Matter, Freedom and the Future: Reframing Feminist Theologies through an Ecological Materialist Lens

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1.1 Introduction

In the wake of second wave feminism, feminist theologies have taken a variety of approaches to discourse and experience, from critiques of patriarchy and androcentrism, to emphases on women’s bodies and experience, to more subtle affirmations of the possibility of divine becoming in the feminine. From their mostly western (white) liberal beginnings, feminist theologies have expanded with some humility, but perhaps not enough, to give space to and to embrace liberationist, womanist and postcolonial perspectives, in approaches that note the multiple dimensions of women’s experience, where race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality and location intersect. Ecological feminism adds a further dimension, exploring critical links not only between women’s embodiment and the materiality of Earth and cosmos, but also between oppression of women and indigenous peoples and ecological destruction (see, for example, Cuomo 1998; Eaton and Lorentzen 2003; Griffin 1995; Hawkins 1998; Hawthorne 2002; Mellor 1997; Mies and Shiva 1993; Salleh 1997).

An ecological focus, however, is not one more perspective to add to a multidimensional approach to feminist theologies. Rather it requires a fundamental shift of perspective, so that the focus of feminism, traditionally a human focus, is rethought within the frame of the materiality that constitutes not only humans but Earth and the cosmos we inhabit. In this essay, as a way of situating feminist theological discourses and experiences ecologically, I focus on a shared materiality as a basis for reframing human being, dwelling, agency and labour, in terms of co-being, habitat, co-agency and more-than-human labour.¹ This implies a rethinking of human freedom that has implications for how we frame feminist theologies in relation to the

¹ I use the term ‘more than human’ to refer to both human and other-than-human constituents of Earth and cosmos. ‘More than human’ includes humankind among many other beings (rocks, trees, mammals, mountains and stars) that are part of the multiplicity of Earth and cosmos.
future of Earth and humankind.

1.2 Feminist and Ecological Feminist Theologies

My formation as a biblical scholar and theologian working in an ecological materialist frame occurred mostly under the influence of the feminism of the 1980s, 1990s and more recently. Some highlights of this feminist and ecological feminist milieu in which my scholarly orientations took shape include the following:

2. Luce Irigaray (1989) takes issue with Schüssler Fiorenza’s ‘sociological’ approach; she champions sexual difference (Irigaray 1993a). She conveys a sense of the importance of the symbolic worlds we inhabit and the manner in which (let us say, western) women have been excluded from the divine in ways that have become deeply embedded in the psyches of women and men (Irigaray 1986; cf. Joy 1990). Retrieving difference as an epistemological and ontological strength, Irigaray opens up possible futures through new symbolic imaginaries in the present. Such imaginaries are oriented toward the possibilities of a divine in the feminine, of a mutuality between women and men at the very intimate core of their interrelationality, and of the thinking of the space between self and other as a space for love (Irigaray 1993b, 2002).
3. Julia Kristeva (1984, 1986a, 1986b) describes a relationship between language and the maternal. Language emerges in association with a separation from the maternal body and, at the same time, the maternal remains as a trace in language. Her ‘Stabat Mater’ describes the interplay between connection and separation, the otherness of both the mother and child (specifically, the son), in the event of birth, and links this to a broader ecclesiological imaginary (Kristeva 1986c).
4. Gayatri Spivak (1993: 148) describes the body in pregnancy as ‘prepropriative’; it is the ‘wholly other’, resistant to the patriarchal economy where woman is construed as the ‘man-consolidating other’.
5. Rosemary Radford Ruether (1992) links human violence and ecological destruction, so that patriarchy is critiqued not only for its domination of
women but for its Earth-destroying impacts. She argues for Earth-healing relationships of partnership between women and men. Ruether (1996) also points western feminists toward the work of women from the majority world.

6. Val Plumwood (1993, 2002), to whose work I will return below, describes a system of mastery underscored by a logic of colonization that has multiple nodes of oppression of women, indigenous peoples and Earth. Against the rationality affirmed in the ‘master’ paradigm, she urges an ecologically-attuned reason, which might underscore an environmental culture.

7. Ivone Gebara (1999) works in an ecological feminist liberationist frame and focuses on relatedness as a feminist theological interpretive key.

8. Sallie McFague (1987, 1993, 1997, 2001, 2008) revisions theology metaphorically, notably with a focus on the body of God, the loving or attentive eye and, more recently, the possibility of hope as practice in the face of anthropogenic climate change.

