

Intra-active sex

*An exploration into ways of knowing and ways of
responding*

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Abstract

In this thesis, dominating, dichotomous ways of understanding and explaining sex are outlined and questioned. Dichotomous ideas and experiences of sex are set in connection with the troubling times that the world finds itself in – times that see a growing need for change on the part of humans. Is it possible for humanity to change if ideas and experiences of sex are justified through a dichotomous logic? Is it possible to embrace non-dichotomous philosophies, such as new-materialism, if we do not also consider sex in non-dichotomous ways? Through a discussion of Karen Barad's notion of intra-action, this thesis works to acknowledge the already intra-active relationality inherent to dichotomous ideas and experiences of sex, and to suggest an intra-active conceptualization of sex. The project of acknowledgement is part of an affirmative feminist project of conceptualizing different ways of knowing, and being in, the present moment – ways that do not demand of the next moment to be dichotomously understood, while simultaneously working to not deny or negate what exists in the present.

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Introduction

This thesis discusses ways of knowing, more specifically: ways of knowing matter; and, not the least, *how* ways of knowing matter. What are the different ways of knowing the relationality between materiality and knowing, and what possibilities for ethical relationality *to know knowing as material* can be generated?

A quote which fuels this thesis comes from the biologist and feminist theorist of science, Donna Haraway, who, in her *The Companion Species Manifesto – Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (2003) writes that “feminist inquiry is about understanding how things work, who is in the action, and how worldly actors might somehow be accountable to and love each other less violently” (7). Implicit in the quote from Haraway above lies the claim that there are different ways of understanding and explaining – different ways of knowing with different consequences. The quote implies that some questions are asked and answered, some answers are accepted and justified, while others are not. In her latest book, *Staying with the Trouble – Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016), Haraway is writing from a place of urgency – she is writing in an effort to respond to the disturbing, mixed-up, troubling, and turbid times we are living in, in a way that does not easily take for granted pre-given questions and answers (2016: 1). Her writing works to show how different possibilities for a human response to these troubling times exist, and how it matters to cultivate abilities of responding – to the world, to humans and non-humans and to oneself. To understand differently, in other words, is to cultivate the ability to respond differently. Or one could say that to understand differently is to relate differently.

The amounts of ways in which humans violently relate to each other are unnumbered. Sexism, racism, ableism, colonialism, the list could go on describing very real, violent structures. An important concern for feminist theory have always been the ways in which specific understandings of sex generate specific relations – relations, both personal and political and not without love, but which nevertheless generate violence. Common for all the *-ism*’s mentioned so far, is that they are justified and reproduced through a dichotomous logic of Self and Other. Within such a logic, bodies, sex, race, ability and nationality are all understood in ways that validate negative differentiation and justify violent relation. ‘Naturism’ is another concept that can be introduced in order to conceptualize the violent relationship between

human and earth. The ecological feminist Karen J. Warren defined ‘naturism’ as “the domination and oppression of non-human nature” (1990: 132). The relation between human and earth, in other words, can also be described as violent – while also full of love.

Common for the affirmative feminist theorists most heavily discussed in this thesis are their focus on exploring different ways of understanding relationality that are not predicated on dichotomous and hierarchical notions of difference. Affirmative feminists, with physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad, philosopher Rosi Braidotti, and the already mentioned Donna Haraway as examples, explicitly argue that the ways in which relationality is understood affect actual relations. In other words: to understand, to know, and to exist in, relationality in non-dichotomous ways could and would, according to affirmative feminists, yield hitherto untried possibilities for ethical relationality.

This thesis takes as a vantage point a personal frustration of mine – namely that so many people whom I encounter and speak with about sex will acknowledge how knowledge on other topics and in other fields is inherently political and situational – that knowledge to some extent affects also what is known – but when it comes to the knowledge of sex, they are not able, or willing, to accept or acknowledge these inherent qualities. The reasons for this hesitation are surely manifold. One possible reason is that we are living in a society where sex is seen as fundamental to what it means to be human. We are defined by sex, we are expected to identify and desire based on sex, we *are* identified and desired based on sex, and to a great degree *we are sex*, we *are our* sex – so then, of course, *we also know sex*. Sex, within our Western context, is made immensely personal, while at the same time utterly public. To try to tease out conversations about how our knowledges of sex are context-dependent, constitutive of bodies, and specific to this moment in time and space seems to hit a sore spot. It is often perceived as a personal attack – as if pointing out that a man’s knowledge of what manhood *is*, is actually situated and contingent, is the same as saying that he does not know who he is. In a society insisting on sex as marker for individual identity, and which demands identity to be coherent in order to be ‘right’, the negative reaction to attempts at challenging this notion of sex can be understood. However, exactly because of the role sex enjoys *as fundamental*, to know sex in different ways – within a feminist project exploring possibilities for change – is important.

Today, there is little doubt that many of the ways in which humans understand, know, and live with the earth are unsustainable – for both humans and non-humans. In a dichotomous scheme for understanding, the earth is understood as material – opposed to, separate from, and below the cultural, human, knowing mind. To focus on the relation between human and earth from an affirmative feminist vantage point, entails that it matters not only how we understand the earth, or the world; affirmative feminists insist that it is also of great importance how we know ourselves as humans. Do we know ourselves as humans fundamentally separate from the earth and each other, or do we know ourselves as fundamentally *of* the earth (Barad 2007)? Within a dichotomous logic, the latter is impossible, since human and earth, knowing and being, body and mind – relationality in general – are understood through an insistence on a fundamental separation that is, moreover, dichotomous in nature. Within this dichotomous logic, everything is understood and known through its opposition to what it is not. Within the dichotomous logic, the world is known through binary pairs such as mind/body, reason/emotion, man/woman, culture/nature, self/other, human/animal. The second terms in these binary pairs are commonly understood through the same differentiating logic as ‘the material’ is – the same logic justifying the ‘ism’s’ above. What falls outside of, short of, in between, or in other ways is not understandable through the dichotomous logic risks abuse, violence, control, pathologizing, suppression, or simply to be overlooked completely.

Through developing the philosophy of ‘deconstruction’, poststructuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida challenged many of the ontological and epistemological presumptions that lie hidden in the naturalization of dichotomous differentiation, and thus also the limits to this logic. According to Braidotti (2013) Derrida is concerned with, among other things, the power relationship between the human species and other animals, and criticizes this relationship for its epistemic and material violence. This critique, writes Braidotti, is part of Derrida’s larger critique of Humanism. Affirmative feminism utilizes poststructuralist insights for conceptualizing the productivity of discursive exclusions but goes further than poststructuralism in conceptualizing the relationship between meaning and matter (Braidotti 2013; Barad 2007). Another poststructuralist thinker that has influenced the affirmative feminists in this thesis is the poststructuralist historian Michel Foucault. Foucault is renowned for his critical genealogies of sex and sexuality, and his theories on power and discourse.

The ways in which humans define themselves is also a topic in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Braidotti writes that when Nietzsche proclaimed the ‘death of God’, it was a proclamation of the end of the idea of Man that was built upon God as the ultimate truth. “What Nietzsche asserted was the end of the self-evident status attributed to human nature as the common sense belief in the metaphysically stable and universal validity of the European humanistic subject” (Braidotti 2013: 6). Braidotti formulates her conceptualization of posthuman, affirmative subjectivity on the legacy of Nietzsche and anti-humanist theory.

In addition, the monistic philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari are of great inspiration to Rosi Braidotti and also to the philosopher Elizabeth Grosz, whose writings are used in the first part. Braidotti writes that “[a]s Deleuze and Guattari teach us, thinking is about invention of new concepts and new productive ethical relations” (2013: 104).

It is in continuation with the above mentioned theories and philosophies that this thesis places itself theoretically – within a theoretical feminist tradition influenced by anti-racist, anti-humanist, post-colonial and post-structuralist theory, concerned with exemplifying and changing how dominant claims to knowledge and understanding are working to constitute suppression of women, native and earth others (Braidotti 2013).

In order to respond to the workings of dominant claims to knowledge, and to imagine relationality in different ways, affirmative feminist theory is taking an explicit vantage point for thinking within new-materialist theory. New-materialism insists on the re-thinking and re-experiencing of matter in ways that are not structured by dialectical difference and ideas of human exceptionalism, but which rather acknowledge the agency and vitality of matter, independent of any human knowing, or acting, upon it. As such, new-materialist theory provides radically different ways of imagining relationality, where the traditional borders between nature and culture, matter and meaning are re-worked.

Sex is an aspect of being human that is commonly perceived as fundamental to humanness, bodies and identity. Sex is also commonly understood through a dichotomous logic. Feminists have always worked to imagine sex differently, and in more equal¹ ways. Considering how

¹ Although what equality means is not a settled discussion.

sex is perceived as fundamental to humanness, one can therefore also argue that feminism always has been concerned with re-imagining humanness. Affirmative feminism sees it as an ethical urgency to rework the notion of what it means to be human today; the argument is that such a reworking would make available different actions and relations for humans in and of the world. One could argue, that since sex is assumed to be such a fundamental part of what it means to be human, the human cannot change without ideas and experiences of sex changing as well. To claim that ideas of sex must change also implies to challenge the assumption of sex as something fundamental, understood and known.

However, even within many feminist circles, sex enjoys a status of something fixed and known – in the sense that it is of the body. It is often insisted that for instance deterministic and reductionist understandings of sex are the source of oppression, and therefore, feminists are working to liberate sex from violent templates for understanding and explaining. A common denominator for most of feminist theory is that sex and/or gender functions as a vantage point for thinking. This is also what feminism is commonly understood to be about – men and women, inequality, sexuality, minorities and oppression. Yet equality, as such, between already defined ‘women’ and ‘men’ in a dichotomous framework has never been the end goal of the affirmative feminist theorists discussed in this thesis. Rather, they focus on practices of knowing, practices of science, and practices of telling stories. These practices are undeniably sexed, because the humans who know, do research, and tell stories are sexed. But within the affirmative feminism of this thesis, sex is not insisted upon to be something specific and given. In fact it is argued that to claim sex as given and known – even if those ‘knowing’ sex are feminists with good intentions – takes part in reproducing the dichotomous, hierarchically differentiating, logic.

Nevertheless, this thesis is very much focused on sex. One can understand this thesis as one would a Chinese finger trap.² In a Chinese finger trap, one finger is trapped on each side of a cylinder made of bamboo-paper. If you try to get out by pulling away, the cylinder stretches and only tightens around the fingers. In a Chinese finger trap, you must rather move into that which is holding you trapped in order to get free from it. Resistance, in this type of trap, is futile. In the same way as you have to move into the finger trap in order to get out, this thesis aims at formulating an affirmative response to common ideas and experiences of sex. If

² I owe thanks to Bjarte Hiley for this idea.

common ideas of sex are not the road to liberation but nevertheless insisted upon as fundamental to what it means to be human, and if what it means to be human needs to change, then an affirmative feminist response cannot be to simply overlook, or try to move away from, the importance of sex. In that sense, this thesis is an effort to dive into the notion of sex, from the viewpoint of new-materialist theory, and explore what sex – and thus humanness – can become.

Part one of this thesis is an effort to acknowledge the role that specific ideas and experiences of sex enjoys in the Western world in the sense that sex provides a structure to the Western philosophical framework, to bodies, lives, and to identities. Part one is focused on a presentation and discussion of the ways in which specific claims to sex and specific claims to knowledge constitute and justify each other and structures the Western framework for thought. It is an effort to recognize what constitutes contemporary ideas and experiences of sex, and to show how the ways in which sex is known, matter for what it is possible for sex to be. As such, part one uses sex as a case study to discuss common ways in which the relationality between knowing and matter is understood.

The second part of this thesis is a relational point of connection between a dichotomous logic presented in the first part, and an affirmative logic built around the notion of intra-action, presented in the third part. The different logics are not fundamentally separate; they are simply different ways of knowing. In this respect, this thesis is building on Braidotti's understanding of the term 'affirmative'. The affirmative, for Braidotti, whether it is affirmative thinking, affirmative politics, affirmative action or affirmative knowledge, refers to the combination of critique and creativity that she perceives as necessary in order to pursue alternative worlds (2013). In other words, in order to create different ways of knowing and being here and now, she claims that generative affirmation is more fruitful than negative critique. This is what the affirmative feminism of this thesis is focused on: affirmation, not opposition and resistance. Because of this focus, I argue in part two that it is imperative to conceptualize 'acknowledgement' as an integral part of what it means to be affirmative. The whole first part is an effort to acknowledge the role of sex in the Western framework for thought and experience in order to make space for possibilities of creation and curiosity. In the second part I spend some time discussing the very real fear of losing one's identity that can follow from the insistence that dichotomous structures are not inevitable, that they are

violent, and that the human identity justified through a dichotomous logic needs to change. It is an effort of this thesis not to denounce or dismiss the experiences of any body, which is why acknowledgement is understood as so important in the affirmative feminist project.

The main discussions of this thesis is located in part three. In the third part, Karen Barad's notion of intra-action is introduced. All three parts are further divided into thematic sections. Barad's book *Meeting the Universe Halfway – Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007) is fundamental to the version of new-materialist theory this thesis argues for. The notion of intra-action provides, according to Barad (2007) for possibilities of conceptualizing relationality and entanglement in ways that does not demand separation or opposition. Intra-action points to how entangled agencies were never separate in the first place, but rather become what they are through entanglement. As such, intra-action is a term meant to provide possibilities for response and explanation that are not weighed down by the either/or-demands within the dichotomous logic. Is it possible to conceptualize sex that acknowledges the 'realness' of dichotomous ideas and experiences of sex, while not insisting on the eternal truth or 'naturalness' of those ideas and experiences? What can sex become when taking intra-action as template for understanding? Again, the focus on sex serves as a case in point in order to facilitate discussions of changed notions of identity, humanness and relationality.

Barad's theory stands at the center of this thesis, while Haraway's writings serve as a guide throughout for making connections and drawing lines of relationality. Additionally, Braidotti and Grosz contribute with valuable perspectives. In an affirmative vein, it must also be mentioned, that the theories of Rene Descartes, Thomas Hobbes and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel make this thesis what it is.

With regards to the possibilities for change in ways of knowing, ways of being and ways of acting and experiencing, personal identities and theoretical positions are discussed interchangeably throughout the thesis. Some divisions are made, like in section 3.3 and 3.4 where recognition of intra-active relationality with regards to sexuality and identity, and theoretical positions and identity are discussed respectively. Nevertheless, discussions of changed ways of knowing and being cannot be limited to either research or personal experiences. Building on Haraway's notion of 'situated knowledges' (1988) that will be

presented in part one, I argue that the life behind the look of the researcher is always present in the research. Similarly, the justification of separating lines within theory cannot be separated from ideas about how the world of the individual is structured. The discussions in this thesis are therefore both a challenge for the human individual, and a challenge for the production of theory – both feminist and otherwise. To be one-sidedly focused on different ways of doing research would necessarily silence some of the relational connections between theory and experience, metaphysics and politics – a relationality that is insisted upon by affirmative feminists.

This thesis, in other words, is an affirmative critique of dichotomous conceptualizations of sex. The thesis claims that the ways in which sex is known and understood are contributing to the reproduction of a violent, dichotomous logic. Additionally, because of the status which sex commonly enjoys – as fixed, known and inherent to personhood – to conceptualize sex from a new-materialist perspective is a challenge for affirmative feminism. Is it possible to conceptualize sex in a way that allows for the relations between new-materialist theory and commonly held ideas and experiences of separation to emerge more clearly?

Lastly, I consequently use the term ‘sex’ in this thesis, unless the sex/gender divide is discussed specifically. To use ‘sex’ is both a play with the Norwegian language where the word ‘kjønn’ is used both for sex (biologisk kjønn), and for gender (sosialt kjønn); an effort to show the dichotomously reproductive nature of the separation between sex and gender, and in the name of affirmation, imagine an alternative; and finally, the word ‘sex’ also refers to the act of having sex, of being sexual, a verb. As such, I argue that the use of the term ‘sex’ invites more play, more experimentation, and more ambiguity into discussion about knowledges regarding sex – discussions that are too often limited by ready-made questions and answers.

1 PART ONE:

Claims to knowledge and claims to sex

1.1 Dichotomous logic

In line with the theoretical tradition outlined in the introduction, Elisabeth Grosz that Western thought and logic is governed by binarized or dichotomized categories (Grosz 1993). That thought and logic is governed by dichotomies means that the world, knowledge, humans, animals, ethics, bodies, sex – everything – is expected to be understandable through and within this dichotomized framework for thought. Examples of such leading dichotomies are: culture/nature; reason/emotion; subject/object; self/other; discursive/material; mind/body; man/woman; human/animal; masculine/feminine; neutral/specific; social/biological; universal/particular. Such dichotomous categories are pairs of opposing concepts: they ‘kind of’ belong together but are simultaneously mutually exclusive. The logic behind these binaries state that if something is not the one, then it has to be the other and vice versa. A concept thus derives its meaning through its differentiated relationship to its opposing concept. The differentiation within the conceptual pairs function by a hierarchical logic where the former terms are accorded privilege over the latter. In addition, each pair function in lateral alignments that are cross-correlated with the other pairs. The specific relations between dichotomous pairs means that all the concepts on one ‘side’ are understood in connection to one another, the same is the case for all the concepts on the other ‘side’. Within such a logic, concepts such as emotional, weak, feminine, nature and woman are ‘logically’ bound together, as are rational, strong, masculine, control and man. Thus the dichotomous logic is sexed in specific and binary ways, since concepts are understood through their perceived connections to ideas of sex (man/woman). The connections that have been – and still are – made between the female/feminine and the body and emotions, on the one hand, and between the male/masculine with the mind and reason, on the other, are prevalent (Grosz 1993). Within this framework, the notion of ‘difference’ is defined through pejoration. The leading terms enjoy the status of norm-giving, and difference comes to mean a comparison with the first or the former terms. Difference, then, amounts to a comparison with the norm and has a fundamental negativity to it (Braidotti 2013).

Because the dichotomous system is organized along binary categories, the dichotomous logic produce questions of inclusion and exclusion. In other words, the logic is maintained by including and excluding people and things from one or the other (or both) ‘sides’ of the dichotomies. Hence, a dichotomous logic demands everything to be associated with either the one or the other side in order to make sense. It is of relational value for human beings within this logic to be associated with one of the two ‘sides’ in order to be understandable – preferably the former. Bodies and things are marked by systems of power and knowledge as belonging to either one or the other side. If a body or a thing is deemed ‘too different’, as in not adhering to any of the ‘sides’, it is, by virtue of the dichotomous system, unintelligible, impossible or simply non-existent.

The prevalence and unavailability of dichotomized separation within the Western framework for thought can be called a ‘bottom-line’. A bottom-line here refers to that within a framework which serves as the foundation for thinking. As such, the logic making up the bottom-line serves as a ‘truth’ that functions as a validating and justificatory measure for the understandability of both bodies, things and knowledges; hence it plays a generative as well as limiting role with regards to what can be thought and experienced. Bottom-lines, in other words, both generate and limit which ideas and experiences are deemed possible and impossible. When relating this to knowledge one can see that the knowledge assumed to correlate with, and be understandable by, the bottom-line in question (dichotomous differentiation), is also deemed to be ‘good’ or right knowledge. If something falls outside of, in-between or in other ways are not easily marked as the one or the other, it is defined in negative terms or perhaps overlooked completely. An example of knowledge valued by its correlation with the dichotomous logic is found, for instance, relating to sex-change surgery. A client opting to change their sex from man to female will more easily be accepted to be ‘right’ in their knowledge that they were always a woman ‘inside’ if they claim to have been emotional as children, have feminine inclinations or have always liked to play with dolls, than if the client simply wants to be a woman, but have been a ‘normal’ boy growing up. There have been reports about manuals circulating consisting of knowledge about what to say to medical professionals in order to be believed as in need of sex-change surgery (Stone 1993). In a similar but different vein: much of the research showing the high levels of consciousness in octopuses, and their similarities to humans with regards to problem-solving skills and self-awareness, went unpublished for decades because the researchers were afraid to be laughed at

for producing knowledge that would go against the commonly held belief of human exceptionalism and superiority (Montgomery 2015).

The notion of bottom-line can be connected to the concept of hegemony as it is discussed by Judith Halberstam in the book *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). Halberstam builds on both Gramsci and Stuart Hall when she defines hegemony as the (re)production and achievement of power for dominating groups where this (re)production does not happen through coercion but through the production of an interlocking system of ideas (Halberstam 2011). This system is persuasive in convincing people of the rightness of any given set of often contradictory ideas and perspectives and uses ‘common sense’ as a means for this persuasion. Common sense comes to mean this very set of interlocking ideas and beliefs which is persuasive precisely because these interlocking ideas do not present themselves as ideology or try to win consent – they are in other words, common sense (Halberstam 2011: 17). The argument about common sense is a circular one – that which is common sense is common sense – and that is partly why common sense is so difficult to discuss or argue against. The notion of bottom-line, in other words, refers to a system or framework of ideas which enjoys the status of common sense to the degree that they are not in need of argumentation to be believed. An example of such a hegemonic belief, or a bottom-line in Western thinking, is that humans eat meat. Vegetarianism is therefore often perceived as an ideology or a particular or special way of being in the world for people with special interests, while eating meat is very seldom presented as an ideology or even as a choice. Similarly, yet slightly different, children’s books portraying heterosexual love will seldom, if at all, be accused of influencing children’s choices in life. Books about homosexual love, however, cause some to worry about affecting children’s identities and opinions. Stories and knowledge about heterosexuality, or eating meat, is thus neutral or ‘normal’ and do not need justification, while vegetarianism and homosexuality are specificities and oddities and does not enjoy the quality of neutrality (Bergmo 2010).

A key point in the definition of hegemony and common sense above is related to the phrase ‘often contradictory ideas’. This formulation points to how all the ideas included in what is deemed ‘common sense’ does not have to be coherent with each other. In relation to the dichotomous framework for thought, an example of such contradictions would be the idea of ‘nature’. Nature is typically on the ‘lesser’ side in a dichotomized pair with culture. However,

at the same time the specific ideas about nature insisted upon by the dichotomous logic function as a validating measure for the dichotomous system's own logic. If something concurs with the bottom-line or the common sense it is deemed to be 'natural', and if something does not concur it is typically 'unnatural'. The idea of naturality, as in pre-cultural or fundamental, thus has some positive connotations to it, and serves to justify dichotomous insistences on correlation. This support for insistence in dichotomous correlation has apparent effects when considering the dichotomous logic in relation to bodies and sex. For example: if a woman is defined as being masculine – or in other words not feminine, which would be the 'natural' correlation – she will typically be seen as 'unnatural', and sometimes also as 'ugly' – she will somehow be 'wrong' according to the dichotomous logic. Importantly, the level of correspondence between bodies/things on the one hand, and the system invoked to understand bodies and things, on the other (here, the dichotomous logic), is therefore a validating measure for deciding whether something is 'good' or 'bad', 'right' or 'wrong'. Within this logic, 'good' knowledges are commonly those that convey this correspondence in terms already validated and understandable through the same dichotomous logic. Such a circular justification, maintains itself partly through its status as common sense, and are "beliefs that are persuasive precisely because they do not present themselves as ideology or try to win consent" (Halberstam 2011: 17).

1.2 Culture/nature

Within the dichotomous framework of thought nature is, as mentioned, presumed to be the object of investigation for the cultural, human subject, who thinks with *his* rational mind³. In that sense, nature is something 'out there', separate from 'us', which 'we' can gather information about. The idea about 'nature' therefore takes part in upholding the separation between subject and object, human and animal, and so forth. Nature is something that is revealed by, yet independent of and separate from, both knowledges and knowers (Barad 2007).

Within the dichotomous logic and the claims to knowledge commonly held in connection to this logic, 'Nature' is given the status of a fixed entity with inherent qualities that once and

³ 'His' because rationality and the mind is within the dichotomous logic associated with men and the masculine.

forever is understood and revealed by Western thought and knowledge. 'Nature' is a justificatory argument as proof for the 'truth' in the dichotomous logic, as was shown with the example of a masculine woman being unnatural above. 'Nature', in this logic, serves as a fixed foundation, from and upon which culture derives its meaning, and nature or what is deemed 'natural' thus confirms that knowledges which correlate with the dichotomous system are true.

Following the dichotomous logic, nature is presumably something 'we' *know*. In addition, 'good' and valid knowledges within this logic are presumed to be independent of and unaffected by time and space, claims Grosz. Knowledges are presumed to be independent of their origins and enjoy a status of being 'eternally true' (Grosz 1993). These claims to knowledge mean that, presumably, nature's true reality is revealed through our knowledge about it, and this true reality is perceived as fixed – revealed to us in a neutral way, independent of our methods for generating knowledge. Within this framework, nature, is static, unchanging and there to be exposed, understood and transcended by culture. The knowledge we have about nature, then, is presumably unaffected by its origin within a social context and a dichotomous framework which is sexed – as stated – in specific and binary ways. The idea of 'nature's true reality revealed' is an effect of the quality knowledges enjoy within the dichotomous logic as seemingly unaffected by and separate from their origin. The insistence on neutrality inherent to knowledges hides that knowledges originate within a dichotomous, sexed logic, hence 'good' knowledges continue to enjoy their definition as being fundamentally neutral.

Nature is then also something to be transcended by the cultural huMan knower. Simone de Beauvoir pointed out in her ground-breaking work *The Second Sex* (1989), that the notions of transcendence and immanence popular in modern Western philosophy are sexed in accordance with the dichotomous logic. De Beauvoir connected the philosophical concepts of transcendence and immanence to actual, lived human lives and showed that transcendental activities – creative, artistic, self-enriching – structurally more available to men, and to a great extent unavailable to women. Traditionally, women were more often than not left to leading lives of immanence – concerned with the maintenance and reproduction of life and its basic conditions. As such, women's lives have also been more closely connected to nature, than the artistic, creative and more cultural lives of men.

