

**Inventive feminist theory: Representation, Materiality and Intensive Time**  
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[Feminist materialism] amounts to a new paradigm for feminist thought  
(Alaimo and Hekman 2008: 10).

The desire for transformation animates feminist praxis. As a politics seeking radical redress, feminism is driven by an imperative for change (Ahmed, Kilby, Lury, McNeil and Skeggs 2000: 1).

If you've spent years dealing with body issues and feel like you need a little help with loving yourself, here's an invitation to transform your life. "How To Look Good Naked" wants to hear from you! (*How To Look Good Naked*, Living, USA)

It is widely noted that much of social and cultural theory is currently invested in examining matter, the material and materialization. Feminist theories have been especially important in both establishing this 'material turn', and in staking out some of its key features, including thinking about gender and sexuality, the body, nature and culture. Conceiving matter as that which is necessarily entangled with culture and that acts in and of itself, feminist theorists have done much to complicate and break down the opposition between nature/biology and culture/language. In so doing, many commentators of feminist materialism, and new materialism more generally, argue that it marks some kind of break with the linguistic or discursive turn<sup>i</sup>, which dominated in the 1980s and 1990s, and therefore indicates a new and changing framework for theoretical enquiry. For Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, feminist materialism is a new paradigm, a 'wave of feminist theory that is taking matter seriously' (2010: 6).

The idea that there is a new wave of feminist theory is unsurprisingly contentious, and debate about the terms of the material turn is ongoing. For example, some feminist

theorists express concern at the characterization of what the discursive turn was – or is – and the extent to which a focus on the material is new. Sara Ahmed (2008) argues that the gesture of ‘point[ing] to feminism as being routinely anti-biological, or habitually “social constructionist” [...] both offers a false and reductive history of feminist engagement with biology, science and materialism’ (2008: 24) and that ‘we need to appreciate the feminist work that comes before us, in all its complexity’ (2008: 36). Similarly, Nikki Sullivan (2012) expresses being ‘increasingly frustrated by the claim, repeated of late with a mantra-like monotony, that (usually nameless) feminists and/or social constructionists – even those whose work appears to focus on the body – routinely ignore the matter of corporeal life’ (2010: 299). Others, such as Maureen McNeil (2010), argue that theorists of the material turn are in danger of ‘exaggerat[ing] the power of the cultural turn, overestimating its significance and hold’: ‘naturalisation, as a key cultural pattern of projection, has not stopped’ (2010: 434).

The discursive turn (or what McNeil designates here as the cultural turn) is at pains to point out the plethora of ways in which nature is shaped by and accessed through culture, and to highlight that what might seem to be natural is not inevitable, and thus might be otherwise. For example, Simone de Beauvoir’s (1949/1997) powerful claim that ‘one is not born, but becomes, a woman’ (1997: 295), has been so influential to feminism because it draws attention to the distinction between nature or biology (birth) and culture (becoming)<sup>ii</sup>. To focus on culture, then, is to refuse biological essentialism and to imagine gender differently: If one is not born but becomes a woman, then there may be other ways of becoming gender(ed). Or, if matter is to be understood through culture, attention is drawn to the discursive scripts through which nature is conceived and molded; through which matter comes to matter (Butler 1993). For feminist critics of the new materialisms, it is crucial not to over-simplify the conceptions of both nature and culture that were developed as part of theories of discourse, and not to lose sight of how women remain defined by biology.

In this article, I attempt to pull through key arguments developed in the context of the discursive turn, and consider what light a feminist materialist approach might shed on them. My focus is on the relations between bodies and images. As these relations have

long been of interest to feminist theory, my aim is not to reduce the important work that has been done by feminists on bodies and images, but to consider the ways in which the material turn might approach and understand them and, more specifically, to pay attention to how certain prevalent themes within contemporary visual culture might be helpfully understood via an emphasis on materiality. In this sense, as I explain below, my approach might be understood in terms of what Christina Hughes and Celia Lury (2013) call ‘returns’ rather than turns, or what Karen Barad (2007) describes as a process of ‘diffractive reading’. Rather than set different perspectives in opposition to each other, I try to draw connections between different theories of the relations between bodies and images, and unpack how certain feminist concerns are approached from different angles in different historical and intellectual contexts. Here then, drawing on insights developed in the both the ‘discursive turn’ and the ‘materialist turn’, I focus on how bodies and images are entangled together as material assemblages (Deleuze 1986/2005) or phenomena (Barad 2007).