9. Catherine Keller, working from a process perspective and in dialogue with postmodern writers, opens up spaces for thinking theology otherwise. Biblical apocalyptic thinking continues as a trace in contemporary narratives of apocalypse, to which we need to bring a kind of counter apocalypse, a breathing space for hope (Keller 1996, 2005). Genesis 1:2 reminds us of an originary matter, or inchoate stuff, in partnership with the creator spirit. Critiquing the tradition of creation *ex nihilo*, Keller (2003) calls forth the potential of a plurality of becoming in creation, a kind of radical uncertainty filled with material possibility. Mystery becomes something to be tracked rather than received (Keller 2008).


11. Anne Pattel-Gray (1995) challenges white Christian feminists to rethink our privilege. Before Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2000) wrote of talking up to white women in the space of dialogue with secular feminists, Pattel-Gray (1995, 1998) was speaking up to the churches in Australia and reminding Australian feminist theologians and religious scholars that we are ‘not yet Tiddas (sisters)’, that colonial women in Australia have a long history of oppressing their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ‘sisters’ and benefiting
from their oppression (see also Skye 2007).


This sampling of feminist and ecological feminist thinking only touches on a rich and vibrant heritage of theological discourse, that invites us to engage in a theology that needs to be, as Heather Eaton (2000) argues in relation to the Earth Bible, ethically accountable, and that has social, cultural and political implications and effects. For an ecological orientation, these thinkers offer significant challenges and resources for:

1. not accepting without question received worldviews;
2. reconstructing not only our Christian origins but our origins and orientations as human beings as part of our more-than-human world;
3. recognizing our embodiment and so understanding our continuity with other mammals and more broadly with other things;
4. understanding that our being embodied is complex and diverse, and encompasses a range of human experiences of relationality, sexuality and language, that cannot be easily categorized;
5. putting at the heart of our work the knowledge that our work may be, and for many of us is, dependent on prior and ongoing injustices, such as colonization, and the privileges that we have accrued as a result;
6. opening spaces where we can stand with what we cannot know—the space of the other, the space between self and other—and which we can inhabit in hospitality and hope.

If feminisms offer so much to situated ecological thinking, why would I argue that something other is required?

My argument is that precisely in opening spaces to critique our received understanding of the world, feminisms, especially in an ecological feminist mode, push us beyond themselves. We are challenged not only to revision what it means to be sexually embodied human beings who are different in ways that queer theory might
press us to see as more than male or female, but also to revision what it means to be human beings at all in a more-than-human framework. The capacity to think beyond normative assumptions about sex, gender and sexuality can inform our ability to think beyond normative assumptions about being human. One way I suggest that we can do this is to take as foundational the materiality we share with all other things in the cosmos.

1.3 Matter, Materialities and Materialisms

Timothy Morton (2010) discusses the ‘ecological thought’, the thought of our interconnectedness with and embeddedness in this wider community of coexistent others, who or which are particular in space, time and relation to us. He criticizes the use of the term ‘matter’ for its non-specificity, its generalizing character (Morton 2012). While, as I argue below, ‘nature’ is an homogenizing term, the term ‘matter’ is not in the same sense problematic. ‘Matter’ pertains not to some overarching other-than-human category, but to ‘stuff’ in its minutaie and indeterminacy (in its intangibility at a subatomic level). ‘Matter’ refers to the stuff which constitutes each element and their complex agglomerations in the universe (stars, trees, water, air, individual animals, including human beings, and plants, minerals, tables, computers), each instance of these in their peculiar specificity and interrelatedness. ‘Matter’ is a term that supports the ecological thought, which Morton (2010) describes. Matter is the stuff that both connects us and constitutes each as uniquely itself.

There are several ways of theorizing matter and materiality that may be useful for the task of describing an ecological materialism. John Bellamy Foster (2000: 21-31) traces the rise of materialist views in science and philosophy in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England and France, views often seen at the time to be in conflict with Christian views of God. These materialists came to an understanding that the physical universe operated under its own laws, and that these laws, adequately understood, could offer sufficient explanation, for example, for the operation of mind, without appeal to a supernatural end for humankind. Among such potentially ‘heretical’ materialists was Charles Darwin, whose articulation of the theory of evolution unsettled notions of humankind as the end of a great chain of being, and affirmed connections between humankind and other species.

