

New Concepts for Materialism: Introduction¹

IRIS VAN DER TUIN AND A. J. NOCEK

We write the introduction to this special issue of *Philosophy Today*, “New Concepts for Materialism,” fully aware that readers may be experiencing glossary and lexicon fatigue. As Monika Rogowska-Stangret notes at the outset of her book-essay contribution to this issue, “[a]lmanacs, encyclopedias, glossaries, lexicons, word books, vocabularies, companions, (theoretical) toolboxes pop up like mushrooms in the forests of the humanities in recent years”; however, she then offers a careful reading of the emergence of this genre of humanities writing, as well as a convincing account of how it might function as powerful method for engaging “troubling time/s.”² While we are deeply sympathetic to this account, and acknowledge that this issue bears a striking resemblance to other keyword collections, we also want to underscore several features of the issue that differentiate it from other contributions to the genre, which may even provide the weary reader with renewed faith in the importance of glossaries for speculative philosophy in the twenty-first century.

Another disclaimer: Despite the resemblance this issue may have to other new materialism companions and glossaries, it is not primarily a conceptual toolkit for the field of new materialism (even if “new” and “materialism” appear in the title and we play with their close association throughout this introduction). Although the essays assembled here engage the field of new materialism at every point, and grapple with its many histories, enabling and restricting bibliographies, current (trans-)disciplinary formations, and emergent futures, taken together, the essays are not content to merely survey, deepen, expand, or revise an already settled field of study. Thus, and unlike many other glossaries, the “materialism” that is at stake is a dynamic one, and has yet to be fully formed. It is for this reason that the issue brings together new concepts for a materialism that is always *in the making*.

One could say that the philosophical and pedagogical impetus of the issue is situated at the intersection of Susanne K. Langer’s “generative ideas” and Paulo

Freire's "generative themes." Langer has famously argued that, "[t]he end of a philosophical epoch comes with the exhaustion of its motive concepts. . . . Yet the human mind is always active. When philosophy lies fallow, other fields bring abundance of fruit."³ The fact that new materialism deems, in Karen Barad's terms, "a belief in representationalism (the independently determinate existence of words and things), the metaphysics of individualism (that the world is composed of individual entities with individually determinate boundaries and properties), and the intrinsic separability of knower and known (that measurements reveal the preexisting values of the properties of independently existing objects as separate from the measuring agencies)" bankrupt and finds itself infused with other fields as diverse as quantum physics and the life sciences,⁴ the (media) arts and the scholarship thereof, and feminism, anti-racism, and decolonial thought confirms Langer's observation that, in spite of academicity having become doctrinal, "beneath our rival 'isms,' our methodologies, conferences and symposia, of course there is something brewing, too."⁵ Freire draws attention to the (social) need to invest in the "*untested feasibility*" of themes that are not restricted by inauthenticity, power-ladenness or exclusive academicity.⁶ While Langer was talking about the philosophical study of symbolization in the 1940s, a study she deemed "the keynote of all humanistic problems,"⁷ the essays in this twenty-first-century journal special issue are all invested in post-humanistic themes, or they demonstrate how Langer's philosophy of symbolization ("mystical, practical, or mathematical, it makes no difference")⁸ was already a post-humanism. Notwithstanding that Freire's work relies heavily on a logic of dialectics, we argue that the conceptual essays gathered together in this issue all perform, are situated in, and investigate military-industrial complexes in their academic, mediatized, and environmental incarnations.⁹

