

Material Resolutions – The “New” Material Feminisms and The Politics of Sex/Gender, Time and Place

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“The real unity of the world consists in its materiality...” (Engels 1987 [1878]).

The new material feminisms represent a fundamentally and thoroughly transdual methodology that collapses the modern / postmodern dichotomy in its various linear and teleological manifestations. As Iris van der Tuin and Rick Dolphijn succinctly put it, “New materialism is a cultural theory for the twenty-first century ... that is non-foundationalist yet non-relativist.”¹ As such it is promising as a method to transcend seemingly irreconcilable differences associated with the entrenched modern / postmodern division within feminism, most often understood as an essentialist / constructionist (analytical) impasse. As Marysia Zalewski points out, “postmodernism’s emphasis on the constructive nature of meaning and reality arguably links it with the [modern] historical materialist approaches of socialist feminism.”² Others have also identified in the new material feminisms a similar overlap of modern and postmodern ideas.

Ultimately, this exercise of assigning theoretical (and historical) pedigree to the new material feminisms is important insofar as its heterogeneity serves to indicate the common ground of many otherwise diverse (even antagonistic) theoretical traditions.³ Here I elaborate on that theme in terms of a rapprochement of Marxist (modern) and postmodern types of materialism, but also tease out further methodological advances the new material feminisms represent, specifically van der Tuin and Dolphijn’s cartography and its transdisciplinarity. I’ll also begin to outline some of the conceptual mediations it represents pointing out overlaps with Mary O’Brien’s biosocial notion of reproduction. The appropriate starting place, then, is with the features of O’Brien’s dialectical reproductive materialist theory.

Mary O’Brien

Mary O’Brien developed a dialectical analysis of reproductive process by adapting Marx’s method of historical materialism and Hegel’s notion of dialectics, while including reproductive process and labour which both assigned to biological nature hence excluded as involuntary and part of “necessity.” The result of her integration of reproductive process and historical materialism is a thoroughly dialectical understanding of reproduction as the substructure of history. Her materialism is distinguished from Marxist materialism in key ways. First, she applies

¹ Iris van der Tuin and Rick Dolphijn, “The Transversality of New Materialism” in *Women: a cultural review* (v.21, No.2, 2010) 153-171, 167.

² Zalewski, *Feminism after Postmodernism*, 133. See also Iris van der Tuin (“Deflationary Logic: Response to Sara Ahmed’s ‘Imaginary Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gesture of the ‘New Materialism’” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* (2008 15) 411- 416.

³ See Iris Van der Tuin, “Deflationary Logic: Response to Sara Ahmed’s ‘Imaginary Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gesture of the ‘New Materialism’” in *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, (2008 15: 411 – 416), 414-415.

her analysis to reproduction as dialectical in itself and with reference to processes of production; second, she assigns theoretical, epistemological, and ontological primacy to the relations of reproduction (or procreation of the species) as opposed to the daily reproduction of the individual; and finally in that she understood materialism itself as fundamentally dialectical. In her own words: “The ‘material’ realm—biological nature comprehended in human thought and practice—is itself dialectically structured.”⁴

For O’Brien, both Hegel’s idealism and Marx’s materialism *idealize* reproductive process by assigning “the biological necessity to eat and to produce...ontological primacy over sexual needs and the procreation and birthing of children.”⁵ In other words, Hegelian dialectics and Marxist historical materialism could not account for what O’Brien argues is the true ground of historical materialism – reproductive process.⁶ For her, giving birth, which is a uniquely female process, is historical in that it is the integration of consciousness and knowing on the one hand, and of action on the other. Although birth is involuntary it is also constituted of specific knowledge and awareness and is constitutive of a particular subjectivity that is naturally only that of biological women.

In O’Brien’s analysis, biological processes are not fixed but dynamic and historical, hence Jeff Hearne’s description of her methodology as “reproductive dialectical materialism.” He points to the unique complexity of her theory, since it is “far from a simple materialism or simple structuralism: it is fully dialectical; it is reproductive, bodily, really material; and it is also centred on consciousness, experience and alienation rather than on some abstracted forms of structuralism.”⁷ Bev Thiele elucidates the implications of O’Brien’s thought asserting that she “presented a way out of the impasse reached in the late ’70s as Marxist-feminists struggled to find a materialist basis for patriarchy which did not imply ‘biological reproduction.’”⁸ For example, O’Brien theorizes reproduction as a complex dialectical process comprised of a number of “moments” that begin with ovulation and end with independence of the offspring. She names ten such “moments”: menstruation, ovulation, copulation, alienation, conception, gestation, labour, birth, appropriation, and nurture, some of which men and women share.⁹ They represent the fundamentally bio-cultural and biosocial character of human reproduction and express the complexity of reproductive process, which is dialectically structured and not entirely differentiated by gender. For example, copulation and nurture are “moments” shared by men and women. O’Brien stresses that these points in a process are not meant to emphasize the temporal dimensions of human reproduction, but its myriad elements too often described reductively as a simple linear progression culminating in birth; something she believed was the result of a world described in androcentric terms.

