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Conversing with the Unexpected: Towards a Feminist Ethics of Knowing

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Abstract^[1]

The (new materialist) challenge to radically question notions of (human) subjectivity and agency is paradoxical insofar as its protagonists and addressees are a human 'we' who seek to understand nature and who strive for responsible relations with Others. Reading Karen Barad in an affirmative confrontation with the work of Donna Haraway and Judith Butler, this paper sketches possibilities of keeping in a state of permanent tension contradictory theoretical sitings/sightings of human and social agencies, arguing that in terms of a project of refiguring knowledge practices as communicative relations with Others, they are equally necessary.

Perhaps our hopes for accountability for technobiopolitics in the belly of the monster turn on revising the world as coding trickster with whom we must learn to converse (Haraway, *Promises* 68)

[1] Feminist epistemologies can be characterized by the assumption that practices of knowing are inherently political and that ethics is thus an integral part of knowledge production (Rouse; Singer). As Andrea Doucet and Natasha Mauthner point out, the ensuing questions of accountability and responsibility, of "what it means to 'know well' and to 'know responsibly'" (124) are, to an important degree, questions of *relationality*, of conceptualizing and maintaining relationships with the research subjects— which/who can then no longer be approached as *objects* of knowledge. Turning to Barbara McClintock's research into corn plants, Doucet and Mauthner specifically focus on practices of knowing that are not concerned with humans, to illustrate the ethical importance of developing research practices that operate as communicative relationships, allowing for an opening of unexpected alterity, for that which exceeds assumed patterns and categories: "Not only did McClintock develop and maintain a close and 'loving' relationship with her research subjects, but she also focused in on the uniqueness of each research subject, even those subjects whose characteristics fundamentally challenged the theoretical, ontological and epistemological perspectives that she started out with" (Doucet and Mauthner, 128). In this sense, feminist engagements with knowledge and knowledge production are generally oriented towards a reconfiguring of given practices of knowing in order to achieve greater responsiveness in these relational processes and to thus transform hierarchical, exclusionary, and violent relations.

[2] Karen Barad explicitly situates her work within feminist traditions that focus on "the possibilities of making a better world, a livable world, a world based on values of co-flourishing and mutuality" ("Erasers" 450). In the vein of this ethical and political commitment she makes compelling arguments for reconsidering and refashioning our practices of knowing. With her reading of Niels Bohr's interpretation of quantum physics she argues that "practices of knowing are specific material engagements that participate in (re)configuring the world" (Barad, *Meeting* 91). Her perspective is particularly interesting insofar as she approaches these questions as a physicist from a disciplinary perspective that may appear—at least in respect to its subject matter (if understood as natural laws of inorganic matter)—furthest away from any social or political considerations. Barad, however, emphatically formulates ethical and political questions of responsibility not as judgments 'after the fact' of scientific discovery, but as an integral part of the subject matter of physics, as a question of research relations with, and responsiveness to, inorganic matter. Practices of knowing, in this understanding, are not modest observations of an independent reality; they are constitutively involved in the material becoming of the world. The material engagement of knowing is thus not conceptualized in terms of interactions *between* entities but in terms of *entanglement* and *intra-action*; "we are a part of that nature that we seek to understand" (Barad, *Meeting* 67).

[3] Barad's work carries the assumption that considerations of relationality are not restricted to *social* relations and *human* actors beyond the realm of living organisms. She radically questions the anthropocentric conceit implied in conceptions of knowledge based on a separation of knower and known object. This critique of anthropocentrism is at the same time a critique of social constructionism: its aim is "not to expose scientific knowledge as *in general* contingent and alterable if 'we' chose, but rather to show it as in need of alteration in specific respects, and as potentially open to chances responsive to that need" (Rouse, 207, original emphasis). The 'we' in question thus becomes a highly complicated figure; it is decidedly not a detached human observer in search of transcendental truths or totalizing explanations. In fact, the status of a human subject, as such, becomes problematic. Barad can cogently argue that ethical problems are not simply questions of 'proper' or 'good' human decision-making in the processes of knowing. Causality is not a one-way-street from human activity to material effects 'in the world'; the notion of entanglement is a serious challenge to all assumptions about differences between, and properties of separable entities, as well as to any notion of linear causality. The particular ethical stance that Barad proposes is based on the premise of the fundamentally entangled relationality of all being: "Entanglements are relations of obligation—being bound to the other—enfolding traces of othering. Othering, the constitution of an 'Other', entails an indebtedness to the 'Other', who is irreducibly and materially bound to, threaded through, the 'self'—a diffraction/dispersion of identity" (Barad, "Quantum Entanglements" 265). The historical entanglement of the ethical demands of responsibility and accountability with humanist assumptions and connotations is thus problematized. Barad does not regard them as specifically human prerogatives or duties: "Responsibility is not ours alone. [...] Responsibility entails an ongoing responsiveness to the entanglements of self and other, here and there, now and then" (Barad, *Meeting* 394). Responsibility and accountability are opened up for reworking; the central connotation is no longer an imperative of *taking charge* and *giving reasons* but, rather, an ability to *respond* to Others.