Karl Marx took this scientific and philosophic materialism in a different
direction. Foster (2000: 53) describes an Epicurean materialism that was more than mechanistic, but 'pointed to human cultural evolution as representing a kind of freedom for rational organization of historical life, building on constraints first established by the material world'. Working with, but departing from, this approach, Marx and Engels develop a practical materialism in response to the oppressive labour practices of the industrial revolution (Foster 2000: 53). In their view, labour constitutes an interactive or metabolic relation between humans and 'nature' (Foster 2000: 158). Under capitalism, the worker is a commodity, alienated from the product of her or his labour, since 'capital is stored-up labour', moreover, it is labour stored up as private property (Marx 1959: first manuscript). While there seems to be more focus on the human than on matter per se, the emphasis on the relationality of labour, and its meaning within economic and social institutions, suggests a framework for rethinking human engagement with materiality. Importantly, Foster (2000: 254) argues, we need to address 'the issue of the relation of the materialist conception of nature to the materialist conception of history (that is, of the alienation of labor to the alienation of nature)'. For Foster (2000: 254), this linking of the alienation of labour and the alienation of 'nature', is more than a question of whether 'nature' is dominated and abused for 'narrow human ends' and more than a question of whether human existence can in a sense transcend these alienations so that 'the alienation of human beings from nature and from each other will be no longer the precondition for human existence'. Rather, the primary issue is that the alienations of labour and of 'nature' imply the alienation of 'all that is human' (Foster 2000: 254). The implication is that an ecological materialism requires a rethinking of what it is to be human.

Simone de Beauvoir (1953, 1996) develops this historical materialist tradition in a feminist direction. Her work on 'old age' offers Sonia Kruks (2010: 269-75) a paradigm for thinking about the complex material conditions of human experience. Beauvoir (1996) exemplifies a nuanced understanding of the way in which material conditions—such as the corporeal limits of an aging body, the production (or construction) of aging bodies in discourse, and a society's treatment of aged persons—work together to produce the experience of 'old age'. Beauvoir 'focuses our attention on the confluences, mutual mediations, and interconstituencies of diverse

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2 William Cavanaugh (2008: 35-47) applies this concept of alienation to contemporary consumerist economies, in which consumers are alienated from the things they consume or use in three ways: from products, production and their producers.
forms of materiality—on bodies, the structures of worked matter in which we live and act, and the cultural and discursive media we produce’ (Kruks 2010: 262). Beauvoir’s nuanced treatment of the materiality of aging offers a model for attending ‘non-reductively’ to ‘diverse genres of materiality’, aware of ‘their confluences, mutual mediations, and interconstitutive effects’ (Kruks 2010: 276). An ecological materialism must likewise attend to diverse genres of materiality, including, but not exclusively, the historical (or practical) materialist mode. Such attentiveness will take account not only of the interdependence of humans and other animals with a wider Earth community for their sustenance and flourishing, but also of the toxic effects of materials such as asbestos and lead, and the intersections of harm on humans with, for example, their economic and socio-cultural status. However, it will go beyond these interrelationships (beneficial and dangerous) to consider a wider materialist frame in which relationship to human well-being is one aspect of the interrelationality of matter.

1.3.1 A Materialist Frame and Matter-Spirit Dualism

Plumwood’s (1993) critique of system of mastery is germane to this ecological materialism. A logic of colonization has characterized a dominant mode of western rationality, where women, slaves, the body, animals and matter are opposed to, and hyper-separated from, men, master, the mind-soul-and-spirit, humans and spirit (again) in a system of thought and practice that valorizes the latter set. In each set the elements are identified with one another: women with slaves, bodies, animals and matter, and men with mastery, mind, soul, human being and spirit (Plumwood 1993: 41-68). Mapped onto this is the theological presupposition that the divine creator and heaven are on the male side; the created and Earth are on the female side. This mapping resonates with Schüssler Fiorenza’s (1992: 117) description of kyriarchy. For Ruether (1992: 198-99) the historical rise of technological control over nature occurred at the same time as European colonialization; she contends that a logic of domination and deceit (parallel to what Plumwood describes as the patriarchal logic of colonization) is linked with a denial of death, narratives of world destruction and especially the ecological and social destructiveness of war. Greta Gaard (1997), writing of queering ecofeminism, argues that a constitutive erotophobia underpins the structures of dualism which Plumwood critiques.
Plumwood (1993: 47-55) describes some further aspects of this system, which I will outline briefly in relation to the master/slave paradigm, but we could replace master/slave with man/woman or human/nature or spirit/matter:

1. the work of the slave and the master’s dependence on the slave are kept in the background or denied (backgrounding);
2. the slave is the other, excluded from the category human which is defined by, and as, the category of the master (radical exclusion);
3. the slave is incorporated or assimilated to the master’s worldview as ‘lack’, as describing necessity and lacking the masterly quality of freedom (incorporation);
4. the slave is valued only in terms of his or her use by, or for, the master (instrumentalization);
5. slaves are seen as alike in that they are interchangeable; this alikeness can be reinforced by stereotyping or demonization (homogenization).

