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# What is Your Essentialism is My Immanent Flesh!

## The Ontological Politics of Feminist Epistemology

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**ABSTRACT** This article examines one of the main epistemological frameworks that feminist theory has used for the past 30 years: essentialism and anti-essentialism. It explores what is at stake by continuing to use such perspectives within the late days of the early 21st century, and how it is linked to a performance of critical sophistication which has specific political consequences. Instead of seeing the body as essentialist, the author draws on two examples – popular musician Kate Bush and ontological ideas about the Goddess – to present the body as immanent flesh. This has implications for thinking through different forms of relational and critical perspectives circulating in the current climate, and the author argues that the recent (re)introduction of affect and the increasing interest in haptic knowledge is part of the immanent flesh's potential for transforming (feminist) knowledge and the wider world.

**KEY WORDS** anti-essentialism ♦ essentialism ♦ Haraway ♦ immanent ♦ Kate Bush ♦ ontology ♦ Starhawk ♦ Stengers

Feminist theory has, over the past 40 years, developed its own canon of established figures and narratives, what Clare Hemmings describes as the practice of 'telling feminist stories' (Hemmings, 2005: 115). This article examines one particular feminist story – essentialism and anti-essentialism – in order to engage with the implications of its fixity within institutional and pedagogical locations. I outline how it operates as a narrative in which to make sense, and make value claims, about the practice of feminist theory in the contemporary context. Through this I engage with questions

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surrounding responsibility and ontology, examining how these issues are bound up with the perpetuation of the essentialism–anti-essentialism debate.

This article covers four areas that enable me to explore these issues in depth. To begin with, I outline the historical and theoretical debates surrounding essentialism–anti-essentialism. In the second part, I move on to examine what is at stake through remaining attached to it as a critical language, through the work of Isabelle Stengers, Clare Hemmings and others. The third part develops the claim that the issue that plagues essentialism–anti-essentialism is primarily an ontological one. I situate this using the example of the British popular musician Kate Bush, whose immanent embodiments of femininity engender an ontological evaluation that reinserts the legitimacy of female bodies within the critical landscape. Considering Bush's work by moving through the vectors of these debates, in particular her first album *The Kick Inside* (1978), which draws upon the divinity of the female body as a creative source, can offer the female body a renewed literacy which is not contained by the threat of essentialism. In the fourth part of the article I speculate what a critical culture grounded in immanent flesh would be like, as I draw upon contemporary critical debates about ontology, affect and haptic intelligence to demonstrate these alternative possibilities.

#### A HISTORY OF 'WOMAN'

The 1970s was a time of radical political reclamations of the 'body of woman', in all her manifold varieties. She was revolutionized by the avant-garde critical writing of Hélène Cixous, who declared that woman must 'write yourself: your body must make itself heard' (Cixous, 1986: 96). Luce Irigaray (1985) similarly drew upon the female body as a suppressed site of onto-political, alternative symbolic wisdom. Both these writers were heavily critiqued in the 1980s by critics such as Toril Moi (1985), who saw such efforts at reclaiming to be nothing less than fixing woman in her metaphysical place.

Within the feminist social movements that swept through the decade in many different countries, a woman's place in society was also under revision. A central tenant of the politics of the UK's Women's Liberation in the 1970s was the redefinition of the role of woman, often explored through consciousness raising groups. Newspapers like *Shrew*, written and disseminated by different groups of the London Women's Liberation Workshop on a rotating monthly basis, offered a space where so-called ordinary women radically reshaped the social and their place within it. Consider this statement, which was the cover piece for issue No. 4 in 1972:

I am becoming aware of my position as a woman, both in society and in terms of my own personal relationships, but awareness and commiseration

with other women is not enough. True sisterhood is not a mutual bargain to protect each other to the point of preventing growth. Solidarity must not become yet another blanket of security, but a framework for development. (*Shrew*, 1972: 1)

The sense of growing and solidarity through personal and collective development – in relation to the ‘I’s ‘position as a woman’ – is a striking aspect of this statement. These words articulate a model of subjects in processes of constant transformation, while avoiding stasis. Commiseration and mere awareness are the limits that must be crossed. Arguably it summarizes an important part of the activities of Women’s Liberation groups which sought to redefine, and substantially transform, women’s roles within the body politic.

