

1. Introduction

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Our aim in *Body Matters* is to remind you of your inherent materiality and the inextricable ties you have with the rest of the material world. It seeks to illustrate that it is inaccurate to imagine your existence is distinct and at a distance from the physical world; once this truism is realized, the intellectual rupture that persuades you to imagine that you stand at a distance from the world will be repaired. In short, this book demonstrates how you are a body and that you come into being because of a set of shifting materials acting in relationship with other materials.

The New Materialities

The text of *Body Matters* is theoretically nourished by the ideas of the New Materialisms (cf. Barad 2003, 2007; Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010) and establishes a new material focus for scholarship. A New Materialities approach broadly echoes the primary intentions of most of the moves held under the umbrella label ‘Posthumanism’: it rejects and challenges human exceptionalism, gives voice to ‘others’ and recognizes the part non-human others play in the creation of our worlds.¹ It acknowledges that:

‘[w]e’ are not outside observers of the world. Nor are we simply located at particular places in the world; rather, we are part of the world in its ongoing intra-activity.

(Barad 2003, 828).

And further following Barad (2003, 2007) and Drazin and Kuchler (2015), it does this by attending to the manners by which materials are able to engage, resist and enable outcomes. Consequently, the book focuses on the material creativity of relationships, and it does so by highlighting how the physical properties or capacities of materials co-productively collide and labour together in relationship. Adopting this focus demonstrates the role materials play in shaping people's lives, but, perhaps more importantly, also illustrates the persistence (even determined obstinacy) of materials' behaviours in supporting people to become what they are. Thus, it takes Barad's (2003, 2007) notion that any item's existence is predicated on what it is in relationship with, as its articulating theme.

[m]atter is not a fixed essence; rather, matter is substance in its intra-active becoming
– not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency
(Barad 2003, 828).

Broadly speaking, Posthumanist ideas question what it means to be human, and the place humanity has assumed for itself in the hierarchy of its own creation (Haraway 2008; Morton 2010, 2013, 2016). New Materialisms, along with the Animal Turn, Multispecies Move, Transhumanism and third wave Feminism fall under the banner of Posthumanism. As a consequence of its wide reach and applicability, Posthumanist thought has effectively permeated through discipline boundaries, and, in so doing, has generated fertile intellectual environments where robust cross pollination of epistemologies has liberated some excitingly creative and diverse responses to consider past, present and future practices. Even with

acknowledgement of any tensions and resistances between different theoretical approaches and directives, together they circulate one key point: that being human is a physical or material relationship as much as a social one, thus that being human demands constant negotiations between material entities. Indeed, we are reminded that we are not only situated within the physical world, but crucially we are part of it. Even as we consider how we create, transform and consume our environment (Coole and Frost 2010, 3) we also need to recognize how we are equally shaped by materiality of the world around us. Consequently, as a result of placing attention on the co-generative relationships between people and the material world, there is now a widening body of interdisciplinary literature considering diverse and varied material engagements: wetlands, dust, clay, lava, oceans, forests, snails, wheat and viral epidemics are all considered influential shapers of people's worlds (Whatmore 2002; Boivin 2008; Helmreich 2009; Morton 2010; Dillon et al 2012; Head et al 2012; van der Veen 2014; Drazin and Küchler 2015; Marder 2016). We anticipate that this book, which specifically addresses human bodies as matter, will also be placed amongst this creative and dynamic literature.

Agents and agency

Within Enlightenment-inspired ontologies, agency has overwhelmingly been viewed as the preserve of rational thinking humans. This is underpinned by the assumption that agency – the ability to effect change – is somehow synonymous with intentionality (Gell 1998, 16–17; Bennett 2010, 29–30). To some extent this notion was challenged by Gell (1998), who offered a means of thinking about the agency of the object world – how simply by *being*, things can impact on other things, including humans (see also Latour 1993, 2004; Boivin