I take up three specific and related points that are currently being debated in feminist materialisms: (i) the concept of representation, and more widely, representational thinking; (ii) the concept of causation and an understanding of time as non-linear, intensive and inventive, and; (iii) the understanding of theory as immanent and inventive. These points are explored through the case study of images of transformation. As I will argue, such images, from makeover television to health, exercise and dieting campaigns, are a prevalent part of contemporary popular culture. They proliferate across different mediums and come from commercial, government and third sector settings; indeed, this is part of what makes them worthy of attention. They suggest the possibility of a better future via the transformation of the body: deal with ‘body issues’, ‘lov[e] yourself’ and ‘transform your life’ as the invitation from *How To Look Good Naked* puts it, above. They therefore indicate that transformation is a key cultural theme. The emphasis these images place on transformation is examined in terms of how theories of the material grapple with the worlds they engage with, where change and transformation are seen as key. I then consider how transformation, as Ahmed, Kilby, Lury, McNeil and Skeggs put it in the quotation above, ‘animates feminist praxis’ (2000: 1), and suggest both feminist theory and the relations between images of transformation and bodies might be understood in terms

of non-linear time. The article is therefore concerned with asking: What connections can be made between feminist work on bodies and images developed in different historical and intellectual contexts? What are the resonances between the transformations emphasized in new materialisms and what Ahmed, Kilby, Lury, McNeil and Skeggs describe as the animating of feminism? In what ways might the emphases on invention, transformation, and change in new materialist theories be understood as part of a *feminist* project?

### **Images of transformation**

One field in which the relations between bodies and images has been thoroughly studied is feminist visual culture.<sup>iii</sup> While this work is undoubtedly wide and varied, according to feminist theorists of visual culture, in order to understand how certain kinds of ideal body shapes and sizes come to dominate a particular historical, social and cultural era, it is necessary to track how bodies are depicted in contemporary popular culture.

One of the most prevalent themes within contemporary visual culture is the idea that transformation – of the self and the body – is important and desirable (see Coleman 2012). To provide just a few examples of the UK context, images of transformation are central to a range of commercial and government campaigns and initiatives. The Change4Life government health campaign encourages us on its website ‘to make small changes to eat well, move more, and live longer’ and offers ‘loads of tips and help to make changes for a healthier future’. Images of transformation are also commonly featured in advertisements and promotional materials for getting fit and/or losing weight. The fitness centre chain Fitness First has used the slogan, ‘Be yourself...only better’ and in 2009 released a game for the Nintendo Wii called ‘NewU: Fitness First Personal Trainer. The Slimming World website states, ‘we help you to look good and *feel good about yourself*’. Furthermore, for the last fifteen years or so, prime-time television in the UK has been dominated by what Rachel Moseley (2000) has called a ‘makeover takeover’. Initially concerned with ‘making over’ homes (*Changing Rooms*, BBC, 1996-2004), the genre shifted to focus on people (*What Not to Wear*, BBC, 2001-2007, and *How to Look Good Naked*, Channel 4, 2004-present, as just two examples).

The transformations suggested in these images function via a promise that the future will be better, if certain changes are made to the body: ‘Stick to the rules and you’ll never be stuck for something to wear again’, as the *How To Look Good Naked* website says; ‘Look better for longer by protecting your skin’ as the *10 Years Younger* website puts it; ‘live[...] happily, not exactly ever after, but more ever after than we had done’, as one of the Change4Life television adverts sums up the need for healthy living. The better future is therefore not a distant time, but an experience felt in and as the present. They also indicate that improving the self necessarily involves changing the body. Indeed, they can be seen as an example of what Mike Featherstone (1991) suggests is ‘a new relationship between the body and the self’ (1991: 187) where ‘the inner and outer body become conjoined; the prime purpose of the maintenance of the inner body becomes the enhancement of the appearance of the outer body’ (1991: 171).

