



24 APRIL 2022

QUEER MATERIALITIES:

AN EXPLORATION INTO QUEER LANGUAGE IN RELATION TO THE NEW
MATERIALITIES MOVEMENT

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Acknowledgments

Thank you to my friends, Badger, Bear, and Mouse, who agreed to participate as part of my project.

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Abstract

This project was undergone with the intention of exploring the parallels between the theory coming out the New Materialities Movement and the language used by Queer individuals, particularly when discussing the queer experience. The research gathered for this project was primarily through auto-ethnography and informal conversations with three queer participants, in which they controlled the flow of conversation and highlighted what they found to be most relevant to the topic of collective and subjective queer experience. In my findings, I made use of New Materialities theory to support as well as contrast my ethnographic evidence, and take an overall a curious yet critical eye into the synergies and connections that allow for this interesting overlap in material perception.

INTRODUCTION

The New Materialities Movement in Anthropology successfully works to not only push, but to expand the boundaries of the widely accepted anthropocentric perspective of reality. Taking a critical eye to how humans, particularly in Eurocentric societies, approach the world around them – in that for them, it is viewed as the *world* around *them*, as separate things that interact – is paramount in questioning the ideological grounds for such a reality. This step toward a shifting in language, and therefore a shift in the very way that we conceptualize ourselves in relation to our own realities, parallels the type of language often normalized in queer spaces. Though this is not necessarily proven, I believe this to come about as a result of the heightened awareness of *self* that is commonly acquired in queer individuals as a result of participating in strictly heteronormative societies. This project has pushed me to explore the realities of queer materiality, and the extent to which queer individuals reflect the move away from anti-anthropocentric thought like that in the New Materialities Movement. As someone part of the queer demographic who has participated in queer spaces for many years now, both online and in person, I hope to shed light on this curious connection by delving into the complexities of the queer experience and considering the significance of queer materiality as it blends the boundaries of matter, space, and identity.

METHODOLOGY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

My research for this project primarily followed two ethnographic methodologies: informal conversation with three queer individuals and auto-ethnographic account of my own experiences in the queer community. I will be referring to the three participants by their chosen pseudonyms, Badger, Bear, and Mouse, from here on. Though all three participants are close friends of mine, this study has illuminated the vast differences in our collective experiences as queer individuals within the queer community. I will be maintaining an appropriate and effective level of reflexivity on my own accounts as I discuss them, as well as drawing focus to certain moments wherein I may have inadvertently influenced my participants responses. My conversations with each participant remained one-on-one in particular for this reason, as I began the research for this project determined to ensure authenticity in relaying experiences and opinions unique to their personal history, and as such, allowed each of them to control the flow of conversation outside of

my initial comments about this project's subject matter. Naturally, the information I gathered varied widely as a result.

The theory that initially provoked my motivations for this project are not directly related to queer studies, as could be expected by my chosen topic, but rather follow the theory emerging from the New Materialities Movement in Anthropology. My hopes for this project are to engage with certain parallels between the language used in New Materialities theory and that of the understanding that develop within the queer experience. I approached this project looking to critically explore this connection, and my findings henceforth will reflect that process. Initially, my interest was sparked by Morton's (2013, 2014) works, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* and *What is Dark Ecology?*, both of which provoked compelling anti-anthropocentric thought in relation to the insignificance of the individual human, or rather a collective insignificance between all matter, when faced with the objective realities that exists beyond our immediate comprehension. Bennet (2010) and Barad (2003) layered nicely into my research by specifically focusing further in on the agency and importance of matter and materiality in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* and *Posthuman Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter* respectively. Their reworking of the language utilized in unraveling how humans fit into and affect the material world, and especially how that matter then works around and affects humans right back, in which there is a reluctant acceptance of the uncontrollable blending of boundaries on equal footing, is paramount to my later observations on queer relationships with materiality. Pilkey (2014) offers relevant, though extremely limited, points on domestic queer materiality in a heteronormative society in *Queering heteronormativity at home: older gay Londoners and the negotiation of domestic materiality*. More notably, Coole and Frost (2010) compliment both Bennet's (2010) and Barad's (2003) work in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* by exploring the interconnected nature of materiality, subjectivity, and identity – all of which remain central to the underpinnings of this project. Though this only covers the literature I will primarily be using to support my findings, my overall research for this project proved to be an enlightening experience in providing a renewed sense of wonder for the world around me, a feeling that I hope to relay in the following discussion on queer identity and language.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Despite all three of my discussions beginning with similar queries, the information I gathered managed to cover an intriguing array of topics, some of which were unexpected and left me pleasantly surprised with the proceedings. I organized the major themes discussed into the following three central subcategories within my findings: Identifying the Self (The Queer Experience), Materiality and Queer Spaces, and Queering Language.