Viewing the actions of the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) in this way is a far cry from how it is often told as an inherited feminist story. Perceptions of the WLM often disregard these activities as essentialist, naive and critically unsophisticated, and, by implication, have no ground to base contemporary feminist knowledge politics. This can be evidenced by contemporary critical writing. Alison Stone, for example, has suggested the problems regarding essentialism emerged from the ‘exclusive tendencies within the dominant feminist theories of the 1970s and 1980s, theories that emerged more or less directly from Second Wave Feminism as a political movement’ (Stone, 2004: 85).

Such a statement has become a normative way of inheriting the actions of the WLM, an interpretation that is nonetheless understandable if we account for Eve Setch’s perspective that suggests second wave historiography in the UK is dominated by a privileging of its ‘intellectual legacy’ over its grassroots activities (Setch, 2002: 173). However, this has damaging implications for the circularity of essentialism–anti-essentialism debates because they remain alienated from the mobility of women as political subjects – whatever kind of women they may be – as they redefine their place in the society in different historical contexts.

This circularity continues to have political and epistemological consequences for the usefulness and impact of feminist theory in the present. According to Niamh Moore, essentialism–anti-essentialism theories remain ‘abstract’, yielding ‘little meaning for activists’ (Moore, 2004: 230–1), or for people outside the academy. Hemmings also points out ‘the depth of shame’ (Hemmings, 2005: 118) one experiences when being called an essentialist is second only to being called a relativist, accentuated by virtue of essentialism’s links with the racism of the (supposedly) essentialist 1970s (Brain and Hemmings, 2003). Moore goes on to assert: ‘so dominant has anti-essentialism become in feminist theory that accusations of essentialism have been akin to accusations of not being a “proper” feminist’ (Moore, 2004: 229).

Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero may offer a way out of the difficulties of using words and concepts that become unfashionable, critically maligned or shameful:

... it is necessary to use words with bad intentions (*cattive intenzioni*), situating them in a different context that can overwhelm and recodify them, pushing those terms toward unpredictable meanings. One needs ultimately to use words that are metaphysically compromised – and *ontology* is one of them – to attack the system that produces them and to finally destabilize them. (Cavarero and Bertolino, 2008: 137)

Arguably 'woman' is an example of a word that has become, since the 1980s, 'metaphysically compromised'. Often just mentioning the term, one is seen to be guilty of reinstating a metaphysical essence which a large wealth of deconstructive critical thought has attempted to undo as 'contingent foundations' (Butler and Scott, 1992) became the privileged way to understand subjectivity and knowledge politics.

Understanding the ontological differences of woman is the larger point I want to make in this article. For the ontologies that underpin understanding of matter(s) are important to the formation of knowledge politics, conjured by Karen Barad's conjoining phrase, 'onto-epistemological' (Barad, 2007: 18). Such a point is gestured to in the title to this article, which counterposes the same body within two different ontological frameworks, one that looks at a body and says 'immanent flesh', and the other which says 'essentialism'. The essentialist body, I want to suggest, remains grounded within a dualistic mode of being which shapes the horizons of the debates in which it is encased. Further, when a body is framed by different ontological understandings, what that body means, and what that body can do, is transformed. Even if there is only one physical body, there are potentially multiple ontological bodies we can map onto that body. This can dictate orientation to knowledge, the world and our relationship to each other. In the next part of the article I further situate the essentialist–anti-essentialist debate within its historical and theoretical context before going on to explore what is at stake by remaining attached to it as a dominant feminist story that is retold without contention, or a without a consideration of its wider, political implications.

## THE TRANSITION OF IDEAS

Anna G. Jónasdóttir has described the impact of the 'de(con)structive gale of postmodernism [which] swept over the world' since 1985, where the 'P-P-D trinity (postmodernism, post-structuralism and deconstructionism)' (Jónasdóttir, 2008: 58) came to reign sovereign over critical theory. Alongside Kathleen B. Jones, Jónasdóttir further writes of the need to 'situate post-structuralist premises within the history of ideas' so as 'to demonstrate their partiality' (Jónasdóttir and Jones, 2008: 19). I would like to affirm this move, by also locating debates surrounding essentialism–anti essentialism as fundamentally tied to the context and processes of history (and the history of ideas) within which they emerge and circulate.

