

Material Feminisms. Edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.

Bits of Life: Feminism at the Intersections of Media, Bioscience, and Technology. Edited by Anneke Smelik and Nina Lykke. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008.

Olivia P. Banner, University of California, Los Angeles

At the beginning of this new century, feminist technoscience studies scholars are responding to recent calls that theory and analysis should provide a rigorous engagement with materiality, which the late twentieth century's postmodernist turn to the linguistic and the discursive usurped. Such calls are especially urgent in a time in which definitions of "life"—of the material itself—are undergoing rapid change. *Material Feminisms* provides important feminist theoretical and practical engagements with the material from multiple disciplinary sites, not only feminist science studies but also disability and race/ethnic studies. The articles in *Bits of Life* place greater emphasis on what some might consider to be the opposite side of the material coin, that of the virtual and the digital, and generally focus more on bodies' representations within the sciences and cultural narratives. Taken together, these two collections mark the profound theoretical shifts that accompany new configurations of life and the material in a posthuman age.

The editors of *Material Feminisms*, Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, argue that the feminist emphasis on social constructionist models, while enormously productive, has led us to an impasse. Such prevailing models account for how the body is represented, but they do not provide "a way to talk about these bodies and the materiality that they inhabit" (4). These lacunae make "it nearly impossible for feminism to engage with medicine or science in innovative, productive, or affirmative ways—the only path available is the well-worn path of critique" (4). In addition, this neglect of the materiality that bodies inhabit—that is, the environment—has left feminism without deep theories of the "agency, significance, and ongoing transformative power of the world" (5). Each section of articles, the first on theory, the second on the material world, and the final on bodies, sets out to address these gaps.

In the first section, Elizabeth Grosz calls on feminists to reconsider the utility of Darwinian theory as an account of the indeterminism involved in change; Clare Colebrook examines what a vitalism newly conceived as

unactualized potential (instead of, as in conservative philosophical accounts, as that which animates matter) might have to offer feminist theories of materiality; and Susan Hekman provides a historical genealogy for the material turn—especially useful for readers less familiar with the terrain—tracing it up to the recent work of Karen Barad, who is represented here with her important essay “Posthumanist Performativity.” Building on physicist Niels Bohr’s agential realism and bringing it into conversation with Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, Barad argues for the world’s intra-activity. The world is neither, as realists would have it, out there waiting for scientists to discover its laws, nor is it, as social constructionists would have it, purely a product of culture. Rather, the material and accounts of it intra-act in local contexts; the marking of boundaries and projects contributes to the formation of matter, so that discursive practices delimit how matter will be engaged and articulated. “*Matter comes to matter* through the iterative intra-activity of the world in its becoming,” writes Barad (140). In other words, phenomena are not entirely independent of the devices that measure and produce them, and those devices are part of the activity that constitutes matter. The agential realist account therefore contests the boundary of human/nonhuman. It no longer regards culture as a force acting on the passive field of nature; the two are inseparable because “the apparatuses of bodily production . . . are . . . part of the phenomena they produce. Matter plays an active—indeed, agential—role in its iterative materialization” (143). In this formulation, humans are responsible for the marks they leave on matter.

Barad’s account resonates throughout the second set of articles in their focus on the material world—the interplay between the human and the nonhuman—and as they follow Barad in contesting modernist boundary-making projects. Donna Haraway continues her investigation of interspecies relations, and Vicki Kirby and Stacy Alaimo unpack a history of feminist strategies that have often glorified the devalued term in the nature/culture divide. Through an analysis of the media and material event that was Hurricane Katrina, Nancy Tuana shows that the storm’s power, increased by human-produced circumstances—oceans that were warmer than usual due to global warming—is therefore paradigmatic of the inseparability of humans and environmental phenomena. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands’s use of her mother’s encroaching Alzheimer’s to theorize landscape and the phenomenology of environment rounds out this section and provides a bridge to the next section’s focus on othered bodies, especially those marked as racially or physically other.

In this last section, contributions explore identity and experience as grounded in the materiality of corporeal existence, shifting the paradigm

away from identity as purely a product of social construction. Tobin Siebers argues that the disabled body and experience provide a realist account of minority identity. Some postmodernists rejected bodily experience as a basis for identity claims, but conceived as an object of knowledge within a social network of meanings, bodily experience can be reclaimed as a legitimate base ground from which to formulate identity claims. For Michael Hames-García, the socially and historically constructed nature of race does not mean that it should be excised as an identity category; he urges that we instead experiment with racial identities, recapitulating them not as fixed sites but as always undergoing transformation, as in the example of the Zapatistas, who define their identity as “the product of five hundred years of struggle” (331). Suzanne Bost rereads the Chicana feminism of Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga in light of both authors’ experiences of illness and pain. For Bost, Anzaldúa and Moraga shifted from theorizing a Chicana feminism delimited by ethnic boundaries to a feminism predicated on the capacity of all bodies for sickness and pain. In so doing they provide a model for a postidentity politics opened up to new alliances and relationalities. Elizabeth Wilson investigates the interrelation between body, brain, and pharmaceuticals to subvert traditional feminist accounts of depression as a manifestation of social oppression or as socially constructed, instead revealing the imbrication of the biological with the psychological that the success of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors—with their ability to bring the gut and the brain, organs themselves, into an empathic relation much like that aimed for in talk therapy—points to. Finally, Susan Bordo uses the intimate experience of learning how to braid her biracial daughter’s hair to discuss what it means to learn from the inside and outside about raced experience, concluding that “we need to spend less time ‘theorizing difference’ and more time learning from and about the differences *and* similarities in each other’s lives” (416). This last section makes especially clear that thinking through the materiality of corporeal experience and how it is translated through social constructions is providing rich new ways of thinking about identity and coalition, about the interrelatedness of body and theory. Against the post-structuralist tenet that subjectivity is an empty category of humanist thought, these contributions suggest that identity is not just a cultural construction; rather, those constructions have immediate impact on how people experience and live out their daily lives.

