

“POSTHUMANIST PROCESSES ARE ALREADY ALWAYS AT WORK”: AN INTERVIEW WITH IRIS VAN DER TUIN

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Introduction

This interview took place as part of the, “What’s the matter with education? Faculty seminar in new materiality,” which focused on new materialism in relation to the field of educational research. There were four scholars invited to present during the seminar, Iris van der Tuin was one of them. Her talk was titled *Epistemology in a Speculative Key* (SFU Faculty of Education, 2018) and focused on her current research on algorithms creating new knowledge. As graduate students participating in the seminar, we had the opportunity to interview her.

For Iris van der Tuin’s presentation, the seminar read Karen Barad’s interview in *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, which became the basis for many of our questions. But as two of us, Caroline and Sam, were new to the scholarship around new materialism, we took this as an opportunity to start a focused reading regimen, and to ask about those things which we did not yet understand. We dived into reading various articles (Geerts & Van der Tuin, 2013, 2016), interviews (Centre for the Humanities, 2014; Iliades, 2016), presentations (Disruptivemedia, 2014; Van der Tuin, 2017, Manchester Met Faculty of Education, 2017), books (Dolphijn & Van der Tuin, 2012; Van der Tuin, 2015), and other readings (Ramina van Midde, 2016). The third member of our group, Jacqueline, had a little more experience with new materialist theory and brought in ideas of different scholars to broaden our understanding.

As this interview was tied into the education seminar, we wanted part of the interview to discuss our lingering questions about new materialism, but we also wanted to inquire into Iris van der Tuin’s past and current research interests, so we expanded the scope of our questioning. Eventually, we decided to focus on three main topics: how new materialism is being used in educational research, Iris van der Tuin’s work surrounding “Generational Feminism,” and the idea of “sexual difference” in the construction of gender.

The organization of the seminar into interviews, presentations, and group discussion allowed us to deeply research a challenging theory. Having the opportunity to interview a renowned scholar in the field expanded our learnings and sparked our curiosity further. We thank Iris van der Tuin for her time and energy as she sat with us for this conversation.

Question 1

Sam: *In the introduction of your book *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, you comment that you conducted interviews with some of the most prominent scholars of new materialism. If you were to add to the book, who are some of the other scholars you would want to interview, and what would you hope they add to the conversation?*

Iris: This is a fantastic question, but where to start? Maybe I should first say a little bit about why there are interviews in the book in the first place. Because actually the new materialism book that I wrote and undertook as an interviewing kind of thing, together with Rick Dolphijn, grew out of a seminar. When I met Rick, who's a Deleuze scholar, we realized that we shared ideas but not necessarily concepts. He comes from media theory, I come from feminist theory, so we compiled a list of each of our five favorite footnotes. I'm not able to write without Donna Haraway's situated knowledges or to speak without it, so that was on the list and nine other texts. And then we looked at this list, and we were like 'wow!' This is also interesting for other people, this is not just between the two of us, let's say. So we opened up the conversation about the texts to whoever wanted to join at the Faculty of Humanities at Utrecht University, and we really liked that conversational model in a way, because, to say it resembles new materialist ideas would not do justice to new materialism, but the generative nature of a conversation was something that interested us. So then we wanted to do something around conversation in the book and with multiple voices.

Karen Barad was the first one we interviewed. It was actually an online interview, she was in California and we were in Utrecht. And it was part of a conference, not necessarily meant for publication, but when somebody had typed it all up we decided again 'oh this is interesting for more than one person.' So then Karen Barad became the first one we interviewed for our book. We chose Rosi Braidotti and Manuel DeLanda, because of the fact that they coined the term neo-materialism, as you know. And because we didn't want new materialism to be too smooth in a way, we chose Quentin Meillassoux who is somebody who doesn't self-identify as a new materialist. I don't know if he calls himself anything? Maybe a speculative materialist or speculative realist or something like that.