IDENTIFYING THE SELF // THE QUEER EXPERIENCE

In more recent years, I have come to recognize that the connotations following specific terminology in the LGBTQ+ community has undergone a subtle change. Though this is more commonly present in younger individuals, the term Queer has been reclaimed and nearly replaced the significance of using the term Gay as a descriptor for the community in many instances, primarily to push for a more intersectional outlook. Mouse took the time to make this distinction as well, claiming that “using the term queer feels more all-encompassing of an identity and a collective experience,” one that embraces the reality of intersectional identities instead of forcing labels on experiences constantly in flux. Though this is more prevalent in cities with active queer communities, commercialized gay spaces ironically tend to exclude a lot of LGBTQ+ individuals by catering exclusively to cisgender, white, gay men. Alternatively, if a place advertises itself as a queer safe space, it is more likely to have been made by and for queer people and therefore holds true to that claim by providing a comfortable environment for intersectional queer identities. Having grown up near and witnessed this myself in Los Angeles, I believe it important to note that most of the effort being put into creating queer safe spaces in the city is done by queer and trans people of color. While this distinction between queer and gay terminology choices could have been placed effectively under the next subcategory – Materiality and Queer Spaces – I chose to place this at the beginning of this section because this understanding is essential in accurately viewing how deeply intertwined the queer experience is with collective and subjective identity. Mouse illuminated this quite clearly in our discussion, stating that being queer “cultivates community” and allows for solidarity and freedom in being “authentically, confidently, and recognizably queer” despite the automatic *othering* that occurs when simply existing as a queer person in a cisgender heteronormative society.

Attempting to define or explicate something as impossibly convoluted as an individual's personal identity almost seems like a futile task, and not least because, in reality, identity is anything but stagnant or easily envisioned. We define ourselves through our likes and dislikes, and by who or what we choose to surround ourselves with, but digging deeper than that to try and grasp an idea of *the self*, of a core essence of being, leaves us with the feeling of "trying to grab hold of water," as Bear puts it. Morton (2014) articulates this by explaining how "we think that existence means solid, constant, present existence. It is based on the fantasy that all parts of me are me: that if you scoop out a piece of me, it has Tim Morton inscribed all over it and within it... [but] this is not the case. All entities just are what they are, which means that they are never quite as they seem. They are rippling with nothingness" (Morton, 2014; 11). Essentially, trying to conceptualize someone's personal identity is so difficult because we are stuck attempting to comprehend and give presence to a concept that does not exist in this plane of reality as we believe it to. Even still, the act of looking inward for answers about our own existence is a common occurrence within the queer community because introspection on that level is already required to maintain an acceptable understanding of our own sexuality and gender performance. This is because, in a cisgender heteronormative society, especially in areas with limited access to queer knowledge and support, all a queer person really knows before they start that introspection process is that they are experiencing something inherently different to that of their peers. Both Badger and Mouse commented on how frightening and lonely that experience can oftentimes be, and in my case, it prompted a desire to bridge a connection between my own warped perception of self and the potential to grow into someone I could not only be comfortable in, but be proud of as well. Conceptualizing identity is, then, to a certain extent, a tad delusional in that our understanding of the *self* exists in the aesthetic and abstract dimension of an individual's reality. It is real only that we make it so by giving it weight in our everyday lives through our connections with materiality.

We make our identities a reality by bringing attention to these connections, and the queer community is especially adept at this process because of what the queer experience already entails. Bear insists that they were never as aware of themselves to extent that they are now, and that growing into their queerness has been akin to exiting their shell, except they had never

realized there was a shell to begin with. Even more interestingly, Bear follows this by saying that “identity exists without solid format,” and that it is the connections we make that “keep us together, even if it can never be solidified.” During my discussion with Badger, they offhandedly mentioned that they do not perceive themselves as a person, at least “not in that way,” but instead that they “see things in terms of connections with space colors;” They characterized themselves in terms of “the grey-brown of the mud in a riverbank, the misty-grey of a bright sky, the sand and dirt of the beach.” When asked to clarify, Badger reiterated simply “how do I explain myself as person? I don’t. I accept what I am inside and that everyone will interpret me different to what I am, and that’s that. The only thing left to do is accept myself as is.” This abstract interpretation of the *self* ties in beautifully with Coole and Frost’s (2010) claim that “we are ourselves composed of matter. We experience its restlessness and intransigence even as we reconfigure and consume it” (Coole and Frost, 2010; 1). Contrasting with Morton’s explanation of existence as filled with nothingness, Coole and Frost offer the other half of this naturally occurring paradox in a world of bursting matter and material connections. Though Morton would say that seeming is never quite as it seems, the complexities of human subjective perception and experience of identity seem to exist in a messy scribble of understandings that contradict each other at every turn and leave us with the impression that we do not really know anything despite knowing everything we can about ourselves and our own realities.

