

Feminist Materialisms

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We know how much matter and materiality influences, shapes and manipulates our becoming. Therefore how can we be anything but interested in feminist theories of materialism? We are interested in theorizing that opens a redefinition of how matter and materiality may be perceived. It is especially interesting when this theorizing also embraces the queerness in the world. This volume is a tribute to a new way of thinking about materiality, and represents a feminist voice in the ‘material turn’ that appears to be taking place in the social and human sciences.

Feminist materialisms can be seen as a part of the call for new understandings of crucial developments and challenges in science and technology, which have implications for ethics and politics. Issues of matter and materiality, bodily materialities and material elements and environments have been important concerns for feminists and for feminist theorizing. In recent years different names have been attached to over-

lapping endeavors to push feminist theorizing beyond the 'linguistic turn' and a too exclusive focus on discursive aspects of gender and other social categories – a focus which generated a negligence of pre-discursive aspects of bodies, and trans-corporeal relations between bodies and non-human actors. These endeavors have been called body materialism, feminist materialism, material feminism, all of which seem to interrelate and intra-act as branches within a 'material turn'. Currently it seems as if feminist materialisms overlap with what has been labeled New Materialisms or even Third Way Materialism.¹ Together they form part of a current re-orientation in feminist scholarship, as well as in other scholarly fields, dealing with cutting edge issues of science and society.

Feminist materialisms accentuate a growing demand for new ways of thinking about matter related to timely issues in late modern society, such as material culture, geopolitical space, food, climate and environmentalism, gender, body, nature, and culture. According to a recent anthology in the field, the material turn invites us to think in new ways about the nature of matter and the matter of nature, about the elements of life, the resilience of the planet and the distinctiveness of the human, as well as the reinterpretations of the way we produce, reproduce and consume our material environment (Coole and Frost 2010: 4-5). Feminist materialisms have summarized approaches that analyzed the post Cartesian ideas of nature and materiality as mechanistic and lifeless. They address the issue of matter at many levels in philosophical and analytical ways, both in the everyday taken for granted character of the material world as well as in the reconsideration of key theoretical key ideas. Feminist scholars have been at the forefront of this endeavor and have made path-breaking theoretical contributions and connected feminist theory with core notions of the natural sciences. Several have explored and extend-

ed the pioneering work of the American biologist Donna Haraway, who over the last two to three decades has analyzed the entanglements of human/nonhuman/post-human in a range of iconic figures such as the Cyborg, the Cyote, and the Oncomouse. Haraway's influential work is now being broadened by feminist scholars through explorations in the key field of how 'matter comes to matter'. One is the American physicist Karen Barad, who forms the main inspiration for this volume and whose path-breaking notion of post-humanist performativity is based on a blend of feminist studies (Butler), Science and technology studies (Latour), and the Quantum Physics of the Danish physicist Niels Bohr.

It seems that there are a plurality of modes and genealogies in the field that have been reworked in recent feminist theorizing. One line of inspiration for current feminist materialisms comes from Marxist and feminist Marxist scholarship. Though Marxism as inspiration has been contested and often rejected as an epitome of the deep sciences of modernity, the feminist Marxist discourse also carries important continuities consisting of insights about change, denaturalization and historicity.² Karen Barad departs from (post) Marxist understandings of materiality as purely economic or social, and advances the idea of agential realism as a new materialist understanding of 'natural-cultural practices' that cuts across the well-known academic divides (Barad 2007: 226).

Another source of inspiration for current feminist materialisms has been the feminist reinterpretations of 19th and early 20th century critical vitalism. One recent and vigorous example of new thinking of vibrant matters has been suggested by the American political scientist Jane Bennett. Her approach is influenced by neo-vitalist traditions, Deleuze among others, and she endeavors to bring different forms of vitalism into a 'political ecology of things' and to capture a vibrant materiality, that runs

alongside and inside humans. Her goal is to explore how political events might change if we gave the force of things more attention, and how political responses to public problems would change, were we to take the vitality of the (non)human bodies seriously. By ‘vitality’ she means the capacity of ‘things’ edibles, commodities, storms, metals – not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans, but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own (Bennett 2010: xiii).

European feminists like Braidotti and Colebrook are also attempting to reframe vitalist questions in current feminist theories. In so doing their ambition is to avoid the political misuse of vitalism, notably the reactionary teleology of nature embedded in early vitalism and the political affiliation with Nazism and fascist ideologies (Braidotti 2006; Colebrook 2008).

