



## La crítica feminista bajo el prisma del materialismo agencial. Un enfoque posthumanista

*Agential Materialism and the Feminist Paradigm. A Posthumanist Approach*

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### Resumen

El fértil campo de la crítica feminista ha producido abundantes y brillantes frutos en su desarrollo a lo largo del siglo veinte, pero es desde la ventaja que da la distancia en el tiempo que podemos ahora tomar cierta perspectiva sobre los contextos generales de producción y recepción en que dicha crítica feminista ha tomado el cuerpo de nuevos mitos que subvierten el falogocentrismo de los que la precedieron. El presente artículo pretende establecer un diálogo entre estos nuevos cuerpos discursivos (principalmente en el trabajo de Cixous, Hayles, de Beauvoir, y Haraway) y el materialismo agencial de Karen Barad, utilizando su constructo crítico de “fenómeno” como instrumento para comprender las dimensiones que el paradigma feminista adquiere en el contexto posthumanista para proponer la intra-acción difractiva como alternativa a los constructos naturalizados.

**Palabras clave:** materialismo agencial, responsabilidad, paradigma feminista, Karen Barad, post-humanismo.

### Abstract

Much has been argued within the fertile critical field of feminism in the second half of the twentieth century. With the advantage of distance from the twenty-first century, we can now gain a certain perspective on the general context of production and reception of feminist criticism as it becomes embodied in new myths that subvert the old phallogocentric ones. My approach intends to start a dialogue between such embodiments (mainly in the work of Cixous, Hayles, de Beauvoir, and Haraway) and Karen Barad’s agential materialism, using her critical construct of “phenomenon” as an instrument to understand the feminist paradigm in the post-human context and proposing accountable diffractive intra-action as an alternative to naturalized constructs.

**Keywords:** agential materialism, accountability, feminist paradigm, Karen Barad, post-humanism.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1987, when the Women's Press published the British edition of Alicia Suskin Ostriker's *Stealing the Language*, its logotype was an ironic iron; hot, flat side facing threateningly into the third dimension of the reader's extratextuality. This logotype suits Ostriker's proposal most adequately in that despite its aesthetic claims, she overtly exposes the subversive sociopolitical intentions of her study. By gathering a poetic corpus of American female authors and inscribing them within the wider historical context of a repressed literary tradition by women, Ostriker inaugurates American feminist poetry as a literary movement comparable to American Romanticism or Modernism on the basis of carefully selected common stylistic features. These include the claim for self-definition within the social and cultural constraints of the female body (1987, 11), a certain hardness of tone, humorous exaggeration, 'hard-edge, crystalline, no-nonsense style' (Ostriker 1987, 12), and the use of revisionist mythology, among others. Although Ostriker acknowledges that myth revision is a literary strategy that was used before by the romantics and early modernists (Íbid)—and I would add, the main body of postmodern art—what makes the female poetic myth-revision of the American sixties a distinct literary movement is its feminist agenda, which significantly conditions the selection of myths to be revised and the absence of 'nostalgia for a golden age or past culture' (Ostriker, 1987: 213).

Although it is this particularity that allows Ostriker to claim for an aesthetic generalization of female poetry, she is perfectly aware of the difficulty in overcoming racial, social, geographical or sexual differences among women poets (Ostriker, 1987: 14). In noticing them, Ostriker was in fact voicing some of the cornerstones of the future development of feminist criticism in the last decades of the twentieth and first years of the twenty-first century. With the recent development of fourth-wave feminism, I would also add the technological and generational gaps to her list.

In this article, I would like to propose a posthuman critical frame for feminism based on Karen Barad's agential materialisms that intends to bridge among the differences that decohere feminist criticism along its development. While the posthuman approach allows to consider anthropocentrically-based gender differences from a wider perspective, agential realism contributes to make the feminist agenda accountable for the circumstantial phenomena that it often presents as universal. The result should provide a critical instrument that entangles the feminist agenda and aesthetics with an empirical basis that can account for the definition of its origins and direction as well as the participants involved. I will begin with a short description of Barad's application of Niels Böhr's notion of phenomenon to the critical arena as it solves the discursive and empirical paradox of subjective objectivism. Then, I will reflect on the relevance of iteration in this discussion and propose an alternative to Barad's diffractive model that also includes reflection so as to make it cohere with the space-time continuum in terms of mimesis. Once this critical frame is defined, I will use it to revise the development of early feminist criticism so as to explain the causes of its foundational paradoxes and the problems involved in its proposed solutions. Ultimately, this critical

approach poses an aesthetic and ethical challenge to the future development of feminist criticism and poetics that is based on assessing agential responsibility in managing diffractive definition towards mimetic becoming.

