

GENDERING THE ANTHROPOCENE?

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Abstract

The essay aims to analyze the relationship between new feminist thinking and the Anthropocene. Although many feminist thinkers point out the risks and difficulties hidden behind the reference to a generic *Anthropos* in the expression “Anthropocene,” feminism has made important contributions to the birth of ecological sensitivity and continues to provide valuable input in attempts to rethink the relationship between human beings, non-humans and the planet. While reviewing in particular some of the most recent trends within feminism, which have tried to imagine new forms of relationship between the human and the non-human based on the principles of recognition and justice, the essay also discusses the materialistic orientation and its potential in addressing issues related to the Earth and all its inhabitants.

Keywords: Epistemology, Ontology, New Feminism, Historical Materialism, Incorporal.

1. *In the name of the Anthropocene*

Is it even possible to combine the notion of Anthropocene with feminist thought?¹ Such a connection is neither simple nor obvious. And this is so for many reasons. The first clear reason is the explicit reference to an *Anthropos* that seems to recall once again the universal subject (and therefore a white, Western and, why not, patriarchal man). A second reason implies a subtler consideration: gender thinking has been deeply involved in challenging the naturalization of differences, starting from sexual differences; in this respect the return to nature supported by the discussion on Anthropocene poses a series of difficulties both on the theoretical and on the practical level.²

1 Cf. N. Theriault, *Gendering the Anthropocene*, <https://inhabitingtheanthropocene.com/2015/05/20/gendering-the-anthropocene/>

2 As Richard Grusin wonders at the beginning of the volume *Anthropocene Feminism*: “Insofar as early feminism begins with a critique of nature, a critique of the

Feminist movements, as is well known, were first in advocating the urgency of environmental issues and the need for radical change in how we relate to the planet,³ as they stressed the insufficiency of biotechnological solutions – through which only specific problems can be solved – and the need to rethink the order of priority of the Earth as a whole. In the 1980s ecofeminism began to spread: as a movement developed within feminism, it aims to combine the advocacy of women’s values and rights with the protection of territories, communities, biosphere and health.⁴ While relying on an intersectional and transversal approach to ecological issues, it combines scientific solutions, questions of justice and values with problems connected to labour exploitation. Contributions in these fields made clear the insufficiency of a purely theoretical point of view and that a reassessment of the relationships of strength and power was due on the economic level, as well as concerning the systems of exploitation of the landscape and the workers conditions.⁵ Although not originally connected to feminism, Vandana Shiva reaches the same conclusions. She argues notably that “maldevelopment” – a process of exploitation, inequality, and injustice – is dragging the world down a path of self-destruction, and she proposes the ideas and processes initiated by Indian women in rural areas as suitable solutions to arrest the destruction of nature and start its regeneration.⁶

idea that gender differences were biological, that gender was natural, how does feminism address the definition of the human as a geological force, the embrace of the naturalness of ‘man’?” (Grusin 2017, p. 9).

- 3 Among the best known texts at the origin of this discussion, see *Silent Spring* by Rachael Carson (1962) considered a forerunner manifesto of the environmental movement and *Le féminisme ou la mort* by Françoise d’Eaubonne (1974) which identifies patriarchal capitalism as the common denominator of the oppression of women and the exploitation of the planet and, finally, *Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?* by Sherry Ortner (1974), where the author argues that the universal subordination of women across cultures is explained in part by a common conception of women as “closer to nature than men” (ivi, p. 73).
- 4 The term ecofeminism was officially introduced in March 1980, in the first conference held in Amherst (Massachusetts), following the *Three Miles Island* nuclear disaster on 28 March 1979. Cf. Shiva and Mies (Eds.) 1993.
- 5 Cf. Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen 1999. In their text the authors introduce a form of “moral economy” which would be able to bring back the values of life, survival, materiality and necessity. By presenting examples of sustainable and supportive economic models, alternative to the dominant paradigm, the authors stress the need for an extension of a set of values and actions already existing in the South of the world, aimed at redefining and restoring the sense of community in relation to nature and its resources.
- 6 See Shiva 1988; and also: Shiva 2012.

