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## The Case for Working with Feminist New Materialisms against the Dualisms that Divide Us

By Ștefania Chihaia<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This paper provides a theoretical overview of dualisms which lie at the foundation of Western thought in an attempt to highlight the fundamental contribution that feminist new materialisms bring to sociological theory and practice and beyond. To delineate the oppressive patterns of thought generated by anthropocentric dualistic thinking, I will draw on the influential works of ecofeminist Val Plumwood, science studies scholar and feminist Donna Haraway, and feminist theorist Karen Barad within the material turn. The exploration begins with an analysis of the Cartesian subject-object dichotomy rejected by post-humanists and new materialists, a dichotomy which spawns many others, and continues with a mapping of the crisis of reason that Western thought is confronting. The crisis of reason is held in place by human attachment to binary conceptual pairs which serve to naturalize systems of domination. The materializing effects of this crisis include the marginalization, oppression, and exploitation of bodies human and nonhuman, justified through the uneven valorization of mind/spirit/masculine/culture over matter/body/feminine/nature, shaping the hazard-ridden epoch that we now call the Anthropocene. In this context, I then provide a brief outline of the material turn's proposal for situated, embodied knowledges, which entails a consistent non-dualist philosophy, and its urgent relevance in the contemporary global context. Notions of responsibility (defined as the capacity for response), the nature of the epistemic subject and the generation of knowledges, embodiment, boundaries, and positioning, as well as the very mechanisms we use to conceptualize the world, are being reconfigured within the material turn. Across disciplines, scholars are proposing new frameworks that encourage non-typological, engaged, accountable positioning within the world on the part of the human subject. Finally, a parallel is drawn with the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose insights complement the epistemological work of feminist new materialisms and their call for situated, embodied knowledges, thus providing a fertile ground for exploration in the areas of exclusion between the disciplines of sociology and philosophy. The aim of this paper is to offer new avenues for critical interdisciplinary thinking meant to re-assess and reconfigure the underlying assumptions of Western systems of thought.

*Keywords:* Crisis of Reason, Nondualism, Ecofeminism, Material Turn, Situated Knowledges, Anthropocene, Posthumanism

### Introduction

Feminist theory and scholarship has played the leading role in the development of the new materialisms, as the male/female dichotomy informs and is entangled with all other oppositions which govern Western thought (Plumwood 2002; Alaimo & Hekman 2008; van der Tuin 2011). In the introduction to their *Feminist Philosophy Reader*, Alison Bailey and

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Chris Cuomo write that “serious attention to the pervasive human problem of women’s subordination can lead to deep questioning of just about anything” (2008, 1). Within feminism, the move away from theorizing power as centralized emerged with the recognition that social justice issues such as racism and sexism are not individual attitudes but structures systematically entrenched at the institutional level (Bar On 1993, 91), to such a point that gender could be regarded as a social institution itself (Martin 2004).

The systematic devaluation of women across cultures mirrors the systematic devaluation and exploitation of entities which are not perceived to be in power, or which do not maintain the will to rationalize, dominate, and exploit. These oppositions are underlying anthropocentric assumptions which have formed “the master model of human culture” (Plumwood 1993): hierarchies which emerge in the uneven valorization of mind/spirit/masculine/culture over matter/body/feminine/nature across dimensions of contemporary thought and practice. The material turn in social science, indebted in large part to feminist thinkers, provides a much needed inquiry into the conceptual bedrock from which our knowledge-making practices originate, and the dysfunctions found therein.

The present paper hopes to draw a story, through the voices of feminist and feminist materialist thinkers, of how the underlying assumptions at the foundation of Western systems of thought reveal themselves in the effects they have upon bodies. They reveal themselves as anthropocentric discourse is produced and established anew, often unknowingly, at the expense of those human and non-human bodies which end up being marginalized, appreciated as less significant, and excluded from Western reason's greater scheme of meaning. It is such unquestioned conceptual frameworks which often serve to further reproduce and legitimize the well-established dualisms that lend sense to countless forms of domination, exploitation, and abuse. In my exploration, I will draw mainly on the works of Donna Haraway, Val Plumwood, and Karen Barad as leading figures in the field of feminist/posthumanist/new materialist thought.

