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*Bits of Life: Feminism at the Intersections of Media,
Bioscience, and Technology* (review)

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Book Reviews

Anneke Smelik and Nina Lykke, eds., *Bits of Life: Feminism at the Intersections of Media, Bioscience, and Technology*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008, 240 pp. \$30.00 paper.

Bits of Life: Feminism at the Intersections of Media, Bioscience, and Technology investigates contemporary entanglements of biology and technology from the perspectives of feminist science studies. Emerging from an international exchange that involved universities from the Netherlands, Denmark, the United Kingdom, and the United States, the book is enriched by the transnational conversations from which it originated. This important volume presents a solid genealogy of feminist cultural studies of technoscience; a compelling array of essays that interrogate technoscientific embodiments, artifacts, practices, and theories; and a potent figuration—that of “bits of life.” The editors, Anneke Smelik and Nina Lykke, explain that bits of life “signifies today’s cultural fusion of the biological and technological” (p. ix). The figure—a “daughter of Haraway’s cyborg”—is intended to “strike a middle road between the metaphorical and the material” (p. xii) as it departs from the predominant emphasis on social constructivism within feminist theory: “The emphasis on life marks a shift away from the deconstruction of layers of textuality, and toward an understanding of the inextricable entanglement of material, biocultural, and symbolic forces in the making and unmaking of the subject” (pp. xxiii–xxiv). Even as this volume both emerges from and contributes to a rich body of specifically feminist science and cultural studies, it proposes far-reaching disciplinary and methodological challenges, as the editors insist that the consideration of bits of life “forces a new relationship between the natural sciences and the social sciences,” challenging us to “develop scientific thinking at the intersection of different domains” (p. xiv).

The first section, “Histories and Genealogies,” presents three different cross-disciplinary mappings of the development of feminist studies of technoscience. The first two essays, “Feminist Cultural Studies of Technoscience: Portrait of an Implosion” by Nina Lykke and “Roots and Routes: The Making of Feminist Cultural Studies of Technoscience” by Maureen McNeil, offer fresh perspectives on the constitution of this field, as Lykke writes from a Scandinavian perspective, noting that science and technology studies have been performed in Scandinavian universities since the early 1980s, and McNeil includes cultural anthropology and studies of visual culture in her genealogy, along with the perhaps more expected categories of literary studies of science, British cultural studies, and feminist science-fiction studies. Although both essays bring us to “feminist cultural studies of technoscience,” the two genealogies cover rather different territories, which in

and of itself is intriguing. These lucid, detailed, and complementary histories of the field make this collection even more valuable for use within graduate seminars. This section concludes with an interview of Donna Haraway, conducted by Nina Lykke, Randi Markussen, and Finn Olesen, in which Haraway discusses the separate genealogy of feminist science studies scholars, who are rarely mentioned within “canonized versions of the history of science studies” (p. 40). The fact that, as Haraway puts it, “we do know their genealogies very well,” but that “they do not know ours” (p. 40) underscores the significance of the histories in the first section of this book.