This renewed turn to vitalism is also visible in the cover of this volume of *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning*, in the classical marble sculpture from 1913 called: *The Fistfighter*. This 178 cm high naturalistic artwork is impressive in its depiction of male nudity and in its details, such as the fusion of human/animal feet/marble; and yet at the same time it epitomizes the vitalist trend in artwork and literature in the glorification and admiration of the healthy and strong male body. The artist, Thyra Boldsen (1884-1968), was one of the few female artists of the time who worked with vitalist motives and who imbued her artwork with an interest in philosophy. The cosmopolitan outreach of her style made her a successful artist, even in the USA, where she lived from the early 1930s and where she created a range of well-known public and private sculptures (Nielsen 2003).³

These are just a few indications of how the material turn has yielded a cascade of new ideas about “modernity’s most cherished beliefs” (Coole & Frost 2001: 6), and has brought the gaps between agency

and cause, subject and object, nature and culture and a host of related binaries under critical scrutiny. For instance Karen Barad endeavors to use the notion of performativity as a diffraction grating for reading feminist and queer studies and science studies through one another while simultaneously proposing a materialist and post-humanist reworking of the notion of performativity. This is a project that entails, among other things, a reworking of the central notions of discursive practices, materialization, agency, and causality. The project includes the outline of an agential realist ontology as an alternative to well-known representationalism that separates the world into words and things (Barad 2003: 811). In her outline of a new relational ontology as the basis for a post-humanist performative account of the production of material bodies, Barad is inspired by Niels Bohr’s work known as the ‘Copenhagen interpretation’. According to Bohr, the primary epistemological unit does not consist of independent objects with inherent boundaries and properties. Rather such units should be seen as phenomena – and, notably, phenomena of such a character that do not follow the rules of common classical physics regarding behavior. In Barad’s notion of agential realism, phenomena do not merely mark the epistemological inseparability of ‘observer’ and ‘observed’: phenomena are the ontological inseparability of agential intra-acting ‘components’. The idea of intra-action as opposed to the common term inter-action suggests a reworking of the traditional notions of causality. A specific intra-acting, for instance, enacts an agential cut, effecting a separation between ‘subject’ and ‘object’ – a cut that enacts a local resolution within the phenomenon of the inherent ontological indeterminacy. This means that “relata” do not pre-exist relations, but rather that “relata-within-phenomena” emerge through specific intra-actions. The idea of agential separability is fundamental, since in the absence of a classical ontological condition of

exteriority between observer and observed, it provides the condition for the possibility of objectivity (ibid.: 815). Thus, an agential realist ontology challenges the idea of matter as a static or an individual entity:

Matter is not little bits of nature, or a blank slate, surface, or site passively awaiting signification; nor is it an uncontested ground for scientific, feminist, or Marxist theories. Matter is not a support, location, referent, or source of sustainability for discourse. Matter is not immutable or passive. It does not require the mark of an external force like culture or history to complete it. Matter is always already an ongoing historicity (ibid.: 821).

One way of understanding complex theories is to learn about the processes of thought and the reflections of those who have developed them. In this volume of *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning* we appreciate the unique opportunity to intra-act with Karen Barad in different ways, and to present a sample of articles that exhibit the Barad influence on feminist studies in a Nordic perspective. We start with a lengthy, interview with Karen Barad and a recent article by her. The interview was conducted in the summer of 2011 by two Danish scholars, Malou Juelskjer and Nete Schwennesen, and has been through a shared editorial process. In this thought provoking interview, Barad elaborates on her theoretical outset and provides us with her personal reflections, among other things making the following statement on her theoretical approach to materiality:

Symmetries do not just appear, rather they are indicative of underlying conservation laws, and it is therefore crucial to examine the forces at work, and so I didn't want to simply postulate some built-in symmetry of the human and nonhuman. What was needed was to have a more complex topology than a kind of level playing field of objects and subjects. Not

a parliament of things but a kind of questioning and unsettling of representationalist politics that was very much alive in feminist work at the time and still is (p. 12).

In her article "*Nature's Queer Performativity*" Karen Barad presents a motley crew of queer co-workers: social amoebas, neuronal receptor cells in stingrays, lightning, a phantom species of dinoflagellates, academics (a strange companion species), and atoms among them – who all assist in the discussion of nature's queer performativity. In this article, the possibility of the queerness of one of the most pervasive of all critters – atoms – is entertained. These 'ultra-queer' critters with their quantum quotidian qualities queer queerness itself in their radically deconstructive ways of being. The purpose is to show that all sorts of seemingly impossibilities are indeed possible, including the queerness of causality, matter, space, and time. The article also considers questions of ethics and justice, and, in particular, examines the ways in which moralism insists on having its way with the nature/culture divide.

In the article "*Different Kinds of Matter(s) – Subjectivity, Body, and Ethics in Barad's Materialism*", René Rosfort analyzes Barad's notion of agential realism from a critical philosophical perspective, starting with an explanation of the historical background of the nature/culture divide in the twentieth century. The author then turns to the problem posed in Barad's ethics. It is argued that ontology and epistemology no longer provide a unit for separate investigation, but appear entangled, transformed into an 'ethico-onto-epistemology'. This idea is examined as disregarding crucial aspects of human nature (subjectivity and body) and neglecting the concrete problems of ethics. By using observations of a 17th century philosopher, Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, Barad's 'ethico-onto-epistemology' is challenged for disregarding the persistence of subjec-

tivity, dissolving the ambivalence of the bodily matter(s) and neglecting the need for concrete individuality in ethics.

