

Joseph Shafer

## Crises in New Materialist Readings

- Kerstin Howaldt, Kai Merten (ed.), *New Materialist Literary Theory: Critical Conceptions of Literature for the Anthropocene*. London: Lexington Books 2024. 233 pp. [Price: EUR 105,95]. ISBN 978-1-6669-2912-6.

For roughly two decades now, a certain dilemma or conceptual gap has lingered regarding the compatibility of literary theory and so-called new materialisms. New materialisms, after all, had gradually risen over the 1990s to finally privilege that universe of natural matter which for so long had been excluded by the solely linguistic parameters of a »literary« theory wherein textual material was rooted in linguistic traces. In fact, nature served predominant streams of literary theory as a radical or absolute alterity, a corporeal substrate or blank page, notably through frameworks like Freudo-Lacanian psychoanalysis, structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstructionism, and their receptions, be it the alterity of feminine matter in Judith Butler's »sexual difference« or the distortion in Timothy Morton's »ecology without nature.« Yet pioneers like Donna Haraway and forerunners of feminist materialisms such as Vicki Kirby, Elizabeth Grosz, Samantha Frost, and Claire Colebrook paved the way for the likes of a Karen Barad when introducing the performative »agencies« in nonhuman entities, the organic substances or natural phenomena, which, until then, were repressed or barred from linguistic-based discourses. But famously, in 2003, Barad declared, »Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every »thing« – even materiality – is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation.«<sup>1</sup> Such pronouncements or initiatives may nevertheless feel ironic at times, if that method of analyzing non-linguistic and non-representational matter in often microscopic elements or nonhuman bodies gets reapplied back to practices of reading text exclusively as written language, that is, by reading about worlds and matter culturally represented by words alone. This crisis is central to *New Materialist Literary Theory*, edited by Kerstin Howaldt and Kai Merten.

Yet that unresolved debate inevitably recedes into the background of a collection which additionally features several other crises, evidenced by the fuller title, *New Materialist Literary Theory: Critical Conceptions of Literature for the Anthropocene*. Along with »new materialism,« this project takes »the Anthropocene« as a primary subject, but also »speculative realism,« and strands of »literary theory« via still broader literary studies. Perhaps to garner a narrower scope, editors and contributors apparently agreed to limit new materialism to a few of Karen Barad's notions, »entanglement« or »diffraction.« Meanwhile, the book discusses the disparate field of speculative realism mostly in the terms of Graham Harman's »object-oriented ontology« (OOO), the »correlationism« of Quentin Meillassoux, with occasional nods to Timothy Morton. Thus the book is organized into three distinct sections. With its eleven chapters from eleven different contributors, one third of the essays is dedicated to a Baradian concept in »Part I: Entanglement,« the second, to an aspect of speculative realism, with »Part II: Speculation,« and the third tries to bridge the first two, with »Part III: Aligning Entanglement and Speculation,« although both the first and second sections contain essays which compare Barad and Harman as well.

Hence the collection addresses a number of crises which came to prominence in the early 2000s by more or less combining them. For the overarching crisis is not so much real-world climate

change or the Anthropocene, since the »Introduction« by Howaldt and Mertin and the chapters which follow only mention or discuss the Anthropocene in passing; except for Howaldt's essay on climate change in three contemporary British plays, Evan Gottlieb's on Percy Shelley's hope in a »romantic anthropocene,« and Marco Caracciolo's on unknown futures in science fiction. Nor is the largest issue the choice to boil the ever-widening field of new materialisms down to a few of Barad's main terms, though this choice was likely a key component for the 2019 conference that this collection was based on. The other challenge, that of bringing speculative realism under the aegis or title of »New Materialist Theory,« is not a problem either because the editors openly accept this challenge.

Howaldt and Mertin explain how those two frameworks do seem mutually exclusive. Whereas Barad will find every subject-position always already enmeshed in the internal relations or divided cuts of agential matter, which performs in disappearing and evading our reflection or re-presentation by »diffraction,« speculative realism will find every object always distinct and already sealed-off, withdrawn from each other. This latter object thus carries a cut-off mysterious essence that must now be speculated or fictionalized, which is a starkly foreign approach to Barad's science studies – to the visibly splitting »agential cut« in the queerly dis/appearing and performatively clinamenesque performances of a matter that entangles its observers. Meillassoux, for example, himself criticized Barad for a lack of uncertainty. Yet Howaldt and Mertin identify and quote that very rift in order to suggest instead that complementary senses of uncertainty nonetheless exist in each object of study. They conclude, »we stress the instability, situative arrangement and intra-activity of each act of speculation but we also stress the epistemological uncertainty in each agential cut,« boldly claiming that »each speculation is an agential cut, each agential cut is a speculation« (16). This attempted suturing or mirroring of the evasive kernels in Barad and Harman/Meillassoux is the editors' priority. But it is not the main task of subsequent contributions. The chapters have the responsibility of providing related readings of literary texts.

