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Preface

Peta Hinton and Iris van der Tuin

Just how feminist are new materialist orientations? This was a question posed by Rachel Loewen Walker at the *Feminist Materialisms* conference in Copenhagen in April of 2012, and it jolted a series of responses from the audience which, overwhelmingly, confirmed that the 'feminist' content of new materialism was either in a process of being dismantled, subsumed by the broader associations of material agency that new materialist scholarship promises, or, if it were to position itself as new materialist, then the specificity of feminism's identity as political and ethical would take on altogether different proportions. What Loewen Walker's question prompted amongst her audience was the opportunity to reflect upon the way new materialism's general insights into the nature of matter (as dynamic, articulate, self-organising) might still be conceived within specifically feminist parameters and, in hand with this, to inquire into what these parameters might constitute, or, more to the point, *how* they might be constituted. In other words, is it enough to diagnose new materialism's feminist politics by affirming that it undoes dualisms, and is therefore feminist 'by nature'? Indeed, this question demands that we should consider what forms of feminist political agency we evidence in new materialisms, and to ask to what do these political formulations respond?

These questions were also key to a set of papers at the 8th *European Feminist Research Conference* in Budapest, taking place a month after Copenhagen, which serves to highlight the current interest in the matter and relevance of a feminist politics of new materialism. Given the clear contemporary purchase of these questions, this journal special edition draws together scholars who address the way new materialist and third-wave configurings of materiality transform and interrogate the nature of the political within a specifically feminist framing; a project that also involves asking the question of how feminism itself is reworked and rethought within new materialist currents.¹ Rethinking materiality's dynamism - materiality as force - directly involves the way we think its politics. Riding the wave of new materialisms, 'force' no longer translates into the co-constitutive yet binary interplay of power (normative ideology), on the one hand, and resistance, on the other. Here, force is the impetus *immanent* to this entire constituency, the *élan vital*, in Bergsonian terms, which generates the metamorphoses in/of the dialectic. To situate this activation of matter within a new materialist frame does not entail the claim that familiar feminist shapings of the political have reached stalemate. Instead, as many of the authors illustrate in this issue, second wave politics are already inflected with this notion of material force; the political in its feminist incarnations has always been shot through with material dynamics. One only needs to look at Simone de Beauvoir's ill-received (read: unpopular) conclusion to *The Second Sex* in order to stumble upon matter's metamorphosing impetus, even when phrased in existentialist terms:

[...] the fact is, one would not think of expecting gratuitous generosity from oppressors; but the revolt of the oppressed at times and changes in the privileged caste at other times create new situations; and this is how men, in

their own interest, have been led to partially emancipate women: women need only pursue their rise, and the success they obtain encourages them; it seems most certain that they will sooner or later attain perfect economic and social equality, which will bring about an inner metamorphosis. (Beauvoir 2010: 764)

Such genealogical movement, the ‘always already’ materiality/ies of change, adjectifies the ‘new’ of new materialism and allows us to read second wave products affirmatively.

In many ways, then, the focus of this issue is a ‘timely project’ (Grosz 2002: 15), given the increasing need for feminism to give account of its contemporary relevance (how and why do we identify as feminist?), and to consider its political goals in view of new materialism’s broad uptake with the nature of dualism, agency and materiality. The question of time, and of timing, is intrinsic to this project; it orients inquiry into the generational dynamics of feminist theory suggested above, but it also announces what is significant to the spacing of feminist politics itself. As Elizabeth Grosz (2002: 13) suggests, feminism is marked by both a need to address a past that has failed ‘to provide a space and time for women as women’ and ‘the necessity, in the future, of providing other ways of knowing, other ontologies and epistemologies that enable the subject’s relation to the world, to space and to time, to be conceptualized in different terms.’ In other words, themes of change and transformation are, as Rebecca Coleman references with Sara Ahmed et al.’s argument, clear collaborators in what defines feminist praxis. However, as Coleman also demonstrates in this volume, the causal relation that would define a movement from past (error) to (positive) future (possibility) is not so readily available. Taking up the affective relation of bodies and

images in a case study of healthy eating campaigns and makeover television, Coleman considers instead an enfolded temporality that is ‘non-linear, intensive, and inventive’ (Coleman, 2014: PAGE), in which images of transformation that situate aspirations for a healthier being are actively materialized in the present. As Coleman points out, this reworking of causality and chronology carries implications for the way feminist politics is approached and articulated. The ‘promise of a better future’ that underlies a feminist political program is found, in Coleman’s argument, to materialize here and now and, as Peta Hinton and Kathrin Thiele indicate in their respective contributions, this imparts a different sense of responsibility: a need to account for how and what it is that we, feminists, participate in materialising.ⁱⁱ What we find in this inquiry is not a defensive break with a feminist past (see Loewen Walker, Thiele, and Hinton in this issue), but instead an indeterminacy that animates and denaturalizes the familiar coordinates of second wave feminist political work and renders its texts and its practices wholly relevant to a feminist present and future. In this sense, these second wave political goals are both able to be situated, generationally, while they remain, to think this through Grosz’s (2010: 48) notion, ‘untimely’; ‘out of time’, ‘filled with potential for present and future’, and a ‘becoming-more’ or ‘becoming-other’ that orients them toward the unknown.

