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Feminist Standpoints and Critical Realism. The Contested Materiality of Difference in Intersectionality and New Materialism

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ABSTRACT

Feminist theory and critical realism should consolidate their collaboration since they have much in common. Nevertheless, feminist standpoint theory and critical realist ontology remain at odds, as extended debates have shown. I argue that this is because of the importance that feminism places on *difference* – which brings up the problem of relationality in a material way – and thus makes it hard to integrate into traditional critical realism. Dialectical critical realism contributes greatly to an understanding of relationality but lacks difference's historicity. This claim is elaborated through a discussion of intersectionality in feminism and feminist new materialism. The discussion shows that the mainstream understanding of both approaches has grave deficiencies and profits from critical realist metatheory. Notwithstanding, CR can learn from the motives and ways that difference is deployed in both strands.

KEYWORDS

Critical realism; feminist standpoint theory; difference; dialectical critical realism; negative dialectics; intersectionality; new materialism

1. Introduction

This article¹ departs from the unsatisfactory condition that critical realism (CR) and feminist theory have, as of yet, not developed strong ties.² In the first section, I will argue that this status quo is because of the way that *difference* is approached as a key category of feminism. In the second section, I will discuss the materiality of a feminist standpoint. Materiality is the explicit focus of feminist standpoint theory and implicitly foundational for much of contemporary feminist discussions. I will relate it to CR. I will show how this standpoint is 'othered' and connects to the theme of *difference*. Much of CR tends to view difference as an epistemological and 'neutral' category. This does not do justice to its materiality that is closely tied to the way *relationality* and its historical materiality are approached. Dialectical critical realism (DCR) contributes greatly towards an understanding of the relationality of difference, yet it still does not relate to materiality in a way that accounts for feminist desiderata. I maintain that the move away from metatheory and towards *negative dialectics* can greatly contribute to a mutual understanding of CR and feminism. In order to justify this assumption, I will discuss materiality, difference and relationality in

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Intersectionality (IS) and *New Materialism* (NM). On the one hand, an immanent critique of IS and NM will show that neither paradigm is sufficiently capable to deal with the metatheoretical problems associated with difference and relationality and that CR metatheory can contribute to a solution of the problems. On the other hand, it will demonstrate that some intrinsic features of the materiality and relationality of difference in feminism elude the theoretical topology of traditional CR.

2. CR, feminist standpoints and difference

CR has always been a philosophy of science that transgressed customary boundaries. One of its main achievements has been the introduction of a normative momentum into the neutral fields of epistemology and ontology. Bhaskar's *explanatory critique* demonstrates that social objects are always value-laden and are thus never subject to 'neutral' considerations. It highlights that a given social status quo and its negative normative evaluation can be changed for the better by means of thoughts and actions that are as 'rational' as our very thinking about allegedly neutral issues like epistemology and ontology. Explanatory critique intimately connects CR with more applied critiques of oppression like Marxism. While the linkage of CR to Marxism has always been evident, its ties to feminist theories have not developed evenly (Gunnarsson, Martinez Dy, and Van Ingen 2016, 442). One key aspect of feminist theory, the incorporation of a standpoint into philosophy of science, demonstrates this well. Sandra Harding's concept of strong objectivity, which expands weak (that is, value-neutral) scientific objectivity by inquiring 'which values and interests advance the growth of knowledge' (Harding 2015, 36) seems compatible with Bhaskar's argument that 'the process of knowledge-production may be causally, and internally, related to the process of the production of the objects concerned' (Bhaskar 1998, 51). Both assumptions build on a kind of epistemological relativism and both argue that normative judgments matter for science. Why then, have feminist critiques of oppression not drawn heavily on CR metatheory? An exchange between Tony Lawson (Lawson 1999), who maintains a canonical CR position on epistemological relativism and Sandra Harding (Harding 1999), who argues for feminist standpoint theory, gives us an answer. Harding concludes her critical assessment of CR with the belief that 'epistemological and ontological assumptions and arguments are always intimately entwined' on which ground she holds 'assumptions about reality and ontological arguments' to be a matter of their intrinsic 'strategic value' (Harding 1999, 132).

2.1. Feminist standpoints, ontology and critical realism

The problem links to the kind of relativism associated with feminist standpoint theory. Its relativism does not pertain to the transitive domain of knowledge production, but to the intransitive domain – or rather to something that happens when we relate both. This touches upon the problem of the *materiality of oppression* or, otherwise put, the nature of the ontological objects that are at stake. A comparison with the Marxist understanding of oppression can illustrate this. Marxism resorts to a set of functional assertions that are compatible with a relatively separatist understanding of social objects. Its mode of critique is thus immanent in two ways: one evident and one concealed. Marxist critique is immanent to its subject matter – the account of oppressive society – inasmuch as it 'deploys transcendental

(and other) arguments to demonstrate that the account is internally inconsistent' (Bhaskar 2008b, xiv) and thus seeks to engage with the prevailing material basis of our thought and action in order to change it from within. It is also immanent to the *mode of relationality* that emerges when we try to come from the transitive to the intransitive domain – it assumes that these objects are really there and clearly relate to each other *and* our thoughts about it. This double relation licences a *universalism* that makes scientific critique possible – we can reproduce the objects as (concrete) universals and critique them as such. This also means that we require and are well advised to look for universally 'shared features [...] that the feasibility of projects of emancipatory progress mostly rests' (Lawson 1999, 45) upon.

