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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Interrogating the Founding Gestures of the New Materialism

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Abstract

In this article, I aim to further thinking in the broadly 'new materialist' field by insisting it attends to some ubiquitous assumptions. More specifically, I critically interrogate what Sara Ahmed has termed 'the founding gestures of the "new materialism"'. These founding rhetorical gestures revolve around a perceived neglect of the matter of materiality in 'postmodernism' and 'poststructuralism' and are meant to pave the way for new materialism's own conception of matter-in/of-the-world. I argue in this article that an engagement with the postmodern critique of language as constitutive, as well as the poststructuralist critique of pure self-presence, does not warrant these founding gestures to be so uncritically rehearsed. Moreover, I demonstrate that texts which rely on these gestures, or at least the ones I discuss in this article, are not only founded on a misrepresentation of postmodern and poststructuralist thought, but are also guilty of repeating the perceived mistakes of which they are critical, such as upholding the language/matter dichotomy. I discuss a small selection of texts that make use of those popular rhetorical gestures to juxtapose the past that is invoked with a more nuanced reading of that past. My contention is that if 'the founding gestures of the "new materialism"' are not addressed, the complexity of the postmodern and poststructuralist positions continues to be obscured, with damaging consequences for the further development of the emerging field of new materialism, as well as our understanding of cultural theory's past.

Keywords

New materialism; constructionism; representationalism; materiality; poststructuralist feminism

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In this article, I engage with the specifics of what Sara Ahmed refers to as ‘the founding gestures of “the new materialism”’.¹ With this phrase, Ahmed draws attention to the fact that much new materialist rhetoric is founded on a specific understanding of cultural theory’s past as having been negligent of the matter of materiality. Moreover, she argues that sentences in which such an understanding of the past of cultural theory are articulated ‘are repeated without illustration or contextualization’, which, she observes, results in ‘the “routinization” of the gesture of pointing towards the anti-biologism or constructionism of others’.² Ahmed’s critique speaks directly to the heart of the matter, namely, that the gesture of pointing to the alleged anti-biologism and constructionism of others (and here ‘others’ refers to an unidentified group of scholars who, importantly, associate with ‘postmodernism’ and ‘poststructuralism’) is rarely elaborated.³ One consequence of this lack of engagement is that much new materialist rhetoric appears to rely on a misinterpretation, if not misunderstanding, of postmodern and poststructuralist thought. An engagement with the postmodern critique of language as constitutive and the poststructuralist critique of pure self-presence, I wish to argue in this article, does not warrant such founding gestures to be repeated so uncritically. Moreover, an engagement with cultural theory’s past renders the situation much more complicated than many who associate with new materialism currently suggest. In what follows, then, I discuss a small selection of texts to juxtapose the past that is invoked in the repetition of this founding gesture with a more nuanced reading of that past.

At the outset of my discussion, I want to make clear that my critical interrogation does not aim to prescribe how to read ‘postmodern’, ‘poststructuralist’ or ‘new materialist’ texts correctly (if that is even possible). Nor do I aim to resolve the debate between poststructuralist and new materialist approaches to the matter of materiality. I want to emphasise, then, that this article is not about choosing sides in this debate. What specifically interests me here is that the founding gesture used (recycled, and thus continuously reinforced) by many so-called ‘new materialists’ emphatically dismisses postmodernism and poststructuralism for being relativist and anti-realist *without*, as Ahmed so poignantly observes, any illustration or contextualisation. I also want to make clear that by homing in on a very specific debate between poststructuralism and new materialism—a debate that deals with the status and meaning of language, referentiality and representation—I do not wish to reduce the ethico-political concerns of new materialism to this debate. Nonetheless, as this debate (in)forms new materialism’s founding gestures, and thus lies at the core of this movement, calling attention to its problematic nature is urgent and crucial for the further development of new materialism as a politico-philosophical tradition, as well as our understanding of cultural theory’s past.

In what follows, by carefully unpacking some claims about postmodernism and poststructuralism made in the broadly ‘new materialist’ field, I wish to accentuate the proximity and potential usefulness of the former ways of thinking for those who wish to contribute to

1 Sara Ahmed, ‘Open Forum Imaginary Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the “New Materialism”’, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2008, pp. 23–39. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1350506807084854>

2 Ibid., p. 25. Nikki Sullivan argues similarly in her critical response to the new materialism. See Nikki Sullivan, ‘The Somatechnics of Perception and the Matter of the Non/Human: A Critical Response to the New Materialism’, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2012, pp. 299–313. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1350506812443477>

3 In an earlier article, I discuss the moralism that underlies these gestures. See Dennis Bruining, ‘A Somatechnics of Moralism: New Materialism or Material Foundationalism’, *Somatechnics*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2013, pp. 149–68. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3366/soma.2013.0083>

contemporary debates about materiality.⁴ To do this, I first turn to the ways in which cultural theory's past with all its shortcomings has been per/conceived in some texts that are associated with new materialism. I will do so in a schematic way that highlights some of the most commonly articulated criticisms with regard to the alleged neglect of matter and materiality in postmodernism, poststructuralism and other associated but crucially not differentiated positions, such as the discursive turn and linguistic constructionism. After identifying these common threads in the 'founding gestures of the new materialism', I suggest how these gestures can be nuanced and (re)configured. I then place these gestures within a genealogy of theory(ies) of embodiment before offering a brief alternative to the texts discussed in this article.

II

In her contribution to a special issue of the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, Maggie MacLure provides a description of what she terms 'the materialist critique of representation'. She writes that 'many new materialist writers ... have been especially critical of the "linguistic turn" in post-structural theory, detecting a pervasive "representationalism" that has rendered *material realities inaccessible behind the linguistic or discourse systems* that purportedly construct or "represent" them'.⁵ MacLure's argument revolves around the notion that despite their best efforts, the (again unidentified) scholars associated with the 'linguistic turn' are still trapped in a dualistic and representationalist mindset. Indeed, MacLure's position is underpinned by the idea that those who associate with the linguistic turn and/or poststructuralist theory implicitly argue that material reality is buried deep under discourse and language. The editors of the special issue in which MacLure's article appears make a remarkably similar observation. They first write that 'authors writing for this special issue make it clear that rethinking humanist ontology is key in what comes after humanist qualitative methodology'.⁶ They then explain what they find important about a 'rethinking [of] humanist ontology' by posing the following question: 'what would we do at the end of our studies if we academics ... really, truly, no longer believed in the language/reality binary that presumes a structure of depth—that language (secondary) can stand in for the real (primary)'.⁷ These passages provide a clear example of the oft-rehearsed criticisms directed at scholars who associate with postmodernism, poststructuralism and the like; namely, notwithstanding their critical interrogations of discourse, language and representation, as well as their critique of dichotomous thought, these scholars are still believed to adhere to a dualistic representationalism.

