

and invites you to cross over that threshold all the way. I'm very familiar with that role in my work. I do it all the time.

**Haas** How does the particular environment or situation influence the relation?

**Wade** In *The Clearing*, everything is a lot: a lot of costumes, of objects, a lot of lights, of sound. It's definitely this cornucopia, a maximalist approach. I remember all the conversations I had around how to bring Puddles into being with stage and costume designer Claudia Hill. How do we generate this myth around the pelican who's covered in oil in the bottom of a cruise ship at the end of the world? That already is a very complex score to fill. So Claudia eventually made a wig of all these different pieces of hair that she had found and stitched together. And she literally designed a trash bag cape. We decided that we don't want to use new materials but as many recycled materials as possible – you can you can do a lot with trash! Trash is complex!

## Kathrin Thiele Figuration and/as Critique in Relational Matters<sup>1</sup>

Figuration as a speculative relational technique for a different vision on and for the world is one of the most promising feminist in(ter)ventions toward an onto-epistemological methodology for feminist research and practice. And its genealogy, by which it has become one of the central (material) metaphors for a world-practicing-thinking-differently, is for me deeply connected to two feminist thinkers in particular: Donna Haraway (feminist technoscience) and Rosi Braidotti (feminist philosophy). Since the 1980s, both scholars have used and elaborated upon the concept of figuration throughout their work, and they have also influenced each other in these ongoing propositions of how figuration matters, both for critical thought and concrete living. In my current research project on “Relation(al) Matters,” in which I engage closely with conceptual issues of complex relationality as a primary condition(ing) of planetary existence, I use the following genealogy in relation to the conceptualization of figuration in Braidotti's and Haraway's work: introduced by Haraway in her “Cyborg Manifesto” in 1985, the cyborg can be read as one of the earliest speculative figures that Haraway *thinks-with*, being joined then by

1 A different version of this text has been translated into German for Angerer, Marie-Luise and Gramlich, Naomie (eds.), *Feministisches Spekulieren: Genealogien, Narrationen, Zeitlichkeiten*, Berlin 2020.

others, such as the trickster, the monster, the oncomouse, companion species, or, most recently, “Camille.”<sup>2</sup> This speculative, critical approach to knowledge production via figuration or figuring is taken up in Rosi Braidotti’s work on *Nomadic Subjects* in which she, in conversation with Haraway, builds her inquiry and dream of a different feminist subjectivity – the nomad(ic) – specifically on (re)figuring capacities.<sup>3</sup> She sees figuration as referring “to ways of expressing feminist forms of knowledge that are not caught up in a mimetic relationship to dominant scientific discourses.”<sup>4</sup>

In 2004, while reflecting again on the significant role played by different “feminist figurations” in her work, Haraway, on the occasion of the publication of *The Haraway Reader*, introduced further characterizations of the multispecies kinship of what she by then had coined “sf-figurations” – many of which have proven highly infective to various feminist discourses.<sup>5</sup> In her introduction, Haraway elaborates again on the function of thinking with figurations. The following passage captures the powerful dimensions of figures and figuration as a feminist (methodological) practice that she considers here:

Figures collect up hopes and fears and show possibilities and dangers. Both imaginary and material, figures root people in stories and link them to histories. Stories are always more generous, more capacious, than ideologies; in that fact is one of my strongest hopes. I want to know how to inhabit histories and stories rather than deny them. I want to know how critically to live both inherited and novel kinships, in a spirit of neither condemnation nor celebration. I want to know how to help build ongoing stories rather than histories that end. In that sense, my kinships are about keeping the lineages going, even while defamiliarizing their members and turning lines into webs, trees into esplanades and pedigrees into affinity groups.<sup>6</sup>

Before engaging more closely with the specificities of figuration, allow me once more to jump into the work of Braidotti. In 2011, when rewriting her *Nomadic Subjects* for the second edition, Braidotti also again stressed the immense significance of figuration for her as a critical and transformative tool for feminist research and practice. She further explained that figurations should not be read merely as “figurative ways of thinking,” but they should

2 Haraway, Donna J., *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York 1991; Haraway, *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan@\_Meets\_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience*, London 1997; Haraway, *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis 2008; Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham, NC 2016.

