

## EDITORIAL

# The Materiality of Resistance: Resistance of Cultural-Material Artefacts and Bodies

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### Introduction

‘Resistance studies’ draws on several theoretical traditions. Not only does the field include social movement studies, everyday resistance research and revolution studies, but also contains studies on, for example, guerrilla warfare and terrorism. Moreover, resistance studies sometimes engage with specialist fields, such as feminist studies, queer studies, peace studies, critical race studies, critical legal studies, heritage studies, design and crafts, and so on. These many fields, theories, and discussions relate to resistance studies because ‘resistance’ challenges different forms of power, including discursive truth-regimes, as well as more material injustices of capitalism (Lilja and Vinthagen 2018).

This editorial, and the collection of articles in this issue, provides new insights into the knowledge that a focus on materiality can offer us, particularly with respect to various resisting conducts and political subjectivities. For the purpose of our argument, we have identified three major trajectories in the scholarly literature—new materialism, resistance studies, and feminist/queer studies—which together contribute to a more elaborated view of political struggle. By embracing these research strands, the issue seeks to fill a gap in existing research by displaying how matter makes power and resistance possible, how matter orients resistance, and how discourses and materiality are deeply entwined. The matter that matters in the moment of resistance involve, among others, books, paper, pavements, streets, public transport, buildings, taxis, as well as bodies, artefacts, gatherings, and economy.

The question that we wish to explore is, ‘How does the intersection, or even merging, between the discursive and material inform collective resistance as well as informal/individual resistance?’ We will elaborate upon this question below by exploring, firstly, how the discursive is continuously enmeshed with matter and nonhuman agencies, as well as directing our attention to the posthumanism of feminist theory, and secondly, we highlight the contributions of materiality to shaping resistance. Finally, the impact and condition of materialities for the emergence of resistance subjectivities will be addressed.

## **Feminism, Posthumanism and the Crossroad between Discourses and Matter**

Matter has always been important for feminist and queer studies. Not only bodies, sex, sexualities, and desires, but also questions of economic redistribution are central examples of the role of matter in feminist scholarly work. However, instead of taking the materiality upon which culture is built as a starting point in her analyses, Judith Butler turns the understanding of materiality upside-down and asks, ‘Through what regulatory norms is sex itself materialized?’ What is important for her is to understand materiality as something that emerges together with norms. It is, she writes, ‘a process of materialization that stabilizes the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter’ (Butler 1993:9-10). The materiality is not stable. It becomes fixed and even looks natural through reiterations of embodied norms. For us Butler’s work is one of several entrances into the discussion about how discourses and norms become part of matter.

The process of materialisation is never without friction, and re-materialisation is always possible, such as when bodies appear in a different way than what is understood as natural or normal. This re-materialisation can become evident in protesting movements and assemblies. Resisting assemblies are where bodies gather, move and appear in a way that is beyond ordinary reiterations. In line with this, gathering bodies could both be understood as being motivated by various political purposes in different public spaces, as well as becoming in themselves a performative and potential re-materialising force (Butler 2015). The bodies of the assemblies occupy pavements, streets, and squares, which are utterly

materialising conditions for public assembly and public speech. The bodies become performative and transient producers or reproducers of the character of that material context (Butler 2015). Even this material context transforms when trucks or tanks, for example, suddenly become platforms for speakers. Then, the material environment is actively reconfigured and re-functioned (Lilja 2017).

Moreover, it is not only bodies or streets, but also artefacts—such as pamphlets, flags and textiles—that are of discursive-material importance in the moment of resistance (Johansson 2017; Lilja & Wasshede 2016; Alm & Martinsson 2016). Artefacts—such as various flags (for example, the red socialist or rainbow flags) or the veil and other forms of clothing—are different types of materialities in resistance practices. These materialities can make counter-communities of belonging possible, recognisable, and visible by playing a role in marking boundaries between those who belong and those who are excluded from them. Material artefacts stand out as ‘agentive’ forces that merge with discourses and become transformative (Butler 2015; Alaimo and Hekman 2008:4-7).