Thus, as well as being timely in its inquiry, the need to mark out a feminist politics of/within new materialism is also, and clearly, an ‘untimely’ project. And if we shift this focus on time to consider the contemporaneity of new materialist scholarship and its ethico-political developments, the need to address its feminist temperament (as well as the shapes that feminism assumes) becomes increasingly clear. A review of the field will show that, to date, most compendiums on new materialism seem more

broadly oriented or implicitly feminist in their direction, without necessarily picking up with what feminist new materialism ‘looks like’ as a focus of inquiry. This is another way of saying that the question of the political in the context of new materialism has been asked in such a way that, while new materialist ways of conceptualizing positive difference/differing have been devised (see for example Alaimo and Hekman, eds. 2008; Barrett and Bolt, eds. 2013; Coole and Frost, eds. 2010), the question of the political has not yet been answered with specific regard to feminist politics. By way of an exemplary symptom, we wish to follow up on Dagmar Lorenz-Meyer’s remark, made in her essay ‘Re-Assembling Gender: On the Immanent Politics of Gendering Apparatuses of Bodily Production in Science’, included in the current special issue, that when ‘gender’ is no longer signaled out as a key term in these compendiums (Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman’s often-cited *Material Feminisms* is the case in point here), we must ask ourselves whether this under-referencing of gender may be the result of the authors assuming that their entire book is about gender or ‘sexual differing’? Feminist new materialists work towards tackling ‘dualism’ as a thoroughly gendered phenomenon that has received feminist highlighting since Beauvoir’s 1949 *The Second Sex*. Thus, with the explicit claim of the gendered nature of any dualism being an important push for feminist new materialist work, along with Lorenz-Meyer we wish to flag the danger of relying on an implicit understanding of our dealings with a gendered phenomenon. After all, this is how phenomena still actualize; gendered dualism is a ‘sticky sign’ (Ahmed 2004: 92). Donna Haraway, highlighted by most authors in this volume as amongst the defining avant-garde of feminist new materialisms, has in ‘Situated Knowledges: *The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*’ (1988) warned the community of feminist scholars of the non-exhaustive nature of the binary pair

totalization and relativism. For Haraway, assuming that gender is ‘everywhere’ may result in its disappearance; i.e., in a gender-blind analysis that does not have an eye for power as *potestas*, where we enthusiastically embrace material force as *potentia* (cf. Braidotti [1994] 2011). Taking up with Haraway’s (and Karen Barad’s) analytics of apparatuses of bodily difference in her ethnographic study of human-technology encounters in a research laboratory, Lorenz-Meyer reveals how a new materialist lens serves to both highlight the need for gendered analysis as well as to demonstrate its materializing affects. In asking which genderings come to matter, Lorenz-Meyer also points to an important dimension of this analysis; its rendering visible the tensions and exclusions that are generated in knowledge making practices.

The question of the many manifestations of power, then, forms the core of the matter of this special issue. Above we claimed that ‘Rethinking materiality’s dynamism - materiality as force - directly involves the way we think its politics’, and it is here that we would like to argue that this zooming in on ‘force’ must *not* suggest that force-as-power in its most complex, or ‘double’, Foucauldian sense is nothing but a representationalism fought by (feminist) thinkers of non-dualist relatings. As Noela Davis demonstrates for us through the example of epigenetics and case studies on stigma, any possibility for representations to recommend themselves as ersatz materiality, or to remain unanchored from, or within, the space of material production, is unavailable. Also drawing on the work of Barad, a common voice in the essays that comprise this volume, as well as offering a materialist reading of Michel Foucault, Davis indicates for us how it is that culture is manifestly biological at the most intricate, molecular, level. Indeed, as Davis points out within her argument (see also Hinton in this volume), this makes feminist political practices and interventions

themselves expressly, and irrevocably, material, and biologically reconfigured. Hence, we must not fail to notice the complex relation that is proposed here with regard to gendered dualism in as much as feminist new materialism's affirmation of the material and biological nature of feminist politics is as much a *continuation*, as it is a *troubling* of Beauvoir's argument against biological determinism. Counter intuitive in its suggestions, this materialist feminism actualizes as a curious temporality indeed; it is neither anti-biological (*pace*, Ahmed 2007 and Sullivan 2012) nor turning to 'biology' in an attempt to dismiss something else.

