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in/between new material feminism and object-oriented  
ontology**

TAYLOR, Carol <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0914-8461>>

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**Published version**

TAYLOR, Carol (2016). Close encounters of a critical kind: a diffractive musing in/between new material feminism and object-oriented ontology. *Cultural Studies - Critical Methodologies*, 16 (2), 201-212.

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# Close Encounters of a Critical Kind: A Diffractive Musing In/Between New Material Feminism and Object-Oriented Ontology

Carol A. Taylor<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

For a number of years, new material feminists have been developing new theoretical tools, new modes of conceptual analysis and new ethical frameworks. Object-oriented ontology, part of the speculative realism ‘movement’, has been engaged in something similar. Yet these endeavours have often taken place in ‘parallel universes’, despite sharing – or at least colliding around – a range of somewhat similar ontological and epistemological commitments. Composed as a diffractive musing encounter, the article brings Barad’s *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, already a ‘foundational’ text for new material feminism, into an encounter with a speculative realist text of the same ‘foundational’ status, Harman’s *The Quadruple Object*. The article develops a notion of diffractive musing as embodied, sensory struggle which instantiates intellectual generosity as a mode of critique.

## Introduction

Speculative realism first went viral on the internet a couple of years ago and is now making itself felt in academic articles and books. I came to speculative realism via my immersion in new material feminism and after many years of engaging with feminist theory and politics. While feminism continually tuned me into the daily politics of sexism and the need to combat these on an everyday basis through our intellectual practices with students as well as our individual and collective actions on the bus, in our homes, workspaces and in the streets, new material feminism had enlivened my senses, bringing to the fore engagement with the world as bodymind entanglement. It had propelled me, via the promise of diffraction, into a creative

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: Carol A. Taylor, Sheffield Institute of Education, Sheffield Hallam University, Arundel Building, 122 Charles Street, Sheffield, S1 2NE. Tel: 0114 225 6260. Email: [C.A.Taylor@shu.ac.uk](mailto:C.A.Taylor@shu.ac.uk)

imaginary for thinking otherwise, and into pondering how, if we are thinking otherwise, we might also be reading and writing academic articles otherwise. More specifically, new material feminism touches me, presses on my skin as sensorium, with its invitation that knowledge is a material-discursive co-constitution by all sorts of agents not just human agents. It impels me to worry about and try to work out how to affectively and ethically embody mattering as an entangled responsibility for the actions we take (however small) which enact differences that matter for humans, nonhumans and other-than-humans alike (Barad, 2007). It is perhaps worth stating here that the material feminism I activate in this article differs from an 'earlier' incarnation of material feminism which, in its alliance with Marxist historical materialism, is principally concerned with the gendered inequalities entailed in the reproduction of capitalist modes of social and economic organisation. However, as Lenz Taguchi (2013) makes clear, it is also to be differentiated from a 'renewed' materialist phenomenological account on two fronts: one, because renewed materialism continues to privilege human subjects' experience of matter in relation to what matter affords or enables humans to do; and two, because it explains material relations by resurrecting a mode of subjectivity based on conscious acts of making meaning which continue to gesture to a transcendent dimension with its hidden structures of truth or meaning beyond the human. So, although offering a valuable corrective to social constructionism, a renewed materialist phenomenological account 'still takes the human subject as a starting point, and thus produces a negative and dialectical ontology' (Lenz Taguchi, 2013, p. 711). In contrast, in the Baradian-inspired 'new' material feminism I invoke, matter is not 'given' to the human but rather acts on its own terms in an emergent, contingent and dynamic practice of materialization which includes human and nonhuman bodies and gives rise to unpredictable, if sometimes enduring, assemblages and conglomerations. 'New' material feminism undoes the binary separation of knowing and being; and it troubles concepts of will, intention and agency, recognizing them not as individual possessions, nor as manifestations of the

negotiated pull of structure and agency as in social constructionism, but as force, flow, affect and intensity distributed across a multiplicity of different human-nonhuman modalities.

Furthermore, the ‘weirdness’ of Barad’s quantum physics promised a queer(y)ing that could undo identity by unmooring the fixed coordinates of time, place and space through an emergent ‘dynamic relationality between continuity and discontinuity’ (Barad, 2010, p. 244). Specifically, the word ‘weirdness’ produced an errant wandering to the concept of ‘enweirding’ and the agency of objects, from which I went to Ian Bogost’s (2012) book on ‘alien phenomenology’, and then from Bogost to Graham Harman’s (2011) theory of object-oriented ontology, which is either an offshoot of speculative realism, its overarching field, or its origin, depending on who you read. The affinities between speculative realism and material feminism seemed immediately apparent: both theories proposed a realist ontology, albeit inflected differently and refracted through different disciplinary histories and epistemological affiliations; both questioned human exceptionalism and thereby (implicitly in the case of object-oriented ontology and explicitly in the case of material feminism) offered posthuman principles and allegiances, again differently inflected; and both opened new, radical ways of knowing and being by, variously en-weirding, diffracting or queer(y)ing knowledge production.

But, at this early point, some considerable differences also seemed immediately apparent. For all her theoretical abstraction, Barad’s world is a place of human-and-more-and-other-than human flesh, blood and bone entanglements. Her concerns are to do with the materialisation and force of differences that matter in a ‘worlding’ of entangled relationality, that is, an ethic of being with/in the world. For Harman and Bogost, objects ‘withdraw’ from us. Neither seem at all interested in the ‘livingness’ of things but with abstract concepts, in which re-reading the work of the philosophical fathers seem to take precedence over ethical praxis. As a feminist, this worried me (and there is more to come in what follows on the other worries that

speculative realism provoked). Nevertheless, the affinities and dissonances between speculative realism and material feminism continued to intrigue me, and I was encouraged by Hird's comment (2013, p. 365) that 'a conversation between feminist science studies and critical theory, speculative realism and object oriented philosophy is overdue' to pursue these wondering-wanderings further.