For these reasons, the concepts assembled here owe no small debt to the methods and practices that have come to define new materialism, but they are also, and equally, indebted to those methods and practices stemming from various strains of historical materialism; as well as from ancient, anthropological, mystical, indigenous materialisms; and from the various genealogies of materialism running through evolutionary and developmental biology, quantum physics, mathematical computing, art practice, architecture, and continental philosophy. Such a restless and unruly ensemble of propositions may appear to lack an organizing principle, and even warrant the critique of those who assume that a unified front is needed in order to confront an era marked by enviro-climatic, geopolitical, and socio-economic upheaval. Ultimately, however, our wager is that it is more dangerous to assume the presence of such a unified framework.¹⁰ We therefore believe that the absence of a unified theory of matter should not be read as a deficit or lack that demands to be filled. Instead, we offer an affirmative refusal to subsume matter under a transcendental scheme that always already knows the response that it will

receive to the questions that it poses. Again, with Langer this is how we diagnose the situation we are in:

A word that everyone snaps up, or a question that has everybody excited, probably carries a generative idea—the germ of a complete reorientation in metaphysics, or at least the ‘Open Sesame’ of some new positive science. The sudden vogue of such a key-idea is due to the fact that all sensitive and active minds turn at once to exploiting it; we try it in every connection, for every purpose, experiment with possible stretches of its strict meaning, with generalizations and derivatives. When we become familiar with the new idea our expectations do not outrun its actual uses quite so far, and then its unbalanced popularity is over. We settle down to the problems that it has really generated, and these become the characteristic issues of our time.¹¹

In this spirit, by placing “new” in front of concepts rather than materialism, we attempt to give expression to a non-doctrinal materialism.

Deborah Goldgaber takes up a version of this refusal to subsume matter under a transcendental scheme by “sett[ing] down to the problems that it [the generative idea] has really generated” in her contribution to the issue, “Morphogenesis.” Citing Catherine Malabou, she pushes back on the tendency of new materialism to function like a “master theory” and assume that all morphogenetic processes are “intrinsic” or “internal” to matter and that exteriority is a “transcendental instance” *tout court*. It is just this tendency of many new materialists to exclude or disavow the reality of exteriority and negativity that Stacey Moran addresses in her essay, “Decoherence.” But this time she takes up the challenge in the context of debates in the history and philosophy of quantum physics. She demonstrates how the *dis*-entanglement of entities (decoherence) is just as essential to the operations of theoretical and experimental physics as entanglement, and then gestures to how new materialism’s failure to address this aspect of the quantum experiment is a symptom of the field’s allergy to exteriority; and this could prove problematic for its political project more generally.

But, if we include essays that seem to distance themselves from aspects of the new materialist project, then this is not because we are looking to draw lines in the sand and establish critical distance from the concepts, methods, and practices deployed in its name. Rather, taken together the concepts assembled here on the one hand celebrate what new materialism has been able to accomplish, and on the other hand, acknowledge the limitations of the conceptual apparatuses it deploys.

In reference to the former, a number of the essays affirm the important historical and conceptual advancements that new materialism makes over earlier and other contemporary materialisms. Dimitris Vardoulakis, for instance, shows how new materialist philosophies are largely able to overcome the teleological burden of older materialisms (historical and dialectical); however, he insists that the political bent of historical materialism is worth retaining in a blended (histori-

cal and new) materialism that he calls “Neo-epicurianism.” Likewise, Goldgaber and Hedwig Fraunhofer (both following Rosi Braidotti) underscore the valuable critique that new materialism performs of what the former calls “continental materialisms” that exclude the biological and physical body from their theorizations of embodied subjectivity.

This critique of older materialisms is by now familiar to those who follow developments in the theoretical humanities in the last couple of decades.¹² Indeed, object-oriented ontology, speculative realism, eco-feminism, science and technology studies, eco-criticism, neo-vitalism, process metaphysics, and a range of other post-human materialisms have all rallied around the critique of post-Kantian continental philosophy and its inability to theorize the material world outside of the straightjacket of human phenomena: language, culture, power, human subjectivity, etc. And although it may be impossible to disentangle these materialisms absolutely and identify the ones that are truly “new materialist,” there do appear to be certain genealogical and conceptual features that distinguish new materialisms from other twenty-first-century materialisms: where new materialists tend to share a commitment to a Deleuzoguattarian, affirmationist monism (Spinozism) in which matter is conceived of as vibrant, in process, and *intra*-acting,¹³ other contemporary materialists, by contrast, are inclined to promote any combination of the following: inert and indifferent matter, subject-object duality, (techno-)rationality, mathematical idealism, the withdrawn reality of matter/objects, and negativity.¹⁴ But what matters to the contributors to this issue in particular is the positive project of new materialism and how its affirmationist program has produced new working methods and conceptual architectures that traverse humanities, social sciences, hard sciences, the arts, and beyond. It is for this reason that the issue features a number of concepts that owe their fabrication to the practices of new materialism.