When applied to ‘nature’, we find in homogenization and stereotyping a denial of the complexity of nature, of the difference within nature, and of human continuity with nature. In this regard the word ‘nature’ is problematic in itself, as a generalizing term which masks the differences between the many constituents of Earth and cosmos, species, kinds, ecosystems, galaxies, and so on.

Plumwood (1993: 195) argues that because the system of mastery fails to account for the multiple others on which the ‘master’ depends—other than humans, providing the ‘raw materials’ for food, clothing, shelter and myriad other human relations and actions, and other humans, providing labour—it will collapse, since it neglects and/or denies the things which sustain the ‘master’. As I will suggest later, the notions of labour and agency can be extended beyond human frameworks, so that humans are enmeshed in more-than-human frameworks of production and reproduction. Plumwood (2002: 218-35) looks toward this kind of shared material agency when she describes aspects of a possible materialist ecological spirituality.

Suspicious of spirituality in the framework of a matter-spirit dualism, she writes of ‘achieving more earth-friendly and counter-hegemonic forms of spirituality’ that honour ‘the material and ecological bases of life’ (Plumwood 2002: 229). Such spirituality will be ‘counter-centric in affirming continuity and kinship for earth others
as well as their subjecthood, opacity and agency. It will be dialogical, communicative, open to the play of more-than-human forces and attentive to the ancestral voices of place and of earth’ (Plumwood 2002: 229). Elsewhere, Plumwood (2008) explores ways in which this relationship to place is multiple; we are not only interrelated with (and responsible to) the place or places we inhabit, but all those places and their constitutive agents (including humans) on whose productive and reproductive labour we depend must also be accounted for in our attentiveness to place. Ignoring the complexity of our relationships to multiple places is part of the ‘dematerialization’ of commodity culture, that is, the process of alienation (of becoming less and less in touch with) the material conditions that support our lives.

1.3.2 Material Agency

This ‘dematerialization’ extends to the way in which we ignore the complex factors involved in human agency and act as if we act alone. Jane Bennett (2010: 34) takes up a notion of material agency and questions the assumption that other-than-human things are without agency, or that their impacts and acts should be described as qualitatively different from human impacts and agency. To speak of ‘material agency’, she proposes, will be a strong ‘counter to human-exceptionalism, to, that is, the human tendency to understate the degree to which people, animals, artifacts, technologies, and elemental forces share powers and operate in dissonant conjunction with each other’ (Bennett 2010: 34). She offers the following example:

The sentences of this book also emerged from the confederate agency of many striving macro- and microactants: from ‘my’ memories, intentions, contentions, intestinal bacteria, eyeglasses, and blood sugar, as well as from the plastic computer keyboard, the bird song from the open window, or the air or particulates in the room, to name only a few of the participants. What is at work here on the page is an animal-vegetable-mineral-sonority cluster with a particular degree and duration of power (Bennett 2010: 23).

As I have discussed elsewhere, in an ecological context, the question of agency needs to be understood in a wider more-than-human framework, where particular human social structures intersect with the sociality of the more-than-human habitats in which
those structures subsist.3

When a human acts, for example, to form a pot on a potter’s wheel, the action of making the pot occurs within a contextual field in which the qualities of the clay, the technology of the wheel and the place of work are integral to the making of a particular pot (Malafouris 2008: 33). The intention to form a pot is elicited from, and actualized by, a ‘world of things’ as an engagement with the possibilities their materiality and material situation affords (Malafouris 2008: 33; see also Bennett 2004: 365-67). More negatively, for example, when a human or a company acts to pollute a river, the properties of the waste and the water and the geography and flow of the river, each contribute to the ‘world of things’ in which the pollution is actualized. Moreover, the polluting act may be a by-product of an act of which the governing intention was not to pollute but to dispose of waste. While the intention is not tied directly to the effect, the responsibility for the action is, precisely because the intending agent does not adequately account for the more-than-human contextual field of the action. With more complex actions, it may be that the intending agent cannot wholly account for the more-than-human contextual field of the action. In all these contexts, from an ecological perspective, the concept of agency finds a focus not in an individual entity that acts, but in the process of enactment, distributed in ‘collectives of humans and nonhumans’ (Knappett 2008: 140, 143; see further Law and Mol 2008; Jones and Cloke 2008).

This focus on agency as process unsettles the active/passive dualism that maps onto the master/slave dynamic, because an entity that is acting can at the same time be acted upon. Moreover, just as Plumwood (2008) argues in relation to the multiplicity of our relationships to place, every action of an elite is already a complex process of enactment by multifaceted (usually unacknowledged) more-than-human collectives.