Lykke and Smelik’s figuration of bits of life is agile, as bits of life appear in surprisingly divergent forms in different essays—for example, the disintegrating hormonally sexed body, the dismissed mitochondrial DNA of the donor mother of in vitro fertilization (IVF), and the multimedia software “MyLifeBits,” a medium for personal memories. Celia Roberts, in “Fluid Ecologies: Changing Hormonal Systems of Embodied Difference,” argues that the “contemporary hormonally sexed body . . . is disintegrating into ‘bits’” (p. 46). These bits are not discrete, however, but interconnected with larger systems and flows. While the hormonal body Roberts describes demands complex and nuanced understandings of sex and gender, old-fashioned misogyny reappears in other technological discourses, as some bits of life are discounted. In the high-tech environments of Dutch human and bovine IVF, for example, Amade M’Charek and Grietje Keller note that the genetic contribution of the human donor mother is trivialized and, in an apt mirror image, the sire’s contribution to cattle breeding is magnified, even when the advertising focuses on the quality of udders. The central trope of this collection, the bits of life, ranges from human and animal bodies to that of digital media. José Van Dijck, in “MyLifeBits: The Computer as a Memory Machine,” examines the software intended to help people chronicle their everyday lives, asking how “the processes of digitization, multimediation, and Googlization affect the construction of memory” (p. 121). Although Van Dijck argues that digital technologies “promote a different materiality” (p. 127), the mix of essays in this collection and the radically different sorts of things that are analyzed as bits of life raise larger questions about what is meant by “materiality.” The spectator’s sense of materiality becomes a rather vertiginous issue in Anneke Smelik’s essay, “Tunnel Vision: Inner, Outer, and Virtual Space in Science Fiction Films and Medical Documentaries,” when the tunnel imagery in science fiction “signifies something virtual and abstract” and similar medical imagery “signifies something actual and concrete,” yet “both sites of images are equally virtual and abstract to the spectator” (p. 129). Smelik suggests, however, that “carnality” is reinstalled “at the very heart of a cyberculture that desperately wants to rid itself of human physicality” (p. 144). Thus science fiction films and medical documentaries entangle “inner, outer, real, and virtual space” into a tight Gordian knot (p. 144).

The most potent contemporary figuration of bits of life in Western culture, of course, has been that of the gene. And yet, as Haraway, Evelyn Fox Keller, and others have demonstrated, the predominant conception of the gene as a detached agential entity is not only simplistic and inaccurate, but bound up with pernicious dualisms and hierarchies. Here, Mette Bryld and Lykke expose the “reductionism and genetic essentialism” of the celluloid icons of human reproduction—Lennart Nilsson’s *Life’s Greatest Miracle*, and the original Swedish version, *The Miracle of Love*. Interestingly, the authors trace how the second version was revised in response to feminist critiques of the original. And yet the new

version of the film still supports a heteronormative, ethnocentrist image of the family. Moreover, “human subjectivity” is “represented as a question of genetic programming” (p. 92). Jackie Stacey’s “Screening the Gene: Hollywood Cinema and the Genetic Imaginary” notes that “the gene has no visual signifier,” and yet the anxieties it has provoked “have been given a visual life and, in particular, a cinematic life” (pp. 96–97). Stacey argues that in both *Gattaca* and *Species*, “the desire to transform the body into legible information that can be read as pure data and replicated accordingly . . . is thwarted by unexpected uses of technologies of imitation” (p. 109). Indeed, the unexpected, especially that of surprising material agencies, provokes a movement from humanist to posthumanist science studies.

The figuration of bits of life can contribute to the development of a post-humanist science studies even when that ethical or political orientation is not apparent within the essays themselves. Amade M’Charek and Grietje Keller’s essay “Parenthood and Kinship in IVF for Humans and Animals” traces the strikingly distinct configurations of IVF in cattle breeding versus that of human cell-nucleus transfer, but concludes by challenging readers to think through “each practice from the point of view of the other” (p. 76). The stark contrast between human IVF, for which risk is calculated according to health and success rate, and that of cattle breeding, for which the risks are “primarily commercial” (p. 74), underscores the blatant commodification of nonhuman creatures. Roberts argues that “hormones make strange connections among animals, food, and humans, across vast distances” (p. 53). Such connections, in my view, underscore the need for posthuman environmentalisms that trace networks of concern across human bodies, nonhuman animals, and material environments.

The ethical and political possibilities for posthumanist theories and modes of life require that we engage with material substances and forces, as well as their entanglement with discourse, culture, and human practices. Several essays, including the introduction, emphasize the need for feminist science studies to attend, simultaneously, to the material as well as the discursive. Roberts argues that the study of the effects of environmental estrogens would “benefit enormously from a critical feminist approach to contemporary reconfigurations of material-semiotic bodies” (p. 59). In her reading of Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl*, Jenny Sundén focuses on “intimate couplings of women and machines, insisting on an understanding of the subject that exceeds the poststructuralist ‘text,’ in the direction of a materialistic approach of embodied sexual specificity” (p. 147). She argues that *Patchwork Girl* “treats language as material, even corporeal, to the point where it is no longer possible, or even meaningful, to distinguish among the reproduction of texts, bodies, and quilts” (p. 158). Moreover, Sundén contends that the interaction between the reader’s body and the keyboard and screen make the experience of reading *Patchwork Girl* a “corporeal as much as a mindful endeavor” (p. 152). Although Sundén states that *Patchwork Girl*, like Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, raises questions “about the very limits of humanness, of life itself” (p. 148), the question of animal life is conspicuously absent from the essay. The quote from Shelley regarding the “dissection room and the slaughterhouse” provokes larger questions about how nonhuman animals fit—or do not fit—within posthuman theories and creations.

