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What is the Matter with Matter? Barad, Butler, and Adorno

¿Cuál es el problema con la materia? Barad, Butler y Adorno

Quin és el problema amb la matèria? Barad, Butler i Adorno

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Abstract

This article aims to read feminist new materialisms (Barad), together with 'postulated' linguistic or cultural primacy of Queer Theory (Butler), to show how both are engaged in similar critical-ethical endeavours. The central argument is that the criticism of Barad and new materialisms misses Butler's materialistic insights due to a narrow interpretation of Butler's alleged social-constructivist position. There is, therefore, a specific focus on where they both make similar ethical appeals. Moreover, the article relies on Adorno's negative dialectic to highlight an interpretation of Barad and Butler as being part of the same dialectical movement, in which materialism and idealism fluctuate in their mutual criticisms, thus continuing the procession towards 'new knowledge' and emancipation, or freedom, through their motions back and forth.

Keywords

Agential realism; Negative dialectics; Queer feminism; New materialism; Quantum physics.

Resumen

Este artículo pretende hacer una lectura de los nuevos materialismos feministas (Barad), junto con la "postulada" primacía lingüística o cultural de la Teoría Queer (Butler), para mostrar cómo ambos están comprometidos en esfuerzos ético-críticos similares. El argumento central es que la crítica de Barad y los nuevos materialismos pasa por alto las ideas materialistas de Butler debido a una interpretación estrecha de la supuesta posición socio-constructivista de Butler. Por lo tanto, se centra específicamente en los aspectos en los que ambos hacen llamamientos éticos similares. Además, el artículo se basa en la dialéctica negativa de Adorno para destacar una interpretación de Barad y Butler como parte del mismo movimiento dialéctico, en el que el materialismo y el idealismo fluctúan en sus críticas mutuas, continuando así la procesión hacia el "nuevo conocimiento" y la emancipación, o libertad, a través de sus movimientos de ida y vuelta.

Palabras clave

Realismo agencial; dialéctica negativa; feminismo queer; Nuevo materialismo; Física cuántica.

Resum

Aquest article pretén llegir els nous materialismes feministes (Barad), juntament amb la primàcia lingüística o cultural "postulada" de la Teoria Queer (Butler), per a mostrar com tots dos estan compromesos en esforços crític-ètics similars. L'argument central és que la crítica de Barad i els nous materialismes perd les idees materialistes de Butler a causa d'una interpretació estreta de la suposada posició social-constructivista de Butler. Per tant, hi ha un enfocament específic a on tots dos fan apel·lacions ètiques similars. A més, l'article es basa en la dialèctica negativa d'Adorno per destacar una interpretació de Barad i Butler com a part d'un mateix moviment dialèctic, en el qual materialisme i idealisme fluctuen en les seves crítiques mútues, continuant així la processó cap al "nou coneixement" i l'emancipació, o llibertat, a través dels seus moviments d'anada i tornada.

Paraules clau

Realisme agencial; Dialèctica negativa; Feminisme queer; Nou materialisme; Física quàntica.

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, Butler has been the figurehead, at least for some critics, of a branch of post-structuralist or social constructivism feminism claiming that everything is cultural and mediated through language (Butler, 1999). Butler even goes as far as implicitly invoking comments of Engels and Marx on consciousness and ideology (Marx & Engels, 1975, pp. 43–45) when referring to Althusser's statement that "an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and ... [t]his existence is material" (Althusser, 1971, p. 166, cited in Butler, 1997, p. 275). However, despite Butler's attempts to challenge this interpretation, it persists. The critics I want to engage with, diverse as their critiques may be, can be grouped under the umbrella of New Materialism. While Barad does not consider themselves part of what is generally understood as New Materialism, this term may still be applied to agential realism, since it has become commonplace within the humanities and social sciences to include Barad's theory under this umbrella (Adrian, 2016, p. 77). The following does not seek to account for all the nuances among new materialists. Instead, the aim is to position Barad in particular, and new materialisms in general, in tension with Butler's (mistakenly) stipulated 'primacy of language'.

The critique of social constructivism central to this article is found in "Meeting the Universe Halfway" (Barad, 2007) and in an essay bearing a similar title published eleven years earlier (Barad, 1996). In both texts, Barad claims that social constructivists, despite their intentions, have principally focused "on cultural factors" (Barad, 1996, p. 162), neglecting an account of materiality/matter. Barad argues that the dichotomy between culture and nature, language and matter, is mistaken and proposes that "[w]e need to understand the technologies by which nature and culture interact" (Barad, 1996, p. 163). To

do so, Barad draws on the writings of Niels Bohr, whose concepts of "philosophy-physics" (Barad, 1996, p. 165) and "Complementarity" (Barad, 1996, p. 168; 190 [note 9]) examine the gap that separates physics (matter, materiality, and nature) from metaphysics (concept, theory, and culture). According to Bohr, whom Barad relies on in both texts,

we cannot neglect the interaction between the object and the instrument of observation, the question of the possibilities of observation again comes to the foreground. Thus, we meet here, in a new light, the problem of the objectivity of phenomena which has always attracted so much attention in philosophical discussion (Bohr, 1961, p. 93).