### **First Passage to Critique: Em/bodied Diffractive Musing**

#### *Em/Bodied*

bell hooks (1994, p. 192) notes that the legacy of the Cartesian cogito in educational practice has meant the erasure of the body in order that we may 'give ourselves over more fully to the mind' such that the normalized, governing assumption is 'that passion has no place in the classroom'. And not just the classroom. It often seems that passion has no place in academic writing either, as we bend our thoughts, bodies and emotions to producing another star-rated journal 'output', engage in the never-ending pursuit for diminishing, and increasingly competitive, research funds, and burnish our public profiles on social media – meanwhile exhausting our passion in favour of commoditized, entrepreneurial academic productivity. Yet, in opposition to this climate, and the concomitant propulsion in much (though not all) mainstream academic writing towards an 'ablution of language' (Minh-ha, 1989, p. 17) in which (it is assumed) transparency of thought can be represented in the cold light of day on the dispassionate page, the forces of passionate attachment are ranged. These forces encourage us – give us heart to – resist the tyranny that requires academic writing to display Depth, Surface, Essence Appearance, and Competence in favour of instantiating the practices of Performance, Authenticity, Pretence, Truth, Lies (MacLure, 2005) which, although often castigated as 'frivolous', are more likely as practices to help recover some of the gleeful fun of playing with ideas that Derrida thought should be the provenance of universities (Myerson,

1997). It may be that such writing is risky. It may be, as Barthes's (1953, p. 16–17) notes, that writing which works against the modes established 'under the pressure of History and Tradition' may be 'a mere moment'. It may also be that such writing provides examples of personal commitment and imagination that Sword (as cited in Badley, 2011, p. 264) thought was needed. The exemplars for doing this are beginning to multiply – but how might *I* do this?

Sensorializing Mazzei and Jackson's (2012) concept of knowing-in-being is for me one way forward; one way to contest the assumed separation of mind and body, and unravel the notion that unreason attends and inheres in the (female) body while freeing the mind, as purer substance, for intellection (Grosz, 1994). Instead, thinking with/in/from the plurality of the sensory body generates differing modes of apprehension which, at least for me, are not those of the monstrous workbench in which I tongue the corpse of severed data (Holmes, 2014), but an immanent sensory melody in which I hear-feel the deafening thrum of 'all the bells of noon', touch the ongoing rush and flush of flowing matter, breeze in the alive-ness of all things and beings. Being-in-the-moment, as a Buddhist might say. Aiming to apprehend in skin-mouth-eyes-fingertips the joy of the world in its intra-active becoming, as Barad (2007) might say. Such sensory knowing is, as Pink (2009) noted, embodied *and* emplaced. This (my) body is a specific body – here-now – but I attempt not to separate movement from seat-work (Daza and Huckaby, 2014) because I have a bad back which any stasis exacerbates. As I sit and write I move continually, attending to the micro-movements that occur, propelled into critique as the sensory joyousness of adventitious seeking, the hard-sought-after-going-on, gathering 'materials' in my getting-heavier pockets as I go, assembling 'stuff', turning 'things' over in my hands, enmeshed in the haecceity of moments, rather than worrying about the getting 'there' (wherever 'there' is) and having arrived, sorting, arranging, pinning, finicking. Such sensory knowing continually unfinishes academic writing because the road is made by walking. Thus, I think with Latour (2004, p. 246) that:

The direction of critique [is] not away but toward the gathering ... Critique [should] be associated with more, not less, with multiplication, not subtraction.

Such more-ish-ness becomes a taste on the tongue, an embodied experiment in writing which changes my thinking while changing 'me' (Bridges-Rhoads, 2015).

### *Diffraction*

A diffractive reading ... spreads thought and meaning in unpredictable and productive emergences (Mazzei, 2014, p. 742).

Theories [...] matter, they induce difference into the intra-active becoming of the world. They matter because they are diffractive (Seghal, 2014, p. 197).

Diffraction is not a singular event that happens in space and time; rather, it is a dynamism that is integral to spacetime mattering. Diffractions are untimely. Time is ... broken apart in different directions, non- contemporaneous with itself. Each moment is an infinite multiplicity. 'Now' is not an infinitesimal slice but an infinitely rich condensed node in a changing field diffracted across spacetime in its ongoing iterative repatterning (Barad, 2014, p. 169).

The visionary potential of diffraction makes 'a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction'. Diffractive mappings are not rationally made, because the productivity of diffraction comes from elsewhere (van der Tuin, 2014, p. 236).

Critique is not just a reflection that leaves what it reflects upon unaltered, but a diffraction that changes what is put under critical scrutiny (Folkers, 2014, p. 17).

These five ways of looking at diffraction indicate the generative momentum of this concept as a way for thinking, doing, researching, being and becoming in productively different ways. I wish, like Stevens with his thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird (why 13? Only 13?), I could include more diffractive appreciations not simply to attest to its conceptual mobility, but also as an incantatory device in urging diffraction as a research practice which renders ‘methods’ as tools, ‘analysis’ as coding, and ‘methodology’ as a thinking frame for research obsolete. As Barad (2007, p. 30) notes, diffraction ‘does not fix what is the object and what is the subject in advance’, which puts Heidegger’s (1962, p. 24) point that ‘every inquiry is a seeking. Every seeking gets guided beforehand by what is sought’ somewhat out of joint. Diffraction en-courages us (gives us heart) to pay greater attention to research as an emergent enactment of materially-embodied socio-political practices, and to the cuts, boundaries and differences we co-constitutively produce through knowledge enactments.