However, one of the many difficulties that one faces when writing on new materialism in the wake of countless monographs, edited collections, articles, and even university centers and institutes bearing its name (or some version of it), is that there doesn't seem to be anything especially “new” about this materialism any longer. We say this not only because new materialism has been in the making for nearly two decades now, and for this reason the designation of “new” is quickly becoming what historically distinguishes this materialism from other materialisms—ancient, historical, transcendental, and so on—rather than announcing the emergence of conceptual practices that are truly unanticipated and avant-garde within “Theory.” This is less of a criticism in itself than it is an observation that also paves the way for our more serious concern: namely, that new materialism is becoming an all-terrain framework that is always already sufficient for theorizing any and every configuration of matter. This is likely the kind of criticism of new materialism that François Laruelle would share with us, and we think it is worth

considering whether and to what extent new materialist theorizations have come to be in the business of proving the sufficiency of their theories of matter rather than expressing the irreducibility of matter to any one conceptual frame. We do not take this criticism lightly, and it is with an eye to it that the contributions working in a new-materialist mode do not resort to rehashing well-rehearsed conceptual frameworks. Rather, they are all designing their concepts at the edges of intelligibility: Abstraction, System, Modality, Sculptural Plasticity, Community, Transversal Posthumanities—these are some of the concepts that activate thought instead of recapitulating what has already been decided.

Thus, in refusing to authorize a dominant framework for materialism we think it is especially important to include work that does not directly engage in the same conceptual genealogies as new materialism, although it may indirectly overlap with or undermine these genealogies at times. A. J. Nocek's conception of "Transcendental Biology," for example, undercuts the transcendental assumptions of complex systems theory by developing the notion of transcendental biology, which is rooted in the alterity of biological matter and indebted to the theoretical biology of Conrad Hal Waddington and the speculative philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. Other contributions to this issue, such as Jason Tuckwell's "Technē," also explicitly engage with computational matter. However, Tuckwell repositions Aristotle's conception of *technē* at the very center of questions of agency and the mathematical function in computational logic. Likewise, Angela Mitropoulos draws on the ancient conception of *oikonomia* to investigate and critique modern materialisms, Marx's political economy in particular. Other materialist investigations of political economy populate the issue, including Alex Taek-Gwang Lee's "Materialist Politics" and Vardoulakis's "Neo-epicurianism," and do not strictly fall in line with new materialist orthodoxy.

The value of these and other contributions does not lie in their ability to undercut or oppose the new-materialist canon, however. Such a reactive stance is neither the point nor is it especially productive. Rather, at least part of their importance stems from their capacity to multiply the expressive potentials of matter, and in so doing, unleash conceptual genealogies of the material world that do not always neatly adhere to the dominant practices of Western metaphysics, as Li Chi-she clearly shows in "Opacity" and Dean Anthony Brink in "Quantum Dialectics."

Taken together, the essays in this special issue are part of a wider intellectual project that aims to pluralize our conceptions of matter without authorizing any one expression to speak on behalf of the others. If this falls in line with Langer's philosophical project, which is very much a product of Whitehead's call not to overestimate the value of our abstractions ("the fallacy of misplaced concreteness"—see Bleeker in this issue), then so be it. The real challenge is to value their input without overvaluing it, and so we thereby resist the temptation to frame the project in exclusively Whiteheadian, Deleuzian, or Spinozist terms. The call to

pluralize our conceptions of matter is then also and inherently a political project that calls upon us to combat the modern colonial tendency to presume that one framework can be marshaled to account for all the others. Such a colonization of thought and practice, which is well and truly the defining feature of Western philosophy, is what our search for new concepts for materialism seeks to challenge.

