

The somatechnics of perception and the matter of the non/human: A critical response to the new materialism

European Journal of Women's Studies

19(3) 299–313

© The Author(s) 2012

Reprints and permission:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1350506812443477

ejw.sagepub.com



Nikki Sullivan

Macquarie University, Australia

Abstract

Drawing on Sara Ahmed, this article confronts the often repeated claim that feminists and/or social constructionists – even those whose work appears to focus on ‘the body’ – routinely ignore the materiality of corporeal life. This charge is often accompanied by the claim that poststructuralist feminists have, for connected reasons, also ignored ‘non-human animal’ life. This article critically interrogates the ways in which the somatechnics of perception and particular universalizing epistemic sexing practices feed into and out of one another in much contemporary work on ‘animal sex’. It also aims to build on Ahmed’s critique of the founding gestures of the new materialism in and through a close engagement with the work of a small number of theorists who identify with the new materialism.

Keywords

Animality, constructionism, embodiment, materiality, matter, ‘nature’, non/human, perception, poststructuralist feminism, ‘sex’, somatechnics

Like Sara Ahmed, to whom I am eternally grateful for her ‘Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the “New Materialism” ’ (2008), I am increasingly frustrated by the claim, repeated of late with a mantra-like monotony, that (usually nameless) feminists and/or social constructionists – even those whose work appears to focus on ‘the body’ – routinely ignore the matter of corporeal life.¹ What often accompanies claims such as this is the assertion that in their refusal to seriously engage with ‘biology’,

Corresponding author:

Nikki Sullivan, Macquarie University, Media, Music, Communication and Cultural Studies, North Ryde, Sydney, New South Wales 2042, Australia

Email: nikki.sullivan@mq.edu.au

'physiology', 'nature', feminists have also tended to pay scant attention to 'non-human' life forms. This kind of criticism is particularly common in 'animal studies', or, perhaps it is more correct to say that a number of scholars who identify with the new materialism have, of late, turned to the figure of the 'non-human animal' to justify these connected claims. A prime example of this is Myra Hird's article 'Animal trans' (2008), in which the author articulates her interest in 'nonhuman animal' behaviours and morphologies – which, she suggests, have been well 'documented' by the sociobiologists on whose work her thesis relies – 'as part of a wider concern with "new materialism"' (2008: 229). In short, Hird argues that sociobiological accounts of non-human animal sex (as infinitely diverse and physically vicissitudinous) take us to the heart of the matter that feminism either 'forgets' or fails to see. This (constitutive) claim, I contend, exemplifies what Ahmed refers to as a 'founding gesture of the new materialism'. As Ahmed sees it, the routinization of such gestures in the founding of a new field constitutes 'a way of losing sight' of the genealogy of feminist thought (2008: 24). While I agree with Ahmed's critique of 'new materialism', I want to think of the gestures on which this article focuses as less a losing sight (of the genealogy of feminist thought), than as the vehicle and effect of a very particular, situated optics: a somatechnics of perception which engenders what it purports to merely 'observe' – that is both 'non-human animal' sex and/as the matter of new materialism, and the failure of past feminisms to regard² matter *as such*. In doing so this perceptual schema reiterates the dichotomizing gesture it attributes to poststructuralist feminist accounts of corporeality(ies). My argument, then, is that 'matter' is inextricable from the I/eye that perceives it: perception makes 'matter' matter, it makes 'some-thing' (that is no-thing) (un)become *as such*, it makes 'it' intelligible. And nowhere is the somatechnical character and function of perception more clearly demonstrated (and simultaneously denied) than in the 'new materialist' vision(s) of matter articulated in the work on 'non-human animal' sex.

New materialism: A very brief introduction

Much recent work that identifies with what it refers to as 'new materialism' begins from the premise that over the last couple of decades feminism and/or social constructionism has focused on 'culture', 'discourse', 'language', 'the semiotic' and so on, to the detriment of 'matter' (whatever that might mean). For example, feminist philosopher and physicist Karen Barad has made the oft-cited claim that in recent feminist work, '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' (2003: 801). In the introduction to their edited collection *Material Feminisms* (2008) Stacey Alaimo and Susan Hekman put it this way: 'The guiding rule of procedure for most contemporary feminisms requires that one distance oneself as much as possible from the tainted realm of materiality by taking refuge within culture, discourse, and language' (2008: 1) – a claim that in its very making reaffirms a distinction between the thing that feminists have allegedly ignored (materiality) and the thing that they've allegedly focused myopically and obsessively on (culture). Consequently, argue Alaimo and Hekman, while poststructuralist feminists claim to deconstruct binary logic 'there is one dichotomy that they appear to embrace almost without question: language/reality' (2008: 2).

'Postmoderns' they state (without any reference to particular theorists or texts) 'are very uncomfortable with the concept of the real or the material world. . . . postmoderns failed to [perform] . . . a deconstruction of the material/discursive dichotomy that retains both elements without privileging either' (2008: 2, 6). As someone who is deeply imbricated in poststructuralist feminism(s), and is thus implicated in the aforementioned charge, I would like to make it clear that what makes me uncomfortable is not a materialist conception of being-in-the-world, but rather, the distinction between 'culture' and 'matter' (as discernable elements) which, as I demonstrate in due course, is engendered by the new materialist perception of poststructuralist feminism(s) which constitutes what it purports to merely 'observe'.