In considering materiality as force we wish to emphasise another of its efforts, namely, feminist new materialism's impetus - as it runs with the work of Haraway, Barad and especially Vicki Kirby (1997, 2011) - to show how the matter-textuality dualism is always already reworked. In these approaches we find that text, too, is a material reconfiguring that is inherently, and incessantly, excessive, even in cases of intentional determination (of pejorative embodiment). In Haraway's words: '[w]hat boundaries provisionally contain remains generative, productive of meanings and bodies' (Haraway 1988: 594). Thus it remains impossible to disentangle *potestas* from *potentia*. To illustrate this point, let us refer to the most basic notion of feminism, cited by Thiele in her essay in this issue, 'Pushing Dualisms and Differences: From "Equality *versus* Difference" To "Nonmimetic Sharing *and* Staying With the Trouble"'. When Joan W. Scott claimed, in 1996, that feminism entails the securing of a terrain (a terrain of sexual difference), she argued that feminism secures the terrain of gendered dualism, because it *needs* this terrain in order to *shift* hierarchical sexual difference. Gendered dualism is as much part of feminism as its disruption and the allusion to a future of (sexual) differing. As such, it is in 'staying

with the trouble’ of this constitutive tension of a feminist politics that Thiele finds the possibility for a thinking of sexual difference (a thinking *with* Irigaray) in posthumanist/new materialist terms as a worlding force that does not start with (human) subjects placed *in* the world, but rather views their capacity for relation as ‘performances *of* this world in its dis/continuous worlding’ (Thiele, 2014: PAGE). For Thiele, this thinking offers a ‘feminist cosmo(po)logy’ that attends to, rather than attempts to resolve, the continuous production of asymmetrical (sexually differentiated) power relations. It transforms the question of how to ‘share with’ the (sexually different-iated) other in inter-subjective (humanist) ways to a notion of sharing as an ‘ethico-onto-epistemological *different* articulation of worlding itself’ (Thiele, 2014: PAGE).

What Thiele’s discussion helps to raise is the important suggestion that the innovative, immanent, or monist, gesture of feminist new materialism does not entail a happy-go-lucky flat, or flattening, ontology, because as feminists we are not after pure possibility as existing in a vacuum or a totality, materially *or* discursively. It seems to us that new materialism’s feminist political potential entails the careful search after the condition of possibility *of possibility*. As Hinton makes clear in her contribution to this special issue, this involves actualized practices of exclusion, and of affirming asymmetries in the very process of their address and realignment. With Haraway’s suggestion that a situated standpoint is necessarily objective (thus disrupting the ‘known’ coordinates of subjectivity), Hinton underlines as the political work of feminism the need ‘to address the capacity *for* identity as a political gesture’ (2014: PAGE). Leveraging Haraway’s argument in ‘Situated Knowledges’ (1988), Hinton points out that feminist inquiry also constitutes as its political subject. Thus, what is

analysed becomes crucial to what materialises as specific identities, including the way these might be delineated as subjugated or marginalised identities. A feminist material politics in this view involves not only attending to the political dynamism of bodily specificity, *as if* pre-existing the materialist strategy of feminist standpoint theories, but of considering also the political gesture of feminist intervention that arrives as a form of violence that is constitutive of what it names, isolates for inquiry, or intervenes into. What this also affirms is that a feminist new materialist approach is inescapably methodological. As both an approach to inquiry and constituting its own objects of inquiry, it is material practice in all senses.

By way of conclusion we will come full circle to Loewen Walker and her contribution to this special issue. In line with her public proposal to ponder over the feminism of new materialist orientations, Loewen Walker argues here that we should not get ourselves all too easily seduced by (self-made) futures of horizontal inclusiveness. Whereas *potentia* flags open-ended becomings, Loewen Walker wishes for a new materialism that is attentive to the oppressive structures that stay, in spite of, or as part of ontologies of virtual pasts, living presents and leaps into the future. Making the counterintuitive claim that it is via possibility (for change) - such as the passing of Bill C-38: The Civil Marriage Act in Canada, which acknowledged queer rights to marriage - that a definite context comes into being, Loewen Walker suggests that we must be careful about how we phrase futures of equality in both methodological and ethico-political terms. She alludes to the broader question of how *potestas* may be at work in such futures and how we might continue the feminist gesture of involving the sticky structures of oppression in 'our' research. It is in this light that we have asked ourselves for the current special edition of *Women: A Cultural Review*: what can new

materialism(s) bring to the question of a feminist genealogy of ‘the political’, and how is it in here that we find (feminist) new materialist concerns anticipated? What does a third-wave feminist new materialist politics look like? How does it deal with the received notions of feminist political theory and practice? (Considering gender, equality, difference, location, for example). How does it approach the push to affirmative, affective and durational stances? And how does it embrace the empirical, as a well-known parameter of any political reasoning? These are the questions that define the contributions to this special issue, and to which we promise no easy resolution, only the anticipation of their dynamic, and materially productive, engagement.

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ⁱ We use 'third-wave' along the lines of Colebrook 2004 and Van der Tuin 2009. I.e., third-wave feminist theory signifies work that is not predicated on the sex-gender distinction or mind-matter, nature-culture and word-world splits. This implies that both third-wave feminist work and non-dualist scholarship are spatiotemporally transversal notations, as we explain in this Preface.

ⁱⁱ For an insightful introduction to the affective turn and feminist politics in relation to images and bodies see Papenburg and Zarzycka, eds. 2013.