Especially pertinent to the paradox of reproduction, or women’s embodied experiences of their reproduction as a source of both profound power and

⁴ *Ibid.*, 236-7.

⁵ Mary O’Brien, *Reproducing the World: essays in feminist theory* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), 231.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁷ Jeff Hearne, “Mary O’Brien...Certainly the Most Important Single Intellectual Influence...” *Canadian Woman Studies*, 18:4 (Winter 1999): 15.

⁸ Bev Thiele, “Retrieving the Baby: Feminist Theory and Organic Bodies,” *Canadian Woman Studies*, 18:4 (Winter 1999): 54.

⁹ Mary O’Brien, *The Politics of Reproduction*. Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981. 47.

vulnerability is O'Brien's conceptualization of the two moments of significant change in reproductive process which have already been discussed in some depth in Part 1. For her, contraceptive technology signified great change in the social relations of reproduction, if it existed on a mass scale, since it allows women to separate heterosexual intercourse and reproduction for the first time: an experience that without technology is only men's. Contraceptives go back to pre-Christian Egypt; the difference from modern contraception is its mass production, distribution, and control by men through the medical industrial complex. For O'Brien, contraceptive technology alienates women and their reproductive processes, which must then be mediated as for men. This entails a change in women's experience of reproduction, in its overlapping biological (separating sex from reproduction), psychological (recognition of choice, self-value, sexual identity and agency) and sociocultural dimensions (behaviour vis-à-vis potential sex partners, not just co-parents). This new development allows for rationalization of reproduction. However, it allows women, and men, to control the process that provides the material basis for the structuring of social, political, and cultural life.

O'Brien believed that mass contraceptive technology had the promise of liberating women, not just of furthering control over female reproduction by the male. "It is because contraceptive technology actually transforms both the process and the social relations of reproduction that it constitutes, in Hegel's terminology, a world-historical event. In the first place, it provides a heretofore nonexistent material base for gender equality, rescuing the notion of equality from the dubious justifications of rhetoric and placing it firmly on a material basis."¹⁰ Before the advent of mass contraception, the only way to choose parenthood was to be celibate or non heterosexual.

O'Brien never resolved the contentions and quarrels that surrounded her radical theory, especially as they reveal deeply complicated conflicts between anti-natal and pro-natal positions and historical differences between mainstream Western women and Third World and minority women. Most significantly, her universalist claims were denounced as essentialist and challenged, as was her seemingly heterosexual bias because of her use of "sex" to mean heterosexual intercourse. Regardless of one's perception of O'Brien's work, it is a way of assessing the changing material and ideological structure of reproductive process that has outlived its original focus. The fact that *The Politics of Reproduction* was published in 1981 and addressed the "new" technologies of reproduction at that point and yet is pertinent in the early twenty-first century, shows her prescience. O'Brien's feminist materialist theory is a necessary starting point for understanding and negotiating the lived complexity of Western patriarchal cultures and is evident in the biosocial negotiations observable in feminist debates about new reproductive technologies. If we can see past the dated discourse, an unavoidable but superficial artifact of academic trends, her complex understanding of the relationship of ideas, society and biology in reproduction (or consciousness, social relations, and biological process in her terms), is relevant and critical to the feminist movement today, and indeed to the unresolved nature/nurture (or sex/gender) tension in Western culture more broadly. Furthermore, her ideas (even if not yet recognized as such) are apparent in a vibrant and growing

¹⁰ O'Brien, "Feminist Theory and Dialectical Logic," 110.

literature and approach in feminist theory somewhat controversially announcing a “material turn” but safely categorized under the umbrella of “post-constructionism.”¹¹

New Material Feminisms

I employ Nina Lykke’s umbrella term for the diverse and many theories that constitute the material turn. In addition to capturing the common denominator of these works that are critical of the limits of constructionism, Lykke defines post-constructionism as a new “thinking technology” (borrowing Haraway’s wording) that I argue best describes its capacity to transcend the feminist (social) constructionist / (biological) essentialist impasse because it breaks away from any temporal and conceptual limitations associated with the feminist waves model.

The new material feminisms are associated with a “breaking feminist waves” methodology which circumvents the limitations of linear teleological fixity associated with the waves metaphor.¹² I suggest material feminism can counteract the problem of relying on the trope of unshakable antagonistic differences in feminism presented as second versus third wave feminism, and essentialist versus constructionist views of women’s subject positions. Post-constructionist, material feminist theories position themselves to take the best from the history of feminist theory without regard for this well worn divide to address the “material discursive” constitution of bodies and material life such as I have argued O’Brien’s reproduction does.¹³ As Lykke aptly describes: “The aim of these endeavours is to theorize bodily and transcorporeal materialities in ways that neither push feminist thought back into the traps of biological determinism or cultural essentialism, nor make feminist theorizing leave bodily matter and biologies ‘behind’ in a critically under-theorized limbo.”¹⁴

