



**IMMATERIAL MATTERS,  
OR THE UNCONSCIOUS OF MATERIALISM:  
A CONVERSATION WITH  
ELIZABETH GROSZ**

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ABSTRACT

In this conversation, which took place across several months in the year 2021, Elizabeth Grosz describes her position with respect to “new materialism” and “the material turn”: while she emphasizes the necessity of materialist thought in the current situation marked by a global pandemic, she also stresses the equal importance of what she calls “the incorporeal”: an excess in and of matter, materiality’s heterogeneous virtuality, differentiability and becoming-other. Grosz describes the incorporeal as mutually implicated with materiality in a way that eschews both monism and dualism. The conversation roughly follows five topics: 1. How does one conceive of ontology without fixity? 2. How does matter “make sense”? 3. Can we think sexual differences beyond cisgender binarism and oppositional dualism? 4. What are the ethico-political implications of a materialist thought predicated on becoming and immanence? 5. Is psychoanalysis compatible with materialism, and is there a materiality of the unconscious? In the course of this exceptional interview, Grosz discusses the works of Jacques Derrida, Donna Haraway, Sigmund Freud, Luce Irigaray, Karen Barad, Friedrich Nietzsche, and of course Gilles Deleuze, among many others...

Keywords: New Materialism; Covid-19; Feminist Thought; Psychoanalysis; Nietzsche; Deleuze.

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**THOMAS CLÉMENT MERCIER:**

1. How are you doing, Elizabeth? How are you living the current “moment”? How would you say this “moment” speaks to the necessity of a materialist thought—and of a feminist materialist thought in particular—in order to think what is happening “today”?

**ELIZABETH GROSZ:**

I am doing better than most, I suspect. This current moment—the global pandemic that is wreaking havoc everywhere, both economically and biologically—is something none of us have experienced before. Living in isolation, with much of education, industry and production diminished if not stopped, has been very difficult for all of us, though in very different ways, depending on where we live, who we are and the resources to which we have access. Of course materialist thought is significant and worthwhile as a mode of analysis of the medical, cultural and social effects of the pandemic: we need a clear and careful understanding of the globally differential effects of the virus and its governmental and social modes of regulation—the fact that minorities feel the economic and medical effects more, that women are more likely to care for those affected (or stuck at home) and more likely to be economically impoverished, that poorer countries will have larger death tolls and less resources to protect their populations, and that countries led by dictators, populists or want-to-be dictators are faring worse than countries with an engaged and democratic leadership all attest to the significance of materialism, and especially a feminist, anti-racist materialism. But following my work on the incorporeal and the writings of Deleuze, Gilbert Simondon and Raymond Ruyer,<sup>3</sup> we also need to understand the idealist or incorporeal implications of the current “moment” as well as its material consequences: we have been transformed, as individuals and as a species, by a species of being whose total size on Earth is less than one cup! The life of the coronavirus is not reducible to its material forms alone. It is a life that directs itself to its own growth and proliferation, that capitalizes on the biology and life forces of some mammals it infiltrates to grow, reproduce, that responds to its environments, that is itself the center of an order of organization and self-proliferation that we understand only crudely and dimly. This virus, like all viruses, develops itself according to its own parameters and forces: we are

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<sup>3</sup> See *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism* (Grosz 2017).

ourselves the long-term evolutionary effects of first viral and then bacterial forces, which condition and infuse all forms of life on earth. There is a direction, an energetic orientation, to its own ends and “goals”, which challenges and problematizes our own. There is thus both a play of energetic or material forces at work in the pandemic, but there is also, indistinguishably, a play of different aims and interests, ends and goals, viral and mammalian. In this and in all global infections, there is a clash of values and interests, as much as a clash of life-forms that I would classify as incorporeal or extra-material. This makes the pandemic of interest not only sociologically and epidemiologically but also philosophically and in evolutionary terms.

**TCM:**

2. In the introduction to your most recent book, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism* (2017), you write:

With the rise of so-called new materialism, it is perhaps necessary to simultaneously call into being a new idealism, no longer Platonic, Cartesian, or Hegelian in its structure, that refuses to separate materiality from or subordinate it to ideality, resisting any reduction of the qualities and attributes of each to the operations of the other. In what follows I explore the entwinement of ideality and materiality, how each is the implicit condition for the other. As mutually implicated, ideality opens materiality up not just as the collectivity or totality of things but as a cohesive, meaningful world, a universe with a horizon of future possibilities. (13)

Am I right to read in this passage a certain distancing move from what has come to be called “new materialism” (however heterogeneous this assemblage of works and texts might be)? Would you like to explain here the personal and theoretical reasons that justified this move when the book was written? Would you say that *The Incorporeal* denotes an evolution in your work, or on the contrary testifies to a continuity in your thought?

**EG:**

You are right to read this as a small distancing (but not a critique) of the limits of “new materialism”. I have never felt comfortable with the description of “materialist”, largely because most forms of materialism, even “new materialism” and “new feminist materialism” are not so new. I am really only aware of two forms of materialism, reductive materialism which proliferates in analytic philosophy, psychology and economics and affirms that it is only

