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“I Started out as a Social Constructionist”: A Conversation with Myra J. Hird, Part 1

Interview by Rebecca Scott

As a student of Communication, I have come to understand the field as being principally concerned with the symbolic world. Thus we see cultural studies, news and media studies, and language studies and linguistics as defining traditions; discourse and textual analysis as defining methods; and social construction as a defining theoretical approach. Yet the field has been defined in a number of ways which can vary drastically or conflict with one another. Rather than seeing this as a serious problem of identity, I suggest that, quite possibly, this is Communication’s most productive feature. Being interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, or whatever you would like to call it, Communication has the distinct advantage of being relatively free from the binding constrictions of older, more established disciplines. This means the field is at the forefront of producing novel research.

Yet perhaps Communication, too, produces and reproduces its own disciplinary blind spots. For example, if the object of study is principally the symbolic, then where does that leave matter? In the field, we’ve become very good at viewing the world through the lens of social construction. Yes – there is matter, but it has no significance of its own, on its own. It only becomes significant through social and cultural processes, and in particular, by way of its articulation in language. In other words, humans grant meaning to nonhuman others. As an undergraduate in Women’s Studies, then a Master’s student in Communication, and now a PhD student in Sociology, I’ve become very well versed in social construction, to the degree that I have a conditioned non-response to matter in and of itself. Questions of matter are the entirely wrong questions. They are no matter. Behind questions of matter lurks biological determinism, technological determinism, positivism, and perhaps most dangerously, realism.

Matter sometimes makes an appearance in fields like anthropology and material culture studies, in which matter is figured as artifact. Artifacts are like indexes of culture and the social: their shape and form express human needs and values by way of a kind of “grammar”¹ that carries embedded assumptions. Matter also figures in the field of Communication in studies of technology. Like artifacts, technologies express culture and the social, as well as the idiosyncratic assumptions of individuals who design and use them. But these studies often place matter off-centre: artifacts and technology are usually understood in terms of a decidedly-human world.



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The “natural” world – the world of dirt, worms, trees, bugs, whales, water, atoms, Higgs bosons (maybe) – is left to the scientists. More specifically, the work of revealing the world through “scientific practice” is left to the scientists, while the work of deconstructing and critiquing that scientific practice is taken up by social scientists. We see our role as a check on science, a watchdog of their assumptions, their discourse, their ethics, and the implications of their work. Yet we tend to shy away from exploring, for ourselves, their objects of study.

In other words, social science tends to have two blind spots: the “natural” world is not a salient topic of study, and when it is, it is approached anthropocentrically.

What might it mean for us to take matter seriously, and not merely approach it as a backdrop to human interactions, a blank slate, or a non-thing? Certain approaches to science studies have attempted to do just this. Bruno Latour’s work is foundational. According to Latour, the social sciences have spent too much time focusing on the social and on culture, much to the detriment of scholarship – and to the detriment of our world.² He argues strongly against anthropocentrism, and instead suggests that we understand matter both as real and as having agency. Dr. Myra J. Hird, Professor and Queen’s National Scholar in the Department of Sociology at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario, Canada, is one scholar who has taken up this call, and who has made her own calls as well.

One will not find biological determinism in her work: on the contrary, Hird shows, by way of analyses of intersex and trans, chimerism, maternity, and presently, bacteria, the ways in which we can find, in nature itself, contestations of our own deeply held assumptions. For example, in “Chimerism, Mosaicism and the Cultural Construction of Kinship,”³ Hird argues that, contrary to heteronormative notions of kinship that rely on biological conceptualizations of “blood” or “bloodlines,” the phenomena of chimerism, the presence of two cell lines that are genetically distinct in one organism, and mosaicism, the same phenomenon expressed in patches of tissue throughout the body, demonstrate the ways in which kinship cannot be essentialized in this way. Hird writes,

Western notions of kinship are strongly imbued with heteronormativity ... [K]inship is understood culturally in terms of specific ideas about biology, which assimilates people's identity narratives within heteronormative frameworks. Chimerism and mosaicism challenge this heteronormative matrix in important ways by severing links

between biological “truth” and commonsense notions of kinship.⁴

In other words, nature itself may be a source of productive critique for feminist, anti-racist, environmentalist, and other kinds of ethically motivated work. Hird’s forthcoming book, *The Origins of Sociable Life: Evolution after Science Studies*, approaches bacteria and the “microcosmos” with such a spirit in mind, discussing, among other topics, the ethical implications of a world profoundly shaped by bacteria.

