

Materialities in Anthropology



Figure 1 The microbes on an 8 year old's hand

Recognising 'human' as a relational
process generated within a material field

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This module adopts a student led structure with a view to encourage independent, empirically grounded research. The research you complete during this module can approach any topic that fires you but it should address one or all of the themes of

materiality; becoming; blurring boundaries; porosity



This module brings the significance of new ways of dealing with matter into focus through the evaluation of posthuman theoretical methods of understanding matter, the conditions of materiality and the Anthropocene (Cf. Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010; Ingold 2013; Malafouris 2013; Morton 2013; Latour 1993; Witmore 2014). In so doing, the student on this module will be exposed to ethically and politically informed ideas for future sustainability from an interdisciplinary and practical perspective, and will be supported to consider how these contemporary debates address current global challenges.

By adopting an experiential approach, the student will be offered a weekly opportunity to learn through engagement with the materials being considered so as to understand how materials - as both substances and 'things' (such as: water, clay, light, bacteria, plants) - behave in human worlds. In recognising that the physical properties of materials (within the wider frame of the processes of 'becoming') both limit and provoke the construction of social worlds, students will be encouraged to explore how different interactions in a variety of environmental settings produce diverse cultural practices.



Figure 2 Omo people, Ethiopia, East Africa

Overview

Recognising the importance of materials to human lives has deep roots in Anthropology and cognate disciplines. Consequently, the study of materials has created a wide and significant body of literature. This module – whilst noting past foci – turns to explore current trends in the study of materials.

Materialism

The study of materials is a multidirectional pursuit and, as a result, has liberated a variety of different perspectives. Within the discipline of Anthropology, for example, the first scholars labelled cultural materialists focused on the relationship between the material world and human cultures claiming this was key to understanding human behaviour, expression and practices. This perspective - called 'Materialism' (coined in American cultural anthropology studies by Marvin Harris in the 1960s) - demonstrated the links between culture and material factors by noting how humans used the planet in different environments. This perspective, close to Geography's environmental determinism that was briefly popular early in the 1900s and later deemed imperialist and racist, claimed that cultural differences emerge as a result of ecological features and availabilities (think – Onka's Big Moka and Rappaport's work on the ratio of pigs in PNG to the human population (1967)). Thus, in short, cultural materialists see social life as the response to material conditions. This kind of materialistic perspective (remember: termed *Materialism*) was in part inspired by Marxist thought that sees life in terms of balances between give, take and attributed value, but is also quite distinct. Using an economic lens, as Marxism does, recognises hierarchies with regards usage and structure, but Materialism, whilst inspired by these ideas, also rejects the dialectic tensions that Marxism relies on. Furthermore, it outwardly rejects the idealist theoretical

positions that privilege human thought and thinking as the precursor and key influence in practice, where Marxist thought does not.



Figure 3 Objects from the Mexican Folk Art Museum

Material Culture

The materialistic approach cited above should not be confused with Material Culture studies. 'Material Culture Studies' is an interdisciplinary method of study that foregrounds the part objects play in people's lives. Scholars who are inspired by this framing demonstrate the vivid links between human culture and the things humans make and use. For the academics exploring material culture, it is the 'stuff' and things around people that can be used as objects of study - as reflections of who we are and what we have become (Cf. Miller 1987, 2005, 2010).

Influences

Running in parallel to the studies that explore material culture are a number of moves that continue to influence and deepen the way in which scholars approach material. There are a few key theorists that you need to familiarise yourself with. Latour, for example, in his seminal text, *We have never been modern* (1993) and

with his ANT (Actor Network Theory) offers a method by which to understand how things and people are entangled in an affective network of influences. (ANT claims that objects are not inert but can be seen as 'actants' – entities that provoke behaviours in accordance with their place in a larger distributed system – and as such need to be recognised as agents or players within structures.)

