

What if Culture was Nature all Along?

Edited by Vicki Kirby

Edinburgh University Press, 260pp, 2017

ISBN 9781474419291

Reviewed by Stefan Herbrechter

The Nature of Culture

What happens if nature is neither lacking nor primordial, but rather a plenitude of possibilities, a cacophony of convers(at)ion. Indeed, what if it is that same force field of articulation, reinvention, and frisson that we are used to calling—‘Culture’? Should feminism reject the conflation of ‘woman’ and ‘Nature’, or instead, take it as an opportunity to consider the question of origins and identity more rigorously? (Kirby, ‘Natural Convers(at)ions’ 234)

IT IS NOT OFTEN THAT YOU GET AN EDITED VOLUME WITH SUCH A CLEAR CONCEPTUAL AND pragmatic focus as *What if Culture was Nature all Along?* The main reason for this is that Vicki Kirby is both the editor and the ‘subject’ of this collection. In fact, as she describes it, it is a kind of ‘group hunt’ based on the fact that she has ‘mentored all of the contributors in one way or another over many years, and as a result [they] have all become comfortable with [their] differences’ (x). The title—*What if Culture was Nature all Along?*—echoes Kirby’s contribution to the signature volume of new feminist materialism, Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman’s *Material Feminisms* (2008). In that chapter—‘Natural Convers(at)ions: Or, What if Culture was Really Nature all Along?’—Kirby gives an intermediate summary of her take on and intervention within the emerging feminist (re)turn to materialism and the ongoing deconstruction of the nature-culture binary that has been one of the cornerstones of ‘Western metaphysics’; or, in other words, ‘our’ predominant world picture (which, of course, and especially today, does no longer belong to any ‘us’, in fact, it never did). Materialism returns (with a vengeance) after the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ and the reign of ‘cultural constructivism’ (according to which everything is linguistically mediated and culture takes precedence over nature). For feminism, amongst many other minority discourses, the emphasis on linguistic mediation and cultural construction have undoubtedly had many

liberatory effects, in the sense that women, for example, were able to take seriously Simone de Beauvoir's idea that one isn't born a woman but that it's society or culture that 'constructs' femininities (and masculinities, as well as animals, machines, gods, monsters, objects, realities... nature and everything else). Roland Barthes's motto of the 'denaturalisation of (cultural) myths' arguably was the beginning of poststructuralist/constructivist cultural politics. The idea was to denounce naturalisation (or the claim that something is 'natural') as a political ideologeme of conservatism. Things are 'naturally' the way they are, there is an essential 'necessity' in keeping things the way they are, things will 'naturally' return to the way they were, etc. Instead, by 'deconstructing' this myth of 'nature' as an unchangeable and unchanging essential truth, attention to cultural constructedness—as if nature didn't 'construct' in 'her(?)' own ways—from its initial supplementary position (cf. the evolutionary idea of 'nature via nurture') moves centre-stage. In fact, 'nature' is a cultural (early modern? Enlightenment? Romantic?) invention—and, increasingly in modernity and especially today, in globalised technoscientific societies, we are experiencing a 'post-natural' condition.

As radical and important cultural constructivism has been (and in many respects continues to be—just look at the ambient regressive political climate that, often in the name of 'human nature', wants to go back on achievements like women's and gay rights, racial equality, the redistribution of wealth, animal liberation, ecological thought, postcolonial critique etc.), the nature-culture dichotomy has seemingly never been more precarious than today. This is the context in which Kirby asks whether it might not be 'better', in fact—this is one way of reading the 'what if?' in the title—to think that 'culture was nature all along', or, initiate a careful return towards a (deconstructed) form of 'biologism':

Not many would dispute the presence of a biological reality that is quite different from culture and that we imperfectly try to comprehend. But surely, if we were without our skin and we would witness the body's otherwise invisible processes as we chat to each other, read a presentation aloud, type away at our computers, or negotiate an intense exchange with someone we care about, we might be forced to acknowledge that perhaps the meat of the body *is* thinking material.
(Kirby, 'Natural Convers(at)ions' 221)

I have underlined the word 'skin' in the above passage because, when I first saw the proposal for the volume under review here, it was going to be called 'Sociology under the Skin: What if Culture was Really Nature all Along?' While it was probably better to privilege the subtitle, the idea of something has been going on 'under the skin' of culture (or sociology) as a result of cultural constructivism and thus, as a side-effect, has somehow become 'other', is a compelling one. This side-effect, this