A social constructionist approach is very likely to beget a deep suspicion of the approaches to matter taken by Latour, Hird, and others. With this in mind, I sat down with Myra Hird in her office at Queen’s University to ask her, in Part I of this interview, about social constructionism and matter. Tacitly, this interview serves as a critique, but an offering too – one very much in line with the interdisciplinarity that is has characterized the field of Communication, and endowed its richness.

RS: I would like to ask you about terms you have used to describe your approach to your topics of study: neo-materialism, new materialism, and speculative realism. In your article “Re(pro)ducing Sexual Difference,”⁵ you note that Latour has suggested that these terms refer to approaches that attend to the “thingness of things.”⁶ I’m wondering what the significance is of these terms and how you’ve used them in your work.

MH: I’ve changed what I use, and I think that’s part of my own learning process. I think I can explain my use of those terms if I tell you a little bit about how I came to my present research [on bacteria]. So I started out very much firmly within a social constructionist camp focusing on discourse, and I did my PhD on violence in intimate adolescent relationships. I think for all intents and purposes that was a study that any good sociologist would recognize. It was firmly social constructionist: I looked at discourses, I looked at the ways in which young people construct violence, and in the end, the thesis became less about violence and more about gender. And I was looking at the ways in which violence plays out through gender. When I got to the end of that thesis, I felt like I had mined gender theory as much as I could, in some ways. I felt that I had a very firm grasp of a

social constructionist understanding of gender. Like a good starting-out academic, I did as much mining of that as I could.

So my research mode went from something that's very stereotypical, like heterosexual relationships, and then I looked at non-heterosexual relationships, and then I became interested in sexuality, and gender constructions, and I eventually moved into intersex and trans. And what interested me about those topics was less about identity, which is what most people do when it comes to trans and intersex – most people look at it in terms of these being non-normative identities, and how people with intersex conditions, people who identify as trans, people who don't identify as trans, and people who identify as transsex versus trans, come to construct an identity for themselves, and then how that identity does and does not coalesce with more normative identities – I wasn't interested in that at all. I was interested in how *anyone* constructs an identity and what I found interesting about intersex and trans was that both of these identities drew heavily on biology. And I use biology in an overarching sense including development, including evolution, and including genetics. So when I was studying intersex and trans, what I found very interesting was how those people who are constructing intersex and trans in the large umbrella sense were invoking biology to do so. And then how people who were troubled by intersex and trans identities were also invoking biology. So my whole public conversation with Tamsin Wilton⁷ was really about “what is the biological basis of masculinity and femininity?” Because what I found so interesting was that while at the same time that scholars were arguing that gender is completely discursive, *à la* Judith Butler⁸ – that we're interpellated into a psychical and governmentality notion of gender –

RS: And that there is no pre-discursive body –

MH: That's right, and though there is no pre-discursive body, everyone invoked a pre-discursive body anyway, whether implicitly or explicitly. And I was very curious about this and very bothered by this. It seemed to undermine their own arguments. And so I made it my business to find the myriad exceptions there are to normative biological notions of sex – not gender, but sex. Keeping in mind of course Butler's

whole thing about gender creating sex, I was interested in how gender creates sex – “after Butler.” It was at this point that I adopted Rosi Braidotti’s⁹ term “neo-materialism” or “new materialism” – that’s where I get this from. Elizabeth Grosz was doing the same thing; Rosi Braidotti was doing the same thing. And I later discovered Elizabeth Wilson, Vicky Kirby, etc., who I think are doing something else. But there was a group of feminist scholars who were doing what Braidotti calls “new materialism,” and what I understood that to mean was the attempt to understand gender through biology.

