New Material Feminisms

ontology I biology I difference
‘WHAT’ IS THE MATTER

What’s at stake

In its first decade the third millennium has witnessed a ‘turn’ towards the material, the material of bodies: the human animal and non-human animal, the organic and inorganic. It is a reorientation of concerns from the epistemological to the ontological, from the ‘how’ to the ‘what’ (McNeil 2010, pp. 430-431). This material turn comes as an acknowledgement by Western scholars of the inadequacies of social constructionism as a way of thinking about and through life (Van Der Tuin 2011, p. 271). As stated by Van Der Tuin¹ (ibid), it is feminism riding its third wave, which finds itself at the vanguard of this new materialism, her claim is an echo of other feminist thinkers such as Elizabeth Grosz² (2011, p. 8), Marsha Meskimmon³ (2003, p. 453) and Susan Hekman⁴ (2010, p. 3).

At stake, is a growing awareness of the material implications of the political, the economic, the social and the environmental, that the long-standing side lining by constructionism has left unrecognised (Coole & Frost 2010, pp. 2-3). A turn towards the material is a turn towards the ethical for it is only when the matter of matter is addressed that the boundaries between entities - human and non-human animals, the organic and inorganic, boundaries that are manipulated for the construction of, or used as a by word for hierarchies - can be dissolved. Karen Barad, uses the term, ‘entanglement’s’ to describe how matter, be it micro or macro is never discrete, that its realness and it’s existence is always in relation to everything else (2007, p. 6). Barad makes clear however, that a state of unboundedness is not about making everything same, for same is not a neutral term it is merely that which is dominant (ibid. p. 378). This state of unboundedness is not an static homogenous heap, is active, dynamic it is the entanglements, or ‘intra-actions’ of matter, matter that is different and is always in a state of generative difference in its intra-action. As Barad states, ‘…entangled practices are productive…different intra-actions produce different phenomena’ (ibid. p. 58). Difference, then is not perceived as Other, it is material and material force and not a signifier of value or lack there of. What is at stake then is a more effective way of breaking apart the dualisms that constructionism has failed accomplish.

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⁴ Susan Hekman is Professor of Political Science at the University of Texas
The recognition of social constructionism’s limitations is neither a dismissal nor an undoing of this epistemological approach. Constructionism’s project was integral to the excavation and deconstruction of embedded Cartesian thought, which had essentialised and naturalised difference. Constructionism’s de-naturalisation of sex, class and race thus paved the way for the redressing of social, political and economic inequalities (Alaimo, n.d.). However, for many feminists this socially constructed world in which, as Karen Barad⁵ (2003, p.801) states, ‘Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters [and that] the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter’, is one that fails to recognise and address the actual physical reality of the universe, the world and our bodies. The unacknowledged constitutive nature of matter has profound consequences. That is, a material world that is only meaningful or agential when 'shaped' by language (culture) is one in which Cartesian dualism is reconstituted (Kirby 2011, p.69; Alaimo, n.d.). The manifestation of one set of binaries sets the Cartesian vortex in motion, sucking all other associated binaries down into its centre. A centre that is human and more specifically male, white and Western. A reference point against which everything else is measured, and found lacking in its difference (Kirby 2011, p.112).

⁵ Karen Barad is a physicist and professor of the Feminist Studies Department, University of California
NEW MATERIAL FEMINISMS

A material force for freedom

The project of new material feminisms does not pivot around a further unveiling and deconstruction of seemingly ‘naturalised’ differences in order to expose the patriarchal order that has validated the male as authentic knowledge producer and, rendered woman as passive receiver of that knowledge. Rather it is emblematic of an, ‘affirmative’ turn in feminist theory (McNeil 2010, p. 427). On this positive form of theorising, Elizabeth Grosz states,

[it]...is not only about addressing the rights and wrongs, those done to women and made by women, in the past and the present; it is also...about addressing how these wrongs can be transformed, how a better social system or structure might be brought into existence than what is currently available...[it's] about addressing new ways of thinking subjects, objects and the real. It may be orientated towards a new metaphysics a new way of understanding what is [author’s emphasis] in terms more relevant to women and their interests than previous models offered (Grosz 2010a, p. 101).