Barad takes Bohr's comments about this problem to indicate the fruitfulness of "read[ing] Bohr's philosophy-physics as an argument for the necessity of including practice within theory" (Barad, 1996, p. 166). Nevertheless, Barad diverges from Bohr by introducing "agential realism as a framework that ties together the epistemological and ontological issues ... [in an effort] to address particular concerns that social constructivist approaches to science make apparent" (Barad, 1996, pp. 167–168).

Barad and Niels Bohr's multifaceted philosophy-physical epistemology

According to Barad (Barad, 2007, pp. 97–131), Complementarity ushered in a novel onto-epistemology aimed at ensuring, in Bohr's words, "the logical compatibility of apparently contradictory laws which appear when we use two different experimental arrangements" (Bohr, 1937, p. 293). Complementarity refers to the notion that multiple theories may be necessary to explain

the ‘full extent’ of a given phenomenon or object, e.g. light behaving as both wave and particles (the two-slit experiment in physics). Barad describes Bohr’s philosophical-physical assumptions as indicative of a rejection of the “Cartesian (inherent, fixed, universal) subject-object distinction” (Barad, 1996, p. 175; 2007, p. 125). This rejection was central to the development of the theory of Complementarity, since the findings of Bohr, and quantum physics in general, cannot be said to complement any form of subject-object dualism. Moreover, for Bohr, Complementarity was also directly related to epistemological assumptions. On this point, Bohr wrote that “an artificial word like ‘complementarity’ ... serves only briefly to remind us of the epistemological situation here encountered, which at least in physics is of an entirely novel character” (Bohr, 1937, pp. 293–294). A novel epistemological situation that would have shattered previous theories attempts to posit *Grand Unified Theories* – the findings of Bohr and quantum physics thus constituted a new epistemological situation which revolutionised the field of physics. This is evident from Bohr’s comment that “[t]he apparently incompatible sorts of information ... which we get by different experimental arrangements can clearly not be brought into connection with each other in the usual way, but may, as equally essential for an exhaustive account of all experience, be regarded as ‘complementary’ to each other” (Bohr, 1937, p. 291). Hence, Complementarity between theoretical fields or spheres must be used to describe how different ‘experimental arrangements’ can yield “mutually exclusive phenomena” (Barad, 1996, p. 179) even when they examine the same phenomenon or object. From Bohr’s epistemological findings, Barad then paraphrases Bohr’s notion of philosophy-physics as accounting for how “[p]henomena are constitutive of reality. [Moreover, r]eality is not composed of things-in-themselves or

things-behind-phenomena, but things-in-phenomena” (Barad, 1996, p. 176). In Barad’s “Bohrian ontology” (Barad, 1996, p. 176) the material world, the Kantian things-in-themselves, are therefore always already mediated by a given experimental arrangement. Barad presents reality as a kind of phenomenological objectivity specific to an observer’s perspective or experimental arrangements. Cognition is always of a phenomenon wherein things or objects become according to the ontoepistemology situation that governs the arrangement of this or that experiment.

Barad then proceeds with developing a theoretical position called agential realism (Barad, 1996, pp. 175–186; 2007, pp. 132–185), which is, in part, inspired by Bohr’s onto-epistemological suggestions and which accepts that a multitude of contravening theoretical positions may describe the same object. In this regard, Barad is in full agreement with Bohr, who stated that “it appeared to me to be of interest to point out that also in other regions of human knowledge we meet apparent contradictions which might seem to be avoidable only from the point of view of complementarity” (Bohr, 1937, pp. 294–295).

Barad’s Bohrian-inspired onto-epistemology: Agential realism

Containing some preliminary comments on the connections between Barad, Butler, and Adorno, the following section may be skipped by readers already familiar with agential realism.

Barad stipulates four characteristics that are the cornerstones of agential realism:

- (1) agential realism grounds and situates knowledge claims in local experiences: objectivity is literally embodied;
- (2) agential realism privileges neither the

material nor the cultural: the apparatus of bodily production is material-cultural, and so is agential reality; (3) agential realism entails the interrogation of boundaries and critical reflexivity; and (4) agential realism underlines the necessity of an ethics of knowing (Barad, 1996, p. 179).