Sensory knowing – that is, embodied diffractive musing as I develop it in this article – arises with/in the diffractive feminist ‘her/story’ told so well in recent journal special issues (*Gender and Education*, 2013, Vol. 25, Issue 4; *Parallax* Volume 20, Number 3, 2014, for example). This her/story pays homage to Haraway as the ‘founding feminist mother’ of this concept, and her re-visioning of the masculine gaze of optics that diffraction his/torically tells, and to Barad’s appropriation of diffraction as both a quantum phenomenon relating to interference patterns and a useful metaphor for methodological practices that entail ‘the processing of small but consequential differences’ which interfere with, contest and undo canonical tales, preferred readings, and dominant discourses. This her/story points up how ‘different differences get made, what gets excluded, and how these exclusions matter’ (Barad, 2007, p. 29–30). Doing diffraction in this vein brings to mind a small (?) undoing of the masculine his/tory of optics: I re-member that Spinoza was a philosopher-craftsman whose practical philosophy led him to the notion that ‘interacting with things and understanding things cannot



be separated' (Hurley, 1988, p. ii); that 'the units of understanding are not propositions but acts'; which led Deleuze (1988, p. 13) to suggest that Spinoza's affirmative philosophy had 'enough confidence in life to denounce all the phantoms of the negative'. This re-minds me that in doing diffraction 'one never commences; one never has a tabula rasa; one slips in; enters in the middle; one takes up or lays down rhythms' (Deleuze, 1988, p. 123). Doing diffraction as sensory melody is, then, a becoming-movement towards embodying the figure of the 'boarding-house lodger', as Deleuze (1988, p. 4) characterized Spinoza, that is, one who 'solicits forces in thought that elude obedience as well as blame'.

### *Musing*

Meditative contemplation; thoughtful abstraction; critique as intellectual food; gustatory thinking.

Musing as slow theory. Not theory which is developed at snail's pace, but rather theory which partakes of the slow movement's commitment to deceleration, consumption reduction, ethical environmentalism, and the nurturing of non-commercial forms of well-being. While Honore (2005) is its most famous popularizer, perhaps the slow movement's ecological impulses as found in slow cities, slow food, slow design (Fuad-Luke, 2007) have something useful for the development of critique as diffractive musing. Roberts (2013) notes that a slow education would focus on 'deceleration, patience, and immersive attention'. Diffractive musing as slow theorising may help deterritorialize critique for those practices of 'working the limits' that Mazzei (2014) thinks necessary. Perhaps by valuing contemplation more in the unhurried spacetime-mattering of doing, reading and writing critique we may also attend to the pulsing sense of immersive joy that comes-with emergent thinking. So that, like Deleuze and Guattari (1994, p. 212), we might say that 'contemplating is creating', it is an event that occurs 'meanwhile' and which 'belongs to becoming [because] nothing happens there, but

everything becomes' (ibid, p. 158). The *longue durée* of contemplative creation does not constitute musing as an apolitical practice. On the contrary, it provokes careful attention to 'ideas' as 'technologies for pursuing inquiries' (Haraway, 2008, p. 282). Musing critique directs a keener analytical gaze towards the 'mark a minute' cultures of postsecondary assessment regimes, and to contemporary university practices which condition bodies to accord with the finitude of 'resource envelopes'.

### **Second Passage to Critique: Reading and Writing Which Maximizes**

In his engagements with other philosophers and writers – Hume, Bergson, Spinoza, Proust, Foucault – Deleuze was seeking a reading which maximizes. Such a reading, according to Hurley (1988, p. iii) is an invitation to 'come as you are – and read with a different attitude', one more akin to the way we approach poetry. A reading which maximizes is less concerned with seeking a 'full' analysis (an illusion anyway and always) and is more about an affective reading which, as Hurley notes, 'may be more practical'. Writing in this mode is 'not a solitary pleasure [because there is] a connection between you and the material' (Winterson, 2014); it becomes an act of 'receiving' and 'transmitting', a form of 'telepathy' even, such that 'we're not even in the same year together, let alone the same room ... except we *are* together. We're close. We're having a meeting of the minds' (King, 2000, p. 115–117). Of course, thinking this 'meeting' as a maximizing of diffractively em/bodied sensory knowing assuredly does *not* return us to the disembodiment of individualised cognition. Instead, its musing mode works to instantiate the nonhuman with/in us. A diffractive reading and writing which maximizes focuses subjectivity as multiplicity and recasts Burman and MacLure's (2005, p. 288) 'necessary ... but not necessarily paralyzing' question 'who am I to write this' in a new light in which 'to write is to struggle and resist; to write is to become; to write is to draw a map' (Deleuze, 1999, p. 38).

Above I endorsed Latour's idea that the direction of critique is toward the gathering, the multiplication. Latour (2004, p. 231) argues that this formulation helps critique face away from its obsession with deconstructing matters of fact towards a more positive engagement with 'matters of concern'. He proposes that, in dealing with matters of concern, the critic is:

Not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles ... the critic is the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and in need of care and caution (Latour, 2004, p. 246).

Below, as I diffractively muse on speculative realism and material feminism, I want to activate this care and caution by engaging critique as a close encounter of the generous kind. The idea of critique as a more generous connection, as intimate association, as getting closer to in order to add to, not to take something away, be negative, hostile or destructive, works with Barad's argument that 'critique is over-rated, over-emphasized, and over-utilized, to the detriment of feminism' (Barad, as cited in Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012, p. 49). Critique as a serious enterprise of more gentle holding begins with Kirby's (2011, p. 82) idea that:

The practice of doing critique involves close encounters with another person's way of thinking, intellectual commitments, 'temperament' and 'personal idiosyncrasies that animate their writing style.

Thus, a diffractive reading in/between object-oriented ontology and material feminism doesn't aim at a 'murderous manoeuvre of dialectical reasoning', as Kirby (2011, p. 83) calls it, in order to highlight what is 'good', 'better' or more advantageous about one approach vis-à-vis the other, but rather to look at their utility for thinking differently in-between. I am mindful of St Pierre's (2016, f.c.) advice that the best preparation for educational research is to study philosophy, not methodology, and she cites Rajchman's (2000, p. 7) point that:

To make connections one needs not knowledge, certainty, or even ontology, but rather a trust that something may come out, though one is not yet completely sure what.

In what follows I try to do this. I trust that something may come out but at the *moment I write this*, I am not quite sure what.

