

Book Review

Material Feminisms

Edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008, 448 pp.

ISBN-13: 978-0-253-21946-6

Reviewed by Pat Louw

English Department

University of Zululand

Material Feminisms is a thought-provoking collection of essays by writers such as Susan Hekman, Stacey Alaimo and Karen Barad. For Alaimo it constitutes a development on her earlier work, entitled: *undomesticated ground: recasting nature as feminist space* (published in 2000 by Cornell University Press, Ithaca). As the title of the earlier text indicates, Alaimo takes on the issue of the connection between representations of the female and nature. Some feminist critics have distanced themselves from the idea of identifying women with nature as it has essentialising tendencies, putting women in a weak position with regard to men, who are identified with culture and society – and power. While ecofeminists make a valid point that the exploitation of marginal groups, women and nature all stem from the same mindset, that is, an attitude of domination and patriarchal authority, there have remained some divisions between feminist theorists and ecofeminists. The essays in *Material Feminisms* provide stimulating arguments on these issues with important implications for feminist theory, ecocriticism, and critical theory in general.

Hekman's essay, 'Constructing the Ballast: An Ontology for Feminism' gives an overview of the direction which feminist theory has taken in the past few decades. She refers to Donna Haraway's attempt to

overcome the discursive/reality dichotomy, and indicates that ‘many feminists turned to discourse at the expense of the material’ (Hekman 2008:87). In addition to Haraway, Hekman invokes Bruno Latour’s view that the critique of empiricism has driven theorists away from facts into an over-emphasis on the discursive realm. She says that ‘the point is not to privilege the discursive over the material but to understand the material in discursive terms’ (Hekman 2008:88). While she acknowledges the contribution that theories of social constructionism have made to feminist theory, she feels that there has been a disproportionate loss of the material as opposed to the linguistic. This has important implications for a renewed conception of realism. Hekman states: ‘What we need now is not a return to a modernist conception of reality as an objective given, but rather an understanding of reality informed by all we have learned in the linguistic turn’ (2008:88).

Hekman advocates a move from epistemology to ontology in order to correct the imbalance between the discursive and the real. While supporting the conviction that ‘our only access to ontology is through the discursive’, she nevertheless maintains that ‘for the new ontology, our language structures how we apprehend the ontological but it does not constitute it’ (2008:98). One of the philosophers Hekman turns to is Ludwig Wittgenstein, even though ‘his work on language is seen as one of the major causes of the turn to discourse and away from the real’ (98). She disagrees with this interpretation of his work:

Wittgenstein, like the postmoderns, is trying to break philosophy away from the modernist conception of language as the mirror of nature. But Wittgenstein does not move in the direction of epistemological nihilism, of a conception in which language constitutes our world. Rather, his view is that language is what we do *in* the world. It is a central part, but not the only part, of our form of life. For Wittgenstein, language and the world are always intimately connected and interacting (Hekman 2008: 98).

Although ‘Wittgenstein’s linguistic philosophy and postmodernism are generally identified as the principal causes of the linguistic turn of contemporary thought’, Hekman argues that ‘Wittgenstein’s work does not, in fact, privilege the linguistic, but rather, it offers a way of integrating

Pay Louw

language with reality (Hekman 2008:99). Hekman goes on to draw support for her argument from the work of Deleuze and Guattari and also Michel Foucault. Her re-reading and reinterpretation of these writers is both challenging and illuminating and provides ground for much interesting debate and discussion.

