Since the inception of interdisciplinary feminist studies (under whatever heading), the field of feminist materialist thinking, from Christine Delphy to Karen Barad, has both exploded and imploded on itself. Recently under the auspice of a range of speculative and queer feminist materialisms, previous insights – especially from feminist science studies – are re-evaluated and re-read through animal studies, in-house science feminisms and green critique, critical disability studies and crip theory, new materialisms, and older ones, such as queer phenomenology or dialectic materialism (Alaimo 2011). In this think piece, I would like to query the posthuman, or material, or ontological turn, and ask more poignantly: was this turn (whatever we want to call it) an ethical turn?

Nowadays, materialities hail us from all sides, in all forms, from around and from within: Waste accumulates in landfills, and in the oceans, scattered garbage congeal into plastic continents. The weather heats our planet, and hurricanes, wood fires and climate refugees keep uneven steps. Erupting volcanoes halt European air traffic and solar flares wreck technological havoc. The drugs we ingest are flushed out of our bodies and into lakes, seas and other bodies of water, perhaps to alter the sexual morphology of fish and prove the critical salience of materialist enviro-feminist Stacey Alaimo’s concept »transcorporeality«. Clearly we are embedded in reciprocal relations of both human and non-human making. With a material-semiotics of its own, widely celebrated recent science phenomena, like neuroplasticity and epigenetics, re-conceptualize the multiple materialities of bodies. With riffs from poststructuralist theory, embodiment in present biotechnology is a case of contingent co-configuration within context. Newly mapped microbiomes also belie humanist assumptions of self-contained individuality: the number of microbes, e.g. bacteria, that inhabit our bodies exceeds the number of our »own« bodily cells by up to a hundredfold. Like all of us »companion species« (Haraway), neurons and genomes are produced in reciprocity with environments, thus finally putting the tired nature or nurture debate to rest. We are naturecultures. Basta! But how are these converging strands of materialisms changing the horizon of feminist studies? I believe the timely ethics of posthumanist gender studies is long overdue.

Entanglements of self and other, cultures within worldly nature, pasts, presents and futures emerge here as a kind of starting point, but the entanglements does not come from an interconnectedness of separate entities to start with but are instead »specific material relations of the ongoing differentiation of the world« (Barad 2010, 265). And these entanglements, these onto-epistemological
processes of »becoming with« (Haraway 2008, 15) are always also, I argue, relations of obligations: they do come with an ethics.

In part a reaction to worldly urgency, in part to the inability of culturalist theories to deal with the concerns of embodiment, human or non-human, Animal Studies stands as a form of posthumanist scholarship coming of age (Weil 2010). Here, animals (like microbiomes, neurologies or climates) are not of concern as merely instruments of theory, but because our lives also affect them. Ethics, argues animal theorist Kari Weil, is in this posthuman respect not a concern for the good. Nor does it refer only to a Foucaultian meta-ethics or care for the self. Rather the ethical turn in this field is in the materialist wake of poststructuralist theory an attempt to recognize the other. Posthumanist ethics, entangled with onto-epistemologies of worldly »intra-actions« (Barad), emerge as efforts to respect and meet well with, even extend care to, others while acknowledging that *we may not know* the other and what the best kind of care would be. In fact, Barad claims, »the very nature of matter entails an exposure to the Other«. In a Levinasian vein, posthumanist ethics come with a critique to the whole Western philosophical tradition and humanist thought. Similar to the criticisms of Franz Fanon and Luce Irigaray, Levinas stated that European humanism always tried to incorporate the other into the same, differences into universal models, in totalizing and unethical ways. If we want humane practices of care and concern, the humanistic idea is not enough. As relations precede identities, in Harawayian and Baradian vernacular, engagement, concerns for alterity and care for others is prior to selfhood.