For feminism, this universalism intricately connects to exactly the materiality of oppression that it seeks to overcome. The materiality is shaped in a way that obstructs the second kind of immanence being turned into emancipation – patriarchal oppression does not yield the kind of objects that enable forms of universal representation and therefore, universalist strategies for emancipation are scorned.³ This means that much feminism not only attacks or androcentric aspects of existing ontologies – which would amount to a limited epistemological-practical critique. This is because it sees no (emancipatory) use in ontological considerations whatsoever, since 'dictating the shape of reality' is viewed as too ambiguous a project, one that is interrelated with vexed power questions: 'wanted and needed by whom, and empowering for whom?' (Barker 2003, 107). As ontology is debunked, epistemology aligns with strategy; and it becomes a crucial tactic to dismantle any kind of ontological considerations. Ontology becomes part of the problem, not the solution. This is a fact that many 'universalist' critical realists do not acknowledge. An example of such a universalist critical realist is Tony Lawson, who stated that 'ontological perspective like critical realism can have little to say on [...] what is and is not strategically advantageous' (Lawson 2003, 129). From a feminist perspective, such a position – that assumes 'ontology claims to be prior to culture and politics' (Harding 2003, 154) – is dangerous as it remains at odds with the assumption that 'the "partiality" of cultures' is 'productive of knowledge' (Harding 2003, 155) and constrains an 'interventionist conception of science' (Harding 2003, 156). From the perspective of feminist standpoint theory, ontological considerations lead away from what for CR resembles a specific aspect of epistemology – the who and why questions (Peter 2003, 99) – namely a focus on the contextual and performative aspects of knowledge production. Feminist standpoint theory and, as I would argue, the largest part of contemporary feminism are sceptical of claims about the solidity of scientific processes precisely because they want to highlight the (potentially) omitted aspects. For them, 'avoiding oppression' is not about a positive (universal) goal, but about 'accommodating the potential contestedness of needs' (Peter 2003, 99). This requires a destabilization of (potentially all) existing perspectives in order to make place for that, which is (potentially) not represented or even representable. *Ontologies are positive* inasmuch they confine the basic features of reality and as they establish these confines, they are already dangerous for feminist standpoint theory because they limit the fluidity and openness of critique.

Understanding the antagonism in the debate between CR and standpoint theory does not answer why the latter boasts such a strong drive towards this specific collapse of ontology into epistemology. If we seek to evade the danger of perpetuating the circle of arguments for and against ontology apparent in the discussion between Lawson and feminist standpoint theorists, we have to abandon 'our' CR perspective to some part and try to see

things from the angle of feminist standpoint theory. We must see that we cannot reduce the problems to philosophy of science and conflicting ontologies, as this would automatically thwart any kind of dialogue. In order to begin the dialogue, we should partially step away from CR metatheory and approach the implicit and explicit assumptions of feminist standpoints.

2.2. *Feminist standpoints, patriarchal Othering and the materiality of difference*

A good entry point is *patriarchal Othering*. Beauvoir (1956, 16) first described it in a rather general and phenomenological way and much of recent feminism has expanded theoretically on her notion (implicitly or explicitly). For CR, Gunnarsson (2016) has thematised the concept. Questioning the role of love in our society (Gunnarsson, 2011b), she argues that 'gendered power and love' can be framed in terms of 'the figure of the *Dominant and its Constitutive Other*' (Gunnarsson 2016, 2). It can be summed up by the idea that 'supposed outside or other of something is in fact constitutive of, hence internal to, this very something' (Gunnarsson 2016, 2). The Other is thus completely different from the Dominant, in fact it is difference sans phrase. This othered difference is linked with patriarchal oppression – women *are* the Other, they *are* difference. This amounts to a *quasi-materialism* that goes beyond the metatheoretical dispute on essence between poststructuralist and realist accounts of feminist standpoints (New 1998, 362ff).

The feminist standpoint of difference is often misunderstood to be mainly about 'epistemological privilege' (New 1998, 368). While epistemology may be the terrain of much explicit contestation, we should acknowledge the peculiar materiality of difference. Many feminists indeed argue that this reduction to non-materiality is exactly the problem, specifically: socialist feminists, in their fight against patriarchy being a 'secondary contradiction' (cf. Winslow 2007) in comparison to the principal contradiction of class; radical feminists, in their insistence that female 'difference' does not just mean being 'different from' the male (oedipal) model (Gilligan 1982, 24ff); and deconstructivist feminists, in their fight against the oppressive aspect of the production of the 'abject' materiality of the (feminine) body (Butler 1993, 3f). These kinds of negations of materiality point to a *sui generis* 'negative' ontology relevant for feminism. It cannot be grasped in terms of a positive description of something with clear (spatio-temporal and categorical) boundaries and hence it cannot be clearly framed as an ontology. To the contrary, it is at odds with ontological considerations. It is nevertheless material and therefore ontologically relevant.

How can CR make sense of this 'othered' *materiality of difference*? Apparently it cannot do so by holding it to be a 'normal' intransitive object – its materiality is not that of an 'object A' or a 'generative mechanism B', but is in a strange way fluid and evading. Judith Butler noticed introspectively that 'trying to consider the materiality of the body' led her to 'find that the thought of materiality invariably moved [her] into other domains' (Butler 1993, ix) – and this indeed seems to be a key to understanding the problem. The articulation of a *feminist standpoint* evades its clear formulation in realist terms, as it seems to be essentially conjoined with difference. Ontological and epistemological problematics are intertwined, which is a problem for CR's desire to establish clear-cut ontological frameworks and I would go even further and argue that it is implicitly problematic for most strands of CR. This does not mean that all feminist desiderata are incompatible with CR. Neither does it mean that we should abandon critical naturalism and its

emergent-power materialism which, amongst other things, yields a specific understanding of the materiality of the categories 'sex' and (consequently) 'women' (Gunnarsson 2011a). However, we should acknowledge that traditional CR approaches omit something that has a genuine material relevance for feminism.

A key obstacle to the deepening of the dialogue on the materiality of difference between CR and much of contemporary feminism thought is certainly the latter's implicit or explicit poststructuralist foundation. The othered feminist standpoint connects to an understanding of difference that has been heavily criticized by CR. Alan Norrie (Norrie 2010) offers a convincing discussion of the poststructuralist thought on difference that traces it back to the thought of Derrida and Deleuze. *Derrida's* usage of difference is liable to an epistemic reductionism. He seeks to deconstruct unitary systems – especially totalities – with his concept of *différance*. This directly attacks (Hegelian) dialectics, but it also remains within its limits. Deconstruction seeks to 'erase' all positive meaning (Norrie 2010, 187), which it holds to be logocentric and instead seeks to institute radical difference as such. In its legitimate attempt to radically foreground the power-structured nature of discourse, it is too general and reproduces an actualist and irrealist worldview (Norrie 2010, 187). Its overly epistemic focus on difference makes judgemental rationality impossible as it 'erases' the real structured grounds of oppression and justice (Norrie 2010, 189). *Deleuze* has a different understanding of difference that is more ontological. It seeks to privilege non-being over being and thus overcome difference's tie to the (Hegelian) contradiction that arises when we think in terms of identity and its negation (Norrie 2010, 196). It thus ontologizes difference as representing both non-being and negation, stasis and change. Difference thus ultimately represents an ontology of radical indeterminacy and change.⁴ Norrie criticizes this ontology for its flatness and unstructured form and accuses Deleuzian difference of being 'ubiquitous in time and space' and thus 'so over-inclusive and under-determining as to be unserious about its real possibility' (Norrie 2010, 205).

