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Becoming Otherwise: Embodied Thinking and the “Transformative Matter” of (New) Feminist Materialist Theorizing

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Abstract

Beyond the affirmation of theory as an abstract, disembodied mindful project defined in opposition to a too-corporeal passive (feminized) matter/body by poststructuralist feminist materialist philosophers (ie., Irigaray, Rich, Cavarero, Braidotti), theorizing has been reformulated as an embodied process, in which the corporeality of the thinking subject – among other factors – is called upon in order to rethink simultaneously what it means to theorize and what it means to exist as a corporeal subject. Similarly, riding the critical-creative wave of reclaiming the agential materiality of “embodied-embedded” (Braidotti, 2011) thinking processes, the question that remains crucial (in both senses of the word *to matter*) to new feminist materialist conversations is “how does theorizing *matter*?” Reading poststructuralist feminist movements affirmatively, this text aims to stress the relevance of going beyond the dominant Western philosophical habitus of thinking disembodiedly “from nowhere”, namely from the position of a neutral or “abstract masculinity” (Hartsock, 1987), arguing, with Van der Tuin and Dolphijn (2010; 2011), that theorizing is “always already” a material-discursive ongoing practice. Moreover, acknowledging the material processes of theorizing is not only relevant when it comes to “onto-epistemological” accountability (Barad, 2003), but also is a task that carries with it ethico-political implications inasmuch as, only by virtue of acknowledging how theorizing does *matter*, the inner transformative potential of new feminist materialism becomes possible. The phrase “becoming otherwise” is therefore introduced here to point to the generative force that a new feminist materialist framework assigns to concepts and to “onto-ethico-epistemological” (Barad, 2003) processes of embodied-embedded theory making(s).

Keywords

new feminist materialisms, onto-epistemology, corporeal feminism, abstract masculinity

Volverse otro: el pensamiento encarnado y la «materia o importancia transformadora» de la teorización del (nuevo) materialismo feminista

Resumen

Más allá de afirmar la teoría como proyecto abstracto, incorpóreo y consciente, que se define en oposición a una materia demasiado corpórea, pasiva (y feminizada), según filósofas materialistas postestructuralistas y feministas como Irigaray, Rich, Cavarero o Braidotti, la teorización se ha reformulado como un proceso en el que se invoca la corporeidad del sujeto pensante –entre otros factores– para replantearse, al mismo tiempo, qué significa teorizar y qué significa existir como sujeto corpóreo. De manera similar, y apuntándose a la tendencia crítica y creativa de reclamar la materialidad agencial de los procesos de pensamiento «encarnado e incardinado» (Braidotti, 2011), la pregunta que sigue resultando crucial para las conversaciones del nuevo materialismo feminista es «¿Cómo se materializa la teorización?» y «¿Cómo importa?» (considerando los dos sentidos de matter como «materia» e «importar»). Al interpretar los movimientos feministas postestructuralistas de manera afirmativa, este texto pretende enfatizar la relevancia de ir más allá de la costumbre filosófica que constituye el pensamiento incorpóreo «desde ninguna parte», es decir, planteado desde una «masculinidad abstracta» (Hartsock, 1987) o neutra, dado que, junto con Van der Tuin y Dolphijn (2010, 2011) se argumenta que la teorización «ya es siempre» una práctica material y discursiva continuada. Es más, reconocer los procesos materiales de la teorización no solo resulta relevante en lo referente a la responsabilidad «onto-epistemológica» (Barad, 2003), sino que además es una tarea con implicaciones éticas y políticas, en tanto que solo reconociendo cómo se materializa e importa la teorización se plantea el posible potencial transformador interno del nuevo materialismo feminista. Así, la expresión «volverse otro» se introduce en este texto para señalar la fuerza generativa que el marco del nuevo materialismo feminista asigna a conceptos y procesos onto-ético-epistemológicos (Barad, 2003) de elaboración de teoría encarnada e incardinada.

