

New Materialism and the Question of Anthropos

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New materialism, a comparatively recent development in Western intellectual history, has broadened the horizon of humanities.¹ Fresh engagement with natural science, rereading of earlier natural science texts,² endeavours to extricate the question of matter and materiality from the depths of language and discourse have become synonymous with this critical movement.³ While a comprehensive account of new materialist scholarship would need to engage with all these aspects, my aim in this paper is to critically evaluate a particular aspect of new materialism. Taking the question of anthropos as its primary axis, this article would argue that contrary to its commitment to forge a posthumanism-inflected non-dualist account of relational ontology, its inadequate engagement with the constitutive elements which distinguish the human from the nonhuman world results in its being rooted in the same anthropocentric tradition that it had set out to dismantle. I intend to demonstrate how new materialist ventures to address the question of materiality leaves the anthropocentric distinction of human and non-human uninterrupted, and in turn, how this potentially undermines the new materialist call to disarticulate the dualist strata of thought.

This article is divided into two sections. The first one will look into a number of new materialist texts and through close analysis unravel how certain new materialist practices subscribe to and reinforce the human/nonhuman binary, thereby compromising its claim to subvert anthropocentrism and producing what Colebrook calls ‘ultra humanism’ (Colebrook 106) that leaves the humanist constitution of these categories intact and instead of scrutinizing the metaphysical framework to unfold on what ground this radical separation came into being finds solace in ‘fetishizing’ a (material) world beyond the domain of humans (Colebrook 104). Such endeavours fail to fully realize the immense potential that the founding principles of new materialism entail. Against this backdrop, focusing on the works of Vicki Kirby and what I would call Kirby’s ‘radical nonhumanism’, the second section of this article would provide an outline of how, when pushed to the extreme, new materialist axiomatics indeed provide concepts that, instead of a mere value reversal, dismantles the binary structure from within and render the human/nonhuman dualism untenable.

New materialism and the topos of human

'Return to matter'- this maxim contains within itself the general founding principles and interventionist implications of the new materialist paradigm (Lemke 91). The emergence of new materialism can be traced to two interconnected but distinctly separate intellectual currents.⁴ Works produced within the domains of natural science have been decisive in articulating matter in a non-essentialist manner. Numerous researches in natural science helped to establish matter as poietic, plastic, and unstable, as opposed to the general perception dominant in the Western intellectual tradition that considered it passive, inert with no agential capacities of its own.⁵ On the other hand, the development of the new materialism is significantly indebted to a 'minor' tradition in Western philosophy that strongly undermines dualist thought by proposing a radical, monist philosophy of immanence and arguing for univocity of being (Van der Tuin *New Materialism*, 153)

Before delving further into the analysis of a set of new materialist themes pertaining to our current purpose, let us first take a look at the narrative structure of new materialist articulations. Being the point of rupture that separates it from its theoretical predecessors, the axiomatic call to *return to matter* implies that there are certain limitations within the dominant critical paradigms, and the will to circumvent them is what marks the interventionist force of the new materialism. This narrative of return is two-fold. While signifying a turn from the current perspective, implicit to the concept of return is what it literally stands for, i.e. moving beyond where we are currently at in order to go back to where we once belonged. For new materialism, the call to return bears within itself this dual signification. It is a turning away from the discourses that until recently dominated the humanities in order to retrieve certain questions which were predominant at a particular spatiotemporal coordinate of the history of humanities. But recuperating these questions does not mean bringing them back as they were in that earlier period of time. The logic of this return narrative reads somewhat like this - the discourse that were until very recently in vogue ceased to hold its status because it proved inadequate to address the concerns of our present. As already mentioned, this discourse in question is that of linguistic/cultural turn, which has pushed us away from the domain of the real by keeping us confined within the realms of abstraction.⁶ Despite the veritable body of knowledge the discourses of linguistic turn produced, its obsessive investiture in linguistic/cultural constructivism failed to address the question of matter and

materiality. Vexation at this de facto erasure of the material world is captured succinctly in Barad's comment that:

Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter. (*Posthumanist Performativity* 120)

