



# The geographies of cultural geography III: Material geographies, vibrant matters and risking surface geographies

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## Abstract

The doing of material geographies within the subdiscipline of cultural geography has been inspired by Jane Bennett's (2010) account of *Vibrant Matter*. This review follows the various trajectories in recently published research in the field of material geographies and argues that scholars should aim to embrace the call of matter to think politically and beyond the surface. The review argues that there is a risk of doing 'surface geographies' where research reflects matters at play rather than evaluate the interconnectivity and co-constitution of materialities and their geographies.

## Keywords

geography, materiality, politics, surface geographies, vibrant materialism

## I Introduction

Stephen Daniels, the conference chair of the 2011 Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) annual conference, has argued that '(T)he "Geographical Imagination" has the metaphorical capacity to refigure a larger conceptual field, to bring material and mental worlds into closer conjunction' (Daniels, 2011). Daniels encapsulates the continuing inspiration for new research and (for others) exposes the manifold tensions within the published research on material geographies. In this, my final review, my focus will be on the work within the realms of material geographies. I undertake this review in a context where the material parameters of the discipline are also shifting (Phillips, 2010). As a result of the capacities of the geographical conceptual realm, there are several moments where there has been

a surge towards a notion of 'new' materialisms and orientations. Occasionally, the promise of the imagination within the research process to refigure the worldly materializes, whereas in other accounts there is simply only a shallow engagement presented. This is where the *political* engagement with the concept of material is absent; this is what I term a *surface geography*. In these research projects, there is use of the concept of 'materiality', but without any reflection, critique, engagement or evaluation; leaving a *surface* recording, a description, a mapping or illustration of materialities within a site or those which are observed.

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## II Material research or surface geographies?

On reading the publications in this field, I have been drawn towards the conceptual question of ‘what makes these material geographies and not surface geographies? In my review *surface geographies* locate themselves at the outer edge, the surface film, rather than engage with the questions or politics of what is at stake materially. Surface geographies risk delivering a visual collage of what is observed rather than considered through theories of the material, politics, affects or effects. Citing examples of a ‘surface geography’ approach would be an easy way of narrating, but given my polite respect and abhorrence of unscholarly reductionist ‘judgements’ in published reviews I would prefer to show how a good account of materiality emerges in a researcher’s approach. Hetherington is an exemplary scholar who engages with the material, and who also gives us a full account of his practice. The result is a published account of research which embodies a clear politics of ‘doing’ materiality, but also provides a transparent account of research practice. ‘My aim is to bring materiality back in, and to see places generated by the placing, arranging and naming, the spatial order of materials and the systems of difference that they perform’ (Hetherington and Munro, 1997: 15).

What Hetherington argues here is that materials are *live*, active, agentic and powerful. His first step is to acknowledge their ‘place’, their ‘arrangement’ and their ‘names’. The second step is to consider their spatial ‘orderings’; to evaluate hierarchies, patterns and significations. The third step is to unravel their ‘performance’, their role, their *effect* and indeed any marked absences. Hetherington is not content with simply describing the materials in their place, or producing a tally of actors in this scene. Hetherington moves beyond the *surface* of matter, to engage with the politics, grammars and productive power of materials that are in place, shaping

place and effectively making a *difference* to place and the place of each other.

## III Vibrant materialisms

*Vibrant Matter* (Bennett, 2010) has been foundational for recent expansion in research on materiality. At the same time, the politics and philosophies of Jane Bennett have proven to be philosophically inspiring. Bennett marks a moment where there is a shift change in research on the cultural geographies of materiality which seems energized by her seam of rich narrative which animates our assumptions about the inanimate, and much more (see Bennett, 2011). In some accounts of published research within the field of material geographies, Bennett’s call of going beyond the surface is naively hollowed out in research practice, resulting in shallow iterations, descriptions and accounts of the material both conceptually and empirically. Bennett (2010: 112) argues that ‘materiality is a rubric that tends to horizontalize the relations between humans, biota and abiota’. So rather than stratified frameworks of thinking about the material, be they horizontal or vertical, materials, as in Hetherington’s account, are active and co-constitutive of their geographies, places, sites and spaces. This approach promotes ‘vital materialisms’, where humans and non-humans alike are material configurations, not dividable, separate or separable, but integrated, co-constituted and co-dependent. Bennett herself accepts that her theoretical account of ‘thing-power’ could be used to exemplify Adorno’s (1973) point about ‘Western Philosophy, a tradition that has consistently failed to mind the gap between concept, and reality, object and thing’ (Bennett, 2010: 12). Bennett’s response is to prioritize; the ‘ethical task at hand here is to cultivate the ability to discern non-human vitality, to become perceptually open to it’ (p. 14). The power of matter and the seductive nature of materiality as a philosophical and political research orientation are

presented here. The geographies of material geographies are reviewed through a topological lens, which seeks to understand *materiality* within a historicized, theoretical account where the risks of doing *surface* geographies remain within sight.