## BARAD'S AGENTIAL MATERIALISM

In 2004, Barad developed her agential materialist method on Niels Böhr's concept of phenomenon. In the early 20th c, this concept would replace the object of scientific study in traditional physics and redefine 'objectivity' as 'accountability.' In classical Physics, objectivity was granted by the preexisting distinctions between observer, instrument and object of observation, which Böhr questions considering that the constructivist nature of such supposed preexistence is unjustifiably taken for granted as if it were a mathematical axiom. After observing that experimental results were conditioned by the specific design of experiments, Böhr redefined the object of scientific study as phenomenon, involving the entangled intra-action (Barad, 2007: 152) of observer, instrument and object, which only become determinate in each particular phenomenon.

Karen Barad's posthuman approach to the relationship between the physical and the discursive offers a possible solution to the problem of indeterminacy from the field of Quantum Physics that is based on recently found empirical evidence (2007). Rather than presupposing the existence of interactive elements such as object, subject and instrument that can be manipulated in the elaboration of discursive and physical experiments, Barad builds on Niels Bohr's formulation of *phenomenon* as a material and discursive intra-action that *precedes* the agential cut from which differences become determinate. The intra-active model differs from the interactive one in that the objects, instruments and subjects entangled in it appear as a result of their intra-action, and are therefore diffractive rather than reflective. This intra-active model is in-formative in the material and discursive sense, *producing* both matter and discourse (the material-discursive) through their mutual intra-action. In Barad's model, differences exist, but they are the result of an agential materiality that is based on choice and iteration (causality and agency) at the same time. Although Barad acknowledges that phenomena intra-act through the 'iterative (re) materialization of relations of production' (2007: 35) and defines intra-action as an iterative process (2007: 170, 213, 390), her agential materialist method replaces the reflective model by the diffractive one as 'a particularly effective tool for thinking about social natural practices in a performative rather than representationalist mode' (2007: 88). It is remarkable how mimesis is discarded as 'nothing more than iterative,' while the iterative nature of performativity is not:

"[R]eflexivity is based on the belief that practices of representing have no effect on the objects of investigation and that we have a kind of access to representations that we don't have to the objects themselves. Reflexivity, like reflection, still holds the world at a distance. It cannot provide a way across the social constructivist's allegedly unbridgeable epistemological gap between knower and known, for reflexivity is nothing more than iterative mimesis (Barad, 2007: 87-88)".

Her material-discursive approach intends to solve



the naturalist-constructivist gap by bringing discursive constructivism under experimental evidence and material causality under agential accountability.

Up to this point, Barad's agential materialism works as a magic wand that would 'straighten' Schleiermacher's hermeneutic circles. Still, iteration or the temporal vector in 'the spacetime matter manifold' (Barad, 2007: 177) presents several problems. Barad argues that phenomenal intra-actions replace the reflective model of representation with the diffractive one, the mimetic with the creative. Every act of observation reconfigures—rather than reflects—all the elements involved in observation and is thus an act of creation. In this sense, all phenomena are original and self-determining, that is; they have semantic and ontic determinacy (Barad 2007, 294-295). Another problem emanates from the first, which is the paradox that effects (differences emerging from the differential cut) precede their causes. This would imply a reversal in the temporal vector, except that everything occurs and exists only in the present time (including the past and the future, thus denying the vectorial quality of time). Both problems involve discarding iteration, which nonetheless Barad introduces as a preexisting relational quality.

Following Barad's own agential materialist approach, it can be argued that both iteration and reflection are discarded as the result of the agential cut, and that both do reappear when instead of trying to explain the agential cut that produces differences, one tries to explain the agential relation that (re)produces similarities, which must also emerge from intra-action. An approach considering differential sameness as the result of diffractive and reflective intra-action would be possible by considering difference as the agential cut that adjusts the changes enforced by time on space so that it (space) remains in a relationship of self-sameness. The result would then articulate an aesthetic definition of creative mimesis that accounts both for the material and the discursive in the spacetime continuum. The key of such differential sameness is in accountable agency, or a sort of causal freewill that must be understood in posthuman terms, in an entangled human and non-human, and more intriguingly, possible and impossible continuum. As far as the human element is also entangled, the aesthetic definition of creative mimesis as differential sameness is also an ethical one.

Barad's method of agential materialism is mainly articulated around the material-discursive practices of Quantum Physics, feminism and ecocriticism. I would like to add a construct of differential sameness to her method as a paradox-solving instrument that could account for the internal paradoxes leading the development of feminist critical discourse and poetic practice as a discourse-matter phenomenon since the second half of the twentieth century by diachronically contrasting the visions of (mainly and roughly) Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Katherine Hayles, Judith Butler and Donna Haraway, although going back to Virginia Woolf for illustration.

