Resistance, Materiality and the Spectre of Cartesianism: A Contribution to the Critique of Feminist New Materialism

Evelina Johansson Wilén and Carl Wilén

University of Gothenburg

Abstract

An important camp within the emerging field of resistance studies has been characterised by a tendency to study and theorise matters of culture, language, and discourse at the expense of matter itself. For researchers interested in feminist resistance, feminist new materialism – with its focus on the entanglements of 'natureculture', matter, the body, sexual difference, agency, and change – might appear to offer productive theoretical tools that can help shift the focus towards materiality. Through a reading of selected works of influential feminist new materialists, this article critically analyses how resistance can be articulated within the theoretical scope of feminist new materialism. While the authors agree with the identified gains of a material turn within resistance studies and in relation to feminist resistance, it is shown that new materialism is of little help in this regard. In a first step, it is argued that the new materialist attempt to undermine the modern and postmodern forms of Cartesian dualism ends up reproducing its fundamental premise through the equation of difference and independence on the one hand, and of identity and unity on the other. In a second step, the authors argue that the failed attempt to challenge Cartesian dualism gives rise to two theoretical problems with important implications for feminist resistance. On the one hand, in its efforts to transcend older versions of materiality as unalterable and constant, feminist new materialism comes to privilege change and the register of historical specificity at the expense of limits and the register of the transhistorical, in a way that disguises resistance rooted in the relatively stable condition of vulnerability. On the other hand, in its attempt to supersede the difference

between nature and humanity by granting agency to matter, feminist new materialism is led to sacrifice intentional action in a way that undermines core aspects of the emerging field of resistance studies.

Introduction: Resistance Studies and Materiality

It would be of no avail to offer a general assessment of the status of materiality within the emerging field of 'resistance studies', since it is rooted in distinctly different traditions of investigation of resistance. As a field, resistance studies relate to 'the state-oriented, structuralist, and public scope of "contentious politics" (itself a combination of social movement studies, revolution studies, and studies on guerrilla warfare, civil warfare, and terrorism)'; it engages with 'informal "everyday forms of resistance" within subaltern studies, the history-from-below movement, and "autonomist" approaches to radical politics within post-Marxist and poststructuralist studies', and it often takes inspiration from different specialist fields, such as 'gender studies and feminism, queer studies, peace studies, political science, sociology, critical race studies, anthropology, pedagogics, psychology, media and communication studies, critical legal studies, heritage studies, design and crafts, and so on' (Lilja and Vinthagen 2018 p. 213). The relation between these different theoretical traditions, disciplines, models, areas of empirical investigations, and discussions is due to the fact that resistance challenges all forms of domination (Lilja and Vinthagen 2018 p. 213). Naturally, within the traditions combined in resistance studies, the status of materiality alters from a fundamental to a negligible standing.

However, even if a general assessment of the status of materiality would be in vain, several scholars have identified an influential camp within the emerging field of resistance studies, which during the last decades have tended to study and theorise matters of culture, language, and discourse at the expense of matter itself (Törnberg 2013; Busch 2017; Lilja 2017). A similar diagnosis can be made in respect of contemporary feminist theory, where the primary focus has operated at the level of discourse rather than matter (Alaimo and Hekman 2008, p. 1ff; also Grosz 2008, p. 22; Colebrook 2008, p. 52). Doubtless, phenomena such as discursive resistance, identity construction, language, and performativity are important in the study and practice of resistance. However, this focus

can tend to conceal or overlook the materiality of resistance not only in the analytical frameworks used, but also in the empirical material studied. In paying insufficient attention to key material resources of various forms – such as property relations, structural conditions of the state and its institutions, repression, the patterns of the city, space, place, the body, and sexual difference – crucial dimensions of resistance are lost while at the same time important contributions from several of the theoretical and empirical traditions investigating resistance, which in fact has influenced and/or been a part of the field of resistance studies, are excluded or disguised. Against this background, the recently emerging thought collective of 'new materialists' would seem to be a natural place to look for inspiration in trying to combat this lack of interest in materiality within the field of resistance studies (see Törnberg 2013; Von Busch 2017). For researchers interested in feminist resistance, it is the feminist version of new materialism that appears to be most pertinent, since it addresses the entanglements of 'natureculture', the body, sexual difference, agency, and change in a way that promises a break from the dominant poststructural culturalist orientation.

Through a reading of selected works of influential feminist new materialists – such as Stacy Alaimo, Karen Barad, Elisabeth Grosz, Susan Hekman, Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin – the main purpose of this article is to critically analyse how resistance can be articulated within the theoretical scope of feminist new materialism and to point out its limitations in relation to feminist resistance. Since our purpose is to analyse the feminist new materialist theoretical intervention in general, rather than to investigate existing internal theoretical distinctions and conflicts, we will focus more on the similarities than on the extant differences between these theorists. Moreover, it is beyond the scope of the current article to assess and survey the actual impact of the feminist new materialism on other areas of feminist resistance research. Our concerns in what follows are restricted to the emerging field of resistance studies and its understandings of resistance (which we will come back to below).

The investigation will proceed in four steps, which are reflected in the four subsequent sections. In a *first step*, we will analyse the dominant patterns of feminist new materialist theorisation of the relation between