Your actual question was: if you were to add to the book who are some of the scholars you would want to interview and so what would you hope that they add to the conversation? I would go for younger scholars, because I think that all the scholars that we have included are pretty established, so that is something that I really would want to do. And of course these younger scholars are not necessarily very known, so giving you their names wouldn't necessarily ring bells or anything. I am thinking of Felicity Colman, Astrid Schrader, Katerina Kolozova, Vera Bühlmann, and Anna Hickey-Moody. Achille Mbembe is definitely one of the established

thinkers that I would like to add because of the connection he makes between critical race studies and, I don't think he calls it new materialism, but he writes about the Anthropocene a lot, and talks about it a lot as our common condition, so that's something that I would like to add to the book.

Question 2

Sam: *I'm always interested in what people have had to leave out. So in your writing up of the interviews in *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, Rick and you obviously had to do some editing of your conversations. Is there anything that was left out as it maybe did not fit with the book that you were writing, but you still feel is interesting or important talk about?*

Iris: That's an interesting question. We pushed the interviewees to the limit. Manuel DeLanda and Quentin Meillassoux are not actively pursuing feminist research projects but we did invite them to talk about gender. And also, the interview questions were co-productions. That is something that is not in the book I think, I don't think we say anything in the introduction about how the questions came about.

I already said that the first interview was with Barad and over Skype because she was not able to attend a conference we had organized. And I was like 'there's all of these people that have decided to come to Utrecht because of Karen -- how can we make her present in a different way?' This is how we came up with the interview on screen. And we sent her our questions in advance, and she edited the questions, because she was like 'this is something that has to communicate to an audience that I'm not necessarily in the same room with, so let's be very clear about things.' She wasn't editing our opinion, or our reading. I think at some point when we ask something about critique, her answer is: 'I don't like critique.' So it's not that everything had to be smooth. And this is what we've done with all of our interviewees. So we sent the questions, and then we got some feedback on them, like 'what do you mean?'; like 'if you're interested in this, perhaps also look at that.' And we also returned the transcribed interviews to the interviewees. Often we wanted to clarify how scholars like Meillassoux and Delanda talked about feminism, about gender. We wanted our book to be as good as possible.

It was very difficult to find a publisher, because nobody understood the format, so they were asking 'it's a co-authored book that includes four interviews so... there's six people involved?' And that was exactly what we wanted to communicate. That one does scholarship, one does theory with a lot of people, and usually these people are not made present or acknowledged, only as footnotes maybe. And then not everything fits into a footnote. Lots of publishers wanted the names of the of the four interviewees on the cover, in terms of famous people will sell well... Open Humanities Press was interested because they published more co-authored volumes, they also have a project called *Living Books about Life*, consisting of books consisting of previously published materials that editors link to, so stuff that's online already, so they knew about formats with multiple voices. But what they wanted us to do is to change the order. We had the chapters first and the interviews last, and they asked us to put the interviews first and the chapters last. Didactically it works very well to have the interviews first and the

chapters last. And we wanted the interview questions to communicate with the chapters. So ideally, question one refers to chapter one, etc. So yeah, that's what we did.

Questions 3 & 4

Jacky: *Scholars in the educational field, working within new materialism or posthumanist theories (e.g., St. Pierre, 2013, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Weaver & Snaza, 2015; Mazzei, 2016; Taguchi & St. Pierre, 2017) have been pushing towards a turn in our approach to research, that moves away from qualitative methodologies centered on a humanist logic towards a reorientation of thought in using ‘concepts as methods’ (Taguchi & St. Pierre, 2017). However, this push has met some resistance, where some scholars would call it ‘policing’ the boundaries. Could you discuss the debate a bit and explain your stand on the issue?*

Iris: This is a really challenging question, and I want to ask something in return before I continue. I completely get the question and I also think it's a timely one, but there is also some sort of binary in the question, like qualitative methods center on a humanist logic and concepts as methods do not. Qualitative methodology centered on a humanist logic like, for example participative observation, or filming situations, and immersing yourself completely into what you are observing, so you are your own instrument, or using the video camera to create or recreate some sort of visible overarching eye, right? So that is qualitative methodology centered on a humanist logic, but I think using concepts as methods is also very qualitative, isn't it a new form of qualitative research?