Materialist feminism, in contrast to its (wilfully?) blinded other, is characterized by Alaimo and Hekman as that which is working to find 'a way to talk about the materiality of the body as itself an active, sometimes recalcitrant force' (2008: 4). Material feminism, they claim, 'takes the materiality of the *more-than-human* world seriously', and believes (*pace* Latour) that 'nature is agentic', that it 'punches back' at humans and the machines they construct to explore it in ways we cannot predict' (2008: 7; my emphasis). 'The body' as it is (re)presented in the vision Alaimo and Hekman offer is imbued with or animated by something (they perceive as) other-than-cultural – a force which, by implication, must, one can only presume, be 'natural', fundamental, *a priori*. Moreover, this 'more-than-human' or 'other-than-cultural' force, this nature as agentic, is clearly conceived as separate from, at odds with and prior to 'humans', and the (instrumentalist) technologies with which we aim to apprehend the world.

One of the most interesting and telling iterations of the association of materiality with 'nature', the physical world of bodies and 'non-human animals', with the 'other-than-cultural', occurs in Rebecca Scott's (2008) interview with Myra Hird. The interview opens with the following all too familiar criticism of unnamed theorists: 'For social constructionists questions of matter are entirely the wrong question. They are no matter. . . . The "natural" world – the world of dirt, worms, trees, bugs, whales, water, atoms, Higgs bosons (maybe) – is left to the scientists' (Scott, 2008: 24). I have to admit, that when I first read this statement I was unfamiliar with Higgs bosons, and so, like any good researcher, I turned to the internet. What I found was mind boggling to say the least, and yet, at the same time, it supported my feeling that there is something quasi-religious³ at work in the writings of the new materialists – at least those whose work I engage with in this article.

The Higgs boson is, or so the story goes, a hypothetical massive scalar elementary particle that has been predicted (by quantum physicists) to exist but which has not been observed *as such*. The existence of the particle is 'postulated as a means of resolving inconsistencies in current theoretical physics', and it has been claimed (without a hint of irony!) that 'if the Higgs boson exists, it is an integral and pervasive component of the material world'.⁴ In other words, the Higgs boson is an article of faith, a sort of placeholder for all that we don't (yet) understand, a black hole that we look to to make sense of life and all its seeming inconsistencies. The Higgs boson, also allegedly known as 'the God particle', has been described by physicists Howard Haber and Michael Dine as 'the one missing piece of our present understanding of the laws of nature'.⁵ What a vision! – one in which scientists are able to see the all-important truths that feminists

have either unwittingly missed, or blindly refused to see. What was it that Irigaray said about the 'same old stories' reproducing the same history? 'The same. Same. Always the same' (1985: 205).

As I noted earlier Ahmed refers to criticisms of past feminist work such as those made by Barad, Alaimo and Hekman and Scott as 'the founding gestures of the new materialism' (2008: 23). A founding gesture is, of course, a move that establishes identity in and through differentiation, and as such, the premise that engenders the new materialism could, as I suggested earlier, be thought of as an effect and a function of a particular somatechnics of perception (rather than as a statement of fact), of a situated optics that constitutes both past feminisms and itself (as 'new', unique, insightful, visionary) in and through a process of differentiation that in perceiving/positing its other as somehow inadequate, wrong-sighted and so on, disavows the debt to the other that, I argue, is at the heart of unbecoming-with.

Somatechnics of perception

A few years ago, a number of colleagues and I coined the term somatechnics in order to highlight what we see as the inextricability of soma and techné, of bodily-being-in-the-world, and the *dispositifs* in and through which corporealities, identities and difference(s) are formed and transformed, come to matter, if you like. Somatechnics, then, supplants the logic of the 'and' (thereby moving beyond instrumentalist logic), suggesting that technés are not something that are added or applied to 'the body', nor are they simply tools the already-constituted body-subject manipulates to its own ends. Rather, technés – in the Heideggerian sense – are techniques and/or orientations⁶ (ways of seeing, knowing, feeling, moving, being, acting and so on) which are learned within a particular tradition or ontological context (are, in other words, situated), and function (often tacitly) to craft (un)becoming-with in very specific ways. Perception, then, is both the vehicle and effect of a particular situated somatechnics, an orientation to the world in which the I/eye is always-already co-implicated, co-indebted, co-responsible.

I want to begin to flesh out this notion of a somatechnics of perception by means of an anecdotal entry from the journal of Janet Schaw, an 18th-century Scottish 'Lady of Quality'. On a visit to Antigua in 1774 Schaw wrote of an incident that tells us much about the somatechnics of perception and its role in the somaticization, the coming-to-matter, of the non/human. Proceeding on foot from St Johns Harbour to her lodgings, the newly arrived Schaw was startled by 'a number of pigs [that] ran out at a door, and after them, a parcel of monkeys' (1923: 78). This, she writes, 'not a little surprized me, but I found what I took for monkeys were negro children, naked as they were born' (1923: 78). 'The [oscillating] gaze that in the brilliant light of a Caribbean morning, played between children and monkeys, unable . . . to decide the humanity of the dark beings on which it settled, was not', argues Warren Montag, Schaw's alone; it was a mode of perception, a way of seeing/knowing, that 'enveloped her', that 'saw through her' (1997: 292), in which she was 'co-implicated'; a perceptual schema that, in some senses at least, is, as this article will demonstrate, no less operational today than it was two and a half centuries ago. Indeed, it is, I contend, apparent in the work of the new materialists discussed in this article.