It is over 20 years since Diana Fuss explored in her book, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*, the question of whether, following Stephen Heath, it is worth taking the 'risk of essence' (Fuss, 1989: 17). Writing out of the Derridean saturated late 1980s onto the early 1990s, Fuss sought to outline how a radical constructivist can be just as essentialist as an essentialist. We recall: 'to insist that essentialism is always and everywhere reactionary is, for the constructionist, to buy into essentialism in the very act of making the charge; *it is to act as if essentialism has an essence*' (Fuss, 1989: 22; emphasis in original). In the introduction to the book, Fuss wrote:

One of the prime motivations behind the production of this book is the desire to break or in some way weaken the hold which the essentialist/constructionist binarism has on feminist theory. . . . [The debate has] foreclosed more ambitious investigations of specificity and difference by fostering a certain paranoia around the perceived threat of essentialism. . . . The very confusion over whether or not the essentialist/constructionist tension is beneficial or detrimental to the health of feminism is itself overdetermined and constrained by the terms of the opposition in question. (Fuss, 1989: 1–2)

Fuss's intervention, and her desire that it will 'in some way weaken the hold' the oppositional pair has on feminism theory, may have had some impact upon feminist epistemological practices. All dialogue among feminist critics in the 21st century is not, after all, exclusively couched in terms of the opposition. Feminism has departed to engage in different theoretical refrains (to intersect with queer theory, Deleuzian materialism and neo-vitalism, anti-racist feminism, transnational 'feminism without borders' [Mohanty, 2003], to name a few). Still, the violence of the language used to refer to essentialism, which promises the shame that Hemmings describes, should be noted: 'threat' and 'paranoia' is never far away should we venture too near to it.

Despite feminist epistemology's varied engagements with other critical languages and positionalities then, essentialism–anti essentialism still seems to be a common favourite when it comes to the type of stories that are told to shape the feminist landscape. This can be evidenced by Biljana Kasic's plea in 2008, nearly 20 years after Fuss's first suggestion, for an alternative perception on these questions to 'refresh the atmosphere around feminism' so that we can depart from a situation of 'endlessly conflicted and unresolved positionality among feminists in addressing issues such as "constructivist versus essentialist strategy," "gender dichotomy versus trans/ gender/ sexual positioning," "gender equality versus freedom," "academic versus activist feminism"' (Kasic, 2008: 454). Kasic articulates the troubling tendency towards circularity and enclosure that continues to plague feminist critical thought. Again, the problem she is articulating is arguably an ontological one – one that can only think in terms of binarisms

and oppositions, incapable of moving across ideas and nourishing the 'indigestion' (Haraway, 2008: 299) required to inhabit contradictory worlds of thought that we do not wish to master.

Recent critical writing has also replicated this tendency towards an absolutist approach to anti-essentialism: 'Anti-essentialists . . . repeatedly argue that such [essentialist] universalising claims about women *are always false*, and function oppressively to normalise particular – socially and culturally privileged – forms of experience' (Stone, 2004: 85; my emphasis). What kind of fundamentalist power does the argument that something is always false hold? It is arguably an act of faith which, Rosi Braidotti suggests, is an important component mobilizing contemporary critical thinking. She argues 'the postsecular position on the affirmative force of oppositional consciousness inevitably raises the question of faith in possible futures' which carries an 'aspect of residual spirituality' (Braidotti, 2008: 18).

In highlighting this point about anti-essentialist critiques, I do not wish to undermine how they can, and have been, productively mobilized for political ends, as they do offer 'strategies that allow a rethinking of *both* identity and social determination' (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 25). For these critiques have loosened the fixed understanding of multiple normalized social formations (such as gender, sexuality, economics, class), even if an anti-essentialist challenge does not equate with the structural undoing of oppressions, or begin to explain how essentialist identities are imposed upon innocent bodies by virtue of where they are positioned within a gender oppressive, class unequal, racist society. It is my wish to draw attention to the 'always false' conviction which the anti-essentialist statement above enacts. Its role in perpetuating absolutist faith in that system is arguably problematic. For in this schema, the anti-essentialist position is placed in a privileged space in relation to power, critique and knowledge that the essentialist can never occupy, and this is apparent in how these critiques are continually repeated, seemingly without question.