Jacky: *Yes, but it's coming from these scholars who are working from a new materialist or posthumanist perspective. For example, they suggest using concepts like rhizomes or diffraction and starting from there, without moving forward with a preestablished idea. My reading into this issue is: a humanist logic in research methodology implies that you take a framework and you go with that framework and it establishes what you are going to be looking at, which immediately excludes something. This makes the research very rigid. In that sense, what some new materialist or posthumanist scholars in education are saying is that we need to do away with that and really start from a posthumanist view of research. For example, St. Pierre is very strict, she writes about it in several articles (St. Pierre, 2013, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c). Others, though, are saying, wait a minute, we don't need to be restricting these things, we don't need to be saying what is posthumanism or what it isn't, or how do we approach posthumanism or not, while others are more policing what is and what it is not, you know, checking the boundaries a bit. So, there are these two discourses going on right now in what I have read recently.*

Iris: I think that, it is always the research question that defines what methodology you are going to use, and I think that it is still possible to use these qualitative methodologies and at the same time unpack, you know, the posthumanist logic and also being posthumanist in the sense of trying to really also include in your writing what maybe this method has made visible or what it has excluded from view. So, I think you can be posthumanist in a way around video apparatuses and all of those things. What I notice is that, in education, new materialism is being picked up as

a response to precisely these qualitative methods centered on a humanist logic, but what I see is that research projects become extremely, and please correct me if I'm wrong, but they become all case studies and beautiful articles zoom in on very small, very tiny instances or instantiations of in- or exclusion in or around the classroom. I'm not saying that it is not good, but these are often beautiful articles about one exemplary boy, one paradigmatic encounter, and maybe there are scholars that need something else. I recognize the debate, I can understand why people find it policing, and I would say, if there is a need to work with more data or to generate more data, you can also be aware of the fact that it may show patterns, it may invisibilize certain subtleties and you can write about that. It depends on your research question. Is that an answer to your question? What is your own perspective?

Jacky: *As I was thinking about all these dynamics, I was also thinking about what you wrote about the archives that we all come with (Van der Tuin, 2015) and that they probably mark a little bit our thinking and the directions that we go, so in the same way, I think these methodologies narrow your view.*

Iris: The new ones?

Jacky: *No, the old ones. Qualitative methods. I don't think it necessarily excludes the possibility to analyze the generated data with a posthumanist perspective, but I know that some of these scholars feel very strongly about it. A very strong feeling that you cannot, for example, analyze a face-to-face interview with a rhizomatic concept. Or at least, this is what is being discussed at this time.*

Iris: I wonder if we can flip the discussion, because if it is true that most very conceptual research projects in education focus on unique encounters, I guess we all know that in order to have one of those encounters, you'd need to spend a lot of time in a classroom, for example, or with children, so perhaps we can also say that the very rich posthumanist interpretations of the specific encounters, they also make certain other encounters invisible. So perhaps we can also flip the argument around a little bit.

Jacky: *Something comes to my mind from St. Pierre. She says that while she was doing her research that she had to interview all these people, right, and she had been to this place before and she had lived in this place so she had had all these experiences. And she also had a dream that she was talking to somebody about these issues, but because of the framework that she was using, she could not include this dream, she just could use the interview as data. So, the interviews were her data, but all these other experiences were excluded. The interviews were the data, so she did not know where to include the other experiences because they were not part of the data. They were real and they obviously mattered in her analysis, but she says that they weren't data so she could not classify it or code them (St. Pierre, 2017a).*