In their multiple declinations (feminist animal studies, material feminisms, indigenous feminisms, queer ecologies, feminist science studies, feminist environmental and climate justice analyses, antiracist and anti-colonial activisms) the feminist movements have either stressed how important and urgent it is to think anew our practical, economic and political structures or insisted on the centrality of a rethinking of practical, economic and political structures. Moreover, the idea of linking the exploitation of women to the exploitation of the planet, coupled with the awareness that any kind of discrimination (related to race, gender, class, sexuality, age, ability) is not the result of a personal deficit or of biological deficiencies, but rather stems from socially produced political problems,⁷ qualifies feminism to lead the way today in expressing the voices and views of the non-human.

So let us try to – briefly – outline the critical points raised by recent feminist movements concerning the concept of Anthropocene, and the need to correct its course. A shift in focus is in this respect advocated from the universal model of man in the direction of a *posthuman* model, understood not necessarily as the dissolution of human beings, but as their radical rethinking. To this aim, new forms of knowledge and fundamental practices need to be established in order to once and for all get out of the era of “man” as it has been thought, represented, and studied in the modernity.

2. *Anthropos, who?*

The first problem that the Anthropocene poses to the most recent feminist movements is precisely the expression *Anthropo-cene*. According to Paul Crutzen – Nobel prize winner and “father” of this word – a new era began when James Watt put his steam engine (1763 – 1775) into operation, thus giving rise to the Industrial Revolution. But as Australian cultural theorist Claire Colebrook asks: “Who is this Anthropos who dates himself at the point of the Industrial Revolution or some other mark of his own mak-

7 As Gaard emphasizes: “Queer feminist scholars have documented the ways that erotophobia and hegemonic heterosexuality are not only part of dominant Western ideas of nature but are interstructured with environmental degradation (Sandilands 1994; Gaard 1997). Colonialism, white heteromale supremacy, heteronormativity, and the linked devaluations of the erotic and all those associated with/seen as ‘nature’ – indigenous people, women, nonhumans, queers – intersect to naturalise heterosexuality and heterosexualise nature, together influencing Western culture’s erotophobia” (Gaard 2017, p. 174).

ing? Does this man of the Anthropocene know what he is saying when he makes a claim for ‘we’ humans: who is he when he talks this way? Does this man of the *Anthropos* realize what was required to ask the questions he asks and have the desires he expresses?” (Colebrook, 2017, p. 10).

The question then becomes: “*whose* Anthropocene?”. Inasmuch as the geology and historical conception underlying this definition makes reference to the techno-industrial history that generated the Anthropocene scar, then clearly the *Anthropos* scientists are looking for is still, or mostly⁸, the Western man: “industrial man, *Homo faber*, *Homo economicus*, consumer man, nuclear man” (*ibid.*). First of all, as it has been widely pointed out, this generalization would lose sight of the remaining part of the world’s population that has not contributed in equal measure to the exploitation of the planet’s resources (for this reason Jason Moore has suggested we rather use the term *Capitalocene*). Hence also the resistance opposed by thinkers like Donna Haraway, who to the more widespread Anthropocene prefers a more inclusive “Chtulucene,”⁹ which stands for not only an epistemological but also an ontological overcoming of the human. The discovery that the human body is composed for less than 10% by exclusively human genes, while the remaining 90% is shared with fellow species¹⁰ – bacteria and fungi and other a/biota with which we coexist, and on which we depend to exist – has notably pushed Haraway to look for a name that does not stop at the condition in which we find ourselves, but that takes charge of the interweaving that identifies us no longer as human, but as the result of a constant and continuous interconnection. “To be one is to become with many” (Haraway 2008, p. 4).

8 Within the philosophy of science the contribution of some female scholars has been decisive for a reconfiguration of the point of view. In this regard, Sandra Harding, for example, elaborated the concept of “epistemology of the point of view,” stressing how the way scientists see things is inevitably linked to social position, personal experiences, class, economic condition, sex, and physical structure. This multiplicity, rather than leading to the weakening of objectivity or to the partiality of the points of view, if held together through an inclusive debate, produces greater reliability of judgements. Consequently, greater participation in discussion and research by individuals with different points of view is more likely to produce greater objectivity in scientific practice (cf. Harding 1986). On this point, see Helen Longino’s account (Longino 1990).

9 Haraway takes this definition from the name of the Californian spider *Pimoida Cthulu*, and not from H.P. Lovecraft’s monster, with an extra “h” that breaks the unity of the singular being like a metaplasm.

