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The (Im-)Possibilities and (Dis-)Comforts of Watery We's: Exploring Entanglement, Mothering and Solidarity within Hydrofeminism(s)

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Introduction

Water is a connector, a differentiator, a facilitator, a communicator. It brings all kinds of bodies into intimate contact, despite and because of our differences. (Neimanis 2018)

This essay reflects on how hydrofeminist discussions of connectedness, inequality, and a leaky 'we' across differences may inform thinking about gender and other intersecting markers of difference in relation to climate catastrophe. We unpack and interrogate the 'we' in hydrofeminism through three main prisms: (1) the gendered notion of motherhood and the practice of mothering, as seen through ecofeminist, queer, and black feminist perspectives, linking this to critiques and possibilities of identification; (2) the (dis-)comfort,

racialization, and affordances of leaky academic institutions; and (3) responsibility, situated accountability, and indebtedness with regards to unequally distributed privileges and politics of location. These themes emerged from a symposium, "With and Against the Current: Exploring Hydrofeminism(s)," which we co-organized at the University of Copenhagen on 11–12 December 2023.¹ Initially planned as an afternoon lecture by cultural theorist Astrida Neimanis, whose work in *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (2017) and elsewhere has been instrumental in defining hydrofeminism, the event expanded organically. The symposium included a collective presentation by Astrida Neimanis and wildlife pathologist Aleksija Neimane, with a screening of *We Are All Mothers* by filmmaker Patty Chang from the group's collaborative project on marine mammal death; keynotes by Astrida Neimanis and author, community builder, and scholar Alexis

Pauline Gumbs; and talks and performances by artist Madeleine Andersson, author Siri Ravn Hjelm Jacobsen, dancer and choreographer Lydia Östberg Diakité, and author Lesley Ann Brown. With contributions from participants within different disciplines in the sciences, arts, and humanities, holding varying independent and institutional affiliations, and practicing within a Scandinavian and international context, we aimed to showcase the broad range of hydrofeminism's impact and application.

As a novel epistemological/methodological concept, hydrofeminism has gained traction within the fields of environmental humanities and feminist theory over the past decade. Hydrofeminisms offer valuable perspectives on the connections, solidarities, and inequalities, leaks, and flows, between water(y) bodies, and point to some of the ways in which intersectionality, inequality, and difference mediate the climate catastrophe and its effects. These feminist theories of our shared ecological landscape highlight our different imbrications in the watery flows that we, both humans and more-than-humans, are a part of, and encourage us to consider ourselves as watery containers that can learn from how water connects and permeates all of our bodies. Two of the speakers at the symposium, Astrida Neimanis and Alexis Pauline Gumbs, whose work we engage with in this essay, can account for some central debates in hydrofeminism. Neimanis's 2017 book *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Methodology* has become a landmark work in hydrofeminism. The book deals with the tensions of how water, on the one hand, connects, challenging boundaries, dichotomies, and separation; and on the other hand, how watery thinking, instead of fetishized and fetishizing 'oneness', simultaneously exposes inequalities and coloniality of environmental violence. Thus Neimanis (see also 2024) also points to the dangers of being seduced by romantic ideas about watery abundance and connection. Rather than being canonized as a hydrofeminist thinker, Gumbs identifies as a "Queer Black Troublemaker, Black Feminist Love Evangelist and an aspirational cousin to all sentient beings"—a position that

can also be read as a stance on hydrofeminism (<https://www.alexispauline.com/about>). In her 2020 creative nonfiction book *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, Gumbs meditates on the lessons in fugitivity and survival that marine mammals might teach us. Many of the species that she writes about are endangered or have become extinct, and Gumbs' writing exposes connections between colonial violence, enslavement, environmental racism, and the violence experienced by sea mammals—and potentials for adaptation, resistance, and change.

What is at stake in this essay drawing on the above-mentioned scholarly work is that even if fluid exchanges provide an image for environmental embeddedness—and one that has been particularly fertile for embodied feminist imaginations—bodies of water do not affect all human bodies alike. Even within Scandinavia, there are significant regional, cultural, bodily, and economic differences between levels of dependency on coastal climates, levels of vulnerability to flood zones, and degrees of exposure to groundwater toxins. Globally, bodies of water have their own histories and temporalities, connected to but distinct from the rhythms of terrestrial life.