nature and society, of agency, of the body, and of sexual difference against the background of a preceding feminist and progressive tradition premised on a suspicion towards nature. In a second step, we will critically investigate the ways in which the new materialists have sought to undermine and transgress both modern and postmodern forms of Cartesian dualism and dichotomies between nature and society. A detailed analysis of the attempt to move beyond Cartesianism is warranted because this effort is at the heart of the new materialist project as a whole and – more importantly – because it contains specific implications for the theory and empirical study of resistance. In our view, the attempt to break loose from Cartesian dualism is a failed one insofar as its advocates end up reproducing the fundamental premise of the thought of René Descartes himself, through the equation of difference and independence on the one hand, and of identity and unity on the other. While a significant result in itself, in terms of the aims of the present article the more pertinent finding is that the failed attempt to challenge Cartesian dualism gives rise to two distinct theoretical weaknesses. These relate to the problem of a) limits and vulnerability, and b) intentionality. Both weaknesses are of central importance for the study of feminist resistance and we will investigate them separately. Hence, in a third step, we will deepen the analysis of the new materialist effort to transcend older versions of materiality as unalterable and constant. Our conclusion is that feminist new materialism comes to privilege change and the register of historical specificity at the expense of limits and the register of the transhistorical, in such a way that disguises resistance rooted in the relatively stable condition of vulnerability and natural limits of the body. Lastly, in a fourth step, we will develop our reading of the new materialist attempt to transcend Cartesianism and the difference between nature and society by granting agency to matter. We find that feminist new materialism is led to sacrifice the notion of intentional action in a way that undermines central aspects of the emerging field of resistance studies. In light of such findings, while we agree in principle with the call for a material turn within resistance studies and in relation to feminist resistance, we doubt that new materialism can be of much help on this front. That is, insofar as vulnerability and intentionality is important for the study and practice of resistance, our argument is that the status of materiality within resistance

studies ought not to be defined by new materialist theory. However, it will not be enough to propose a re-introduction of materiality in general. Rather, what is needed is a discussion and an analysis of what status and boundaries the notion of materiality ought to be granted within the field in relation to other important notions, not least the nature and material *limits* and *stability* of bodily vulnerability (our third step of analysis) and the *difference* between human intentionality and the materiality of nature (our fourth step of analysis).

Sexual Difference from Static Being to Free Becoming

Nature has a prominent place as a contested political category in the history of resistance. Before the French Revolution of 1789, the socio-political content of nature incarnated the promise of a new world of equality and freedom, and was identified with progress and radical demands for social and political change (Losurdo 2004, p. 60; see also Jameson 2009, p. 327). The category of nature was mobilised against *l'ancien régime* and its advocates; it was used as a challenge to the existing order and it was understood as the foundation of the statement that the aim of every political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of human beings, who self-evidently 'are born and remain free and equal in right'.[4] In this way, the declaration of 1789 aligned itself with the thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who positioned nature as an element in opposition to the existing order with his famous formulation: 'Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains' (Rousseau 2010 [1762], p. 33).

During the Revolution, nature's socio-political content started to switch sides as it came to be consolidated as a major category of reaction at the time of the Restoration, mobilised against what was seen to be the new artificial and unnatural regime, basing its legitimacy on the abstract concepts of freedom, equality, and popular sovereignty (Losurdo 2004, pp. 60–1). For Edmund Burke, the abstract claims of legal equality

[4] "Déclarations des droits de l'homme et du citoyen" (1789), see http://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/conseil-constitutionnel/francais/la-constitution/la-constitution-du-4-octobre-1958/declaration-des-droits-de-l-homme-et-du-citoyen-de-1789.5076.html

violate the 'natural order of things'; they are in fact the 'most abominable of usurpations', which specifically threaten 'nature's prerogative' (Burke 2014 [1790], pp. 8, 50). The conservative and reactionary project thus criticised the new status quo with the help of the category of nature and argued for a return to the state of natural perfection (Losurdo 2004, p. 60). While nature, as before the Revolution, was still posited as a political category outside of, and denied by, the political order and used as a source of critique, the present order had changed. Before the Revolution, in principle the political regime was rooted in self-evident political and economic difference; after the Revolution, it was rooted in self-evident political equality, which meant that the social and economic differences that undeniably continued to exist now had to be explained and legitimised rather than merely taken for granted (Hunt 1996, p. 15; Hunt 2007, pp. 16, 29, 147, 148). However, both progressives and conservatives were in agreement insofar as nature was seen as a transhistorical and static category.

The rupture in the history of ideas of nature immediately came to involve the early women's movement. However, the use of nature in this regard was more ambivalent than in the political discourse of the progressives (who excised the category of nature from their discourse) and that of the conservatives (who affirmed the category of nature within their discourse). The source of ambivalence can be located in the fact that the changing socio-political content of nature also involved the specificity of the female body as a contested site of feminist politics. Mary Wollstonecraft, writing her political manifestos in the midst of the shifting meanings of nature, demonstrates what was at stake. On the one hand, she exposed the contradiction involved in the exclusion of women from the category of the natural rights of man, thus positioning her critique within the pre-revolutionary progressive meaning of nature. On the other hand, she also placed herself within what was to become the post-revolutionary progressive discourse when distancing the argument from the use of the specific nature of the female body for political purposes, even if she acknowledged the existence of sexual difference (Wollstonecraft 1993 [1792], pp. 67, 101). From the intervention of Wollstonecraft, it is possible to draw a line of continuity up to the present day, with feminist arguments placing the feminist project (albeit at times

ambivalently) within the distancing gesture towards nature in general, and the nature of the specificity of the female body in particular. From its very inception, feminist theory was, as Kate Soper has noted, structured around 'the challenge it delivered to the presumed "naturality" of male supremacy' (1995, p. 121; see also Gunnarsson 2012, p. 3).

The excommunication of the female body from the mainstream of the feminist project left culture and society as the main representatives of radicalism and change. One example of such excommunication can be found in the work of the influential anthropologist Gayle Rubin, which is partly premised on the construction of an opposition between the politically significant sociality of gender and the politically insignificant materiality of sex (Rubin 1975). Another example can be found in the equally influential theorist Judith Butler, who criticised the dichotomy of gender and sex that functions as a basis for Rubin's theoretical contribution. Butler argued that both sex and gender ought to be conceived of as constructed if we are to avoid biologism (Butler 1999, p. 94). In this sense, Butler can be understood to be part of the culture-centred feminism that to a high degree dominated the 20th century. For Butler, it is mainly language and discourse that are capable of radical performativity, while materiality is constructed within a psychoanalytic figure of thought, adhering to the uncontrollable and traumatic register of the Real. Even if materiality might destabilise the discursive order by constantly reoccurring, it is always by virtue of being abject and unmentionable. Hence, we can never really get to the real body, which comes 'from a place that cannot be found and which, strictly speaking, cannot be said to exist' (Butler 1986, p. 39). By implication, while the potentiality of resistance within this perspective on the body might have a capacity for negation and destabilisation, it nevertheless lacks constructive and creative dimensions (Alaimo and Hekman 2008, p. 3; Dolphijn and Tuin 2012, p. 145)[5].