[4] In this paper, I turn to a paradox that constitutes an interesting tension in Barad's work. Barad challenges us to radically question notions of (human) subjectivity and agency and invites us to engage in encounters that are unsettling, uncomfortable, and potentially enriching; that open up vital spaces for "reworking the material effects of the past and the future" (Barad, "Quantum Entanglements" 266). However, the protagonists and addressees of these ethical injunctions are a human 'we' who seek to understand nature and who strive for responsible relations with Others. We experience our engagement in the world in terms of first-person narratives, even in our desire to understand and acknowledge that 'we' are not only 'we humans' and that ethics is "not about right response to a radically exteriorized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are part" (Barad, *Meeting* 393). As Barad remarks, the desire to acknowledge 'nonhuman agency' is always poised on the brink of irony: "What kind of move is that to grant agency to other beings?—that's giving with one hand and taking back with the other, all in one move" (Barad, "Intra-active Entanglements" 17). Paradoxically, the acknowledgment of the agency of Others, the admission that there is no singular subject position of a 'human', has to be conceived as the act of a specific, historically situated, subject. This subject, striving to *acknowledge Others*, is configured by social and cultural conditions of occidental metaphysics, enlightenment, capitalism, and colonialism, its status as a subject is constituted *through processes of othering* (cf. de Laetis; Yeğenoğlu; Venn). This subject—and its potential of an ethical desire to know and to acknowledge Others—is thus contingent on the very demarcations and exclusions that constitute these Others.

[5] In the following, I will focus on this problematic and elusive figure of the human subject as decentered phantasm *and* protagonist and addressee of ethical demands. This figure epitomizes a fundamental tension of a feminist ethics of knowing. On the one hand, this ethical stance finds its conditions of possibility in the assumption that social/cultural dynamics can be identified as apparatuses configuring specific historical subjectivities and power differentials. These apparatuses (in the Foucauldian sense of a *dispositive*) are understood as material-semiotic configurations—a notion that implies a constitutive role of social/cultural meaning-making (language, semiotics) in the processes of becoming. The historical discursive space within which feminist epistemologies operate constitutes the relation of meaning and matter through the enactment of an epistemic gap between words and things. This gap brings forth 'language' as a specific means of meaning-making, as a formative agency in the processes of mattering and thus is pivotal for the agency implied in the ethical desire to make a better world. On the other hand, it seems crucial to avoid the implication that all that *is* is shaped by social/cultural meaning-making, or that the social/cultural is the sole active/formative dimension. As I will argue, Barad's interpretation of quantum physics offers interesting concepts and metaphors for working with this tension without being faced with the necessity of *resolving* it. At the same time, it is a challenge to rework the very assumption that concepts and metaphors constitute our access to the world. Reading Barad in an affirmative confrontation with the work of Donna Haraway and Judith Butler, in a way that lets these texts "interrupt each other productively" (Haraway in Schneider, 149), I hope to sketch possibilities of keeping in a state of permanent tension contradictory perspectives: on the one side the production of knowledge about (or conceptual visualization of) social dynamics and orders, and on the other side the elaboration of new practices of knowing based on an 'un-learning' (Spivak, 9) of specific onto-epistemological commitments

that aim for a potential of fantasy, for an imaginary that could let 'us' encounter the dynamism of Others in non-violent ways. The tension in question is succinctly illustrated by the conundrum my reading presents: that Barad offers *concepts* and *metaphors* to trouble the very discriminability of meaning and matter. In order to disrupt and rework specific epistemic assumptions about who we are, what (human) agency is, and, importantly, about the specific role of language in processes of mattering, we have to work with and through the assumption that it matters how we conceptualize our being with and of the world.

Material-Semiotic Entanglements and Relational Ontology

[6] A pivotal element of Barad's refiguring of our practices of knowledge production is her problematization of representation as access to the world. The representationalist belief (deeply rooted in Western traditions of knowing) that words or concepts can (and should) reflect a (pre-existent) reality is linked to the notion that knowledge is fundamentally intertwined with vision.^[2] A theory, in this sense, is an explanation that mediates between objects and subjects; it is a systematic knowledge that, based on specific methodological principles of observation and reasoning, provides us with adequate images of an external reality. Barad's critique of such contemplative interpretations of theory is indebted to the heritage of long traditions of feminist critique of classical notions of objectivity, in particular the attendant separation of subject (as observer and knower) and object (as external, passive reality). In this understanding of objectivity the value of a theory is premised on a clear distinction between the observed reality and the observers, who must (and can) remove themselves from the reality they are studying; it is based on a knowing subject who is able to see everything from nowhere or from all perspectives at once—a presumption that Haraway ironically dubbed as a 'god-trick' (Haraway, "Situated Knowledges" 581).^[3] The deeply problematic and potentially violent aspect of this god-trick lies in the attendant disavowal of entanglement and relationality. The knowing subject presumes the privilege of a self-sufficient unmarked agent wielding a disembodied power of vision, a gaze that allows *him* to "claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation" (581).

[7] A fascinating aspect of Haraway's work is her particular perspective on critique, which she situates *within* Western traditions of knowing—more specifically, within the natural sciences. She explicitly embraces the assumption that our world can be actively arranged and transformed and that modern sciences offer powerful accounts for such endeavors: "A lot of my heart lies in old-fashioned science for the people, and thus in the belief that these Enlightenment modes of knowledge *have* been radically liberating" (Haraway, "Cyborgs" 2). Haraway is attentive to the power-saturated practices that configure specific material-semiotic phenomena to the exclusion of others. Understanding power differentials in terms of social dynamics and specific cultural formations of subjectivity and agency opens up the possibility of conceiving them as amenable to political transformation. The assumption that it is possible to distinguish *social* dimensions of our reality—that there is a 'we' who, in a self-reflexive move, hold ourselves accountable, at least to a certain degree, for what becomes real—is constitutively entangled in the heritage of Enlightenment and humanism. A significant aspect of this heritage is a particular understanding of language, part of which is the assumption of a specific separability of words/symbols

and things: words, symbols, concepts are conceived as mediators between the speaking subject's interiority (mind, intentions) and the exterior world.^[4]

