

New Materialism and Women:
An investigation into identity with
diffractive reading

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Abstract

This master's thesis investigates the concept of identity through a framework of new materialism, asking the question: how does a new materialist framework affect the conceptualization of women's bodies (and beyond)? Based on a personal interest in women's identities, this thesis pursues a post-anthropocentric conceptualization of identity in the context of new materialism, motivated by an exploration into alternative conceptualizations of identity. New materialism in general is a concept that considers ontology and epistemology as already inseparable, implying that ways of knowing and ways of being are entangled and affecting each other. Karen Barad's interpretation of new materialism is adopted throughout this investigation, with a particular focus on agential realism and how boundaries are broken down and created, in order to confront dualistic ideas of identity, such as human/animal, mind/body, or man/woman. As such, this thesis is able to experiment with a post-anthropocentric identity that consists of fluid boundaries, which takes into consideration the agency of matter and the role discursive practices have, in relation to new materialism.

The data is based on field notes and observations deriving from meetings with radical feminist women, as well as embroidery through an arts based research process. The data is then analyzed using diffractive reading, which is a method connected to new materialism. Diffractive reading entails a reading and interpretation of different texts through each other, focusing on an entangled dialogue between them, as well as the collected data. In this case, the texts that will be diffractively read are sections from *Meeting the Universe Halfway* by Barad (2007) and *Material Feminisms* by Alaimo and Hekman (2008). As this method is relatively new and there are no concrete structures (as should be expected, from a method based on new materialism), this thesis also serves as an experimentation and demonstration of diffractive reading.

The results of this investigation into identity reveal a way of being and knowing ourselves that goes beyond limiting constructs, such as the identities human, woman, and lesbian. With a new materialist framework, these identities become fluid boundaries that are temporarily constructed through material-discursive practices. That is, a new materialist post-anthropocentric identity in this context does not necessarily limit itself to dualistic ideas of identities, broadening the horizon and including non-human identities.

Keywords New materialism, diffractive reading, women

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Figure 1. Vulvae. Embroidery on fabric, 2017.

Chapter 1: Introduction

“It was so great to meet you and talk to you, I feel like I’m not crazy in my thoughts. It’s so nice to be able to speak freely with someone like this.”

For most of 2017, I have heard this sentence and different versions of it spoken by women around me, as well as spoken by myself. The reason why this sentiment has been prominent recently is that I have been getting together with women in my life, mainly feminist women, meet in a space where we can discuss any pertinent issues we feel need highlighting. These women are a mix of friends and acquaintances I have made throughout the years, as well as women I have met in online spaces. The latter group came about thanks to our common interest in radical feminism and women’s issues, particularly because we had all experienced some form of censorship in other spaces – both online and offline. We noted often how volatile many topics had become, especially those related to feminism, and the way we had each developed a tendency to protect ourselves in public spheres. The most common way we tend to do that is through self-policing our words and what issues we openly defend or oppose. One phenomena we took particular notice of is the fact that any criticism regarding some current issues in feminism, such as the sex/gender dichotomy, could risk reactions akin to online witch hunting and becoming a social outcast. It is through this common experience we each had separately that we came to find each other and found comfort we had not seen in many other spaces similar to the one we made.

Out of what I think is an instinctive human desire to seek out social contact and touch, we naturally began to look for meetings with each other, outside of our online spaces. These meetings ranged from two people to ten people approximately, and they happened in public spaces such as cafés, or at one of the women’s homes. It was by

hosting and attending the meetings that I became more curious about the change that was coming about within me starting from the outside – starting from the physical connection with these women. The topics we took up during the meetings were not any different from those we wrote about in online spaces, but the presence of our material bodies in a material space with all of the sensory elements that come with it seemed to affect the dialogue and myself. The most distinct element that I can identify is the fact that having a meeting face-to-face can bring about some sense of security that what we talk about has a lower risk of potentially being used against us. I asked some of the women I had met online or offline what their thoughts were on the differences between these kinds of meetings and how they felt specifically in the physical meetings. One of them reflects my own thoughts as she said:

When I meet radical feminists IRL [In Real Life] I definitely speak more freely and there are entire topics that I only talk about IRL. Because everything you write on the internet can be stored, spread around, and read decades later, you have no control over it.¹ (Madde, personal communication, 19 November 2017)

I have made several references to the way I and the other women in the group feel, and I acknowledge the subjectivity inherent in these observations, but they are nonetheless felt, and still worth mentioning as having been the biggest driving factor in bringing us together. Furthermore, while it is still a subjective interpretation, I believe the fact that each of us experienced similar moments of censorship or other threats of exclusion is a phenomenon worth looking into, or at the very least mentioning. Considering these moments and my own observations of the characteristics that follows them – namely, a similar experience among women – I believe there is an underlying phenomenon that is

¹ Own translation from Swedish. Original text: ”När jag träffar radfems IRL pratar jag definitivt friare och det finns hela ämnesområden som jag bara pratar om IRL. Därför att allt man skriver på internet kan lagras, spridas och läsas årtionden senare, man har ingen kontroll över det.”

worth exploring when it comes to the in-person meetings, specifically in the way that the material is brought into the limelight in a manner that online dialogue does not normally allow.

It is then through my interest in the relationship between the material and the discourse, that guides this investigation. It aims to focus on how discourse affects materiality and vice-versa within the context of specific meetings with and amongst women. In other words, I am interested in exploring this dialogue between the discursive and materiality – language, our meaty existence, and objects. That isn't to say that it is only language and discourse that reflects or projects onto us as meaty beings but it is also the material that mirrors and affects language and discourse. In this sense, I am using the following research question to guide my investigation: How does a new materialist framework affect the conceptualization of women's bodies (and beyond)?

This thesis uses diffractive reading to explore the intersection between new materialism with the collected data – field notes taken from conversations with the groups of women I meet. The thesis will follow my discovery of, as well as an inquiry into, new materialism and how it resonates (or falls short) with me, with the aid of the conversations as well as my personal artistic exploration in embroidery. The reason why I have chosen to explore this topic with the framework of new materialism is folded between my motivations as a woman and as a researcher. Living my life as this body and performing as a woman has allowed for this possibility to explore the material-discursive aspect of being woman, of having these identities. It has led me to want to explore what kind of possibilities exist within these encounters, and what can be discovered specifically when looking into the conjunction of the material and the discursive in the context of women's bodies and identities.

To look into this from a new materialist perspective is to attempt to find alternative ways of being, speaking, and listening within the context of women's groups. This particular mix of materialism with women's bodies also leads to a combination of "critique with creativity [...] that does not stop at critical deconstruction but moves on to the active production of alternatives" (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 22). Critical deconstruction here comes from the idea developed by Derrida and the connection between text and meaning. The concept is an attempt at examining the inherent complex and unstable meanings within the object of language. One example is within feminist circles where there are attempts at examining the discursive opposition between 'man' and 'woman'. To use new materialism in this way is to use critique beyond the deconstruction or dismissal of one argument for another. By attempting to go beyond critical deconstruction as a method, the wall of ideological purity, and the finger pointing it tends to manifest, it may allow discourse to move forward towards those alternative practices. One option that forces one to make an effort beyond critique is diffractive reading, as theorized by Haraway (1997):

Diffraction patterns record the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference. Diffraction is about heterogenous history, not about originals. Unlike reflections, diffractions do not displace the same elsewhere, in more or less distorted form, thereby giving rise to industries of metaphysics. Rather, diffraction can be a metaphor for another kind of critical consciousness. (Haraway, 1997, p. 273)

Taking into account what Haraway wrote regarding diffractive thinking, for Geerts and van der Tuin (2016) it is a practice of interacting with texts and applying critique where "diffractively engaging with texts and intellectual traditions means that they are dialogically read 'through one another' to engender creative, and unexpected outcome" (para. 4). This method is useful in bringing various texts together and considering them as they are, while also considering their differences and what differences they make. In this

way, instead of clashing and comparing these texts and theories against each other, it is possible to respect and acknowledge “the contextual and theoretical differences between the readings in question” (Geerts & van der Tuin, 2016, para. 4). It is what I feel to be an innovative practice in analysis that can lead to interesting and creative alternatives to ways of thinking and acting not only within feminism but in an interdisciplinary mode. The use of diffractive reading on new materialism with the collected data is to make an effort not only to look at what we have, what has come before us, and question it but also to look into the future and imagine what could or should come next. It is “being suggestive, creative and visionary” (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 50).

Taking this into consideration, new materialism seems to be able to provide the missing piece apparent in discussions and practices that prioritize language and discourse by bringing back into focus the topic of the body, or rather, of materiality on the same level as language. Examples of these moments will be discussed in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*. New materialism highlights the body as human and non-human, the body and its sensory experiences, and the way it undeniably affects and reflects onto our discursive practices. Not only does new materialism bring the material into focus but it also takes into consideration the potential agency that the material, in particular bodies, contain and utilize. It is an agency that, according to new materialists, does not depend on our intentionality as human. As stated by Frost (2011) these theorists “conceive of matter or the body as having a peculiar and distinctive kind of agency, one that is neither a direct nor an incidental outgrowth of human intentionality but rather one with its own impetus and trajectory.” (p. 70).

Agency is the capacity or condition to act independently, to have power to exert. In the context of new materialism, the essence of the meaning of agency is the potential to act and be acted upon. New materialists also attempt to take this concept further, by removing

the anthropocentric lens on agency. That is, taking the human body and its intent out of the center of the potential to act. In the words of Frost (2011), “new materialists, then, explore how the forces of matter and the processes of organic life contribute to the play of power or provide elements or modes of resistance to it” (p. 70). It is an examination not only of the push and pull that humans and our bodies exert upon the world (material and otherwise), but how other organisms and materiality use their agency and how they are “continually doing things that bear on us” (Hekman, 2008, p. 93). As such, to consider materiality and its concept of agency outside of the realm of being merely a human attribute, allows the conversation to get its claws into the dirt of material and discourse. It might allow for an opportunity to look into what it is about the physical meetings with other women that piques my interest.

The concept of agency as something inherent to all material, not just dependent on the human body and its capacity for reason, which adds a new element when thinking about society and everything that surrounds us. New materialism looks for the ways that agency can be found within different kinds of material and the affects that agency has on other materials. In this sense, I have considered it important to include an additional material element to this investigation, namely embroidery as an arts-based research process. As this thesis bases itself on a theory that considers the dialogue between discursive practices and materiality, the investigation itself should reflect that dialogue as well. Including embroidery as a material research process seems to be a natural fit, considering the nature of the theory and the investigation. It is using the creative process as a strategy to reflect upon new information and as a way to investigate the intersection between material and discourse. The act of embroidering within this context also brings a reflection on the practice as it connects to women – historically and on a personal level. Historically, as the act of working with crafts has mainly been linked to women since the

Stone Age (Barber, 1995) and personally as it is a craft used by both matriarchs in my family. Embroidery and the act of threading a needle through fabric to create an image has had a viscerally material effect on myself that has made it difficult to unravel where my thoughts end and the thread begins. Considering the topic of this thesis and the focus group being women and their experiences, embroidery has become the natural addition to the research data as part of the process.

With this theoretical basis for this thesis and my interest in the field of new materialism and feminism, the problem I focus on takes shape within these spaces mentioned earlier – the spaces created by myself and other women coming together in embodied dialogue. By intersecting the data collected from these moments with new materialist theory it can open up some insight into examining how agency plays a role within materiality and discourse. Additionally, there is the potential for looking into options for practical aspects in applying new materialist theory. The use of embroidery as a form of exploring knowledge may be one option, for example. This will be explored further in *Chapter 4: Difference, diffraction, discussion*, as I feel there is an opportunity within new materialism – a heavily theoretical concept – to explore inquiries using arts based research, particularly when taking into consideration the priority given towards highlighting both the material and the discursive, such as in feminist thought. New materialists seem to push for the next step within feminist analysis as a change regarding how agency is seen in bodies and material objects: a change that moves from power being exerted upon bodies and material objects to a place where these elements hold their own agency that can be exerted outwardly. This change is a move from viewing causation in a dichotomy with an either/or aspect to it – such as, *either* we are shaped by culture *or* we are shaped by nature, towards looking at causation as intricate. According to Frost (2011):

[F]eminists will have to retool their theories of explanation and political critique so that they encompass both an awareness of the ways in which power is discursively naturalized and an appreciation of the distinctive and effective agency of organisms, ecosystems, and matter. (p. 71)

I agree with this sentiment as the next step forward within feminism (or beyond feminism?) may be a step towards a non-anthropocentric analysis of bodies, materiality, and their inherent agency – outside of that which humans may or may not infuse them with. It can be called a form of deterritorialization² of the idea of agency, of humans, of objects: considering agency as something that does not require a human mind to activate it, humans as a part of the natural world and objects that not only are affected by us, but can affect us in turn. In the words of Dolphijn and van der Tuin (2012), “[m]atter is a transformative force *in itself*, which, in its ongoing change, will not allow any representation to take root” (p. 107). By exposing the vulnerable underbelly of constructed representations we are given and apply to ourselves – such as ‘woman’, ‘white’, or ‘lesbian’ – new materialism shows the unstable aspect of that. To question these representations and explore what there may be beyond them or without them is, in my view, a possible new element to be further explored.