[5] For an example of a defence of the bodily in the work of Butler, see Edenheim (2016). Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman make a similar point to us in this regard, arguing that "[e]ven though many social constructivist theories grant the existence of material reality, that reality is often posited as a realm entirely separate from that of language, discourse, and culture" (Alaimo and Hekman 2008, p. 3).

It is against this background of a culture/discourse-centred feminist hegemony that the feminist new materialists articulate their theoretical intervention (Alaimo and Hekman 2008, p. 1ff; Grosz 2008, p. 22; Colebrook 2008, p. 52). Barad offers her own distinctive engagement in the debate with the following diagnosis of the hegemonic status of culture alongside a critique of the theoretical trend that has granted language too much power:

[I]t seems that at every turn lately … every "thing" – even materiality – is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation.' She continues:

> 'Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter (Barad 2003, p. 801).

Moreover, the new materialists argue that nature, materiality, and the body ought not be understood as a static and passive object moulded by culture and society – a notion that unites pre-revolutionary progressives and post-revolutionary conservatives alike – but as living, plural, constantly changing, and active. An important task for new materialist theory is thus to undermine the asymmetry and return to matter its agential power (Barad 2007, p. 177). Alaimo and Hekman also invoke the language of agency: 'Nature is agentic – it acts, and those actions have consequences for both the human and nonhuman world' (2008, p. 5). Dolphijn and Tuin, in a similar spirit to that of Barad, Alaimo and Hekman, describe new materialism as a move away from the practice of reducing the body, nature, and materiality to a passive mass in the grip of thought, culture or the soul. If this move is to be possible, Dolphijn and Tuin argue, the modernist and postmodernist traditions of thought must be short-circuited, since they imply a dualistic and hierarchical practice, not least with the binary opposition between nature and society. New materialism is described as nothing less than 'a revolution in thought', inasmuch as it goes beyond merely supplementing existing thought, and provides us with a 'new metaphysics'. On this view, new materialism 'traverses and thereby rewrites thinking *as a whole*, leaving nothing untouched, redirecting every possible idea according to its new sense of orientation' (Dolphijn and Tuin 2012, p. 13).

As a result, in this new metaphysics, materiality should not be seen as separable from culture, nor as a simple result of it; matter is not caught within the discursive net, nor is the discourse determined by materiality (Dolphijn and Tuin 2012, p. 85). Instead of the modern and postmodern Cartesian dualism, nature and culture ought to be understood as an 'intra-active' relation of 'natureculture' (Haraway 2003). The notion of 'intra-action' was coined by Barad, who argues against the image of materiality as a passive mass without agency and instead proposes an ontology of performativity in which materiality is understood as a constant coming into being. For Barad, rather than being static, matter is changing and therefore historical: 'Matter is substance in its intra-active becoming – not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency. Matter is a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity' (Barad 2007, p. 210). Instead of understanding the relation between different material entities as one of interaction, whereby entities are posed as previously constituted, materiality is understood to be constituted in the very meeting and intra-action. In this sense, new materialism, in Barad's version, is a theory of *monism* and *immanence*, based on the concept of entanglements (Dolphijn and Tuin 2012, p. 85). The concept of entanglement implies 'not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence' (Barad 2007, p. ix).

In addition to grounding the new materialist metaphysics of monism and immanence, the concept of entanglement, in combination with Barad's agential perspective on matter, also has implications for how agency and intentionality are theorised. From the new materialist perspective, preserving the notion of intentional action of individuals or collectives as an important feature of agency appears as an obstacle to the theoretical ambition of transgressing the difference between nature and materiality on the one hand, and humanity and its societies on the other. Within the theoretical perspective developed by Barad, the 'space of agency is much larger than that postulated in many other critical social theories', since 'matter plays an agentic role in its iterative materialization' (Barad 2007, p. 177; Dolphijn and Tuin 2012, p. 55). In contrast to 'humanist' theories of agency, this perspective does not see human intentionality as a fundamental part of agency. Rather, agency is something that happens; it is a 'doing', an intra-action that cannot be

designated as an attribute of subjects or objects (Barad 2003, pp. 826–7; Barad 2007, p. 178).

So far, we have analysed the new materialist objective of deconstructing the binary opposition between matter and culture, and its implications for how agency is understood as intra-action rather than as involving intentionality. We will now analyse how the feminist new materialists proceed with a conception of the body and, more specifically, the sexed body that is rooted in their attempt to overcome the matter-culture dichotomy. In an article on Darwinism and feminism, Grosz, much like other new materialists, promotes a conception of the body as a potentiality rather than something that is simply moulded by culture. The body is 'the virtualities, the potentialities, within biological existence that enable cultural, social, and historical forces to work with and transform that existence' (Grosz 2008, p. 24; Dolphijn and Tuin 2012, p. 33). This conception of the body is connected to her critique of the poststructuralist construction of matter, which she identifies with Butler's work. According to Grosz, Butler's work contains 'an elision of the question of nature and of matter […] Mattering becomes more important than matter! Being "important," having significance, having a place, mattering, is more important than matter, substance or materiality' (Ausch, Doane, and Perez 2000). So, while Butler is interested in performativity and becoming, she does not, according to Grosz, seriously reckon with the matter and the material becoming of the body in itself.