[8] Although Haraway radically questions humanist notions of agency and emancipation, she does not reject the epistemological possibilities opened up by a historical constellation that makes conceivable to us that our world can be transformed or refashioned by collective human activity. Haraway proposes interventions into the practices of meaning-making as making differences in *material-semiotic* apparatuses. This potential for transformation, based on the ethical assumption that it matters which concepts and metaphors we use, which stories we tell, and how we tell them, is premised on the heritage of the epistemic gap between words and things. The notion that it is possible to *make a difference* in the world by working on the right *accounts* (theories) of the world (a basic premise of modern sciences) is taken up by Haraway and reworked through an understanding of language as performative force that does not simply describe existing things but is actually involved in the materialization of the phenomena it speaks about. Haraway worries about the limitations and exclusions in the modern sciences and engages in the endeavor of reconfiguring their humanist heritage, not by rejecting any notion of the human, but by searching for a "route to a nongeneric humanity ... through the radical dismembering and displacing of our names and bodies" (Haraway, "Ecce Homo" 49). As Joseph Rouse remarks, Haraway's work is clearly committed to imagining radical alternatives through refashioning (not rejecting) scientific practices of knowing—a concern that "has a specific utopian dimension that would encourage envisioning new ways of organizing specific scientific fields and the cultural politics in which they are situated" (Rouse, 207). It is in this vein that Haraway proposes to rework the metaphor of vision, to reclaim this "much maligned sensory system" ("Situated Knowledges" 581). She insists on the "the particularity and embodiment of all vision" (583) in order to rethink the notion of objectivity, turning on partial perspectives, limited location, and situated knowledges; a notion of objectivity that "allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see" (583). In this interpretation, theories are not perceived as representations of a somehow pre-existent reality, but as constitutive elements of specific, situated, and thus partial and limited, realities: "sighting devices [that] have been known to reposition worlds for their devotees—and their opponents" ("Promises" 64). Objectivity is thus not rejected but restaged as fundamental entanglement of materiality with processes of meaning-making; the 'objects of knowledge' are material-semiotic phenomena forged by diverse agencies—among them the practices of knowledge-making. Haraway is thus not repudiating the epistemic heritage of the modest witness but attempting to rework it, to become a *mutated modest witness* (*Modest_Witness*).

[9] Through her engagement with Bohr's philosophy-physics, Barad provides interesting openings for such a re(con)figuring of our sighting devices, underlining the ontic non-separability of theory and referent with regard to scientific practices generally considered as the epitome of objectivity in terms of a given materiality that is not amenable to cultural formation. By restaging the notion of the objective referent as a *phenomenon*, Barad can claim that theories (or concepts) are neither purely cultural artifacts that impose meaning, nor simply reflections of an observer-independent reality. In this view, a concept—for instance the classical physical notion of polarization—is "a construct of the human mind, that can be usefully applied [...] under particular experimental circumstances where the notion of

polarization can be unambiguously defined" ("Feminist Approach" 59). Polarization does not refer to "an observer-independent property of some independently existing object, such as a photon"; this does not imply, however, that polarization—as a construct of the human mind—is "some subjective artifact imposed by the observational process" (59). Barad proposes a specific *realist* framework in which reality is not thought of in terms of pre-existent 'things' with specific properties, but in terms of phenomena, which are constitutive of particular entities in their relations: "Reality is composed not of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena but of things-in-phenomena" (*Meeting* 140). This notion of phenomena as "primary ontological units" (140) not only points to the inseparability of observer and observed, but in doing so it posits a specific ontological assumption, namely that there are no individual elements that pre-exist the relations within a specific phenomenon (and are thus exterior to these relations).

[10] Barad's concept of phenomena as basic ontological units defines a strictly relational ontology that avoids any pre-given separation of human and non-human or organic and non-organic. Yet, she holds on to a robust notion of objectivity by conceptualizing separate entities as local and relational effects: individual elements become determinate within a particular phenomenon through *agential cuts*, which enact "a *local* resolution *within* the phenomenon of the inherent ontological indeterminacy" ("Posthumanist Performativity" 815, original emphasis). Barad adds a further complication to this notion of a cut by conceptualizing it in terms of a "[c]utting together-apart", which "entails the enactment of an agential cut together with the entanglement of what's on 'either side' of the cut since these are produced in one move" ("Intra-active Entanglements" 20). This fundamentally reworks our understanding of causality and effect, troubling any "overarching sense of temporality, of continuity" ("Quantum Entanglements" 240). An effect, in this sense, is not the end point of a linear causation but, rather, a local resolution tenuously achieved through agential cuts *effecting* necessary exclusions—making determinate by simultaneously making indeterminate: "Scenes never rest, but are reconfigured within, dispersed across, and threaded through one another. The hope is that what comes across in this dis/jointed movement is a felt sense of *différance*, of *intra-activity*, of *agential separability – differentiatings that cut together/apart*" ("Quantum Entanglements" 240, original emphasis). The possibility of identifying—siting/sighting—separate entities within a phenomenon thus relies on "*an agentially enacted ontological separability within the phenomenon*" (*Meeting* 175, original emphasis).

[11] Crucial to this enactment is the specific apparatus, which enacts agential cuts providing temporal, contextual resolutions of an ontological indeterminacy: "therefore, our characterizations do not signify properties of objects but rather describe the intra-action as it is marked by a particular constructed cut chosen by the experimenter" (Barad, "Feminist Approach" 58). However, read in the light of the heritage of a specific understanding of language, touched on briefly above, an important question is to what extent an agentially enacted ontological separability is contingent on the epistemic space configured by the very understanding of language it is trying to undermine. How do we come to the assumption that 'polarization' is a notion or a concept (a construct of the human mind)? In which way does this understanding of a concept constitute a condition of possibility for the experimental setting that enacts the phenomenon? What particular modes of subjectification are implicated in this understanding of

language, and how does this constitute us as subjects asking these questions and trying to rework them? The desire to contribute to making a better world by engaging in ethically responsible practices of knowing is the desire of a specific (human) subject. Barad, Haraway, and Butler offer different (and to some extent mutually exclusive) theoretical perspectives on the im/possibility of this subject and its agency.

