

***Material Feminisms***

**Edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Heckman**

**Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008; 343 pages.**

The ambitious project of *Material Feminisms* is to inaugurate a “material turn” in feminist theory. Reacting to the “linguistic turn” effected by poststructuralist feminist thought, this voluminous collection brings together a number of feminist luminaries to think through the possibilities for a “new settlement”: a new approach to theorising the interactions and “intra-actions” between nature and culture, materiality and signification, power and bodies, and the human and the more-than-human.

The editors diagnose a pervasive “retreat from materiality” in feminist theory. They attribute it, first, to the influence of poststructuralist thought, and second, to the more long-standing suspicion among feminist theorists toward “nature” (and naturalising arguments about gender, race, rights, and bodies). The contributors deftly engage these two clusters of arguments.

Their engagement with the first cluster seems animated by what Claire Colebrook calls the “scandal of Butler’s linguisticism” about the body—though arguments against Wendy Brown’s work on political identity and Joan W. Scott’s critique of evidentiary appeals to experience also figure prominently. (69) The editors note that “although there’s been a tremendous outpouring of scholarship about the body” in the last two decades, this work “has been confined to the analysis of discourses *about* the body.” (3) In light of this they ask, where is the material, lived, biological, or natural body in this research? Too much has been granted to language, and too little to matter. In widely varying ways, the authors contest the construction of what Karen Barad calls “materiality as either a given or a mere effect of human agency.” (145)

The second cause of the “retreat from materiality” is the deep suspicion of “nature” that pervades a great deal of feminist critique. As Vicki Kirby observes, it is “now axiomatic to eschew naturalizing arguments” in feminist theory. (217) These arguments are regarded as inherently conservative, essentialist, prescriptive, and normalising. But if “nature” has been deployed to oppressive ends, this is all the more reason to engage “with matter itself...[to] render biological determinism ‘nonsense.’” (241) Instead, the question of nature is “entirely displaced” in

feminist poststructuralist thought.” (220) The contributors in this collection argue that feminists need to reclaim materiality as a site of legitimate critical inquiry. That is, feminists need to ask after the agency of bodies and of more-than-human nature, if they are to engage the ethical and political questions facing us at a “toxic” historical moment.

Stacy Alaimo argues that all bodies are toxic at this point in history. (260) Produced by “science, industrialized culture, agribusiness, capitalist consumerism” (260), toxic bodies are an urgent problem for feminist theory: “the traffic in toxins reveals the interconnections” between political projects for environmental and social justice. (262) Lacking a feminist theory of materiality, or reducing the body’s inscription by power to a discursive process renders one unable to theorise this “traffic in toxins,” or its effects on human and more-than-human bodies. As Donna Haraway argues, at a time when techno-scientific projects like mapping—and therefore owning—the human genome constitute new frontiers for the logic of property, self-possession, and ownership, “the stakes are very unequal for life and death on the planet.” (173)

The essays are divided into three sections—though this division between “Material Theory,” “Material World,” and “Material Bodies” is undermined by the substantive arguments for recognising the “intra-action” between the more-than-human world and human bodies (especially in essays by Barad, Tuana, Siebers, Bost and Wilson). Given the highly theoretical tone of the whole collection, the appeal to “theory” as the unifying logic of the first section seems like an alibi for the vagueness of the essays in that section—Karen Barad’s remarkable essay on “Posthumanist Performativity,” reprinted here, is the exception. The subsequent essays, collected in sections two and three, evince that the project of “materializing feminism” is better served by careful, site-specific work than by generalisations about “matter,” evolution, and ontology. In this respect, the contributions of feminist theorists with training in the biological sciences prove edifying.

One of the strengths of the collection is its intensive engagement with previous feminist theory, demonstrating that feminist theory has matured beyond its early preoccupation with the masculine figures of the history of Western philosophy into a distinct, self-critical intellectual project. While some essays do engage Darwin, Bergson, Deleuze, and Latour, most respond to feminist thinkers like Anzaldúa, Barad, Brown, Butler, Gatens, Grosz, Haraway, Moraga, Scott, Sedgwick, and Wendell.

*Material Feminisms* consists of provocative essays that set out to push the limits of feminist thinking on materiality. Yet, I remain ambivalent about the extent to which the collection as a whole synthesises the best insights of poststructuralist critique and “materialism,” which remains nebulous and undefined as a methodology. Indeed, with a few exceptions, the collection reads like a poststructuralist treatment of “materiality,” rather than a materialist treatment of questions of feminist concern. This is a problem exacerbated by the lack of a sustained treatment of *materialist* feminism (in the Marxian sense), which is dismissed in the introduction as too narrow in its emphasis on “labor and class” to “encompass the materiality of human corporeality [and]...of nonhuman nature.” (6 n. 3) But questions of labour and class are not thematised in the collection, except for a few notable exceptions (for instance, Michael Hames-García’s “How Real Is Race.”) Indeed, “class” (which materialists argue is the most *material* of power relations) remains at the margins of this collection, perhaps because its connections to the body seem less “natural.” Readers who pick up the book seeking a contemporary, reinvigorated feminist materialism will be disappointed.

The iconoclastic tone of the collection may elide some important disagreements among its contributors. Indeed, the collection is inadequately reflexive about the lack of agreement or unity around important questions—Is “culture” inside “nature”? Or vice versa? Is ontology necessary for feminist politics? Is it possible to separate epistemological from ontological from ethical concerns? What is the status of biology in relation to lived bodies? In this sense, the collection exposes a problematic more than it decides it. Readers should not expect a coherent, consistent argument running throughout the fourteen chapters. On the other hand, the diversity makes it a highly teachable text (though a difficult one—it is hardly an accessible read for beginners!) for a graduate seminar in feminist theory, environmental philosophy, or contemporary continental thought.

*Anna Carastathis, Centre de recherche en éthique de l'Université de Montréal*