

## HUEY COPELAND

It comes as no surprise that the heterogeneous humanistic and social-scientific writings often lumped together under the heading “new materialisms” have been embraced by a wide swath of Euro-American academics, artists, critics, and curators. In their focus on the internal and external entanglements of matter with both seen and unseen forces, agents, and atmospheres, these supposed theoretical innovations not only echo the preoccupations and procedures of aesthetic inquiry but also suggest the relevance of art-historical methods for producing interdisciplinary accounts of the world’s continual unfolding and reconfiguring.<sup>1</sup> Yet this affinity also pertains to the potential blind spots of the two discourses, which, in the name of universal values and transcendent theoretical schemas, again risk abetting “the social reproduction of white supremacy” through the elision of marginalized perspectives, especially—in the words of Cedric Robinson—that “accretion over generations of collective intelligence” stemming from black cultural traditions.<sup>2</sup>

\* Because of an editorial oversight, the above text was omitted from “A Question on Materialisms” in *October* 155 (Winter 2016). The editors sincerely regret the error and are grateful to the author for the opportunity to present it here. The questionnaire prompt (p. 3) asked respondents to comment from the perspective of their own work about a decentering of the human in theoretical and historical writing across the humanities:

Is it possible, or desirable, to decenter the human in discourse on art in particular? What is gained in the attempt, and what—or who—disappears from view? Is human difference—gender, race, power of all kinds—elided? What are the risks in assigning agency to objects; does it absolve us of responsibility, or offer a new platform for politics? . . . Which, if any, are the productive materialisms for making and thinking about art today?

1. My language here, which aims to frame the ambitions of new-materialist discourse at its best, relies upon that of Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 136. For an approach more typical of aestheticized protocols for engaging the phenomenal world, see Jane Bennett, “The Force of Things,” in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 1–20.

2. I quote, respectively, from Huey Copeland, “Unfinished Business as Usual: African American Artists, New York Museums, and the 1990s,” in *Come As You Are: Art of the 1990s*, ed. Alexandra Schwartz (Berkeley: University of California Press and Montclair Art Museum, 2014), p. 32; and Cedric J. Robinson, “Preface to the 2000 Edition,” in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. xxx. For a related critique, see

Take, for example, the following lines from the introduction to one of the more visible of the new materialist anthologies: “Material dimensions have recently been marginalized by fashionable constructivist approaches and identity politics. Of course, the latter have a good deal to say about the body and its imbrication in relationships of power, but we are not convinced that they pay sufficient attention to the material efficacy of bodies or have the theoretical resources to do so.”<sup>3</sup> As easily as that, knowledges aimed precisely at holistic understandings of material being-together and being-in-the-world are collapsed, caricatured, and dismissed with nary a footnote and more than a whiff of an age-old logic that would limit the thinking of the other to the impositions on her body, without, of course, reflecting upon the white liberal biases that inform such a statement or the volume’s stated interests in ontologies, biopolitics, and political economy.

In her contribution to the anthology, Sara Ahmed rightly pushes against such perverse amnesia, situating her own work as a “renewed” materialism that is deeply indebted to feminist scholarship produced during the “cultural turn.”<sup>4</sup> Yet her essay—focused on the table as a multifaceted site of gendered material and phenomenological encounter—is also a corrective: In it, Ahmed revises one of her previous texts in light of its failure to acknowledge either that engagements with the domestic sphere are also raced and classed or that one of her clinching examples, the Kitchen Table Press, “was about generating a space for woman [*sic*] of color within feminism.”<sup>5</sup> Ahmed’s emendations to her table talk might be further extended to transform her discussion of Karl Marx’s famous disquisition on the production of value within capitalist economies, a passage that also begins by considering the ontological status of a wooden table and that ultimately leads to the seemingly counterfactual proposition “If commodities could speak. . . .”<sup>6</sup> As Fred Moten has brilliantly shown, certain commodities—in particular, enslaved women—did in fact speak, and sigh, and shriek: “The sound—the inspired materiality—of that speech constitutes a kind of temporal warp that disrupts and augments not only Marx but the mode of subjectivity that the ultimate object of his critique, capital, both allows and disallows.”<sup>7</sup>

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Jessica L. Horton and Janet Catherine Berlo, “Beyond the Mirror: Indigenous Ecologies and ‘New Materialisms’ in Contemporary Art,” *Third Text* (2013), pp. 17–28.

3. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Coole and Frost (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 19.

4. Sara Ahmed, “Orientations Matter,” in *New Materialisms*, p. 234.

5. Ahmed, “Orientations Matter,” p. 253; the author returns to Sara Ahmed, “Orientations Toward Objects,” in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 25–63.

6. Karl Marx, “The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret,” in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I* (1867), trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 163, 176.

7. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 11. In a certain sense, Moten’s reading answers the call for a rethinking of fetishism within black studies articulated in Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 9.

Moten's writing instances a critical orientation toward the sensible rooted in the historical production of black flesh—suspended between sexes and genders, animate and inanimate, person and thing, animal and machine, agent and material—that underlines the porousness of ontological categories as well as the brittleness of Western culture's epistemological foundations, which time and again place the black body as limit and exemplar, whether captives in the slave-ship hold, specimens on the examining table, or magnetized targets of state violence in the streets.<sup>8</sup> This approach, what I have called a “tending-toward-blackness—a leaning into and caring for,” animates a range of artistic, social, political, and theoretical practices aimed at establishing an ethical posture toward black subjects and those related forms of being that have been positioned at the margins of thought and perception yet are necessarily co-constitutive of them.<sup>9</sup> If, in the words of the latest rallying cry, “black lives matter,” then we must recalibrate our modes of reading, thinking, and acting in order to pay heed to the political ontology of race and to the mattering of blackness itself.<sup>10</sup>

Among scholars embraced within the framework of new materialism, Karen Barad has productively taken these lessons to heart in staging transdisciplinary encounters between performative, postcolonial, and poststructuralist theories and the philosophy-physics of Niels Bohr, which, in its way, also undoes distinctions between the discursive and the material, the temporal and the spatial, the epistemological and the ontological: Our apparatuses for engaging the world of which we are

8. In addition to Moten's work, these lines are intended to conjure a range of raced materialisms and racialized material practices from the advent of transatlantic slavery to the present: On the flesh and the undoing of gender, see Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987), pp. 65–81; on hierarchies of animation, see Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); on the vexed relation between persons and things, see Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); on the human in and as the machine, see Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s,” in *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 5–45; on being in the slave-ship hold, see Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage,” *GLQ* 14, nos. 2–3 (2008), pp. 191–215; on the black female body as a site of scientific production, see Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2010); and on the black body's vulnerability to state violence, see Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton, “The Avant-garde of White Supremacy,” *Social Identities* 9, no. 2 (2003), pp. 169–81, as well as John Marquez, “The Black Mohicans: Representations of Everyday Violence in Postracial Urban America,” *American Studies Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2012), pp. 625–51.

9. “Tending-toward-blackness” is “meant to rhyme with Martin Heidegger's notion of ‘being-toward-death’—the subject's existential ownership of his own demise—particularly as recast in light of the dynamics of slavery in Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 15.” See Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), pp. 92; 218 n. 88.

10. For a most trenchant account of how the positionality of the slave disrupts questions of politics and ontology, see Frank B. Wilderson, III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

always already a part, Bohr teaches us, not only determine what we “know” but also what at any given moment can be said to *be*. So grounded, Barad’s capacious theorization of how matter matters is oriented to the performative reconfiguring of being on a cosmic scale, enabling us to reckon with the limits of the visual, to think together black bodies and black holes, and to freshly confront the constitution of our objects and their entanglements by putting pressure on the mechanisms through which we continue to reproduce constitutive exclusions both discursively and methodologically.<sup>11</sup> Just imagine what might be possible if, instead of rushing to the new, we tended toward blackness—in all of its sensuous and imperceptible unfolding—that phantom site whose traces everywhere mark the construction of the material world and provide a different horizon from which to take our bearings.<sup>12</sup>

11. Barad; for a complementary account, see Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (Fall 2013), pp. 737–80.

12. For an extended meditation on what this might mean for art history in practice, see my *Bound to Appear*, as well as Huey Copeland, “Flow and Arrest,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Platform of Criticism* 48 (November 2015), pp. 205–24.