Elizabeth St. Pierre et al. (2016) state that the epistemological work done by the new materialisms is philosophical, and that “its *application* in conventional social science research grounded in the old materialisms, empiricisms, and ontologies is not possible” (St. Pierre et al. 2016, 6, original emphasis). For this reason, this paper provides an exploration of the conceptual dualisms which permeate Western thought, in an attempt to delineate the fundamental contribution that new materialist frameworks bring to sociological theory, research, and practice. I will start with an analysis of the Cartesian subject-object dichotomy rejected by post-humanists and new materialists, continuing with a mapping of the crisis of reason that Western thought is confronting and exemplifying its consequences with the mastery of nature as its materializing effect. I then provide a brief outline of the material turn’s proposal for situated, embodied knowledges, and its urgent relevance in the contemporary global context. Phenomenological insights arise throughout the sections of this paper, corresponding to the notion of the embodied human subject. By the end, I hope to shed light on how the existential philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his critique of rationalism corresponds in great measure to the aims proposed by the material turn, providing yet another bridge between sociology and philosophy.

### **Subject and Object**

With the elaboration of his *cogito ergo sum*, René Descartes set the epistemological and ontological foundation upon which Western knowledge stands today. Descartes defined an image of the human subject that is abstracted away from the body, capable of absolute objectivity and in service to pure reason—an image that acts at a pre-cognitive level and is the substrate for all emergent conceptual thought. In their paper on new materialisms, St. Pierre et al. (2016) describe it as “a pre-philosophical image of thought that conditions and pre-judges

everything” (p. 4). For a precise rendition of this metaphysical image, I will cite St. Pierre et al. at length:

Descartes, credited as the father of foundationalism, laid out a plane on which he could invent the concept, the *cogito*, a knowing subject, an epistemological subject, separate from, superior to, and master of everything else in the world. The *cogito*, this exceptional human, has innate agency. All other forms of life, nonhuman, unconscious life, are inferior. And matter (things, objects) is inanimate, inert, passive, waiting to be acted upon; it is the object of his subject, his *cogito*. Descartes’ foundational plane, his image of thought grounded on the master binary, Self/Other, spawned many others [...] (St. Pierre et al. 2016, 4, original emphases).

This image of the *cogito* divides the subject from its world, the knower from the known, while agential power is being stripped from the subject’s interlocutor. Grounded solely in his *cogito*, the Cartesian subject dwells on representations built by *a priori* operations of his own mind. In this, rationalism isolates the subject from the world, “splitting” the self between the outer self in contact with the world and the inner self, engaged in its own internal processes of thought (Spurling 2013, 13). The reflective self is extracted, as it were, from its incarnate roots as embodied consciousness. As Laurie Spurling writes, “reflection entails a change in the structure of consciousness,” where the reflecting consciousness “turns back from the world” to turn upon itself. This, as we have said, splits consciousness, so that the consciousness that does the reflecting is divided from “the consciousness-reflected-on” (Spurling 2013, 13). The subject and the object are apart, inaugurated as such in the divided consciousness of the self.

The god-trick of the “view from nowhere,” from the locus of the disembodied, detached, all-seeing gaze, is the concrete result of the Cartesian *cogito*, which abstracts the intellect away from the total embodied sum of its being and disengages it from the surrounding world by employing “emotional distancing mechanisms” (Plumwood 2002, 44). The objective knower must deny any personal implication with the matter under study, as well as renounce the specificities which would reveal the originating context of their knowledge (i.e., pertaining to identity or cultural context), for such specificities would betray their claim to a “transcending” perspective (Plumwood 2002, 43).

This notion of disembodied objectivity is the consequence of historically-cemented discursive practices with material consequences which are visible in the marks they leave on bodies human and nonhuman, visible in the patterns of exclusion they draw within the human species and beyond it. Psychiatrist R. D. Laing’s (1965) syntagm of “the divided self,” originally applied to the study of mental illness, seems to constitute the default or resting condition of Western thinking. This divided self is internalized in the individual to such an extent that the mind no longer recognizes its material embodiment, and consequently, the continuity between inner-outer, mind-matter and the sustaining role of the body itself. There is, therefore, a chasm in consciousness—not only a split within itself, but a chasm between it and the sensuous world in its manifold otherness.