material forces (the brain, the nervous system, the flow of money and goods, etc.) that are significant or real, even if it also appears that there are non- or extra-material phenomena (such as thoughts, ideas, or even meaningful language, whose material elements do not explain their meaningful operations); and dialectical materialism of the kind developed by Marx, through his critique of Hegelian idealism, where material forces and events transform their meaning, value and effects through the relentless upheaval of the material-structuring logic of the dialectic. I would also not call myself an idealist, which has its clear limits if we concede the materiality of material objects, but I have always looked for forms of knowledge—ideas—which accept that meaning, significance, direction or orientation, are irreducible and often unacknowledged features of and frames for material forces. I would go even further: material objects are themselves composed of and by not only materiality but also by beings that form themselves, atoms, sub-atomic particle-waves-clouds, molecules, and this self-ordering occurs not haphazardly or randomly but according to forms and orders we are only now beginning to understand. I would say that materiality and materialism are of course of direct significance in life and in knowledge; but we can only focus on already organized matter, objects, living beings, where materiality must always already be structured and organized, where its forms and transformations must be viewed as part of its extra-material existence. *The Incorporal* does designate a shift in my work, for I have not explicitly addressed the question (one that was implicit in some of my earlier work) of the ideal or the incorporeal in much detail in my earlier writings. But in retrospect, I can see that my resistance to prevailing forms of materialism, reductive and dialectical, and my fascination with psychoanalysis, and with language, were the ways in which I was committed to a kind of materialism that could somehow accommodate both significance/ meaning and desire/ representation. Neither idealism nor materialism alone are capable of explaining the orders of being and becoming that constitute our world; and given how their relation is defined in mutually exclusive terms in most of the history of philosophy, we need a new set of concepts, and new ways of speaking about their perpetual belonging-together.

**TCM:**

3. I quoted that passage from *The Incorporal* in my previous question because I believe a complex, multilayered approach to materiality is crucial, particularly today as the reference to materialism has become pervasive in certain strands of continental philosophy. Not that there is anything “wrong” with materialism, of course; some of my own work on Derrida, Marx, and

Althusser is very much concerned with the materialist question. But everything hinges on the ways this materialist inflexion is inscribed within the philosophical discourse, in relation to its supposed other (the immaterial, ideality, ideology, language, and so on) and to extra-philosophical discourses of sciences, arts, politics, and so forth. Nevertheless, it seems to me that in recent years the signifiers “matter” and “materialism” have taken on an almost fetishistic significance, an immediate power of evocation and conviction—one that often remains uninterrogated. Any respectable philosopher today begins by presenting themselves as a materialist. This attention to matter is perceived as an unquestionably good thing; it is imbued with positive values: realism, groundedness and commitment to the world, against abstraction, ethereality, idealism, ideological thinking, linguisticism, and so on and so forth.

Your interrogation of materiality through a differential articulation with ideality and the incorporeal contributes to complicating this reading, which is precisely what I had in mind when proposing this thematic issue of *Síntesis. Revista de Filosofía*. As you mentioned in your previous answer, the appeal to matter and materialism—taking the form, today, of new materialism—is not so new. So why do you think it has gained traction over the past decade or so? What did take place in the intellectual field and beyond to justify this renewed interest for the material? And as opposed to what?

**EG:**

This is a very good, and difficult question, and I suspect that others may answer it differently than I will. I think the appeal of materialism, especially so-called new materialism in the last decade or two, was in part a reaction to the political preoccupation of Marxists, feminists, anti-racists and other intellectual activists with the concept of ideology, or the pervasive effectiveness of ideas that represent unspoken political positions. Althusser was among the primary theorists of the quasi-independence of ideas, and especially ideas that represent one’s class interests, from material practices; Derrida too, in quite different ways, argued for the active power of the quasi-autonomy of language itself. Althusser’s distinction between ideology and science, however, made it clear that some discourses, scientific ones such as Marxism and psychoanalysis, for example, aimed to distinguish between the true and the false, the anti-ideological and the ideological. The demise of a politics more oriented to language and representation enabled a more direct and unmediated conception of materialism, “new” materialism, to see itself

as aligned with these political-intellectual struggles. And I don't want to entirely disagree that once science and ideology can no longer be directly separated, or once science is inseparable from ideology in any clear-cut manner, we need epistemologies that are more accessible to different perspectives, to more directly political interests. This has made new materialism more appealing, especially to younger scholars, minorities, and those who felt disillusioned with the failed political promises of heterogeneous alliances made by Marxism, Marxist-feminism and class-race focused politics. New materialism, partly now allied or associated with not only feminism, anti-racism and anti-colonialism, was more influenced by Foucault, and later, by Deleuze and Guattari, and through considerable labor, these works opened out to queer, LGBTI, Indigenous and other minoritarian students and scholars interested in understanding how change is possible. I do not disagree with any of this. What seems to me to be problematic, though, is to identify Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari—and their various philosophical sources (including Althusser and Derrida)—as themselves clear-cut materialists. All these thinkers are interested in and committed to considering, to take one example, the power of language in its various forms to effect political and social actions. This already attenuates any rigid or simplistic materialism, for language is clearly both material and extra-material in ways that remain in contention. When we take language seriously, as we must, then how it informs and transforms material things and practices is difficult if not impossible to separate from these things and practices. I think that new materialism began as a kind of resistance to the reductive materialism of Althusser (and other Marxists of his time), for whom representation, language, “in the last instance” somehow carries the weight of class forces without his specifying how. So new materialism, as opposed to the older “new” materialism of the 1960s and 1970s, is a post-Althusserian new materialism.

**TCM:**

4. My fourth question concerns ontology. In *The Incorporeal*, as in your previous works, you put forward a notion of ontology that is anything but static, essentialist, or substantialist. In the book's conclusion, you explain that your ontology allows to think the material-ideal relation “not through their identity, as monistic reductionism proposes, nor through their binarization, as dualism entails, but in terms of their thorough interplay and accompaniment, their transversal or perpendicular relations” (2017, 251). This ontology involves “a play with an excess of ideality over materiality, and of materiality over ideality” (258); it imbues beings with virtuality and futurity. It is

an ontology of becomings. And you strive to not separate ontology from ethics (through what you call “ontoethics”), in a stunning gesture which you summarize in this important passage—this is a long quotation, but it shows precisely the type of work you perform in order to transform the traditional concept of ontology:

The ontologies and ethics I have explored in this volume would remain external to each other if ontology is understood in its more conventional sense, as an ontology of what is, an ontology of individuated beings. If, however, we follow the Stoics in understanding ontology in terms of “something”, rather than “being”, ontology ceases to direct us only to things and their relations, whether things are understood materially or in conceptual terms, and shows us the processes of becoming, the processes of individuation, that underlie and complicate how being can be understood. If being is, at best, a stage of becoming, or a tendency to which becomings may be directed, a momentary and abstract fixing of what is always changing, then in place of an ontology we must develop an ontogenesis, even an embryogenesis, if we consider primary or true form, an understanding of the processes of coming into being, the processes that engender becomings and ensure that being cannot be identical to itself (over time): a being is always more than itself insofar as it is also the site of becomings without end, becomings that keep it “alive” in whatever sense, that keep a being from remaining the same as itself. (260)

My own work—full disclosure!—is very much influenced by the thought of Jacques Derrida; and, as you certainly know, Derrida was always somewhat suspicious of “ontology”—not to reject it wholesale, of course, but rather to point to a certain excess before and beyond the ontological discourse. To put it schematically, I would say that Derrida was wary of ontology inasmuch as it tends to present itself as a mastering discourse on Being and on the totality of beings. I believe that your work, too, has been influenced by Derrida’s work in several significant ways, directly or more indirectly. At the same time, you seem to me less worried about the philosophical reference to ontology as such. You do something like “philosophy” in a more, let’s say, “innocent” way than Derrida and the scholars influenced by his work do—and here I am of course referring to the influence of Deleuze on your thought, evident in the quotations above and all through your oeuvre.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See also Grosz 1994; 1995; 2004; 2008; 2011.

So, here is my question—and please pardon me if it sounds a little quirky or provocative: Why is it important to maintain a certain ontologizing gesture in your thinking of materiality and of the incorporeal? In the conclusion of *The Incorporeal* you mention that the philosophical genealogy developed in the book is perhaps “idiosyncratic” (249). Would you say that “ontology” as such, the ontological gesture, so to speak, also pertain to your idiosyncrasy? Is it, maybe, your “style”?

**EG:**

You are right that I have been quite strongly influenced by Derrida, and have read and taught his work more than I have published on it directly in recent years. Indeed, I would say that it was his work, along with the very different style and concepts in Foucault, that enabled me to move on to the difficult works of Deleuze, without being able to leave behind the emphasis on language, the power of texts, especially the kinds of institutionalizing texts, documents, official orders and records that Foucault addresses (and Derrida comes to address in his more recent works), texts that initiate and authorize bodily practices. Although he was suspicious of the gesture of ontologizing, Derrida was concerned about the generalized “worlding of the world” by an a priori ontological order—a theological order—even as he recognized the impossibility of not committing to ontological concepts. The phenomenological tradition, from Husserl to Heidegger, is concerned with the order of Being; the ontologies of Deleuze and his predecessors (Spinoza, Nietzsche, Simondon, Ruyer and so on) are concerned instead with becomings, with what changes, orders and transforms beings and their relations. It is a different sense of ontology than either the analytic tradition or the phenomenological tradition. Looking back at my own work, I think I have always had an interest in not so much Being as in becomings, how identities change, how forces transform themselves, how stabilities, when examined very closely, hide a myriad of small transformations or reorganizations that make identities both more fragile and more resilient than they seem at first. Identities are momentary stopping points in processes that are ongoing, not always directly perceptible, and that transform their ingredients through their actions and reactions. There is a growing interest, since the rising popularity of Deleuze’s work, in ontology and ontological questions for at least a decade or more. It seems to have become “fashionable” and more openly addressed, since the rise of new materialisms. I would say that in my work it is more than an ontologizing gesture; I am openly interested in the questions of being and becoming, and increasingly less interested in the epistemological claims about how we know and how we can justify what we know. Ontology



has been in retreat for over a century. The last great ontologist, before Deleuze, was, in my opinion, Henri Bergson, and the attack on his metaphysics as unrigorous, “feminine”, and mystical (led by Bertrand Russell, and in part defining analytic philosophy as a philosophical methodology) foreclosed certain kinds of questions about existence and our place in the universe which again need to be asked, not only philosophical but also ethical and climatological questions. We cannot but ask questions of being, of what is and what can be! Even if we cannot provide definitive answers to many such questions. This is perhaps a quirky answer to a quirky question!

**TCM:**

5. Would you like to say a few more words about the signifying powers of materiality in your thought? How does matter “make sense”, and what does it say about the articulation between ontology and epistemology? Is there a “signifyingness” intrinsic to materiality? How can materialist thought account for questions of language and meaning without folding back into an anthropocentric representation of language, or into a linguisticism? Is this risk avoidable? Should it be avoided, or on the contrary acknowledged?

I would be curious to know how your thinking of matter’s signifyingness relates to, and perhaps differs from, the conceptualization of “material-semiotic” assemblages and practices of worlding in certain contemporary strands of Science and Technology Studies and feminist materialism—notably in the work of Donna J. Haraway, who is also influenced by Deleuze.<sup>5</sup>

**EG:**

I am happy to attempt to talk about this complex and central relation, as I think you are right to suggest that the question of language or signifiability is crucial in thinking about materiality but is commonly only understood as a convenient way to represent already existing objects, relations and processes. Along with Saussure, Derrida and the traditions comprising semiology, I think that we are only able to access material objects and relations because we have the capacity to discern the boundaries of things, even microscopic and macroscopic “things”, and this capacity is given through a language we must already have before we can theorize, conjecture or propose any idea about any thing. The question, one that has been debated for centuries, is what is the nature of language—is it descriptive and propositional

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance Haraway 2008.

(and thus inclined to the possibilities of truth) or is it evocative and poetic (and thus inclined to imagination, expression and the internal operations of the speaking subject)?

