

Vicki Kirby (editor)

What If Culture Was Nature All Along?

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What If Culture Was Nature All Along? is a collection of eleven essays curated by Vicki Kirby that proves that there is still something new to be said about feminist new materialisms and that there is value in facing this topic anew. Despite the massive number of monographs and anthologies that aim to capture and conceptualize the cartographies and genealogies, contexts and key concepts, methodologies, challenges, and blind spots of feminist new materialisms, they are far from being canonized and elude "classifixation" (van der Tuin 2014). Kirby's anthology not only adds to those ongoing debates, but also puts feminist new materialisms into action, and by doing so she offers an insight into what feminist new materialisms can still do (and how). Kirby opens the volume with an introduction, where she asks: "where to begin?" (viii). From my perspective, the starting point for all the essays in this collection is an engaged and generous approach, full of curiosity and unable to be satisfied with shaky theoretical constructions. Thus, although essays gathered in *What If Culture Was Nature All Along?* engage in different topics and develop unique perspectives, the common attitude of affirmative critique and genuine concern is how they all started, even before they actually started. Precisely thanks to the spirit of engagement that percolates through the book as a whole, one may state that this collection of essays was not only born out of engagement, but also calls for one. This is a generous invitation to think with the authors, with feminist new materialisms, over and over again.

Often I have been challenged by audiences new to feminist new materialisms (but at the same time fascinated or intrigued by them) with the question of how to use or apply this trend. *What If Culture Was Nature All Along?* is an answer to this for at least two reasons. First, in this book--in compliance with the authors' intentions--"matters of methodology take centre stage" (ix), and the question "how" is in the spotlight. How to think when "the separation of subject from object, or even one position from another, becomes uncertain" (ix)? How to think when everything is "intrinsically social matters" (x)? What results from challenging a well-established belief that

"what makes human species-being special, indeed, exceptional, is our self-definition as *un-natural*" (3) with a lesson that comes out of Kirby's research, that "those properties and capacities that we understand as properly cultural have always been in the nature of nature to have, to do and to be" (x-xi)? How to proceed when the basis for human identity--the ability to cognize--is the characteristic of life itself? "What *if*--to recall Jacqueline Dalziell's question--Nature thinks" (173)? How to shift away from dualism without finding ourselves in its clutches again?

Second, the question of *using* or *applying* methodologies is problematized here--because "method matters" (26), as Ashley Barnwell convinces readers in her essay reflecting on how academics can maneuver between "old" and "new" methodologies--if the method itself "is not without agency" (34). How to turn to the new methodology or approach designed to "repair past errors" (26) without repeating the denounced practice of exclusion? How to position oneself if we recognize the "co-dependent nature of these generational rifts" (27)?

From the perspective of methodology, Barnwell's essay is a brilliant postscript to an important book by Iris van der Tuin entitled *Generational Feminism: New Materialist Introduction to a Generative Approach*, where--by coining the notion of classifixation--she insists that: "classification is not a neutral mediator but is thoroughly entangled with the work that it does" (van der Tuin 2014, 19). Following Barnwell, we may add more generally that "a method is not just an instrumental and extraneous means to fix a problem" (Kirby, 38). It is an intrinsic part of the problem. Van der Tuin, in her take on how to understand feminist new materialist methodologies, is inspired by how Donna Haraway comprehends boundaries and ways in which they act: "bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic generative nodes. Their *boundaries* materialize in social interaction. Boundaries are drawn by mapping practices; 'objects' do not preexist as such. Objects are boundary projects. But boundaries shift from within; boundaries are very tricky. What boundaries provisionally contain remains generative, productive of meanings and bodies" (Haraway 1991, 200-01). Indeed, this is the productivity of boundaries that fuels the liveliness and sharpness of *What If Culture Was Nature All Along?* We see the importance of gaps, cracks, and thresholds, and we are invited to immerse ourselves in the abundance of questions they provoke.