2008). The New Materialities allows us to further develop this approach, thinking about matter – the material world – more holistically, and questioning the privileged agential status of the thinking human. Attending to how the materials of the world – matter and substance in all its varied states of being – impact upon and influence other matter, including humanity, offers materials a place in the hierarchy of agents (cf. Latour 1993, 2004). Where objects or things have been brought into focus as actants with agential powers in a network of distributed influence, materials have rarely been included until recently (see however Boivin and Owoc 2004; Bennett 2010; Drazin and Küchler 2015). Thus, giving attention to the role materials and substances play in shaping existence provides a novel perspective that gets right at the core of being. In addition, a move towards materials is posited as politically and ethically potent, and is advertised as one that could help us sustainably reevaluate practice (Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010). Our focus on materials in this book and the wider Materialities series therefore, is timely, apposite and undoubtedly helps to dethrone the human from its place of ultimate agential power; however, it also, unfortunately, overlooks one significant detail: that human bodies are always only material too. This book aims to redress the lacuna in the literature.

Bodies that matter

Our aim in producing this book is to firmly establish people as a constitutive part of the material world, recognizing that we are both part of, and equal with, the environment that we have increasingly sought to control, dominate and change. In particular, we are responding to a tendency within the contributing disciplines – archaeology, anthropology and Medieval history – to ignore the materiality of the body, possibly due to culturally embedded Cartesian

notions that separate cognition from the flesh and thereby privilege the mind over the body (Harris, Robb and Tarlow 2013, 171–2). *Body Matters* attends to this omission by bringing together a lively collection of papers that variously explore the visceral, bony and fleshy matter of the body, ‘the blood that flows in veins...the way in which practices transform the muscles, bones and synapses of the body’ (Harris and Cipolla 2017, 67).

One could claim, that by bringing in people as materials we are somehow straining at the edges of Posthumanism scholarship – quite simply because we are drawing in the human body as if it is an object. This accusation could be levelled at us because we are not attending to the person that is a body as much as we are focusing on the body as *a set of interacting materials in relationship with each other*. In our defence, this is not to dehumanize but to assert our very materiality – or the humanity in materiality (following Viveiros de Castro 1998) – and so to remind readers that people are materials too. Therefore, following the multispecies ethnographies that give other species a voice (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Hurn 2012), we are attempting to show both how fleshy materials communicate with other materials to become bodies and also that the boundary, which one assumes acts to contain each person, is more accurately seen as a seeping, shedding, porous affair mobilizing within an influencing matrix of materials, following Strathern’s *dividual* (1998; see Attala, Coard, Govier and Steel this volume). We are attempting to do this by focusing your attention specifically on the physical substances that comprise the human body, with a view to fully realise *how people (are) matter*.

While, on one level, we all realise that bodies are simply flesh, bone and blood, we rarely think of our flesh in the same way as other materials – clay, water, wood, carbon – although in many other cultures clay is commonly viewed as being like flesh (Boivin 2004, 7). Blood, milk, mucus, ejaculate and other substances (or materials) may discharge out of us, but in so doing they are seen as materials, not ‘us’ (Carsten 2013). Once they have left our physical zone of personhood they alter into stuff. As a result, the book wants to avoid presenting bodies as objects that then move to being materials in death – as has been done before – but rather wants to demonstrate that bodies are always comprised of a series of shifting materials, throughout their ‘life cycle’ (for lack of a better phrase) in relationship with the rest of the material world (including air) (see Coard, this volume) – a standpoint that both demonstrates the porosity of people and the inaccuracies of divisions (Attala 2017). What the book proposes, therefore, is to bring into clearer focus the notion of body-as-matter – namely flesh, bone and skin –, emphasizing the physical realities of the body as well as how being a body manifests as a series of physical relationships with other materials.

From the ‘New Materialisms’ to ‘New Materialities’

The New Materialities approach is connected to, but also quite distinct from, the move called New Materialisms. New Materialisms is a philosophy that has also been defined as the third wave of feminism following Braidotti (1991, 2013). Since Marx, the term ‘material’ has held a hue of political economy studies – referencing the movement of items produced for consumption specifically. The term ‘materials’, when used in this light, is unconcerned with the composition of an item, but is concerned broadly with what the item does to both notions, and lines, of value. It explores how production and exchange methods of items impact on

people's lives. Similarly, Material Culture studies looks at things – specifically the things people make – so as to analyse and comment on human cultural life (Miller 2005). Material culture studies understand that the things people make are reflections of the producers' thoughts and claim that through careful analysis of how an item is used can illuminate cultural influences and ideas. Scholars such as Barad, however, have questioned this emphasis on representation: '[m]atter is not an individual articulated or static entity...passively awaiting signification' (Barad 2003, 821; see also Capra and Luisi 2014).

