

Introduction: Reflections on Postcolonial Animations of the Material

Rosemary J. Jolly and Alexander Fyfe

In this introduction to the special issue, “Animating Theories of the Material: Approaching Animist Being in Postcolonial Literatures,” Rosemary Jolly and Alexander Fyfe consider the recent surge of interest in animisms within postcolonial studies alongside the roughly coeval turn to questions of materiality within the humanities. Introducing the five essays in the issue, they raise questions around the potential limitations of various forms of materialism, both “new” and “old,” and highlight possible ways in which postcolonial scholars might responsibly attend to animist modes of thought. They argue for the political importance and the ethical necessity of an approach to animisms that does not reduce them to a “theory” of the material, yet at the same time bears witness to the full range of materialities that obtain within such worldviews.

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The last two decades have seen a surge of interest in animisms—a term broadly used to designate non-Cartesian modes of thought, and specifically the attribution of agency to nonhuman being—within discussions of postcolonial literatures. Once primarily the domain of anthropologists, works by Harry Garuba and Caroline Rooney, among others, have brought animist worldviews into the purview of the study of literary and cultural texts from the global south.¹ In so doing, they have helped to distance much of the colonial baggage of the term—so often deployed by colonial ethnography to distinguish “primitive” societies from their “rational” Western counterparts—and served to render it a legitimate concern within the field. This raises important theoretical and methodological issues for postcolonial scholarship that is concerned with the recuperation of marginalized forms of subjecthood and, indeed,

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1 Harry Garuba, “Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, and Society,” *Public Culture* 15.2 (2003): 261–85; Caroline Rooney, *African Literature, Animism and Politics* (London; New York: Routledge, 2001). Wole Soyinka’s work on the “African world view” is, however, a significant precursor to these more recent interventions. See Wole Soyinka, *Myth Literature and the African World* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

objecthood, in historical and contemporary contexts. Not simply a question of “reading for” animism in social and cultural texts, this project requires a renewed attention to precisely how the “material” is constituted in diverse contexts. At the same time, this line of inquiry raises the question of what challenges animist cultures might pose to existing theories of the material as they are practiced in the academy, whether they be ontological, historical-materialist, or otherwise in orientation. This special issue brings together scholarship that teases out the relations between animisms and questions of materiality in diverse postcolonial contexts.

The renewed interest in animisms has coincided with the “ontological turn” in the humanities and, within that broader movement, the rise in so-called “new” materialisms.² Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* clearly draws upon and bears witness to what has been called the ontological turn, marked roughly as emerging at the turn of the millennium.³ Bennett claims that we need to see nonhuman objects, man-made and “natural,” as having a vital force, as being “quasi-agents.”⁴ Such agency needs to be read alongside human agency in assemblages of human and nonhuman actants,⁵ from waste to electricity, that together manifest the fact that material is not inert in the hands of human-gods, wanton boys, or otherwise. The complication here is that, as Zoe Todd points out in no uncertain terms, the notion of objects as *not* inert matter, and humans and objects as co-constitutive within force-fields such as the climate, is a multigenerational, centuries-old concept of numerous Indigenous and Aboriginal groups.⁶ At issue is the fact that when Cartesian intellectuals live alongside colonized peoples for whom the Enlightenment is an element of their oppression, and not replacement for their non-Cartesian beliefs, the inadequacy of the Cartesian regime to the complicated dimensions of what that regime putatively calls the object, is bound to rub off on erstwhile Cartesians at some point over 400 or more years. Thus, to Todd, Bennett’s recourse to Spinoza, Nietzsche, Thoreau, Darwin, Adorno, and Deleuze, to highlight a long history of thinking about matter in Western philosophy, instantiates “another Euro-Western narrative, . . . the trendy and dominant Ontological turn, . . . spinning itself on the backs of non-European thinkers.”⁷

We move closer to discussions of racism in the work of Mel Y. Chen, who has much to say about the racialization of objects.⁸ While referencing materialisms, Chen is deeply engaged with the affective charge of matter in its racist, toxic, homophobic, and ableist guises. To the extent that Chen critiques objects to be contextualized within what this

2 We use the term *new* materialisms to designate the work of a number of theorists who attend to the agency of nonhuman objects, the most visible perhaps being Bennett, Chen, and Braidotti. The term, it should be noted, is not generally used by these thinkers themselves, although several of them make contributions to an influential collection of essays bearing it as a title. See Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds. *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham NC; London: Duke University Press, 2010).