3 Braidotti, Rosi, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, New York 1994.

4 Braidotti 1994, p. 75.

5 Haraway, Donna J., *The Haraway Reader*, New York 2004.

6 Haraway 2004, p.1.

be considered “materialistic mappings of situated, embedded and embodied, social positions.”<sup>7</sup> In a specific subsection of the introduction to the book, entitled “Against Metaphor,” she argues directly for figuration as a critical feminist tool and project:

[T]he point is finding adequate representations for the sort of subjects we are in the process of becoming ... Nonlinearity and a nonunitary vision of the subject do not necessarily result in either cognitive or moral relativism ... I rather see nomadic subjectivity as both an analytical tool and a creative project aimed at a qualitative shift of consciousness that is attuned to the spirit of our age. The ultimate purpose is to compose significant sites for reconfiguring modes of belonging and political practice.<sup>8</sup>

Collecting what is given to us by these two thinkers as central to any critical and transformative approach to thinking as figuration,<sup>9</sup> the following can be crystallized from what has been presented so far: figures, according to Braidotti, have the capacity to free us from “*mimetic* relationships.”<sup>10</sup> Instead of assuming knowledge to mirror a given world (the logic of representation), figuration as a thinking technique is a “materialistic mapping,” and figuring is to be understood as worlding.<sup>11</sup> However, Haraway argues that if we think-with figuration, what becomes palpable is both their “possibilities and dangers.”<sup>12</sup> Figures are not universally “good.” Instead, they are meant to affect and make us aware of a concrete problem; they are material-semiotic creatures that help us sense the world – or at the very least some dimensions of it – differently. Thus, Haraway writes, figures “root” in a “more generous, more capacious” sense than “ideologies” do and, most of all, figurations are about “how to.”<sup>13</sup> What this means is that, while certainly important in their “what-dimension” (i.e., which specific figures are chosen does matter), figuration as a feminist critical tool engages the more structural

7 Braidotti, Rosi, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, New York 2011.

8 Braidotti 2011, p. 11.

9 For further elaboration on how I use “feminist speculation,” see the collaborative work on the issue in Cecilia Åsberg, Kathrin Thiele, and Iris van der Tuin, in which we write that “[t]he question of the speculative and the methodology of speculation act therefore at the very core of feminism: feminism (in such strong sense) must open a *terrain*, from which it then jumps or leaps into the future, and from which – we would want to go that far – a different future becomes thinkable/imaginable, one in which responsibility, justice and equality play a major role.” See Åsberg, Cecilia, Thiele, Kathrin, and van der Tuin, Iris, “Speculative *Before* the Turn: Reintroducing Feminist Materialist Performativity,” in *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2015, pp. 145–172, here p. 154, emphasis in original.

10 Braidotti 1994, p. 75.

11 Braidotti 2011, p. 4.

12 Haraway 2004, p. 1.

13 Haraway 2004, p. 1.

“how-dimension” of the complex processes of what I want to call “wor(l)ding.” For Haraway, this means “how to inhabit ... [to] critically live ... [to] keep on going”<sup>14</sup> – how not to end stories, but instead defamiliarize and *queer* our senses by introducing other ways of seeing, thinking, and doing.

To use figuration for critical thought-practices is thus a tactic, if you will, to open up alternative horizons and becoming-other subjectivities. This is also why figures are not just about a different rhetoric (in the sense of “mere words”). Braidotti’s choice of the title “Against Metaphor” makes this unambiguously clear. Yet, if figurations and the creation of figures are nonetheless to be taken as metaphors – and they inevitably will because, most of all, we speak here of *textual* creatures – then, as both Braidotti and Haraway repeatedly stress in their work, they need to be understood in a material or visceral manner: figurations are material-semiotic wor(l)dings. As literal “worldly practices,” they are embodied and “in the flesh.”<sup>15</sup> Braidotti similarly explains figurations as an “analytical tool and a creative project aimed at a qualitative shift of consciousness” that hopes to reconfigure sedimented “modes of belonging” and hegemonic “political practice.”<sup>16</sup> This can only ever be meaningful as an embodied and materialist project.

I hope the passages above have already sufficiently communicated the promised *critical* potential of figuration, and that it can be seen how relating figuration and critique, and presenting figuration as a critical project with which to intervene into sociopolitical practice and invent other-wor(l)ding practice, is significant for feminist projects. Figuration, in the sense presented here, is about the creation of different relations between words and things – between wording and worlding. Figures can be used for conceptual relations that are not based on the representational (categorical) split between the materiality of words and worlds.<sup>17</sup> Instead, they can be read as tools to produce thought;

14 Haraway 2004, p. 1.

15 Haraway, Donna J., and Nichols, Thyrsa, *How Like a Leaf: An Interview with Thyrsa Nichols Goodeve*, New York 2000, p. 106. It is important to stress here that due to the specific focus I take in this chapter – figuration as a critical methodology – I follow the genealogies of the concept of figuration only in Braidotti and Haraway. However, I want to emphasize that other feminist influences – especially from Black feminism and/or queer of color thinkers – matter significantly in the development of figuration as a feminist relational practice: the poetic styles of Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa, for example, or the thinking “in the flesh” by Hortense J. Spillers. See Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Berkeley 2007 [1984]; Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, San Francisco 2012 [1987]; Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in *Diacritics*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1987, pp. 64–81.