The symposium generated questions about what knowledges are cultivated within academic settings, how to break with academic protocol, and what the implications are of disrupting the general 'we' so often assumed within these spaces. How can hydrofeminisms help, and how might they hinder, thinking collectively from a 'we' marked by fracture, inequality, and non-alignment? To put it plainly: in what instances does the implied 'we' in hydrofeminism become problematic?

Exploring the tensions of 'we': a conversation

In any collaborative relation there is a fear of deep checking in. What do we do in the event of the force of clashing ...? (Berlant & Stewart 2019, 28)

In this time of climate catastrophe—fueled by centuries of colonialism, slavery and heteropatriarchal mastery, and augmented by a global pandemic with its grotesquely uneven distribution of vulnerability—just who do 'we' think 'we' are? (Neimanis 2024, xxiv)

We—a limited we, the authors of this essay—chose to shape our writing as a conversation to bring forth and cultivate our distinct voices and perspectives. Being accountable and bearing witness to the intersectionality of climate catastrophe, we aim to create a shared space of critique, disagreement, and testimony through collaborative autoethnographic writing (Lapadat 2017). The conversation enables us to show the clashes and (dis)comforts of the 'we' as authors, embodying the tensions that are central to how gender and other markers of difference intersect with climate catastrophe. The conversation format adds another layer to our discussion of community and 'we-ness' within hydrofeminisms. It affords an exploration of how we manifest, both as individuals and as a collective voice, throughout this piece of writing. The conversation format explores how we are influenced by our gender identities, our racialization, our bodies, and our (precarious or more stable) employment in or outside the university. It also asks how we are challenged, as individuals as well as a writing collective, in the writing process by the conversation format. In other words, the conversation format enables a hands-on exploration of the connections and inequalities, leaks and flows, offered by hydrofeminist thought.

Are we all mothers? Gestures towards a tentative, hesitant, and leaky 'we'

Our conversation starts by discussing the video *We Are All Mothers* (2022), visual artist and filmmaker Patty Chang's contribution to the interdisciplinary research project between her, feminist theorist and scholar Astrida Neimanis, and wildlife pathologist Aleksija Neimane, entitled *Learning*

Endings. The collaboration documents necropsies of deceased marine mammals and explores how art practice can contribute to bringing care to this work. Constrained by the COVID-19 pandemic, the three collaborators met online, where Neimanis and Chang bore witness to the necropsies performed by Neimane, introducing visual documentation and ritual to the scientific practice. In the video, through the necropsy of a baby porpoise, Chang reflects on the emotional connection of different species through motherhood, bringing into the scene of mammal death her own care and anxieties for her young son.² Thus, the film addresses the dynamics of connectedness and care across watery—first and foremost mammal—bodies, through exploring topics like mothering, bodily vulnerabilities, exposure to toxins, and death; and how these are entangled with (interspecies) difference and inequality, reflecting tensions that fuel hydrofeminist thought.

Linda: Christa and I had a conversation about motherhood in relation to the screening of *We Are All Mothers*, and Astrida's reflections about the term 'mother'. The moment in the film, showing the breastmilk in the dead baby porpoise's belly, aiming to make it more relatable to me, because I have a presumed relation with breastfeeding, was disturbing for me. I felt that this moment in the film essentialized gender—it interpellated me, as a carrier of mammary glands and reproductive organs that might be used for giving birth, as a per-default mothering body that should feel interspecies identification with other "bodies like mine."