3 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

4 *Ibid.*, vii.

5 Bennett takes the term *actant* from Bruno Latour, defining it as “a source of action that can either be human or non-human; it is that which has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events.” *Ibid.*, viii.

6 Zoe Todd, “An Indigenous Feminist’s Take on the Ontological Turn: ‘Ontology’ Is Just Another Word for Colonialism,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 29.1 (March 1, 2016): 4–22.

7 *Ibid.*, 7.

8 Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

introduction conceives of as colonial regimes of knowledge, her work enables us more than Bennett's to get at the economies of human labor and affect that construct the differences in objects that Alfred Lopez traces directly in his essay. Lopez is determined to ensure that materialists focusing on the abject objectification of nonhuman material do not evade the question of humans who have been treated as material, and thus as immaterial, within Western metaphysics. To this end, Lopez rereads the now well-recognized litany of objects at the beginning of Bennett's analysis not from a perspective of impersonal affect, as Bennett would have it, but by placing the perspective of Bennett's assumed universality in juxtaposition with the perspectives of a homeless person, a Pakistani deliveryman, and an African American worker. Lopez composes a different affective catalogue for these personae, with a very different set of affective resources than those attached to Bennett's implied reader. Lopez seeks to ensure that a renewed focus on the agency of objects, one that aims to undermine anthropocentrism, doesn't overlook those humans who have "never been in charge of the world," yet again eliding "the speaking but unheard voice of those subject-things already vibrantly inhabiting the material world."⁹

Rosi Braidotti is yet another thinker, a posthumanist with a strong interest in the material turn, who registers that the kind of generalized responsibility for environmental degradation often attached to the nomenclature of the Anthropocene is an approach that refuses to acknowledge differential responsibility among the haves and the have nots for such degradation—and therefore, for the possibilities of associating differential responsibility for rectifying that damage.¹⁰ That is to say, the beneficiaries of capitalism's insatiable appetite for raw material extraction, despite its environmental consequences, results not only in planetary degradation, but in a situation in which thinking about beneficiaries rather than "the human" at the species level, results in a more equitable distribution of responsibility, both for past degradation and future damage control and reversal where possible.¹¹ This kind of thinking is only made possible by Lopez and Braidotti's shared conviction of the centrality of those whom Lopez calls "subject-things": humans who have never been (dis)graced with the appellation of the human.

But the arrival of the "new" materialisms—which loom large in several of the essays in this issue—should not obscure the continued relevance of "old" materialisms and, in particular, of Marxist historical materialism in its many forms to discussions around animisms. Although the new materialisms' emphasis upon "the generativity and resilience of the material forms with which social actors interact" might appear to be at odds with historical materialism's emphasis on the *human* capitalist and proletariat (although later Marxisms have, of course, revised this position considerably) such a distinction has been consistently troubled by scholars on both sides of the debate.¹² Indeed, Bennett has noted that "the power of nonhumans is not absent" in

9 Alfred J. Lopez, "Contesting the Material Turn; or, the Persistence of Agency," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Inquiry* 5.3 (2018).

10 Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA, USA: Polity Press, 2013).

11 Rosi Braidotti, "Posthuman Critical Theory," in *Critical Posthumanism and Planetary Futures*, eds. Debashish Banerji and Makarand R. Paranjape (India: Springer India, 2016), 13–32.

12 Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, eds. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2010), 26.

historical materialism, citing Marx's dissertation on "The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature" and his discussion of the commodity in *Capital* as examples.¹³ To this we might also add Alexander R. Galloway's argument that Marxism, specifically the work of Fredric Jameson, possesses a significant ontological dimension in so far as it "requires a reduction to material conditions, a determinism (no matter how weak or strong) of these material conditions, and indeed ultimately an accounting of the absolute horizon that conditions the world as a whole."¹⁴ Approaches informed by historical materialism might then have more to say about (and more to learn from) animist nonhuman agency within contemporary social formations than is often recognized. For scholars who retain a commitment to the critique of global capitalism in all of its forms, this presents both exciting possibilities for the study of capitalism's penetration of the global south and considerable challenges to the assumed "objectivity" of critique.