The notion of an all-pervasive representationalism in contemporary cultural theory functions as a scaffold in one of the most cited texts in debates on matter: Karen Barad's tellingly titled article, 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter

⁴ Here it is interesting to note that Elizabeth Stephens makes a similar observation, specifically in response to Coole and Frost's anthology *New Materialisms*. Stephens argues that 'while Coole and Frost define their work and approach in opposition to that of postmodern or poststructuralist theory [a] closer examination reveals an interesting point of convergence'. Elizabeth Stephens, 'Feminism and New Materialism: The Matter of Fluidity', *Inter/Alia: A Journal of Queer Studies*, vol. 9, 2014, p. 187.

⁵ Maggie MacLure, 'Researching without Representation? Language and Materiality in Post-Qualitative Methodology', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 26, no. 6, 2013, p. 659. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2013.788755>

⁶ Patty Lather and Elizabeth A. St Pierre, 'Post-Qualitative Research', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 26, no. 6, 2013, p. 629. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2013.788752>

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 630.

Comes to Matter'. Barad opens this now (in)famous piece with the remark that 'language has been granted too much power', and she continues her lament, 'the linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every "thing"—even materiality—is turned into a matter of language or *some other form of cultural representation*'.⁸ Representationalism, according to Barad, departs from the assumption that there are 'two distinct and independent kinds of entities—representations and entities to be represented'.⁹ Yet, despite the fact that representationalism 'has received significant challenge from feminists, *poststructuralists*, postcolonial critics, and queer theorists', it is still 'so deeply entrenched within Western culture that it has taken on a commonsense appeal'.¹⁰ The problem that Barad identifies as inextricably linked to a representationalist way of theorising materiality is that in such accounts 'matter is figured as passive and immutable, or at best inherits a potential for change derivatively from language and culture'.¹¹ To remedy this all-pervasive representationalism and, by implication, matter's perceived passivity, Barad offers 'an elaboration of performativity—a materialist, naturalist, and posthumanist elaboration—that allows matter its due as an active participant in the world's becoming'.¹² This is an interesting claim because even though Barad is adamant that matter and meaning are inseparable—in fact, she coins the term 'intra-active' to stress this inseparability—there is a sense in which her emphasis on matter as active and agentic implicitly evokes the existence of some/thing that is extra-discursive *and* has an extra-discursive drive. In fact, the contradictory notion of matter as an active yet neglected and ignored participant in its own becoming—which is not only present in the work of Barad, as I discuss in due course—forms another common point of critique rehearsed in much work that aims to rethink materiality.

The turn to agentic (non-human) matter as well as the expressed desire to avoid representationalism is linked to the idea that there has been an excessive focus on discourse and language to the detriment of materiality. So much so that postmoderns and poststructuralists, and others otherwise concerned with the discursive and linguistic, have allegedly forgotten about, ignored and even rejected *matereality*. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost describe this as an 'allergy to "the real"', while Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman clarify this dismissal of reality as a direct consequence of the so-called postmodern belief that reality is constituted by language.¹³ The latter editors write in the introduction to their anthology *Material Feminisms* that 'postmodernists argue that the real/material is entirely constituted by language; what we call the real is a product of language and has its reality only in language'.¹⁴ Here, then, we find another commonly expressed assumption about postmodernists and the like, namely, the idea that they reject reality. A discussion of this perceived anti-realism offers an interesting starting point for an examination of the ways in which postmodernism and poststructuralism are understood in much work that aims to contribute to current debates on

8 Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter', *Signs: Journal of Woman in Culture and Society*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2003, p. 801, emphasis added.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 804.

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 804, 806, emphasis added.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 801.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 803.

13 Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, 'Introducing the New Materialism', in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2010, p. 6.

14 Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, 'Introduction: Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory', in *Material Feminisms*, ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 2008, p. 2.

the matter of materiality. I turn, then, to Hekman who explicitly refers to this alleged anti-realism in her single-authored monograph *The Material of Knowledge: Feminist Disclosures*.

III

Hekman's book is structured around three theses. She argues that there is a growing dissatisfaction with what she refers to as linguistic constructionism; that feminists are at the forefront of the intellectual project that moves away from this linguisticism; and, that these new ways of thinking need to find a way 'to bring the material back in'.¹⁵ She further clarifies her goals by positing that feminists 'have a particular stake in retaining *reference to reality*. They want to be able to make statements *about reality*', which, according to Hekman, entails 'that woman are oppressed; that their social, economic, and political status is inferior to men; that they suffer sexual abuse at the hands of men', and, most importantly, Hekman writes, 'if everything is a linguistic constructionism, then these claims lose their meaning'.¹⁶ Let me be clear here, I do not aim to dispute the ongoing oppression of or discrimination against women. However, what I find profoundly disturbing about Hekman's claims is the underlying idea that there is a reality other than the one we refer to when we make statements about the world *and* the notion that the linguistic turn has caused this alleged dismissal of reality.

By referencing Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, Hekman elucidates her position. She contends that Kuhn's 'argument that the scientists' concepts create the reality that they study seemed, to at least some philosophers of science, irrefutable. It generated a movement among philosophers of science characterized by the embrace of linguistic constructionism *at the expense of reality*.¹⁷ Elsewhere in her book, she specifically links this way of thinking—that apparently takes place at the expense of reality—to postmodernism and poststructuralism, which 'are identified with the foundation of linguistic constructionism: the thesis that there is nothing but discourse'.¹⁸ Hekman continues to suggest that 'postmoderns and poststructuralists, it is assumed [although it is not clear who makes this assumption], have no possible bases for judgments, moral or epistemological, and reject the existence or even possibility of "reality"'.¹⁹ This generalisation, Hekman immediately acknowledges, is 'problematic on many levels'.²⁰ She notes, 'there is the issue of who is a "postmodern" or "poststructuralist" and what, if any, differences separate the two positions', moreover, she goes on to ask, 'is there a set of common themes that characterize all the theorists placed under these labels?'²¹ Notwithstanding my appreciation for Hekman's critical position towards her own claims, as well as her use of the terms postmodernism and poststructuralism, the most important aspect of her argument—that is, how she understands the postmodern rejection of reality—is left out of this questioning. Now, the difficulty

15 Susan Hekman, *The Material of Knowledge: Feminist Disclosures*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 2010, p. 2.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 3, emphasis added.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 11, emphasis added.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 47. Hekman's claim is, of course, an indirect reference to Derrida whom is absent in Hekman's account but present in this article.