But what are the implications of the new materialist notion of matter and bodies as agentic and transformative with respect to the problem of sexual difference? The conclusion drawn by Dolphijn and Tuin (2012), rooted in their conception of materiality as on-going historicity, is that sexual difference ought to be understood as a plurality of performative differences of particular bodies. By way of understanding sexual difference as materially rooted without positing binary and fixed meanings, they aim to overcome the tragic paradox that Joan Scott (1997) formulated in her work on French feminist struggles: in their attempts to abolish sexual difference, feminists have to constantly recall and emphasise the very differences they want to abolish. According to Dolphijn and Tuin, this kind of conflict signals a dualistic logic between the biological and the social: 'These paradoxes, in the context of feminism, concern the false

opposition between biological essentialism and social constructivism, a problem inherent to "the dualist logic of modernity"' (Dolphijn and Tuin 2012, p. 139). In opposition to the tradition of Cartesian dualism, they want to develop a performative ontology of sexual difference:

> We call this "sexual differing", that is, an allowance for sexual difference actually to differ. It involves a rewriting of sexual difference and sexuality not by means of dualist premises, but as a practical philosophy in which difference in itself comes to being (Dolphijn and Tuin 2012, p. 141).

Here, it is a question of sexual differing, a differing that does not accept the distinction between sex and gender, but conceptualises sexual difference as becoming rather than mere being. According to this perspective, it is impossible to separate the dynamic category of gender from the supposedly static category of sex. As such, the rules of the game appear to have changed. Instead of avoiding sexual difference as feminists interested in radical and progressive change, we ought to affirm it as a category of destabilising becoming. The Wollstonecraftian scepticism towards sexual difference as a political category, which has influenced generations of feminists, now seems to have become supplanted, and sexual difference, or rather sexual differing, now appears to be a plausible point of departure for feminist resistance.

Before returning to the problem of sexual difference and resistance in the final two parts of the article, we first have to deepen the analysis of the attempt to undermine the Cartesian dualism between nature and society at the heart of the new materialist project, since this attempt leads to specific consequences for the conditions of possibility for the theory and study of resistance. Our attempt to offer a more detailed analysis of the new materialist attempt to break loose from the heritage of Descartes will be aided by recent arguments put forward by Andreas Malm (2018), Terry Eagleton (2016), and Lena Gunnarsson (2013).

The Spectre of Cartesianism and the Possibility of Non-Binary Distinctions

As should be clear by now, the main target of new materialism is dualistic thinking – from Descartes to Butler, as the argument claims. If there is something genuinely 'new' in new materialism, however, it is certainly not

to be found in its attempt to overcome the philosophical problem space constructed by Descartes. Moreover, the new materialists are not alone in their efforts in transcending dualisms; the latter has become something of an unquestioned imperative within feminist theory (Gunnarsson 2013, p. 13). Indeed, if one were tempted to 'challenge' one form of dualism or another, it might be wise to recall that, as Vicki Kirkby writes, 'it has become somewhat routine within critical discourse to diagnose binary oppositions as if they are pathological symptoms' (Kirkby 2008, p. 215; Gunnarsson 2013, p. 13). Nevertheless, it is against the dualist tradition that the revolution in thought is imagined, the newness of new materialism is derived, and the philosophy of a new metaphysics of monism and immanence is proposed.

Of course, at a concrete level, there exists an important difference between the Cartesian tradition and the new materialists in the sense that monism and immanence are theoretically distinct from dualism and transcendence. However, when the new materialists propose a monistic theory of immanence, by which the dualistic conceptualisation of the difference between nature and society is rejected, the solution appears to be premised on a deeper reliance on the way in which nature and society have been initially conceptualised in the dualist tradition as categories located in entirely separate spheres. Without that initial distance, and the implied notion that difference equals independence, the observation that nature and society are inseparable and combined does not warrant their collapse in identity. Without the notion that *difference* equals *independence*, one could simply hold that nature and society are different and inseparable (Malm 2018, pp. 48–51). Interestingly, the opposition between dualism and monism, founded at a deeper level on the mutual agreement that difference equals independence, actually leads the new materialists back to René Descartes himself. For Descartes wrote that two substances are really distinct only 'when each of them can exist without the other', and that (and this is nothing but the corollary statement of the first) ' to conceive of the union of two things is to conceive of them as one thing' (2003 [1641], pp. 15, 86, 62, 152; Malm 2018, p. 50ff.).

One can find an example of the implicit mutual agreement between new materialism and Descartes' statement when Barad ventures to undermine the *difference* between nature and society, between human

and non-human, by way of the concept of intra-action, describing the maligned alternative as liberal atomism founded on the notion 'of individually *determinate* entities with *inherent* properties' (Barad 2003, pp. 812–13, 817). Without the initial notion of 'determinate entities' with 'inherent properties', the notion of intra-action loses its force. Dolphijn and Tuin offer another example when they emphasise that they are not against the idea of difference *per se*, but rather what they conceive of as a modernist conception of difference as relational, negative, and reductive, whereby every object has its distinct properties. As an alternative, they propose that we understand difference 'along the lines of an affirmative intensity, which in the end turns into a non-dualism, a monist philosophy of difference' (Dolphijn and Tuin 2012, p. 121). Difference is thus something plural and constantly shifting, which comes into being as a continuous differing. There are no stable differences, only differences that emerge locally and contingently (Dolphijn and Tuin 2012, pp. 121, 127, 153). Thus, Dolphijn and Tuin present a conception of difference emerging from a profound and privileged form of sameness or monism, which we are in need of since:

> Whether it concerns earthquakes, art, social revolutions, or simply thinking, the material and the discursive are only taken apart in the authoritative gesture of the scholar or by the commonsensical [sic] thinker; while in the event, in life itself, *the two seeming layers are by all means indiscernible* (2012, pp. 291–2, emphasis added).

Without the initial notion of 'the two seeming layers' being discernible and stable, the proposed monism would be less acute. The same figure of thought can be detected when Noela Davis presents new materialists as seeking to 'theorize an *entanglement* and *non-separability* of the biological with/in sociality, and what they criticize in much feminism is the conventional assumption that the biological and the social are *two separate* and *discrete* systems that then somehow interact' (2009, p. 67, emphasis added). Without the notion of two 'separate and discrete systems', the 'entanglement and non-separability' are unwarranted.