10 The results achieved at the beginning of the new millennium by the “Human Genome Project” after about fifteen years of research have been decisive in this respect.

Object of dispute are also the narrative formulas that are at the origin of the reflections on the Anthropocene. These are mainly seen as stemming from motion of pride in stating that man has left his indelible seal on the planet.¹¹ According to Stacy Alaimo, the feelings of guilt produced by these actions “appear coated with a veneer of species pride” (Alaimo 2017, p. 90). Furthermore, the widespread aesthetics connected to the Anthropocene, which is often conveyed through static images of illuminated cities, structured in a symmetrical way, without life and movement, conveys the absence of other points of view than the implicit one of man. Often depicted are crossroads of lights, trajectories of travels, networks of colours that cancel out any natural element. Winds, tides, currents, as well as the movements of birds, cetaceans, etc., are never taken into account, as are non-human agencies and trajectories. In these images life disappears. “Where is – asks Alaimo – the map showing the overlapping patterns of whale migrations with shipping and military routes? Or the sonic patterns of military and industrial noise as it reverberates through areas populated by cetaceans? Or established bird migration routes, many of which have been rendered inhospitable to avian life? The movements, the activities, the liveliness of all creatures, except for the human, vanish” (ivi, p. 92).

The landscape connected to the Anthropocene translates then in visual terms what Donna Haraway has defined as “God’s-eye view”, a view that operates a sort of obliteration of all the creatures that inhabit the planet. Once again the risk is to lose the multitude of biological and chemical intersections, as well as the geological transformations that intertwine human and natural histories.

3. Recompose the epistemological fracture

The questioning of the category of Anthropocene also paves the way to two fronts of theoretical reform. The first one supports an epistemological repositioning based on questioning the central position of humans, which does not in the least mean deleting them from the picture. The second one implies an ontological reformulation.

Let us start from the epistemological perspective. As an increasingly transversal approach has been adopted in the field of scientific knowledge,

11 The famous article by Will Stefan, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill’s concludes that “humankind will remain a major geological force for many millennia, maybe millions of years, to come.” Stefan, Crutzen, McNeill 2007, p. 618.

thus effectively reading the phenomena of transformation in the environmental, geological, marine etc. conditions based on the interweaving of different disciplines, similar strategies seem to be required also by the cultural sphere, the way human beings interpret themselves, tell their own story, relate to others and to the non-human, based on a general attitude stepping away from sectionalized thought categories.

The split between nature and culture, built on the firm belief that culture is the prerogative of *humanities*, while nature is the object of observation of hard sciences, replicates a fracture repeated in various areas: from the mind-body to the organic-inorganic, or human-non-human, dichotomous distinctions have led unfailingly to a hierarchy of values widespread across the entire Western culture. Groundbreaking work on this topic was made in the late 1950s by Charles Percy Snow in the book *Two Cultures*, which placed the separation between scientific world and *humanities* at the center of his critique (Snow 2001). Issues connected to communication and experience exchange have generated a stiff division of labour, assigning to scientific and technological research a key role in the social development of a community, and to the humanistic culture the supervision of political choices. Snow criticized the fragmentation of a world that presents itself to human experience as unitary, advocating the need to communicate developments in science through political choices. More recently, at the beginning of the 1990s, Bruno Latour resumed the critique of the distinction between nature and society. He challenged the emphasis placed by science on subject-object and nature-culture dichotomies, linking it to the emergence of the ecological crisis. Latour's famous provocation – “Can anyone imagine a study that would treat the ozone hole as simultaneously naturalized, sociologized and deconstructed?” (Latour 1991, p. 6) – is meant to make clear that things or phenomena cannot be taken as isolated objects but have a hybrid structure that encompasses both cultural and natural dimensions.