[12] The claim that individual entities are separable and differentiable from each other only within a phenomenon refigures the notion of objectivity in a very material sense; objectivity now refers to a specific apparatus through which particular cuts are effected or take effect, thus configuring elements with specific and local causal relations. As Barad points out:

This apparatus is both causally significant (providing the conditions for enacting a local causal structure) *and* the condition for the possibility of the objective description of material phenomena, pointing toward an important reconciliation of the Cartesian separation of intelligibility and materiality, and all that follows (*Meeting* 175).

[13] Barad illustrates this with reference to Bohr who explains the impossibility of simultaneously determining momentum and position of a particle by arguing that objects (particles) with a particular property (e.g. momentum) do not exist prior to, or beyond, the particular apparatus of measurement. In Barad's interpretation, this points not primarily to an epistemological problem (we cannot *know* both position and momentum simultaneously); rather, it is an *ontological* problem: the momentum of a particle is a phenomenon that is constituted as such (as a property of a particle) in a specific measurement apparatus enacting a cut which provides a temporal, contextual resolution of an ontological indeterminacy.

[14] A crucial consequence of this agential realism is not only that the determination, or measurement, of a particular property (e.g. position) is an *intra-active*^[5] achievement, but also that the determination of a particular property necessarily implies the exclusion of the constitution of other properties (e.g. momentum). Barad argues that this poses an *epistem-onto-logical* question; the assumption that apparatuses of observation and the 'objects' of observation are inseparable elements of a phenomenon points to the "necessary mutual exclusions that are constitutive of phenomena" (Barad, "Intra-active Entanglements" 14). This in turn allows for a specific interpretation of, for instance, the paradoxical physical observation that both light and matter can behave either like waves or like particles.^[6] In Barad's reading, Bohr's principle of complementarity, which is based on the ontological assumption of the inseparability of objects with particular properties (wave-like or particle-like) from the specific experimental apparatus, allows for the conclusion that both wave and particle are mutually exclusive phenomena—yet both *necessary* for a full account of possible behaviors of light and matter. Again, this is to be understood in a very material sense; complementarity does not imply mutually exclusive explanations or interpretations, but material-discursive phenomena (in this case, diffraction patterns effected by wave-like behavior and scatter patterns effected by particle-like behavior).

[15] Barad's suggestion of a relational ontology is indissociably linked with a re(con)figuring of accountability in ways that "resist the gravitational force of humanism" (Barad in Dolphijn and van der

Tuin, 54). Since a relational ontology displaces "the very notion of independently existing individuals" (54), it is obvious that agency can no longer be conceptualized in terms of "something that someone or something has to varying degrees" (54). Furthermore, "agency is not something possessed by humans, or non-humans for that matter. It is an enactment. And it enlists, if you will, 'non-humans' as well as 'humans'" (55). This reconceptualising of agency beyond the scope of the human cannot escape the paradox that the desire to acknowledge non-human agency has to express itself as the desire of a specific subject. There is thus a tension in Barad's work: While convincingly criticizing the anthropocentric conceit of human exceptionalism, she stresses that the "acknowledgement of 'nonhuman agency' does not lessen human accountability; on the contrary, it means that accountability requires that much more attentiveness to existing power asymmetries" (Barad, *Meeting* 219). I read Barad's references to 'human accountability' and to existing power asymmetries as a challenge for further elaboration, for if it is (ethically and politically) adequate to found a critical perspective on the assumption that our historical reality is defined by power asymmetries, then this implies a more classical formulation of power and agency: that some (identifiable groups, entities, individuals) *have* more power than others.

[16] However, the claim that there *are* power asymmetries does not stop at this idea of *having* power, instead, it is reworked through the notion of the agential cut; power asymmetries exist as *effects* of specific apparatuses that can be (conceptually, theoretically) visualized as social structures and inequalities. Here, Barad's notions of apparatus and phenomenon resonate with Foucault's concept of a 'dispositive' in its assumption that asymmetries of power are not due to immutable 'natural' properties of individuals, but that individuals in unequal power relations are relationally constituted; as subjects who (appear to) have different amounts of power. Both the idea of having power and the notion of identifiable groups, entities, individuals are fundamentally troubled, and reworked as local resolutions within specific apparatuses. This claim that there are power asymmetries poses an ethical demand on practices of knowing to provide sighting devices that can make these apparatuses (dispositives) 'visible' and thus amenable to political practices of transformation. This, however, begs the question of *who* can engage in these practices, and what desire and which intentions they can have to make such realities visible and amenable to change.^[7]

Sightings of Agency

[17] With her notion of agential realism Barad shifts the focus from questions of epistemology and representation (how can we know, what can we know, and does our knowledge provide adequate (mirror) images of reality?) to questions of epistem-onto-logy and practices of intra-action (how are we part of the reality we seek to know, which realities are constituted, and which are excluded?). This, in turn, fundamentally restages questions of agency and responsibility. The notion of research ethics, for instance, can no longer be conceived in terms of conscientiously avoiding errors in our observations and of giving truthful accounts of these observations. Instead, it becomes a problem of being accountable for the "role 'we' play in the intertwined practices of knowing and becoming" (Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity" 812). The ensuing questions of who 'we' are and what role we play, however, are far from

obvious or banal. Above, in my reading of Barad's agential realism, I quote a passage from one of her earlier texts where she explains that the concepts we use "describe the intra-action as it is marked by a particular constructed cut *chosen by the experimenter*" (Barad, "Feminist Approach" 58; my emphasis). At first glance, this seems pretty straightforward: 'we' are 'experimenters' who can be held accountable for choosing cuts and thus for the ensuing separability of particular intra-acting entities. This interpretation, however, incurs humanist assumptions of intentionality and agency, which Barad clearly does not subscribe to. An important aim of her notion of agential realism is precisely to cut agency "loose from its traditional humanist orbit" (Barad, *Meeting* 177) and thus from its alignment with human intentionality or subjectivity. In this later text she is quite clear in her statement that "we are responsible for the cuts that we help enact not because we do the choosing (neither do we escape responsibility because 'we' are 'chosen' by them), but because we are an agential part of the material becoming of the universe" (Barad, *Meeting* 178).