New Materialisms, on the other hand, emerging from Marxist thought, was originally considered to be a 'neo materialist' movement, the aim of which was to extend Materialism out to the body (Coole and Frost 2010). New Materialisms attends to the politics of embodiment with a view to challenge the artificial distinctions between sex and gender culturally placed on bodies – hence its subtitle: the third wave of feminism. These New Materialisms, therefore, scrutinize the dispossession of the body by paying sharp attention to the othering inherent in the representations of dichotomies such as male and female (Bradiotti 1991). This is not simply to assert for a more localized scholarship in rejection of global theories about gender but rather to shine a light onto how the flesh is both overlooked and lived (in). New Materialities (hereafter NM), however, shifts the lens away from the politics of gender and embodiment to the wider world of substances and their role in the co-generation of bodies both physically and intellectually. Any levelling of a representational playing field here moves away from consideration of people's bodies within a political and cultural system to one where the flesh is the thinking material within a material system; therefore, the body emerges as both the material to think with and through (cf. Levi Strauss 1964).

As many of the posthuman moves demonstrate, a rejection of anthropocentrism brings with it a revaluation of the terms culture and nature (cf. Descola 2013). Positioning bodies or flesh as materials contributes even more deeply to that set of debates. We maintain that as the intellectual barriers erected to keep people out of nature dissolve, it becomes clear that in a physical sense people – even when cultural – are also always natural too. Unfortunately, it seems that it is difficult to hold that thought. It appears awkward, slippery and thinking tends to reject any notion of our physical ties to materials and leaps back to separation and a human exceptionalist focus. This book aims to support thinking to connect with materials and offers examples to further and boost that intention.

Is this just a matter of language? And, who is ‘the body’ anyway?

When we use the phrase ‘*the body*’ we draw people away from their materiality. The bleeding, oozing, suppurating, desiccating, flaking, peeling and smelling event (or shape of cohered materials) that pumps, breathes and mobilizes as if bounded together into a person is sanitized and made invisible. This representation of people creates a distance between the material reality of being a body and how the body is perceived. This distance occurs between the words ‘person’ and ‘body’ – presenting them as if they are two different items, when in fact they are one thing. For Stoller, this paradox is summed up in the final line of a Sufi poem by Rumi:

‘We are the sweet cold water and the jar that pours it’

(Rumi, cited by Stoller 1997, prologue)

Consequently, in discussions that talk of ‘the body’ in this way conspire to make its fleshy complexity imperceptible and, immediately it is forgotten – the various organs, bones in multiple shapes, sinews, muscles, veins, nerves and different fluids and gases formulating and transforming in concert within it disappear from view. Therefore, when we try to talk of ourselves either the person or the body is lost. The body becomes a person-less thing and the person is, equally, bodiless. Barad is confused as to why ‘language has been granted... [so] much power’ and asks ‘How did language become more trustworthy than matter?’ (2003, 801). She makes a call to turn back to matter; she wants matter to ‘actively matter’ (Barad 2003, 809).

Of equal concern is that when we discuss ourselves as ‘the body’, we present our flesh as an object situated in space with an epidermal perimeter, which designates our physical limit. Contained within the boundary of the skin, the physical entity called body articulates as discrete and individual without you being with it. This perspective is a material fallacy and a device that belies the messy, leaking and percolating material reality of your body – and it is exactly this device that insists the fleshiness of your being-ness is blurred out and away from your experience and consideration. And worryingly, it supports the perception of a separation not only of your awareness of yourself as flesh but it also encourages a distance between you (as body of materials) and the rest of the materials of the world that comprise you. Consequently, as bodies are simply a community of materials shuffling and rearranging to maintain your shape, to continue to ignore the role materials play in shaping both your body

and our shared worlds is foolish on a number of counts, which amount to more than simple inaccuracy.