Barad's statement sums up the general sentiment prevalent in new materialist scholarship regarding the adverse effects of the linguistic turn.⁷ Criticism for their singular attention to the processes of signification, interpretation and meaning-making at the cost of rendering matter, the 'flesh of the world'⁸ irrelevant from a critical and political perspective has become one of the founding gestures of new materialism.⁹ But more often than not, this founding gesture remains unsubstantiated in a significant number of new materialist projects as a thorough engagement with works produced within the linguisticist framework remain uncannily absent.¹⁰ Discounting rigorous textual analysis, new materialist projects tend to engage in customary negation of the linguisticist-culturalist discourses in the form of uncorroborated remarks. Presented thus, the cultural/linguistic turn provides the counterpoint against which the new materialist discourses validate their claims to novelty. Burnwell notes the absolute necessity of having such a counterpoint, something that came before, which provides the backdrop for a recently emerged discourse to posit itself as 'new' (26-27). It is only by declaring itself to have enacted a definitive rupture with its predecessor that a newly evolved position can assert its emergence as the inception of a 'new' paradigm, and for new materialism, positions aligned to cultural-linguistic turn (often held to be synonymous with 'postmodern turn' or 'poststructuralist turn') function as its philosophical precursor from which it claims to have broken away.

Claire Hemmings deploys the analysis of political rhetoric of philosophical narratives geared towards providing a divergent account of the development of feminist thought in the West. Since feminist philosophy was one of the chief contributors in forging the material turn and its various proponents, Hemming's discussion of the trajectories of feminist thought sheds light on the structural constitution of new materialism. The singularity of Hemmings' work lies in her attempt to trace the evolution of feminist theory over the past few decades through the lens of the various narrative schemas that different feminist positions deployed to provide a general account

of their development and their relation to their intellectual past. Hemmings divides the journey of feminist theory in terms of three narrative structures – progress narrative, loss narrative, and return narrative (2011). The return narrative is based on the belief that in the course of its evolution feminist theory has lost some of its essential achievements that had been gained at an earlier point in time, and because of its diversion from these achievements, the current feminist discourses are incapable of addressing pressing socio-political issues at hand. But what has been lost can be retrieved and the mistake which diverted the course of feminist theory leading up to the present can be rectified. Thus, the return narrative creates a homogeneous history of how feminist theory evolved over time and situates various divergent, often discordant, positions within that history by ironing out their particularity. Such claims are often made through rhetorical tools instead of intense analysis, and the stark absence of references are substituted by generalized propositions. New materialism subscribes to the ‘political grammar’ of this return narrative whereby it posits itself as the radical force that has set out to retrieve materiality forfeited with the advent of cultural/linguistic turn. And as already mentioned, the absence of engagement with the various works that they rebuke for their failure to address the question of materiality is characteristic of the narrative structure of new materialism. Hemmings writes:

The otherwise striking lack of even general citation in return narratives is, I believe, a reflection of their need, and power, to unite the opposed progress and loss narratives of Western feminist theory. How much more, then, the danger of introducing reference to particular theorists, the meaning of whose work is most certainly not shared or whose representative status is contested? [...] the absence of direct citation in return narratives is precisely what allows a more elusive citation practice to permeate the glosses. What is cited is that common historiography, and its citation—precise in its vagueness—both references and produces reflective agreement. (112).

Following this founding gesture, new materialism routinely deprecates cultural constructivism for its de facto removal of matter and materiality from the purview of its critical lens and its over-emphasis on the political economy of signification. It argues that foregrounding the processes of ‘materialization’¹¹ has rendered matter into a passive and inert entity that is always already mediated through language and other cultural apparatuses which endows it with meaning. This is

not to claim that the existence of matter is dependent on language, rather it accepts the ontological individuality of matter. But addressing this ontological domain is impossible as matter can only be accessed as long as it is mediated by language. Therefore, any query regarding materiality is structurally compelled to take cultural devices as its primary object of analysis. Consequently, matter as such is driven out of the field of critical inquiry. If by political we understand ‘the dimension of antagonism constitutive of human societies’ and politics signifies ‘the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political’ (Mouffe 9), then such an understanding of materiality has immense implications. These notions of political posit willful subjects as sole agential actors, and this introduces a set of problems. In a Cartesian vein, this type of perception of materiality reinforces the dualist distinction between language and materiality and other dualist distinctions which are associated with and work through this dualist distinction such as nature/culture, mind/body etc. The structure of dualist logic is such that it prioritizes one category over the other and defines the other category as subordinate, parasitically dependent on the first one. The language/matter binarity in discussion attributes secondarity to matter because irrespective of its non-linguistic ontological status, its intelligibility is singularly dependent on language. The non-linguistic ontological structure of matter remains forever inaccessible because it is impossible to attain a position outside language which could allow us to explore its constitution before its entry into language. Therefore, being inaccessible to all practical purposes, this prelinguistic, primordial materiality is analogous to the Kantian notion of the thing-in-itself. In Kant’s conceptualization, the thing-in-itself functions as the cause of the world of appearance but remains forever inaccessible to the conceptual tools of the phenomenal world.¹² There can be no appearance without this cause, but this does not mean that the faculty of understanding would allow us to approach this primordial domain. It can only be understood as a ‘transcendental object’ which causes the phenomenal world to come into being, but maintains an autonomous existence with respect to it. We are confined within this world of appearance, passage to the absolute (i.e. transcendental) is barred, and the truth of this domain is forever outside our reach (Kant 381). Adorno calls this the ‘self reflectivity of reason’ - the ability to determine what is unknowable. To Adorno, this is an advantage and not a limitation as it allows us to understand what can be known and directs our intellectual faculties to that domain instead of indulging in speculative exercise in the futile hope of realizing the truth of the absolute (7). Although it is self-evident that the

