



# Materiality-critique-transformation: challenging the political in feminist new materialisms

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The rise of new materialisms in feminist debates since the late 2000s is often marked by a spirit of enthusiasm – a sense of excitement is tangible in many of the texts convening under the labels of new materialism. ‘Something is stirring. Calls for attention are heard from within. Visceral movements resonate from within the belly of the beast of academia. They beckon us from inside the humanities and the natural sciences. . . . Stirrings are felt more widely as well, from the world within and around us’ (Åsberg et al., 2011: 218). Scholars involved in these debates on a ‘turn’ to the material and a ‘move’ beyond the human (as ‘Man’ and

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‘Anthropos’) present their interventions as projects of renewal, even sometimes of radical rupture with epistemic foundations of modern Western thinking. They call for fundamental epistemic shifts, they diagnose the implosion of analytical categories and, in particular, they address the limitations of and the violence done by dichotomies and dualisms such as nature/culture or human/non-human (see, for instance: Alaimo and Hekman, 2008; Coole and Frost, 2010; Hinton and van der Tuin, 2014; Kaiser and Thiele, 2014; Revelles-Benavente et al., 2014; Tiainen et al., 2015; Barrett et al., 2017; Bühlmann et al., 2017; Ernst et al., 2017; Revelles-Benavente et al., 2019). Latest since Karen Barad’s (2007) agential realist intervention in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, a (re)turn to and of the material has been proclaimed in feminist theory to counter a diagnosed dominance of social constructionism and the focus on language only.

The general claim in contemporary feminist debates inspired by the new materialisms is that a theoretical renewal is conducive to new – and better – answers with regard to current social, political, economic, ecological and technological impasses and crises. Such renewal promises to better grasp the complex imbrications of the political with/in material conditions and to hold a key for re-configuring political agency (Bargetz, 2019) and re-envisioning (more-than-) human worlding practices. Yet, as the debates grow and deepen over the years, contributions and responses to the new materialisms become more cautious. In the politically challenging times of the last years, feminist scholars increasingly articulate a desire to address (again) more prominently questions of exclusion, domination and exploitation, and to invest in struggles for political emancipation and utopian thinking. Such recalibration of feminist critical debates also calls for a more elaborate reconsideration of the theoretical relation of the new materialisms to the traditions of historical materialism, social constructivism, poststructuralism and post- or decolonial theories (see, for instance: Chen, 2012; Meißner, 2016; Roy and Subramaniam, 2016; Tompkins, 2016; Willey, 2016; Bargetz, 2017; Thiele, 2017). It is in this sense that Diana Coole calls for ‘a new materialist *critical* theory of the present’ and suggests a ‘capacious *historical* materialism’ (2013: 464; emphasis added), which operates with ‘a multidimensional ontology’ for understanding, evaluating and attempting to transform our ‘thick present’ (Haraway, 2016: 125). In Coole’s words, new materialisms’ ‘detailed, empirical fine-grained studies of micro-level phenomena’ need to pay again more ‘attention to intermediate structures of political economy and broader macro-level systems’ (2013: 453). Such endeavour, however, faces the challenge to then address both the precarious social structures by zooming in on everyday phenomena and the contingent vibrancy of matter (Bennett, 2010), and it requires asking how they are entangled with new modes of governance through political and economic incentive structures and concrete, material tools, instruments and technologies (Allhutter and Hofmann, 2014; Allhutter, 2019).

This special issue aims to take on the challenge characterised above. Against the background of feminist theorising and practising with/in the new materialisms, the collection of articles assembled here elaborates on the specifically political horizon

of new materialist thinking in view of the latter's position on ongoing processes of economisation, precarisation, individualisation and de-solidarisation in today's neoliberalised global order. As guest editors of the issue, we are interested in thick conversations between different theoretical paradigms in order to address complicated and tension-filled issues as driving forces of feminist theory. We aim for multifaceted conversations because what circumscribes our endeavour here is the question of whether and how the field of feminist new materialism can be considered not only as an onto-epistemological approach but also as a critical social theory that confronts issues of economic and political crises. Composing the issue opened up the following questions: How does feminist new materialism contribute to a critical theory on domination and exploitation? How do new materialist critiques of anthropocentrism and social/linguistic determinism relate to political (emancipatory) notions of social transformation and critique? How do new materialisms contribute to an understanding and critique of the material conditions of our historical present? And last but not least, is it possible to envision a new materialist political utopia?