Hence, when the new materialists counter the dualist statement of fundamental difference with the monist statement of fundamental sameness, entanglement, and inseparability, they only appear to be the flip

side of the Cartesian notion stating that difference equals independence and that union equals collapse in identity. By implication, new materialism – as much as the Cartesian form of thought that comprises one of its chief targets of criticism – is premised on the dualism or binary opposition between difference and independence on the one hand, and unity, dependence, and identity on the other. Thus, the new materialist monism appears to be little more than an extreme response emanating from the heritage of extreme dualism, and therefore a *consequence of Cartesianism* rather than a successful rejection of this tradition (Malm 2018, p. 51).

The Cartesian binary opposition between difference and unity at work in new materialism excludes the logical possibility of holding that distinctions and differences can, as Gunnarsson argues, simply signify that two things are not identical at the same time as they cannot be neatly separated from each other or must be mutually independent (Gunnarsson 2013, p. 14). And it is not necessarily problematic to maintain that objects and processes can be simultaneously both different *and* united. Even if, as Eagleton argues, it is not hard to find reasonable arguments for why one ought to reject the false dichotomy between dumb matter and immortal spirit, the conclusion might still be that humans are not 'set apart from the material world (as for idealist humanism), or mere pieces of matter (as for mechanical materialism)'; 'They are indeed pieces', Eagleton continues,

> But pieces of matter of a peculiar kind. Or, as Marx puts it: human beings are part of Nature, which is to think of the two as inseparable; but we can also speak of them as being "linked", which is to point up their difference' (Eagleton 2016, p. 12).

In other words, human beings might have properties that are identical with and yet irreducible to nature (Bhaskar 1998, pp. 97–9).

The attempt to begin the work to undermine the Cartesian heritage by trying to think both difference and unity beyond the new materialist dichotomy can be further clarified via the Hegelian conception of abstraction. The distinction between abstract and concrete is all too often understood as a distinction between what actually has existence (the concrete) and illusion (the abstract). In the Hegelian tradition, the

distinguishing characteristic of the abstract is instead its indeterminateness and simplicity, unlike the concrete concentration of many determinations (Hegel 1969 [1816], pp. 70, 77). Marx locates himself in the centre of the Hegelian meaning of abstraction when he writes: 'The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse' (Marx 1993 [1857], p. 101). Thus, the abstract is no less real than the concrete; the fact that, as Marx writes elsewhere, 'Hunger is hunger' is no less real than the fact that 'hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth' (Marx 1993 [1857], p. 92).

Hence, human hunger can be understood as an abstract natural property that is *identical* in all places and at all times, at the very same time as the concrete form of appearance of hunger is *different* in every historically specific social context conditioned by the organisation of property relations and cultural circumstances. Likewise, at an abstract level one could understand humanity and, in prolongation, society as consisting of the same material substance as nature, with the former being dependent upon and inseparable from the latter. From here, two different paths are possible: one is that of new materialism, which reaches the deeper Cartesian conclusion that by virtue of the identity and inseparability of nature and society, no relatively stable difference between them can be defended, which leads them to the conclusion of a double monism of both substance and properties, as well as a rejection of the difference between abstract and concrete; or the other path, which we find more persuasive, whereby nature, humanity, and society are seen as identical and consisting of one and the same substance at an abstract level, but that both humanity and society (in different ways, of course) at a more concrete level have properties that are irreducible to nature (e.g. Malm 2018, pp. 53, 59). Of these two alternatives, only the latter can undermine the spectre of Cartesian dualism and the binary opposition stating identity or difference.

In light of this, we would argue that a central task for radical contemporary theory is the deconstruction and annihilation of the binary opposition and dualism between identity and difference, unity and distinction, inseparability and separation, dependence and independence,

which could leave a space within which the binarity between the terms can be constructed as less rigid yet without losing their distinctness. That is to say, if we want to break loose from the Cartesian heritage, and in respect of the credibility of such an attempt we are evidently in agreement with the new materialists, the urgent task is to deconstruct the binary oppositions that have structured and given meaning to the new materialist project from the very outset.

In fact, if differences and distinctions are turned into the problem as such and subsequently abandoned, it would not be possible to theorise and investigate the relation and dialectic between nature and society or that between change and stability, since a relation presupposes a difference between the terms that is constituted by and/or constitutes the relation (Gunnarsson 2013, p. 14). In addition, if the dialectic between nature, human beings, society, change, and stability is logically excluded, crucial features of resistance studies will be buried. What is at stake is, on the one hand, the condition of possibility of the notion of vulnerability rooted in sexual difference, and on the other, intentional action. The new materialists sacrifice both of these key concepts in their failed attempt to undermine the Cartesian tradition. Let us then move on to a more detailed consideration of, first, the problem of vulnerability, and second, the problem of intentional action.

Materiality as Limit and Transgression: On Vulnerability and Resistance

When introducing and arguing for the importance of a feminist new materialist intervention, Alaimo and Hekman take female bodies and their specific sufferings and pleasures as a starting point. According to them:

> Women *have* bodies; these bodies have pain as well as pleasure. They also have diseases that are subject to medical interventions that may or may not cure those bodies. We need a way to talk about these bodies and the materiality they inhabit (Alaimo and Hekman 2008, p. 4).

Hence, Alaimo and Hekman do not simply describe their perspective as being theoretically motivated; they also appear to articulate political incentives. But what kind of specific sufferings and pleasures and what

forms of resistance can be related to the bodies to which the authors are referring? One obvious example would be the birth-giving body, which is often female-identified though not always (Obedin-Maliver and Makadon 2016), with its pleasures, needs, potential complications and, not least, specific limits. Another example, mentioned by Alaimo and Hekman (2008) themselves, is the history of medical research that has taken the male body as study of object and norm. Other examples, not only related to the female body, could be found in every form of resistance or movement that wholly or partly mobilises around the limits of the body, such as acts of resistance against long working days, or bad or dangerous working conditions. These examples demonstrate that bodies are deeply political, and that the security and health of some bodies can be perceived as less valuable than others. But does the specific way in which the feminist new materialists present materiality provide effective tools for the political struggles that Alaimo and Hekman implicitly use to legitimise the new materialist feminist perspective? Considering these examples alongside our previous analysis of the dominant patterns of the feminist new materialist theorisation of change in the second section above, we will develop a critique of the feminist new materialist conception of changing matter and investigate related notions such as limits, predictability, unpredictability, the register of the historically specific and of the transhistorical, strength, vulnerability, and sexual difference in relation to feminist resistance. At the bottom of these notions, we find the unsuccessful endeavour to counter the Cartesian dualism between nature and society through the theoretical gesture granting agency and change to nature. We will not argue that the move to understand nature in terms of change is a mistake as such, but rather that it in the new materialist project contains a problematic exclusion of stability and transhistorical properties, which are important in so far as the study and practice of resistance are considered.