As stated earlier, I believe that this research will fill a gap that I have identified as being a lack of focus on the importance of both discourse and the material within discourse around women and identity. Not only do I feel there has been a lack of focus but also a lack of practical application of these theories that could evolve towards something different. The goal of this thesis is, again, to experiment with diffractive reading and new materialism in the context of discourse with the body, the material. These issues will be

² De-territorialization is a concept developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their book *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972). It can be defined as the decontextualization (which is sometimes followed by a recontextualization) of something – taking something from its original context and re-situating it somewhere new, where it can create new meaning, new functions.

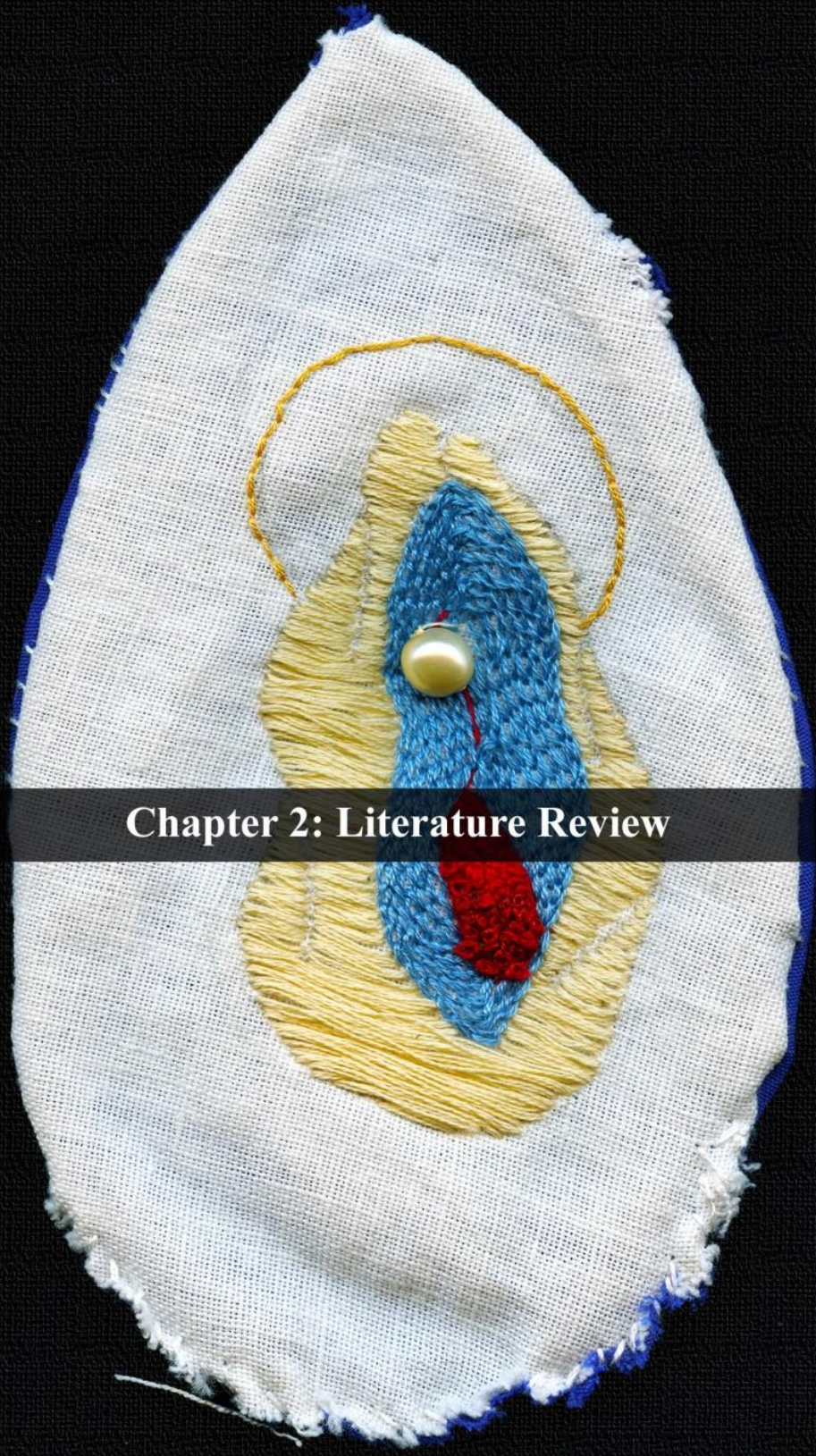
explored within this thesis and the main research question guiding it is: How does a new materialist framework affect the conceptualization of women's bodies (and beyond)? There is an additional supporting question guiding the method of this research which is: what does diffractively reading these experiences reveal?

The following chapter is an in-depth analysis of the literature used as a framework for this thesis. It will focus on particular aspects of new materialism pertaining to this thesis, such as looking into agency and an alternative to characterizing the material world. The way it looks into this alternative is by attempting to rework the subject/object dichotomy. This chapter will highlight the author I am basing the framework of new materialism around, namely Barad, while also utilizing other authors to further contextualize the theory.

Chapter 3: Method and Data is an overview of the data collection, and the method. The main form in which data has been collected is through field notes during in-person meetings with different groups of women. One other form of collected data is with embroidery, focusing on the process of embroidery as a part of the investigation and in connecting the material and the theoretical. The main method used to analyze the data and the literature is diffractive reading. This approach infers a respectful look into different texts, bodies, memories, and landscapes as “reading insights through one another” (Barad, 2007, p. 25). The secondary method is arts based research, as a way to consider artistic creation an alternative to ways of knowing.

During *Chapter 4: Difference, diffraction, discussion*, an experimental diffractive reading is attempted as a method of analysis of the chosen texts together with the collected data, memories, and parallel references. The chapter exemplifies a journey throughout identification and misidentification, how a material-discursive agency can lead towards an alternative post-human existence through the framework of new materialism.

The final chapter is a conclusion of this journey and of the findings, focusing particularly on the conceptualization of identity and how new materialism can lead to an alternative way of considering knowledge and the material-discursive, as it pertains to women and women's bodies.



Chapter 2: Literature Review

Figure 2. Maria. Embroidery on fabric, 2017

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter explores what other researchers have written about new materialism and how it relates to this thesis. It goes over the various aspects that agree with or contradict each other, giving an overview of new materialism, the most important topics that relate to this research, as well as how new materialism relates to feminism and women. I examine in detail how new materialism deals with the phenomena of organisms and materials while relating it to this research: namely, the intersections of discourse and the material, and specifically the material reality in meetings among women. In short, this section will also go over the different forms new materialism takes when interpreted by different researchers and how these areas of difference relate and intersect with each other.

New materialism

New materialism, or neo-materialism, is a contemporary concept that has emerged thanks to materialist research that came together through the sciences and the humanities (Bühlmann, Colman, & Tuin, 2017). It emerged from post-structuralist thought as a term coined by Braidotti (1991; 2000) and DeLanda (1995). It is difficult to pinpoint an exact definition of new materialism, a characteristic typical of postmodern or post-structuralist theories. Depending on how it is used as a framework and on the researcher herself, it changes widely and produces a “variety of neo-Marxist, feminist, and gender theories” (Kruks, 2010, p. 258). Here, this research will focus on new materialism as specifically developed by Barad, because her interpretations offer creative insights into matter and agency relevant for this thesis.

New materialism can be defined today as a cultural theory that attempts to move beyond Cartesian dualist modes of thinking that can be found within all factions of the sciences and the humanities. To accomplish this, new materialism turns the spotlight onto

matter – while not forgetting about mind, an element that dualist thought has tended to prioritize. Dolphijn & van der Tuin (2012) assert that in this sense, new materialism is “devoid of the dualisms that have dominated the humanities (and sciences)” (p. 85). This statement is, in my view, incorrect, or rather, hopeful. I don’t believe it is possible for new materialism or any theory to be completely devoid of any kind of dualistic thought. Humans and non-humans naturally categorize: others as well as ourselves. See: Guimond (2000), Crisp & Hewstone (2007), and Krueger & DiDonato (2008). In short, categorical behavior is not inherently negative but simply a mechanism used to navigate social groups on a fundamental level.

At the same time, a complete rejection of dualistic thought is a form of dualistic thought. To reject it is to assert a polarity between dualism and non-dualism that still implies a hierarchy between them. From this point of view, the hierarchy is topped by (an attempt to perform) non-dualistic thought. I believe this can turn into less of a removal of dualisms and instead further imposition of them, but with inverse roles. That being said, new materialists still make an attempt at breaking through what is perceived to be a blockade of dualistic thought by confronting matter and mind on equal planes. How new materialists attempt this, is by traversing dualist thought which may lead to a re-writing of difference. On the traversing of mind/matter, Dolphijn & van der Tuin (2012) state:

New materialism shows how the mind is always already material (the mind is an idea of the body), how matter is necessarily something of the mind (the mind has the body as its object), and how nature and culture are always already ‘naturecultures’ (Haraway’s term). (p. 48)

In this sense, new materialism has created a shift within knowledge production, its forms, as well as its meanings. One example of this shift caused by a development of new materialist thought can be found in work developed by Barad (2007) pertaining specifically

to matter, its agency, and the concept of interaction, or ‘intra-action’ (p. 33) in her terms. Barad’s theories on matter and agency rely heavily on quantum physics as developed by physicist Niels Bohr, who contributed to the current most accepted theory for quantum physics. Barad (2008) takes inspiration from Bohr’s “philosophy-physics” (p. 131) attitude in her theories as well as Butler’s theories on performativity, particularly when it comes to the development of ‘agential realism’³.

Agential realism is both an epistemological theory as well as an ontological theory that attempts to describe how reality is shaped – onto-epistemology. It conceives of a different process for examining objects and creating knowledge within science. This theory also attempts to put the shaping of reality outside of the limits of human conceptualization by including nonhuman organisms and objects. According to Barad (1998b):

Agential realism entails a reformulation of both of its terms – ‘agency’ and ‘realism’ – and provides an understanding of the role of human *and* nonhuman factors in the production of knowledge, thereby moving considerations of epistemic practices beyond the traditional realism versus social constructivism debates. (p. 89)

As such, agential realism is a theoretical framework to look at and analyze the intra-actions between matter and discourse and their inseparability. When it comes to the term intra-action, Barad has replaced the prefix *inter* (which can be defined as among or in the midst of) with the prefix *intra* (which means from within). This means a shift away from focusing on the interaction of independent bodies that have the ability to act separately, to a framing of these same individuals and their agency as emerging from within that relationship – or interaction. This framework allows for a new form of

³ Barad also builds from other theorists as much as from Niels Bohr, such as: “Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway, Vicki Kirby, Joseph Rouse, and others” (Barad, 2008) which can also be seen in Barad (1998a; 1998b; 2001).

conceptualizing the relationships between each other as humans, non-humans, discourses, objects, and matter.

By considering these relationships, it is possible to observe how agency transforms and changes: our relations with each other, discourses, and matter are always entangled and affect each other. An example where agential realism can be applied to this research is in the phenomenon that led to myself and other women seeking out groups for ourselves: It is an entanglement of the relationships of organisms and our bodies, the political and social discourse surrounding our bodies, and a human/digital social interaction. In this sense, agential realism as it pertains to new materialism, is a way of regarding the link between matter and discourse as already connected and analyzing these connections. This is closely associated to the ideas of agency and matter, which will be similarly explored as their own elements that relate particularly to this research.

Agency and Matter

Considering the way that new materialism tries to avoid separations and dichotomies, the best way to go over some concepts relating to this research within new materialism is by intersecting them. In this case, the idea of agency and matter within new materialism will be explored together as they are inseparable in this context. Put simply, matter can be defined as dynamic forms that create boundaries between each other. Humans, non-humans, objects, organisms, and cyborgs. These boundaries become fluid when taking into consideration agency: an intra-active action that comes about through change.