understanding regarding materiality within the linguistic domain is not identical to that of noumenon, from a pragmatic perspective a certain parallel can be drawn between the two. Since the plane of absolute remains epistemically inaccessible, Kant's placement of the noumenon as unknowable was pragmatic in the sense that by showing what can be known and what cannot it established a proper domain of philosophical enquiry. Now, the manner in which linguistic turn frames materiality does not ascribe it a transcendental status; neither does it function like 'cause', nor is it ever claimed that it cannot be affected by culture. According to new materialism, the cultural turn argues that even though matter has a primordial existence beyond and before language, in itself this materiality is insignificant as it can attain significance only through cultural/linguistic interpellation. To sum up, matter in itself, in its primordial prelinguistic form can have meaning only within language and culture, and the processes of cultural signification lie at the heart of how matter would be interpreted and the value it would carry within the antagonistic and hierarchical domain of the political. Hence, any emancipatory narrative would have these interpretative grids, processes, and devices of interpellation as its central concern. In this sense, the de facto erasure of materiality can be thought of as a pragmatic move, because this effacement has political implications.

As already mentioned, the import of the *affective pull*¹³ of the new materialist narrative structure lies in its claim to recuperate materiality. New materialism holds that - a) with everything being a product of linguistic-cultural investment within the linguistic/representationalist model, matter in itself has been effaced from the domain of critical enquiry; b) since cultural investiture is paramount for matter to *become* as such, matter in itself lacks agential capability. Whatever agential role it has is imparted by culture - a domain synonymous with willful, conscious human subjects and their institutions which endow meaning to the brute world of materiality. Considering these two features, it is self-evident that such a position is based on the dualist distinction between human (culture) and the nonhuman (inert matter), and being the sole architect able to negotiate the signification grids, human becomes the primary category in its relation with whatever is outside their identity. Consequently, new materialism's call to grasp fully the critical-political charge of materiality before and beyond the representationalist schema of language and culture is a move beyond the topos of the anthropos. In the light of this discussion, let's take a brief look at some of the new materialist texts. My focus will be solely on understanding in what sense non-humanism can be thought of as immanent to new materialism.

In 2012, Rick Dolphizn and Iris Van Der Tuin published a collection of interviews of some noted new materialists and positional essays on new materialism titled ‘New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies’. In one of these articles, after pointing out the crucial role held by nature-culture dualism in western thought and mentioning how instead of working within this binary, the aim of new materialism is to understand the way this distinction came into being, Dolphizn and Van Der Tuin write::

It [...] gives special attention to matter (materiality, process of materialization) as it has been so much neglected by dualist thought. In the same breath we then always already start with *matter* [...] new materialism has been proven to be capable of opposing the transcendental and the humanist tradition that are haunting cultural theory, standing on the brink of post-postmodern era [...] (94)

In another section, they write:

Cultural theory in the postmodern era has been unable to account fully for materiality, whereas it found itself surrounded by an excessive representation [...] of matter [...] in popular culture as well as cultural theory. (106)

In the prefatory address of their volume on new materialism, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost chart the trajectories and distinguishing features of the new materialist paradigm (2010). Commenting on how theories of cultural constructivism fail to conceptualize materiality adequately and in what sense new materialism is radically different from its predecessors, they write:

[...] the dominant constructivist orientation to social analysis is inadequate for thinking about matter, materiality, and politics in ways that do justice to the contemporary context of biopolitics and global political economy. [...] we are also aware that an allergy to “the real” that is characteristic of its more linguistic or discursive forms [...] has had the consequence of dissuading critical inquirers from the more empirical kinds of investigation that material processes and structures require. (6)

Highlighting how the linguistic turn functions within a modernist framework and how its constructivist approach has eclipsed the domain of materiality, the introductory essay of another collection on new materialism reads:

Perhaps due to its centrality in modernist thought, postmoderns are very uncomfortable with the concept of the real or the material. [...] postmodernists argue that the real/material is entirely constituted by language [...] In their zeal to reject the modernist grounding in the material, postmoderns have turned to the discursive pole as the exclusive source of the constitution of nature, society, and reality. (Hekman and Alaimo 2-3)

A comprehensive critical account of new materialism is beyond the scope of our enterprise. But these statements capture the common thread running through the otherwise divergent body of work that has come to be labelled as new materialism. For new materialism, the linguistic turn has thoroughly denaturalized matter/nature. To elaborate, linguisticism's singular focus on the representationalist schema rooted in the ontological separation between materiality/language distinction and other associated binaries implies a triadic structure at work. The first component of this triad is brute matter, inert, devoid of any agential functions. The second component is the buffer zone of culture where an economy of forces interpellates it within its terms. And the third component is matter which has now become accessible to us through the interpretative workings of cultural devices. In this sense, there is nothing natural about nature and the natural matter since what appears as natural is nothing but the production of various discursive apparatuses. This is why Kirby calls this 'second nature' or 'second order construct'¹⁴ which, contrary to its appearance as natural, is unnatural through and through. She writes:

If it is true that we invent a world through a refractive hall of mirrors from which there is no escape, no substantive appeal to an extra-linguistic or causal origin, then it makes sense to assume that culture's hermetic self-capture discovers a 'second nature' (which is really culture in disguise) as the ground and explanation of who we are and how we should live [...] according to this view it can have no directly perceived, or substantive facticity because

the very act of making sense of a world is necessarily an interpretive makeover. In other words, what appears as that which precedes the arrival of the human remains a cultural back-projection with no unmediated presence, and this then implies that cultural signs of nature overlay a now inaccessible and unknowable nature as such.” (Kirby *What If*, 3)

What causes this transformation that takes inert, non-agential nature as its raw material and moulds it into cultural artefacts attributing to it meaning that it lacked before is the domain of the anthropos. This is not to say that what Kirby metaphorically calls the ‘first nature’ is incapable of change, but whatever alteration it undergoes is merely accidental resulting from various interconnected processes. It lacks conscious will and intention which only intentional human actors are capable of. Consciousness, intention, agentiality separate humans from other entities, and language being one of the finest manifestations of the ability to think in abstraction becomes synonymous with the human - the homo loquens (Kirby *Quantum Anthropologies*, 40-41). Moreover, as language produces matter by rendering it meaningful, any understanding of it within this framework would be anthropocentric where humans function as the sole agential actor capable of moulding matter (nature). So, considering that there is a prediscursive domain of materiality that becomes tangible through its mediation by language; and that language and materiality bear two ontologically distinct structures with language being synonymous with humans, new materialism’s call to recuperate matter from the depths of language/discourse/culture is *by right* critical of anthropocentrism, and this feature is immanent to its constitution. The question of language is particularly significant for new materialism as it continues to reiterate how during the linguistic turn only processes of linguistic construction received critical attention and how it reduced materiality to language. Consequently, in the radical imperative to move beyond the linguisticist paradigm in order to comprehend materiality adequately lies the nonhumanist charge of new materialism.

One of the associated claims of new materialism is its commitment to the univocity of being that focuses on how the various dualist distinctions (language/materiality, nature/culture, human/nonhuman) fall short in the face of critical scrutiny and how in reality these categories are entangled. But our discussion so far provides the ground for speculating whether, in its bid to provide a nonhumanist account of materiality, many representatives of new materialism inadvertently reinstall language/materiality distinction and other associated dualisms that have

hitherto sustained the humanist framework of constructivism. The radicalism of new materialism lies in its commitment to understanding materiality beyond a reductive understanding of culture, to understand how it informs its representations. But their efforts to refurbish the question of materiality operate on humanist accounts of both language and matter. Paradoxically, Kirby's critique of certain proponents of poststructuralism for their lingering commitment to the language-materiality distinction which new materialists attempt to thwart can be read against various new materialist projects themselves:

The abstracting technology of language, intelligence, and creative invention is separated from the body of the material world, indeed, from the material body of human animality. Ironically, given the initial concern to question the separation of nature from culture within Cartesianism, the sense that human identity is somehow secured and enclosed against a more primordial and inhuman "outside" (which must include the subject's own corporeal being!) recuperates the Cartesian problematic, but this time without question. (Kirby *Natural Convers(at)ions*, 220-221).

