

New materialisms/New colonialisms

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Abstract

Departing from the fact that new materialist approaches have successfully shifted the focus toward matter and material bodies in their dynamic becomings, in this position paper, we argue that race and the very processes through which racialized bodies come to matter (in both senses of the word) still have to be considered as areas that are underrepresented in many new materialist approaches. It appears that new materialisms still miss a strong link with post- and de-colonial theories, as well as with critical race and migration studies. Asking what productive conversations (or better, *entanglements*) between new materialisms and postcolonialisms might look like—yet, precisely, without resorting to an approach that seeks to *supplement* what is putatively ‘missing’ from these bodies of knowledge through any efforts to combine them—this paper foregrounds the need for deeper understandings of the very processes through which bodies marked by race, ethnicity, nationality, sex/gender, and species come to matter. Along these same lines, and in view of recent discourse with new materialist perspectives, we are pressed to ask how new materialist theory might be traversed by particular energies and silences that form around the question of race, and how we can understand and analyze these from within a new materialist framework. Against this backdrop, we propose four thematic strands. Each of these strands engages with questions situated at the entanglement of the natural sciences and the humanities, matter and meaning, the human and the nonhuman, critical theories and affirmative politics, as well as epistemology and ontology, and in doing so puts forward the need for new materialist theorizations of material bodies in their dynamic becomings with regard to processes of racialization, racism, as well as colonialisms. At the center of each of these strands lies the question of how particular boundaries and meanings are enacted through particular practices and along with what political and ethical consequences; that is, who and what matters and who and what is at the very same moment excluded from mattering.

Keywords:

Agency, animal studies, Barad, Bennett, episteme, epistemology, genetics, Haraway, Mbembe, migration, necropolitics, nonhuman animals, philosophy of technology, politics, postcolonialisms, posthumanism, race and racialization, racism, technologization of borders, technoscience studies, the nonhuman.

Introduction

Whether directed through scientific practices, technologies, biologies, politics, or epistemologies (and their entanglements), an important move for and within new materialist inquiry is the attention it has given to matter and material bodies in their *becomings*. With this emphasis on matter’s non-teleological and dynamic agency, social and linguistic

constructionist accounts of the body have been problematized for not only reifying the dualism of (passive) matter and (active) mind, but also for running the risk of theorizing the body as a mere object upon which powerful discourses may act. Instead, new materialist theories consider bodies as potentially unruly, as agentive ‘entities’ (or assemblages) in themselves. However, while this approach to materiality has been foregrounded, race and the very processes through which racialized bodies come to matter (in both senses of the word) are considered to be areas that are underrepresented in many new materialist approaches.¹ What is more, it appears that new materialisms still miss a strong link with post- and de-colonial theories, as well as with critical race and migration studies.

Postcolonial studies of science and technology have particularly illustrated how certain technologies and technoscientific practices are not only not innocent but, in fact, deeply intertwined with colonialism, white supremacy, and racism. Indeed, and from the outset, postcolonial theories have focused on questions of materiality, the body, and nature, and the call for an even stronger shift toward matter, science, biology, and the nonhuman can be recognized in recent literature.² Against this backdrop the question arises of how postcolonial theory can remain loyal to its roots while at the same time taking into account various forms of material and nonhuman agency that new materialisms propose. We ask what might productive conversations (or better, *entanglements*) between new materialisms and postcolonialisms look like? How might new materialist insights influence postcolonial theories, and vice versa? And as an additional consideration, how might we address the challenge of undertaking the task of this inquiry without resorting to an approach that seeks to *supplement* what is putatively ‘missing’ from these bodies of knowledge through any efforts to combine them?³

¹ Some notable exceptions are Hames-Garcia (2008), Puar (2012), and a number of articles in the open-access online journal *darkmatter*.

² See, for example, Anderson (2009) and Seth (2009). Other examples of this engagement can be found in Scott’s (2007) discussion of the “beastification” of African bodies within Enlightenment and the nineteenth century’s Darwinism. Biological determinism and its justification of classed, raced and gendered differences by means of science and rise of social Darwinism (Gould 1996) has been critically analyzed by many (postcolonial) scholars. Similarly, objectification and pathologization of Other bodies has been discussed at length and in relation to how bodies are not only constructed and materialized but also how bodies have been exposed, exploited and examined for scientific curiosity and as matter(ial) of science (see, for example, Cohen 1998; Nelsson 2004; Hayden 2005).