Letting go of the antagonistic trope in feminism enables three significant advances. First, it lets us go deeper “into and beyond” claims that post-structuralist arguments have been detrimental to feminism, and to carry the mantle of transdualism further (e.g. challenging the biology / society, and sex / gender binaries).¹⁵ Secondly, it reframes a purposive and politically engaged feminism that moves beyond blame in the academic tradition of bettering one’s forebears, which can entrap its participants into a nullifying stasis. This reframing includes stressing continuity and commonality while also plainly stating divergences; and finally, it allows a more generous (re)interpretation of centrally important thinkers and their contributions, and to productively reconcile them with others in the history of feminism with whom they may not otherwise be placed (especially if they are on either side of various divides like the modern / postmodern one.) I offer this chapter in recognition of the need to approach feminisms this way, especially by involving *the way texts are received* as part of their overall impact. When it comes to biological determinism (but it applies to any theory), Birke claims “...it isn’t only a question of what is argued, but how that argument resonates with the wider culture” a point Judith Butler also makes when reflecting on *Gender Trouble’s* (unintended) watershed feminist anti-essentialist

¹¹ Nina Lykke, “The Timeliness of Post-Constructionism” *NORA—Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 18:2 (June 2010): 131-136.

¹² “Breaking Feminist Waves” is the name of an excellent recent Palgrave Macmillan series examining the themes introduced here as complicating teleological and linear narratives within feminist thinking. Linda M. Alcoff and Gillian Howie provide an astute foreword to the series.

¹³ Donna Haraway in Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, ed. *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

¹⁴ Lykke, “The Timeliness of Post-Constructionism,” 2010, 131-132.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.

significance.¹⁶ Where I do refer to feminist waves, my purpose is not to pit one feminism against another but to make sense of dominant trends (understood both diachronically and synchronically) to confront seemingly irreconcilable problems and salvage a more decided and purposeful feminism.¹⁷

Although materialism may be experiencing a renaissance of sorts, as evident in recent literature it is being used in a diverse number of ideological traditions that would require delineation. I don't intend to clarify all of the strands that go into this movement, as the very depiction of materialisms (in the plural) indicates the scope and complexity of such a project. Coole and Frost, introducing the new material feminisms capture something of this intricacy in stating: "... there are currently a number of distinctive initiatives that resist any simple conflation, not least because they reflect on various levels of materialization."¹⁸ My starting point for examining materialism is through the methodological and worldview aspects of historical materialism and specifically as situated in its socialist feminist appropriation in second wave Anglo-feminism. More specifically, I am concerned with materialism as a neoMarxist methodology adapted within feminism, especially as standpoint epistemology – a concern with social relations as constitutive of subjectivity. Here I go further in understanding the new material feminisms as encompassing a transversal methodology as a development upon the biosocial negotiation I've attributed to O'Brien.

In spite of the dominance of the discursive approach to gendered reality since the 1990s, recently there has been an emergence of interdisciplinary feminist theory that emphasizes materiality as part of a "discontent with the social constructionist orthodoxy."¹⁹ These new material feminisms, variously referred to as, for example "the new materialism,"²⁰ "new feminist materialisms,"²¹ or simply "material feminisms"²² renegotiate the biological essentialist and social constructionist binary, and constitute what has been called "the material turn,"²³ "the ontological turn,"²⁴ or "the postconstructionist turn."²⁵ In a recent overview of the most recent texts Iris van

¹⁶ (Birke and Asberg 2010: 417, Butler 1996: 111).

¹⁷ See Clare Hemmings' *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (USA: Duke University Press, 2011) which provides a deep analysis of the kinds of stories feminists tell themselves about where we've come from and where we're going. Two are the "loss" and "return" narratives which both present a problematic present feminism combined with a better past feminism that we can only hope to approximate or return to as the case may be. My intention is to not simply construct such ultimately simplistic and negative depictions.

¹⁸ Coole and Frost, Introduction to Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Eds), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010); 4.

¹⁹ Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, ed. *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 90.

²⁰ Ahmed, Sara. "Open Forum Imaginary Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the 'New Materialism.'" *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 15:1 (2008): 23-39.

²¹ Iris van der Tuin, "'New feminist materialisms'" *Women's Studies International Forum*, 34 (2011) 271 -277.

²² Alaimo and Hekman 2008.

²³ Ahmed, 2008; Myra J. Hird, "Feminist Matters: New Materialist Considerations of Sexual Difference," *Feminist Theory* 2004, 5 (2): 223-232.

²⁴ Asberg, Cecilia. "Enter cyborg: tracing the historiography and ontological turn of feminist technoscience studies" *International Journal of Feminist Technoscience*, 1:1, 2010; M. McNeil, 2009, Keynote presentation opening of the Posthumanities Hub, Linköping University, 6 October.

²⁵ Lykke, 2010a. See also Asberg, Cecilia and Nina Lykke, "Feminist technoscience studies" *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 17:4 (2010) 299-305. I like Rosemarie Garland Thomson's conceptualization of "The various critical turns – from linguistic to material – [as] spatial-temporal metaphors that posit theory as a material phenomenon" as in a skier "navigating a solid surface at a

der Tuin characterizes the material turn as a multidisciplinary phenomena in Western academia, that “feminist theory is at the cutting edge of... ”²⁶

Some key examples from the many vital, groundbreaking material feminist texts from across the disciplines²⁷ are Susan Hekman and Stacy Alaimo’s *Material Feminisms*, Gillian Howie’s *Between Feminism and Materialism*, and Michael Hames-Garcia and Paula Moya’s *Reclaiming Identity* (2000), as well as disability theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s “Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept.” But the ideas have vintage, for example in the work of such thinkers as Lynda Birke and Sandra Harding, and feminist technoscience theorists more generally even though there is no consensus on inclusion.