Philipp Erchinger, for instance, will seek a »practical materialism« in Wordsworth's poetics, which, he admits, may not be associated with new materialism but it accounts for the physical labor and leisure of poetry-writing for Wordsworth. Grant Hamilton turns readers farther away from the book as an object in pursuance of abstract notions or ideas like »history,« which can be studied with a Morettian »distant reading« through macro-computational analyses, of, say, the number of times a word is used, or computer-generated graphs of algorithmically »related« words across large data pools like *The Tale of Two Cities* or Dickens' entire oeuvre. Hamilton does propose a technique adapted from Barad's (her »apparatus«) in order to trace relations; but, as Annina Klappert's neighboring essay points out, Barad herself explained why Moretti's »distant reading« was antithetical to her objective. Despite the ways Hamilton's data-crunching emphasizes a »process« similar to Barad's focus on the connectivities of things over any single object, Hamilton's virtual processing of inter-connected words through a common idea deviates from Barad's focus on the intra-relations of visible phenomena, like the magnetic fields or electrical charges seen by birds or sharks and the connections un/seen with/in that matter. Nonetheless, when examining natural phenomena as intangible and impermanent as »east winds,« »mad gusts« or »air,« as in Ann-Katrin Preis's essay about Wilfred Owen's WWI poetry, the object of analysis still remains the signified representations of written words in a text – significations which are always reproduced through differences between signs and the *différance* between their own printed material body and valuation in appearing. For Arne De Boever, those words comprise the written »lists« in W.G. Sebald's novels, his frequent lists of things, or it's those words in Richard Powell's sci-fi »neuronovel,« *Bewilderment*, which Caracciolo reads to entertain two kinds of uncertainty: that of an unknown future due to climate change and neuroscience's unconvincing explanations of subjectivity.

On the other hand, Birgit Kaiser recognizes this underlying theoretical crisis, not only when sketching a brief history between Saussure, father of modern linguistics, language for Freud, and early new materialists like Claire Colebrook, but when struggling to reflect upon the meaning of words, print, or literally printed lines in Clarice Lispector's *The Passion According to G.H.* Lispector's disruptive punctuation marks, her »dashes,« present »a part of the textual body that is not immediately attributed to signification,« says Kaiser, and, »in addition to foregrounding the text's materiality itself (producing a suspense of narration and a withholding of meaning), the dashes also spatially frame the transformation G.H. undergoes« (89). Here Kaiser views the work as a material body which, having punctuated the veil of appearance, visibly and affectively deflects her reproduction of signification or representation despite seeing its character transform.

That relatively omnipresent theoretical enigma is spotlighted seldomly, or at least not as directly as it is broached indirectly, as in arguments like Daniela Keller's when reconsidering Nicholas Royle's experimental novel, *An English Guide to Birdwatching*. The novel, Keller astutely observes, tables an interesting analogy: that between birdwatching and reading. To investigate that analogization, Keller returns to Derrida, to the political or interpretative power of his maxim, *il n'y a pas de hors-texte* [there is nothing outside text], and she wagers that a reader can indeed »embrace a Materialist understanding of Jacques Derrida's work« (191). But, as Keller also notes, Derrida believed any »thing« outside the system of language – nature foremost, the beast, the desert, etc. – acquires value only when incorporated and represented by that linguistic system of self-reflection. That is how Barad and company redressed Derrida, by letting nature perform in a manner that resists appearing for or as cultural representation. So, the question is, how exactly might a reader work across the surface of a page and its different materialities, between print, or even between pages, through competing senses of linguistic traces and nonlinguistic paginal matter, through words, colors, or fabrics, as if each was rendered no more legible or mysterious than the light waves or particles which frame them? *New Materialist Literary Theory* raises and informs such questions.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Karen Barad, Posthuman Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter, in: *Signs*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Spring 2003), 801-831, 801.

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