1.3.3 A Materialist Freedom

An outcome of this understanding of human (and more-than-human) agency as a process of coagency is a need to rethink the relation between freedom, materiality and agency. Drawing on the work of Henri Bergson, Elizabeth Grosz (2010) rethinks the idea of freedom. In what might resonate with Ignatian understandings of freedom, she

3 See my discussion of material agency in Elvey (2009a, 153–54), from which the following paragraph in large part comes; see further Elvey (2011a, 12–14, 179).
argues for a move from a focus on ‘freedom from’, that is strived for within political and social contexts of oppression such as patriarchy, to a focus on ‘freedom for’, ‘where freedom is conceived not only or primarily as the elimination of constraint or coercion but more positively as the condition of, or capacity for, action in life’ (Grosz 2010: 140). ‘Freedom from’, Grosz (2010: 141) argues, ‘remains tied to the options or alternatives provided by the present’. In this regard, to rethink freedom we need to rethink our relation to time. ‘Freedom for’ becomes a capacity to act and in acting to transform oneself, even while one’s action is constrained to greater or lesser extents by external factors, such as social situation and past experience.

For Grosz, the idea of ‘freedom for’ has links with Irigaray’s (1986, 1989) notion of becoming, so that the subject who enacts freedom for, is a ‘subject-to-be’, a subject-in-becoming. ‘Freedom for’—and the subject-in-process enacted in this sense ‘freely’—is always an exercise of agency ‘within and through the materiality that life and the nonliving share’ (Grosz 2010: 142). Occurring in a process of more-than-human material coagency, free acts are free insofar as ‘they are integral to who or what the subject is’ (Grosz 2010: 144). They both express and transform the subject, and express that transformation as a process of the subject-in-becoming (Grosz 2010: 146).

The capacity for transformation, integral to this notion of ‘freedom for’, is a characteristic of matter, of the material organization of things, including human bodies. This freedom is not limited to humans, but can be recognized in the capacity for choice exhibited in even ‘the most elementary forms of mobile life’, expressing ‘both the particularity of each species and the specificity of individuals within them’ (Grosz 2010: 149). Thus, Grosz argues:

[Materiality] is also the field in and through which free acts are generated through the encounter of life with matter and the capacity of each to yield to the other its forms and forces, both its inertia and its dynamism. Matter, inorganic matter, is both the contracting condition of determination and the dilating expression of indetermination, and these two possibilities characterize both matter in its inorganic forms and those organized material bodies that are
Arguing against a limited liberal feminist agenda that has focused on freedom from the constraints of patriarchy, Grosz (2010: 151) argues that freedom understood in this wider material context, not simply a context of historical materialism, but a context in which bodies are engaged materiality, in both time and space, is ‘not primarily a capacity of mind but of body ... linked to the body’s capacity for movement, and thus its multiple possibilities of action’. She sees this freedom as attained ‘through the struggle with matter, the struggle of bodies to become more than they are, a struggle that occurs not only on the level of the individual but also of the species’ (Grosz 2010: 151). What Grosz calls a ‘struggle with matter’ is a material coagency in which matter itself is ‘matter-in-becoming’.

A materialist framework suggests that ‘[f]reedom is the consequence of indetermination’ and ‘[i]ndetermination liberates life from the constraints of the present’, so that ‘the world itself comes to vibrate with its possibilities for being otherwise’ (Grosz 2010: 152-53). From a feminist perspective, the challenge becomes ‘how to enable women to partake in the creation of a future unlike the present’ (Grosz 2010: 154). Grosz does not here address the question of what kind of future we might ‘partake’ in creating.

1.3.4 Summary

Before I turn to this question of a future, let me summarize some of the preceding discussion. Firstly, I am discussing two basic materialisms: i) the material conditions of human lives understood in terms of just distribution of, and access to, goods such as food, shelter, clothing and adequate life-giving social networks and culture, and the alienation or otherwise of labour; ii) the materiality that describes human embeddedness in, interconnectedness and interdependence with, a more-than-human sociality. These two materialisms are not entirely separate, but the first resonates more with an historical or practical materialism and allows an ecological extension from
social justice to environmental or ecological justice. The second is the wider frame which potentially decentralises the ‘human’ and understands the material embeddedness of humankind as one instance of wider more-than-human materialities and material agencies. While Grosz does not take a specifically ecological perspective, her discussion of freedom, as does Bennett’s discussion of agency, fits this second frame. In this second materialism social justice becomes an instance of ecological justice, notwithstanding the tensions that arise when deciding who or what might benefit and who or what would be harmed by a particular action for ecological justice.