Feminist analysis takes up and develops this approach supporting a post-disciplinary practice, based on a different *modus operandi* in humanistic and scientific knowledge that first and foremost overcomes this distinction.¹² Starting from the proposal of the intersectional method (see Crenshaw 1989), which has the merit of showing how biological, social

12 As Åsberg writes: “Ontologically, the world we inhabit is not bifurcated in this simplistic manner, and we have now come to experience the dark side of its rationalistic affordances and profits. Consequently, we need ethical research practices and epistemologies that dare step out of disciplinary comfort zones” (Åsberg 2018, p. 193).

and cultural categories (gender, ethnicity, social class, disability, sexual orientation, religion, caste, age, nationality, species and other axes of identity) interact at multiple, often simultaneous levels, some feminist contributions have insisted on the commonality of experiences and practices and on their contribution to the construction of a common vision of the systematic nature of oppression. And this applies to human beings as much as it does to animals and generally to the non-human. *Posthumanities*¹³ then work to overcome the gap between the two areas of knowledge by elaborating, as Åsberg puts it, “a much-needed type of integrative humanities, a rickety and imperfect engine of discovery fuelled by advanced (more than feminist) philosophy, environmental humanities, cultural science and technology studies, and a street-smart type of postdisciplinarity that keep critique societally relevant” (Åsberg 2017, p. 187; see also: Neimanis et al. 2015)¹⁴.

As Åsberg argues: “If the humanities and the arts can be said to be broadly concerned with the self-reflection and understanding of the human species, the posthumanities comes about when we recognise the relationships between the multiple planetary alterations that go sometimes under the name the Anthropocene” (Peterson 2019). What is at stake is not the content of the single disciplines (ecologism, gender studies, cultural geography, bio-art, postcolonial studies, etc.), but rather a new methodological perspective, which goes beyond classical disciplinary distinctions, not to dethrone human beings, or to replace them with bacteria, animals or robots, but to find “more-than-human” forms of interaction and coexistence. “Feminist posthumanities cover or converse with such postdisciplinary practices. It labels a wide-spread, multi-sited, evolving and growing effort to rework the role of the humanities and their relation to science, technology, art and contemporary society on the basis that our idea of the human is fundamentally reaching its limits, and changing. Feminist posthuman-

13 On the basis of technologies acting on the body, Åsberg prefers to speak not of a postbiological condition, but of a postnatural condition (Halberstam and Livingston 1995), foreseeing not only a revision of the concept of human, but also a revision of that of nature. Cf. Åsberg, Braidotti 2018.

14 In this process of re-elaboration, the body assumes an unavoidable centrality. As Hayles writes: “If my nightmare is a culture inhabited by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being, my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival” (Hayles 1999, p. 5).

ities thus responds to the need for more-than-human humanities” (*ibid.*). Posthumanities do not necessarily postulate an exit from humanity, or the overcoming of its biological limits (as it happens in the trans-humanist perspective), but rather answer the need for a qualitative change in the anthropocentric and androcentric perspective that has defined modern thought in the direction of new forms of human and more-than-human humanities.¹⁵ One further outcome of this repositioning is an epistemology that does not ignore ethical-political consequences. Polemical target of this operation are the Eurocentric “epistemologies of ignorance” (Alcoff 2017), that is to say, the attitude of ignorance that has allowed to perpetuate epistemic injustices consolidated in many European intellectual tendencies during the era of colonialism.¹⁶ The practice of the epistemology of ignorance has separated philosophy from its context, allowing the parallel development on the one hand of universalistic and cosmopolitan discourses and on the other hand of slavery and of the exploitation of human and environmental resources. Overcoming this “veil” means reactivating critical reflexivity. This also means to openly denouncing regimens of exclusivity and ignorance toward otherness, which, in the case here under investigation, is that of non-human beings. This new epistemological viewpoint advocates the overcoming of the typical bifurcations of Western culture (such as black/white, man/woman, hetero/man, civil/wild, to mention just some of the clearest examples) supporting an “embodied and embedded worldliness of knowledge” (Åsberg 2018, p. 196).

15 This is not the place to retrieve the complex humanism-anti-humanism debate. It will suffice to mention the important contribution coming from non-European cultures, from authors like Edward Said, who explains that the modern Western Eurocentric humanist model is not the only possible humanism (Said 2004). Paul Gilroy pursues this tradition and takes a critical distance from post-human discourse by reiterating that we are not all simply human in the same way or to the same extent (Gilroy 2000). Form of humanism are also Avtar Brah’s diasporic ethics, Vandana Shiva’s anti-global neo-humanism, and the African humanism or Ubuntu (cf. Drucilla Cornell, “Exploring Ubuntu: Tentative Reflections,” <http://www.fehe.org/index.php?id=281>).