19 Hekman, p. 47.

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.* For a description of these differences, albeit in a sociological context, see Ben Agger, 'Critical Theory, Poststructuralism, Postmodernism: Their Sociological Relevance', *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 17, 1991, pp. 105–31. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.17.1.105>

with responding to Hekman's argument lies in the fact that she does not reference any postmodern or poststructuralist text or theorist to support her claims. For this reason, I turn to the logic that seemingly underlies her argument, namely, that linguistic constructionists think and write 'at the expense of reality'.

It seems to me that Hekman implicitly suggests that discourse and language cover up and bury, as it were, a primary and untainted reality. Contrary to Hekman, however, I argue that scholars associated with this kind of thinking (Butler, Derrida, Haraway, Shildrick and Spivak, to name just a few) instead point out that even our best efforts to understand *matereality* are always-already inextricably and constitutively intertwined with the discourses out of which this *matereality* emerges. Consequently, the theoretical endeavours of these scholars do not set out to think reality at its own expense but, rather, depart from the idea that reality is, to put it in Harawayan terms, always-already and necessarily 'artifactual'. For Haraway, the term artifactualism 'means that nature for us is *made*, as both fiction and fact', and she continues by suggesting that 'if organisms are natural objects, it is crucial to remember that organisms are not born; they are made in world-changing technoscientific practices by particular collective actors in particular times and places'.²² Haraway's observation is thus not about anti-realism, but about the ways in which we understand what we refer to as reality. Haraway elaborates, albeit in specific reference to biology:

*Organisms are biological embodiments; as natural-technical entities, they are not pre-existing plants, animals, protistes, etc., with boundaries already established and awaiting the right kind of instrument to note them correctly. Organisms emerge from a discursive process. Biology is a discourse, not the living world itself. But humans are not the only actors in the construction of the entities of any scientific discourse; machines (delegates that can produce surprises) and other partners (not 'pre- or extra-discursive objects', but partners) are active constructors of natural scientific objects. Like other scientific bodies, organisms are not ideological constructions. The whole point about discursive construction has been that it is not about ideology.*²³

Haraway's passage importantly critiques the notion of pre- or extra-discursive objects (such as reality and matter), and, simultaneously, undermines the idea of language being merely representational.²⁴ Haraway's artifactualism, then, helps to make clear that suggesting, as Hekman does, that some scholars think about language and discourse 'at the expense of reality', is to evoke a notion of reality in a highly particular way, which is itself the result of a contextually specific discursive practice.

To give Hekman her due, it must be acknowledged that she devotes one chapter each to Foucault and Butler. However, she writes in these chapters, respectively, that 'one "postmodern" thinker, Michel Foucault, does not fit the commonly accepted profile of the "postmodern"'.²⁵ Similarly, Butler, the one theorist who 'stands for the linguistic constructionism that has dominated feminist theory in the last decades' actually 'moves

22 Donna Haraway, 'The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others', in *The Donna Haraway Reader*, Routledge, New York, 2004, p. 65.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

24 In fact, you could say that language is one of those machines that Haraway mentions in the passage above and is thus an active constructor of objects—a point that I will return to in due course.

25 Hekman, p. 48.

beyond linguistic constructionism'.²⁶ Hekman continues, not only 'is [Butler] a student of Foucault', she also realises 'the limitations of a strict linguistic constructionism'.²⁷ I emphasise Hekman's contradictory engagement with these scholars because it provides one of the clearest examples of how new materialism's founding gestures misrepresent the theorists and positions under critique. Instead of concluding that perhaps postmodernism and poststructuralism do not neglect the material or advocate linguistic constructionism 'at the expense of reality', Hekman's contextualisation of these scholars—who allegedly most clearly represent postmodernism and poststructuralism and thus the rejection of reality—turns them into the exception to the rule. But this rule is not discussed in either of these chapters. This is not surprising since no postmodern theorist, to my knowledge at least, has ever claimed that there is no reality. Perhaps the absence of such claims by postmodernists and poststructuralists constitutes the reason not many who contribute to the new materialist debate discuss particular theorists or texts to justify the criticisms that I mention in the introduction of this article. There are, however, a few texts in which particularly Butler's work is singled out and examined, and it is to those readings that I now turn.

IV

Lena Gunnarsson's 'The Naturalistic Turn in Feminist Theory: A Marxist-Realist Contribution' stands out from many texts that contribute to current debates on the matter of materiality for two reasons. Not only does Gunnarsson engage with Butler (albeit briefly) to ground her critique of what she terms 'nature-phobic tendencies within feminist theory', thereby refusing to blindly copy the oft-rehearsed criticism that postmodernists have neglected matter without providing evidence for such claims, but she is also critical of new materialism. Gunnarsson engages with 'the feminist debate about nature and its relation to the social from a Marxist-Realist point of view'.²⁸ In fact, she clarifies that 'the realism to which [she] subscribe[s] is the *critical realism* first developed by Roy Bhaskar' (emphasis in original), and which offers 'a robust meta-theoretical basis for challenging *poststructuralist tendencies* towards relativism, subjectivism, cultural reductionism, *anti-realism and anti-naturalism*'.²⁹ In an article that is concerned with 'new materialist' texts like this one, a discussion of a Marxist-Realist inspired text may seem odd. However, Gunnarsson's description of 'feminist nature-phobia', which she specifically links to the work of Butler, is similar to much rhetoric that underpins new materialist texts such as Hekman's aforementioned book. I turn, then, to Gunnarsson's discussion of these nature-phobic tendencies, which, according to her, are clearly visible in Butler's work.

Gunnarsson claims, 'although it seems rather undisputable that human societies are rooted in organic and non-organic natural realities, the challenge to such claims by feminist theorists like Judith Butler has had an enormous influence on feminist discourse'.³⁰ She goes on to

²⁶ Ibid. p. 95.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 95, 96.