### **The Crisis of Reason**

Feminist, post-humanist, and new materialist scholars, as well as scholars in other disciplines, agree that the infrastructure of Western epistemology and ontology consists in a system of multiple exclusions, entailing dominances and subjugations, exploitations and exhaustions (Plumwood 1993, 2002; Grosz 1993; Gerber 1997; Barad 2014; St. Pierre et al. 2016; Nimmo 2019), all of which have their origin in this divided state of consciousness. The underpinning assumptions and narratives of Western thought have been structured around

interlocking sets of dualisms demanded by the schism in the rational subject split from the body—i.e., reason/emotion, culture/nature, man/woman, spirit/matter, and active/passive. These sets of dualistic characteristics are identified with their objects, namely masculine-active-subject-reason-culture against feminine-passive-object-emotion-nature (Plumwood 1993, 33). This has been called the “master model” of human culture (Haraway 1991; Plumwood 1993), a model based on ideals of “human sovereignty, transcendence and self-knowing” (Nimmo 2015, 196), and constructed around narratives “deeply indebted,” Haraway writes, “to racism and colonialism” (1991, 1). To exemplify, the categories of male/female, mental/manual (labor), civilized/primitive, human/nature serve to naturalize gender, class, race and nature oppressions (Plumwood 1993, 43).

The described state of consciousness has been termed the “crisis of reason.” According to Elizabeth Grosz in *Feminist Epistemologies*, the crisis of reason is “a consequence of the historical privileging of the purely conceptual or mental over the corporeal” (Grosz 1993, 187). That is, it is derived from the lodging that Western knowledges have taken in abstract processes of thought, and their inability to recognize that their own processes of material production are grounded in the body—and its interactions within the world— even as they disavow it as devoid of significance. Grosz goes on to state that this crisis has been “described as a crisis of identity, of modernity, of capitalism, of morality, and even of science” (Grosz 1993, 189). She lists the fundamental assumptions of Western knowledge that have been called into question by inquirers into the crisis of reason, rendered below in brief:

1. The assumption that methods of study are methodologically appropriate for the object being studied. “The question, ‘How does this knowledge, this method, this technique, *constitute* its object?’ cannot be raised or answered” (Grosz 1993, 190, my emphasis), as traditional procedures of knowledge are assumed to be fully transparent, descriptive, and explanatory;
2. Knowledges are assumed to act within the boundaries of segregated disciplines, which are themselves the result of historically constituted relations of power; these disciplines are constructed so that they *divide* knowledges according to specific historically established categories corresponding to dualistic binaries, e.g., the human being’s interior self (psychology) and its exterior self (sociology), the universal (philosophy) and the particular (history); although cross-fertilization between disciplines is possible, “the spaces of exclusion” *between* them remain untheorized (Grosz 1993, 190);
3. The established criteria by which knowledges are judged to be valid or true, fairly recurrent across disciplines, are based on the belief that the human knower exists apart from the object known, as though the object were “a kind of prediscursive referent of knowledges” (Grosz 1993, 191);
4. Knowledges are presumed to be valid across time and space, and their genesis in terms of historical social, cultural, and political context, underlying beliefs, and power dynamics is deemed irrelevant: “[t]hese processes of production leave no trace in their product” (Grosz 1993, 191);
5. Genuine knowledge is considered “perspective-less,” detached from the situated positioning of the knowing subject; this detached point of view is available to anyone with “suitable training;” this training process helps secure the regularity and repeatability of emergent knowledges.

The last point listed by Grosz brings to mind Haraway's description of the anthropocentric system of production that has "threatened to reproduce, literally, all the world in the deadly image of the Same" (Haraway 1992, 297)—through the same perspective-less gaze, scalable and reproducible, detached and unaccountable for its positioning. But the perspective of the master subject, the all-powerful Man "whose Eye produces, appropriates, and orders all difference" (Haraway 2003, 193) has no claim to objectivity, as it has too often served to cover, legitimize, and naturalize its dominant positioning. This anthropocentric attitude Haraway calls "the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere" (1991, 189), the human self-positioning at the top of the pyramid of terra's material forms of being, unable to relate to others outside the safety conferred by an underlying, taken-for-granted hierarchical structure, unavailable to the vulnerability of acknowledging the limits of its vision. Illustrating the mutual exclusion of the two stances, the "embodied" versus the "disembodied" subject, Haraway writes about "the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body, *versus* the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity" (Haraway 1991, 195). Forms of knowledge that make the knower vanish not only lack transparency but lack accountability in the discourses they put forth.