16 As Braidotti writes: “‘white Man’s burden’ as a tool of imperialist governance assumed that Europe is not just a geopolitical location but also a universal attribute of the human mind that can lend its quality to any suitable objects, provided they comply with the required discipline [...]. This makes Eurocentrism into a qualitatively more pervasive trait than a matter of attitude: it is rather a structural element of Europe’s self-representation, implemented in both theoretical and institutional practices” (Braidotti 2017, p. 23).

Within the debate on the Anthropocene, this epistemology invites us to walk past the human/non-human, living/non-living dichotomy and reject the idea of an exceptionalism of man.

4. *The ontological shift*

The decentralization of the *Anthropos* has consequences at several levels, not least on the ontological one. In particular, in the name of a human-non-human continuity, the distinction between *bios*, understood exclusively as human life, and *zoe*, understood as animal and non-human life, loses all validity. This change in perspective at ontological level has important political consequences, inasmuch as insects, plants, cells, bacteria, the whole planet and the cosmos, are thereby turned into a political arena. For those among feminist thinkers who consider the answers coming from the epistemological perspective somehow unsatisfactory, this ontological turn is of the greatest importance. As Elizabeth Grosz, one of the protagonists of this turn, writes: “when epistemology questions itself and its own conditions of knowledge, its own lacunae and places of unknowing, there is a residue or remainder of ontological issues and concerns that is untouched by epistemology and that may not always be submitted to existing schemas of knowledge, existing forms of grammar and syntax or forms of representation” (Grosz 2017, p. 3). Feminist theory, also, “needs to welcome again what epistemologies have left out: the relentless force of the real, a new metaphysics” (Grosz 2005 p. 32). On this ground, ontological inquiries have developed within feminism, which have led, among other things, to the formulation of a new materialism. Very diversified contributions have emerged in this process, as positions tend to focus, on the one hand, on the central role of life and, on the other hand, on a newly developed idea of materialism. The question is very complex and it will here suffice to say that dealing more closely with nature has produced a full dismissal of the idea of human superiority. The practice of humility, based on which it is no longer the human gaze that determines laws and establishes norms, shifts the focus toward life as (active) “subject” in its own right. New and different objects of analysis (Grosz 2011, p. 16) come then to the fore within a context of open multiplicity, in which the role of the human is no longer that of defining and recognising: “life exists whether we recognise it or not” (Huffer 2017, p. 75).

Social constructivism, subjectivism and epistemology give way to ontological and metaphysical approaches to nature, to the relationship between

form and matter, to the limits of human beings and to the question of life itself (cf. *ivi*, p. 65).

The intrinsic difficulty of this perspectival shift, as pointed out at the beginning of this account, lies in the risk to start playing the game of biopowers, as denounced by Foucault. As soon as the discourse is tied to life, and the human being is reduced to life, or to natural force, all differences and even the different responsibilities that led to the current situation disappear. All guilty, none guilty. Faced with catastrophes and climate change, no difference can be allowed. Against the power of globalisation, a univocal battle needs to be fought, leaving no room for social, cultural, civil, economic differences (see Baucom 2012, p. 4). However, the risk is the return to a neutral ontology that either refers to a “being” endowed with different qualities, from which discrimination on a natural basis is generated (“nature as the naturalization of inequalities”, Braidotti 2017, p. 22),¹⁷ or to being understood as an indistinct force that would annul the differences. This is why it has become urgent to resume the ontological question.

It is in this context that Rosi Braidotti develops her proposal for a relational ontology, based on an idea of life as the indistinguishable interweaving of *bios*, the noble part and intelligence, and *zoe*, as that irrational element that escapes any form of submission to domination and control. Hence her return to Spinozian monistic ontology.

Resting on a monistic ontology – writes Braidotti – drawn from neo-Spinozist vital materialist philosophy, I have proposed cross-species alliances with the productive and immanent force of *zoe*, or life in its nonhuman aspects. This relational ontology is *zoe*-centered and hence non-anthropocentric, but it does not deny the anthropologically bound structure of the human. Anthropomorphism is our specific embodied and embedded location, and acknowledging its situated nature is the first step toward anti-anthropocentrism. This shift of perspective toward a *zoe*- or geocentered approach requires a mutation of our shared understanding of what it means to speak and think at all, let alone think critically. (Braidotti 2017, p. 32).