A third exemplary publication on material geographies, and one of the most impressive and radical engagements with vibrant materialisms, is Gibson-Graham's (2011) paper 'A feminist project of belonging for the Anthropocene'. Their intervention here is aimed at thinking regional geography with ethical and environmentalist politics which focuses on living differently with others on the earth, in practice. Here, Gibson-Graham promotes thinking holistically about interdependencies that can forge sustainable ethical communities which have geographical engagements focused on well-being and happiness rather than economic growth and targets. Following Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010), they are inspired to undertake 'the ethical act of subsuming ourselves within others' as well as our own materiality and tuning into the dynamism that does not originate in human action' (Gibson-Graham, 2011: 2). At the heart of their account their aim is to *actively connect*, methodologically, philosophically, pragmatically, rather than *see* and iterate material connections. A different mode of humanity is embraced here; from the modern accounts of 'man' we turn against an 'illusory sense of autonomy' (p. 3) towards an interdependent, human-centred process of becoming and belonging. The materiality of living, creating and politics is emergent, non-hierarchical and post-human. The important aspect of materialism for these authors is a possibility for political change and reimagining of a complex of living that is situated in resolving human and non-human violence, alienation, resource-poverty and environmental desertification of the seas and land. Temporal and spatial scales shift within this use of the geological unit of the Anthropocene, which advocates a framework that is challenging to our usual

understanding of capital, materials, life and politics. This is a vitalized account of geographies of materiality and material geographies, historically narrating the now familiar cultural politics of landscape, social representation and nation.

#### IV Material geographies

Genealogically, material geographies are rooted in Raymond Williams's (1958, 1973) cultural materialism and the philosophies of Stuart Hall. Since Jackson's (2000) call to 're-materialize' cultural geography, there has been an increase in the numbers of scholars turning towards matter and materiality (see Cook and Tolia-Kelly, 2010; Gregson et al., 2010; Hicks and Beaudry, 2010; Jayne et al., 2010), reflecting a *politics* of attending to the material (Anderson and Tolia-Kelly, 2004; Clark et al., 2008; Crang and Tolia-Kelly, 2010; Miller, 1998). Opportunities for new political and philosophical manifestos have ensued (see Anderson and Wylie, 2009; Gregson and Crang, 2010; G. Rose and Tolia-Kelly, 2012; M. Rose, 2011). One of the trajectories of new research has formed around Ian Cook's (2004, 2006; Cook and Harrison, 2003) practice of 'following the thing' (e.g. Burrell, 2011). Gregson and Crang's (2010) themed issue of *Environment and Planning A* on waste examines the complexity of waste and its transnational material flows. They succeed in contributing to the diversity and vitality of current waste scholarship (p. 1023), where waste has often been immaterial in the scholarship (p. 1026). The special issue as a whole affirms that 'material properties are processual, relational and distributed' and that materials need to be thought through their transformative states. As a result of thinking in this way, matter cannot be destroyed, it can only transform, mutate, morph (Davies, 2011), and thus continue in dynamic circulations. In this vein, Adey et al. (2011) argue that liberal life and threats to liberal life (such as natural disasters and revolutionary movements) are carried along by the

very same circulations and interdependencies of matter. For example, the craft of an airline can be both freeing and imprisoning depending on the political or environmental events that contextualize one's experience at any given time. In addition to context, the power of human perception also acts as a material force (Anderson, 2011, 2012); it has effective power.

## V Matters of citizenship and nation

Materialities of national belonging are mapped further, beyond human-centred materialities, through the bio-securitizing of the nation by Barker (2010), where flora and fauna are categorized as 'in' place or erased out of the national picture. Setting categories of who or what belong to nation results in representations of a 'moral citizen', which visually define inclusion to nation. Responses to these representations and their connected material exclusions have fuelled a need for published research to challenge the politics of delimiting places for 'races' and other human identities (see Yamanouchi, 2010), including heteronormative accounts of sexual identity and their sites of belonging (Gorman-Murray, 2011; Jeyasingham, 2010; Waitt and Gorman-Murray, 2011).