Moving from philosophy and into ethnography Lis Højgaard, Malou Juel-skjær, and Dorte Marie Søndergaard in their article *“The ‘WHAT OF’ and the ‘WHAT IF’ of Agential Realism – In Search of the Gendered Subject”* use two different empirical data sets for illustrating how the conceptual toolset of agential realism contributes to make sense of real/virtual transgressions and gendered presence in gaming settings, and how the concept of “spacetime-mattering” has potential for the analysis of subjectification processes. The first piece of data stipulates a ‘WHAT OF’ approach in the world of computer games: WHAT OF the myriad of real and virtual voices, sentiments and actions and their interconnections and meaning for gendered subjectification? The second piece is guided by ‘WHAT IF’ thinking: WHAT would we be able to see IF we brought insights from quantum physics, i.e., “spacetime-mattering”, to the conception of thinking subjects. By reading agential realism diffractively with two different empirical examples and two different research ambitions, we become aware of specificities of what the engagements may enact.

Matz Hammarström, in *“Challenging Mainstream Metaphysics – Barad’s Agential Realism and Feminist Philosophy of Religion”*, shows how agential realism fundamentally challenges mainstream masculine metaphysics of separateness, and in doing, so clears the way for a relational understanding of reality, being and becoming. Hammarström’s position is based on theology/philosophy of religion, where he finds the concept of an ethico-onto-epistemology particularly useful for further development of a feminist philosophy of religion. This argument is developed through a discussion of Pamela Sue Anderson’s and Grace Jantzen’s feminist philosophies of religion. Here Hammarström shows how

they can benefit from and find support in Barad’s onto-epistemological metaphysics. The article outlines the impact of Barad’s thinking on our understanding of reality, being and becoming at large, and presents agential realism as the cornerstone of relationalist metaphysics, and then describes how it may be a fruitful perspective for an alternative understanding of religion.

From metaphysics to an empirically based auto-ethnographic experience, Tine Damsholt discusses in her article *“How Towels Came to Matter – on Discursive-Material Reconfigurings of Gender in Academia”* how elements such as towels, humidity, teasing, bodies, sweat, marble, Orientalism, tone of voice and genitals, can be involved in a specific material-discursive performing of gender. In a Turkish Hamam all these elements came to matter in a dynamic reconfiguring, where academic gender and bodies as material-discursive phenomena were destabilized and reconfigured in an on-going process. The article attempts to develop a non-reductionist understanding, stressing how both material and discursive elements are involved in the doing of gender, and how the gendered body comes to matter in a new way when enacted upon or when ‘measured’ by a different apparatuses. Following the plot of this auto-ethnography, the article demonstrates how a performative approach could deal with materiality, moving from Butler’s perspective to a performative version of science and technology studies, and notably by concepts put forward by Barad.

Finally the essay *“Non-Governmental Organizing in the People’s Republic of China – a Reading Inspired by Agential Realism”* by Cecilia Milwertz and Wang Fengxian illustrates how new perceptions of gender and development NGOs in China appeared, when they apply Barad’s concepts. This allows these authors to understand the NGOs not as separate units but rather as entangled with party-state institutions and foreign donor organizations. The authors

contend that there is no inside, no outside as regards NGOs but rather only intra-acting.

We should also like to draw readers' attention to the art photos in this issue. These art photos, by Kine Ravn, have been selected because they illustrate entanglements, even in outer space, as well as the dissolvent of the nature/culture divide seen as our way of proposing a 'diffractive viewing'. The photos, the interview with Barad and her article, the articles and essay illustrate an interdisciplinary issue that offers something more than simple diversity in the field of feminist materialisms: Karen Barad provides us with personal insights into her theoretical arguments and concepts – and the authors illustrate a pragmatic use of her analytical tools and reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the concepts. As such, this volume is itself intra-acting – with the material turn, with the concepts and thoughts of Karen Barad, and even with our readers – and may serve as a starting point for further theorizing within feminist materialisms, not as a break off from the past, but as the making of new agential cuts. A move that we would appreciate and welcome!

NOTES

1. See Alaimo and Hekman (2008: 17-18) for elaborations on terminologies.
2. For key Marxist ideas of science and culture see Jameson (1984/1991). For continuities/discontinuities in Marxist and poststructuralist feminism see Lykke (2010: 96-97).
3. For further elaborations of Danish vitalism/animalism/primitivism see Andersen (1998) and Hvidberg-Hansen and Oelsner (2008).

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