As mentioned, a counterintuitive reading observes that Kirby's critique of the poststructuralist turn for its reminiscent Cartesianism that keeps the anthropocentric boundaries of human/nonhuman distinction intact despite its claims to the contrary can very well be read as a commentary on the new materialist discourse. The Cartesian underpinnings of these new materialist enterprises reveal themselves in their literal interpretation of the axiomatic call to eschew anthropocentric principles of linguisticism which keeps the categories of language/matter intact, takes language as an individual - but not the dominant - compartmentalized component (one albeit associated with humans but having an affective role in a limited capacity nonetheless) (in)forming the political, and adds 'non-linguistic domain' of matter to that.

Therefore, being engaged in operating through the categories of language and matter as they were advanced within the humanist tradition, it fails to understand how this distinction came into being, what was at stake in this differentiating operation, and how the discourse of the anthropocene precisely emerges by enacting this distinction. Rather, it ends up translating its commitment to nondualism into a simple epistemic critique which argues for rendering the contours of language and matter ambiguous without working through the categories themselves.

Anirban Das's insight, albeit in a different yet analogous context of certain section of Western feminist theory's call to move beyond the sex/gender binary by merely blurring the distinction between these categories, can be brought to bear on this particular context to argue that an offhand rejection of dualist categories through an epistemic critique is not enough because - firstly, this rejection of dualism by either opting to think through a monist perspective or blurring of boundaries still operates within the broader metabinary of dualism/nondualism; and secondly, and more importantly, even when questioning the categories of language, one still has to work through it (Das 45-46). It is my contention that the absence of engagement with the terms of the various dualist structures that new materialism intends to displace lands a number of new materialist ventures under discussion squarely back into the domain of dualism.

New materialist projects indeed provide new contours for thought and practice. The radicalism of its will to address the question of matter, its conceptual arsenal, its affirmative approach, focus on concept creation, and its general critical charge undoubtedly has made a lasting impression in the humanities. But its nonhumanist inflection and commitment to a nondualist mode of thinking remain deeply qualified in that it often finds itself navigating within a dualist, humanist tradition which accepts, somewhat uncritically, the categories (i.e., matter, language, human, nonhuman) forged within these traditions. To corroborate this, let's take a look at one of the representatives of the new materialist turn.

Jane Bennett calls her project 'Vital materialism' (2010). One of the founding dualisms of Western intellectual tradition is the separation between conscious, sentient subjects and an inert, nonhuman world of brute matter. Lacking any agential role of its own, this nonhuman world doesn't have any significant political purchase and the sole conductor of this field are humans. Bennett's project attempts to argue for a different notion of the political by demonstrating how nonhuman bodies also function as agentic actants. It seeks to delineate a different understanding of politics by elaborating on the modes of interaction between humans and the nonhumans where they exist together in assemblages and instead of being the autonomous, agential character ascribing meaning to the nonhuman world through its interpretative ventures, humans are presented to be deeply affected by nonhuman bodies. For example, in a chapter dealing with food as nonhuman actants, Bennett writes:

Food will appear as actant inside and alongside intention-forming, morality-(dis)obeying, language-using, reflexivity-wielding, and culture-making human beings, and as an inducer-producer of salient, public effects. We can call the assemblage formed by these human and nonhuman bodies “American consumption” and name as one of its effects the “crisis of obesity” (39).

Though nonhuman actors are here entering the stage of affectivity which had hitherto been perceived to be exclusive to humans, Bennett does not question the metaphysical structure that informs the formation of these categories. Bennett's political project thus follows an additive model, where the nonhumans are merely added to the affective field, but the configuration of these categories remain unexamined. Bennett's design follows an interactive model where these categories are regarded as self-present, primarily existing individually in space and time, which then enter into a relation where both enact on each other (Bennett *Force of Things*, 4). In a previous article, where she called her project ‘thing-power materialism’, Bennett writes::

Thing-power materialism is a speculative onto-story, a rather presumptuous attempt to depict the nonhumanity that flows around but also through humans [...] Thing-power materialism figures materiality as a protean flow of matter-energy and figures the thing as a relatively composed form of that flow. It hazards an account of materiality even though materiality is both too alien and too close for humans to see clearly. It seeks to promote acknowledgement, respect, and sometimes fear of the materiality of the thing and to articulate ways in which human being and thinghood overlap. (*Force of Things* 349).