By putting forward this panoply of new concepts for materialism we are also challenging (both implicitly and explicitly) the hegemony of certain materialist frameworks—whether scientific, computational, Marxist, Western, Modern, or even New Materialist. In other words, by pluralizing our conceptions of matter¹⁵ we are also attempting to decolonize our conceptions of matter.¹⁶ It may be at this point that speculative philosophy and decolonial anthropology meet head on, as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and handful of other anthropologists have recently claimed.¹⁷ What we would like to propose here in any case is that this issue is a first attempt to decolonize materialist thinking largely from within (what we fear) is the colonialist enterprise of (new) materialism in philosophy today.

Iris van der Tuin—Utrecht University

A. J. Nocek—Arizona State University

NOTES

1. This journal special issue is a co-production of two international research networks: the Society for the Study of Bio-Political Futures (<http://www.biopoliticalfutures.net/>) and the 2014–2018 COST Action IS1307 New Materialism: Networking European Scholarship on “How Matter Comes to Matter” (<http://www.newmaterialism.eu>). A combined seminar composed of the membership of these two networks took place at the 2017 meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association hosted by Utrecht University in July 2017 called “Networking Around Materialist Concepts.” The SSBF was introduced by Gregg Lambert (Syracuse University) and Cary Wolfe (Rice University) and the COST Action by Felicity Colman (University of the Arts London) and Iris van der Tuin (Utrecht University). Invited speakers were Vera Bühlmann (TU Wien), Stacey Moran (Arizona State University), Jeffrey T. Nealon (Penn State University), Adam Nocek (Arizona State University) and Helen Palmer (Kingston University London). The current issue is an expanded version of the discussion that took place in Utrecht, with many of its participants now represented as authors. Here we wish to thank Gregg Lambert for his early collaborations on the issue, Peg Birmingham for the trust granted to us, and Melisse Vroegindewej, Vilde Aavitsland, and Ian Moore for their formatting eye for detail. We thank the authors for their patience and their conceptual creativity.
2. Barad, “Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness.”
3. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 9–10.
4. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 107. See also Moran, “Quantum Decoherence,” in this issue.

5. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 18.
6. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 102.
7. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 25.
8. Ibid.
9. For “meaningful thematics,” see Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 102. The complexes refer to, and are offshoots of, Giroux, *The University in Chains*.
10. As Isabelle Stengers explains in reference to her choice of the term, “cosmopolitics,” “cosmos must therefore be distinguished here from any particular cosmos, or world, as a particular tradition may conceive of it. Nor does it refer to a project designed to encompass them all. . . . In the term cosmopolitical, cosmos refers to the unknown constituted by these multiple, divergent worlds, and to the articulations of which they could eventually be capable, as opposed to the temptation of a peace intended to be final, ecumenical: a transcendent peace with the power to ask anything that diverges to recognize itself as a purely individual expression of what constitutes the point of convergence of all.” Stengers, “The Cosmopolitical Proposal,” 995.
11. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 23.
12. For instance, see Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman, *The Speculative Turn*; Dolphijn and Van der Tuin, *New Materialism*.
13. For example, see Braidotti, *The Posthuman*; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.
14. Steven Shaviro offers insight into the differences between new-materialist realisms and the other speculative realisms in *The Universe of Things*. See also Meillassoux, *After Finitude*; Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*; Negerastani, *Intelligence and Spirit*; and Mackay and Avanesian, *#Accelerate#: An Accelerationist Reader*.
15. See Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse*.
16. See Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*.
17. See Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*; Charbonnier, Salmon, and Skafish, *Comparative Metaphysics*.

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