The idea and effort to master nature through knowledge and power, can be understood as culture's effort to transcend – move beyond or excel past – nature as a given. This effort is not bereft of its sexed structures: according to environmental philosopher Freya Mathews the Enlightenment philosopher Rene Descartes – who is sometimes claimed to be the father of modern Western philosophy – maintained that “the aim of philosophy/science was to make ‘men’ the ‘masters and possessors’ of Nature” (Mathews 1991: 32).

The separation between nature and culture is not only an idea from the past, however. In his book *The Great Derangement – Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) Amitav Gosh asks why the extreme weather events caused by climate change has not been brought into fictional literature to a greater degree. Climate change is, after all, affecting all of our lives, but is still predominantly written about in non-fictional literature. Part of the answer, Gosh claims, lies in that climate change challenges and refutes ideas from the Enlightenment, such as the boundaries between nature and culture. Extreme weather reminds us about the agential impact of the earth, while at the same time bringing cumulated human actions right up to our faces, our doorsteps, and into our lives. Because of the pervasiveness of the dichotomous logic, and how it validates and brings sense to human life, Gosh claims that to bring such a depiction of nature into fictional literature – into transcendental artistic imagination – would be “too powerful, too grotesque, too dangerous, and too accusatory” (2016: 32). The events of climate change are defying the ideas of nature as fixed, understood, mastered and transcended. “These events are not entirely of Nature (whatever that might be)” (2016: 33), thus they are forcing us – humans – to reevaluate our ideas about ourselves.

Because of nature's role as a validating and justificatory measure for the truth of Western philosophy's dichotomous claims, such climatic events – events that are difficult to deny are not the result of climate change – also challenge our very ways of knowing. Within commonly held claims to knowledge in the Western tradition of thought, there is an underlying belief that since the object of investigation – no matter what it is – presumably exist separate from, and independently of the knowledges of it, it will be “resistant to false or invalid methods, misinterpretation, or misrepresentation” (Grosz 1993: 191).

The nature that is known and understood through ‘our’ knowledges about it, then, is presumed to, in and of itself, resist false representation. ‘Genuine’ and ‘good’ knowledges are assumed

to be transparent and neutral instruments of the intellect – simply describing and/or explaining ‘reality’ as is, without distorting, manipulating or constraining it (Grosz 1993). However, nature is apparently not unaffected by the claims to knowledge insisting on huMan’s fundamental separation from it, as it provides humans with the perceived right to exploit nature for personal gain or to fill the ocean with plastic.

The affirmative feminist project insists that the claims to knowledge commonly held in the Western framework for thought – ways of knowing which demands dichotomous separation and hierarchical differentiation – is in need of explicit change. Such changes could be a tool in a feminist transformation of the world, which is why the effort of this thesis is to discuss intra-action as a tool for affirmative developments in feminist theory of knowledge.

One sees the need for such a transformation of claims to knowledge if one considers again the argument above that knowledges are deemed ‘good’ if they make objects understandable through a correlation with the dichotomous logic. If it is accepted that these claims to knowledge demands that the object and the knowing subject must be dichotomously understood – in other words, that claims to knowledge lay demands and restrictions on the possibilities for what can be known – then how can knowledge be neutral, transparent or in other ways be said to *not* affect what is known?

1.3 The reproduction of knowledge, discourse and systems of power

If the belief in knowledges neutrality is debunked, the following step is to examine the mechanisms by which the insistence in neutrality and the common-sensical nature of the entanglement of claims to knowledge and claims to sex are reproduced.

As has now been stated, knowledges within the dichotomous framework for thinking are considered to be perspectiveless, they “lack the means to understand their own self-development as knowledges” (Grosz 1993: 193). In other words, they do not acknowledge the historicity and materiality of knowledges – how they are produced, generated, validated and justified, and the material and contextual specificities that any and all production of knowledge is always related to. Donna Haraway writes that it matters what stories tell stories, and that it matters what knowledges know further knowledges (2016: 35). What Haraway

does is point to the relational nature of knowledges which means that the stories and knowledges that are used to generate new knowledges matters for what knowledges will be possible to know. The common claims to knowledge within the dichotomous framework, however, does not acknowledge this. This lack of acknowledgement reproduces an idea of knowledges as essentially value-free and of knowledges as independent from previous knowledges and material specificities.

The relation of knowledges to politics, within a dichotomous logic, remains external to knowledges. To claim that politics are external to knowledge means that the possibility of using or applying knowledges to political purposes is acknowledged, but that the political investment of knowledges is perceived as separated from the knowledge itself. However, following Grosz, knowledges are rather inherently political. To claim that knowledges are inherently political means that knowledges are exactly what they are as a result of the entanglement of power and knowledge, and that this entanglement must be considered internal to knowledges. According to Grosz, it is this entanglement of knowledge and power that generate certain possibilities for further knowledges, and not others, and it is this entanglement that guides the material effects that knowledges have (Grosz 1993).

Knowledges perceived as inherently value-free and non-political feed into the rolling story that knowledges are separate from the knowing human subjects. In other words, the idea of knowledges as value-free and non-political hides the fact that knowledges are produced by knowing subjects with specific ideas about life, what it means to be human, who they are themselves, and who their equals and non-equals are – as well as these subjects' personal investment in certain knowledges. The systems of power reproducing favored positions for some specific bodies – systems that are inherent to knowledges – are left unacknowledged when adhering to the dominating claims to knowledge within the dichotomous framework for thought. To point out that knowledges are inherently political and constituted through systems of power, then, would be to claim a specific position *against* the 'common sense' as defined by Halberstam above. To claim the inherent political nature of knowledge can perhaps be perceived as particularly radical and ideologically insistent if the knowledges which inherent political-ness is insisted upon concerns bodies and sex. In other words, knowledges that are perceived as 'naturally given' because of their assumed neutral representation of something

biological and/or natural can be especially hard to acknowledge the inherent political nature of – that is: their inherent entanglement with systems of power.

Foucault is famous for his argument about the connections between power and knowledge in *The History of Sexuality – the Will to Knowledge* (1978). Here, Foucault presents a genealogy of sexuality and argues that sex and sexuality are historical products. The claim that sex and sexuality are historical products means that the ways that we know and do sex and sexuality today, are specific to this particular point in time and space. In addition – when keeping in mind the inherent political qualities of knowledges – these specific ways of knowing and doing sex are closely related to structures of power. Foucault specifically claims that developments, mechanisms and procedures in multiple fields such as medicine, pedagogy, science, law and psychiatry are important co-creators of how and what is known about sex. Foucault underlines the dynamics between knowledge, power and discourse and how they co-constitutively produce specific truths, understandings and possibilities for and about sex and sexuality – and everything else.

For Foucault, discourse points not only to language but to practices of speaking, acting, writing, and communicating that varies between different groups and different disciplines. Discourse, in other words, is not only what is said, but the ways in which something is said, the channels used to say it, the possibilities available and excluded at any given moment for what can be said, as well as norms and habits regarding who says/does/writes what, and so on.

‘Discourse’ is linked to particular – material and linguistic – ways of knowing, producing and organizing knowledge. When these specific ways of knowing, producing and organizing knowledge then is institutionalized, these institutions – these ways of knowing and organizing knowledge – construct subjects in accordance with these knowledges. Foucault argues: the institutions construct subjects correlating with the knowledge constitutive of the institutions themselves. This production of subjects happens through systems of valorizing, judging and imposing ways of speaking and acting within fields and institutions such as law, medicine, pedagogy and so on. Following Barad’s understanding of Foucault one can say that “discourse is not what is said; it is that which constrains and enables what can be said. Discursive practices define what counts as meaningful statements” (Barad 2007: 146). One can add that discursive practices also define who counts as valid knowers and valid subjects.

Discursive practices, then, are boundary-making practices in the sense that they continually define who, and what utterances, are accepted at any given time. Discursive practices are co-constitutive of the world of which they are a part.

Power, in Foucault's argument, is not defined as subjugation, violence or dominance exerted by one group or individual over another, or as "groups of institutions and mechanisms that ensure the subservience of the citizens of a given state" (Foucault 1978: 92). Rather, and contrary to a negative definition of power, power is inherent to all types of relationships and is the immediate effects of the divisions, inequalities, and dis-equilibriums which occur in relationality. Power, then, can be understood as internal to the friction that is inherent in any relationality – friction causing new and further frictions – rather than power being the cause of friction. Power is not simply repressive but, first and foremost, productive. As a multiplicity of force relations, power is both inevitable within any relation and constitutive of relations (Foucault 1978). Force relations become visible through struggles and confrontations, which continually transform – struggles and confrontations that strengthen or reverse these same relations. Power is nothing without resistance, without the relation of force. In that sense, resistance is what is power. The very existence of power relationships depends on resistance – possible, improbable, spontaneous, savage, solitary, quick to compromise, interested or sacrificial resistance – producing the dynamics of force relations (Foucault 1978). Power is then not an expression of binary, hierarchical relationships or a description of a top-down dynamic: power spreads out from below and is an expression of the manifold relationships of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery of knowledge production, in families, in groups and in institutions – power is productive of the relationships it is continually a part of (1978).

What such an elaboration of Foucault's theory can provide is to show how knowledge, power and discourse are co-constitutive of each other and, moreover, that knowledges are inherently invested with power or productive friction. The acknowledgment of this investment and entanglement gives a sense of the continual dynamics of production and reproduction of knowledge. With relation to bodies and sex within the dichotomous system – and since resistance is what fuels power-systems – it is possible to argue that the system of dichotomous normalcy *needs* 'deviant' or resisting bodies in order to maintain its insistence on what is normal. The dichotomous system is dependent on some bodies 'failing' and resisting

dichotomization in order for the system to try to fix them, correct them, and know them. In this sense we see that resistance against ‘the norm’ – even if unintended as resistance – is productive of force relations.

What is missing from Foucault’s elaboration on power, however, is, according to Donna Haraway, an account of how technology and information in the technological age function in relations of power and the production of subjects. In her text ‘A Cyborg Manifesto – Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century’ (1984), Haraway argues that Foucault’s description of power and the social systems and institutions that shape human subjectivity through protection, treatment and measurement lacks an acknowledgement of the role that technology play in the production of people (or cyborgs in Haraway’s words). Because of this short-coming, Foucault’s whole account of the knowledge-power-discourse dynamic is lacking, Haraway claims, it does not fully grasp the material reality making up the fields of force and is therefore not able to serve as a satisfactory foundation to build imaginaries and the creation of different possibilities upon.

Foucault’s notion of ‘biopolitics’ which is his term for the strategies and mechanisms by which human life and subjectivity is managed and shaped under the authority of social systems and institutions does not account for how technological information-distribution makes possible, and also demands, the spreading out of life, body, home, workplace and almost anything else. According to Haraway, Foucault’s theory does not account for the almost infinite ways of connection that is possible through technology and ever-renewing ways of communication and information-distribution. Domination in the age of the cyborg, writes Haraway – where humans are hybrids and bodies are made, not born – is not normalization and medicalization as in Foucault’s biopolitics. Networking, an ever-present cellphone, redefined and redesigned communication and relationality, and the ways information can seemingly take on a life of its own, must be included in an analysis of power. These new aspects of being human, she writes, is not caught in Foucault’s notion of power.

Haraway’s argument is an important contribution to a discussion about power and is a way into this thesis’ discussions of feminist theory and affirmativity. In an affirmative way, Haraway not only contributes with a critique of existing theories – an acknowledgement of an aspect in contemporary power that is not, according to Haraway, included in Foucault’s

writings – but also and consequently creatively formulates her own concept of the human as Cyborg. Because of the affirmative approach, the cyborg gives renewed possibilities for thinking about power and knowledge. Regarding sex there is no doubt that technology, the internet, and numerous informational channels provide almost innumerable opportunities for self-definition, sharing of experiences, spreading and justification of knowledge and so much more. The acknowledgement of the importance of technology within structures of power is highly necessary in order to imagine what sex could become. Technology is not only a part of the human every-day life, but, if we follow Haraway, is constitutive of us as human. Additionally, Haraway's critique necessarily opens to several questions about the relationship between knowledge insisted upon by the 'old' institutions, and the polymorphous movements of knowledge and information continually distributed in the time of Cyborgs. In the following thesis, Haraway's critique of Foucault's notion of power will be included in the discussions.

The most important value of the inclusions of Foucault's theory in this thesis, however, is to show how knowledge is produced and reproduced through ever-dynamic entanglements with discourse and power – although one could follow Haraway and change discourse for 'technobabble' (1985) and conceptualize power as a polymorph techno-hybrid-version of the force relation between the repressive and the productive.

In joining Foucault's argument to the notion of bottom-line presented earlier, what becomes clear is that is that the ideas of fundamental, dichotomous separation and binary sex, (as well as huMan exceptionalism and individualism which will be included to the discussion later) are the continual results of systems of (techno-)power working in co-constitutive ways with discursive practices and knowledges. It is important to note that since the bottom-lines of dichotomous separation and binary sex are 'common sense'-knowledge, they also enjoy a status of being eternally true, and not necessary to defend.

1.4 Humanness

Feminism in public discourse is commonly believed to be about equality between women and men. Feminist efforts like that of intersectional theory, a term coined by black feminist Kiberle Crenshaw, have worked to complicate discussions about equality between sexes through the inclusion of other social identificatory categories such as race, class, able-

bodiedness, sexuality and so forth. Intersectional feminists argue that sex is never a separate phenomenon sectioned off from other categories like class, race or sexuality. The category of sex must therefore be seen as always in relation to – and as intersecting with – other categories of identification.

Intersectionality as feminist method has enjoyed wide appreciation, and is productive in pointing out how differentiating boundaries, defined as inherent by society, work together and create social inequality – and how social inequality is not the same for a white and a black woman; a disabled, homosexual man and an able-bodied homosexual man and so on. Following the arguments of queer theorist Jasbir Puar (2011) however, in intersectionality's effort of complicating differences, it also plays into the reproduction of difference as inherent and hierarchical, and reproduces an idea of boundaries as given, inherently present and true. In other words, through insisting that certain differentiating categories intersect, intersectionality also insist on those intersecting categories as inherent to the people in question and insist on those defined differences as a fundamental part of their identities as humans. This insistence on differences as inherent goes to the crux of the feminist project of this thesis. From an affirmative feminist perspective the question is not 'in what ways are people different from one another – and what can be done about the consequences of these differences?' This question assumes certain truths about what it means to be a human: that humanness implies and demands social categories inevitably understood through hierarchical differentiation. The question fueling this thesis, rather is: 'by what measures and standards do we know what we are? – and if those standards were different, what possibilities for knowing and being could emerge?'

The point of the affirmative feminist critique and imaginary of this thesis – rather than focusing on sex as something that is given and 'known', and on differences as inherent – is to focus its feminist attention on how differences are understood and produced through systems of knowledge and power; how the knowledge-power dynamics can be understood in relation to actual bodies, and how it might be possible to alter those knowledge-power dynamics, and through that, the fundamental understanding of difference and what it means to exist. Such a project, however, cannot be embarked on without a focus on sex, since ideas and experiences of sex – as binary and inherent – are so ingrained in the Western philosophical framework and is insisted upon by (almost?) any and all social institutions and relations. The affirmative

feminist project insists on critique and creativity, acknowledgement and curiosity. Therefore, in an affirmative vein, and in order to facilitate uncharted creativity, it is necessary to acknowledge the immense position sex enjoys with regards to defining what it means to be human.

1.4.1 HuMan

According to Rosi Braidotti, Western Humanism is a civilizational and cultural model in which the main idea is that of the universalizing power of self-reflexive reason which is seen as inherent to humanity (2013). However, according to this Humanism, all humans are not human in this sense. Only some are accorded this mark of human exceptionalism, and traditionally, Europe defined itself as the defining power of human-ness through making humanistic universalism its particularity (Braidotti 2013). In order to expand human capabilities to those presumably lacking the predefined values of critical reason and self-reflexivity, imperialist crimes and violence have been committed in numbers in the name of Humanism.

Exploring the history of the notion of ‘human’ reveals a series of deadly, sexed and racialized exclusions and inclusions, showing that this concept is not at all ‘neutral’. In her book *The Posthuman* (2013), Braidotti shows how the idea of the human of Western Humanism has served as the defining and comparative norm for what or whom might be called human – and, furthermore, how these specific versions of ‘human’ have produced what is then deemed non-human, inhuman, anti-human and inhumane, as well as posthuman (Braidotti 2013). This is also argued by Halberstam who quotes James C. Scott, writing that “legibility is a condition of manipulation” (Halberstam 2011: 10). What is meant by that is that to claim to understand something, is also to manipulate it. All kinds of subjects are manipulated precisely when they become legible and visible to the state, like for instance undocumented workers, visible queers or racialized minorities (Halberstam 2011). The traditional human of Western Humanism can be represented by the Vitruvian Man of Leonardo da Vinci, thereby connoting manhood, reason, strength, ablebodiedness, whiteness and health. Furthermore, these ideals have been foundational to ideas of the human subject as citizen, rights-holder and property-owner (Braidotti 2013). In other words, both the notions of ‘human’ and ‘citizen’ holds within them certain standards and demands for being human or citizen ‘enough’, just like institutions

produce the subjects they are assumed to represent, as was argued through Foucault. The definitions of human and citizen thus produce other subjects to become legible by their failure in relation to those demands – these others are the unacknowledged foundation upon which the notions of ‘human’ and ‘citizen’ can be built.

In her book *Feminist Morality – Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics* (1993), Virginia Held elaborates on the argument that human subjects described in Western theory and philosophy have predominantly been defined as being fully grown men. These men are commonly presented as individuals in contractual, competitive and oppositional relations with the male individuals surrounding them. Perhaps the insistence on the fundamental maleness of subjectivity has not always been a conscious claim from theorists and philosophers. The degree of awareness is not of great importance however. The point is that what a human has predominantly been described as being in the theories serving as fuel for thought throughout the Western philosophical tradition, and which has also been the foundation upon which institutions and states are developed and built, has generally been described through the lives and experiences of men and excluded women’s experiences and lives from these descriptions. This notion of the human in Western philosophy, writes Held, is very much defined in accordance with the citizen of Hobbes state of nature. Hobbes theorizes humans as always already fully-grown men who, as fundamentally separated from each other, are not occupied with interaction or engagement with others. Instead, these ‘ideal’ humans are defined by an oppositional, individualized identity, always in competition and in denial of any reciprocal nature of human interaction (Held 1993).

The very idea of subjectivity, as such, is then more strongly connected to manhood and maleness, than womanhood. Where men have been defined as human, women have often been defined *as women*, thus being marked as more sexualized and less able to be rational. Because of the dichotomous framework and the male-centered definition of what a human is and the contractual relations *he* partakes in, rationality – what defines knowledge and makes huMans exceptional – is defined through the transcendence of the ‘feminine’ and the feminine ‘side’ of the dichotomies (Held 1993). When acknowledging the connections between the rational man transcending the feminine and the discussion about nature, culture and transcendence above, the deep- and far-reaching effects and insistences of the dichotomous logic emerges.

The transcendence of the feminine correlates with another dichotomous pair, namely the private vs. the public. The proper and ‘natural’ role of women within this framework, built on rationalism and contractual relations, are as biological mothers and care-takers in the home, defined by their bodily activities, like bearing children and menstruation, while men traditionally have taken and been given the role of those leaving the home, going out into the public and cultural sphere. Women and the feminine, as more closely tied to and determined by natural processes and biology, are therefore not capable of the same rationality and moral as the rational ‘economic man’ (Held 1993).

One can argue that this presentation of the notion of human is simplified, and it is thus important to note that this does not mean that women have not been part of history, that women have been less important than men, or that this is a true representation of how all humans in the West think about humanity. If history is told in terms of human men and women, women will always be half of that story. This presentation of how the human has commonly been defined, however, shows that women often are the unacknowledged half which serves as a prop to build up the stories told for and by the male ‘leading characters.’ It does not say anything about all lived lives, but it shows some structural lines of connection; structures that are affecting public institutions, popular culture, norms and habits to bigger or smaller degrees. Another important point is that this story is not told in order to frame ‘bad’ men for suppressing women. Rather, it is an effort to make explicit the validating and justificatory structures of which we are all a part – whether we like it or not. These structures are reproducing sexist knowledges through sexist ways of knowing – ways of knowing which generate limits and possibilities with regards to what it is possible to know and be, both with regards to sex and with regards to existence as such.

Drawing the attention back towards claims to knowledge, one can say that within all knowledges there lie implicit claims to what knowledge is and who can be a knower. In other words, inherent to knowledges there are implications for who or what can do the knowing, in addition to implications for the relationship between the knower and what is known. Specific claims to knowledge entail specific possibilities for subjectivity. Knowledge claims within the Western dichotomous framework imply (at least) two important things with regards to subjectivity. Firstly, as knowledge is commonly understood as a mediator between the knower

and what is known – the subject and the object – these claims to knowledge demand a fundamental separation between the subject and its surroundings. Secondly, as the knowing subject within the dichotomous framework necessarily connotes ‘human’, subjectivity is also first and foremost understood through self-reflexivity, rationality, whiteness and maleness. Both of these points, when they are firmly embedded within the dichotomous logic, reproduce ideas and insinuations on hierarchical differentiation.

Because of the greater feminist project of this thesis, I insist that it is possible to produce a more non-sexist definition of what it means to exist as human being. Many would perhaps insist that sex nevertheless would have to be part of that new human-ness – at least in ways somewhat close to the definitions we have today: our bodies are natural, are they not? Hopefully, by now, the notion of ‘natural’ brings a look of scepticism.

1.4.2 Sex

The distinction between nature and culture as described above can be compared to that between biology and the social. Similar to ‘nature,’ ‘biology’ is often used as a justificatory argument; it is presumed to describe some pre-social ‘truth’. The biological is thus more ‘natural’ than the social and the cultural. Many feminist efforts have been directed towards dislodging fixed and foundational conceptualizations of nature from claims to truth. In other words, feminists have argued against biologically determinist arguments insisting that the biology of bodies causes specific and thus ‘natural’ social effects and structures of equality.

When the separation of ‘gender’ from ‘sex’ – the social from the biological – was popularized in the 1970’s, many feminists embraced that separation as a road to liberation (Fausto-Sterling 2000). As it became possible to be born with one specific biological body – to have a biological sex – but have a different gender – a different social identity – that separation functioned as somewhat liberational from deterministic demands. It became possible for individuals to have one biological identity and another social identity not necessarily correlated to the demands of the dichotomous logic. As such, it became possible and justifiable to fight for the right of ‘normalcy’ even if one did not by traditional measures ‘fit’ in the dichotomous logic.

However, this ‘solution’ insists that liberation from a dichotomous regime is to be found within dichotomous differentiation. In other words, this ‘solution’ maintains both the dichotomous divide between the biological and the social, and the insistence on the social transcending the biological, while claiming to be liberatory. There is no doubt that to broaden the category of normalcy *is* liberatory within the dichotomous logic in question, sometimes it is even a matter of life and death – nevertheless it does nothing to challenge the more foundational ideas embedded in the framework of thought that the very idea of what ‘normalcy’ is, is built upon. The ideas and ideals for what makes up a ‘normal’ human being, in other words, are highly specific to this time and place in history. The idea that human beings are inherently individual with unitary identities is one such historical and cultural construction – one corresponding nicely with the dichotomous logic of Self and Other, and which is reproduced through capitalist interests – a point that will be picked up shortly (Braidotti 2011).

With regards to sex, we can follow Foucault who argues that the idea of sex – binary and ‘natural’ – as an essential and fundamental part of a normal human’s individual identity in the ways that we insist on it today, is a historical and cultural specificity. Much of feminist theory is also guilty of the insistence on and reproduction of sex as inherent, as is part of Puar’s critique of intersectionality above that intersectional theory insists on sex as constant for thinking about what it means to be a human – sex (in relation to the binary) is thus a bottom-line for thinking also in much of feminist theory: *the* difference which is always present in an individual human being in a specific way (Puar 2011).

Through the qualifying, measuring, appraising, and hierarchizing of bodies and subjects based on norms, goals and ideals, the juridical, medical and administrative structures of a society, purportedly there to serve their subjects, are themselves producing the subjects they come to represent (1978). Foucault states that systems of power, and thus also discursive practices and knowledge as presented above, are directly connected to the body. What then is insisted upon (here: sex), through systems of power and societal structures, as being ‘essential’ or the most important aspects of a body to talk about and tell the ‘truth’ about, are not inherently the most essential parts of the body. Rather, the knowledge insisting on this essentiality of sex is the product of the entanglement of social and material factors (1978).

That sex and sexuality are assumed to be such essential parts of the body, writes Foucault – in the highly specific ways that they are – is a result of the deployment of sex and sexuality as a measure for states to control and police populations. In order to be legible to the state, and to be a valid subject and citizen – a valid human – one is demanded to state one’s sex. Only by this declaration of sex, does one have access to one’s own body and one’s own identity (Foucault 1978). Because of this demand for sexual declaration, writes Foucault, a desire for sex – binary sex – has emerged through history: a desire to have it, to have access to it, to discover it, liberate it, and formulate it in truth (1978). This demand for declaration, I would add, could also very well amount to the desire to distance oneself from the leading conceptualizations of sex and state one’s uniqueness with regards to sexual definitions. As liberating as that feels, however, the very desire for the declaration of sex, writes Foucault, is a product of the social systems there to police and protect us. According to Foucault, this logic makes us think that fighting for the rights of sex liberates subjects against superior powers. However, following Foucault, the ideas of such liberation are in fact supporting the very system they think they are opposing – “we must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power” (Foucault 1978: 158). The insistence on sex, as inherent to individual human identity, only provides freedom within a system which continues to insist on dichotomous and hierarchical categorization as the measure of understandability, where sex and/or gender is acknowledged as the most fundamental identificatory trait of an individual, and where difference spells negation (Fausto-Sterling 2000).