As feminist theory has been at pains to point out, the transformation of the body is not neutral, but is a gendered, classed, aged and raced process. For example, makeover television is a ‘spectacle, primarily, of female transformation’ (Deery 2004: 212), and as Jessica Ringrose and Valerie Walkerdine put it, it is ‘working class women [who] are the primary “vessels” of transformation’ (2008: 242; see also McRobbie 2005). Similarly the need or desire to change the body through diet, exercise or cosmetic surgery is felt most keenly by women (Bordo 1993/2003, Throsby 2008, 2009, Orbach 1993), and the Change4Life campaign has been targeted particularly at mothers (Evans, Colls and Hörschelmann 2011). In grouping together these diverse perspectives on the type and prevalence of images of transformation, my intention is not only to show that feminist theory has taken a keen interest in them, but also to begin to establish a relationship between contemporary popular cultural images and a feminist imperative for transformation that I will examine below.

### **Representation, textuality and materiality**

Perhaps the prevailing way in which feminist theory has tracked the relationships between the body and images (of transformation, and also images more generally) has been via the concept of representation. In her assessment of feminist analysis of

media, for example, Ros Gill (2006) argues that representation is a key way in which those who work on and in the media understand how ‘media images relate to individuals’ sense of identity and subjectivity’ (2006: 8). She suggests that the centrality of the concept of representation to feminist media studies emerges with the development of a media culture in the late 1960s where ‘[u]nlike their mothers and grandmothers, second-wave feminists were bombarded daily by representations of womanhood and gender relations in news and magazines, on radio and TV, in film and on billboards’ (2006: 9). Second wave feminists responded to this new problem by criticizing the ‘narrow range of patronizing or demeaning stereotypes through which women were represented’ (2006: 10), which some tied to the lack of representation that women had within the media industry (2006: 9). For example, in a 1977 paper Angela McRobbie argues that through its range of representations, the British magazine aimed at 13-15 year old girls establishes ‘a sameness, a kind of *false* sisterhood, which assumes a common definition of womanhood or girlhood’. Moreover, ‘by at once defining its readership vis-à-vis age, and by describing what is of relevance, to this age group, *Jackie* and women’s magazines in general create a “false totality”. Thus we *all* want to know how to catch a man, lose weight, look our best, or cook well!’ (1977: 3).

In these senses, as Gill argues, ‘representations matter’, and thus ‘feminist analyses of the media have been animated by the desire to understand how images and cultural constructions are connected to patterns of inequality, domination and oppression’ (2006: 7). In terms of the images of transformation that I am interested in here, some feminist analyses see their prevalence as symptomatic of ‘post-feminist media culture’ (Gill 2006, McRobbie 2005, 2008) where, as Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer (2006) put it in a discussion of makeover television, ‘a “celebration” of the body, the pleasure of transformation, and individual empowerment function as a justification for a renewed objectification of female bodies’ (2006: 257). In particular, feminist theories of makeover television critique the representations of appropriate feminine embodiment that they perpetuate, and see them as a form of governing, regulating and disciplining the female body (Walkerdine 2003, Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008, Weber 2009). Of central concern in these accounts, then, is the ways in which the objectification of female bodies in representations has effects on

‘real’ female bodies. Representations are the ways in which images come to *matter*, that is to shape bodies. Representations therefore mediate between idea(l)s in visual culture and ‘real’ bodies; indeed, representations come to construct what it is that we see as ‘real’.

The concept of representation gained considerable currency from the 1970s as part of the discursive turn. For example, a dominant trend within postmodernism and poststructuralism is to attend to how images function as a language. Images are understood to be representational texts; a series of encoded signs, that can be read in order to decode their message(s). Stuart Hall (1997) explains representation as the process whereby meanings come to be successfully exchanged. Images are signs that convey shared meanings. However, for postmodernist theorists such as Hall, representations don’t simply reflect the world, but construct it: ‘we *construct* meaning, using representational systems – concepts and signs’ (1997: 25). Importantly for Hall, according to the constructionist approach to representation:

we must not confuse the *material* world, where things and people exist, and the *symbolic* practices and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate. Constructivists do not deny the existence of the material world. However, it is not the material world which conveys meaning: it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concepts. It is social actors who use the conceptual systems of their culture and the linguistic and other representational systems to construct meaning, to make the world meaningful and to communicate about that world meaningfully to others (1997: 25).

Here, then, images (language) and bodies (material) are conceived as different entities; the material world ‘exists’ but it is language that represents that world to us, that gives us access to it, that makes it meaningful. Bodies are constructed by language.