Secondly, the notion of the material basis of human being and action has social, political and theological implications precisely in regard to the question of ‘freedom for’ raised by Grosz, and its relation to a future unlike the present. Morton (2010: 135) writes of ‘forward thinking’, saying: ‘The ecological thought hugely expands our ideas of space and time. It forces us to invent ways of being together that don’t depend on self-interest... [O]ther beings elicited in the ecological thought ... compel us to imagine collectivity rather than community—groups formed by choice rather than necessity’. In Plumwood’s (1993: 43) description of dualism, necessity appears on the side of matter and freedom on the side of spirit. Both Grosz and Morton offer materialist approaches that destabilise this hyper-separation of necessity and freedom and see choice emerging in and through material relations, choice as a capacity of matter.

1.4 Freedom and a Future Unlike the Present

In a particular way, climate change concerns human freedom and the possibility of a future unlike the present. For Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009), notions both of the future and human freedom are unsettled by the capacity of humans to effect the Earth on a geological, not only a biological, scale through human-induced (anthropogenic) climate change. Chakrabarty (2009) argues that human history and ‘natural’ history can no longer be separated, because while humans have always affected other than humans, it is now the case that as a species humans have the capacity to affect Earth itself on a geological or planetary scale, through human-induced climate change. Some scholars are calling our era the Anthropocene, an era characterized by the geological agency of humans, because as a species we are acting as a geological agent of mass extinction.
The flow-on effects of extinctions of species, and changes in climate, on the human species itself cannot be predicted with any degree of certainty. These uncertain effects nonetheless highlight the finitude of both the species and the planet; thus for Chakrabarty (2009) the way we think of the future is changing. Moreover, this geological agency of humankind, albeit enacted more by elites than others, is to a significant extent related to Enlightenment, colonial, industrial, technological—and their ‘post’ (e.g. post-colonial)—pursuits in the name of human freedom. While the actions of converting fossils, stored in the Earth’s crust, into fuels then into greenhouse gases in the atmosphere have been undertaken by elite humans more than others, it is as a species that humans have become capable of a kind of geological agency. This is complicated by the fact that this geological agency has a feedback effect in that it will exacerbate the rich-poor divide, and the aspiration toward freedom from injustice, that in part accompanies it.

For Chakrabarty while globalization and capitalism, in its changing forms over recent centuries, are implicated with anthropogenic climate change, the issue is bigger than capitalism:

the crisis of climate change is here with us and may exist as part of this planet for much longer than capitalism or long after capitalism has undergone many more historic mutations. The problematic of globalization allows us to read climate change only as a crisis of capitalist management. While there is no denying that climate change has profoundly to do with the history of capital, a critique that is only a critique of capital is not sufficient for addressing questions relating to human history once the crisis of climate change has been acknowledged and the Anthropocene has begun to loom on the horizon of our present. The geologic now of the Anthropocene has become entangled with the now of human history (Chakrabarty 2009: 212).

Chakrabarty defends the use of the generalizing term ‘species’ as being helpful in understanding what it is to have the collective capacity to act as a geological agent. What does this enacted capacity, that is already ‘entangled with the now of human history’, and thus the ‘now’ of women that comes under the purview of feminist theories and theologies, mean for our understanding of freedom for life? What does this collective capacity mean for the possibility of a future unlike the present, when
what climate change already promises is a future (potentially) tragically unlike the present? We need a framework to describe this, to see human freedom for life as also a freedom within the limits of the matter we are individually and uniquely, but also coexistentially, collectively.

1.5 The Materiality of Who We Are

Deborah Bird Rose and her colleagues write that:

The humanities have traditionally worked with questions of meaning, value, ethics, justice and the politics of knowledge production. In bringing these questions into environmental domains, we are able to articulate a ‘thicker’ notion of humanity, one that rejects reductionist accounts of self-contained, rational, decision making subjects. Rather, the environmental humanities positions us as participants in lively ecologies of meaning and value, entangled within rich patterns of cultural and historical diversity that shape who we are and the ways in which we are able to ‘become with’ others. At the core of this approach is a focus on the underlying cultural and philosophical frameworks that are entangled with the ways in which diverse human cultures have made themselves at home in a more-than-human world. In short, there is now a recognition that the whole world, at all scales, is a ‘contact zone’. The deepening environmental and social crises of our time are unfolding in this zone where the nature/culture divide collapses and the possibilities of life and death for everyone are at stake (Rose et al. 2012: 2).

In previous work, I have described a number of aspects of a materiality that might inform our understanding of ourselves as formed of and enmeshed, ‘entangled’, in the ‘stuff’ of the cosmos: material givenness; material agency; the materiality of texts, language and voice; material transcendence (Elvey 2003, 2005, 2008, 2011a, 2011b); and to these I would add, drawing on Wainwright (2012), the materiality of habitat; and drawing on Jean-Louis Chrétien (2004), the materiality of vocation.