## WHAT IS AT STAKE?

Given the deep investments that the essentialism–anti-essentialism debate holds over feminist scholarly and pedagogical practice – and here I want to emphasize that I do not wish to denigrate the intersubjective exchanges that occurred between feminists who had these discussions initially<sup>1</sup> – we might ask what exactly is at stake in continuing to affirm its relevance. Critical sophistication is arguably an area that is demonstrated through the literacy of the essentialism–anti-essentialism debate. Sophistication, Isabelle Stengers argues, has become a critical industry saturated by:

. . . 'essentialist hunting', that is an inexhaustible source for academic publications and the production of ever more critical stances (is not 'feminism' itself essentialist? and so on). Worse, it entails a 'tolerant' attitude when third world ecofeminist fighters, such as Vandana Shiva, appear not to possess the code – we (who know and could criticize her as an essentialist) have to be indulgent. (Stengers, 2008: 41)

Stengers points to the endless discursive production embedded within the essentialism–anti-essentialism debate. In writing this article I, inevitably, am producing more critical stances that Stengers finds so exhausting. My question, however, is how is this intervention made in such a way that can enable these debates – however temporarily and out of political necessity – to be consigned to the archive with good humour, respect and a sense of responsibility. For exploring different ways of creating interventions may allow new discussions to emerge in their place.

Stengers points to how the critical sophistication demonstrated as one 'hunts' is implicated with western feminism's assumptions about power and privilege, mediated through the act of critique. Thus to talk of woman outside the west, is to talk in a primitive language 'we' must tolerate because the context is not advanced, or developed critically enough, to even be aware of its lack of sophistication. Now that we have reached the point within our current critical climate where it seems the very least western theoretical feminism can offer is the embarrassed practice of tolerance to writers such as Vandana Shiva (and others like her) who dare to presume that woman still exists as a viable force structuring a global political reality, shouldn't this raise some form of concern? For surely there *are* material women and there are material men (and many more sexed materialities besides). One effect of the circularity of the debate is to keep knowledge production firmly within the western academy. 'Critical sophistication' actually becomes a technology of gate-keeping and one that has conservative implications; particularly if we see the aims of our intellectual pursuits as embedded within a process of 'decolonizing theory and practising solidarity' (Mohanty, 2003) on a global scale.

The compulsion to protect and perform knowledge because we are 'who know' becomes the smug preoccupation of the 'critical' feminist subject. However, in cultivating pervasive uncertainty over the contingency of woman, shouldn't we really know better than to systematically deny women's oppression and existence at any level of ontology? What pernicious misogyny is at play that prevents us from being able to talk of women for fear of being called essentialist: women existing? You've got to be kidding me! Women don't exist. That's essentialist!

Haritaworn et al. also suggest that the 'dead end of the identity critique' (Haritaworn et al., 2008: 86) has led to a slow response from academics to the cultures of racism that have emerged in the UK since September 11. They go on to assert: 'While racialised people and communities were

surveilled, detained, deported and killed on the grounds of their "culture" and their phenotype, [academics] increasingly sought to demonise attempts to problematise this as "essentialist" (Haritaworn et al., 2008: 86–7). Both Stengers' and Haritaworn et al.'s texts offer, in different ways, insight into the dangers of coveting sophistication uncritically. They help us understand the implications of occupying certain positions in the name of tradition, habit or excellence, underlining that such perspectives are always bound up with power and privilege. When the performances of critique are over, there still needs to be some sense of political responsibility towards the interconnected, global world we live in, and the changing political realities of differently racialized and gendered subjects within that world.