### THE FEMINIST PARADOX

At the heart of feminist criticism, there lies a necessary paradox that while intrinsic to all discursive

practices, becomes increasingly pressing in the twentieth century as the explosive cocktail combining Marxism, psychoanalysis, social constructionism and more recently, information technologies. While the Marxist background fuels feminism with a political agenda that requires rising gender consciousness, Psychoanalysis contributes to this feminist agenda with an obvious superstructure against which gender consciousness can build a synthesis. Within this frame, social constructionism is a powerful hinge in denaturalizing discursive constructions based on supposedly biological axioms. Finally, information technologies reinscribe materiality within the discursive giving a new emphasis to a physical body that was already discarded by more discursive approaches. Underlying this combination, the feminist paradox emerges from having to assert a gender identity that can oppose patriarchal discourse. Several difficulties arise then in having to deny superstructural premises that would be necessary to define gender identities (such as the biological), or relativizing discursive constructs based on the same premises that sometimes build feminist discourse (hierarchical). Underlying such paradoxes one can always find the binary logic that articulates around sameness and difference. This is so because such binary logic is an instrumental device that preconditions paradox as a result. This is proved by the fact that paradoxes dissolve when logical binaries are replaced by quantum complementarity.

### MYTH AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

The way in which Freud naturalises classical myths for the construction of psychoanalysis has never ceased to strike me in that it bridges the gap between myth as a discursive construct and the biological aspect of sex as if such gap had never existed. Psychoanalysis is pervaded by a general sense of mimesis (iteration) that grants the perfect correspondence between the physical and the imagined or dreamt, implying that the second is a symptom of the first. While this is of course, quite convenient for guaranteeing the correct interpretation that would lead to psychological healing, it requires in readers and patients a suspension of disbelief that is inherent to all fiction. The way that Marxism grants discursive superstructures the power to sustain economic (material) conditions operates in a similar way, that is; on the condition that the human participants involved willingly suspend their disbelief in discursive representation. I guess my response to both has always been conditioned by my early training in Russian formalism, or Jakobson's break of the linguistic sign into arbitrarily related pieces.

It should not strike me then, that the strong psychoanalytic and Marxist background of feminism should also condition a similar approach in feminist criticism and poetics. As the patriarchal capitalist discourse inscribes its repressive politics on the female body, a particular naturalization of carefully selected qualities defining women produces female bodies that naturally, adjust to the pattern. The acceptance of the instrumental use of psychoanalysis is necessary for this feminist agenda, because it subscribes the gender difference that inscribes the objectification, submission and silence that feminist poetics intends to overcome. His methodological internal contradiction presupposes the female construct as the unmarked

discursive sign—silenced, obscure, diabolic and irrational in psychoanalytic and Christian mythology. However, the basis of this construct is often biological, centered on selected parts of the female body involving more precisely, and ironically, female sexuality only. Even though Adrienne Rich's attack on heteronormativity would rid feminist poetics from the retreat into sameness (Rich, 1980: 631-636), this attack is still based on representing women on sexual terms only. What is however surprising to me in feminist criticism and discourse is its strategy to use such physical qualities to rewrite the myths that produced them, when a shorter and easier way would be to denaturalise the mimetic correspondence between myth and body in the first instance. Easier and shorter indeed, but dysfunctional because feminism could then only work in the negative, never being able to produce its own correspondences on a basis it rejects. There is an inherent violence inscribed at the heart of feminist discourse (critical and poetic) targeting change on an ethical and political basis that debunks patriarchal myths as it creates its own. Strikingly, the result is the same as with psychoanalysis: new qualities emerge that naturalise the patriarchal construction of the female body and psychology (as well as the male ones).

In 1981, Julia Kristeva was already aware that the semiotic *chora* that she opposed to the symbolic law in her 1974 doctoral thesis was perhaps 'a kind of fantasy of archaic fulfillment which an arbitrary, abstract, and thus even bad and ultimately discriminatory order has come to disrupt' (Kristeva, 1981: 29). In 1974, she presented this semiotic *chora* as 'a non-expressive totality formed by the drives and their stasis' that 'precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality' and that is identified with the feminine as 'nourishing and maternal' (Kristeva, 1984: 25-26). 'The mother's body,' she claims, 'is therefore what mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations and becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic chora, which is on the path of destruction, aggressivity, and death' (Kristeva, 1984: 28). While in 1974, Kristeva claims that 'we must restore this motility's gestural and vocal play [...] on the level of the socialised body' (Kristeva, 1981: 26) implying the preexistence of a lost natural order based on the biological code, a few years later she would advocate for a retreat from differential sexism and any kind of anthropomorphism and propose to 'challenge the myth of the archaic mother' instead (Kristeva, 1984: 29, 34).