16 Braidotti 2011, p. 11.

17 I use this term rather than “representationalist” because I do not agree with the “-ist” ending, which suggests a negative and ideological connotation. My purpose here is to distinguish different approaches to how words and worlds are related. I do this in line with the Deleuzian argument for “a new image of thought,” “against representation.” See Deleuze, Gilles, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, London 1994 [1986]. Yet, I also want to warn

they constitute rather than they reflect. Figures intervene into the world; they *are*, and they do their work, by participating in the stories told instead of speaking from outside or beyond.

### Diffraction: A “New” Figuration of Critique

Thus far, I have presented some initial thoughts related to the matters and mattering of figuration and critique. I engaged with seminal examples from within the feminist tradition that suggest the critical potential of figuration as a materialist intervention and a material-semiotic technique in and for feminist critical thinking. However, in order to specify further the relation between figuration and critique, and to say more about how to read its critical potential as a relational mode, I now turn my attention to the question of how figuration – when taken seriously as a material-semiotic in(ter)vention – (must) also re(con)figure(s) critique itself. When claiming criticality as a significant dimension for the use of figuration in feminist thinking, it is important to understand what critique actually means. This should never be simply taken for granted, not least as, precisely in a time when polarization in the social field is growing, it is of critical significance to explicate how critique and criticality as in(ter)ventions into the here and now are understood.

It is here that diffraction as a “new” figuration of critique comes to the fore. As a queer feminist figuration of critique, diffraction can also be traced back to Donna Haraway, who introduced it into her writing in the 1990s in order to precisely shift what criticality itself is (or could be).<sup>18</sup> In her use of diffraction – inspired by a painting by the artist Lynn Randolph, who also already provided the figuration for Haraway’s cyborg – Haraway emphasizes

against over-simplistic presentations of what representation as representationalism supposedly is or does. This happens especially in some Object Oriented Ontology discourses (see discussion of this problem in Åsberg, Thiele, and van der Tuin 2015), when issues regarding the structural problematics of representation (I think here of Spivak’s seminal discussion in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”) are simply neglected as if “we” have/can overcome them. See Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, in Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind C. Morris, New York 2010, pp. 21–78 [1983]. Also, Barad’s use of “representationalism” – in her argument for an onto-epistemological/posthuman “push” to Butler’s concept of performativity – led, in some feminist new materialist contexts, to this questionable stand against representation. See Barad, Karen, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2003, pp. 801–831; Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham, NC 2007.

- 18 It is also important to emphasize this introduction of a different mode of critique via diffraction and feminist thinking because of Bruno Latour’s rather well-circulated essay on “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2004, pp. 225–248. However, Latour neglects to mention Haraway’s engagement with precisely (t)his question on the necessity to develop a different engagement with criticality and critical feminist thinking already in the 1990s.

that she wants to use the metaphor of diffraction as “another kind of critical consciousness at the end of a rather painful Christian millennium, one committed to making a difference.”<sup>19</sup> In this way, she brings diffraction into the feminist discussion in order to reformulate what is usually (also in feminist circles) taken to be the meaning of critical and the practice of critique – namely, to disagree, to take apart, to dismantle – and to give it another twist, in line with her overarching feminist project invested in ongoingness rather than ending histories, as discussed above. Diffraction, as a “new critical consciousness” – a “new” that must be relativized as being only new for and within specific contexts, namely the framework of the (Western) modern sciences – is a figure that, for Haraway, in relation to critical thinking, allows her to learn to count beyond two (the oppositional model of critique) and three (the dialectical model of critique), and thus to open criticality towards a *flourishing of difference that makes a difference*.<sup>20</sup> From here, we can also turn to one of the most recent uses of the figure of diffraction as critical in(ter)vention: Karen Barad’s agential realism that owes, as she herself writes, “as much to the thick legacy of feminist theorizing of difference as it does to physics.”<sup>21</sup> Drawing on the quantum phenomenon of diffraction, which figures a different “spacetime mattering,” in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* Barad explicates what she terms “ethico-onto-epistemology” via the two-slit diffraction experiment.<sup>22</sup> This she does in order to reinvigorate this different kind of critical consciousness – the one already stressed by Haraway when claiming diffraction as a figure to *think-with*.<sup>23</sup> In resonance with the earlier understanding, for Barad, diffraction “is not merely about differences, and certainly not differences in any absolute sense.”<sup>24</sup> Rather, what is at stake here is a different figuration of difference itself. As she argues, diffraction is both “about the *entangled* nature of differences” and “a *material* practice for making a difference, for topologically *reconfiguring connections*.”<sup>25</sup> Here, diffraction becomes visible as more

19 Haraway 1997, p. 273.

20 “Flourish” is a very precarious word to use when addressing the differential – i.e., the unequal or asymmetrically structured, exclusionary – social field. For an important discussion of this problematics that also builds on Haraway’s work, see Shotwell, Alexis, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*, Minneapolis 2016.