Under these terms Grosz projects feminism into the future, indeed a future generated by feminism itself. She regards it as a reorientation away from, ‘the freedom from’, towards, ‘the freedom to’ (2010b, p. 141). Freedom from - the hierarchies that have imposed limitations on women because of their sex (race or class etc.) - keeps women’s freedom tethered to what Grosz calls, ‘a negative conception of liberty’ (ibid). For how can absolute freedom be achieved if it is constantly defined in reference to that from which freedom is sought; it is freedom at the end of a leash. Having chewed through its leash, ‘freedom to’, is exercised through its own actions, its nature is generative and mobile (ibid). Grosz thus advances the, ‘freedom to’ as a, ‘positive conception of freedom, freedom as the ability to act and in acting to make oneself even as one is made by external forces’ (ibid, p.142). Freedom according to Grosz is thus located in,

the realm of actions, processes, and events...It is not a state one is in or a quality that one has, but it resides in the activities one undertakes that transform oneself and (a part of) the world. It is not a property or right bestowed on, or removed from, individuals by others’ (ibid, p.152).

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Grosz states that she takes her definition of freedom from philosopher Henri Bergson (Grosz 2010b, p.142)
Grosz thus perceives a new orientation towards the material, the material as force and the force of material (rather than matter as inert or passive) as a process by which autonomy can be sought and the freedom to express material difference and for material differences to be expressed can be done so without prejudice.

**Grosz’s provocation**

sexual difference is not just one social difference among many but is the difference that makes all other lived differences possible, the engine of all lived differences (Grosz 2010c).

This quote introduces Elizabeth Grosz’s provocation that sexual difference is generative of all other differences, that it is a creative force. The issue of sexual difference has, to date, been addressed by feminist theorists in two ways, either through its elision or, its reiteration. The former refutes an essential sex and endorses sex as cultural construction or gender. This elision is underpinned by a sundering of the biological body from gender. It is a shaking off of the body that some feminists regard as having kept woman tethered to the denigrated half of a binarized world. Having discarded the body and all of its perceived negative associations and affiliations with it, woman and man meet within culturally constructed terms, un-essentialised but subject to the vagaries of prevailing socio-political values and beliefs (Colebrook 2000, p.77; Grosz 1995, pp.39-40). The inequities experienced by women are thus historically produced and as such are subject to change and amelioration. Constructionism, in effect has served to underpin the egalitarian project within feminism.

The problem with egalitarianism, as raised by Luce Irigaray, is that within its shadow lurks the question, ‘Equal to Whom?’ (Irigaray 1989, p.59-76 cited in Grosz 2011, p.215). In her explication of Irigaray’s objections to a feminism of equality Grosz states that in seeking equality there is a reduction of one to the other (woman to man), thus rendering man, and his socio-economic and political powers, privileges and rights, as that against which all else must be measured and if found lacking must be brought in line or made same in order for an equalisation to happen (2011, p.148). However, in making man the measure, the process of equalisation is undone for it simply consolidates mans dominant position and in doing so re-founds binaristic and teleological thinking.
Difference feminism is non-reductionist. The sexes are impermeable, dispossessed of any common ground across which comparisons can be made and commonalities found. Woman, therefore, cannot be reduced to a version of man (Grosz 2010a, p.101). Proponents of a feminism of sexual difference are charged with the return of woman to the female body, a body that had historically given rise to the degraded socio-economic and political conditions of women. Thus, the threat of essentialism lingers in the air of sexual difference (McNeil 2010, pp. 435-436).

As part of the New Feminist Materialism’s project of addressing the actual, material reality of bodies (Kirby, 2011; Colebrook, 2010; Barad, 2003), Elizabeth Grosz adopts a risky strategy for the purposes of allaying allegations of essentialism and biological determinism through her examination of Charles Darwin’s writings. Feminists have traditionally given Darwin’s theories a wide berth because of the perceived determinism of his ideas that posed an obstacle to the sundering of the link between female biology and the cultural position of women (Kontturi & Tiainen 2007, p. 251). Grosz, however, intercepts Darwin’s writings on sexual selection with Luce Irigaray’s on sexual difference as a means by which biology itself reiterates sexual difference without falling into the trap of biological determinism (Grosz 2010c).

Natural selection | Sexual selection

...a feminism of difference would entail a non-reductionist understanding of sexual selection as a principle vital to and irreducible to natural selection. This is Darwin’s greatest thought and the one that hardly anyone ever talks about (Grosz 2010c).