In the light of our discussion, the implications of these statements are self-evident. Various other representatives of new materialism share a similar structure that introduces nonhuman actors but doesn't interrogate the constitution upon which the separation of the two and devaluation of nonhuman came into being. Rather, following an additive model similar to the one espoused by Bennett, it perceives the political to be an aggregate of these categories that are ontologically distinct and mutually exclusive in space and time. Susan Hekman's ‘mangle’ (2010), Nancy Tuana's ‘viscous porosity’ (2008), Braidotti's ‘matter-realism’ (2012), to name a few, share this same trait. But does this mean that any effort to destabilize these binaries and advance a theory of

materiality beyond the topos of the human is always already compromised by the spectre of anthropocentrism? Is any discussion of language bound to be located within the domain of the anthropos? Are new materialist efforts to circumvent language/materiality distinction structurally compromised from within?

Outline for a Radical Nonhumanism

The problematic feature manifest in a significant amount of new materialist scholarship, as elaborated in the previous section, is that even though it proposes to redress the question of matter by eschewing the all-encompassing notions of language and discourse, it does not question what language is or what defines matter as such. These endeavours take these operational categories as they were designed within the humanist tradition where language was primarily a mode of communication between individual agents. For example, let's take a look at a brief excerpt from the writings of Wilhelm Von Humboldt, one of the pioneers of modern linguistics:

The bringing-forth of language is an inner need of human beings, not merely an external necessity for maintaining communal intercourse, but a thing lying in their own nature, indispensable for the development of their mental powers and the attainment of a worldview, to which man can attain only by bringing his thinking to clarity and precision through communal thinking with others. (27)

And that this communicative model was unquestioningly presupposed by various new materialist enterprises becomes evident in the way they take language as the meaning-making function through which human subjects make sense of the outside world (Bennett *Vibrant Matter*, 39). This in turn guides the renewed quest for matter and materiality in new materialism to seek the real, matter-in-itself by eschewing language in the hope that this would usher them into a truly original understanding of the material domain. Therefore, what we observe here is a simple repudiation of language instead of working through it, questioning its basis which secures its boundaries and keeps it neatly confined within the locus of the anthropos.

Focusing on the works of Vicki Kirby, a thinker associated with new materialist scholarship, this section would provide an outline of how an unorthodox reworking of

language/materiality binary can be possible from within the new materialist premises that unsettles the constitution of this binary by displacing the constitutive conditions of language which defines it as the exclusive habitat of anthropos. Such a manoeuvre unmoors language from its ascribed position within the humanist tradition and argues that language has never been about humans. Such a gesture renders the dualist schema of language/materiality unsustainable to the extent that any originary separation of the two becomes impossible. As within the metaphysical tradition language is the definitive marker of the anthropos and since its absence is synonymous with the inarticulate domain of brute matter (nature, world), disarticulating this binary disrupts the hitherto secure boundary, distinguishing human from the nonhuman such that a definitive break between the two becomes untenable. This aspect of Kirby's work I call 'radical nonhumanism'. Since the space of this article will not permit a comprehensive discussion of her work, I would start from Kirby's polemical engagement with Judith Butler's theory of materiality to understand the unorthodox nature of her conceptualization of language¹⁵ which provides the basis of this radical non-humanism.

Judith Butler's conceptualisation of materiality is based on a performative account that attempts to elaborate how the appearance of matter (nature) as the 'irreducible' referent is the result of its being posited as such within language (Butler *Bodies That Matter*, 28). Since matter's appearance as pre-discursive is the product of language, there can be no access to this primordial ground of materiality. Language and materiality are embedded such that the possibility of a pure, pre-linguistic exterior is forever foreclosed. The import of Kirby's notion of language emerges succinctly in her critical scrutiny of Butler's theory of materialization. Butler's account, Kirby contends, proves problematic on two interlinked grounds. First, even though Butler argues for the embeddedness of the two, it doesn't deny the existence of an extralinguistic sphere that remains inaccessible to language, which in turn, surreptitiously institutes an absolute split between these two domains (Kirby *Live theory*, 69). Second, for Butler, 'materialization', the affective processes of the linguistic and the discursive which produce matter as such within its terms, remains tied to human exceptionalism in the sense that it locates culture and language as exclusive to humans. Citing Butler's response to Kirby's question in one of the interviews she took of her, Kirby writes:

Butler presumes that signs of thinking, whether models, representations, symbols, or the corollary social behaviours through which they are made manifest, are evidence of specific,

human, cultural capacities. Indeed, these signs are enclosed in a self-referential system whose complex meld of intransigence and change is the very stuff of political life. Importantly for Butler, these signs and models, these conceptualisations and curiosities, cannot be biological in nature. (Kirby *Subject to*, 10)

Therefore, Butler's endeavour, despite its wish to the contrary, sticks to the fundamental tenets of constructivism that discounts materiality by reducing it to anthropogenic practices of the language and discourse. It is against this backdrop that Kirby, following Derrida, introduces the concept of *general writing* that radically reorients its previous constitution where it always figured as opposed to and excluded from the realm of the anthropos.