(post)natural other—a biology that persists—has been coming back to haunt ‘us’ (especially ‘us’ in the humanities, which are now fast becoming, partly due to the advent of new materialisms, but also posthumanisms, speculative realisms, object-oriented-ontologies etc., ‘new’ or ‘posthumanities’ grappling with the new ‘entanglements’ with science, especially around the notion of ‘life’. What still ‘matters’ in the otherwise defunct opposition between nature and culture is, precisely, this (biological) entanglement of ontology and epistemology that is expressed in the phrase ‘thinking matter’, and which turns life into the main battleground for rethinking the ‘structural complicity and re-figuration’ of what Kirby calls ‘nature’s essential humanity’, in the sense of an inseparability between (human, and nonhuman) culture and biology. In fact, she points out about the volume that ‘culture in these readings is biology at work... [a]llergic, hormonal, neuronal, genetic and perceptual plasticities are social matters, not because culture affects or interprets biology, but because “inheritance” has always involved implicate causalities and open-ended creativities’ (x).

Tracing and tracking a certain vitalism while complicating an inevitable anthropocentrism (‘writ large’) the essays—following and engaging with Kirby’s own work, especially her *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large* (2011)—move towards a ‘more refracted sense of identity as eco-logy’. The motto for Kirby and the contributors of this volume could be this:

Instead of a yawning gulf between nature and culture, we shuttle across little bridges of translation and transfer passages of metamorphosis where the communication between matter and form is mutually enabled. (Kirby, ‘Natural Convers(at)ions’ 227)

In fact, it is because ‘nature is articulate, communicative—and, in a very real sense—intentional’ (Kirby, ‘Natural Convers(at)ions’ 228) that Kirby bases her thought, which is driven by a very productive combination of Derridean deconstruction and (posthumanist) feminist materialism, on the provocative adaptation of arguably Derrida’s most infamous phrase (*‘il n’y pas de hors texte’*): ‘there is nothing outside of Nature’, which means that “there is no radical disconnection between nature and culture, and that agency is a distributed, implicated eco-logy with no central, organizing origin’ (229).

In her introduction to the volume reviewed here, ‘Matter Out of Place’, Kirby intervenes again within the discussion about what kind of materialism may be needed to retain the achievements of cultural constructivism and poststructuralism while facing the posthumanist challenges of technology, ecology and postanthropocentrism. Kirby thus provides an important counter-position to the thinkers of ‘originary technicity’ (Derrida and Stiegler; see Bradley), who aim to relativise human exceptionalism by stressing the implication of the human (and

life more generally) with technics from the very beginning. However, rather than focusing on this technological ‘other’, Kirby and her mentees are focusing on the natural ‘other’, so to speak. As Kirby explains: ‘what makes human species-being special, indeed, exceptional, is our self-definition as *un-natural*’ (3). Human self-understanding in terms of cultural constructivism rests on a positioning of nature as an ‘inaccessible and unknowable *nature as such*’ (3). In times of anthropogenic climate change, however, nature is likely to make a return that requires a thinking and political action that is able to harness both technological and ecological challenges to ‘our’ basic *material* living conditions. A ‘new’ materialism, however, cannot be a simple emulation of scientific empiricism, objectivity or realism (whether ‘speculative’ or ‘naturalistic’), as Kirby writes:

The difference that new materialism might make can feel liberating, as if we are at last given access to material reality and all those objects that were previously barred to us—biology, geology, climate, animals, plants, objects; the list is infinite and the intervention seductive. But whether constructionist or new materialist, ontology or epistemology, object or subject, this tendency to posit two separate entities or systems leaves their respective identities intact. (14)

The task is therefore—and the individual contributions to the volume are all taking up this challenge—‘[c]an we work with a sense of “materiality” that is more surprising, involved and, dare I say, scientifically leveraged, by contesting the actual identity of these terms and their respective contents, circumspections and capacities?’ (14). The emphasis is thus on entanglement, co-implication, or ‘intra-action’ (Karen Barad’s term), between biology and culture. Kirby thus takes Derrida seriously in aiming for a biological grammatology in the sense of a generalised science of ‘life writing’.