Elsewhere,⁷ I used the phrase ‘white optics’ to refer to this perceptual schema, since here whiteness functions, as Montag notes, not simply as a human attribute, a racial characteristic, but rather, ‘as the very condition of one’s humanity, one’s species being’ (1997: 285). To put it somewhat differently, whiteness-as-humanness is integral to a specific, situated, somatechnics of perception which helps constitute the necessary background from which Schaw knows her ‘self’ and (her) ‘others’. This ontological background, or in Heideggerian terms, the orderability of the context in which Schaw comes-to-be/see/know, involves the veiling over of co-indebtedness, co-responsibility, co-articulation (or ‘granting’ as Heidegger calls it) as the ground of ontological possibility, of (un)becoming-with, and simultaneously, the being-haunted by that which necessarily threatens ordering.

In an earlier article⁸ I argued, drawing on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Linda Alcoff, that visuality is the effect and vehicle of sedimented contextual knowledges, rather than a neutral process that provides access to empirical objects/facts,⁹ and that ‘the realm of the visible, or what is taken as self-evidently visible’ (and/or visibly self-evident) is ‘the product of a specific form of perceptual practice, rather than the natural result of human sight’ (Alcoff, 2001: 268). Roger Lancaster makes a similar claim when, in his critique of ‘sex’ as it is conceived and/or constituted in scientific texts, he states, ‘physical bodies, like the material world that encloses them, really exist. But . . . nothing is actually self-evident about what will be *seen* as self-evident in the nature of the body. . . . what so often appears self-evident and timeless . . . belongs to history, not to nature’ (2003: 36, 72–73). For Lancaster, then, as for Merleau-Ponty, perception is ‘an embodied social and collective art’ (2003: 67), one that constitutes ‘things’ as similar or different, familiar or strange, worth note(ic)ing or not, worth reporting or not. Such ‘things’, argues Lancaster ‘are not self-evident in the nature of the world. They depend on what perspective one takes – or refuses to take’ (2003: 67).

The model of perception elaborated by Lancaster, Alcoff, and more generally, Merleau-Ponty, allows us to conceive Schaw’s (somewhat unstable) vision of species-being as visibly self-evident as something other and something more than symptomatic of individualized racism. What we see instead is that visuality is, by definition, an ethico-political phenomenon in which the Is/eyes that see are always-already co-implicated, co-indebted, co-responsible: that the perceptual schema that engenders the vision Schaw offers us is crafted (shaped and structured) by shared, situated, tacit knowledges sedimented in visceral sensibilities. ‘This is knowledge not that one *has* . . . but that one *is*’ (Boddy, 1998: 105). In other words, perception is always-already ‘of-the-world’, always already a co-constitutive ‘seeing-with’ that shapes the seer and the seen, the knower and the known, such that they are always intertwined (although never reducible to one another).

Alcoff’s discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s well-known account of the blind-man’s stick as an instrument in and through which he habitually perceives rather than consciously interprets the world, further illustrates this point. Arguing that interpretation is inseparable from perception, Alcoff states, ‘Our experience of habitual perceptions is so attenuated as to skip the stage of conscious interpretation and intent. Indeed, interpretation is the wrong word here: we are simply perceiving’ (2001: 276). Given this, we might conclude that the perceptions that Schaw offers her readers are both constituted by the

environment in which they occur, and at the same time, are constitutive, they shape the world and those in it in accordance with dominant ontologies, and in particular with idea(1)s regarding the non/human.

Seeing the non/human

The story of what Janet Schaw saw provides, I suggest, an interesting segue into an interrogation of recent accounts of non-human animal behaviours and morphologies as envisaged by a number of theorists who identify with 'new materialism'. In particular it illustrates the importance of asking repeatedly how perception (as a situated somatechnology) shapes what the tellers of (some) stories claim merely to observe in their encounters with non/human others. In short, it raises the question of the 'how of somaticization',¹⁰ a question I want to now bring to bear on more contemporary accounts of non/human others.

In a paper entitled 'Animal trans' (2008), Myra Hird claims that 'non-human animals have, for some time now, been overburdened with the task of making sense of human social relations'. Non-human animals, she notes, 'supposedly exemplify human animal qualities like the family, fidelity, . . . and perhaps above all, sex complementarity' (2008: 227). Given this tendency, Hird recommends that we exercise caution when citing the behaviour of non-human living organisms in discussions of human sociocultural relations, but despite this warning she nevertheless suggests that 'the recognition of sex and sexual diversity amongst nonhuman animals' (2008: 229) may have much to offer our impoverished understanding of the matter of sex, gender and sexuality.

The focus of the paper is, as the title suggests, transness in animals, the study of which, Hird argues, 'might make a useful contribution' (2008: 230) to what she identifies as the tendency, in feminist literature, to *either* conceive trans as unnatural and thus inauthentic – a position which relies on and reinforces a purely determinist biologicistic model of sex – *or* as performatively transgressive – a claim which Hird argues is made from a sociocultural perspective 'as though trans is a distinctly human enterprise' (2008: 234). As Hird sees it, both perceptions are problematic insofar as they rely on a binary opposition between nature and culture, and privilege one of these terms over the other. In doing so, both miss what Hird refers to as 'the physical vicissitudes' in and through which trans (as both change and movement across, transition and transgression) occurs.