The idea that bodies are discursively produced has been particularly important for feminist work on the body. For example, Foucault’s influential concept of the docile

body<sup>iv</sup>, which sees '[t]he body [a]s the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas)' (1991: 83), has been elaborated by feminist scholars to dispute the idea of gender being fixed by the biological, and to show how '[o]ur bodies, no less than anything else that is human, are constituted by culture' (Bordo 2003: 142). Examining *visual* culture has formed an important part of this project: images – film, television, advertising, music videos and so on – are seen as powerful scripts that regulate and are inscribed on the body. For example, Susan Bordo argues that the prevalence and circulation of images that show perfected female bodies are 'teaching us what to expect from flesh and blood. Training our perception of what's a defect and what is normal' (2003: xviii) and literally coming to shape and mould the body.

One of the reasons that theorists such as Alaimo and Hekman argue that contemporary interest in the material constitutes a new paradigm of feminist theory is that it re-thinks, contests or moves on from the discursive turn in social, cultural and feminist theory, and as such also re-works the concept of representation. Alaimo and Hekman explain the discursive turn as a result of postmodernism and poststructuralism, where attention is focused on the constitutive role of language. Thus, feminist analyses interrogate the ways in which 'discursive practices constitute the social position of women' and 'define and derogate women' (2010: 1). Alaimo and Hekman argue that postmodernism challenges 'the epistemology of modernism [which was] grounded in objective access to a real/natural world' by seeing 'the real/material [as] entirely constituted by language; what we call the real is a product of language and has its reality only in language' (2010: 2). In this sense, they contend, rather than deconstructing the dichotomy of materiality/language (nature/culture), 'postmoderns have turned to the discursive pole as the exclusive source of the constitution of nature, society, and reality' (2010: 2).

Feminist and quantum physicist Karen Barad (2007) has unpacked the problems with such a focus on discourse, arguing that it privileges 'discursive over material concerns' and 'inadvertently enacts' 'the nature-culture dualism' (2007: 34-35). That is, while concerned with the body and with how representations 'matter', theorists of discourse, often implicitly, prioritize culture over nature. In particular, Barad has



pointed to how representational thinking underpins accounts of matter that privilege discourse. Defining representational thinking as ‘the belief that representations serve a mediating function between knower and known’ and in ‘the power of words to mirror preexisting phenomena’, Barad argues that such a notion of representation ‘displays a deep mistrust of matter, holding it off at a distance, figuring it as passive, immutable and mute’ (2007: 133).

A concern that has been raised with the material turn is that concepts developed in the context of specific scientific practices can be too readily transposed to other contexts, including the social sciences and humanities (see for example Papoulias and Callard 2010). However, given that the concept of representation has been central to understandings of images, it is helpful to unpack the relevance of how the work of the new materialisms discussed in this article trouble representational thinking. As I’ve suggested, one of the objections made by new materialists of the discursive turn is that nature and culture, bodies and images are separated out into distinct entities, and that agency is ascribed only to culture. In their introduction to theories of the new materialisms for example, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (2010) argue ‘materiality is always more than “mere” matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality of difference, that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable’ (2010: 9). Furthermore, in seeing only culture as agentic, a uni-directional relationship is set up between nature and culture, where it is culture that acts on nature. However, if it is the case that matter is active and self-creative, then the relations between bodies and images are not uni-directional.<sup>v</sup> Moreover, bodies and images are not separate entities but are entangled or assembled together.

Indeed, as is now well documented (for example Cheah 1996, Fraser 2002, Colls 2007), Barad develops her problematization of representational thinking via a detailed account of the scientific apparatus through which reality is observed and measured in quantum physics. Drawing on the work of Niels Bohr, and arguing against an understanding of observational and measuring tools as neutral and objective, Barad argues that scientific apparatuses do not reflect reality, nor mediate between matter and scientists, but are in fact an integral part of the reality they seek to understand; the nature of reality depends on the technologies through which that reality is observed

and measured. As she writes, '[a]pparatuses, in Bohr's sense, are not passive observing instruments. On the contrary, they are productive of (and part of) phenomena' (2007: 199).

### **Materiality, intra-action and phenomena**

I will return to Barad's concept of phenomena below. Here I want to consider in more detail how feminists in the discursive turn have theorised bodies and images, nature and culture. As I have made clear, the concept of representation that feminist theorists of visual culture work with is more complex than seeing representations as mirroring a pre-existing reality. It is not that representations are 'passive observing instruments', simply capturing and measuring what is really there. Rather, representations come to matter in particular ways; they come to set the standards of appropriate and desirable femininity, for example. Indeed, in her analysis Bordo offers her definition of how culture acts on matter:

When I use the term *material*, I do not mean it in the Aristotelian sense of *brute* matter, nor do I mean it in the sense of "natural" or "unmediated" (for our bodies are necessarily cultural forms; whatever roles anatomy and biology play, they always interact with culture). I mean what Marx and, later, Foucault had in mind in focusing on the "direct grip" (as opposed to representational influence) that culture has on our bodies, through practices and bodily habits of everyday life (Bordo 2003: 16).