Palabras clave

nuevos materialismos feministas, onto-epistemología, feminismo corpóreo, masculinidad abstracta

Engaging with feminist materialisms

What is theory? What does it mean to theorize? These very questions, albeit at different times and with differing outcomes, have been pivotal for the conceptual *oeuvre* of feminist poststructuralist materialist theorists. Recalling the work of Adrienne Rich (1987), an influential feminist thinker and poet, I would like to argue that:

Theory, the seeing of patterns, showing the forest as well as the trees, theory can be a dew that rises from the earth and collects in the rain cloud and return to earth over and over. But if it doesn't smell of the earth, it isn't good for the earth. (Rich, 1987, pp. 213-14)

Just like another very well known feminist scholar suggests, theory always “comes from somewhere” (Haraway, 1988). Theory, then, will come back where it came from, in its own movements, it will “return to earth over and over” (Rich, 1987). And, in order to do

good – to be generative, to speak to the world, to make a difference, to be e/affective, as Rich calls for – theory should carry the sensory traces of its own genealogy.

What is theory? Mainstream Western philosophy, defined as the thinking activity of the mind, is rooted in the Platonic and then Cartesian dualisms that oppose pure theory to the passive state of matter/corporeality. The main efforts of feminist (materialist) thinkers, among them Luce Irigaray, Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway, has been that of unpacking the questions at stake within this dualistic opposition structurally inherent to Western philosophy and asking: What is theory? Who can be a subject of theory? Consequently, the gendered character of the body/mind dualism in relation to theory formation is exposed and the entitled thinking subject, defined as “abstract masculinity” (Hartsock, 1987), is deconstructed together with his universal claims, affirmed traditionally in opposition to the all-too-corporeal (feminized) “others” of philosophy: women, ethnic others, children, non-human others, matter itself.

Engaging with sexual difference feminisms (Irigaray, 1985; AAVV, 1990) and with their nomadic and Deleuzian re-writings (Braidotti, 2002, 2011; Colebrook, 2000a), we can read how sheer transcendence (and disembodied theory), as an essentially “human” (read: rational, universal and masculine) thinking activity, belongs to a historically situated idea of subjectivity defined by excluding from itself the dimensions of femininity and corporeality (and, some scholars would now add, animality and matter). Following the work of Genevieve Lloyd (1984), Claire Colebrook explains how, in Western philosophy, reason and masculinity are co-defined in a dualist opposition to the body and femininity:

[n]ot only western thought devalued the body and femininity; both the feminine and the body are *negated* in the constitution of thought *as thought*. Reason does not just occur through a subordination of the body. Reason *is* disembodied and is essentially and radically divided from materiality. (Colebrook, 2000b, p. 28; emphasis in the original)

Thus, the dualism on which western philosophy is built is precisely that which opposes (dualistically and in a gendered manner) thought to embodiment, and that which constructs the power of rational philosophical thinking on the negation of corporeality/femininity/matter. (White) masculinity emerges as an unmarked and disembodied category, partaking in the required attributes of the thinking subject. In dualistic opposition, we find femininity and its own baggage of bodylines and sexual difference-otherness (Lloyd, 1984). This is why Rosi Braidotti in *Patterns of Dissonance* – and referring to the work of Adrienne Rich and Luce Irigaray – explores the meaning of theorizing as a “female-embodied thinker” and stresses that “one of the main issues for women in contemporary philosophy is the need to speak about the *bodily roots* of the thinking process” (Braidotti, 1991, p. 8; emphasis mine).

According to Braidotti (1994; 2011), processes of theory formation are necessarily “embodied-embedded”. These very partial locations, endowed with the active materiality of the networks and connections that enable the making of theory, cannot be escaped. However, the partial, embodied-embedded coordinates from which theory emerges can, in fact, be silenced and overlooked; this is the case when theory is practiced by the distant gaze of a “modest witness” (Haraway, 1997) and when partiality, embodiment and embedded location are not acknowledged. In this case, objectivity is claimed and with this “god trick” the thinker can enjoy the epistemic privilege of his “view from nowhere” (Haraway, 1988).

Questioning abstract masculinity

Emerging within the framework of French post-structuralism is the body of sexual difference theories (largely represented by Luce

Irigaray) that powerfully criticize – both on a symbolic and on a social level – the centrality of disembodied, rationalist and universal masculinity in western culture (phallogocentrism). Sexual difference philosophies denounce the universal value attributed to the masculine gender through diagnosing the “perverse” logic (Braidotti, 2005) underpinning phallogocentrism: the *asymmetrical* same/other dualism that organizes all other dichotomous pairs in a hierarchical and gendered way: femininity/masculinity, passion/reason, body/mind, immanence/transcendence, being/thought, nature/culture, personal/political, etc. Willing to overcome dualistic oppositions and disembodied subject-positions, sexual difference theorists argue that corporeality is constitutive of what it is and means to *exist* and *think*; therefore, stressed is the importance of the embodied nature of subjectivity as the site of resistance for being (ontologically) and thought (epistemologically) against the sexually undifferentiated (universally masculine) logic of *the same*.