These new material feminist texts similarly analyze the effects of a once-radical feminist constructionism that has, arguably, become institutionally entrenched while acknowledging the continuity of thought from across the modern / postmodern spatio-temporal designation. For example Lykke believes that the new materialist feminisms, best described as “post-constructionism,” are indebted to feminist de/constructionism “from Beauvoir to Butler” and that “... very few of the feminist theorists who argue for a rethinking of sex, biology, and embodiment would deny the genealogical kinship with feminist de/constructionism... ”²⁸ Significantly, then, this reengagement has the advantage of decades of feminist insight about the co-constitutive relationship between representation and reality regarding sex/gender and embodiment, a hallmark of postmodern thought though not exclusive to that approach.²⁹ Interestingly, some key players in the linguistic turn are also important to the material turn, most notably Donna Haraway, which demonstrates the emphasis on continuity of thought instead of discontinuity and breakage that is, I argue, a hallmark of this turn.³⁰

certain speed” (Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie, “Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept” *Hypatia* 26:3 (Summer, 2011).

²⁶ van der Tuin 2011: 271.

²⁷ For a few see Howie, *Between Feminism and Materialism: A Question of Method*; Lynda Birke and Cecilia Asberg, “Biology is a feminist issue: Interview with Lynda Birke” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 17,4: (2010) 413-423; Kath Woodward and Sophie Woodward *Why Feminism Matters: Feminism Lost and Found*; Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, ed. *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Linda Martin Alcoff, “Who’s Afraid of Identity Politics?” in *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*, eds. Paula M.L. Moya and Michael R. Hames-Garcia (California: University of California Press, 2000) 312 – 344; Stevi Jackson, “Why a Materialist Feminism is (Still) Possible—and Necessary” in *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 24, 3 / 4 (2001) 283-293; Noela Davis, “New Materialism and Feminism’s Anti-Biologism: A Response to Sara Ahmed” in *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 16, 1 (2009), 67-80; Alexandra Howson *embodying gender* (London: Sage Publishers, 2005). Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Eds), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010); Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007).

²⁸ Lykke 2010: 132.

²⁹ For example see Ahmed 2008, and Lykke 2010.

³⁰ There is scholarly disagreement about Haraway’s positioning as a postmodern theorist, especially in the context of discussions about the new material feminisms. See Kolmar and Bartkowski (Eds). *Feminist theory: A reader* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 2000) which presents her work as bringing about the shift in feminism from modernist to postmodernist foundations, and Nina Lykke’s, “The Timeliness of Post-Constructionism” and Asberg, “Enter Cyborg,” 2010, 19-20 which complicate a simple characterization of her work as situated in either one or the other category. In addition, I have written an chapter including this discussion which is currently in the process of publication.

Because the features of post-constructionism are often characterized as “new” which implies “next” in a chronological succession with a connotation of replacing, and bettering, it has drawn some feminist ire.³¹ Rather than rehearsing the debates I start from the proposition that there is a coherent body of work emerging from feminist theory that questions the linguistic turn and calls for a critical re-engagement with materiality, i.e. the material body. I argue (as does Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, and others) that it does so in no simple way, but one that delivers on the unfulfilled claims about material agency made in good faith by both modern and postmodern epistemological traditions in feminism.³² At the same time, I agree with Zalewski’s characterization of the problem at hand, when she writes, “... the entrenchment of feminist work in academic institutions has arguably encouraged a stereotypical approach which involves building reputations on the basis of finding fault with the work of others.”³³ While there are significant differences between “modernist” 1970s feminisms and “postmodernist” 1990s and contemporary feminisms not to be overlooked, like Zalewski and others, I question whether this emphasis currently serves feminism. Considering this rift in terms of Wendy Brown’s “wounded attachments” is a fitting caveat. Our challenge remains constructing political selves without becoming trapped into an oppositional self / other framework; Nietzsche’s resentment or “(the moralizing revenge of the powerless).”³⁴ According to Brown identity politics and feminism, in particular, ends up reinforcing the very “wounded attachments” it aims/claims to sever. The risk in identity politics based on recognition of patterns of historical subjugation of particular groups by others, is a dualistic political psychology that merely reproduces roles of victimhood and empowerment in ultimately reactionary and defeatist ways.³⁵

Political philosopher Sonia Kruks, and feminist quantum physicist Karen Barad (among others) have noted the connections between different materialisms – as indeed Zalewski (and others) prefigured in linking “modern” and “postmodern” approaches within feminism more generally.³⁶ Kruks discusses the overlaps of various “genres” of materialism in this proposed materialist renaissance showing how both the poststructuralist and the neoMarxist variants are linked in their emphasis on “the ways in which subjectivity arises as the reflex or expression of social practices, or as the effect of discourses.”³⁷ In my terms they are both constructionist at base, or in Elizabeth Grosz’s phrasing they work “from the outside in” instead of “the inside out.”³⁸

As others have shown, and I argue, new material feminisms negotiate and ultimately build upon the overlaps of Marxist materialism and poststructuralist understandings of discursive materialization that standpoint epistemology represents. Standpoint epistemology evolved in the history of socialist feminism during the period when it incorporated a psychoanalytic approach within its materialist analysis

³¹ See Ahmed 2008, Davis 2009 and van der Tuin 2008.