What mediates between these two radically different approaches is precisely the acknowledgment of the problematic of *difference* as a sociosymbolic, sacrificial contract and universalism (Kristeva, 1984: 19, 25, 34). In the years separating both visions, something became apparent to Kristeva that the feminist activism of the seventies could not yet foresee: the threats involved in the feminist attempts to either 'possess [the sociosymbolic contract] in order to enjoy it as such or to subvert it' or to break it (Kristeva, 1984: 24). In 1981, Kristeva points to the totalizing dangers of Freudianism and socialism for feminism, of the feminist plural 'we' (Kristeva, 1981: 21, 24), as a sort of 'inverted sexism' (Kristeva, 1981: 27). But in the way of this realization, a feminist phenomenon takes place that agentially cuts a semantic/symbolic linguistic binary based on the formation of the gendered transcendental subject, producing the naturalised gendered bodies of the participants involved as

universal plurals, together with myths of oppression and liberation such as the phallogocentric symbolic and the semiotic archaic mother. After these, other differences will be cut, like the myths of inverted sexism and radical feminism (Kristeva 1984: 27) or even feminist 'terrorist commandos' (Kristeva, 1984: 26), of belittled male writers (Kristeva 1984: 32), and the 'singularity of each woman' that 'will be able to break free of its belief in Woman' (Kristeva, 1984: 33). According to agential realism, none of these existed before Kristeva took her pen, and neither did she, as the author who penned them. All of them are differences cut by the feminist phenomenon, and yet, they both reconfigure previous phenomena and preconfigure subsequent iterations, or else they could not have been cut or even cited here. While it may be true that the particular qualities of Kristeva's writing are diffractively cut out of a specific materialdiscursive phenomenon, they also appear as a response to the temporal changes that have altered the balance of former materialdiscursive phenomena. Kristeva's writings reflect this balance by diffractively cutting differential qualities so that it remains (the same).

Back again in the 1970's, despite her claim that she refuses to strengthen the effects of the past by repeating them (Cixous 1976: 875), that 'the point is not to take possession in order to internalise or manipulate,' (Cixous, 1976: 887), Cixous's language is full of stolen<sup>1</sup> language. She redefines woman using traditional similes such as love, the irrational, the magical, motherhood, singing, orality, family, nature or chaos, and new psychoanalytic ones such as the unconscious, desire, the libido, genesis, the unregulated, the peripheral, the impossible or the repressed that perpetuate the masculine frame for difference. While she makes a strong emphasis on the physical aspect of female voice and identity, she is still selective of specifically sexual parts only. In rebelling against phallogocentric male myths, Cixous writes the myth of the New Woman in poetic terms (Cixous, 1976: 877) that hide or adorn 'with the mystifying charms of fiction' (Cixous, 1976: 879) a repressive economy. The stolen myth of the promethean New Woman who steals the language justifies the institutional repression she subverts against because she who speaks from the peripheral must place herself outside.

Yet Cixous' Woman is New because she steals and flies, because she is capitalised, a quality that did not preexist Her, but is cut together with Her in Cixous' text. Also new is the lost naturalised order that justifies Her right to steal and fly, a right to restore what was never possessed—and therefore, did never exist as a possession—and must for that very reason, be stolen, and not restored. What are the qualities of the new stolen property that emerges together with traditional similes? Least those traditional similes are also cut with it, its ontological quality is that it is itself stolen, which is impossible if it is new. The phenomenon of Cixous's 'Laugh of the Medusa' lies in a differential sameness whereby *écriture féminine* is cut together with the New Woman and the Old one, the performativeness of which iterates the

1 In order to describe the New Woman's act of writing, Cixous recurs to figurative language, by using the pun in the term 'voler,' the two meanings of which—to steal and to fly—are used metaphorically to signify some Promethean 'capacity to deappropriate unselfishly' (Cixous, 1976: 889) instruments that appropriate male speech.



ideological backgrounds of psychoanalysis and Marxism, ancient Greek mythology and the religious and literary traditions of the sermon. It is through differential sameness that it becomes possible to steal what has already always belonged to Woman although they never (neither property, nor Woman, nor *écriture*) existed before stealing.

Cixous defines *écriture féminine* as a practice by which 'woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies' (Cixous, 1976: 875). By claiming a right for self-definition from the margins of discourse, Ostriker's vision willingly renounces discursive authority on the basis of gender difference. While assigning different values to traditional negative female stereotypes, she needs to reinforce them. In 'stealing the language' for myth revision, Ostriker seems to imply a renounce to unmediated self-expression, a feminist version of Bloom's anxiety of influence that seems to classify feminist writing within the wider frame of postmodern writing. When Ostriker argues that feminist poetics—unlike male poetics—lacks a 'melancholy at his lack of priority' (Bloom, 1997: 96), she is against her own claim of feminist myth-revision, which often finds its angry expression through a melancholy for a past that never existed. Against this, it can be argued that sameness cuts the spacetime abyssal in *différence*, performatively bringing signifier and signified together simultaneously because *all* the differences emerge from each phenomenon to *iterate* themselves, and each phenomenon silences what cannot be named (like in Wittgenstein's famous Proposition 7) because what cannot be named is impossible. In this sense, *écriture féminine* is possible.