In Plumwood's work we find a description of science as "monological, instrumental, [...] encouraged not to question its ends," these features making it "a good servant of power" (Plumwood 2002, 53). In her writing, as well as in Haraway's, we may recognize the motif of the veiled center of power, encouraged not only to not question its ends but to not question its own source. Rationalism appears not as a form of enlightened reason, balanced and perceptive, but rather as a "cult of reason" which projects its own *a priori* structures and machinations onto the external world, and which is built on the disavowal of the tangible dimension of embodiment, defining as 'externality' and 'otherness' the material conditions of its very existence (Plumwood 2002, 4).

From this disregard and disavowal of their own historicity and materiality have emerged patriarchal forms of knowledge which imprint the same dynamic (that produced them) upon the knowledges produced, the world they set out to describe, and the path they lay forward for emerging studies. Disembodied forms of knowledge distance the knower from the known and equate this detachment with the noble ideal of "objectivity," without applying the same precise operations of reason to an analysis of their own becoming. But Grosz describes the inescapable fallacy of a reason that is not transparent to self-analysis:

If reason is not self-inclusive, then there must be an irrational or nonrational kernel within rationality that subverts its claims to provide methods and systems of judgment for knowledges. I have already suggested that reason's blind spot can be located in its inability to know the knower. This has had particularly traumatic effects on the social sciences insofar as their object and subject are avowedly similar. [...] A discipline whose object is man is necessarily incomplete unless it can include its own production as a discipline within the knowledges it produces (Grosz 1993, 193).

The author proposes, then, avenues to correct the inertia-sustained course of knowledge-making in the social sciences. Given the established dichotomized way of Western reason, it is necessary to turn our attention to the subordinated or excluded member of the binary pair: "*body* as the *unacknowledged condition* of the dominant term, *reason*" (Grosz 1993, 195, original emphases). Feminist epistemological work has thus been paving the way for the new materialisms, facilitating "the turn to matter," bringing to the forefront of sociological thought notions of situatedness and embodiment, and an awareness of the interconnectedness of thought and matter. These elements are held as prerequisites for

accountable knowledge-production in the context of a contemporary world ridden with the oppression, exploitation, and violence against bodies human and nonhuman.

### A Phenomenological View

For a detailed analysis of what might constitute the experiential basis of the Western conception of reason, we may turn to philosopher Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (2000). In a feminist critique grounded in phenomenology, Sheets-Johnstone argues that oppositional pairing has an inherent potential for uneven polar valorization, which in turn has far-reaching oppressive consequences. She explores the possibility that binary thinking, or thinking structured around a “fundamental unevenly valorized binary opposition” (Sheets-Johnstone 2000, 183), is an ordering principle of the male mind, arising from male experiences. Through phenomenological lens, she provides a corporeal analysis of male experiences, the most telling of which is the relationship between the male and his phallus—between his conscious desires and his unconscious member, described as “something capricious, a corporeal eccentric that is unamenable to reason and that does what it wants according to its own nature” (p. 186).

While female bodies are culturally packaged and publicized as unpredictable, unreliable and at the mercy of nature, due to women’s experience of the menstruating cycle, of birth and breastfeeding, and of menopause, the male body is protected from such intense cultural exposure to its own infirmities and unpredictability. This propagates what the author calls a Phallic Myth Syndrome built around the invulnerability of the male form and upheld by “established, everyday cultural distractions and veilings” (Sheets-Johnstone 2000, 189-91). These distractions, illustrated most evidently in Hollywood productions and in the music industry, cloak the gender binary in the forms of male action and female embodiment. As the real, exposed, vital female body is put on display for its sensuousness and its raw sexuality, the real male body is never revealed as such, as that would show its potential for impotency: “[b]eing always there in full power, it of course vanquishes castration fears as well as unpredictability” (Sheets-Johnstone 2000, 192). It is worth citing Sheets-Johnstone at length for her psycho-phenomenological interpretation of the origin of the “master” mentality:

To have absolute control over ‘the flame of love’—to have the power of the phallus—is equivalent to perpetual erection, which is to say *never having to pee*, for having to pee stifles the flames of passion and compromises autonomy. Power over passion in consequence means leaving the natural everyday body behind. In turn, it means uneven polar valorizations. It means dominating nature. It means establishing a repertoire of ‘I cans’ that has no equal and no limits (Sheets-Johnstone 2000, 194).