The first is that knowledge is situated, a claim that follows from the assertion that observations and local experiences are related to a particular situation. Moreover, scientific objectivity and the notion of objective data are both ideas rooted in or determined by specific experimental arrangements. However, this does not lead to relativising the experiment or the data, since the knowledge gained is particular to a specific local experience. To account for the wealth of possible contradictory experiences, Barad suggests that these, despite their differences, may be thought together in ways that diffractively think their differences as ‘immanent otherness’, to use phraseology inspired by Critical Theory and post-structuralism or what Barad calls “‘exteriority within’” (Barad, 2007, p. 135). Donna Haraway first suggested the usefulness of diffraction in feminist theory, explaining that “the rays from my optical device diffract rather than reflect. These diffracting rays compose *interference* patterns, not reflecting images” (Haraway, 1992, p. 299). Barad subsequently takes up this notion, using it to give “matter its due as an active participant in the world’s *becoming*, in its ongoing intra-activity” (Barad, 2007, p. 136, my emphasis). Or, as Evelien Geerts and Iris van der Tuin write:

[D]iffraction ... denote[s] a more critical and difference-attentive mode of consciousness and thought ... a more ‘critical consciousness’ than reflexivity, as it gives us the opportunity to become more attuned to how differences are being created in the world, and what

particular effects they have on subjects and their bodies (Haraway, 1997, p. 273) ... For Barad, reading (and theorising) diffractively ... means that ... [“texts and intellectual traditions”] are dialogically read ‘through one another’ (Barad, 2007] p. 30) to engender creative, and unexpected outcomes (Geerts & van der Tuin, 2021, pp. 173–175, my emphasis).

The aim of this article – to look for similarities in Barad and Butler – therefore follows in the footsteps of Barad’s own understanding of reading and theorising diffractively, even if the main gist of the article comes from the traditions of Critical Theory (Adorno) and post-structuralist (Butler).

At this point, it is important to remember that, for Barad and Bohr, Complementarity means that an object and how it is measured – experimental arrangements – are inseparable (Barad, 2007, p. 139). From this claim, Barad draws an important parallel which I would paraphrase cautiously as: *discursive practices function as apparatuses in the ‘quantum experiment called life’* (I am of course being metaphorical here and not trying to question the realness of reality, as this would not serve the argument of this text). Diffraction and Complementarity both constitute the core around which Barad builds the onto-epistemology of agential realism – an account of being (ontology) an agent, of having agency, always related to a specific local situation or experience. The same situations or experiences used by scientists to gather evidence for their knowledge claims (epistemology).

Hence, diffraction (as a critical theory or mode of inquiry) can be thought of as part of the critical feminist tradition (Butler) that resembles Adorno’s focus on non-identity and objective suffering (Adorno, 1990, p. 202). However, it must be emphasised that neither agential realism nor new materialisms are, in any way, strongly connected to those

philosophical traditions that hail from Kantian *Kritik* (Kant, Hegel, Marx, the Frankfurt School, Foucault, Derrida, etc.). Hence, a central goal in this article is to highlight how it is possible to short-circuit two 'far removed' theoretical spheres. The *modus operandi* of Barad's critical gist seems, therefore, to be similar to that of Critical Theory, as both engage in criticising their object immanently. Or, as Barad writes, "[t]he two-slit diffraction experiment *queers* the binary light/darkness story^[1] ... *Diffraction queers binaries and calls out for a rethinking of the notions of identity and difference*" (Barad, 2014, p. 171, my emphasis).

The second characteristic concerns the fact that since agential realism comes down neither on the side of nature nor of culture, it is an onto-epistemological position where bodily production cannot be described neatly as one or the other. According to agential realism, both natural and cultural explanations of reality are concerned with the same. However, the discrepancy between the two kinds of explanations depends on their diverging *Weltanschauung*. Barad then proceeds to single out Butler and Foucault as representatives of "the representationalist belief that in the power of words to mirror preexisting phenomena is the metaphysical substrate that supports social constructivist ... beliefs, perpetuating the endless recycling of untenable options" (Barad, 2007, p. 133). Challenging their representationalism, Barad proposes that Complementarity refutes presumptions about the primacy of language and culture (social constructivism). Nevertheless, singling out Butler seems a controversial move, since Butler is in fact aware of the charge of representationalism and even admits that: "I [Butler] think perhaps mainly in *Gender Trouble* I overemphasize the

priority of culture over nature, and I've tried to clear that up in subsequent writings" (Kirby, 2007, p. 144). However, Barad charges post-structuralism and Butler (Barad, 2007, p. 135) with only having changed their outlook on the world (from biology to culture), rather than taking a stance against the mistaken representationalism that is central in both biologically and culturally centred 'feminisms'.