³² See for example, Lykke, “The Timeliness of Post-Constructionism” and van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2010, 159.

³³ Marysia Zalewski, *Feminism after Postmodernism: Theorising through practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 141.

³⁴ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (online) “Identity Politics”, 18.

³⁵ See *Why Stories Matter*, which examines this complex dynamic/phenomenon in terms of a history of Western feminism and the narratives that are told there.

³⁶ See Zalewski, *Feminism after postmodernism*, 2000.

³⁷ Sonia Kruks, “Simone de Beauvoir: Engaging Discrepant Materialisms,” in Coole and Frost, 2010, 259.

³⁸ Cited in Kruks, from Coole and Frost, 259.

(especially regarding Mitchell's *Women: The Longest Revolution* (1966) and the famous insights of Gilligan (1982) and Chodorow (1978). In this view, poststructuralist materialism deepens the social constructionist elements of Marxist variants by focusing on the process of materialization. Standpoint theory inherits this counter-intuitive hybridity of Marxist/modern concerns with social structures and historical change/process, and a poststructuralist focus on the process by which we come to embody social location, and this starts to take us into the conceptual dimensions of the new material feminisms. Though even standpointism was subjected to anti-essentialist interrogations, both then and now it represents a negotiation of the two seemingly radically divergent traditions of modern and postmodern social and political thought and is emerging anew in the new material feminisms.

The common element across materialisms before the postconstructionist turn, was a concern with the features of individual embodiment and social location, and the process of social inscription as the starting point of analysis rather than biological essence. Older materialisms, even with the incorporation of especially postmodern theory, remained mired in social constructionism. While postmodern theories aimed to add agency to the modern / Marxist structuralist debate, they ultimately failed as I (and others) have argued because they remained dualist. Van der Tuin and Dolphijn argue, "New materialism is a cultural theory for the twenty-first century that attempts to show how postmodern cultural theory, while claiming otherwise, has made use of a conceptualization of 'post' that is dualist."³⁹ Tempting though it is to place new material feminisms as a straightforward synthesis/resolution of the failings of postmodernism and Marxist materialisms, Kruks and van der Tuin and Dolphijn reveal why we shouldn't. What new material feminisms offer is fundamentally undermined in such a depiction.⁴⁰

van der Tuin reinforces my argument, linking standpoint theory and the new material feminisms, but much more than that – she highlights and forecasts what else is entailed in the new material feminisms, conceptually and otherwise. She summarizes, "...I have strategically positioned new materialism as the inheritor of feminist standpoint theory, and as such, as an epistemic strand that engages with historical materialism...*but not solely so*. After studying the ways that new materialism repositions second-wave feminist epistemology in general and feminist standpoint theory (a materialism!) in particular, I have come to argue that new materialists claim that a fruitful feminist positioning entails a focus on the material-semiotic *not only in past feminism... nor just in contemporary feminism*."⁴¹ In a later article, she elaborates her new structure and joins forces with Rick Dolphijn, and it becomes clear how the new material feminisms ("new materialism" in their phrasing) implode the nature / culture (or sex / gender) binary altogether. This has implications for feminist theory but much more broadly as a paradigm-shifting phenomena, emerging from across disciplines as diverse as quantum physics and women's studies and with equally far-reaching and profoundly transformative effects. They phrase it "the transversality of new materialism"⁴² and it goes a step beyond in conceptualizing exactly what the new material feminisms offer in terms of a historical and contemporary view, and culminating in "a cartographical methodology... to avoid a

³⁹ Iris van der Tuin and Rick Dolphijn, "The Transversality of New Materialism" in *Women: a cultural review* (v.21, No.2, 2010) 153-171, 166-167.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 414-415, my emphasis.

⁴² Iris van der Tuin and Rick Dolphijn, "The Transversality of New Materialism," 2010.

dialecticist feminist epistemic realm.”⁴³ The best way to get at the radical potential of cartography is to first see how the new material feminism exemplify that concept in challenging the commonplace view of feminism as manifested in successive waves.

