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Research Proposal for *Anthropocene Bodies: Permeability as Ecology, Permeability as Disability*

Introduction

As historian Dipesh Chakrabarty notes in his influential paper “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” we have entered “a new geological age” now commonly known as the “Anthropocene,” a name that through its root of *anthropos* acknowledges the impacts of humans on Earth during the rise of modernity (209). With this age comes a need for new epistemologies and interdisciplinary research that combines activism with careful thought (Adamson 7). This research project, titled *Anthropocene Bodies: Permeability as Ecology, Permeability as Disability*, will address this need by combining three disciplines that have emerged from the milieu of the Anthropocene: the environmental humanities, posthumanism, and disability studies. Through critical cultural and textual analysis, it will attempt to forge new ways to encounter cultural artefacts of the Anthropocene, expanding upon previous scholarship to create values and vantage points for understanding the ecology of existence. As with much work in the above disciplines, this project will take the standpoint that humanities research can address the precariousness of living in a fast-changing world of imperiled environments, or what Ulrich Beck defines as a “risk society” (Alaimo 19). To do so, this project will begin with environmental humanities scholar Stacy Alaimo’s concept of “trans-corporeality,” which she describes as a state “in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human

world” (2). This project will then focus on the permeability of “trans-corporeality,” building upon Alaimo’s work by taking permeability in a “generative” and “affirmative” direction via philosopher Rosi Braidotti’s posthumanist interpretation of Gilles Deleuze’s “becoming” (46, 33). From this theoretical basis of posthumanist permeability, the project will build upon the emerging field of environmental disability studies through four thematically-focused analyses titled “Becoming-Ocean,” “Becoming-Oil,” “Becoming-Virus,” and “Becoming-Mars,” which will use cultural texts and science fiction as data. Through these analyses, this project aims to generate new ways of understanding and perceiving bodies in an Anthropocene world in order to promote a scholarly activism of care, curiosity, and acceptance.

Literature Review

Within the past few decades, a new discipline called the environmental humanities has emerged that combines the insights of scientific ecological awareness with the methods and methodologies of humanities research (Adamson 4). As noted environmental humanities scholar Joni Adamson writes, this blend of epistemologies has roots in “environmental justice” and the influence of activism in 20th and 21st-century cultural studies (5). Adamson notes that a growing awareness of the Anthropocene has led environmental humanists to adapt their research in search of answers to how we may adapt to climate change, what future the humanities have during ecological crises, and how qualitative research encourages interdisciplinary collaborations and creativity (6-7). Dipesh Chakrabarty’s influential work that combines Anthropocene awareness with history has been both a leader and a marker of the shift within the environmental humanities from traditional textual analysis to a critique of the Anthropocene as a result of modernity and “globalization” (207). Chakrabarty claims that our retrospective understanding of

industrialization creates a new narrative that links Enlightenment values with capitalistic environmental destruction (207-212). An Anthropocene perspective of history shows the necessity for interdisciplinary thinking, a focus on climate as a sociological agent, and keeping a critical eye on environmental (in)justice (Chakrabarty 217-218). Environmental humanities research has, since then, turned towards combining critical theoretical insight with cultural studies activism.

Many theoretical lenses have emerged from the effects of modernity, two being posthumanism and disability studies. Posthumanism arrived as a reaction to what noted posthumanist and feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti calls “the humanist ideal of ‘Man,’” which necessarily excludes many people from recognition as fully human (32). Posthumanism also often parallels the environmental humanities in critiques of Enlightenment rationality as too focused on humans over nonhumans, creating an alternative in posthuman “post-anthropocentrism” (Braidotti 31). Braidotti’s specific theory of “critical posthumanities” offers “nomadic knowledge” by proposing process-based subjectivities that celebrate difference and change (31, 53). She takes a “materialist approach” that accounts for the physical effects of the Anthropocene by offering posthumanism as a site for political and ethical conversations of how to utilize social and environmental change to enact positive justice (Braidotti 32). Specifically, Braidotti promotes “nomadic generative force and affirmative ethics” to overcome negative critical rhetoric (46). One way to do so is through Deleuzian “becoming,” where subjects merge and change, belying hierarchy and fixity (Braidotti 49).