21 Barad, Karen, “Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart,” in *parallax*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2014, pp. 168–187, here p. 168. Without being able to go into further detail in this chapter, in this article Barad explicitly (via a multi-temporal diffraction pattern) traces her thinking of diffraction to Anzaldúa’s teaching and her significant work on *mestiza*, hybridity, and “mita’ y mita” (half and half) – “neither one nor the other, a strange doubling” (Anzaldúa 2012, p. 41), which Barad finds most fitting to deal with queer realities of quantum phenomena (see Barad 2014, p. 173f).

22 Barad 2007.

23 Haraway 1997.

24 Barad 2007, p. 381.

25 Barad 2007, p. 381, emphasis added.

than a metaphor, precisely in the above-mentioned sense, where I argued that figuration as a feminist critical tool is not a matter of words only.<sup>26</sup>

With Barad, this new critical consciousness – or critique as diffraction – is a delicate process of differentiation that is all about entanglement. It is a *complex relation(al) matter* – differentiation and/as entanglement – and no longer the classical figuration of critique, which sees its process as separative (oppositional) or as sublative (dialectical). Different from those classical critical maneuvers, the aim of which is to decide on things (i.e., to “end histories” as Haraway earlier argued), or which aspire to finally separate things out so that we know what is good and right (critique as moral judgment), criticality in a diffractive sense has a more disrupting potential in which transformation or shifting is key.<sup>27</sup> Critique as a diffractive procedure aims to listen to and trace heterogeneous histories so that new interferences can enrich theoretical and practical engagements with specific questions. All of this serves to think beyond the common conceptual (Western/scientific) logic of twos or threes. Interference patterns are in/determinate and therefore not a matter of prescription.<sup>28</sup>

In order to now unpack this different understanding of critique a little further, in the following I turn to a concrete practice in which such a transformed understanding of critique and criticality is central: the international humanities initiative Terra Critica: Network for the Critical Humanities.

### Critique and/as Diffraction in (and on) Terra Critica

The Terra Critica network was founded in 2012 at Utrecht University,<sup>29</sup> and since then it has developed into a lively platform with committed core

26 For further elaborations on the thought of diffraction as a promising theoretico-practical *ethos* of a different difference, see also Thiele, Kathrin, “Ethos of Diffraction: New Paradigms for a (Post)humanist Ethics,” in *parallax*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2014, pp. 202–216.

27 Regarding the quest of transformation and shifting as key, see also AnaLouise Keating’s book *Transformation Now! Toward a Post-Operational Politics of Change*, Chicago 2013.

28 See Haraway 1997 and Barad 2007. To stress in/determinacy here is very important in order to distinguish Barad’s quantum philosophizing from an understanding of it as a “new” thought system (*Denksystem*). For very insightful discussions on how thinking as a transformative force needs to depart from the Western image of thought as systemic thought-thought systems, see Édouard Glissant’s poetics (and philosophy) of relation (*Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing, Ann Arbor 1997; Glissant, *Philosophie de la relation: Poésie en étendue*, Paris 2009); and for an even more direct address of the problem of thought systems as the only image of thought valid to be called “thinking” in the West, see also Édouard Glissant’s *Introduction à une Poétique du Divers*, Paris 1996.

29 Birgit M. Kaiser and I founded the network in 2012 as a response to the pressures that were put on the humanities and critical scholarship – largely by neoliberalist market perspectives placed on the university, society and, in a broader sense, knowledge production itself. Working in feminist, queer, de/postcolonial, literary theory, we felt the need to counter this pressure, but we also realized that we need to reposition ourselves within critical cultural studies when addressing a world that we see as increasingly entangled in complex, systemic, asymmetrical, and/as relational ways.

members – or combatants – fighting to keep critical in(ter)ventions alive in an increasingly neoliberalized university system. Via its different local practices, the network reaches beyond academia and cooperates with contemporary art spaces in Utrecht and beyond.<sup>30</sup> I do not want to claim here that this rhizomatically unfolding initiative – and more concretely even our core group members – subscribes unanimously to diffraction as the promising new (feminist) figuration of critique. Yet, what I want to stress is that as a project whose aim is to re-examine critical thinking under the complex conditions of the twenty-first century, a strong concern for transformation – i.e., a concern for *figuring differently* – in relation to the open question of what critique actually is, provides the essential glue that holds all of our practices together.