This issue proceeds from new materialisms' *evolvement from* rather than *break with* other research traditions. Corporeality, materiality and affect have long been major aspects in feminist critical theories, and their theorisation has been crucially linked to critical engagements within academic knowledge production in general and in the human and social sciences in particular. The special issue, therefore, focuses on the possibilities of re-inscribing feminist new materialisms into a larger theoretical and political genealogy, one that shows commitment to political transformation as a matter of (re)turning (Barad, 2014) and im/possible abandonment (Hinton and Liu, 2015). The issue seeks to explore how a new materialist-inspired sensitivity to onto-epistemological entanglements as 'specific material engagements that participate in (re)configuring the world' (Barad, 2007: 91) can contribute to our understanding of the changing relations of socio-material (re-)production and care and how it can help us address socio-material relations more effectively. While socio-material relations cannot be locally contained and effect and affect human lives and more-than-human materialities on a global scale, they are always situated and localised in differential and unequal ways (see, for instance: Bath et al., 2017). This suggests that we need to consider feminist new materialisms as an ethico-onto-epistemological approach *as well as* a critical socio-political theory. Only in this way can we, who work with/in the frameworks or in the vicinity of feminist new materialisms, contribute to alternative contemporary political modes that critically evaluate current exploitative relations. Such an analytical lens enables us to envision a multidimensional ontology that approaches the in/accessible plasticity, the un/intended effects and the im/materiality of social formations as gendered, racialised and classed relations (see also: Saldanha, 2006; Chen, 2012; Weheliye, 2014; Stark, 2017; Yusoff, 2018).

Our special issue is framed around three concepts: materiality, critique and transformation. In their relatedness, these concepts give direction to the articles assembled here. They help to develop a combined understanding of feminist new

materialisms as both an onto-epistemological approach and a critical socio-political theory. With *materiality*, we want to signal the above stated necessity for feminist new materialisms to combine their theorisations of matter as (in)corporeal materiality of the world (and ‘us’ as being *of* this world) with a differentiated analysis of the co-emergent socio-political and economic conditions, such as has been carried out by diverse versions in the history of (feminist) material(ist) thinking. In this spirit, bodies, images, texts, materials, norms etc. can never be neatly separated (Enguix Grau). Similarly, (more-than-)human life and death cannot be disconnected; they are im/materially haunting each other (Rogowska-Stangret) while (political) agencies materialise in networks of micropolitics and technological platforms that connect people organising around a goal (Stark, Revelles-Benavente and Cielemecka). Also, im/materialities such as the structuring process of data in academia appear as thing-power (affecting bodies and managing affects), which haunt modern (self-)governance of academic performance (Staunæs and Brøgger). Matter, then, also implies the materiality of social relations, i.e. the structures of domination and inequality and the need to consider their historical specificity (Bargetz and Sanos). And last but not least, a crucial question is whether and to what extent feminist new materialisms provide the means to take into account ‘classical’ feminist issues such as gendered oppression and liberation, gendered bodies and patriarchal structures (Čičigoy).

*Critique* is our second focus in this issue, and it is also another foundational dimension of feminist theorising. We want to emphasise that critique is both essential for feminist new materialist engagements and, yet, is also in need of being re-envisioned in relation to how we understand critical interventions into everyday contemporary realities. Critique as an *affirmative*, rather than antagonistic relation emphasises connectivity (Stark, Revelles-Benavente and Cielemecka) and seeks alternative ways of being in the world (Enguix Grau) that may also depart from the *inescapability* of the thing-power of matterings such as data (Staunæs and Brøgger). And yet, an affirmative approach to critique needs to also account for continuous relations of power and eschew the illusive utopia of a society that turns everything into ‘life’ (Rogowska-Stangret). Taking a critical view on affirmative critique further brings up the historical archive of antagonistic elements of and in feminist critique as opposition to domination (Čičigoy). A genealogy of critique as critique of both power relations and of critical imaginaries can, thus, be an attempt to carefully attend to the ambivalence of feminist critique (Bargetz and Sanos).