The exploration of what belongs where and through which historical account is taken up in the public sphere is the focus of Slocum (2008: 849) who exposes the seemingly benign materiality at the farmer's market where nostalgia is deeply racialized in the creation of a white food space. This account of 'moral' geographies of race belonging to nation is elaborated through engagements with literary accounts by Daya (2010). Here, race is being made through the process of eating itself (p. 489). What authors argue is that race 'fixes' groups to particular locales: for Millington (2005), the Palace Hotel in Southend-on-Sea is a site for asylum-seekers, where melancholia (Daya, 2010; Slocum, 2008) and nostalgia are enlivened through the material trope of race inequality. The identity politics of

race-geographies are embedded in new research on both contemporary racism (Shurbin, 2011) and the cultures of race and affect at the museum (Tolia-Kelly and Crang, 2010); a viscerality of difference is threaded through these accounts. It is at the site of the vernacular geographies of living where Bonnett (2010), Crang and Tolia-Kelly (2010), McLloyd (2011), Nayak (2010) and Swanton (2010) present the racialized poetics and politics of affect materially within the geographies of nation, region and political narratives.

## VI Visuality/materiality

The interdependencies of the embodied eye, the visual and material economies are considered too by Ash (2010), Capriotti and Kaika (2008), Fish (2007), Hawkins (2010), Horton (2010), Pratt (2007), Rantisi and Lisle (2010) and Wilson (2011). The cultural practices of the visual are squarely situated within the visceral realm by these authors. This trajectory within the discipline culminates in work on materiality and architecture (Jacobs, 2006; Jacobs and Merriman, 2011; Jacobs et al., 2012). Jacobs revolutionizes our attending to the materialities of architecture, promoting a new theory which commands an understanding of the logics and 'semiotics of materials'. This is a significant moment in the material geographies of architecture. Streebel (2011) also argues for a further enlivening of architecture, where the building is seen as organism; this is extended by Rose et al. (2010: 337), who argue that 'feelings are part of building events'. This is counter to Wilford (2008) 'where mundane relationships and materiality are transformed into something iconic' at the site of 'house'. Lees and Baxter (2011: 117) drive this account of sensibilities further to a fundamental call to take seriously 'the force of the material'. There are, however, 'constructive promises built into the material architecture' (Bester et al., 2011) which come prior to the presence of architectural mass.

## VII What does matter say?

Responding to a fundamentalist account of material geographies, Abrahamsson and Simpson (2011) sensitively revitalize materiality beyond the realms of the solid (see also Kearnes, 2003). In all cases, however, the ‘voice’ of matter is at stake. Harvey (2010) reminds us of the agentic nature of matter and thus asks ‘what and who can speak on behalf of the material landscape?’ Matter so often speaks through human sensibilities in accounts of nature, landscape and ecologies, through memory (Cloke and Pawson, 2008), landscape and archaeology (Tolia-Kelly, 2011), assemblages of stone (Edensor, 2011), island insularity (Williams, 2010), the poetics of rubbish (Hawkins, 2011), gardens (Hitchings, 2003), legislation (Hillman and Instone, 2010), urban walking (Middleton, 2010) and military airspace (Williams, 2010). As Stewart (2011: 446) argues, the textures of the environmental atmosphere are felt materially and atmospheric attunements are palpable and sensory. Stewart explores everyday life using concepts such as ‘plasticity’ and ‘density’ in emergent worlds that are continual and perpetual. For DeSilvey (2010), newly emergent landscapes are co-dependent on memories and soundings within the locale; these orchestrate the links between past and present sensibilities. Lorimer (2010) emotively and humanely takes this further in his account of ‘Elephants as companion species’. He argues that ‘(T)heir bodies ... bear traces of multimillennial histories and multinational geographies of movement, captivation and conflict’ and ‘at the landscape scale, the ecological theatre of Sri Lanka is characterised by interspecies entanglements’ (Lorimer, 2010: 492). Their materiality does not affirm either static temporalities or spatialities, as their bodies are not fixed.

Overall, what we encounter is a myriad of materialities with varying philosophical and theoretical roots; thus what we require in this

field of research is a ‘corporeal’ generosity (Clark, 2007) to engage, empathize, process. Occasionally what is presented are *surface* collages, and graceful descriptions of things, places, surfaces and representations. These risky surface accounts lose connection with theoretical underpinnings, and indeed the political context. Accounts such as these operate against the very imperative of *materiality* and *materialism*, historically. The risk of presenting a loose account of materiality through doing surface geographies is to erode a more robust and promising tradition. Surface geographies depoliticize and make palatable the material world. By embodying a ‘looking-onto’ rather than ‘being-with’ orientation in the process of research makes the encounter sterile, palatable and benign; the nature of ‘material’ politics becomes reduced to picturing a collage of materials observed, not felt. The vitality and life of things thus become framed, reflected and filmic – a negation of networked meanings, values situated in a political world, with political grammars and aesthetics. This result of mirroring, mapping and reflecting materialities as found objects risks the loss of remembering the genealogies of doing the material. There is an embracing of the tools of deadening matter, of killing the vitality of objects, things, artifacts through sticking to the surface, unsituated and unsullied by matters’ own dynamic presence, decomposition and violation.

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