



# Mangrovia Encounters between Epistemologies of the South and New (Feminist) Materialism

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## Abstract

With the increased interest sparked across academia in both new materialism and epistemologies of the South, old colonial and patriarchal habits rear their vicious heads. On the one hand, feminist contributions are, in many cases, ignored or watered down in mainstream discussions in both approaches, pushing feminist political projects at the core of these epistemologies to the margins. On the other hand, the engagement in conversations and commitment to the ideas that emerge from the epistemologies of the South are limited or not recognized, a situation that contributes to perpetuating coloniality of knowledge. Accounting for these challenges, this paper puts into conversation epistemologies of the South (focusing on theorists from the Americas) and new feminist materialism in terms of specific concepts such as dualism, difference, time, universality, body-land, and relationality. By showing both the affinities and differences between the two, this paper demonstrates the richness and diversity of arguments; furthermore, it investigates what new materialism has to do with decolonization and tropicality. This paper concludes by addressing the questions: to what extent and in what way might new (feminist) materialism need to be decolonized? And how does it speak to “tropical materialisms”? Although this paper does not specifically focus on the tropics, tropical images of thought such as the “mangrove,” are evoked throughout the text.

**Keywords:** new materialism, decoloniality, epistemology, Eurocentrism, tropical materialism, epistemologies of the South, new feminist materialism

## Corazonada<sup>1</sup>

There is currently an increase in interest in the study of new materialism and posthumanism in a variety of academic disciplines; in parallel, there is a growing body of work suggesting that these currents need to be decolonized (Todd, 2016; Rosiek et al., 2019; Chao & Enari, 2021). This raises some immediate questions: Do posthumanism and new materialism indeed need to be decolonized? To what extent and in what way might they need to be decolonized? And this gives rise to a further question: What attempts have there been to perform such decolonization? This paper aims to offer some possible responses to the first set of questions. As a starting point, I give some recent personal experiences and impressions.

On the one hand, I have had discussions with scholars engaged with anti-colonial and decolonial theories who are not familiar with new materialism but who have started to question its apparent “supremacy” as *the* radical critical theory in certain academic areas such as gender studies. Although I would argue that social constructivist approaches still dominate research in social sciences, these scholars’ *corazonada* that the increased interest in new materialism should be taken seriously. One of the key aspects of the metaphysics/ontology, or onto-epistemology, known as new materialism is the desire to bridge conversations and traverse theory and praxis. Some of the challenges for new materialist scholars, then, are to have more active conversations with decolonial scholarship and to address questions such as how to disseminate our ideas and dialogue with others who might not share the same technical language or be trained in theory. Otherwise, how can we aim to traverse theory and praxis and to show the relevance of theory to everyday practices? While I raise these points, it does not mean I have answers. I, myself, trained in philosophy, have found that embodying the theories I work with is a lifelong labour. On the other hand, I have personally perceived an increased interest in both decoloniality and new materialism in various academic departments—which would not be a problem if it were not accompanied by the depoliticization of some of the theories’ basic principles, as will become more visible in the following sections.

New materialism and epistemologies of the South have been in conversation for some decades, particularly regarding environmental justice issues, due to the strong relation that indigenous communities have with the earth (Lundberg et al., 2021).<sup>2</sup> Rosi

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<sup>1</sup> This Spanish word can be translated as “feeling-thinking.” For an elaborated analysis of this concept, see, for example, the chapter “Bodies, Knowledges, and Corazonar” in Santos (2018).

<sup>2</sup> See also, e.g., Eggleston (2019); Clary-Lemon & Grant (2022). See also the new materialism and decoloniality workshop: <https://mutablematter.wordpress.com/2016/06/28/new-materialism-decoloniality-workshop-7-8-july-duisburg/>. However, Rosiek et al. (2019) have pointed out that these conversations have been scarce.

Braidotti (2022), in her book *Posthuman Feminism*, offers an overview of the linkages between new feminist materialism and some epistemologies of the South that is worth analyzing. However, these encounters between epistemologies of the South and new materialism have not been explored at length. In this paper, I aim to put new (feminist) materialism and epistemologies of the South into mangrovia conversation — a rhizomatic dialogue, which is complex, non-uniform and horizontal, and where neither is occupying the role of the Master — to reveal some of these points of affinity, thinking in principle about an audience that might not be familiar with either of the two approaches. Some key aspects will be brought forth in which these currents of thought concur and differ; equally important is to introduce the political project each of them is engaged in.

This article is organized as follows, first, I introduce each of the currents separately. After this, I select some concepts that are common to both tendencies of thought and focus on describing aspects that connect or differentiate them. The authors chosen, both from new materialism and from epistemologies of the South, take a critical and mostly feminist stance. To illustrate the epistemologies of the South, I further hone the focus, emphasizing authors who are based in the Americas, many of whom hail from tropical regions. This is significant as tropicality and epistemologies of the South are entangled due to their colonial and capitalist experience (see Chao & Enari, 2021). The conclusion addresses what the encounters between new feminist materialism and epistemologies of the South have to do with decolonization and tropicality.

### **Temperate Landscapes: New (Feminist) Materialism**

Amidst the increased popularity of new materialism in diverse areas of research, many questions remain—for example, how is new materialism different from other labels such as “new materialisms,” “post-humanisms,” “speculative materialism,” “new empiricisms,” and “feminist new materialism”? It is important to clarify that new materialism is not a conscious, planned collective project, just as other “-isms” such as modernism, postmodernism, post-structuralism, and feminism are not. Often these labels are established at a later stage as a way to capture tendencies in thought that have similar patterns. Broadly speaking, the term has been used to name the work of certain theorists who explore a different metaphysics/ontology/epistemology, which involves performing re-readings of matter and materiality. However, they may not necessarily call themselves “new materialists”, and it is always risky to group heterogeneous worldviews under a single umbrella term.