Bordo makes a clear distinction between 'representational influence' and 'the "direct grip" that culture has on our bodies'. Culture 'grips' materiality through how it is enacted in and through bodily practices and habits. Bordo's refusal of 'representational influence' can be seen as echoed in other feminist work on the relations between bodies and images. To touch on just a few examples, Griselda Pollock (1987) has questioned the helpfulness of a conception of representations as that which is somehow separate from reality, and argued that there is 'a common misconception to see images as merely a reflection, good or bad, and compare "bad" images of women (glossy magazine photographs, fashion ads, etc.) to "good" images of women ("realist" photographs, of women working, housewives, older women,

etc.)' (Pollock 1987:41). Her point is that seeing women as 'real' and images as 'representations' is unsustainable, as the distinction between reality and representation cannot hold. Laura Mulvey's (1975) influential theory of the male gaze similarly attempts to examine the 'direct grip' that images have on women's bodies. From a psychoanalytic position, the female spectator of narrative Hollywood cinema does not remain at a distance from the image, but is 'absorbed' into the image (1975: 13). The image is experienced materially.

In many ways then, feminist work developed as part of the cultural or discursive turn has challenged a clear distinction between reality and representation. As such, my suggestion here is twofold. First that Barad's definition of representationalism – which is developed in the context of a discussion of quantum physics – does not seem to map neatly on to feminist work in and of visual culture, where representations do not 'mirror preexisting phenomena' but are at least in part constitutive of them. Second, what these diverse theories of visual culture and representation seem to be interested in and grappling with is the *materiality* of images. How do images 'grip' or become part of the body? How are culture (images) and nature (bodies) intertwined? In these different ways, I would suggest instead that representation indicates a particularly thorny issue for feminist theory that is returned to again and again. Representation is a means of theorizing the ways in which bodies are constituted through images, and to think – in my reading – the materiality of images.

In this sense, Hughes and Lury's account of '*re*-turns' in feminist theory, posited in an article on feminist methodology and the new materialisms, is helpful here:

Rather than the currently ubiquitous narratives of 'turns' with their endless twists, ruptures and sudden encounters, such returns are products of repetition, of coming back to persistent troublings; they are turnings over. In such re-turnings, there is no singular or unified progressive history or approach to discover. Rather, there is the intensity of multi-dimensional trajectories, as concepts are de- and re-contextualised (2013: 787).

Hughes and Lury's conception of 'turnings over' resonates with Barad's account of diffractive reading. Diffraction – a key concept in quantum physics (see Barad 2007: Chapter 2) – is developed by Barad as an approach 'to place the understandings that are generated from different (inter)disciplinary practices in conversation with one another. That is [the] method is to engage aspects of each in *dynamic* relationality to the other' (2007: 92-93, see also Haraway 1997, van der Tuin 2011)<sup>vi</sup>. In both cases there is an attempt to 'read across' approaches and trajectories, to 'com[e] back to persistent troublings'. The relations between bodies and images might therefore be understood as such a troubling, which the concept of representation has sought to address. How then might a new materialist approach to bodies and images not be a break with approaches developed through theories of discourse, but a *turning over* of the problem?

One way to address this question is to return to Barad's concept of phenomena, which refers to something quite specific. Phenomena are 'the *ontological* inseparability of intra-acting components' (2007: 33). That is, phenomena 'do not merely mark the epistemological inseparability of observer and observed' – for example, phenomena do not just refer to how knowledge of an object is only possible through an agency of observation, nor to 'the results of measurements' (2007: 33). Phenomena 'are not mere laboratory creations but basic units of reality' (2007: 33): Barad's argument is concerned with the ontological (as well as the epistemological) nature of reality, and, for her, the 'basic units of reality' are necessarily 'entanglements' of 'intra-acting components' (2007: 33). In other words, it is not so much that representations give us access to the pre-existing material world, but that representations and matter intra-act to produce phenomena. Again, it is important to note here that Barad's term is 'intra-action' rather than 'interaction'. As she suggests, whereas 'interaction assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action' (2007: 33). That phenomena *are* 'intra-actions', then, refers to their necessarily relational nature, where relations do not exist *between* pre-existing things but produce and are part of them.