Braidotti’s idea of a nomadic philosophy of radical immanence “foregrounds embodiment and embeddedness, not disconnection from the thinking organism” (Braidotti 2017, p. 33). Based on this perspective, life is a material that on the one hand is always incorporated and as such ma-

17 This is why, for example, Claire Colebrook dwells in particular on how to understand indifference on the level of ontology, arguing that “Indifference is how we might think about an ‘essentially’ rogue or anarchic conception of life that is destructive of boundaries, distinctions, and identifications” (Colebrook 2017, p. 4).

terial, on the other hand it is also the bearer of cognitive instances. Hence Braidotti's rethinking of the soul-body relationship: "We think with the entire body, or rather, we have to acknowledge the embodiment of the brain and the embrainment of the body" (*ibid.*, see: Clark 1997).

Donna Haraway ventures even deeper, and in *Staying with the Trouble* outlines some sort of crumbling of the mind-body unity in the totality of the earth. Leaving behind her original and well-known cyborg myth, Haraway now presents the figure of *compost*. We are more compost than post-human. We inhabit different forms of *humus*, not humanity. Only by adopting a composting approach can we witness the definitive decomposition of the human being elevated above the body of nature. Compost is the common making of the world, *worlding*.¹⁸

The form of knowledge that emerges from this new situation in which there is no longer an established boundary between what is living in the human being and what is non-living, organic and non-organic contributes to overcoming all traditional ontological and then epistemological categories. In the wake of the rejection of the logic of appropriation, incorporation, and essentialist identification, the outcome is a radical, critical, speculative position of difference.

One of the outcomes that deserves attention in this shift is the surge of a materialistic perspective, that is to say, the idea that matter is the bearer of meaning and develops itself in a dynamic way, in a process of "mattering."

5. *The materialistic turn*

The materialistic turn is not marginal in the relationship between feminism and Anthropocene. It shifts the focus from a discursive criticism of

18 Interesting input can be found in Viola Carofalo's account on Donna Haraway's latest proposal. Compared to her early proposal of the cyborg, "the myth of Chthulucene does not seem to have the same power and fertility. [...] while in the cyborg myth there is intentionality, there is an enormous potential for planning, in this underground ctonic myth there seems to be little more than the search for a refuge, the attempt to remedy the defeat of the human being, not its implementation. [...] What is lost is the project, the activating, immediately political factor of the mythical discourse. If in the cyborg narration it was possible to imagine the overturning of the relations of force that innervated the present society in view of the construction of the future society, in the Chthulucene everything seems already given. The conflict disappears, the project disappears, the resistance remains. But it is a small little resistance. The resistance of spiders who have no other choice but to retreat to their shelter/dwelling, in a welcoming community that seems more fragile than mobile" (Carofalo 2019, pp. 48–49, my transl.).

nature as a human construct to let matter and materiality find their form of expression. As Coole and Frost argue in the introduction to the collection *New Materialism*:

Our existence depends from one moment to the next on myriad micro-organisms and diverse higher species, on our own hazily understood bodily and cellular reactions and on pitiless cosmic motions, on the material artifacts and natural stuff that populate our environment, as well as on socioeconomic structures that produce and reproduce the conditions of our everyday lives. In light of this massive materiality, how could we be anything other than materialist? How could we ignore the power of matter and the ways it materializes in our ordinary experiences or fail to acknowledge the primacy of matter in our theories? (Coole and Frost 2010, p. 1).

In the re-evaluation of the material dimension, the agent-like dynamism of matter takes center stage, to the aim of showing how the becoming of the world is not exclusively an effect of cultural inscriptions or human activities. The new materialism has rediscovered a materiality that materializes, evincing immanent modes of self-transformation that force us to think of causality in much more complex terms; to recognize that phenomena are trapped in a multitude of interacting systems and forces and to consider again the acting capacity of matter. “The codes of the world are not still, waiting only to be read. The world is not raw material for humanization; [...] the world encountered in knowledge projects is an active entity” (Haraway 1998, p. 593).

Matter is conceived as possessing its own way of self-transformation, self-organization, and therefore no longer as passive. In this respect, the idea that agency is only human and that only human beings possess cognitive capacity, intentionality and freedom to make autonomous decisions is seen as obsolete, as all claims to dominate nature also are. The human species is moved back to a place within the natural environment, whose matter is no longer imagined as a massive and opaque fullness, but rather recognized as indeterminate, constantly being formed and reformed in an unpredictable way. Matter is not, it becomes. Thus we observe objects that are formed and emerge within a relationship of fields and bodies in a multitude of organic and social processes. Ontology is developed on many levels, there is no definitive rupture between sentient and non-sentient entities nor between material and spiritual phenomena.