²⁸ Lena Gunnarsson, 'The Naturalistic Turn in Feminist Theory: A Marxist-Realist Contribution', *Feminist Theory*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2013, p. 4, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1464700112468567>

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 4, 5, emphasis added.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 5.

clarify her position, now specifically drawing on the work of Bhaskar, by arguing that ‘what is at work in Butler’s writings and in discursive poststructuralism generally³¹ is ... “the epistemic fallacy”, whereby ontological questions are understood in epistemological terms’.³² Gunnarsson continues her critique, noting:

*Butler is right that we cannot know about sex other than through conceptual systems that are always culturally constructed. What I question is the way in which she derives from this truth the conclusion that sex does not exist beyond our conceptualisations of it. While Butler has sought to refute claims that she reduces biology to its enmeshment in discourse, her framework precludes an analysis of what effects biology might have on discourse and performative processes. Likewise, her appeal to ‘materiality’ (1993) is unconvincing to the extent that she insists on attributing to discourse the force that structures, constitutes and governs the material.*³³

On the one hand, writes Gunnarsson, we ‘cannot know about sex other than through conceptual systems’, yet, on the other hand, this apparently does not mean that ‘sex does not exist beyond our conceptualisations of it’. One way to respond to Gunnarsson’s questioning is to argue, as Thomas Laqueur does in his book *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, that the ways in which sex is known are socially, culturally and historically specific. He writes, ‘sex, like being human, is contextual. Attempts to isolate it from its discursive, socially determined milieu are as doomed to failure as the *philosopher’s* search for a truly wild child or’, as he goes on to note, ‘the modern anthropologist’s efforts to filter out the cultural so as to leave a residue of essential humanity’.³⁴ Laqueur’s passage importantly points out that sex is not a thing in and of itself. In other words, that what we refer to as sex (or materiality, for that matter) is not determinably separate from the background against which it takes shape. What seems to structure Gunnarsson’s questioning, in contrast, is the implicit assumption that the thing represented in the ‘conceptual systems that are always culturally constructed’ is separate from its representation.

Gunnarsson’s implicit suggestion that (something we refer to as) sex does exist beyond our conceptualisation is the kind of critique that lies at the heart of Samantha Frost’s discussion of Butler’s writing in her article ‘Re-Considering the Turn to Biology in Feminist Theory’. Similar to Gunnarsson’s questioning of Butler, Frost discusses the ‘what about hormones?’ question Butler’s critics have posed in response to her performative theory of gender, and which, pace Gunnarsson’s questioning, also seems

31 Interestingly, disputing Butler’s work is here regarded as disputing ‘discursive poststructuralism’ more generally, while references to this kind of poststructuralism are not given.

32 Gunnarsson, p. 5.

33 *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6, emphasis added.

34 Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: The Body from the Greeks to Freud*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, p. 16. Note that Jeffrey Weeks argues similarly, albeit in a different context, about sexuality. He writes: ‘I want to stress that sexuality is shaped by social forces. And far from being the most natural element in social life, the most resistant to cultural moulding, it is perhaps one of the most susceptible to organization’, and he goes on to argue, ‘indeed I would go so far as to say that sexuality only exists through its social forms and social organization’ (Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality*, Routledge, London, 1986, p. 24). He then continues, in a similar way to the reasoning that characterises the writings of Laqueur: ‘I do not wish to deny the importance of biology. The physiology and morphology of the body provides the preconditions for human sexuality. Biology conditions and limits what is possible. But it does not cause the patterns of sexual life’, and he then makes a crucial remark: ‘I prefer to see in biology a set of potentialities which are transformed and given meaning only in social relationships’ (Weeks, p. 25).

to imply that certain things simply cannot be discursively conceptualised into being.³⁵ ‘These critics’, Frost writes, ‘can be seen as reversing the terms of sceptical inquiry to suggest that hormones and chromosomes are aspects of the sexually dimorphic biological body that are beyond the range of discursive materialisation’, and she goes on to clarify this position: ‘in other words, some elements of the body’s sex are ontologically prior to or outside of the discursive regime that would render bodies intelligible according to the matrix of heterosexuality. Those elements ... cannot be doubted, deconstructed, or otherwise denaturalised.’³⁶ Frost immediately, however, notes that Butler, in her response to these criticisms, offers ‘an absolute reassurance to [her] interlocutor’, yet, ‘some anxiety prevails’.³⁷

Butler clarifies this anxiety in *Bodies That Matter*. She notes in the preface of this book, in response to critics of her earlier *Gender Trouble*, that ‘bodies live and die; eat and sleep; feel pain, pleasure; endure illness and violence; and these “facts”, one might skeptically proclaim, cannot be dismissed as mere construction’, and goes on to argue that ‘surely there must be some kind of necessity that accompanies their primary and irrefutable experiences ... but their irrefutability in no way implies what it might mean to affirm them and through what discursive means’.³⁸ Furthermore, Butler elucidates in the introduction:

*To ‘concede’ the undeniability of ‘sex’ or its ‘materialization’ is always to concede some version of ‘sex’, some formation of ‘materiality’. Is the discourse in and through which that concession occurs—and, yes, that concession invariably does occur—not itself formative of the very phenomenon that it concedes? To claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates, causes, or exhaustively composes that which it concedes; rather, it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body.*³⁹

There is, then, no anti-realism in Butler’s account. Butler does not deny the ‘body’; indeed, she writes, ‘the linguistic capacity to refer to sexed bodies is not denied’.⁴⁰ What Butler does do, however, and this is fundamental to my argument in this article, is alter the very meaning of ‘referentiality’. That is, she argues ‘the constative claim is always to some degree performative’, or, in other words, she directs us to the constitutive effects of language.⁴¹

Jessica Cadwallader aptly captures this crucial alteration of the meaning of referentiality in her review of three books about Butler’s work. She explains ‘Butler’s reference to “chromosomal” and “hormonal” differences can be understood not as a concessional constative [*sic*] claim about the body—and especially not a constative [*sic*] claim about those elements which are not able to be performatively “recuperated” but’, Cadwallader makes clear, ‘as a demonstration that this claim participates in that which it allegedly only

35 Note that this question is addressed by Butler in the preface of *Bodies that Matter*. See Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Routledge, New York, 1993, p. ix.