Speaking broadly, new materialism in the context of this article is referring to a specific metaphysic/ontology or onto-epistemology that aims to traverse (but not necessarily “overcome”) modernist and postmodernist worldviews. Let’s take a simple example:

the occurrence of an earthquake. A modernist approach would assume there is a “natural” event that can be explained in an “objective” and “universal” way; the experience of the subject is secondary and determined by the “natural” event itself. On the other hand, in a postmodernist reading, the event “might” be an event, but one cannot give an account of it except through one’s own experience/perception; one is not negating this reality, but the reality cannot be accessed without human influence, and therefore the event itself is secondary. These two ways of dealing with the same subject-object dichotomy illustrate the context in which new materialism emerges and gains its *raison d’être*: to new materialism, there is both a material event and a human experience/perception that participate in the phenomenon known as “an earthquake”; neither of these is more important than the other, and it is possible to give an account of both (see Ahmed, 2008).

The main commonality that all new materialists share is the abovementioned understanding of reality and their interest in the possibility of embracing the materiality that was cut off by the linguisticism of post-structuralism.<sup>3</sup> As Braidotti sums up: “Neo-materialism’ emerges as a method, a conceptual frame and a political stand, which refuses the linguistic paradigm, stressing instead the concrete yet complex materiality of bodies immersed in social relations of power” (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 21). In other words, new materialism is a perspective that allows us to question the reduction of nature according to an anthropocentric representation and at the same time recognize its agency.<sup>4</sup> In current academic research, one can find diverse authors whose works ascribe to so-called material “turns”. Although not all of these authors exclusively understand new materialism as having been generated in feminist settings and some might fail to deeply engage with new feminist materialism,<sup>5</sup> some of new materialists’ and new feminist materialists’ queries are related and are reciprocally helpful.

I came to new materialism through feminism, and more particularly through the work of Braidotti who notes that new materialism built itself on the contributions of late-’90s feminism. In her own words: “Feminist philosophers have invented a new brand of materialism, of the embodied and embedded kind” (2005, p. 177). An introduction to this formulation is outlined in the book *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* by Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (2012). Even though feminist theorists have

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<sup>3</sup> Sara Ahmed has made the criticism that this statement tends to be made without giving examples of exactly “how feminism or poststructuralism have not dealt with the body as a real, living, physical, biological entity or have reduced ‘everything’ to language, signification and culture” (2008, p. 25).

<sup>4</sup> Cornelia Möser (2021) follows Pia Garske’s distinction between “agency” (*Handlungsfähigkeit*) and “efficiency” (*Wirkmächtigkeit*), the former referring to the “capacity to act” and the later referring to “whether someone or something has an impact.” She implies in her critique that new materialists are focusing solely on “efficiency” when they speak of agency. It is not the aim of this paper to develop this idea further, but I do not think that agency in new materialism is necessarily focused solely on efficiency.

<sup>5</sup> Sometimes referred to as feminist new materialism.

played an important role in developing new materialism, we are currently witnessing a well-established practice in which feminist contributions are relegated to a marginal place within the mainstream of this materialist scholarship.<sup>6</sup> The term new feminist materialism might potentially be read by some people as meaning a specialized branch or offshoot of new materialism (i.e., new materialism with a feminist spin), but thinkers like Braidotti argue that feminism is part of the root, the genealogy, the genesis of it. Because of this, I do not see any new materialist project that is not attached to a feminist genealogy, and this is the reason why I choose to use the term “new feminist materialism.” Nevertheless, to resist falling into the trap of essentialisms and purisms, which would risk breaking up conversations, both terms are often used together in this paper, speaking of new feminist materialism/new materialism. Furthermore, as one decides which authors to engage with based on personal, disciplinary, political, and cultural experiences, a certain limited set of authors and texts are referred to here out of the vast literature being produced about new feminist materialism/new materialism. It is important to keep in mind that new feminist materialism/new materialism is not a theory finished once and for all, but one that is still in the process of becoming.

According to Dolphijn and van der Tuin, new materialism has been influencing research in the humanities and science and technology studies since the late 1990s. However, according to Möser (2021), it peaked in 2010 and started to decline. I see a different reality than Möser in which academic research is showing increased interest in new materialism in all disciplinary areas.<sup>7</sup> As happens with many movements (which usually are not uniform, but receive their labels later on) this movement’s contours are blurry. “New materialisms,” “new materialism,” “new feminist materialism,”<sup>8</sup> and other related terms might not necessarily refer to the same problematizations, yet they may somehow be intertwined.

As Möser (2021) accurately highlights, new materialism might be confusing or misleading to many people because of the charged meaning of the words “new” and “materialism”. For many, “materialism” refers to Marxist-derived theories, such as social feminism. New materialism, however, is not a branch of historical materialism, though it is informed by it to a certain extent (see Wingrove, 2016). Manuel DeLanda, for example, is critical of Marx’s theory of economics, but he takes from Marx his

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<sup>6</sup> I am referring to areas of research in new materialism that occur outside Gender Studies departments, such as in Law, Philosophy, and Geography departments. Braidotti has pointed out a similar pattern in relation to posthuman scholarship (see Braidotti, 2022, p. 2).

<sup>7</sup> The examples are vast. To name a few: this *eTropic* special issue on posthumanism, new materialism and decoloniality; the emergence of journals such as *Matter*; the ongoing Utrecht summer school on post-humanities; and the European program “Cost Action IS1307 on *European New materialist network*” that ran until 2018 (several projects derived from it remain active).