³ See Dolphijn and van der Tuin’s suggestions (2012) for the way that new materialisms rework the parameters of disciplinary formation through a non-additive and immanent (counter-) logic. For these authors, new materialist analyses or approaches are not something that can be *applied* to an existing disciplinary field, as such, but rather emerge from within a discipline in a generative movement that also helps to constitute the discipline in question.

An exploration of the manifold relations between, and entanglements of, postcolonial theory and new materialisms is thus a project that presents itself with some urgency, and with it we anticipate a rich dialogue that may help us to develop better understandings of the very processes through which bodies marked by race, ethnicity, nationality, sex/gender, and species come to matter. Along these same lines, and in view of recent discourse with new materialist perspectives (see for example, Sullivan 2012; Irni 2013), we are pressed to ask how new materialist theory might be traversed by particular energies and silences that form around the question of race, and how we can understand and analyze these from within a new materialist framework.

A number of important questions arise here that represent focal challenges and lines for future research. We want to consider, for example, what it would mean to acknowledge the body as a material-semiotic actor—that is, a generative axis of the apparatus of bodily production, as Donna Haraway (1992) has put it—for understandings of race. Can new materialist theories allow for better understandings of the very processes through which race materializes—both in terms of meaning and ideology and as racialized matter and bodies? This query visits the more general question: if matter *becomes* rather than *is*, *how* does matter participate in the ongoing materialization of bodies and identities? And how can we approach this question without at the same time reinstalling a universal or a generic body at the heart of our inquiry? What kind of a notion of the political is needed for this inquiry, and how might our understanding of politics be reframed if matter is considered as vibrant, as an active part within processes of materialization? More specifically, what would it mean to understand matter as agentive and radically open (Barad 2007) or as dynamic (Bennett 2010) for anti-racist politics as well as for the critique of race and racism today? Barad, for example, provides us with a powerful understanding of matter as “a congealing of agency” (2003, 822), rather than as a substance or a thing. However, what remains open is the question of what it means for understandings of politics and political agency that there are no such things as individually constituted entities, times, and places. Furthermore, if ‘we’—and thus our bodies, thoughts, knowledge, and lives—are always already entangled in a web of “ongoing responsiveness”, as Barad (2007, 394) suggests, what exactly may be the basis for ethical and political action? What does it mean for emancipatory politics that, according to Barad’s argument regarding agential separability, entities can always break with their relations and entanglements and enter into (become part of) new relations and entanglements? How might the concerns of postcolonial politics meet with a posthumanist emphasis on the non-human,

and what might it mean to undertake postcolonial inquiry that takes the non-human as its point of departure?

Last, but not least, the issue of how race might figure in and through new materialisms' onto-epistemological performances gains traction for and from what can be roughly understood as a set of postcolonial concerns. A challenge may also lie in facing the question of how new materialist scholars can account for and critically reflect the fact that, at the moment, new materialisms might be seen as an overly *white* academic field that is primarily undertaken at some of the leading research and teaching universities in Europe and North America rather than at the (academic) margins. Geo-politically situated questions of race/racializing that might shape new materialist epistemologies also need to be met with the question of how knowledge production itself can be considered in racial/izing terms. Here, the onto-epistemological assertions of new materialism, both in terms of content and understood as materializing practice(s), can be brought to bear on questions of race. This approach both turns a critical lens onto new materialisms as sites of knowledge production, at the same time that it asks how and where new materialisms respond to these problematics.

Methodology

Over the last few years, new materialist scholars have developed a rich portfolio of highly original analytical apparatuses of investigation into the nature of becoming (see, for example, van der Tuin 2014). The metaphor of diffraction, apparatuses of bodily production (Haraway 1991; 1992; Barad 2007), and the figure of companion species (Haraway 2003; 2008) are only some of these promising approaches that might help us get to richer descriptions and theorizations of the very processes through which marked bodies (human and nonhuman alike) come to matter in both senses of the word, as well as of the role bodies themselves take in these processes. As neither the world nor our knowledge stand still, the methodological aim of this inquiry involves constantly scrutinizing, sharpening, and reconfiguring our analytical tools and methods in view of such new materialist insights.