Why is this important?

The world is a physical event becoming itself. Everything – including items typically considered immaterial like light or thought – emerges physically and energetically as if within a material or substance from another material or substance, and as such cannot be divorced from what is around us. Moreover, as each substance is determined by its properties, every material singularly and in relationship with other materials is limited by its inherent capacities. For this reason, the NM perspective encourages materials to be brought into discussion but despite good intentions it too tends to overlook the notion that people are also materials in relationship. NM recognizes organic, inorganic and synthetic substances, how they form into things, are reshaped, disintegrate, digest, transform and in so doing shape people's lives (cf. Drazin and Kuchler 2015) but rarely does the perspective recognize that people are bodies-of-materials. Thus, this burgeoning mass of literature explores a range of diverse substances such as oil, carbon, diamonds, water, soil, clay, as well as synthetic materials such as plastics and compound chemical pharmaceuticals – but it still has a tendency to side step the notion that human flesh is a material and that living bodies are substances agglomerated into people. Perhaps, this is because it is simply so blindingly obvious? Or perhaps it is because some aspects of human exceptionalism are just too stubborn to erase?

The editors of this book feel a sense of urgency pressing down on them. This urgency is prompted by an ecological awareness of the consequences of what is now called the Age of the Anthropocene. Recognizing the problematic anthropocentric focus of the name that still places humanity as the pivot around which all existence circles, we nevertheless also recognize the value of using a label that demands attention to current global shifts. As dark as these days are (Morton 2016), and as depressing as the notion of an Age of the Anthropocene is, it has inspired scholars from diverse disciplines to creatively reconsider current practice and methods. The intentions of this book are melded with that creativity. The various posthuman moves, including the scholarship of the ontological turn, are responsible for the loud strident calls for inclusivity (specifically with regards to recognizing personhood); a levelling of the representational playing fields (Witmore 2014) between human and otherthanhuman beings (Whatmore 2002; Kohn 2015); a recognition of the co-generative, influential and relational biosocial aspects of being (Barad 2007; Ingold and Palsson 2013); and new ethically grounded analytics (Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010) to approach these new worlds that seem to be blossoming up before our eyes as we reject a number of past values and methods. The New Materialities move has swooped in on the wing of this creativity and, through an extension of Latour's actants and Actor Network Theory (1993) that recognizes the agency of things other than human, asks for attention to how earthly substances shape lives.

Thinking with and through the body is not to think about it. Thinking about the body puts it at a distance – to be viewed as different, as a product, as another. Thinking through or with the body places the flesh of the body (the very meaty assemblage) as the physical pivot from which all conclusions can emerge. This perspective on the flesh demands realization that

your being is predicated on a series of complicated physical properties inherent in the relationships of the materials that compose you. It also reminds you that the properties that support the chemicals of your flesh to cohere and shape themselves together into the form known as you-as-body are also in relationship with the rest of the materials in the world around you. As we inhabit a time in which human activity is considered to be detrimentally impacting on the physical forces driving materiality, it is both timely and apposite to seriously reconsider our methods and the consequences of how we think with the materials that become us.

Body matters

It is this that *Body Matters* addresses: both the stubborn tendency to see materials as inert as well as the representations that disassociate the living body from the material world. In addition to keenly attending to the materials of the body, we also (following Barad 2007) hope to problematize any divisions that language establishes between materials in favour of a lexicon that elucidates relationships and connections. Therefore, this book takes as its starting point the axiom that bodies are matter – flesh, blood and bone – and inspired by the phenomenology of embodiment that advocates for a ‘sensuous scholarship’, and in hearing Stoller’s cry to avoid ‘bloodless language’ (Stoller 1997, xv) we offer this series of chapters.