#### WHAT IS YOUR ESSENTIALISM IS MY IMMANENT FLESH: KATE BUSH

Engaging with the female body, and further than that, the divine feminine as a means of exploring alternative ontological knowledges, is a risky conceptual task, particularly given the witch-hunting afforded to essentialists which I have – via Stengers – described in the preceding section. The title of this article offers a proposition which I now flesh out with the help of Kate Bush and the figure of the Goddess. Writing about Bush it is perhaps difficult to avoid accusations of essentialism. Many of her performances enact spiritually orientated, autoerotic, embodied feminine subjectivities within popular culture that can be seen to veer close to an essentialist conception of woman's subjectivity. However, I want to argue it is important to not simply dismiss her creative engagements with the female body, and her exploration of counter-female mythologies, as essentialist. They also present an alternative ontological map, a body of immanent flesh. She does not merely reinforce stereotypes that serve to reduce 'woman' to her body. She offers a different relational, desiring and spiritual economy that is resolutely embodied. This provides a challenge to dualistic modes of ontology and inserts the legitimacy of female bodily knowledge within culture.

Bush's first album, *The Kick Inside* (1978), is a powerful self-representation of the female subject released at the end of a decade that saw numerous reclamations and redefinitions of womanhood, as I described at the very beginning of this article. Bush's subject is motivated by her emotions, impelling others to 'feel' as much as she can. The first song on the album, 'Moving' opens with a plaintive address to a listening stranger: 'Moving stranger, does it really matter?/ As long as you're not afraid to feel'. The underlying ontology she presents is one that has the capacity for connective, affective transference. 'How I'm moved, how you move me/ With your beauty's potency/ You give me life, please don't let me go', as the song becomes a space to build a relationship, encouraging listeners to

participate and enter into a relationship of mutual renewal. This is an important aspect of the ontology of immanent flesh: its thresholds are open, presenting an extended relational map that seeks connections through invitations. In short, it is an ontology oriented to the world, and this different aspect of relationality is presented in the first song on Bush's album, as her relationship with the listener is given central importance.

As well as being open to the world at the level of feeling, the ontology of *The Kick Inside* is situated within a divined female flesh whose sexuality and liquid are sources of celebration and mythologizing. Both 'Strange Phenomena' and 'Kite' celebrate the so-called irrational powers that emanate from women's volatile, unpredictable bodies, weaving them in conjunction with supernatural or unknowable phenomena. In these songs Bush offers a counterpoint to hierarchies and dualisms which reside at the core of western cultural belief systems predicated within an ontology that privileges transcendence, detachment, objectivity and a belief in the rational self (Christ, 2004). She does this through venerating the irrational in her songs, aligning her music with the recovery and celebration of female-centred images, mythologies and rhythms that situate divinity within the immanent fleshiness of the female body. This is significant since throughout history 'women lack a female god who can open up the perspective in which *their* flesh can be transfigured' (Irigaray, 1982: 64).

'Strange Phenomena' present female bodily fluids, specifically menstruation, as a type of magical power which is available for women to tap into. In the song menstruation is deliberately linked with the moon, the paranormal, liminal and inexplicable forces of creativity:

Soon it will be the phase of the moon  
 When people tune in  
 Every girl knows about the punctual blues  
 But who's to know the power  
 Behind our moves. (Bush, 'Strange Phenemona', 1978)

The chorus is an anthem to the 'strange' forces emanating from women's bodies: 'Raise our hands to the strange phenomena' (Bush, 1978) as the peculiarity of women's seeping bodies is granted a positive figuration. While 'Strange Phenomena' celebrates women's menstrual capacities, 'Kite' also *enacts* menstrual rhythms through a menstrual muse:

Beelzebub is aching in my belly-o  
 My feet are heavy and I'm rooted in my wellios  
 And I want to get away and go  
 From all these mirror windows. (Bush, 'Kite', 1978)

Menstrual energy in the song is figured as a site of wonder and creative pleasure and pain, as the singer is prompted to become a kite flying on the wind. The song mimics the humour, excitement and bouncing movement

of the kite's diving, flying and soaring. The enduring image in 'Kite' of a human flying, swooping on, with and through the wind, can also communicate an idea of the mind in imaginative flight, and all this is prompted by the devil 'aching' in the belly of the speaker. Between these two songs, a space is created where the irrational rhythms, experiences and fluids of women's bodies are utilized in a creative moment. These can be treated directly as subject matter, or communicated via a rhythmical structure, as in 'Kite'. Both songs create a new language of menstrual expression, as Bush forces the immanent flesh of the female body, with its different rhythms and fluid cyclical movement, into a culturally intelligible form that can be heard, felt and danced to.