The third characteristic of agential realism is that it is a critical project seeking ways to examine the theoretical, practical, and philosophical presumptions behind a given account of 'reality'. With regard to the notion of critique, Barad writes that "[t]he placement of the boundary becomes part of what is being described ... Descriptions of phenomena are reflexive, and the shifting of *boundaries constitutes a meta-critique*" (Barad, 1996, p. 182, my emphasis). Such a meta-critique, if read with the two-slit experiment in mind, leads to the changing of experimental arrangements, constituting a criticism of the founding principles of the theory used in other experiments. By 'shifting the boundaries' diffractive readings 'constitute a meta-critique' by layering another (different or contradictory) theory onto the object of earlier theory. And since the second does not fit neatly with the first, they come to distort each other, making their individual descriptions, while of the same object, of different parts or sides of the object. Theories, therefore, condition and are conditioned by their specific contexts. In relation to Butler, Vicki Kirby indicates that "[t]he value of Butler's style of criticism then comes in her tenacious interrogation of the very ideas whose taken-for-granted necessity may tend to exempt them from inquiry" (Kirby, 2002, p. 265). Here Kirby frames Butler's criticism in a way that seems comparable with Barad's, since both thinkers would agree that 'mutually exclusive phenomena' dictate possible knowledges in specific situations and

¹ "Electrons are queer particles, *mita' y mita'* [half and half]. They are particles. They are waves. Neither one nor the other. A strange doubling. A queer experimental finding" (Barad, 2014, p. 173).

contexts, and because both are concerned with paying attention to the ethical concerns that spring from what is excluded or non-identical within a given theoretical framework.

The fourth characteristic central to agential realism relates to what Barad calls a need for an 'ethics of knowing'. According to Barad, since "[a]gency is a matter of intra-acting ... not something someone has" (Barad, 1996, p. 183), it "calls for direct accountability and responsibility" (Barad, 1996, p. 183) – 'an ethics of knowing'. With these statements, Barad announces that knowledge production requires that an ethical demand is met: that the context of the experimental arrangements that leads to this knowledge is criticised and developed in light of the artificial boundaries it creates to meaningfully observe its object of inquiry.

Difference(s): Between idealism and materialism

A demand that shares similar general characteristics with Barad's 'ethics of knowing' can also be found in Adorno's lectures on "Ontology and Dialectics", where Adorno remarked, "I believe the nerve of any critique of ontology ... is intrinsically bound up with the critique of ... what is allegedly 'original' ... which only a highly prejudiced perspective could regard as entirely unconnected with specific social and political tendencies" (Adorno, 2019, p. 17). With this quote, I wish to suggest that there exist strong parallels between many different kinds of *Kritik* – concerning this article, i.e. Critical Theory, Queer Feminism, and new materialisms and Barad's agential realism. With this suggestion, I am not arguing that Adorno set out to develop negative dialectics into a novel kind of ontology (this is Barad's aim, not Adorno's) nor that Butler's position is wholly subsumable within either negative dialectics

or new materialisms. What I want to indicate is the exciting intersection between Critical Theory, Queer feminism, and new materialisms (including agential realism), which all converge around a focus on differences rather than identity and unity – what Adorno called non-identity and identity (Adorno, 1990, pp. 146–148).

On the one hand, Adorno, not unlike Barad, sought to destabilise the primacy of the subject by giving primacy to 'objective suffering', whilst simultaneously warning against *naïve* materialism becoming a substitute for subjectivism. Negative dialectics discerns the presence of a fluctuating movement within the dialectical tradition whereby the tradition continuously repeats a back-and-forth movement between idealistic and materialistic positions. Elsewhere, Adorno talked about this fluctuation: "[d]ialectics is not ashamed to recall the famous procession of Echternach: one jump forward, two jumps back" (Adorno, 1990, p. 157). A fluctuation or oscillation that has flowed continuously since it was described by the ancient Greek philosophers (Atomism, Socrates, Plato, etc.). In Barad, something similar happens when social constructivism (Butler and Foucault) is criticised. Each of these terms occupies an extraneous position in a dialectical dichotomy. Barad, nevertheless, seems unaware of negative dialectics and thus of its critique of the division between concept and matter, subject and object. With this remark, I am thinking in particular of how agential realism seems to bridge the subject/object divide at that specific moment when it is dictated by the experiment's theoretical foundations (its discourse). Because negative dialectics is absent in Barad, Adorno's critique of the division between concept and matter, subject and object (Adorno, 2005b), is a missed opportunity to think about agential realism and new materialisms dialectically with social constructivism. I am thinking in particular of

agential realism's attempt to bridge the chasm separating subject and object and how the chasm is determined, in Barad's words, by the theoretical basis of the experimental arrangements (what we might, with Butler and Foucault, call particular scientific discourses). It is therefore interesting that in "Negative Dialectics" Adorno used an almost proto-Baradian language to state that "[t]he pre-subjective order (which in turn essentially constitutes the subjectivity that is constitutive for epistemology) sees to it that data are apperceived in this way and in no other, according to their claim" (Adorno, 1990, p. 171). i.e. the observer's language can, therefore, be said to be meaningfully concerned with its object only from within the observer's theoretical paradigm or specific epistemological framework. Hence, when Barad writes that "Bohr insists that only concepts defined by their specific embodiment as part of the material arrangement ... are meaningful" (Barad, 2007, p. 143), Barad relies heavily on David Favrholt's description of Bohr's consideration that "classical physics [is] a conceptual precision of the descriptive use of ordinary language" (Favrholt, 1993, p. 7). Thus, each possible experimental arrangement comes with its own 'field of possibility' and a predetermined set of possible interpretations. The specificity of each arrangement demarcates which 'language' is meaningful for which particular experimental arrangement. It is illustrative to think about this in relation to earlier comments about the two-slit experiment. Particularly when it comes to understanding how technical language (subject-specific terminology) associated with one experimental arrangement might exclude results possible of seeing or finding other results. Bohr defined 'ordinary language' as the "use of words where a sharp separation between subject and object can be maintained" (Favrholt, 1993, p. 8). Hence, ordinary language sustains

a kind of Cartesian duality, a separation of mind and body. The subject (the 'I' in identity) describes the world (the non-'I'dential) through this distinct separation.