<sup>8</sup> Not to mention the wide variety of related approaches that focus on matter/materiality; for example, actor-network theory, legal materiality, and posthuman approaches.

interest in the oppressed;<sup>9</sup> DeLanda values materiality, although of a different type. The materiality in new materialism refers primarily to “matter” in its various and complex versions. Meanwhile, “new” (Braidotti also uses the prefix “neo”) does not mean “a better or improved version of ‘old’” (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 94). Rather, it refers to re-readings of “minor traditions”; it is in this sense that Diana Coole and Samantha Frost call it “renewed materialism” (as cited in Braidotti, 2022, p. 108). Indeed, as Dolphijn and van der Tuin clarify: “New materialism says ‘yes, *and*’ to all of these intellectual traditions [such as materialism, pragmatism, and monism], traversing them all, creating strings of thought that, in turn, create a remarkably powerful and fresh ‘rhythm’ in academia today” (2012, p. 89).

There is a certain anger, discomfort, and frustration projected towards new feminist materialism/new materialism, particularly by other feminisms, that should be taken seriously; see, for example, Sara Ahmed’s “Open Forum Imaginary Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the ‘New Materialism’” (2008). Even if I engage with new feminist materialist scholarship, I think that we should avoid treating it as something akin to hyper-consumerism, where scholars engage in the latest trend for fear of being behind the times. Pursuing such an ideal creates risks: for example, the principle of diversity/multiplicity, a key feature of new feminist materialism, can be lost as the theory enters into the mainstream. Chasing after a trend can result in the penalizing of those who do not do so: for example, witch hunts against those not engaging with new materialism, or the refusal to fund or publish those who do not take a new feminist materialism/new materialism approach, as has happened with other terms and trends in the humanities and social sciences such as “critical thinking,” “intersectionality,” and “interdisciplinarity.”

It is important to highlight that new feminist materialism as such is a project that has emerged in the context of temperate European landscapes and is informed by Western philosophies; however, its influence and inspirations have not remained within these limits.

### **Mangrovia landscapes: Epistemologies of the South**

Not surprisingly, the North-centric feminist epistemologies put pressure on the epistemologies of the North to the latter’s limits, but they themselves remained within such limits.... They were, however, of crucial importance to open up the space for the emergence of South-centric feminist epistemologies, which broke said limits and

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<sup>9</sup> He states, e.g., that it is the role of “Leftists to cut the umbilical cord chaining us to Marx and reinvent political economy” (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 41).



performed external critiques of the epistemologies of the North.  
(Santos, 2018, p. 4)

The more I become familiar with post-colonial, anti-colonial, and decolonial scholarship, the more its similarities with new materialism/new feminist materialism resonate with me. The fact that my initial approach was through new feminist materialism, and not other epistemologies, may be because the education I received in the tropical savanna and subtropical highlands of Mexico has been predominantly Western, coupled with the colonial assumptions I imbibed when younger, which made me believe that the most important philosophy is that produced in Europe, the US or Canada— thus invoking the image of an hierarchical tree of knowledge (Lundberg et al., 2022, p.13). It is evident that most of new materialism/new feminist materialism's theoretical basis and critiques are oriented towards major Western traditions of thought, namely Modernism and Postmodernism. But it is not the only epistemology that questions Modernism; epistemologies of the South, many of which are in the tropics, share similar criticisms and put forward similar ideas, such as multiplicity/plurality, non-linear time, non-exhaustive dichotomies, critique/creativity, and the material/flesh. These horizontal, rhizomatic conversations at the core of both new materialisms and epistemologies of the South invite “mangrovian” ways of thinking (Lundberg et al., 2022, p.13).

But what does the term epistemologies of the South refer to? I borrow the term from Boaventura de Sousa Santos. Santos (2018, p. 1) understands these epistemologies as being those knowledges that are “anchored in the experiences of resistance of all those social groups that have systematically suffered injustice, oppression, and destruction caused by capitalism, colonialism, *and* patriarchy” [emphasis mine]. In my use, the term covers epistemologies such as post-coloniality, which is said to have been grounded in the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group and has a strong focus on British and French colonialism; anti-coloniality, which has its beginnings in Black movements such as the civil rights movement in the US and African anticolonialism; decoloniality, which emerged in the study group Modernity/Coloniality in Latin America and the Caribbean; Indigenous epistemologies; and other epistemologies that might not be academic tendencies, such as communitarian epistemologies. Many of these epistemologies are rooted in tropical regions; however, it is important to note that the heterogeneity within these labels is huge, and their relationship is neither homogeneous nor always harmonious.<sup>10</sup>

In what follows, my analysis draws on the formulations of the decolonial theory of the Modernity/Coloniality group. However, it needs to be highlighted that the term

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Colpani (2022) to follow some of the debates held among post-colonial and decolonial scholars.

“decoloniality” is used widely by scholars in ways that do not necessarily share the same genealogy, definitions, or assumptions. For decolonial theory scholars, there is a major conceptual difference between two terms, *colonialism* and *coloniality*. *Colonialism* refers to a moment in history/time in which some societies were under the political control of other societies, a condition that can change and often has changed, usually after an independence movement calling for an end to that occupation/domination; in a sense, this change of regime is what gives meaning to the term “post-coloniality.” *Coloniality*, a concept developed by Aníbal Quijano, refers to more complex socio-cultural processes derived from colonialism. According to the Modernity/Coloniality scholars, the colonization of the Americas in the fifteenth century configured a new and different global order in which colonialism, global capitalism, and Eurocentric modernity are entangled. Quijano states that “[d]uring the same period when European colonial domination was consolidating itself, the cultural complex known as European rationality/modernity was being constituted, which was established as a universal paradigm of knowledge and of the relation between humanity and the rest of the world” (Quijano, 1992, p. 14).<sup>11</sup> Thus, modernity cannot be understood without coloniality.