I agree with Norrie's critique of both Derrida and Deleuze and the respective epistemologically and ontologically reductive notions of differences. The poststructuralist instance that the foregrounding of radical difference is the 'deepest level of critique' (Norrie 2010, 212) render many important forms of critique impossible. Moreover, its metatheoretical instance – that there is nothing but difference – is paradoxically triumphantly positive and determinist on its own terms. However, the material alteration that the feminist usage of poststructuralist metatheory implies does something to the theme of difference. It establishes an intrinsic connection to a social totality that is insufficiently grasped by metatheories that do not account for the gendered character of difference. These metatheories thus remain universalist in their insistence on a 'general' and 'non-gendered' theory. In DCR's terminology, this is about the relation of *metacritiques* ₁ and ₂, that is, the way that a general critique of philosophy bears on the 'relationship between philosophical problems and underlying social relations' (Norrie 2010, 183). I will now explain how DCR can help to resolve this conundrum.

2.3. Difference, relationality and dialectics

I believe that this theme takes us to the limits of classical CR. Difference in its feminist appropriation obviously has to do with a qualification of relations – one thing/structure

differs from another because it relates to, but is not the same as, the other. Difference tells us about the character of relationality and here *dialectics* come into play. It is not until the development of DCR that Bhaskar thoroughly addresses the problem of relationality, which indicates that original CR's partially succumbs to what was criticized as ontological monovalence. Bhaskar argues that original CR or '1M'-CR – which I would prefer to call 'analytical CR'⁵ – 'abstracts from space, time and the process of change' as it is 'indifferent to difference' and thus it is liable to result in 'ontological externalism', that is, it denies the existence of 'internal relationality'⁶ (Bhaskar 2008a, 8–9). He further acknowledges that this denial is forcibly 'subsuming a particular under a universal without mediation' (Bhaskar 2008a, 9). The motive of difference is therefore connected to that of a relation to another thing and its overarching affiliation with a given totality of relations of relations. Here, critical dialectical theory of society⁷ and DCR depart: for the former, totality is an ordering of relations in a concrete time-space formation that has to do with specific types of contradictions (that is, real determinate negations) internal to these relations; for the latter, totalities are connected to the theme of absence and hence an axiological moment, a 'concrete utopianism' (Bhaskar 2008a, 8).

I see this utopianism as the imposition of yet another (ethical) positivity – '[w]hat should be disclosed as a work of product and process is now presented as already present' (Norrie 2005, 107). It leads away from the concrete, historical aspect of totality that is only negatively attainable, that is, as representation of *historically specific dialectical (internal) relationality of difference*. Difference – as it is relevant for feminist approaches – is not a problem of metatheory but requires a non-universalist dialectical take on *historicity*. This becomes especially evident when we consider the relationality of difference from the perspective of *emergence* and *abstraction* as we find it with original CR. It proposes a concept of emergence that is mainly ontological and based on a synchronic emergent powers materialism (SEPM), that is, it proposes that a complete backward-reduction of lower-order things to higher-order things is not possible (Bhaskar 1998, 107f). The classical example is that of emergence from natural to social matters. Person A can be seen as a product of the emergent properties of natural mechanism I (the category human), natural mechanism II (the category sex) social mechanism III (the category gender) and social mechanism IV (the category sexuality). Neither is reducible to the other, but nevertheless there is an emergent causal relation between I–IV. Emergence is thus only possible if it is accompanied by stratification, that is, the fact that mechanisms 'belong to different layers or strata of reality, and furthermore, these strata are hierarchically organized' (Danermark et al. 2002, 59). This can equally be expressed in terms of abstraction – a term usually associated with the conceptual development of causal emergence. One can then abstract from IV to I, but not the other way round. This *one-way-abstraction*, which is essential for the CR notion of structures as inter- and independent ontological entities, must be defended. However, it has the major drawback that it cannot itself explain the property and (potential) causal efficacy of: (a) the interrelation between different emergent layers and strata; and (b) the intrarelation of a thing. This would require an understanding of a social whole that defines the relations but is itself not determined solely by intrarelations, that is, itself a 'thing' or 'structure'. Such an understanding implies a very different, negative theorization of abstraction. We cannot think such a whole as something static or positive and ultimately independent from relationality. Rather we should see how relationality connects to dialectics as result of concrete historical conditions. For example, the nature of

(gendered) difference is a feature of a societal totality that produces ‘othering’, whilst it is materially relevant, it is not a directly attainable aspect of reality (Flatschart 2012). We need a theoretical representation of totality as delimitation of the causal properties of the materiality of relationality; but we have to account for how relationality and difference are historically conjoined and how the nature of their peculiar coalescence affects the possibility of metatheoretical abstractions (such as thingness, intra-action and structuredness).

In the following section, I will discuss two important paradigms in contemporary feminism – intersectionality (IS) and the New Materialisms (NM) – and in so doing I will justify my argument that much of CR misses the materiality of difference as it insufficiently treats its gendered, negative historical character. I will do so in a double movement: first, I will use CR to inform a critical examination of difference in IS and NM; and second, I will coalesce this examination with a discussion of CR’s lacuna concerning the relevant stakes that both IS and NM raise when it comes to difference.