On the other hand, I want to make it clear that Butler engages in a similar line of thought in their books "Gender Trouble" (1999), "Bodies That Matter" (2011), and "Subjects of Desire" (2012b). These texts comprise a body of literature that does not seek to 'subsume everything to language', as some of Butler's critics have suggested. Instead, Butler seeks to account for how bodies come to matter (Meijer et al., 1998). In the following, I will draw specifically on Butler's understanding of 'the many modalities of matter' (Butler, 2011), suggesting not only that Butler's account of the materialisation of gender is compatible with Barad's agential realism, but also that Butler read with negative dialectics provides a clearer account of why it is a mistake to read Butler as a linguistic idealist (Hull, 1997). The idea of reading Butler with Adorno was, in this context, first formulated by Carrie Hull, who argues that Butler's account of Gendering (i.e. how a child becomes either male or female through the interpellation of gender by a doctor who declares 'it's a girl/boy': See, e.g. Butler, 1999, xvii; 2011, xi) coupled with Adorno's materialism clearly shows how Butler's position is not out-and-out linguistic idealism. Hull instead argues that Butler's Althusserian notion of 'the many modalities of matter' provides a point that is not far from Adorno's materialism, since both thinkers maintain that "objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder" (Adorno, 1990, p. 5), or as Butler puts it,

[i]f one 'is' a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive ... because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts ... and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities (Butler, 1999, p. 6).

However, this should not be taken to mean that either Hull or I believe that Butler and Adorno are saying the same thing. Rather, Butler and Adorno can productively be brought together so that Butler's argument benefits from Adorno's more dialectical understanding of the relationship between idealism and materialism – language and body/matter. By understanding idealism and materialism as locked in a dialectical tension with one another (dialectical means that each contains the other within as that immanent Other that constitutes its Identity), Butler's claim that gender categories, which are linguistic constructions, materialise in social contexts are not marred by an insurmountable logic contradiction. Instead, it simply contains a dialectical dichotomy.

Ebbs and floods: Fluctuations between Barad and Butler

Adorno can help Butler insofar as the latter's negative dialectics sidesteps the danger of 'throwing the dialectical baby out with the bath water' (Adorno, 2005a, pp. 43–45[§22]) when criticising positive dialectics – i.e. Identity Thinking. Thus, whereas Butler claims that dialectics is "phallogocentric" (Butler, 1999, p. 15), thus throwing the baby out with the bathwater, negative dialectics aims to think non-identical within a dialectical frame of reference able to understand how conceptuality might never fully describe its object of inquiry, thereby making Adorno's position similar to Complementarity.

However, whereas negative dialectics was primarily a theoretical-philosophic endeavour, "Gender Trouble" was written to criticise biological essentialism (Butler, 1999, pp. 135–141) and the exclusions caused by second-wave feminism's reliance on it. By arguing that earlier feminism had become ossified around a mode of thinking that could easily be described as Identity Thinking,

Butler interjects their criticism into the internal debate concerning feminist discourses. Queer Feminism is thus an interjection that helped shape the development of feminism in new emancipatory ways. In this way, Butler's critique of the naturalisation of the binary relationship of sex and gender categories led to the development of a self-criticism of feminism that sought to show precisely how its adherence to binary categories of sex neglected to account for specific cultural characteristics of sex/gender acquisition – that is how sex was gender all along (Butler, 1999, p. 12). Because of this focus on the cultural rather than material aspects of gender, it is not surprising that Barad (and other new materialists: viz. Bray & Colebrook, 1998; Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012; Jagger, 2014; Kirby, 2002) returns the favour by arguing a materialist critique of Butler's perceived cultural primacy. However, Barad's criticism, conceived of within Adorno's understanding of the genealogy of dialectics, could be productively positioned in a dialectical tension with Butler's position. Taking one step forward or two steps back, Barad unknowingly imitates the famous 'procession of Echternach'. I therefore suggest we interpret Barad and Butler as engaging in a ritualistic dance in which each is critical of the other's position while simultaneously being part of a continues fluctuation between different positions. With negative dialectics, Butler's argument could be conceived as less static and more dynamic than Barad and new materialists seem to think. Instead, we may think of Butler's presumed linguistic one-sidedness as, to use terminology borrowed from agential realism, a particular local experience of gender and sex categories within a specific experimental arrangement (to use Barad's terminology) that Butler uses when engaging critically with second-wave feminism. Moreover, there is a possible convergence between Barad's Bohrian-inspired claim that agential realism