The non-human is no longer just the other who deserves respect, but a “thing” to pay attention to because of its ability to act and its effects on the living organism (Coole and Frost 2010). This vision of materialism distances itself, although it does not totally reject it, from historical materi-

alism.¹⁹ The new feminist materialism – as various works of the last fifteen years have been labeled, including those of thinkers such as Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, Vicky Kirby, Luciana Parisi, Arun Saldanha, and Elizabeth Wilson – deems the results produced by the linguistic or cultural shift in feminist theory, cultural theory, political theory as well as critical studies on race to be insufficient, and considers it risky to leave issues of biology or related to “nature” to reductionist thinking due to the conservative outcomes that might result from it. In relation to the Marxist orientation of historical feminist materialism, the reassessment of nature seems however to determine a non-negligible distance. While historical materialism considers matter as the product of human intentionality and therefore as the effect of practices and choices based in any case on human agency, the new feminist materialism acknowledges also non-human agency. Whereas material in the dialectical tradition refers to the establishment of social and human relationships, for the new feminism it also pervades the sphere of the non-human. The opening to this agent causes an involvement also in terms of affectivity toward the non-human and identifies matter as a constitutive condition of any meaning.²⁰

This change in perspective is a very important step. In a culture where science is handled as legitimate truth, the new materialist feminism makes its voice heard where the male perspective has been largely dominating, and develops a feminist science, a feminist ontology, and finally a feminist metaphysics.

6. *New materialism and Anthropocene*

Concerning the political perspectives opened by contributions to new feminist materialism, it is worth mentioning at least two positions, that of Jane Bennett and that of Karen Barad. In what follows, and by way of

19 On the relationship between traditional feminism and ecological feminism, see Stevens, Tait, Varney 2018, p. 5 f.

20 The autonomy of matter as a source of meaning echoes one of the main points in the criticism of the traditional Western subject as tainted by a marginalising tendency of the other. In this respect, an important step forward has already been taken by dialectical materialism, which stresses the importance of the material conditions in which the subject of knowledge and action finds itself, notably in reference to the historical heritage of Western metaphysics, enlightenment, capitalism, and colonialism. The acknowledgment of these conditionings is necessary in order not to fall once again into a universal notion of the human being that would restore ‘West-centered humanism’ (Schueller 2009, p. 237).

conclusion, I will also make reference to Elizabeth Grosz's most recent proposal and how it opens a new way beyond new materialism.

In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett provides an account of human agency as dependent on non-human forces and theorizes a "vital materialism" that encompasses both human and non-human bodies. In *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Karen Barad develops the theory of "agencial realism". Inspired by Bohr's contributions, her theory shifts from the representational perspective and therefore from a vision linked to the linguistic turn, to the study of intra-actions, that is to say, actions which no longer belong to the human living being alone but which constitute a field of action in constant intersection. Within this perspective, no priority is granted to the subject's gaze, as observer and observed constitute a unity. In this regard, Barad claims that matter is enfolding.

The political fallout of both points of view is particularly interesting. Out of the anthropocentric perspective, Bennett proposes a rethinking of democracy as a place for political exchange not among individuals, but among different entities. Granted that human beings cannot be separated from the non-human world, the democratic theory as developed up to now is misleading insofar as it imagines human beings as autonomous and distinct from the non-human. How can one give "word" to other beings, letting politics no longer remain a purely human prerogative, however, poses some difficulty. Alongside the proposal of a "parliament of things", put forward by Latour,²¹ Bennett suggests that a distinction is needed between objects and things, as to recognise the "power to startle and provoke a gestalt shift in perception" (Bennett 2009, p. 107). What is at stake is to acknowledge that a shift produces a change in our perception not because it is self-produced by our awareness, but because it is the result of the action of things. Unlike Bennett's focus on things, Barad points to the mixing in the observer-observer relationship. In this perspective, since the