As a performative and non-anthropocentric ethics of worlding practices, such a posthuman ethics contradicts the humanist assumption of a proper boundary between ethics and politics, agency and subjectivation, autonomy and dependence. This is perhaps not so strange to the ethical / political imaginary of feminism, but posthuman ethics also complicates the feminist identity. Already in the cyborg manifesto, Haraway (1991, 176) explains: »… to recognize ›oneself‹ as fully implicated in the world, frees us of the need to root politics in identiﬁcation, vanguard parties, purity, and mothering«. As we always already are reciprocally becoming with the world, however, the ethics of entanglement do entail both responsibilities and opportunities for reworking the material effects of the past and the future. There is, however, no redemption from pasts written in the flesh of the world, writes Barad. »Our debt to those who are already dead and those not yet born cannot be disentangled from who we are.« (Barad 2010, 266).

To answer to the first question of this short essay, indeed, I would say that the materialist, or ontological, or posthuman turn comes with some serious ethics.
We have never been human but always companion species

The term *posthuman* has come to designate a very loosely related set of recent attempts to reconceptualise the relationship between the rapidly changing field of technology and the conditions of human embodiment. Interpretations vary between the feminist conceptions of Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingston and N. Katherine Hayles, but even more so between literary animal scholar Cary Wolfe’s recent work and that of technophobic or technophiles renditions. On the one hand, conservative opponents like Francis Fukuyama, in his dystopian vision of *Our Posthuman Future* (2002), sees the posthuman as a metaphor figure for science out of control, as a bioengineered assault on our fundamentally pure, sacrosanct human nature and our essential dignity. To Fukuyama, humanity now needs to be preserved and protected from technological interference. Rosi Braidotti employs the posthuman in radically different, even oppositional vein, and Donna Haraway’s onto-political notions of the cyborg and «companion species» gesture of course also to something completely different. They signal to feminist scholars the need to acknowledge that we have never been purely human in the first place and that critiques of androcentrism already puts feminist theory firmly in the posthuman line of thought.

»Companion species« stands as Haraway’s word choice to avoid a recursive gesture of fetishizing »the posthuman«. This concept has after all now travelled way beyond disciplinary confinements and even taken on a popular life of its own (much like the cyborg did). Troublesome posthumanisms in popular circulation share often a belief in modern progress, in technology as salvation *from* bodily vulnerabilities, even from death. Uncritically celebrating Enlightenment ideals of anthropocentric humanism, they translate into a form of super–humanism (i.e. trans–humanism) working to *complete* the mind–body split e.g. fantasies of digitally downloading minds or cryo–preserving bodies. Such unwholesome *post–feminist* and *post–biological* understandings of the post–human (as extra–humanist) fail to consider the recalcitrant nature of bodies and materiality at large. Instead, trans–humanist conceptualizations of the post–human translate into the desire to realize the disembodied human self of the Enlightenment, purified and enhanced by science, medicine, and technology in order to transcend disease, ageing, and eventually death. It appears as a dream of perfection and infinitude that harbours a disregard for vulnerability, *thus incompatible with feminist posthuman ethics*.

In fact, with this concept of reciprocal ontology (»companion species«) Haraway makes a compelling argument for *interspecies survival*. As such, this concept must be read in the light of three decades of technoscience studies and ecofeminist struggles to come to terms with the body, with biology, and with life–changing materialities from a less universalist and more modest standpoint than that of triumphalist Western techno–humanism. Companion species are about
interdependence and co-constitution but also about power relations, about who gets to live and who gets to die in the companion species constellations. Haraway writes: »Under the material-semiotic sign of companion species, I am interested in the ontics and antics of significant otherness, in the on-going making of partners through the making itself, in the making of bodies lived in the game. Partners do not pre-exist their relating; the partners are precisely what come out of inter- and intra-relating of fleshy, significant, material-semiotic beings« (Haraway 2008, 165). Haraway suggests that we acknowledge surprising relationality, critical reciprocity and inhabit the ethics of »meeting well«.

