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Introduction to Part III

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Introduction to Part III

ALISON SPERLING

The contributions of this part elucidate the complicated relationship between feminism and New Materialism. The contributors in what follows both highlight the affinities between feminism and New Materialism as well as challenge the multiple intellectual histories out of which ‘feminist New Materialism’ can be said to have emerged. They also question the ways in which political thought has operated (or has not done so) in various strands of New Materialism.

Cornelia Möser’s essay opens the third part of this volume and provides a helpful overview of the ways in which New Materialism has been received and developed, specifically in the French context. She situates New Materialism as originating in STS and in linguistic and structuralist philosophy, and suggests that Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman’s collection *Material Feminisms* from 2008 might serve as a starting point, as it is certainly a touchstone text, across the essays in the field. Möser describes New Materialism as an intellectual project that interrogates the relation between the linguistic and the material and which addresses things and thing-ness, the nonhuman, the boundaries between subject and object, and questions of agency beyond the human and beyond human perception: a kind of posthumanist ontology. According to Möser (citing Jana Tschurenev), an early critique of New Materialism lies in the fact that much of the scholarship did not pay attention to social structures and institutions. Importantly for Möser,

New Materialism is not substantially connected to socialist feminist traditions, French materialist feminism, or to Marxist feminism. This critique of the lack of certain feminist and political traditions in the various collections Möser analyses is echoed in other essays in the part.

Chiara Bottici's contribution reclaims intersectional feminism through anarchist thought; it re-imagines, via anarchic feminism, political embodiment in the world. Bottici argues that anarchist feminism has not received its due as a foremother of intersectional and inclusive politics, which are as important as ever in the contemporary moment, in part because anarchist thought is not often embraced in academia or in public debates (largely, according to Bottici, because it has been wrongly and universally associated with violent tactics). Anarchafeminism has long argued that the liberation of women must include all women, particularly those whose resistance does not accord to the same subjection of power present in electoral politics or in capitalist, or corporate power. If women do not want to be ruled by men, it does not follow that they want to be ruled by women: in other words, Anarchafeminism does not aim to seize or claim state power, but to dissolve that power altogether. The paper develops an idea of the transindividual (following Spinoza) as an anarchist feminist process of becoming as opposed to individuation-as-event or as becoming-singular. Bottici argues that all bodies are processes, a longstanding notion of Anarchafeminism that has been wrongfully ignored in genealogies of New Materialism.

The third chapter in this part by **Émilie Filion-Donato** has the lofty goal of intervening into one of the most complicated challenges of 'standpoint theory' or situated knowledges — that is, in Filion-Donato's words, 'if everything we do, down to how we perceive, has an impact on the things we measure or want to talk about, how can we ever be sure we are getting the "right" measurements? How can we act collectively without this shared account of the world?'.¹ Filion-Donato responds to this set of questions by mobilizing Evelyn Fox Keller's use of the 'psychodynamism of individuation', which allows for a dynamic autonomy or dynamic objectivity that is crucial for her project because it demands attention for *shared* emotions and experi-

1 Filion-Donato, in this volume, p. 242.

ences. Through this allocentric perception, the individual oscillates between self and other, or between individuation and a connectivity with the world. Filion-Donato's exploration of these issues is complexly wedged amongst key figures of the discipline: following Fox Keller, then Ernest Schachtel, and decidedly against Helen Longino's critique of Keller, Filion-Donato attempts to confront the challenge towards New Materialism which was raised in response to Karen Barad's diffractive method. What Filion-Donato termed 'killing the subject' in the conference that inspired this collective volume, and 'decentering of the subject' in her contribution to the volume, is not, for Keller or, I think, for Filion-Donato, the same as imagining, even if momentarily, an erasure of the frontiers between subject and object. In other words, Keller only dissolves the subject temporarily, and importantly (as well as somewhat counter-intuitively), she does so through an expansion of the subject to include the object; in short, she creates a relational ontology.

We stay with Karen Barad's work in **Christoph Holzhey's** contribution to the section. Holzhey poses crucial challenges to Barad while also introducing the nuances that may be required to think physics and ontology together at dramatically different scales. Holzhey approaches the question of ontology by denying the importance of physics for ontological questions at human scales, a kind of 'cut between politics and ontology'² that partly follows from foundational work in gender studies, which distinguished between biological sex and the social construction of gender. He details his suspicion of the allure of the performativity of matter, especially at the scale of particle physics because recent philosophies of physics have claimed matter as fundamentally creative and agential. Holzhey attempts to 'deactivate the performative normativity of ontology by re-doubling reduction', that is, if the atomic level is only demonstrable or 'pragmatic' at higher scales, 'then the same properties can emerge in the same pragmatic sense also from a radically different ontology of continuous matter'.³ Physics does not offer a foundational understanding of matter but rather the tools which we can use to think the performative — and thus the political — power

2 Holzhey, in this volume, p. 256.

3 Ibid, p. 265.

of an ontology of matter that is formulated as what Holzhey calls an 'indeterminacy of ontology'.

Together these four essays provide a thorough sense of some of the key contributions of feminist New Materialism, while also boldly challenging certain assumptions that have undergirded its development. These essays are important to our continued understanding of the relation between feminism and New Materialism as they provide a critical eye toward what has thus far been over-determined, presumed, or omitted from what became a quickly accepted and employed mode of feminist thought operating against the linguistic turn that preceded it. These essays convincingly demonstrate that debates about what New Materialisms are and what they can do are still very much unsettled, and still warrant sustained and critical attention.

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