What is important here is that neither sex nor humanity – as these are commonly understood, thought and experienced in the West today – is a road to feminist transformation and liberation, at least not the feminist transformation that is pursued in this thesis. Although feminism as it is commonly known and practiced focus largely on the liberation of women and sexual minorities, there are feminist theorists who have grappled with the problematic of what the subject of feminism is, if subjectivity in itself is sexist.

The feminist theorist Judith Butler picked up on Foucault’s argument in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990). She writes that if ‘woman’, as the subject of feminism really is herself constituted by the political system which is also supposed to facilitate her emancipation, and if that very system is producing subjects along hierarchical and dichotomous lines of differentiation, the appeal to such a system for the emancipation of ‘women’ is self-defeating

(Butler 1990). To claim any ‘side’ of the dichotomous system then, whether it is for liberatory or justificatory purposes, without at the same time to question and explore by what measures and structures those ‘sides’ are maintained, takes part in reproducing that very system. Butler also argued that to insist that something is ‘natural’, or ‘biological’ in the sense of ‘prior to culture’, is to exclude the acknowledgement that this insistence is always already also cultural by being brought forth through language (1990).

Following Butler’s argument, the impossibility of ‘neutral’ knowledges is thoroughly cemented. Knowledges about nature will undeniably always also be cultural because they are brought forth into and through culture. Butler is, however, often critiqued by materialist feminist for arguing that ‘everything is culture’ and that she herself has ‘picked a side’. She is critiqued for ‘bracketing’ the material in a claim that everything material is always already social and thus denies the vital and agential materialism of bodies (Davis 2009).

From an affirmative, materialist feminist perspective, such a critique is understandable. Affirmative, materialist feminism insists on the constructed nature of the boundary between human and animal. Butler is taking the human realm as vantage point, and thereby makes herself blind for what truths about human-ness she is herself reproducing. ‘The social’ in Butler’s account refers to human sociality as *the social*, hence marking humans off as ontologically different from nature and matter and thereby reproducing dichotomous differentiation.

Karen Barad is one materialist feminist who explicitly comes to Butler’s defense. She too insists that Butler fails to recognize matter’s dynamism in the end and claims it is ultimately derived from language or culture. Nevertheless, she insists that some of Butler’s reflections – also regarding matter – are fruitful for further thinking. According to Barad, Butler argues against the fixity of nature and hence for an opening up for possibilities of change. Barad quotes Butler as proposing “a return to the notion of materiality ... [as a] process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter” (Barad 2007: 64). This notion of processes of materialization, in addition to and combined with the notion of performativity – a concept from Butler developed for materialist feminist perspectives through Barad – makes Barad’s reading of Butler a positive one. I will return to Barad’s theory and arguments in part three.

1.4.3 Individual identity

As shown, in battles for freedom and equality, feminists are sometimes guilty of reproducing suppressing ideas about what it means to be a human as part of this world. Intersectionality is, as mentioned, one direction within feminist theory that insists on complexity while at the same time insisting on humans as specific individual entities that, according to intersectional theory, *has* to be different from each other in specific, hierarchical ways.

Following Rosi Braidotti, the very idea of identity dominating in the West today is following the same dichotomous logic as has been presented and critiqued thus far. Within this logic, identity is presumed to be inherent to the individual and the individual is separated from all others (2013). Braidotti argues that the ideal of a unitary identity – a Self – always implies and demands a dualistic opposition, it demands something ‘other’ which it is not, thereby cementing the oppositional notions such as man and woman, old and young, white and black and so on (2011). However, these ideas and beliefs in a unitary and separate identity, and the insistence on individualism that goes hand in hand with that, are not any intrinsic part of ‘human nature’. Rather, the very ideas of personal identity and individualism that are dominating and popularized in the West are themselves historical and cultural formations – formations that according to Braidotti are becoming increasingly problematic because of their linkage to differentiating categories like sex, race and sexuality, that are insisted upon as true (Braidotti 2013). Related to this, Halbestam claims that some of the problematic aspects of the notions of identity and individualism are the connections to selfishness, untrammelled consumption and its opposition to more collective and connective mentalities (Halberstam 2011).

Following the arguments of Foucault and Braidotti one can see that the insistence on sex as essential to human identity – the knowledge that one *is* ones sex – is in itself formative of our current ideas and experiences of sex. Likewise, the knowledge we have about what it means to be human – as for instance a separate individual with the ideal of a unitary identity – will be formative of our hopes and expectations for, as well as our actual, ideas and experiences of identity.

Belief in individualism and unitary identity is an important part of modern liberal discourse on freedom and autonomy. If we are to follow the arguments of Braidotti, however, there is nothing inherent to the concept of freedom built on an idea of individualism and unitary identity as these concepts are historically and culturally specific. Braidotti also points out that capitalism, under the cover of individualism, and through selling the idea of ‘the right’ to high quantities of consumer choices, fuels the idea of a unitary, separate and possessive individual who is making ‘free’ choices (2013). The capitalist spinning machine, then, as Braidotti calls it, fuels into the liberal idea of freedom as individualism and individualism as freedom.

When the idea of subjectivity – as unitary, individual identity – is demanded to be understood by and correlate with dichotomous and binary ideas of bodies, an unobtainable ideal is created. The spinning capitalist machine reproduces these dichotomized ideals by selling differences along the lines of dichotomous differentiation. The ideas of liberal individualism get sold as ‘new, negotiable identities’, which in reality is promoting uniformity and conformism to the dominant ideology (Braidotti 2013). Following Braidotti’s arguments about the link between individualism and capitalism – individualism being fundamental to what ‘the human’ means today – we can gather that an analysis of the forces reproducing ideas about sex and what it means to exist as a human, is not sufficient without the inclusion of capitalism. Capitalism feeds into the ideas of sex, humanness and individualism and sells ever smaller differences in the name of uniqueness while in essence following the lines of dichotomous differentiation and thus through commodification heavily represents heterosexual and heteronormative bodies (Halberstam 2011).

When delving into the pervasiveness of the dichotomous logic and the ways in which it is ingrained into Western common sense, it can quickly result in a feeling of helplessness. If one accepts this knowledge – that the knowledge commonly used to understand ourselves are also limiting us and damaging us and the world – what is one to do? What alternatives are there, if one is not to ‘pick sides’, and not create ‘new sides’? What actions are possible without the inevitable result of damnation?

In *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) Judith Halberstam argues for what she calls ‘shadow feminism’. She credits postcolonial feminists Gayatri Spivak and Saba Mahmood and claims that “Western feminist theories of agency and power, freedom and resistance tend to be and

have proposed alternative ways of thinking about self and action that emerge from contexts often rejected outright by feminism” (126). In an effort not to adhere to the same ideals of positivity, reform and accommodation defined by the system she sets out to critique, Halberstam seeks to theorize a feminism of self-destruction, negation of feminist subjectivity rather than formation and antisocial femininity. In an act of ‘resisting mastery’ from all-encompassing theories insisting on their own omnipresence – like the dichotomous logic – Halberstam claims that failure – the act of not ‘fitting’ – can be read and experienced as an act of resisting such mastery. Success, Halberstam claims, will always be defined by the claims to knowledge and truth constituting the framework any subject is a part of. Fighting for the right to be deemed equally successful by measures co-constitutive of a dichotomous logic, will not challenge the framework that ultimately judges what and who is included and excluded. Therefore, failure is an act of resistance.

It seems that Halberstam thinks that the best option for a try at existence outside of, or away from, suppressive dichotomies is to embrace unbeing, undoing and unbecoming through shadow feminist non-actions. Halberstam is right in that ‘action’, ‘being’, ‘freedom’ and many other concepts used to conceptualize feminist struggles are the products of a suppressive system. Her point is that if freedom means freedom to become a master, or if being means being a woman in relation to man, then she wants to be restless, to not own property, to go off the radar, to not be (2011). Although sympathetic to her project, it brings about the feeling of giving up, of not caring, of closing the door to the rest of the world. When remembering Foucault’s argument, we realize that this is exactly what she does: the system she is opposing needs failure *as resistance* in order to maintain itself. Even if she might be seeking new forms of failure which are so far not understandable to the system she is opposing, it is the nature of these failures as resistance that diminishes the generative powers of her feminist project. It seems as though Halberstam thinks that there is a goal existing somewhere, a world that ‘should have been,’ but which she realized she can never reach – not through the concepts and tools constructed by the system she opposes. It is in a response to the assumed choice of having to be ‘for’ or ‘against’ that this thesis argues for affirmativity as an idealistic response to the troubles of our times and for redefinitions and re-imaginings of what is and what could be.

The affirmative feminist project is not aimed at reaching a goal in the future through resisting what exists here and now. This hesitance towards ‘resistance’ is what fuels the inclusion of ‘acknowledgement’ to the affirmative critique. To work by a pre-defined ideal of how it ‘should’ be would be based in knowledge we do not have about the future, and thereby it would impose a demand on the future to correspond with the knowledge of today. Rather, an affirmative approach is focused on the here and now. However, the affirmative feminist project is not focused on resisting what is, but rather, in Haraway’s terms, ‘staying with the trouble’. The affirmative feminist project is thus an exploration of what *now* can be imagined to consist of – thereby generating hitherto dormant possibilities for the future. As an affirmative alternative to being and/or being restless, for instance, Haraway proposes ‘becoming-with’ as an acknowledgement of how existence is fundamentally relational and processual. In *When Species Meet* (2008) she writes that “[i]f we appreciate the foolishness of human exceptionalism then we know that becoming is always becoming *with*, in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake” (244). Being is in other words a continual becoming, and becoming is never a solitary endeavor, but always a becoming-with.

What is highly important in the affirmative feminist project is that it is not aimed at reaching a particular goal. Rather, the affirmative perspective acknowledges the past and its inheritance in the presence, while is at the same time open towards the future without letting neither future nor past dictate what *now* shall be filled with. The point of the affirmative approach is thus to acknowledge that we are already here. We are where we need to be, in any given moment, and we need to inquire into alternative and different ways of understanding, ways of relating and ways of loving. The ethical implication of this feminist project is immense and will be further discussed throughout this thesis. But for now, I will point out that such an affirmative project – focused on relational and processual life – instills responsibility and accountability into ethical becoming-with. Through becoming-with one is rendered capable of responding to the other (Haraway 2016) – one is accountable for ones responses and responsible for ones accounts.

1.5 Situated knowledges

The already mentioned Donna Haraway is a feminist concerned with the imagining of alternatives with regards to what exists, what is known, as well as what existence and knowledge is known to be.

This effort is not possible without the combination of critique and creativity. Therefore, one could already argue that Haraway is an affirmative feminist. In addition, in order to be able to critique, acknowledgment is necessary. Therefore, acknowledgement is, in this thesis, claimed to be an aspect of the affirmative. Acknowledgement means to give something recognition, to recognize that something is the way it is. In order to stay with the trouble of *now*, a recognition of what now consists of is needed. To facilitate such recognition – recognition without resistance – this thesis argues for the inclusion of ‘curiosity’ to the notion of the affirmative. Curiosity points to a desire to know more and to learn more. Not necessarily with the aim of critique in mind, but rather learning for the sake of learning and relating.

The affirmative feminist project curiously asks what is in need of recognition – of acknowledgment – in order to facilitate critique, imagination and creation. For Haraway, the situated and sexed nature of knowledge is in need of such recognition. As a feminist scholar within science studies it is not enough for Haraway to simply point out and prove biases and prejudices within science, nor to state that there is an inequality in representation of sexes at play. She is wary of focusing on an identity-political premise claiming that women can do different and/or better science than men, as this would imply an ahistorical common female essence, and/or that some perspectives and social and embodied spaces to do research from are better than others. Instead of only insisting that women and/or feminists represent ‘something different,’ Haraway is concerned with questioning what this difference is, what it entails, how it comes about, and how such a questioning can lead to change (Egeland 2008). In other words, ‘sex’ – as men and women – does not represent a bottom line in Haraway’s feminism and theory of science, but rather serves as a vantage point for discussing what difference is and how the Western philosophical framework, with its claims to knowledge, is structured.

In the text ‘Situated Knowledges – the Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Knowledge’ (1988) Haraway challenges the idea of knowledge as fixed, neutral and

eternally true. She demonstrates how facts cannot be universal truths, because they are always rooted in specific stories, bodies, knowledges, frameworks and ideas. The critique of universal objectivity did not start with Haraway and is a point for other non-feminist theorists of science as well, like Bruno Latour with his Actor Network Theory is one example of. What Haraway does, however, is to show how all knowledge is sexually specific because it originates in a sexed body.

Haraway's concept of 'situated knowledges' is an insistence on the embodied nature of all knowledges. Because all human knowledges come from human bodies, and all bodies are embedded within a sexed framework for understanding knowledges, existence and ethics, all knowledges must undeniably be sexed or sexually specific. (Haraway 1988; Grosz 1993). 'Neutral' or 'objective' knowledges, as in 'seeing everything from nowhere' is, in other words, an impossibility.

Vision is, according to Haraway, a dominating metaphor for knowledge, knowledge production, and the communication of knowledge. However, Haraway argues that vision – as in perspective or knowledge – has been claimed as a conquering gaze from nowhere by the presumably 'unmarked' subject positions of 'Man' and 'White' (1988: 581). What is commonly perceived as unmarked, neutral, or objective knowledge is not at all neutral, as has been argued above, and often a badge of neutrality signifies knowledge produced through structures favoring male and white bodies. This favoring of knowledge-position is a possibility within a logic that equates knowing, rational and universal consciousness with the male and the white, while the Other to that Self is the negative counterpart, thus marking the knowledge of women and diverse minorities as partial, affected by their non-neutral bodies, and in other ways not as 'good'.

Haraway is trying to redefine objectivity from a feminists – embodied – perspective through an insistence on the acknowledgement that all knowledge is embodied, and that there is no 'neutral' if neutral means unaffected. In effect, Haraway's point comes to mean that the very ideas of neutrality and objectivity are also sexed along the lines of the dichotomous, hierarchically differentiated logic.

For feminist theorists of science, to point to the sexed nature of 'neutrality' and 'objectivity' has been important in order to show that this sexed conceptualization of knowledge is not

only something theoretical and mythical. Rather it is put into ordinary practice through it explicitly being presented as an obtainable ideal, while still being out of reach for the embodied others who are not allowed *not* to have a body, and thereby always being limited by disqualifying and polluting biases – sexualized and racialized others (Haraway 1988).

Haraway has critiqued feminist theory (at times, herself included) for reproducing the divide between the biological, as fixed and true, and the social through the reproduction of the boundary between the ‘hard’ and the ‘soft’ sciences. Many feminists leave the research fields of physics and biology to the people traditionally in charge – predominantly men – and are content in critiquing and deconstructing structures, practices and ideologies of objectivity from a distance (Haraway 1988). For Haraway it is a key point to examine and critique the knowledges that produce further knowledges, and the ideas that think new ideas. Ideas and knowledges do not spring up into existence without connections to context and bodies.

Rather, and a key point for feminist theory, knowledges and ideas are never separate from the bodies and contexts they are (re)produced within. The acknowledgement of this connectivity of knowledges, and the embodied nature of knowledge – that knowledges are always situated – is what for Haraway makes possible feminist objectivity (1988).

A key point when accepting Haraway’s argument about the sexed nature of ‘objectivity’ and ‘neutrality’ is that claims to knowledge insisting on such ideals, themselves become demanding of sex understood as a dichotomy. Because of the position ‘objectivity’ holds in relation to rationality, consciousness, humanity, maleness, separation and truth, it is inextricably linked to demands of bodies correlating with the dichotomous logic. Common claims to knowledge, then, with an insistence on ‘objectivity’ or ‘neutrality’, are in and of themselves demanding sex to be thought of and experienced as dichotomous – and ever-present in the human experience.

If one accepts that knowledges are always dependent on the bodies and context of their (re)production, then to live and work by the notion of situated knowledges would be an affirmative action. It opens up for acknowledgement of connections and critique of seemingly invisible bottom-lines inherent to knowledges, that are a lot harder to spot if knowledges are not acknowledged to be situated. For Haraway the notion of situated knowledges provides a possibility to “partially translate knowledges among very different – and power-different –

communities” (1988: 580). The notion of situated knowledges could thus provide a tool for transforming communication and connection across perceived boundaries. The notion of situated knowledges is an affirmative tool in that it partakes in making visible how ideas of sex are present on all structural levels of theory and experience – as knowledge – as always sexed – is undeniably a part of all ideas and experiences. At the same time, as recognition, it also opens up for new channels and ways of communication, thereby allowing for possibly unimagined possibilities to emerge.

The concept of reason is within common claims to knowledge dominating in relation to ideas about ‘good’ knowledge. Feminists have at times tried – and still try – to salvage and resuscitate the notion of ‘reason’ from its sexed and hierarchical investments in power relations (Grosz 1993). However, as Grosz points out

where feminism remains committed to the project of *knowing women*, of making women objects of knowledge, *without in turn submitting the position of knower or subject of knowledge to a reorganization*, it remains as problematic as the knowledges it attempts to supplement or replace (1993: 207 emphasis in the original).

Rationality, in other words, that which *is* knowledge within the dichotomous framework, residing in the ‘mind’ of the ‘human’, is sexed along dichotomous lines of differentiation. Similarly, although ‘objectivity’ has come under critique by both natural scientists and social epistemologists (Barad 2007; Grosz 1993), it is still striven for both in the natural sciences and the Humanities through their search for verifiable, formalizable, reasonable techniques for research, which ignores the specificities of the researching subject. This search for objectivity becomes particularly problematic in the disciplines of the Humanities when the object of research is huMan – thereby searching for human’s particularities – while at the same time insisting on the huMan subject’s neutrality and universality (Grosz 1993). To have reason and objectivity as ideals, then – as that which provides ‘good’ knowledges – even if the notions are challenged, makes the acknowledgement of knowledges situated particularity an impossibility. It does not acknowledge or challenge reason’s connection to the problematic neutrality of the huMan mind.

In summary, this first part has presented how commonly held claims to knowledge in the dichotomous system of thought are connected to specific claims to sex. These connections both generate and limit the possibilities for thinking, imagining and experiencing sex, and

more broadly the possibilities for thinking, imagining and experiencing what existence could mean. As was mentioned in the introduction, current insistencies on dichotomous definitions of sex and existence are today too often resulting in violence which makes the exploration of possibilities for being an important ethical issue.

The connections between claims to knowledge and claims to sex does not mean, however, that the sexed nature of theory or experience is inherently bad. As long as bodies are sexed and knowledge is embodied and embedded, knowledge will undeniably be sexed. But what could sex come to mean if the connections between claims to knowledge, bodies, and the dichotomous framework were acknowledged more explicitly, thus making specific connections possible to critique, and perhaps be turned into a foundation for creation? If claims to knowledge did not meet the demands of the dichotomous logic, and if claims to knowledge did not demand bodies to be sexed through a dichotomous system, what could sex become? These questions are affirmative in that they demand acknowledgement, critique, curiosity and creation.

In part three, Karen Barad's notion of intra-action will be discussed in relation to the questions above. First, however, part two will elaborate on and discuss the fear that a critique of the dichotomous logic can invoke. Identities are justified and understood through this logic, to call for change in this logic, necessarily also means that identities must change. The fear of losing one's sense of self is very real, and something that must be acknowledged.

2 PART TWO: Relay

2.1 The very real fear of losing one's identity

Based on the presentations in part one it is clear that the Western framework for thought is founded on the assumption of the inevitable 'either/or'-questions. Either one is male or female, either one is rational or emotional, either something is natural or cultural, social or biological, either one is free or one is not, and so on. Nothing can be both. Either/or-demands are also true concerning the ideals for research. Research is either objective or relativist, claiming social constructivism or empiricist realism, either something is fact or fiction, abstract or concrete, true or not. Recently, these ideals for objectivity have come under questioning – and not only from feminists. Strict dichotomies are no longer going unchallenged within the field of science.⁴ However, the belief in the unavoidability of a choice between two pre-defined answers, still remains and is reproduced through everyday discourse, through expectations put on sexed bodies, and through the ideals still voiced in the sciences and humanities for how research should be done. One could argue that the belief in the inevitability of dichotomous answers to be the only 'right' one is part of Western 'common sense'. According to Halberstam, what is at any given moment termed 'common sense' is heavily dependent on the production of norms (2011: 89). If the beliefs in the unavoidability of binary choices or alternatives are common sense, then, norms correlating with and confirming this belief would undeniably be (re)produced in the forms of words and concepts, habits, bodies, ideas, thoughts and experiences.

Within the dichotomous framework, where difference spells negation, and where the dichotomously paired concepts – however opposite they might seem – always contain its relation to the other within its meaning, to choose between two pre-defined alternatives would necessarily mean to *not choose* the other. In other words, a demand for something to be *something*, is simultaneously a demand for it not to be something *other*. Because difference spells negation, by being or choosing either one or the other, one is implicitly taking an

⁴ Grosz writes that "if objectivity means unprejudiced, observer-independent knowledge, some physicists and epistemologists challenge the belief that observers face 'facts' directly, in a manner unmediated by theories, presumptions, and values" (1993: 192) Grosz is specifically pointing to the field of quantum physics, with which also Barad (2007) is involved.

oppositional stance against what is left out. In other words, individual identity within the dichotomous logic is inherently resistant and oppositional. According to Braidotti, this oppositional stance is what defines subjectivity in the dominating Western political philosophies – exemplified, for Braidotti, by Hegel. Negativity, in this tradition, is “a necessary structural element for thought” (Braidotti 2011: 285). In other words, negativity, or the rejection of something, is perceived as a necessary precondition for the thinking subject. It could be argued that this equation of subjectivity with negativity, combined with the dichotomous demand to choose either/or, equates subjectivity – and personal identity – with taking a stance *against* something or someone, and necessarily results in a short-sighted self-interest. Identity, therefore, as it is insisted upon within the Western framework for thought, is in itself oppositional and needs to negate – or to insist on its own position as in a rejection of – someone/thing else in order to exist in the way it is ‘supposed to’. Such oppositional identity is additionally reproducing the truth of the framework where this identity is justified – the dichotomous framework.

Sex is commonly perceived as one of these ‘either/or’-questions. Although sex is dichotomous, some would perhaps argue that sex simply is something one has or is naturally given through reproduction, and therefore sex is to be exempt from the demands of rejection and opposition within the dichotomous logic as presented above – that sex is not a position one takes, or an oppositional stance as such. However, the demand for answers to correlate with one of two available ‘truths’ announces its arrival already in this argument. Since sex is obviously not ‘only a construction’ because the matter of bodies matter a great deal, then sex is presumed to have to be ‘real’ in the sense natural, unbiased, inherent to personhood and so on. Such deductive argumentation (since sex is not this, then it *has* to be that) is a struggle for feminism, as it takes so many assumptions for granted and claims that it is ‘common sense’ and therefore not in real need of defense. In this logic, the feminists who try to complicate the notion of sex, pointing to how sex is perhaps not so straight forward as common sense might have it, are, for some, annoying ideologists who demand change from someone who might feel that they have never done anything wrong – who simply are ‘themselves’. As was discussed in part one, sex is not ‘just sex’, and the belief that sex is ‘just sex’ plays into the reproduction of the dichotomous system, which is justifying violence against “the bodies of the empirical subjects who signify difference (woman/native/earth or natural others)” (Braidotti 2013: 111).

To accept dichotomies, in other words, is to be inherently resistant and oppositional, because inherent to choosing one ‘side’, the fact of *not* choosing the other is always present. Some would perhaps argue that with the *sex/gender* divide one is not accepting the dichotomous demand for being either/or. However, as I will argue in part three – because of the reproduction of the dichotomy between the biological and the social, and because of the connection between claims to knowledge and the invocation of ‘nature’ as validating and justificatory measure – these ‘new’ identity formations, although they can be ‘normal’, they can never be ‘natural’. Additionally, through the insistence on inherent, unitary identities, these ‘new’ identity formations confirm the naturalness of the dichotomous sexes and contribute to the reproduction of the dichotomous logic.

If sex is perceived, within the dichotomous framework, to be inherent to the body, and if sex simultaneously is perceived as, not determining of, but inherent to identity, then that would necessarily mean that the body is a fundamental part of one’s identity. If the ideas concerning identity idolizes coherency and non-contradiction, as Braidotti (2011) claims, then those ideals will also regard sex and the body⁵. Simultaneously, within the dichotomous logic, the Self is thought to reside in the mind, defining the body as its ‘other’. Hence, the body is simultaneously Self and other (Braidotti 2011). The ‘other’ that it is necessary for the dichotomous identity to negate, then, is not necessarily an explicit other person or thing – someone or something that one is deliberately separating oneself from. Following the dichotomous logic, identity is built on a negation and rejection of one’s body, and hence one’s sex. By demanding that the body be intelligible to the mind by means of concepts and knowledges that are constituted by and constitutive of the dichotomous logic, the body is turned into the other within one’s identity. Hence, it can be argued, identity – as it is insisted upon within the Western framework of thought – demands the negation of one’s body, and since sex is thought to be inherent to the body, identity demands a negation of one’s sex. As it was argued in the first part, the system of dichotomous, natural ‘normalcy’ needs deviant and resisting bodies in order to maintain its insistence on what is normal. If my argument is correct, then Western identity in itself, with its insistence on individuality and on sex as inherent to the body, is a major part of what is reproducing the logic presented in part one.