Coloniality is a process that embeds colonial structures into the collective imaginary and into institutions of power; the process of changing this condition is decoloniality. Quijano (2000, p. 218) used the concept of *coloniality of power* to refer to the global pattern of power “that was based on the idea of ‘race’ and on the ‘racial’ social classification of world population”; this classification laid the ground for the organization and control of the working people as Francesca Gargallo identifies (2014, p. 24).<sup>12</sup> Thus understood, *coloniality* affects a variety of other fields such as *knowledge*, in the sense that only certain knowledge is considered valid (see e.g., Quijano, 1992; Lander, 2000); *gender*, in the sense that not only race but also gender contributed to the institution of such hierarchies (see e.g., Lugones, 2010); and *being*, in the sense of its effects on the language and lived experience of people who were not considered fully human (see e.g., Mignolo, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Coloniality of nature affected human and non-human ecosystems in the global South but particularly the tropics, which are “home to more than two thirds of the world’s biodiversity” (Chao & Enari, 2021, p. 33). David Arnold (2000) has analyzed how the representations of nature in this colonial order disrupted the relationship that people in the tropics had with other species and with natural tropical landscapes in general.

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<sup>11</sup> Original: “[d]urante el mismo período en que se consolidaba la dominación colonial europea, se fue constituyendo el complejo cultural conocido como la racionalidad/modernidad europea, el cual fue establecido como un paradigma universal de conocimiento y de relación entre la humanidad y el resto del Mundo.” All translations into English are my own.

<sup>12</sup> For a further discussion of the concept of *coloniality of power*, see Quijano (1992).



Decolonial feminism is heterogeneous and has criticized some of the arguments made by male decolonial theorists due to their lack of a gender perspective, as well as the locations these theories have emerged from: global North universities. Nevertheless, as Breny Mendoza (2016, pp. 115-119) points out, decolonial feminists have also appropriated some of the arguments and critiques of decolonial theory and have activated conversations with other feminist theories such as intersectionality, Black feminism and postcolonial theory. Decolonial feminists are interested in creating epistemological options that are horizontal, rhizomatic, and that account for the entanglement of nature-culture — “mangrovia” landscapes (Lundberg et al., 2022, p.16) — with which to face the diverse struggles generated by colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy; however, similar to new feminist materialism, they are facing a risk of being neglected and marginalized in mainstream discussions on decolonial theory.

### **Fertile Lands: Meeting Points**

To illustrate the fertile lands where new feminist materialism and epistemologies of the South potentially meet, I want to offer some fragmentary flashes showing their similarities and potential divergences – akin to deltaic mangrove landscapes. Certain selected concepts are explored in what follows, but the list of possibilities is vast. Also, there are not always clear and distinct dividing lines between these concepts; they maintain an intrinsic relationship, so sometimes the narrative “cuts” in between them might be unsettling. The work of feminist authors is centred here; keep in mind, however, that this selection of authors is not exhaustive, and a range of authors and ideas exist far beyond what can be addressed here.

#### ***Dualism***

One of the main critiques put forward by both new feminist materialism and epistemologies of the South relates to dualism, which manifests in various ways. The discussions of the concepts that follow will address diverse versions of this dualism and show some of the alternatives to the Western binary system offered by new feminist materialism and epistemologies of the South. For new materialists, dualisms are to be understood as two sides of the same coin: “An idea opposed to another idea is always the same idea, albeit affected by the negative sign. The more you oppose one another, the more you remain in the same framework of thought” (Serres & Latour, cited in Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 98). Some examples of these false dualisms are: social constructivism/essentialism, culture/nature, idealism/materialism, man/woman, science/humanities, old/new, temperate/tropical, and civilized/primitive.

One might think that speaking of the “global North and global South” contradicts one’s claim to criticize dichotomies, but I agree in this respect with Santos (2018, p. x), who

argues that “[i]n spite of resorting to the North-South dichotomy, the epistemologies of the South are not the symmetrical opposite of the epistemologies of the North, in the sense of opposing one single valid knowledge against another one.” The global South is a historically and materially determined term and does not represent a single location, ideology, or theory. In consequence, epistemologies of the South are varied: some precede Western Modernity in time while others grew up in resistance to it or in its shadow. These epistemologies are grouped together only by virtue of being treated in a certain way by a certain (violent and dualistic) historical process. The aim of these epistemologies is not to replace the epistemologies of the North in a dichotomic way of thinking, but to break (work through, traverse) those dualisms and their hierarchies, allowing instead for multiplicity. In new materialist terms, the epistemologies of the South are not reflecting or refracting but *diffracting* (see Haraway, 2004; Barad, 2007).

Decolonial scholar María Lugones understands “the dichotomous hierarchy between the human and the non-human as the central dichotomy of colonial modernity” (2010, p. 743). This dichotomy serves as the bedrock for organizing social life, thus also informing how we think about race and gender. What Lugones is highlighting is a core critique specific to decolonial theory: some epistemologies of the South may not perceive dichotomic thinking per se as the main problem. For other global South thinkers, the trouble lies in a particular aspect of dichotomous thinking: the relationship between power (*potestas*), hierarchy, and domination.

New feminist materialism and epistemologies of the South question the dualisms developed by temperate global North philosophy. The outcomes of this way of thinking have been, and continue to be, harmful and lethal. The endeavour of these epistemologies is to expose these dualisms and work through them.