### **Third Passage to Critique: Making Connections/ Soliciting Forces**

I began this paper (a while ago) in a state of pique. My pique arose when I saw that the names associated with ‘the movement’ of Speculative Realism (in Harman’s [2013a] view it ought to be capitalized as a proper name) were all male, no women; and it seemed to me that the four men’s names – Graham Harman, Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, and Iain Hamilton Grant – the ‘founding fathers’ of the movement – were engaging in a lot of incestuous mutual citing (perhaps, my gut told me, to convince themselves there was a ‘movement’). Pique deepened to annoyance when I saw a similar thing happening with object-oriented ontology or TripleO (founded by Graham Harman, in alliance with Ian Bogost, Levi Bryant, Timothy Morton). And expanded when I saw the male philosophical lineage Harman *et al.* in elaborating TripleO invokes: Kant, Husserl, Heidegger. Having witnessed the colonisation of a number of emerging fields by masculine interests over the years – the focus in cultural studies on young men’s oppositional and resistant subcultures and the lack of academic engagement with girls’ subcultures prior to Angela McRobbie’s work is one notable example – I was surprised at how much this irritated rather than simply wearied me as another illustration of the ongoing monotony of gendered practices of exclusion.

Added to this, Ray Brassier said that he could see ‘little philosophical merit in a “movement” whose most signal achievement thus far is to have generated an online orgy of stupidity’

(cited in Gratton: 2014, p. 3), a comment which encouraged me initially to relegate object-oriented ontology to a boys-own philosophical hinterland where clubby backslapping competed with the virtual violence of macho smackdowns. Others, too, have noted the gendered exclusions: O'Rourke (2011) remarks on a reference to speculative realism and TripleO as an unfriendly to women 'sausage fest', and van de Tuin (2014, p. 231) notes 'the androcentrism of much OOO work,' although Gratton's (2014, p. 6) book – the first synoptic look at the 'movement' – 'sees no reason to exclude' some notable women theorists as 'disparate thinkers' questioning correlationism. And then, there is the wariness I felt of object-oriented ontology's claim to the invention of a new philosophical universalism, a wariness not helped by the grandiose tone of some of Harman's (2011, p. 96) writing: his concepts, he says, are not 'a taxonomy of entities, but are four structures of reality in general, found everywhere and at all times'. You can see my problem and perhaps you share my pique! Here I reached for the comfort of Haraway's (1991, p. 183) observation regarding the 'rarefield realm of epistemology, [of how] what can count as knowledge is policed by philosophers codifying cognitive canon law.'

And yet. Nevertheless. Meanwhile.

I was intrigued.

I had to know how Barad's worlding warped into Bennett's thingly power into Harman's objects. It seemed like 'now' was a good time to tangle with Harman's object lists which, like Barad's italicised theoretical summaries, affectively struck me as a more endearing stylistic tic. Perhaps it was three moments, working their subdued magic, that helped shift me toward the more generous reading Kirby feels necessary in close critical encounters.

First moment. I remembered Badley's (2011, p. 262) injunction that joining a community of inquiry means engaging in 'transactions' with established authors' texts in order to meet those texts from their own critical standpoints.

Second moment. Meeting *The Third Table* halfway. This is Harman's (2012) little book which uses an anecdote from the British physicist, Arthur Stanley Eddington, to outline object-oriented ontology via the 'everyday table' that Eddington wrote on, the 'physical table' composed of atoms, and the 'third table' lying 'between these two others' (ibid, p. 7). The third table, the 'real table' is not reducible to quarks or table effects on humans, neither does the practical use we make of it exhaust its reality. Its reality is not simply dissolvable into small units; it is 'a genuine reality deeper than any theoretical or practical encounter with it' (ibid, p. 10).

Third moment. Feeling the pulsing energy of a Deleuzian line of flight when Harman (2012, p. 12) dismisses the two cultures, which he terms science and social constructionism, of C. P. Snow as 'failures as philosophy.' proposing instead the 'third culture' of art as the only way to apprehend the reality of objects. This refreshing 'beyond binaries' instant promised a creative cartography which spoke to Deleuze and Guattari's (1994, pp. 202–203) proposal in *What is Philosophy?* for a momentary conjunction of forces in philosophy, art and science 'want us to tear open the firmament and ... let in a bit of free and windy chaos'.

How to pursue that invitation? Perhaps by a wondering without confirmation (not knowing what will 'come out'), a more generous reading, a musing critique.

### **Landing Place 1: Realism/ Materialism**

Of things exactly as they are.

So, that's life, then: things as they are?

It picks its way on the blue guitar.

(from Wallace Stevens, *The Man With The Blue Guitar*)

Graham Harman has positioned materialism as the 'hereditary enemy' of any object-oriented philosophy. In the workshop which originated speculative realism as a movement, Harman said 'I'm an anti-materialist ... materialism is a kind of idealism' (Brassier *et al.*, 2007, p. 398). Three years later, he published an article with the title 'materialism must be destroyed' (Haman, 2010), and in *The Quadruple Object*, he wrote:

What makes materialism such a special opponent is that it does not merely undermine or overmine the object, but performs both of these manoeuvres simultaneously (Harman, 2011, p. 13)

Rather than ungenerously thinking that the gentleman doth protest too much, it is worth looking at what these dis/avowals intend. Harman makes it clear he is not making a literal call for materialism's eradication. He is using his title as a provocation for thinking in order to escape from the loose use of the word 'materialism' which, he contends, 'has been used promiscuously for so many theories that to destroy it might mean to destroy every philosophical position that exists' (Harman, 2010, p. 774). He therefore uses his opposition to materialism as a means to define the core tenets of his own brand of speculative realism, object-oriented ontology. It is interesting to note here that Harman speaks approvingly of Bennett's (2010) materialism in which all things, human, nonhuman and other-than-human, are placed on the same ontological footing, given that Bennett has also been rather firmly co-opted into a range of new material feminist and posthumanist analyses of cultural and

educational practices, and we have already seen the antipathy between speculative realism and feminism. What Harman specifically approves of in Bennett's approach is her opposition to 'reduction as a general philosophical method' and the fact that she 'dissolves the usual strict opposition between free human subjects and inert material slabs' (Harman, 2010, p. 774).