3. Struggling with the intersectional relationality of difference

For a CR readership, IS was introduced by the paper of Martinez, Martin and Marlow in the *Journal of Critical Realism* (Martinez, Martin, and Marlow 2014). They define it as an ‘interdisciplinary approach to analysing the concurrent impacts of social structures, with a focus on theorizing how belonging to multiple exclusionary social categories can influence political access and equality’ (Martinez, Martin, and Marlow 2014, 447). The pluralization of perspectives on oppression has indeed been the overarching aim of IS, which originated in the black feminist movement’s insistence on the difference between the experiences of the bourgeois, white woman and those of a marginalized black woman (cf. Crenshaw 1991, 1244ff). This connects to the theme of difference – it is the search for those who are othered that informs the question of the ‘inter’ (cf. Collins 1986, 18). IS focuses on the *effects* of oppression and thus underlines difference as a category to deconstruct power relations. The relationship between *experiences*, *categories* and *structures* of oppression relevant for IS has to do with the way relations, intra/interaction and structures are approached.

Original authors like Kimberle Crenshaw use the word ‘structure’ in their foundational arguments for the necessity to acknowledge the intersection of different experiences of oppression. From the perspective of CR, their understanding of structure is problematic as it does not denominate causal mechanisms, but only focuses on their performative outcomes. In line with ‘postmodern theory’, it seeks to deconstruct causal structures ‘by tracing categories to their intersections’ in order to ‘ultimately disrupt the tendencies to see [them] as exclusive or separate’ (cf. Crenshaw 1991, 1244). It can be argued that their usage of the term ‘category’ is more sound than their usage of the term ‘structure’. Much in line with Derridean deconstruction, original authors like Crenshaw sought to destabilize the very regime of separation that produces difference.

I consider IS to be a provisional concept that links contemporary politics with postmodern theory. In mapping the intersections of race and gender, the concept does engage dominant assumptions that race and gender are essentially separate categories. By tracing the categories to their intersections, I hope to suggest a methodology that will ultimately disrupt the tendencies to see race and gender as exclusive or separable (Crenshaw 1991, 1244).

Crenshaw adheres to a methodology that has its roots in a critique of categories, not structures. It is this ‘anticategorical’ (Mccall 2005, 1773) baseline of many researchers who operated with IS that causes difficulties.⁸ The usage of ‘categories of oppression’ does not articulate representations of a real substratum; it is the basis for deconstruction. As a variant of poststructuralist thought that shares affinities with the Deriddean understanding of difference, it suffers from similar deficits. It is liable to a ‘rationalization of the denial of ontology, and the collapse of an intransitive dimension’ (Bhaskar 1998, 147) and thereby confines social analysis to the domain of the actual.⁹ *Anticategoricalism* restricts intersectional analysis to: difference of position; identity; and powers/liabilities endowed to subjectivities.

3.1. Critical realism, IS and the relationality of difference

CR critics of IS (Gunnarsson 2011a, 29; Martinez, Martin, and Marlow 2014, 450) have argued that this kind of restriction harbours an implicit *defence of positivism*, as the real genesis of the categories is not questioned but taken for granted. The broader metatheoretical theme was first theorized by Bhaskar, who maintained that much western thought remains with the dilemma of a search for *identity*, or the other way around, puzzled with the theme of non-identity (Bhaskar 2008a, 193). This is the difference and commonality between positivism and post-structuralism: the former defends a simple and closed concept of identity; the latter anxiously tries to subvert it, but ultimately remains negatively connected to the positivist ontological tension. The theme of difference is thus posed as a result of this tension, which is indeed a symptom of a problem that goes beyond positivism as a particular philosophical strand. It is part of the broad tendency of *ontological monovalence* (Bhaskar 2008a, 4). The critique of ontological monovalence argues that change and negation of that which is present and positive have always been insufficiently treated in science and metatheory.¹⁰ This contention is both valid and important for the theme of this article. Anticategorical IS remains trapped in the logic of *positivity*, while aspiring to attain knowledge about something that goes beyond positivity, that is, the *relationality of difference*, which is intrinsically welded with the theme of *change*.¹¹ It cannot sufficiently account for the real nature of the relationality of different intersections as it remains stuck with actualisations of relations – usually the identity of a person or mid-scale entity. Anticategorical IS remains actualist and bound by an ontology of positivity that cannot differentiate between *structural and relational domains*. This is why it struggles with the ‘completeness of the set of groups that constitutes a category’ (Mccall 2005, 1778) instead of approaching the relatively stable character of historical structures of oppression that form a ‘laminated system’ (cf. Bhaskar 2010, 7ff). Because it is incapable of *abstraction*, it confounds the process-dimension of relationality that is at the heart of the motive of difference with the stasis-dimension that necessarily comes with considerations of identities, privileges or subjectivities to which difference is ‘attributed’. The ontological status of both stasis and change remain underexplained as explicit ontological considerations are discarded in an overarching critique of essentialism and separationalism.

What remains of the *relationality of difference* is the double nature of intersections. The concept of IS references two types of relationships: the interconnectedness of ideas and the social structures in which they occur; and the intersecting hierarchies of gender, race, economic class, sexuality and ethnicity. Viewing gender within a logic of IS redefines

it as a constellation of ideas and practices that are historically situated within and that mutually construct multiple systems of oppression (Collins 2000b, 263).

The second intersection encompasses the ontology of structures and can benefit from a CR theorization. The first refers to the intersection of epistemological and ontological matters in which the theme of difference pertaining to the problem of *relationality* is predominant. It seems to be at odds with CR's assertion that ontology and epistemology need to be strictly separated as it maintains a sort of direct 'interconnectedness of ideas and the social structures in which they occur'. The argument most frequently takes the form of a critique of 'objectivity, rationality and abstraction' (Collins 2000b, 271) – qualities usually associated with the male universal and hegemonic domain, in both thought and reality (cf. Lloyd 1993, xii).