Iris: So what you are saying is also that these qualitative methodologies are really strong on what is and what is not data and when you are doing research and when you are not. I know a really good article that is actually working creatively with interviews, it's by a Norwegian scholar, Ingunn Moser. She is a science and technology studies person, and she has an article in

which she writes about a project she was going to do. She is going to do a research project on disability. She is a white, able bodied woman and she is going to interview a disabled man, a man in a wheelchair. She very productively writes about the fact that even within such a framework or with horizontalizing intentions you can end up entering the research site, and in a split second becoming something completely different. In this case, because of the first split second of the encounter with the man, she is there not as an interviewer. So, I think you can also sensitivize yourself to more counter intuitive and very open moments in your so-called humanist research. I think these posthumanist kind of processes are always already at work, you just need to be sensitive to them (Moser, 2006; Geerts & Van der Tuin, 2013).

Jacky: *So, what you mean by sensitive is maybe, registering them in your writing?*

Iris: Yes. You need to be able to record them in some sort of way. And I think the conceptual work allows you to record those instances. What worries me about a debate like this is that it creates a binary that might not be necessary, because it devalues certain methods and uncritically accepts others. I mean, binaries are dangerous, they very quickly devalue one of all options. If this is true, should we choose sides? I don't want to choose sides. Should we all become conceptual researchers? Should we leave qualitative methodologies behind? Should we no longer read that work? Affirmative answers to these questions would worry me. So, I think, there is a lot of policing going on indeed, but I would position it elsewhere.

Question 5

Caroline: *Last year, during the Gender and Education Association Conference, you presented a keynote addressing the interactive curriculum and Liberal Arts Education in Europe. In the keynote description you introduced your view of Liberal Arts Education as a space for programmes with “a generative perspective” that enables students’ effective citizenship, expressed for instance through self-authorship and agency. More recently, you lectured at Leuphana University of Lüneburg to students engaged with the Studium Individuale, thinking about the students’ development, the generative curriculum, Indigenous epistemologies, and the role of the educator through Paulo Freire’s “generative theme”. Since we are addressing new materiality through the Faculty of Education, could you share with us some of the ideas discussed in these events? Especially with regard to Freire’s generative theme in relation to this topic?*

Iris: I've always liked the term generation because it is a double notion. The term denotes both generational classes, generational categories, and etymologically this term also means ‘to generate’, the verb *to generate*. I think because of this double nature it allows for both, critique, because we have to critique generational classifications, and also from a new materialist perspective, we want to record or become-with generative processes that do not fit into these classificatory logics. So, when I was invited for the Gender and Education Association conference, I was trying to prepare myself, I was like “what do I actually have to say at this point about gender and education? How can I bring something to this community and have a

conversation?”. I decided, that I wanted to do something with this double nature of the word generation: generativity and linear generations. And I found out that there is an entire body of work that calls itself generative curriculum. That work is not necessarily coming from Freire, but Freire is also a pedagogy person, so I try to connect the two.

The work on the generative curriculum comes from Indigenous Studies, and it has only been applied to Early Childhood Studies, I think. This work is all about making sure that there are no dualisms imposed on classrooms, not like inside-outside the class, or in-groups and out-groups. It wants to foster curiosity and stuff like that in very young children. But, by connecting the scholarship on the generative curriculum with Freire, I mean with his idea of teaching with a generative theme, we do not address these very young kids, but older youth and even adults, and the discussion becomes one about teaching with something that matters to you and moves you. Likewise, generative curriculum work is also about mattering.

Trying to connect the two I basically worked through Spivak’s notion of unlearning (Danius & Jonsson, 1993). Spivak has two notions of unlearning: the first time she used this word she said we have to unlearn what we’ve learned and we have to unlearn our privileges. But the second time, years later - maybe ten years later or something, when she wrote about unlearning again - she said that unlearning is also about creating or generating positions of agency, and also positions in which we can be affirmative about something. Unlearning in the first sense can become very negatively critical, you know? When you say ‘we have to unlearn our learning, and unlearn our privileges’, it’s only about something that has to go away. But, then, what is this bringing to the conversation? Where is the creativity? She is a French theorist, so she always wants not only *potestas* but also *potentia* in her analyses. I found that *potentia* in Freire’s doubleness, in Freire’s generative theme. It’s just a way in which I managed to bring my discussion around the concept of generation to the field of Education through theory that was already there. But it was very scary to give a talk to an Education community, using Education sources, and not really knowing how these sources are now being debated within the field.