Indeed, the continued relevance of critique to discussions of animism requires a reflection upon its conceptual apparatus and the debts that this might owe to formerly (and presently) colonized peoples. In this regard, the concept of the *fetish* deserves particular attention. A key component in the projects of both Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, this term—originally used to designate an inanimate object that possesses spiritual power—has provided inspiration to immensely influential schools of thought. Inherent in this dynamic of influence, however, is a significant colonial dimension, manifest in the emptying of the fetish's spiritual content in order to serve post-Enlightenment theorizations of the human mind or of capitalism. Louise Green's essay, "Thinking Outside the Body,"¹⁵ reverses this dynamic, asking what the fetish has to say not only to contemporary theories of materiality but also to the current environmental crisis. Offering an incisive critique of Bennett's political ecology and engaging substantively with the French anthropologist Philippe Descola's work on comparative ontology, Green elaborates the exciting "possibilities" presented by an understanding of the fetish that is mindful of its role in animist systems of thought and of its place in intellectual history. Her essay offers one model of how "theoretical" discourse might productively and responsibly engage with animist concepts.

This concern with the environment is also taken up in the essays in this issue by Alison Ravenscroft and Warren Cariou, which, much like earlier work by Todd and Elizabeth Povinelli, demonstrate the assumption of an objective distinction between human and "environment" or "landscape" to be inadequate.¹⁶ Todd and Ravenscroft are as one in pointing out that "if new materialisms do not enter into an intimate encounter with Indigenous and other theories of 'nature' as vital, responsive, intelligent and literate, there will be a recuperation of the very western sovereign human

13 Janell Watson, "Eco-Sensibilities: An Interview with Jane Bennett," *The Minnesota Review* 81 (2013): 154.

14 Alexander R. Galloway, "History Is What Hurts: On Old Materialism," *Social Text* 34.2/127 (2016): 137.

15 Louise Green, "Thinking Outside the Body: New Materialism and the Challenge of the Fetish," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Inquiry* 5.3 (2018).

16 Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). Todd, "An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn."

subject whose undoing is sought.”¹⁷ As Jolly describes it in a recent critical reading of African humanism; as Todd describes it in relation to Inuit critical thinking about “climate”; and as Ravenscroft in this collection herself poses the situation, in many Indigenous and Aboriginal traditions, and most especially in the case of Waanyi writer Alexis Wright, that which Cartesianism defines as “human” and “inhuman” (including land) are so intertwined as to be co-constitutive or, to use Ravenscroft’s word, “consubstantiated.”¹⁸ Ravenscroft critiques Barad and Shaviro for assuming the “we” in their question, “Where did we ever get the strange idea that nature—as opposed to culture—is ahistorical and timeless?” is a given.¹⁹ Not all humans require Barad’s or Shaviro’s correctives, Ravenscroft points out, because it is only the West’s concept of the subject that has fallen into such crisis: Aboriginal and Indigenous traditions have never conceived of nature through the “thingification” of the colonial gaze.²⁰ In this instance the doctrine of “terra nullius” applies not simply to the land itself, but the absence of acknowledgment of Indigenous and Aboriginal voices with intergenerational standing in the rapidly developing canons of “new” materialisms; as Ravenscroft states bluntly, “The colonisers did not arrive in an empty (intellectual) land.”²¹ Both Ravenscroft and Povinelli point to an ethics of mutual care that sustains the human and the land through practices of noticing changes in the land, longing for land:

People visit country and listen to country; they sing for country and cry for country. They worry greatly about country and speak longingly of places they are unable to visit because it is now part of a pastoral property, a mining lease, or just too hard to get to without transport. They feel their country, in return, hears, thinks, and feels about its human relatives.²²