Agency, as has been defined in the introduction of this thesis, is the capacity or condition to act, to have power to exert. This definition allows new materialists to use it as a springboard to develop new ideas about agency: who has it, can it be given or taken away, and what are the ethics of agency in relation to matter? This last question is

particularly relevant in this research as a factor in investigating matter and discourse. Karen Barad takes a head-on approach to these questions and looks into the human element of agency, questioning a human-centered interpretation of it. According to Barad (2008), agency “is cut loose from its traditional humanist orbit. Agency is not aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity” (p. 144).

By questioning a traditionally humanist aspect of agency, Barad developed the notion of agential realism which was explained earlier in this text. In short, agential realism is a framework that can be used to look at reality and how it is shaped (by the sciences, by humanities). When agency is intersecting with agential realism, it is separated from the realm of humanity, implying that agency does not need to rely on a human element to preexist. It rather exists within the space of intra-action and between boundaries, which doesn't necessarily need to include the human gift of agency. According to Barad (2008):

Agency is about the possibilities and accountability entailed in reconfiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production, including the boundary articulations and exclusions that are marked by those practices in the enactment of a causal structure. Particular possibilities for acting exist at every moment, and these changing possibilities entail a responsibility to intervene in the world's becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering. (p. 827)

In new materialism, matter (materiality) is explored from beyond a determinist or essentialist point of view. Matter is traditionally thought of as a stable and fixed entity with no output from itself, such as the one-sided relationship between the sidewalk and a human walking upon it. The human is stepping on the sidewalk while the sidewalk is there to be stepped on. A new materialist perspective on this intra-action might be to suggest that the sidewalk eagerly responds with action as much as it absorbs it. A heavily traversed sidewalk is marred with signs of traffic: it changes shape, developing cracks and waves

according to its treatment. The material it is composed of and the way it is built also contributes to this human/side-walk intra-action: whether it is a smooth and consistent concrete surface or uneven cobblestone, for instance. This relationship also doesn't limit itself to the relationship between direct human activity and the sidewalk. For example, the political and economic aspects that affect the repair and maintenance of the sidewalk are also included in this dynamic relationship, as well as the non-human elements that come into play (animals, machines, and other organisms).

By exploring matter outside of an ideology that would prioritize the mind over everything else, new materialists allow for the dynamism of matter to enter the spotlight. To rethink matter in this way is an attempt at rejecting representationalist and anthropocentric notions of matter. Representationalism is the philosophical notion that the world around us that we see and experience is not the 'real' world but a representation built upon our internal perspectives. It implies that our mind keeps us from experiencing the world first-hand because of this mimetic representation we hold. To look under the folds of this philosophical notion is to look for a phenomenon of matter, of life, and of physicality. By taking up the dynamism of matter in this way is to reject representationalism on two opposing fronts: on the scientific notion of matter as a mimesis of nature, which implies that there is only one representation of matter; and on the postmodern notion of matter as a mimesis of culture, which implies that there is an infinite amount of representations of matter (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012).

The idea of matter as dynamic and "a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface" (Butler, 1993, p. 9) also connects to a feminist approach to matter. This allows for matter to be perceived beyond mechanistic ideas of matter as passive or separable. These are both linked to hierarchical dichotomies that divide mind and matter, positing the mind as superior. Matter as passive

in this sense implies a lack of agency of its own. For any change to occur, it must then come from outside of it, such as an acting human or universal laws. What new materialists then try to do is ask questions regarding a rethinking of matter. Coole (2010) asks whether matter can be imagined “as perhaps a lively materiality that is self-transformative and already saturated with the agentic capacities and existential significance that are typically located in a separate, ideal, and subjective realm?” (p. 92) By theorizing matter as self-transformative and possessing agency, new materialists are able to look into the independent as well as intra-active effects that matter can cause: not as a by-product of outside interference but from within itself, as a part of it.

The notion of matter as separable is also confronted by new materialists, as separation once again implies an inherent division between mind and matter (or the body). This division relies on human self-reflection towards ourselves and our cognitive abilities, especially in regards to our consciousness (mind). By separating our mind as “I” and our body as an organism we inhabit and affect means that our bodies are no more than vessels for our minds. This human-centric idea affects how the body and matter that surrounds us is perceived. Not only does our body cease to be a part of “me” and separates, it also implies that thought can’t exist in or come from the body. This connects quite smoothly into the nature/culture dichotomy and subsequent hierarchy, with its implication that nature is a force that humans don’t belong to outside of our bodies and culture only exists inside us first. According to Kirby (2008):

If we translate the separation of culture from nature into the mind/body split, it seems that the Cartesian subject can admit that s/he has a body (that attaches to the self), and yet s/he is somehow able to sustain the belief that s/he is not this body. This denial is necessary because to contest the latter and all its possible consequences would at least suggest that it might be in the nature of the biological body to argue, to reinvent, and rewrite itself – to cogitate. (p. 221)

A dynamic matter that is always already entangled with mind appears to be one concept that new materialism stands by. The claim so far has been that a qualitative move beyond both the sciences and the humanities in this way could reach a “post-humanist subject” (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012). This would mean moving away from positivism and postmodernism. Taking in consideration Barad’s agential realism, agency is not a characteristic that exists a priori. Agency in matter is a “doing/being” that opens up for different possibilities to occur (Barad, 2008, p. 827). These claims are certainly interesting to explore, but seem to contradict each other. The premise, as I have understood it, is that matter/materiality with agency is a post-humanist concept. However, the foundation for what agency is and how it works seems to have come from how we understand agency as humans – as we can only truly understand anything through our own lenses. Applying agency that is human (as far as we can tell) to all matter seems not to be a step towards a post-humanist moment but further away from it. What can be more humanist than to presume that our existence and way of life is the baseline for all other things? While this research does not presume to offer a *deus ex machina* solution, could an alternative involve opening up for dialogue on what it means to be human? Perhaps it would be helpful to confront that which we might know (humanity, for example) before trying to apply a human-centered reality upon other elements.

Feminism

Before diving into the relation between feminism and new materialism or feminist new materialism, a definition and genealogy of recent feminist movements is in order. While it is difficult today to define one single definition of feminism, as there are currently several acting factions, a general definition is in order.

Put simply, feminism stands for the equality of the sexes. Beyond this exposition, there are many other interpretations of feminism, as a symptom of postmodern plurality. Feminism, its philosophies, and its goals depend on the region where it exists. In the case of this thesis, the focus is primarily on feminism stemming from the United States of America with some influence from Europe. The two major feminist branches relevant here are intersectional and radical feminism. Feminism is of course not limited to these categories but they are the most notable and relevant to this thesis.

Intersectional feminism comes from the term ‘intersectionality theory’ coined by Crenshaw (1989). It is a theory that attempts to bring into light different intersecting forms of oppression. Her focus was primarily on black women and black feminism, in this case examining black women’s experiences and how these two characteristics are constantly interacting with each other in her identity as well as how others perceive her. According to Crenshaw (1989), black women “experience double-discrimination – the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex” (p. 149). Leading from this idea, intersectional feminism acts on the basis that feminism should consider all intersecting identities and characteristics, ranging from sex to race, gender to disability, and class to religion (among others). This allows for a framework where feminists are able to confront systemic injustice and inequality in the different layers that they present themselves in (Knudsen, 2006). Having said that, Crenshaw has commented on the way her theory has been used, stating, “My own use of the term ‘intersectionality’

was just a metaphor. I'm amazed at how it gets over and underused; sometimes I can't even recognize it in the literature anymore" (as cited in Guidroz & Berger, 2009, p. 65).

Radical feminism stems from the idea that patriarchy⁴ is the primary source of women's oppression. The identifier 'radical' is here used not to imply this branch of feminism is extreme but the word comes from the Latin origin of the word *radix*, *radic-*, meaning 'root' which evolved into late Middle English 'radical' meaning 'forming the root'. Considering this, radical feminism looks into the root of women's oppression, which they believe to be the patriarchy and all male-centric systems. This includes governments, religions, societies, and the nuclear family, among others. Radical feminism differs from other feminist ideologies as it places the burden of women's oppression primarily on the relationship between sex roles (Willis, 1984). Over the years, radical feminists are critiqued as using an essentializing theory, which gives less attention to other forms of subordination. Rhode in *Justice and Gender: Sex Discrimination and the Law* (1989) confronted writings by MacKinnon – a prominent radical feminist – regarding the topic of essentialism:

On a descriptive level, dominance-oriented paradigms that divide the world solely along gender lines ignore the ways that common biological constraints are experienced differently by different groups of women. On a prescriptive level, no theory adequate to challenge gender subordination can avoid addressing the other forms of inequality with which it intersects. (p. 64)

These two branches of feminism are relevant in this research as they find themselves on opposing spectrums of the argument regarding the body. On the one hand, intersectional feminism naturalizes pluralistic identities and dismisses the body as a factor

⁴ Patriarchy is a system in place where the father (or male) is in charge and descent follows the male line. This ranges from large-scale situations such as a system of government to small-scale situations such as the family.

in oppression. One recent example is the pushback against pussyhats – created in commemoration of the Women’s Marches in 2017⁵ – on the basis of it being essentializing, evident in various articles written after the fact. See: Riedel (2017), Kozol (2017), Gordon (2018), Woo (2018), Jackman (2018). On the other hand, radical feminism tries to gather women under one umbrella of ‘womanhood’ that does not account for an inclusive women’s experience. One example of this can be seen in the attitude of the following statement by Rich (1979) that “the connections between and among women are the most feared, the most problematic, and the most potentially transforming force on the planet” (p. 11). These two forms of feminism are also relevant to this study as radical feminism is the branch associated with the group of women collaborated with for this thesis. It was with this group identity that I met them, and through our experience as radical feminists in being opposed by self-identified intersectional feminists that we had the discussions that led to this research.

In contemporary feminism, there has been a rejection of theories that focus on materiality. This is evident mainly in the way that feminism moved towards focusing on identity and away from biology (Young, 1997; Cornell, 2000; Heyes, 2000). This rejection is due in part to the fear of essentializing arguments down to a matter of bodies and biological function. By rejecting matter and bodies, feminism has caused a reaction that “requires that one distance oneself as much as possible from the tainted realm of materiality by taking refuge within culture, discourse, and language.” (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008, p. 1). This wariness of materialist theories is understandable considering the way matter has been used as a tool to normalize and enforce female subordination, such as how biological functions have naturalized misogynist theories that, because women possess the

⁵ Stemming from misogynist comments by then-presidential candidate in the USA, Donald Trump, the creators “conceived the idea of creating a sea of pink hats at Women’s Marches everywhere that would make both a bold and powerful visual statement of solidarity, and also allow people who could not participate themselves – whether for medical, financial, or scheduling reasons — a visible way to demonstrate their support for women’s rights” (The Pussyhat Project, 2018)

potential to create life, women are then better suited for child rearing and should therefore exclusively take on this task in their lives. While there is truth in this statement (that women possess the capacity to bear children), the conclusion bases itself on incorrect assumptions that come from socially imposed ideas of women and men's roles in society. For a concrete example, a study by Martin conducted in 1991 examines how socially constructed sex roles affect scientific studies and results. In this case, through an examination on the egg and the sperm and the language used to describe the fertilization process in humans:

The texts celebrate sperm production because it is continuous from puberty to senescence, while they portray egg production as inferior because it is finished at birth. This makes the female seem unproductive, but some texts will also insist that it is she who is wasteful. (Martin, 1991, p. 488)

Feminist activists have spent an enormous amount of energy on the "careful delineation of the processes through which normative imperatives have been naturalized to support arguments that social and political formations arise through the agency of nature or biology" (Frost, 2011, p. 70). Such as the above example by Martin (1991), where biological processes inform the normalization of socially constructed sex roles. This striving for ideas that bring biology back into the discourse is naturally met with some amount of resistance. However, feminism today can and does benefit from the partnership with new materialism, as it attempts to break the tradition of the model of causation that implies that either culture or biology is a qualifier. New materialism offers an argument where feminism can look at the intra-activity of both discourse and matter and develop theories of critique that encompass a greater understanding of all underlying elements in play.