There seems to be a catch in the early Kristeva and Cixous' feminist approach that conditions the subversive novelty of this feminist discourse to the *imagined* preexistence of the very differences they want to subvert. Therefore, the necessity (discursive and ontological obligation) to *voler*, to steal (in terms of restored justice), to imitate in writing the New Woman. According to Cixous, all this is only feasible through a figurative writing that appears as a compulsory imagination. 'Only the poets' she argues, can 'imagin[e] the woman who would hold out against oppression' because 'poetry involves gaining strength through the unconscious [. . .] the place where the repressed manage to survive' (Cixous, 1976: 879-80). For she acknowledges that there is already a poetic tradition that has operated by 'slip[ping] something by at odds with tradition,' were it not for which 'I wouldn't be writing (I-woman, escapee)' (Cixous, 1976: 879). The double meaning in the pun *voler* is no coincidence, because there is an already forgotten and unconscious (enlightened) mimetic tradition before the romantic 'truth' of poetic originality, which I want to cut into difference while reading Cixous. Since poetry ceased to imitate in order to create only, mimesis has haunted the dreams of poetry, as an anxiety of influence (the fractal unconscious of the unconscious).

It is through poetic language that Virginia Woolf *imagines* a Shakespeare's sister in 1929, who is *coincidentally* in *character*, the same as her brother except for the gender differences that make all the difference. This woman who does not have a room of her own *must* be William's sister as much as she *must* be woman, because she *must* be *like* him: a female Shakespeare as long as she does not get married,

which is the reason why she does not, and must also commit suicide rather than succeed. In 1929, a feminist poet martyr is born out of the long religious tradition of early Christianity and Sophoclean tragedy. The unconscious irony is that she never wrote herself, but was written instead on (possibly) a Woolf's imagined autobiographical model, whose particular circumstances as Woolf made them—vividly expressed in poetic form—become extensive to all British women from the Saxons and the Britons to the early twentieth-century working classes. With her, other characters appear: *first*, her shamed father, and then 'the fat, loose-lipped' manager who 'guffawed' at her and the Nick Greene who would take pity enough of her so as to make her with child (Woolf, 1993: 42-45). All of them, together with Cixous' 'smug-faced readers, managing editors, and big bosses [who] do not like the true texts of women', are newly and already cut from the long gothic tradition, where they already haunted the dreams of helpless virgins—or Cixous' 'little girls and their 'ill mannered' bodies'—as the scapegoats of *écriture féminine*, although she claims that 'woman must write woman. And man, man' (Cixous, 1976: 877).

Brave as it is, I cannot but admire Ostriker's attempt at listing the features of the female and feminist poetics of the American sixties. Although independently, none of them can be considered a rhetorical innovation, it can certainly be argued that together, those stylistic features can claim for the aesthetic generalizations that qualify a poetic trend. Yet I must partially disagree with her in that such trend is particularly distinguished by the absence of nostalgia for a golden age or past culture in the selection of the myths it subverts. For I have found that the subversive myths of the poetic and critical performances of this early feminist discourse are all nostalgic of their lost foundational tradition. And this foundational literature is lost not because an already existing tradition was physically destroyed by male domination, documental decay over the passing centuries or as the result of some fire, bombing or ideological repression. What was lost is the very possibility of their existence, which now (re)appears as some sort of prosthetic phallus by virtue of poetic imagination. It feels like an abracadabra that produces the magic (phallic) wand, and cuts as it voices, the stylistic qualities of female feminist poetics. This nostalgia is iterative, while the subversive, non-nostalgic rewriting of ancient phallogocentric myths is the result of diffractive interaction.

#### MISS-REPRESENTATIONS

If there is something that all feminist criticism and practice agrees about, this must be debunking phallogocentric discourses that allegedly (mis)represent women. Yet while pointing at this representational mistake is relatively consensual for the feminist agenda, the terms proposed to put the mistake to rights or correct the deviation are more debatable, since they result from different agential cuts. As with the case of myth subversion, subversion against any kind of phallogocentric discourse presupposes a broken balance that must be restored. This balance takes the shape of (physical or psychological) natural order, and political, economic, social, moral or poetic justice. Because the construction of this original balance is unavoidably

responsible for subsequent displacements, finding a way to articulate a feminist discourse in inclusive ways that must also guarantee individual freedom is often the main challenge of feminism after the 1970s.

While Simone de Beauvoir proposes a binary reciprocity as an alternative to the gaze that constructs women as contingent objects rather than transcendental subjects (de Beauvoir, 2011: 318, 320), Adrienne Rich extends the wrongs of phallogocentrism to compulsory heteronormativity, which she seeks to denaturalise by voicing (cutting into definiteness) the silenced (indefinite) records of lesbianism (Rich, 1980: 649). Common to both approaches is the perspective that presupposes the right of social equality (sameness) on the legal claim to common humanity of sexual and gender differences. The paradox of this challenge to a former naturalised legal ground for sex or gender-based social organization lies in the subsequent naturalization of a possible alternative that must deny its actuality as a premise for existence. The emphasis on falsehood, on distinguishing the difference between the imposed/repressed imaginary/real binaries that foreground the hierarchical circuit of sexual and gender submission and oppression is at the core of the hermeneutic circle that conditions human (and therefore also feminist) empiricism.