It means, to continue, the denial of full embodiment, embodiment which acknowledges its bodily limits and the conditions for its existence. What occurs is an immortalization, a glorification of the aspect that is not in control: the reason/mind that is held under the sway of emotion/matter, the culture that is dependent on nature for its emergence and sustenance. Sheets-Johnstone's interpretation sheds light on the original locus of the master subject: the male mind, and reveals what is, perhaps, the fundamental oppositional pairing that informs all others: mind/reason versus matter (nature)/necessity.

It is telling, Plumwood writes, that to affirm women’s connectedness with nature is to expose oneself to ridicule and accusations of regressing to patriarchal repression, a tradition which equates the regenerative cycles of the earth and animal creatures with unholy, unworthy dumbness (Plumwood 1993, 20; see also Echols 1989, 288). Resisting resonance and, in a sense, solidarity with (nonhuman) nature, one further sequesters it beyond the barrier of reasonable recognition, that barrier which, throughout history, has insisted on the inherent

superiority of the oppressor over the oppressed, and which has assigned more worthiness to those who could wield more power. There are reasons why, Plumwood argues, the question of the “woman-nature connection” cannot be discarded, nor relegated to the margins of feminist discourse, as it signifies the dualistic system of oppression inherent in western thought and sheds light on the normative image of humanity challenged by new materialist discourse.

### **The Mastery of Nature**

In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) and her subsequent work, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (2002), philosopher and ecofeminist Val Plumwood provided a critical perspective meant to integrate the critiques of human domination and that of the domination of nature, rigorously challenging the dualisms at the core of Western culture. Regarding the crisis of reason, which she emphasizes in its full materializing ecological consequences, she writes:

These ratiogenic patterns of thought and organisation – monological, rationalist, hyper-capitalist, colonising and centric – seem at first to be ghosts, shadowy, insubstantial figures, mere phantoms of the real world of political action. But as we scrutinise them more closely we can learn to recognise their very real and material traces intertwined in our lives [...]. Their fingerprints are to be found in the multiple crises of natural limits that now confront us everywhere; their crimes include the ratiogenic degradation of the atmosphere, the oceans, the forests, human food systems, and agricultural land, the ratiogenic crises of pollution and of human health, and the holocaust of animal life. With the increasing power of their technological and economic weapons, their circles of ratiogenic devastation extend ever more widely, even to the global commons and the great natural cycles and processes governing the planet itself (Plumwood 2002, 14f).

The position of human exceptionalism entails a position of absolute exteriority between the human and the nonhuman, as the dualistic, all-powerful construction of culture has determined the resultant inferiority of an entire realm of life. Plumwood thus describes rationalism as “a doctrine about reason, its place at the apex of human life” (Plumwood 2002, 18)—a doctrine with dire consequences, in that the forms of organization it shapes do not leave enough room for oppressed human and nonhuman others to have a fair share of the earth’s resources, and consequently, to make a living that would be deemed free of oppression. The effect of dualism, by forming power through identity, is to “naturalise domination,” to make it an integral part of the identities of the dominant and the subordinated (Ruether 1975, 189).

The stability of the concept of culture and, with it, the identity of the master subject are concretized by perpetually setting them against dualistic accounts of otherness. As such, a red thread runs through our conceptual systems, like a “fault-line” with those sides, where virtually all materializations on the superior side stand for manifestations of reason, and those on the inferior side can be identified as forms of nature (Plumwood 1993, 43f). Such an ideology distorts both sides of the equation by denying any kind of dependency on the “other,” and by reductively defining the other according to a binary logical structure (p. 41). What results is a system of partial knowledge that leaves no room for other agential voices. Here, as Karen Barad (2007) might say:



'agential cuts' are set in stone and identities are cast in steel, enforcing a perpetual state of alienation from the felt aliveness of the *other*, precluding any sense of connection or recognition of codependency. Within this paradigm, dualized nature is perceived as a wild and invading force alien to true humanity (p. 38).

As Plumwood rightfully notes, Western assumptions of "true humanity" are what is at stake in critical feminist and new materialist strands of thought.

Only thorough inquiry into the basis of domination itself may dissolve this conceptual apparatus, this ideology which acts as an instrument and, concomitantly, justification for oppression. To carefully, critically analyze the category of nature is to revindicate it from its fixed locus in the dualizing dynamic, making possible a way of thinking differently.