Feminist New Materialism

One argument made by new materialists that has affected feminist discourse, is through the way matter (particularly bodies and biology) is perceived in relation to social constructions or culture. Feminism has frequently tried to confront the ways that nature and matter have been used to delineate women in society – that confrontation has generally ended up being a complete denial of biological reality. On the other hand, new materialists introduce a different framework with which to work with matter. As opposed to denying its existence or role it has to play, new materialists question the underlying understanding of matter as passive or separable. In other words, it seeks to explore the socially constructed idea of matter as inert, which holds a negative connotation. A feminist new materialism then allows the opportunity to look into mind, matter, and consider the intra-actions that occur within and among them. It gives feminists a chance to “rethink the very reality of nature and of matter itself, and to move away from the deep theoretical divide between the cultural and the natural” (Tillman, 2015, p. 32). Frost (2011) presents us with a warning regarding the repeated intermingling of feminism and matter:

However, in bringing the processes, movements, and activities of biology and matter into their analyses, [feminists] must often confront the suspicion that they might be suffering from a political amnesia and intellectual myopia through which the essentialisms of old might reassert themselves. (p. 74)

Frost continues with the argument that feminist new materialism also helps to develop feminist vocabulary when it comes to confronting dynamic processes made up of “organisms, objects, and environments” so as to better discuss their intra-actions and the “complexity of causation” (2011, p. 79). This idea of looking into inclusivity of all forms, beyond anthropocentrism, seems to be a main theme that follows feminist new materialist ideas, particularly in exploring matter the environment surrounding it/us in relation to

socially constructed ideas. It is an attempt at “taking matter seriously” as Alaimo and Hekman (2008) assert, expanding that, “[m]aterial feminists explore the interaction of culture, history, discourse, technology, biology, and the ‘environment,’ without privileging any one of these elements” (p. 7)

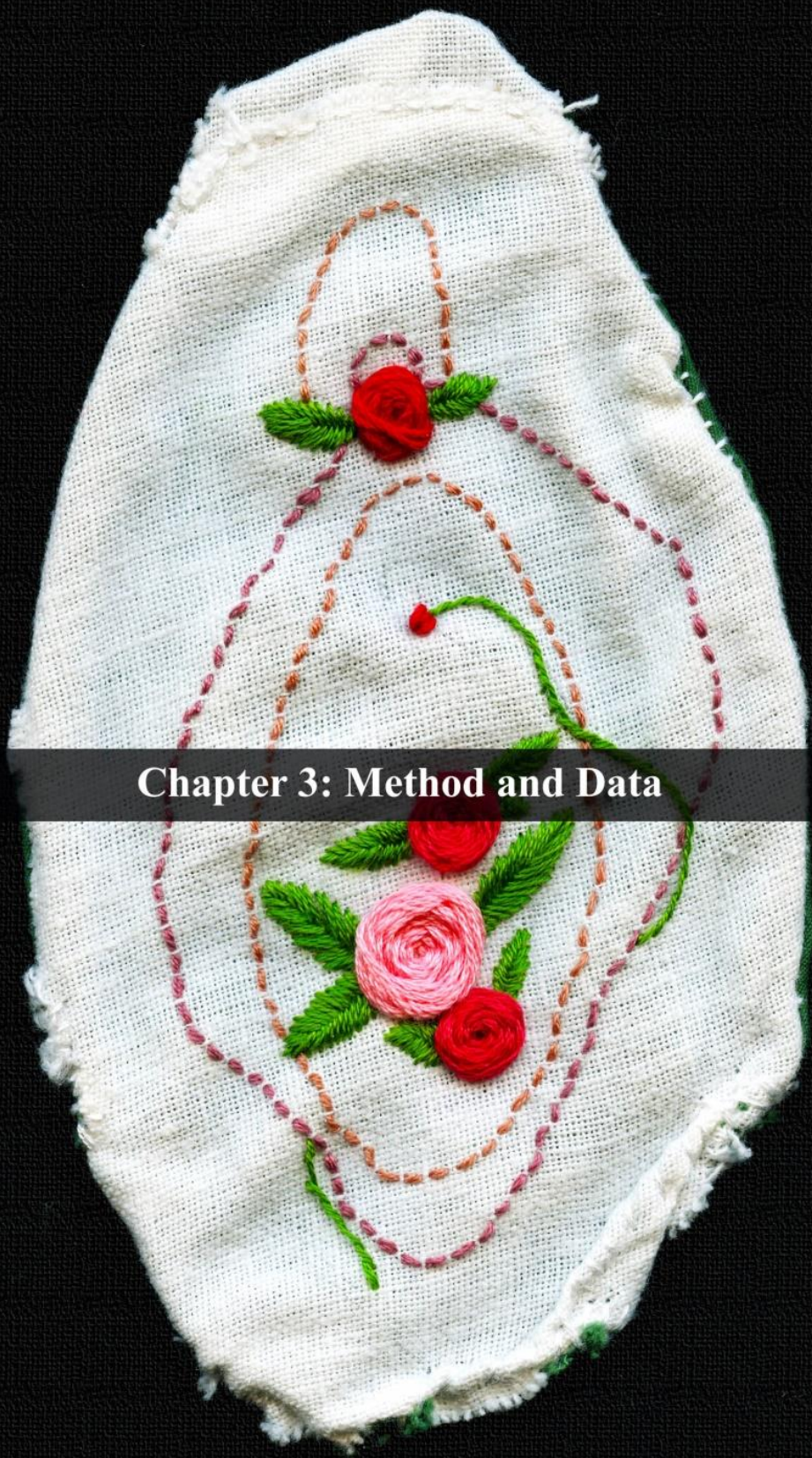
By considering all the above elements and their different forms of intra-acting with each other, a feminism that could consider the context as a whole comes forward. It could inspire a feminism that does not merely depend on matter to drive the arguments or on linguistic constructions to define itself, a feminist new materialism that regards materiality and matter as a sturdy base on which to build its discourse from, without discarding important elements such as social, political, and economic environments. “Beginning with material substances rather than already constituted social groups, may, in fact, allow for the formation of unexpected political coalitions and alliances.” (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008, p. 9) When it comes to other elements that affect feminist issues other than race or gender, such as taking in consideration the agency of nature and the materiality of the social, Tuana (2008) claims a material feminism could recognize,

the interaction of nature-culture, genes-environment in all phenomena, not just the phenomena of sex or race. As important as it is to make the case that categories of race or distinctions between sex and gender are actually reinforcing sexist and racist practices and impeding efforts to truly understand these phenomena, our efforts are more likely to be ineffectual if we treat race or sex as somehow different than other phenomena, even unintentionally by only attending to them. (p. 209)

Lifting all these phenomena into the limelight the way that a feminist new materialism attempts to do, could provide a new form of vocabulary to discuss feminist issues in further depth than before. One useful example is Barad’s introduction of the term intra-action as a way to conceptualize the agency and interactions not just between humans

but all other elements that come into play in all situations and the boundaries that are created as a result.

Throughout this chapter, I have explored a portion of new materialism and feminism as these theories pertain to women and identity – in particular Barad's concepts surrounding agential realism, the play between the material-discursive intra-actions, and the boundaries that are created therein. In order to look into these concepts, the following chapter gives a detailed description of the data collected and the methods chosen for this purpose.



Chapter 3: Method and Data

Figure 3. Roses. Embroidery on fabric, 2017.

Chapter 3: Method and Data

This chapter details the data, how the data was collected, and the methods chosen to explore the data. The two methods are diffractive reading and arts based research. Diffractive reading, in short, is a method that entails reading different texts with and through each other to gain new or different perspectives. Diffractive reading is used in this research as a way to explore the intra-actions between the data collected with the chosen texts and the exploration that is found within. Arts based research is the utilization of the creative artistic process as a way of comprehending the experience of the researcher and/or the groups involved in the research process. In this research, it is used as a method to examine the experiences I underwent as a researcher throughout this process. This compels me to practice self-reflection through the creative artistic process.

Regarding the data, there are two categories: field notes, and embroidery. The field notes come from my meetings with co-researchers and our conversation. They mostly feature my own notes based off the conversations that developed or my thoughts as a researcher and a member of the group in that situation. Embroidery is work that is explored as a supplement to the readings and a way to place myself and my reflections in front of a mirror and confront new materialism. Through the artistic process, it promotes self-reflection and critique on the readings and the research.

Method: Diffractive Reading

Diffractive reading, as touched upon in the first chapter of this thesis, is a method used to explore different texts and reading them through each other respectfully. Reading diffractively implies respect towards the specific areas of research and its context within each text while also being able to withdraw new or different information from that space of difference between them. It entails a careful reading of several texts within their details and

focusing less on a confrontational dialogue between them and rather on their entanglement (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012). Diffraction in analysis is a step beyond reflexivity and reflection, as Haraway (1997) claims, “reflexivity, like reflection, only displaces the same elsewhere,... What we need is to make a difference in material-semiotic apparatuses, to diffract” (p. 16). In order to make this difference, diffractive reading as a method does not need to be limited to a collection of texts and the intra-action that occurs between them and the interpreter. Diffractive reading entails an inclusive reading that takes into account the context between the texts as well as the context, memories, knowledge (including embodied), and surrounding objects or landscapes that diffract with the texts.

Diffraction in physics (both classical and quantum⁶) tends to measure the effects of difference as well as the entangled formation of the world. Taking this into consideration, Barad (2007) develops her theory of reading diffractively as a way to “study entangled effects differences make” (p. 73). This entails an in-depth exploration of entanglements as well as the idea of exploring and what can come about through this process. It is within this process of intra-activity between texts and data that subject and object emerge, bringing with them new forms of discourse. As Barad (2007) defines it,

[D]iffractive methodology is a critical practice for making a difference in the world.

It is a commitment to understanding which differences matter, how they matter, and for whom. It is a critical practice of engagement, not a distance-learning practice of reflecting from afar. (p. 90)

In the case of this thesis, diffractive reading is present throughout the entire fourth chapter, exploring various texts through each other as well as with the data collected for the study. The texts chosen are Alaimo and Hekmans’ *Material Feminisms* (2008) and

⁶ In classical physics, diffraction is a phenomenon that occurs in the interference of waves (sound, water, electromagnetic). See Heavens and Ditchburn (1987). Diffraction can also be observed through the principles of quantum physics as the phenomenon also occurs in matter. See Brand, et al. (2015).

Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter* (2007). In order to read these two texts diffractively, three sections from each of them have been chosen and paired together in three separate moments (in *Diffraction i*, *Diffraction ii*, and *Diffraction iii*). The chosen pairs are the following, respectively: *Agential Realism: How Material-Discursive Practices Matter* (Barad, 2007, pp. 132-185) and *Landscape, Memory, and Forgetting: Thinking Through (My Mother's) Body and Place* (Mortimer-Sandilands, 2008, pp. 265-287), *Getting Real: Technoscientific Practices and the Materialization of Reality* (Barad, 2007, pp. 189-222) and *On Not Becoming Man: The Materialist Politics of Unactualized Potential* (Colebrook, 2008, pp. 52-84), and *The Ontology of Knowing, the Intra-activity of Becoming, and the Ethics of Mattering* (Barad, 2007, pp. 353-396) and *Natural Convers(at)ions: or, What if Culture was really Nature all along?* (Kirby, 2008, pp. 214-236). By introducing these texts to each other and engaging with them, they are diffracted through each other as well as the collected data, creating a narrative that experiments with diffraction and the possible outcomes this method can bring.

Method: Arts Based Research

Arts based research is a method that entails exploring phenomena through the artistic process. It attempts to explore beyond the "limiting constraints of discursive communication" by instead using the artistic process in research (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 1). Using this process in research is less about trying to find concrete solutions to a problem and more about exploring our thoughts, our points of view, and our ways of comprehending knowledge through the arts. As such, arts based research is more focused on the process and what comes out of that moment in the form of knowledge or understanding than the final product as a work of art. In the case of this thesis, arts based research is used as one option to begin to understand the connections between the chosen

texts and the related data in the diffraction process. It acts as a way of investigating what happens in-between these diffractions outside of a discursive realm and exploring different means to understand. According to McNiff (2008),

Arts based research can be defined as the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies. (p. 29)

In this thesis, arts based research is a tool that provides an alternative perspective that I feel is relevant to the topic of new materialism. Considering the fact that the main method of analysis is diffractive reading, which is highly theoretical and discursive, the importance of including a material-based method seemed necessary. By analyzing new materialist theories, that focus on leveling the playing field between mind and matter (among other dichotomies), it seems logical to include a material mode of analysis in this process as well. Arts based research in this thesis is explored through embroidery as a way to investigate a new form of understanding material-discursive intra-actions. In order to attempt to go beyond the limitations of discursive communication, as asserted earlier by Barone and Eisner (2012), the embroidery is not analyzed as a final artwork, nor is it examined or used to infer knowledge through writing within this thesis. In connection to the diffractive reading method, the embroidery is represented visually with(in) the writing, diffracting with it on a material level that I believe not only complements, but completes the discursive aspect of this thesis. Following how Gerber, et al. (2012) considers arts based research as a method, it is intimately connected to “self-knowledge and knowledge of others” (p. 41), as well as valuing ways of knowing outside of the realm of the discursive.