Now, I’ve since stopped using “new materialism.” Like in the book that I’ve just submitted,¹⁰ I don’t use the term at all. What I like about Braidotti’s work is that I think she is able to weave lots of different discourses together, and she’s able to weave science studies and science and technology studies into her work very well. What I don’t like about the work is that I don’t think it actually engages with biology at all. I think what she does – and I think indeed what Elizabeth Grosz does – is to accept mainstream evolutionary theory and development theory. I’ll give you a couple of examples. Rosi Braidotti, in *Transpositions*,¹¹ talks about sexual reproduction and cloning, and she criticizes new reproductive technologies for what she sees as doing something completely against a natural form of reproduction, which is sexual reproduction, which she says has been around for millions of years. Well, if she engaged with the literature, with evolutionary theory, she would know that it’s actually the inverse which is correct. Cloning, parthenogenesis, and – I would never say a-sexual – but non-sexual forms of reproduction, of which there are several, have been around for billions of years. Sexual reproduction of the kind that animals including humans engage in is a very recent phenomenon, and it’s peculiar amongst living organisms, and it’s a minority practice. And there are a number of times in her work where she does this kind of thing – she invokes a “natural” without interrogating what that natural is. So my criticism of her work isn’t so much that she doesn’t critique science, because I think her critiques of science are very useful; my criticism is that she doesn’t engage.

Elizabeth Grosz is different. I read Elizabeth Grosz's work as being much more careful, and I think she does engage. She's clearly read Darwin. Except that she takes it for granted that sexual difference has always been there.¹² She jumps from bacteria to animals, like big animals like humans, and from here, [bacteria], to here, [animals], we get sexual difference. And, for her, sexual difference is an immutable fact, and there are, *à la* Luce Irigaray, at least two sexes.

So that's why I've dropped the term "new materialism." Because I want my work to not do that. I'm working towards a theory of difference, I suppose, that doesn't rest on an acceptance of quite normative, mainstream evolutionary theory and development. And this is why I've moved towards what Graham Harman¹³ calls "speculative realism." And frankly, I'm at the very beginning of this and I have a lot more to learn.

RS: I think that term is quite new – wasn't it only coined just last year?

MH: My knowledge of it comes from Graham Harman's work, and it comes from the journal *Urbanomic*. There's a small group of scholars who are interested in science and in the natural who have long since abandoned representationalism, have long since abandoned straightforward realist epistemologies. What I read in their work – and again I'm just at the beginning of this – is something I find very, very attractive. What I find is that they bring in a wonderful sense of lively play – by which I mean actual playing. What I like is that for them, matter completely has its own agency. It's that "thingness of the thing." Whilst they're all very aware that we access matter through science and that science comes with a wealth of discursive constructions and embeddedness and all that kind of thing, observer, observed, Niels Bohr, etc. – I find the work is always very mindful that matter acts in ways that we don't expect, acts in ways that we don't control, and has a very large voice in what we know. And I find that a very helpful way of bringing back that sense of wonder, that sense of curiosity that Daston and Park talk about in *Wonders and the Order of Nature*,¹⁴ or other people have talked about in terms of the re-enchantment of nature. So I find it a very sophisticated way of bringing all of that back, and it gives

very well with my own sense of wonder about things and objects. This is my critique of a lot of sociology – we’re extremely good at rendering matter completely boring. We can take something extremely interesting and by the time we’re done with it, it is bland, it is two-dimensional – it’s either completely erased, so that we’re not talking about the object at all, we’ve completely lost it –

RS: Deconstructed it –

MH: Yes, like the famous analogy we love to use with undergraduates: peeling back the layers of an onion, and at the end you don’t have anything! And we see this as a triumph of our discipline.

Well, actually, maybe that’s not so much of a triumph. Maybe it’s a disaster. And so I’m very drawn to analyses that leave open the giant space for those objects to play. And I really see a liveliness that we are unable to stamp out as much as we try. So that’s my trajectory of using these terms. Will I become a speculative realist? I have no idea. Will that be my label for the rest of my career? Who knows? I’m in that process like we all are, I hope, of reaching for things to identify with that can help us with very affective notions. You know when I peer down a microscope, and I’m looking at these bacteria that are moving around, they’re dancing, they’re doing all these things – and I can use “dancing,” I can anthropomorphize – but at the end of the day they’re doing something that I’m curious about, and speculative realism gives me an epistemology to explore that activity without erasing it.

RS: I’m sure you’ve been asked this question a lot, but after hearing you talk about this it seems to become a non-question, that of biological determinism. Where do you locate that within these approaches?