'situates knowledge claims in local experiences' and Butler's notion of 'the many modalities of matter'. In "Bodies That Matter", Butler proposes an account of how an individual subject inspired by Althusserian interpellation comes to be (Althusser, 1971, p. 166). According to Butler's interpretation, subjects materialise (Butler, 2011, p. 38) when they are interpellated within an institutional framework that differentiates permissible identities from illegal ones – 'us' from 'them'. What Barad takes issue with, therefore, is not Butler's particular account of materiality, rather the underlying premise that materialisation is always already mediated through culture and language. That is to say, matter and materialisation are, in Barad's reading of Butler, secondary to culture. Barad, nevertheless, fails to account for how Butler's earlier works laid the groundwork for the subsequent ethical turn in Butler's later works (Butler, 2004, 2012a), a turn which is attentive to what Barad called an 'ethics of knowing'. Furthermore, I want to suggest that Butler's later turn towards the notion of precariousness (ethics and politics) could be conceived as a development that weakens the criticism levelled against Butler by Barad and new materialists (see Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 114[*note 10*]; Kirby, 2007, pp. 161–162[*note 2*]). On the one hand, Butler is anti-realist since bodily features materialise discursively. On the other hand, however, Butler's general position focuses on agents that become, and this becoming is always situational or contextual – one might even say within specific experimental or even cultural arrangements. Moreover, to read Butler's argument as linguistic idealism misses the potential for seeing the dialectical nuance in Butler's argument. Materiality, which for Butler comes into being through language or culture, is not second to culture but becomes intelligible within a specific cultural context. This is therefore where negative dialectics might help Butler, despite their previous

flat-out rejection of it. Negative dialectics does not seek absolute categories or truth. Instead, it aims to show how something is not what it appears to be. The interpellation of gender, whereby I become a man when I am addressed as such, thus materialises my manliness (or lack thereof) – my body – within a social context that directly inscribes its norms on my body. To argue this, never meant to subsume materiality under culture. It means rather that under the experimental arrangements where Butler's thinking occurs, this is how materiality becomes intelligible. Moreover, interpellation is forced on the individual, and this too is accounted for in negative dialectics with the statement that "suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject" (Adorno, 1990, pp. 17–18). Through the objectification of an individual, harm is potentially done, since concepts do not fully describe their objects. Objects, individuals, or subjects may well suffer and be precarious without being human. However, to argue this is beyond both Butler's and Adorno's actual arguments, and, as such, this is where new materialist thinking has the potential to go beyond Butler and Adorno.

Performativity, knowing, and becoming

In "Posthumanist Performativity" (Barad, 2003), Barad writes that "[o]n an agential realist account, it is once again possible to acknowledge nature, the body, and materiality in the fullness of their becoming ... while at the same time remaining resolutely accountable for the role 'we' play in the intertwined practices of knowing and becoming" (Barad, 2003, p. 812). Here, Barad criticises the separation of nature and culture, alluding instead to the fact that within the framework of agential realism, body and mind, nature and culture are intertwined. Among new materialist thinkers, Gill Jagger also understands that nature and culture are intertwined and writes that "Butler's work is

criticized for not allowing an adequate role for the materiality of the physical body in the process of its materialization” (Jagger, 2014, p. 321). Abigail Bray and Claire Colebrook continue this idea when they write that “Butler’s challenging discursive account of sex still posits a duality between signification and matter, where matter is seen as radically anterior” (Bray & Colebrook, 1998, p. 44). There seems therefore to be a consensus among new materialists (and Barad) that social constructivism, embodied by Butler’s works, fails to think of materiality beyond its becoming within the frame of cultural signification. That is, Butler neglects an account of how matter comes to matter outside of cultural contexts. Adding to the above criticism, Kirby writes,

Butler’s aim is to remind us that the ... outside ... is always/already a language effect – a cultural production ... Unfortunately, however, by privileging the term ‘culture’ in this way, the identity and sexualized hierarchy between ideality and matter, culture and nature, and mind and body, are surreptitiously reinstalled [within Butler’s critique of the sex/gender distinction] (Kirby, 2002, p. 268).

And while I concur that Butler’s argument, on the surface, is cultural-centric, I strongly disagree that this is all there is to it. Rather, as we have seen with Adorno, Butler’s argument contains a form of materialism that, despite, or perhaps because of its ‘linguistic idealism’, is only slightly hidden. Thus, materialism exists within Butler’s argument, and to argue that it does not is neither charitable nor productive. Moreover, with negative dialectics, it is no longer a case of idealism or materialism. Instead, each position is in the other as that against which it is developed. In its context – the 1990s – Butler’s idealist argument was warranted in order to correct the thinking in the second-wave feminist

discourse of ‘women’ as a universal category. Butler’s “Gender Trouble” engaged in a particular discourse (experimental arrangement) where Butler’s argument proved influential in changing how feminism thought about gender. But this does not mean that materiality was done away with, as Butler has since argued.