### ***Difference***

New feminist materialism has also been described as a “philosophy of difference” (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 126), whose definition of *difference* is informed by Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy. Braidotti (2002) explains that “difference” throughout Western philosophical thought has been crystallized in a negative sense as the origin of inferiority; it is conceptualized as the state of being “different from” and thus potentially “less worthy than” — creating a dialectical relation between the self and the other. New feminist materialism pushes instead “towards a difference that no longer focuses on a ‘differing from’, but shows ‘difference differing’ or ‘difference in itself’” (Thiele, 2014, p. 11). In this latter logic, difference is not understood as a reason for domination (as if there could be any justification for it). This argument, however, does not deny the negative impact that such a dialectical understanding of difference has had on human life and its relationship to the non-human.

For Quijano, the Western or European identity consolidated during the encounter with other cultures in the fifteenth century (the so-called “New World”). The relationship with these new others was marked by differences that were established as “natural” and which therefore were used to justify hierarchical subordination (see also Lundberg et al., 2022). As Quijano explains, according to this mindset, “only European culture is rational and can contain ‘subjects.’ The rest are not rational. They cannot be, or harbour, ‘subjects.’ Consequently, other cultures are different in the sense of being unequal, indeed inferior, by nature. They can only be ‘objects’ of knowledge and/or of practices of domination” (Quijano, 1992, p. 16).<sup>13</sup> Although times have changed, the colonial structure of this rational knowledge remains alive; for example, theorists in the global South have exposed the extractivist practices of which they are victims. In the words of Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui: “The legitimate word belongs to those above, those below provide the materials. The same as in every system of knowledge, we provide raw material, and they give an elaborated product back to us” (cited in Grosfoguel, 2016, p. 134).<sup>14</sup> Cusicanqui is referring to the well-known practice in which the North takes the knowledge and experiences of the South to produce validated theories. On the other hand, when the global South produces theories, it is common for these theories to remain in the margins. This knowledge extraction follows the patterns seen in the material extraction of tropical environments in benefit of the global North’s profit and wellbeing (Lundberg et al., 2022, p. 2).

It is not the aim of epistemologies of the South and new feminist materialism to deny the existence of the hierarchies and structures of domination built upon the idea of difference. Without depoliticizing the struggles against these structures, both new feminist materialism and epistemologies of the South commit themselves to working through them, and thus they embrace the power (*potentia*) of difference in itself. However, they do this without the naïve belief that difference itself is devoid of conflict and contradiction.

### ***Pluriversality/Relationality***

New feminist materialism differentiates itself from universalist ontologies. Braidotti (2011, p. 85), for example, states that “universalism” has acquired a bad reputation in some areas of feminism thanks to works that have revealed the overgeneralizations regarding diversity that are hidden under that term. Furthermore, universalism has traditionally been disembodied, while concealing an abstract masculinity, whiteness

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<sup>13</sup> Original: “sólo la cultura europea es racional, puede contener ‘sujetos’. Las demás, no son racionales. No pueden ser o cobijar ‘sujetos’. En consecuencia, las otras culturas son diferentes en el sentido de ser desiguales, de hecho inferiores, por naturaleza. Sólo pueden ser ‘objetos’ de conocimiento y/o de prácticas de dominación.”

<sup>14</sup> Original: “La palabra legítima le pertenece a los de arriba, los de abajo dan insumos. Lo mismo que en todo sistema de conocimiento, nosotros producimos materia prima y nos devuelven producto elaborado.”

and Occidentalism, a false “subject position that allegedly transcends spatio-temporal and geo-political specificities” (Braidotti cited in Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 22). But Braidotti does not dismiss the term; rather, she proposes a reconceptualization of it. Thus, “false universalism” is understood as in fact being a political stance that universalizes some differences over others. Braidotti then reconceptualizes universality in a distinctive and enabling way, arguing that universality is “a qualitative leap, from individual experience to collective practice” (2011, p. 115). Here “individual experience” is to be understood as being embodied and embedded in the materiality of existence, implying that universality is situated and therefore not gender-neutral or disembodied. Her proposal is informed by the feminist politics of location and situated knowledges.<sup>15</sup>

In a similar vein of questioning this abstract and false universalism, decolonial theory works with the concept of *pluriversality* (for the theorization of this concept, see, for example, Mignolo [2007]; Escobar [2020]). Arturo Escobar (2020) highlights that pluriversality, common in some epistemologies of the South, responds to an ontological relationality, or radical interdependence, not only among humans but also with non-humans and the earth. It is in this sense that one can say that universality, in new feminist materialist terms, and pluriversality refer to relationalities that are rooted. This concept is illustrated by the Zapatista movement’s well-known call for “a world where many worlds fit” (EZLN, 1996, section 3).<sup>16</sup> When one acknowledges the different metaphysics/ontologies of various communities, it becomes more evident that a single truth, worldview, and reality, as proposed by Modern/Colonial universalism, is not possible. The words of the communitarian feminist Lorena Cabnal illustrate this idea nicely: “There are no two equal stones, no two equal rivers, no two equal mountains. Although a tree gives us fruits, they are not identical. In this way, our bodies are not the same, the forms of communitarian coexistence are not the same” (interview with Cabnal, in Korol, 2020).<sup>17</sup>

Pluriversality, thus understood, not only describes the diversity of realities but also questions the reduction of these to a single perspective. This relates to the idea behind the reformulated concept of universality used by Braidotti, in which the experiences of communities and subjects are what inform the concept of universality: a bottom-up conceptualization.

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<sup>15</sup> The term “politics of location” was coined by Adrienne Rich, and “situated knowledge” by Donna Haraway.

<sup>16</sup> The original full sentence reads : “El mundo que queremos es uno donde quepan muchos mundos.” This sentence has been analyzed in relation to universality by, for example, Hinkelammert (1996, p. 238), who interprets this claim as a universal project based in “fragmentation/pluralization.”