While the strategies on this album may be seen by an essentialist critique as reinforcing exclusive notions about female bodies, the immanent flesh is actually extensive and generative, allowing 'woman' to move out of the prescribed place a dualistically encased patriarchal culture would consign her to. This ontology departs from the logics of hierarchy and separation into the world of possible connections precisely because her flesh is substantiated through her utterance. The immanent flesh says: the female body is here to stay; multiple, subject to transformation and self-definition (there is not one, but many). That Bush provides an example of such flesh on her 1978 debut album encourages a return to these reclamations of female bodily space. She presents them as a viable intervention which deserves to stick into the grooves of dualistic cultures still frightened by female bodies; a return that could necessitate its transformation.

#### WHAT IS YOUR ESSENTIALISM IS MY IMMANENT FLESH: THE GODDESS

Through divining her own flesh and presenting connective relational openness, Bush created a model of ontology congruent with ideas that shapes the female-focused 'thea-ology' (Christ, 2004: 7) of Goddess-based, neo-pagan spirituality. The revival of such a religion towards the end of the 1970s was, Carol Christ notes, 'one of the most unexpected developments of the late twentieth century' (Christ, 2004: xiii). Often seen as the height of essentialist embarrassment, the Goddess nevertheless provides a noteworthy ontological challenge to the dualisms of conventional humanist subjectivity because she is grounded within immanent models of divinity and like Bush has, of course, immanent flesh. Such an ontology is able to 'reject the all-too familiar hierarchical dualisms that shape our understandings not only of God, but of ourselves and the world' (Christ, 2004: 100). Immanent models of ontology are significant because of the alternative relational economy they embody – an interconnected rather than split subject in mutual 'intra-action' (Barad, 2007: 34) with their surroundings.

It is an example of an ontology not frightened by the flesh (as dualistic ontology arguably is), but drawing upon it as a source of knowledge that matters.

The Goddess, as an ontological model, has not always been the dowdy essentialist you might believe her to be either. In her dissertation on the symbolic practices of Greenham Common Peace Camp, Anna Feigenbaum outlines the genealogy of the Goddess and the Cyborg and suggests that the 'the relationship between these often opposed icons of feminist imaginaries' (Feigenbaum, 2008) is far more intimate than one would expect. Long posed as ontological enemies, illustrated by how the couple come to oppose each other in pairings such as natural and unnatural, naive and sophisticated. This is further underlined by the perpetual paraphrasing of the now iconoclastic last lines of Haraway's 'Cyborg Manifesto' within feminist scholarly debate: 'I'd rather be a cyborg than a Goddess' (Haraway, 1991: 181).

What Feigenbaum shrewdly points out is that when quoting this line, the beginning of the sentence is rarely granted similar attention: both Goddess and Cyborg 'are bound in the spiral dance' (Haraway, 1991: 181), a loving reference to, in characteristic Haraway style, to Starhawk's (1999) reclaiming witch-craft 'bible': *The Spiral Dance: Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*. Starhawk's writing is often seen as anathema to academic writing, and is everything it shouldn't be – even if she offers engaged analyses of power which emerge from her experience as a psychologist and political activist. Her work is increasingly being taken more seriously by scholars, Stengers being a prime example, while Braidotti sees her as part of the 'post-secular' turn in recent feminist theory (Braidotti, 2008). Her spectre certainly seems to haunt the pages of Haraway's texts, whose concern for creating a world where multi-species encounters can flourish would not see her out of place at a pagan mute. Similarly, Haraway's influence is implicit in Starhawk's work: *Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising* (2002) is arguably a reference to Haraway's 'Cyborg Manifesto'.

While the feminist critics Feigenbaum refers to 'imagine affinities between the two figures in their own accounts', she argues that there is at play a more profound 'monstrous sisterhood' (Feigenbaum, 2008) present between the Goddess and the Cyborg. This can be found in the 'the witch-weavings of the displaced and so unnatural Greenham women, who read the cyborg webs of power so very well' (Haraway, 1991: 153). While Feigenbaum situates this affinity through the symbolic, technological and myth-making practices of Greenham women, I would also extend this monstrous sisterhood by naming it as ontological. So that both Goddess and Cyborg are really ontological mess-mates, breaking down the objective, dualistic subject of liberal humanism and providing an alternative ontology, neither aspect of which is based on essential 'innocence' (Haraway, 1991: 146).