What Deleuze brings to this tradition, while firmly remaining outside of it, is his insistence on the force, the effects, of propositions, statements or signs rather than their signifiability, their meaning or reference. In other words, he seems to be interested in what language does, rather than what it means. This tradition you refer to in feminist materialism and STEM studies is now commonly associated with many feminist thinkers, most notably Karen Barad<sup>6</sup> and Donna Haraway, who have both been influenced, in different ways, by French philosophy, but less directly by Deleuze.

I am not sure matter “makes sense” in itself. It has its own sense, which is non-linguistic, but not as a whole. The whole of matter is an aggregation, a collection to which we may give meaning but which has it only *de facto*. How specific parts of matter, objects and their components, make sense requires us learning their “languages” rather than us simply naming them! Otherwise, we simply create a new order of imperialism, the royal naming of the world by us. We need to recognize, as Haraway does in some of her writings, that “objects”, that is, entities that form themselves chemically and biochemically, not to mention other species, do speak in their own “languages”, their own manners of representation: scientists need to “listen” in the languages of their objects, whether these are viruses, chemical and molecular transformations, bacteria, other species. Once we open up language or representation to a broader understanding—wavelengths “speak” or “signify” as do all self-forming objects—we have a more Deleuzian and a less semiological understanding (where the material or signifier is given in itself, and the signified is dynamic) of the ways in which elements in the world, pre- or non-linguistic elements, can nevertheless mean, signify or represent to themselves in ways we do not understand. We need language to understand, but even with human languages, vast parts of the world are “untranslatable” for us! Materiality always leaves an unrepresented residue or excess over its representations. And it is this excess that requires more than an epistemology, more than a reckoning of what and how we know, for it requires an acknowledgement of what we might not know, what the limits of our knowledges are and how they necessarily require an outside, a non- and extra-epistemological space which epistemologies may come to address but may have not adequate means to do so now. Every form of knowledge, given it requires protocols, techniques, procedures and modes of learning and

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<sup>6</sup> See Barad 2007.

transmission, runs behind ontologies, forms of being and becoming, trying and retrying to address them more closely and adequately.

**TCM:**

6. Your materialist thought has always been very attentive to the question of the irreducibility of sexual difference, which you've notably analyzed through readings of Charles Darwin and Luce Irigaray. This question occupies a prominent place in most of your texts and books, from *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994) to *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (2011).

In his recent article "Irreducibility and (Trans) Sexual Difference" (2019), Oli Stephano aimed to "illuminate a tension internal to [your] provocative theory of the irreducibility of sexual difference: while it establishes sexual difference as an ontological force of differentiation, it simultaneously delimits the forms sexual difference can take as fixed and uncrossable". Stephano, using some aspects of your theorization of sexual difference against others, wants to show that "[i]f the power of sexual difference lies in its capacity to generate difference, it need not be constrained to an immobile binary of sexually specific bodies whose morphological possibilities are fixed". In turn, Stephano "argues for the capacity of sexual difference itself to become otherwise than solely cisgender" (141). I was very interested by the questions raised in Stephano's article. What I find particularly interesting is that several strands of transgender studies and transfeminism have felt the need, like you did, to "re-materialize" feminist studies and to reinvest questions of sex, gender, and subjective embodiments through a renewed attention to corporeality, flesh, and materiality. I also have in mind Gayle Salamon's important work on Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray in *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*, for instance (Salamon 2010). Some of this work also draws on your thought, albeit by trying to account for the "tension" described by Stephano in the above quotation. Is it something you would like to discuss in the context of this interview?

**EG:**

I know Oli Stephano's paper and admire his work. I think that the relations between sexual difference, in Irigaray's very particular sense, and sexual identifications, the ways in which one understands one's own sexuality and desires, is an open-ended and complicated one. One can invent, if one has the will, imagination and means, unthought-of sexual identities, desires,

practices and relations. But it is also true, as Stephano notes, that we humans (along with the vast variations in animal species above the level of bacteria) are always and only produced by sexual difference. We come from sexual difference in what I think is an uncontentional claim—we need the gametes of male and female, whatever sex or gender we may come to embody. We may greatly vary how conception occurs—it can occur artificially, accidentally or with effort and intention—but there are no human beings who have ever lived except through sexual difference, the condition of their history and existence, but not a limit on their possibilities for new futures. I do not think that this entails that we must be cisgendered, or come from cisgendered parents. But I do not see how sexual difference can proliferate and reproduce without at least two sexes. What those sexes are or could become is a matter of openness and invention. Sexual difference is not the “immobile binary of sexually specific bodies whose morphological possibilities are fixed” in my understanding. Rather, the fact that there are (at least) two sexes logically precludes the two being a binary relation at all (the binary is always of the form of A and not-A; it is what appears as two but is in reality two versions of the one). From the two comes the many; but without at least two, there cannot be generations, transformation, openness, change. Only difference begets difference, both biologically and culturally.

**TCM:**

7. I appreciate the way you formulate the question of sexual difference as implying “at least two sexes”. It is a reminder that difference is not reducible to mere opposition, contradiction, or duality. In a conversation with Simone Stirner published in 2016, you phrased it thus:

I think, moreover, that feminist and queer theory have worked to dismantle sexual *oppositions*—that is, where the two sexes are considered mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive—not sexual difference, which I understand is the right to define oneself and one’s other according to one’s own terms, not those devised to characterize the “human” (that is, white, Eurocentric, able-bodied masculinity). *Difference is the undoing of opposition.* (29, last emphasis mine)

A common misunderstanding, I believe, is to reduce difference (and in particular the difference mobilized by the notion of sexual difference) to the duality of the two, to a binarism, while thinkers like Deleuze and Derrida (and the authors they inspired) strived to think *différentiation* and *différance*

precisely so as to maintain differential heterogeneity without, however, reducing it to dialectical oppositionality.<sup>7</sup>

The notion of “sexual difference” gets bad press today, for reasons that are perhaps understandable but probably deserve to be analysed. I believe that the way you highlight the importance of sexual difference—and it seems to me that you’re not doing it today exactly in the same way you used to in the 1990s or even in the 2000s, which could explain Stephano’s objections to an extent—testifies to the emphasis you put on heterogeneity, differentiability and, potentially, conflict. Your ontology of becoming also involves differences in intensities, relations between forces, and doesn’t shy away from thinking the conflictuality or antagonism that can always spring from becoming and alterity. I think this could also explain why you read authors—notably Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud—who never ignored the violence, even the cruelty of the world. Am I right to think that these references set you apart from certain strands of new materialism and posthumanism which tend to focus on commonality, connectivity, companionship, symbiosis, harmonious becoming-with and relationality? Are there political implications to your recognizing the differences and, potentially, conflicts that can always arise from the plurality of becomings?