Thanks to feminist theories it became possible to deconstruct the phallogocentric system that gave the thinking subject the attributes of masculinity or “abstract virility” (Braidotti, 2005, p. 299). Therefore, in deconstructing phallogocentrism and situating it within its historical geo-political context, it is clear that, as a result of historical *power/knowledge* relations (Foucault, 1980), the located position of a white, male, heterosexual, rational, able-bodied and property-owning subject became the “anthropological paradigm of modernity” (Boccia, 2002) – namely the human (the norm) against which *embodied others* (Ahmed, 2000) were marked by a pejorative negative difference and did not make it to full humanity. Drawing on Nancy Hartsock’s feminist political theoretical formulation of the problem (1987) and, following the line of the abovementioned criticisms coming from sexual difference theories and feminist nomadism, in this article I employ the concept of *abstract masculinity* to refer to the subject position that stands at the centre of phallogocentric ontology (social relations) and epistemology (modes of thought). Reflecting back on the question of Western ontological and epistemological dualism, Hartsock writes:

Dualism, along with the dominance of one side of the dichotomy over the other, marks phallogocentric society and social theory. These dualisms appear in a variety of forms in philosophy, technology, political theory, and the organization of class society itself [...]. *Abstract masculinity*, then, can be seen to have structured western *social relations* and the *modes of thought* to which these relations give rise at least since the founding of the polis (Hartsock, 1987: 169-170; emphasis mine).

It is indeed with the notion of abstract masculinity that Hartsock pointed at the position of universal-disembodied masculinity as what structured Western-modern (phallogocentric) historical conditions on a social, cultural and epistemological level.

With *situated knowledges*, Donna Haraway takes part in the project of questioning abstract masculinity, adding her own contribution to

many other critical approaches coming from different perspectives (eg., feminist theories and epistemologies, critical theories, critical sociology, postmodern anthropology, etc.). The “enemy” indeed, Haraway writes, has been clearly described with Hartsock’s concept of abstract masculinity (Haraway, 1988, p. 578), similar to the very modest witness of scientific experiments that works as “the legitimate and authorized ventriloquist for the object world, adding nothing from his mere opinions, his biasing embodiment” (Haraway, 1997, p. 24). He is self-invisible and transparent and his words are “not polluted by the body” (Haraway, 1997, p. 32). The universalistic epistemic tendencies of the traditional subject of philosophy grounded their certainties and faith in a disembodied western reason that allows man to become “the invisible gendered subject” (Whitehead, 2004). The way out from *his* position regarding the “god trick”, Haraway argues, is only possible through a responsible commitment to self-positioning and to a knowledge-practice that is necessarily embodied, situated and partial:

We seek not the knowledge ruled by phallogocentrism (nostalgia for the presence of one true world) and disembodied vision. We seek these ruled by partial sight and limited voice –not partially for its own sake but rather, for the sake of connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible. Situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals. (Haraway, 1988, p. 590)

Haraway’s critique is meant to expose the power location of the very unmarked category whose viewpoint comes “from nowhere”, who can unfairly enjoy what *he* calls “objectivity”. However, as Haraway states “the only position from which objectivity could not be possibly be practiced and honoured is the standpoint of the master, the Man, the One God, whose Eye produces, appropriates, and orders all differences” (Haraway, 1988, p. 587).

Understanding thought as embodied-embedded, in her work Braidotti (1994; 2002; 2011) develops a thinking strategy aimed at making room for a different understanding of difference(s). Drawing on the nomadic vibe of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), Braidotti adds to it her own feminist twist: the concept of sexual difference and the practice of the politics of location (Rich, 1987). Differences are understood beyond dualism, that is, beyond the hierarchical one/other opposition. Difference, rather than as the devalued counterpart of the norm, is reaffirmed positively in its generative force of creativity and becoming: in new feminist materialist terms, we could more adequately say “differing” (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2011).