The process of naturalization that discards the fabricated nature of discourse as false—or at least, relative—rests on the axiom of objectivity paradoxically *erasing* (and its resulting trace) human presence from human knowledge. This absence guarantees transcendental knowledge and ontological existence by depriving humanity and non-humanity from agency, and entrapping reflection within a causality that precludes responsibility. The causal paradigm that both targets and rests on objectivity renders problematic results that have been explained within phenomenology as uncertainty. In 1935, Schrödinger explained uncertainty relations through his famous thought experiment of the cat. Inside a sealed steel chamber, a living cat is exposed to a poison that would kill it if an electron decays (that would as probably not). Until the chamber is opened, the cat is in a living-dead superposed state, the uncertainty of which cannot be resolved without interfering with the experiment. The obvious conclusion is that the only possible objective knowledge is uncertain.

As long as the critical issue lies in intelligibility, it is doomed to be limited by it. The gender identity politics behind the feminist project conditions the results obtained as either predetermined or uncertain among many (though more or less probable) possibilities. Thus, Rich's lesbian alternative to heteronormativity conditions discarding heterosexuality as oppressive since the discursive arrangements that naturalise lesbianism together with economic equality and freedom, render heterosexuality as a misrepresentation. Like a cubist painting, de Beauvoir's reciprocal tension between subjective transcendence and objective determinism, renders a discontinuous gender and sexual identity that must be uncertain at facing the impossibility to draw differential results without altering them. The impossible paradox of being both at the subject and object positions at the same time, de Beauvoir's gender and sexual differences must remain reciprocally uncertain (relative) while sustaining the belief in a natural certainty that *must* exist, though beyond

human intelligibility.

Like de Beauvoir, whose positivist approach presupposes the transcendental subject as the locus of an objective, reciprocal observation that qualifies as an uncertain real (de Beauvoir, 2011: 319), Judith Butler also believes that it is possible and even necessary to distinguish the imaginary (false) from the real (Butler, 1993: xxx). By claiming that phallogocentric and heteronormative discourses are 'fables' that 'misnam[e] [. . .] natural facts' (1993: xxx), Butler seems to reluctantly acknowledge the existence of a natural fact that precedes its representation and is independent from it by means of their arbitrary relation, and whose qualities are defined negatively by the necessary falseness of its imaginary representations, and positively as 'original and true' (1993: xxix). Yet, in proposing an alternative direction for feminist political action, the only scope whereby agency can become original (and true?) is through the proliferation of cultural configurations as intelligible possibilities that already exist as unintelligible only, the desirability of which proliferation she naturalizes (Butler, 1993: 188-189). Aware that all (discursive identity) formations must mis-represent marginal differences, she accepts all possible results (performances) as real as long as they do not claim for exclusive naturalization, which can only be done through parodic performances that must be right because they are not wrong, or at least are right in revealing miss-representation.

But instead of naturalizing reciprocity as the alternative to phallogocentrism or heteronormativity (Butler 1993, xxix), Butler proposes parodic performativity as an alternative to identity formations that cite (prefigure) themselves with the intriguing target of survival (Butler, 1993: xxvi). With this, Butler naturalises the liberalization and desirability of exponential production that she restricts to the intelligible only (Butler, 1999: 190), as disposable contingencies that agency does not seem to be responsible for after they are discarded. This is possible because the intelligible operates within the domain of the discursive only and is therefore immaterial, but also because proliferating intelligibilities are not accountable for their own possibilities.

A posthuman approach to feminist poetics has the apparent advantage of skipping the hierarchies of possession and submission imposed by a paradigm based on embodied presence and absence (castration) that materialise through intelligible gendered bodies and the power relations among them. Applying Katherine Hayles' (1999) interpretation of information narratives to female poetics in the late twentieth century allows seeing phallogocentric or heteronormative discursive configurations as code patterns that can be hacked, rather than as physical presences that can be appropriated. Within the frame of this paradigm, the female castration of psychoanalysis is replaced by the randomness of the virtual (flickering) gendered body, which is free from previous myths that are continuously reconfiguring themselves, while denying any previous, present or future permanence to any. Yet applying Hayles' posthuman model to feminist poetics, while making the virtual female less dependent on the body configurations that construct gender myths (traditional and feminist), also has the effect of making it ultra-virtuous in her de-sexualization, and paradoxically more open to random data inter-penetration, threatening its differential basis. On the other hand, hacking the access to information also



acknowledges the preexistence of some given matrix that is not the less hierarchically patterned because it is more 'transparent' or 'virtual.' The possibilities offered by the flickering materiality of randomness versus the absence of castration leave no ground for gendered subjectivity in the absence of a signifying body. While stealing the language might be reformulated as hacking the access (Hayles, 1999: 39-40), nothing guarantees that emerging patterns will arrange into more symmetrical gender arrays. Her analysis of Mark Leyner's *My cousin, My Gastroenterologist*, for instance, concentrates on the cyborg nature of subject construction while leaving the ironic persistence of gendered pattern hierarchies in the text unexplored (Hayles, 1999: 44-45).