This fits with Harman's critique that materialism is guilty of both undermining and overmining the object. A brief explanation: Undermining is a reduction of the object to some primary element, principle or substance which itself can be dissolved into nothing but qualities, for example, the atom is not an 'object' at all but a 'set of habitually bundled traits' as is the apple, and so is the human (Harman, 2011, p. 14). Think Heraclitus, Empedocles, Anaximander. In contrast, overmining is another reduction but one that reduces 'upward' by positing that 'objects are important only insofar as they are manifested in the mind' (Harman, 2011, p. 11). This is a form of idealism which argues that what we think is 'real' is nothing other than a surface effect while the 'really real' is going on below that. Here Plato's Forms come to mind, as does Marx's base/superstructure dialectical materialism. But Harman claims that overmining also happens in those forms of process philosophy which see objects in terms of relations (as in Whitehead), and forms of social constructionism in which objects are the product of language, discourse or power (think Foucault, Butler). Harman (2013b, p. 46) has also dismissed the let's-have-our-materialist-cake-and-eat-it position which he calls 'duoming' which dissolves objects 'simultaneously in two directions'. I will return to this concept presently for I think it is here that a key friction between TripleO and new material feminism might be located. For Harman, the philosophical way out is to dispense with overmining, undermining and duoming materialisms in order to return to a realism that resides in the autonomy of objects. Thus, his stated aim in *The Quadruple Object*: 'objects should be the hero of philosophy' (Harman, 2011, p. 16).



The object's philosophical heroism accords with Harman's claim that there is a 'third way' of philosophical thinking, ignored since Kant's influential view that made things knowable through our experience of them. For Harman (2011, p. 15), following Heidegger, this third philosophy focuses on 'the intermediate layer of autonomous objects, that are both actually individual and also autonomous from all perception'. In *The Quadruple Object*, 'objects':

'Include those entities that are neither physical nor even real' (p. 5).

'Must be accounted for by ontology' (p. 5).

'Not all objects are equally real, but ... they are all equally objects' (p. 5).

'In its primary sense an object is not used or known, but simply is what it is' (p. 73).

'To be an object means to be itself, to enact the reality in the cosmos of which that object alone is capable' (p. 74).

Harman confirms that objects are 'defined only by their autonomous reality' (p. 19) and because 'an object is anything that has a unified reality that is autonomous from its wider context and also from its own pieces' (p. 115), then it follows that physical things and minds are objects, the European Union is an object, and a hammer is an object (p. 116): 'Everything both inside and outside the mind is an object' (p. 143), including unicorns (one of Harman's favourite entities) dogs, diamonds and the Dutch East India Company.

Harman's object-oriented ontology is most notable for its suggestion that 'objects withdraw' from us and each other into their own inaccessible realms. On this point, early in the life of speculative realism, Harman writes of:

‘Objects infinitely withdrawing from each other into vacuums and only barely managing to communicate across some sort of qualitative bridge’ (Brassier *et al.*, 2007, p. 368).

He reiterates later:

The object is a dark crystal veiled in a private vacuum: irreducible to its own pieces, and equally irreducible to its outward relations with other things’ (Harman, 2011, p. 47).

However, although objects recede infinitely, they nevertheless touch, communicate or interact with each other, doing so via their sensuous qualities, their surfaces. As Gratton (2014, p. 100) explains ‘real objects relate “asymmetrically” to other objects through sensuous qualities, and this is just as true for the coffee grinds as it is for the human relation of knowledge to things themselves’. For speculative realists, objects ‘nest’ within other objects, constituting ‘unit operations’ which are not atoms but systems of object conglomerations whose operations are ‘always fractal (Bogost, 2012, p. 28). That objects touch explains how approximate stabilisations are formed and replicated amidst heterogeneous conjunctions of objects but, while objects remain hauntingly near, tangible and felt by each other, they are nevertheless ultimately inaccessible and atomized, locked within themselves (Bennett, 2016 f.c.) But some speculative realists of the TripleO stripe find objects ‘touching’ in another sense captured nicely by Bogost’s (2012, p. 28) phrase: ‘these things *wonder* about one another without getting confirmation’ which points to the idea that objects pursue philosophical divagation on their existential alone-ness amidst their lively relations and atmospheric reverberations. And all we can say to this is: well, maybe, and how could we know otherwise?

Bogost (2012, p. 5) confirms that:

‘To be a speculative realist, one must abandon the belief that human access sits at the centre of being, organizing it and regulating it like an ontological watchmaker.’

Indeed, the ‘abandonment’ of human access is *the* thing that joins the speculative realists, who otherwise are a disparate bunch with little in common, together: they all want to escape the correlationist circle. ‘Correlationism’ is the name Meillassoux (2008) has given to post-Kantian philosophy – which he calls the Correlationist Era – and which, he argues, is founded on the belief that we ‘know’ reality exists because we can think it and, concomitantly, we cannot think outside our own being in the world. Along with other speculative realists, Harman shares a commitment to stop thinking about how we know reality and focus instead on thinking what is real beyond human experience. As a group, they aim to distinguish themselves from other philosophical traditions which they argue remain mired in their inability to think the real in-itself. Thus, for Harman, Actor Network Theory is praiseworthy in introducing an ontology in which objects are recognised as active players in the world although, in his view, ANT’s insistence that things exist primarily in their interrelation misses the irreducible ‘objectness’ of the world. Speculative realists also agree that ‘we can know reality and we can speculate on it’ (Gratton, 2014, p. 7) and Harman’s objects are his philosophical take on giving realism its due. So, to summarise: for Harman what is real are things – objects; objects are where speculation originates; things are real beyond how humans access them; objects can relate to other objects but only to some part of them with other parts remaining infinitely withdrawn. The question arises: to what extent is this position shared by new material feminism? a point also raised by van der Tuin (2014, p. 232) who notes that ‘these young fields are generated by a similar philosophical impetus; however, they diverge as separate schools of thought.’

