

M/C Journal, Vol 19, No 1 (2016)

Corporeal: Exploring the Material Dynamics of Embodiment

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Abstract

Looked at again and again half consciously by a mind thinking of something else, any object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we least expect it. (Virginia Woolf 38)

From briefcases to drugs, and from boxing rings to tower blocks, this issue of *M/C Journal* turns its attention to the diverse materialities that make up our social worlds. Across a variety of empirical contexts, the collected papers employ objects, structures, and spaces as lenses onto corporeality, extending and unsettling habitual understandings of what a body is and does. By exploring everyday encounters among bodies and other materialities, the contributors elucidate the material processes through which human corporeality is enacted and imagined, produced and unmade.

That materialities “tell stories” of bodies is an implicit tenet of embodied existence. In biomedical practice, for example, the thermometer assigns a value to a disease process which might already be felt, whereas the blood pressure cuff sets in motion a story of illness that is otherwise hidden or existentially absent. In so doing, such objects recast corporeality, shaping not only experiences of embodied life, but also the very matter of embodiment.

Whilst recognising that objects are “companion[s] in life experience” (Turkle 5), this issue seeks to go beyond a sole focus on embodied experience, and explore the co-constitutive entanglements of embodiment and materiality. The collected papers examine how bodies and the material worlds around them are dialectically forged and shaped. By engaging with a specific object, structure, or space, each paper reflects on embodiment in ways that take account of its myriad material dynamics.

Bodies

How to conceptualise the body and attend to its complex relationships with sociality, identity, and agency has been a central question in many recent strands of thinking across the humanities and social sciences (see Blackman; Shilling). From discussions of embodiment and personhood to an engagement with the affective and material turns, these strands have challenged theoretical emphases on body/mind dualisms that have historically informed much thinking about bodies in Western thought, turning the analytic focus towards the felt experience of embodied being.

Through these explorations of embodiment, the body, as Csordas writes, has emerged as “the existential ground of culture” (135). Inspired by phenomenology, and particularly by the writings of Merleau-Ponty, Csordas has theorised the body as always-already inter-subjective. In constant dynamic interaction with self, others, and the environment, the body is both creative and created, constituting culture while being constituted by it. As such, bodies continuously materialise through sensory experiences of oneself and others, spaces and objects, such that the embodied self is at once both material and social.

The concept of embodiment—as inter-subjective, dynamic, and experientially focussed—is central to this collection of papers. In using the term *corporeality*, we build on the concept of embodiment in order to interrogate the material makings of bodies. We attend to the ways in which objects, structures, and spaces extend into, and emanate from, embodied experiences and bodily imaginings.

Being inherently inter-subjective, bodies are therefore not individual, clearly bounded entities. Rather, the body is an “infinitely malleable and highly unstable culturally constructed product” (Shilling 78), produced, shaped, and negated by political and social processes. Studies of professional practice—for example, in medicine—have shown how the body is assembled through culturally specific, sometimes contingent, arrangements of knowledges and practices (Berg and Mol). Such arrangements serve to make the body inherently “multiple” (Mol) as well as mutable.

A further challenge to entrenched notions of singularity and boundedness has been offered by the “affective turn” (Halley and Clough) in the humanities and social sciences (see also Gregg and Siegwirth; Massumi; Stewart). Affect theory is concerned with the felt experiences that comprise and shape our being-in-the-world. It problematises the discursive boundaries among emotive and visceral, cognitive and sensory, experiences. In so doing, the affective turn has sought to theorise inter-subjectivity by engaging with the ways in which bodily capacities arise in relation to other materialities, contexts, and “force-relations” (Seigworth and Gregg 4). In attending to affect, emphasis is placed on the unfinishedness of both human and non-human bodies, showing these to be “perpetual[ly] *becoming* (always becoming otherwise)” (3, *italics in original*). Affect theory thereby elucidates that a body is “as much outside itself as in itself” and is “webbed in its relations” (3).