As I said earlier, Hird situates both her critique of what she perceives as dichotomous feminist accounts of trans, and her interest in 'non-human animal' behaviours and morphologies 'as part of a wider concern with "new materialism"' (2008: 229). Hird's attempt to counter the radical feminist view of trans as inauthentic (because 'unnatural') and (what she sees as) the cultural constructivist view of trans as some sort of 'distinctly human [read discursive] enterprise' draws on Elizabeth Wilson's claim that 'by taking on board Darwin's finding that "nature is already generatively and happily perverse", feminist theory might reconsider the ways in which this natural perversity [might] reorganize our culture-centric theories of difference, embodiment and identity' (Wilson, 1998, cited in Hird, 2008: 242). In order to move beyond the so-called culture-centrism in which feminism allegedly finds itself mired, and to which it is blind, and to illustrate this idea of nature as 'happily perverse', Hird turns to the polygendered, polysexual world of

'non-human animals', of 'nature' (and the two seem to be conflated here and in much of the new materialist work that turns to 'non-human animals'): a world which Hird claims has been well 'documented' by sociobiologists.

Moving on from the work of feminists and trans theorists whose visions are constituted as, in various respects, myopic, Hird turns to the realm of science, or more particularly, sociobiology, from which she gleans an array of 'facts', of which the following are a few examples. In support of the idea that sexuality is naturally diverse and that this fact counteracts the popularly held assumption that 'non-human animal' sex is primarily heterosexual and reproductive, Hird cites Paul Vasey's work on primates in which he claims that 'homosexual behaviour is part of our evolutionary heritage: it can be traced back at least 24–37 million years' (2008: 235).¹¹ Alongside this is Bruce Bagemihl's claim that 'homosexual behaviour occurs in over 450 different species of animals, is found in every geographic region of the world, in every major animal group, in all age groups, and with equal frequency amongst females and males' (2008: 235).¹² Similarly, Hird suggests that 'non-human animals' engage in a wide variety of sexual behaviours commonly 'classified as abnormal' (2008: 244). Thus she cites G Krizek's documentation (her word) of 'a sexual interaction between two different orders of insects, a butterfly and a rove beetle' (2008: 244). And, citing David Policansky's work on 'sex change in plants and animals', she argues that in turning to the natural world, the world systematically ignored and/or perceived as limited and limiting by feminists, we see sexual diversity in all its (natural, universal, changing and yet transhistorical) glory. In other words, for Hird and those whose work she cites, sex, as both an act and an identity, is visibly self-evident, even as it is multiple and shifting. What Hird's universalizing vision necessarily excludes, then, and what it shares with Janet Schaw's perception, is any sense that the species-being (in the Foucauldian sense)¹³ of the creatures who cross her path is 'the product of a specific form of perceptual practice, rather than the natural result of human sight' (Alcoff, 2001: 268).

There is much that troubles me about the visions of 'non-human animal' life that we are offered in 'Animal trans', not least the fact that each seems to lack any sense of the other's alterity, or of the role of the other in the constitution of the self (even when, for example, so-called cross-species encounters are cited to substantiate an understanding of identity as relational). In each case, organisms perceived as belonging to a particular species (in terms of 'genus' and 'sexuality') are looked *at*, their being is interpreted (and thus constituted) in and through a perceptual schema that is particular to those who are doing the looking; a universalizing (anthropomorphic and/or colonizing) heteronormative optics that reduces alterity to its own terms, in much the same way as the encounter between Schaw and the anonymous 'non-human' 'negro children' does. But as Donna Haraway reminds us in *When Species Meet*, 'species flourishes, lethally, in the entrails of humanism. . . . Species reeks of race and sex' (2008: 19) – a claim that is clearly illustrated in the sociobiological visions of so-called sex diversity that Hird cites. In the examples given there is no consideration of visibility and thus, I would argue, no real attempt to see *otherwise*. There is no acknowledgement that in and through the encounters that take place, both self and other, 'the human' and the 'non-human', 'the heterosexual' and 'the homosexual', come to matter in very specific, situated ways, or that, as Haraway notes, 'species of all kinds, living or not, are consequent

on a subject- and object-shaping dance of encounters' (2008: 3). Rather, the assumption that (in)forms the perceptions Hird offers the reader is that identity and difference (the matter of species-being) precede the encounter, are independent of it, and ultimately, are fundamentally unchanged by it.

To give Hird her due though, she does not (unlike some of the sociobiologists she cites) (re)present these visions of what Bagemihl refers to as 'biological exuberance', or Roughgarden names 'nature's rainbow' in order to simply identify particular organisms *as queer* (although there is a sense in which her work does – inadvertently it seems – do this). In fact, she is critical of an earlier article in which she made such a move and says:

. . . the problem with my [earlier] argument, it seems to me now, is that I read nonhuman living organisms through the lens of queer, rather than critically reflecting upon how we socio-culturally constitute queer and how we might read queer through a nonhuman lens. . . . we need to resist the temptation to name certain species as queer. . . . It is much more interesting to consider how we might understand trans in humans from, say, a bacterial perspective. (2008: 242–243)

While I agree with Hird regarding the problematic of naming, I am perturbed by the idea that we might see from the perspective of the Other, or, from something other than a sociocultural perspective (whatever that might mean). If, as I suggested earlier, 'social conventions [are] anchored in sensibilities' (Boddy, 1998: 105), and therefore each of us is 'in' a perspective, rather than simply 'having' one (Alcoff, 2006: 117) then it is not possible to simply abandon, throw off, or replace one's perspective with an *Other's*, at will. To presume that we can, or that we should see from the perspective of the Other is no less imperialist, I would argue, than assuming what Donna Haraway refers to in 'Situated knowledges' as 'the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere' (1988: 581).