Like Butler, Camilla Kronqvist writes that “a number of overlapping similarities and dissimilarities exist within the category of woman, and it depends on the [linguistic] context which similarity or dissimilarity we want to highlight as important for the particular use of a word as we use it in a specific situation” (Kronqvist, 2021, p. 216, my translation²). Therefore, whereas Kirby repeats the critique of Butler’s reiteration of binary distinctions, Kronqvist uses Wittgenstein’s later account of language to inquire into those situations where ‘we’ talk about ‘women’ as a way of criticising those of ‘us’ who would claim that the category of ‘women’ must refer to a rigidly definable category of identity. Moreover, Kronqvist’s point seems to parallel Barad’s thoughts on ‘experimental arrangements’. I would contend, therefore, that Kronqvist’s assertion of linguistic contextualities can help account for Barad’s agential realism and Butler’s position as different ‘experimental arrangements’ in examining the same object. Furthermore, if, as Kronqvist argues, similarities and dissimilarities change depending on their specific (in Kronqvist’s terminology linguistic) situation, this would question rigid interpretations of the distinction between observer and observation, culture and nature, subject and object. Therefore, even though each of the critical thinkers examined so far has engaged with various and, at times,

² Orig. Sv. “[F]inns det en mängd överlappande likheter och olikheter inom kategorin kvinna, och det beror på [det språkliga] sammanhanget vilken likhet eller olikhet vi vill lyfta fram som viktig för just det bruk vi gör av ordet i en specifik situation”.

different examinations of social life – dialectics and ideology (Adorno), matter and onto-epistemology (Barad), and gender and sex (Butler) – they all converge around what I would call a critical enterprise that seeks to locate and criticise those instance(s) where, in Adorno’s terminology, the nonidentical raise the question of *whether or not this is ‘the right or good life?’*. That is an ethical concern.

Negative dialectics: between Butler and Barad

I want to suggest that the critical enterprises mentioned so far converge because each of them could be used fruitfully to improve the others. Hence, the aim is now to suggest that Butler with Adorno could be compared with new materialisms *via* their shared concern with ‘the good life’ (Butler) or what Barad calls ‘an ethics of knowing’. With this, I want to suggest that Barad’s notion of an ethics of knowing (how an ethical need in the production of knowledge must become central) is directly relatable to the role that knowledge production plays in shaping our understanding of social realities.

I understand Barad’s ‘ethics of knowing’ as suggesting something similar to Butler’s interpretation of Foucault’s oddly brave gesture (Butler, 2002, p. 224). According to Butler’s reading of Foucault freedom is performed as a speech act that functions as an act of risk-taking which is virtuous in those circumstances where it “exceeds the limits on intelligibility that powerknowledge has already set” (Butler, 2002, p. 224). Such a statement seems strikingly close to Barad’s interpretation of Complementarity, where different scientific theories account for the (to use Butler’s Althusserian phrase) ‘many modalities’ of scientific knowledge. In “Merely Cultural”, Butler writes that

poststructuralism, which is a way of reading that lets us understand what must be cut out from a concept of unity in order for it to gain the appearance of necessity and coherence and to permit difference to remain constitutive of any struggle ... *This resistance to ‘unity’ may carry with it the cipher of democratic promise on the Left* (Butler, 1997, pp. 276–277, my emphasis).

To better contextualise the quote above it seems necessary to point out that “Gender Trouble” constitutes a critical reproach of the rigid sex/gender dichotomy set up by second-wave feminism, which had until then helped feminists secure certain rights and emancipation for ‘women’ as a unified political category. Butler’s criticism of second-wave feminism and new materialisms’ criticism of Butler’s social constructivism both constitute selfreflective and immanent criticisms that, albeit occupying a ‘far removed’ theoretical sphere, are both part of a broader feminist surge within the academy and society at large.

What unites Butler and Barad is their shared concern or interest in the many ways life goes on beyond specific experimental arrangements that make up a given account of the social *status quo*. Moreover, by interpreting Barad as continuing a dialectical fluctuation between idealism (Butler) and materialism (new materialisms) we can better see how new materialist theories (including Barad’s) can be interpreted productively as a moment in the genealogy of dialectics. Thus, Butler’s linguistically focused critique of the unity of the subject of feminism occupies what could be called an ‘idealist’ position, if this position in relation to both the earlier ‘materialist’ position of second-wave feminism and the novel position of new materialisms then inscribe themselves within this fluctuation when they, rightfully, criticise Butler’s presumed linguistic idealism and

thereby force Butler to clearly state how their feminism contains an account of materiality.