Towards new feminist materialism

Epistemologically, Braidotti’s feminist nomadism becomes the figuration for a philosophical cartographic method in which theory

is performed in its “always already” be(com)ing within embodied-embedded relations of power. Creativity, awareness, responsibility and willingness to make these relations visible are all tasks involved within this new materialist, feminist nomadic philosophical project. Approaching theory-making as coming (affectively, effectively) from the cartography of contemporary relations of power, this method wants to show “the bodily roots of the thinking process” by practicing the politics of location. Locating oneself in his/her own body is more than understanding what it means to have a certain body – as Adrienne Rich powerfully puts it: “to recognize the places it has taken me, the places it has not let me go” (Rich, 1987, p. 215-16) in order to “recognize our location, having to name the ground we’re coming from, the conditions we have taken for granted (Rich, 1987, p. 219). On an onto-epistemological level, as Karen Barad (2003) would say, the creative outcomes go towards the affirmation of multiple, situated and differing locations for accountable, embodied-embedded theory making(s). In fact, this approach is crucial within a new feminist materialist take on theory formation, in which “dualism is pushed to its own extreme” and traditional dualisms are transversally re-*thought through* (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2010; 2011). Thus, theorizing from situated perspectives not only subverts the dualisms on which Western philosophy and abstract masculinity builds (eg., thought/corporeality, transcendence/immanence), but also engenders modes of *engaging with* and *thinking through* difference(s) “beyond dualism”: allowing differences to *differ* in a plural and horizontal way.

The philosophical impetus of overcoming dualisms does not leave untouched the great divide between ways of being and ways of knowing. As a matter of fact, ontology and epistemology are approached in their mutual co-constitution. In a new feminist materialist framework, Barad’s “onto-epistemology” (Barad, 2003) is therefore used to indicate a *non-representationalist* approach to discursive practices and processes of knowledge building. In this sense, reality is conceptualized in a monist and “intra-active” (Barad, 2003) way in which the knowledges of the world, rather than being thought to “represent” or “illustrate” reality objectively, are produced by and contribute to engendering material-semiotic processes of change. Ontology is conceptualized as a rhizomatic network of becoming(s) or material-discursive intra-actions. What we are witnessing is a reality with no copies and no originals, in which everything becomes intransitively, at various speeds and intensities, interconnected with other processes of transformation(s). Therefore, within this radical immanent ontology of becoming, there is no room for structural dualisms or representationalist instances.

Re-thinking the productivity of theorizing by overcoming representationalism and dualistic oppositions (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2010), new feminist materialism asks, instead, *how questions* and takes onto-epistemology as its methodology. In this way, moving beyond the gesture of separating thought (epistemology) from being (ontology), the *transversality* of new materialism engages

with (etico)-onto-epistemological questions, where what exists in the world is always already in a relation of *intra-activity* with what we know and say about it, and vice-versa, because, as Barad states, “we are part of [the world] we seek to understand” (Barad, 2003, p. 828). Drawing upon Barad’s article titled “Posthumanist Performativity” (2003), the notion of *ethico-onto-epistemology* allows us to unpack the dynamics according to which “phenomena come to *matter*” (Barad, 2003, p. 817) – co-constitutively, on a material, discursive and ethical level. It is by following this very line that new feminist materialism seeks to understand the ways in which theorizing does *matter*, in both senses of the word.

How does theorizing *matter*?

New materialism provides the conceptual tools for opening up theory formation and understanding thought as always already embodied and located within spatio-temporal coordinates. That is why – faithful to Haraway’s concept of *situated knowledges* as “the politics and epistemologies of location, positioning and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition to be heard to make rational knowledge claims” (Haraway, 1988, p. 591) – there is, in a new materialist framework, no room for disembodied god tricks: what is taken as accountable knowledge is situated in partial perspectives. Therefore, in a methodological choice that is part of a new materialist framework, we can apply the insights offered by third wave feminist epistemology in order to “capture the new order consisting of non-dialectical approaches in the field of feminist knowledge theory” (van der Tuin, 2009, p. 27). This task involves being aware of the power/knowledge nexus, making visible the situatedness and the embodied-location(s) of every knowledge claim and, thus, being committed toward onto-epistemological accountability – both in content and in the process of knowledge production.