⁵ This is perhaps evident in the shame that, for many, is connected with aging, or other changes in the body, like gaining weight. Or the big step it is for many to ‘come out’ as something other than what they believe their surroundings assume that they are.

According to Foucault, a dominating story when it comes to sex and sexuality is that it was thoroughly repressed during Victorian times in the 1800's, and that this repression is sufficiently stubborn so that it must be rebelled against – that sexuality must be freed from repression, silence and taboo by bringing it out from the shadows, into the light and into discourse. Facing this 'repression-hypothesis', as he calls it, Foucault poses three questions. First, he simply asks if sexual repression is truly a historical fact – to which he points out that this is not the most important question: "rather, why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed?" (1978: 8-9). Second, he questions the notion of power, to which his reply, as shown in the first part of the thesis, is that power is not simply top-down repression, but rather generative forces existing everywhere in processual relationality. Third, Foucault asks almost rhetorically:

did the critical discourse that addresses itself to repression come to act as a roadblock to a power mechanism that had operated unchallenged up to that point, or is it not in fact part of the same historical network as the thing it denounces (and doubtless misrepresents) by calling it 'repression'? (1978: 10).

In other words, is the rebellion against the formulated repression functioning to remove or diminish it, or are the rebellious acts against the insisted-upon repression a constituent part of what these acts seek to denounce, thereby functioning as a maintaining tool for the story it presumably seeks to dismantle?

The idea that sexuality might actually have been repressed is relatively uninteresting to Foucault. To him, it is more interesting that we are insisting on the truth of this knowledge, and continue to live by it, although we claim it to be repressive.

If accepting Foucault's argument, and if one follows the argumentation above – that the notion of identity demands the negation of sex – one could argue that the insistence on repression of sex that Foucault presents, is inherent to Western, individual identities. In other words, it could be claimed that the notion of identity demanded by the Western framework of thought is insisting on its own repression through its negation of body and sex, and consequently instills a demand on itself to resist its own repression of itself – the sexed body – in order to fight for freedom. This imagined struggle for freedom, Braidotti would argue,

materializes through capitalism as the production of new assumingly ‘negotiable identities’. She argues that in the meeting point between the dichotomous logic’s hold on ‘difference’ as equated to ‘be worth less than’, and the spinning machine of capitalism which sells quantitative differences as freedom for the sake of commodification, the “absence of a qualitative shift in perspective that may alter the rules of the game and challenge the master code, that is to say, the dominant axiom” is proliferating (Braidotti 2011: 17). In other words, capitalism takes part in covering up the bottom-lines of the dichotomous framework that insists on identity as negation and difference as hierarchized – thereby making an argument insisting on the existence of this logic seems fanatic and overreacting – while simultaneously confirming this logic through selling freedom from the assumed repression as individualized identities. Because new ‘solutions’ and alternatives are sold and marketed each second, spinning the machine of commodification and renewal, to change ‘the master code’ or the dominant axiom is a great challenge for affirmative feminism.

It is apparent in much of the critique against materialist or posthuman feminism, that although they to a great extent agree on what issues are currently the most pressing in the world – the exploitation of women, nature, natives and minorities – they are hesitant to accept new-materialist or posthuman alternatives for thinking and acting differently because they believe it will come with a loss of human identity (van Ingen 2016; Chandler 2013). Some also argue that it is basically impossible to change the idea of identity and subjectivity from its current foundation in a dichotomous logic, because these connections are so embedded in our material and technological lives (Rekret 2016).

Affirmative feminism insists that to change the world, it is not enough to think about the world ‘out there’, and how it should change. Affirmative feminist change demands a recalibration of perspective. Instead of perceiving oneself as separate from the world, where knowledge plays a mediating role, it is necessary to conceive of oneself *as* the world – inherently connected to that or them that we call ‘other’. Such a notion of connectivity and relationality, affirmative feminism insists, needs to be the basis for what we call identity or subjectivity. Although common sense ideas about sex, identity and subjectivity *are* firmly embodied and embedded, the affirmative feminist position is that they are not fixed, inherent, or eternal, and hence it is possible for them to change. Importantly, for those ideas and experiences to change, actual people need to change as well. This is of course not a small

task, but feminism has always been about changing the world, so there is in fact nothing new under the sun.

Now, none of the critiques directed against new-materialist or posthumanist theory that I have read have mentioned sex at all – except to agree that women are suppressed. Because of the key position binary sex holds within the dichotomous framework, as both inherent to body and identity and as an organizing structure for the whole of the philosophical framework, I argue that to focus on changing ideas and experiences of human sex is elemental to the affirmative feminist project. As it is now, ‘sex’ is inherently oppositional, and every body that insists on binary sex and individual identity is taking part in reproducing the dichotomous framework.

Rather than their ideas and experiences of sex, explicitly, what the critics are concerned with losing if traditional dichotomies are not serving as explanatory model for the world are ‘human’ identificatory traits, like natural rationality, agency, autonomy, intentionality, intelligence or creativity (van Ingen 2016; Chandler 2013). In other words, they are nervous about what they might become if their identities are not grounded in the idea of human exceptionalism and are worried that a greater sense of attachment to the world will mean a loss of freedom for the individual (Chandler 2013). Freedom, for Chandler, apparently means the freedom to be selectively connected to what one holds dear, and the possibility to transcend the rest. What is important from an affirmative feminist perspective is to not succumb to the demands of liberal discourse insisting on both freedom and identity to be issues understood through the logic of either/or. If freedom and identity are understood dichotomously, then from the perspective of someone insisting on the truth to dichotomies, any alternative perspective on the world would mean a loss of freedom and identity. In other words, from an affirmative feminist perspective, both freedom and identity needs to be reconceptualized from within a framework insisting on relationality. An important question is if such a reconceptualization can be done without feeding into the feeling of loss that some are experiencing. This is especially urgent if changing ideas and experiences of sex, which is understood as so personal, really is a key component in an affirmative feminist project of becoming more accountable and less violent – of transforming the world.

2.2 Acknowledgement

Within the framework for thought insisting on separation, it is not only personal identity that derives meaning from negation and resistance. “Critical theory banks on negativity [as well] and, in a perverse way, even requires it” (Braidotti 2011: 285). When critical theory – and identity – requires negativity to exist, then the negation of that negativity is supposed to be generative of freedom, positivity and, most often, some notion of progress or transcendence. With relation to personal identity, this resistance commonly materializes through buying new micro-changes to one’s identity through commodities. In critical theory, this resistance takes form as negative critique. Negation, in other words, is presumed as a means to erase negative conditions from the present.

The idea of negativity and negation as inherent to existence, identity and theory – and hence the demand to negate negation as a means of resistance and existence – is far removed from the affirmative logic. Braidotti defines the affirmative as a combination of critique and creativity. However, in an acknowledgement of how critique is commonly understood as negation, she writes that critique must be aimed at creating “the conditions for overturning negativity precisely because [those conditions] are not immediately available in the present” (Braidotti 2011: 286). Braidotti’s focus is not to negate the presence, but rather to generate possible openings for transformation through critique. To reconceptualize critique in this way, through an acknowledgement of how critique is commonly understood, is both valuable and important in the affirmative feminist project. It is important – and affirmative – in that it acknowledges the forces going into the constitution of the meaning of critique as negative. Such an acknowledgement makes available alternative options different from the traditional dichotomous options of positioning oneself ‘for’ or ‘against’ something. Such a theoretical positioning – for or against – is inherently resistant and negative. Even in being ‘for’ one is against something else. Hence, affirmative feminism searches for the development of critical theory along with an alternative philosophical framework aimed at explaining the world without succumbing to either/or-demands.

In this vein, I argue that ‘acknowledgement’ must be added as an explicit part of a definition of the affirmative. To explicitly add acknowledgement to the notion of affirmation is important because the conditions for overturning negativity cannot be created without the acknowledgement of what takes part in constituting that negativity. Some critics argue that

new-materialist ontologies are incapable of dealing with power inequalities because they do not make distinctions between human and non-human actors and are therefore not able to theorize inequality and domination (Cudworth and Hobden 2015). I will discuss this claim in part three, but for now, if there is a point to avoid traditional notions of resistance and opposition, and one still wishes to recognize power inequality – because inequality is very much real – then acknowledgement becomes important. One could perhaps argue that acknowledgment is already an integral part of Braidotti’s notion of affirmative critique. Still, I argue its importance in the affirmative feminist project, because it does not carry any residue from negative, oppositional definitions and, as such, it is not in need of a reconceptualization in order to be an affirmative concept. In addition, the meaning of acknowledgement – to acknowledge – is to recognize, accord due recognition to or to “accept or admit the existence or truth of (something)” (OED). This definition of acknowledgement goes right to the center of the affirmative feminist project. In other words, it is not about masking or denying power differences, but rather to acknowledge their existence also where they are commonly not assumed to be present.

In the affirmative feminist project of reconceptualizing identity as more relational and connective, the notion of acknowledgement serves two important roles. First, it is important to acknowledge the role that the insistence on certain identity positions plays in the reproduction of the dichotomous logic. In other words, it is important to acknowledge identity’s position in the reproduction of the insistence on separation. This has partly been done already. Secondly, affirmative feminism argues that relationality and connectivity is not something that should be strived towards reaching in the future, but rather that the world is fundamentally relationally connected to itself already – right now. Therefore, acknowledgement can work as an affirmative feminist response to those critics that are hesitant to adopt a new-materialist logic because they are worried that their identities as separate – and therefore ‘free’ – individuals are threatened. To acknowledge the connectivity and relationality already existent in places insisting on separation is a tool in the affirmative feminist project.

In the third and final part of this thesis I discuss Karen Barad’s notion of intra-action as a tool in the affirmative feminist project. I discuss the possibilities it can provide for reconceptualizing sex and identity in ways not adhering to either/or-demands. Because sex and individual identity today are commonly seen as inherent to what it means to be human,

could such reconceptualizations provide the possibilities for altering conceptualizations also of what it means to be human? And if rejection and opposition – traits seemingly inherent to feminism – are not what affirmative feminism views as strategies for positive change, what are the consequences for theory production when discussing intra-action?

3 PART THREE:

Intra-action

3.1 Intra-action and material-discursivity

Barad's notion of 'intra-action' is a key concept in the metaphysical framework she has developed called agential realism (2007). The agential realist framework, partly through the notion of intra-action, conceptualizes the relationship between biology and the social; nature and culture; and matter and discourse in a way that allows for these often assumed 'parts' or 'sides' to be understood as never fundamentally separate in the sense of one existing prior to, or outside of, the other. In other words, intra-action and agential realism is purportedly providing theoretical tools for conceptualizing possible alternatives in the endless debates between social constructivism and traditional realism (Barad 2007; Berg 2014). What Barad calls agential realism, others will call new-materialism.⁶

If intra-action allows for a reconceptualization of nature and culture, not as separate, but always entangled, and if sex is commonly understood as biological and material, what can sex become through using intra-action as concept to think with? And what consequences could that have for the affirmative feminist project aimed at understanding and exploring different ways of explaining? Could the notion of intra-action be a tool in a feminist transformation of the world? Let me start by elaborating on the notion of intra-action.

'Intra-action' is a term designed to signify that – and how – everything is made up of the relations of which it is a part. Everything is made up of relations between parts yet, at the same time, these parts do not exist, and have never existed, separately and individually as preexistent of entanglement. Rather, the parts, and the boundaries between them, are produced through their fundamental relationality; they are thereby relationally and continually co-creating each other. "Distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through intra-action" (Barad 2007: 81). What intra-action means, then, is that relations are what the world consists of – relations are not only in the world, they are the world. Relating parts become the parts

⁶ From an interview with Karen Barad done by Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin. In the interview new-materialism is described as showing how nature and culture are always 'naturecultures' (Donna Haraway's term), and that new-materialism offers an alternative to transcendental and humanistic and dualist traditions that are haunting cultural theory.

that they are – in other words, get their relational meaning – through intra-active relationality (Barad 2007). Importantly, relations are not something that things, beings and words are involved in, as if relations were external to existence. Rather, relationality, and the understanding and conceptualization of relationality, is inherent to the meaning of words, beings and things. The boundaries between the intra-active parts are not inherent, but are rather enacted through the intra-activity.

Similar to how Haraway's notion of becoming-with can be understood in relation to the notion of being, so too can intra-action be understood in relation to the notion of interaction. Where interaction describes the intermingling of two or more assumed-to-be separate and individual entities, intra-action disrupts the very metaphysics of individualism that holds that there are discrete objects with inherent characteristics 'bumping' into each other and sometimes interacting (Barad 2007). Hence, intra-action is a term signifying the fundamental ontological relationality of everything existing, radically different from the dichotomous logic's insistence on fundamental separation as the bottom-line for existence.

What emerges with the notion of intra-action, then, is that the biological and the social are not separate spheres or entities, sometimes interacting. Rather, they are mutually constitutive of each other, and, within the dichotomous framework, the demand for the biological and the social to be understood as separate is an intra-active part in constituting them as separate.

Different from the dichotomous logic where nature, matter and the biological is understood as fixed, inert and/or as a foundation upon which the social culture unfolds, Barad and other new-materialist and posthumanist theorists insists that "matter is not immutable or passive(...) It does not require the mark of an external force like culture or history to complete it. Matter is always already an ongoing historicity" (Barad 2003: 151). That matter is not passive, and is in itself an ongoing historicity means that matter is defined, not through being intelligible to humans, but rather as vital and intelligible to itself – "matter is substance in its intra-active becoming – not a thing, but a doing" (Barad 2003: 822). To conceptualize matter in this way is important for feminist theory. Myra J. Hird explains that a new-materialist conceptualization of matter does not demand material differences to be understandable by one single explanation of 'reality', but rather works to normalize differences and consider them in their own right (Hird 2004a). Since sex, body, biology and

matter are all on the same ‘side’ in the dichotomous logic – they are all assumed to be fixed, inert and ‘known’ – such a reconceptualization of matter could be of great importance for thinking and experiencing sex in new ways. In other words, a different understanding of matter is of ethical and political importance, as it provides new possibilities for conceptualizing sex. If we follow the presentation in part one, current leading conceptualizations of sex and matter, as dichotomously understood and ‘known’, are not simply something that concerns physical bodies but rather structures the whole framework of Western thought, putting specific demands on bodies, lives, thoughts and experiences.

However, not everyone is convinced by new-materialist theory. Sara Ahmed is critical of Barad and the new-materialist turn. In the text ‘Open Forum Imaginary Prohibitions – Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the ‘New Materialism’ (2008) Ahmed argues that the theorists commonly concerned with new-materialism too often are positioning themselves over and against a false representation of feminist theory as anti-biological. “By constructing feminism as ‘prohibiting’ an attention to the biological and other matters, this new work is often referenced as a gift to feminism in its very refusal to be prohibited by feminism’s prohibitions” (Ahmed 2008: 24). To voice a caution against the idea of a ‘break’ in feminist theory where the ‘new’ is thought as separate from, and better than, the ‘old’, I would agree is important. One can follow Grosz who writes that insurances on the scope and limits of knowledges, and the separation of knowledge into disciplines are “themselves effects of historically concrete, dynamic relations of power” (1993: 190). Now, Grosz is first and foremost writing about disciplinary boundaries that insist on, for instance, the separation of the inside and the outside of the subject (the disciplines of psychology and sociology respectively), or the universal and particular (philosophy and history). I would nevertheless argue, that an insistence on a break within feminist theory on the basis of matter and biology, thereby creating an idea of ‘us’ and ‘them’ – at least if Ahmed is right in her argument that this break is predominantly a taken-for-granted assumption – could have “problematic consequences for our understanding of the genealogy of feminist thought” (2008: 24). In other words, an insistence on a separation could take part in masking the intra-active relations, also within theory, that make new-materialist thoughts possible.

Ahmed spends some time in her article arguing and exemplifying how there is not, in fact, an automatic anti-biologism⁷ within what she calls second-wave feminism, and that to claim that feminism is forgetting biology, would itself be to forget feminist work on biology. Ahmed argues that “the very claim that matter is missing can actually work to reify matter as if it could be an object that is absent or present” (2008: 35). What this quote reveals is that although Ahmed wishes to theorize “the complexity of how all sorts of different things cohere” (2008: 35); and although she apparently does not wish matter to be dichotomously understood as either absent or present, her critique of new-materialism is nevertheless voiced from a dichotomously founded metaphysical vantage point. When she claims it a possibility that new-materialism might reify matter as ‘an object that is either absent or present,’ I would argue that she is in fact missing the complexity of new-materialist theory. Ahmed’s critique is an interesting example, nonetheless, of critics who share the ‘goal’ of new materialist theory – to reconceptualize the relationship between traditionally dichotomous concepts – but who still critique new-materialism based in dichotomous premises. As such, Ahmed’s critique takes part in showing how embedded the dichotomous logic is.

Anne-Jorunn Berg writes in the article ‘Hva skjedde med kyborgen? Om feministisk materialitetsteori’(2014) that the locus of existence for feminist theory is to conceptualize sex (kjønn) in different ways. This has always been done through more or less explicitly conceptualizing the relationship between the biological and the social, the material and the discursive. In that regard, the separation of gender from sex meant liberation from biologically deterministic relationship between body and identity – something which had tremendous political effects. As already mentioned however, the separation of sex and gender is a version of the insistence on the separation between nature and culture, a separation which is reproducing the dichotomous logic and the framework presented in the first part of this thesis. The separation of gender from sex still insists that sex is of the body, sex is material, and that sex, body, nature and matter is fixed and known.

Ahmed claims that she is writing from a place of frustration. She is frustrated with self-identifying new-materialists who state that ‘I don’t think everything is just social’. Such a

⁷ Noela Davis, in a response to Ahmed, writes that: “‘anti-biologism’ can be elaborated as the claim that feminism does not engage with such factors as biology, matter, corporeality or the physical, and instead tends to a social constructionist view whereby the brute, given physicality of the body is overlaid with social and meaningful inscriptions” (Davis 2009: 68).

statement, she writes, implies a made-up character of someone who does think everything is just social – and she is worried that second-wave feminists are being made into this character through statements like that above. Ahmed acknowledges Myra J. Hird for the term ‘new-materialism.’ Quoting Elizabeth Wilson, Hird writes in her text ‘Feminism matters – New materialist considerations of sexual difference’, that “sexual difference founded on compulsory heterosexuality is itself the key technology for the production and perpetuation of western Man” (Hird 2004a: 230). In other words, the idea of sex as binary within a hierarchically differentiated framework of thought and being, is the key component in the reproduction of the violent idea of huMan exceptionalism. If sex is understood as inherent to the body; the body is understood as material within a framework that perceives the material as fixed, inert and known; and this understanding of matter and sex is working as a foundation upon which the human ‘exceptional’ identity is reproducing itself, then to reconceptualize sex from a new-materialist vantage point, and as I argue through the notion of intra-action, is essential for the affirmative feminist project of understanding how things work and to understand what and who is in the action – so that it is possible to be more accountable and more response-able.

Ahmed argues that feminists have theorized the relationship between the biological and the social with care. Feminists have argued that biology does not determine human behavior, while at the same time acknowledging that biology in some ways shape what we do, and Ahmed’s opinion is that second-wave “feminist work on biology (...) offers us a very rich archive of how we can think ‘this some way’” (Ahmed 2008: 29). Now, the issue from a new-materialist perspective is not the level of care with which feminists are thinking the relationship between the biological and the social. In a reply to Ahmed’s text, and building on the same Elizabeth Wilson as mentioned above, Noela Davis writes:

For Wilson, the problem is not that feminists do not address the biological in their work, but that their engagement with it is restricted and conventional. Her claim is that many feminist accounts remain committed to a conceptual separation of the biological from the social; that is, at some level the nature/culture division remains unquestioned in their work (Davis 2009: 70).

Taking intra-action into account, I think it becomes quite clear that Ahmed is thinking and writing from a perspective that, although she very much wishes to theorize the entanglement of the biological and the social, nevertheless ends up theorizing this entanglement as an

interaction, and thereby insist on their fundamental separation prior to that interaction. Following Barad, however, there is no ‘prior to entanglement’. The intra-active entanglement of matter and meaning, nature and culture, therefore, needs to be the vantage-point for thinking – feminist thought and other – not conceptualized as an imagined goal.

Matter, in Barad’s theory, is never separate from the social or the discursive, and importantly, the discursive does not necessarily imply human sociality or discourse. To conceptualize matter, not as a foundation for human culture, but as something vital in and of itself, would necessarily mean that the idea of the human subject as the center of history would have to budge. The human subject would need to be reconceptualized as in an always intra-active and interdependent relationality with the material – in other words, as also material-discursive – thus making intra-active material-discursive relationality part of the definition of the human subject. The idea of the human subject as separate from nature, in other words, does not make sense from a new-materialist perspective. The connectivity of the material and the social, then, is not dependent on the involvement of any human subject – at least not as the one who finds, understands, or in other ways engages with the material. Critics have argued that such a ‘flat’ ontology necessarily “sidesteps any epistemic questions over the conditions of thought” (Rekret 2016: 227). In other words, that new-materialism seems not to acknowledge any material constraints on the human access to non-human nature, and are thus not acknowledging that there is a limit to our thought’s access to the world. Whether it is possible for humans to “consider matter in its own right,” like Hird writes (2004: 223), is a good question. However, to dismiss new-materialism because there are limits to human knowledge is quite contradictory to new-materialist theory. Such a dismissal would assume that only what is known through human knowledge is worth consideration, and would thus put the human mind at the center stage of being. Now, some would perhaps intervene and argue that no matter how ‘flat’ our ontology is, our personal experiences would nevertheless be from our personal perspectives – and of course it would. The point for affirmative feminism, however, is that the foundation, from which ‘our perspective’ is commonly understood as coming from, is not inherent to what it means to be human. In other words, affirmative feminism claims that ideas about mind/body-separation, binary sex, individualism and unitary identities that are currently argued as ‘our perspective’ are not inherent to what it means to be and become-with. Hence, that there are limits to human cognition when it comes to understanding matter, is irrelevant. New-materialists insist that matter understands itself through materializing.

Barad conceptualizes ‘material-discursivity’ in order to point to how “the material and the discursive are mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity” (Barad 2007: 152). With regards to matter and discourse – the biological and the social – then, material-discursivity and intra-action holds that the boundaries between matter and discourse are never inherent. Material conditions matter, not because they ‘support’ particular discourses or knowledges in some way or another, but because “matter comes to matter through iterative intra-activity of the world in its becoming” (Barad 2007: 152). Barad writes that,

Neither discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior. Neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither is reducible to the other. Neither has privileged status in determining the other. Neither is articulated or articulable in the absence of the other; matter and meaning are mutually articulated (Barad 2007: 152).

What is important is that if something matters for anyone/thing, that means that it is material-discursive and intra-active.

The notion of intelligibility is important for Barad in relation to material-discursivity and the possibility it provides for theorizing matter not necessarily as something that is ‘known’ by humans. In the dichotomous framework intelligibility – to be able to understand something – demands a rational, human subject to do the understanding. It demands a mind separated from a body. As an alternative to understanding discourse as human, social discursive practices, Barad claims that discourse (always also material) is better understood through the notion of intelligibility.

When intelligibility – that something is comprehensible or able to be understood – is not a human-based affair, it means that understanding is also done by matter. Intelligibility, then, for Barad, is a matter of response rather than internal human mind-activity reacting to an external world (Barad 2007). A tree encapsulating a wound in its branch caused by breakage from heavy snow, for instance, is a tree’s material-discursive response – a response to the intra-activity of branch, snow, humidity, time and place leading to breakage and activating the knowledge and memory within the tree of how to respond to the wound. Discursive practices, in other words, are a matter of response – not necessarily in human acts or language.

Just like the common understanding of intelligibility insinuates human exceptionalism and thus separation from the rest of the world, so do other concepts. Definitions that we take for granted to be true, are often masking more or less unspoken bottom-lines which ultimately affects what knowledge is possible to produce. According to the plant physiologist Stefano Mancuso, the definitions commonly used to describe ‘intelligence’ serves as a tool for the continuing hierarchical differentiation between humans and animals. In other words, that the way humans in the West are commonly defining intelligence, does not only have the function of simply and neutrally describing inherent qualities of the concept intelligence (are there any?). Rather, specific definitions are utilized in order to insist on – and enact – the assumed inherent truth to the boundaries between humans and other animals. The definitions have thus served to elevate humans over non-human animals in a system of differences understood through pejoration and dichotomies (Høeg 2018). When studying animals more and more, Mancuso says that humans are beginning to understand that the barriers we have set up to insist on human exceptionalism are based in the wrong presumptions. Definitions of intelligence have, according to Mancuso, for instance described intelligence to be the ability to use tools or to plan ahead – qualities traditionally assumed to be unique to humans. However, in an interview with the Norwegian newspaper *Morgenbladet*, Mancuso states that research shows that many animals can in fact do exactly those things. Mancuso’s argument, as a plant physiologist, is that plants are intelligent as well. Not if intelligence means human intelligence, of course, but Mancuso defines intelligence as ‘the ability to solve problems’, thereby not setting an assumed boundary between human and non-human as a bottom-line for the concept of intelligence.

Hierarchical differentiation between humans and animals is, in itself, used as an argument for treating other species differently than subjects of ‘our’ own species. The notion of intra-action is valuable to make sense of this example. What emerges is that it becomes possible to acknowledge how beliefs about existence, definitions of words and habitual practices, for instance, are, intra-actively working together in shaping ethical relations. In other words, there is nothing innate or ‘natural’ about the specific ways we live our lives. Rather, specific ways of living are intra-active material-discursive (re)productions.