On the dialectical oscillation in feminist thought: Barad, Butler, and Adorno

Before Butler's critique of second-wave feminism, Adorno had criticised "the unity principle ... [by developing negative dialectics t]o use the strength of the subject to break through the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity" (Adorno, 1990, p. xx). Negative dialectics and Butler are, therefore, both concerned with objectivity and materiality, at least insofar as these are nonidentities that help to refute universally presumed subjectivities (i.e. the predominance of Hegelian subjectivity and 'women' as the universal category of second-wave feminism). In the sense that Adorno used this term, suffering functions as a flash of lightning that awakens us to the wrongness of the present. Cook, in "Adorno's Critical Materialism" (Cook, 2006), referred to suffering as a starting point for outlining "not simply that Adorno's philosophical enterprise is materialist in orientation, but precisely what is distinctive about that orientation ... [namely that] Adorno rejects naïve realism ... [since] an object can be known only 'as it entwines with subjectivity'" (Cook, 2006, p. 722, referring to Adorno, 1990, p. 186). Moreover, according to this argument, Adorno was critical of Hegelian dialectics because it forgot about the role that objectivity plays, even if we can only ever know it as entwined with subjectivity. The gist of Cook's engagement with the role of objectivity or materiality in Adorno is that Adorno highlighted the effect that the present social reality (capitalism) subsumes first nature to second nature – matter to thought. By doing so, culture is naturalised *via* the totalising gestures that make matter (life) submissive to the needs of culture (politics).

The fluctuation of dialectical progression already mentioned calls for a few additional

remarks. Adorno did not stipulate that the genealogy of dialectics proceeds in a linear manner, where each position remains coherent with the earlier versions of its side (materialism—idealism). Adorno's description of the dialectical procession with reference to 'the procession of Echernach' – 'one jump forward, two jumps back' – suggests Adorno's awareness that a certain amount of dialectical tension plays out within a given idealistic and materialistic position. Adorno was particularly aware that in idealism and materialism there is an ongoing external and internal 'struggle' between these positions. For this reason, I want to suggest that the 'negative' in negative dialectics should be understood both as a comment on the lack of a positive *telos* in dialectics and as a suggestion that any criticism of idealism or materialism has to take into account their internal contradictions. I take my cue for these suggestions from Adorno's essay "Progress" (Adorno, 2005c), where it was stated that

[p]rogress means: to step out of the magic spell, even out of the spell of progress that is itself nature, in that humanity becomes aware of its own inbred nature and brings to a halt the domination it exacts upon nature and through which domination by nature continues. In this way it could be said that progress occurs where it ends (Adorno, 2005c, p. 150).

In light of Adorno's understanding of the progress and procession of dialectical thought, Barad's argument, if figured diffractively against and with Butler's presumed social constructivism, would be a constellation of progressive feminisms that each seeks to say something meaningful about material and social realities. However, because of their widely different theoretical spheres, it seems prudent to suggest that negative dialectics (where idealism and materialism are neither insurmountable

differences nor the same) provide an occasion, even if only for a short moment, to think of their tension as productive insofar as they share similar ethical concerns that drive these theories towards emancipatory aims. Moreover, because neither Barad nor Butler sides with either idealism or materialism, and because they both (together with Adorno) seem to emphasise the objective side of things (ranging from strong [Barad] to weak [Butler and Adorno]), it is possible to interpret them as the other's Other, or with negative dialectics, as each other's non-identity. Not only this, but Butler interpreted with new materialisms adds a much-needed objective focus to Butler's cultural-centric argument. However, if Butler is thought with Barad and new materialisms, then it is essential to understand that materialism is already present in Butler but that it materialises, becomes intelligible – comes to matter – in cultural settings when the precariousness of an individual calls for a broader investigation into an 'ethics of knowing'. Or to say this with Adorno, when 'objective suffering' becomes present in the now, this tells us that "our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different" (Adorno, 1990, p. 203). While I do not think that Butler is a staunch social constructivist (since materiality is present in their theory), Barad and new materialist theories may provide Butler's

position with a less anthropocentric account of materiality – something also lacking in Adorno. However, with Adorno's negative dialectics, as well as Barad's interpretation of diffractive reading, the tension between Barad and Butler should be seen as a productive tension where novel nuances and interpretations might be developed. It is through their shared concern for 'an ethics of knowing, 'precariousness', and 'suffering' that I see these three thinkers engaging in different, but at the same time similar, critical examinations of the present. They all differ in their specific experimental arrangements. Adorno thinks dialectically against dialectics to give objectivity its due. Butler immanently criticises biological essentialism in second-wave feminist discourses to show that such a perspective fails to grasp neglected lived experiences (Queer and non-binary lives). And a third, Barad (and new materialist thinkers), sees how the lack of materialism in Butler leads to an unfair importance of culture that then fails to think ethically about objects themselves, animals, plants, etc. Barad and Butler may, however, be short-circuited – be brought together – through negative dialectics so that it preserves both arguments in a way that simultaneously opens up the possibility to find nuance in Butler without presuming this can only be done by rejecting Butler's presumed linguistic idealism

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