[18] There is no human 'we' before or beyond any specific relations of intra-action within specific apparatuses, just as there is no difference between culture and nature: "To begin analysis with the nature/culture dichotomy already in place is to begin too late." (Barad, "Erasers" 449). The problem is, however, that 'our' very possibility to perform analysis (as it is understood in scientific/academic knowledge production) is predicated on a subject position that operates within the material-discursive space of modern Western rationality. Practices of knowing in the sciences as well as in the humanities are contingent on specific epistem-ontological conditions that enact a separation of a subject (desiring to know) and an object/subject (which is to be known). The assumption that concepts are constitutive 'elements' of material-discursive phenomena, and that they can give 'us' access to possibilities of effecting other agential cuts and, thus, of refashioning these phenomena, implies a specific separability of knower and known and of signifier and signified. This separation is, however, understood in the sense of an agential cut that configures the conditions of possibility of a performative enactment of meaning-making.. In this sense, an ethically accountable subjectivity is desirable: the assumption that 'we' can (and should) strive to make a better world relies on a particular, agentially enacted, human intentionality and agency as transformative powers, and this enactment is entangled in legacies of "European intellectual, moral, and even theological history" (Keane, 675). 'We' are thus faced with the paradox that our ethical and political commitment to the critique of human exceptionalism is bound to notions of history, agency, and politics that find their conditions of possibility in such a material-discursive space, which poses the *social* as an epistemic horizon "in relation to which action is defined, experienced, and transformed" (Scott, 16).

[19] Barad, in her agential realist account of this in/separability, radically decenters the role of language as medium of meaning-making, loosening the notion of intelligibility from linguistic moorings. In this decentered ontology there is no subject of ethical invocation—this does not, however, exclude the possibility of specific apparatuses that effect agential cuts constituting such a subject. This tension of ontological in/separability is the nexus of my affirmative confrontation of Barad with Haraway, and Butler. They focus on different—and to degrees mutually exclusive – apparatuses that are, however, all adequate for an ethical engagement with practices of knowing in our historical present. Haraway clearly

addresses the assumption of human subjectivity and social transformability of reality as a crucial condition of possibility for her critical perspective. She embraces the notion of humanity as a powerful element of critique and emancipatory transformation while at the same time focusing on the constitutive exclusions of this figure: "I think, 'we'—that crucial material and rhetorical construction of politics and of history—need something called humanity. It is that kind of thing which Gayatri Spivak called 'that which we cannot not want'" (Haraway, "Ecce Homo" 49). This assumption that we are the subjects we need to criticize is one that Haraway seems to share with Butler. We *are* these subjects in the sense that a specific form of subjectivity is the condition of possibility for our ethical, epistemic, and political commitment. This subjectivity, with all its violent, confining, and exclusionary implications, configures a specific agency. It is a condition of possibility for our participation in the processes of becoming and for our ethical desire to shape and transform these processes. The critical momentum in both Haraway and Butler arises from their commitment to work on sighting devices that open up possibilities of (materially) refashioning the apparatuses that constitute our subjectivity. Haraway proposes that there is an approach to this commitment in the quest for metaphors that could allow us "to imagine a knowledge situation that does not set up an active/passive split" (Haraway, "Cyborgs" 3), a situation that acknowledges that there are all sorts of different actors, only some of which are humans. At the same time she warns us that this assumption is "risky business" (3), and I read this warning as a reference to our historical reality in which participation in political processes is premised on the status of a self-sufficient subject founded on hierarchical dualisms, eurocentrism, androcentrism, and anthropocentrism. It is thus ethically called for to acknowledge that "[p]erhaps only those organized by language are *subjects*" (Haraway, "Cyborgs" 3)—and that not even all *humans* enjoy the full privileges of this status.

[20] Haraway's suggestion that language should be acknowledged as an historical apparatus configuring human subjectivity is situated in the legacies of Western rationality; the privilege of the status as a (human) subject is premised on intelligibility within this discursive order. She explicitly locates her critical approach of finding other (better) metaphors, of telling other (better) stories, to get involved "in a kind of science fictional move, of imagining possible worlds", in the heritage of "a particular set of descriptive technologies as a Eurocentric and Euro-American person" ("Cyborgs" 3). Her warning that attempts to acknowledge Others as actors is risky business points to problematic confinements and exclusions in the historical field of intelligible political agency and thus founds the ethical commitment that politics in a shared world have to be reconfigured in order to respond to the fact that "agents are more heterogeneous" (3). The commitment of siting/sighting the presence of Others who cannot act as *subjects* and are thus excluded from the games of politics and knowledge production as we know them—but who, even without playing by these rules, are nevertheless agentive forces—is also clearly present in Butler's pivotal question, whether "we need to assume theoretically from the start a subject with agency before we can articulate the terms of a significant social and political task of transformation, resistance, radical democratization" (Butler, "Contingent Foundations" 13). Butler challenges this assumption; she questions its problematic implications and effects, claiming that "certain versions of the subject are *politically insidious*" (13; my emphasis). She refuses to assume that a coherent identity with identifiable needs and interests can be grounded in individual attributes or traits of a pre-given subject: "There is no ontologically intact reflexivity to the subject which is then placed within a cultural context; the cultural

context, as it were, is already there as the disarticulated process of that subject's production" (12). She questions the temporality implied in our concepts of political agency; the idea that first there are subjects with particular interests who then can express these interests and perhaps decide to cooperate with others with whom they share a common cause. This temporality is insidious insofar as it effects the disarticulation of the conditions of the constitution of the subject, thus affirming the phantasmatic figure of an autonomous, intentional subject. The disavowal of the conditions of subjectivity and agency is a political and ethical problem: "In a sense, the epistemological model that offers us a pre-given subject or agent is one that refuses to acknowledge that agency is always and only a political prerogative" (Butler, "Contingent Foundations" 13).

