

**Feminism After Gaia: Care and the Posthuman**

Nathanja van den Heuvel

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**Abstract**

The prior issue of *Krisis* (42:1) published *Critical Naturalism: A Manifesto*, with the aim to instigate a debate of the issues raised in this manifesto – the necessary re-thinking of the role (and the concept) of nature in critical theory in relation to questions of ecology, health, and inequality. Since *Krisis* considers itself a place for philosophical debates that take contemporary struggles as starting point, it issued an open call and solicited responses to the manifesto. This is one of the sixteen selected responses, which augment, specify, or question the assumptions and arguments of the manifesto.

**Keywords**

Care, Feminism, Gaia, Nature-cultures, Posthuman

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Presumably, feminism has always-already been ecological. Presumably also, it should come as no surprise that explicit modes of ecofeminism would appear, combining the critique of masculinism with a concern for the nonhuman, followed by the more recent turn to nature and life in feminist environmentalism and the new feminist materialisms. As suggested by Colebrook, the concept of feminist emancipation harbours an implicit ecology (Colebrook 2014, 8). First, liberal feminists fought against the exclusion of a certain group of bodies from the rights of humanity in general, the argument being that in so far as one is human, hence finite, there cannot be pre-political mastery over any other being. Thus for liberal feminists, sexual equality follows from a refusal of transcendence. But importantly, this refusal of transcendence indicates an overcoming of mastery as such: *“If an appeal to humanity in general overturns any possibility of a pre-given political hierarchy, because all humans are born equally rational, then that same humanizing gesture will lead to a questioning of the human. By what right can humanity be declared to be definitively rational, definitively self-conscious or definitively social political?”* (8-9). Hence we enter the posthuman.

Presumably therefore, a feminist response to the Critical Naturalism Manifesto would start off with a “why only now?” For resentment it is however too late, as well as too late for philosophical debunking. For nature has already “returned by the force of its own repression,” states the Manifesto, or as Isabelle Stengers more stringently warns us, Gaia will not wait (Stengers 2015, 50). Today the stakes are indeed different. While explicit ecological and feminist environmentalism and the new feminist materialisms further the refusal of transcendence, Gaia, states Stengers, installs an “unprecedented or forgotten form of transcendence” in the heart of our lives, a transcendence that cannot be “invoked as an arbiter, guarantor, or resource,” but intrudes as “a ticklish assemblage of forces that are indifferent to our reasons and our project” (47). Although the transformations characteristic of the ecological crisis are the result of anthropogenetic changes, they arise from an environment over which humans do not have control.

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What must we do, if we are to live through the intrusion of Gaia? The authors of the Critical Naturalism Manifesto suggest the mode of response should be “to care.” But Gaia does not care about us, neither does she demand us to worship or to care for her. Gaia is a mother, however “an irritable one, who should not be offended, stemming from before the cult of maternal love, which pardons everything” (Stengers 2015, 45). For children of this mother it makes no sense to wait for her to do something for them, or to ask her what she wants from them and then just do it. Rather, read through Stengers, caring is to be provoked – in the attention to Gaia – toward new modes of thinking and acting in more-than-human worlds.

Taking seriously the invitation to think with the Critical Naturalism Manifesto demands further care with care. In one of her recent books, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*, María Puig de la Bellacasa explores the ethical and political significance of care for thinking in the more-than-human worlds of nature-cultures and technoscience. While Puig de la Bellacasa does not tell us how to care, as the ethics in her ethics of care do not refer to the realm of normative moral obligations, she nevertheless provides thorough insights in what it means to care. I present here the most relevant. First, to care is not to care for, but rather to care with; to care for presumes that the object of care and its needs are known. To care with, by contrast, is a speculative endeavour concerned with the potentialities (both human and nonhuman) of a given situation. Second, care is not something that must be added to the world, as if the world would lack care; rather, care is already there, however often in neglected practices. The “ethics” in the ethics of care is about a “thick and impure involvement in the world where the question of care needs to be posed” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 6). What this means is that care is inherently situated and normatively ambivalent. Third, and related, care is about remediating neglect. The ethicality in this is “about making us care for what humans, most of us, have learned to collectively neglect” (162). Fourth, care makes of ethics a hands-on, ongoing process of recreation, for to care is a doing, a life sustaining activity, an everyday constraint (160). Fifth, as an inherent affective practice, care might induce ethos transformation.

To sum up, care in more-than-human worlds is a speculative, critical-constructive, messy, situated practice that we must learn or relearn, and of which it would be foolish or even dangerous to think of as easy, but “suicidal to think of as impossible” (Stengers 2015, 50) or as a “why only now.”

## References

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## Biography

**Nathanja van den Heuvel** currently holds the position of PhD advisor of the Faculty of Humanities of the VU Amsterdam. In this capacity, she teaches within the graduate programme, coaches PhD candidates, conducts research on the topics of well-being, inclusion and social safety and develops research policies. Prior to that she worked as a University and College lecturer at Leiden University, Willem de Kooning Academy and ArtEZ AKI and was awarded her PhD at Leiden University with the dissertation “Towards a Feminist Playology. Social Sport Studies and the Limits of Critique”. Her research interests include, but are not limited by, feminist theory, aesthetics, the philosophy of play and eco-philosophy. Her professional experience outside academia has also deeply informed her scholarly persona. She developed a funded project on inclusivity in primary education, in collaboration with a social design bureau, the municipality of Rotterdam and diverse primary schools. In addition she is founder of OPA (Open Performance Academy) and has taken up many administrative roles, amongst others at the Society for Women in Philosophy and the OZSW (Dutch Research School of Philosophy).