On a methodological level, a new materialist perspective allows, as I mentioned above, *how* questions to be asked, i.e., questions that do not presuppose their “object of inquiry” to be grasped “out there” (i.e., the *what*) or to be explained in a teleological fashion (i.e., the *why*), but rather which allow the possibility of asking questions that focus on *processes* (i.e., the *how* of *becoming*) of *material-semiotic* intra-actions (Haraway, 1988; Barad, 2003), within both the “object of knowledge” and in the making of “knowledge itself” (apparatuses of production). Drawing on Barad’s concept of (ethico)-onto-epistemology, in a post-humanist performative framework, the cartographical method provided by new materialism consists, therefore, of mapping out how *boundaries* are drawn and how contemporary power relations operate. Indeed, a new feminist materialist approach focuses on the agencially and intra-activity of these relations, without aiming to be an epistemology of representation. Therefore, as an (ethico)-onto-epistemological strategy, new feminist materialism is about

addressing the *how* of the *matter*ing of phenomena: the differing intra-active forces of the present in their interconnected becomings.

Moreover, focusing on the unfolding of the event in its intra-actions, new feminist materialism argues that “we know nothing of the (social) body until we know what it *can do*” (van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2010, p. 17; emphasis mine). Indeed, as Barad writes in relation to the potential of change implicit within *intra-actions*:

Intra-actions have the potential to do more than participate in the constitution of the geometries of power, they *open up possibilities for change* in its topology, and as such interventions in the manifold possibilities made available reconfigure both that will be possible. (Barad, 2001, p. 104; emphasis mine)

This is, therefore, an *onto-epistemological* exercise because it does not separate the material from the discursive in a representationalist manner (but understand both as co-constitutive). It is also an *ethico-political* exercise because – understanding intra-actions as offering possibilities for re-configurations – its aim is to map out relations and open up room for motion and change within re-configurations. As Hinton and Van der Tuin wrote recently in their preface to the special issue *Feminist Matters: The Politics of New Materialism*, the political potential of new feminist materialism entails, in fact, “the careful search after the condition of possibility of *possibility*” (Hinton and Van der Tuin, 2014, p. 6; emphasis in the original). The transformative *matter* of new feminist materialism lies, therefore, in this ethico-onto-epistemological exercise, seeking affirmatively the potential of *becoming otherwise* of matter, of life and of theory (and everything together)

Conclusion

In this text I have shown in which way some materialist feminist philosophies (i.e., sexual difference theories, corporeal feminisms, feminist nomadism), inspired by Luce Irigaray’s critique of Western phallogocentric metaphysics, creatively elaborate a different way of thinking that tries to move beyond dualisms –on the level of both content and methodology. I suggest that the move beyond dualisms should include a self-reflective instance towards our understanding of philosophical thought *as such* and towards the very thinking strategy we adopt to make theory. Arguing in favour of the onto-epistemological accountability of embodied-embedded thought, I wanted to stress the located character theorizing. As for the (new) materialist feminist philosophies referred to above, going beyond dualisms consists in a critical and affirmative move that also entails the reformulation of thought (and being) as such and leads to overcoming the ontology/epistemology and being/thought dualisms. In other words, the question shifts from “what is theory?” to “how does theorizing *matter*?” Accordingly, a shared point by the (new) materialist feminist

philosophies mentioned here is that corporeality is constitutive of what it means to think and exist; it is important to make explicit the embodied-embedded work of the thinking process so to show that theory does come from somewhere and that, in its co-constitutiveness with a reality in continuous becoming (onto-epistemology), it can make a difference as a creative political project. In particular, in order to become a transformative matter, the theorizing of new feminist materialism is performed beyond representationalist aims; namely, beyond the epistemological temptation of mirroring the real (the *what*) in the objective view of the god trick that guarantees the truth of a representation. New feminist materialism places the emphasis on the creativity of a *concept* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994) and focuses on the generative aspects of theory. Concepts are approached as “apparatuses of knowledge production” (Barad, 2003): they help us address, in a *transformative* and *intra-active* way, the reality we are part of and we try to understand. It is by engaging transversally with the ethical-ontological-epistemological entanglements that room can be created for engendering material-discursive processes of change.

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