Briefly, material givenness describes the materiality of bodies, pregnant bodies and Earth as material necessities for human life. This givenness resists a naïve essentialism because the underlying materiality of human life, even when bought and
sold through organ trading and human trafficking, retains a quality that is what Spivak (1993: 148) calls ‘prepropriative’ and Jacques Derrida (1994: 7) ‘aneconomic’. These necessities exist prior to, necessary for, and sometimes as the unacknowledged ground of, the economic systems in which they might be afforded an economic value.

Ariel Salleh (2009) argues that rarely, if ever, is the reproductive labour associated with the life-giving aspects of these grounds (Earth, bodies, pregnant bodies) afforded economic value. In contrast, even when kept below a just value, the productive labour that relies on these grounds for its raw materials, and the maintenance and renewal of its labour force, is included in economic accounting. Social justice and socialist movements for freedom from exploitative labour rarely include reproductive labour along with a revaluation of productive labour. The feminist accounting for reproductive labour, however, needs to expand to include not only the reproduction of the work force, but also the production and reproduction of the wider material conditions that make any work possible. If we are not to continue a necessity/freedom dualism mapped on to the passive/active, woman/man, nature/human dualisms that Plumwood (1993) and others critique, we need all the more to account for the wider reproductive materialities of labour, not only the productive ones.

This rethinking of the material ground represents a nuanced essentialism where givenness is gift-like, giving itself to myriad less and more complex forms of organization which we sometimes delineate as inorganic and organic. Both kinds of organized matter (organic and inorganic)—and we should leave open that they may not be as easy to delineate as we have imagined—are involved in processes of agency, such as human labour (both reproductive and productive, noting that some labour, such as the writing of a poem or the planting of a garden, may be both). The notion of material agency, or coagency, discussed above, recognizes that human productive and reproductive labours occur in the context of agency understood as a process shared across human and other-than-human constituencies, so that every work has multiple producers, some human, some other than human. One aspect that I have considered is the question of the materiality of texts (Elvey 2011a, 2011b). Enmeshed with this question are far broader questions of the relationship between matter and language, including the materiality of the voice, its corporeal production.

Briefly, Kristeva (1984) argues for the trace of the maternal in language. The severance (which is also a continuing connection) of the child and mother becomes
encoded uncannily in language (and texts) through what Kristeva calls the ‘semiotic’. The maternal is one instance and aspect of the material given. The separation from, and connection to, the mother, encoded in language as the semiotic, is part of a wider severance/connection of humans and their material milieus. I argue that the givenness of ‘the material’ might remain as a trace in language, precisely through the trace of the maternal, that is, the semiotic (Elvey 2011a: 28-43; 2011b). Through this uncanny quality of language and texts, the material ground of production and reproduction (including of language and texts)—the materiality of ‘stuff’, of human bodies, Earth and cosmos—can be traced (and may indeed actively ‘push up’ through a text; Wainwright 2012: 293; Rigby 2004).

The underlying principle is that the material ground and our material milieus precede and remain as a trace in our constructions of them, even as they and we both exercise coagency and are mutually transformed in our interactions, including discursive ones. The notion of habitat, which includes built as well as so-called ‘natural’ environments, becomes important for situating humans in our particular local material contexts (Wainwright 2012). The senses connect us with our material milieus. Voice, for example, is produced materially through the interplay of corporeal processes and qualities of air, and could be understood as a material mediation of the breath (itself material) producing sound that is picked up by the organ of hearing, the ear. Voice also has a wider meaning and takes us into that space where the inner life is produced in, and produces, certain material transformations.

In this focus on materiality, is there room for spirituality, for theology, for something like a divine other? Rather than imaging the divine or the sacred as purely immanent in matter, and its organized forms, I suggest that matter itself has a quality of transcendence, a material transcendence. Matter itself is not fully graspable or knowable and carries in its otherness—even the otherness that is the material constituency of human beings—a calling forth and an openness to its being otherwise, that is, to its becoming-other (Elvey 2008, 2009b). In this sense, matter is always matter-in-becoming. In this frame, divine transcendence is a kind of uncanny immanence at the point where a material transcendence and the alterity of the divine meet in things, from the subatomic realm to the macro organization of a forest, a mountain or a star system.