But perhaps I am being less than generous in my reading of Hird's suggestion. In a footnote, a couple of pages prior to the question of 'how we might understand trans in humans from . . . a bacterial perspective', Hird cites Donna Haraway's 'More than metaphor', an article in which the author suggests that the *Mixotricha paradoxa*, a minute single-celled organism that lives in the gut of the South Australian termite, troubles the Logic of the One since 'it' 'lives in a necessary symbiotic relationship' such that 'its' being, 'its' borders, are indiscernible as such. In short, as Haraway sees it, *Mixotricha paradoxa* is illustrative of what she refers to as 'companion species', of '(un)becoming-with' as co-constitutive, heterogeneous, multiplicitous and ongoing. Perhaps what Hird is suggesting, then, is *not* that it may be possible (or beneficial) to take up the position of the bacteria as a singular, situated being (or species), to see from its point of view, but rather, that the development of other – what Haraway calls diffractive rather than reproductive – perceptual schemas or optics may better enable an understanding of '(un)becoming-with'.¹⁴ On this alternative model of visibility, seeing is always already 'seeing-with', perception is a mode of co-constitutive (un)becoming carnal. But, even if we read Hird's call in this way, there nevertheless remains the problematic conflation in her schema, of seeing otherwise, of 'reading through a nonhuman lens', with a move beyond (the limits of) 'culture-centrism' which she associates with a particular kind of poststructuralist feminist enterprise; one that overlooks, fails to recognize, or misperceives that which is seemingly beyond or other than, 'culture'.¹⁵

These founding gestures (which are central to Hird's thesis, and typical of new materialism more generally) seem to me to share much with the somatechnics of perception at work on that hot December day in 1774 when Janet Schaw encountered the anonymous 'non-human' 'negro children', the metonymic remainder if you like, whose assumed (species) being was so central, and yet seemingly so alien, to her own.

For Schaw, however, the problem lay (at least as she saw it) not with her vision, but with its object: the little black creatures whose appearance (momentarily) disturbed the orderability of the ontological context in which she comes to be (human). For writers such as Hird, Scott, Barad and Alaimo and Hekman, on the other hand, the problem with dominant contemporary feminist vision lies not with its object, but with the eye that refuses to turn towards 'the material' and those things with which matter is allegedly most intimately associated: the physical body (DNA, blood, viscera),¹⁶ the world of 'nature' ('non-human animals', plants, hurricanes¹⁷) and, of course, sex. And again, I am reminded of Irigaray's critique of the veracity of the same old stories, in particular, stories about sex (in all senses of the word). But if, as my earlier engagement with what Janet saw suggests, perception (as a situated somatechnical practice of knowledge/identity production) constitutes that which it presumes to merely apprehend, and is, in turn, shaped by it, then vision and its object are inextricable. Given this, what is at stake in both new materialism generally, and in new materialists' accounts of 'non-human animal' behaviours and morphologies, is the somaticization of matter: the mutual engendering of the *how* and *what* of perception. Given this, let us turn, now, to the question of matter.

The matter of matter

In the interview with Rebecca Scott mentioned earlier, Myra Hird claims that despite the commonly held perception of matter as 'inert, stable, concrete . . . and resistant to socio-historical change'¹⁸ (Hird, 2004: 224; see also Soper, 1995), 'matter completely has its own agency, it's like the "thingness of the thing"' (Scott, 2008: 28). The 'thingness of the thing' is a phrase Hird borrows from Latour (2004), for whom a thing is a gathering, a coming together of participants in a generative, ongoing process. This would seem to imply that for Hird the thingness of the thing is less a static innate essence, than what molecular biologists refer to 'pluripotent life' (always-already relational, continuously unfolding potential). At the heart of the new materialist vision, then – or at least of that vision as it is re-presented by Hird – is a notion of the agency of matter as the thingness of the thing. Agency, writes Barad (whose thinking clearly influences Hird's thesis), is not an attribute, but rather 'the ongoing reconfigurings of the world' (Barad, 2003: 818), and matter is less a substance than a 'doing', a process. However, we are unlikely to perceive matter as agential (un)becoming (as what I understand, *pace* Butler, as materialization), claim Hird, Barad, Latour and others, unless we move beyond (the limits of) social constructionism which Latour argues has come to dominate the social sciences, and towards what he refers to in an interesting choice of phrase as a 'new scientificity' or 'second empiricism' (2004: 246).