In the opening essay by Kirby, we are faced with the first gap: between "symbolic systems" and "what they purportedly re-present" (1). Barnwell meditates upon the impossibility of methodological clear-cuts between "old" and "new." Florence Chiew problematizes the distinctions between observable objects and observing subjects, senses and reality, senses and the brain, even between particular parts of the brain, I and environment, possibility and deficit. By doing so, Chiew offers a biological (meaning always already social) understanding of sensory substitution and brain cross-modal plasticity. Michelle Jamieson challenges the notion of causality in cases of allergy and the gap between reason and effect. Allergy that emerges from Jamieson's text is a phenomenon attesting to the impossibility of detaching the individual from the antigen or genes from the environment--they are entangled even before they happen to be exposed to each other. Rebecca Oxley is perplexed by paternal postnatal depression and how it is differently understood in fathers, and with this she opens up the complex cultures of hormones ("*already* bodies, and *already* social" [99]). Noela Davis explores the boundary between phenotype and genotype, between an individuum and its environment, between the past, present, and future that manifest bodily. She illustrates this with epigenetics: a scientific discipline that renders the world as "a materialization of differentiations within one system" (114) rather than a

collage of autonomous, discrete, independent factors. Xin Liu investigates the nuances of difference (particularly racial difference) as a gap and mobilizes the complex nature of visual encounter and its perceptual, conceptual, and corporeal histories. Jacqueline Dalziell tests several boundaries: between individuum and collective, sociology and (micro)biology, human and nonhuman, program and language, intelligence and intelligence-like, matter and thinking, revealing the epistemological and political stakes of feminist new materialisms. Astrida Neimanis meditates upon the breaks in the concept of representation, thinking about how nature (including humans) writes and reads itself without the blind spots of representationalism. John Willcock ponders the separation of space and time in the discourse of environmentalism and urgencies associated therewith. Last but not least, Peta Hinton invites us to dwell on the boundary between death and life, *potestas* and *potentia*, affirmation and negation, being present and absent, indifference and difference. She thus offers us the frame to look closely at feminist new materialist political and ethical stances, positions, and views.

With this wide range of boundary-revisiting projects, readers are faced with all the layers of "boundary-making practices" (125): ontological, epistemological, ethical, political, and methodological. This results in a deep problematization of how feminist new materialisms are sometimes conceptualized: matter instead of language, biology rather than linguistics, ontology and not epistemology, object and not subject, postanthropocentrism in place of anthropocentrism, and so on. Even the "turn to matter"--the possibility of making the movement of turning to something--is questioned here: if we turn to something, what is it that we leave behind and how is it possible to leave it behind, if, rather than with separated entities, we are talking here of "tangled intimacies" (ix)?

Importantly, the entanglement is understood here as a departure from the additive logics of "and-and" that is important in the notion of posthuman theory as understood by Rosi Braidotti. She states: "Feminist posthuman politics is an experiment with intensities beyond binaries that functions by 'and-and', not by 'either-or'" (Braidotti 2017, 37). From the perspective of the authors invited to chew over the question *What If Culture Was Nature All Along?*, the duality of choice--either "and-and" or "either-or"--is in compliance with the ethics of exclusion and the paradoxes of leaving dualisms behind, only to find them again in front of us. The logic enacted here is neither "and-and," nor "either-or," but that of simultaneity or slash, which evokes Baradian theoretical decisions present in concepts such as "cutting together-apart (one move)" (for example, Barad 2014), "dis/continuities" (for example, Barad 2010), "no/thingness" (for example, Barad 2012), and also brought to the understanding of feminist new materialist logic by Peta Hinton and Xin Liu in their elaboration on the "im/possibility of abandonment" (Hinton and Liu 2015) in feminist new materialisms.