The research for this thesis and the embroidery process occurred almost simultaneously and the resulting discursive content is a combination of the diffractive intra-actions between all of these processes. The visual text in this thesis representing the embroidery is also diffracted in the text during *Chapter 4: Difference, diffraction, discussion*, more so in the *Interlude* and *Diffraction ii* sections. However, the process is present throughout the entirety of the thesis, as it played an important role in guiding my thoughts as a researcher throughout the texts as well as my experiences with the women (see *Data: Field Notes*). It is not explicitly evident within the written text and instead spread throughout this thesis visually, engaging with the thesis within the investigative process as well as the final rendition. It was through the embroidery process – the highly material moment between my thoughts and the fabric – combined with the readings and investigations that led to the resulting text in this thesis.

Considering how the thesis topic has a focus on women (by analyzing women's meetings and conversations, which is further explained in the *Data: Field Notes* section), embroidery relates closely to women on a historical level and on a personal level, which will also be further expanded in the *Data: Embroidery* section.

Data: Field Notes

In this section the data collection is explained and how it intersects with the research in this thesis, as well as the standards for collecting the data and how it is applied. The main source of data collected throughout the research for this thesis originated from meetings held with other self-identified radical feminist women, which manifested itself in written observation of the content of these meetings as well as personal reflections while taking into account new materialism. Basing myself on my experience with the women from these gatherings and my interpretation of the material-discursive conjunctions with new materialism, the field notes are presented in this thesis in the form of a narrative

exposition. These expositions are included throughout the fourth chapter in this thesis in three sections; namely, *Prologue*, *Interlude*, and *Epilogue*. These three sections are paired with the diffractive discussions that follow, existing as separate but also functioning as successive investigations. In this sense, the collected data from the gathering has a higher focus on my interpretation of their content, using my position as one of the women as a point of departure.

The meetings and moments with other radical feminist women, which has been mentioned often throughout this thesis, occurred regularly starting from the summer of 2016 up until late autumn of 2017. The meetings took a wide variety of shapes and locations, ranging from online forums to in-person meetings, from smaller moments between myself and one other woman, to larger groups meeting together in organized events. The women who organized or attended were women who, like myself, were members of radical feminist forums who decided to reach out and gather in person. These meetings had the explicit goal of meeting and creating female-only spaces where there was freedom to explore and debate radical feminist issues together. Drawing from the motivation that these meetings incurred in some of the women and myself, an organization was also founded with these same values in mind: creating events to facilitate radical feminist discussion. For the purposes of this research, the focus has been mainly on the process of moving from gathering in online spaces to gathering in person and the content of these gatherings from a new materialist perspective.

The women are simultaneously research subjects as well as research partners. They are research partners, as this investigation would not exist without their active participation in these meetings. On the other side of the coin, they are research subjects as I am choosing to investigate the content of these meetings, what brought us together, and what divides us in the end. In this sense, they are referred to throughout this thesis as ‘women’ or ‘the

women' to denote their position throughout this thesis. This word makes reference to the original reason that brought us together as a group, which was the desire to discuss issues relating specifically to women, our bodies, and our material reality. They are also referred to in this way due to the need for a certain degree of anonymity, as many of the women (including myself) have been ostracized or otherwise made to fear expressing ourselves openly in this context. In order to afford them the anonymity some of the women require referring to the group as women became the desired solution.

Data: Embroidery

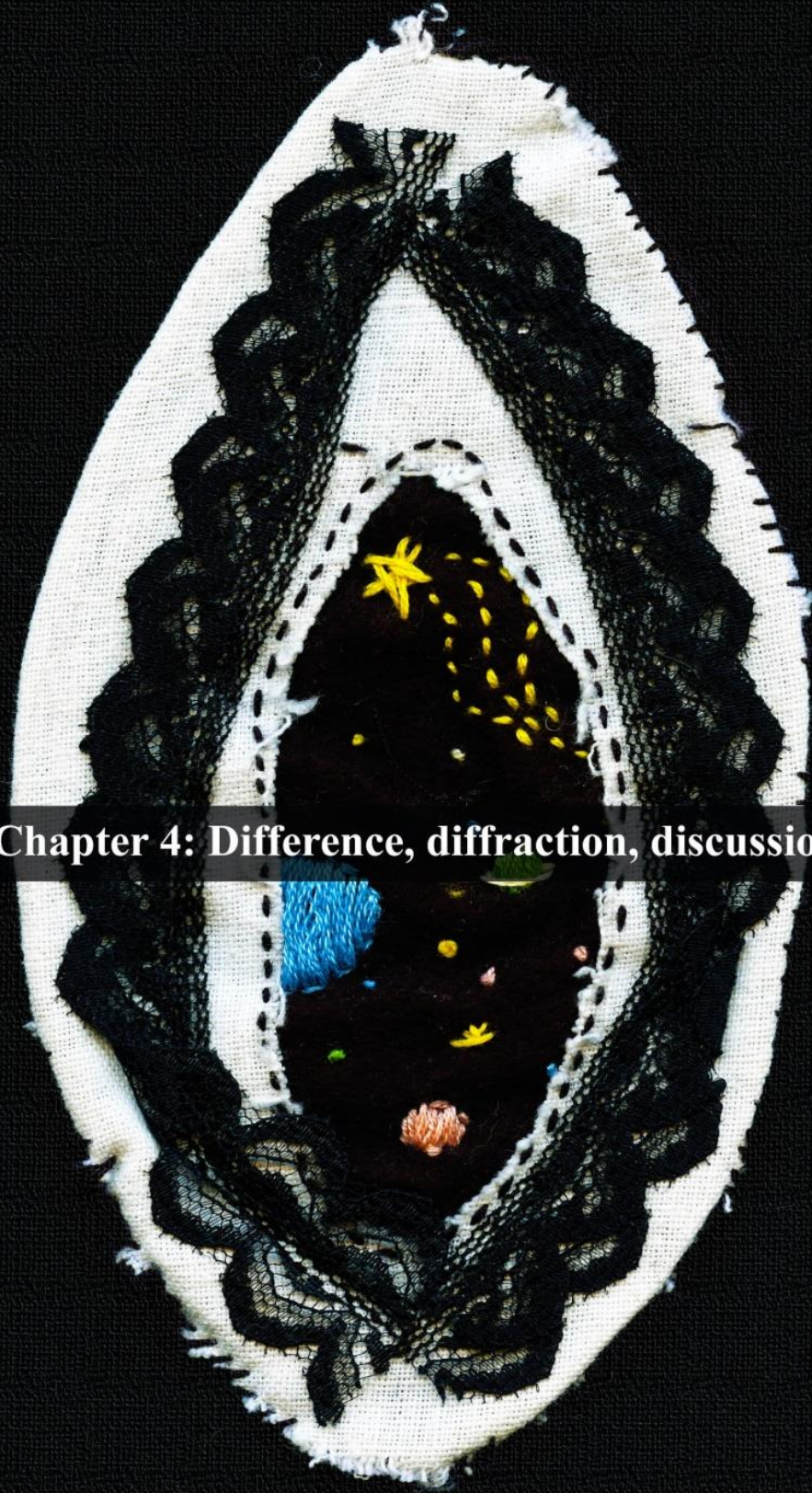
The data collected in relation to the arts based research method took the form of embroidery, where the focus is in the process of the embroidery together with the investigation of new materialism and bodies. This process is not only evident in part within the fourth chapter, but also visually within this thesis, as has been mentioned previously. The embroidery is not intended to be representational, as the aspects of it that are relevant to this thesis is the process of the embroidery itself, the way it has participated in this investigation, and how it continually diffracts even beyond the writing itself.

The process of data collection followed a regimen that was intimately related to the investigation, particularly the process of reading and analyzing texts as well as the meetings with the women. That is, the act of embroidery either punctuated or initiated the process of a reading or a meeting. It is a highly personal and individual creative process, so the way it is used and presented here in this thesis is as a material form of inquiry that diffracts with the texts and the writing. As such, the visuals are spread throughout this thesis in a way that mirrors the process as it came about throughout the investigation prior to writing. Each piece introduces as well as leads into the writing in the same way that the embroidery was created – with and through the reading.

The relevance of the medium has two levels: a personal and a historical/feminist level. On a personal level, it is an art form that is intimately connected to women in my family, especially my grandmothers. It was used by them either as a form of personal expression or as their profession. The act of creation by women on fabric has an attractively material aspect that links closely to this thesis, and the desire to investigate women and bodies through new materialism. On the historical and feminist level, embroidery is an art form that has its links to women throughout history as far back as the Stone Age where women often produced garments and cloth through embroidery and other fabric creations (Barber, 1995). It is believed that the reason women took up this kind of labor was due to the fact that women most often played a large role in rearing children, meaning that their labor depended “upon the compatibility of this pursuit with the demands of child care” (Barber, 1995, p. 29).

The use of embroidery (and other fabric crafts) by women has developed further throughout society to the point where embroidery became a feminized craft that belonged to women. It was at the same time an act of leisure as well as labor, as Parker (1984) explains how in the 17th century “working-class women were employed as sweated labour in trades associated with embroidery, and middle-class women became embroiderers because the craft’s aristocratic and feminine associations made it an acceptable occupation” (p. 108). The perception of embroidery in connection to women (and men) changes and fluctuates throughout history, and contemporary use of the art form has expanded beyond the limitations of subverting women. Taking into consideration the historical aspect of embroidery and its connection to women, the use of the method in this thesis helps close the circle around the material-discursive aspects pertaining to women from a new materialist perspective.

Within the following chapter, the data collected as well as the chosen texts on new materialism are intersected in detail. By entangling moments from meetings with other radical feminist women with texts on new materialism, I explore my research question on how our bodies and identities are framed within the context of new materialism. As a secondary research question, I am curious in finding out what diffractively reading these experiences might reveal in this context. Taking in consideration diffraction as a methodology, this chapter includes interjecting narrative sections that feature particularly relevant moments or reflections that came from meeting with other radical feminists which brought about this research.



Chapter 4: Difference, diffraction, discussion

Figure 4. Space. Embroidery on fabric, 2017.

Chapter 4: Difference, diffraction, discussion

Prologue

Early in the year 2016, I had been undergoing a massive shift in ideological beliefs and values, moving closer towards a matter-focused ideology, which was radical feminism. In this shift, I found myself endlessly devouring Adrienne Rich, Andrea Dworkin, and Janice Raymond. Such was my appetite; it was as if I was starved from a belief system where I could see myself in it. With this hunger for information, another desire surged inside – a strong desire to meet like-minded women and speak to them. It was a desire that consumed me at every waking moment, where I reached out to anyone that exhibited even the smallest common characteristics I yearned for.

This resulted in amassing a decent collection of European radical feminists who were just as hungry as I was for a meeting such as this one. In the context of this year, it was particularly strong in us. It was the first year where Michigan Women's Music Festival (Commonly referred to as Michfest) would not be held, the first time in almost 40 years where a gathering for women of this magnitude would not happen. It was deeply saddening at the time but also inspiring. It inspired me to reach out to the women I had gotten to know over those months, and I successfully held a small gathering of women over the course of one weekend. It was in honor of Michfest but also due to a desire inside of us to seek out friends, allies. We had felt increasingly stifled in most feminist spaces, where opinions stemming from a radical feminist perspective were not accepted.

This small gathering of women I hosted was my first taste of congregating with other women in this way. To meet with like-minded radical feminist women felt inspiring for us all, and while our conversations did not vary wildly from those we had in online spaces, the material aspect of the meeting seemed to include a new and unexpected variable. Somehow being in the physical presence of each other and having conversations

surrounding feminism, our bodies, our sexualities, and our rights as human beings, dragged out of us a sense of motivation and inspiration we had not expected. In my case, I drew from this motivation a push towards facilitating more of these meetings more often for women. I could sense the positive aspects it brought me, in terms of improved self-esteem and higher curiosity in analyzing our ideology, and hoped that by offering more gatherings it could allow other women to draw something positive out of it as well.