“Breaking Feminist Waves”

One of the best contemporary feminist insights associated with the material turn is the need to subvert the presentation of feminism as adequately captured in a waves analogy, especially as it positions modern, second wave feminisms in conflict with postmodern third wave feminisms.⁴⁴ For example, Linda Alcoff and Gillian Howie, Marysia Zalewski, Kath and Sophie Woodward mitigate the “feminism trapped between modernity and postmodernity” paradigm by critiquing, and offering an alternative to, the waves metaphor. For example, Alcoff and Howie critique that such presentation sets up a chronological and teleological view of feminist theory that tends to work against positive frames for new work (among other deleterious effects).⁴⁵ This is because as Howie writes: “Dialogue between liberal feminists, radical, Marxist, and postmodernist feminists will enable us to organize around problems as they emerge and impact on diverse situations ...”⁴⁶

This new thinking about representing feminism will be an integral part of its renaissance because it makes possible attempts to fully access and reclaim diverse feminist theories without regard to entrenched disputes, whether characterized as generational or ideological. It also sets new material feminisms apart from the modern / postmodern division in all respects. “Breaking feminist waves” seems a natural outgrowth of difference feminism and diversity battles within feminism arising around the linguistic turn. In these new iterations it comes across that there is a coherence to the generational divisions, but that they shouldn’t be misinterpreted as homogenous slices of history.⁴⁷ A further consequence of this approach emphasizes the ideological complexity of any wave of feminism making room for creative cross-generational (and cross-conceptual) combinations as Zalewski and Kath and Sophie Woodward demonstrate. For example, Zalewski puts into engagement “seemingly radically opposed” thinkers like Andrea Dworkin and Judith Butler; while Kath and Sophie Woodward make comparisons between the thinking of, for example, Luce Irigaray and Ariel Levy, and argue that Betty Friedan’s centrally important book, *The Feminine Mystique*, had clear links with Irigaray and Cixous, noting they are rarely considered together because the former is seen as empirical, and the others as psychoanalytic.⁴⁸ While such combinations may not be unique to new material feminisms, that they are emerging as part of a larger trans-dualistic framework is. Such moves highlight transdualism’s greater significance for scholarship across the disciplines. As Kath and Sophie Woodward aptly put it, “Whilst it is always important to consider a writer in context, it is equally important not to be bound by dualities of discipline or academic traditions.”⁴⁹

⁴³ Ibid, 414-415.

⁴⁴ Woodward and Woodward 2009, Zalewski 2000.

⁴⁵ Howie 2010: vii.

⁴⁶ Ibid.: 205.

⁴⁷ See Alcoff and Howie in Howie 2010, Woodward and Woodward 2009, and Zalewski 2000.

⁴⁸ See also work on Simone de Beauvoir in, for example, Kath Woodward and Sophie Woodward. *Why Feminism Matters: Feminism Lost and Found* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), and Kruks in Coole and Frost, 2010.

⁴⁹ Woodward and Woodward, 2009, 168.

Most significant among the theorists constituting the new methodological paradigm is Marysia Zalewski in *Feminism after postmodernism* which systematically investigates the “alleged gulf” between modernist and postmodernist feminisms, both theoretically and by applying each purported approach to dilemmas surrounding new reproductive technologies.⁵⁰ She helpfully positions herself as a mediator between two sides of a stalemate situation; her purpose is a practical one, addressed to the presentation of more traditional feminisms as anachronistic and feminism’s quietude over the last few decades because of its imbrication in the essentialist / constructionist loggerhead. She effectively illustrates the convergences as well as the divergences of the radical, liberal, and Marxist (modernist) feminisms with the psychoanalytic (postmodernist) ones – which breaks down the hardened view of two opposing, chronological camps. Her approach also demonstrates how attending to particular material issues, like reproduction, can help revive feminist activism. The subtle message is that these radically opposed differences are theoretically articulated and enacted, but in practice they lose (much) of their significance.

Nina Lykke’s sophisticated theorization of the new material feminisms as post-constructionism similarly subverts linear temporality and its controversial conceptual implications, most clearly in refusing the prefix “new.” She explains: “Constructionist and post-constructionist feminist ways of theorizing are, as I see it, running in parallel.”⁵¹ Ultimately, Lykke’s “post-constructionism” indicates continuities and discontinuities with de/constructionist feminisms that prevents simplified and misleading characterizations. Significantly, she highlights how post-constructionism is not a simple turning away from previous theory but a positive and progressive negotiation. She emphasizes that its central feature is “The double move of going into and beyond post-modern epistemological thought and constructionist understandings of science ...” rather than “sticking to Harding’s more simple taxonomy, ‘post-modern feminist epistemology.’”⁵²

Beyond traditional materialism?

New materialism doesn’t just expand or widen older kinds. It announces a new, transversal, but also meta-disciplinary methodology. Though new materialism does represent the addition of “bodily materiality to the economic” – this limited understanding misses the greater offering.⁵³ It is not simply “new” in the teleological sense here (as others have noted) because earlier forms were more complex than recognized in academic renderings, and teleology is shared by social constructionist and essentialist alike.⁵⁴ van der Tuin and Dolphijn are directive and clear about the precise kind of negotiation of postmodernism and modernism that the new material feminisms represent. New materialisms are transdual in the sense of challenging linear teleology in theory making, which has overlapping and intertwined spatial and temporal dimensions. They summarize that, “the immanent gesture of new materialism is transversal rather than dualist as it intersects academic (neo-) disciplines (for instance, feminist theory, science and technology studies, and media and cultural studies), paradigms (for instance, the Saussurian/Lacanian linguisticism

⁵⁰ Zalewski, 2000, 1.

⁵¹ Lykke 2010, 133.