[21] This clearly resonates with Barad's claim that agency is not a property of individual entities (of human subjects in particular). From this common assumption, however, both focus on different questions. While Butler is concerned with the possibilities of rethinking intentionality and (political) agency in a posthumanist account of human subjectivity, Barad is pointing to new possibilities of responsiveness to Others by rejecting the reduction of the notion of agency to human intentionality or subjectivity; her crucial argument being that "matter plays an agential role in its iterative materialization" (Barad, *Meeting* 177). She explicitly refers to Butler's theory of performativity as an alternative to the inadequacies of the constructionist inscription model of (cultural) meaning imposed on passive materiality. She is, however, critical of Butler's "exclusive focus on human bodies and social factors, which works against her efforts to understand the relationship between materiality and discursivity in their indissociability" (34).

[22] As Barad remarks, this focus on human bodies and social factors "ultimately reinscribes matter as a passive product of discursive practices rather than as an active agent participating in the very process of materialization" (Barad, *Meeting* 151). In her reading, Butler's understanding of performativity is hampered by anthropocentrism and thus unable to take into account the dynamism of matter. Barad agrees with Butler's proposition that the intelligibility of any phenomenon implicates a constitutive outside—an exteriority within. This notion of a constitutive outside is an alternative to the "unsatisfactory options" (Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity" 825) of an absolute exteriority (of a preexistent nature) or an absolute interiority (the reduction of nature to culture). She argues, however, that Butler's notion of the constitutive outside is reductive because it is limited to intelligibility constituted by language and, thus, points to "an exteriority *within language*—it is the 'that which' to which language is impelled to respond in the repeated attempt to capture the persistent loss or absence of that which cannot be captured" (825, n31). Here, Barad is clearly alluding to a passage in *Bodies that Matter*, where Butler proposes that the materiality of the body is "that what persists within these contested domains" (Butler, *Bodies* 36), adding that:

perhaps we will have fulfilled the same function, and opened up some others, if we claim that what persists here is a demand in and for language, a 'that which' which prompts and occasions, say within the domain of science, calls to be explained, described, diagnosed, altered or within the cultural fabric of lived experienced, fed, exercised, mobilized, put to sleep, a site of enactments and passions of various kinds. To insist upon this demand, this site, as the 'that without which' no psychic operation can proceed, but also as that on which and through which the psyche also operates, is to begin to circumscribe that which

is invariably and persistently the psyche's site of operation; not the blank slate or passive medium upon which the psyche acts, but, rather, the constitutive demand that mobilizes psychic action from the start, that is that very mobilization, and in its transmuted and projected form, remains that psyche. (37)

[23] Barad concedes that Butler offers an alternative to theories of social constructivism by emphasizing the importance of the constitutive outside, that which has to be excluded in order to attain (albeit always tenuous) intelligibility. Her critical questions point to the problem of accounting for the agential role of materiality with this focus on the linguistic dimension of processes of materialization. Barad reasons that "while Butler correctly calls for the recognition of matter's historicity, ironically, she seems to assume that it is ultimately derived (yet again) from the agency of language or culture. She fails to recognize matter's dynamism" (Barad, *Meeting* 65).

[24] This assessment of failure is interesting, when read in light of Barad's engagement with the theories of quantum physics. What exactly does it imply to point to the failures, or shortcomings, of a theory? If theories are never systematic representations of an independent reality, pointing out shortcomings of a theory does not necessarily imply that the theory in question is wrong or incomplete. Barad's argument that a reduction of the possibilities for agency to practices of resignification points to "an unfortunate reinscription of matter as subservient to the play of language and displays a commitment to an unacceptable anthropocentrism" (Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity" 825 n31) is, in itself, plausible. Butler is indeed *focusing* on the constitutive agency of language in the materialization of phenomena (such as, for instance, bodies), which become intelligible in and through the terms and logics of language. In doing so she is *not negating the possibility* of other agencies, which are, however, not *intelligible* in her theoretical sighting. Read through Barad's terminology, Butler's theory is focussed on the agential cuts that constitute (human) subjects in and through language as local resolutions in a specific (historical) discursive order. Butler acknowledges bodily and psychic dynamics, which can never be captured by this discourse; in fact, these exteriorities-within are agencies that prompt the ethical questioning of this discursive order in her work. She is interested in the agencies of the unacceptable, the dynamism of the spectral presence of that which is excluded in the agential cuts effected by the order of (linguistic) intelligibility, asking "how the unintelligible gets lived out, and how what is not lived out, what is unliveable, also leaves its mark or assumes figural or symptomatic form as spectre, monstrosity or a mode of unintelligibility" (Butler, cited in Bell, "Vulnerability" 133). Butler's focus is on a specific local resolution that constitutes 'us' as (human) subjects and thus configures and confines 'our' possibilities of acknowledging, or *recognizing*, these dynamics through linguistic intelligibility. Her point is that this configuration is specifically problematic in a material-discursive space that enacts the gap between meaning and matter, or words and things in terms of an immutable ontology, relegating discursive unintelligibility to the domains of spectrality or monstrosity. The ensuing question is, then, how we can rework our conceptual approach to the domains of the unintelligible in order to learn to engage in actual conversations with unexpected Others.