Thematic strands

In this position paper, we propose four thematic strands. Each of these strands engages with questions situated at the entanglement of the natural sciences and the humanities, matter and meaning, the human and the nonhuman, critical theories and affirmative politics, as well as epistemology and ontology, and in doing so puts forward the need for new materialist

theorizations of material bodies in their dynamic becomings with regard to processes of racialization, racism, as well as colonialisms. At the center of each of these strands lies the question of how particular boundaries and meanings are enacted through particular practices and along with which political and ethical consequences; who and what matters and who and what is at the very same moment excluded from mattering.

i. Science, Technology, and the 'Machine-Readable' Body – Race as Technology

Migration in the wake of post-9/11 security policies, the increasing technologization of the borders, as well as their relocation into the body (for example, in the form of biometric analysis and genetic and isotope testing) raise some of the most pressing techno-philosophical questions today. Even though it is important not to lose sight of the fact that borders are not democratic—meaning that not everyone can pass through every border—borders today seem to be nowhere and everywhere at the same time. They can be portable such as ID cards and biometric passports or virtual and thus accessible from everywhere, as is the case for biometric and genetic databases. The technologies and technoscientific practices involved change not only the very meaning and materiality of borders but also of bodies. Yet techno-philosophical analyses trying to take into account these phenomena in their entanglement and with regard to their political and ethical implications still represent a minority.

Asking for technology and the body at the same time almost inevitably evokes the question of what kinds of connections extend between the both. But what if it is not so much a question of connections but of entanglements? What if the body and technology are not two connected poles that somehow interact with each other but rather technologies always embodied technologies and material bodies always already technologized bodies—yet in different ways and with very different ethical and political consequences? What if, material bodies “do not pre-exist as such” but rather materialize together with their particular boundaries always only through “mapping practices”, as Haraway (1991, 201) suggests? What if technology, far from being something external to the body, is always, yet in different ways and with very different consequences, entangled with material bodies? Is it possible to get to a deeper understanding of the processes through which bodies come to matter in both senses of the world in their entanglement with particular technologies and technoscientific practices from which they cannot be separated? Furthermore, what would it mean to understand the technologies and practices involved in the processes of border control as closely linked to what Achille

Mbembe termed “necropolitics”—that is, a particular form of politics that functions as a regulator for “the distribution of death” (Mbembe 2003, 17)?

Technologies certainly create their own possibilities and limitations. But what about the bodies involved? There is a tendency to argue that new biometric technologies are making use of the body as a source of information and an object of control (Dijstelbloem et al. 2011, 7). While such a perspective regards certain technologies as instruments with the potential to read, translate, and transform the material body in many ways, the body itself remains plastic matter. What is more, it is argued that the body as technologically-readable body becomes a component of the machine; although, an entirely passive one. Do material bodies really have to be regarded as mere “machine-readable information storage devices” (ibid., 12) or even as truth machines that could be technologically accessed and read-out? Or is it possible to philosophically determine and trace the potentials of material bodies to be unruly, that is, to disrupt the attempts of their technological silencing and objectification, and with it the belief that technologies function precisely according to specific (social or political) interests that had been embedded into them. If race today does not enter only through the skin, as Frantz Fanon has stressed using the term epidermalization, but is increasingly read off of the very interior of the body, that is, of DNA, isotopes, or the alleged efficiency of certain organs, the question comes up what new materialist theories can set against such attempts of a reterritorialization of race through the means of particular new technologies and technoscientific practices.