3.2. Historicity and materiality in feminist understandings of difference

To avoid the abovementioned trap – the reduction of the first kind of intersection to a mere epistemological problem – we should acknowledge that its materiality is determined by the historical, non-determinate character of relationality. As shown above, the challenges of the relationality of difference induce dialectics and its transcendence of one-way-abstraction. It is exactly the materially 'patriarchal' character of one-way-abstraction that pervades IS's strong impulse to argue for the inseparability of relations (Gunnarsson 2015, 9).¹² It is assumed that the universalized understanding of abstraction is connected to a kind of dualist thinking that affirms that something can only be either the one or the other. This critique of 'binaries' attributes power effects to the formulation of such separations as 'men/women' or 'white/black'. It thus attacks all 'Western' scientific inference as a mode that automatically privileges one (the concrete research object) over the other and thereby objectifies that which should not be objectified as 'difference ... defined in oppositional terms' (Collins 2000a, 70; 2000b, 70).¹³ It is only consequential that for IS, 'abstracting one category from concrete reality while putting others aside amounts to a violation of the complexity of reality' (Gunnarsson 2015, 10). The reason for this urge to retain inseparability is however not a general commitment to complexity. It is to be found with the nature of *materiality*. Materiality needs to be concrete and attributable to othered entities. For 'universalist' metatheories like CR, the concrete is never something intrinsic or immediate, it is at best a quality attributed in opposition to abstractness and thus related to the one-way-abstraction via its terminal focus, that is, its ultimate necessity to come to one present entity. As shown before, the resulting understanding of materiality requires a topology of finite or self-identical objects. It is this identical character that is challenged by IS as it is liable to ascribe essential qualities to those objects. The notion of difference is set against *essentialism*, as it is in contradiction to metatheoretical unity and identity, which are the salient points of any positive metatheoretical framework.¹⁴

I agree with Lena Gunnarsson that unity and difference are not necessarily exclusive categories, and that 'there is a remarkable lack of clarity in much feminist work as to the difference between mere distinction or difference on the one hand and dualism or binary on the other' (Gunnarsson 2015, 9). Her advocacy for a perspective that embraces both unity and difference is conclusive just as her critique of poststructuralist/constructionist feminism in general is important. I would however approach *unity-in-difference* from another point of view. I want to emphasize that IS's problem of difference is not about

a metatheoretical choice between essentialism/realism and constructionism/post-structuralism. Rather, it is about seeing that the ‘tension produced by the essentialist/constructionist debate [...] is constitutive of the field of feminist theory’ (Fuss 1989, 1) precisely because it often represents a one-sided view of difference. This one-sidedness is a product of the concrete standpoint feminists represent and defend, but this standpoint is relevant beyond its content. It indicates a performative problem. Specifically, the concreteness of a specific historic embeddedness and the materiality of its standpoint resemble a form of immediateness and inseparability that may be questioned metatheoretically, but that remains important because it points towards the question of historicity. We should embrace unity and difference, but a kind of difference that is othered, gendered and historically material. *Historicity* thus becomes more than a general feature of social entities. It is not reducible to formal distinctions between social entities but relates to difference as a feature of the concrete materiality of historical totality. It is this ‘othered’ aspect of historicity that intrinsically relates to the feminist agenda and dialectics.

A CR approach is in many ways superior to the (anticategorical) mainstream of IS, especially when it comes to the theorization of different structures of oppression. CR should however acknowledge that the IS struggle with the relationality of difference points to a dimension that is hard to accommodate in ‘original’ CR and entails dialectical considerations. Other than in DCR, with its metatheoretical and normative impetus, the kind of ‘concrete’ difference that IS thematises, in order to expand and correct feminist standpoints, is about the problem of historicity. The relationality of difference is historically material and eludes metatheory. It is at odds with (analytical) one-way-abstractions and indicates dialectics as a possible remedy to the IS inability to abstract from a static understanding of the relationality of difference.

4. New materialist radicalizations of the materiality of difference

It is the grave defect of IS that it tries to attain knowledge about relations but lacks the tools to access their materiality. Difference often remains purely symbolical as it is retracted to the domain of language and linguistic concepts of performativity. While seeking to preserve the anti-essentialist and deconstructive impulse of IS, NM tries to re-open the (feminist) debate in areas that were categorically excluded by classical post-structuralist agendas – nature, the body, materiality and the status of things vs actors.¹⁵ This can be understood as a new accentuation of the *materiality of difference*.

4.1. NM's (ethico-)ontoe pistemology

Concerning the general problem of ontological underpinnings, NM advances a novel position because it explicitly admits ontology. In its critique of linguistic approaches, NM seeks to establish a ‘materialist turn’ that foregrounds questions of matter, substance and things. It does so by resorting to a Deleuzian *monism*, that is, a radical understanding of immanence (Dolphijn and Van Der Tuin 2012b, 85). This brings matter back in, but as an ontogenetic self-organized entity that is neither localized nor substantially fixed (Folkers 2013, 25). NM thus proposes a vitalist and contingent *agential realism* (Barad 2003) that reframes the materiality of difference by introducing a novel and explicit ontology.

NM argues against the (Cartesian) separation of mind and matter and thereby seeks to destabilize humans as 'rational, self-aware, free and self-moving agents' (Coole and Frost 2010, 8).¹⁶ The resulting anti-anthropocentrism is significantly different from that upheld by CR. It does not build on a transcendental realism – an 'ontology of transfactually potent and active structures' (Bhaskar 2009, 68) – but offers a vision of immanence in nature that is *post-humanist* in a quasi-political way. An example of NM's anti-anthropocentrism can be found in Donna Haraway's work on the interaction of species in which she undermines the idea that only humans can be subjects and have/make history. She achieves this by radically problematizing the category subject itself (Haraway 2008, 67). The post-humanist destruction of any distinction between mind and matter is just one example of its radically contingent and fluid ontology. IS's anticategorical deconstruction of differences was still bound to a positivism of present discourses, structures and reality and troubled with its relationality. I have demonstrated how CR metatheory can overcome the ontological problems of IS by insisting on a depth ontology. I have also argued that CR, like IS, remains puzzled with the problem of relationality of difference. NM innovatively deals with both problems by repudiating them. Following the concept of *assemblage* first coined by Deleuze and Guattari (2005, 4) – that significantly inspires NM (cf. DeLanda 2006) – it denounces the search for any kind of real pattern of things in the world and holds them to be contingently related and defined without any essential qualities (DeLanda 2012, 4). This effectively constitutes a *flat ontology* that 'contains nothing but differently scaled *individual singularities*' [original emphasis] (DeLanda 2012, 28). While IS maintains a deconstructive approach that turns the material problem of relationality into a problem of the incompleteness of positive statements about things and thereby could not avoid positivity (while troubled with difference and negativity), NM eschews this epistemological trap by debunking any kind of separation between ontology and epistemology. This is evident in its radical critique of *representationalism*, that is, the assumption that the relation between categories and things matters for philosophy of science (Barad 2003, 804). NM therefore abandons the problem of a separation between epistemology and ontology. It does so by explicitly drawing on a Humean concept of contingent relations between ideas and impressions which leads to the consequence that 'the main territorializing process providing the assemblage with a stable identity is habitual repetition' (DeLanda 2012, 50). By simply arguing that there is no difference between agents and things and knowing and the known, NM assumes that it has overcome the problem of the relationality of difference that puzzled IS. The result is called *agential realism*.