Christa: Yeah, I had a lot of conflicted feelings about the film, because on the one hand, it's really beautiful and moving, but its focus on identification feels so taboo in environmental studies today. There are so many species and beings that are difficult or impossible for us to identify with, "strange strangers," and effacing these differences is arguably also an attempt to eradicate the otherness of and in the world (Morton 2010). Identification has also been problematized through black feminist and queer challenging of solidarity, or even empathy, as emerging through perceived similarity,

also present in Alexis Pauline Gumbs' work. And then my second response was in response to the title, to question whether we really are all mothers—or want to be considered in this way. I think there is something powerful about being able to talk about motherhood in an academic context. But at the same time, I don't understand insisting on the "all." Linda and I talked about the moment on the first day when Astrida said, motherhood is not everything, but it is more than what it is usually said to be. I almost wish we had gotten to talk a bit more about that. Because why motherhood and not care? Or why motherhood and not other terms that actually already are more expansive than motherhood typically is?

Linda: For me, parenthood is problematic, as it refers to biological procreation and reproduction. I would rather think with the notion of ancestry, linking it to Alexis Pauline Gumbs' work. Ancestry for me is more expansive, referring to ties with other living beings that do not align with ideas about linear generational time, primacy of procreation or interspecies difference. The notion of ancestry challenges the idea of the mother-child relation as *the* primary (human) intimacy. In the conversation following the screening of the film, it was interesting to experience the echo of discourses about, for instance, refugee "mothers and children," where someone becomes more 'grievable' (Butler 2016) because they are a baby or a mother. This shows how idea(l)s about heteronormative parenting (the mother is a feminized body) can constrain our imagination and affectivity with regards to more-than-human bodies.

Anne-Sophie: I also thought that especially the title of the movie [*We Are All Mothers*] worked against itself. The title seems to suggest a kind of universalizing gesture, that motherhood is something everyone is a part of. However, *I do not think that mothering and parenting is a universal experience*. This claim to a universal, and in this case a parental we is one of the potential pitfalls of thinking with water. As Astrida herself writes in a recent introduction with the fitting title "Hydrofeminisms and the desire for a watery 'we': "while this watery

abundance is certainly a beautiful idea, the risk here is that 'we' all get swept up and swept away" (Neimanis 2024, xxiv).

Christa: I agree that the universalizing gesture was a big part of what was difficult in the motherhood conversation. I want these conversations to make space for different ways of relating—and not relating. In the end, I think a big part of what bothers me about the insistence on motherhood is just how unqueer and binary it feels—at the same time that a lot of hydrofeminist writing, and certainly *Bodies of Water*, leans so heavily on the idea of queerness to talk about breaking with linearity and fixed categorizations.

Motherhood seems a place where it's hard not to bring our own experiences into the critical conversation. I talked to a friend after the film screening, a mother to two young kids, who had a really strong negative reaction to what she saw as the film's abjection of motherhood, its representation of the role of mother as suffering. I hadn't thought of that, but could see what she meant when she said it. And my own response is definitely colored by my experience as a stepmother, a role that to me seems important in its own right but that I wouldn't want to conflate with motherhood, and my non-binary partner's experience as a non-biological parent, but not a mother. I know I'm being ridiculously literal here, but I think relying on a term like motherhood, which comes with such strong cultural associations, encourages these responses. Maybe the idea of universalizing motherhood was meant as a provocation, and in that case, I wish we had taken it up a bit more explicitly.

Ida: As much as I agree that we should be careful with too-easy identifications across all kinds of significant otherness and difference, I also think there is something powerful in carefully rehearsing identification in spite of everything that sets us apart. In *Undrowned*, Alexis Pauline Gumbs positions identification as a—problematic, yet potentially powerful—mode of solidarity. She writes: "My hope, my grand poetic intervention here is to move from identification, also known as that process through which we say what is what, like

which dolphin is that over there and what are its properties, to *identification*, that process through which we expand our empathy and the boundaries of who we are become more fluid, because we *identify with* the experience of someone different, maybe someone of a whole different so-called species." She goes on to say that the project is not about gathering sympathy for marine mammals because "they are like us," but to challenge normative definitions of the human "so tangled in separation and domination that it is consistently making our lives incompatible with the planet" (Gumbs 2020, 9).