This leads ultimately to *transformation* as one of the significant ‘ends’ of critical feminist thinking. What else should feminist material(ist) and critical analyses aim for but the wish to transform existing unequal and discriminatory socio-political realities into more inclusive, socially just and generous relations? Transformation can be envisioned as a shift from matters of concern to matters of care and mutual interest (Staunæs and Brøgger), as a matter of (intra-)connectivity and relationality (Stark, Revelles-Benavente and Cielemecka) and as joyful appropriation of as well as resistance to gender norms and embodied normativities (Enguix). If transformation (in an emancipatory sense) is a necessary dimension of feminist theory and

politics, crucial issues to discuss are the envisioned potential as *potentia* for transformative practices (Rogowska-Stangret) and the complicated and complex materiality of transformative politics (Bargetz and Sanos). Social structures that appear as *stable* arrangements can be understood as *transformable* dimensions which always need to be (re)achieved in and through transformation (Čičigoy). The different positions and approaches made available by the articles in this issue show that transformation is necessarily collective and plurivocal. *How* to envision transformation – as yet another progress narrative, i.e. another instantiation of the antagonism of old vs. new, or as a foundational shift of the dichotomously structured onto-epistemological-cum-socio-political terrain – remains a question of continual critical relevance for feminist (new) materialist engagements.

The articles collected here offer a range of responses to the questions raised so far. The first two attend to matters of care in the human and more-than-human world, and they do this through the lens of a new (feminist) materialist approach that takes into account both the ambiguities of affirmation as a foundational aspect of new materialist thinking and the possibilities of an affirmative critical approach in feminist research. In ‘Pushing Feminist New Materialist Vitalism to an Extreme: On Bare Death’, Monika Rogowska-Stangret critically engages the limits of the affirmative and vitalist potentials in new materialist research in view of ‘our today’ (Bunz et al., 2018). Reading Rosi Braidotti’s (2006) seminal text ‘The Ethics of Becoming Imperceptible’ with a hunch to tune into matters that ‘fail to come to life’ or are ‘unproductive and devoid of relations’ (Colebrook, 2008), Rogowska-Stangret develops a complex response to what is right now very often called the (condition of the) Anthropocene. To fully grasp the landscapes of ‘our today’, she offers the concept of ‘bare death’ in order to relate to instances in which something has died but can no longer enter into the ‘generative powers of a Life’ (Braidotti, 2006: 158). In her argument, Rogowska-Stangret also makes use of Pinar Yoldas’ art installation *The Ecosystem of Excess* (2014) in order to think about becoming and the transformation of life and death in a way that responds to the *ambivalent* landscapes of ‘our today’.

In ‘In the Mood of Data and Measurements: Experiments as Affirmative Critique or How to Curate Academic Value with Care’ Katja Brøgger and Dorte Staunæs critically engage with academic valuing/evaluation practices. They show that technologies used to govern performance at universities consist of monitoring and comparative instruments and are designed to affect and direct behaviour. Brøgger and Staunæs argue that these academic environments of exposure, comparison and self-monitoring are deeply entangled with a vulnerable affective economy. They explore how data may affect our moods and how academic value could be curated by other means and with more care. Drawing on feminist new materialist thinking and speculative feminist storytelling, Brøgger and Staunæs discuss ways of experimenting with affirmative critique of the current use of data in academic research. For doing so, they draw on an experiment with 30 PhD students who explored how to curate academic value with care.

Engaging other sensorial and affective registers than data visuals measuring performance, they conclude, can provide more liveable world(ing)s.