<sup>17</sup> Original: “No existen dos piedras iguales, dos ríos iguales, dos montañas iguales. Aunque un árbol nos dé frutos, no son idénticos. De esa manera los cuerpos no son iguales, las formas de convivencia comunitaria no son iguales.”

### **Cuerpo-territorio**

Like other new materialists, Karen Barad (2001, pp. 76-77) advocates for the possibility of speaking and giving an account of the real, matter, and nature after poststructuralism. Barad gives the name “agential realism” to her theory that reconfigures not only matter but also time and space. For her these are not ontologically prior substances with determined properties or identities that come into interaction, thus generating intersections that constitute a phenomenon; instead, they are generative forces that co-emerge through *intra-action*.

For Barad, matter is not an isolated substance, nor is it passive or static; rather, it is an active agent of phenomena. This is an important point for new feminist materialism, since matter, throughout the history of Western philosophy, has occupied a minor position in relation to that of the mind and, in postmodern approaches, has been relegated to a product of discursive practices. For Barad, “*matter is substance in its intra-active becoming—not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency. Matter is a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity*”; she goes on to say that matter “*refers to phenomena in their ongoing materialization*” (2007, p. 151) [emphasis in the original]. For her:

Phenomena are ontologically primitive relations – relations without preexisting relata. That is, relations are not secondarily derived from independently existing “relata”, but rather the mutual ontological dependence of “relata” – the relation – is the ontological primitive. Relata only exist *within* phenomena as a result of specific intra-actions (i.e., there are no independent relata, only relata-within-relations). (Barad, 2012, p. 49)

Barad does not deny the role of discourse, nor does she fall into a new “essentialism”; instead, she advocates for privileging *neither* nature *nor* culture. She proposes that “phenomena” are what she names “material-discursive intra-actions.”<sup>18</sup> As she puts it: “Phenomena are entanglements of spacetime-mattering, not in the colloquial sense of a connection or intertwining of individual entities, but rather in the technical sense of ‘quantum entanglements’, which are the (ontological) inseparability of agentially intra-acting ‘components’” (Barad, 2012, p. 32). Among these “components,” the author considers nonhuman elements such as environmental conditions. Along these lines, a phenomenon is not solely a discursive or a “natural” event; a phenomenon here is a complex arrangement of discourse and material “spacetime-mattering” conditions.

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<sup>18</sup> Her understanding of this term comes from the physicist Niels Bohr and quantum physics. See Barad (2001).



In a different formulation but a similar endeavour, *xinka* communitarian feminists from Guatemala have also developed a concept that puts emphasis on the fundamental relationality at the heart of bodily and material reality. The concept of *territorio cuerpo-tierra* (body-land territory) emerged from their fight against sexual violence and mining exploitation.<sup>19</sup> According to Cabnal, this concept is:

a way of approaching and feeling the body as a living and historical territory, but it does not refer at all to the Western geographical conception of bodily geography or a map: it alludes to a cosmogonic and political interpretation of the way bodies have a *relationship* of being in the web of life. At the same time, it leads us to examine the way in which multiple forms of oppression — the structural historical effects of patriarchy, colonialism, racism, and neoliberal capitalism — have been built on bodies, causing them to be expropriated through different pacts and mandates. [emphasis mine] (Cabnal, 2016)<sup>20</sup>

Communitarian feminism argues that the *relationship* between body and land by indigenous peoples<sup>21</sup> has been disrupted by colonialism and, in the case of women, also by patriarchy.<sup>22</sup> One of their challenges, then, is to nurture that relationship — not in a romanticized sense of going back to “primordial” times, but rather in a way that is done from their body-land territory, which is immersed in a complex historical milieu.<sup>23</sup> Thus, Barad and these communitarian feminists do not find it possible to define bodies, land, time, etc., in any way that extracts them from the web of relations.

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<sup>19</sup> For an overview of communitarian feminism, see the chapter “Los feminismos comunitarios” in Gargallo (2014).

<sup>20</sup> Original: “una manera de plantear y sentir el cuerpo como territorio vivo e histórico, pero para nada se refiere a la concepción occidental geográfica, de geografía corporal o de mapa: alude a una interpretación cosmogónica y política acerca de cómo los cuerpos tienen una relación de ser y estar en la red de la vida. A la vez, nos lleva a revisar cómo han sido construidas sobre los cuerpos las múltiples opresiones, los efectos históricos estructurales del patriarcado, el colonialismo, el racismo y el capitalismo neoliberal, que los ha llevado a la expropiación a través de diferentes pactos y mandatos.”

<sup>21</sup> I use the label “indigenous” to name the population prior to the invasion of the American continent. However, I am aware of the debates around the naming and the lack of consensus. E.g., for some, “original peoples” refers to a primordial past that blurs the contemporaneity of such peoples. Indigenous for some is a colonial name, so the people might prefer to call themselves by their chosen names such as the Mapuches. Others take the label of “indigenous” because they claim that if they were conquered as such, as such they will liberate themselves. See Gargallo (2014, p. 27).

<sup>22</sup> These feminists are more aligned with the argument of the existence of an indigenous patriarchy which merged with colonial and African patriarchy. Paredes (2008), for example, named this the “entronque patriarcal” (patriarchal juncture). This notion is not shared by all decolonial feminists, and this should not be considered a problem: rather than being an either/or situation, in a diffractive reading it is obvious that indigenous communities were already so diverse before coloniality that one cannot expect the same practices in each one. It’s more likely that some communities might have experienced what Segato (2010) calls patriarchies of low intensity, while in other groups the sex/gender relations might have been more equal, and in still others these relations might have been more oppressive. More research might help to address these issues in different locations.