The network understands its work as emerging from within a constellation of multifaceted connectedness and in complex asymmetrical global entanglements. Therefore, in this project we acknowledge actively and affirmatively that any evaluation and assessment, as critical work implies, must come about from within the constitutive processes of change and differentiation – via continuous feedback loops and multilateral negotiations. In order to not arrest, but make flourish, visions of change and transformation in contemporary thought and life, what is asked from us today is

a critical practice that affirms [its] situated nature ... yet dares to answer to the needs of *terra critica*: a world in critical condition, whose planetary connectivity calls for critical intervention and creative responses, neither relativistic nor universal, but with sustainable futures in view.<sup>31</sup>

Such self-understanding of how criticality is at work in our practicing of Terra Critica is, in this sense, well figured by diffraction, and in what follows I want to bring to the fore multiple dimensions that allow me to further specify how the turning to critique as a diffractive rather than a reflective approach matters to us.

As the guiding terminologies of entanglement, multidependency, and intra-activity for this project suggest, Terra Critica is predominantly a shared and collective endeavor. Every time we meet, we create spaces in which we build the in/determinate constellations with and in which we wish to work. We are never just multiple, contingent, or infinite – the recurrent practicing with core members plays a most relevant role in the network. Rather, the composition of each event or the way in which Terra Critica opens itself each time to the context wherein it manifests itself (in different academic contexts, in different geopolitical locations, but also in nonacademic public spaces such as

30 Terra Critica's collaborative partner in the arts in Utrecht is the nonprofit public art institution Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons. Together with Casco, since 2014, Terra Critica has organized, and continues to organize, regular "ReadingRoom" events (<http://terracritica.net/readingroom/>) (last access: April 25, 2019).

31 Terra Critica, [www.terracritica.net](http://www.terracritica.net) (last access: April 17, 2020).

contemporary art institutions), aims to create what I term here a *severality*. I borrow this concept from the feminist psychoanalytical thinker Bracha L. Ettinger, who in her theory of matrixiality speaks of severality as a diffractive space of shareability “that evade[s] the whole subject in self-identity, endless multiplicity, collective community, and organized society.”<sup>32</sup> What we aim for in *Terra Critica* are indeed immanent, earthly relations with each other, in which the individual expertise on chosen discussion topics is less important than the work on opening up to listen to the emergence of a more collectivized thinking together, beyond “the subject in self-identity.”

In its practice, *Terra Critica* cherishes a conversational or patterning way of engagement. Conversation – the literally hard work of transformation with/ in the presence of others (*con-vers-ing*) – is our most favored practice for a different critical atmosphere wherever we meet. Because it takes time to converse, the intensity of this mode enables the production of relational patterns of understanding, rather than mere reflection on positions previously established in (public or academic) discourse. The critical practice that *Terra Critica* aims for most of all is perhaps best expressed as a form of superimposition born of invention and intervention: an in(ter)vention. In our work, we neither look for the end of a debate, nor do we aim to find *the* solutions for a problem. Instead, by following our quite specific critical and/as conversational choreography, our concrete and thematically driven engagements with the question of critique and criticality hope for complex relational practices on *terra critica*; practices that help to work towards a shift in and for our (critical) consciousness. The actual work that is supposed to happen in this context depends entirely on the (in)corporeal permeabilities, indeed the very response-abilities to and with each other that we develop throughout the meetings themselves. It is in this way that the actual “critical limit-work” that each of us is able to give in, and to, the collective spacetime-mattering in the present matters the most – *it must work us, or it won't work*. Yet, if it works, the transformation we experience can no longer be characterized as solely epistemological. Rather, what is created by our being-thinking-together-and-with-each-other is an ethico-onto-epistemological in(ter)vention in the Baradian sense, in which “knowing is a material practice of engagement as part of the world in its differential becoming.”<sup>33</sup>

But I must pause here. I must ask: does my argument for the practicing of a different – diffractive – criticality in *Terra Critica* now not fall prey to the very logic of overcoming of, and opposition to, another tradition that figuration as a critical tool aims to undo? It is clear from this rhetorical question that it would be premature to conclude here the presentation of figuration as a *critical* relational practice. Instead, it is important to once more look deeper into the complicated matters of figuration in order to return with a shift

32 Ettinger, Bracha L., “Copoiesis,” in *ephemera: theory & politics in organization*, vol. 5 (X), 2005, pp. 703–713, here p. 704.

33 Barad 2007, p. 89.

more complex than any straight-line move “from-to” might suggest. For, if we want to seriously follow a figuring critical project that aims to interrupt exactly this sequentiality (the common positioning of knowing a “better place” or of “overcoming” that which is for what is to come, such as from appropriation to figuration; from a dualist to an entangled framework), we must turn to the question of “non-innocence” in and of figuring or relational matters.