But what would such an understanding of technologies, bodies, and agency mean for emancipatory politics and for the desire to pursue more livable worlds? What does such a materialist account mean for race, racialism, and its critique? What would it mean to acknowledge the body as a material semiotic actor, that is, a generative axis of the apparatus of bodily production, as Donna Haraway (1991) states, for the understanding of race? What does it mean to argue that objects and, for that matter, also bodies neither pre exist as such nor that they can be understood sufficiently as mere socio-historical constructions or discursive effects. Would such an account circumvent the limitations of social constructionist theorizations of race and allows us to come to a better understanding of the very processes through which race materializes—not only as meaning and ideology but also as racialized matter/bodies? What might such an account set against attempts of a reterritorialization and a reessentialization of race? Thinking race, and even more the materiality of race, is never innocent. It took a very long time for scholars of color as well as other critical thinkers and political activists to deconstruct the belief that race is a naturally occurring attribute of the

human species. Does that mean that race and, especially, racialized bodies are mere socio-cultural and linguistic constructions? Or does race do matter in both senses of the word?

As Donna Haraway (1997, 213) reminds us, “race is the kind of category about which no one is neutral”. Race clearly matters and it would be shortsighted to believe that racialized bodies are mere linguistic constructions with no material effects whatsoever. Do new materialist figures and concepts provide us with a deeper understanding of not only how racialized bodies come to matter through technoscientific (and other) practices in both senses of the word—that is, how they materialize and become meaningful in the very same movement—but also an understanding of race as a relation and a technique; while racism then would denote the system of producing and legitimating difference. What would it mean to understand race as such a technique or perhaps even a technology in the sense of a specific techno bio political material-discursive apparatus of producing life and death through reading, categorizing, making intelligible, sorting, and hierarchizing bodies? Rather than being pre-existing—that is, a transcendental and supposedly natural—phenomena or, on the contrary, mere social and linguistic constructions, could such an account provide us with an understanding of racialized bodies as effects of material-discursive relations; not matters of fact but matters of concern? Moreover, could such an approach provide an understanding of race as a technique/technology that aims “at permitting the exercise of biopower” (Mbembe 2003, 17) over bodies that have been marked?

ii. Politics of Matter – Re(con)figuring the Political

The second half of the twentieth century was characterized by a turn away from scientific and philosophical realism toward linguistic and social constructionism. In the wake of this turn, metaphysics and ontology were declared to be dead. While thinking and talking about ‘the real’ became the source of such a fundamental discomfort in philosophy that it needed and still needs “to be toned down, softened by the requisite quotation marks” (Barad 2007: 205), the more recent years have been characterized by a re/turn to matter, material objects, and the question of what counts as real. Instead of reawakening essentialism and determinism, however, this heterogeneous philosophical movement is defined by ontological relationalism and openness, understanding material objects, and even matter itself, as agentive forces that are actively involved in the dynamic becoming of the world.

Karen Barad, for example, emphasizes in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) by drawing on the philosophy-physics of Niels Bohr, quantum field theory, and poststructuralist

philosophy that relata do not precede their relations. For Barad, relations “do not follow relata, but the other way around. Matter is neither fixed and given nor the mere end result of different processes” (2007: 136–137). Rather than signifying a property of things matter is always agentive and generative. Consequently, Barad rejects not only the notion of interaction, but also individualist metaphysics. According to Barad, individuals do not pre-exist as such but only within phenomena; that is, particular materialized and materializing intra-active relations. The neologism ‘intra-action’ denotes that ‘objects’ and agencies do not exist prior to the intra-actions (instead of interactions) through which they come to matter in both senses of the word. It is for this reason that Barad understands her account of agential realism as an ‘ethico-onto-epistemology’; that is, as the entanglement of what is usually separated into ethics, ontology, and epistemology. It therefore follows that, for Barad, ethics is about ‘response-ability’, about enabling the response of the Other. Responsibility, thus, is always already integral to the world’s intra-active becoming. Barad provides us with a powerful understanding of matter as “a congealing of agency” (ibid.: 151), rather than as a substance or a thing. However, what remains open is the question of what it means for the philosophical understanding of politics and political agency that there are no such things as individually constituted entities, times, and places. Furthermore, if we—that is, our bodies, thoughts, and lives—are always already entangled in a close web of “ongoing responsiveness” (ibid.: 394), what is the basis for ethical and political action? What does it mean for emancipatory politics that, according to Barad’s concept of ‘agential separability’, entities can always break with their relations and entanglements and enter into (become part of) new relations and entanglements? What is at stake for political philosophy if relata do not precede their relations?

Inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of ‘material vitalism’, Jane Bennett puts forward the idea in *Vibrant Matter* (2010) of ‘a life’ within matter. For Bennett, the term ‘life’ designates “an interstitial field of non-personal, ahuman forces, flows, tendencies, and trajectories” (Bennett 2010: 61). Instead of a mere substance, matter is refigured as “a vitality at work both inside and outside ourselves” (ibid.: 62). Against this backdrop, Bennett develops the concept of a “thing-power” which fundamentally redefines, amongst other things, agency and ethics by assuming that everything within and around us is connected. Consequently, “in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself” (ibid.: 13). By understanding everything as being “in a sense, alive” (ibid.: 117), life itself becomes not only a vital force, but also an ontological foundation. At the same time, however, the question comes up of how such an approach also

reframes philosophical thinking about death as well as the very notion of death and that what, following Achille Mbembe, may be called ‘necropolitics’—a specific form of politics that functions as a regulator for “the distribution of death” (Mbembe 2003: 17).

As Thomas Lemke argues, such a relational account of agency and ontology “may open up an avenue for a more materialist account of politics” (Lemke 2014: 3); or, more precisely, for an actualized understanding of biopolitics after Foucault. In any case, such an account demonstrates the need for a more inclusive form of politics, which explicitly contests human exceptionalism. In contrast to Latour’s ‘parliament of things’, Barad, however, argues that—despite the fact that ‘we’ are always deeply entangled (and part of) a close web of human and nonhuman relations and forces—‘we’ are the ones who are responsible and accountable for that what matters as well as for that what is excluded from mattering. Against this background the question arises how do the very ideas of politics and the political change if matter is understood as agentive or vibrant? Who is recognized as a political actor and on which basis? What is more, do new materialist concepts of a new metaphysics provide us with better understandings of that what Michel Foucault termed ‘governance’? If so, how, if at all, does the governance of humans differ from the governance of nonhumans?

iii. The Colonial Animal and De/Colonizing the Nonhuman

In his position paper “The Postcolonial Animal” (2002), Philip Armstrong writes that the field of postcolonial studies shows little interest in the animal in comparison to its efforts to discuss “other” humans, cultures, and territories. One reason he gives for this, quoting Spiegel (1996, 15-16), is a fear of comparing animal suffering with human suffering: “many people might feel that it is insulting to compare the suffering of non-human animals to that of humans. In fact, in our society, comparison to an animal has become a slur”. So let us ask why? Or, more to the point, in view of new materialist analyses, why should this inattention to the animal, and to the suffering that does not automatically presume that the question of suffering should pivot on the “who” (human subject) that suffers, continue to mark postcolonial theory? What might the nonhuman offer to this line of inquiry? And is it possible that postcolonial theories already share common ground with posthuman agendas?

Armstrong’s discussion encounters a number of ways in which the animal might figure in complex relations with human culture(s) that allow for novel philosophies of ontological existence that do not fold around the rational human subject. As he argues, leaving the animal out of postcolonial discourse may indeed be one of the “colonial legacies of European

modernity” (Armstrong 2002, 414) that presumes an unbridgeable and incomparable distinction between human and animal species. At the same time, this oversight may be calculated, given that the animal resists “the imperialist desire to represent the natural- and specially the colonial terrain- as a passive object or blank slate ready for mapping by Western experts”. I wonder if the unruliness of the animal which resists the colonial terrain can be inspiring fo postcolonial undrestandings of agency and responsiveness in novel ways. Attention to the animal also reveals that, at base, the relationship between human and animal assumes a humanist rationalist self which is fundamental to colonialization. Thus, the nonhuman (animal) actually offers a sharp analytical tool to disassemble the human of modernity that takes centre in postcolonial analysis.