The way I understand this is that, for Gumbs, identification via disruptive language can be a strategic tool for articulating shared suffering and urgencies across difference, in this case articulating shared struggles across histories and practices between marine mammals and black feminists, a poetic starting point for collective protest. I think it's important to note that Gumbs' identification is different than a colonizing gesture of a universal 'we'. It is an identification motivated *by* difference, by acknowledging shared—but not necessarily equal—vulnerabilities to the violences of colonial capitalism. Again, as much as I think we should be wary with identification, I also think there is a certain way in which identification can be mobilized as a way of moving beyond the pitfalls of sympathy without connection (Ferdinand 2022), which seem to haunt a lot of attempts to organize across difference.

On a slightly different note, I read the title 'We Are All Mothers' as a gesture—however problematic and provocative—towards an expanded notion of motherhood. This, too, could be read in line with queer, black feminist work on mothering that pushes against white and heteronormative idea(l)s on motherhood by offering mothering as a verb, a practice of care-as-dissent to existing family, gender, and species categories. At least, this is an analytical framework which could be tested against the content of the film. What I found especially interesting was how the film proposed the practice of acquiring knowledge about something or someone—here the interdisciplinary coming-together of artists and scientists over the

autopsy of the dead porpoise—as an act of 'birthing' each other through categories, scientific and/or metaphorical. This, to me, makes it very clear that 'mother' is no innocent category, but a highly ambivalent practice that carries within itself the violence of definition, as much as it carries a promise of sustenance.

Linda: I also see ambivalence as central to the film's portrayal of mothering. I thought the film addressed the entanglements (inseparability and co-occurrences) of care, harm, and environmental violence through reflecting on breastfeeding as a practice of mammal mothering. Here, mothering manifests as a care relation which might pass on toxicity, harm, and violence. The film refers to the toxicity of the breastmilk of Inuit women to highlight how producing breastmilk could be a body's way to expel toxins, and then asking more generally whether mothering could be a way of passing on violence, in this case environmental racism, that the mothering body has suffered. Here, care becomes 'slow violence' (Nixon 2013) due to environmental racism and the differentiated effects of climate catastrophe. I wonder how these care-harm-violence entanglements might apply—or not—to the black feminist and queer conceptualizations of mothering beyond procreation.

Differentiated (dis-)comforts: practicing hydrofeminisms in- and outside leaky and haunted institutions

Anne-Sophie: I think what you just said Linda about slow violence and environmental racism is what ties the different elements of the symposium together. So far we have focused a lot on Neimanis and Neimane's contribution to the symposium as well as Patty Chang's film *We Are All mothers*, which all took place on day one, but for me what was particularly interesting about day two was Lesley-Ann's introduction to Alexis Pauline Gumbs and Gumbs' book *Undrowned* which, in my opinion, represented a very different, perhaps even

opposite, consideration of hydrofeminism to the one presented in Chang's work. By reiterating the words, *some of you really need to hear this*, Lesley-Ann's introduction was, at least the way I heard it, a way of insisting that the lecture hall in which we all sat during those two days is a differentiated space. It was a way of reminding us, or at least it reminded me, that we are not one big homogeneous, harmonious we. It was the opposite of universalism; it was the opposite of saying we are all connected, or we are all mothers. It was a way of calling some of us out on our privileges and making us remember the power structures that are at play in a university setting, and I think it was needed at this time when some of us, and here I am including myself, had settled into the space quite comfortably. Lesley-Ann was not afraid to make the space a little bit uncomfortable again, and I think that was important.

Linda: I think I follow you—and yet I also think that at the same time, Lesley-Ann was making the space *more* comfortable to other bodies. I think what Lesley-Ann showed with her intervention was that this symposium is not necessarily a privileged bubble “at the university.” On the contrary, some people are already feeling very uncomfortable in this space. Consequently, when Lesley-Ann said that *some of us* in the audience need to hear what she is saying, more than others, I would guess that it made it more possible, breathable, for some bodies to be there.

I also thought about the different difficulties in hearing something. With Lesley-Ann's

some of you really need to hear this, I might feel “okay, wow, I'm guessing *I* really need to hear this, but it is making me feel fragile” (DiAngelo 2018), and then will I hear that? On the other hand, with Alexis Pauline Gumbs self-identifying as a Black, queer love evangelist and an aspirational cousin to all living beings, I wonder how love evangelism might be received within a university setting. People can also fail to hear something because it does not seem academic enough, or serious enough, pointing to euro-centric idea(l)s of knowledge.