### Non-innocence in and of Critical Figurations

To start by way of recapitulation: at the heart of my interest in figuration (and also in thinking *Terra Critica* within this context) lies a desire to manifest a more relational approach to thinking, knowing, and living. And yet, a *more* relational mode of production (be it in knowledge, economy, culture, or sociality) will not make the difference one seeks with it, until the hegemonic/Western thought structure of straight lines is also critically addressed and shifted itself; this teleological and progressivist “arrow of time,”<sup>34</sup> which also leads into a political imagination that invests in futurity merely as progress and the overcoming of what came before.<sup>35</sup> With this in mind, in a last step I want to return once more to the two exemplary feminist thinkers of figuration, Braidotti and Haraway, who, in this chapter, I think-with in order to explicate figuration as a relational, rather than an appropriative, mode of (knowledge) production. In order to reach the critical point I want to make, allow me once more to dive deeper into their particular tonalities, as a more relational practice via which to re(con)figure the hegemonic dichotomous, representational, and appropriative modus of (knowledge) production. Reading Braidotti and Haraway with and next to each other, and thus reading them diffractively, also yields insights into how their respective critical feminist projects take shape politically. We thereby arrive at their respective engagements with what I want to call an affective temporality – i.e., that context for and in which their figures work in order to relate otherwise. Following their suggestions more closely will also allow me to further flesh out why an awareness of “non-innocence” is so crucial when working towards more relational methods or techniques of inquiry.

Again, this issue of non-innocence is very closely related to Haraway’s oeuvre. So, let me start once more with some specifications from her work. Haraway never tires to stress the political necessity of not losing sight of what she (from her earliest work) calls the “partiality” and “situatedness” in every practicing of (knowledge) production: no position is innocent.<sup>36</sup> However, we also have

34 See Prigogine, Ilya, and Stengers, Isabelle, *The End of Certainty: Time, Chaos, and the New Laws of Nature*, New York 1997; Rovelli, Carlo, *The Order of Time*, trans. Erica Segre/Simon Carnell, New York 2018.

35 See Kirby, Vicki, *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large*, Durham, NC and London 2011; Muñoz, José Esteban, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York 2009.

36 Haraway 1991.

to be careful not to make too easy a claim of this possible situating of knowledge(s) – using partiality and situatedness as mere “locality.”<sup>37</sup> Haraway’s initial emphasis regarding figurations as linked to “possibilities *and* dangers” is what we can come back to here.<sup>38</sup> In a famous passage from “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism,” she explains what the possibilities and dangers, or the non-innocent (onto)epistemologies, imply:

A commitment to mobile positioning and to passionate detachment is dependent on the *impossibility of innocent* “identity” politics and epistemologies as strategies for seeing from the standpoints of the subjugated in order to see well ... “Being” is much more problematic and contingent. Also, one cannot relocate in any possible vantage point without being accountable for that movement. Vision is always a question of the power to see – and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices.<sup>39</sup>

If this important insight about the impossibility of “purity” – be it in relation to questions of knowledge, politics, or both – is brought to figuration as a critical in(ter)vention towards a more relational form of (knowledge) production, the way in which Haraway’s figuring in(ter)ventions can never just mean presenting solutions or findings, or even finding the ultimately “right” category or concept that closes the concrete ambivalence or messiness at stake, must be considered carefully. For Haraway, figuration is something that can be introduced as a problem of “intensity” (to use a Deleuzian expression). It is an acknowledgment of a foundational ambivalence that is also at stake when I speak of a different temporal order (in the above, I referred to it as affective temporality) in/with figuration as a methodological tool. Any simple move “forward” or any straight “turning to” a different positionality cannot suffice: visualizing practices, or telling “other stories,” will always also at the very least bring to the table the need for a conversation around the attached issues of exclusion and exclusivity, privileging and appropriation, and (structural) violence.