Following this initial meeting in honor of Michfest, I met many radical feminists who had the same desire to help other women and facilitate these meetings. Together, we created several online spaces that allowed for discussions from a radical feminist perspective and on radical feminist topics. These spaces made the process to organize meetings easier and they began happening at semi-regular intervals: in people's homes, in coffee shops, and other public spaces. Some of these women and myself established a radical feminist organization based in Europe, based on our desire to organize and help more women,

The founding of this organization was based on creating spaces for women, where we could be mediators for women who might have curiosity in these gatherings. It followed the same idea that motivated me initially: to find and meet with like-minded women or women who were curious about radical feminism. With this in mind, it was creating specific places for specific kinds of people: in this case, women who are radical feminists or are interested in the ideology. This search for people "like us" and creating physical meeting spaces to facilitate feminist conversation led the majority of my curiosity in this thesis. I feel it relevant to examine and analyze the material-discursive implications in the creation of these physical spaces over online spaces, and what is in the 'essence' of these physical spaces and meeting in a bodily manner that affects us.

In the next section, *Diffraction i*, this curiosity focused on meeting women in physical spaces will be analyzed by looking into two texts and reading them diffractively with memories from these meetings. By diffractively reading the texts, memories, and bodily experiences and the ways they intersect or collide, an analysis is developed on the topic of the material-discursive. The sections from Barad (2007) and Alaimo and Hekman (2008) are explored by reading them through each other to find out in what way the texts converse with each other, collide with each other, or otherwise intra-act. At the same time, relating these texts to the main topic of women's spaces and meeting other women in a physical space, and looking at what new comes out of this analysis.

Diffraction i

What does it mean to discuss the differences in appearance and feel of having online meetings or conversation with other women versus having physical meetings or conversations? Does the material aspect of meetings affect the conversation and the result? These are the fundamental questions that guide this first diffractive section in terms of the (woman's) body, discourse, and how that can be considered in new materialist terms and specifically material-discursive terms. By highlighting women's bodies in this context, the analysis will also have a feminist angle, derived mainly from feminist new materialist thought.

Having an online presence as an identifiable woman is known to attract unwanted attention, mainly in the form of gendered name-calling or threats (Franks (2009), Megarry (2014)). This is an unfortunate but commonly accepted phenomenon as a part of having public opinions online – regardless of whether you present yourself as sexed or not. The difference is that once that presentation is distinguished (whether you have been identified or identified yourself as female or male) the responses are commonly sprinkled with some added gendered insults if there is disagreement. These gendered insults are a two-way

street, utilized both towards men as much as they are towards women (Scruton, 2017). The hostility that exists online is an extension of gendered human communication offline that is further exacerbated and facilitated by the anonymity of internet spaces.

In the case of the women I had met and myself, we publicly existed in online spaces as feminists. We utilized spaces specifically for feminists or general feminist-oriented discussion with the impression that our input as feminists would be considered a part of the general feminist discourse. While we are accustomed to the hostility online directed specifically towards feminists (Lewis, Rowe, & Wiper, 2017), we had not expected the same amount of vitriol from within feminists spaces and from those who identified themselves as feminists. As a result of our questioning the power language holds over matter and why we were discouraged from specifically taking up issues relating to our bodies as women, we were then capable of creating a space amongst each other where we were able to take up these discussions freely.

The way in which Barad (2007) interprets language resonates strongly on this topic, where she states that language, in relation to the linguistic turn, “has been granted too much power” (p. 132). Currently we are at a point in the spacetime continuum where matter is simply a matter of reconceptualization through language and discursive practices. That is, matter loses its’ agency when it is possible to use discourse to erase it or ignore it. From a feminist standpoint, this web of hierarchies erases any possibility to enact honest dialogue around, for example, intimate partner violence (IPV) against women, which manifests mainly in physical violence being enacted by men against women (Center for Health and Gender Equity [CHANGE], 1999)⁷. This specific topic came up most often amongst feminist circles I and the other women participated in, but were consistently shut down as it was deemed insensitive to single out a perpetrator based on their sex.

⁷ There are disparaging results in studies on intimate partner violence that indicate that the results may have depended on subjective interpretations of the questions (how they are presented to subjects), how violence is defined, what kind of injuries the study accounts for, etc. See Dutton and Nicholls (2005).

Looking at this occurrence from a feminist point of view – which has traditionally focused on gender-based violence as a primary form of conceptualizing female oppression – seems to be antithetical to feminist ideals. What do feminists and women gain from being disallowed from highlighting their experiences with men and conceptualizing these experiences from a feminist perspective? And what, specifically to this situation, happens when this form of censorship is being performed by feminists against other feminists? From a new materialist perspective, to discard one element of the phenomenon of IPV is to lose an important piece of the puzzle that enables one to conceptualize the intra-actions of all acting and non-acting elements. Instead, is it possible to consider new materialism as an opportunity to help take into consideration all the elements in play? For example, by rejecting the delineation of fixed boundaries between phenomena and instead consider these boundaries and the interconnection of these phenomena is one form of engaging with new materialism in this context.

The agential cuts (the boundaries) that are enacted in the situation experienced here is that of an arbitrary boundary created between an ‘I’ and an ‘Other’. In this case, between those who believe that matter – in this case human bodies – have no significant standing in cases of physical violence and those who do. The constant creation of boundaries that somehow both encircles and divides us further seems to prevent any momentum – be that forwards, laterally, or backwards. I believe this momentum is necessary in this case in order to better comprehend our experiences and all elements involved in them. Mortimer-Sandilands (2008) poses a few intriguing questions on understanding the body in relation to the landscape around us: “How can we understand the human body as a particular site of perceptions of, and interactions with, the more-than-human world? How can we describe the relationship between body and mind, or between experience and reflection, in organizing human experiences of the environment?” (p. 265)

Part of that environment, is also the human experience. The human is not of the world or enacting upon it, but in it. The human is a part of it, a phenomenon that enacts with(in) the environment around it and vice-versa. Not only that, but there is now a type of parallel world that functions alongside our material world: cyberspace. A space where we exist as ourselves (or not) and disconnected from ourselves simultaneously, as is reflected in the desire to seek out the person-to-person conversation with other radical feminist women. The material-discursive implications of conducting dialogue on human bodies using online platforms are that the dialogue is lacking in context. The discursive practices, the content of what is being discussed and enacted upon, necessitates that material connection, particularly this content which depends on a discussion revolving around feminism and sex-based oppression. Our human female bodies are the landscape on which these discursive practices are enacted upon, but by having a dialogue that erases the material aspect of these practices (such as in an online realm), the dialogue becomes lacking. According to Barad (2007), “our ability to understand the physical world hinges on our recognizing that our knowledge-making practices... are material enactments that contribute to, and are a part of, the phenomenon we describe” (p. 32).

The act of seeking out meetings in the physical world (as opposed to the online world) was an attempt at understanding not only the physical world but to better comprehend how the physical world intersects and intra-acts with our discursive practices. In this case, to sit down with other women who hold similar values to myself, to sit in a space foreign to me, to meet total strangers from the internet (not a recommendable practice), yet at the same time to hold very similar conversations as those we held online there was a remarkable difference worth applying to feminist analyses. I do not believe these meetings are in any way new – they are very reminiscent of radical feminist consciousness-raising groups that happened frequently in the United States of America

during the peak of radical feminist movements. The goals and values then were similar to those that drove me to create and seek out these meetings: to meet with like-minded women, to share our experiences, and to discuss feminist ideology as freely as possible.

The fact remains that the act of remembering involves a recognition of a relationship between the body/mind and the external world that is not only determined by internal forces. The experience of memory is thus always already social, technological, and physical in that the conditions of the relationship between brain and object cannot help but be located in a complex range of conditions that offer the subject to the experience, and the experience to the subject. (Mortimer-Sandilands, 2008, p. 274)

Here I am extending Mortimer-Sandilands ideas on memory (in relation to her experience with her mother with Alzheimer's) towards the general human body, the human experience that is not always human or dependent on human subjectivity. In this case, the specific human female experience embodied in the material-discursive. These meetings looked into the different aspects of women's reality, women's bodies, and the intra-action between them while also considering the landscape around us and its' affect. Agential realism "recognizes matter's dynamism" (Barad, 2007, p. 151) as a part of the process of materialization – matter is just as involved in this process as discursive practices are, and separating them entails a continued enforcement of the mind/body dichotomy. According to Barad (2007), with new materialism and agential realism, matter and the material process is always already discursive and vice versa.

When taking up feminist topics such as the issue of female human bodies and the specifically sex-based oppression that half of humanity faces, it is essential to consider the material reality of these bodies. That is, rejecting the amount of power language possesses to the point where it takes precedence over materiality, while at the same time avoiding

essentializing the argument to a simple bodily distinction, as discursive practices are not inert linguistic constructions. Considering the material-discursive aspects in feminist theory would imply a new assumption that the separation between mind and body only exists as long as they are conceptualized as separate entities (likewise with all other linked dichotomies). That is, these phenomena are already entangled – they have always been entangled – and through rejecting dichotomies from this point of view, it is possible to open up a new form of dialogue around sex-based oppression and feminism. One form this can take is a rejuvenated focus on gatherings that value in-person conversation to foster communication and dialogue that, I assume, without a physical connection, those material-discursive intra-actions that end up being lost to the wind as a result.

Interlude

One troubling aspect I noticed at the time (and still see today) was the virulent atmosphere present in situations that required a high level of discourse, particularly on the topic of feminism in general. It was increasingly difficult in my experience to have a conversation between people who disagreed without it starting hostile and ending with insults or (in the case of online spaces) in blocking. I felt a natural pull towards spaces where it was possible to hold dialogues not only between those who already agreed but those who similarly disagreed amongst each other and explore these opinions. I hold these types of discussions in high regard and believe that exposing oneself to different arguments not only teaches how to understand the O/other side, but also to find nuance and properly defend one's own argument.

In the context of being confronted with dissenting arguments, I also defended the possibility for there to be spaces where groups of people could still come together with those who hold similar ideas and values. Particularly in the case of marginalized groups who are openly censored elsewhere, which was the sensation the women I met and I

experienced daily. There should be the possibility for both types of spaces: a space that is free for all to join, where all voices are equal to each other and civil discussion between opposing opinions can ensue; as well as a space set aside for certain groups of people if there is a desire to do so.

These values that I hold in terms of facilitating spaces for open discussion, no holds barred, inspired the creation of a radical feminist organization based in Europe with three other radical feminists. The goal was simple: create spaces or events for women curious about feminism or radical feminism where it is possible to explore the ideology and different standpoints without fear of censorship. I helped found the organization because of these particular values surrounding open dialogue. The three other founders had similar values but different focuses, for instance in better facilitating a space where women can taste freedom outside of patriarchy, albeit constructed. To create something akin to Michfest and the sisterhood that there blossomed was certainly in the back of my mind as we planned and dreamed of the future.

Over time, the organization amassed in total ten members in order to divide tasks equally amongst ourselves. The expansion came also from a desire for improved diversity amongst ourselves that could help in creating an event that would be as accessible as possible to as many people as possible. As such, the group consisted of women from six different European countries. Our common characteristics amongst ourselves were that we were women, lesbians, and radical feminists that longed for a women's space. For the first time for me, there was a sense of peace. The kind of peace that comes from finding somewhere to belong to that did not exist before.

However, through my recent readings in new materialist theory, in particular on the ideas of boundaries (which will be explained and explored in this section), there were some new growths sprouting inside of me. These new ideas particularly affected the way I

reflected on my need to congregate with people similar to myself. I also found myself questioning my identities from the perspective of new materialism: what does it mean not only to exist as an adult human female, but also to categorize myself as a woman? What are the physical and social ramifications, if any? Why is there such a strong dependency towards social identities (as can be seen in the recent surge in identity theory and politics), particularly when taking into consideration new materialist modes of thought regarding the lack of boundaries between all ‘things’?

These are some of the questions that guide this next diffractive moment, together with the happening in the organization that resulted in my removal from it – as a founder, as an organizer, and as an attendee. While the ten of us had gathered and started work on the organization as a group collected ‘under one banner’, so to speak, there were still some disagreements amongst us on certain values within feminism. This is a completely natural dynamic, I believe, as it is difficult to bring together any group of people of any size and expect everyone to agree on everything. In this case, my values regarding the protection of migrant women was considered antithetical to the values under which the organization was created. While the organizations’ core values never explicitly highlighted the topic of migration, my opinions were considered oppositional to the core values and I was formally removed.