Using Mancuso’s definition, the tree in the example above is intelligent in that it renders itself capable of responding (Haraway 2016) to the intra-active processes it is part of. The tree is an

intra-active agent in the world making itself intelligible, and responding to itself and its intra-active relations. Due to the fact that the tree is an intra-active part of the world – where everything, in the end, is connected – that tree can be understood as the world making itself intelligible to itself.

Thinking about human bodies from a new-materialist perspective, this notion of intelligibility allows for bodies to be ‘enough’ and valuable, valid and justified in and of themselves – not because they are ‘understood’ through dichotomous concepts by the human Self. According to Grosz and Braidotti, the body poses a challenge within the dichotomous framework because it is both human and other (Grosz 1993; Braidotti 2011). The body both confirms the dichotomous logic and defies dichotomization. It is excluded from the dichotomous claims to knowledge which insists that the human mind discovers knowledge about known objects, but is nevertheless highly necessary for that human mind to exist. The body, within the common Western framework for thought is both what is demanded to be understood, and – albeit often silenced and unrecognized – a part of what is insisted upon as doing the understanding. Hence, the body complicates questions of either/or.

From a new-materialist perspective, this whole demand for either being someone who understands, or being that which is understood, is sidelined. Instead the body represents a “know-how immanent to the living and lived body” (Braidotti 2011: 130). In other words, much like the tree responding to its own position in the unfolding of intra-active relationality, one could argue that there is a sense of trust inherent to the idea of embodiment from a new-materialist perspective. Instead of the relationship between mind and body being defined as understanding/understood, the idea of embodiment from a new-materialist perspective instills trust as that which makes sense of the experienced mind/body separation. The body is trusted to know, not what it is in the sense that it has to be something, but rather that it knows how to respond to its surroundings as life unfolds. Like a tree, the body is intelligent. Such a conceptualization of the body thus alleviates some of the pressure for the body’s responses to ‘make a detour’ around the dichotomous concepts of the mind in order to be validated and justified. To imagine human sex without dichotomous justification from the mind-as-separate, seems perhaps like an impossible task. I nevertheless argue, that it becomes a possibility through the notion of intra-action.

Taking intra-action and material-discursivity as vantage point for thinking and experiencing would mean that a feminist project aimed at conceptualizing sex cannot be to think and figure out how ‘biology in some way shapes what we do’. Our social worlds and our knowledge and meanings about biology (and other things) are always also part of that biology, and the intra-action of bodies and knowledge is always also part of the social. To accept intra-action and material-discursivity would necessarily mean that sex cannot be dichotomously separated from gender. Nor can sex be assumed to be something fixed, only biological, or ‘known’ as in that we know some inherent truth about sex.

The boundary insisted upon by humans between the biological and the social is not an inherent boundary, but rather one that is acted out through the insistence on its existence – through the intra-action of knowledge and bodies. Hence, it is not a question of ‘how are the biological and the social entangled, and what does this entanglement make of sex?’ The very phrasing of this question confirms the legitimacy of an either/or-demand, even as it tries to make sense of it in a connective way. The mentioned question opens up for answers based in ideas of interaction, not intra-action. When the question rather begins with the acknowledgement of biology and the social’s always already entanglement, the possibilities for hitherto unasked and unanswered questions open up.

As such, it becomes clear that when Ahmed is cautious about new-materialism reifying matter as ‘an object that can be found’, she is in fact not taking into consideration the possibility of an intra-active relationality between matter and meaning, and ends up evaluating new-materialism based on the premises of a dichotomous logic. Within a dichotomous logic, however, new-materialist arguments will never be ‘right’, as they will not adhere to the demands of ‘figuring out’ a solution to either/or-questions.

Iris van der Tuin, who also wrote a response to Ahmed, claims that what Ahmed is most skeptical of is “new-materialism’s innovative character” (2008: 411). While I agree with van der Tuin, I also think that Ahmed’s argument about the importance of acknowledging one’s situated position in theory is important within an intra-active, affirmative feminist project – and not only in theory, but in all aspects of life. When taking an intra-active perspective on theory and theory production, the acknowledgement of one’s theoretical position’s intra-active connectivity to its context – also to what it opposes – must be taken into account.

To conceptualize material-discursivity and intra-action in the way it is done above demands the acknowledgement of relationality as inherent to any definition, any position, idea, experience, identity, knowledge, matter, thought or thing. Intra-activity provides, in other words, a theoretical foundation for thinking and experiencing from an understanding of the world that everything is fundamentally entangled; that the idea of inherent separation is an illusion; and that boundaries are continually enacted, (re)produced and (re)iterated.

Additionally, to accept such a definition would mean an acknowledgement of the intra-active fact that one is continually taking part in producing the boundaries that one lives by. When boundaries are continually and intra-actively being produced and enacted, and one is also always taking part in intra-active relationality, then that means that one must acknowledge one's own contributions to the reproduction of boundaries, and acknowledge the effects of specific boundaries. Some are critical towards such fundamentally relational reconceptualizations of subjectivity, both for the consequences it may have for the individual, and for the possible consequences for critical theory in general (van Ingen 2016; Rekret 2016). These criticisms will be returned to throughout the thesis.

3.2 Intra-action, causality and claims to knowledge

In this section I explore linear causality, one of the common templates for explanation and understanding that is both constituted by and constitutive of a dichotomous logic - causality and claims to knowledge are discussed through the notion of intra-action. Linear causal explanation, the invocation of 'nature' as justification, and dichotomous claims to knowledge are often used to validate and 'explain' sex and sexuality. When sex is considered inherent to identity and subjectivity within the Western framework for thought, it is important to explore and acknowledge the mechanisms by which ideas about sex and identity are maintained in order to make possible a reconceptualization of subjectivity from an affirmative feminist perspective.

If knowledges are situated in bodies that are sexed, then knowledges are sexed. How does the acknowledgement of the sexed nature of knowledge relate to the demands for linear causality to be a template for explanation within the dichotomous framework? If sex and knowledge – nature and culture – are commonly perceived as separate, and the relationship between them

is understood as a linear and causal one where natural sex causes the discovery of neutral knowledge, then Haraway's notion of situated knowledges necessarily challenges this perception when it instills knowledges with an inherent sexed and political quality. The body, as was mentioned in the previous section, complicates this seemingly straight-forward linear causal relationship between being and knowledge – sex and knowledge. To explore affirmative feminist notions of causality is important because feminist theorists have grappled with the demands for linear causal explanations of bodies and desires.

Following an intra-active logic, knowing and being are never separate, neither is knowing and sex. Knowing and being are not isolable, but rather mutually implicate and co-constitutive of one another (Barad 2007). In other words, knowing and being does not 'start out' as separate and then end up in entanglement – it is not an interaction. Rather, knowing and being intra-actively constitute their own differentiated becoming – the boundary between them is continually being made and remade. Knowing and being is, nevertheless, commonly separated in Western philosophy – something that is evident in the separation of the 'fields' ontology and epistemology. This separation, however, is according to Barad (2007) and Grosz (1993) a symptom of the framework insisting on the separation between subject and object, nature and culture, human and world. Barad suggests 'onto-epistemology' as a term highlighting the entanglement of knowing and being (2007). Further she suggests 'ethico-onto-epistem-ology', to highlight how the intra-active entanglement of knowing and being – the becoming of the world – is a deeply ethical matter as well. What (we know) exists, and (what we know about) how it exists, is without question linked to theories about what knowledge is, who a knower is, and theories on how knowers should relate to other existing entities (ethics). Existence, knowing and acting intra-actively constitute one another. Through the notion of intra-action it becomes possible to acknowledge these connections between existence, knowing, and acting. Recognizing the intra-active connections between ontology, epistemology and ethics means that the ideas that shape us as humans must be acknowledged as mattering for the unfolding of politics; for what moral guidelines are justified; and for what relations are deemed possible and/or right. In other words, the ideas we have about what existence means, the knowledge we have about sex and about nature, about relations and our position in the world – it all matter for what relations, to one self, one's surroundings, and the world at large, are deemed possible and/or right.

The notion of intra-action, then, implies that sex and knowledge are in fact not, and have never been, separate, but rather mutually constitute and implicate each other (Barad 2007)⁸. In fact, the notion of intra-action holds that everything mutually implicate and constitute each other – or itself (as it is everything). Following the logic of intra-action, sex is, at any given moment, the material-discursive product of the intra-activity of knowledge and bodies.

Linear causality – that something causes an effect in something else – will necessarily need a reconceptualization when taking an intra-active perspective. Linear causality assumes that “cause and effect are supposed to follow one upon the other like billiard balls”⁹. A reconceptualization of causality is necessary because the notion of intra-action holds that there are no separate entities ‘bumping into’ and causing effects in other separate entities. The point is therefore not that causality does not exist, but that it is necessary rethink what it means. The expectation of linear causality between separated entities as a justificatory template for explanation is reproducing a dichotomous logic, and is therefore, from an affirmative feminist perspective, in need of reorganization.

Commonly it is expected that the biological sex of a person – female or male – will lead to feminine or masculine behaviors, respectively, which again will lead to sexual desire towards the opposite sex (Butler 1990). The relationship between sex and sexuality is, in other words, commonly understood through linear causality, and through a belief in the ‘naturalness’ of binary sexed bodies and heterosexuality (Butler 1990).

Bodies and sex are only one aspect feminists are exploring through alternative ways of understanding causality. History, and the way history generally is told – as a telos of progress, one great battle following the next, the great Men of history driving evolution forward – is also highly focused on linearity. Hird writes that “feminist scholars are interested in non-linearity not merely as the absence of telos but in so far as it emphasizes [what Grosz calls] ‘the accidental, chance, or the undetermined plays in the unfolding of time’” (Hird 2004a: 227).

In other words, it is about recasting the actors of history to acknowledge that the world does not ‘progress’ by force of huMan will, but rather that the unfolding of the world is an intra-

⁸ This is true for all meanings of the word ‘sex’ - whether it is the act of having it or to ‘be’ it.

⁹ Interview with Karen Barad by Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (2009)

active relational process, where all humans and non-humans play an agential role. In the context of affirmative feminism, it is not enough to simply insist that history be told differently from a perspective more honoring of women's contributions. To do so still holds a very humanistic focus, and it maintains the dichotomous logic as well, by not challenging the dichotomous conceptualizations of matter, nature and so on. 'To tell women's stories', however – or the stories of any other marginalized group – is not without value, and remains an important part of the project of acknowledgement. It is important to acknowledge power inequalities, to acknowledge different perspectives, stories and subject positions, it is important to acknowledge alternative ways of being that are not commonly presented – because there are many of those. However, all this acknowledging should, from an affirmative feminist perspective, not be done with 'equality between the sexes' as the end goal. Equality between the sexes must, from an affirmative feminist perspective, be seen as only one part of an intra-actively entangled logic.

When Barad names her metaphysical framework 'agential realism' it is a play on ideas. As was mentioned, she aims for it to serve as an alternative to the imagined choice between social constructivism and traditional realism. 'Agential' points to agency, and thereby also change and process. Intra-active agencies, however, does not imply a human agent – "it is not something that humans and even non-humans *have* to varying degrees. And it is not a binary proposition, either on or off" (Barad 2007: 172, my italics). In this sense, intra-active agency is radically different from liberal humanist agency in the acknowledgement of matter and objects as agential forces in the continual production of knowledge and the becoming and mattering of the world. Agency, in other words, refers to intra-active involvement. "Agency is an enactment, a matter of possibilities for reconfiguring entanglements" (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2009).

Traditional realists, according to Barad, assumes there to be a

one-to-one correspondence between scientific theories and reality [which is] used to bolster the further assumption that scientific entities are unmarked by the discoveries: nature is taken to be revealed by, yet independent of, theoretical and experimental practices, that is, transparently given (Barad 2007: 41)

For Barad, the 'realism' in agential realism refers to a belief that scientific theories can provide reliable and understandable access to the onto-epistemology of the world – that

theory can provide reliable access to experiences of becoming. What differs radically from traditional realism, however, is the broad concept of agent, and the notion of intra-action. Realism for Barad, entails an acknowledgement of how everything is fundamentally entangled in the intra-activity of agential forces, and how boundaries therefore are fundamentally instable and in a continual, intra-active becoming. ‘Realness’, in the agential realist sense, does not signify anything fixed, static or ‘prior’. Rather, what is real, is processual, intra-active entanglements that continually make up the world.

David Chandler is highly critical of the reworking of causality that necessarily has to follow from agency not being a human property anymore. In his text, ‘The World of Attachment? The Post-humanist Challenge to Freedom and Necessity’ (2013), he is primarily critiquing Jane Bennett and Bruno Latour for their new-materialist and actor network theory respectively. However, I believe that to engage with his critique through the notion of affirmative feminist intra-action will be illuminating. From a new-materialist perspective, human subjects are not the cause of an effect, Chandler writes, and agency is not linked to consciousness. The agential forces “merely influence outcomes but do not necessarily have intentions and purposes” (2013: 523). Chandler sees this as limiting for human agency, as the human is embedded in multiple assemblages, relations and associations which are not with “real, struggling, contesting people, colleagues or comrades but with unknowable, unseen, complex, overlapping and interlinking processes” (2013: 527-528). In a new-materialist perspective, Chandler argues, these non-human connections and relations get the ‘credit’ when explaining contingencies and causal relations, not human subjects themselves – something which then transforms the human subject from its “natural, rational or autonomous existence [to a position of] forever negotiating, experimenting and reflecting upon its imbrication within complex, fluid and overlapping networks and assemblages” (Chandler 2013: 525). To focus on these ‘attachments’, would, according to Chandler, lead to a situation where humans could never constitute their own ends. It would mean that knowledge could never predict the future, and humans would never be able to know anything in advance because of all of these attachments and agential forces ‘disturbing’ the free acts and choices of human subjects. There are several issues with Chandler’s critique. He describes the human as natural, rational and autonomous, and seems to oppose these ‘innate human qualities’ to being attached and connected to ones surroundings. Chandler is insisting on the human subject’s separateness, and claims this separateness to be a prerequisite for being able to act, predict or

choose anything. If the subject is not separate, but rather aware of its attachments, Chandler writes, then politics would merely be “a question of responsiveness – of ethical responsibility – not of freedom” (2013: 525). Clearly, Chandler opposes ethical responsibility and freedom.

To predict the future, and be right, seems to be what Chandler understands as ‘freedom’. Freedom, for Chandler, seems to be to determine outcomes by existing forms of knowledge, and to insist on one’s separation from the world. To broaden the category of agency and to rework the notion of causality would necessarily change existing forms of knowledge – about the world, about identity and about relations. Chandler thinks that such changes would mean that human subjects could never collectively understand, constitute or transform the world (2013: 528). From an affirmative feminist, intra-active perspective however, this is what human intra-active subjects can do, but while simultaneously being accountable, responsible and ethical to an extended body of relations – not only those that concur with Chandler’s ‘right’ knowledge. From an intra-active perspective, it is not that one cannot make predictions, choose, or act. The point is, rather, that freedom or identity is not connected to ‘being right’, but rather to be open for changes and new inputs – open for the possibility that those inputs might not come from a human subject who knows the ‘right’ knowledge, at least not if ‘the right knowledge’ means knowledge that correlates with the dichotomous logic. As already mentioned, affirmative feminism cannot be ‘right’ if what is ‘right’ or wrong is defined by the dichotomous logic. It is not impossible to talk about causality from an intra-active perspective, but any talk or idea about causality necessarily brings with it an acknowledgement of intra-active relationality with regards to both knowledge, being and bodies. To bring such an acknowledgement of intra-action into identity and into any conversation would necessarily mean that one does not attach one’s identity to the idea of being ‘right’. From an affirmative feminist perspective taking intra-action into consideration that the point is not to change the human subject so that it correlates with these ‘new’ ideas. Rather, the point is to show how the human subject has in fact always been intra-active, the human subject have never been autonomous and ‘free’ in the sense Chandler nostalgically wishes for it to continue to be, and intra-action shows how the very insistence that the human subject is separate and exceptional is in fact intra-actively taking part in (re)producing a world filled with pain and suffering. Additionally, when making use of the notion of intra-action and material-discursivity, and if one holds that knowing and being are, in fact, not isolable, Chandler’s identity is, in fact, not fundamentally separate from the world at all. His

experience as an autonomous human with human agency is of course a product of how the meaning of those concepts intra-actively have come about. Chandler writes that if humans were to live in a new ethics of awareness of attachment, and if matter were acknowledged as having agency, then “we could not make free choices because we lacked the meaningful structures through which we could aspire to create our own ends” (2013: 525). What Chandler in reality does, in this quote, is to admit to human identity’s intra-active connectedness. He claims that the current dichotomous structures for understanding, explaining, and justifying the world, are necessary in order for humans to be humans in the way that he thinks humans should be – and he is right. Human identity is intra-actively entangled with the framework from within which they are thought and experienced. What affirmative feminism argues, nevertheless, is that the structures and the specific identity that Chandler insists on, needs to change in order for the world to become a less violent and exploitative place. However, those changes do not mean the loss of separation, agency and autonomy, but they do mean the acknowledgment that those ideas, founded in a dichotomous logic, were never ‘real’ in the eternally true sense. From an affirmative feminist perspective, those ideas are themselves, always already intra-active.

It was briefly mentioned in the relay, but something I find peculiar in several of the texts critiquing new-materialism, is the fact that they will very much agree with the statement that the world is in a complex and globalized ‘crisis’ (Chandler 2013), or that “the bodies of the empirical subjects who signify difference (woman/native/earth or natural others) have become the disposable bodies of the global economy” (Braidotti quoted by van Ingen 2016).

However, these critics seem reluctant to opt for any changes that would mean that they might have to change themselves. However, if we agree that the world is in some kind of ‘crisis’, and if we accept that knowledge and being are mutually implicative – that the knowledge we have about the world, necessarily also shapes how we live in it – and that this way of living is in fact harmful in many ways, then that means that we need to be in a different way, which necessarily means that we need to know ourselves and the world differently as well. Because ideas about sex are so formative for our identities and our knowledge about the world, and because ideas about sex are so undeniably tied to questions about matter, then to know sex differently is an important part of the affirmative feminist project of understanding how worldly actors could perhaps love each other less violently, and as such it could be a tool in the feminist transformation of the world. But is it possible to balance between knowing sex

differently and not alienating the critics who are then afraid of losing themselves? To answer that question it is important to explore sex and causality further, and their intra-active connections to claims to knowledge.

Feminist efforts to sidestep the demands of linear causality have been made, such as the division of sex from gender. However, although the category for what is accepted as normal might be broadened through the fight for sexual rights. If it is correct that there are expectations for linear cause and effects when it comes to sex within the dichotomous framework, then non-linear causal explanations with regards to sex can never be ‘natural’ as it will go against ‘naturally derived knowledge’ about bodies and sex. In other words, linear causality demands sex to be understood as biological, fixed and known. Although gender is separated from the notion of sex and one claims the right to have ‘non-correlating’ sex and gender, sex is still fixed, biological and known through assumingly neutral knowledges. Additionally, as non-linear causal explanations within the dichotomous framework can never be ‘natural’, then that maintains the insistence on nature as a justificatory measure for knowledges.

‘Representationalism’ is Barad’s term for the dichotomous claims to knowledge concerned with correspondence between word and thing. These claims to knowledge evaluate knowledges based on how well a word is thought to represent an object (2007). That knowledge is representing what is known, or in other words makes the world understandable, is not debated here. The issue from an affirmative feminist perspective is rather that if representation implies some inherent truth to both the words and the objects that are known, and assumes that knowledges are neutral in their representation of the world ‘out there’ because they simply describe the ‘natural’ causal relationship between thing and meaning, then the meaning of representation demands the world to be understood through a dichotomous framework. Hence, a body in some way falling ‘outside of’ the dichotomous categories would be un-representable by natural, neutral, representationalist knowledge – it could be accepted as ‘normal’, but it could never be natural. The reason why something falling outside of dichotomous correlation could never be natural is because ‘natural’ within the dichotomous framework implies not only correspondence between words and things, but also linear causality explaining the connection between body, behavior, and desire in a way deemed ‘good’ by the dichotomous framework. One can therefore argue that the commonly

held meaning of ‘representation’ where a thing causes a representative meaning to form; the belief in the existence of neutral knowledges; and the conceptualization of nature as something which is fixed and known, are co-constitutive of, and mutually (re)producing each other and the logic of which they are a part. Affirmative feminism argues that ‘representation’, ‘nature’ or ‘neutrality’ are not ‘things’, or ‘entities’ with inherent qualities and meanings, but rather that the qualities and meanings they are claimed to have are both constituted by and constitutive of a dichotomous logic. All three concepts – with their respective meanings – does not exist as they do, prior to, or outside of, their relation with each other. Rather, they are intra-actively and mutually implicating each other, serving as validation and justification for each other and the dichotomous logic. In other words, representationalist claims to knowledge, ideas about ‘nature’ as separate from and prior to culture, and the claim to knowledges neutrality, are intra-actively co-constitutive of each other. Following the logic of material-discursive intra-action, this intra-activity is co-constitutive of the living bodies and the material world that are ‘explained’ and ‘known’ through these knowledges.

Ideas about linear causality and claims to knowledge are, in fact, intra-actively taking part in causing, not only the expectations we have for sex, bodies and lives, but our actual sex, bodies and lives. Hence, if our ideas and experiences of sex need to be reconceptualized as part of the greater affirmative feminist project of understanding how worldly actors can be more accountable and response-able, then that means that we need to reconceptualize our claims to knowledge as well. But if ‘knowing’ and ‘being’ mutually implicate each other, where do one start? Is there a ‘right’ place to start? According to Haraway, such questions can lead to apathy, or worse, the idea that “only if things work do they matter” (2016: 4). That if what one does, does not fix everything, it does not matter. This idea, I argue, is evident in Michiel van Ingen’s (2016) critique of Rosi Braidotti’s book *The Posthuman*. In a review named ‘Beyond The Nature/Culture Divide? The Contradictions of Rosi Braidotti’s *The Posthuman*’, van Ingen writes that, if “there is no possibility at all of distinguishing between the ‘cultural’ and the ‘natural’ elements of our world, [then to] talk of ‘continuums’ or different ontological ‘levels’ is simply incoherent” (2016: 536-537). In the book, Braidotti argues for a philosophical framework that does not claim nature and culture to be distinguishable by an inherent border, and van Ingen is critical of how Braidotti goes from this insistence to then then talk about a nature-culture continuum. According to van Ingen, to do so, is to ‘admit to’

the existence of different ontological levels after all. It seems that the expectations van Ingen meets Braidotti with, is that efforts to communicate and present new ideas must be ‘just right’ in order for them to be valuable. In her book, Braidotti argues for a reconceptualization of the whole Western philosophical framework, and it seems that van Ingen then expects Braidotti to do this, in a way that would make sense to him, but nevertheless not use the words and concepts that are presently available. In other words, it seems like his expectation is that Braidotti should create something new without building on what already exists, and that if she cannot do that, then the effort does not matter. Additionally, when introducing intra-action to this problem, the point for affirmative feminism is not that one cannot speak about neither ‘nature’ nor ‘culture’ anymore. To have such an expectation would be in line with van Ingen’s argument that any ‘new’ framework would have to be fundamentally separate from the old. Such an expectation would presume that knowledge actually is produced independently of other knowledges. The point for intra-active affirmative feminism is rather to acknowledge that when one articulates ideas about ‘nature’ or ‘culture’, the boundaries limiting one concept from the other are the continual products of the intra-activity of that very articulation – in relation with its material-discursive context. In other words, affirmative feminism wishes to conceptualize ‘representation’ in a more affirmative and intra-active way.

A more affirmative feminist understanding of knowledges representing the world would be if ‘representation’ were to be understood through the notion of ‘situated knowledges’ and the notion of intra-action. In other words, affirmative feminist claims to knowledge would necessarily be based on the notions of ‘situated knowledges’ and ‘intra-action’. These claims to knowledge, instead of assuming separation and inherent qualities possible to ‘discover’, would rather assume there to be intra-active relations possible to acknowledge. Affirmative feminist claims to knowledge, in other words, would include an acknowledgement of how both words and knowledges are the intra-active products of their contexts, and also constitutive of their contexts. In addition, an affirmative feminist perspective would necessarily acknowledge the knowers position in the intra-active becoming of knowledges, and this knowers knowledges about what it means to be a knower. In other words, affirmative feminist claims to knowledge recognizes that the ideas about life that a body carries, undeniably will take part in the materialization of that body and that body’s material-discursive (material and social – the two are never separate) context. But what does such recognition look like in practice? And what value can such acknowledgment have for

feminism? That Chandler's idea of a separated identity really is intra-active after all, is one example of such affirmative feminist recognition. In the following I bring the themes of causality and sex with me, and make an effort of exemplifying what acknowledgement of intra-active relationality looks like specifically with regards to sex and sexuality.