**EG:**

Sexual difference remains, as Irigaray suggests, “the issue of our age” (1993, 5) insofar as it seeps into and co-occupies bodies which express and articulate all other living differences—race, class, gender, ethnicity and so on. You are quite right to suggest that it gets bad press in certain contexts today. But this is because many readers identify “sexual difference” with either sexual “identity” or with sexual orientation and above all, with a sense of fixity or givenness. In fact, however, the concept of sexual difference is never only about identity and it is misunderstood as a commitment to “binarity”, a reading I dispute. And you are right to point out the messy complicatedness of this concept, which has much more to do with future possibility not open to us presently than with what exists and has a fixed identity. There is nothing but conflict, and certain modes of conflict are the conditions of creativity of all kinds. There is no harmonious resolution of the conflictual relations between human subjects, there is no possibility of a mutually beneficial symbiosis with other entities or species. These are romantic fallacies that our wishes and needs as human subjects or as dominant subjects concur with and do not harm other beings, that there is a way out of the violence that

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<sup>7</sup> See Deleuze 1994; Derrida 1982. See also Grosz 2005.

constitutes survival, both biological and economic. But everything has a cost and sexual difference is not only about the acknowledgement of different perspectives and interests but also about the price of engagement and who or what pays it. Difference has yet to be attained; it does not describe the sexes as they currently exist but is the political and ethical promise of the potential to be otherwise, in ways yet to be developed, perhaps in ways that are currently experimental. Sexual difference affirms precisely the right to define oneself in ways one chooses, but it must also acknowledge that from which one comes, a heterogeneity that can never be just one. This may allow us to differentiate between less and more exciting and open possibilities for change—to distinguish between those that repeat patterns and models of the white, heteronormative, bourgeois subject, and those that open up the possibilities for new modes of exploration, subject formation and social engagement.

**TCM:**

8. I would like to gather elements from your responses to questions 5 and 6 to raise a more general question about the place of “the human” in your thought. In your response to question 5, you mentioned a space of untranslatability, an epistemic outside that exceeds human language, knowledge and representability. In your response to question 6, you suggested that the irreducibility of sexual difference relates to our material, human condition as sexed living beings. In the 2016 conversation with Simone Stirner (aptly titled “All Too Human”), you said the following:

So I understand that we wish for a future beyond sexual difference, or at least the diminished forms of difference that patriarchy provides us, but I do not see that resorting to science, technology, and their various techniques will in any way address, let alone overcome, the problem of sexual difference. Given that the question of sexual difference has not been adequately raised by the sciences, and especially the biological sciences, I find it alarming that we must look to (corporate and patriarchal) technologies, especially medical technologies, to find an answer to the problem of sexual difference. What is it about this irreducible difference that is so difficult to accept? Must we become like mushrooms in order not to be women and men? We are not posthuman but all-too-human!! We may wish to move beyond sexual difference, but wishing does not make it so. (28)

While it is obvious that your thought works towards decentring the human, to account for the inhuman and material forces and virtual becomings on which what we call “the human” depends, you are not ready to abandon the human as if we had landed on the “posthuman” continent. You strive to think the situatedness of our epistemic categories and of our material embodiments in such a way that our all-too-human conditions must be taken into account—and here again I see (possibly) the influence of a certain Nietzschean perspectivism, which entails that our finitude and situatedness cannot be simply abstracted away, and that forces and motions can and often do clash. How do you hold together the necessity to decentre the human and that of accounting for our all-too-human conditions? What are the implications for a “more-than-human” ontoethics and politics that would not simply be “posthuman”?

**EG:**

You are quite right to discern that I do not believe that we are (yet) posthuman, and it is likely that we may never move beyond the characteristics that mark the human at the present—witness, for example, the wanton destruction of others and of habitats, the relentless search for wealth and influence, the refusal to acknowledge the needs of others and so on. We must not mistake ourselves for having overcome our own prejudices, for we have not! And you are right to recognize that Nietzsche is never far from my thoughts, especially on the human (but in truth, on almost every topic!). He makes clear that we are both the objects of the will to power, but also, above all, the field in which various wills to power play themselves out. We are already de-centered in the sense that there are many aspects of our being of which we are unaware that exert their influence on our actions—our psychological and species impulses, for example; and in the sense that our consciousness addresses only that which it must and yet there is much that we cannot know and do not control about ourselves.

A more-than-human ontoethics would need an ethics that accommodates not only all the modalities of the human in their engagements with other humans but also the non-human which accompanies and is affected directly by the human: we would need a human that is aware of the price, for other living beings, both present and future, of our current activities. In other words, what the human is currently not, but which is possible with the cultivation of an ethics and politics of universal inclusiveness along with the recognition of the right to invent oneself in new directions, the right, that is, to difference, sexual difference. Without these two lines of force, an All that

includes heterogeneity, and a Self that includes the means for creative self-definition, that can make itself a work of art, we remain stuck within the increasingly depressing global reach of profitability, now marking health, education and the affects of self-affirmation. This question of the price, the cost, to ourselves but above all, to our environments, of our activities needs to be asked with directness and frequency. What a new ontoethics will involve is to be openly developed.