Povinelli describes this as a relation in which, if the humans withdraw care and attention from the land, the land will return in kind, withdrawing care from humans: in Cartesian terms, it will fail to be able to sustain humans. This mutual turning away, Povinelli points out, evolves into changes in the material being of the consubstantiated party, human and land.²³

Here land is not a possession, but that subject with which one is in relation. Thus if Alexis Wright, the primary subject of Ravenscroft’s essay, has always been unrelenting in her claim for Waanyi sovereignty, this is because such sovereignty would be the only precondition under/against Australian settler nationalism that would enable the mutual care that the land/people co-constitution demands. It is challenging to

17 Alison Ravenscroft, “Strange Weather: Indigenous Materialism, New Materialism, and Colonialism,” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Inquiry* 5.3 (2018).

18 Rosemary J. Jolly, “Effluence, ‘Waste’ and African Humanism: Extra-Anthropocentric Being and Human Rightness,” *Social Dynamics* 44.1 (2018): 158–78; Todd, “An Indigenous Feminist’s Take on the Ontological Turn: ‘Ontology’ Is Just Another Word for Colonialism.”

19 Steve Shaviro cited in Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” *Signs* 28.3 (2003): 801.

20 Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 812. The term *thingification* is originally Fanon’s, a fact omitted by Barad, a sign of the erasure of the relations between race and thingification in her account.

21 Ravenscroft, “Strange Weather.”

22 Kate Rigby, cited in Ravenscroft, “Strange Weather.”

23 Povinelli, *Geontologies*, 28.

express these ideas without seeming to fall prey to a romanticization of indigeneity. Such a romanticization, and indeed exoticization, would entail a fixing of both native and nature in time, precisely as unchanged by history and therefore unchanged by colonial regimes. This kind of fixing in time is what Povinelli describes as a foundational figure of late liberalism, in the form of the Animist (capital A), who is associated with the Aboriginal, but is not, as we read Povinelli, in fact the Aboriginal, but a Western idea of the Aboriginal. This notion of the Aboriginal is the one projected onto the native Other by the West, in which the native Other carries the load of nonrecognition of the binary, life/nonlife. This Aboriginal Other, the animist, is a figure of late liberalism because the animist is the only form of concession late liberal governance accepts in configuring relations between Aboriginal on the one hand, and land on the other. The Aboriginal subject must squeeze themselves into the putative shape of the recognizable Animist for settler governance to recognize (some of) their rights, sometimes. As Robin Wright puts it, Povinelli “argues that settler Australians desire stories about totemic Dreamings, not because they challenge the ontological presumptions of settler governance, but because they exemplify a performance of difference that sorts humans into those who do or do not differentiate between Life and Nonlife.”²⁴

This caricature of the animist, the creation of monstrous late liberal settler governance, is not the subject of the animism explored in this collection, although the animist practices under review here certainly have to figure that Animism within the purview of their multiple late liberal antagonists. Let us explain, using Warren Cariou’s essay as an example. On the safe side, which turns out not to be so safe, one can either read Indigenous practices out of animism, and incur, justly we would say, accusations of the reinstatement of the White settler subject that new materialisms, at least nominally, seek to dislodge. Or one can be risky and engage the question of the relations between older animisms, older materialisms, and their history under the sign of settler capitalist colonialism. In this instance, one always risks the accusation of bringing Aboriginal thought into the discourse under the sign of Povinelli’s late liberal animist, an impoverished figure, rendered virtually transparent under the weight of settler regimes’ outsourcing of the very question of the life/nonlife binary to a generic native subjectivity.

What Warren Cariou describes in his description of the relations between himself and sweetgrass, however, is not a ritual, fixed in time, unchanging, where the sweetgrass is a totemic object. He is describing an embodied relation with the sweetgrass braid as one of intimacy with the land. He tells the story with the permission of the elders, in order to ensure, to the best of their ability, that its parameters are not easily exoticized into native nostalgia. In such an instance, the co-constituted subject, Cariou-sweetgrass, would be read as Cariou the naïve native informant, showing the tools of “being native” (as opposed to “going native”) to the anthropological eye of the White reader.²⁵ Instead, we read Cariou’s story as one of the gift of

24 Robin Wright, “Geontologies by Elizabeth Povinelli.” *Society & Space* (blog). 2017. <http://societyandspace.org/2017/03/01/geontologies-by-elizabeth-povinelli/>.