It would perhaps make sense at this point in the article to turn to the work of Latour and engage directly with the concepts cited above. However, as someone whose ways of

seeing, knowing, being, feeling and so on have been profoundly shaped by feminism and poststructuralism I am both sceptical about, and uncomfortable with, the idea that we must turn to the voice of authority (in the guise of science or male philosophers) in order to see clearly, and so for strategic ethico-political reasons, I will resist such a move. Likewise, I refuse to simply accept the claim that those whose work has most interested and inspired me are at best one-eyed, and at worst, wilfully blinded to the hydra-headed nature that they allegedly fear may fix them to that which they have worked so hard to escape. Why, I am left wondering after having read a plethora of 'new materialist' writings, do we need to turn to 'scientific' studies of bonobos, bowhead whales, bighorn sheep, buffbreasted sandpipers, aphids, to see physical intimacy as radically diverse? Why do we need to look to bacteria (or, more correctly, to contemporary scientific perceptions of bacteria as a form of species-being) in order to envisage our 'selves' as other than singular bounded beings whose identity is innate and unchanging? Why the conflation between animality (as other-than-cultural) and matter as agential? – a conflation made explicit in Birke et al.'s claim that a focus on animal agency (rather than on animals as passive objects of study) can 'pose the question of the agency of matter in complex new ways' (2004: 176). *How* exactly, I wonder, does the former enable the latter? What is it about 'animal agency' that makes such a revisioning possible? Why *animal* agency? Surely it is possible to reconceive 'being' as 'unbecoming-with' without focusing (or at least without *having* to focus) on 'animal agency' (one has only to think, for example, to the work of Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, Rosalyn Diprose, Gayatri Spivak, Donna Haraway, Margrit Shildrick, Gail Weiss, Helen Longino and so on, to see that this is the case). And if it is possible to do so, then why the call in so much of the work that identifies with new materialism to look to/at so-called non-human animals, and, more particularly, non-human animal sex?

The answer, in a nutshell, at least as I see it, is that at some level, the theorists I've engaged with in this article perceive the 'other-than-human' (read 'non-human animal') as somehow closer to 'nature' than 'the human', and here 'nature' is where pluripotent life is most visible, where pluripotency matters. Hence 'nature' *is* pluripotent life, and vice versa, and 'sex' comes not simply to symbolize this, but rather, is constituted as the indexical embodiment of pluripotency (as agentic matter). What we have here, then, is a universalizing ontology, the antagonisms internal to which are illustrated in the perceptions of the new materialists I've discussed in much the same way that they are in Schaw's account of her dis-orienting encounter in Antigua. Moreover, in order for pluripotent life as nature (in the sense of agentic matter) (and vice versa) to function as a sort of unnamed centre, as the God particle which becomes visible through its postulation, boundaries must be drawn between 'it' and all that is not 'it', between those who see it, and those who don't. And of course, these boundaries must be virulently policed, as the following example demonstrates.

In a critique of the work of Judith Butler which functions as what Ahmed refers to as a founding gesture, Barad argues that Butler's theory of materiality is problematic on two related counts: first, 'it reinscribes matter as a passive product of discursive practices rather than an active agent participating in the very processes of materialization' (2003: 821) – a claim that from my perspective is simply wrong. And second, 'it is limited to an account of the materialization of human bodies or, more accurately, to the construction

of the contours of the human body' (2003: 821). In other words, as Barad sees it, Butler's work misperceives matter as static, is limited by its myopic focus on the human, and – and this is the crucial point – these failures of vision are *structurally connected*. Thus it seems that for the new materialists I've cited, the problem with Butler's work and with the work of other poststructuralists who critically interrogate discourse, culture and so on, is that their failure to focus on so-called non-human life forms, on (in some cases at least) 'nature' as some sort of perverse generativity or pluripotency, is an effect of structurally excluding 'matter', and vice versa. As Sara Ahmed so aptly puts it in her critique of new materialism, 'the point of entry for the construction of this field is the critique of past feminism for not engaging with matter *as such*' (2008: 32; my emphasis). And here I can't help but recall Gayatri Spivak's claim that 'the body *as such*' is the effect of a particular perceptual schema (one that presupposes its being and is thus shaped by that presupposition) rather than *something* a neutral, free-floating perception can recognize *as such*. She states in a 1994 interview with Ellen Rooney:

I would say that biology, a biology, is one way of thinking the systematicity of the body. The body, like all other things, cannot be thought as such. . . . You know, if one really thinks of the body as such, there is no possible outline of the body as such. . . . There are thinkings of the systematicity of the body, there are value codings of the body. The body, as such, cannot be thought, and I certainly cannot approach it. (Spivak, 1994: 177)

Similarly, in his critique of the instrumentalist orientation to technology, Heidegger writes, 'when man [*sic*], investigating, observing, ensnares nature as an area of his own conceiving, he has already been claimed by a way of revealing that challenges him to approach nature as an object of research, until even the object disappears into the objectlessness of standing-reserve' (1977: 19). If we replace 'nature' with 'matter' here, Heidegger could well be referring to what I see as the expediting (*Fördern*) orientation that informs the new materialist writings with which I have been engaging and that constitutes the world and/of others as raw material ('standing reserve' or *Bestand*) to be used in an ordering that is ends-driven and yet, ironically, without end.

To put it another way, without wanting to homogenize the work of those theorists who identify with new materialism, I nevertheless would suggest that the founding gestures I've examined in this article presuppose something called matter – albeit some 'thing' whose substance, whose boundaries are relational, undecidable, and constantly in flux – and in doing so, constitute 'it' (matter) as *a priori*. For example, Hird writes, 'while feminism has cast light on social and cultural *meanings* of concepts such as sex, gender, and sexual difference, there seems to be a hesitation to delve into the *actual physical processes* through which stasis, differentiation and change take place' (2008: 230; my emphasis). Similarly, Barad suggests that 'any robust theory of the materialization of bodies would necessarily take account of *how the body's materiality* – for example, its anatomy and physiology – . . . *actively matter[s] to the processes of materialization*' (2003: 809; emphasis in original). Here, matter is given an ontological priority, and, as we have seen, is metonymically associated with 'physical processes', with 'anatomy' and 'physiology', and elsewhere with 'non-human animal' behaviours and morphologies, which in and through this perceptual schema are posited as 'more-than- or other-than-cultural'. It is a small, and seemingly logical step then to imagine

