth and World: Philosophy After the Apollo Missions*. Columbia UP, 2015.

Ronell, Avital. *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*. U of Nebraska P, 1989.

Siebers, Tobin. "Mourning Becomes Paul de Man." *Cold War Criticism and the Politics of Skepticism*. Oxford UP, 1993, pp. 89–110.

Warminski, Andrzej. "Allegories of Reference: An Introduction to *Aesthetic Ideology*." *Ideology, Rhetoric, Aesthetics: For de Man*. Edinburgh UP, 2013, pp. 3–37.

Eszter Timár
Department of Gender Studies, CEU
Central European University Private
University
Quellenstraße 51
A-1100 Wien, Austria
Vienna Commercial Court
FN 502313
Austria
E-mail: etimar@ceu.edu