Christa: For me, the discomfort that Lesley-Ann brought up was a motivation to self-question and think critically about your own positionality in terms of racial histories and institutional histories, whereas Astrida's discomfort in her keynote on settler-colonialism was more a reflection on the discomfort itself, a motivation to be in this discomfort. Though there was a moment at the end of this part of the conference where she said, it does not end here, you should obviously go out into the world and do something with these thoughts.

Ida: For me, the discomfort produced by Lesley-Ann's call-out reminded me of the responsibility inherent in hosting moments of knowledge sharing which invites marginalized epistemologies and bodies to the table. As organizers who are racialized as white and currently—however tentatively—enjoying the privileges of the university (which is not to say that we are not experiencing its violences as well), I really wonder how to navigate these—sometimes leaky, sometimes pretty solid—boundaries between sanctioned knowledge, and then those ways of knowing and articulating worlds which are historically shunned from the institutional spaces of academia. As Linda is saying, sometimes our willingness to listen is hindered by the ‘un-academic language’ of repressed knowledge systems. What do we ‘owe’ those of our guests who represent and embody marginalized positions and speak from marginalized epistemologies? Invitation, I think, is not enough, making space is not enough. I think the question of holding space is urgent, of learning how to take on the responsibility of—and strategic possibilities granted by—privilege. A start could be for those of us who are racialized as white (and/or enjoy other privileges) to put ourselves at risk rather than inviting someone else to take on a position of risk. So for example, what would it have meant if we, the white organizers and hosts, would have called out the power structures and dis/comforts of the space, instead of leaving that silent gap for Lesley-Ann Brown, our invited guest who is not affiliated with the institution and who also does not enjoy white privilege, to fill? For me, hydrofeminist thinking opens questions of debt and solidarity,

which ultimately are political and strategic questions that demand our sustained (self)critical and creative attention. They are, I think, excellent examples of the importance of coupling political and speculative practice.

Christa: That was one of the powerful things about the symposium for me, how important institutionality and affiliations became on both of the days. Of our two keynotes, Neimanis has an institutional affiliation and Gumbs has explicitly chosen not to go down that path—but of course, there are several institutions hosting the symposium itself. In Lesley-Ann Brown's introduction I thought that her provocation against institutions was really powerful, but at the same time the institution is also an incredibly leaky, to use your word Linda, place and in some ways less and less institutional. Most of us are precariously employed within the institution, and so even as we're having these important conversations about positionality, the institution is becoming a less and less solid place to be situated from.

Linda: It feels like a violent contradiction, between the institution being leaky, porous, even dissolving in some respects, while also still being rigid and haunted. I think about the architecture, the bodies that enter the institution, the bodies that get the paycheck, that are in front of the room. I am thinking of my own body in front of the room: a white, queer, and female-passing and increasingly almost always Danish- and Western European-passing body, it is part of reproducing the white space of academia, especially since I have become permanently employed a couple of years ago. Perhaps here, the leakages coexist with, and might even reinforce walls that keep some bodies out—thinking of intersecting markers of difference and whiteness, in this case.

Anne-Sophie: Yes, and then, going back to the broad theme of our symposium and this conversation, I think that simplified interpretations of hydrofeminism or the theoretical work being done within the field have a tendency to think that leakages are purely a positive thing. However, many

who are working within academic institutions would probably agree that the leaky institution, as you call it Christa, where many are forced to lead a very precarious work-life, can be really damaging. And so, the leaky institution where people are constantly filtering in and out might be productive for the institution, but it is also very damaging to a lot of individual lives. Being part of a leaky institution and maintaining healthy personal finances, for example, often does not mix well.