In his book on materialism, Eagleton relates the active notion of matter within new materialism to poststructuralism and different versions of vitalism: the matter in new materialism is, he writes, 'regarded as a sort of materiality without substance, as fluid and protean as the post-structuralist notion of textuality. Like textuality, the stuff is infinite, indeterminate, unpredictable, non-stratified, diffuse, free-floating, heterogeneous and untotalisable' (2016, p. 11). In this way,

Eagleton continues, new materialism not only describes the world as ever changing, but also tends to invest change, energy, and force with value – even though 'all dynamism might in fact not deserve admiration' (2016, p. 14). In relation to the fact that the new materialists can be identified as inheritors of the thought of Gilles Deleuze, the admiration of change should not come as a surprise. 'For the most part', Eagleton writes,

> Deleuze can see constraint only as negative, a view that faithfully reflects the marketplace ideology he otherwise finds objectionable … with a handful of qualifying clauses, we are offered a banal antithesis between the vital, creative, desirous, and dynamic (to be unequivocally endorsed) and the oppressive realm of stable material forms (to be implicitly demonised) … What we are offered, then, is a Romantic-libertarian philosophy of unbridled affirmation and incessant innovation, as though the creative and innovative were unambiguously on the side of the angels (2016, p. 16).

In a similar manner, Gunnarsson (2013) has uncovered and criticised the feminist new materialist glorification of the dynamic and the ungovernable. As both Eagleton and Gunnarsson point out, the fact that feminism is about social change does not necessarily imply that totally unpredictable and chaotic change ought to be feminism's main goal. The point is that change as such is not politically radical. For most feminist movements, it is instead *emancipatory change* that is of interest, and such change may or may not be (and is often somewhere in between these two poles) planned, structured, and organised. In other words, the unruly body as such cannot be taken *a priori* as a radical political actor. Bodies are in part constantly changing, which leads to mutations of both desirable and undesirable kinds (Gunnarsson 2013, p. 9).

In extending the critical investigation of the difference between desirable and undesirable change, one should pose the question of whether emancipatory feminist resistance requires the transformation of bodily matter. If so, how are we to think about what seems *not to be* constantly changing, what seems not to be unpredictable, but rather quite expected – for example, the transhistorical condition that bodies without food, water, emotional and physical care, shelter against heat and cold, will hardly survive for any length of time? In its celebration of

free and unrestrained matter, the body that is ascribed a radical political potentiality of resistance within the new materialist project precludes the restricted, weak, and limited body. The notion of limits as negative per se conforms quite well, as Eagleton shows, to the neoliberal ideology of the market that most new materialists and feminists in fact seek to criticise (2016, p. 25).

In an interview with Butler, Vikki Bell asks how she relates to philosophical vitalism, many proponents of which – such as Spinoza and Deleuze – are central to the feminist new materialists. In response, Butler concedes that she does not want to reject the vitalist interest in the potentiality of becoming, which she argues has some affinity with her reading of Foucault and the possibility of the self to become something else, but she also describes how she believes that concepts such as finitude and vulnerability might have greater ethical potential:

> [P]erhaps it is more important, more timely, to consider notions of life that are bound up with transience, which is not necessarily an exclusively negative thing. One could argue that the precariousness of life is the ground or basis upon which our obligations to shelter life emerge. I also think, maybe, it's a kind of modest conceit that keeping in mind the transience or precariousness of life allows us to value life differently or more vigilantly, so it does translate into a more ethical position for me (Bell 2010, p. 150).

According to Butler, life is something that is both constantly changing and finite. Hence, even if there are important differences between Eagleton and Butler, it is the vulnerable, limited, and needy body that the latter has recently turned toward theoretically, and that the former has invoked as the foundation for a materialistic ethics and Marxist politics (Butler 2004; Eagleton 2011). Even if both Eagleton and the later Butler proceed from concrete situated bodies, they also emphasise abstract (in the Hegelian sense) transhistorical aspects of human existence beyond contexts and circumstances. It is these characteristics that both thinkers want to mobilise politically against a system that contradicts foundational bodily needs. Many of the bodily questions of resistance present today are about claims set out from this limit, against the exploitation of bodies that cannot *take any more* (for example, long working hours), or that

are in need of care (for example, the need of assistance or treatment in order to live a liveable life). Birth-giving bodies need qualified attention and care, and midwives need breaks and decent working conditions in order to guarantee the quality of the care they provide. Here, it is not the body as transgressive, fluid or agentic that is at stake; rather, it is the body as vulnerable and finite that forms the point of departure for political demands for systemic change in the *specific direction* of adaptation to the body's limits. The presupposition for that kind of demand is, of course, that one can distinguish the differences (to repeat: difference does not necessarily equal independence) between the nature of the transhistorical material needs of the body and the historically specific social organisation of, for example, maternal care.

However, even if the respective conceptions of vulnerability set out by Eagleton and Butler signal a step forward in relation to new materialism, it remains sexless within their theorisations. Hence, they comprehend vulnerability in general terms. But sex-specific forms of vulnerability and sex-specific needs also have to be politicised, rather than merely dissolved into some form of sexual plurality or variation. If the conception of 'sexual differing' appears to obscure and disguise the female bodies worn out on nursing floors, or those given inadequate aid at the same hospitals and not provided with any care at all, the privileging of change would find those bodies uninteresting, since they are about the limits of the body rather than the constant change of materiality. In this sense, one could argue that the new materialist ideal of immanence privileges a Romantic-libertarian model of transgression; the monism of feminist new materialism is a kind of transcendence in disguise. In the last instance, it is the possibility of a symmetrical focus on vulnerability and limits on the one hand, and change and transgression (planned and unplanned) on the other, together with the relation between the register of the historically specific and the transhistorical, that becomes lost in the new materialist notion of matter.