36 Samantha Frost, ‘Re-Considering the Turn to Biology in Feminist Theory’, *Feminist Theory*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2014, p. 314, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1464700114545323>

37 Butler, cited in Frost, ‘Re-Considering the Turn to Biology’, p. 314.

38 Butler, p. ix.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

seeks to name, forming the body, its chromosomes, its hormones'.⁴² With this changed concept of referentiality in mind, I turn once more to Gunnarsson.⁴³ She writes:

*It is only if we concede that there is a natural dimension to social existence, and seek to specify its conditioning role while demonstrating that such conditioning is not the same as determinism, that we have reached the core of the determinist argument and challenged the notion that if there is nature, nature overrides everything else.*⁴⁴

This passage not only shows Gunnarsson does not take into account the constitutive effects of language, but also emphasises the importance of the way in which Butler has changed the meaning of referentiality. By this, I mean that every attempt at specifying 'a natural dimension to social existence' will always-already, and with no exception, be a discursive practice. Our specifying practices will produce some/thing that is necessarily always other-than the 'natural dimension' we seek to specify.

Now, the sceptic, new materialist or otherwise, may object here and contend I harbour a language/reality dichotomy. I will return to this line of thought below, but here I would like to mention such an objection fails to take into account, as Margrit Shildrick aptly notes, that 'given the theoretical insights of deconstruction, it is no longer possible to separate out the abstract and the material: both are discursively produced and are equally unstable'; consequently, 'it is not a matter of denying that the medium of the body has reality, but of affirming that there is no essential corpus upon which meaning is inscribed'.⁴⁵ Given this, we might say Gunnarsson's suggestion of specifying 'a natural dimension to social existence' is a fruitless endeavour as we will never be able to recover this dimension other than by always-already also being constitutively involved in its specification. And we might also say, then, Gunnarsson's questioning of the Butlerian notion that 'sex does not exist beyond our conceptualizations of it' appears indeed to be not so questionable at all.

Frost reads Gunnarsson's frustration with Butler's assertion that 'sex does not exist beyond our conceptualizations of it' differently. Frost writes that 'perhaps what animates the "what about hormones?" question is not a desire to capture or hold on to some kind of pre- or extra-discursive realm', but instead, she continues to suggest, 'perhaps what troubles feminists in the face of the biological body is not necessarily or only its discursive naturalisation but also *an inability to talk about the social in interaction with the body outside of the framework of meaning*'.⁴⁶ The italicised part in this last quotation is, of course, a necessary consequence of adopting Butler's position, which Frost paraphrases as follows: 'the grammar we have at our disposal is such that we cannot talk about the putative reality of biology without naturalising it. If we concede the existence of

42 Jessica Cadwallader, 'How Judith Butler Matters', *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 24, no. 60, 2009, p. 293, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08164640902852506>

43 Allow me to make clear that I support Gunnarsson's critical interrogation of some tendencies of the material turn, such as 'the glorification of the dynamic and unruly' (Gunnarsson, p. 3). I also agree with her argument that both the radical constructivist (which is neither the same as poststructuralist nor descriptive of Butler's position) and biological determinist are characterised by 'reductionism, insofar as that which is really both biological and socially constructed is reduced to a matter of either biological or social determinations' (Gunnarsson, p. 6). I disagree, however, with her implicit reasoning that sex (or any other 'thing') is extra-discursive and/or can be thought outside a framework of meaning.

44 Gunnarsson, p. 6, emphasis added.

45 Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*, Sage, London, 2002, p. 120.

46 Frost, 'Re-Considering the Turn to Biology', p. 316, emphasis added.

hormones ... we thereby, through that concession, reconstitute a domain of extra-discursive reality.⁴⁷ Yet, despite this acknowledgment it seems that Frost steadfastly wants to be able to think a putative reality *and* holds Butler accountable for hiding this reality behind linguistic constructions.

Frost writes, 'even as Butler chafes against the seeming explanatory fullness of the discursive account of the biological body, *the terms of the exchange as she retells it position what is beyond meaning as beyond the purview or reach of the social*', and she continues, 'it is as if, in our conceptual playground, social effects can only be those constitutive of meaning'.⁴⁸ My problem with this formulation is whether Frost is right to assert that Butler positions that what is 'beyond meaning' as 'beyond the purview of the social'. This, to me at least, seems the kind of positing gesture that Butler expressly avoids.⁴⁹

This positing gesture is further illustrated by Frost's assertion that what is eclipsed in Butler's thinking, 'are the interactions between the social and the biological that are not, or not only, linguistic or discursive'.⁵⁰ Frost elucidates, 'the point of saying so is not to deny that biology is discursively naturalised nor to preserve some domain of the biological as undetermined by the normative imperatives of the discursive regimes we inhabit', but rather, 'to remember, to grant to ourselves, and to consider what it means to say that we, as biological organisms, are *alive*'.⁵¹ Despite the fact it may seem as if the sole point of mentioning that we are 'alive'—a concept that remains uninterrogated in Frost's article—is precisely to emphasise the existence of that which remains beyond culture and the social, the extra-discursive facts of life, Frost explicitly writes that this is not the case. Rather, the reason she emphasises that we are alive is 'if we can grant that we are alive, that we develop, grow, and die, then we also implicitly grant that living bodies grow within, and cannot grow without, habitats'.⁵²

Frost makes this point, then, for which she relies on the work of Fausto-Sterling, to highlight a certain permeability that is inherent to our bodily being-in-the-world. She elaborates:

Against the notion that the body is spatially indifferent and temporally static, [Fausto-Sterling] situates the body in (its) historical time, insisting that we conceive of the body as a collection of processes of growth, transformation, and dynamic re-stabilisation both within

47 Ibid., p. 314. Note that Shildrick makes a similar observation. She writes, 'organic bodies are as it were naturalized post hoc', Shildrick, p. 11.

48 Frost, 'Re-Considering the Turn to Biology', p. 316, emphasis added.

49 A similar kind of positing gesture occurs in Noela Davis's criticism of Butler's work. She writes, 'for Butler, the physical body is apparently no more than a base that we cannot know, that cannot be made known and that interpellative naming animates and contours with a social, and thus knowable, existence'. See Noela Davis, 'New Materialism and Feminism's Anti-Biologism: A Response to Sara Ahmed', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2009, p. 78. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1350506808098535> In contrast to Davis's reading, I would like to suggest that the physical body is *not* turned into an unknowable 'base' in Butler's work. It could not be because it is not an actuality as such. What Davis refers to as an unknowable 'base' is, rather, produced in and through the very articulation of Davis's claim, which is, moreover, infrastructurally connected to Davis's value-laden perceptive practices. The argument that there is something such as 'a base' completely ignores Butler's insistence that 'language and materiality are fully embedded in each other'. See Butler, cited in Margrit Shildrick with Janet Price, 'Openings on the Body: A Critical Introduction', in *Feminist Theory and the Body*, ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1999, p. 9.