According to Grosz, Darwin’s theories of sexual and natural selection have suffered from a mistaken conflation by feminists, wherein the former has been regarded as variation of the latter (ibid). In this conflationary reading, sexual selection is made on the grounds of perceived fitness such that it will contribute to the survival of the progeny of a pairing and ultimately that species (ibid 2011, p.118). In addition, Darwin’s explication of the mechanism of sexual selection is read as an indication that sexual selection is a male prerogative. For feminists then,

...Darwin’s understanding of sexual selection ...they [feminists] read as privileging maleness and attributing activity to it while affirming the relative passive position of femaleness (ibid 2010c).
This interpretation of Darwin’s writing renders male, the sex that drives sexual selection and thus natural selection, and has understandably led to the distancing of feminists from Darwin’s ideas and biology in general. Grosz, in her analysis of Darwin’s writings on sexual selection, offers a feminism of difference that deals with biology, while avoiding essentialism. With regards to sexual selection, Grosz states that Darwin clearly differentiates sexual from natural selection. The former is not necessarily made on the basis of an individual’s fitness, survival or perceived ability to produce healthy offspring. Rather, selection is made on the basis of erotically desirable characteristics that range from the most colourful plumage, the most appealing design of nest to the largest antlers and the most tuneful of bird songs (ibid. 2011, p.125). These characteristics may or may not relate to an individual’s fitness and this is where Darwin separates out sexual from natural selection. Grosz refers to Darwin’s example of the Oryx, a species of antelope whose females show a preference for males with the largest horns that tend to curve along their backs. Far from equipping them with a defensive advantage these horns are in fact redundant, if not a hindrance, to the male’s survival, for in order to use them to defend itself the animal is forced to its knees, thus rendering it vulnerable (ibid. 2010c). The example of the Oryx also brings to the surface the question of sexual selection as a primarily male force. As exemplified by the Oryx it is the female preference for large horns that perpetuates this characteristic in the male even to the detriment of its own survival. It is not the case that sexual selection has no role in natural selection but that the two are differently orientated; the latter towards attaining the desired mate, the former towards survival (ibid.)

Sexual selection and sexual difference: origins of sexual difference

Having dealt with oft and mistakenly conflated processes of sexual and natural selection, Grosz then addresses sexual selection it terms of sexual difference (2010c; 2011d, pp.143-168). The prevalence of sexual dimorphism throughout the animal and plant kingdoms led Darwin to postulate on its likely early origins and prior to bifurcation, the morphologies of both sexes were to be found in one form (Darwin 1871, p.257-258 cited in Grosz 2011, p.124-125)
1859 p.132, cited in Grosz 2004 pp.69-70; Grosz 2011, p.162). His observations on the origins of sexual difference come from his almost decade long study of barnacles (Grosz 2010c; Grosz 2011 pp.160-165). Grosz states that Darwin’s analysis of fossil and contemporary specimens yielded evidence of an evolutionary shift in many species of this crustacean from hermaphroditic to bifurcated forms\(^8\) and thus the latter must have been naturally selected on the grounds of its evolutionary advantageousness (2011, p.164). Darwin realised that in order for a species to have the best chance of survival, it must diversify and the optimal way of achieving this is through sexual reproduction, wherein sexual as opposed to a-sexual reproduction (cloning) requires two different morphologies. Grosz suggests that natural selection selects sexual reproduction as the most successful form of reproduction, because reproduction as a consequence of morphological difference that then generates more differences is, in effect, how life continues to be.

**Essentialism re-found?**

Grosz tackles the issue of essentialism by emphasising that Darwin made it clear that sexual selection is not a function of reproduction, because selection is not necessarily made on grounds such as the fitness of a mate nor on the sexual morphology of the mate (there is a growing body of evidence of homosexual practices amongst non human animals) (Grosz 2011, p. 8). Her point is that bodies whatever morphology they possess they are fundamental to processes of sexual selection. Those bodies that are inter-sexed are not outside of this, for they have the sexed morphologies, but have two rather than one (Grosz 2011, p.108). The positing of sexual difference then, does not circumscribe sexual identity or choices about whether to reproduce or not. ‘Sexual difference’, as Grosz states, ‘is ontological’, a material reality, but the values attached to this difference and all other differences generated from them are constructions of prevailing socio-economic and political conditions and these too have material consequences (Kontturi & Tiainen 2007, p.249). While these conditions have material consequences they do not have ontological status, the differences experienced as a result of these conditions can be challenged, changed in other words, made different.