In this section, we have analysed how the failed effort of emancipation from the Cartesian dualism between nature and society, by way of granting agency to matter, has led to the priority of the changing and agentic body, which we see as a weakness, particularly in relation to the phenomenon of feminist resistance, insofar as political claims

based on the weakness or precarity of the body are downplayed, but also to the extent that change in itself cannot be said to bring about social justice. Change sometimes jeopardises the limits of specific bodies in specific social contexts, which indicates the need for organised change if emancipatory ends are to be attained. We will now turn to the potential problems that arise when disconnecting agency from human intentionality, a theoretical manoeuvre that Barad describes as pivotal to her agential realist perspective (2007, p. 177).

Feminist New Materialism and the Field of Resistance Studies

Whether involved in resistance from below against patriarchy, sexism, capitalism, racism, fascism or other relations of power or forms of states, most activists would probably agree that intentional action (individual or collective) is a crucial dimension of their practice. Not unexpectedly, the problem of intentionality (and related phenomena such as aims, purposes, or some form of interests related to action) is also an important area of contention when resistance is theorised within the emerging field of resistance studies (Baaz et al. 2016, p. 140).

Nevertheless, if there exists such an agreement between activists and academic theorists of resistance, the implication need not be that intentional action is perceived as the *differentia specifica* of resistance, deciding whether or not the phenomenon we encounter can be analysed as resistance. Recently, Mikael Baaz, Mona Lilja, Michael Schulz, and Stellan Vinthagen have convincingly proposed a definition that *excludes* intentional action:

> Irrespective of intentions, we view resistance as (i) an act, (ii) performed by someone upholding a subaltern position or someone acting on behalf of and/or in solidarity with someone in a subaltern position, and (iii) (most often) responding to power (or, as we will see below, other resistance practices, which in turn emerge as a response to power) (Baaz et al. 2016, p. 142).

Their most important argument for excluding intentions from the concept of resistance is that a wide array of important phenomena for

resistance studies would then also have to be excluded from empirical research, not least various forms of everyday resistance and resistance that is not directly and manifestly intended to affect power (Baaz et al. 2016, p. 140). As an example, Baaz et al. point to the fact that one of the largest contemporary resistance movements would be excluded if intentionality were included in the definition of resistance. They write:

> Digital file sharing in which millions (who mainly seek free films, music, and software) actually undermine some of the biggest transnational corporations in the world – within the entertainment industry and software business – and, by extension, an essential feature of contemporary informational capitalism, namely, intellectual property rights (Baaz et al. 2016, p. 140).

In other words, including intentions in the definition would make invisible unintended or 'other-intended' resistance, which are forms of resistance that nevertheless undermine power relations by dint of their consequences (Baaz et al. 2016, p. 140). Hence, this preferred definition of resistance rejects the requirement that a direct relation between a *specifically intended* consequence and the *actual consequence* of an action be provided.

However, the implication of the argument is not that the problem of intentions is seen as irrelevant to the study of resistance altogether. On the contrary, knowledge and interpretation of actors' intentions is, as Baaz et al. write:

> helpful in those cases where it is made possible. An explicit aim and perhaps even a conscious strategy to undermine power will have consequences for how the resisters act. Such explicit and strategic resistance will also be easier to categorize for an observer (2016, p. 142).

In addition, the argument for not including intentions in the definition of resistance is *rooted in* a more foundational reason – namely that resistance against a specific power relation can be an unintended or 'other-intended' consequence; that is, resistance can be an effect not intended to be something at all or intended to be something other than its result. Even if unintended consequences reasonably can be the effect of impersonal or non-human powers – such as natural catastrophe,

technical failure, economic crisis, etc. – the notion of an act being 'other-intended' presupposes the existence of human beings' intentional action. If resistance is 'other-intended', the premise is that the existence of an intention of some form or another precedes the action resulting in a *different result than the intended one*. Hence, since the critique of definitions of resistance that include intentions relies on the fact that an act can have 'other-intended' consequences, *intentional actions in general* appear to be the implicit theoretical presupposition of the very definition of resistance that excludes the direct relation between *specific intentions* to undermine a specific power relation and *the actual consequences*.

Irrespective of whether or not one accepts the latter argument, it is clear that Baaz et al. include intentional action and related notions as important features of the study of resistance in general. Hence, regarding the definition of resistance, one could construct a continuum with one extreme only including intentions and the other holding intentions outside of not only the definition of resistance but also resistance studies altogether. Between those two poles, it would be possible to situate the position developed by Baaz et al., which holds that intentions should be excluded from the definition of resistance but included as an important aspect of the field of resistance studies.

The new materialists are, of course, well aware that it would be difficult to win the argument that a tree or a stone has intentions in the way in which it is common (and perhaps not entirely unreasonable) to think about intentions, that is to say, as a way of the human mind directing itself toward a specific object. Instead, as we discussed earlier, most new materialists have opted to reduce the category of agency so that it is not 'aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity', and is instead a matter of intra-acting and being 'an enactment, not something that someone or something has' (Barad 2003, p. 826). To the extent that feminist new materialism relies on the theoretical gesture of jettisoning human intentionality from the specificity of the category of agency or action, they are only able to support the extreme end of the continuum (that excludes intentional action from not only the definition of resistance but also the field of resistance studies altogether).

At this point, what becomes even clearer is that what is at stake in the new materialists' failed attempt to break free from Cartesianism,

alongside the notions of vulnerability, stability, limits, and the register of the transhistorical, is the abandonment or refusal of the concept of intentional collective action. Since the new materialists sacrifice the possibility of intentional action when they grant agency to non-human and human actors alike, a central pillar of the project of resistance studies is undermined. That is, irrespective of whether the intentional action of human beings is implicitly presupposed in the very definition of the concept of resistance itself, or is identified as an important part of the study of resistance in general, the feminist new materialist argument is incompatible with the premises of the field.