The relationship between these two occurrences – the friction between myself and the other members of the organization and my initial doubts regarding identity – created a strong spark in the direction of questioning group identities and their meaning. If my identities are fluid to the point where I can choose a new identity every day, and if my intimate connection with other women based on these identities under the umbrella of sisterhood can be cut due to different opinions, why do I look for people with similar characteristics as myself to create these bonds with? What is the relevance in finding

connections with people on the basis of shared characteristics that do not define us as a whole, such as our physical bodies?

This pain of being confronted with difference from spaces that were previously considered “safe”, and the pain of my beliefs regarding identity being questioned by ideas from new materialism is diffracted in my embroidery as a part of arts based research. Seen through the framework of agential realism, this experience of pain does not remain within the human realm and is extended and diffracted beyond the ripples within my brain. Specifically through and in the material process of embroidery, this pain emerges. Clumsily gripping the end of a frayed piece of embroidery floss and failing to thread it through the eye. Getting new information and not only failing to comprehend it but not even capable of seeing how it fits together. Putting that frayed end in my mouth to moisten it and help the separate ends join and act as one. Beginning to find the links between these areas that at first seemed like separate phenomena but somehow came to be more entangled than ever. Pricking myself in the finger countless times as the needle passes through the fabric, sometimes leaving a blood stain. Struggling to find a sense of self that is not entirely dependent on my material reality, as a human, as a female human, as a lesbian female human.

Diffraction ii

Through experiencing this pain – intellectual pain and bodily pain – that highlights difference and creates boundaries between my body, my surroundings, and myself, there is an interesting conundrum around the concept of identity as it pertains to new materialism. What does it mean to yearn for a solid identity that is based on matter, in this case on my body? Considering this agonizing pain, where the first instinct is to seek refuge in the closest safe space, is it possible for new materialism to offer any insight into these painful intra-active moments?

In this case, there are two entangled moments of pain: the intellectual pain of being in a situation where differing viewpoints collide, which resulted in ostracization, and the bodily pain of experiencing a new view into identity that may not depend entirely on the human body. As a starting point into looking at these painful moments through new materialism, Colebrook (2008) offers the following:

Bodies matter, not because they cause our being, but because the living of them *as material* – as the very nature that is our own – is made possible only through regarding ourselves as subjects, as beings who have some recognizable, repeatable, and accountable identity. And to have identity, or to be *someone*, is to possess some minimal degree of self-definition. (p. 68)

In this context, one's identity and sense of self as a human is not dependent on or caused by the human body, but it comes about through a simultaneous performance and creation of boundaries. That is, using my material-discursive experience as an example, I perform myself as I perceive myself (with)in my body as a gendered being. In this case, a woman. These boundaries that would otherwise not exist then revolve around this performance – boundaries around myself as human and not animal, in the world and not of the world. These boundaries and performances are also dependent on an other that can perceive me not as I see myself but as the performance that is exhibited, and then attributed to a fixed category.

Bodies (matter) in new materialism changes from a static and powerless 'thing' towards a place where matter, according to Barad, is a doing. Matter is a process of materialization, where "phenomena come to matter through this process of ongoing intra-activity" (Barad, 2007, p. 210). Phenomena such as, in this case, the idea of identity growing out of these ongoing intra-activities that result from the materialization of bodies

and discursive practices. By “refusing the idea that matter needs to be granted meaning” (Colebrook, 2008, p. 56) with thought, matter gains its’ own agency, so to speak.

The agential realism here protrudes from the fact that matter pre-exists human intentionality. There are no boundaries separating anything until there is an intra-action. It is within this intra-action that they are made, yet they are not distinctly solid. Boundaries are in constant motion, intersecting and overlapping or breaking apart from each other. In the human social context, these boundaries are consistently in a mode of adaption, where our interactions with the material-discursive and vice-versa find themselves in a fluid motion.

Colebrook (2008), while taking in consideration Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of becoming-woman as a way of widening the idea of concepts, asserts that “woman is not she who gives herself form, becomes what she is, or realizes her proper potential in animating her materiality with the sense of who she properly is; woman is that which does not master or comprehend it/herself” (p. 78). My interpretation of this from a new materialist perspective is that Man is a way of governing, categorizing, setting boundaries. To be(come) Man is to look backwards and recognize himself in life, in matter. A step beyond this is Woman, who does not recognize herself nor find any relation to herself in life. She merely is without relation. Drawing from the previous assertion by Colebrook (2008) and developing it further, Woman in this sense could offer a freedom from finding the one ‘truth’ and towards an agential realist being; conceptualization without a perfect conclusion or solution, and altogether dynamic in its’ intra-activity.

If “woman is that which does not master or comprehend it/herself” (Colebrook, 2008, p. 78), then the pain that occurs from opposing ideologies can subside. That is, the kind of pain that stems from being confronted with opposing views and causes ones worldview to crack, may come out of an instinctive desire to avoid that pain. Avoiding the

pain, because it is painful, but also because facing it would mean facing a new mode of being that has sprung up on the horizon. Using the situation in this thesis, that new mode of being requires the ability to re-evaluate who 'I' really am, considering how fragile 'I' am, as my perception of myself was blurred through the conflict with the organization as well as the meetings. The pain is in this case a step towards conceptualizing myself through agency outside of stringent conditions – such as, being human, a woman, and a lesbian and all the performances that follow.

These conditions, these performances, are yet as much a part of me as my limbs, organs and past are. In offering this alternative in conceptualizing be-ing Woman, there entails some form of pain. If, in the pain of discovering something new (it could be a way of looking, one's sense of self, performance, among others), there is a split between the old and the new. The old must be replaced in order to make space for the new, which can be as extreme as changing the framework around which we view ourselves and everything else, or as little as adapting the new knowledge to old situations. Essentially, be-ing Woman in this sense is to move beyond the form that requires pain for new change to occur and to exist in an agential, malleable, potential form. This conceptualization of being borrows heavily from Barad (2007) and her theories of agency:

Agency is a matter of making iterative changes to particular practices through the dynamics of intra-activity (including enfoldings and other topological reconfigurings). Agency is about the possibilities and accountability entailed in reconfiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production, including the boundary-articulations and exclusions that are marked by those practices. (p. 214)

This form of conceptualization can offer a sense of freedom beyond dichotomic ideas of separation between mind and matter, blurring these lines as well as those between human and non-human. The strong boundaries that anchor humans to identities (social and

biological) can be broken and instead (re)place humans in the world as a part of the world. “The human is a sense of what might be, of potentiality or proper realization. To be human is to be burdened with giving oneself a world, with forming oneself and deciding on one’s own being” (Colebrook, 2008, p. 79). Going beyond the idea of human as formed outside of the world – as being a world within the world – through a reconceptualization of humans and pain, might be one potential application of new materialism.

In order to explore a reconceptualization of humans through the application of new materialism, the following section will analyze the existence of socially imposed boundaries thrust upon humans and other organisms by humans.

Diffraction iii

“Quantum physics teaches us that the belief in an inherent fixed Cartesian distinction between subject and object is an unfounded prejudice of the classical worldview” (Barad, 2007, p. 359). That is, the boundaries between subject and object are consistently in a mode of fluidity, blurring the borders between them. The example presented by Barad, originally conceptualized by Niels Bohr, is that of a blind man with his cane. When he holds his cane firmly in his hand, it acts as an extension of his body and his self in investigating the landscape surrounding him. When he holds his cane loosely, it becomes an object to aid in observation of the landscape around him. Subject and object are constantly blurred, the tip of the cane at once a separate object and the tip of the blind man’s body.

Considering the fluidity of matter, particularly when taking into account a quantum interpretation of matter where particles are in constant motion between bodies, organisms, and space, this context may offer a new form of interpretation regarding human social identities and their boundary-making practices. The apparatuses that are these identities (such as the human identity) construct the boundaries that guide our material-discursive

being. In this sense, the blurred inseparable separability between the discursive (identity) and matter (our bodies) exposes the intra-activity in between. By acknowledging the entangled aspect of the material-discursive, a conversation can be opened up in order to look into a human existence beyond simple dichotomies. I believe a new materialist framework enables this conversation to take a post-humanistic stance, in a way of considering the relevance of matter as well as discourse.

Kirby (2008) presents in her text a perspective on the binaries between language/culture (mind) and nature (matter) that entangles with arguments presented by Barad (2007) in relation to agential realism and the intra-action of apparatuses. Kirby (2007) here aims to present nature, bodies, and non-human organisms, beyond a prescriptive phenomenon that is merely surrounded and represented by language (by humans). She affirms, “the point isn’t to take away the complexity that culture seems to bring to nature but to radically reconceptualize nature ‘altogether’” (p. 233). This reconceptualization of nature entails a rejection of anthropomorphic interpretations of the universe around us, where the human is placed at the center and acting as an observer. Additionally, it also entails a conceptualization of humans as different but entangled with the universe, as opposed to securing “the difference of our identity *against*” (Kirby, 2008, p. 233) non-human organisms and their behavior.

My justification for wanting to *naturalize* language and its productive energies rests on considering how strange this ‘inside’ of language might be. It could be likened to the way physicists negotiate the spatial demarcation of what is inside or outside the universe: what seems outside is actually another aspect of the inside, an answer that also ‘explains’ why the expansion of the universe is described as an expansion into itself. (Kirby, 2008, pp. 228-229)

This argument by Kirby on the naturalization of language combined with Barad (2007) and her concept that “minds are themselves material phenomena that emerge through specific intra-actions” (p. 361) provide a framework with which to look into boundaries specifically pertaining to identity. These boundaries come into being through the intra-action between human minds and bodies, such as through an observation of our sex differences on a visual level as well as a cellular level, and constructing from that observation the boundaries between male and female. These boundaries serve a simple function of delineating borders that occur within sexually dimorphic species, but what happens when these boundaries are further complicated with social identities, like man and woman?

The measuring of the boundaries between man and woman are based upon an observation of the makeup of our matter that is later extended towards behavior and personality. The differentiation of man and woman as distinctly separate subjects and objects deny a realm of human and post-human experience that goes beyond group and social identity. It creates agential cuts that prevents an intricate look into the intra-action that could happen if this differentiation between matter was not in a fixed state, held there by the power of language. That is, a new materialist account of identities and labels could instead be seen as fluid and entangled, constantly in a state of motion and change, where differences are created and broken down repeatedly. According to Barad (2007), “differentiating is not about radical exteriority but rather agential separability. That is, differentiating is not about othering or separating but on the contrary about making connections and commitments.” (p. 392)

These connections and commitments can come from a simultaneous rejection and acceptance of a multiplicity of identities. Using the investigation in this thesis, connections are created through mutual interests and matter while simultaneously being broken down

by these same elements. Being in this post-boundary state entails accepting a way of being and knowing with an infinite amount of possibilities and potentialities that are not dependent on fixed and constructed states. “Events and things do not occupy particular positions in space and time; rather, space, time, and matter are iteratively produced and performed.... The very nature of possibilities for change are reworked” (Barad, 2007, p. 393).

Considering this, a new materialist turn of the material-discursive and particularly of language, would support a simultaneous multiplicity as well as erasure of identities. These identities can go beyond those constructed within the realm of human society and encompass non-human boundaries, landscapes, or environments. The post-human connections that are always already entangled allow for the new materialist presumption that “we are of the universe – there is no inside, no outside. There is only intra-acting from within and as part of the world in its becoming” (Barad, 2007, p. 396). A material-discursive intra-action in becoming human, for example, would entail a differentiation of humans from other animals, from plants, from our surrounding landscape, from the Earth we are a part of – this differentiation can accept these identities while simultaneously taking into account the connections therein.

In positioning humans as a part of the world, of the universe, can also allow for a positioning of knowledge outside of the human realm since “knowing is not a capacity that is the exclusive birthright of the human” (Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, 2007, p. 379). This has been attempted in this thesis through the inclusion of an artistic knowledge through embroidery, yet this knowledge is still dependent on the agentic actions of a human, so falls somewhat short here.

The final section of this chapter, *Epilogue*, attempts taking into consideration the entire phenomenon that has been presented in this investigation in the context of identities, particularly pertaining to my self-identity as a woman, human, and lesbian. The material-discursive aspect of these identities are further explored while observing the state of these boundaries and the next step for human potentiality.

Epilogue

As this investigation ends, so do the meetings with the women. Because of the path that has been taken throughout this thesis, beginning in *Prologue*, the growing doubts have resulted in my distancing from these meetings as well as curiosity into what there may be beyond human potentiality. In this case, looking beyond what it means to exist, perform, and identify as a woman, as a human, and as a lesbian. The reasons for having desired these meetings with other women (particularly radical feminist women) from the start stemmed from seeking a group to identify with, a group that held similar views and looked like me. In this case, women who are radical feminists. However, through this investigation, it became more and more evident that even spaces where it seemed like I had found my ideal group, there was still the same hostility that I had originally tried to avoid as well as aggressively colliding viewpoints.

