

# Feminist theory and/of science

*Feminist Theory special issue*



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In choosing the unwieldy phrase ‘Feminist theory and/of science’ as the topic for this special issue, we hoped to call attention to a paradox: the relative lack of traffic between feminist theory and feminist science studies, despite their shared commitment to feminism. Although feminist interventions in the sciences have ranged from problems of professional inclusion to issues of language, objectivity and epistemology, the field of feminist science studies has not fully incorporated some of the central insights of feminist theory. The converse is also true. A cursory survey of anthologies and textbooks suggests that feminist theory has also betrayed a certain chilliness to feminist science studies, granting the area adjunct chapter status rather than centrally incorporating its insights.

The essays in this special issue challenge this double exclusion, not only addressing the distance between feminist theory and feminist science studies, but also refusing the marginalization of science – and thus of feminist science studies – within feminist theory. Instead, writing under the rubric of what might be called a ‘new materialism’, the authors included here argue for the relevance of materiality, performance/performativity and agency to feminist science studies. In so doing, they demonstrate that issues central to feminist science studies have the potential to complicate, enrich and thus reinvigorate feminist theory, as well as extend its purview.

To begin this dialogue, Rebecca Herzig’s essay, ‘On performance, productivity, and vocabularies of motive in recent studies of science’, brings feminist theories of performativity into conversation with science studies conceptions of performance. She argues that, although science studies has explored the problems of essentialism and realism by stressing the performative nature of facts, investigative techniques and experimental spaces, the emergence of performance-based research threatens to reproduce essential notions about the body and the inherent productivity of science. Focusing on the work of Judith Butler – and perhaps more importantly on her interlocutor Karen Barad – Herzig suggests that feminist theories of performativity have already worked through several paradoxes and binaries, including the notion that there is a distinct, and unavoidable

binary between 'real', material bodies and discursive, constructed selves. Instead of reproducing and rehashing these debates, Herzig challenges feminist theory to move beyond its commitment to a model of acquisitive productivity and instead to explore alternative modes of imagining activity.

Margrit Shildrick's article, 'Genetics, normativity, and ethics: some bioethical concerns', explores the problems of scientific fact production, the materiality of the body and feminist concerns about humanism, realism and universality through the specific example of the human genome project. Sharing Herzig's focus on productivity, Shildrick argues that science is problematically productive, not merely descriptive. She contends that recent developments in genetics challenge any feminist desire to reclaim the materiality of the body, primarily because the human genome project reduces the body to a series of codes that can then be compared to a normalized standard of humanness. Yet, she also takes a hopeful, and subversive, stance towards genetics, arguing that even in its project of standardization the field reveals the fluidity, uncertainty and impurity of scientific pursuits, theories and facts. When boundaries between normalcy and abnormality, agency and passivity, the material and the discursive, human and animal, are deconstructed, not reinforced, we can come to understand the inherent uncertainty and messiness of contemporary biosciences, and genetics in particular. Sharing with the other essays in this issue the strategy of using one field to destabilize and rejuvenate another, Shildrick's essay demonstrates how the contributions of postmodern feminist science studies can be borrowed to model a productive new direction for bioethics.

Sharing with Rosengarten the goal of challenging any fixed boundary between humans and animals, and joining Herzig in an attention to performativity, the authors of 'Animal performances: an exploration of intersections between feminist science studies and studies of human/animal relationships' explore the potentially powerful connections between feminist theory and animal studies. Lynda Birke, Mette Bryld and Nina Lykke argue that feminist theory's avoidance of essentialism/determinism has prevented the examination of *animality*, a concept long linked to conceptions of race, sexuality and gender, that has served as a convenient boundary of humanness. Drawing on Barad's concept of intra-action, Birke et al. suggest that if we are to unhinge the human/animal binary and examine questions of bodily agency and the problem of materiality, we must recognize the performativity of animality and the agency of animals. To that end, they propose we examine the process of *animaling*, a verb analogous to *queering* that calls our attention to the discursive and performative production of the human/animal boundary.

If Justyna Kostkowska's contribution to the volume, "'To persistently not know something important": feminist science and the poetry of Wislawa Szymborska', engages with materiality and performativity, it does so in a different register. Textual rather than biological or biomedical, still its mode of performativity leaps from the materially productive to the realm of the enuciative, evocative, even vatic. Kostkowska's piece addresses the

intricate, though often overlooked, traffic between the disciplines of science and poetry. For nearly five decades, she argues, the Nobel Prize-winning poet Wislawa Szymborska has rejected a science she views as grounded in patriarchal standards of expertise, objectivity and absolute truth. Nevertheless, she finds that Szymborska's poetry embodies many of the basic principles of feminist science studies. Engaging with anthropology, sociology and biology, her poems often question notions of value free science, singular viewpoints, binary systems and absolutist/universalist thinking. Kostkowska suggests that Szymborska functions like a feminist scientist, articulating in her poetry the curiosity and astonishment of discovery. Though her topic is discursively rather than taxonomically marginal to the customary concerns of feminist science studies, Kostkowska shares with Birke et al. a challenge to arbitrary divisions between humans and nature/animals, and to disciplinary divisions. While in the past ten years scholars in feminist science studies have begun to bridge the gap between science studies and literature, much remains to be accomplished. Kostkowska's essay investigates the imbrication of these 'two cultures' in a shared feminist vision and practice.

Marsha Rosengarten shares with Birke et al., Shildrick, and Herzig a debt to the work of Butler and Barad, especially the attention to performativity and intra-action. With Kostkowska she shares an understanding of how imagination functions as a constitutive part of scientific practice, although in this case the artefact of that practice is not a poem but in a viral load test. In her analysis of 'The challenge of HIV for feminist theory', Rosengarten proposes an expanded model of performativity that merges the insights of science studies and feminist theory in order to encompass the processes by which the material foundations of HIV scientific research are produced in the intersection of the iterative (materially and discursive) and the imaginative. Far from being self-evident, Rosengarten argues, the form of HIV science is contingent on the matter used to study it. As the concept of the viral load test is differently deployed and reiterated in HIV medical science, it materializes its object differently.

Myra Hird's book review essay, 'Feminist matters: new materialist considerations of sexual difference', concludes this special issue by surveying a handful of recent books on the new materialism: Buchanan and Colebrook's *Deleuze and Feminist Theory*, De Landa's *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, Margulis and Sagan's *What is Sex?*, and Wilson's *Neural Geographies*. Hird argues that these works offer two important additions to feminist theory: a renegotiation of sexual difference based on novel – and destabilized – conceptions of matter, and a challenge for feminist scholars to broaden the proper objects of feminist theory to include spaces, issues, problems that do not overtly concern women or gender. The essays in this special issue contribute to the new materialist project outlined in Hird's review essay. They broaden our sense of the proper objects of feminist theory and practice to include material entities (gene sequences, human beings, lab rats or a horse-and-rider), technologies of knowledge (like the poem, or the viral load test), productive acts of performativity like *animaling*, or potent moments of freedom from the

narrow framework of utility, such as those enabled by postmodern feminist approaches to bioethics.

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