Ingold, too has contributed to this body of literature and the many debates about materiality. Ingold's position sees things and objects as nodes within a meshwork of becoming (2011, 2013). For Ingold, the key notion to grasp is that things are not complete (2011). They are, and everything is, best conceived of as within a process of becoming and so are not 'made' in the sense that you might understand a product to be finished (in an economic or Marxist sense). He, in agreement with Barad (2007:ix) maintains stuff cannot be seen as 'finished' or 'made' but rather is more accurately thought of as in a constant state of material flux, moving through stages of being in association with being within a wider mesh. For Ingold, people and things are part of this mesh of becoming together co-inspirationally (2011, 2013).

Morton (2013) also recognises a wider meshwork supporting and connecting all aspects of existence. For Morton (2013), conceiving of a meshwork helps us grasp the interconnected complexity of items or things as a whole. This perspective sees the divide between what appear to be discrete things disappear or blur within the total mesh. For Morton, discrete things are obvious but also problematic. For example, he describes some of them as hyperobjects – those things that are just too big (such as lava, water, grass) to successfully label when the world is described in this way.

Bennett (2007, 2010), on the other hand, approaches materials as lively entities. Her philosophical approach recognises how things, materials, substances, pull at us for attention and as a result influence our behaviour because of their inherent vitality – a vitality that she believes emerges as part of being in relationships with other materials. (You could apply Delanda's ideas about bubbles and form here (1998).)

Barad looks to the intersections between the material and the social by calling for bodies to be recognised as matter (2003). Barad (2003) wants matter to matter again, she rejects the lofty favouritism shown to language and thinking and wants

to remind us of how these human activities emerge from materials. In her work she focuses on the relationality of performance and offers a relational ontology that challenges causality by offering the 'notion of intra-reactions' (2003: 815) as a method to understand materiality, engagement and becoming.

The above, demonstrates that scholarship is attempting to reposition what it means to be human in a material world, away from orthodox methods of representation and towards a new method that includes materials and things as more than serendipitous resources for use or as nature turned cultural. Moreover, these ideas attempt not only to get a grasp on how things come into being, but also how humanity emerges as a result of the physics of the material system. These ideas show that scholars are challenging previous taxonomic classifications of categories as flawed and possibly in need of revaluation.

Further influences

The multispecies ethnographies also help in this regard. Those involved in this move also question the value of categories – but in this case specifically species' categories. The scholars writing multispecies ethnographies inspired by Latour's ideas cite above, the writings of Haraway (2000, 2008), Kohn (2013) and Viverios de Castros' Perspectivism (2012) and the ontological turn (Cf. Carrithers et al 2008) draw non-human animals into the foreground to demonstrate the influential part they play in making humans what they are. This move, rather than seeing non-human animals as different 'others' shows how together, in a co-creative, co-productive cycle human and non-human animals generate each other as they exist in relationship.

New Materialities

The New Materialities move can be seen as a development of the above influences but with two key differences – 1) that humans are brought into the equation as comprised of materials, and 2) that this move coheres around, fuses and is informed by the perspectives explored above but does so as a result of the Age of the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene is the name given to the era we are living through currently. [The term 'Anthropocene', (era = point in time, in this case starting at the Industrial Revolution), references the fact that the human animal is now deemed so powerful as to be able to influence planetary systems and forces in ways previously unimaginable.] Thus, taking a wider stage than some approaches to humanity, this way of seeing the world aims to reimagine materiality and challenge the human exceptionalist focus that is accused of being formative in the creation of the Anthropocene (Coole and Frost 2010).

Latour (1993), Morton (2013), Bennett (2010) and Witmore (2014) all work to re-level the representational playing field to some extent - to dethrone the human from its pivotal place of influence and significance in a bid to support people to recognise they are material in a world of only materials. This rejection of Cartesian binaries and idealism, in favour of physics and relationships, is a pragmatic approach to being human. It accepts the material field as that from which everything emerges in association with the laws that govern matter, and that being human is predicated on how those relationships can manifest. Thus it brings in substances as affective players on an equal footing to the human who previously would have been thought to be the only agent.