In line with Alaimo and Hekman (2008:4-7), Baaz and Lilja (2017) argue that acknowledging matter as an ‘agentive force’ can enrich the understanding of discursive formations and productions, and thus contribute to the understanding of the practice of resistance. In their investigation of the mobilizations and resistance at a world heritage site—the ninth century Khmer temple Preah Vihear, located in Cambodia—Baaz and Lilja (2017) detail the ways in which matter is significant to the (re)construction of discourses of the temple and conclude that:

There is no clear border between the subject and matter in a moment of resistance; different material circumstances interact with the bodies and minds of the subjects, which provide them with the conditions that they have to either work with or against. The material and various discursive categories interact and shape different forms of resistance (...) Baaz and Lilja (2017:308).

Not only are there blurry borders in the crossroads between culture-nature, but different material phenomena, bodily flesh, or the shape of different landscapes contributes to the development and transformation of a discursive-material order (Colebrook 2000; Grosz 1994). This is in

line with Karen Barad (2008), who argues that nature affects discourses, that they are not possible to separate, and that these things have political consequences. In line with Bennet (2010), Barad, then, embraces matter as ‘vibrant’ and underscores aliveness as a processual character of material ‘things’.

‘Nature’ is yet another entry point into our understanding of political struggles. Among others, the climate is a dramatic and important example that today strikes back and transforms the conditions for non-humans and humans alike. Due to these transformations, new discourse-materialities and a range of resistances emerge. Even if we point out the importance of matter and ongoing performative materializations, we understand resistance as something that is made possible in the entanglement of discourse and matter.

Central to posthumanism is the attempt to undermine the binary opposition between humans and non-humans, as well as the hierarchy that has placed humans in a privileged position. As Wolfe (2011:47) poetically expresses it, ‘the human occupies a new place in the universe, a universe now populated by what I am prepared to call nonhuman subjects’. Posthumanist scholars challenge previous notions of ‘humans’, stating that humans are entangled with animals, and nature with the machines we have created (Wolfe 2011; Braidotti 2016). The notions of ‘cyborg’ and ‘virtual body’ stress ‘the processual and co-constitutive nature of human embodiment, knowledge production, and culture in relation to environment, objects, nonhuman animals, and technology’ (Braidotti 2016:19). The posthuman subject is thus defined as, ‘a composite assemblage of human, non-organic, machine and other elements’ (Braidotti 2016:19).

As demonstrated by feminist theory, the ‘human’ is a concept connected to access to certain privileges and rights, and thus the presumably universal ‘Man’ is, in fact, masculine, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, etc. (see for example Braidotti 2016). In a feminist understanding of posthumanism, both the traditions of androcentric and anthropocentric humanism are criticized for having made all but the ‘Man’ into the Other and nonhuman—the colonized, the non-citizens, women, queers, animals etc.

Braidotti names her own stance as ‘critical posthuman’ and combines Foucauldian genealogies with ‘feminist politics of location’ to ‘provide embodied and embedded accounts of the multilayered and complex relations of power that structure our “being human”’ (Braidotti 2016:15). She calls for ‘careful cartographies of the different degrees and the extent to which any one of us can be said to be “human”’ (Braidotti 2016:15). Moreover, she also calls for a vision of ‘becoming posthuman’, which implies ‘a new way of combining ethical values with the well-being of an enlarged sense of community which includes one’s territorial or environmental inter-connections’ (Braidotti 2016:26-27). This so-called posthuman ethics extends the respect and care for others to include those things that are defined as non-human, such as nature and animals.

## **Materiality and Resistance**

Feminist new materialism has inspired many research fields, among them resistance studies. Various scholars within resistance studies have brought attention to the need to expand the analysis of power and resistance beyond the study of cultural processes, discourses, and intersubjective meaning systems by also including materiality (Törnberg 2013; Lilja 2016; Von Busch 2017). Rather than rejecting the linguistic turn, the suggested approach is to combine the analysis of the symbolic/discursive aspects with that of the material.