⁵² Lykke 2010, 134 & 133 respectively.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 161, See also for example, Lykke, “The Timeliness of Post-constructionism,” 2010 and Alcoff and Howie “Preface” in Howie, *Between Feminism and Materialism*, 2010.

still prevalent in cultural theory today) and the linear spatio-temporalities conventionally assigned to epistemic trends ('new' materialism versus 'good old' Marxist materialism/ identity politics, etc.)⁵⁵ My grappling with the new material feminisms vis a vis the "old" materialisms (especially Marxist ones) may be inadequate in light of a cartographical approach, but was perhaps a necessary step along the way to help us to think through the new entity being proposed. But the transdualism van der Tuin and Dolphijn attribute to the new materialism (or new material feminisms in my wording) explodes linear teleological thinking in both spatial and temporal terms. This complex theorization is capable of addressing and perhaps remedying the leaving out of agented matter in Western thought, whether feminist or mainstream.

I have argued that the postconstructionist new material feminisms represent a "breaking feminist waves" methodology because they challenge dualistic categorization, like modern versus postmodern and second versus third wave feminism, which have significant spatial and temporal connotations. It is this linear and teleological model which underlies both senses of dualistic classification and which van der Tuin and Dolphijn further break away from in theorizing the new material feminism's transdualist/transversal methodology as cartography. The cartographical method they describe includes as an essential feature, transdisciplinarity.

Building from the "Breaking Feminist Waves" point, the difficulties inherent in rigid characterization of the new material feminisms is largely down to classificatory paradigms which fail the conceptual terrain that is being charted. It's easy to get it wrong because modern epistemology defaults to disciplinary boundaries which these new materialisms are most accurately understood outside of.⁵⁶ "New materialism criticizes not only the use of 'a discipline' or 'a paradigm' as pre-determined, but is critical also, along the lines of the dismantling of binary oppositions that it enacts, of the pre-determination of classifications of theoretical trends"⁵⁷ The new material feminisms are fundamentally transdisciplinary, or as van der Tuin and Dolphijn refer to the phenomena, they enact a "disciplinary transversality."⁵⁸ This has implications for the broader applications and reach of its methodological and conceptual (re)negotiations beyond feminist theory and toward a paradigm shift in contemporary cultural theory.⁵⁹ A significant stumbling block has been disciplinary boundaries or "disciplinary territoriality" which distorts and reduces the actual scope and application of the new materialisms.⁶⁰ Comparing the work of new material feminists they demonstrate how, from across sociological and biological fields, "[b]ringing new materialism (assumed to be a pre-existing body of work) into contact with a scholarly discipline (equally assumed to be pre-existing) has distortive effects."⁶¹

One of the key new materialist concepts to inspire van der Tuin and Dolphijn's approach is feminist physicist, Karen Barad's theory of "intra-action." This concept highlights the inter-relational constitution of subject and object or "the

⁵⁵ Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2010, 158 – 159. See also Lykke, 2010, 135.

⁵⁶ Iris van der Tuin and Rick Dolphijn, "The Transversality of New Materialism" in *Women: a cultural review* (v.21, No.2, 2010) 153-171, 159.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 161

intra-action of the observer, the observed and observing instruments, all of which are ‘agential.’”⁶² Starting from quantum physics where unstable referents are changed by their encounters, Barad captures how this applies in the social world. The point is that reality is not observer-independent; reality is not “built by things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena, but of things-in-phenomena”⁶³ This is the perfect analogy for van der Tuin and Dolphijn who wish to show that disciplines which are based in bounded/fixed traditions hold to the false view of stability which distorts what new materialism is accurately understood as. By contrast, the new material feminisms should not be apprehended as belonging to a particular discipline, but as a transdisciplinary approach characterized by post-constructionism (a new thinking technology) that reconciles binary dualisms as differently manifested in various fields.⁶⁴

As I have explored, since the new material feminisms draw on old and new work and from across academic disciplines, they are translinear in a historical/temporal and spatial/conceptual sense, hence defy simply classification. This is why van der Tuin and Dolphijn claim that, “New materialism, then, takes scholarship into an absolute deterritorialisation and is not an epistemic class that has a clear referent.”⁶⁵ In place of linear temporality, they use “Cartography rather than classification”⁶⁶; mapping rather than linear plotting on a time scale.

The gains for scholarly work, and conceptual understandings through which we come to understand and (mis)represent the world, in terms of dualism at present, are equally unbounded. This is a high stakes turn by which we stand to gain a lot within feminist theory, as we saw with the breaking feminist waves approach, but potentially much more than that.⁶⁷ van der Tuin and Dolphijn in particular, elaborate and stretch the benefits in time and scope – backward into history (and forward, in theory), and meta-disciplinarily to scholarship more generally, including a sweep of thinkers who have been relegated to the sidelines because of academic trends of dualism. “Modernist scholars like Bergson, Alfred North Whitehead, William James and Edmund Husserl,” are among those great minds named as having “been pushed aside or reinterpreted by dualist thinking...”⁶⁸ More modestly, the “transversality of new materialism” enables gains in feminist theory by reconsidering and re-evaluating the work of feminist theorists from previous historical moments and traditions like that of O’Brien.⁶⁹

As the new material feminisms address, and I argue, the agency of matter is what’s lost in both modern and postmodern accounts of embodiment and reproduction with the social overdeterminism of the biological. van der Tuin and Dolphijn write, “The strength of new materialism is precisely to be found in its ability to show that agential, or the *non-innocent* nature of all matter, seems to have escaped *both* modernist (positivist) and postmodernist humanist epistemologies.”⁷⁰ The point of

⁶² van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2010, 165.