In outlining his approach, Harman (2011, p. 6) is aiming at ‘a new metaphysics able to speak of all objects and the perceptual and causal relations in which they become involved’. This sounds provocative and exciting yet immediately raises questions: for example, who is doing the speaking in this metaphysics, when, why, and how? responses to which seem, to me, to raise some rather fatal issues for the ‘objects’ of object-oriented ontology which I pick up later (see ‘weirding/worlding’ below). Harman is fully aware that objections to TripleO are often made on the erroneous misunderstanding that he is championing ‘equal rights for objects’ when it is patently obvious that a rock or carrot, a pen or a sword, blue jeans and ipads as ‘inanimate entities [do not] possess the full human toolbox of mental abilities’ (ibid, p. 119). Clearly stung by what he refers to as ‘snide objections’, ‘sarcastic comments’ (ibid, p. 119) and ‘silly’ criticisms (Harman, 2013a, p. 23), Harman makes the important point that:

‘There is no evidence that trees and houses write poetry, suffer nervous breakdowns, or learn from their mistakes. The question is whether this obvious difference between humans and non-humans deserves to be made into a *basic ontological rift*’ (emphasis in original) (Harman, 2011, p. 119).

This is a sound question, and one which also motivates new material feminist understandings as I elaborate below. Here, in the first landing place, I have been at pains to describe the ‘objects’ of object-oriented ontology in some detail partly because it is central to Harman’s explanation of why he is so antipathetic to materialism and because the human/non-human ontological rift object-oriented ontology wants to get over is shared by new material feminism. I now musingly diffract object-oriented ontology via new material feminism and, because I suspect the latter may be more familiar to readers of this journal, I will provide just a short overview of new material feminism, then focus on the main contours of Barad’s account of agential realism as outlined in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

## **Landing Place 2: Materialism/ Realism**

New material feminists are no less a disparate bunch than speculative realists. Nevertheless, they share a view that matter and discourse are co-constitutive and neither is foundational; that matter is agentic; that the human as the principal ground for knowledge production has to be displaced; and that all beings come to being through dynamic processes of co-constitutive emergence. New material feminists, like speculative realists, adhere to a non-dualist, flat ontology, which at the same time reworks epistemology but, unlike speculative realists, they have been particularly exercised by ethics as engaged, embodied, situated and *gendered* meaning-making practices which necessarily displace objectivity, ‘truth’ and ‘reason’ – what Haraway (1988, p. 581) called ‘the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere’ – as central values in social research (Alaimo and Hekman, 2008; Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010; Coole and Frost, 2010; Braidotti 2013). In my own field of education, the implications of material feminism have been explored in some depth recently (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012; Taylor and Ivinson, 2013; Lenz-Taguchi and Palmer, 2013). I now turn to Barad’s agential realism which maps a particular cartography for new material feminism.

It is perhaps first worth tackling head on the realism of agential realism. Barad (2007, p. 56) states that hers is:

A non-representationalist form of realism that is based on an ontology that does not take for granted the existence of ‘words’ and ‘things’ and an epistemology that does not subscribe to a notion of truth based on their correct correspondence.

Her incarnation of realism is aimed at getting out of the individualist and foundationalist (hierarchical and binary) assumptions that ‘prop up both traditional forms of realism and constructivism’ (Barad, 2007, p. 408). She writes that in an agential realist account: ‘Agency

is cut loose from its traditional humanist orbit. Agency is not aligned with human intentionality and subjectivity (ibid, p. 177). However, while the sentiment expressed here accords with Bogost's abandonment of the human as 'ontological watchmaker' referred to earlier, Barad's (2007) agential realism crystallises a divergence which produces new material feminism as the arch enemy of TripleO cf. Harman's comments above – precisely because it commits the correlationist sin of thinking mind, word and world together. Barad's agential realism proposes a posthumanist performative as a means to escape the 'representationalist trap' (ibid, p. 135) that 'takes the notion of [human] separation as foundational'. The problem with humanist representationalism is, for Barad, twofold. First, representationalism makes an ontological separation of words from things, thereby 'leaving itself with the dilemma of their linkage such that knowledge is possible' (ibid, p. 137). Second, representational practices which constitute the material world, nature and matter as separate 'objects of thought' set 'man [a]s an individual apart from the rest', bestowing on him 'a place from which to reflect' (ibid, p. 134). For Barad such reflection results in a geometrical optics that produces the same, and she counters this with a physical optics of diffraction that illuminates difference *and* illuminates the boundary-making practices that institute difference. The enactments of posthumanist agential realism, therefore, disrupts the metaphysics of individualism, and the tenets of humanism and representationalism that hold it in place.

Agential realism 'doesn't presume the separateness of any-'thing', let alone the alleged spatial, ontological and epistemological distinction that sets humans apart' (Barad, 2007, p. 136). Barad argues that 'matter and meaning are not separate entities' (ibid, p. 3), and that '[by] ... allowing matter its due as an active participant in the world's becoming, in its ongoing intra-activity [we] can think[...] the cultural and the natural together (Barad, 2007, pp. 135–6), a point also expressed by Timothy Morton (2010) in his ecological speculative realism. However, while TripleO and material feminism share a critique of human exceptionalism and both forcefully contest the assumption of power and privileges it has

enabled humans to arrogate to ourselves, from this point they shoot off in opposite directions. Remember that what Harman and TripleO are looking for is an a-human real in which objects and the world appear without us – a position that Bennett (2016 f.c.), citing Brassier, Weisman and Meillassoux, ultimately sees as a somewhat chilling lead-in to a post-apocalyptic disanthropy or nihilism. Whereas for Barad (2007, p. 134) an agential realist critique of ‘the inheritance of distance’ leads the other way – *towards* a human-matter entanglement: a responsibility for and of the world-with-us. Like Kirby (1997, pp. 126–7), Barad’s account is one in which word, flesh and world are ‘utterly implicated ... they are all emergent within a force field of differentiations that has no exteriority in any final sense’. Barad (2007, p. 160), thus, talks of ‘bodies being constituted along with the world, as ‘part of’ the world, as being-of-the-world rather than being in the world. She thinks of the ‘worlding of the world’ as an embodied (more-other-than-human-and-human) ethical practice, in which ‘we are not outside observers of the world ... rather we are part of the world in its ongoing intra-activity’ (ibid, p. 184).