Very practically speaking, I connected the theme of generativity also to Liberal Arts Education and to the *Studium Individuale* program. This has to do with ways in which people think about interdisciplinarity. My program, the program that I’m responsible for, but also *Studium Individuale* in Lüneburg, they are considered interdisciplinary programs. And the theory of interdisciplinarity in the curriculum, let’s say, it’s all about making sure that that students get to work on complex societal questions. You know? So not on a pre-set kind of questions that teachers come up with. We want to teach students how to work on real-world problems, I guess that is also how you can say it. But then, at least in Europe, you have to do that in a situation within a university system that is based on disciplines. We’ve got three years in the bachelor, and it’s not that me and my colleagues are teaching our students three years long like Real-world Problems Studies or whatever. We send them to all kinds of corners of the university to get all kinds of insights, methodologies, ideas. What we do is: we help them to formulate a theme, hopefully, a generative theme through which they can make sense of what they have encountered in all those corners, and they can still choose a discipline to specialize in the end. Imagine

there's a student, a first-year student, that is interested in sustainability. That student came to study with us because they realized, very early on, that sustainability is bigger than Economics, Biology, Earth Science, Psychology or whatever. They need information from all of those disciplines. Maybe the sustainability person decides “Okay! I'm going to specialise in the circular economy”, then all of a sudden Economics becomes relevant for that person, whereas first that student was like “No. Economics? The rational subject? I don't want to do that”. In order to enter a master's program, or take classes in the first place, they have to go through the disciplines. And generative themes are helpful in that exercise. This is kind of how I am using the generative theme to help students choose a discipline. You choose this discipline because it adds to a certain problem, instead of that you have the discipline decide what the phenomenon is that you study. Because these students know that disciplines narrow down and reduce reality.

Question 6

Caroline: *In your book you proposed a generational feminism based on an open cartography in which we could responsibly think about generational dualism, as you said now, “understanding genoi as nothing but spatial-temporal actualizations for genesthai” (Van der Tuin, 2015, p. xx). In other words, this acknowledges the fact that generativity envelopes generation but also to generate. So how do you think that your ideas of traversing, explicit in your jumping generations methodology (Van der Tuin 2009), constitute a qualitative shift away from our conflict-based feminist past?*

Iris: Well, let's go anecdotal on this one. When I was writing my PhD - this book *Generational Feminism* came out of my PhD - I was doing research, but I was also teaching. I was teaching history of feminism kind of classes. And when I was doing my research for my PhD I found out that feminists tend to talk about their own history in a very conflict-based way. There is the second wave critiquing the first wave, and, then, the third wave is critiquing the second wave. But also, in terms of how we talk about different, more theoretical tendencies in feminism it is always conflict, conflict, conflict. But when you're teaching the very same material that's not at all what happens. You give students Simone de Beauvoir and they are not going to say immediately “oh my god! Simone de Beauvoir compares women to laborers and blacks which means that Simone de Beauvoir has a white upper-class perspective”. But they are saying “this idea ‘one is not born but rather becomes a woman’ is actually a very interesting way of thinking about gender”, although she didn't use the word gender yet. I got more and more interested in ways of talking about feminism that I knew from the classroom. So, I started to find feminists' written rationalizations of our own history pretty boring. It was like “this is not at all what happens when you read a feminist text”.