In the case of the relations between bodies and images, what this suggests is that rather than being separate entities which inter-act (there are relations between these pre-existing things), it is the relations that produce the phenomena that we understand as bodies and images. It is in this sense that I suggest that a new materialist approach to the relations between bodies and images re-returns (to) the ‘direct grip’ of culture on matter that the concept of representation has attended to. What Barad’s concept of the phenomenon suggests is that bodies and images are not separate entities between which there is a mediating relation (or inter-action). Instead, bodies and images are bundled together as a phenomenon, so that it becomes difficult to establish the boundaries between where bodies end and images begin. Bodies and images are a phenomenon; a materiality of entanglements of human and nonhuman, nature and culture.

### **Causation, transformation and non-linear time**

The entanglement of bodies and images as a phenomenon suggests that it is not only that images effect<sup>vii</sup> bodies, but that materiality and culture are both active and work on each other. Conceived in terms of the concepts of phenomena and intra-action, the idea of a uni-directional causal relationship between discourse and materiality is returned. Causation has been a central way in which power has been understood to operate. For example, while the feminist accounts developed as part of the discursive turn complicate ‘representational influence’, power is understood to operate via discourse, constructing the body in certain ways. As such, explicitly or not, the body (nature) is understood as the effect of images (culture, discourse): culture ‘grips’ the body.<sup>viii</sup> Frost (2010) unpacks this model of power, where ‘the agency of bodies and material objects is understood largely as an effect of power – a unidirectional account of agency’ (2010: 71). She suggests that a new materialist framework examines how ‘culture and biology have reciprocal agentive effects upon one another’. The material turn thus ‘relinquish[es] the unidirectional model of causation in which *either* culture *or* biology is determinative and instead [...] adopt[s] a model in which causation is conceived as complex, recursive, and multi-linear’ (2010: 71).

To argue that causation is complex, recursive and multi-linear is not to argue that causation does not exist. Rather, it is to suggest that relationality is not uni-

directional: bodies are not the effect of images; images are not the ‘cause’ of bodies. This is particularly important to note in light of the plethora of criticisms of ‘bad’ media images, that are held accountable for the production of ‘bad’ – unhealthy, unhappy – bodies<sup>ix</sup>. Instead, as I have indicated, it is to see bodies and images as in intra-active relations; culture and materiality have ‘reciprocal agentic effects upon one another’.

The reading of the relations between bodies and images that I am developing here, through the practice of re-turning the problematic of the relations between bodies and images in light of new materialist theories, suggests a mode of immanent thinking. Indeed, in their joint work, for example, Iris van der Tuin and Rick Dolphijn (2010, Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012) posit Manuel De Landa’s work, including *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (2000), as one of the earliest proponents of the new materialism. Making connections between DeLanda’s and Rosi Braidotti’s (2002, 2006) different approaches, van der Tuin and Dolphijn identify immanent thinking and non-linearity as defining features of new materialism. Immanent thinking ‘points at a *generative matter*, which is a concept that does not capture matter-as-opposed-to-signification, but captures *mattering* as simultaneously material and representational’ (van der Tuin and Dolphijn 2010: 155).

Such a mode of immanent thinking is important to the disruption of time as the progression from past to present to future that the notion of causation as complex, recursive and multi-linear puts to work. This idea that time is non-linear, multi-directional – relational rather than causal – is important to understand the relations between bodies and images: as I have suggested, bodies and images are a phenomenon in which both nature and culture have reciprocal effects. Furthermore, the conception of time as non-linear and multi-directional is important to understand images of *transformation* in two ways. First, as I have argued, a linear model of causation would suggest that images *effect* bodies. The idea that images effect bodies is especially significant to an understanding of images of transformation because of their promise of a better future, that is, a linear model of causation would imply that representations of self-transformation result in bodies that plan for the accomplishment of better bodies in the future. Causation is linear in that (i) the body

is effected by images in the present, and (ii) that actions taken in the present unfold into a better future. The present cause produces the future effect. However, one of the key things that images of transformation suggest is that transformation is an ongoing process. Eating and exercise changes must be *for life* in order to be successful, skills must be continually updated, the rules of how to dress must be continued – and indeed are often checked up on in makeover programmes that return to participants to ask, ‘do they *still* know how to look good naked?’. Furthermore, in suggesting that transformation is necessary, images establish the idea that the present is not good enough, and that, through improvements to the body, the future will be better; healthier, happier, longer lasting for example. The future therefore functions as potential, as that which is or might be different from the present.