The agential realist cartography of worlding Barad elaborates will now be familiar to many. In her view, in nature there are no such things as ‘things’ i.e. entities which are have ‘inherently determinate boundaries’ (ibid, p. 138). Instead, ‘the primary ontological unit is not independent objects with inherent boundaries and properties but rather phenomena’ whereby ‘phenomena are the ontological inseparability/entanglement of intra-acting agencies’ (ibid, p. 139). We may for a moment be tempted to think there is something going on here similar to the way objects ‘touch’ in TripleO but not so. An agential realist ontology maps the mutual constitution of subject-object always and only in/through the dynamism of their intra-active entailment; objects and subjects do not exist before or outside intra-actions. There is no object ‘itself’ possessing an autonomous reality, things are not ‘separate’ from us and don’t ‘withdraw’; they come into being through intra-actions. Individual agency is reframed as the co-constitution of confederate agencies in which agency is a becoming-together in an

‘ongoing ebb and flow’ (ibid, p. 140) (remarkably different from the ‘autonomous’ objects of TripleO or the actants of ANT). And while distributed agency makes it difficult to know (and why do we want to know?) which ‘one’ makes a ‘decision’ (and anyway what constitutes a decision? Ask the Ebola virus in Sierra Leone about that), agential cuts are made (sometimes by humans, sometimes not) which instantiate boundaries, produce properties and deliver differentiation, all the while remaining entangled as phenomena within apparatuses. The piling up’ of concepts here – phenomena, cut, intra-action, apparatus – is a Baradian feature, a ‘personal idiosyncras[y] [of] writing style’ (Kirby, 2011, p. 82) I deal with when I am in a close encounter of a critical kind with Barad, my mind entangled with her words, the page, the book.

Tom-tom. C’est moi. The blue guitar

And I are one.

Where

Do I begin and end? And where

As I strum the thing, do I pick up

That which momentarily declares

Itself not to be I and yet

Must be. It could be nothing else.

(from Wallace Stevens, *The Man With The Blue Guitar*)

A musing diffraction in/between TripleO and material feminism means to dispense with worries about questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality and revel in the fact that together they open a pincer movement which undoes the (man-made) ‘problem’ of correlationism. For Barad, it is an illusion of our own making anyway, because:



‘To theorize is not to leave the material world behind and enter the domain of pure ideas where the lofty space of the mind makes objective reflection possible. Theorizing, like experimenting, is a material practice,’ (Barad, 2007, p. 55).

For material feminism, concepts are practices, theories are material methods for enacting life. The realist materialisation of thinking-in-doing/ knowing-in-being, radicalizes ontology, fusing it with ethics and epistemology, constituting a posthuman ethico-onto-epistem-ology, making all and each of us (however ‘we’ are constituted as phenomena) responsible for each and all of ‘us’ because ‘every intra-action matters’. She spells this out as follows: ‘realism [is] about the real consequences, interventions, creative possibilities, and responsibilities of intra-acting’ (Barad, 2007, p. 37). In place of this, object-oriented ontology proposes that:

‘The in-itself is real. Yet ... this reality remains unattained by inanimate causal relations no less than by human subjects. For there is, in fact, a cotton-in-itself that withdraws from fire no less than from human awareness,’ (Harman, 2011, p. 137).

In order to escape what Harman sees as the ‘claustrophobic honey trap’ that prevents us from thinking the thing-itself because we are endlessly caught up in our thinking about thinking it, Harman offers a ‘weird realism’ of objects ‘that shows the human-world circle to be indefensibly narrow’ and its representations to be ‘narrow and false’ (Harman, 2011, p. 62). The purpose of ‘rescuing’ objects from human thought and installing them as autonomous things is to ‘produce a new metaphysics able to speak of all objects and the perceptual and causal relations in which they become involved,’ (Harman, 2011, p. 6).

I now turn to this ‘speaking of’ which I identified earlier as, in my view, a rather fatal issue for object-oriented ontology.

### Landing Place 3: Weirding/ Worlding

‘The objects as presented in this book are as strange as ghosts in a Japanese temple’ (Harman, 2011, p. 6)

Weird, alien, strange. These are the terms valorised by Harman (2011) and Bogost (2012) in their elaboration of the withdrawal of objects and their estrangement from human capture.

How, then, can we approach the alien strangeness of withdrawn objects in the weird realism of object-oriented ontology? What procedures, practices or even ‘methods’ might work?

Harman’s view is that we need to focus on allusions and in *The Quadruple Object* (2011, p.

68) he writes ‘we all know of a way of speaking of a thing without quite speaking of it;

namely, we allude to it. Allusion occurs in thinking no less than in speaking’. Interesting but

it’s unclear where this gets us to in understanding the secret life of objects, which indeed turns

out to be Harman’s point. We can’t ‘get’ anywhere nearer to objects or reality than we already

are. So, access to the table (or any other object) is ‘not impossible, only that it is indirect’

(Harman, 2012, p. 12). The approach to objects must be ‘oblique’, and even when we are

‘hunting’ objects we must make sure we are ‘non-lethal ... since objects can never be caught’.

They remain withdrawn from all access, making themselves available through ‘allusion and

seducing us by means of allure’ (ibid, p. 12). Perhaps it’s me, but Harman’s objects bear some

resemblance to the *femme fatale* of film noir, a dangerous enchantress attempting to elude the

male gaze, a thing capable of reworking the sexualised norms of abjection.

Bogost (2012) on the other hand, proposes a number of different strategies. Beginning with

the damning view that ‘for too long philosophers have spun waste like a goldfish’s sphincter’,

(Bogost, 2012, p. 110), and lamenting their allegiance to writing which he sees as a pursuit

dangerous for the doing of philosophy, he argues that ‘real radicals ... make things’. He

adapts the homely and undoubtedly masculine notion of carpentry to ‘the practice of

constructing artifacts as a philosophical practice' (ibid, p. 92) and, to exemplify this, constructs technological artifacts that 'work' without human intervention. Except that this 'alien phenomenology' requires human presence to records 'effects'. Like Harman, a seeker after the ghostly object, Bogost writes:

The experiences of things can be characterized only by tracing the exhaust of their effects on the surrounding world and speculating about the coupling between that black noise and the experiences internal to an object (ibid, p. 100).