50 Frost, 'Re-Considering the Turn to Biology', p. 316.

51 Ibid., emphasis added.

52 Ibid., p. 317.

*individual organisms and across generations. In arguing thus, she brings into consideration the various spatial and temporal scales of the permeable body's inescapable engagement with its social and material environment.*⁵³

Before I continue discussing Frost's argument, it is important to underscore here that she develops this part of her article in response to Butler's work in which, according to Frost (and as I quoted earlier), what gets eclipsed are the 'interactions between the social and the biological that are not, or not only, linguistic or discursive'.⁵⁴ What I would like to stress at this point, then, is that my own overtly positioned discussion of Butler (and, earlier, Haraway) does not preclude these interactions or, at the very least, a rethinking of nature/culture that emphasises such reciprocity.

Butler herself suggests that such mutual shaping of biology/culture is present in her work. She says in interview with Vicky Kirby:

*I think we can see in work such as Anne Fausto-Sterling's, efforts to come up with 'interactive' models that insist that (a) biology conditions cultural life and contributes to its forms, and (b) cultural life enters into the reproduction of our bodies at a biological level. My sense is that her formulation is resonant with my brief effort to establish a kind of chiasmic relation between the two. After all, she also eschews forms of determinism, either cultural or biological, and yet refuses the collapse of the categories into one another.*⁵⁵

Butler does not contest, then, the notion of a mutual shaping of nature/culture.⁵⁶ What is particularly problematic about Frost's claim, as I noted earlier, is that in her articulation of 'interactions between the social and the biological that are not, or not only, linguistic or discursive' she implicitly makes a positing gesture; that is, there is a sense in which her claim alludes to interactions which *are* extra-discursive and, problematically, self-evidently visible as such. Again, Butler may help us here.

In the aforementioned interview, Kirby asks Butler whether she thinks that her 'theorization of normative power [is] compatible with the direction of Macherey's musings', which here refer to his notion of "the biological model of the norm" [that] extend[s] Foucault's biopower to include a "natural history of norms", a "force of life" that might even accommodate Spinoza's substantive sense of agency'.⁵⁷ I discuss this particular exchange not to examine Butler's theorisation of normative power but, rather, to draw attention to the way she responds to the idea of 'the biological'. Butler answers:

*I am wondering whether there is, though, in what you describe a certain figure of the 'biological' that presumes that it is 'multiple, contrary, disseminated, undecidable'. I worry that this imputes a certain critical or utopian power to the biological, and that history and science of biology is itself set aside in favour of a rather idealist construal.*⁵⁸

Butler's reply is in keeping with her alteration of the meaning of referentiality because an 'idealist construal' of the biological is, of course, a highly particular account of such a concept.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 319.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 316.

⁵⁵ Butler, cited in Vicki Kirby, *Judith Butler: Live Theory*, Continuum, London, 2006, p. 145.

⁵⁶ And neither, of course, does Haraway whom I cited earlier.

⁵⁷ Kirby, *Judith Butler*, p. 149.

⁵⁸ Butler, cited in Kirby, *Judith Butler*, p. 149, emphasis added.

Consequently, the question that Frost's implicit positing gesture gives rise to is how any non-discursive interaction between the social and the biological can be thought, approached or even si(gh)ted.

To be fair though, in her article Frost does not, unlike in an earlier publication, (problematically) suggest that 'new materialists ... conceive of matter or the body as having a peculiar and distinctive kind of agency, one that is neither a direct nor an incidental outgrowth of human intentionality but rather *one with its own impetus and trajectory*'.⁵⁹ Yet, there is a sense in which her argument in this more recent piece also relies on the idea of an extra-discursive drive, which becomes observable in the 'forces, processes, capacities, and resiliencies with which bodies, organisms, and material objects act both independently of and in response to discursive provocations and constraints';⁶⁰ a claim that in its very articulation completely disregards the inextricability of matter and meaning—a notion so central to much work that associates with new materialism.

In Frost's more recent article that I have been discussing, she contends, in agreement with her emphasis on a mutual shaping of biology and culture:

*We are amply familiar with different theories of how language, norms, psychic formations, or group identities shape our interactions and influence our behaviour, but we are not nearly as familiar with the electro-chemical signals, the hormonal or steroidal floods, the nervous-system adjustments, and the reflex actions that constitute our bodily response to and recalibration in the encounter with our lived and imagined environments.*⁶¹

This contention, as I hinted at earlier, implicitly revolves around a positing gesture; that is, the references to changes, adjustments and actions that take place within the body are, crucially, referred to here as bodily responses. My aim in highlighting this is not to dispute that bodies respond to their environments. Rather, what I find problematic is the underlying idea that we can become familiar with these 'floods', 'adjustments' and 'actions' as though they are empirical certainties in and of themselves that are, to put it in Harawayan terms, waiting to be si(gh)ted. In other words, Frost posits the existence of things she calls hormonal and steroidal floods, nervous-system adjustments, and so on, instead of seeing them as performative effects. If Butler applied this same logic, this would mean positing selves before their performance, which, of course, she does not.

V

So far I have focused on the accuracy of claims about the status and role of matter, referentiality and representation in postmodern and poststructuralist thought. Further, one of the problems I have identified in new materialist work is that it often replaces a perceived idealism in postmodernism and poststructuralism with a highly problematic conception of matter as a thing in or of itself with its own identifiable agentic drives. I elaborate the problematic nature of this conception in due course. First, however, I want to consider what these gestures mean for our understanding of the genealogy of theory(ies) of the body, in particular, feminist theories of embodiment. There is no space in this article to do justice to

⁵⁹ Samantha Frost, 'The Implications of the New Materialism for Feminist Epistemology', in *Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science: Power in Knowledge*, ed. Heidi E. Grasswick, Springer Netherlands, Dordrecht, 2011, p. 70, emphasis added.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Frost, 'Re-Considering the Turn to Biology', p. 314.

the history of scholarship in this field, but it is important to make this return, however brief and selective, lest we forget the body of work that, as Ahmed puts it, ‘disappears in the very argument that we must return to the biological’.⁶² Ahmed further notes that ‘by constructing feminism as “prohibiting” an attention to the biological and other matters, this new work is often represented as a gift to feminism in its very refusal to be prohibited by feminism’s prohibitions’.⁶³ However, making a return to these reputed prohibitions in past feminist theory(ies) of the body reveals that surprisingly similar rhetorical gestures to those that (in)form the new materialist field have been used to prompt a rethinking of the substance of the corporeal.⁶⁴