Disability studies scholars similarly critique narrow definitions of humanity. Lennard J. Davis, a widely-cited specialist in disability studies, argues that the rise of statistics in the 19th century created the idea of a bodily “norm,” therefore casting “people with disabilities...[as]

deviants” (29). Disability studies aims to undermine this binary, examining how it is shaped and formed through texts and other cultural traces, similar to how environmental humanists examine the cultural implications of the Anthropocene. Despite this connection, scholars have only recently considered the connections between disability studies and the environmental humanities, with the first book emerging in 2017 as the anthology *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory*. In the introduction to this collection, disability studies scholars Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara aim to connect disability to “the contexts in which bodies live, work, and play,” leading disability studies towards materialism (1). They argue that such interdisciplinarity facilitates social justice and activism and increases representation both within the environmental humanities and disability studies (Ray and Sibara 1, 7-8). While their book emphasizes a variety of methods, literary analysis retains a key role in this new field, with many possibilities for more scholarship (Ray and Sibara 5).

Within literary studies, disability studies scholar Julia Watts Belser has taken up this call in her 2020 paper “Disability, Climate Change, and Environmental Violence: The Politics of Invisibility and the Horizon of Hope.” In her essay, Belser draws connections between environmental degradation and disability through a textual analysis of Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s poem “Dirty River Girl,” arguing that environmental discourse often uses disability as a negative trait that undermines positive disabled identity. She argues for “disability embrace,” which accounts for the complexities of fighting environmental damage and the suffering of impairment while celebrating being disabled (Belser). Her article shows how literary analysis may combine with activist-oriented critique within environmental disability studies, and how this may show us a way to “live well in the Anthropocene,” though she leaves open the potential for more widespread textual analysis (Belser). Even fewer works consider

posthumanism, the environmental humanities, and disability studies together. Only English Studies scholar Stacy Alaimo's concept of "trans-corporeality," expanded upon in her book *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, considers how bodies' permeable interactions with environments allow a contemplation of "a posthuman environmental ethics," which she supports through the analysis of various cultural texts and science fiction works (3). However, Alaimo's work considers both disability and posthumanism from a negative, risk-based perspective that emphasizes environmental illness as invasion and toxicity (114). This leaves room for using a positive posthumanist lens within environmental disability studies, as well as for textual research that focuses more clearly and equally on the connections between these three disciplines, cultural media, and the genre of science fiction within the context of the Anthropocene.

Research Problem

How may considering posthumanism, disability studies, and the environmental humanities together reveal new epistemologies for living in the Anthropocene? How may a positive vision of posthuman "becoming" support diverse subjectivities via the permeability of bodies and their environments? How may cultural texts and science fiction novels support and complicate what it means to be disabled in the Anthropocene?

Rationale

The two main goals for this research project are scholarly expansion and activism. As Ray and Sibara mention, few academic research projects have directly considered disability and the environmental humanities together (2). This project will focus on disability as an important

topic worthy of consideration within environmental scholarship, increasing conversation between scholars within these disciplines. As well, Braidotti's posthuman approach derives from a Continental philosophical perspective, while the environmental humanities have a deep American influence (31; Adamson 6). Placing Braidotti's theory within a different context will challenge both her work and the work of environmental humanists, and increase engagement between scholars in these fields. Also, while Alaimo's work touches upon all three disciplines with environmental, disability, and posthuman themes, it offers only one viewpoint. This project will build upon her work from a different direction, encouraging more critical use of her concept of "trans-corporeality" within varying textual contexts. It will also expand her method of critically analyzing Anthropocene-oriented cultural texts and science fiction to support theoretical concepts, using different secondary sources to explore the diversity of data within these fields. Each text I will analyze relates either directly or indirectly to the topics of bodies, disability, and the environment, and all have peer-reviewed articles to support my textual analysis. The textual analysis I will perform will be of interest to posthuman, environmental, and disability studies scholars.

This project is also inspired by Adamson and other environmental humanities and disability studies scholars' assumption that activism and academia should work upon the same ideas to build a broad approach to social change (3-4). As mentioned above, Alaimo's work takes a negative approach to disability that Belser rejects in favor of her concept of "disability embrace." By utilizing Braidotti's positive posthuman approach to subjectivity, this project presents a way to expand "disability embrace" into an Anthropocene revaluation of the norms that Davis critiques. Through textual analysis of media and science fiction, it will build the work

of disability studies scholars into a critical material direction, giving both researchers and activists new ways to argue against ableism and for disability justice.

Data Collection, Analysis, and Methods

For this research project, I will utilize secondary data in the form of media and novels (specific titles listed below) procured via the ASU library and my personal library. I will use qualitative textual and cultural analysis techniques to conduct a close reading of each text. For the analysis, I will utilize a critical theory lens. In their research, Alaimo, Braidotti, and Davis all use a critical approach for analysis, which allows room for close reading within a wider cultural context. As well, I will use Braidotti's Deleuzian theory of "becoming" as an overarching critical methodology. Using a critical approach will allow for continuity between my project and the scholarly research that I will draw upon, as posthumanism, disability studies, and environmental humanities work frequently relies upon a critical contextual approach. This methodology will also allow me to focus on textual analysis, context and, as Braidotti writes, "the power relations operational in and immanent to the production and circulation of knowledge" (32). As I will be considering texts with direct and indirect themes of disability and the materiality of the body, critical theory will allow me to probe how power underlies the creation of subjectivities. There are no anticipated ethical considerations for this project.