3.3 Recognition of intra-active relationality with regards to sexuality and identity

Amitav Ghosh writes that societies generate desires for a plethora of different things, for instance: "for vehicles and appliances, for certain kinds of gardens and dwellings" and so on (2016: 9-10). All desire is, in other words, not caused by a 'natural', pre-cultural body. Following Foucault's argument presented in the first part, societies generate desire for sex, as well. In a dichotomously sexed framework favoring linear causality, the desire predominantly accepted and generated will be heterosexual. Other desires will be generated as 'different'. In other words, the bodies that will be deemed the 'most right' are the heterosexual bodies. This system can be denominated 'compulsory heterosexuality,' a term Adrienne Rich popularized in her text 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' (1980), where she claims that heterosexual desire is not only generated by society, but also demanded by society. Rich claims, moreover, that the level of compulsion related to heterosexual desire results in violence, not only towards non-hetero people, but also, because the dichotomous logic favors men, heterosexual women:

Compulsory heterosexuality simplifies the task of the pimp in worldwide prostitution rings and "eros centers", in the privacy of the home, it leads the daughter to "accept" incest/her father, the mother to deny that it is happening, the battered wife to stay on with an abusive husband (Rich 1980: 645)¹⁰.

I would add, however, that men are equally embedded in the dichotomous logic – no one is unaffected. Most importantly, what this quote reveals, is Rich's argument that the demand for heterosexuality does not simply play out in immediate, sexual desires, but rather shapes specific relations of power. The demand for heterosexuality plays out in the desire to have a family that looks like a certain norm and in the desire to have a life that correlates with what

¹⁰ This quote is not included without hesitation. I choose to read the first part of Rich's quote to be about victims of human trafficking. I am not equating human trafficking with sex work, and I am not claiming a stance against sex work per se.

the common sense says a life should be like. In other words, one's surroundings generate a desire to be justified and validated by one's surroundings in a specific way – one's surroundings generate knowledge about what a good life is. To state that one's surroundings generate desires is not to claim that the sexual desires people may or may not feel are in any way false or wrong. Nor is the point to claim that one should oppose one's surroundings options for what a 'good life' means on pure principle only because these desires are generated through a dichotomous logic. Rather, the affirmative feminist project wishes to make visible the intra-activity of knowledge, bodies, matter and meanings that make up the ideas about life that negatively differentiate some bodies from other bodies. Additionally, the affirmative feminist project wishes to acknowledge the claims to knowledge and templates for explanation that justify big and small acts, habits and norms, as well as ways of telling stories, that all together – when not acknowledged for what they are – reproduce a system with too much violence and suppression. Within this project lies an effort to alter the measures for validation of what it means to live and to be human; it also entails an effort to present optional ways for understanding and explaining that which is deemed different. Ultimately, perhaps, the need to understand and explain on terms that are logical within a dichotomous framework will not be so prevalent. Perhaps bodies will simply be bodies and desires will simply be desires.

Considering Haraway's argument about how power has changed in the technological age, one must acknowledge that much has happened since Rich wrote her text in 1980. Channels for support and justification of previously non-normative lives are unnumbered. However, still today, if one does not feel like an individual in the way that the dichotomous logic and causal linearity insists that one should, the possibility for being met with the claim that one's own knowledge about oneself is false is highly present. For instance, a Norwegian trans-boy, Lukas, recently told the Norwegian TV-channel NRK that people will come up to him and tell him that he 'really is a girl', and that what he is doing is stupid ("bare tull") (Nordvåg 2018).

Based in the arguments of Rich, Ghosh and Foucault, one can already claim that sexuality and/or desire is intra-active. Specific experiences of desire and the meaning and definitions that are put on feelings of pleasure are intra-active, material-discursive products. These experiences are the product of one's specific body's embedded experience of its specific placement in time and space. It is quite common to agree on the fact that desires for food are

culturally contingent – what food one considers desirable is dependent on what food one has been exposed to. Sex, sexuality, humanness and knowledge, however, are not commonly perceived in the same way.¹¹ Sex and sexuality are perceived through specific conceptions of ‘nature’, humanness through a belief in ‘universalism’, and knowledge is understood through the measures of ‘objectivity’ and ‘truth’. When all these ideas that are used for explanation and justification – nature, universality, objectivity and truth – are questioned and argued to be intra-active products in and by themselves, it follows that the meaning of sex, sexuality, humanness and knowledge must change in some way.

To ask if sexuality is either caused by biology or by the social would be a reproduction of the belief that it needs to be either one or the other – or that they are interacting, in other words entangled but still separate. Additionally, that question reproduces the demand for the biological and the social to be understood as fundamentally separate. Moreover, to question the cause of sexuality is almost never done when the topic is ‘heterosexuality’ – in that case it is understood as the natural effect of one’s biological sex. Heterosexuality confirms linear causality as an explanatory model and confirms common sense. With other sexualities, however, questions of whether an individual is ‘born or bred’ (“født sånn eller blitt sånn”) are quite common. Non-normative sexualities are in need of an explanation that is logical within the dichotomous framework. This demand for non-normativity to be intelligible through the measures of normative knowledge, is what affirmative feminism calls violence.

From an intra-active perspective the biological and the social are mutually constitutive. Neither is prior to the other, and any boundary between them is one that is continually enacted. An affirmative feminist response to the question of whether sexuality is biological or social would be to acknowledge the demand for a dichotomous answer put forth by that question, and acknowledge that question’s intra-active place in the reproduction of the dichotomous framework. Instead of submitting to this demand, affirmative feminism rather explores different possibilities for response – responses that are deemed impossible within the dichotomous framework. An affirmative feminist response is therefore to acknowledge the

¹¹ Gayle Rubin presented this argument in the article ‘The Traffic in Women – Notes on the “Political Economy” of Sex’, originally published in 1975. She writes: “The needs of sexuality and procreation must be satisfied as much as the need to eat, and one of the most obvious deductions to be made from the data of anthropology is that these needs are hardly ever satisfied in any ‘natural’ form, anymore than are the needs for food. Hunger is hunger, but what counts as food is culturally determined and obtained. (...) Sex is sex, but what counts as sex is equally culturally determined and obtained.”

either/or-logic, take an explicit material-discursive vantage point – in other words, assume that the biological and the social were never separate – and explore what agential forces take part in producing their separateness. Such a response could then exemplify, how even the demand for separation is always already intra-active.

From an intra-active perspective, sexuality, or anything else for that matter, would not be reducible to either biology or to the social. The whole question of either/or, where one needs to be prior to the other, would be recognized as a reproduction of a specific claim to power and truth. Some critics accuse the broadened definition of actor in new-materialist theories of making conceptualizations of power relationships impossible. The argument is that if agency is democratically distributed, then such a theory “cannot deal with power because it cannot make distinctions between nature and society, or between humans, other animals, plants and objects” (Cudworth and Hobden 2015: 138). Chandler also describes the critique and writes that posthumanist and new-materialist theory have been criticized for “removing power relations and reinforcing neo-liberal understandings of individual responsibility” (2013: 524). In other words, new-materialism has been understood as distributing agency equally onto everything that exists, while agency has continued to be understood within neoliberal framings – everything agential has thus been understood through the logic of unitary individuals. However, this is not the case. Agency, in the affirmative sense, does not connote subjectivity, but rather enactment (Barad 2007). Intra-active affirmative feminism does not claim that everything is the same – especially not that everything is perceived as the traditional human, autonomous subject. Quite the contrary; an intra-active perspective allows for the acknowledgement of how systems of power are affecting the differences that are continually being (re)produced through acknowledging the effect of power inequalities in actual intra-actions. In other words, the intra-active affirmative feminist perspective is not blind to differences. Rather, it insists that everything is different, but that differences are not inherent. Differentiating is not about radical exteriority, but rather about agential separability within intra-action (Barad 2007). The meanings that differences have are produced through power relations, and those meanings come to play an intra-active part in the (re)materialization and sedimentation of differences. One could perhaps say that systems of power or power inequality, in the intra-active framework, much like knowledges, can be conceptualized as agential forces in themselves. In other words, nothing mystically ‘disappears’ when taking an intra-active affirmative feminist perspective. Power inequality is

still very much real. Also the insistence on separation is, in itself, an insistence infused with power, in the same way as it is an insistence on the ‘rightness’ of the status quo. That is not to say that affirmative or new-materialist theory is immune to power inequalities – a point that will be elaborated on in the next section.

To return to the topic of sexuality, someone would perhaps argue that the expectation of heterosexuality in relation to bodies is ‘natural’, in that it is heterosexual intercourse that is reproductive in the sense that it ‘can produce a baby’.¹² Some would even go as far as saying that it is not only the expectation of heterosexuality that is more ‘natural’, but even that heterosexuality is more evolutionary ‘right’ than other sexual desires.¹³ It is correct that when reproduction happens through intercourse, a vagina and a penis is needed. However, taking an intra-active perspective on the arguments above, one would have to acknowledge the intra-active becoming of the term ‘natural’ as it has been presented thus far in this thesis, and its use as an argument for something being ‘better’ than something else.

Like it has already been mentioned, Grosz argued that the separation of knowledge into disciplines, genres, schools and so on, is an effect and a materialization of the dichotomous logic insisting on separation (1993). Such separation of knowledge reproduces the idea that knowledges are produced unaffected by other knowledges, neutrally becoming in a vacuum needed to be filled. Following the argumentation above – and since desire is part of being – knowing and desire are not isolable. One could therefore argue that to differentiate sexuality by prefixes (hetero-, homo-, bi-, other) is not a differentiation inherent to sexual desire itself, but rather a symptom of the dichotomous logic insisting on separation. Prefix-sexualities are also, according to Foucault, relatively new terms. The constitution of ‘homosexuality’ Foucault dates to the first characterizations of it around 1870. However, of course, same-sex desire also played out between people before 1870. According to Foucault, the prefixes are

¹² The notion of ‘reproduction’ is not so simple. First of all, through various forms of technology, producing babies is possible in many ways that does not involve heterosexual intercourse. Second, most heterosexual intercourses are non-reproductive. Third, most of human reproduction is a-sexual, both in the sense that bodies continually reproduce themselves through their intra-active relations, and in the sense that life is maintained and reproduced through food and care and non-sexual relations.

¹³ The belief in the naturalness of heterosexuality is, according to Hird (2004b) a product of moral being attached to the notion of ‘natural’. In her book *Sex, gender and Science* (2004), Hird exemplifies how much research on non-human animals for instance, will deny, ignore or explain away behavior that by human standards would clearly be ‘homosexual’. The most notable difference between human and nonhuman animal homosexuality, writes Hird, “is that, among nonhuman animals, homosexuality does not invite negative reactions from other animals” (2004b: 118).

the result of the demand for the “specification of individuals” (1978: 42-43) that grew forth with the growing confessional practices in medicine, psychiatry and law. Prefix-sexuality was “made into a principle of classification and intelligibility” (Foucault 1978: 44).

Considering how sex and sexuality are traits inherent to Western identities, such differentiation of sexual desire takes part in constituting an oppositional identity. Foucault also writes that the constitution of homosexuality in the medical and legal institutions, “made possible a ‘reverse’ discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified” (1978: 101).

One’s prefix-sexuality is something one is, all the time, and in effect, something that defines what one is not. Heterosexual, then, is not something one is only when having reproductive sex (additionally, most heterosexual sex is non-reproductive); it is an identity constituted by and through knowledges and ideas about sexuality as a differentiating concept and identity-marker. An intra-active position is able to acknowledge how the very definition and knowledge of sexuality as differentiated is taking part in constituting sexuality as something that can be more or less ‘natural’. As such, through an intra-active argument, any claim about the ‘naturalness’ of heterosexuality is debunked. Through the notion of intra-action, the idea of prefix-sexuality as a negatively differentiating identity-marker, one that must be insisted upon in order to maintain a coherent identity, is shown to be relational and already intra-active within the system insisting on separation.

According to Braidotti, the foundation of identity in negativity serves as a block, and is an act of violence, not only towards others, but against one self. Braidotti claims that negative identity diminishes one’s capacity to relate, both to oneself and to human and non-human others (2011: 288). One could claim that when identity is oppositional, relationality does not mean connection on a fundamental level, but is rather focused on an effort to find sameness within a logic that disvalues difference. Such a limited perspective on relationality, founded in an idea of negative opposition, will necessarily have consequences for the capacity to relate.

As none of the critics discussed within this thesis explicitly mention sex, it is difficult to know exactly what they would have to say about affirmative sexuality. As mentioned in the

previous section, Chandler (2013) writes that a new-materialist subject is bound to a state of forever experimenting and negotiating, and that it can never know the ends or outcomes of its decisions. One could transfer this to the topic of sexuality, and perhaps Chandler then would claim that to not differentiate sexuality – to not have a set structure supporting one’s actions and decisions – would be to insist that that no one can ‘really’ know what they want because they cannot predict the outcome of their actions. This is not the case for affirmative feminism, however. It is not about everyone ‘really’ being poly-sexual, or that men and women don’t exist. Any-‘thing’, body or desire that exists, exists. To oppose or resist the existence of anything would be to negate the present. An affirmative feminist perspective would, however, be able to acknowledge the fear of not knowing oneself as a unitary, identified, subject that perhaps could play an agential role in keeping some from ‘experimentation and reflection’ over one’s own desires. In other words, it could be argued that instead of new-materialism keeping the subject from knowing itself, rather the demand to know oneself by logical, coherent parameters, to differentiate sexuality, and to perceive prefix-sexuality as inherent to identity, could risk keeping individuals from exploring and knowing themselves.

In an effort to not put dichotomous demands on what the next moment should consist of, affirmative feminism is not concerned with figuring out what sex or sexuality ‘really’ is. In fact, such a question would imply that there is some truth prior to, or a foundation for, all contemporary fuzz, which would again reproduce a notion of separation. Sex and sexuality is, like everything else from an affirmative perspective, in a continual, processual becoming-with. If knowledge is embodied, bodies are different and part of what it means to be. If knowing and being implicate each other, then desire, sex or identity can never be ‘the same’. One cannot know, love, desire or feel anything in exactly the same way as someone else, because embodiment and embeddedness can never be exactly the same. This acknowledgment of difference, I assume Chandler would argue, confines the subject to endless reflections over what others might think and know and feel – a point that will be elaborated on in the next section. For now, I will only say that the embodied, intra-active subject trusts the embodied knowledge that it is constituted by at any given moment, and, because of its acknowledgement of its intra-active relational position, it is willing and open to learn more.

Through the discussions of this section, it becomes clear that the notion of intra-action allows for acknowledgement of non-linear connectivity between nature, culture, knowledge, matter,

power and so forth, inherent to what is known as sex and/or sexuality. As such, the notion of intra-action allows for an affirmative critique of the ‘naturalness’ accompanying linear causal explanations when it comes to sex and sexuality.

3.4 Recognition of intra-active relationality with regards to theoretical positions and identity

The critic Paul Rekret (2016) writes that to accept Barad’s theory would mean an inflation of accountability – that the objects to which one would need to be accountable to in a new-materialist logic would be ever-proliferating. According to Rekret, to not have any pre-defined limit to accountability could affirm epistemic violence in all objectifications, or any representation or boundary enacted. Such inflated accountability could risk obscuring the power asymmetries that, for Rekret, are apparent in the existing dichotomous logic. Taking an intra-active perspective on Rekret’s argument, with an acknowledgement of how sexist and naturist knowledges takes part in producing sexist and naturist people and societies, Rekret is in fact claiming that to acknowledge part of what is (re)producing the power asymmetries that are shaping the world as we know it – power asymmetries that Rekret apparently is worried will not get enough attention – would take the focus away from dealing with those asymmetries. From an intra-active perspective, not aiming at processes, Rekret’s argument sounds like opposition from a place of comfort – only willing to change for the ‘right’ solution. In other words, it sounds like Rekret is waiting for pre-defined ‘solutions’ to the problems he has defined – solutions that do not demand too much change from him – and that do not involve processual exploration and the possibilities for failure.

Affirmative feminist theory insists that to acknowledge the intra-active relationality between knowing and being is a key aspect in the effort to deal with any power asymmetry. If one acknowledges the intra-active connection between ontology, epistemology and ethics – being, knowing and relating – to know the connection between knowing and being in a different way would also mean to know the power asymmetries inherent to relations differently, and to know one’s own relation to, and position in, those asymmetries differently (Barad 2007).

It seems like some of the hesitation towards acknowledging the relationality between knowing and being is connected to the fact that such an acknowledgement would necessarily mean that

what it means 'to be' would change. From the critiques of Chandler (2013) and van Ingen (2016), it seems that if new-materialist theories were accepted, then suddenly humans would not know themselves anymore, that humans would not know how to be, and that the world would be radically different. Chandler and van Ingen seem to assume that to accept new-materialist theory would mean to forget everything we know about being a human – that we would become “incapacitated or paralysed”, as Chandler writes (2013: 525). In other words, it sounds like these critics are giving too much power to new-materialist theory in an effort to insist on the rightness of their own beliefs – and perhaps also to not have to deal with the fact that they are perhaps themselves involved in reproducing the power asymmetries they claim to want to focus on. However, of course the acceptance of relational and processual theories would not alter humanity in an instance. No one would lose their knowledge, or their experiences by acknowledging intra-active relationality as fundamental to existence. One could, however, risk gaining new perspectives that could amount to different, creative and curious ways of being. Ways of being that perhaps, over time, would generate different forms of relationality, and ways of being that would acknowledge – not condemn, deny or oppose – one's own intra-active contribution to power asymmetries.

It is quite understandable, however, that the thought of the recognition of intra-action might seem energy-draining if the human that is imagined as part of these relations is the oppositional, competitive, resistant and negative human that needs to negate in order to feel like it exists in the 'right' way. Thinking from the idea of such an individual, the point of any statement is to make the separation between self and other clearer. One can assume that to state such separation is what Chandler would call freedom, as he opposes relationality and ethical responsibility with freedom (2013: 525). However, from the perspective of an affirmative feminist subject who acknowledges their always already intra-active relationality, communication is not a means to assert one's oppositional position. As any subject is always already relational when taking an affirmative perspective, communication, is rather a means to explore relationality – not to insist on separated identity, but to expand it. The freedom that Chandler does not want to lose is the freedom to transcend – move past and beyond (2013). The freedom to move past, beyond, and leave others behind, is perhaps what Halberstam would call the “freedom to become a master” (2011: 145) – a freedom defined through a suppressive system. The freedom to become a master is a freedom Halberstam does not want, and does not want to wish for, so she conceptualizes her shadow feminism of unbeing.

According to Chandler, what one is left with, without the search for the freedom to become a master, is simply the demand to adapt to one's surroundings and to create reflective and responsible communities (2013: 526).

From an acknowledgement of relationality and processuality, I don't think that what Chandler is worried about, sounds so bad. However, if the individual is thought of as fundamentally alone, still, I can understand that the task of being responsible and reflective could seem paramount – if it is assumed that the weight of a relational world will be on every solitary individual's shoulders. When imagining an oppositional individual in an affirmative world, that individual would, perhaps, as Rekret is concerned about, be confined to “ceaseless reflection upon exclusions [one] necessarily posits” (Rekret 2016: 229). However, from an intra-active, affirmative feminist perspective, even the most oppositional and insistent individual is always already relational. It is not about being trapped in reflective thoughts, trying to do everything ‘right’. It is about becoming-with knowledge and other humans and non-humans; it is about trying without a goal, and not demanding everything to be either right or wrong; it is about trusting one's body and embodied knowledge; and it is about knowing that the process of learning how to become-with does not stop. The subject is embodied and embedded – trusting that the body knows how to live and how to be relational is important in the effort of quieting the mind's demands for correlation. Acknowledging intra-action as fundamental to reality means that one is not alone in this life – one is not alone in learning, thinking and communicating. Learning to become-affirmative is not an individual endeavor – it is a shared project. An intra-active understanding of the subject can be a tool for instilling in the human subject a desire for such learning, cooperating and communicating.

The possibility of cultivating a desire for learning, cooperation and communication through the notion of intra-action is not only present on the individual level. Also, with regards to critical theory, to accept the intra-activity of one's theoretical position could yield new possibilities for relationality. According to indigenous feminist Zoe Todd (2016), Western academia – including new-materialist theory – takes part in structural exclusions that are reproducing current systems of power and suppression. This participation happens even while arguing for connectivity and integration. New-materialism and the focus on ontology that accompanies it, is part of what, in critical theory, has been termed ‘the ontological turn’ (Feely 2016). Todd claims that ‘the ontological turn’, and therefore new-materialism, is

presented in Western academia in a way that implies that it is a ‘discovery’ of the West. Todd’s article ‘An Indigenous Feminist’s Take on The Ontological Turn: ‘Ontology’ is Just Another Word For Colonialism’, argues that Western academy’s silence and lack of referencing to indigenous thinkers and philosophies in discussions regarding the vitality of matter and the aliveness of the world, maintain certain systems of power that rests on dichotomous claims to knowledge. In other words, Todd argues that there is a lack of acknowledgement of connectivity and relationality within new-materialist theory, even when theorists are arguing for relationality – a lack that reproduces certain power inequalities.

Todd argues that to insist on the Western ‘discovery’ of relationality – not necessarily explicit, but nevertheless communicated through exclusions and silence – is quite common in the field of critical theory in the West. The article was originally published as a blog-post after she attended a lecture with the philosopher, anthropologist and sociologist Bruno Latour, especially known for his Actor Network Theory. Todd was astonished that Latour could go a whole lecture, talking about the ‘climate as commons’ without referencing a single contemporary indigenous thinker, when indigenous philosophies and concepts long since have been concerned with conceptualizing the forces of life that connect bodies, breath, weather, culture and nature.

Fundamental relationality is not a ‘discovery’ of Western biology, quantum physics or other theories. To insist that new-materialism is a Western discovery would simply reproduce the idea of knowledges as something that is ‘discovered’, and the Western subject as the implicit and valid knower of such ‘discovered knowledge’ – it would not acknowledge that the knowledge constituting the ontological turn is in a material-discursive, intra-active relationship with other knowledges. Affirmative feminist theory does not have all the answers, or any ‘solutions’, only efforts of becoming-with the ever ongoing relational processes of life and theory-production. However integrated and climate-conscious Western, ontologically directed philosophies are, if they do not as well acknowledge their own position in the structural suppression and exclusion of indigenous thinkers, it reproduces the system of separation that it sets out to critique.

The logic behind Todd’s argument is affirmative and intra-active: the insistence on any separation will, without an acknowledgement regarding the exclusions, reproduce further

separation. Todd shows that good ideas and intentions must be seen in a broader perspective, as those ideas, however good and liberating they might seem at first glance, could be reproducing violent structures. As such Todd's argument is an example for the possibilities of acknowledgement that open up through an affirmative, intra-active, feminist perspective. When Western academia argues for integration without acknowledging its own position in the reproduction of separation, it is not in fact presenting any long-term 'solution'.

If intra-action provides a theoretical foundation explaining how everything is connected, then the acceptance and acknowledgement of one's identity – personal or theoretical – as an intra-active element in the co-constitution of the world would be an integral part of that identity. As such, an intra-active identity would necessarily mean the acceptance that there are no inherent boundaries to theory, knowledge, identity or bodies. Such an acceptance entails an acknowledgement of one's own intra-active partaking in the co-constitutions of the relations of which one is part. The affirmative feminist argument is that, in contrast to ideas of identity based in negation and negativity, acknowledgement of one's own identity's intra-activity would heighten the ethical responsibility for the inclusions and exclusions one is intra-actively taking part in enacting – acknowledgement renders the individual capable of responding (Haraway 2016). As mentioned, Chandler argues that ethical responsibility means a loss of freedom, and for Rekret it means that the subject is confined to ceaseless ontological speculation and reflection (Rekret 2016: 229).

Of course, there cannot be an expectation of anyone consciously knowing or thinking about all the exclusions one is acting out. Firstly, to even believe in the possibility of such a demand would insist that human subjects are the only subjects making exclusions; from an affirmative feminist perspective, they are not. Rather, exclusions are ongoing and processual, and part of any intra-action; they are what make intra-activity going – exclusions are an integral part to intra-actions. Secondly, such a belief would insist that individuals are completely autonomous and self-controlled in their thoughts and actions at all times, and therefore have the capacity to reflect constantly over one's own exclusions. Thirdly, to believe that the individual would be confined to solitary reflection is based on the insistence that the individual is oppositional and alone.

From an affirmative perspective, on the other hand, the subject who acknowledges their intra-active embeddedness – who knows they are not alone, while accepting that unconscious exclusions are sometimes intra-actively reproducing violent systems – that subject would necessarily welcome, or at least acknowledge and not simply dismiss or overlook, if and when others point out unnoticed exclusions in one's own subject position, words, or actions. It would be an invitation to relate, to communicate and learn – not an attack against a unitary, competitive identity in need of defense.

For Braidotti, affirmative ethics means to acknowledge that the harm you do to others is an immediate harm done to yourself (Braidotti 2011). That would mean that to not acknowledge others pointing out the unconscious (violent) exclusions one is making is simultaneously instilling a demand on oneself to comply with ideas of oppositional identity, difference as negation and the whole of the dichotomous framework. Therefore one could argue that to accept the notion of intra-action instills a wish in the subject for continual change and development because identity and existence are based in the acknowledgement of fundamental relationality and processuality. Intra-action instills in the subject a wish to learn from others, because others are undeniably connected to oneself.

Although 'everything is connected', and one acknowledges that one's own subject position is constituted through its relations, if one accepts that knowledge is situated and embodied (Haraway 1988), then other bodies would necessarily know and experience these relations and connections in different ways. Learning about these differentiated experiences – acknowledging their existence with efforts of not demanding those experiences and knowledges to 'fit' in a pre-defined structure for intelligibility – while simultaneously acknowledging that one's ideas regarding intelligibility could be an intra-active part in the reproduction of systems of power and domination are, I argue, qualities of an affirmative feminist identity that emerges through the discussion and conceptualization of intra-action as a template for understanding and explaining the world.