One only has to think of the work of a few better-known feminist theorists, such as Lynda Birke, Vicki Kirby and Elizabeth Wilson, to see that these gestures feature prominently in cultural and feminist theory’s past. In fact, all three scholars start their monographs from the late 1990s with a rhetorical gesture almost identical to the one found in much contemporary new materialist scholarship.⁶⁵ It is not the case, then, as Alaimo and Hekman argue, that ‘*it is now apparent* that the move to the linguistic, particularly in its postmodern variant, has serious liabilities as well as advantages’.⁶⁶ Rather, the per/conception of postmodernism and poststructuralism as indifferent to the materiality of bodily life has, in fact, been part of feminism since the mid 1990s, and especially made feminist poststructuralism a target of critique. This point is borne out by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, editors of *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, who explicitly mention (and rebut) this kind of criticism in the introduction to their anthology.⁶⁷

In surprisingly similar terms to those who associate with new materialism, then, Shildrick and Price identify a particular kind of accusation directed at postmodern and

62 Ahmed, p. 26.

63 Ibid., p. 24.

64 Although what has also been termed ‘the affective turn’ does not fall within the remit or scope of this article, it is interesting to note here that a number of affect theorists have made similar rhetorical gestures as those who associate with new materialism. Consider, in this regard, Clare Hemmings’s observation that ‘theorists of affect argue that constructivist models leave out the residue or excess that is not socially produced, and that constitutes the very fabric of our being’. See Clare Hemmings, ‘Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn’, *Cultural Studies*, vol. 19, no. 5, 2005, pp. 548–67. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09502380500365473> For other critical interrogations of the turn to affect and its rhetorical gestures, see Constantina Papoulias and Felicity Callard, ‘Biology’s Gift: Interrogating the Turn to Affect’, *Body & Society*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2010, pp. 29–56, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1357034X09355231>, and Ruth Leys, ‘The Turn to Affect: A Critique’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2011, pp. 434–72, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/659353>

65 Vicki Kirby writes, for example, ‘I am critical of an empiricism that perceives data as the raw and unmediated nature of the world. However, I am just as critical of postmodern correctives that regard the apparent evidence of nature as the actual representation of culture.’ See Vicki Kirby, *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal*, Routledge, New York, 1997. Lynda Birke remarks that while ‘recent sociological and feminist theory has made enormously important claims about the processes of cultural inscription on the body, and about the cultural inscriptions of the body, the body that appears in this new theory seems to be disembodied’, and she continues to make clear, ‘within theory devoted to “the body”, there is remarkably little that enters within and considers “the body” in terms of its own inner processes’. See Lynda Birke, *Feminism and the Biological Body*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1999, p. 2. Elizabeth Wilson notes that in most feminist projects ‘on “the body”, the body in question is pursued in its socially, culturally, experientially, or psychically constituted forms, but rarely in its physiologically, biochemically, or microbiologically constituted form’. See Elizabeth Wilson, *Neural Geographies: Feminism and the Microstructures of Cognition*, New York, NY, Routledge, 1998, p. 15. Wilson makes similar observations in her introduction to a special issue of *Australian Feminist Studies* that aims to further think the relation between feminist theory and the body. Elizabeth Wilson, ‘Introduction: Somatic Compliance—Feminism, Biology and Science’, *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 29, 1999, pp. 7–18. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08164649993290>

66 Alaimo and Hekman, p. 2.

67 Shildrick and Price, pp 7–10. See also Price and Shildrick, pp. 217–219.

poststructuralist theorists. They write, ‘it is somewhat ironic that in large part the enormous proliferation of feminist theorisations of the body has been mobilised by the response to the insights of poststructuralism and postmodernism, which in their masculinist forms have been often accused of an indifference to materiality’.⁶⁸ The editors continue, however, by noting:

*There is no doubt that in the hands of some practitioners, the potentially endless textual play of many postconventional strategies has seemed to preclude any engagement with the day-to-day lived body, or has at best emptied it out ... leaving only an undifferentiated surface of inscription. But such an impasse ... is not inevitable ... to say that the body is a discursive construction is not to deny a substantial corpus, but to insist that our apprehension of it, our understanding of it, is necessarily mediated by the contexts in which we speak.*⁶⁹

Shildrick and Price then cite Butler’s (in)famous claim that ‘there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body’, to conclude, ‘it is then the forms of materialisation of the body, rather than the material itself, which is the concern of a feminism that must ask always what purpose and whose interests do particular constructions serve’.⁷⁰ It is impossible to do justice to the complexity and rigor of Vicki Kirby’s work in this article, but what is interesting to note here is her frustration with claims such as the ones made by Shildrick and Price.

For Kirby, the insistence that we can only apprehend and understand the body as mediated by the contexts in which we theorise, is ‘to think the order of the nature/culture problematic ... by repeating the very terms that presume it’.⁷¹ I do not disagree with this particular articulation of Kirby’s argument, and thus, before I return to my critical interrogation of ‘the founding gestures of the “new materialism”’, I wish to clarify what I think is at stake in Shildrick and Price’s observations.

To suggest, as the editors of *Feminist Theory and the Body* do, that ‘our apprehension of [the body], our understanding of [the body], is necessarily mediated by the contexts in which we speak’ is not to choose the side of culture or to reduce everything to what Kirby terms ‘a culturalist determination’.⁷² Rather, it is to acknowledge that the body at the heart of our theorising is fundamentally somatechnical.⁷³ For me, the neologism somatechnics refers to the idea that any attempt to apprehend, approach and understand the body (*soma*) takes place not only through a technologising gesture (*technics*), but after the mutual somatisation of technology and technologisation of soma—or, to put it in new materialist terms, the intra-action of matter/meaning—has already taken place. It is not the case, then, that our apprehension of and/or approach to the body is the moment a particular somatechnology articulates itself, but rather is the articulation of the impurity of both *soma* and *technics* within this moment. It is for this reason, then, that I am persuaded by Shildrick and Price’s suggestion that our focus should be on

⁶⁸ Shildrick and Price, p. 7.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7, emphasis in original.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷¹ Vicki Kirby, ‘Human Nature’, *Australian Feminist Studies* vol. 14, no. 29, 1999, p. 24. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08164649993308>

⁷² Kirby, ‘Human Nature’, p. 21.