These revelations culminate in a newfound desire not only to distance myself from these constructed identities that create fixed boundaries and prevent new conceptualizations (such as boundaries between humans and non-humans, or women and men) but also to look for what could be beyond these dichotomies, if there is anything. As such, these moments culminate in a final meeting together with just one of the women, where we discuss these potentialities and possibilities. The focus during this meeting is on the importance of matter specifically in regards to human potentiality beyond the realms of human boundaries. How does matter factor into this potentiality? These topics are explored

in this text through my understanding of the conversation, taking into consideration the previous occurrences.

The conversation focused heavily on an evolution of the human consciousness as a byproduct of the universe. Considering new materialism as a framework, humans are not in the world as if placed here purposefully (as far as we know). Humans are *of* the world, and by proxy of the same energy that makes up the universe on a basic elemental level. In exploring a possibility of an evolution of humans entails an acceptance of chaos within this conceptualization. Evolution is not necessarily a coherent and progressively improving system guaranteed to facilitate something better. It could end up worse, or merely different. This exploration does not assume an evolution towards an improved human akin to God, placing humans once again at the center of the universe and further solidifying Cartesian dichotomies. This exploration instead looks towards a new materialist account of the potentiality of humans, taking into consideration the specific situations mentioned throughout this thesis: human bodies, particularly women, and identities/boundaries.

As can be observed along the investigation in this thesis, beginning with a strong sense of identity and desire to form groups based on these identities, there has developed a crack where there once was only solid, confident boundaries. The blurring between the boundaries of those identities with the surrounding landscape and organisms leads to the question of what might happen to humans when these identities are broken down and discarded. Is it even possible, considering how prevalent identity politics has become? What is left of the shell of the being that no longer gives importance to its boundaries?

Having been accustomed to various identities throughout my life, ranging from identities connected to hobbies and interests to those connected to material reality, there is one boundary that has proved the hardest to let go: Human. While woman is heavily intertwined with this identity, the concept of Woman is still a somewhat foreign and

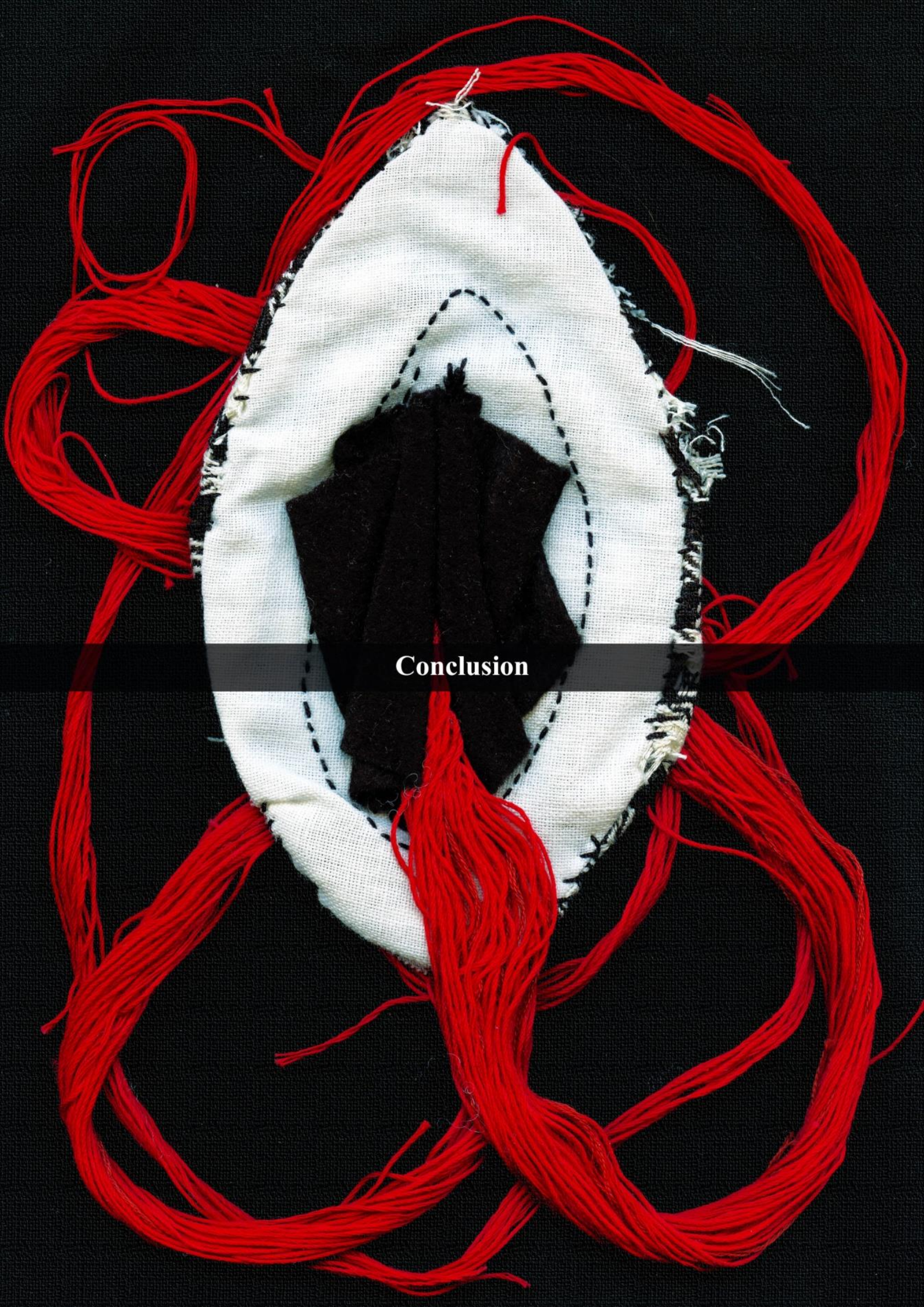
othering concept thrust upon me. Even while identifying strongly as a radical feminist, where the importance of female bodies and womanhood is prevalent, it remained foreign. The boundaries between woman/man are not delineated through a personal identification that manifests itself in a performance, but instead through the intra-actions that highlight differences and similarities.

In this sense, these boundaries only exist as they are constructed through intra-actions with phenomena, placing the being in a constant state of immaterial evolution. These boundaries can be narrowed down to the point of identifying single unique characteristics with which to construct identities. They can also be broadened to infinite landscapes without horizons. Examples of these different states of boundaries could be, respectively, in micro-managing identities (such as human, woman, lesbian, bi-racial, ad infinitum) and conceptualizing our being on a similar level to all other matter, organisms, environments around us.

This combination of matter and mind may be a potential form of conceptualizing dichotomies without a hierarchy. While the new materialist process of seeking a non-dichotomic way of knowing is admirable, I do not consider it entirely feasible. Especially considering the fact that attempting to prioritize non-dichotomies in this sense is a dichotomy, placing a hierarchy between these concepts, where a non-dichotomy takes precedence. As Kirby (2008) affirms,

It is somewhat routine within critical discourse to diagnose binary oppositions as if they are pathological symptoms: conceptual errors that are enduring, insidious, and whose effects can normalize political inequity. However, if the remedial treatment for such symptoms is to replace these binary errors with non-binary correctives, then surely we are caught in something of a quandary. (pp. 215-216).

Only through a thorough understanding of these binary oppositions is it possible to attempt to explore an alternative for being and knowing. Could one form of human evolution be a circling of the tree of evolution as we know of it today? As opposed to evolving outwards or beyond, as a tree grows up and around itself, an evolution that comes full circle. A post-human, post-identity existence as a combination of energy and matter of the universe that exists in an ape-like cyborg format. Beyond even that, consider the human potentiality of accepting constant-moving boundaries. To be simultaneously female and not, to view oneself as an individual person as well as an aggregate of energy, neurons, blood, guts, and bones.



Conclusion

Figure 5. Blood. Embroidery on fabric, 2017.

Conclusion

The journey undertaken throughout this investigation took many unexpected turns, ending but not finishing here at this moment of uncertain identity with a simultaneous confidence in an ever-changing evolution of identity and differentiation. The goal with this thesis was to investigate new materialism in the context of women and women's bodies, asking the question: How does a new materialist framework affect the conceptualization of women's bodies (and beyond)? To answer this question, data was collected through different kinds of meetings with other women combined with artistic creation through embroidery as an alternative way of knowing.

The investigation began with a desire to congregate with other women like myself, women who are radical feminists. These gatherings concentrated around discussions of the material reality of women, such as around issues of rape and intimate partner violence. These conversations came out of a desire to connect the material reality of being a human female together with the discursive identity of being a woman. Both of these constructed boundaries intersect and intra-act with each other, yet we had experienced a censoring of the material aspect and priority given to the discursive aspect. In this sense, these meetings and conversation served as a way of being 'allowed' to confront the material-discursive aspects of our reality. This gathering under an umbrella of identification and contextualizing it through new materialism gave insight on the way in which human female bodies are landscapes upon which discursive practices are acted. In this section, it is concluded that a certain rejection of the power that language has taken hold on matter is necessary in order to consider matter, its affects, and how it intra-acts with its surroundings. That is to say, an acceptance of both language and matter (an instance of material-discursive) in the context of analyzing women's bodies and women's reality is

relevant in pursuing a way of knowing that takes into consideration the intra-active aspect of these instances.

Following the discussion on the importance of the material-discursive combination beyond a Cartesian dualism, there is a diffraction on the idea of identity in the context of new materialism. That is, following the previous ideas surrounding the desire to congregate with like-minded women due to an idealistic perception of group identities, there came an unexpected result. Within these groups of women, specifically after the founding of a European radical feminist organization, despite the connection between our identities, there was still the same attitude concerning opposing viewpoints. In lieu of accepting differences and prioritizing the nebulous idea of sisterhood, priority was instead given to homogenous views and values.

As such, the deconstruction of the idealism around group identity begins, questioning the existence of identities ranging from human, to woman, to lesbian. The pain that can only come from a confrontation with internal perceptions of self leads to a new formulation of the boundaries between mind/matter, human/non-human, woman/man, etc. This new conceptualization of boundaries considers the concept of be-ing Woman in the sense that Woman is the pain of constant fluid change in identity, a consistent challenge to one's own sense of self, values, and worldview.

This diffractive reading culminates in the final section of *Chapter 4*, investigating what I consider a natural succession to the two previous sections: what does new materialism say about a new form of identity beyond that which humans construct around ourselves? That is, using new materialism to diffract the previous experiences and attempt to theorize creatively a different conceptualization of human identity. This section takes into consideration not only the blurring of boundaries between humans and non-humans

(accepting a post-human conceptualization) but also the fluidity of matter and the discursive.

While this investigation has focused heavily on my journey as a human/researcher, the goal is for the findings to go beyond a personal result. The implications of this investigation have the potential to surpass not only myself, but also women. It may offer an opportunity to examine performances of identities outside of anthropocentric perceptions. One implication could be that of a form of conceptualizing women's identity, and by proxy all other human identities, as a fluid material-discursive aspect of the world. In other words, identities and boundaries that are constructed through the use of apparatuses are not necessarily permanent, and the perception of the self and the other can be fluid. This fluidity comes out of the fact that the intra-actions that occur are not repeatable and always include new and different phenomena. As stated earlier, the acceptance of a fluid sense of subject and object, where it is difficult to identify where one ends and one begins, could be an alternative to conceptualizing a post-human identity through new materialism.

[T]here is only the ongoing practice of being open and alive to each meeting, each intra-action, so that we might use our ability to respond, our responsibility, to help awaken, to breathe life into every new possibilities for living justly. The world and its possibilities are remade in each meeting. (Barad, 2007, p. x)

This thesis also served as an experiment into utilizing diffractive reading as a method as opposed to other well-trod methods such as critique or reflection. This experiment aimed to explore what a practical application of diffractive reading might look like and how the results may differ from a critical or reflexive reading. The result has been a combination of texts, field notes, art, and (bodily) memory, which take the form of this thesis. Due to the adaptability and fluidity of diffractive reading as a method, there are few models or structures to follow in the construction of a narrative in this way. As such,

through this unfolding of diffractive reading according to my own interpretation, this thesis could offer an additional example of the practice of diffractive reading.

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