If one accepts the validity and existence of the logic that was presented in part one, and that the 'options' for humanness and existence that emerge through that logic are dichotomously defined, then to accept an intra-active vantage-point to think and experience from could yield hitherto unimaginable possibilities for existence and relationality. This is of course not to

claim that the dichotomous logic is deterministic, that would mean that all humans were the same – which we of course are not. However, when the dichotomous logic demands bodies and lives to correspond with that logic in order to be ‘right’ bodies and lives – and when difference spells negation – then that will necessarily produce a wish to not be different in the wrong ways – in other words, it will produce a wish to be ‘right’ in the right (dichotomous) ways.

Notice that what the issues here are not specific knowledges. Rather, what that the issues are ways of knowing. Knowledge is not inherently good or bad, but ways of knowing can be more or less demanding of something to be understood through the logic of either/or. Haraway writes that to cultivate the ability to respond to others and one self in ways acknowledging of intra-action “requires the risk of being for some worlds rather than others, and helping to compose those worlds with others” (2016: 178 n.32). Simultaneously, Haraway writes that “those who ‘believe’ they have the answers to the present urgencies are terribly dangerous. Those who refuse to be for some ways of living and dying and not others are equally dangerous” (2016: 41, italics in original). The affirmative response to this is that the intra-active logic acknowledges – or wishes to acknowledge – all ways of living and dying. Affirmative feminism does not aim at opposing or resisting certain identities, but rather to acknowledge as much as possible – the intra-activity of everything. Through acknowledgement, intra-active affirmative feminism can both be for some worlds and not others, while not resisting that which insists on separation in the present. From the perspective of intra-active affirmative logic, even that which insists on separation is already intra-active.

That insistence on separation is always already intra-active is important when considering the position of feminist theory. Commonly, feminism insists on its separation and opposition from ‘patriarchy’ as a means to define its own position and project as that which fights for the freedom of women and minorities. Taking an intra-active perspective demands the acknowledgement of how feminism is intra-actively linked to what it opposes, and that this very opposition necessarily takes part in the reproduction of both what feminism opposes, and the feminist political and theoretical identity as being in opposition. In addition, the insistence on sex and sexuality as inherent to identity is, based on the discussions so far in this thesis, perhaps not the road to feminist liberation. Is it possible to know sex in an intra-active way, that will both be for the future, while not being against the present? Is it possible to know sex

in a way that does not deny sex's relevance for identity formation, while simultaneously does not insist on its relevance in specific ways? The last section in this thesis asks what an affirmative feminist way of knowing sex could be. First however, the non-oppositional stance of affirmative feminism is discussed more fully through Anne-Jorunn Berg's critique of Barad's agential realist framework.

3.5 A leap of faith

Karen Barad builds her agential realist framework on Niels Bohr's philosophy-physics. Although sympathetic to Barad's feminist exploration of quantum mechanics, Berg is critical of what she perceives as Barad's presentation of quantum mechanics as a non-debatable and undisputable fact about the relationality of the world (2014). In other words, following Berg, Barad insists on a truth to her presentation of the relationality of the world, an insistence not fitting the feminist project focused on processuality, according to Berg. Berg contrasts Barad's perceived insistence of how the world works to what she claims is the analytical vantage point for the field of Science and Technology Studies, STS (the field that Berg is explicitly self-identifying with), namely 'that the world could have been different'.

For Berg, that Barad takes physical quantum experiments as a vantage point and claims these to present answers to the relationality of the world in a seemingly undisputable way, makes the feminist relevance of Barad's theory dependent on whether Niels Bohr (the quantum physicist that Barad builds on) was right or not. As Berg points out, she is not in a position to evaluate the 'correctness' of quantum physics, nor am I. The critics Trevor Pinch (2011) and S.S. Schweber (2008), point to Barad's theoretical presentations as lacking somewhat of a full social context – especially since some of her argument is that context matters. However, the elaboration of quantum theory and relevant experiments are said to be both elegant and accessible (Pinch 2011; Schweber 2008). To claim that the relevance of Barad's theory is solely dependent on the 'rightness' of quantum physics, however, is, I argue, to miss some of the point and feminist potential of Barad's theory.

Barad conceptualizes all human knowledge as constructed. However, the fact that knowledge is constructed, does not imply that knowledge does not 'work', or that it is false, and the fact that knowledge does 'work', does not mean that we have discovered human-independent facts

about nature (Barad 2007: 40). In other words, I argue that it is quite clear that Barad is not claiming any inherent truth to the quantum experiments she is using as foundation for her theory. Knowledge, it seems for Barad – also quantum mechanics – is undeniably the intra-active, material-discursive product of the entanglement of specific bodies, social structures, space, time, practices, technology, language, ideologies, stories, politics, matter, and so on. Human knowledge, then, will always have the human element within it. Human knowledge will always be situated, and hence be up for eternal debate. Barad's project is perhaps not to claim that her presentation of reality is more or less 'right' than any other – the rightness of human knowledge necessarily depends on human bodies acknowledging its rightness. Rather, Barad's project can be understood as to insist that this understanding of reality based on quantum physics could also be right – and, if the notion of intra-action generated from this understanding were accepted, it could yield the possibility of justifying radically different notions of relationality than what is possible within the currently dominating Western framework for thought.

The analytical vantage point of STS, that 'the world could be different', is of course correct. Considering Barad's claim that exclusions are inherent to intra-action – in other words that possibilities never 'run out', but are continually generated and excluded through intra-active relationality – I assume she would agree with (2007). Similarly, in the words of Halberstam we can acknowledge that the:

worlds we inhabit, as so many thinkers have reminded us, are not inevitable, they were not always bound to turn out this way, and what's more, in the process of producing this reality, many other realities, fields of knowledge and ways of being have been discarded and (...) disqualified (Halberstam 2011: 147).

However, to claim that the world could have been different is not enough for affirmative feminism. Rather, affirmative feminism's argument is that the world is different, and that it is not a matter of dreaming of, or searching for, a different world in the future – which necessarily entails a wish to transcend the pain and negativity in the present moment – but rather to search for alternative possibilities for staying with the trouble (Haraway 2016) of the here and now.

The Western world is highly dependent on 'hard' science to present justificatory evidence for what can be believed to exist (Mathews 1991). Barad's argument, which is founded in quantum

physics, does provide a scientific argument claiming that the world is different than commonly believed. Not only that the world could be different, and that it will be different in the future, but that the world is different, now. Berg argues that more critical readings of Barad's work are necessary. However, looking at some of the possible uses and consequences of Barad's theory, as is presented in this thesis, it is possible to argue that to demand the theory to be justified by the 'natural sciences' before it can be put to use in the 'social sciences', is a reproduction of the idea that the material world is somehow the truer 'foundation' upon which the social is built. In other words, such an argument does not fully account for intra-active material-discursive relationship between/through biology and the social. Moreover it reproduces the separation between these 'fields' of science, a separation that has been argued is the consequence of specific dichotomously inclined power structures. Berg herself acknowledges that the broad acceptance of the separation between natural and social sciences is a consequence of the Western idea of the ontological difference between nature and culture.

Quoted by Berg, Evelyn Fox Keller writes about 'natural science' that "good science typically works to bring the material world in closer conformity with the stories and expectations that a particular 'we' bring with us as scientists embedded in particular cultural, economic, and political frames" (Berg 2014: 118). Berg points out what she calls the monumental challenge of training the look of a researcher to see something else than before. Moreover, Berg claims that part of the challenge of new-materialist theory is how to find ways to explore and present entanglement. Berg is right in pointing out these challenges, and if these new ways to explore and present entanglement needs to be 'right', as in fitting with dominating stories and expectations, it will probably be impossible. From an affirmative feminist perspective, however, the process of becoming-with theory is highlighted. Haraway's cyborg is not only a new perspective for research to take on, but a different life behind the look of the researcher. Insisting that it is difficult to be a cyborg will make it really difficult to be a cyborg.

Affirmative feminism offers two important arguments with a follow-up question each: first it argues that the world is different than commonly claimed, and asks what we can become if we become-with such a vantage-point for thinking and experiencing? Second, it argues that we are different than what is commonly claimed, and asks what we could know about the world (what the world could become) if we took that as vantage point for thinking. Both of these

arguments, however – and thus the possibility for their respective follow-up questions – require the acceptance that the science the argument is built on, might perhaps not be ‘right’ or ‘good’ in Fox Keller’s sense that it brings greater understanding of the world in conformity with dominating stories and expectations. In other words, these affirmative arguments and questions are not logical if the standards for intelligibility is provided through the justificatory measures of coherent individualism/dichotomous logic/human exceptionalism/sex as inherent to identity/and so forth. Hence, for these arguments and questions to be logical, one must also be willing to not be ‘right’, to simply be good enough for now. As such, affirmative feminism can be conceptualized as a leap of faith.

Both Haraway (2016) and Braidotti (2011) are concerned about the secularist demands within the West and Western science. According to Braidotti, a dominating axion in the West is the equation of secularism and emancipation, from which follows the belief that “women’s emancipation is directly indexed upon sexual freedom” (2011: 186). To mention ‘faith’ and critical theory too close together, is, in other words, commonly looked down upon.

Secularism is commonly equated with progress, modernity and the transcendence and ‘leaving behind’ of the traditional. It is a way for the modern West to differentiate itself from ‘the religious others’. However, like Haraway writes: “it is very hard for a secularist to really listen to the squid, bacteria, and angry old women of Terra/Gaia” (2016: 185). In other words, if one’s assumingly unitary, coherent identity is founded in the strong insistence that nothing else than what has already been proven through Western science is true – science that is built upon the framework presented in part one – then to accept a different understanding of relationality would essentially mean that one’s identity is not what one thought it was.

The leap of faith necessary to accept an affirmative framework is thus closely related to identity and subjectivity, as has been argued in this thesis. For Berg, perhaps the concern she voices about the challenge that new-materialism poses for science is enlarged by her explicit identification with the field of STS, and the claim that the world only could have been different, not that it already is. The leap will have to entail a trust that one will persist – even while not being ‘right’ – that one will persist and know oneself even while insisting to be something different than a liberal individual with a coherent identity. Braidotti calls it ‘faithfulness to oneself’ (2011: 186), where the self that one is faithful to is not the Self in a dialectic relationship to others. Rather the self that one is faithful to when taking a leap with

affirmative feminism is the intra-active self, constituted by relations. In other words, to be faithful to oneself from an affirmative feminist perspective is to be faithful to the relations that make up that interdependent, complex non-coherent self.

To conceptualize the affirmative feminist project as an effort to become-with the present moment in different ways; to argue that we are already where we need to be, because we cannot be anywhere else right now, underlines the importance of exploring ways of knowing. In other words, affirmative feminism does not have a goal of what should be known, and for what or how anything should exist, in the future. Rather, affirmative feminism aims at exploring different ways of knowing and being, here and now.

3.6 Sex-as-phenomena

Although it was argued in the previous section that taking an affirmative feminist perspective could perhaps be defined as a leap of faith, the faith in question is not based on what can commonly be termed a ‘non-sensible’ belief – a belief that is, as Haraway writes, “tied to doctrine, profession, confession, and taxonomies of error” (2016: 88). Rather, the faith and belief discussed in the previous section is about material-discursivity, practices of worlding, and about being – becoming-with, that is: affirmative, intra-active knowledge, and as such, the faith in question is to believe in the sensibility of intra-action.¹⁴ What can sex become from a vantage point that believes in intra-action?

In the name of acknowledgement, there is no denying the immense role ideas and experiences of binary sex are playing everywhere in Western society. Binary sex is perceived as inherent to personal identity; it structures the Western philosophical framework; and it is insisted upon in almost all institutions, venues, meetings, and explanations of the world. In addition, binary sex works as a justificatory measure for dichotomous, representationalist claims to knowledge. As already discussed, representationalist claims to knowledge are playing an important and intra-active agential role in the reproduction of the insistence on separation as fundamental to existence. Affirmative feminism argues that this insistence on separation –

¹⁴ The use of ‘(non-)sensible’, here, comes from Haraway (2016) who writes that theory cannot be about belief, as belief is not considered ‘sensible’, but theory can be about finding, shaping and playing with thinking companions. In this thesis ‘intra-action’ is such a thinking-companion – one which allows for sensible new-materialist theories to make sense of the world.

within a philosophical framework where ‘difference’ is understood as negation and a negative comparison – is an important agential force in the justification and reproduction of exploitative, limiting and suppressive norms, structures, habits, thoughts and experiences. The times we are living in, are, according to Haraway, times of urgency:

[times] of great mass death and extinction; of onrushing disasters, whose unpredictable specificities are foolishly taken as unknowability itself; of refusing to know and to cultivate the capacity of response-ability; of refusing to be present in and to onrushing catastrophe in time; of unprecedented looking away (Haraway 2016: 35).

There is little doubt that Life will continue although humans went extinct. From the perspective of Life, humans are not all that important. However, for the world to remain a world hospitable to humans, humans necessarily need to change their ways of living – the human needs to change its understanding of self. The role that sex plays in defining what it means to be human is immense, and most often sex is explained and understood as unchanging, natural, true and inherent. But if sex is perceived as unchanging – at least if it is ‘natural’; and if sex is simultaneously validating and justifying the whole Western philosophical framework; and if sex, in addition, takes part in defining what it means to be human – then change for humanity can only go ‘so far’. If sex is insisted upon, as we know it is within the Western framework for thought and experience, then sex will always be an unchanging foundation which justifies and naturalizes separation – sex will always be that which insists on oppositional identity, and hence resistance against one’s own body. The reason sex insists on oppositional identity, is because the way that we know sex today demands there to be an inherent separation between body and mind. Hence, the body must be understood through measures of correlation insisted upon by the mind – and so too, must sex.

If negative opposition is not a strategy for affirmative feminism, it is not an option to resist or oppose binary sex. Therefore, the strategy for affirmative feminism is to *know sex differently* – and affirmative feminism argues that to know sex differently, because it is perceived as so personal, natural and inherent, could provide the possibilities of knowing identity and humanity differently as well. But how can sex be known in a way that does not *oppose* or *resist* the ideas and experiences commonly had of sex – ways that do not *deny* certain ideas and experiences of sex – and simultaneously do not *insist* on sex in specific ways either? The point is not to abolish sex, but to acknowledge that through identity and philosophy sex is playing an agential part in how we treat each others, and how we treat the world. To know sex

differently, could yield as of yet unimagined possibilities for ways of becoming-with and ways of relating.

Critics, such as Rekret (2016) and van Ingen (2016), argue that when a connection is explicitly drawn between ontology and ethics a new dichotomy is created between those who are ‘attuned’ to matter and difference – the new-materialists – and those who ‘resent’ matter and difference – the rest. According to Rekret, this binary calls for a transformation of the subject, so that one might “be ‘attuned’ to or ‘register’ materiality” (2016: 227). For Rekret, this call for transformation of the subject ends in a kind of epistemological blackmail, where critical interrogation of such subject transformation is amputated through being posited as an ethical failure – the interrogating philosopher “is easily brushed aside as ‘resentful’ and ‘hubristic’, still too attached to modern dualisms and concepts” (2016: 230).

Rekret is to some extent right in his criticism – when attunement to matter is tied to ethics, a separating line between those who ‘care’ and those who do not, is easy to construct. However, taking an intra-active perspective, where even the critical philosophers are understood as always already intra-active, I would rather define these differing positions based in degree of acknowledgement, and not as a dichotomy of attunement/resentment. They can also be claimed to be a necessary intra-active part of the production of new-materialist theory in that they challenge and question the theories. Nevertheless, from an intra-active perspective, development of theory is done most fruitfully through learning and collaboration, not through critique. Critique, says Barad in an interview, is too often:

a destructive practice meant to dismiss, to turn aside, to put someone or something down—another scholar, another feminist, a discipline, an approach, et cetera. So this is a practice of negativity that I think is about subtraction, distancing and othering (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2009).

Although I can understand Rekret’s argument, that new-materialism ends only in critique and counter-critique, that is not the aim for affirmative feminism. Through acknowledgement, intra-active affirmative feminism holds space for the dichotomous logic without insisting either on the continuance of the dichotomous logic or on affirmative feminist theory’s identity as in opposition to it. The intra-active affirmative feminist position is not an oppositional stance. It is affirmative. The oppositional stance, as was claimed through quoting Haraway in section 3.4, is a dangerous one, as it insists on the rightness of some ways of living and dying

and not others. Through the notion of intra-action it is acknowledged that new-materialism cannot create a ‘new opposition’, since theory and theoretical positions are intra-actively linked together. In other words, Rekret is critiquing new-materialism from the vantage-point of a dichotomous logic – an argument that one can assume, based in his critique presented above, that Rekret would predict.

Perhaps a focus on the big transformations of the subject in the name of ethical relationality is not the right starting-point for everyone – which is partly why the focus on ways of knowing is important. Knowing and being mutually implicate each other, so it follows that changed ways of knowing ultimately – understood from an intra-active perspective – would alter ways of being as well. As such, intra-active acknowledgement is an important affirmative feminist tool in the project of understanding, in different ways, how things work, and what might be possible – and perhaps, then, through understanding and imagining, intra-active acknowledgement is an important tool in an affirmative feminist transformation of the world. It should be noted that of course changed ways of knowing will not alone end pollution, exploitation, suppression and extermination. My argument is not that intra-active claims to knowledge will single-handedly transform the world, neither that any other effort will. However, if one does believe in the intra-active connectivity of ontology, epistemology and ethics, not only on a theoretical level, but rather, if one acknowledges that the way that one knows the world, necessarily effects what one does to – and in – the world, then to conceptualize different ways of knowing, that are as *sensible* and ‘right’ as possible, without being right in a way that demands dichotomous logic, I believe is quite important.

As a way of formulating how the world is fundamentally intra-active, Barad suggests ‘phenomena’ as the primary ontological unit. She develops this concept from a reading of the quantum physicist Niels Bohr’s philosophy-physics where ‘phenomenon’ refers to the relationship between the researcher, the observed, and the measuring apparatus (method, technique, and physical arrangements). For Bohr there was no unambiguous way to differentiate between the object and the observer in physical experiments without an apparatus. Thus, Barad explains, “[a]n apparatus must be introduced to resolve the ambiguity, but then the apparatus must be understood as part of what is being described” (Barad 2007: 118). In other words, the boundary between observer and the observed is not inherent. The boundary is rather enacted through the apparatus’s intra-action with the observer and the

observed. For Bohr, because of the inherent ambiguity of the boundaries in a quantum experiment, “a condition for objective knowledge is that the referent is a phenomenon (and not an observation-independent object)” (Barad 2007: 120). What this quote reveals is that objectivity, for Bohr, did not refer to any ‘neutral’ observation of an assumed-to-be separate object. Rather, objectivity is contingent on the phenomenon – the intra-active relationality between observer, observed and apparatus – being the referent. Because Bohr’s notion of objectivity is not predicated on an inherent distinction between the object and the observer, the practice of research is thus situated within theory. For Barad, this connectivity between theory and practice bears the result that “method, measurement, description, epistemology, and ontology are not separable considerations” (2007: 121). Rather, method, measurement, description, epistemology, and ontology, must be considered as intra-active agential forces in the research experiment. ‘Phenomena’ is the result of Barad’s development of Bohr’s notion for the philosophical framework agential realism.

When phenomena does not only refer to relationality in a quantum experiment but rather to ontology and existence, the world does not, first and foremost, exist of things in and of themselves with inherent boundaries and properties, but rather of “phenomena [which] are the ontological inseparability/entanglement of intra-acting ‘agencies’” (Barad 2007: 139). Phenomena can be described as differentiated patterns that are produced through the intra-actions of multiple material-discursive agential forces. Agencies, for Barad, refers to any ‘thing’ involved in intra-action. It is not a notion reserved for humans, but rather refers to the agential forces intra-actively working together, constituting the universe as it currently exists. Following Barad, matter, as well as knowledge, practices, philosophical systems, habits, bodies and so on are agential and serve as agential forces in the ongoing materialization of the world. The apparatus in Bohr’s quantum experiment is agential in that it enacts a boundary between the object and the observer. The intra-action of observer, observed and apparatus makes what Barad calls an ‘agential cut’ – a boundary.

Phenomena, or differentiated patterns, are (re)produced, understood and made intelligible through boundary-making practices. In a human context, such boundary-making practices can for instance be habits, norms, discursive practices, ways of knowing, ways of explaining, concepts, words, knowledges and/or material specificities. As such, boundary-making practices can be compared to apparatuses and are part of the phenomena they purportedly

only represent. In other words, the concepts used to describe something – because of the possibilities and limitations it puts on both the observer and the observed – must be understood as an intra-active part of what is described (which, in addition, is never separate from the observer). Phenomena, or specific material-discursive patterns, because of their intra-active nature, are always processual, always becoming. In that sense, following Barad, because phenomena are what the world is made up of, and because they are intra-active and processual, they continually (re)configure the world – continually, intra-actively make up the world. Phenomena, therefore, are specific material (re)configurations which come to matter – ways in which the world is made up that matter for us and/or the world (Barad 2007: 140).

If the body is neither only biological nor only social, nor an interaction of the two; if sex/gender is an excuse for feminists to leave ‘science’ alone (Haraway 1988) and a hiding place for the insistence on dichotomies; if the idea about sex as inherent to identity, and about binary sex as inherent to the body, are historical and cultural specificities; and if sex is not the road to (feminist) liberation, what can sex be then? Is it possible to conceptualize sex in a way that does not deny its realness and importance at this moment – in other words, a way that does not deny or denounce the actual, and very true, experiences of people and the concrete materializations of binary claims to sex – nor insist on binary sex having to be true at the next moment? To explore such non-dichotomous, non-demanding, non-denying and non-insistent conceptualizations of sex is important because of the qualities of sex as omnipresent and ubiquitous. If all human knowledge really is sexed through being embodied and situated; if anything in the world that humans know anything about (the whole world as we know it) really is sexed, what does it do, then, if sex is demanded to be understood in certain, specific, dichotomous ways? It would necessarily demand of the world to be understood and explained in those same dichotomous ways – which would necessarily generate dichotomously justified actions and doings. Following Haraway:

the doings of situated, actual human beings matter. It matters with which ways of living and dying we cast our lot rather than others. It matters not just to human beings, but also to those many critters across taxa which and whom we have subjected to exterminations, extinctions, genocides, and prospects of futurelessness (Haraway 2016: 55).

It could be argued that if humans were situated and sexed in ways that did not demand separation and hierarchical differentiation, perhaps humans would be able to do different

things and to live and die in different ways – ways that are perhaps not as contributive to, and at least more acknowledging of, the reproduction of a dichotomous logic. Sex plays an immense agential role in the lives of the humans acting on/in/with the world, therefore to know sex differently can be a tool in generating different understandings, explanations and actions.

No conceptualization of sex has ever lasted forever,¹⁵ and there is no need to believe that there will ever be a final answer to the question of what sex is. Indeed, from the perspective of affirmative feminism, nor are final answers the goal of research. Rather, the ‘goal’ is the processual, embodied, ongoing search for alternatives that might yield alternative modes of becoming-with, here and now, that are more accountable to and responsible for – able to respond to – the intra-active relations making up the world. How would a conceptualization of sex as phenomena play into the affirmative project?

If knowledge, concepts, words and matter can all be understood as agential forces, then almost everything that has been discussed thus far in this thesis could be conceptualized as agential forces taking part in (re)producing sex. Through the notion of intra-action, the agential forces that could be claimed to intra-actively constitute ‘sex’, as it is commonly understood, are for instance: dichotomous claims to knowledge; demands for linear causality; binary logic; ideas of sex as inherent to individual identity; ideas of individual identity as inherent to humanness; capitalism; bodies; hierarchical notions of difference; connections between humanness and maleness; the sexed nature of the notions of ‘objectivity’ and ‘rationality’; sexed ideas about nature; insistences on human exceptionalism; and time and space. The list is not exhaustive, and will never be exhaustive. Exclusions, boundaries, or agential cuts are, as previously mentioned, an integral and explicit part to any intra-active phenomena. Thus far ‘sex’ could very well be understood as a phenomenon.

If sex were understood as a phenomenon – phenomena being intra-active and processual – and if boundaries or agential cuts are part of any phenomena, it could make available an acknowledgement of the processuality of sex. In other words, to know sex-as-phenomenon could make available an understanding of sex, not as fixed or a foundation, but rather as a

¹⁵ Thomas Laqueur argues in *Making Sex – Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (1990), that before the enlightenment, bodies and sex were understood through a one-sex model. In this model for understanding sex, women were understood, not as radically different from, but rather as lesser versions of men.

becoming. An acknowledgement of the becoming of sex, could open up a space for discussions, contributions, curiosity, further acknowledgement, critique and creativity with regards to the material-discursive ‘content’ and consequences of specific claims to sex-as-phenomenon. To conceptualize sex (or anything else) as a phenomenon – a material-discursive pattern – could be valuable in an affirmative feminist project because it allows for an exploration of the agential forces that intra-actively constitute sex as we know it – also the power asymmetries. To conceptualize sex as a phenomenon is therefore a way of knowing sex, not as on either side, or in the middle of, the tug-of-war between social constructivism and physical realism, but rather as a material-discursive, intra-active becoming.

Sex-as-phenomenon poses a challenge to the widely accepted divide between sex and gender – a divide commonly accepted by feminists. What would it mean to know sex-as-phenomenon? How does knowing sex-as-phenomenon place itself in relation to knowing sex as separate from gender? Is it feasible or relevant to think about knowing sex-as-phenomenon *instead* of sex/gender? From an affirmative feminist perspective, to imagine sex-as-phenomenon as a ‘better’ replacement alternative to the sex/gender divide, is not a good option. If an affirmative aim is to not dictate what should be known, and similarly aim to not oppose what is already existing but rather aim to explore different ways of knowing and being, to insist on the ‘rightness’ of sex-as-phenomenon – if that means that ideas and experiences of sex/gender is ‘wrong’ – goes against the affirmative aim. Then, from an affirmative perspective and because of the very real material-discursive ideas and experiences of gender that exist, perhaps gender must also be known as phenomena – as differentiated patterns. Such a conceptualization would be in line with how Barad defines phenomena. For Barad an apparatus, a concept, a boundary, any-‘thing’ that matters in the continual (re)configuring of the world, is a phenomenon (2007: 140, 177). In the name of acknowledgement, then, and from an affirmative feminist perspective insisting that the world already is intra-active, gender is, and has always been, a phenomenon.

