REVIEW

Review of *Teaching with Feminist Materialisms* by Petra Hinton and Pat Treusch (Utrecht: ATGENDER, 2015)

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The emergent area of scholarship invoked by the phrase “new materialisms,” most often identified with scholars such as Karen Barad, insists on the entanglement of matter and meaning. When paired with feminist theory’s concern for the relationship of embodied difference to forms of power, feminist engagements with the concept of new materialism invite reassessments of the relationships between theory and practice, epistemology and ontology, knowing and being. These reassessments have significant implications for the role of matter in pedagogy, as the nine essays in the edited collection *Teaching with Feminist Materialisms* demonstrate. This collection, a part of the Teaching with Gender series published in Utrecht by the European Association for Gender Research, Education, and Documentation offers instructors of undergraduate and graduate students both an overview of feminist materialism’s core questions and tools for incorporating feminist materialism into their classrooms. These tools include specific course topics, assignments, and handouts. Collectively, the essays in *Teaching with Feminist Materialisms* explore how feminist materialism might be leveraged in the classroom, focusing on why and how instructors might

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use feminist materialism's understanding of knowledge as indistinguishable from the environments, objects, and practices in which it emerges.

The collection's Introduction by editors Peta Hinton and Pat Treusch offers a genealogy of feminist materialism, which will be especially generative for readers familiar with current debates in new materialism. Hinton and Treusch point out the links between, on the one hand, feminist theory's "scrutiny of the nature/culture binary," which "has left little room for any simple separation of an empirical world from an inquiring subject," and, on the other hand, new materialism's awareness of how "objects and subjects of inquiry are entangled, emergent, and contingent" (3). For Hinton and Treusch, feminist materialism is the sign under which these two critical traditions overlap. As a pedagogical practice, it reveals that text-based learning is "not animated by (human) student- or (human) teacher-led reading practices alone," but rather that "the process of formulating 'what matters' in the text is a co-productive engagement of bodies, spaces, and wor[l]ds" (4). This critical account of feminist materialism raises questions about whether—and, if so, how—feminist materialism might be distinguished from new materialism more broadly, or from related areas of inquiry, such as feminist science studies. After all, Hinton and Treusch suggest that new materialism is always already feminist in that it emerges from feminist theory's investigations into the ways in which embodied subjects and material worlds are mutually constitutive. Their introduction, therefore, does not delineate feminist materialism from other forms of materialism so much as shed light on new materialism's feminist backbone. Although at times it claims to elucidate feminist materialism as "an emerging topic of feminist studies" (19), the introduction summons work by Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and others in revealing materialism to be fundamental to feminist studies.

The chapters in *Teaching with Feminist Materialisms* attend to feminist materialism's insistence on the inseparability of practice and theory. The chapters can be broadly divided into those that focus on specific classroom practices and those that focus on larger theoretical questions of teaching with materiality in mind. Several essays provide sample writing prompts, classroom handouts, and assignments, such as Sofie Sauzet's "snaplog" assignment prompts, Dagmar Lorenz-Meyer's discussion questions for scaffolding "memory work," and Astrida Neimanis's handouts and workshop notes for teaching "weather writing." The chapter by Iris van der Tuin and Rick Dolphijn, editors of the formative collection *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* (2012), will be of particular interest to new materialist scholars interested in questions of pedagogy. The chapter describes Utrecht University's

Thresholds Project, a seminar format in which students spend ten weeks mapping alternatives to the binary oppositions of humanism in the context of student-selected course themes, including “Naturecultures,” “Immanent Time, Immanent Space,” “Science, Humanities, and the Ethics to Come,” and “Semblance and Event” (23). Van der Tuin and Dolphijn describe the Thresholds Project as a platform from which experiments with new materialism, including those focused on the intra-action of matter and discourse, can be conducted (32). Like Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, Sigrid Schmitz surveys specific course formats that work at the intersection of science studies, new materialism, and feminist theory; her chapter reflects on the importance of promoting “transcultural” dialogues that account for differences among student identities, learning styles, and disciplinary backgrounds. The essays focused on in-class practice are saturated with the heady theoretical apparatuses of new materialism and feminist theory. Nevertheless, many of the in-class activities and assignments they describe will be recognizable to anyone familiar with student-centered pedagogy: close reading (van der Tuin and Dolphijn), visual and rhetorical analysis (Sauzet), reflection papers (Lorenz-Meyer and Neimanis), and group work (Schmitz). In these accounts, feminist materialism recalibrates classroom content, but it is less clear how it transforms the means by which this content is received and practiced by students.