'sex' in terms of agentic physical/material processes – the ejaculation of semen, the contraction of nerves, increased blood flow, muscular spasms, the production and release of pheromone-soaked scent and so on, which combine in ways that make sex as an act which occurs (usually, but not always) between members of a particular species, visibly self-evident. However, what I hope my analysis of the somatechnics of perception at work in the writings of the new materialists discussed makes apparent, is that this particular vision constitutes life in terms of species-being (matter/non-matter, culture/more- or other-than-culture, human/non- or other-than-human, heterosexual, homosexual, polysexual and so on) rather than simply describing that which, despite feminism's inability to perceive it, always-already exists *as such*.

In conclusion, then, I want to propose that just as what Janet saw two and a half centuries ago was shaped by the universalization of whiteness-as-humanness, the (new materialist) looking at or to so-called 'non-human animals' – as a counter to what is perceived as 'culture-centrism' – is both an effect and a vehicle of the universalization of matter. And here matter, envisaged as 'empty, defined only negatively by what it is not' in much the same way as whiteness is, can be considered, I want to suggest, borrowing from Cynthia Kraus, as a 'place-holder that has enabled the critical gesture of denaturalising the natural by border-crossing' (2000: 157), and, at the same time, as 'a naturalized effect produced by the very gesture of denaturalising boundaries that are usually posited themselves as natural divides' (2000: 157), culture/nature, human/animal, representation/reality and so on. To put it more simply, while, on the one hand, what we might think of as the new materialist optics presents us with a vision of (un)becoming as always-already inter-/intra-relational, on the other hand, such an optics functions in and through the rearticulation of a culture/matter split, and, by association, the (constitutive) appropriation of both the (bad) feminist other, and the (good) non-human other as raw material ('standing reserve' or *Bestand*) to be used in an ordering that is ultimately ends-driven and yet, ironically, without end. This being the case, we are, as Warren Montag claims, no less 'imprisoned in the limits' of universalizing optics than was Janet Schaw and the pigs, monkeys/negro children whose (un)becoming-with tells us so much about the 'how of somaticization' and the somatechnics of perception.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. For example, Elizabeth Wilson states 'the body at the centre of these [feminist] projects is curiously abiological – its social, cultural, experiential, or physical construction having been posited against or beyond any putative biological claims' (Wilson, 2002, cited in Alaimo, 2008: 237). Similarly, Susan Alaimo claims that 'feminist cultural studies, profoundly influenced by theories of social and discursive construction, have embraced the cyborg as a social and technological *construct* . . . but have ignored, for the most part, the *matter* of the cyborg, a materiality that is as biological as it is technological' (2008: 244). For other examples, see Ahmed (2008).

2. I use this term to refer both to the act of carefully observing, and to the holding in high esteem.
3. Indeed, 'bodies' and 'natures' (as other- and more-than human and/or cultural) and the 'stuff' that binds them (that is, matter) take on the status of a sort of holy trinity in much new materialist work: at once esoteric and yet somehow knowable, at least if one looks hard enough and well enough, and retains an unwaivering faith in one's (unmediated) powers of perception
4. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Higgs_boson (accessed 10 March 2010).
5. www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=what-exactly-is-the-higgs (accessed 27 September 2010).
6. For an insightful account of Heidegger's notion of orientation and its usefulness for feminism and/or queer theory, see Ahmed (2006).
7. See Sullivan (2007).
8. See Sullivan (2005).
9. As Paul Lancaster notes, 'Paul Rabinow, Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour have all, in different contexts, pointed out, "fact" and "factory" both derive from the common Latin root, *factum*, meaning "something made", "something fashioned", "something done"' (Lancaster, 2003: 67). In other words, facts are, in the Heideggerian sense, crafted, they are the vehicle and effect of particular techné, particular learned ways of seeing and knowing, particular orientations to the world, rather than *a priori* things-in-themselves.
10. I borrow this phrase from Noela Davis (2009)
11. I would argue that this is less an empirical fact, than the truth-effect of a particular perceptual practice, a situated 'optics', if you like. In the critique of 'homosexuality' as a transhistorical, universal fact, queer theorists have provided detailed examples of the significantly different ways in which what we might think of as same-sex acts have been interpreted, evaluated, positioned and lived, have, in short, come to matter. See, for example, Sullivan (2003).
12. In his critique of sociobiological narratives, Roger Lancaster writes, first, what occurs is that 'concepts, relations and activities characteristic only of humans – "society", "bonding", "hierarchy", "slavery", "rape", "harem" – are used to describe animal behaviours. Then, the very behaviours so described – anthropomorphized – are invoked to shed light on human social practices. Nothing escapes, nothing exceeds, this closed circle of reification and fetishism' (2003: 61). And one might well add to this list of 'relations and activities characteristic of humans', homosexuality, which Bagemihl takes to be visibly self-evident, but which queer theorists have convincingly argued is a relatively recent, primarily western, concept.
13. In *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, Foucault maps what he sees as a shift from the punishment of certain (sexual) acts, to the identification and condemnation of certain types of people. In a discussion of what he refers to as 'a new specification of individuals', he writes: 'As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than a juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood in addition to being a type of life, a life form. . . . The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a *species*' (1980: 43; my emphasis).
14. For a discussion of Haraway's account of these different ways of seeing, see Sullivan (2006).
15. There is no real consideration of the term 'culture' in Hird's essay.
16. It is often the case that those associated with new materialism speak of, for example, 'blood' as if it is a thing-in-itself. For an example of this tendency, see Fraser and Valentine (2006).