The editors of *Bits of Life*, Anneke Smelik and Nina Lykke, have chosen their title to indicate “today’s cultural fusion of the biological and the technological” (ix)—“life” as it is fragmented into its constituent parts and as it is digitized into bytes. The emphasis throughout this collection

lies in representations of life: how changes in cultural modes of looking “are changing our perceptions of bodies, technologies, and ourselves” (x). The book aims to find new ground for the media literacy we need to understand these new configurations. While the editors note the turn away from social constructivism, most of the essays focus less on interrogating the ontological and epistemological assumptions guiding theoretical work and more on analyzing the representational.

The first section includes a description of the roots of feminist cultural studies of technoscience in the Scandinavian and Anglo-American contexts and a reprinted interview with Donna Haraway. Articles in the second section focus on bodies and their representations. Celia Roberts documents shifts in the understandings of the hormonal body: whereas in the early twentieth century biomedical discourses conceptualized the hormonal body as a mechanism closed off from its environment, by later in the century it was conceptualized as an informational body open to its surrounding environment. Roberts then reads how that hormonal body, now understood as at risk and in interrelation to an environment itself saturated with hormones, becomes the responsibility of women. Other contributions include a contrast of in-vitro fertilization technologies in the context of both human and bovine reproduction and their different imagined kinship relations, and two articles investigate filmic representations of human life in an era of new genetic and visualization technologies. The book’s third section moves directly into the virtual zone, with analyses of how digital storage technologies change the “performative nature” of memory itself (115), of the collapse of the virtual and the visual in the tunnel imagery shared by medical technologies and cyberfilm, and of a hypertext that makes visible the constructedness of the cultural alignment of men and machines through a narrative that concretizes female subjectivity as part of a “machinic monstrosity” (160).

In the collection’s final section, Barad reprises her argument in “Post-humanist Performativity” to demonstrate her agential realist account of intra-action for our posthuman age, when “life” includes not just its conventional signification of, for example, a human or animal being but also genetically engineered life-forms that span species barriers, the artificial lives created by computer programmers, and virtual lives inhabiting the virtual world. Rosi Braidotti’s final essay redefines life against and through death in order to fully decenter the human of the Enlightenment project. Taking death seriously allows us to fully critique the humanist ideal that aligns consciousness with subjectivity, provoking a radical realignment of all those conceptual divides—for example, human/nonhuman, animal/

human—that are based on the phallogocentric subject and that restrain the realization of the full potentiality of the body, and the subject, as situated within dense fields of interrelations. In pursuit of an ethics suitable for our posthumanist world, Braidotti espouses an affirmative mode of joy that realizes the subject's continuous process of becoming.

Of the two volumes, *Material Feminisms* more clearly charts new theoretical waters, demonstrating how feminist thinking about materiality suffuses multiple disciplines and keeps them in lively conversation with one another. Both, however, provide succinct and rich overviews of where feminist studies, especially feminist technoscience studies, stands today. That one collection is predominantly U.S. focused, the other European focused, testifies to the field's importance in both settings, yet only *Material Feminisms* includes articles that address race, ethnicity, and disability. In addition, both collections could have been further enriched by contributions from postcolonial standpoints. We can hope that the future will see the publication of such a range of viewpoints. ■

The American Protest Essay and National Belonging: Addressing Division.
By Brian Norman. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007.

Laura Gray, Rogers State University

Brian Norman's *The American Protest Essay and National Belonging: Addressing Division* examines selected American essayists, "unearthing a tradition of American writer-advocates—some well known, others less so—whose work may have previously been overshadowed by more dominant strands of the essay form on one hand, and by a default attention to protest novels or poetry on the other" (4). Employing methodologies from feminist and social movement theories, Norman focuses primarily on well-known writer/activists from women's liberation, civil rights, and other social movements in order to illuminate some neglected or previously misunderstood aspects of texts—texts he identifies and defines as the American protest essay. In this way, Norman joins a broad body of scholars who demonstrate that writers from historically marginalized spaces add significantly to the American literary canon. While there are works he does not address that would enrich his conversation (notably Jacqueline Jones Royster's *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change*