Drawing upon a diverse range of case studies from anthropology, archaeology and medieval studies, the contributors to this volume variously consider – indeed question – the boundaries and *dividuality* of the human body, drawing attention to its porosity as it merges, commingles

and interacts with other matter (see Attala, Govier, Feyers-Kerr, Rahmen, Steel). Some chapters (Coard, Webster) highlight the very materiality or physicality, of the body, focusing the gaze firmly on its fleshy, bony, dusty reality. Whereas the agency of the physical body, separate from the thinking agency of the mind, is highlighted by Burton and Webster. Feyers-Kerr, Rahmen, Steel and Walsh draw attention to the physical, haptic and sensual engagement of body and substances – variously clay, plaster, water – and how these tactile material engagements shape social worlds. All these chapters demonstrate the virtue to turning our attention towards the matter of the body, demonstrating how it enables us to situate people within the material, physical world and thus to better understand how people forge relationships, and come into being, both with each other and with other things – how matter and people co-produce social worlds.

Focusing on burials from Çatalhöyük and influenced by the work of Barad (2003, 2007, 2012) and Bennett (2010), Eloise Govier challenges Cartesian notions of body-mind-thing separations, instead emphasizing the importance of the *relationships* between matter/things and the porosity of the body. Bennett's understanding of vital materiality, that people are made up of many things, substances, 'its' (2010, 113) lies at the heart of Govier's chapter: she contends that we cannot fully understand how bodies *become* if we separate them from the materials that flow through them and act with them.

Luci Attala interrogates the material, bodily consequences of ingesting plants with hallucinogenic properties, specifically challenging notions embedded within anthropological

studies of consumption that foodstuffs (in this case specifically phyto matter or plants) are essentially inert, consumed, experienced and enjoyed by humans but without agentic capacities. Instead Attala, uses Barad's (2007) focus on the agency in relationships and Bennett's notion of vitality (2010), to remind us that we are what we eat; through ingesting food – eating and, by extension, drinking, smoking and other forms of consumption – matter commingles and the body *becomes-with* (Haraway 2008) what it consumes (ingests, inhales).

Within the context of the Xié of northwest Amazonia, Elizabeth Rahmen demonstrates the inherent material porosity of flesh and how the body is shaped through its relationships with the other materials. The chapter specifically attends to the co-creative engagements of water with flesh, but it also illustrates the roles other materials, such as tobacco, play in shaping bodies. Rahmen concentrates on the process by which Xié personhood is encouraged to sediment into flesh. This ethnographic example clearly demonstrates how the boundary between the matter of the body and other environmental materials is blurred and simultaneously co-productive and also illustrates the role the riverine landscape plays in the material creation of healthy, strong and vital individuals.

Louise Steel also explores of the matter of *being* – or personhood – focusing on specific handlings of skulls in funerary ritual in the Neolithic and Bronze Age of the Near East and Aegean. Influenced by Barad's agential realism (2007), Steel views these haptic relationships between the matter of the dead and living bodies as collective events or phenomena, so as to demonstrate that rather than being separate, discrete entities are porous, seeping into each

other as they co-produce personhood. Furthermore, this chapter problematizes the notion that personhood is individualistic by demonstrating its inherent materiality.

Interactions between the body and earthy substances, such as soil and clay, among the Mun of East Africa provide the focus for Kate Fayers-Kerr's chapter. She questions traditional approaches to body painting, which focus on skin as a passive blank canvas upon which cultural ideas are inscribed. Instead, Fayers-Kerr explores how the materiality of the body becomes, interacts, and is at one, with the wider environment, emphasizing the fluidity and porosity of engaging matters and illustrates how cultural identities are pointedly co-produced and shaped-with as a result of relationships with surrounding materials.

The materiality of the dead body in medieval Europe is the subject of Harriett Webster's contribution – namely, what physical characteristics of the body needed to be present to demonstrate that the soul had departed the flesh. Webster focuses specifically on how the supernatural became tangible and visible in the very flesh of normal human bodies when these became the location of miracles. Webster also explores how other objects might act as proxies for the human body in the curative process. This chapter therefore demonstrates ironically how the matter of the human body was used in medieval Europe to corroborate the spiritual and immaterial – this against a backdrop of understandings of the separation of corporeal flesh from the soul, which lie at the root of persistent notions that people are separate from the material world that this volume aims to challenge.