This is significant in that within the very relationship of the Cyborg and Goddess, the binary which attempts to keep the essentialism (Goddess)–anti-essentialism (Cyborg) divide discrete and clean is contaminated at the level of process: Goddess and Cyborg collide in acts of continuous naturecultural pollution which underwrite ontological understandings of the dualistic subject. It is not merely a deconstructive act (at the level of symbols and text) but an ontological reordering of bodily understanding through which suppressed sites of knowledge can become apparent. As Papadopolous et al. advocate, ‘the construction of new bodies, their facticity, is not an epistemological problem, it is an ontological one’ (Papadopolous et al., 2008: 65).

For other bodily knowledges to become part of the world we thus require *multiple* ontological understandings – being *can* be otherwise, and so can the ways of knowledge. That is why when one person looks at a body and says ‘essentialism!’ and the other says ‘immanent flesh’, there is nothing wrong with this – apart from the hierarchy of ontological knowledge which says the flesh must prove its legitimacy within a set of conditions decided by the judgement which calls a flesh essentialist. The maintenance of singular knowledge ontologies is about the maintenance of power through binding bodies to a narrow version of being that is always answerable to the dualistic norm. As Elisabetta Bertolino writes, describing Adriana Cavarero’s philosophical praxis: ‘if one merely questions or deconstructs ontology, seeking in this way to avoid it, the ontology itself has not been transformed. Our theories and approaches will still be grounded in ontological *perspectives*. Inevitably, ontology is an instrument of power’ (Cavarero and Bertoloni, 2008: 132; emphasis added). The circuit of dualistic enclosure has plagued the logic of feminist knowledge politics at an institutional and pedagogical level for too long now. We require different literacies and more lively experiments.

## SPECULATING ON IMMANENT FLESH

What would an immanent culture look like can we speculate, in the flesh? In many ways, of course, we exist within its critical landscape, all of the ingredients are here for the tasting (Mol, 2008), as we enter into frameworks of understanding that are increasingly multi-sensorial (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2009). Immanent ontologies are also, according to Silvia Federici, part of the knowledges that were suppressed in the transition to capitalism in the 16th and 17th centuries, whereby ‘the body had to die so labour could live’ (Federici, 2004: 141). Moreover, she argues that:

... the mechanical body, the body-machine, could not have become a model of social behaviour without the destruction by the state of a vast range of pre-capitalist beliefs, practices and social subjects whose existence

contradicted the regularization of corporeal behaviour promised by Mechanical Philosophy. (Federici, 2004: 141)

Within this shift towards the culture of modern dualism inaugurated by Mechanical Philosophy, where the body was split off from knowledge, matter, spirit – in short the cosmos as a *‘living organism’* (Federici, 2004: 141; emphasis in original), including magic and other forms of occult practices – it led to the rupturing of an interdependent, interconnected immanent ontological culture. The knowledge of the body embedded in its environment is very much a suppressed knowledge as time, space and bodies became regularized within a social system intent upon alienating and segregating its subjects. These knowledges are not banished totally but exist as counter-memory within the body politic and resurface in reclaimed experience (Starhawk, 1982); which ‘inhabit again what was devastated’ (Stengers, 2008: 58) in order to transform the social world.

The affective ‘(re)turn’ (Hemmings, 2005: 133) is also part of the immanent knowledge within the reach of our critical cultures, and is part of the immanent flesh we can locate within Bush’s music, and her insistent invitation for others to ‘feel’ (Bush, 1978). Affective responses to reading a text, watching a film or experiencing some piece of culture is increasingly becoming the norm. This is significant because the postmodern subject, plagued by the ‘waning of affect’ (Jameson, 1993: 10) for so much of the 1980s and 1990s can scream ‘finally, I can feel something!’ Scholarly cultures may have just about grown up and begun to acquire emotional intelligence – this certainly underscores what will hopefully become a waning of detachment in knowledge practices.