Yet, what matters here is that Haraway affirms rather than deplores this foundational ambivalence. This she also reveals in her most recent figuring: the imperative “to stay with the trouble,” which leads into *Staying with the Trouble* as an enabling horizon – something to live and learn with.<sup>40</sup> In one of her earlier public lectures, in which she already used this figuring formula and also linked it to a deconstructive (Derridian) temporality, Haraway stresses that staying with the trouble is about “inherit[ing] the past thickly in the present

37 Muñoz 2009.

38 Haraway 2004, p. 1.

39 Haraway 1991, p. 192, emphasis added.

40 Haraway 2016.

so as to age the future.”<sup>41</sup> When it comes to her figuring project, thus, the emphasis on a nonlinear, nonsequential, and nonprogressive temporal horizon is crucial. And this becomes even more poignant in the ultimate publication of *Staying with the Trouble*, in which she introduces her project as follows:

In urgent times, many of us are tempted to address trouble in terms of making an imagined future safe, of stopping something from happening that looms in the future, of clearing away the present and the past in order to make futures for coming generations. Staying with the trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future. In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful and Edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.<sup>42</sup>

I will come back to the details of this passage in a moment. In order, however, to allow again for a reading alongside each other and bring Braidotti's stance on the consequentiality of figuration as a critical tactic once more into the discussion, I want first to move to her work again. Braidotti's critical project carries a very similar concern as Haraway's, and yet when we look more closely into the presentation of the promising horizon of her feminist critical figurations, we can also register a difference in tonality. The passage below specifies Braidotti's in(ter)ventions of figures and figurations, and it argues in favor of different subject formations (nomadic, and more recently also posthuman). Yet, what we can see is that, when compared to Haraway, her figuring project is articulated with a much more positively liberating timbre. Thus, in the second edition of *Nomadic Subjects*, Braidotti elaborates that her figurations, as nomadic subjects, are intended as

creative expressions for the intensity, i.e. the rate of change, transformation or affirmation, the *potentia* (positive power) one inhabits. Following Deleuze's Spinozist formula we simply must assume that we do not know what a body can do, what our embodied selves are capable of ... Nomadic subjects are transformative tools that enact progressive metamorphoses of the subject away from the program set up in the phallogocentric format.<sup>43</sup>

41 Haraway, Donna (2011), "Staying with the Trouble: Becoming Worldly with Companion Species." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUSOvVBsX8g> (last access: August 28, 2020).

42 Haraway 2016, p. 1.

43 Braidotti 2011, p. 12.

While Braidotti is well aware of the ubiquity of power relations – in her terminology of *potestas* and *potentia* – when it comes to politically unfolding this foundational ambiguity in relation to power, her critical or political project nonetheless places greater emphasis on one side: “*potentia* (positive power).”<sup>44</sup> Thus, here we are indeed *moved away from* the subjugating/subjectifying *potestas*, and *towards* the different, subject creating *potentia*. Intensity is, of course, also in Braidotti, the measure of figurations, and this implies that what is suggested here is not a simple progressive narrative. Intensities are always a question of thresholds, dynamics, and very specific relation(al) matters. Yet, Braidotti’s clarity of a “we simply must assume that ...” and her stress that nomadic subjects are “enacting progressing metamorphoses of the subject away from ...”<sup>45</sup> also mobilizes an affective political investment into futurity as progress that is not to be found in Haraway’s “[s]taying with the trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future.”<sup>46</sup> I want to add that Braidotti stresses this goal to think with figurations as future-oriented for very obvious ethical and political reasons. Yet, in doing this, her work cannot but miss – at least to some degree – the foundational stress on ambiguity, or what I take as the non-innocence in and for all theoretico-practical propositions that Haraway holds on to. Braidotti’s nomadism (in as much as the posthuman in more recent works), willingly or not, also reproduces something of the arrow-like, progressive (affective) temporality, rather than creating itself in a more “chaotic” (to use once more Prigoginian terms) and “haunted” (with Derrida and Barad) timeframe or affective temporality, in which any taken-for-granted-ness of unity, direction, and progressive order is damaged.<sup>47</sup>

Now, nothing lies further from my intention than to end this text by way of positioning the different usages of figuration presented in this chapter in opposition to each other. Not only do I see such an argumentative move as

44 Braidotti 2011, p. 12.

45 Braidotti 2011, p. 12.

46 Haraway 2016, p. 1.

47 See Prigogine and Stengers 1997, and Barad, Karen, “Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTimeEnfoldings, and Justice-To-Come” in *Derrida Today*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2010, pp. 240–268. In this context, I would also like to refer the reader once more to Édouard Glissant’s decolonial thought of relation in which he frequently uses the terminology of “chaos” as an opening horizon for relationality (*le chaos-monde*), and from there also moves towards his favored *pensée de la trace* as a radical (in its literal etymological sense of reaching the root) shift to unwork the colonial, Western, classical order of thought (see Glissant 1996). A reference to Caribbean philosopher and cultural critic Sylvia Wynter might be illuminating here as well, whose work is unique in rigor when she claims that any “overturning” (of the colonial order) has to mean a systemic shift linked to autopoiesis. See Wynter, Sylvia, “The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoietic Turn/Overturn, Its Autonomy of Human Agency, and Extraterritoriality of Self-Cognition,” in *Black Knowledges/ Black Struggles: Essays in Critical Epistemologies*, ed. Jason R. Ambrose and Sabine Broeck, Liverpool 2015, pp. 184–252.