Beyond entanglement? Fetishization, complicity, and responsibility

Ida: I think there is significance to how hydrofeminism resonates with so many people from so many fields of artistic and intellectual practice. The problem, as I see it, is a tendency towards a kind of fetishization of entanglement that lacks critical depth and political content. In my opinion, entanglement is a *problem*, never an answer or a solution. Acknowledging deep relationality is merely the beginning of a long journey into probing the question of what, then, we can do and build together (Ferdinand 2022, 233). Entanglement prompts accountability, not just on a theoretical level, but in ways that are embodied, practiced, risky, and real. For me, hydrofeminist responsibility is about practicing a kind of situated accountability that disallows reproductions of western, affirmative innocence which is unable to or unwilling to deal with whiteness and privilege. It is a tough job, of course, because it highlights questions of injustice and inequality, and it invites discomfort and guilt, which is always awkward and painful.

Anne-Sophie: I think that it is when other scholars simplify what someone like Astrida is trying to do that the problem of fetishization arises. Once you simplify it down to this idea about, *oh thinking with leakages and waters is what is going to connect us all and then it is all good*, then we have a problem. But hydrofeminism cannot and should not be boiled down to such a simple argument of universalism, although it does seem to carry that dangerous interpretative potential (Neimanis

2024; Povinelli 2022). Also relating to the question of fetishization, I think it is so important to remember that *watery spaces are also historical spaces*. There is a tendency to fetishize the ocean as this great place of origin and then sort of forget that the sea is filled with painful history or histories for a lot of people (Ferdinand 2022; Sharpe 2016 and many others). And that again relates to the question of problematic universalism, when we forget to differentiate between the way different bodies relate to different spaces and institutions, be this Copenhagen University or the ocean as this great imaginary as well as an actual physical space.

Linda: I think it matters what words we use. I agree that the way Astrida uses “entanglement” includes complicity and points to unequal power relations. Yet, I would sometimes like to say *complicity*, instead of entanglement. Or responsibility—not the way Haraway (2012) writes about it, “response-ability,” but the old-fashioned, unsexy responsibility.

Ida: There are a few sentences in *Hydrofeminism*, that are pretty overlooked, where Astrida reminds us that entanglement comes with the question of debt. Once we have come to understand our bodies as ecosystems in indefinite relation, she asks: “what do we owe, and how do we pay?” (Neimanis 2017, xx). For me, this is a very challenging and crucial question, that demands attention towards and commitment to not just clever cultural analysis, but actual struggle and structural change. Imagine if our collected hydrofeminist and environmental inquiries would start there, with exactly the question of what we owe each other across our different, entangled, privileges and positions, and what the many different ways of paying our debts could look like?

Christa: The tricky thing with entanglement is that even if the writing is quite clear about hierarchies of power and different levels of accountability, the term itself does imply a situation where we're more equally actors than we are. In that way, I think it brings us back to the motherhood/mothering conversation, and the issues that came up

around that term. In this same vein, I've struggled sometimes in reading hydrofeminist texts which state explicitly that they are anti-essentializing (Neimanis 2017), but where my initial reaction to reading is the opposite of that.

Linda: For me, there is a lot at stake in how I articulate my point of view in these discussions. I recognize the tendency to place myself on some moral higher ground, like now I find out that it is about complicity and responsibility, and I am going to argue for this to convince others. It can become pointing fingers and critiquing injustice, in a way that centers my perspective and reproduces my privileges and blind spots. It points to the question of what kinds of critiques, also of institutions, can be articulated and enacted from different positions. As a faculty member with a permanent contract, my critique of institutions grows from a position of complicity, and having access to resources which I might have the possibility and the responsibility to re-distribute. This differs from the positionality of the critiques put forth by, for instance, independent scholars or activists. And perhaps it also prompts a responsibility to listen. I have a feeling that these reflections on intersectionality, positionality, and politics of location within and around leaky institutions are also relevant when grappling with the broader hydrofeminist questions about our entangled, differently (under) privileged bodies of water, and our indebtedness to each other.

Christa: Maybe there just is an inherent problem with having these conversations within institutions and we just have to accept that. Gumbs' lecture would have sounded a lot different from within an institution—part of what was powerful about her words was also knowing that she has chosen a different path. Maybe we just have to accept that there are some things that are problematic in this institutional position rather than trying to get out of it—and working from there.

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Notes

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- ² For more on this video see: <https://www.learningendings.org/current> and <https://patty-chang.square-space.com/new-page-3/>.