Recognising the role materials play in making us human can be seen in the work of Ingold (2011, 2013), Bennett (2010) and Drazin and Kuchler (2015), and is increasingly being demonstrated in the work of scholars from various disciplines. This course offers you a chance to join that group of thinkers by researching into a material of your choice in the Lab. Inspired by the work we will be engaging with each week, you will explore how materials make you what you are.

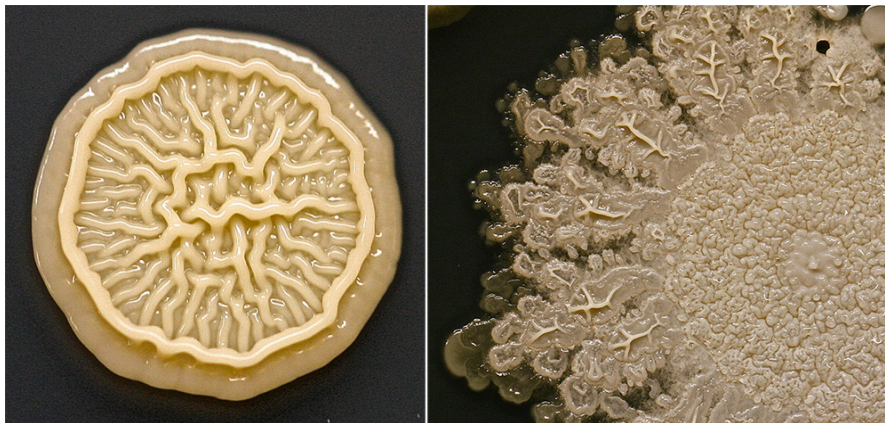


Figure 4 Germs



Figure 5 Mud Monsters Papua New Guinea

Course structure

This module is designed to allow you to begin to feel part of the research community that academia is built on. With a view to support the aims of Education for Sustainable Development goals (2014), this module also adopts a peer-review, collaborative, solution-seeking framework. We will meet once a week for 4 hours straight. That means classes will run for 4 hours consecutively. This stretch of contact time will allow us to become collectively embedded and immersed into the issue of the week. Immersion into a subject or topic will afford you time to 'settle' into, and get to know, the complex ideas this course circulates together. As our timetabled slot straddles lunch I expect we will eat together. The Lab is self-contained and offers a space with as few distractions to our process as possible.

The course structure is divided into 2 parts. Part one runs up until Reading Week, part two runs from Reading Week until the end of the module. The final week will be assigned to presentations.

After the first week, which will be delivered by me (Luci), you (students) will take co-ownership of the module and together we will steer the groups' course through the semester. In practical terms this means after the first week each one of you will assume responsibility for a session. This responsibility includes the delivery of a lecture and facilitation of a discussion during that session. This structure will demand knowledge of the ideas of the course, and the article you will be lecturing on.

After Reading Week, the course will change direction. During this period you will be supported to complete your assignments. Attendance during this second section of the course contributes to your marks. Low attendance will jeopardise your ability to attain high marks.

Timetable of the course structure

- Week 1 - Luci, explanation of the course, outline, direction, allocation of articles or chapters
- Weeks 2 - until Reading Week - student-led lectures and discussions
- Reading Week...
- Week 6 - until final week - working in the Lab together to create final presentation (more detail below).

Doing your lecture

Each student will choose one of the course articles or chapters to focus their lecture around. (We will agree on what you will lecture on in the first session. The articles are in a folder on Moodle. You will need to either choose one of these articles **OR** one of the chapters from the e copy of Drazin and Kuchler (2015).) Your lecture should last between 30 mins - 1 hour (max) (with qs). You are free to fill your time as you see fit, BUT within your slot you must -

- Summarise, explain and give a comprehensive overview of the source you are dealing with so that your class understands the piece thoroughly.
 - The aim is to communicate effectively. You might feel the best method is to use a PowerPoint or, on the other hand, you may feel the article is better summarised experientially through making, walking, eating etc.
- Place the source within current debates on Materiality/isms, and in doing so demonstrate your knowledge of the debates.
 - This means you must show that you understand what other thinkers are saying about similar issues to the ones being covered in the source you have chosen.
- Critically engage with the source.
 - This means consider its value, worth, flaws, what it is lacking, how you might have improved it and remember to say why.