On my agential realist elaboration, phenomena do not merely mark the epistemological inseparability of 'observer' and 'observed'; rather, *phenomena are the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting 'components.'* [original emphasis] (Barad 2003, 815)

The concept of agential realism – the agency of things – is crucial for understanding NM's (partial) dismissal of IS's anticategorical stance. Categories or 'things' that went with them are not deconstructed for not sufficiently representing the complexity of relations and the agents produced at their intersection. The question of relationality is simply retracted 'into' things themselves. There are only things and they are at the same time acted upon and acting and they represent an *onto-epistemology* that – in terms of agential questions like that of feminism – transforms into an '*ethico-ontoepistemology*' [original emphasis]

(Dolphijn and Van Der Tuin 2012a, 68). Agential and ethical questions are conjoined with those of philosophy of science in an immediatist way – the peculiarity of axiology as opposed to ontology or epistemology is rejected. The materiality of reality thus qualifies as the ‘contracting condition of determination and the dilating expression of indetermination’ (Grosz 2010, 151), material states or things are at once determinate and indeterminate and this also goes for actors and their freedom. Agential freedom links ‘not to choice’, but rather ‘pertains to the realm of actions, processes, and events that are not contained within, or predictable from, the present’ (Grosz 2010, 152). Elizabeth Grosz gives us the example of gayness, which is for her ‘neither produced from causes [...] nor is it the consequence of free choice’ (Grosz 2010, 153), it simply is as it is in process and freedom has to do with the acknowledgement of its movement.

4.2. A critical realist critique of relationality in NM

Although this monism might at first seem to be a pleasing way out of many problems that come with thinking in ‘dualities’, it significantly obstructs the feasibility of metatheory. If all dualities relate to one ‘process of self-making’ (Grosz 2010, 152) of which we are part and which is at the same time outside of us, the question of relations – chiefly that of ontology and epistemology – becomes secondary. According to CR and its transcendental argument, science can only be possible if ontology and epistemology, specifically the intransitive and transitive domains, are kept separate (Bhaskar 2009, 16) as it is only this separation that makes new scientific knowledge production possible and averts static positivity. Taking it further, only the separation (of two things) makes a relation between them and consequently change possible. Thinking otherwise means committing ontological monovalence, or what Bhaskar calls ‘token monism’ (Bhaskar 2008a, 41), as it buttresses an ‘ideology of categorical (including epistemological) stasis’ (Bhaskar 2008a, 44). What distinguishes the NM monism from others is its purported rejection of stasis. It claims to be non-static as it openly embraces fluidity. As I have argued elsewhere (Flatschart 2013, 99ff), this builds on the double move of an appropriation of two distinct strands of thought, Bachelardian epistemology and Bersonian ontology. The former ‘empties’ the real substance of objects by assuming that they are ‘produced rather than induced’ (Bachelard 2002, 108), the latter makes any immediate take on them impossible as they are always in a constant flux – a ‘pure duration’ (Bergson 2002, 61) – that combines us and the world in a *state of change*. The important thing is that this state of change really is static. Speaking about an object or a category implies that the object is defined by certain features that establish its internal delimitation. If we argue that A is affected by sexist oppression, then we make two statements: (1) that A is currently affected by the incriminated state; and (2) that this state presently does not change (but might in the future). Arguing that A’s state is always already in change effectively either denies that this state is really the case or prolongs it eternally, as it always has to be the case. One way or the other, stasis is the result as absolute contingency prevails. This effective stasis remains obscured as it is meant to be the same as change. We somehow have and have not access to it, as we are directly related to it and are and an inseparable part of it. The result is scientific practice that is prone to resort to ‘intuition in action’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 409) when seeking to acquire materiality and is thus in a state of ‘virtual coexistence with itself’ (Deleuze 2001, 80).

It should be clear that ‘onto-epistemology’ poses serious problems for the question that is important for IS – the *distinction of things and relations*. In effect, there cannot be any distinction between both, yet we still have two concepts (as we need them, CR would argue). The solution lies – as often in NM – in the introduction of a neologism, *thingification*.

Thingification – the turning of relations into ‘things,’ ‘entities,’ ‘relata’ – infects much of the way we understand the world and our relationship to it. Why do we think that the existence of relations requires relata? [...] I present a relational ontology that rejects the metaphysics of relata, of ‘words’ and ‘things.’ (Barad 2003, 812)

The relation of things and relations shall be overcome by introducing a new particular (thing or category – we cannot say), ‘thingification’. NM claims to abandon (de-)constructivism, yet it can be accused of playing a language game itself. While semantically introducing ‘material’ categories, it remains constructivist as these categories have no real reference, are solely language constructions. It constitutes a ‘material-discursive’ (Barad 2003, 810) in a reductionist sense, as it refers to no other material structures than discursive ones (cf. Flatschart 2016, 5). We cannot evade talking about things or structures and relating them to each other. That is why *intra-action* – another neologism that, according to Barad, demarcates a revolutionary intervention and thus characterizes NM – is framed equally vaguely as the concept of ‘thingification’. Barad (ibid) explains that the notion of *intra-action* represents a profound conceptual shift. A specific *intra-action*, that involves a specific material configuration of the ‘apparatus of observation’, enacts an agential cut that effects a separation between ‘subject’ and ‘object’. This contrasts with a Cartesian cut, which is an inherent distinction between subject and object. She states that:

Crucially then, *intra-actions* enact *agential separability* – the local condition of *exteriority-within-phenomena*. [...]. Moreover, the agential cut enacts a local causal structure among ‘components’ of a phenomenon in the marking of the ‘measuring agencies’ (‘effect’) by the ‘measured object’ (‘cause’). Hence, *the notion of intra-actions constitutes a reworking of the traditional notion of causality*. [original emphasis] (Barad 2003, 815)

The crucial question is what defines ‘intra’. In DCR, Bhaskar introduces the concept of *intra-action* to qualify internal relations of a totality (of dialectical relations) (Bhaskar 2008a, 114). This however presupposes that there are also external relations and that things that can relate. If we abandon things and their relations in the first place, there is absolutely no-thing, nothing referable that could define the ‘intra’. Consequentially, there is no origin for an ‘agential cut’ that could separate things, as there is no causal basis that qualifies as thing (or relation). If there is no definable category of gender, how can we arrive at ‘male’ and ‘female’ (genders)? Speaking of *intra-actions* of a gender system and their causal efficacy can only make sense if its real character is as such attainable and if we can refer to particular causal mechanisms (of a thing). This brings us back to the problem of *abstraction*. In its monism, IS essentially avoids abstraction. But unlike IS’ anticategorical refusal of abstraction – that still remains negatively tied to its contradictory core in relationality – NM reifies the problem. It thereby mystifies the materiality of gendered difference, whilst claiming to have a material and ontological ‘solution’ readily at hand.

4.3. The materiality of difference revisited

When we scrutinize the materiality of difference, we see how NM ends up in a conceptual and practical one-way street. It explicitly cherishes *difference* as being: the essence of its departure from classical ontologies; the driving force of its view on materiality; and, ultimately, the motive of its understanding of practice. This is evident in Elisabeth Grosz' assessment that we need to 'enable more action, more making and doing, more difference' (Grosz 2010, 154). Difference is however not negative or qualified in any other way, it just 'is'. Gilles Deleuze's work on difference, which is elementary for NM's ontology, may help to elucidate things. He writes:

When the identity of things dissolves, being escapes to attain univocity, and begins to revolve around the different. That which is or returns has no prior constituted identity: things are reduced to the difference which fragments them, and to all the differences which are implicated in it and through which they pass. [...] For eternal return, affirmed in all its power, allows no installation of a foundation-ground. On the contrary, it swallows up or destroys every ground which would function as an instance responsible for the difference between the original and the derived, between things and simulacra. (Deleuze 1995, 67)

Deleuze's take on difference can be read as an attempt to defend it as ultimate category – there 'is' nothing but difference and difference only produces difference as there is no ground but difference. What sounds like a paradoxical word game has an implicit material motive: the abandonment of the 'difference between', that is, the assumption that there are two different things that can be differentiated. This abandonment is necessary if any notion of (separate) things is to be overcome. In a way, this may be interpreted as a radical and robust way of underlining the materiality of difference: there cannot be anything other than the 'other' represented by difference. NM then seeks to foster a feminist standpoint and its connection to the materiality of difference by 'give[ing] witness to the suppressed differences, contingencies and possibilities housed within each moment, not as an attempt to provide a new solidity, but as the preservation of liquidity and heteronomy itself' (Rutzou 2015, 56). If defending feminism means defending difference, NM offers the most radical defence of all.

Besides the abovementioned metatheoretical difficulties that may be criticized from a CR perspective, there are also problems with the feminist representation of the materiality of difference. The insistence on a monism defined by difference implies Deleuzian univocity. An attempt to rewrite 'sexual difference and sexuality not by means of dualist premises, but as a practical philosophy in which difference in itself comes to being' (Dolphijn and Van Der Tuin 2012c, 141) cannot avoid an infinity of ways to express this 'new' understanding of the materiality of difference. It may easily neglect concrete historical differences that reproduce 'old' patriarchal dualisms and their material oppressiveness (cf. Ahmed 2008, 28ff).

While NM can be understood as an attempt to represent difference even more radically than IS, by giving it ultimate ontological weight, it moves away from the problem of *historicity*, which is, I argue, the baseline of the materiality of difference in feminism. NM's monism is radically anti-historical as it thinks in assemblages that confound human historicity – that is, a specific qualification of processes in time/space – with 'everything that processes': the 'term 'historical' is 'referring to cosmological and evolutionary history in addition to human history' (DeLanda 2006, 28). As the example of agency has shown,

this effectively obstructs theorization of the specificity of human history and its dialectical relation to societal totalities. I therefore contend that NM obstructs feminist emancipatory agendas; just as it obstructs attempts to integrate the gendered materiality of difference with a coherent metatheory like CR.

5. Conclusion

Difference remains a contested theme that is interpreted in various ways. I have tried to show that a feminist reading of difference touches upon an eluding materiality that can be traced back to the fundamental backbone of many feminist approaches, namely, the assumption of a feminist standpoint linked to (patriarchal) oppression and its othering mechanisms. Stressing relationality, feminist standpoint theories are critical of ontology and highlighting difference. This makes close ties between many feminisms and CR difficult. I argued that we need dialectics in order to make sense of this peculiar relationality of difference and maintained that DCR is insufficiently capable of representing the dialectical relationality of difference, as it does not acknowledge that a move away from metatheory towards historicity is necessary in order to represent its materiality.

I tried to corroborate this claim by critically discussing how difference is represented in IS and NM. 'Anticategorical' IS struggles with the relationality of difference. In its attempt to represent difference in a most non-identical way, it reifies the actualisations of relationality and remains incapable of theorizing emergent structures. Its double understanding of intersections however articulates a dimension that goes beyond traditional CR – the historicity of the relationality of difference, which conjoins with a gendered materiality. I interpreted NM as a current that continues where IS left off. It explicitly turns towards the materiality of difference and develops a novel monist ontology around it that aspires to abolish all dualist separations, chiefly that between epistemology and ontology. Although this is at odds with CR and yields many problematic conclusions, we can learn from NM motives. Its agential realist rejection of things and relationality can be understood as an attempt to represent the hidden gendered materiality of difference in a most radical, 'material' way. I contended that NM ultimately fails in its objectives because its ontology – *inter alia* – forsakes historicity.