Objects

In parallel to the “affective turn,” a “material turn” across the social sciences has attended to “corporeality as a practical and efficacious series of emergent capacities” which “reveals both the materiality of agency and agentic properties inherent in nature itself” (Coole and Frost 20). This renewed attention to the “stuff” (Miller) of human and non-human environments and bodies has complemented, but also challenged, constructivist theorisations of social life that tend to privilege discourse over materiality. Engaging with the “evocative objects” (Turkle) of everyday life has thereby challenged any assumed distinction between material and social processes. The material turn has, instead, sought to take account of “active processes of materialization of which embodied humans are an integral part, rather than the monotonous repetitions of dead matter from which human subjects are apart” (Coole and Frost 8).

Key to this material turn has been a recognition that matter is not lumpen or inert; rather, it is processual, emergent, and always relational. From Bergson, through Deleuze and Guattari, to Bennett and Barad, a focus on the “vitality” of matter has drawn questions about the agency of the animate and inanimate to the fore. Engaging with the agentic capacities of the objects that surround us, the “material turn” recognises human agency as always embedded in networks of human and non-human actors, all of whom shape and reshape each other. This is an idea influentially articulated in Actor-Network-Theory (Latour).

In an exposition of Actor-Network-Theory, Latour writes: “Scallops *make* the fisherman *do* things just as nets placed in the ocean lure the scallops into attaching themselves to the nets and just as data collectors bring together fishermen and scallops in oceanography” (107, *italics in original*). Humans, non-human animals, objects, and spaces are thus always already entangled, their capacities realised and their movements motivated, directed, and moulded by one another in generative processes of responsive action.

Embodied Objects: The Issue

At the intersections of a constructivist and materialist analysis, Alison Bartlett’s paper draws our attention to the ways in which “retro masculinity is materialised and embodied as both a set of values and a set of objects” in Nancy Meyers’s film *The Intern*. Bartlett engages with the business suit, the briefcase, and the handkerchief that adorn Ben the intern, played by Robert De Niro. Arguing that his “senior white male body” is framed by the depoliticised fetishisation of these objects, Bartlett elucidates how they construct, reinforce, or interrupt the gaze of others. The dynamics of the gaze are also the focus of Anita Howarth’s analysis of food banks in the UK. Howarth suggests that the material spaces of food banks, with their queues of people in dire need, make hunger visible. In so doing, food banks draw hunger from the hidden depths of biological intimacy into public view. Howarth thus calls attention to the ways in which individual bodies may be caught up in circulating cultural and political discursive regimes, in this case ones that define poverty and deservingness. Discursive entanglements also echo through Alexandra Littaye’s paper. Like Bartlett, Littaye focusses on the construction and performance of gender. Autoethnographically reflecting on her experiences as a boxer, Littaye challenges the cultural gendering of boxing in discourse and regulation. To unsettle this gendering, Littaye explores how being punched in the face by male opponents evolved into an experience of camaraderie and respect. She contends that the boxing ring is a unique space in which violence can break down definitions of gendered embodiment.

Through the changing meaning of such encounters between another’s hand and the mutable surfaces of her face, Littaye charts how her “body boundaries were profoundly reconfigured” within the space of the boxing ring. This analysis highlights material transformations that bodies undergo—agentially or unagentially—in moments of encounter with other materialities, which is a key theme of the issue. Such material transformation is brought into sharp relief by Fay Dennis’s exploration of drug use, where ways of being emerge through the embodied entanglements of personhood and diamorphine, as the drug both offers and reconfigures bodily boundaries. Dennis draws on an interview with Mya, who has lived experience of drug use, and addiction treatment, in London, UK. Her analysis parses Mya’s discursive construction of “becoming normal” through the everyday use of drugs, highlighting how drugs are implicated in creating Mya’s construction of a “normal” embodied self as a less vulnerable, more productive, being-in-the-world.

Moments of material transformation, however, can also incite experiences of embodied extremes. This is elucidated by the issue’s feature paper, in which Roy Brockington and Nela Cicmil offer an autoethnographic study of architectural objects. Focussing on two Brutalist housing developments in London, UK, they write that they “feel small and quite squashable in comparison” to the buildings they traverse. They suggest that the effects of walking within one of these vast concrete entities can be likened to having eaten the cake or drunk the potion from *Alice in Wonderland* (Carroll). Like the boxing ring and diamorphine, the buildings “shape the physicality of the bodies interacting within them,” as Brockington and Cicmil put it.