An alien phenomenologist's carpentry 'offers a rendering satisfactory enough to allow the artifact operator to gain some insight into an alien thing's experience (ibid, p. 100). Maybe. But who, I wonder, is doing the 'rendering'? By whose criteria is this rendering deemed to be 'satisfactory'? And, again, who is doing the 'speculating'? Undoubtedly Bogost himself, alone or in collusion with other – male? – philosopher carpenters. This is the problem I signalled to earlier. Bogost complains that posthumanism isn't posthuman enough (ibid, p. 8). If so, that's also the case for object-oriented ontology but in this case the human who is reinstalled as recorder of traces is indubitably male, embodying an opaque set of values, and judging from a distance.

Lest this seem like a reinscription by other means of the sovereign, rational subject (as Alaimo [2014] suspects it is) it is worth briefly reviewing another of Bogost's strategies: wonder, a stance he adopts in order to 'respect things as things in themselves' (ibid, p. 131). But this sort of wonder opposes the 'old methods' which illuminate and enlighten, seeking instead a wonder 'that hopes to darken, to isolate, to insulate'. While I wonder where the joy is in this, it becomes clear that Bogost's proposal is to replace the fiction of knowing with speculative fictions which gesture to 'the awesome plenitude of the alien everyday' (ibid, p. 134) with its democracy of objects each of which exists within tiny ontologies that are at one

and the same time a dense mass and a unit or part connected to other units. Speculative fictions are ‘applied’ and ‘pragmatic’ (ibid, p. 29), they are metaphoric, in the vein of magic realism and fiction (recall what Harman said about ‘art’). In this way Bogost hopes that speculative realism will become a practical philosophy ‘things speculate and [speculative realism] speculates about how things speculate (ibid, p. 31). Such speculation, Bogost avers, is a funhouse mirror, where the scholar is a ‘carnival barker’ proceeding through ‘educated guesswork’ via creative acts which ‘earnestly but bemusedly’ approach the object through distortions which remain ‘a perversion of the unit’s [thing’s] sensibilities’ (ibid, p. 31). Speculative realism, in this iteration, is a practice of enweirding, in which the weird ‘other’ is approached, named, storied, fictionalised, turned into words (or ‘other’ things), but never known, because it remains the autonomous real in-itself. In other words, we ‘know’ about things – or think we do – because we (humans) make up stories, fictions, narratives about them. But this sounds suspiciously like what philosophy has been doing all along. And, despite Joy’s (2013) praise for weirding as a practice for unmooring texts from their human contexts which accomplishes an ungrounding of ourselves in play and pleasure, there is the enduring worry that, while van der Tuin (2014, p. 231) is right to say that object-oriented ontology, like material feminism, ‘revitalizes the question of subjectivity,’ the subjectivity that is ‘revitalized’ will have human lineaments, and remain – however implicitly – mired in his gendered magnificence.

The brittlestar is not an object that withdraws.

‘Brittlestars don’t *have* eyes, they *are* eyes, [it] is an animal without a brain’ ... [it] can change its coloration in response to the available light in its surroundings, [it can] break off an endangered body part and regrow it ... Brittlestars are living testimony to the inseparability of knowing, being and doing (Barad, 2007: pp. 375–380).

Having a compound eye as a skeletal system, it grows toward, meets, mingles with, and works with, the creatures who live around it, with it, on it, and the seabed and sea which it and they lives with/in and inhabit. In *Meeting the Universe Halfway* Barad (2007) makes it clear that the unthinking brittlestar, in simply doing what it does, makes a vital (in all senses) contribution to worlding the world. It is itself a doing, a part of the world's becoming, and 'what' and 'how' it sees/knows/feels/senses is enacted relationally and dynamically. There is no separation of knower, knowing and known. Agential realism figures knowing not as an intellectual act requiring an intellectual agent but 'an ontological performance', a distributed posthuman practice of open-ended articulation. In tuning into the different differences that matter, the difference that the brittlestar makes to the productive livingness of its surroundings comes into view – diffraction disrupts representationalism, figuring each and every intra-action an ethico-onto-epistemological matter, a quantum entanglement undoing cause and effect, effacing identity and sameness, reworking subjectivity as relation and ethics as embodied knowledge such that there is 'no exterior position [of] contemplation ... only intra-acting from within and as part of the world in its becoming' (Barad, 2007, p. 396).

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have followed St Pierre's/ Rachjman's advice: 'trust that something may come out, though one is not yet completely sure what.' The embodied diffractive musing in/between the two 'foundational' texts of object oriented ontology (Harman's *The Quadruple Object*) and new material feminism (Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway*) I have engaged has enabled something(s) to come out. These principally concern the ontological and epistemological differences in orientation towards the realm of objects, things and materialities. Object-oriented ontology proposes an autonomous realm of objects which, albeit touching each other weirdly via their sensory qualities, are cut off from thought and held at arm's length, only to be known through the speculative fictions we (humans) construct about

them. This contrasts markedly with new material feminism's entangled ethic of knowing-in-being which refuses TripleO's anti-correlationist stance in favour of a mutually constitutive desiring embrace of world-word-object. As a wondering without confirmation, this particular close encounter is an enactment of a more generous mode of critique which moves 'beyond an easy sense', shifting us away from the reductive and negative towards the 'spreading of thoughts and knowledge,' (Mazzei, 2014, p. 3). In aiming to create space for the sensory happening of a little slow theory, I have sought to introduce a small gust of 'free and windy chaos' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p. 203) into academic article writing. The various Landing Places are my attempts to proceed with the care and caution Latour thought necessary. With that in mind, despite having an intense desire to wrest 'weird' from the speculative realists and resituate it with the feminist fore-mother of weirding, Mary Daly, I will pass on that for now.

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