pointless from a diffractively critical perspective, but positioning the issue in this manner would also misinterpret the relation(al) matters that these two exemplary figures in the feminist arena precisely share with each other. Yet, the reason why I wanted to reach this point and draw attention to specific differentiations between Haraway's and Braidotti's theoretico-political propositions is to bring to the fore the almost inevitable fact – something I experience whenever I am part of the Terra Critica initiative – that when conclusions are drawn from critical projects, these present themselves again within a progressivist horizon that cannot but oppose itself to that which it also cannot but want to overcome. Perhaps when we emphasize the in/determinate potential of “what a body can do,”<sup>48</sup> we no longer have the strict either/or framing in place that scientific positivism or ideological critique both rely on. Still, in every critical project there lies the danger of remaining wedded to the narrative horizon of linearity and progression – the straight line in which a before and an after matter in terms of what, how, and which relations are made. This critical crux – the conundrum of non-innocence in relation(al) matters – is precisely what I wanted to foreground in this chapter: to im purely *stay with* a figuring critical in(ter)vention and not to fall again into the progressive logic (i.e., one that bases itself on overcoming one thing by another) so dominant in how “we” tell stories; to keep doing the systemic work of shifting and rewriting knowledges.<sup>49</sup> This is a relational matter, theoretico-politically so important, yet also always so ambivalent. Its motivating critical question of “how to make a difference,” intrinsically interested in futurity, turns out to be answered quite differently than might have first been expected.

To bring this insight back once more to the practice(ing) of the Terra Critica initiative: the thematic framing of each of our events – i.e., the “what” we discuss – is important. Whoever participates in Terra Critica is above all interested in the critical work done in theoretico-practical and artistic form(ation) s. And yet, Terra Critica as a body of severality is not after the Truth (capital letter “T” intended) of the subject matters in focus, with the wish to establish itself as the powerful critical apparatus measuring the world. Instead, in a rather different sense of “being after,” Terra Critica is after the very practicing of critique and criticality in the spaces it creates. It is the relational *thinking together* in view of current critical matters itself; the listening to each other for long stretches in our conversations; the reading to and with each other; and therefore again, the listening to each other. It is also the continual combat regarding the matters at stake, a fighting *with and along* each other, that transforms individualist relations of one against the other. Such specifically diffractive and experimental critical working trains us in the ethico-political thinking craft to punctually disrupt and to slowly *unwork* the inherited and

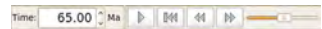
48 Braidotti 2011, p. 12.

49 Wynter, Sylvia, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument,” in *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2003, pp. 257–337.

sedimented canon of critique. Unworking (resonating with Spivak's unlearning) implies a *staying with* critique's troubled legacy. Yet, it does so in a way that also enables us to re-turn (to) it differently.

## Possible Bodies (Helen Pritchard, Jara Rocha, Femke Snelting) We Have Always Been Geohackers

The Anthropocene should go in a bug report, in the mother of all bug reports. It is hardly an uncontroversial concept.<sup>1</sup>



Detail of Gplates main interface (timeslider)

Possible Bodies is a collaborative inquiry into the concrete and at the same time fictional entities of so-called bodies. The research collective asks what material-cultural conditions of possibility render “bodies” *volumetrically* present, specifically in the context of technologies and techniques of 3-D-tracking, modeling, rendering, and scanning.<sup>2</sup> Although different volumetric technologies are situated in specific domains and regimes, their knowledge practices persistently affect and confirm each other. Possible Bodies has grown convinced that this circulated unfolding contributes to the crystallization of *standard operations* that are primarily informed by a hegemonic interest in efficiency, control, probability, and optimization. In response to this we propose that these *standard operations* call for there to be an affirmative form of responsibility-taking, one that might generate other figures and operations.

Triggered by a lack of trans\*feminist experiments with volumetric geocomputation techniques and the necessity to engage with a counterhistory of geologic relations, the *Underground Division* of Possible Bodies recently took a leap of both scale and time, which implicated a jump from inquiries into the field of body politics to considerations of geopolitics. Together with a group of companions participating in “Depths and Densities,” a workshop in the context of transmediale festival 2019, we moved from individual somatic corporealities (or zoologically-recognized organisms) towards the so-called

1 Rocha, Jara, “Depths and Densities: A Bugged Report,” in *Transmediale journal*, 2019, <https://transmediale.de/content/depths-and-densities-a-bugged-report> (last access: October 2019).

2 Possible Bodies, “The Possible Bodies Inventory,” <https://possiblebodies.constantvzw.org> (last access: July 2019).