Also, I've always been really influenced by scholars, feminists like Gayle Rubin and Adrienne Rich, who talk about the necessity to find continuities between women and between the generations. Why? Not intrinsically, but because of patriarchy. One of the definitions of patriarchy is the exchange of women (Rubin, 1975). I was like... if we do, as feminists, what patriarchy does to women, what are we doing? So, I tried to find an alternative way of thinking

about feminist history, and, in the end, I found it in the notion of generation because of its double etymological roots. You can both criticize certain ways of talking about feminist history, in the feminist past as well as in the feminist present, and you can be creative with the very same material. I think these two tendencies always happen at the same time. Sometimes I want to be very critical, I want to keep that very negatively critical angle too. This is why jumping generations is a qualitative shift away from the conflict-based feminist past. The notion of generation can situate the conflict-based narrations of a feminist history and it can also make sure they open up a little bit. We can find allies throughout history.

Question 7

Sam: *Your diffractive reading of Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray (Geerts & Van der Tuin, 2016), as well as Karen Barad and Henri Bergson (Van der Tuin, 2011) created something new in both works. In both cases, while the scholars wrote about similar subject matters some of their ideas could be read as oppositional. Is this the procedure of diffractive reading, or how do you decide what authors' works, or what works, to read diffractively? And also would this be related to the idea of the archives that we all carry?*

Iris: The two texts came about rather differently. The diffractive reading of Beauvoir and Irigaray was conducted because of the fact that these feminists are very often seen as each other's opposites. And me and a student, we wanted to show that that's not the only possible reading, so that was a very conscious decision to do that research, which was a master's thesis of Evelien Geerts, my co-author. The Karen Barad and Henri Bergson diffractive reading happened more spontaneously. So I said that I wrote the new materialism book with Rick Dolphijn from within a seminar situation, and after maybe one or two years I got a little annoyed by the fact that our seminar conversations were in the end always about Deleuze. Deleuze was the big, you know, New Materialist or whatever, and that can be very productive for a burgeoning field, but I was also getting a little bit bored. So, it was summer and I always like to have a summer reading project, so I decided to read Henri Bergson from the beginning to the end, like his main four or five books. And doing that, I found myself constantly writing Barad references in the margins. Eventually I wrote that article not because there was some sort of oppositional reading going on, but simply because I wanted to expose that reading apparatus. My Bergson is always Bergson plus Barad. And, you know, I did this in 2009 so it's been nine years of researching with Bergson, so there's also different Bergson now. It is possible for me now to read Bergson without Barad, but initially I wanted to write about the fact that reading Bergson with Barad creates a certain Henri Bergson. That's how that article came about.

You ask if there is a standard procedure for a diffractive reading, or how I decide what authors' works, or what works, to read diffractively. There are multiple reasons and the closest to methodology that I ever got, like a bottom-up kind of methodology, is when I talked about posthuman interpellation in the *Parallax* article 'Diffraction as a Methodology for Feminist Onto-Epistemology: On Encountering Chantal Chawaf and Posthuman Interpellation' (Van der Tuin, 2014). Interpellation is this idea that you're already a subject before you know it, so when

that door opens and somebody yells "hey," intent meaning to reach you, you will know that that's the case before you're actually conscious of it. So you'll always look back, you look around milliseconds before you're consciously deciding to respond. This interpellation into subjectivity and the fact that it happens before you know it consciously, before you've processed it rationally, I've used that in order to think through why I diffract certain authors and not others. Because I think when you're scribbling down something in the margins, it's not necessarily considered knowledge production. Knowledge production is considered to be something that happens consciously, whereas when you're writing stuff in the margins, you're not making these connections with every word or with every sentence you want to make a link, these links present themselves to you. And some of them just keep you busy. And you want to do the work of trying to figure out how both authors are connected and change when you write about them through one another, like I did with Barad and Bergson.

Barad, after I had sent her my text, she was like 'I didn't agree with you at all, I wanted to write you an email after each page I read.' And that's because, with diffractive readings you also show where the differences and the dissonances occur. So you don't necessarily have to be faithful to a certain scholar, you're faithful to an observation, an intuition, a posthumanist interpellation.