⁶³ Barad cited in Matz Hammarstrom, “On the Concepts of Transaction and Intra-action” *The Third Nordic Pragmatism Conference*, Uppsala, 1-2 June, 2010, pp. 9-10.

⁶⁴ See Lykke, 2010, 135.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁶⁷ See Birke, Lynda and Cecilia Asberg, “Biology is a feminist issue: Interview with Lynda Birke” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 17,4: (2010) 413-423; Hekman in Alaimo and Hekman, 2008; and van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2010, 167.

⁶⁸ Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2010, 167.

⁶⁹ As has been the case with new scholarship on de Beauvoir, and Shulamith Firestone.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 159.

difference between new material feminisms and previous approaches is that matter has agency. It is not simply (as) represented in scientific nor sociological/cultural theory alike. More specifically, they explain: "...whereas a modernist scientific materialism allows for one True representation of matter, and a postmodernist cultural constructivism allows for a plethora of equally true representations, it is the shared *representationalism* that is questioned and shifted by new materialism. Matter is a transformative force *in itself*, which does not need to be re-presented."⁷¹

Conclusion

In essence, the new materialists argue, like Mary O'Brien and I, that bodies are material; i.e. products of complex biosocial processes which are neither simply nor primarily a biological fact, nor are they purely socially constructed artifacts. Meanings are attributed to bodies, and bodies come to reflect those meanings even genetically and in our bones as Fausto-Sterling reveals. That the meaning of biology is politically and culturally mediated is a cornerstone feminist insight richly and variously explained by scholars in the interdisciplinary field of feminist (techno)science studies since the 1970s.⁷² But we know from at least as early as Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that biological bodies are cultural and historical entities in process.

The sort of rigid biology / society binary that has been a significant feature of feminist discourse until now has limited an adequate or realistic understanding of women's lives. Anne Phillips states: "the variety of women's interests does not refute the claim that interests are gendered. That some women do not bear children does not make pregnancy a gender neutral event."⁷³ I would suggest also that seeing sex/gender as socially constructed does not mean that it is not also biological. In fact it is material, which means an inseparable combination of both as the terms sex/gender, or reproduction in O'Brien's theory, or Haraway's "material discursive" imply. Furthermore, because of women's rightly apprehensive engagement with all things biological because of their historic association with "nature," feminism's actual engagement with the biological body outside of a reductive Cartesian framework has been limited.⁷⁴ However, like post-constructionists, I argue that without refocusing on material rather than abstract forms of embodiment, feminism will remain at an ultimately unproductive (biological) essentialist versus (social) constructionist impasse at the foundation of the most difficult feminist issues especially regarding reproduction and new reproductive technologies. Biology, understood as historical and cultural process *and* materially grounded, can be reclaimed for feminism. In spite of biological determinism built on a false belief in natural bodies as passive matter, feminist biologist Lynda Birke aptly argues that "biological knowledge can be a feminist ally."⁷⁵

In many significant respects the new material feminisms represent the most promising feminist approach to the constructionist / essentialist impasse especially as it plays out regarding NRTs. In specific, as diverse and emergent theories which

⁷¹ Ibid., 164.

⁷² For an excellent historiography of feminist technoscience studies see Cecilia Asberg, "Enter Cyborg: tracing the historiography and ontological turn of feminist technoscience studies," *International Journal of Feminist Technoscience*, 1,1(2010).

⁷³ Phillips, Anne. *The Politics of Presence*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, 68.

⁷⁴ Birke and Asberg 2010: 414.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 415.

insist on the interpenetration of biological and social realms, in various terminology, they constitute a methodological approach that has the greater consequence of “breaking feminist waves.” As such they post a broader challenge to oppositional narratives in terms of feminist theory (e.g. 2nd versus third wave feminism) or more general theoretical trends (modernist versus postmodernist). As discussed, such presentations signify dual and antagonistic conceptual, not only temporal, dimensions as well.

These new material feminisms enable an incorporation of the diversity of women’s individual embodied sex/gender experiences, while still accounting for the corporeal commonalities women share. This has positive implications for a theory of reproductive justice, for example. They also reignite recurring debates about feminism’s (perhaps exaggerated but nonetheless real) theoretical and practical differences. In particular they are a potentially fruitful ground for the working out of the biosocial dialectic within feminism, and specifically in feminist technoscience studies, but also more broadly between divisions like the natural sciences and social sciences. For example, Birke, Asberg, and Lykke are among those who have argued for a better relationship between feminism and science, including between those who do (techno)science studies and more traditional human studies within feminist theory, though especially van der Tuin and Dolphijn reveal how the transdualism or “transversalism” of the new materialisms will have resonance far beyond feminist studies.

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