Sociologist Anton Törnberg (2013) points to the lack of elaboration on the role of material agency in resistance practices. In his reading of texts by James Scott, who is a leading figure within Resistance Studies, Törnberg contends that Scott, in his later work *The Art of being Governed* (2009), shows that ‘material things such as crops, infrastructure, physical terrain, mountains and valleys are central parts of resistance strategies to avoid oppressive state control’. However, Törnberg is critical towards the way Scott treats materiality by reducing it to a background factor or a medium instead of treating it as an active participant. Thus, Törnberg suggests that the scope of analysis moves to the interplay between material agency and social relations in the hopes that a more complex understanding of the concept of resistance may contribute to new materialist literature.

Also Otto Von Busch (2017:68), in his article on materiality in consumer resistance, suggests that ‘a material perspective can open new dimensions of how humans and objects (or nonhumans) act in concert to open specific possibilities of resistance (...)’. Von Busch introduces the concept of ‘assemblages of resistance’ and suggests a methodology of ‘unpacking’ these assemblages by examining how the different elements ‘support, multiply, and act together as a unit’ in shaping resistance (2017:76). He further gives examples of how different types of matter are mobilized by activists and how materials ‘literally tie together their actions to others and towards their cause’ (2017:75).

In his discussions on resistance and matter, Von Busch delves into the example of the Spanish Yomango movement, which calls itself a ‘counter-lifestyle movement critically commenting on the role consumerism plays in contemporary society’ (2017:77), and sets the system of consumerism against itself. Yomango is understood by Von Busch to be an example of “hacking” consumerism. Yomango sees stealing as an act of resistance. To support a lifestyle that is organized around shoplifting, its participants have designed the cookie handbag. The cookie handbag of Yomango is a metal cookie box equipped with a shoulder strap. It has a metal casing which blocks out alarm tags inside. Von Busch considers it as an object endowed with aliveness, orienting human actors towards resistance in their everyday life. The bag is perceived as a materialization of the Yomango ideas, of creativity and disrespectfulness, thus symbolizing the possibility for resistance against surveillance as well against ‘regimes of ownership’. Moreover, it is endowed with a material agency by offering an ‘unsurveilled space for the possibility of stealing’ (2017:80). Thus, as Von Busch argues, the ‘thing power’ of the cookie box handbag is mobilized to strengthen and expand the impact of the resistance strategies used by Yomango.

Lilja and Baaz (2018) provide another example in which unpacking the matter-culture of resistance practices occurs. They discuss the potential of a Preah Vihear Temple ‘replica’ for resisting the discursive orders, which have previously legitimated war in the border area between Thailand and Cambodia. As a repeat of the ‘original’ temple, the replica borrows recognizable elements from the ‘original’ through references to it, although contextually separated from it (Derrida 1976). This creates

ambivalence, and the replica comes to challenge the idea of the Preah Vihear Temple as being exclusive and irreplaceable. Still, however, the material ‘copy’, at the same time, confirms and acknowledges the discursive importance of the ‘original’ temple. In addition, the replica adds to the discourses about the Preah Vihear Temple and its heritage, thus changing the meaning that is assigned to it. Overall, the material-symbolic artefact that the constructed replica constitutes resist, challenge and change the discourses of the ‘original’ Preah Vihear Temple.

### Materialities and the emergence of resistance subjectivities

As stated above, materialities matter, not only for acts of resistance, but also for the emergence of resistance subjectivities. One way that materialities inform the emergence of resisting subjectivities is through matter that has some kind of ‘spatial’ meaning—places, centres, and houses. Physical, material settings, such as mass graves or political uprisings in public places, evoke different emotions and could thus become means of emotional management. As we decide which settings to visit or which to avoid, we are managing our emotions (Hochschild 1983; Baaz et al. Lilja 2018). Thus, if we visit political protests and demonstrations—spaces where emotions are generated and pass between the bodies at a political event—we manage our political ‘selves’ through the emotions that we have come to experience. In political uprisings, emotions—such as anger, frustration, and fear—have a tendency to become more intense as they circulate among the participants, which sometimes escalates the resistance. Physical, material settings, then, matter for the emergence of resistance subjectivities (Baaz, et al. Lilja 2018).