[25] Barad's discussion of Bohr's quantum physics might offer helpful ideas for a rearticulation of her assessment of Butler's theoretical failure to recognize matter's dynamism. In particular, the insight

captured in the principle of complementarity; that the constitution of phenomena through specific apparatuses implies the exclusion of other possible and *equally necessary* phenomena, could help to disrupt any possible aspiration for theoretical comprehensiveness or universal generalizability. The assessment of a particular failure of a theory would then neither imply that this theory should be rejected as such, nor that it could be improved so that it might offer a *complete* vision. Rather, the assessment of failure appears as an attribute of any theory; it is the acknowledgement that theories necessarily produce exclusions when visualizing particular realities and are thus to be made accountable for their effects of displacement and marginalization. Instead of aspiring to comprehensiveness, an interesting opening lies in the possibility that different, even contradictory, points of view can be considered as equally possible, or equally necessary when siting/sighting apparatuses that constitute and differentiate particular forms of agency—while marginalizing or excluding other forms.

Learning to un-learn

[26] Turning back to the passage in *Bodies that Matter*, this reformulation of the failure of a theory focuses the critical engagement with Butler's text on the specific commitment implied in it. Butler is committed to visualizing an agency that can question the assumptions of an immutable ontology of sexed bodies. Furthermore, she is committed to the sighting of specific *social* apparatuses of exclusion that are constitutively entangled with dispositives of power and domination. A key question is "[w]hich bodies come to matter and why?" (Butler, *Bodies* X). In particular, Butler is concerned with psychical and phantasmatic investments implicated in the processes of somatization of sexed bodies. She does not conceptualize the body "as a unilateral or causal effect of the psyche in any sense that would reduce that materiality to the psyche or make of the psyche the monistic stuff out of which that materiality is produced and/or derived" (36). So, while her focus is clearly on the linguistic apparatus that partakes in the constitution of bodies as *sexed bodies*, there is no necessary dichotomy of activity/passivity or of cause/effect in her argument.

[27] Indeed, the claim that materiality might be conceptualized as "a demand in and for language, a 'that which' which prompts and occasions" (Butler, *Bodies* 36) confounds any clear distinction of passivity and activity. Butler's argument that gender "designates the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established" (Butler, *Bodies* 10) does not have to be read as an idealist approach that "turns matter into the stuff of language" (MacKenzie, 4)—no more, in fact, than, for instance, Barad's argument that polarization is effected within an experimental apparatus. Butler's focus on the constitutive role of language in the materialization of sexed bodies, in conjunction with her critical questioning of the normative compulsion to assume a coherent gender identity in order to be intelligible as a subject, *problematizes* a constellation in which "[l]anguage is what makes matter 'matter'—what makes it have significance in the political sense" (5). Butler's theoretical sighting device points to specific limitations and exclusions of an historical constellation of the political, within which the status of a subject is organized by language—to the exclusion of heterogeneous agencies unavailable to these linguistic confinements. Butler's focus is on the visualization of a space of contingency through the disruption of a specific ontological assumption, namely the assumption that sexed bodies are the material basis for cultural

interpretations of gender. Calling the *discursive* presupposition of a given materiality (of sexed bodies) into question does not imply a negation of materiality: "To call a presumption into question is not the same as doing away with it; rather, it is to free it from its metaphysical lodgings in order to understand what political interests were secured in and by that metaphysical placing, and thereby permit the term to occupy and to serve very different political aims" (Butler, *Bodies* 6). Here, the political commitment is clear; Butler is concerned with the (violent) limitations of a specific enactment of meaning-making as a human (linguistically mediated) prerogative. As she goes on to specify, "[t]his unsettling of 'matter' can be understood as initiating new possibilities, new ways for bodies to matter" (6).

[28] Butler contributes to the unsettling of such presumptions by proposing a theory aimed at the sighting of a particular psychic economy constituted by a regime of rationality, which binds our intelligibility as subjects to the assumption of a coherent identity. She argues that the formation of such an identity is effected by realizing specific normative possibilities and thus involves the loss of other possibilities. She is committed to the sighting of specific social/linguistic apparatuses that bring us into being as subjects through the exclusion of other possibilities. More specifically, she is interested in the way that these exclusions have to be disavowed and are thus lost to us *as possibilites*; they are relegated to the unconscious, an enigmatic domain of the unacceptable—an exteriority within the subject. If some possibilities (of living, thinking, experiencing) are thus excluded from intelligibility, this does not mean, however, that they are not *there*. It is precisely this spectral presence that Butler points to, the forms of 'life' that haunt a mode of intelligibility as its outside (Butler, quoted in Bell, 133). As I pointed out above, Barad's injunction to be accountable for cuts we make opens up the question who this 'we' could be. Butler provides a theoretical sighting device that visualizes specific historical constellations that (in Barad's terms) agentially enact this 'we' as human subjects. She begins the analysis with a human/non-human dichotomy, and in this respect her perspective cannot make the entanglement and inseparability *appear*—but she does not enact this dichotomy as being in any sense *primary* or *intact*. She engages in a deconstructive project that looks for what is *ruled out* in the enactment of this dichotomy, asking what price 'we' pay in order to become a subject, and how "the limits on what can be lived out make themselves known in the midst of what is being lived out" ("Quantum Entanglements" 134). Language is sighted as a necessary condition of a subject and at the same time the limits of this linguistic constitution of subjectivity appear as a specific space of possibility.^[8] The crucial question is how we can respond differently, more openly, to the prompting and occasioning of the constitutive outside in order to make other possibilities available.