There are no marks associated with this activity. This is a chance for you to show your commitment to your studies and to be part of a team of researchers exploring a concept. Moreover, this activity is designed to respect your knowledge and allow you all to help/teach each other to understand the writings from different perspectives (i.e.: your own (and not just the lecturer's!)).

Assignment Pattern

Assessment Component 1 – 60% Project: this begins in the second half of the term and comprises the creation of a portfolio of work based upon the student's project.

What is a project? In this instance 'project' refers to a body of work compiled during class that explores a topic from a New Materialities perspective. The project will not rely on reading and writing exclusively but must, in part, form materially - through engagement with a substance or substances. The outcome can be sculptural, like a diorama, or audio-visual (think, Pink *Sensory Ethnography* (2015)) or simply culminate in a folder of sketches, ideas, findings, poems etc., (think, Barry *Syllabus: notes from an accidental professor* (2014)).

The project will be completed in class. If work done outside of the class is wanted to be included in the project this will need to be explained and authorized. 'In class' means during the 4-hour slot we have in the timetable. Your marks come in part from your process, in recognition of the notion of becoming (read Ingold!)

The topic will be arrived at in negotiation with the course lecturer *and* your peers. The topic must reflect the overall course themes (relationships with the material world – boundaries, porosity, blending, becomings) but must emerge from you and your interests. Consequently, you will need to make a case for the direction you want to take and the rationale underpinning your inspiration. Here, I will be looking for you to know the literature so that you can make an informed case.

Researching your topic will be achieved experientially ['in the Lab'] as well as traditionally. This means you will be expected to think creatively about your relationship with the material world (inspired by the readings from the first half of the course) and to realize this relationship materially. This could be haptically, through tactile means, audibly, visually and so on. This is a challenging exercise, quite different from your previous assignments. As a result, you will be supported throughout the process.

Marks for this section will be linked to your application and your engagement. You will work on this project each week to accumulate marks. This project will inform the second part of your assessment for this module. Make sure you read the section 'Assessment Component 2' below before you decide what you want to explore/work on.

Exemplar: Plastics and Water – exploring how plastic and water behave together.

Assessment Component 2 – 40% Oral Presentation (15 mins): applying Lab work to 'real life'. The student will create a presentation that ties together their coursework project topic, construction and findings with an ethnographic example of their choosing. The chapters in Drazin and Kuchler (2015) should help you with this assessment.

Exemplar: Plastics and Water – demonstrating how plastic and water are negotiated in Coastal Province, Kenya

Materialisms – Core texts

- Coole, D. H., and Frost, S. 2010 *New Materialisms: ontology, agency, and politics*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Drazin, A., and Kuchler, S. (eds.) 2015 *The Social Life of Materials: studies in materials and society*, London, New Dehli, NY, Sydney: Bloomsbury.

General Bibliography

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- Barry, L. 2014 *Syllabus: notes from an accidental professor* Drawn and Quarterly.
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<https://seansturm.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/delanda-deleuze-diagrams-and-the-genesis-of-form.pdf>.

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Gabrys, J. 2012 'Becoming Urban: sitework from a moss-eye view', *Environment and Planning A* 2012, volume 44, pages 2922 – 2939

Hacking, I. 1999 *The Social Construction of What?* Harvard: Harvard University Press

Haraway, D. 2000 *How Like a Leaf*, New York: Routledge.

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See Barratt's chapter on Porosity.

Hastrup, K., and Rubow, C. (eds.) 2014 *Living with Environmental Change: water worlds*, London & New York: Routledge.

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