Also, the meeting with ‘things’ can create political subjects and motivate different kinds of resistance. The artists Valarie James and Antonia Gallegos have taken migrants’ items that they found—such as medication, perfume, children’s backpacks, shoes, family photos, and ID cards—and turned them into art in order to represent a complex story of desperation, death, family, and survival. The artists use what they experience as authentic artefacts to display the migrants’ vulnerability, letting their voices be heard. Their art displays how material objects bring us closer, and remove the distance, to abstract discourses and practices of migration. Events, traditions, and times, which seem theoretical and

distant, become more concrete and imaginable when we see or touch material 'things' that were present during these events, and we embrace them more intensely. Material closeness is experienced by someone when they pat something that has been touched by someone else. 'Authentic' objects move us and sometimes create resisting subjects as the artefacts interact with the bodies and minds of the viewers, producing an emotional experience of time-travelling, as well as giving rise to new perspectives and interpretations. Authentic artefacts help us welcome the stories of absent subjects into our lives and let them affect us and inform our lives in the here-and-now. As these configured, fictional stories come to life 'within' us, the boundaries between the self and others, the subject and object, and the past and present are dissolved. This experience sometimes motivates political actions and leads up to emerging resistance subjectivities. Overall, 'authentic' material-symbolic artefacts are used at museums as a form of resistance, with the aim of opening up new significations, new subjectivities and 'proxy' resistance practices with regard to migration and migrants (Lilja 2019).

## Concluding Remarks

We have touched upon some themes emerging at the nexus of different fields—new materialism, resistance studies, and feminist/queer studies—and suggest that an appropriate unit of analysis for resistance study is the assemblage and processes of the material and symbolic constructions, practices, bodies, and artefacts of resistance. This issue will further explore these aspects. Among others, Brandon Sims elaborates on the material base or means of resistance. According to Sims, self-violence is one category of action among a range of resistance tactics that may be conceptualized by varying the locus of embodied harm or non-harm against self or other. Self-violent resistance should be embraced as a concept for academics and activists to situate self-imposed suffering among other forms of resistance, such as armed conflict, nonviolent action, and suicide attacks.

Evelina Johansson and Carl Wilén argue that in its attempt to supersede the difference between nature and humanity by granting agency to matter, feminist new materialism is led to sacrifice intentional action in a way that undermines core aspects of the emerging field of resistance studies. The authors strongly reject the monoism of new materialism, and



in an attempt to 'save' agency as a concept, they suggest an alternative position, designating intentional action by humans with intended, non-intended, or 'other-intended' consequences. These consequences might in some cases be understood as 'influenced' by non-human powers, such as natural catastrophes that can lead to economic crises. While Johansson and Wilén acknowledge the effect of nature or matter, it is, however, not seen as invested with agency.

Mona Lilja and Lena Martinsson argue, on the other hand, for increased scholarly attention to materiality and artefacts connected to political struggles. Artefacts like the veil and Manga comics, which form the focus of their paper, become important items that function as connecting nodes for resistance practices or discursive transformations. The artefacts are recognisable around the globe, but have very different histories. They have acquired different meanings and become part of (or are excluded from) particular political struggles and communities, as well as counter-communities of belonging, both transnationally and locally. The artefacts become parts of resistance and/or mobilise people into assuming or rejecting communities, identity positions, or subjectivities. The shifting discursive materialities of different artefacts make these items transformative and important factors for resistance and political struggles for change.

There are still a number of questions to attend to regarding the role of materiality in the study of power and resistance. For example, when viewing human intentionality as capable of being agentic in conjunction with nonhumans in complex assemblages (Bennet 2010), what options/limitations does that perspective offer us? And when the concept of human agency is replaced with the idea of affect, of having the capacity to affect or be affected (Bennet 2010; Fox and Allard 2017), does resistance become retheorized as 'a flux of forces or affects in an assemblage that produces micropolitical effects contrary to power or control' (Fox and Allard 2017)? Here, more theoretical elaborations are needed, and we hope that this issue will inspire more researchers of the transdisciplinary field of resistance studies to take on these and other challenges that are being posed by new materialism.

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