Hayles herself notices the irony in the 'devaluation of materiality and embodiment' resulting from replacing a paradigm based on presence/absence by another based on pattern/randomness, since 'changes in material conditions and embodied experience' (1999: 48) are precisely what make such paradigm change possible. Therefore, she considers the possibility of 'seeing pattern and presence as complementary rather than antagonistic' (1999: 49) while still not accounting for the mechanisms of such complementarity.

Such path is *almost* pursued by Donna Haraway's almost posthumanist approach in her advocacy for the monstrous myth of the cyborg. A hybrid between the physical and the discursive, or human and machine, Haraway's 'cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century' (Haraway, 1985: 66) blasphemously contesting the myths of psychoanalysis and Marxism at the heart of feminist poetics. Restrained by a political responsibility that is 'weary of holism, but needy for connection' based on *affinity* rather than identity, and most relevantly, 'unfaithful to their origins' (Haraway, 1985: 68),<sup>2</sup> Haraway's feminist vision has the advantage of doing without the psychoanalytic tradition (Haraway, 1985: 67) while involving both the physical and non-physical (Haraway, 1985: 70) in a double vision with unimaginable possibilities (Haraway, 1985: 72). To Haraway, cyborg politics is the struggle 'against perfect communication [. . .] insists on noise and advocate pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate fusions' with no available dream of a common language (Haraway, 1985: 95). Wary of the dangers of gender difference and its ironic poetics of myth appropriation, Haraway's cyborg myth paradoxically hesitates between construction and discovery (Haraway, 1985: 65) in heteroglossic balance between the equal abysses of the naturalised biological and the artificial composite. Both Haraway's hybrid and Hayles' flickering signifier coincide in constructing their original myths on the rejection (not appropriation) of previous ones and on an unexplored identification between the physical and the discursive.

In both posthuman myths, like in Woolf, de Beauvoir, Rich, and Cixous, the agenda of feminist politics has largely displaced the aesthetic one. Wary of the differential dangers

inherent to myth appropriation, Hayles and Haraway turn to randomness and uncertainty while leaving symmetry in pattern construction and its complementary relation to embodied presence, and responsibility based on an intriguing 'affinity' in choice vaguely indeterminate.

Sensing the danger necessarily involved in cutting differences, Hayles and Haraway opt for a methodology that leaves agency unaccounted for while rejecting determinism. Yet both acknowledge a need for symmetry and affinity that point to the pre-existence of patterns and repetitions intentionally left out of the equation even as incognita. This procedure coincides with Barad's disregard of iteration in her description of phenomena, which precludes ethical (and aesthetical) responsibility in agential choice. Unsurprisingly, their respective myths evoke the patriarchal vision of women as chaos (in the form of randomness or uncertainty), for which they claim a central (not marginal) position as a condition for order (as pattern or affinity). Like Heisenberg, while they acknowledge there must be some order in the form of pattern or affinity, they locate it beyond human skill to ascertain, causing an unimaginable amount of informational (and performative) waste (disposable patterns and affinities) that nobody is accountable for (informational and identity liberal economy). Yet patterns and affinities take place, if not causally, at least performatively, and if the subject(s) involved in their phenomenal occurrence are not to be left out of the equation for the sake of positivist objectivism, their agential responsibility must be accounted for. Haraway's cyborg myth is a responsible construction whose aesthetic ideal seems to be pastiche articulated by ironic heteroglossia (uncertainly affirming and denying already existing discourses), while Hayles' emphasis on randomness presents some problems with symmetrical (responsible) patterns and presence. Still, in the shift from Ostriker and Cixous's emphasis on writing from the margins towards Hayles' randomness of flickering signifiers, and Haraway's blurring of margins, the paradigm of feminist aesthetics seems to have moved from difference to indefinition, which is the traditional location of the rhetorical figure, rather than to its interpretation. With the advantage of forty years of feminism, I see that one of Ostriker's main contributions to feminist poetics is precisely her combination of political and aesthetic agendas through a brave attempt at rhetorical accountability. I believe that it is precisely in accounting for *figuration* that a feminist aesthetics in the twenty-first century would most healthily benefit from Ostriker's seminal study on women's poetry, since it profits from the material embodiment and suspended randomness that clearly cuts the blurred or differential presence of flickering bodies.