**TCM:**

9. For the next two questions I would like to continue exploring these ethico-political issues by taking them in two different directions. First, I would like to follow the Nietzschean thread of the will to power with a political (or metapolitical) question dealing with materialism's relationship to its own discursivity. My impression is that many authors associated with posthumanism and the current "material turn" tend to overlook the Nietzschean problematic of power and the question "Who speaks?";<sup>8</sup> this might be related to the privilege given to matter over questions of language and discourse. By marginalizing these questions—and, with them, the work of thinkers usually lumped together in the so-called "linguistic turn"—the risk is to ignore their own immersion in discursivity, the very form of their discourse, and the way such discourse is also infused by will to power and conflicts between asymmetric differences. They work with seemingly ahistorical concepts that are meant to designate the thing-in-itself, "matter," with the risk of falling back into idealism—a materialist idealism, so to speak, but an idealism nonetheless—and of being oblivious of historical-cultural differences, problems of language and translation, material determinations, power relations involving a multitude of human and other-than-human forces. They use concepts such as "matter", "movement", "immanence", "production", "plasticity", "relationality", "symbiosis", and so on, as if these concepts didn't have a history marred by conflict, unrest, and power, and as if one could ignore their cultural-linguistic and material inscription in contexts driven by the exploitation of categories of population and being, both human and non-human.

In recent years, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson—notably in *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World* (2020)—has argued that certain uses of new materialist concepts, as long as they are construed as ontological givens or a priori, can result in downplaying the long history of violence and economic inequalities, racial, gender and sexual oppression, slavery and antiblackness, conditioning the determinations of what we call "matter."

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<sup>8</sup> See Nietzsche (1968, 157); and Foucault (1989, 333).



Jackson's point is not that new materialist concepts should simply be abandoned—many of her concepts, such as plasticization and symbiosis, still reflect a materialist sensibility after her critical reformulation—but that they should be reworked through feminist, queer, and critical race theories in order to uncover what made them possible in the first place, their historico-material conditions of possibility.

How do you situate yourself with respect to these questions? Don't you detect the risk of a certain philosophical "conservatism"—a risk which comes from ignoring the Nietzschean question "Who/what speaks?"—in much new materialism's claim to have gone beyond the "linguistic turn," or beyond the human? Can this risk be avoided? Aren't there specific limitations to new materialism's marginalization of language and critical discourse analysis, especially when it comes to problematizing the form of its own discourse, its own historical-cultural and material inscription, as well as the political and anthropological provenance of its language and conceptuality? Conversely, can contemporary materialisms contribute to transforming the question "Who/what speaks?," and help us think otherwise the inscription of discourse in the field of forces and wills to power? How can the materialist discourse speak to its own material-discursive positionality, notably with respect to the intersection of race, gender, capital? What sort of answers does your non-dualist thinking of materiality-incorporeality bring to this difficult problem?

**EG:**

Of course, there is no real or clear answer to this question. But I completely agree that the question of language is central both to politics and to the limits of materialism. And the question "who speaks and of and to whom" is central to a nuanced sense of politics, where our questions and answers are complicated by contexts and conflicts. What constitutes this "who" who speaks is the most complicated of questions because it relies on and is to a large extent created by precisely our relations to objects, to animals, to others of different kinds—the very differences and distinctions that surround and conceptually enable racist, sexist, homophobic and xenophobic relations, but which are the field on which we speak and become ourselves. Jackson's work has revealed the tenuous limits of an abstract, disembodied post-modernism.

Nietzsche is, as always, a figure who does not fit in well with prevailing discourses, or identities, and is a necessary reminder of the cost of discourse,

the price of truth, the multiplicity of truths, their perspectivism and the relevance of knowledges to how we live our lives. I agree too that some or perhaps even much of new materialism has ignored or diminished the relevance of language, as if it too were simply material without at the same time being immaterial. This washing away of the dynamic historical and inherently political content and context for self-formation in some of the “new” materialists makes it less a new materialism than reiterations of “old” materialism, either dialectical or reductionist.

What language, if we understand it metalinguistically, ensures is that every material utterance, insofar as it is meaningful, must also contain a significance, meaning or ideal element. Language is not composed only of matter, but is materialism’s excess, its capacity (a fundamental one even before human language) to mean and be otherwise. The universalism of some of the new materialists must be problematized to the extent that there are no universal identities, practices or forms of human existence (and perhaps animal existence) and the inherence of significance or value in human relations is historically, culturally and geographically specific and constructed through often heinous and wantonly destructive acts. This ensures that there are not universal or pregiven signs, identities or social practices, only the histories of previous practices, previously bodily forces, and their capacity to be refigured, transformed, struggled for or against. We cannot but be materialists; but equally, we cannot afford to be reductionist materialists, for materialism must be able to adequately address specific questions about the meaning of matter even more than matter itself, the resonances of matter in its particular configurations for this species or that, for this historical location or that, for this geographical location or that. Such meaning is not to be limited to human language but clearly also constitutes the lived worlds of all species, which seek signs or representations of the things they need or require. Feminism, queer theory, critical race theory, multicultural theory, as well as theories of class and ethnicity are crucial to amplifying the right to explore the relevance and necessity of our relations to the material and natural world and each other. Without their insistent reminder that there cannot be one perspective or one set of truths, we remain in the intellectual thrall of the very traditions that have profited from and continue to proliferate white Eurocentric masculinism.