<sup>23</sup> The literature on how indigenous peoples have engaged with matter is vast, and concepts such as *pachamama* have been incorporated into environmental studies. On the concept of *pachamama*, see, e.g., Asambleas del Feminismo Comunitario (2010).



## ***Time***

New feminist materialism assumes a nonlinear conception of time and questions the idea of time as progress. To continue with agential realism, Barad uses quantum physics and the “quantum leap” and diverges from the Euclidian conception of time and space and the Newtonian notions of causality, as well as the idea of matter as passive. Time, for her, is historicized: it “is not given, it is not universally given, but rather (...) is articulated and re-synchronized through various material practices (...) *time itself* only makes sense in the context of particular phenomena” (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 66). It is not the aim here to develop Barad’s full argument, but in the context of this discussion, to note how she suggests that time is not a stable or eternal property that is prior to an event or phenomenon; rather, time is constituted in intra-actions with space and matter.<sup>24</sup>

Time’s radical relationship with matter and space calls into question the idea of linear or progressive time. This has implications in, for example, how feminist waves have been traditionally conceived. According to new feminist materialists, feminist waves have been understood in a dialectical way, meaning that a new wave implies the negation or overcoming of the preceding waves or generations of feminist inquiry. Instead, new feminist materialism aims to work in a generative way, performing what Braidotti calls “transpositions” or doing what van der Tuin labels “jumping generations,” a term “for the bridging of ‘classes’ that were previously considered to be incommensurable, while being, in fact, part of a non-exhaustive dichotomy” (van der Tuin, 2009, p. 24).

New feminist materialism traverses and dialogues with the previous waves or generations, thus avoiding Master narratives, phallic Mothers or Oedipal structures. According to van der Tuin, Master narratives, in which the dialectic of the Hegelian Master-slave is reproduced, are common in the second wave of feminism; these narratives mean the confirmation by negation or subsumption of the philosophical Masters. Phallic Mothers refers to this same dialecticism, which seeks to embrace the competition of theories in order to have the right or power (*phallus*) of knowledge, or, in the Master-slave structure, to become the Master. Oedipal structures are also a dialecticism and are inspired by the Oedipal complex, which is impelled by competition and the sense of rivalry (van der Tuin, 2009, pp. 20-22).

The Quechua and Aymara languages in Bolivia share the word *pacha*, which expresses what could be translated as “time-space”, as in Barad’s agential realism (see also Swinehart, 2019). However, the Quechua-Aymara formulation does not

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, the section “The Atom’s Queer Performativity” in Barad (2012).

necessarily follow the same ontology and structure as Barad; the translation of *pacha* needs to be situated within Andean metaphysics to understand its *raison d'être*. Rivera Cusicanqui, for example, describes how present, past, and future are experienced by the Aymaran. Imagine a person walking: her here and now, her “present,” is her body engaged in the act of walking/living; she has her past in front of her, as it is what she can see, and it is what she is using to guide herself; and she is carrying the future on her back (Canal Encuentro, 2018).<sup>25</sup> This notion of time, as Rivera Cusicanqui explains, is very different from the Western notion, which visualizes time as a line in which the past is situated behind us and the future in front of us — a linear notion that Barad is also calling into question.

### ***Subject-Object***

The Cartesian dualism *res cogitans / res extensa*, which translates into the dualism of mind/body or of subject/object, has informed Western epistemology for centuries, not without being subject to diverse criticism by currents of thought such as postmodernism and feminism. Using the example of the earthquake that I described in the introduction, the modernist/realist mode of knowledge makes the following correlation: there is an earthquake, an event that is clear and distinct, and the subject can come to know that event in an objective way. This way of knowing has considered “things” that fall under the category of “object” to be passive and, to a certain degree, at the disposal of the “subject.” A postmodernist/social constructivist approach, on the other hand, would question this perspective: the object is not at all passive and at the human’s disposal; however, the object (the earthquake, in this case) can only be accessed through the subjective human *representation*. The human subjectivity becomes a barrier or limitation to knowing the object in itself; in other words, the object, though it is understood as not passive, is subsumed to the effects of human linguistic practices. New feminist materialism/new materialism aims to traverse these two sides of the same coin, positivist objectivism and representationalism. Its starting point is the understanding of the various forms of “matter” (objects and bodies) as active agents that are not determined solely by human representationalism; it is in this way that new feminist materialism/new materialism works to decentre the anthropocentrism in both ways of knowing.

Decolonial theorists (I am following the analysis of Maldonado-Torres, who refers to Enrique Dussel) describe the modern subject-object formulation as *ego conqueror / ego conquered* (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, pp. 244-245), implying that this formulation laid the ground for diverse colonial dichotomies such as human/non-human, culture/nature, and mind/body. The conquered peoples were positioned in the role of

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<sup>25</sup> For an interesting analysis of the ways in which new materialism and decolonial theory concur on the idea of space-time, see Eggleston (2019).

the object, understood as incomplete humans, passive bodies, and subjects of exploitation (as natural resources are, see also Arnold, 2000). In this modern idea, and I would say also in postmodernism to a certain extent, the conquering subject is a distinct individual and is self-reflexive, while the object is a clear and distinct entity which is external to the subject.