That objects, spaces, and structures are therefore intrinsic to, rather than set apart from, the dynamic processes through which human bodies are made or unmade ripples through this collection of papers in diverse ways. While Dennis's paper focusses on the potentiality of body/object encounters to set in motion mutual processes of becoming, an interest in the vulnerabilities of such processes is shared across the papers. Glimpsed in Howarth's, as well as in Brockington and Cicmil's discussions, this vulnerability comes to the fore in Bessie Dernikos and Cathlin Goulding's analysis of teacher evaluations as textual objects. Drawing on their own experiences of teaching at high school and college levels, Dernikos and Goulding analyse the ways in which teacher evaluations are "anything but dead and lifeless;" they explore how evaluations painfully intervene in or interrupt corporeality, as the words on the page "sink deeply into [one's] skin." These words thereby enter into and impress upon bodies, both viscerally and emotionally, their affective power unveiling the agency that imbues a lit screen or a scribbled page.

Yet, importantly, this issue also demonstrates how bodies actively forge the objects, spaces, and environments they encounter. Paola Esposito's paper registers the press of bodies on material worlds by exploring the collective act of walking with golden thread, a project that has since come to be entitled "Walking Threads." Writing that the thread becomes caught up in "the bumpy path, trees, wind, and passers-by," Esposito explores how these intensities and forms register on the moving collective of bodies, just as those bodies also press into, and leave traces on, the world around them. That diverse materialities thereby come to be imbued with, or perhaps haunted by, the material and affective traces of (other) bodies, is also shown by the metonymic resonance between Littaye's face and her coach's pad: each bears the marks of another's punch. Likewise, in Bartlett's analysis of *The Intern*, Ben is described as having "shaped the building where the floor dips over in the corner" due to the heavy printers he used in his previous, analogue era, job.

This sense of the marks or fragments left by the human form perhaps emerges most resonantly in Michael Gantley and James Carney's paper. Exploring mortuary practices in archaeological context, Gantley and Carney trace the symbolic imprint of culture on the body, and of the body on (material) culture; their paper shows how concepts of the dead body are informed by cultural anxieties and technologies, which in turn shape death rituals. This discussion thereby draws attention to the material, even molecular, traces left by bodies, long after those bodies have ceased to be of substance. The (im)material intermingling of human and non-human bodies that this highlights is also invoked, albeit in a more affective way, by Chris Stover's analysis of improvisational musical spaces. Through a discussion of "musical-objects-as-bodies," Stover shows how each performer leaves an imprint on the musical bodies that emerge from transient moments of performance. Writing that "improvised music is a more fruitful starting place for thinking about embodiment and the co-constitutive relationship between performer and sound," Stover suggests that performers' bodies and the music "unfold" together. In so doing, he approaches the subject of bodies beyond the human, probing the blurred intersections among human and non-human (im)materialities.

Across the issue, then, the contributors challenge any neat distinction between bodies and objects, showing how diverse materialities "become" together, to borrow from Deleuze and Guattari. This blurring is key to Gantley and Carney's paper. They write that "in post-mortem rituals, the body—formerly the manipulator of objects—becomes itself the object that is manipulated." Likewise, Esposito argues that "we generally think of objects and bodies as belonging to different domains—the inanimate and the animate, the lifeless and the living." Her paper shares with the others a desire to illuminate the transient, situated, and often vulnerable processes through which bodies and (other) materialities are co-produced. Or, as Stover puts it, this issue "problematise[s] where one body stops and the next begins."

Thus, together, the papers explore the many dimensions and materialities of embodiment. In writing *corporeality*, the contributors engage with a range of theories and various empirical contexts, to interrogate the material dynamics through which bodies processually come into being. The issue thereby problematises taken-for-granted distinctions between bodies and objects. The *corporeality* that emerges from the collected discussions is striking in its relational and dynamic constitution, in the porosity of (imagined) boundaries between self, space, subjects, and objects. As the papers suggest, corporeal being is realised through and within continuously changing relations among the visceral, affective, and material. Such relations not only make individual bodies, but also implicate socio-political and ecological processes that materialise in structures, technologies, and lived experiences. We offer *corporeality*, then, as a framework to illuminate the otherwise hidden, politically contingent, becomings of embodied beings.

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