[29] This commitment to making available new possibilities is one Butler shares with Haraway and Barad—as well as the assumption that this endeavor necessitates a reconfiguring of the subject, a questioning of foundational assumptions of what it is to be a human subject. Through her focus on psychic dynamics of subject formation, Butler provides sighting devices that can make accessible to us the psychic attachments that bind us to a particular ontology of bodies and subject formations. Acknowledging these attachments as a condition for our status as subject can open spaces of possibility by giving us access to the exclusions that are constitutive of our attachments, which can then be mourned *as losses*. If, in modern Western rationality, the status of a subject is premised on the disavowal of constitutive

entanglement and relationality, Butler's work addresses the problem that this cannot be remedied by simply acknowledging—avowing—this relationality. The ethical demand implicated in the desire to acknowledge the agency of Others and to be open to unexpected alterity, can be posed in Butler's terms as the demand to learn to give up the "first-person narrative point of view" (Butler, *Precarious* 5). This is not something that could be conceptualized in terms of rational decisions; the ethical desire to respond to Others requires the mourning of the loss of fundamental certainties about ourselves and our needs.

[30] Gayatri Spivak's suggestion that we need to start "un-learning our privilege as our loss" (9) succinctly captures the intricacies involved in this task of acknowledging and mourning the limitations of our subjectivity—as a privilege that is co-constitutive with loss. In order to enjoy the prerogative of being a subject with agency we have to disavow our fundamental dependency. Maintaining the ethical stance that there is—in our historical present—a specific human responsibility in the becoming of the world means that we have to take on this site of privilege and loss as 'our' heritage and 'our' means of reworking these privileges in order to become different. This becoming-different would necessarily imply that 'we' engage in the endeavor of fashioning "new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries" (Foucault, "Subject" 216). It may even, in some time-zone in spacetimemattering, mean that the subject itself, with its implication of agential separability of subject and Other, could disappear like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea (Foucault, *Order*).

[31] For now, however, 'we' who engage in these discussions, who feel addressed by the ethical demands, compelled by the hope that it is possible to make a better world, have to work through this privilege of entitlement provided by subjectivity. Butler, as well as Barad and Haraway, from their different (disciplinary) perspectives, make compelling arguments why the work of acknowledging and un-learning this privilege should be a desirable goal. In light of this common desire to make possible connections built on a responsibility that is "not about right response, but rather a matter of inviting, welcoming, and enabling the response of the Other" (Barad quoted in Kleinman, 81), the theories of Butler, Haraway, and Barad can be read as sighting devices that visualize particular apparatuses accounting for specific entanglements and relationalities. In doing so, they necessarily displace or marginalize other apparatuses and relationalities. A feminist ethics of knowing, as I read it in Barad, Haraway, and Butler, does not presume to reach theoretical inclusiveness. Rather, it calls attention to the (necessary) limitations of any sighting device. Their perspectives may be contradictory or even mutually exclusive with regard to the siting/sighting of human and social agencies—in terms of a project of refiguring knowledge practices as communicative relations with Others, however, they are equally necessary.

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Notes

1. I thank Peta Hinton and Karin Sellberg for insightful comments and astute questions to different versions of this text.

2. This is expressed in the Greek roots of the word theory, which goes back to "theoria": 'contemplation, speculation, a looking at, things looked at,' from theorein 'to consider, speculate, look at,' from theoros 'spectator,' from thea 'a view' + horan 'to see'" (<http://etymonline.com/?term=theory>).
3. Haraway underlines that her term 'god-trick' refers to the notion of objectivity as a "single vision" (584) of an unmarked, disembodied subject, as well as to the notion of the relativity of visions: "Relativism is the perfect mirror twin of totalization in the ideologies of objectivity [...] both [are] 'god tricks' promising vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully, common myths in rhetorics surrounding Science" (584).
4. As Webb Keane notes: "speakers of European languages tend to see the normal function of language as reference and predication [...]. This common-sense view of language stresses the capacity of language to point to things in the world, to speak about them in ways that are essentially true or false; and this view locates that ability in the semantics of individual words." (680).
5. "[I]n contrast to the usual 'interaction', which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action." (Barad, *Meeting* 33)
6. The very claim that this *observation* is *paradoxical* is contingent on a specific epistemic rationality that allows us to *conceptualize* 'light' as 'something' that (conceptually) transcends different 'states' or phenomena.
7. It is important not to limit this perspective on differentials of political power and the question of who 'we' are to the distinction between human and non-human. 'Our' concept of the political certainly relies on this distinction, but it also implies a very specific historical constellation of human subjectivity and agency. As David Scott argues, the European colonial regimes implemented specific rules "of a new game of politics" (45); a game that obliges anyone who aspires to political action to play by its rules. Even more: part of the rules of the game require the systematic disabling of other (human) forms of life "by systematically breaking down their conditions, and with constructing in their place new conditions so as to enable—indeed, so as to oblige—new forms of life to come into being" (Scott, 26).
8. Again, it is important not to restrict the questioning of this human subject to its attendant differentiation from the 'non-human'. Saba Mahmood argues that Butler's work on the complex and constitutive relationship of exteriority and interiority in the processes subject formation is situated in a specific historical and political context (2005). Mahmood points out a tendency to equate *human* agency with a universal (socially constituted) will to resist the constraints of norms. This, she argues, stays within a binary logic of resistance and accommodation, and thus within the field of liberal notions of freedom. In her ethnographic work on women of the mosque movement in Cairo, Mahmood finds *human* communities in which the subjects do not experience and explain their acts as expressions of an inner self, but as means of the (bodily) development and constitution of the self.

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