**TCM:**

10. I would now like to raise the question of the ethico-political from the perspective of immanence. Immanence remains for me a difficult, rather enigmatic notion. How can the focus on immanence claimed by most contemporary materialisms be translated into an ethics or a politics of the “should” and “should not”—without reclaiming a discourse of transcendence, or a politics of representation? My sentiment is that many contemporary theories that present themselves as immanentist are somewhat embarrassed by this problem. To take an example, Bruno Latour, as he discusses immanence and the conditions of a radical empiricism, is led to make the “distinction between good and bad transcendence” (2013, 162). While “bad transcendence” leaves experience behind in search of more solid and more permanent foundations, “good transcendence” would account for immanent discontinuities in and of experience itself, discontinuities that make up immanence’s fundamental continuity. And he adds: “[Good transcendence] is still transcendence, of course, since there is a leap, but it is a *small* transcendence. In short, a very strange form of immanence, since it does have to pass through a leap, a hiatus, to obtain its continuity—we could almost say a ‘*trans-descendence*’, to signal effectively that far from leaving the situation, this form of transcendence deepens its meaning; it is the only way to prolong the trajectory” (162). Later in the book, Latour adds that “bad transcendence” is what leads to “moralism” (462). I understand Latour’s salutary warning against moralism; but isn’t there a risk that a certain moralism be reinstated through the distinction between “good” and “bad” transcendence?

What is your take on the question of moralism? You’ve started answering this question by raising the issues of cost and the price of engagement that come with your thinking of futural becomings and virtuality—and, here again, it seems to me that the notion that there is nothing but difference and conflict, even a potentially creative conflict, is something that sets you apart from someone like Latour, for instance, by challenging the idea there could be inherently “good” forms of continuity, trajectory, or connectivity; but I would love to hear more about how the problem of immanence factors in your ongoing search for an ontoethics, one that would not simply be a moralism of “good” versus “bad.”

**EG:**

I don't know Latour's work very well so I will resist commenting on him. But the question of moralism is, for me, immensely problematic. It holds no force, it states an opinion. An ontoethics is never a question of "good" or "bad", because the universe, what we ontologize about, is itself and is—without the overview of a human-built theology—indifferent to us even as we form a part, a smaller part than we commonly imagine, of the real, the world, or what is. There aren't "good" or "bad" forms of connectivity or continuity, just lines which affect us in different ways depending on our position(s) and our nature(s). These may be good or bad, useful or not, to us, but this is an opinion and not what is inherent in the real. Now, to be clear about the limits of an ontoethics—it cannot definitively say "this is bad (or good)" of any action or event at the time of its occurrence, but it must, in order to be ontological, seek out the ramifying consequences and effects of acts and claims. It cannot even directly say these ramifying effects are good or bad. Perhaps this is one of the differences between an ethics and a morality—an ethics provides limits while a morality provides norms and values?

**TCM:**

11. Very early in this interview you mentioned your "fascination with psychoanalysis" as one of the reasons why you resisted conventional representations of materialism. Your interest in psychoanalysis could hardly be overstated. From your very first works, starting with your PhD thesis, psychoanalytic authors and notions have been crucial to your thought, and pervasive to your corpus.<sup>9</sup> Since we're here to discuss matter, materiality, and materialism, I want to ask you about your understanding of the articulation between psychoanalysis and materialism—a relationship I find enigmatic, ambivalent, truly captivating. In a way, Freud's scientific method and his frequent reference to "material reality", his personal beliefs, and more generally the philosophical and ideological bedrock on which psychoanalysis was founded can arguably be said to be compatible with some of the principal tenets of materialism. However, Freud never ceased to describe the importance of a series of notions, phenomena, and levels of reality that seem to straddle and perhaps exceed the opposition between the material and the immaterial: desire, dreams, the drives, the unconscious, the phantasm, the *Unheimlich*, but also seduction, castration, fetishes and sexual difference,

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<sup>9</sup> See for example Grosz 1989; 1990; 1994; 1995; 2011.

and everything Freud describes as “psychic reality” (*psychische Realität*). Although Freud usually ends up maintaining a more or less clear distinction between “psychic reality” and what he calls “material reality”, he does so by emphasizing that “psychic reality” possesses a cohesion and a resistance that compares to “material reality”. What’s more, in virtually all his writings, Freud stresses the undeniable power of influence and the materializing force of this supposedly immaterial reality, “psychic reality”, and demonstrates that its scope and effects are often difficult to circumscribe—to the extent that “psychic reality” often seems to contaminate and overflow materiality, thus blurring the limit between material and psychic realities, and making the last instance of “material reality” hard to strictly identify or locate in all rigor. In fact, many authors have tried to show that the problematic of “psychic” versus “material” reality in Freud’s writings entailed many other difficulties or contradictions which, far from being hindrances, could be interpreted as productive avenues for psychoanalytic or post-psychoanalytic research.

It seems to me that the differential representation of reality (or realities) offered by psychoanalysis could provide many an argument to support your reflections on the complex interplay between the material and the immaterial in *The Incorporeal*. However, and maybe surprisingly, the book doesn’t include chapters on the psychoanalytic authors you are so familiar with—starting with Freud, Lacan, and Irigaray. Is there a reason for that? Would you like to clarify how psychoanalytic notions could factor in your thinking of incorporeality, virtuality and becoming in relation to matter and materiality?

One reason why I wanted to ask this question is that I’ve been somewhat struck by a certain lack of engagement with psychoanalytic authors in many contemporary works associated with the “material turn”—as if the great questions raised by psychoanalysis, questions of interpretation, of metaphor and metonymy, of phantasm and fictionality, of desire and the unconscious, the economy of the drives, sexuality and repression, otherness and *Unheimlichkeit*, violence and cruelty, and so on, were considered things of the past, even in those apparently progressive circles of continental philosophy. And when these notions are discussed, it is often to operate a certain “re-materialization”—indexed on a positivist epistemology inherited from techno-scientific discourses, or from a Eurocentric representation of animism inherited from Western anthropology—which attempts to do away with the ambiguities of psychoanalytic questions as to what really “matters.”