Raising directly the question of suffering and the hierarchies of power that produce and sustain the priority given to certain suffering bodies over others, Armstrong’s argument draws our attention to the entanglement of science and colonization, in particular how it is that bodies have been materialized and understood differently within scientific discourse as well as how bodies are enacted, used, and disposed of as the means of science. In other words, it is the disposability of (experimental) biomatter within biomedicine and the sciences more generally that is at stake here, and what might constitute as killability, or a killable body. In sum, biomatter has transformed (from the human model) into the form of killable bodies of animals. The emphasis here is not on the scientists themselves, but rather on the need to highlight the mechanisms of scientific experimentation that sustain scientific practice and knowledge. In this sense, science is indebted to the biomatter with which it works, and such a debt needs to be admitted, considered, and remembered if we are concerned with the ethics and politics of these practices. Taking this focus demands that we ask: what makes human suffering special and exceptional in comparison to the (non)suffering of that which is not human? What does it mean to mobilize “human” life and suffering far away from the rest of the world in terms of human exceptionalism, killability and necropolitics (Mbembe 2003)? Can we ethically discuss suffering, life, and death without (re)vivifying hierarchies that account for one species’ suffering over others? Can we even say that it is suffering that matters?

Already something of the relevance of these posthumanist considerations for postcolonial discourses might be felt here. The discussions thus far recounted tend to focus on how bodies, science and power have been in an entangled relationship within the modernist sciences, and for this reason they present a curious case for postcolonial critical engagement. When posed within a postcolonial frame, such posthumanist interventions might produce some very

interesting insights for both new materialism and postcolonial studies. What will happen, for example, if we ask Spivak's famous question "can the subaltern speak?" in a laboratory where the inhabitants are the transgenic mice, flies and bacteria? What kind of a "language" could we consider transgenic fruit flies to speak? How can we talk about agency in a fruit fly laboratory at the same time we talk about killability and disposability of fly bodies? Can Barad's concepts of "agential separability" and "constitutive exclusion" be of any use for such this line of questioning?

What should be commented here is that postcolonialism today does not, indeed, if we take Armstrong's argument into account, *is not* restricted to questions of human subjectivity, differences, objectification, power relations, and epistemology. It can engage with the onto-epistemology of science/knowledge in a posthuman era as well as take into consideration the im/possibility of agency/agentiality of the dehumanized Other within the contemporary scientific enterprises that are affected by capitalism and profit oriented policies. Crucially, this assertion involves our asking what a postcolonial theory might look like if it takes the *non-human* as a point of departure. Concomitantly, we are pressed to ask how postcolonial theories transform when we admit, through a new materialist, posthumanist lens, that "we have never been human" (Haraway 2006). And if opening its critical repertoire in this way (or maybe it can be better understood as a diffractive exercise in making an existing critical repertoire visible...), would it be possible for postcolonial studies to stay truthful to its political ambitions? Indeed, having posed the question in this way, perhaps we can put it another way: is it a case that when we bring the question of the non-human to bear in this field of inquiry, we find that our posthumanist political ambitions already resonate with existing postcolonial political and ethical commitments?

As well as taking up with questions of techno-biopolitical colonization of non/human bodies and onto-epistemologies of colonized bodies, central themes in this strand could extend to a postcolonial technopolitics, the Anthropocene, (Bio-)Capitalism, the Nonhuman as figure/figuration, posthuman postcolonialisms.

iv. The Geo-politics of Knowledge and the 'White Episteme' of New Materialism

Issues of relationality and the complications of identity posed through a focus on the posthuman raise questions regarding the nature of power and the political momentum of new materialist inquiry. Along these lines, and with a notion of agency understood in terms of an ontological irreducibility, new materialisms have been criticized in different ways, and by

different scholars, for their lack of a robust engagement with the question of power and politics. Watson and Huntington argue, for example, that new materialisms tend to privilege “only certain human-nonhuman assemblages” (2008, 34). Alternatively, and already expressing a postcolonial sensibility, Sundberg argues that even though posthumanist analysis is a powerful tool in challenging (modernity’s) nature/culture dualism on the one hand, and eurocentric knowledges on the other, it “tends to reproduce colonial ways of knowing and being by enacting universalizing claims” (2014, 33). In other words, Sundberg argues that posthumanism is ultimately built upon eurocentric epistemological and ontological grounds because it takes the nature/culture dualism as its point of departure as if modernist conceptions of science are universal. As such, posthumanism is silent about location and it is silent about an indigenous epistemic.