What may appear as a purely linguistic word-choice reveals the simultaneity of it being a world-choice *at the same time* as it disturbs our ethico-political orientation, pointing to the impossibility of "'innocent' positions" (Haraway 1991, 191), the ambivalent situation that "'we' are in *this* together" (Braidotti 2017, 40): always already complicit, entangled, in. Importantly, this ethico-political reorientation might materialize in the form of disorientation: how then should we proceed? Several authors in the volume take up this question from environmental and political perspectives (like Willcock), offering a novel approach to the ethics and politics of life itself (in/different politics and in/human ethics, in Hinton's essay), or asking what kinds of ethical stances are possible in the world of flat ontology (like Neimanis). Neimanis supports her

argument that "a flat ontology does not presuppose a flat ethics" (185) with an elaboration on how it is essential to recognize "How are we, as natural agents among myriad others, taking up nature's pen?" (194). This question adds an important voice to the discussion on (human) responsibility in times of the Anthropocene.

What If Culture Was Nature All Along? has primarily methodological, but also ethico-political aims. It moreover takes the floor with reference to the question of the genealogies of feminist new materialisms as it provides a vivid illustration of the concept of "jumping generations" (van der Tuin 2009; 2014) by deriving inspiration and food for thought not only from feminist new materialist scholars like Vicki Kirby, Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, or Elizabeth Wilson, but also from less obvious (from the point of view of feminist new materialisms) theoretical choices like--to name a few--Judith Butler, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, or Jacques Derrida. This is once again a proof that genealogies of feminist new materialisms are far from being a closed project, and that with feminist new materialist methodologies, we aim at "[r]einvigorating the feminist futures of the feminist past through cartography [that] does not repeat linear logic" (van der Tuin 2014, 29).

It is also important to stress that five out of the eleven essays directly or indirectly answer to the hope expressed by Elizabeth Wilson in her article "Gut Feminism": "if only it [feminist theory] could be in a more open and generative relation to biological data, if only it could allow a less antagonistic, a more amphoteric relation between itself and the life sciences. In alliance with the biological sciences, feminism could build conceptual schemata about the body that are astute both politically and biologically. . . . I have provisionally called this method gut feminism--a feminism that is able to think innovatively and organically at the same time" (Wilson 2004, 85-86). With essays by Chiew, Jamieson, Oxley, Davis, and Dalziell, who are directly engaged in analyzing biological data, we see "gut feminism" enacted as biological and political thought simultaneously; we may appreciate it as a promising approach that, by viewing organicity as always already social and political, opens up new horizons for feminisms.

This recognition directs our attention to the question of the academic disciplinary situatedness of the authors, especially considering that--as I have tried to capture above--the book presents arguments and data from the humanities but also and *at the same time* from sources one might assign to the natural sciences or even mathematics (in Kirby's essay). Given the fact that feminist new materialisms, at least from Haraway's *Manifesto for Cyborgs*, struggle to bridge the gulf between Charles Percy Snow's "two cultures," Kirby's anthology provides a novel approach. It demonstrates the fact that thinking with feminist new materialisms, thinking according to Baradian concepts, where indeed "[v]alues and facts are cooked together as part of one brew" (Barad, Juelskjær, and Schwennesen 2012, 16), has no academic field assigned. Thinking cuts across the grid of academic disciplines, providing, yet again, the example of how methodologically, epistemologically, ontologically, politically, and ethically--*at the same time*--productive and generative all boundaries, breaks, gaps, and cracks are.

Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, in their influential book *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, diagnose that feminist new materialisms are, among other things, "pushing dualisms to an extreme" (Bergson 1896/2004, 236, in Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012, 115-136). In *What If Culture Was Nature All Along?*, Kirby and others are pushing feminist new materialisms themselves to an extreme. By consequently insisting on immanency, entanglement, simultaneity, complicity, "the im/possibility of abandonment," problematizing gaps and

mediation, not losing the ethico-political dimensions of onto-epistemological queries, engaging in discussions with(in) feminist new materialisms, they are doing feminist new materialisms anew and "same old" *at the same time*.

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