17. See Tuana's (2008) essay which, as she states, was motivated by 'the urgency of embracing an ontology that *rematerializes the social and takes seriously the agency of the natural*' (2008: 188; emphasis in original).
18. It is unclear who, exactly, conceives matter in this way and why, but this is not a conception that I would associate with poststructuralist feminism(s).

References

- Ahmed S (2006) *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Ahmed S (2008) Some preliminary remarks on the founding gestures of the 'new materialism'. *The European Journal of Women's Studies* 15(1): 23–39.
- Alaimo S (2008) Trans-corporeal feminism and the ethical space of nature. In: Alaimo S and Hekman S (eds) *Material Feminisms*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 237–264.
- Alaimo S and Hekman S (2008) Introduction: Emerging models of materiality in feminist theory. In: Alaimo S and Hekman S (eds) *Material Feminisms*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 1–19.
- Alcoff L (2001) Toward a phenomenology of racial embodiment. In: Bernasconi R (ed.) *Race*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 267–283.
- Alcoff LM (2006) *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bagemihl B (1999) *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity*. New York: St Martin's Press.
- Barad K (2003) Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28(3): 801–831.
- Birke L, Bryld M and Lykke N (2004) Animal performances: An exploration of intersections between feminist science studies and studies of human/animal relationships. *Feminist Theory* 5(2): 167–183.
- Boddy J (1998) Violence embodied? Circumcision, gender politics, and cultural aesthetics. In: Dobash RE and Dobash RP (eds) *Rethinking Violence Against Women*. London: Sage, pp. 77–110.
- Davis N (2009) New materialism and feminism's anti-biologism: A response to Sara Ahmed. *The European Journal of Women's Studies* 16(1): 67–80.
- Foucault M (1980) *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Fraser S and Valentine K (2006) 'Making blood flow': Materializing blood in body modification and blood-borne virus prevention. *Body and Society* 12(1): 97–119.
- Haraway D (1988) Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies* 14(3): 575–599.
- Haraway D (1992) The promise of monsters: A regenerative politics for inappropriate/d others. In: Grossberg L, Nelson C and Treichler PA (eds) *Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Haraway D (2001) More than metaphor. In: Mayberry M, Subramaniam B and Weasel L (eds) *Feminist Science Studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Haraway D (2008) *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Heidegger M (1977) The question concerning technology. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. Lovitt W. New York and London: Harper Perennial, pp. 3–35.
- Hird M (2004) Feminist matters: New materialist considerations of sexual difference. *Feminist Theory* 5(2): 223–232.

- Hird M (2008) Animal trans. In: Hird M and Giffney N (eds) *Queering the Non/Human*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 227–244.
- Irigaray L (1985) *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Porter C. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Kraus C (2000) Naked sex in exile: On the paradox of the ‘sex question’ in feminism and in science. *NWSA Journal* 12(3): 151–177.
- Krizek, G (1992) Unusual interaction between a butterfly and a beetle: ‘Sexual paraphilia’ in insects? *Tropical Lepidoptera* 3(2): 118.
- Lancaster R (2003) *The Trouble with Nature: Sex in Science and Popular Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Latour B (2004) Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern. *Critical Inquiry* 30(2): 225–248.
- Montag W (1997) The universalization of whiteness: Racism and enlightenment. In: Hill M (ed.) *Whiteness: A Critical Reader*. New York: New York University Press, pp. 281–295.
- Policansky D (1982) Sex change in plants and animals. *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* 13: 471–495.
- Roughgarden J (2004) *Evolution’s Rainbow: Diversity, Gender and Sexuality in Nature and People*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Schaw J (1923) *Journal of a Lady of Quality: Being the Narrative of a Journey*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Scott R (2008) ‘I started out as a social constructionist’: An interview with Myra J. Hird. *Stream: Culture/Politics/Technology* 1(2): 23–37.
- Soper K (1995) *What is Nature?* Oxford: Blackwell.
- Spivak GC with Rooney E (1994) In a word. In: Schor N and Weed E (eds) *The Essential Difference*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 151–184.
- Sullivan N (2003) *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Sullivan N (2005) Integrity, mayhem and the question of self-demand amputation. *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 19(3): 325–333.
- Sullivan N (2006) Somatechnics, or monstrosity unbound. *Scan: Journal of Media Arts Culture* 3(3). Available at: scan.net.au/.
- Sullivan N (2007) ‘The price we pay for our common good?’: Genital modification and the somatechnologies of cultural (in)difference. *Social Semiotics* 17(3): 395–409.
- Tuana N (2008) Viscous porosity: Witnessing Katrina. In: Alaimo S and Hekman S (eds) *Material Feminisms*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 188–213.
- Vasey P (1995) Homosexual behaviour in primates. *International Journal of Primatology* 16: 173–204.
- Wilson E (1998) *Neural Geographies: Feminism and the Microstructure of Cognition*. New York: Routledge.
- Wilson E (2002) Biologically inspired feminism: Response to Helen Keane and Marsha Rosengarten, ‘On the biology of sexed subjects’. *Australian Feminist Studies* 17(39): 283–285.