21 Latour argues that even though the division between human and nonhuman might have been necessary in order to "increase mobilization and lengthen some networks," it has now become "superfluous, immoral and – to put it bluntly – anti-Constitutional" (Latour 1991, p. 142). It is therefore essential to reconfigure the boundaries of the collective. In the new parliament, all representatives will have to be given the floor. "Let one of the representatives talk, for instance, about the ozone hole, another represent the Monsanto chemical industry, a third the workers of the same chemical industry, another the voters of New Hampshire, a fifth the meteorology of the polar regions, let still another speak in the name of the State; what does it matter, so long as they are all talking about the same thing, about a quasi-object they have all created, the object-discourse-nature-society whose new properties astound us all and whose network extends from my refrigerator to the Antarctic by way of chemistry, law, the State, the economy, and satellites" (ivi, p. 144).

requirements of epistemological representationalism are no longer fulfilled, political representation itself is called into question. As evidenced by Bohr's experiments, it is not possible to measure the electron independently from the photon that measures it (and that conditions the result); similarly, the process of political representation does not entail an inter-action between the subjects of politics, but rather an *intra-action*, which means that the elements are their relations. In other words, it is impossible to think of human beings without considering them in relation to the demands that come from the materiality of their body or from the environment in which they live. Agential realism, Barad argues, considers "the agential contributions of all material forces (both 'social' and 'natural')" (Barad 2007, p. 35)²².

This return to materialism has recently found a reformulation in the work of one of the new materialist thinkers, Elizabeth Grosz. In her work on the *Incorporeal*, she expands her previous position, attempting an understanding not only of materiality but also of the conditions of materiality that cannot be material in themselves. "I believe – writes Grosz – that the increasing emphasis on an ever more open materiality must address what this entails for ideality – for ideas, concepts, for space and time, for language and its capacities to represent, signify, and express" (Grosz 2017, p. 263).²³ Her proposal is "to explore the intimate entwining of the orders of materiality and ideality, the impossibility of a thoroughgoing and nonreductive materialism, a materialism that cannot and should not be opposed to ideality but requires and produces it" (ivi, p. 5). This point is clarified with additional remarks, as further on she claims: "I do not want to privilege ideality over materiality, but to think them together, as fundamentally connected and incapable of each being what it is without the other to direct and support it. Ideality frames, directs, and makes meaning from materiality; materiality carries ideality and is never free of the incorporeal forms that constitute and orient it as material" (ivi, p. 12). The ideal dimension is certainly not to be traced back to the positions of pan-psychism, or to

22 With reference to political discourse, new feminist materialism has been met with criticism. Stephanie Clare, for example, points out that, although the introduction of a new ontology is key to the knowledge of the non-human world, political discourse must remain human-oriented (Clare 2016).

23 In her account on the history of Western thought investigating the forms in which this hybridization takes place, Grosz also mentions Hegel and Schelling, and their attempt to bind together ideal and material. A careful re-reading of Hegel's philosophy of nature can show us how organic and inorganic, living and non-living are inseparably connected and in ontological interdependence. The connection between life and non-life in Hegel's philosophy has been only recently brought back into focus. For more on this topic, I refer the reader to Achella 2019.

the idea of a Creator God conceived as an external force that gives coherence and direction to the world. Rather, it is a question of showing how in the material constitution of the world there is already a meaning or many meanings, values, orientations, potentialities through their own ways of order and organisation, without the need to invoke an independent God who exists separately from this world. While introducing epistemic subjectivity into materialism, Grosz's further shift seems to open up a new field of investigation. As she acknowledges,

this can begin a *new new* materialism in which ideality has a respected place and where these forces of orientation can now be recognized as a condition for and immanent in materiality. Such an understanding of the world as material-ideal, as incorporeal openness, may provide a way to conceptualize ethics and politics as well as arts and technologies as more than human (but less than otherworldly), as ways of living in a vast world without mastering or properly understanding it, as creative inventions for the elaboration and increasing complexification of life in the world of coexistence with all other forms of life and with a nonliving nature (ivi, pp. 13–14).

This last step toward a material-ideal ontology can offer a model of interaction that is able to keep inside not only materiality but also that ideal, not human intentional condition that determines matter. In this perspective there is no longer any hierarchy but only an interconnected and circular reference, where nothing comes before and nothing after, where there is no longer a high and a low but where everything is intimately linked. In this perspective we can accept to call this era “Anthropocene”, but we will no longer feel the risk of it being inhabited by a dominating *Anthropos*.

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