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\(^8\) Sexual bifurcation is irreversible. As soon two morphologies emerge, difference continues to be generated (Darwin cited in Grosz 2007, p.249).
UNCERTAIN UNDERPININGS

An untimely practice

Grosz suggests that the shift in focus of feminist theory from epistemological to ontological concerns that enfolds a reorientation towards the material, is, ‘untimely’. Elaborating on this she states,

Something is untimely, out of its own time, either through its being anachronistic, which is another way of saying that it is not yet used up in its pastness, it still has something to offer that remains untapped, its virtuality remains alluring and filled with potential for the present and future…or…more interestingly and in a less secure and predictable mode than an exploration and revivification of the past…[it] is the leap into the future without adequate preparation in the present, through becoming, a movement of becoming-more and becoming-other, which involves the orientation to the creation of the new, to an unknown future, what is no longer recognisable in terms of the present (2010d, pp.48-49).

What of my own practice could be considered as being ‘untimely’? If I take the first part of Grosz’s definition of the term, the untimely as something, ‘not yet used up in its pastness’ (ibid. p.49). There are two materials that, for the last year, have continued to engage my interest and practice; peat ash and bovine gelatine. As a human resource there is evidence to suggest that peat/peat bogs were of significance from at least a 2000 years ago. Many of the human bodies found preserved in peat over a large proportion of northwest Europe are believed by archaeologists to be deliberate depositions; the violent deaths experienced by many of those individuals⁹, mostly Iron Age, are thought to be ritualistic; the in-betweeness of peat bogs, that they are neither fully dry land nor water may have played a significant part in their selection and at a more pragmatic level they may also have acted as and represented territorial boundaries. (Kelly 2002, p.25; Renfrew & Bahn 1991, p.59). Peat bogs were also a source of iron ore for Iron Age societies and the peat itself was certainly extracted for fuel purposes from at least 1,500 years BP (Northern Ireland Environment Agency 2010; Andriesse 1988). Industrialisation has of course since taken over the extraction and production of iron and other fuels, such as coal, gas and oil, leading to the decrease in domestic use of peat as fuel, and certainly peat bog ritualism lives on for the most in folklore rather than in practice (Sopo 2004; Monaghan 2004, p.52).

⁹ Garotting, stabbing, mutilation, axe trauma to head and torso
In terms of peat as being, ‘not yet used up in its pastness’ (Grosz 2010d, p.48) its role as subject matter in the creation for contemporary poetry such as that of Seamus Heaney bears this out\textsuperscript{10} (Northern Ireland Environment Agency 2010). As a non-renewable resource, peat has also become a focus for environmental concerns and for conservationists the preservation of peat bogs is vital for sustaining its particular

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{10} Seamus Heaney (1975) The Grauballe Man. \\
As if he had been poured in tar, he lies on a pillow of turf and seems to weep

the black river of himself
The grain of his wrists is like bog oak, the ball of his heel

like a basalt egg. His instep has shrunk cold as a swan’s foot or a wet swamp root.

His hips are the ridge and purse of a mussel, his spine an eel arrested under a glisten of mud.

The head lifts, the chin is a visor raised above the vent of his slashed throat that has tanned and toughened. The cured wound opens inwards to a dark elderberry place.

Who will say ‘corpse’ to his vivid cast? Who will say ‘body’ to his opaque response?

And his rusted hair, a mat unlikely as a foetus’s. I first saw his twisted face in a photograph, a head and shoulder out of the peat, bruised like a forceps baby,

but now he lies perfected in my memory, down to the red horn of his nails,

hung in the scales with beauty and atrocity: with the Dyning Gaul too strictly compassed on his shield, with the actual weight of each hoded victim, slashed and dumped.
\end{quote}
species of fauna and flora. Peat also continues to be used as fuel, although mainly at a local level of production and consumption (Sopo 2004).

In relation to my own practice, it is the combusted state of peat that is initially of interest to me (see Figure 1). The Irish peat fired fuel stations, from which my own supply has been secured, collect the fly ash from their combustion process for onward sale to the agricultural industries as fertilizer (Paappanen et al. 2005, p.9). As a waste product that is, in Grosz’s (2010d, p.48) terms, ‘revivified’, it’s ontological state shifts from one wherein its morphology as fuel is killed off through its combustion, its used-up-ness leaving it redundant in the past, to one where its ‘new’ ashy state opens up other potentialities and as such it is not, ‘…used up in its pastness’ (ibid.).