I anticipate requiring two years to complete this project. First, I will conduct a close reading of the secondary data, taking comprehensive notes transcribed to a Word document. Then I will conduct further theoretical research, finding more scholarly sources to utilize throughout my project and in the literature review section. I will use the citation manager software Zotero to organize the sources that I find. Next, I will create a comprehensive outline in

Word with my close reading notes and citations linked from Zotero. I will then re-read the secondary sources, add further notes to the outline, and research more scholarly articles before starting the first draft. After the first draft, I will begin revisions and conduct further research as necessary. Finally, I will have professors within the field review my work and provide suggestions for revision before writing the final draft.

For this study, I will organize my main analysis into two parts with two sections each. Part one will focus on media texts, and part two will analyze science fiction novels. Each section focuses on a single material environmental aspect of the Anthropocene: the ocean as a site of pollution and increasing human use, oil as our main energy source and driver of bodily toxicity and climate change, viruses as increasingly impacting human bodies, and Mars as an indicator of the move towards space travel and accessibility. I will utilize the texts outlined below to analyze these four factors from a positive critical posthumanist and disability studies perspective to find out what they say, directly and indirectly, about how disabled bodies and disability interact in “becoming” with the permeable environments of the Anthropocene. Below is an outline for my project, with the secondary sources I will analyze listed underneath their respective sections:

- 1) Introduction
 - a) Literature review
 - b) Theoretical stance
- 2) Part 1: Media and Materials
 - a) Becoming-Ocean
 - i) Jason deCaires Taylor’s underwater sculptures
 - ii) Giuseppe Arcimboldo’s *The Four Seasons* paintings
 - iii) William Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest*

- b) Becoming-Oil
 - i) ExxonMobil's "Energy Lives Here" advertising campaign
 - ii) Brenda Longfellow and Glenn Richards' interactive documentary *Offshore*
 - iii) Benh Zeitlin's film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*
- 3) Part 2: Science Fictions
 - a) Becoming-Virus
 - i) Mary Shelley's novel *The Last Man*
 - ii) Neal Stephenson's novel *Snow Crash*
 - b) Becoming-Mars
 - i) Philip K. Dick's novel *Martian Time-Slip*
 - ii) Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy, including *Red Mars*, *Green Mars*, and *Blue Mars*
- 4) Conclusion
 - a) Broader implications and suggestions for future research

Broader Significance

Foremost, this study will provide both a needed support of, and challenge to, Alaimo's work in *Bodily Natures*, expanding upon her concept of "trans-corporeality" by utilizing its claim of material permeability in textual analysis (19). It will further her claims of media and science fiction texts as sites of "provocative and politically potent" corporeal analysis by using a critical theory lens to analyze new texts within these genres (Alaimo 4). It will also challenge Alaimo's claims of negative disability by combining her work with the "disability embrace" of Belser's study, and the positivity of "becoming" in Braidotti's posthumanism (para. 3; 33). Along with

expanding research in posthumanism, disability studies, and the environmental humanities, and furthering their interdisciplinary conversation, this study will also provide scholars and activists new analyses of how disabled subjectivity may be considered during the “planetary crisis” of the Anthropocene, where bodies change through interaction with a permeable environment (Chakrabarty 197). This standpoint will challenge negative views held towards disability in environmental humanities research (Ray and Sibara 2).

While not the immediate goal of the project, this study will also add to the scholarship of both media and science fiction studies, and propose a new lens from which to analyze the secondary texts listed above. In turn, these analyses will show how disability studies research may be expanded further in the direction of textual analysis that considers sources often not directly associated with disability and the body. As well, this study will encourage further dialogue between scholars and activists, building upon the work that Adamson has done to legitimize literary analysis as a form of environmental justice (5). From the consideration of my research questions, scholars and activists will have a new conception of how to approach disabled subjectivity within a posthuman, environmental context, as well as within media and science fiction studies. This will potentially generate further avenues for research into how activism and scholarship within these fields may work together more closely, how other media and science fiction texts undermine the concept of the “normal body,” and how we may treat the Anthropocene as an epistemological experiment to generate new, ethical approaches to what it means to be human (Davis 23).

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