In this article, I was only abstractly able to indicate the negative dialectics of difference as expression of historicity and gendered materiality. I pointed towards the critical theory tradition and its understanding of dialectics that is in many ways on par with DCR but also exhibits diverging characteristics like the assumption that a non-identical, othered aspect of dialectics cannot be expressed in metatheoretical terms. The German feminist materialist debate in the tradition of the Frankfurt School has contributed important insights on this topic. Notable authors that deserve attention include: Regina Becker-Schmidt, who recently engaged with the topic (Becker-Schmidt 2016); and Gudrun-Axeli Knapp, who developed her perspective in dialogue with other feminisms (Knapp 1988). An interesting approach is provided by Roswitha Scholz, whose theorem of value-dissociation (Scholz 2014) explicitly deals with the problem of abstraction and discusses it in the light of a theory of real-abstraction (Scholz 2011). The theme of difference, gender and dialectics requires more attention – a discussion of gendered negative dialectics vis-à-vis DCR would be advantageous for both CR and feminist theory.

Notes

1. I thank the two reviewers for their constructive criticism and valuable suggestions.
2. Notwithstanding important endeavours to change this – a major milestone is the recent special issue of the *Journal of Critical Realism* (Gunnarsson et al. 2016) that incorporates many important and topical contributions.
3. This is certainly the case in much recent feminism with its strong focus on intersectionality, deconstruction and particularities. It certainly does not apply to all kinds of feminisms, especially not older materialist versions, e.g. Jónasdóttir (1991).
4. This will become relevant in the discussion of NM.
5. I consider *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* to be an impressive book because of the step towards the 'dialectization' of CR. However, I do not agree with one of its core pillars, the philosophy of absence, and the consequent scheme of different 'layers' in the development of CR (1M, 2E, 3L, 4D). To the contrary, for me, the core distinction is the one between positivity and negativity, stasis and change, things and their changing relationship and ultimately analytical and dialectical modes of meta-theoretical thinking.
6. Relationality that matters here is internal, as it is only internality that expresses the essential (real) holistic character of a relation represented in a thing. I could, for example, establish a relation between the oppression of women and rainfall in the Mekong delta in Vietnam. This relation is obviously a pure construction not (socially) material and it does therefore not matter. It would be a mistake to assume that relations are always only (ex-post) constructions, as our way of ordering the relevance of relations is itself (implicitly) socially grounded in societal totality. How so has much to do with the process of abstraction and its real character.
7. With this I mean materialist approaches that have tried to understand society as a totality and its social relations as dialectical contradictions. The most elaborated version of this strand of thought can probably be found in the work of the Frankfurt School, particularly that of Adorno (1973). Recent endeavours like that of Ollman (2003) also deserve attention.
8. I want to emphasize that not all positions in IS agree on anticategoricalism, my critique is certainly only partially relevant for intra- and intercategory approaches that often have very different agendas. As anticategoricalism is aligned with poststructuralist metatheory and much of feminism is still dominated by the latter, the critique of the anticategorical approach is, as I believe, addressing the majority of IS scholarship that exists to date.
9. This form of the epistemic fallacy, which Roy Bhaskar termed the 'linguistic fallacy' (Bhaskar 1998, 147) has obviously much to do with a discursivist perspective on social science. While the meta-theoretical connection to discourse theory and its specific form of a contingency-centred approach is evident, it is not at the heart of the problem of IS as I want to highlight it in this paper. I will therefore not follow this thread. For a general critique of discourse-reductionism see (Flatschart 2016).
10. Bhaskar pushes this critique further to institute his understanding of absence, which he somewhat prioritises over presence (Bhaskar 2008a, 36). Ontological monovalence then is not only about the evasion of difference and change, but also about the exemption of real determinate absence. I do not concur with this move, but believe that the critique of monovalence can still be employed fruitfully.
11. Change and relationality are so closely associated because the concept of relationality is per se one that encompasses a different theoretical topology than that of structures, identities and positivities. A relation is something that is between (at least) two things that are assumed to exist positively at a specific time and in a particular position in space. While the real existence of things is necessary in order to speak about something as separated from something else, the existence of relationships is crucial for seeing that things are always also connected. Yet if this connection is to be graspable, it must not be reified and thought of as just another 'thing'. Relationality is therefore the representation of the fact that things are changing as they are connected with other things. As such it is causally efficacious in itself, but does not necessarily obstruct our attribution of causal powers to things (as relatively closed positive entities).

12. This is true for anti-categorical approaches, but may be less the case with inter-categorical heuristics such as that of Klinger (2003) and Gudrun-Axeli Knapp (2005), which are however in the minority.
13. This corollary naturally leads to grave difficulties with methodology as some advocates of IS have noticed (Mccall 2005, 1771).
14. 'Positive' here also means qualifying as 'underlabourer' of systematic scientific activity. Much feminist thought cannot and does not aspire to provide a constructive basis for any kind of realist science as it remains de-constructive without any option for reconstructive endeavours.
15. NM is a rather diverse and non-institutionalized trend and positions diverge. Some are similar to CR (Coole 2005); others explicitly attack the foundational assumptions of CR metatheory (Cheah 2008). I centre my explicit reference on the position of Karen Barad, who is an important figure in the movement, but in so doing try to account for fundamental metatheoretical trends that inform most of NM thought.
16. This seriously misunderstands Descartes philosophy – it was a lot more determinist and in fact attributed to both physical and mental phenomena a mechanical ontology of forces, which is represented in Geulincx' metaphor of two clocks that strike at the same time (cf. Russell 2000, 545). It was therefore not Descartes' (social) ontology, but his epistemology that was rational and 'free' – a fact that NM is not surprisingly dismissing, as it is, just like IS, insensitive to the importance of a systematic differentiation between epistemology and ontology.

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Notes on contributor

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