Question 8

*Sam: New materialism seems to go past postmodern feminisms' look at both the body and mind as social constructions to bring gender back to the material, also giving it equal weight with the mind, hence staying away from essentialism. As you and Rick Dolphijn stated in your *New Materialisms: Interviews and Cartographies*, both people are defined more by their "essence, [which] is determined by what affects the thing and by how it is affected, [and that feminism can be opened up] by affirming the molecular ways in which the body and mind can be conceptualized as 'female' and how they are created (as one)" (2012, p. 152). How do these ideas of gender, or sexual difference, incorporate the newer areas of research such as transgender studies?*

Iris: I'm happy you mention in the question 'sexual difference.' Because for me sexual difference has always been a very important concept. Also, in relation to transgender studies, and there's not that many people that are very convinced of this, but I am. Partly because I think we should also keep that legacy of sexual difference feminism alive in a way. So what is sexual difference for me? It's really a Braidottian notion, a notion of the feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti (1994/2011). She wants to say that, let's call it gender relations, happen on three different levels. So she says there's differences between men and women, there's differences among women, and there are differences within each and every individual woman. That's how she has always written about it.

So now there are two things I want to say. First why am I so interested in that model? Because of the third layer of sexual difference. Why is the third level of sexual difference so interesting? Another way of talking about the theory of gender is to talk about the fact that

there's difference between men and women, and then there is diversity, which is the second layer of sexual difference, the difference among women, the differences among men, we can also say. That's diversity thinking, but Rosi Braidotti adds the differences within each and every individual woman. Which means that the way in which you are a woman differs constantly, according to the constellation you find yourself in. And also with psychoanalysis, we know that we can surprise ourselves. You know, we seriously do, you can do something, say something, you surprise yourself in positive or negative ways. You can embarrass yourself. Psychoanalysis in many corners of feminism has disappeared. Whereas also in terms of philosophies of becoming, we must keep that level of what it means to actually be human.

Secondly, let's go to the transgender issue. Many scholars have said that sexual difference is an essentialist concept, because of this idea that the starting point is the difference between men and women. I think we can very easily say, and this is something that I think we can all agree with, that we all were born and thrown into this gender binary. You can be transgender, you can be intersex, the first layer of sexual difference has nothing to do with essentialism for me, but it has everything to do with the social order, the structure of medicine as a profession, all of these things. By rephrasing the first layer of sexual difference, it's not the differences between men and women as if those differences are essential differences, but it is the world we're still living in. And then the second layer of sexual difference becomes the differences between whoever is gendered female, and whoever is gendered male, it doesn't necessarily mean that these people identify with these labels, but the fact that the categories may not actually account for that diversity. And then there is the third layer, you can surprise yourself.

Before I came to Vancouver, I visited Evergreen State College with a group of interdisciplinary colleagues and I heard a talk by Jonathan Leggette, who's leading one of Seattle's, and maybe US-wide, most important intersex self-organizations. He was super eloquent, as if he had been working on the theme of intersex for 25 years, and then very well timed at some point in his talk he said that medical doctors found out about his "intersex condition," it's not a word he wants to use, but let's use it for the sake of brevity, less than a year ago. So that must have surprised him. And this is how he talks about it, he had to incorporate something into his identity, because he found out that his medical records were all blacked out, and all of these things. It was both a terrifying story but also a very empowering story. And that's what I mean with sexual differing and the importance of the model of sexual difference in a Braidottian key. The concept of sexual difference can do justice to all of the Sandra Harding's layers of gender, like the individual layer, the social layer, the structural layer, and the symbolic layer (Harding, 1986). And very profoundly so.

Your question was: How can we incorporate the newer areas of research such as transgender studies? I think that these newer areas both confirm and deepen the notion of sexual difference. Most scholars and most people think of difference as very dualistic, and that logic has become stuck to the notion of sexual difference. Sometimes that's justified, I'm not saying that there are no French feminists that don't use difference in a dualistic way but it's not necessarily so.

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