MATERIALITY AND QUEER SPACE

Exploring how queer people make use of materiality to connect with space and identity performance is especially exciting because it highlights the merging of life and matter. Bennet (2010) describes this playful intertwining of materiality as *vital materiality*, in which matter itself is not this dull and lifeless thing, but rather vibrant and filled with energy. Bennet (2010) goes further and even questions how we can experience the *self* as vibrant matter, which is not as far reaching as it sounds considering life on earth is just as much a part of earth’s materiality as its non-living counterparts. The rift between human and *other* is a concept entirely human created and perpetuated in an attempt to uphold anthropocentric ideations of existence, and Barad (2003) determines our role as a piece of that materiality with the claim that “we do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because ‘we’ are of the world” (Barad,

2003; 829). We are made up of matter, and matter can therefore be studied as an extension of the *self*, a practice that the queer community is particularly adept at, though likely for different reasons.

Mouse recounted their relationship with the aesthetic and as an extension, with matter, as a particularly enjoyable form of self-expression. Their choices in presentation, whether it be hair color, clothing, accessories, etc. are conscious decisions on their part to essentially represent and display their personal identity through the materials that they like, or perhaps resonate more strongly with. In studying materiality at home, Pilkey (2014) finds that “domestic possessions underwrite subjectivity through their realization of identity in concrete rather than abstract form” (Pilkey 2014; 1144). Even more, the “accumulation and arrangement of objects at home are materializations of our ongoing construction of subjectivity: these objects are physical realizations of personal meanings and interpersonal social relations” (Pilkey 2014; 1144). Mouse chooses to surround themselves in and around “bright colors,” “weird fabrics,” and “unique patterns.” Badger, on the other hand, does not focus on personal presentation so much as spatial material objects. They expressed themselves as deeply connected to the land and culture they grew up in, emphasizing feelings of comfort and fulfillment in “quiet, small spaces,” or peaceful areas far from civilization like forests or bogs. In this way, Badger connects with their surroundings more so than their physical being, and their choices regarding what they place in their favorite environments, or where those environments are, act as an extension of *self* in the same way that Mouse’s clothes do. While these various materialities may be subtle in their affect, they leave behind a deeper appreciation for “the profound ambiguity and causal force of the aesthetic dimension” (Morton 2014; 10).

QUEERING LANGUAGE

The language in queer spaces was one of the initial motivators for this project, and taking a look into how it is utilized, as well as its shortcomings, is a key factor in developing a more present understanding of queer materiality. Barad (2003) notes that “lately every ‘thing’—even materiality—is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation (Barad 2003; 801). Queer materiality can, then, act as a form of language primarily expressed through matter and performance instead of words. Badger dedicated a considerable amount of

time in our discussion to explain that “there is no adequate way to describe identity in its true from,” which is why we lean towards silly language in an attempt to describe it, because its better understood through theory, through the abstract, through the aesthetic. They concede that “the language is improving,” but that they “don’t think [they’ll] ever fit into a box that can be shown or defined in that. Specialized language is hard that way. The best [they] can do to is say [they] exist as somewhere between this, this, this, and this.” Bear followed a similar thread, affirmed that “the language [they] use for this (describing *self*) is very abstract, but [that] it can’t be experienced or understood in any less complex or convoluted way.” In spite of this, Bear maintains that “you don’t have to understand or grasp it in order to recognize and respect its absolute realness,” a sentiment that I find extremely relevant when discussing non-corporeal observations. Although, utilizing materials to convey messages is not by any means a new practice for the queer community. Adding in subtle codes in everyday outfits to signal other queer folk has been practiced and has evolved throughout history as a language in itself. Mouse plays into this by wearing odd, homemade dangly earrings – a common stereotype within the community to signal as a wlw (woman loving women) individual. Other indicators include campy makeup or even carabiner clips for keys. All of these small forms of expression contribute to a subtle mode of language made by and for queer people through performative materiality choices.

This is exactly why working with materiality as a mode of language is significant, because the words we have access to are not enough. The feelings, thoughts, and concepts that queer materiality displays are, simply put, difficult to understand and express, and are, to a certain extent, easier to grasp hold of without clear verbal language. Barad (2003) highlights the value of performativity in that “properly construed, [it] is not an invitation to turn everything (including material bodies) into words; on the contrary, performativity is precisely a contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real” (Barad 2003; 802).

CONCLUSION

While Queer Materiality, as I have explicated above, highlights the blending of boundaries between personal conceptions of the *self* and the *other*, the New Materialities Movement matches this sentiment in kind, and continues to build onto the theory that comes out of this anti-

anthropocentric investigation into existence. The synergies between both Queer Materiality and New Materiality theory explore a unique thread of overlap that enables a fresh rediscovering of the world we live in, of our realities, and of our place in them. Although the queer experience is by no means static or easily replicable because of its inherent subjectivity, examining its intersectionality and tendency to disregard widely accepted societal norms in an attempt to defend authenticity in individual and collective existence helps to uncover new connections in the material world. This particular project may be limited and relatively inconsequential, but I nonetheless believe it to be a start, perhaps, in the direction of further exploring the absolute remarkable nature of matter itself, and how individuals like those in the queer community perpetuate a playful blending of materiality as a casual yet significant form of interaction with the world.

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