Quijano, for example, argues that the subject really exists, but it does not exist in isolation. Rather, it exists “as a differentiated, but not separated, part of an intersubjectivity,” and he goes on to argue that knowledge according to this perspective “is an *intersubjective relationship* concerning something, not a relationship between an isolated subjectivity, constituted in itself and before itself, and that something” [emphasis mine] (Quijano, 1992, p. 15).<sup>26</sup> Black-Asian American feminist Margo Okazawa-Rey, for example, when discussing the reenvisioning of the feminist self and how to work with others, follows a critique similar to Quijano’s: “there is no ‘I’ without ‘you’; that I am ‘I’ and you are ‘you,’ but the definition and the construction happen together” (2018, p. 28). She then continues by making an interesting remark about how this relationship has been constructed in the global North: “It’s really interesting that in Western psychology, pathology is codependence, and in Eastern thought, pathology is when you become too separate from others, the collective” (p. 28). In her view, this relationality or connectiveness, as she calls it, is not to be confused with extractivism, “extracting ideas and resources from human beings or from the environment”; what she calls “true connectivity” allows us to “generate ideas, ways of doing, ways of being in the wider world” (p. 29).

## Imagining Other Possible Landscapes

In this paper, I argue that both new feminist materialism and epistemologies of the South theorize alternatives to the modern Occidental (and positivist) way of viewing and treating the world. I have selected pertinent concepts — “meeting points” — to show some of these similarities and have analyzed them through theorists from both approaches. This exercise now allows me to address the initial questions: Does new materialism/new feminist materialism need to be decolonized? To what extent and in what way might it need to be decolonized? And, finally, how does it speak to “tropical materialisms”?

Although it is true that both new feminist materialism and epistemologies of the South have similarities, there are two points in relation to this that I want to focus on. The first has to do with the popularity of new materialism/new feminist materialism over

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<sup>26</sup> Original: “Existe como parte diferenciada, mas no separada, de una intersubjetividad” / “El conocimiento, en esta perspectiva, es una relación intersubjetiva a propósito de algo, no una relación entre una subjetividad aislada, constituida en sí y ante sí, y ese algo”.

epistemologies of the South. The second follows what Jerry Lee Rosiek, Jimmy Snyder and Scott L. Pratt have identified: a limited dialogue between these two movements (2019, p. 332). Why is new materialism/new feminist materialism gaining more interest than epistemologies of the South? Note that I am not implying that it should be the other way around, in a dialectical way; rather this is a rhetorical question that allows me to show one of the aspects that I think we, as researchers working with these theories, need to explore. One aspect relevant to the popularity of new materialism/new feminist materialism is its location of emergence; and places of enunciation matter: academia in the temperate global North generate positions and relations of power (*potestas*). However, mainstreaming new materialism can lead to the omission of theories that are an essential part of it, such as the feminist theories that make up new feminist materialism. New feminist materialism is at the root of new materialism, yet even so, it is ignored by the latter; on many occasions, new feminist materialism is pushed to the margins, thus limiting engaged conversations. Furthermore, the establishment of new materialism can also lead to the eclipsing of other theories such as Indigenous knowledges which offer important insights into materiality. Whether we like it or not, coloniality continues to inform our decisions regarding whom we establish conversations with, or not, and where we look for our theories.

This influences the second point: that the limited conversations might be informed by the persistent assumption in academia “that Indigenous studies scholarship is primitive, less rigorous, less theoretically refined, simplistically concerned with identity politics, and so on” (Rosiek et al., 2019, p. 333; see also Arnold, 2000, p. 13). This assumption can also “frame people’s encounters with the literature before they read it or even pre-empt such reading” (Rosiek et al., 2019, 333). Moreover, Indigenous studies done by Indigenous researchers, or work based on epistemologies genuinely rooted in the South, tend to be done by people who have a harder time accessing academia and its resources, often having to fight to gain a foothold in the system. For this reason, it is necessary that scholars working with new materialism/new feminist materialism or epistemologies of the South identify and avoid practices of erasure and extractivism, that is, to not become “agents of displacement” (Rosiek et al., 2019, p. 334). It is necessary to engage in conversations with the diversity of epistemologies of the South, generate practices of companionship, and enable radical imagination (see also Chao & Enari, 2021, pp. 44-46).

It is important, however, to address these epistemologies with responsibility and avoid contributing to their depoliticization as they become more mainstream. This is especially important for those of us who work in academic environments and participate in the production and circulation of knowledge, simply because academia continues to be a space of power and validation of knowledge. In particular,

epistemologies of the South have emerged in the context of specific struggles that demand from us an ethical and political accountability; their *raison d'être* should not be erased or distorted. We should hear, for example, the calls by Black theorists to be aware of how white scholars have appropriated and benefited from their work on race. In the chapter "Holding My Sister's Hand" in her book *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) describes how white women have benefited from the experiences and theorizing of Black women and women of colour to gain space in the academy, but without genuinely engaging in critical analysis of whiteness and its complicity in unequal structures of power. Although hooks was making these claims decades ago, this scenario has not changed significantly. Cusicanqui makes a similar claim when she questions the ways in which some decolonial theorists appropriate the experiences and knowledge of Indigenous thinkers to produce "their" theories and thus advance their own academic careers. Some terms have emerged to name these practices, such as methodological extractivism (Santos, 2018), cognitive extractivism (Simpson in Klein, 2012), and epistemic extractivism (Grosfoguel, 2016).

Even though my focus in this text has not been specifically on the geographical tropics, but rather has been an exploration of materialisms and epistemologies arriving from both the global North and South, including pertinent examples especially from Latin America, I think that tropicality scholarship resonates in many of the concepts, arguments and authors addressed in this paper. Tropical materialisms offer a double-edged movement: on the one hand they expose European imaginaries about the tropics as "Edenic paradise" or "pestilential hell" (Lundberg et al., 2022, p. 2), and, on the other hand, they offer material figurations to build alternatives to the hegemonic North. Figurations such as "tropical landscapes" and the "mangrove" are very powerful for describing the material and epistemological diversity "contained" in the tropics. Following these material imaginaries, I am for "mangrovian" conversations among different tropical, southern, landscapes that no longer look to the single hierarchical tree of knowledge for validation.



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