### **The Situated, Embodied Nature of Knowledges**

Recalling Grosz's listing of the epistemological and methodological consequences of the crisis of reason, we see that the separation of existence into hierarchical realms, the setting of the subject against the object, "is the unquestioned ontological assumption about the nature of being we accept *before* we begin our social science research projects," according to St. Pierre et al. (2016, 4). The new materialisms, along with the new empiricisms, refuse the ego-centric image of thought that lies dormant at the foundations of Western knowledge. Necessarily, this field of thinking about matter and giving attention to materializing practices is philosophical in nature, as it proposes a reconfiguration of metaphysical terms, as well as a re-assessment of notions of ethics, accountability, and knowledge itself. If we accept that the construction of knowledge is a social activity, accountability must be required of those who participate.

Challenging notions of hegemonic objectivity, Donna Haraway offers an account of situated knowledge, very influential within feminist studies, that is the essence of ethical relating. Her work is in service to the feminist goal of an "epistemology and politics of engaged, accountable positioning" (Haraway 1991, 193), positioning which is power-sensitive and, in being so, truly open and fertile for conversation and for the cultivation of new ways of seeing meant to refine "the capacity for response" (Haraway in Kenney 2017, 257). Haraway writes:

Through their reaching into each other [...] beings constitute each other and themselves. Beings do not preexist their relations. 'Prehensions' have consequences. The world is a knot in motion. Biological and cultural determinism are both instances of *misplaced concreteness*—i.e., the mistake of, first, taking provisional and local category abstractions like 'nature' and 'culture' for the world and, second, mistaking potent consequences to be preexisting foundations. There are no preexisting foundations. There are no pre-constituted subjects and objects, and no single sources, unitary actors, or final ends. In Judith Butler's terms, there are only 'contingent foundations;' bodies that matter are the result (Haraway 2003, 6, my emphasis).

For Haraway, the practice of feminist theory is rooted in a "refusal of typological thinking, of binary dualisms, and both relativisms and universalisms of many flavors" (2003, 6). From such a perspective, there is no desire to inhabit "an uncontested position of knowledge" (Lettow 2016, 5), a point of critique which has often been addressed to new materialist frameworks (see also Sundberg 2014; Lemke 2017). Rather, there is a recognition that the embodied nature of cognition, feeling, and perception grounds us within the material and materializing world, as an entangled part of it.

According to feminist theorist Karen Barad, whose work *Meeting the Universe Halfway* is a contribution of central importance to the material turn, we are responsible, from the position we inhabit as human beings on the earth, to develop our “response-ability”: our ability to respond to the unfolding of the discursive-material world as embodied human beings, endowed with discernment. She defines response-ability as “an iterative (re)opening up to, an enabling of responsiveness” (Barad 2010, 266) towards the other, who is the receptor of the discursive and material practices that we choose to enact: either to infirm or to affirm, to subjugate or to respect.

A detour into the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty will serve to place Barad’s insights, as well as Haraway’s, into a broader and well-established philosophical context, crossing the disciplinary boundary between sociology and philosophy, as new materialisms do. Barad’s notion of response-ability brings to mind Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s concept of embodied resonance. According to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, ethics and affection, reason and emotion are not abstract processes within a subject segregated from the world, but embodied reactions that result from interactions with myriads of human and nonhuman others. As philosopher David Abram writes, Merleau-Ponty was

the first phenomenologist to identify the body, itself, as the conscious subject of experience. Transcendence, no longer a special property of the abstract intellect, becomes in his *Phenomenology* a capacity of the physiological body itself—its power of responding to other bodies, of touching, hearing, and seeing things, resonating with things (Abram 1996, 84).

From this emerges a view of a human subject that exists in resonance with/in the world he seeks to know. At the meeting point between meaning and matter, between self and other, each instant of perception is a potential re-enactment of “the birth of intelligence” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 37): an embodiment of a self-reflective attitude that contains within itself the capacity to disown harmful convictions and to respond ethically to the world. In this view, in Barad’s words, the human being moves towards an understanding of the world from within, where “knowing is a matter of part of the world making itself intelligible to another part of the world” (Barad 2014, 185). With feminist theory, following Grosz (2010, 49), the material turn can be understood as a “a movement of becoming-more and becoming-other”— a process of recognizing, and of re-memembering, our material belonging in a sensuous world which we have thoroughly interiorized, neglected, and exploited.