Now, one could really reflect endlessly over the intra-action of agential forces and phenomena, making the premonitions of Rekret and Chandler correct. However, just because you could, does not mean that you do. Any enactment or acknowledgement of intra-activity, agential forces or phenomena necessarily entails exclusions – agential cuts and boundaries are part of the ongoing intra-active process of becoming (Barad 2007). For Barad, to

acknowledge that exclusions are inherent to any acknowledgement and to any enactment “requisite questions of accountability” (2007: 135). In other words, to stop reflection simply because there are some preset structures that give one ‘permission’ to, or justifies the act of not pursuing connections further without acknowledging that one is contributing to a specific agential cut, it could be argued, is to abdicate one’s responsibility for one’s own actions and experiences. Acknowledgment of one’s own contribution does not mean that one necessarily always have to immerse oneself in reflection over the exclusions one contributes to, nor does it mean that one is demanded to even know all the exclusions one contributes to – that would be impossible. Barad’s argument is rather that to acknowledge the possibility for exploration of exclusions could foster more accountability in relationality because it situates the existence of the subject in intra-active relations (2007). Partly because boundaries are explained and understood as inherent and natural, the subject within the dichotomous system is not presented with the option of reflection outside of questions of either/or. The affirmative feminist subject is rather aware of the fact that simply by existing it is producing exclusions – exclusions, in other words, are not inherently bad or violent. To say that all exclusions, taken to their limit, are violent (Rekret 2016) would be to insist on the negativity of existence and subjectivity. Through the acknowledgment of the fact that exclusions are always produced – also without the involvement of any human subject – the affirmative subject welcomes the challenge to be accountable in intra-active collaboration. To be aware that there are always exclusions inherent to any action, acknowledgement and enactment allows for the possibility of greater accountability and greater response-ability, but it does not demand from the subject to be confined in solitary reflection, nor does it demand from the subject that it has to be ‘right’ or provide the final answers.

Returning to sex-as-phenomenon and gender-as-phenomenon, and taking as a vantage point the insistence that the world is already intra-active, one can argue that gender – behavior, personal identity, self-presentation, the way one is perceived – is always also part of the material-discursive sex-as-phenomenon.¹⁶ When considering the value of the notions of intra-action and sex-as-phenomenon for feminist theory, one can argue that even to keep the divide between sex and gender, but to know them both as material-discursive, intra-active phenomena, would be a tool in the affirmative feminist project of acknowledging relationality, understanding how things work, understanding who and what is in the action,

¹⁶ One could argue the opposite, as well, that sex-as-phenomena is always part of gender-as-phenomena.

and to open up for new possibilities of learning and collaboration. Perhaps it can be argued that to know both sex and gender as-phenomena, is a fruitful step for feminism-becoming-affirmative. However, in the name of acknowledgement and accountability, to keep the separation between sex and gender – even while insisting on their intra-active nature-as-phenomena – would, from an affirmative perspective, need to also foster an acknowledgement and acceptance of what ideas of separation that distinction is reproducing outside of the specific realm of sex/gender. In other words, if one accepts that the sex/gender divide is contributing to the reproduction of the logic presented in part one on this thesis, then feminist theory needs to ask if it is able to be accountable for the exclusions it is contributing to through the use of such dichotomously differentiated concepts – concepts that, by an intra-active logic, necessarily take part in producing dichotomously differentiated identities, people and worlds. Perhaps the answer is that it *is* possible – that discussion will not be had in this thesis.

In the Norwegian language, the word ‘kjønn’ is used for both ‘sex’ and ‘gender’. Sometimes it will be specifically differentiated through saying ‘biological kjønn’ and/or ‘social kjønn’, but nevertheless, the term ‘kjønn’ remains the same. As such, ‘kjønn’, in and of itself, does not demand the same stark separation between the biological and the social as the division between sex and gender does. In an affirmative vein, the value of ‘kjønn’ compared to the differentiation between sex and gender, I argue, is that ‘kjønn’ to a greater extent allows for an acknowledgement of how the biological and the social are always already intra-actively entangled. The question, when thinking with the notion ‘kjønn,’ is not *if* the biological and the social are entangled – a question which the common-sensical nature of the differentiation between sex and gender provokes. Rather ‘kjønn’ allows for questions that are more focused on intra-activity and relationality, rather than questions focused on the justification and validation of entanglement from the vantage point of a logic of separation. It is in this vein, and through an appropriation of the logic of the Norwegian language, that I in this thesis – except when explicitly writing about the sex/gender-divide – consequently use the term ‘sex’. And it is because of this appropriation that I, for the remainder of this thesis, continue to write about sex-as-phenomenon – a concept that always is material-discursive, and therefore encapsulates also what is commonly known as ‘gender’. Additionally, to use ‘sex’ rather than ‘gender’, or both of them, allows for sex as activity – sexual practices and desires – to be explicitly intra-active and processual parts of sex-as-phenomenon.

To define sex-as-phenomenon in the way just described is in line with Braidotti's argument that "we need to rethink sexuality without genders" (2013: 98). Braidotti writes that "because the gender system captures the complexity of human sexuality in a binary machine that privileges heterosexual family formation and literally steals all other possible bodies from us, we no longer know what sexed bodies can do" (2013: 99). I do not believe that a discourse of 'we have forgotten' or 'we need to get back' is fruitful for the affirmative feminist project. The reason for my doubt is that such nostalgia can function to prevent the acknowledgement of what actually exist in the present moment, while simultaneously functioning as a way of opposing the present moment. As discussed in section 3.3, any understanding of sexuality can already be explained as intra-active, here and now – it is not something that necessarily needs to be returned to, or achieved. As such, sex-as-phenomenon, which entails sexuality as intra-active, can be understood as a theoretical tool in Braidotti's project of conceptualizing and experiencing sexuality as polymorphous and perverse "(in the sense of playful and non-reproductive)" (2013: 98) – an understanding of sexuality that does not demand coherency, nor the invocation of 'nature' or linear causality as templates for explanation and justification.

Taking an intra-active vantage point, there is nothing inherent about the separation between gender and sex. They are both material-discursive tools used to explain and experience bodies and behaviors – tools that were embraced by feminists. This separation did, as has already been mentioned, have great political consequences because it allowed for identity to be explained and justified in non-deterministic ways. As such, although gender is perceived of as separated from sex, that separation – gender included – is still a conceptualization of sex. Sex-as-phenomenon could perhaps, again, provide feminist theory with new ways of knowing sex and humanness – ways that could take part in highlighting the relationality among humans and between humans and the non-human world. To focus more on that relationality is necessary, claims affirmative feminists, in order to cultivate more ethical response-ability (Haraway 2016). The feminist motto 'the personal is political' was popularized in the late 1960's, and aimed at underscoring the connections between personal lives and political structures. The phrase points to connections moving in both ways – personal lives are both of value for and affecting politics, and politics affect, is of value for, and should address, personal lives. The phrase can be read as a feminist effort to draw lines of connections between the two sides of a traditional dichotomy – the personal vs. the political. Within a

feminist project acknowledging a need for ‘the human’ to change, a fitting feminist motto could perhaps be that ‘the metaphysical is personal’. To add this to the old motto would necessarily insist on the connectivity between the metaphysical, the political and the personal. To claim that ‘the metaphysical is personal’ would be a feminist motto acknowledging the ethico-onto-epistem-ology of the world. In ‘Feminism and Postmodernism,’ Seyla Benhabib argued that postmodernist definitions of subjectivity as nothing but a ‘position in language’ would make female emancipation unthinkable (Benhabib 1995). In other words, she argued that definitions of subjectivity matter for women’s lives. In a sense, then – although not always explicitly – feminists have insisted that the metaphysical really is personal.

If sex is really understood as one of the most fundamental parts of what it means to be a human, and if it is possible to conceptualize sex in a way that allows for sex to be a becoming, a process, a becoming-with, then ‘sex-as-phenomenon’ necessarily generates challenges – and/or possibilities – for the feminist project of altering understandings of what it means to be human. From an intra-active perspective one could also argue that ‘human’ is a phenomenon, one that is constituted and (re)configured through human and non-human enactment of boundaries and agential cuts. If sex – the assumed-to-be a ‘natural’ and fundamental part of the human – is a material-discursive becoming-with of an unnumbered amount of agential forces, then, necessarily, so is ‘the human’. As such, if the affirmative feminist project is aimed at imagining different ways of knowing and being ‘human’, one could argue that the notion of intra-action, and sex-as-phenomenon, could be valuable tools in this project.

Although to know sex or human as-phenomena allows for the becoming-with of sex and humanness, this way of knowing does not demand sex or human to be anything specific. Additionally – since acknowledgement is an important part of intra-active affirmative feminism – it does not denounce the already existing and very real meanings and experiences of sex and humanness. Based on the critique presented throughout this part, where Rekret and Chandler were concerned about the subject being confined to endless reflection over their relations, one could assume that a critical response to sex-as-phenomenon would be that the subject would neither know its own sex completely (because it is impossible to know fully all the agential forces constituting sex-as-phenomenon), nor would it be able to predict the sex of others. I understand their critiques as a worry for uncertainty and insecurity – that they need to feel certain that tomorrow will be understandable by the same measures as today, otherwise

they will not know who or what they are. Such critiques would assume that sex necessarily will be part of the affirmative subject in the same way it is part of the liberal subject – as stable and coherent. To claim that it is a loss not to know sex in the same, fixed and assumed way as we do today, is to insist on sex as inherent to identity, individual, coherent identity as ‘right,’ and that sex is somehow ‘natural’. In addition, and following the philosopher Osho, “to ask security for tomorrow means to remain in constant fear. Security is not possible, so when you are afraid of insecurity, your fear cannot be destroyed” (2004: 4). From this quote, with relation to the topic of sex, and considering Chandler’s critique, to accept sex-as-phenomena does not mean that one cannot predict what sex one will consider oneself as tomorrow, or that one cannot predict the sex of others. Neither does it mean that one cannot predict what type of genitals the next person one will have a sexual desire for will have. Rather, affirmative feminism is concerned with how one meets predictions and reality, one’s own and others. If it is a demand that the predictions one has for tomorrow needs to be ‘right’, otherwise one’s whole identity and sense of self is at stake, then that puts great demands of coherency both on the world and on oneself. If the prediction rather is done through the acknowledgement of phenomena as the primary ontological unit – in other words, with the acknowledgement of the fundamental processual nature of all things – the understanding of sex/human/identity-as-phenomena could be part of easing the blow when things actually do not go as planned. (Quite often, things do not.) Taking a vantage point in the notion of intra-action and sex-as-phenomenon, one’s sense of freedom and one’s sense of self are not built on whether or not one is right in one’s predictions or not – like Chandler’s (2013) notion of freedom entails. Rather to know sex-as-phenomenon, and to know oneself as intra-active means to allow for, and welcome, non-oppositional meetings with the urges and desires that might arise in the body – meetings full of acknowledgement and accountability.

The phenomenon of binary sex is (re)produced partly by the specific connections between dichotomous claims to knowledge and the body. If intelligibility within the dichotomous framework implies a human mind doing the understanding, and the mind is separate from the body, then, necessarily the mind is understanding the body. Following the dichotomous logic, the body must be understood by the mind by means of dichotomously demanding concepts assumed to be neutrally existing, in order for it to be intelligible in the ‘right’ way. In other words, the Self, in order to fulfill the demands of continuing to be that particular, coherent self, must reproduce the dichotomous logic through explaining and understanding the body by

means of dichotomous concepts. The self needs to negate sex and the body in order to remain itself. Within the Western framework for thought, it is not enough for the body to be intelligible to itself, it is not enough for the body to be alive and responsive to its surroundings. Rather, the body is understood as an object that should be intelligible to the mind by means of the knowledge available at any given time – knowledge that is assumed to function as a neutral mediator.

The point from an affirmative feminist perspective, accepting intra-action and sex-as-phenomenon, is that the worth or value of anything – least of all bodies and sex – are not based on the level of correspondence with descriptive words and concepts (words and concepts which intra-active production in a sexist, dichotomous framework is acknowledged). The body knows itself, and also knows its own – sometimes changing – desires. If to know sex, humanness, and also identity as-phenomena could alleviate the perceived demands for bodies and desires to be understood as ‘normal’, ‘natural’ and/or ‘right’ – in the sense fitting in the dichotomous logic – then such a conceptualization of sex could have great political consequences. A conceptualization of sex-as-phenomenon could free the subject from the demand of negative comparison, a demand put forth by the dichotomous logic.

However, Foucault (1978) writes that a response to the fact that sex and sexuality are seen as quintessential elements to human bodies and identities could be to instead discuss bodies and pleasures. In other words, the very notions of sex and sexuality, claims Foucault – even in their non-differentiated forms – are so ingrained in a dichotomous and violent system of thought, that it would be more fruitful to use the notions bodies and pleasures. Bodies and pleasures – not as markers for identity, which sex and sexuality are perceived as today – but as some ‘thing’ one lives in, as, with and through. Following Foucault, one could argue that to know the body-as-phenomenon would be to allow for even greater accountability as to what exclusions are produced through different ways of knowing and being the body. In this thesis, sex is always already material-discursive. However, for political purposes, body-as-phenomenon, it could be argued – if thinking from an understanding of the body as intelligent and knowing – is less in need of justification and reconceptualization, than what sex-as-phenomenon is. As such, it could be a more fruitful concept to work from, and with, for an affirmative feminist project aimed at exploring ways of loving oneself and others in less violent ways. If the body were known as a phenomenon, sex-as-phenomenon could be

understood as an agential force co-constitutive of the body-as-phenomenon. What emerges from such an argumentation – through the claim that knowing-through-phenomena is a fruitful, affirmative way of knowing and being – is the possibility for knowing and being the exact same ‘things’ as already known. However, to know-through-phenomena makes available the possibility for knowing in a way that allows for relationality and intra-activity to be acknowledged. As a response to Chandler, who is worried that the world will change and be unpredictable and chaotic with the acceptance of new-materialist logic, one could say that – through knowing-with-phenomena – the world very much stays the same, although everything changes. New possibilities for understanding, explaining and doing are thus generated.

Chandler (2016) is worried for the human subject and what will happen to it if it lacks meaningful structures. What would happen if the structure of sex is not known in the same, fixed way? I argue that his worries are futile. No structure – and certainly not sex – will disappear tomorrow and leave humans confused and unable to communicate. The question is rather if those structures can be known as-phenomena so that their processual nature can be acknowledged. Nothing has ever remained unchanged and without relations to other things – to acknowledge that and explore ways of knowing and being that are continually acknowledging that could be a tool for staying with the trouble of the times that we are living in – a way of cultivating response-ability.

Final remarks

As a few final remarks, I wish to return briefly to the discussion of section 3.5 ‘A leap of faith’. There I argued that the focus of affirmative feminist theory is not to reach a goal in the future. To have the future as the main goal would necessarily mean to define what that goal *should* entail based on the knowledge of today. Simultaneously, such goal orientation, it could be argued, would be an act of opposition against the present moment. That does not mean that one can not work for a more ethically responsible world, however.

It is possible to argue that all theory, any experience and any agential intra-activity are responses to and configurations of what the present moment consists of. One could argue that inherent to knowledges, ways of knowing and ways of being, there are varying degrees of insistence and demand as to what the previous, the present or the next moment *should* consist of. When one moment follows the next, any moment, and all that exist, will be full of memory and inheritance from the responses had and done in previous moments (Haraway 2016). Memory and inheritance, however, does not imply determinism and rigidity. Rather, memory and inheritance provides the possibilities for being accountable to what exist, and the possibilities to cultivate responsible ways of responding to what is, here and now.

In section 3.5, I argued that we are already where we need to be, and that affirmative feminism is focused on exploring different ways of knowing, and being in, the present moment. In a last effort of intra-active acknowledgment, I wish to include an example of how it is possible to know *that one can know, and be in*, the present moment in different ways.

Human language is partial knowledge. I dare say that no human being speaks all currently existing languages – or even knows every word in one single language. Taking as vantage point my own duo-linguistic position – knowing Norwegian and English – there are several words in multiple languages, which does not translate directly to either English or Norwegian. Take for instance the word *gigil* in Tagalog, a Philippine language. *Gigil* describes “the irresistible urge to pinch [or] squeeze someone because they are loved or cherished” (Lomas 2017). This is a feeling well known also for English and Norwegian speakers, although there is no single word for it in any of these languages. The feeling is sometimes quite stereotypically portrayed, however, through depictions of annoying aunts pinching little

children's cheeks. Another one is *abbiocco*, an Italian word for “drowsiness following eating a (large) meal” (Lomas 2017), or *uitwaaien*, a Dutch word describing the feeling of walking in the wind, and the possibility it gives to clear one's head.

These three words describe feelings most of us can recognize. I cannot help but wonder if it is perhaps not a coincidence, but rather a result of material-discursive, intra-active relationality that Italy, famous for its food-culture, has developed the word *abbiocco*, or that the windy Netherlands have a word like *uitwaaien*. Differently put, these words, any word, can be conceptualized as-phenomenon – intra-active agential forces such as, time, space, necessity, and so on, take part in reproducing them as-phenomena. And those words-as-phenomena, again, take part in reproducing the human-as-phenomenon who ate too much, and has to lie down for a nap. Similarly, Sami languages have 180 words for snow and conditions relating to snow, words that allow for people to act accordingly, to know what precautions to take, how to collaborate and the conditions regarding that particular snow (Magga). The Sami language is an agential force in the becoming with of Sami people and the land they are living with. Snow is of course a very big part of the everyday lives of people living in the northernmost parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, having words to describe it, plan around and with it, and collaborate with others regarding it makes life there possible.

The point of this little linguistic exploration is two-fold. First, it is an effort to acknowledge the possibilities for knowing anything as-phenomena. Second, the example works to show how even if there are not words for some specific thing, feeling or relation does not mean it cannot exist. Learning new words can make collaboration easier and faster, but not knowing the Tagalog word *gigil* does not diminish or discredit the actual urge to pinch. However, knowing the words can provide tools for communication, for collaboration and for understanding oneself and others. The example shows that language, as a kind of knowledge, develops through and with its surroundings, its users, concrete materiality, technology and diffuse hunches. From the example of the 180 Sami words for snow, I think of utility, and the need to be precise – exact. In a city like Oslo, on a snowy day where my only time spent outside would be to walk to and from the T-bane for ten minutes, I would not need to call the snow anything other than just ‘snow’. My experience of it would perhaps be a feeling of calmness regarding the white layer covering everything, or a feeling of irritation regarding cold temperatures and perhaps a more strenuous walk to the T-bane. Although it could

perhaps be helpful with regards to choice of clothes, it would not be paramount for me to know if the snow is *čimus* “firm, even snow (but not firm enough to bear)”, or if it is *dobádat* “sticky snow, heavy wet snow” (Magga). If the snow really was sticky and heavy, one could imagine that I met my Sami neighbor on the way to the T-bane, and that this neighbor called it ‘dobádat’, and not just ‘snow’ – this I imagine could be the beginning of quite an interesting conversation where I could have learned more about different qualities of snow and also broadened my own possibilities for experiencing snow in different ways. Such a learning experience would provide new memory and inheritance to next moment I encountered snow.

These examples both show the possibilities for knowing, and being in, any moment in different ways; the possibilities for cultivating different ways of knowing and being through collaboration and learning; and the examples show the becoming-with of people, places, weather, language, and so forth. The examples also show how words, and the knowledges and ways of knowing they are part of, matter for human and other bodies.

Some words are used simply out of habit or tradition, even if other words could describe reality and relationality in much more nuanced ways. That some words and concepts are perhaps out-dated is the argument when affirmative feminists suggest neologisms like Haraway’s ‘becoming-with’ and Barad’s intra-action. They are both efforts of putting words onto relationality that so far have gone unnamed in the Western philosophical tradition¹⁷. To know the nuances of snow, most likely does not complicate the lives of Sami people – I imagine the opposite, that these words take part in providing freedom in the becoming-with of humans and snow. As such, one could argue, that to put into words, knowledges and experiences the intra-active relationality of the world would not leave the subject uninhibited and paralyzed, as Chandler puts it, but rather could provide a greater sense of freedom *and* be a tool in cultivating ethical relationality.

¹⁷ If it truly has gone unnamed is a question worth research. When exploring indigenous philosophies, like that of Inuits, one discovers concepts like that of ‘Sila’ which bears the meaning of both breath, life, wind, weather, soul, spirit, time, energy and God (Merkur 1983; Todd 2016). It is a notion outside the reach of my understanding, but it is a notion that enfolds all life and living things, and is both felt, seen and lived. As such it is a notion which encapsulates a fundamental relationality of the world. One can also draw connections to the Norwegian word ‘ånd’ which can connote both breath and spirit. In Danish, to breathe is to ‘trekke vejret’ where the word for breath also means weather. In Spanish, il Tiempo means both weather and time. In other words, perhaps there have been, and already are, concepts, also in the West with more relational meanings than those we are commonly accustomed to. Thank you to Ole Kristiansen for providing me with this knowledge.

To end this thesis, I wish to write briefly about curiosity from the perspective of affirmative feminism. One could go into a discussion about a possible moral obligation to seek out new knowledges. Personally I would argue that to impose a demand for certain, specific actions, is not the way to go. Rather, an affirmative feminist response is to cultivate knowledges and experiences of, and ways of knowing relationality through intra-active acknowledgement and efforts of collaboration and learning – with both human and non-human others.

According to OED, curiosity is the desire to know and learn. In other words, curiosity is the desire to inquire. In the feminist project of understanding how things work and how worldly actors might love each other less violently, and when one, through acknowledging intra-activity – recognizes that there are continually possible things to understand, curiosity, it could be argued, is a valuable tool.

The philosopher Alberto Manguel, in the book *Curiosity* (2015), writes that final answers deprive us from the right to continue questioning. In that sense, curiosity is not about insisting on ‘right’ answers, but rather the satisfaction about an increased desire to ask more questions and the pleasure of conversing with others, or in other ways exploring. To appreciate curiosity, according to Manguel is to see the state of questioning as equally, or more, rewarding than knowing. In that sense, the curiosity which Manguel describes is more about ways of being and knowing attuned to curiosity, than about what should be known. Manguel describes curiosity as a reverse law of gravity in the sense that it causes our experience of the world and of ourselves to increase with asking (2015: 24). In other words, both the world and oneself changes through curiosity.

If the pain inflicted upon others, is also pain inflicted upon oneself, then it would follow that to learn about others, is also to learn about oneself. Haraway (2016) writes that to be curious and to let oneself be taught is to expand notions of subjectivity. She writes that relational curiosity is about asking about what others find intriguing, and let oneself learn from what might arise. Curiosity, can, perhaps be defined as an aspect of the affirmative feminist subject – the subject who acknowledges it when others have something to teach; who acknowledges its own intra-active processuality and becoming-with other agencies.

Curiosity is risky, however, because it might obligate the subject to change. To recognize one's own intra-active becoming-with the world, could place a feeling of obligation in the subject, for being response-able (Haraway 2016). In a different sense, Manguel insists on the danger of curiosity because those who traditionally are understood as 'the curious ones' are also those branded as 'different' – "the village witch (...) the nonconformist homosexual, the alienating outsider and the unorthodox explorer" (2015: 46). Hence, within a dichotomous logic, built on a negative understanding of difference, curiosity becomes a liminal concept. It is transgressive, challenging and processual – it does not stop. In that sense, curiosity is affirmative. Together with acknowledgement, affirmative critique and creativity, curiosity allows for exploration and expansion.

It is important to note, however, that to be curious does not mean to accept, or take on, anything that emerges. To be curious about sex for instance, does not mean that one is confined to endless curious exploration of one's own and other's bodies, and endless reflection into how capitalism is affecting one's own sexual life. In an affirmative vein, curiosity could come to mean simply that one is aware and inquiring of one's own intra-active subject position, one welcomes the teachings of others, as one would wish that others did in return, and one is curious of the boundaries one is enacting and the agential forces that are active in one's life.

For Foucault, the notion of curiosity evokes 'care'. "[I]t evokes the care one takes of what exist and what might exist" (1994: 325). Following this quote of Foucault, one could argue that curiosity as affirmative, and in that sense also acknowledgement and creativity, is to care for the world, for oneself, and for the relations that one acknowledges are intra-actively constituting the world as oneself.

To acknowledge the relationality already inherent to human identity is made possible through knowing sex-as-phenomenon and knowing-through-phenomenon. In other words, sex-as-phenomenon, it could be argued, is a notion that can bridge the assumed gap between ideas within academia and other parts of society. To foster learning, collaboration and experiences of relationality must be a focus point for affirmative feminism and new materialist theory. In this vein I argue for the possible value of conceptualizing curiosity as a notion inherent to affirmative feminism. Much like acknowledgement, curiosity is a well-known term

commonly understood as positive. To foster explicit relationality between critical theory and the actual lives and experiences of people is important for the affirmative feminist project if neologisms like becoming-with and intra-action is going to be concepts that take part in shaping the worlds of more beings than critical theorists. In that vein, to argue for affirmative curiosity can be a stepping-stone.

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