

23 Nov 2023 17:00-18:00

Trans Ecologies Symposium 2023 Submission
Department of Geography at Durham University

The shelled gastropod:
trans-corporeality in necro-ecologies.

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PANEL: Practices: Ecologies of Creativity and Play

Prompt:

How might creative and playful practices help compose with/in trans ecologies, and to decompose (REJECT/RE-CONSTRUCT) the taxonomic regimes (NAMING) through which sex, gender, and species are demarcated (SEPERATED) and policed?

Abstract:

This panel explores what is made possible through creative and playful practices at the interconnected levels of the body and of structures and systems of knowledge making. New forms of embodiment and relationality may issue forth from playful disruptions of dominant taxonomies, while artistic engagement with biological processes of decomposition might orient us towards modes of ambiguous slippage that signal possibilities for other ways of knowing. In exploring creativity and playfulness, this panel encourages collective reflection on ways of thinking that enable exploration of sex and gender as multiplicitous and non-linear, and modes of embodiment that exceed or confound systems of oppression and exploitation.

At the start of the panel, we will ask each of you in turn to share a 5-minute response to the above prompt (in italics). Please use this time to reflect briefly on how the question relates to your work. We encourage you to use a small number of image-rich slides to accompany your reflection. Once all panellists have responded there will be some time for you to ask questions and to make observations between yourselves, after which the facilitated conversation will be opened out to include all attendees.

Contribution:

Thank you for much to Sage Brice and Felix McNulty for giving me an opportunity to share my practice-research with you, and to contribute to these trans-ecological discourses through a brief presentation which I have named: ‘The shelled gastropod: *trans-corporeality* in necro-ecologies’. This presentation specifically responds to this panel’s provocation: *Practices: Ecologies, Creativity and Play*, which in part mediates on the ways in which biological processes such as decomposition may allow for the necessary slippage and disruption of assumed taxonomies and reductive binary structures.

In particular, my response contributes to contemporary dialogues on the permeability of bodies, what Stacy-Alaimo refers to as our *trans-corporeality*

(Alaimo 2010), within the milieu of a post-humanist new materialism, but attention is also paid to ‘necro-ecologies’, that being the study of *posthumous* material relations, and a soft-approach to Eyal Weizman’s premise of ‘forensic architecture’ (Weizman, 2012, 2021). Like Karen Barad’s ‘agential trans*materiality’ (2015) and Rosi Bradotti’s ‘active trans-position’ (2006), the *trans-* in Alaimo’s *trans*-corporeality signifies a plethora of intersectional readings transecting ontologies of animacy and the sensorial, biotechnical interventions (birth, growth, ailment, and death), human, animal and plant bodies, and spaces of trans-ition, whether *-gender*, *-species* or interior-exterior relations). It takes as a starting point the premise that bodies are porous and intra-active (Barad, 2007), offering a conduit for thought. Here, the prefix functions as a becoming and ontological folding of binary sensibilities.

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For further context, this contribution builds on the production of a site-specific work: *Soft Shell* (2023) which was shown as part of an exhibition and symposium titled *An Elastic Continuum* earlier on this year. *Soft-Shell* is a composite sculpture made of ceramic tiles and condensation cure silicone casts, that have been taken from architectural features (explicitly, a sink and a gutter-way), in a disused chapel and mortuary. The work functions as a *skinning* of the building, a relic, a permanent embalming, and a positive-negative imprint of the facility that was used for the temporary storage of human bodies before their disposal. In reference to quantum field theory’s understanding that matter is ‘a condensation of other beings, places, and times’ (Barad, 2015, p. 416), condensation cure silicone acts as a material prompt. The use of this rubber is purposeful in *Soft-Shell*: a material used for medical procedures as well as preservation practices, to slow the process of putrefaction.

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And so, alongside Alaimo’s premise of *trans*-corporeality, my response this evening not only considers sites of *trans*-ition (as with hospitals and mortuaries), but the ‘transmigration of form’ (Oestigaard, 2005) (i.e., putrefaction, seepage, confluence, and re-constitution) following biological cessation. The ceramic structure on which the silicone pieces sit (suggesting both autopsy-table and tomb) also offers an interface with cooling temperatures, akin to the *trans*-ience, of algor mortis. The tiles provide a seemingly impermeable barrier, one that appears to be water-tight, as if to contain seepage. Here, the sculpture offers parallels between the infrastructure and plumbing of the building (that is, the basins, drains and pipes), and bodies which, after death, becomes liquescent, as tissues percolate from orificial openings. Following our passing, *trans*-cellular fluids permeate beyond the body into ‘symbiotic condensations’ (Neimanis, 2007, p. 29). We collectively drain and pool, participating in a hermaphroditic condition that sees no separation of matter: no partition of the human and non-human, and a folding of binary sensibilities (i.e., passive–active, female–male, human–animal).

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In recognition of this, *Soft-Shell* co-operated with a walk of snails, hermaphroditic animals, in support of this shared *trans*-formation. In nod to the scalloped shell used in Christian baptisms, symbolising re-birth, and in acknowledgement of the site-specific approach of the project, the work offers another emblem of the shelled gastropod as to signify our *trans*-fused constitution. This inseparable condition argues against the premise of a hermetically-sealed selfhood. It pushes against the humanist understanding of a singular and discrete corporality.

The scholarly writings of Astrida Neimanis present a challenge to the hermetic, notably in her observation that ‘Bodies of water puddle [...] They seek confluence’ (2017, p.29). She posits: ‘Our wet matters are in a constant process of intake, transformation and exchange’ (p.2). Donna Haraway further articulates this, notably in her statement: ‘We are compost, not post-human [...] ‘Critters – human and not – become-with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time’ (2016, p.97). As noted by Barad in their article: ‘TransMaterialities’ (2005) ‘matter is an ‘ongoing un/doing’ (2005, p.411), a ‘re(con)figuring, where trans is not a matter of changing *in* time, from this to that, but an undoing of “this” and “that”,’ an ongoing reconfiguring of *spacetime-matterings* [...]’ (p.411).