MH: That’s a really good question. One of the things I find really disappointing about my discipline is that it seems to be filled to the brim with sophisticated critiques of science that take as their starting point the idea that science is somehow pitted against humanity and that science is there to reverse issues of social justice, etc., and that the job of the social scientist is to

always be completely and entirely distrustful of science and scientists. I find those analyses rely very heavily on: (1) popularized critiques of science - you know, *Not in Our Genes*,¹⁵ etc. – and; (2) mainstream understandings of evolutionary theory and developmental biology. The more I read evolutionary theory and developmental biology, and indeed genetics, the more I understand these fields of research and the disciplines in which they're embedded to be in much more flux than, for instance, sociology. I wish sociology was in as much flux as developmental biology. Unfortunately, we're not. Okay sure, we move from Marx, to Durkheim, to Weber, to whomever, to Foucault, to Deleuze. These are not paradigms, overturned. You know, we all remain very much within the discursive. There is flux in science. For instance, there's a book called *Assembling the Tree of Life*.¹⁶ The book is really interesting. It is filled with articles that contest the tree of life, starting at the root, the last universal common ancestor (LUCA), and whether or not, for instance, Archaeobacteria and Bacteria should be separate kingdoms. And how these differentiate from Eubacteria. The tree of life: always within bacteria, which is where almost the entire show is. By the time we get to animals, the show is pretty much over, and it's a fine differentiation of already-well-established metabolism, diploidy, etc., etc., so there's really not much happening by the time we get there. All the big things happen within the Precambrian –

RS: Which you've called innovations or inventions –

MH: Yes, absolutely. And what's interesting is that scientists – it's many scientists writing, and this is one book of many – they're very speculative, they're very much owning “well, we think this, because if we do this molecular phylogeny, we find this; but, its complicated by artifacts, its complicated by various noise levels.” There's a play at work. There's a very strong sense of, “Okay, we know this, but we don't know this. Let's play a little and see what we can get. Let's rearrange the tree a little and see what we get.” I found one of my big surprises was to find in science, amongst scientists, a very keen and very appealing desire to play. And I don't find that when I read sociology.

RS: So scientists are not naïve realists or reductionists in the way that we assume.

MH: No, absolutely. When I went into the Margulis¹⁷ laboratory [as field work for my forthcoming book], I wouldn't say I was a naïve sociologist, and I didn't go in there to do an ethnographic study of how scientists construct their object of study – I wasn't interested in that at all. But within the first week, over brown-bag lunches around the lab table, I'm listening to scientists who have never taken a social science or humanities course in their life talking about Ludwik Fleck's *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*,¹⁸ Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.¹⁹

They're not these naïve realists that we paint them to be. Which makes me ask the question, Why do we need them to be like that? Now, I'm not saying all scientists, I mean how can you talk about "all" scientists around the world? It's a silly thing to do. But the scientists that I engaged with don't look at their objects of study like that at all, nor do they look at the project of science like that. They don't see it as being this overarching paradigm that then will be overturned and revolutionized to be replaced with another paradigm. They don't see it like that. They see it as a messy, mumble-jumble of speculations – some speculations being much more borne out by evidence than others. But that it's always open-ended. And they're very clear that, yes, scientists stake their careers on validating a particular speculation, and that the ways they do this might be credible or not so credible. They're very well aware of all of that discursive production of science. But they don't lose that sense of wonder about the objects themselves.

And so I find curiously that it's sociology that seems benign, that seems static, that seems less curious, and less interested in finding out new things that we're uncomfortable with. And I find that interesting – which is why I'm not a very good sociologist.

RS: Once we realize that it's important for sociologists to not only pay attention to science, but to take it seriously, the question is, how do we do that? To what degree do we attend to science? A lot of scientists and social scientists are critical

of scholars who seemingly borrow or extract terms from scientific discourse and use them for their own purposes in ways that are perhaps diluted or inaccurate. In a way, this points to a kind of disciplinary entrenchment where boundaries are drawn: “that’s my territory,” and non-scientists don’t have any claim to speaking science. On the other hand, borrowing terms doesn’t seem to be a very keen engagement with science. So, how do you engage with science in a way that’s actually meaningful, and not just metaphorical?