More intriguing are the chapters that take a broad view on how feminist materialism might transform the contemporary academy. For Beatriz Revelles Benavente, feminist materialism means “de-centering the figure of the teacher” and also teaching itself; she argues that the institutional realities of the contemporary academy still allow for the creation of “agential spaces,” in Barad’s sense, which in turn can enable potential acts of resistance and change (61). Hanna Meißner, too, sees hope in the contemporary academy. She resists the nostalgia inherent in presentist pessimism by pointing out that “academia never was a paradise of critical pedagogy but, rather, an institution shaped by and mired in exclusionary practices and epistemic traditions founded on limiting dichotomies” (130). Meißner optimistically reads what many call the current “crisis” in higher education as an opportunity for “new practices of knowing” (138). Kathrin Thiele, through her sensitive reading of Hannah Arendt, concurs that the academy might become a place “to practice thinking as action” (108). Maya Nitis, drawing primarily from Jacques Rancière and Paulo Freire, argues compellingly against “the pernicious norm of mastery” as the goal of higher education (115). “Entering a class with a text, film, etc. without objectifying or instrumentalizing the material on hand,” Nitis writes, “rewrites the presumed relationship of humans as subject-doers and material as

passive object/s” (119). For Nitis, the classroom should become a space in which teachers, students, and objects are reconfigured as “collaborators” in necessarily partial and contingent experiences of inquiry (120). These chapters demonstrate how feminist materialism can go beyond radical pedagogy’s challenge to the teacher/student binary and posthumanism’s displacement of the human by exploring the ways in which the academy exposes the politics of materiality. Thinking hopefully, Benavente, Meissner, Thiele, and Nitis together suggest that thinking with, through, and about matter can be a way of acting against hierarchies of power.

Although the collection is pedagogically strong, *Teaching with Feminist Materialisms* may leave readers wondering about another aspect of materiality; that is, the material constraints forced upon teachers and students by the contemporary neoliberal academy. To what extent can higher education instructors model their in-class activities, assignments, or course designs on the feminist materialist practices described in these essays, while still attending to requirements of their departments and disciplines? In other words, how can the pedagogical practices proposed by these authors be enacted by academics constrained by, for example, financial cuts to higher education, requirements for tenure, and administrative demands requiring the legibility of academic work? Surely the possibility of doing so would be greater for tenured faculty in certain departmental, disciplinary, and national contexts. The volume’s relative silence on the topic of instructors’ and students’ material realities, and how these realities may affect their degrees of educational access, learning capacity, and pedagogical freedom, is emblematic of the ongoing challenge of attending to the interrelation of theory and practice, a point of contention among many critics and thinkers of feminist materialism.

As a whole, *Teaching with Feminist Materialisms* provides a welcome contribution to current conversations about how the mutuality of theory and practice that feminist materialism avows can come into being in the contemporary academy. To those already familiar with the core principles of new materialism and feminist theory, the collection’s Introduction will be a welcome reminder of their mutual entanglement. Admittedly, the collection does not radically alter ongoing discussions within new materialism, feminist studies, or pedagogy. The volume’s essays encourage thoughtfulness about teaching, even if they leave ambiguous how feminist materialism in particular can inform classroom practices. They do, however, show that holding these areas of inquiry in mind at the same time does open and extend up important questions about how, as teachers and students, we differently encounter and

experience matter—how, indeed, we *are* matter.

References

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Bio

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