The concept of *general writing* or *language in general sense* cannot be thought of as a cultural/ linguistic mediation where matter is posited as the radical exterior that can only be accessed through language but which can never be fully exhausted within it (Kirby *Quantum Anthropologies*, 13). Rather, in a Derridean vein, language needs to be approached in terms of the logic of supplement. The concept of supplement has been elaborately discussed in a number of his early works.¹⁶ Within the logic of supplement, the primordial lack¹⁷ of nature is filled by the institution of supplement that emerges from within. It works by a dual logic, on the one hand, it adds something to the existing field and in this sense it functions like a surplus; on the other hand, it substitutes something, and these two aspects function together. But what it substitutes has always already been absent, and it is this originary absence that is supplemented through the institution of supplement. Therefore, it cannot be said that supplement takes the place of a prior presence (Derrida *Of Grammatology*, 144-45). Keeping in mind Derrida's reading of Rousseau's text through the (non) concept of supplement, if fulfilment of the originary absence through supplement is how the 'origin' is established as such, then we must contend that supplement is integral to this 'origin', and that both the origin and the primordial lack we mentioned earlier is conceivable only through the institution of supplement. As Derrida puts it in the context of Rousseau's obsessive enterprise on the purity of nature that 'The supplement to Nature is within Nature as its play' (Derrida *Of Grammatology*, 258). In this sense, supplement is a *different* manifestation of nature itself. Language or writing in general sense, thought through the logic of supplement, therefore does not exist in a relation of exteriority that acts on nature (matter) from outside.

The concept of general writing spans across Kirby's entire oeuvre. While within the constructivist framework language, understood in the restricted sense of the term, always figures within an oppositional relation with matter, the framework of 'language in general sense' (also called 'general text'¹⁸) as discussed above circumvents this split, but not by rejecting the categories altogether or enacting a reversal like a significant amount of new materialist scholarship discussed in the previous section do. Instead, within the conceptual framework of general writing, difference is not dependent on the outside, but it is a movement from which the inside-outside distinction proceeds, it is the general structure of becoming. Therefore, any ontological split between these categories which in the constructivist framework find itself mired in oppositional logic, becomes unsustainable.

Kirby reads Derrida's notion of the general text within the contentious domain of materiality and explicates it as 'Entanglement of systemic energies' (*Quantum Anthropologies* 55), 'Systemic complexity' (*Human exceptionalism* 54), 'inclusive systematicity' (*Quantum Anthropologies* 59) where signification or interpretation does not stand exclusively outside the domain of matter, but rather is a manifestation of the system itself that functions through the logic of supplement. The system itself functions in an aporetic manner that does not allow any ontological split between categories, rather they are manifestations of the complex functions of the system of which these categories (language, matter) are 'different expressions'. Kirby writes:

[a]ny "unit" is not so much a separate part of a larger whole to which it remains indebted, but rather a unique instantiation of the system's own reinvention (or rewriting) of itself. Thus, every "instance" is "the whole," and this imploded, holographic sense of identity confounds linearity as an unfolding sequence of separate, successive moments. (*Quantum Anthropologies* 55)

Language is not a medium, it does not interpret a primary presence (nature, matter) situated beyond language. Language does not come after nature, rather it is 'originary' in the sense that it produces the (non) origin precisely by supplementing it. The supplement-origin relation doesn't function in a binary mode where the two separate and self-present entities enter into a relation, rather the difference between them comes into being only after the advent of supplement. Read into the context of the new materialist framework, the radical import of this conceptual formation becomes

evident, and one of the major contributions of Kirby is to bring the conceptual framework of general text within the contested site of materiality. Even though this possibility was already present in Derrida's postulations of textuality, this was never fully explored as deconstruction was thought to have a limited purchase, significant only as a tool for semantic analysis. Kirby's unorthodox approach introduced the question of language within the discussion of the ontological structure of being which provocatively manifests itself in her rephrasing of the much-cited maxim associated with Derrida that 'there is no outside text' as 'there is no outside nature' since whatever supplements nature is a play of nature itself. Therefore, the distinction between nature and culture doesn't hold any significance for Kirby, neither is she troubled by the need to eschew language in order to recuperate the question of matter (nature). Rather, as supplement, as a *differant* expression, culture is always already with/in nature. In this sense representation, interpretation, meaning-making - in short, processes associated with the domain of culture - is auto affectivity of nature itself (*Quantum Anthropologies* 36). It does not require a human agent to read it, provide it with interpretation. But language/culture is the very stuff of nature itself and such an orientation displaces its position of synonymity with humans which secured the boundary distinguishing them from the nonhumans who were devoid of language. Kirby writes:

Not many would dispute the presence of a biological reality that is quite different from culture and that we imperfectly try to comprehend. But surely, if we were without our skin and we could witness the body's otherwise invisible processes as we chat to each other, read a presentation aloud, type away at our computers, or negotiate an intense exchange with someone we care about, we might be forced to acknowledge that perhaps the meat of the body is thinking material. *If it is in the nature of biology to be cultural—and clearly, what we mean by “cultural” is intelligent, capable of interpreting, analyzing, reflecting, and creatively reinventing—then what is this need to exclude such processes of interrogation from the ontology of life?* (*Natural Convers(at)ions* 221; emphasis mine).

Kirby's nonhumanism isn't exhausted within the additive framework where the nonhuman world (matter, nature) is attributed affectivity and as an actant added to the domain of the political. The novelty of Kirby's approach lies in its reworking of these operational concepts that pushes those concepts to their limit, such that any separability between them becomes impossible. In our

discussion of various new materialist projects, we observed how their literal interpretation of the new materialist call to eschew the dominance of language ended up reinforcing the humanist understanding of both language and matter. Within this understanding, the necessary task of questioning the humanist configuration of language remained absent. Instead, the call to move beyond linguisticism often resulted in merely extending the communicative notions of language to nonhumans which de facto reinstalled the human/nonhuman, language/matter dualism which it had set out to debunk. But the significance of Kirby's project lies precisely in displacing the humanist configuration of these operative categories by introducing the concept of general writing. Language, unmoored from its humanist constitution and understood as the general structure of the world collapses the metaphysical distinction between human/nonhuman or nature/culture from within and opens up the possibility for conceiving these categories *differant-ly*. And this, I submit, is the radical import of Kirby's nonhumanism.

Notes

1. See Coole & Frost 2010; Alaimo & Hekman 2008; Dolphizn & Van Der Tuin 2012; Pitts-Taylor 2016; Ellenzweig & Zammito 2017.
2. See Barad 2007; Grosz 2011.
3. See Coole & Frost 2010; Alaimo & Hekman 2008; Dolphizn & Van Der Tuin 2012; Pitts-Taylor 2016; Ellenzweig & Zammito 2017; Braidotti 2012.
4. Alaimo & Hekman 2010.
5. Coole & Frost 2008; Ellenzweig 2017. But contrary to the general new materialist claim that within the previous materialist settlements matter was conceived as passive, it has been asserted that such a generalized picture of old materialist traditions might not be accurate (Wilson 125).
6. Coole & Frost 2010.
7. Alaimo & Hekman 2008.
8. Originating in Merleau-Ponty's work, this concept has often been used approvingly by new materialists (Kirby *Quantum Anthropologies*, 112-36). Also, see Kirby 2009; Tuana 2008.
9. We will discuss this in detail while analyzing a number of pioneering new materialist texts later in this article.
10. Discussed later in this section. Nikki Sullivan in her article also expressed her vexation at the uncorroborated reiteration by new materialists as to how positions associated with the cultural turn ignored the question of matter (2012).
11. Butler 1993, 9.
12. Kant 1998, 381.
13. Hemmings 2011.
14. See Kirby 2016.
15. This, in turn, has immense implications for the question of materiality.
16. Derrida 1976.
17. I am calling this 'primordial lack' in a provisional sense. Provisional because the textual economy of Derrida's reading of Rousseau's texts where the (non)concept of supplement emerged, doesn't allow us to think of this

primordially in terms of full presence because of two reasons. Primordial lack signifies an absolute absence perceived in terms of a negative mode of being, something that *is* not there, something that *is* not present. Lack therefore is the presence of an absolute absence within the origin. But Derrida's notion of supplement does not merely fulfill a prior non-presence, on the contrary this idea of a primordial lack is possible only after the advent of supplement which produces the origin, without/before supplement there cannot be an origin as such. Origin, to put in a Derridian vein, is a function of supplement. And since supplement produces the 'origin;' and yet at the same time is the result of this 'lack' which can only come after the origin, supplement has to be considered as something that can neither be an absolute outside (of the origin, nature), nor can it be identical to the inside.

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