Would you say that there is a certain erasure of psychoanalytic questions in the current “material turn”? Is it because these questions seem to at

least complicate a certain positivist tendency in new materialism, its commitment to “realism” through the identification of something like matter or materiality in the last instance? Is there room in materialism for the immaterial? And what of the other(s) of matter—that which, perhaps, doesn’t ever seem to really matter?

**EG:**

You are right that psychoanalysis, and particularly Freud (and to a lesser extent Lacan) have been central to my work for the whole of my intellectual career. I began with Freud and Lacan, and I remain fully committed to Freud’s understanding of psychical functioning and its intimate relation with material or bodily forces such as drives, instincts, impulses and actions. And while my fascination with Lacan has waned, I remain fully indebted to his work on the language of the unconscious or “the unconscious structured like a language”, which led me to the history of semiotics, from Saussure, through the Russian Formalists (Bahktin/ Volosinov) the Prague School (Roman Jakobson), the Copenhagen School of Linguistics (Louis Hjelmslev), American pragmatism (C.S. Peirce, William James) to French semiotics (Roland Barthes, Claude Levi-Strauss, Derrida and perhaps even Foucault). Lacan’s insistence on the irreducibility of language made a lot of sense to me, and directed me to a more careful understanding of language by looking, as an outsider, at the history of twentieth century linguistics. Without this influence, I don’t see how I could have understood the power of language and its capacity to reveal, while hiding, the irreducible possibilities of signification.

While I agree that Freud could have readily been included in an ontoethics, with limited time and space, I felt that I had already written enough about psychoanalysis. Similarly, although most of my writing owes a great intellectual debt to the works of Luce Irigaray, I did not directly refer to her work in the book either. But both Freud and Irigaray—or maybe it was Irigaray’s Freud—were always in the background of that book (and all my work), pushing me to see the unconscious of materialism itself, its “repression” of its own incorporeal conditions and frame. I had the option of more psychoanalysis or providing something of an introduction to Gilbert Simondon and Raymond Ruyer for an English-speaking audience, and for this project, these two were difficult for me to resist!

There is a certain erasure, or at least a placing of psychoanalysis in the shadows, in some or perhaps much of new materialism, I suspect, not because of what Freud says, but because he is the author who represented or

emblemized a certain political moment (the rise of second wave feminism and the emergence of gay and lesbian politics, the writings that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s) that new materialism—at least the new materialism which does not really address feminism, race or class—wants to supersede or mark as that which it overcomes, that is, to mark its own timeliness in the present. That much of new materialism marks itself as “realist” seems to me to be the reduction, one more time, of ontology to epistemology. I do not see why the material world must be self-subsistent and self-contained. Indeed, it makes no sense that there is nothing but matter. It is materialism, the theory of a world of only matter, that lacks a social and political purpose, that requires a direction, an orientation (or many), aims and ends that only an account of the immaterial or the incorporeal can address. The incorporeal frame, the possibilities of sense within the world, the multiple modes of making sense—from the emission of particles, to the marking of territory, to the elaborations and differentiation of numerous languages—add a richness to the world, add to it the possibility of its being otherwise, the necessity of change, forms of unpredictability and openness that a rigidly materialist ontology cannot explain without reductionism. We live in a universe of sense, of excessive sense, where the meaning of things, even things we already know, is already there, and yet also remains open to the future, and where these senses are capable of transforming how events occur, who they effect and what future they bring.

**TCM:**

12. You’ve just mentioned the futurity of events and, as this interview comes to an end, I would like to reflect on the time we’ve spent together—virtually, but in actuality—and look to the future. We started this conversation in May 2021. It is now October. These past months—marked by stupor and grief, material-semiotic uncertainties, institutional restrictions brought about by a pandemic that exhibited our common fragility while highlighting a multitude of intersectional inequalities on local and global scales—have taken me from Paris to Santiago, where I am writing this last question. In the meantime, many of us have lost close ones. In 2000 already, Jean-Luc Nancy was asking: “Why me? Why survive, generally speaking? What does it mean ‘to survive’?” (2002, 5)

How does one work, think, write under these circumstances? What have you been working on during the time we’ve shared? What are your current projects, and do you think your work—in both its form and content—has been affected by ongoing events?

**EG:**

OK, this is a question I do not know how to answer. It is difficult, sometimes even impossible, to think philosophically, or abstractly, in times of real crisis, where people we know are sick and dying, where we are now immersed in a plague, not unique but unseen in living memory, where public life has transformed itself into mediatized form and social interactions remain highly restricted. Each of us has, no doubt in different degrees, suffered from isolation, a striking change of context and meaning, and the creation—and loss—of the habits of our everyday lives. I have worked, much more slowly and without the same impetus as usual, on Ruyer's work in more detail. Ironically, his and Simondon's writings have been strikingly prescient of the emergence of life from what we usually characterize as non-life, through viral and bacterial forms, from which all terrestrial life forms have evolved and which they include in their biology. For me, trying to understand a little of viral life—from a philosophical perspective rather than a scientific one—has been helpful in surviving the present moment. I suspect that the pandemic will have a profound and disrupting effect on the intellectual production of many scholars and activists: when this crisis passes, things will not be the same as before. I hope this hiatus will produce new thinking about subjectivity (in all its variations and possibilities) and about our relations to nature and with other forms of life. It will also entail ensuring our governments address the crisis of climate change, and above all, our finding new ways to live collectively and with other species, for our mutual benefit. From the temporary suspension of social life may come a new awareness of our indebtedness to the world and our responsibility to ensure it remains an open resource for all the generations that follow. This is perhaps optimistic, but at this moment of suspension, when the proliferation of the virus remains relatively uncontained, we may have all begun, in different ways, to imagine better social arrangements for our lives. We will see...

**TCM:**

Thank you very much, Elizabeth, for this time we've shared.



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