25 Zoe Todd notes that the call for papers for the Association of Social Anthropologists of the United Kingdom and Commonwealth for its 2014 annual conference reads “Ethnographic methodologies have evolved in relation to other traditions, internalizing over the years diverse scientific, political, literary,

the land to its people: “The plant is revealed in these works as a teacher, operating through its scent, texture, and literal rootedness to teach humans about their own connectedness to particular living places.”²⁶ This sovereignty-as-rootedness is common to both Ravenscroft and Cariou’s arguments, instantiating the land as material in its rooting of the humans that know it intimately, rather than in the settler sovereignty of the land and its people as material for extraction. Thus, what these essays point to as missing in Western ontologies of new materialism is the absence of a sense of the *danger* of neo-colonial resurrections of the object as Animist (capital A) in the overlooking of cultures that have never decoupled life from nonlife, or land from human from ancestors, in the first instance. To read the entry of Aboriginal/Indigenous/postcolonial subjects into the question of new materialisms exclusively under the sign of Povinelli’s putative animism—as the quintessential romanticization of indigeneity—is to reject the crucial contributions of non-Euro-Western scholars to the debate in yet another act of colonizing knowledge and to reassert (yet again) the incompatibility of Aboriginality and the intellectual.

The essays by Ravenscroft and Cariou—which both deploy readings of published literary works—suggest the privilege that literary texts may hold insofar as they provide a space in which animist modes of thought can operate and circulate. This is also a major concern in Alexander Fyfe’s essay, which considers how scholars might seek to understand the relations between capitalism and animist modes of thought as they are embodied in literary texts. Arguing that Garuba’s influential formulation of “animist materialism” and “animist realism” ultimately emphasizes literary representation at the expense of a focus upon literary production, Fyfe proposes a practice of reading that simultaneously places specific texts in the context of local instantiations of capitalism and attends to the question of nonhuman agency. He proposes the concept of extracapitalist wealth, elaborated in relation to Karl Marx’s work on capitalist value and building upon arguments by anthropologists such as Jane I. Guyer that relate to the concept of “wealth in people,” as a model by which we might understand some instances of animism in literary texts. The subsequent reading of Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* trilogy contextualizes the fiction in the crisis of capitalism and argues that at the level of content and form, the author articulates an extracapitalist form of wealth that, in its ability to exist in spite of capitalism’s cycles of destruction, constitutes a form of “resilience” under capital. The essay ultimately suggests that a renewed focus upon the animist dimension of texts that have conventionally been read as “magical realism” or as “cosmopolitan” productions might reveal a different order of political engagement in the domain of the literary.

This special issue is therefore intended to prompt new lines of inquiry at a critical moment in postcolonial studies. The contradictory position in which we find ourselves is that the humanities’ current interest in materiality (in all its forms) offers an exciting “in” for the recognition (we would prefer, following Kelly Oliver, *witnessing*)²⁷ of animisms at the very same time as certain of these theories of matter entail the

cinematic, linguistic and artistic techniques. . . . Physical, emotional and analytical proximity can be perilous—we risk losing our compass, getting too close and ‘going native.’” See ASA, cited in Todd, “An Indigenous Feminist’s Take on the Ontological Turn,” 10.

26 Warren Cariou, “Sweetgrass Stories: Listening for Animate Land,” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Inquiry* 5.3 (2018).

27 Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: Duke University Press, 2001).

complete or partial effacement of animist understandings of materiality. The essays collected here all suggest ways in which postcolonial studies—broadly construed as an interdisciplinary formation—might engage this challenge. But there remain many neglected areas of study. Although one of the principal aims here has been to broaden the geographical scope of the study of animisms within postcolonial studies, substantial parts of the globe remain underrepresented, not least the Indian subcontinent and South America. Future work in this vein will, of course, require engagement with a broader range of thinkers, activists, and scholars. It is our hope that as the field's interest in animisms expands, it will develop a robust attention to the varied and varying constitutions of the material across different contexts. The essays that follow bear witness to the aesthetic and political stakes of such a move.