The essay contributions to *What if Culture was Nature all Along?* all engage with the speculative (‘what if?’) and the atemporal (‘all along’) deconstructive logic of living matter, even while coming to it from very different angles of course. Ashley Barnwell follows Kirby in reminding the new or posthumanities of an often forgotten ‘methodological’ third, namely social science, and sociology more specifically. She recalls that agency and its politics are the traditional domains of sociological analysis and asks how, within the proliferation of nonhuman agency, can we attend to the material, the affective, and the ecological without disavowing sociology, subjectivity, and judiciousness. Florence Chiew looks at how neurobiology has been revising traditional notions of visual perception that rely on the ‘object’s externality from the perceiving subject or body’ (48). Instead, the idea of ‘cross-modal plasticity’ she takes up uses the ‘sociological insight that neurobiological processes are experience driven’ (50), which she employs to argue that the neuronal cannot be separated from the social and that change,

invention and creativity already inhere within biological matter. Michelle Jamieson looks at recent changes in understanding allergy, as either biologically or psychologically caused, and the move towards 'multifactorial and biopsychosocial models of illness' (71) more generally. In her own version of what if culture was nature all along, Jamieson shows that in the context of allergy 'we are confronted with evidence that the material body does not pre-exist its social and cultural contextualisation: phenomena often taken to be quintessentially biological actually evidence biology's social, psychical and historical complexity' (72). Biology, or nature, is thus not fixed but is itself constantly 'under construction', as Kirby also says (20). In a similar vein, Rebecca Oxley focuses on 'paternal postnatal depression' and the role of the 'sociality of hormones' to further promote an 'embodied sociology'. In understanding the medical side of the somatic experience of paternal postnatal depression, Oxley discovers another example of co-implication of the biological and the socio-cultural, namely in the 'material-semiotic' agency of hormones (98). Noela Davis, in turn, uses case studies on stigmatisation from epigenetic research to show how the social and biological are entangled and are, in fact, mutually constitutive of another, in the sense that bodies don't need to be 'animated' by the social, but do themselves already contain 'animation, agency and sociality' (110). Epigenetics as the main mechanism of cell differentiation, Davis argues, is essential because 'somatic maintenance involves a constant gene-environment interrogation as the body strives to sustain itself in a perpetually changing context' (120). In this sense 'we are always already environmental, and the relations of difference, between body and environment, biology and the social, are relations of externality *within* us' (122). It is also in this sense that biology is inherently 'political', since through epigenetic change, it anticipates and influences future genetic adaptation and development and thus complicates the distinction between being and knowing, ontology and epistemology. Following a similar trajectory, Xin Liu complicates the distinction between bodily experience and the visibility of 'racialised encounters', or, between ontology and epistemology in processes of 'racialisation'; while Jacqueline Dalziell looks at the attribution of consciousness to nonhumans and the problematic 'cognitive cut' that inevitably has to occur at some stage, or, in other words, where to draw the line between conscious and non-conscious forms of life. The problem of this arbitrary cut is that it inevitably reinscribes an anthropocentrism into this distinction, namely in the form of (necessarily human) adjudication. Her specific case study is that of microbiology and the question of 'the strange sociality' of slime moulds with their ability to learn and select. While Dalziell concludes her contribution with Kirby's provocative and speculative question 'what if nature thinks?', Astrida Neimanis explores the idea of 'nature representing itself' in the form of 'nature writing'. And while Will Johncock reconsiders the question of time (as social construction and natural process) in the context of climate change and the idea of 'running out of time', the volume, fittingly, concludes with Peta Hinton's critique of new materialism's 'ontology of

presence' with its privileging and affirmation of 'life itself' (especially in Rosi Braidotti's feminist posthumanism inspired by Spinoza and Deleuze). Instead, following Kirby (who, in turn, takes up Derrida's idea of '*lavielamort*'), Hinton speaks about the 'sociality of death' as an 'essential socio-ethical operation of life itself'.

Needless to say, it is impossible to do justice to such a highly challenging and complex set of essays and ideas—or 'matters'—in such a short space of time. Let me stress again that *What if Culture was Nature all Along?* stands out as both a methodological and a theoretical volume. It succeeds in presenting and exploring the complexities and the co-implication of culture and nature, thought and matter, human and nonhuman, science and sociology, life and death, in action. It thus demonstrates that if nature is 'writing' all the way down, writing can be neither cultural nor natural, but remains—and this is one of Derrida's major lessons—entirely other.

STEFAN HERBRECHTER is research fellow at Coventry University. His publications include *Autoimmunities* (with Michelle Jamieson; Routledge), *Narrating Life* (with Elisabeth Friis; Brill) and *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (Bloomsbury). He is also series editor of *Critical Posthumanisms* (Brill) and director of the *Critical Posthumanism Network*. For more information please go to: <http://stefanherbrechter.com> and <http://criticalposthumanism.net/>.

Works Cited:

- Bradley, Arthur. *Originary Technicity: The Theory of Technology from Marx to Derrida*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Kirby, Vicki. 'Natural Convers(at)ions: Or, What if Culture was Really Nature all Along?' *Material Feminisms*. Ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Heckman. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2008. 214-36.
- Kirby, Vicki. *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011.