⁷³ For a concise and compelling explanation of the term somatechnics, see Nikki Sullivan, ‘Somatechnics’, *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 1, nos 1–2, 2014, pp. 184–7. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2399974>

interrogating what purpose and whose interests specific kinds of materialisations serve, rather than attempting to engage with the material itself. It seems, however, that the scholars who I have been critically interrogating in this article replace the language/matter dichotomy they see in postmodern and poststructuralist thought with a kind of realism that points to ‘the material itself’.

Rebecca Coleman provides a clear example of this contradictory rhetoric in an article titled ‘Inventive Feminist Theory: Representation, Materiality and Intensive Time’. She contends ‘conceiving matter as that which is necessarily entangled with culture *and* acts in and of itself, feminist theorists have done much to complicate and break down the opposition between nature/biology and culture/language’.⁷⁴ Furthermore, Coleman remarks, ‘in seeing only culture as agentic, a unidirectional relationship is set up between nature and culture, where it is culture that acts on nature’, and then notes, ‘if it is the case that matter is active and *self-creative*, then the relations between bodies and images are not unidirectional. Moreover, bodies and images are not separate entities, but are entangled or assembled together.’⁷⁵ Despite Coleman’s assertion to see matter as always-already entangled-with or inseparable-from, or to put it in Harawayan terms, as ‘materio-semiotic’, there appears to be, at the same time, a theoretical longing for capturing and talking about matter—which as Coleman’s passages demonstrates is clearly conceived as imbued with its own extra-social drive, agency and liveliness—as somehow separate from the (sociocultural) background against which this matter is con/perceived. Contradictorily then, matter’s inseparability from this background is not denied and is even emphasised, but so is its *self-creative* part.

Yet, this ‘self’ is not free from cultural influence. Neither does this ‘self’ exist as if in a vacuum. Coleman acknowledges this when she writes, evidently influenced by Barad’s scientific feminism, ‘it is not so much that representations give us access to the pre-existing material world, but that representations and matter intra-act to produce phenomena’, and she continues to explain, ‘that phenomena are “intra-actions”, then, refers to their necessarily relational nature, where relations do not exist between pre-existing things but produce and are part of them’.⁷⁶ I do not disagree with this reading of Barad or the claims in this last passage, but what bothers me is that despite the awareness of this undeniable inextricability, Coleman (like Frost) keeps suggesting that matter *acts*, which presumes a kind of knowledge of matter and its effects as somehow clearly separately identifiable as such in the phenomenon that this intra-action can be said to produce.

Here, then, it seems appropriate to briefly, and somewhat simplistically, discuss the poststructuralist critique of self-presence in response to such problematic articulations about matter. It seems that the authors whose work I have been critically engaging consistently refer to a signified that can never be recuperated; that is, a trace of that which is evoked as ‘matter’. Derrida’s elucidation of this concept is helpful. He writes:

We must allow the trace of whatever goes beyond the truth of Being to appear/disappear in its fully rigorous way. It is a trace of something that can never present itself; it is itself a trace that can never be presented, that is, can never appear and manifest itself as such in its phenomenon. It is a trace that lies beyond what profoundly ties fundamental ontology

⁷⁴ Rebecca Coleman, ‘Inventive Feminist Theory: Representation, Materiality and Intensive Time’, *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2014, p. 28, emphasis added. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2014.901098>

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35, emphasis added.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

*to phenomenology. Like différance, the trace is never presented as such. In presenting itself it becomes effaced; in being sounded it dies away, like the writing of the a, inscribing its pyramid in différance.*⁷⁷

Following Derrida, we can say that the concept of matter carries with it, always-already, the mark of a trace of other concepts, other processes of relation and difference, other traces. And thus, crucially, the concept of the trace helps elucidate that where we expect to find whatever it is that is signified (in this case matter), we are time and again (re)directed to a trace of that signified (necessarily temporally differed and spatially deferred). What is more, ‘the trace is never presented as such’ or, putting the point differently, Derrida notes that ‘whoever believes that one tracks down some *thing*; one tracks down tracks’.⁷⁸ Consequently, despite the fact that we may expect matter, nature and/or substance to precede its trace, we can only ever find its trace.

The scope of this article does not allow me to go into a detailed discussion of Barad’s theoretical framework, but in light of Derrida’s critique of self-presence it is interesting to turn to Coleman’s description of a Baradian scientific apparatus. Coleman writes:

*Barad develops her problematization of representational thinking via a detailed account of the scientific apparatus through which reality is observed and measured in quantum physics. Drawing on the work of Niels Bohr, and arguing against an understanding of observational and measuring tools as neutral and objective, Barad argues that scientific apparatuses do not reflect reality, nor mediate between matter and scientists, but are in fact an integral part of the reality they seek to understand; the nature of reality depends on the technologies through which that reality is observed and measured.*⁷⁹

It seems to me that Derrida’s notion of the trace and Barad’s elaboration of Bohr point to a similar process at the heart of producing meaning, as well as a concomitant inevitable ontological instability of the meanings produced. Consequently, instead of foreclosing an investigation into the proximity of these positions—and such a foreclosure is performed by the repetition of the claim that poststructuralism and postmodernism neglect matter—the juxtaposition above demonstrates that their proximity should be further explored by those who associate with new materialism.

What I hope my discussion in this article illustrates is that ‘the founding gestures of the “new materialism”’ appear to be questionable at the very least. If these gestures are premised on the conceptual separation, or idealist construal, of matter as a thing that is somehow separate from the background against which it emerges, then this seemingly contradicts the argument that initially inspired new materialism’s re-thinking of the materiality of the body, matter and nature. More importantly, an engagement with postmodern/poststructuralist approaches to the matter of materiality, as I have demonstrated, shows a similarity to new materialism that the latter movement too quickly dismisses in the repetition of its founding gestures. If, as Rosalyn Diprose notes, there is an ‘impossibility of separating bodies from how they are known’,⁸⁰ then, I urge scholars who associate with new materialism to trace the ways this impossibility has been theorised in, as well as (in)formed, cultural theory’s past.

⁷⁷ Jacques Derrida, ‘Différance’ [1968], in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 2nd edition, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA, 2004, p. 294.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* p. 296.

⁷⁹ Coleman, p. 35.

⁸⁰ Rosalyn Diprose, ‘A “Genetics” That Makes Sense: Take Two’, in *Ethics of the Body: Postconventional Challenges*, ed. Margrit Shildrick and Roxanne Mykitiuk, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2005, p. 254.

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