Crucially, this future as potential is *brought into the present*, so that concerns about what the future might be if the self/body is not transformed are required to be acted on now:

60 active minutes. Just one of the ways to change for life. Search Change4Life or call 0300 123 4567 for your free info pack. Now. (Change4Life 60 Active Minutes television advert).

It’s never too early to get your baby on the right path to a healthy and happy future. Get started now! (Start4Life, Change4Life website, July 2011).

Get FREE recipes, workout tips and more. Find them in our weekly email newsletter. Sign Up Now. (Weight Watchers UK website, July 2011)

These examples suggest, then, that the potential of a different future is part of the present. The futures indicated by images of transformation are not a far-off time, but are felt in the present, as the need to change, transform, *now*. In this sense, images of transformation can be understood as working through an intensive or immanent time, where time doesn’t (only) move from the present to the future, but where the future is experienced in and as the present, as that which must be acted on now. The idea that time is non-linear and multi-directional that is proposed by the new materialisms is

important to consider then because, with images of transformation, time is not that which unfolds uni-directionally, but is multiple, recursive, intensive. The better future is not so much *the effect of* present actions, but *is* the present (see Loewen Walker, this issue).

The second way in which it is important to take seriously the idea that the future is not (only) that which unfolds from actions in the present is in the context of feminism, the ‘espousal’ of which ‘involves a belief in the possibility of a better future’ (Ahmed, Kilby, Lury, McNeil and Skeggs 2000: 6). While this better future cannot only be achieved through looking forward – Ahmed, Kilby, Lury, McNeil and Skeggs note that ‘such a belief requires a questioning of our understanding of history, not only through a questioning of who or what should be the subjects of and for history, but also through a rethinking of how we, as feminists, relate to the past’ (2000: 6) – the underpinning of feminism (along with other minoritarian movements) by a belief in progress has recently been remarked upon. For example, some of the work that sees feminism as today in crisis – in that young women do not identify with the term (Scharf 2012), that postfeminism relies on the idea that feminism has been so successful that it must now be repudiated (McRobbie 2008, Gill 2006) – draws attention to the problem with seeing feminism as a progressive movement: the present may be different from the past, but it might not be better than it. Lisa Adkins (2004) offers a particularly interesting position on the seeming failure or crisis of feminism and argues that it is only possible to imagine feminism as ‘having passed’ if feminism is understood to be a particular way of knowing that depends on ‘teleological and progressive notions of history’ (2004: 427, see also Coleman and Ferreday 2010). The idea of time and causation as non-linear, as intensive and immanent therefore raises questions for the feminist belief in a better future. What happens to the transformative ethos that, as Ahmed, Kilby, Lury, McNeil and Skeggs argue, ‘animates feminist praxis’, if time is not linear and causation does not unfold uni-directionally?

### **Inventive feminist theory**

The argument in new materialisms that matter is generative, changing and agentic has, as I have discussed, led theorists to develop concepts of invention, transformation and creativity in order to account for how the material and cultural intra-act. It has also



involved theorists considering the relationship between theory and the worlds they seek to understand. Coole and Frost describe this trend within new materialism as an ‘antipathy toward oppositional ways of thinking’ (2008: 8), where exponents:

prefer a creative affirmation of a new ontology, a project that is in turn consistent with the productive, inventive capacities they ascribe to materiality itself. The prevailing ethos of new materialist ontology is consequently more positive and constructive than critical or negative: it sees its task as creating new concepts and images of nature that affirm matter’s immanent vitality (2008: 8).

I would sound a note of caution here that creative affirmation of materiality is necessarily positive rather than negative; to ‘affirm matter’s immanent vitality’ is not necessarily to suggest that processes of materialization are ‘positive and constructive’. However, the understanding of concepts as inventive and immanent resonates with Barad’s argument that apparatuses of observation and measurement are necessarily entangled with the worlds they observe and measure. Just as it is not possible to separate out bodies and images into different entities bodies, neither is it possible to separate out theory from the relations between bodies and images that it theorizes. Theory is one of the ‘apparatuses’ through which phenomena are produced. Theory is immanent and inventive.