Ros Coard explores the fluidity of the body, by highlighting what occurs when body materials desiccate. Using this theme as a pivot around which her discussion circulates, Coard highlights how bodies are not materially static or bounded entities, but instead are merely materials in flux, in a continual state of becoming. To establish this clear focus, Coard takes an almost microscopic look at the manner by which bits of bodies are regularly discharged when extraneous. This relentless ‘shedding’ of body matter – hair, skin, nail – produces a scattered layer of body bits across our lives re-merging with bodies through inhalation, balling up in corners and settling on furniture. This diaspora of dried fleshy parts not only scatters us throughout, it also enables us to then intermingle with, and, simultaneously transform into, the surrounding environment. Coard observes that in contrast to other living elements of the human body – our flesh, organs and bones – the materiality of these shed corpora is not attended to or recognized as of value but rather is considered, using Douglas as ‘matter out of place’ (Douglas 1966).

The lived experience of the body and its haptic interaction with other materials – ceramic drinking cups from Middle Bronze Age Kerma – is the focus of Carl Walsh’s chapter. Walsh explores the notion of *body schema* (cf. Malafouris 2008), questioning Cartesian ideas that separate people – the bounded body – from the material world, instead recognizing that the human body comprises a commingling of seemingly disparate matter such as clay. He focuses on bodily actions – handling and drinking from a cup – in which human flesh, matter and object are materially entwined through specific performed – and culturally informed –

gestures. Walsh makes the case that these material entanglements and gestural performances combine materials and objects into the *body schema*.

Our final bodily offering looks at the agency of distributed objects – namely medieval relics, in this instance the finger of Saint Germanus of Auxerre. Janet Burton’s account of how saints’ bodies were manipulated, handled, moved around and encased in costly materials in visually stunning reliquaries, reminds us that the human body is not immutable, but is subject to transformation – the fleshy matter of the body decays leaving only bone. Throughout this chapter Burton emphasizes the materiality – substance of – medieval relics and the elaborate, costly reliquaries they were housed in. This chapter also firmly establishes how the body – or in this instance part thereof – continues to have agency in death, analogous to Gell’s distributed objects (1998, 221–3).

Conclusion

Body Matters therefore, specifically notes that the NM perspective overlooks the materiality of bodies. NM recognizes materials (cf. Drazin and Kuchler 2015) but it has a tendency to side step bodily substances as materials that comprise us as people. Thus, the body is not presented as a substance or even an assemblage of substances working together but is typically presented as acting on, distinct from (and therefore divorced from) the world of materials. *Body Matters*, therefore, addresses the Cartesian tendency to see materials as inert and the representations that disassociate the living body from the material world.

As with the ontological turn that pushed scholars in anthropology to avoid translating differences into those idea-forms established by the discipline, the ethnographic content of this volume helps us conceive of and sense how materials and our bodies are variously entwined and co-productively engaged together. Fayers-Kerrs's chapter illustrates this beautifully with her discussion of how soil becomes bodies and how bodies are blended with the landscape. Furthermore, her chapter demonstrates how soil slips between being organic and inorganic/ living and non-living depending on relational situation rather than objective context. A similar point is picked up by both Attala and Govier with regards how bodies become through ingestion, inhalation and incorporation of different substances. These works not only demonstrate how the line drawn between objects (or to use Barad's term 'phenomena' (2003)) is blurred but how it is also dramatically unsuccessful to characterize items as fixed in separation when viewed through the lens of NM.

Moreover, and continuing with this thread that attempts to sew dualities together, the location of agency, typically positioned in human bodies, emerges seriously troubled using this perspective. Where Cartesian-inspired theory attempted to surmount this problem by producing – (literally) from thin air – the notion of a spirit that was claimed to animate flesh, the NM directly contests that claim by asserting that agency is not placed within any material, let alone flesh, but rather can be regarded as the outcome of relationships. Thus, because reality 'is not composed of things-in-themselves...but things-in-phenomena' (Barad 2003, 817) agency is more accurately understood as 'a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has' (Barad 2007, 178).

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Notes

¹ For example, see the work of Haraway (2008), Helmreich (2009) and *The Multispecies Salon* ethnographies (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Hurn 2012; Kohn 2013) as illustrative of literature that challenges zoocentrism by bringing in non-human animals.