In *Phenomenology and the Social World*, Laurie Spurling (2013) presents Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology as “a way of integrating philosophy and social science” (p. ix). The aim of this approach, according to Spurling, is to offer a unified and coherent perspective of the human being living in the world. Such a perspective is non dualistic in nature, and it aims to offer a kind of “*diagnosis* (=seeing-through)” (Spurling 2013, ix) of our lives as lived through all of their (seemingly) opposing dimensions and attitudes. This seeing-through is meant to penetrate beyond these surface splits through to the underlying assumptions that originally isolate psyche from soma and the self from the world. As such, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology can be understood as a counterpoint to the “the malaise in contemporary knowledge, and its inability to come to terms with our experience of living in the world” (Spurling 2013, 4)—a world that does not necessarily fit or substantialize categories of thought. Further, his approach aligns well with the new materialisms’ aims, providing a fertile ground for exploration in the areas of “exclusion,” in Elizabeth Grosz’s words, between the disciplines of sociology and philosophy: at the nexus where the inner (self, the province of philosophy/psychology) meets the outer (self, the province of sociology). At the meeting between inner and outer, we come into conversation with and in the world, as parts of it. Such

conversation cannot be a mere projection of our abstract ideals, and it should not diminish the world without so that it may fit neatly inside fixed categories enounced by the human mind. As Haraway writes:

Perhaps the world resists being reduced to mere resource because it is—not mother/matter/mutter—but coyote, a figure of the always problematic, always potent tie between meaning and bodies. [...] Perhaps our hopes for accountability, for politics, for ecofeminism, turn on revisioning the world as coding trickster with whom we must learn to converse. Feminist embodiment, feminist hopes for partiality, objectivity, and situated knowledges, turn on conversations and codes at this potent node in fields of possible bodies and meanings (Haraway 1988, 596).

## Conclusion

Judith Butler advised that “theory posits foundations incessantly,” and we are tasked with “question[ing] the foundations it is compelled to lay down” (1992, 7). Jacques Derrida, too, warned that “casting doubt on responsibility, on decision, on one’s own being-ethical, seems to me to be—and is perhaps what should forever remain—the unrescindable essence of ethics: decision and responsibility” (2003, 128). The new materialisms not only question the metaphysical foundations of Western knowledge, but propose alternative modes of understanding, conceptualizing, and *envisioning* the more-than-human world, in full awareness of the co-constituted nature of discourse and matter.

It is important to mention that the prevailing ethos of new materialism is “more positive and constructive than critical or negative” (Coole & Frost 2010, 8). Its proposed task is to give expression to new images of the human being and of the more-than-human world which affirm its vitality, its meaningfulness: the continuity of thought-and-matter, the interrelation of subject and object, and the interdependency of entanglement of mind and body, reason, and emotion. This is post-Cartesian rather than anti-Cartesian thinking (Coole & Frost 2010, 8), articulated within “a language of hope and potentiality” (Bargetz 2019) geared towards the discovery of non-hegemonic political forces. “Monopolising mind may make us feel superior but it is not helping our accommodation to the earth,” writes Plumwood (2009, 122). New materialist epistemologies work towards “an active, deliberate and reflective positioning” (Plumwood 2009, 122) with nature against the destructive, dominant attitudes enforced by a dualizing culture. Perhaps the diagnosis they offer, both of our lives as lived and of the very foundations of our knowledge, will open across disciplines more pathways for study which are available for honest, critical inquiries into what is constituted as knowledge, the ways we come to know, and the social practices that result therefrom. Inevitably, such reconfigurations of knowledge, and of the meaning of the subject, “must acknowledge the permanent condition of our fragility, mortality, and finitude” (Haraway 1991, 4)—our inescapable situated nature.

Discourse matters, as feminist, new materialist, and critical theorists explain, and we are responsible, as researchers foremost, for the discourses we advance within the academic field. We are responsible for the avenues we pursue in conceptualizing the world—practice which, in turn, shapes our perceptual capacities, our ways of being-in-the-world, and our modes of relating to the other, in whatever form the other may be. As St. Pierre et al. (2016) write, how we conceptualize existence—as a way of being, as a mode of living and relating—has profound ethical consequences, and it is an endeavor we cannot afford to disengage from if we are to tackle issues of social justice and environmental devastation, and if we are to address problems, local and global, personal and collective, which consist of the play of power over the dispossessed.

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