Many questions arise from such a formulation of theory. For feminist theory, some will certainly require further thinking through whether or not the material turn constitutes a ‘new wave’ of feminism. As I have suggested in this article, one series of questions will involve feminist theory concerning itself with time (see for example, Grosz 2000, Adkins 2004, Coleman 2009); in terms of my focus on the relations between bodies and images of transformation, causation is recursive and time is intensive, as immanent, recursive, non-linear, potentiality. The better future of images of transformation are materialized in and as the present; to draw on Bordo’s argument, through practices that are embodied and lived out. While there is undoubtedly controversy about the claims that the new materialisms make to the new, to transformation and the inventive, perhaps the uncoupling of feminist theory from

linear temporality is a way of seeing feminism not as over and done with but as being done immanently. Such a project is political, I would suggest, not least because it turns over rather than turns away from what troubles feminism. Rather than seeing feminist theory in terms of progress – as the unfolding of linear trajectories that lead to a better future – an understanding of inventive feminist theory would place emphasis on the performativity of our ways of observing, describing and intervening in the worlds we are part of. As Barad puts it, ‘our intra-actions contribute to the differential mattering of the world. [...] We are responsible for the cuts that we help enact not because we do the choosing (neither do we escape responsibility because “we” are “chosen” by them), but because we are an agential part of the material becoming of the universe’ (2007: 178). The politics of inventive feminist theory here is thus understood as ‘an ethics of worlding’ (2007: 392)<sup>x</sup> and my suggestion is that such an inventive practice might be a way of continuing to ensure the animation of feminism’s transformative nature.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This turn is variously characterized as the cultural, discursive or linguistic turn. In this article, I call it the discursive turn because I primarily attend to how feminist Foucauldian work has argued that the body is a discursive construct. It is worth noting the slipperiness of these terms and turns, as it is difficult to unpack the distinctions between them, and the ways in which they turn into a new set of

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theories and approaches. Indeed, below I discuss the notions of ‘returns’ (Hughes and Lury 2013) and of diffraction as a means to trouble the setting up of distinct turns, and/or the notion that turns have linear historical trajectories.

<sup>ii</sup> For a discussion of de Beauvoir’s focus on the transcendence of the immanence of biology through the Deleuzian concept of immanence, see Coleman (2009).

<sup>iii</sup> Such work has come from different disciplinary backgrounds, including media and cultural studies, film studies, art history, sociology and philosophy, has taken as its focus different kinds of images including photographs, fine art, mirror images advertisement, television programmes, and Hollywood cinema, and has developed a range of theoretical approaches, including Marxist feminist, psychoanalytic, textual and empirical. Given the breadth of this field of work, it is difficult to provide references to all of this work. I refer to specific example below, and see also Coleman (2009) for a discussion of some of it.

<sup>iv</sup> It is worth noting here that an alternative reading of Foucault, where materiality is emphasized rather than or as well as discourse, is possible. For example, the concept of bio-power draws attention to the production of materiality as well as its regulation and governance.

<sup>v</sup> It is also not as simple as reversing the relations to suggest that bodies create images – such an argument would place emphasis on individuals to change the images that they produce, when one of the most powerful insights of the discursive turn has been to highlight how the images that dominate visual culture are *cultural* images.

<sup>vi</sup> Interestingly, Barad explains diffraction in contrast to representationalism: ‘[Diffraction] is not a self-referential glance back at oneself. While reflection has been used as a methodological tool by scholars relying on representationalism, there are good reasons to think that diffraction may serve as a productive model for thinking about nonrepresentationalist methodological approaches’ (2007: 88).

<sup>vii</sup> I use the grammatically incorrect ‘effect’ here and below to draw attention to the uni-directionality of a cause and effect relationship between images and bodies. See Coleman (2009).

<sup>viii</sup> Of course, for crucial reasons, theories of power and/as discourse were developed to combat the idea that *biology* determines women’s bodies; this is part of the reason that McNeil cautions against the material turn is that the determinative role of biology remains powerful today.

<sup>ix</sup> For a much more detailed discussion that problematizes this unidirectional relationship between images and bodies from a Deleuzian position, see Coleman (2009).

<sup>x</sup> On worlding as an ethical and political project, see also Haraway 2007 and Suchman 2006.