Of course, feminist theorists have long been utilizing affect and emotion as modes of analysis, as Kristyn Gorton attests, in her survey of contemporary feminist engagements with affect and emotion. Furthermore she writes ‘the attention to emotion and affect . . . offers a way of thinking about subjectivity that is not tied solely to the psyche. In other words, our actions are guided not just by what we think but also by how we feel and our bodily response to feelings’ (Gorton, 2007: 346). Herein lies an ontological framework of knowledge where the discipline of the knowing subject may not be the end result of assessment process, where compassionate knowledge cultures can be nurtured. Also one day there may be a time when we may know something as much through laughter or palpitation, as much as through a rational analysis.

The final site which suggests immanent ontology is upon us is a growing awareness of haptic knowledges. Haraway, following Eva Shawn Hayward, chooses to see the world through the ‘fingery-eyes’ of ‘optic-haptic’ perception (Haraway, 2008: 5), which ushers forth a knowledge of the world that is simultaneously processual *and* situated. By this I mean that Haraway’s concepts allow critical insight into the invisible hands which make up objects, and encourage people to stand before the

object (or the image) and consider what its histories are: 'Visually and tactically I am in the presence of the intersectional race-, sex-, age-, class-, and region-differentiated systems of labour' (Haraway, 2008: 6) within any given object or product that is presented within the circuits of commodity capitalism. This is crucial – if Federici's narrative about the transition to capitalism and how it alienates its subjects from their environment is accurate – because an appreciation of the processes of production allows a perception not only of the product but the whole chain of connections which made it. It is what living in a process-based, rather than product-based, culture would be like. Thereby it is possible to gain situated knowledge – what are the raced, sexed, classed, gendered (and so on) stories of objects that, due to the sheer pace of life in a hyper-consumptive society, there is little time usually to pause and consider? Optic-haptic perceptions also chime with Stengers' desire to slow down the pace of critical thinking (Stengers, 2008: 48) and provide a definite, embodied intervention that genuinely alters the lived temporalities we contend with. This is also part of the immanent flesh's potential – to reconnect and make a circuit of slowed down knowledge as a means of re-visioning the social by asking: what is *already* there?

Puig de la Bellacasa understands these shifts as an increased interest in haptic engagement:

. . . haptic engagement conveys an encouragement for knowledge and action to be crafted in touch with everyday practices . . . [allowing for a] deepened attention to materiality and embodiment [creating] an invitation to re-think relationality and its corporeal character, as well as a desire for concrete, tangible, engagement with worldly transformation. (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2009: 298)

Within the culture of touch knowledge there is a 'concrete' and 'tangible' reconnection of matters in relation, as subjects displace the exclusive tyranny of optic knowledge (what is seen at a distance is only what is known), and foster new tools, which, of course were there all the time anyway in (touching) hands, waiting to be used. This is the armoury of a different ontological perspective that seeks tactile, material, historically situated, process-based and slowed-down knowledge – as a means through which to shape critical worlds that it cannot be 'objective' about, in the traditional scholarly sense.

With such armoury as affect and the haptic at its disposal, the possessor of immanent flesh seems a whole lot more powerful than a mere essentialist body. Its fleshy noise seeks to make a connective scream with the world, as arms are outstretched, while heart (and shame) is endearingly open. Through this immanent flesh we could be engaged in the business of building a social world where people, animals, machines and all as yet unnamed others *can* actually live together – it could exchange critical sophistication for some rather useful ontological tools, gifted by voices churning with the paths of history.

## NOTE

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1. See Schor and Weed (1994). This edited collection includes a number of essays examining the key debates between feminists over the essentialism–anti-essentialism question. The debates between essentialism and anti-essentialism have provided fertile ground for feminist critique from the 1980s onwards. Toril Moi (1989: 117–32) wrote of the need to distinguish ‘female’ as a biological characteristic from ‘feminine’ as a cultural characteristic; while Diana Fuss wrote of the need to take the ‘risk’ of essentialism, and warned against the presumption that essentialism is ‘always and everywhere reactionary’ (Fuss, 1989: 13). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1984/5: 175–87) coined the term ‘strategic essentialism’. This term was first used in relation to subaltern studies, but has been appropriated by feminist theory. The early 1990s saw Butler writing about the ‘contingent foundations’ of feminist politics that destabilize the category of ‘woman’, asking how it can be a site for the unity of feminist politics, see Butler (1992: 4).

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