The latter part of her explication of the untimely, draws out its dynamism and uncertainty, defining it as a,

...leap into the future... a movement of becoming-more and becoming-other, which involves the orientation to the creation of the new, to an unknown future, what is no longer recognisable in terms of the present (2010d, p.49).
Elsewhere, I have discussed bovine gelatine in relation to my practice and the writings of Grosz and Darwin\(^\text{11}\) (Wilson 2011). I refer to one work in particular, \textit{and I will follow} (2011) (see Figure 2) presenting the non-hierarchical entanglement of cultural and natural factors and forces that coalesce in the gelatine of, \textit{and I will follow}.\(^\text{12}\) Bovine gelatine’s untimeliness, in the sense of it becoming more and other than its present is visibly tangible in its myriad of states. What of the peat ash? Once mixed with water and allowed to dry, the peat ash has greater stability than the

\(^{11}\) specifically their postulation that both nature and culture continually recognised one another through one another

\(^{12}\) ‘...gelatine is a material that I selected for my own purposes however, that choice was based on the properties that this bovine by-product exhibited. Such properties are an entanglement of cultural and natural processes, both emergent within one another, bringing with them all the changes from the Palaeogene to its presence in, \textit{and I will follow}. A presence that continues to be in transit as the hot gelatine solution cools, sets and changes state again as the temperature of the gallery is gradually recognised in the material’s composition. It is a relay of motion, a “becoming of unbecoming”’ (Wilson 2011, p. 9)
gelatine, if a little friable (see Figure 3). Does its cementitious properties render it ‘timely’? Perhaps, this is too literal a reading of Grosz. Her ‘leap into the future’, for me is located at the point when water is added to the ash. It is not only a return to its unused-up pastness, its redundancy, in order to re-employ and use it up as it is in its ashy state. It is a movement of materials and what Grosz refers to as, ‘material forces’ (ibid. p.50) which include me as well as the chemical and physical properties of the materials, in and of themselves and in reaction to one another and this movement of forces generates something other than what was before. Nevertheless, the discrete, objectness of the peat blocks have been and continue to be a source of frustration. So too, are recent experiments with stronger mixes of gelatine that have led to more settled forms or as someone remarked, their appearance of having become (see Figures 4 & 5). In order to counter this frustration I have brought both materials together by pouring the gelatine in and around a block of peat ash (see Figures 6 & 7) so that another ‘leap’ may be generated, a ‘leap’ to something unknown and unimagined. Yet this too appears to have become (see Figure 8).

Claire Colebrook\(^1\), through her reading of Grosz, perhaps goes some way towards helping me unpick and articulating these issues. She states,

> For Grosz, sexual difference is literally material. In order for life to be it does not go through time [author’s emphasis], and time is not constituted as a marking out, tracing, or constituting of the same. Rather, life-biological, evolving, dynamic life is the production of potential relations (2008, p.73)

It is this ‘production of potential relations’ (ibid), that seems to be driving my desire to continually bring materials (and enfolded into that, material forces) into relation in order to create something that is continually seeking out a future, a future that never comes to be, for it is always beyond. Grosz herself perhaps illuminates something of my practice in the first few sentences of her book, *Becoming Undone*,

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Figure 4: bovine gelatine

Figure 5: bovine gelatine

Figure 6: bovine gelatine & peat ash

Figure 7: bovine gelatine & peat ash

Figure 8: bovine gelatine & peat ash
This book is an attempt to address a series of imperceptible movements, modes of becoming, forms of change, and evolutionary transformations that make up natural, cultural, and political life. I have called these movements “becomings,” but what it is that becomes, and what it becomes, are less clear and less interesting than the movement itself. Movement does not attach to a stable thing, putting it in motion; rather, movement pre-exists the thing and is the process of differentiation that distinguishes one object from another. I am interested in the processes that make and unmake objects, whether these are natural objects, manufactured objects or those objects that live and experience (2011, p.1).

How then can I have a practice that is less interested in what becomes than in the becomings themselves? A performative aspect to my work has been remarked upon before, and while I acknowledge this, I remain resistant to shifting the ‘how’ of my practice to the ‘what’ of my practice, because of a real or imagined implication that I would then have to produce a performance. Annemarie Mol\textsuperscript{14} describes an, ‘ontology-in-practice’ as that which allows ‘different enactments’ of a single materiality to exist (Hekman 2010, pp.82-83). In light of this perhaps, a way forward is to make visible both the becomings and that which has become, rather than foregrounding one over the other. In this way multiple enactments or versions of material forces and material can be seen, be it through ‘performance’ or however those becomings are made manifest, and that produced from the ‘performance’.

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