Attentiveness to a material transcendence is a calling forth that resonates with the notion of vocation I want to extrapolate from Chrétien (2004: 19), who speaks of
existence as already a ‘yes’ to a call: ‘I have already responded when I respond’. For Chrétien (2004: 19), human response occurs within a world, ‘the inexhaustible chorus of which I am only one voice enduring perpetual inchoation’. In the materialist frame I am sketching, the ‘yes’ that humans already are is extended to all things. Taking this a step further, Deborah Rose (2011) describes the mutuality of a ‘yes’ between things, between bats and flowering gums for instance. This material interplay in which species cooperate for their mutual survival and flourishing is a joint affirmation, a response of ‘yes’ to ‘yes’. This description of a mutual responsiveness for the flourishing of each, draws on Plumwood’s two tasks: ‘to resitute the human within the environment, and to resituate nonhumans within cultural and ethical domains’ (Rose et al. 2012: 3). Moreover, it suggests that the notion of freedom, as a capacity to respond for a future imagined otherwise, may helpfully be understood in this frame of a mutuality of cooperative call and response grounded in our materiality and material embeddedness. It will also be necessary to recognize the complexities of more-than-human interactions, where mutual survival and flourishing are not necessarily the outcome, at least at the level of the individual.

1.6 Conclusion

I have outlined briefly some bases for a materialist reframing of feminist theology. A combined and extended practical materialism, while resisting the alienation of human labour, affirms and accounts both for other-than-human labour (often elided) and the reproductive labour (frequently unacknowledged) which has human and other-than-human aspects. In this practical materialist frame, the labour involved in producing feminist theological outputs is more-than-human. Moreover, an underlying materiality supports any human enterprise, including the making of theology. This could be a trite observation, but I hope I have indicated that in concepts such as material organization and coagency, habitat and vocation, the material basis of our being anything, including feminist theologians, has profound implications for our imaginary as theologians.

It was surprising to me, as I prepared this essay, that freedom emerged as an important uniting concept. I have discussed freedom before in the context of the Lukan usage of the term *aphesis* (liberation and forgiveness) and pointed toward a kind of material grace, as a ‘capacity of things to shift toward freedom ... the freedom
to act as we are ... to know ourselves as participants in a more-than-human *ecos* where we continue to learn what it means to exercise our co-agency well’ (Elvey 2009a: 170). This concept of a materially-based freedom can be developed more fully.

*To act as we are* means to understand ourselves as already materially engaged, as called forth, as already implicated in all kinds of reproductive and productive labour, some of it unacknowledged, some of it alienated, some of it part of a mutual ‘yes’ with other things that is oriented toward mutual sustenance and flourishing. The freedom to respond in chorus, acting *as we are*, links us to the future in several ways. Two important ones are these: i) the future of climate change, which will likely be other than we intended and perhaps beyond our capacity to redress, and which tells us that we have become, as a species, an agent on the scale of Earth’s climatic and geological systems themselves; ii) the future we might yet hope for or imagine, toward which we might exercise the kind of transformative ‘freedom for’ that Grosz (2010) explores.

If we think of our collegial theological enterprises, we need to take into account both futures. The first describes the habitat in which we will labour to produce theology, as members of a species in cooperation with other species. We will continue to be cognisant of the dynamics of gender, social and cultural situation and bring this understanding to an analysis of the unequal impacts of climate change on particular human groups as well as on other species. We will also need, in taking account of this first aspect of the future, to do theology contemplatively, attending to matter, bodies, senses, habitat, texts and so on, in ways that enable us to know ourselves otherwise, not only as members of a species that is a geological agent, but recognizing what this means in terms of our connectedness with other things, a connectedness that is vulnerable and interdependent, as well as powerful. The second takes us in the direction of thinking the collegiality of theology as a more-than-human collectivity oriented toward ‘new possibilities’ not only for collective life, but for how we as a species engage with the world.5

Feminist theology is, in my view, no longer an ‘endpoint’, if it ever was, for theological engagement. Rather feminist theology has opened up ways of being toward the world that enable us to see and imagine ourselves and our world otherwise, to affirm our being one species among many with particular gifts and challenges.

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5 The term ‘new possibilities for collective life’ is borrowed from Eric Santner (2006: 58, 133).
While feminists will continue to strive to ‘dream forward’, a term Rosi Braidotti
(2010: 217) uses when she evokes an ‘ethics of nonprofit’ at the level of being, while
we will continue to enact transformations for humans, especially women unjustly and
violently treated, while we will continue to intervene in discourses that frame women
and many others as available to be abused, we must also recognize the partiality of
feminist theories and theologies as human projects. We can then also appreciate the
gift feminist approaches are to a wider Earth community as modes of discourse that
open spaces for thinking beyond themselves, for thinking, loving, engaging in the web
of material relations in which we are who we are.

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