As a result, we can conclude that through its reproduction of the deeper form of Cartesian dualism, the monism of feminist new materialism, from the perspective of resistance itself, rules out the following possibilities: 1) to intentionally act in accordance with an analysis of the differences between, for example, the material specificity of the birth-giving body on the one hand, and the power relations between men as men and women as women on the other (since nature and society are collapsed into one another); 2) to intentionally formulate criticism of a system not adapted in relation to the limits and stability of the material fragility of the body and act according to that form of criticism (since change is glorified and limits are perceived as belonging to an outmoded mechanical materialism); and 3) to act intentionally at all (since human intentionality is sacrificed as a result of the will to grant agency to both the human and the non-human). Again: the third possibility that is ruled out also undermines the inclusion of intentionality as an important aspect of the theorisation and empirical research of resistance – in the form argued for by Baaz et al.

Therefore, a theoretical position that can contain both abstract identity (human beings, society, and nature consist of the same substance) and concrete differences of properties (among other things, the property of intentional action of human beings cannot be reduced to nature) is an important precondition for the field of resistance studies and for the empirical analysis of resistance, since it rescues the notion of intentional collective action, which is at risk of being dissolved when non-human matter is invested with agency.

A natural alternative would be to 1) save *agency* as a concept

denoting collective and individual intentional action by human beings with intended, non-intended or 'other-intended' consequences and calling the influence of 2) *non-human powers* (earthquakes that trigger an economic crisis, for example) and 3) *impersonal powers* rooted in, without being reducible to, the actions of human beings (economic crisis triggered by the inability to pay back housing loans, for example) for conditions, outcomes, effects, causal effects, etc. No one as yet has argued that it would be easy to distinguish between these, but the fact that it is difficult or impossible *for us* to distinguish between y and x (an epistemological question) does not warrant the conclusion that there exist no differences at all (an ontological question). Just because we cannot discern the milk from the coffee in our *café au lait*, this need not mean that the difference between coffee and milk does not exist (or that they are not both identical as forms of liquid at the same time as they have different properties at a more concrete level).

Moreover, the defence of the category of intentional action does not necessarily lead to an empty notion of liberal negative freedom. Eagleton provides a precise formulation of the alternatives, which is worth quoting at length:

> If reductive materialism finds it hard to make room for the human subject, not least for the subject as agent, so too does this 'new' version of the doctrine. Whereas mechanical materialism suspects that human agency is an illusion, vitalist materialism is out to decentre the all-sovereign subject into the mesh of material forces that constitute it. In drawing attention to those forces, however, it sometimes fails to recognise that one can be an autonomous agent without being magically free of determinations. Autonomy is rather a question of relating to such determinations in a peculiar way. To be self-determining does not mean ceasing to be dependent on the world around us. In fact, it is only through dependence (on those who nurture us, for example) that we can achieve a degree of independence in the first place. The autonomous subject set up by most postmodern thought is a straw man. To be free of all determinations would not be freedom at all (2016, pp. 13–14).

Put simply: the liberal autonomous subject is not the necessary consequence of a defence of the specificity of individual or collective human intentional action.

Conclusion

The existing research gap characterising important parts of the emerging field of resistance studies that consists of not taking materiality into account is worrying and constitutes a weakness of the field. In this sense, it is not surprising that new materialism appears to provide a promising theoretical toolbox for resistance studies, since its proponents reprise exactly the critique of the theoretical tendency, increasingly hegemonic during the last four decades or so, that views everything as a matter of language. Hostility towards this dominant theoretical trend serves to motivate and underpin the new materialism.

By our account, the intervention of the new materialists contains a contribution in two limited ways. First, while the new materialists can hardly be celebrated as the inventors of the conception of active matter (for examples of such notions about 400 years old, see Wolfe 2016), the common denominator of the pre-revolutionary progressive and the post-revolutionary socio-political content of nature as solely a transhistorical, static, and unchanging category is challenged in a plausible way. The problem is that the content is only reversed: instead of opening up the way for a symmetrical focus on change and stability, on the transhistorical and the historically specific, the new materialists move towards the opposite end of the continuum by emphasising change and contingency.

Second, we agree with the new materialist critique of poststructuralist culturalism as all too dominant. However, we also agree with the poststructuralist critique (Ahmed 2008, p. 24; Hemmings 2009, p. 36; Bruining 2016, p. 22) of the founding gestures and claims to newness of the new materialists as a way of legitimising and overstating the novelty of their own project. But the problem here is *not* that the new materialists fail to acknowledge their debt to poststructuralism; rather, it is that feminist new materialism does not manage to move far enough away from poststructuralism.

If, as Baaz et al. (2016, p. 138) state, not anything goes in relation to the study of resistance, it might be a good idea to retain a sceptical stance

towards new materialism, whether feminist or not, when one attempts to include materiality in the study of resistance. Our conclusion is that the field of resistance studies would have little to gain from reproducing Cartesian dualism with the resultant short-circuiting of an analysis of the dialectic between nature and society, irrespective of whether that monism is presented under the banner of poststructuralism or new materialism; there is little to be gained from privileging becoming and change at the expense of being, limits, stability, and vulnerability; from excommunicating the possibility of collective intentional action from below to resist power relations. In the last instance, is it so scandalous to establish a difference between human and non-human actors? Perhaps such conclusions appear deeply problematic to some because, as Eagleton suggests, they 'fear that to highlight the difference between humans and the rest of Nature is to establish an invidious hierarchy'. But, Eagleton continues, ' men and women are indeed in some ways more creative than hedgehogs. They are also unspeakably more destructive, much for the same reasons. Those who deny the former are at risk of ignoring the latter' (2016, p. 12).

Finally, in the dialogue about how matter ought to matter within the field of resistance studies, our critical investigation of feminist new materialism provides some hints as to what might be crucial ingredients within a defensible notion of materiality. It will be important to develop a concept of matter that is capable of containing the relation between difference and identity, nature and society, change and stability, abstract and concrete, the historically specific and the transhistorical, as well as intended and unintended consequences.

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