**The post-disciplinary matter of posthumanist gender studies**

Materialities beckon us of course also from inside the humanities and the natural sciences in an age when transgenic biotechnology and patented genes, wildlife conservation and anthroposcene rhetorics, in-vitro meat and in-vivo foetal imaging, embryo selection and consumer custom-made pharmacology are the *post-natural* orders of the day. The on-going reinvention of materiality is by no means work exclusive to feminist scholarship, although feminist scholars feature prominently in these debates. Transgender thinkers, eco-critiques, crip theorists and disability scholars have, like feminist body studies or health scholars, tried to incorporate the body as agential materiality, and scholars working within science and technology studies (STS) are reiterating the multiplicity of bodies and other materialities as they are known and performed in, for instance, medical practice.

In the spirit of the queer feminist concepts of Judith Butler (1994), feminist scholarship in this posthumanist vein works »against proper objects« of research. More specifically, this turn of feminist research entails a turn from anthropocentrism to the integration of both human and non-human natures. I find Cary Wolfe’s understanding of »posthumanities« particularly useful as an engine of discovery and differentiation for materialist feminist scholarship. It entertains several moves from social constructionism to material-semiotics, from disciplinary wars to post-disciplinary alliances of unexpected kinds and it brings the trouble to home. Enriched with the re-inventive natures and creative worlding practices of posthumanist feminist thought (Irigaray, Haraway, Hayles, Barad, Alaimo and many others), social and cultural theory at large (also outside gender studies) meets up with agential materialities in a varied set of registers that trail thought-provoking paths beyond the constructionist feminist frameworks of analysis.
Conclusions

The performative ethics of posthumanist gender studies can be captured in the words of feminist theorist and physicist Karen Barad (2010, 265): »Crucially, there is no getting away from ethics on this account of mattering. Ethics is an integral part of the diffraction (ongoing differentiating) patterns of worlding, not a superimposing of human values onto the ontology of the world (as if ›fact‹ and ›value‹ were radically other). The very nature of matter entails an exposure to the Other. Responsibility is not an obligation that the subject chooses but rather an incarnate relation that precedes the intentionality of consciousness.« Such a posthuman ethics goes to the very enactment of bodies and the material-semiotics of the world of which we are collectively a part, but also to how we relate in scholarship. Like in the performative understandings of gender-as-doing, here »reality is an active verb« and »beings do not pre-exist their relatings« (Haraway 2008). This entails also an invocation to taking posthumanist ethics seriously in relation to how we organize ourselves scholarly (posthumanist gender studies is but one suggestion among many). The timely ethics of posthumanist gender studies works then in a loosely Butlerian sense both »against proper objects« and »against proper subjects« so to re-vision, meet up with and inhabit well the continuums of naturecultures, human- and biological sciences, material-semiotics and human / non-human reciprocities.

To conclude this limited report on the posthuman twists and turns, I advocate posthumanist gender studies because it may open up feminist analysis to the shifting relationship between the human and the non-human (animal, machine, environment), natures and cultures, the popular and the scientific. Posthumanist gender studies may as such re-tool the human sciences and prepare us to meet up with the on-going transformations of the world (Åsberg 2008; 2009; 2012). This is important for feminist research as a worldly practice, e.g. as these transformations are also inflected by changing patterns of gender, age, ethnicity, and sexuality, and vice versa. Such posthumanities both include, and step outside the comfort zones of, human (culture), »humanism«, and the humanities. Informed by feminist technoscience studies, we work at my feminist research platform The Posthumanities Hub to see posthumanities not as a universal appraisal of interdisciplinary omnipotence but as zooming in on the nitty-gritty of specific nodal points of material-semiotic entanglements. In the poetic words of Ursula Le Guin, in our analytical forages, it helps us »bring strange stuff« home. It may help us to inhabit, in simultaneously critical, creative, and reciprocal manners, the meaningful materialities of emerging naturecultures, the new, unsettled Self–Other relations pertaining to gendered and sexualized, aged and racialised, healthy and sick, human and non-human ideals of embodiment – and the inclusions and exclusions they engender. In any case, the world keeps materializing.
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