The special issue then continues with addressing the im/possibilities of political transformation, that is the complexities and complicities which are at stake if we zoom in on specific phenomena and political practices. Using a (feminist) new materialist approach that emphasises the precarious assemblage of matter and discourse, body and affect, the next two articles in the issue engage with embodied transformative practices, transformative collectivities and embodied political action. In 'Connectivity in Times of Control: Writing/Undoing/Unpacking/Acting Out Power Performances', Olga Cielemecka, Beatriz Revelles-Benavente and Whitney Stark turn to contemporary power constellations that run between control and connectivity, with the urgency of collective academic/activist alliances as emancipatory practice/politics. They argue that political control based on regimes of individualism, hierarchies of assumed classifications and imperialistic subjectivities organises connections and divisions that justify hierarchical dominations and distributions. Referring to connectivity as a practice acting in *and* at odds with those controlling political regimes that organise and classify matter(s), Cielemecka, Revelles-Benavente and Stark experiment also with their own writing methodology in this article. In between a conversation and the strict linearity of typical narratives, the authors discuss the political stakes of multiple ideas of connectivity in three empirical scenarios that traverse different spheres of life. In this way, they trace entangled forces of separation and control and how they perform within these scenarios.

The issue then moves to "Overflown bodies" as Critical-political Transformations' by Begonya Enguix Grau, who focuses on how bodies, gender and politics are entangled through the figuration of what she calls 'overflown bodies'. These bodies are assemblages embedded in complex relationships of matter, discourse, emotions, affects, ideologies, protest, norms, values, relations, practices, expectations and other possibilities of (for) social and political action. Referring to three ethnographic cases about feminist political activism in contemporary Barcelona, Enguix Grau explicates how 'overflown bodies' assemble matter and discourse in these cases, and how matter, bodies and gender politically matter here. She shows how the three cases illustrate modes and modalities of (political) agency, but also emphasises the limits and boundaries of bodies. Ultimately, it is through visibility and recognition that 'overflown bodies' become critically and creatively transforming, and thereby a conceptual tool to address exclusion, domination, as well as political emancipation and social transformation.

The final two articles conclude the special issue by directly addressing the need of new feminist materialisms to re-engage the background of multiple feminist genealogies. In 'Unthinkable Concepts, Invisible Genealogies: Rereading the New Materialist Rereading of *The Second Sex*', Katja Čičigoy thinks alongside Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin's (2012) rereading of Simone de Beauvoir's ([1949] 2011) *The Second Sex* as performing what van der Tuin calls 'jumping generations'. Čičigoy argues that this new materialist reading of de Beauvoir

might well bring forth unexpected possibilities in the text. Yet, the danger is that such a reading decontextualises fragments of de Beauvoir's text and thus renders unreadable and unthinkable important aspects of earlier generations of feminist philosophy. As Čičigoy argues, what matters here is not simply a question of historical accuracy and remembrance. Rather, she raises the epistemological and political problem that a methodological 'misreading' obliterates concepts of gendered oppression and liberation that are still of vital importance for feminist thinking. Čičigoy concludes her discussion by proposing that de Beauvoir's concepts and their ethical and political commitment could be taken as a resource for rethinking a new materialist understanding of *sexual differing* in terms of a utopian perspective for political interventions intending to transform the material conditions in order to allow for alternative, egalitarian forms of differing.

In the final article of this issue, 'Feminist Matters, Critique and the Future of the Political', Brigitte Bargetz and Sandrine Sanos propose an argument that aims to reconfigure the political via feminist critique. Bargetz and Sanos deal here with the contemporary reformulation of critique, in which scholars argue that critique must be reframed in different and more 'productive' ways because its 'conventional' formulation and practice has outlived its usefulness as a conceptual tool. Reading Karen Barad and Eve K. Sedgwick together, the authors claim that the new feminist materialist critique *of* critique should be read as symptomatic of the contemporary intellectual landscape that claims to move *beyond* critique. While being sympathetic with the desire to rethink a form of critique that speaks to the (urgent) politics of the present and the remaking of political imaginaries, Bargetz and Sanos argue that the theoretical gesture to move *beyond* critique may offer a potentially troubling remapping organised around certain kinds of repression (of the undetermined and ambivalent work of critique) and amnesia (of feminist genealogies and different feminist projects' conceptualisation of matter) that yields a politics without politics. Taking into account a longer genealogy of feminist critique, Bargetz and Sanos conclude with a call for a notion of critique that moves beyond a merely reparative or optimistic view and, instead, attends to the (utopian) ambivalences of critique.

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