Adding to this, Sundberg asks “what kind of spaces are posthumanist geographies creating? And, what kinds of subjects?” (2014, 35). In a similar vein, Panelli suggests that posthumanist geographies are bound in and by Eurocentric scholarship (2009). Panelli’s argument raises the question: is posthumanism and new materialism a white middle class western location for those who can afford to leave the question of race, power, identity and subjectivity? Or another way of putting this question is: who can afford new materialism and its politic(al)?

In a lecture at the ICI Berlin in 2013, Jasbir Puar raised similar sentiments regarding new materialism as an epistemological venture. Puar’s concerns were angled at what she identified as the ‘white episteme’ of new materialism that requires intervention, in particular in the areas of Object Oriented Ontology and Speculative Realism. While her understanding (at least in this context) of what constitutes as new materialism is considerably broad, her comments reflect into a recurring critique of new materialism; that it contains a progress narrative that prioritizes affirmation and ‘transpositions’ – or nonlinear and qualitative leaps (Braidotti 2006). According to Ahmed (2012, 180), this politics of transposition implicitly urges us to ““get beyond” categories like gender and race”, that “restrict not only the “capacity to act” but our capacity to think that capacity”.

Related to this, the ways in which matter or materiality is configured in new materialist theorizations is contested on the basis that it implicitly carries a racializing and universalizing gesture. As Irni (2013, 355) observes, this gesture can be found in new materialism’s analytical focus on the posthuman and the more-than-human, conceived as “*the new* – vital and urgent – in contrast to the other, “more traditional” (and implicitly, not as exciting) concerns that include materialist and postcolonial feminism” wherein questions of race and

gender are more rigorously engaged. From a slightly different perspective, Nikki Sullivan (2012, 303) addresses a 'white optics' – a racialized perceptual schema - in new materialist conceptualization. For Sullivan, this whiteness-as-humanness enables, and is reproduced through, the universalizing of agentic matter, understood as “an ontological priority” (2012, 310) that functions as the (reinstalled) “unnamed centre” (2012, 308) of new materialist inquiry and its political and ethical efforts.

The reflexive nature of new materialist inquiry is one that insists upon an unavoidably enfolded methodological gesture – that is, when we inquire we co-constitute – the very *stuff* of our analysis is a dynamic materialising of both the object and the subject of our epistemic interventions. This methodological emphasis has crucial implications for how it is that race and ethnicity, or the continuing impact of colonial relations in shaping contemporary materialities, economies, social spaces and knowledge practices, might be accounted for in and as new materialist onto-epistemologies. It also raises the critical question of how new materialism performs its onto-epistemological work, and indeed whether it is possible to claim that something has been “left out” of new materialist inquiry, without also inquiring into the mechanisms and silences that might overlook such crucial considerations.

From this perspective, we would ask whether it is possible to both acknowledge the importance of these critiques of new materialism, to say “yes” to their concerns, while also performing that doubled gesture of asking *how* new materialist onto-epistemologies might perform such erasures or elisions of race. From here, we could ask a related question: how might we approach or uncover the assumptions about the human and the iterative acts of exclusion that are also potentially at work in critiques of this field, and to ask this from within (what we identify as) a new materialist frame? This query extends to the claims that new materialism itself makes regarding the complicated and entangled nature of identity, pressing us to also ask how we might understand these critiques, or indeed any claim regarding the elision of race within new materialist discourse, if we cannot presuppose that identities such as race and gender operate as fixed grids of intelligibility that are either present or absent from new materialist onto-epistemological performances? Indeed, might these onto-epistemological performances enact, interrogate, and recast issues of race and the human, at the same time that they are also considered to elide them?

Extending this question regarding race a little further, we would also ask how debates organised under the name of Afro-pessimism can relate to the terms of a new materialist onto-epistemology, and in view of a notion of negativity as it operates in these discussions. This inquiry, along with the inquiry into new materialism’s white episteme, are projects currently

being undertaken by Peta Hinton in collaboration with Liu Xin, a completing Ph.D candidate based at Åbo Akademi University, Finland. The section concerning the white episteme of new materialism has been co-authored by Hinton and Xin.

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