The book concludes with essays by two major scholars of what I would term a “materialist posthumanism,” Karen Barad and Rosi Braidotti. Barad’s “Living in a Posthumanist Material World: Lessons from Schrödinger’s Cat” features a feline that is merely a thought experiment. But her essay, which argues that life,

“in all its specific material configurations, is not an inherent property of separate individual entities but rather an entangled agential performance of the world,” refuses to cordon off living creatures, as well as other material agencies and phenomena, from consideration. Barad opens up a staggeringly vast field of post-humanist concern. Humans are not external to nature, but instead are “part of the lifeblood of the universe in its ongoing re-creation, and we must indeed be accountable to and for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part” (p. 174). Barad’s theory of agential realism (explained in much more detail in her massive book *Meeting the Universe Halfway*) may be as counter-intuitive as Schrödinger’s cat, with its thoroughgoing reconceptualization of ontology, epistemology, and agency. Rather than present another figuration of bits of life, this essay insists, more broadly perhaps, that life “is not a secret to be revealed.” Barad’s conclusion, which emphasizes the “inexhaustible creative vitality of the world” (p. 174), segues into the essay by Braidotti, the final one in the book.

In “The Politics of Life as Bios/Zoe,” Braidotti contrasts “zoe as vitalistic, pre-human, generative life to bios as a discursive and political discourse about life” (p. 177). Noting that “[c]enturies of Christian indoctrination,” with its phallogocentrism and mind/body dualisms have denigrated zoe, Braidotti argues that contemporary “scientific practices have forced us to touch the bottom of an inhumanity that connects with the human, and that does so precisely in the immanence of the human’s bodily materialism” (p. 178). Making this an apt essay for the volume’s conclusion, she argues that “the category of ‘bios’ has cracked under the strain and splintered into a web of interconnected ‘bits of life’ effects” (p. 178). Positing the body as an “eco-logical unit” and “collective entity,” Braidotti contends, raises questions regarding ethics, power, and temporality, which she answers with “a sustainable brand of nomadic ethics.” The “starting point” for this ethics is “the relentless generative force of bios and zoe and the specific brand of transspecies egalitarianism that they establish with the human” (p. 183). It is exciting to see Braidotti extend and transform the concept of sustainability—which is, in my view, a term that all too often implies managerial, humanist perspectives. She insists, provocatively, that “sustainability is about decentering anthropocentrism”: “the notion of sustainability brings together ethical, epistemological, and political concerns under the cover of a nonunitary vision of the subject” (p. 190). I hope that Braidotti’s conception of sustainability has far-reaching effects on international discourses, policies, and practices. And yet I wonder, while drowning in images of the Gulf Coast oil disaster, what environmentalism would look like if it proceeded from the idea that sustainability ethics “can be understood as a geometry of how much bodies are capable of” (p. 188). Wouldn’t the “sustainable self that aims at endurance” need to be at least complemented by the concepts of species and ecosystems (however problematic) in order for a nomadic posthumanism to be inclusive of nonhuman creatures? Braidotti’s rich and challenging essay, like the other pieces within this volume, reveals the alliances among feminism, posthumanism, and the new materialism, but it also reveals some fault lines.

As a collection, *Bits of Life* raises significant questions about how late-twentieth-century media, biotechnologies, theories, and practices reconfigure ethics, politics, epistemology, and the subject. This superb collection demonstrates that feminist science studies is well poised to grapple with these difficult questions.

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