MH: Well I go with Mackenzie’s distinctions between critique, extraction and engagement.²⁰ And we have a lot of examples of each one, less so with the third I think. I think there are compelling critiques, and less compelling critiques. I think Donna Haraway, Anne Fausto-Sterling, Elizabeth Wilson, Vicky Kirby, and Luciana Parisi are wonderful examples of critiques of science. I think they are also wonderful examples of extraction and engagement.

Extraction is an interesting one. I always think of Sokal and Bricmont’s *Fashionable Nonsense*,²¹ because the whole book is about critiquing extractions of science. For instance, they look at Latour’s “A Relativistic Account of Einstein’s Relativity.”²² They point out that Latour completely misunderstands the relationship between the observer and the observed. Sokal and Bricmont point out that for Latour the observer has to be human, and has intention, and has affect, whereas for Einstein the observer wasn’t human at all. The observer was an object. And that change is the extraction. I’m wholly convinced of Sokal and Bricmont’s critique of Luce Irigaray’s extraction of fluids²³ for the understanding of sexual difference. It’s no secret that I’m quite a sceptic when it comes to Irigaray’s work, and I don’t find her use of fluids compelling at all. I think she’s adapting a concept, a terminology, to her own ends.

Which brings us to the question of, Why not? I don’t think that we’re under any obligation at all to remain truthful to a scientific concept. I do think we are under an obligation to specify how we are adapting it and what differences there are. So what I find interesting about Irigaray’s work, for instance, is that on the one hand, she’s entirely critical of

logocentric “language of the One,” which I have a lot of sympathy for. When we’re talking about phallogentrism and logocentrism, I completely agree with her. But she then uses science, which she identified as being entirely logocentric, to make claims about the “sex which is not One.”²⁴ And I’m unclear how that can be done, or why we would want to do this, if science is the language of the One.

So on the one hand, I don’t have a sense that particular concepts are owned by particular disciplines. I don’t think that physics owns the concept of “singularity.” I do think it’s important, though, that social scientists own up to the fact that they are changing the meaning of a concept, and that they also specify why they are using a concept from the sciences. Because without that specification and without owning up to it, it opens social scientific analysis to criticism that it is trying to use material from a discipline that has much more cachet within society, that it’s a sort of physics envy, or a biology envy. I don’t think that disciplines own concepts, but I do think that we need to own how we are using the concept and why we are using the concept. So I think so long as we do that, I don’t see any problem at all.

And in fact, when done well, it contributes to a messiness that I find very attractive. You know, the messier the better. But of course, for me if - well, the Cochrane Reviews are really the gold standard – but if randomized trials are the gold standard of medicine, then for me engagement is the gold standard of the social sciences. To me, engagement between the social and natural sciences is the gold standard. And that’s really what I’m interested in doing, which to my mind is the most difficult thing to do.

Part 2 of this interview will appear in an upcoming issue of *Stream*.

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Notes

- 1 Kingery, 1996.
- 2 Latour, 1999.
- 3 Hird, 2004.
- 4 Hird, 2004, p. 220.
- 5 Hird, 2002.
- 6 Latour, 2000, p. 112.
- 7 Hird is referring to a series of responses between Tamsin Wilton and herself in the journal *Sexualities*, regarding a paper written by Wilton entitled “Out/Performing Our Selves: Sex, Gender, and Cartesian Dualism.” The series includes: Wilton, 2000; Hird, 2002; Wilton, 2002; Hird, 2002.
- 8 See, for example, Butler, 1990.
- 9 Braidotti, 2002.
- 10 Hird, forthcoming.
- 11 Braidotti, 2006.
- 12 Grosz, 2004.

- 13 See the journal *Urbanomic*, Collapse Volume II, at http://blog.urbanomic.com/urbanomic/archives/2007/09/collapse_volume_2.html.
- 14 Daston & Park, 1998.
- 15 Rose, Lewontin & Kamin, 1984.
- 16 Cracraft & Donoghue, 2004.
- 17 Lynn Margulis is a biologist and professor of geosciences at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She developed the now-accepted theory that symbiosis is the origin of certain cellular organelles.
- 18 Fleck, 1979.
- 19 Kuhn, 1970.
- 20 Mackenzie & Murphie, 2008.
- 21 Sokal & Bricmont, 1998.
- 22 Latour, 1988.
- 23 Irigaray, 1992.
- 24 Irigaray, 1985.

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