## CONCLUSION

An aesthetic reading of women's poetics from the perspective of Karen Barad's agential realism allows defining a women's poetics as the *phenomenon* that accounts for the patterned, differential presence of the subjects, objects, and instruments involved in it. Perhaps the most striking aspect of Barad's construct, the *phenomenon*, is that it does without the problem of universal language or identities, since it is inherently particular and temporary. The first consequence of this particularity or temporality is that

<sup>2</sup> To Haraway, pleasure in the confusion of boundaries is balanced by responsibility in their construction, which is quite reminiscent of the Horatian classical formula of *prodesse aut delectare*. Acknowledging the precedence of origins while being unfaithful to them is typically articulated through irony, which is one of Ostriker's rhetorical features for feminist poetics.

it not only creates itself, but also precedes the myths or models it no longer needs to steal, hack or imitate, because all models (physical and informational) are defined through performative intra-action. Key to the development of the feminist political agenda in Barad's approach is the agential aspect of the differential cut, which involves responsibility without the burden of victimization. A feminist aesthetic approach to Barad's agential realism presents poetry as the material agential cut that defines women, each woman, women's poetry and their sociocultural, historical, political environment in their embodied poetic experience.

Through Barad's approach, Woolf's prose produces the myth of Shakespeare's victimised sister, Rich's defines the myth of oppressed hypersexualised woman, Cixous' defines redemptive *écriture féminine* in its epics against phallogocentrism, de Beauvoir's reciprocates the transcendence of the female subject, Hayles' creates elusive flickering signifiers, and Haraway's composes the cyborg myth. These are some of the myths generated by women's poetry and poetics (poetic phenomena) in the second half of the twentieth century. Each of them enacts an agential cut that defines both women poets and their poetry as much as their contexts of composition. They also cut agential differences in defining a negative male paradigm of gothic monsters that materialise into *our* fathers, husbands, sons, colleagues and neighbors as much as *our* sisters or sister-lovers (the possessive, in this context denotes intra-action rather than possession).

The relevance of Barad's agential realist model is that it is based on a notion of iteration (mimesis) that is not reflective, but diffractive. It causes itself and others as everyone and everything entangled become definite, and is therefore burdened with the blessing of free though responsible accountability. Each poem and its entangled criticisms cut differential figures that condition their intra-action, each woman poet is entangled in its composition and therefore its *form* and its content are mutually intra-active.

Thus, it neither steals nor hacks previous myths, languages, codes or borders, because none exist before intra-action. Her signifiers do not flicker, because they only exist in the present moment and can never serve as models or myths for future intra-actions, but rather emerge from them. Still, it acknowledges differences and thus the political agenda finds room in it as accountability, or the practice that accounts for choice in agential intra-action.

Yet, there is a creative responsibility in naming as it engages matter intra-actively, that can only be resolved by facing iteration and bringing reflection back into focus. Each differential cut defines a pattern based on repetition or affinity (creative mimesis) that we used to call identity or Law (divine, natural, or social), and may now perceive either as compulsion or obligation. Iteration restricts or contains figurative unrealised possibilities or uncut determinacies by comparing them to what is plausible, an act of judgment that counteracts the effects of time on space. While the transcendental constant is ontological, the temporal variable is differential. Or to put it in simpler terms: space contains temporal change into self-sameness, while time expands spatial sameness into differential cuts. Contrary to Heisenberg's uncertainty, it is possible to know though not objectively, nor subjectively, but intra-actively, by accounting

for agential intra-action, which is literally creative in material and discursive terms, reflective and performative.

Poetic figuration has the advantage of acknowledging the creative and mimetic, the temporal and the spatial, the textual and the textural by escaping the absolute determinacy of imitation and restraining abyssal differential experimentation. Schleiermacher's hermeneutic circle ceases to be aporetic if considered intra-actively, which restores the poet to its place in the city as *it* who foresees the past in cutting the present, in creating a found model. Poiesis is a heavy burden that should not be taken lightly. There is agential responsibility in naming patriarchy and victimization, in creating myths that *must* be challenged, and in the material-(in)formational intra-action of the poetic text, as it determines its participants, objects, and conditions. There is agential responsibility in (if) cutting beauty and the terms of beauty, in defining art as a ground for space-time balance, since the uncertainty in affinity and randomness is also an agential cut erasing accountability from freedom.

So far, feminism has been contesting or rejecting previous models while eluding its agential accountability in the process, producing an increasing amount of discarded waste in its unrealised redemptive aesthetic promise. A more ecological management of poetic practice would measure its creative potential against its agential intra-action by acknowledging its accountability in cutting the past aesthetic models it claims to react against (by appropriation or rejection). To me, the result of this equation seems ironically Horatian, or based on balance, with the difference that now, this balance is of an intra-active character. I very much doubt that Ostriker meant this when she qualified American early feminist poetics in the 1980s, but I find her brave in cutting determining aesthetic qualities for feminist poetics, in proposing an aesthetic criterion versus the supposedly objective turn to quantity in the discursive frame of the poetic liberal economy of the late 20<sup>th</sup>c.

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