MATERIALITY

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THE 16TH CENTURY philosopher René Descartes bequeathed western thought a problem it has been struggling to solve: the relationship between mind and matter. Within queer studies and feminism, the problem boils down to this: To what extent are the phenomena we call gender and sexuality determined by biological matter – genes, hormones, and so on – and to what extent are they creations of culture, language, symbols, and so on? For a long time, the dominant feminist response to the question was a widespread somatophobia that kept the material body at bay lest biological essentialism should rear its ugly head. When feminism and queer studies did approach the materiality of bodies, they did so within a predominantly linguistic and psychoanalytical framework that emphasises language and discourses rather than the materiality of lived experience (e.g., Butler 1993; see also, Howson 2005). In effect, they opted for the non-material side of the Cartesian divide.

Attention to the role of material culture in maintaining or subverting gender/sexual norms has often focussed on how objects serve to amplify and overdetermine relatively small sexual differences between humans to produce distinct genders. Giving pink things to girls and blue things to boys is only the most obvious and simplest process that begins at birth, or earlier if the gender of the foetus is known. However, research also amply demonstrates that material things do not automatically support dominant expectations – gendered, sexual, or otherwise (see, Scanlon 2000). Material things can be deployed to challenge gender and sexual

expectations, whether it is queer Barbie dolls (Rand 1995), or perfumes and scents (Graham 2006). The latter, for example, are often marketed as substances that bolster a heteronormative desire that is rarely sufficient in itself – which it ought always to be as the supposedly "natural," incontestable basis for all sexuality – but is always lacking in something and in need of supplementation in the form of scents or other material props.

Yet, despite the important insights of the above research it is too one-sided to take us to the queer heart of materiality. The discursive approach privileges the cultural side of the Cartesian binary, the second grants material things rather little independence; they simply do as culture and society dictate even if they might not always succeed in fulfilling "our" aims. Neither response addresses the inscrutable queerness of things. What do I mean by this?

To begin with, on a philosophical level we have to realise that the world is made up of complex processes of being, which our intellect freezes and moulds into objects. We have little choice but to do this because we need the illusion of solid objects if we want to comprehend and manage the world in a practical sense (Bergson 1990). However, in doing so we miss something about the fluidity and openness of objects in the process, their thingness or otherness. According to philosopher Henri Bergson (1990), the *élan vital* of being, or what we might call the queerness of matter, lies in its continual impulse to become other than it is, to differentiate itself, to become more elaborate and thereby exceed simple categorisation. This is especially evident in the ceaseless evolution of biological matter (Grosz 2004). Understood in this way materiality poses something of a challenge to normative ideas that demand stable objects and neat categories, such as heteronormative gender and sexuality, among other things because within things and the material world there is always an otherness present.

For philosopher Theodor Adorno (1997, 189–94), accepting the otherness of things was an ethical stance and a condition for accepting otherness as such. His is an important insight. Threats to our ecological and environmental futures, and those of countless other species, owe much to Descartes' stance towards material nature as something subject

to Man's scientific curiosity, domination, and exploitation. By contrast, respect for the environment rests on a more general respect for matter that is not subordinated to culture and society; it is more than and different to our understanding of it. In the face of resurgent fundamentalisms and fanaticisms of many sorts, and contempt for and hostility towards all manner of differences, this fundamental respect, grounded in our materiality, ought to be a pressing concern for queer theorising, much of which still neglects matter in general and material culture in particular. This neglect is odd for several reasons one of which is that things lead closeted lives.

A thing is not a simple matter. It emerges out of complicated history that includes relations of production, raw materials, chemicals, other organisms, industrial processes, marketing, supply chains, and much more. Rarely are these immediately apparent at the point of purchase or even in our daily usage of things. Most often, their full complexity is concealed and unknown to us. How we understand things depends on how much of their history and the assemblages in which they are implicated we take into account. A familiar example is when a commodity is boycotted because its thingness – its place in unequal relations of production, the profits it earns for reactionary interests, its negative environmental impacts, and so on – suddenly become known to us.

Our material being – our embodiment and the things on which we rely – connects us to, is dependent on and created by much larger material flows and structures than our own biology or status as individuals. From this posthuman and indeed queer perspective it is simply not possible to sex and gender things, nor the assemblages of which they are part, without resorting to extreme simplification and distortion (Graham 2004). Indeed, as feminist and queer biology reminds us, sexing bodies itself demands a very narrow focus on the morphology of sexual difference, whereas most human cells are not sexually dimorphic (Hird 2004).

In more recent years, the recognition of materiality's queerness has given rise to a revitalised material feminism that eschews Descartes' binary in favour of the mutual imbrication of mind and matter (see,

Alaimo and Hekman 2008). One that has shifted attention from epistemology to ontology in an attempt to dismantle the material-discursive divide by granting both their due within a "material-semiotics" (Haraway 1997) that attempts to "meet the universe half way" (Barad 2007) by exploring the myriad ways in which the material world emerges and is given fixed, if only ever temporary, form in and through a range of material-semiotic practices – scientific, social, cultural, and political – all with ethical implications. In these approaches, the material world is not a passive ground onto which humankind writes its messages as it pleases. Materiality, including bodies, also plays a part of its own that is not reducible to cultural dictates. It is dynamic, full of surprises, an "intra-action" of discourses, technologies and materials (Barad 2007; see also, Pickering 1995), "vibrant" (Bennett 2010) and with its own *raison d'être*.

Materiality, then, from being a supposedly reliable and incontestable guarantee of sex, sexuality and gender differences has emerged in recent scholarship as plastic, unpredictable, difficult to confine within simple sexed and gendered categories, occasionally subversive and sometimes rather queer. If we fail to recognise and respect this, we risk undermining the material foundations of our own future existence.

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