

**Research Article**

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Theorising Things, Building Worlds: Why the New Materialisms Deserve Literary Imagination

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Abstract: The New Materialisms constitute a rich field of critical inquiry that does not represent a unified approach; yet there is a general tendency to theorise objects by highlighting their agency, independence, and withdrawnness from human actors. Jane Bennett speaks of “thing power” in order to invoke the activities of “nonsubjects,” and she suggests to marginalise questions of human subjectivity and focus instead on the trajectories and propensities of material entities themselves. This essay takes issue with Bennett’s and other New Materialist thought, and it also offers a critical engagement with Bruno Latour’s notion of nonhuman agency. In his recent work, Latour has been concerned with the question of how we can tell our “common geostory.” Taking up his literary example (by Mark Twain) and adding one of my own (by William Faulkner), this essay argues that our understanding of the powers of rivers and other nonhuman agents remains rather limited if we attend primarily to the mechanics of storytelling in the way Latour does. Rather, it is the aesthetic and experiential registers of literary worlding that offer alternative venues for imagining nonhuman beings and our interactions with them in the era of the Anthropocene.

Keywords: New Materialisms, nonhuman agency, thing theory, literary worlding, American literature and the Anthropocene, Environmental Humanities

He
bent strings and my grandfather’s
fields were flooded and I
stood out
on a
red
clay hill/looking at
the pain.
I used to feel. The blues
he played built the levee
as the river with
in him ran down
through my eyes and my pen
trembled like Lucille does
when B.B.’s tender fingers
stroke her hair in tongues.

—Sterling Plumpp

The Mediterranean on a calm September night. Floating in a sea kayak. The sound of gently breaking waves in the middle distance. In front of you an expanse of blue and silver in constant, tranquil motion. No painter

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(not even Richter, subtle master of shades and light) can capture this moment, any moment, out here. Minutes dissolve into movement, lose their contours, become oblivious to the measuring of time. Neither space nor shape can be chopped up into sights. It's a shape-shifting element; it's all around you. Your body the only medium capable of resounding its stillness and silver-blue, the surface as it stretches and ripples. The smooth tension of water that lifts you up on its colors, sways you on gently rolling hills. All solidity has given way to the flow of fading hues, coming at you, swathing you, going right through you, wetting your skin, expanding, dispersing. One big body, you part of it rather than center. While the orange is slowly dropping for the day, there remains the timeless swinging, swelling, melting. An unbroken medium, holding the tension, and holding you in your plastic cradle, glazed with sea water. A breeze of pine wakes another sense, you wonder where from, out here, mingling with the blue an unseen green.

A recollection of water's sway as the sun is setting. Can we call this a story? If so, who would be the characters? Or should we better say, actants? The sea, the currents, the breeze? The warmth of a late-summer day? Or is this simply an expression of independent thing power, as Jane Bennett would have it, an assemblage of elements—water, wind, light—that impress themselves on the mind, yet act independently of human doing. From the perspective of object-oriented ontology (OOO), we cannot know the entities in question, even if we weave them into words and sentences: they are “withdrawn,” doing their own thing. The scene presented here is, quite obviously, entirely suffused with humanness—a small window on the world, a moment, a bounded perception, an embodied experience.

Such evident subjectivity does not square with a philosophy oriented toward objects as objects, that is, as an independent reality of object being, and that, accordingly, projects an ontological beyondness where entities come into their own at a remote distance from human knowledge, design, and desire. Meanwhile, other new materialists are interested precisely in the ways that human and nonhuman agencies interact in complex associations and assemblages. In this essay, I take up some of the critical questions raised in current debates on materiality, objects, and the agency of the nonhuman in the Anthropocene. Thing theory, actor-network theory, speculative realism, and other approaches in the field of current materialist thought, offer innovative ways of (re)thinking the active role of inanimate objects, the relations between people and things, as well as those activities and interactions that are seen to be independent of humanity's impact. Different as these approaches are, one premise they share is that things are alive and kicking: the object world is no longer perceived as inert matter or mere extension, screen, or backdrop of human action or consciousness, but as having its own vitality. Actor-network theory (ANT) has inspired us to see things as part of larger networks of human and nonhuman actants, and the range of “interobjectivity,” as Bruno Latour has called it (“Interobjectivity”), of late includes an ever-widening array of “objects,” from urban transport systems to maritime habitats, from the substances active in our planet's stratosphere to those in our intestines. Accordingly, the planes of action addressed are as diverse as cloud computing and global warming, primate societies and recycling facilities, molecules and microbes.

Situating my own approach to object life necessitates taking issue with some of the premises that define recent materialist and ontological thought, particularly regarding questions of relationality, agency, storytelling, and the vitalism of the object world. I will engage with two theorists who have received much attention in new materialist debates: Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett, and just briefly touch upon other ontological approaches. I consider Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Economy of Things*, and Latour's 2014 essay “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene,” contemplating how they both draw on literary figuration in their respective take on the agency and vibrancy of objects. How are Bennett's notion of *thing power* and Latour's project of writing “our common *geostory*” (“Agency” 3) informed by their respective form of storytelling? How can actor-network theory, as Rita Felski asked, help literary studies “to reimagine practices of reading and interpretation” and vice versa (737)? I will attend to both the affordances and the constraints of object-oriented theorising, and, relating it to my own work on the life of things, propose how literary and cultural studies can expand the imaginative scope of critical materialism by considering object life and thingness through a literary lens. Reading Latour's discussion of the Mississippi River, which serves him as one “agent of geostory,” along with William Faulkner's 1954 essay “Mississippi,” I will further consider the way these texts stage the interaction of the river, the land, and the inhabitants (including novelists, engineers, and geologists). I ask how nonhuman agency is imagined in these different

accounts—Latour’s critique of scientific reasoning and embrace of narrative, and Faulkner’s rendering of the Mississippi’s erratic powers.

Theoretical Perspectives

Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* has little in common with traditional materialisms inspired by Marx in that it shifts the emphasis from the human to the nonhuman. She deliberately leaves aside questions of subjectivity for the sake of “developing a vocabulary and syntax, and therefore a better discernment of, the active powers issuing from nonsubjects” (ix). While the innovative potential of the new materialisms certainly lies in this shift to the nonhuman, it also entails significant blind spots. Neither conflating the life of things with human biographies, as anthropology tends to do, nor singling out scenes of independent object agency, as Bennett does, grant us a view of the bigger picture. While it is important to remember that physical things continue to exist after their social lives (in a narrow sense) have ended, we need to complicate the stories we tell about their active trajectories and take into account the complex economic as well as cultural dynamics of obsolescence, which entail tendencies of both supersession and persistence.¹

Bennett’s “political ecology of things” sets out from a scene of discarded objects that continue to unfold their vital activities as trash—accumulating and thriving in the shadow of consumer practice. *Thing power* denotes the “lively powers of material formation”—nonhuman forces that reside in and emanate from “quasi agents” such as minerals and metals, oxides and acids. Such agents are seen to have “trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (Bennett viii). She cites Robert Sullivan’s rendering of a dump in *The Meadowlands* (1998), a nonfiction account of the author’s voyage to the wetlands and toxic “disposable world” (Pinsky) of northeast New Jersey that serves Bennett as an illustration of “vibrant materiality” and the “force of things” (Bennett viii):

The garbage hills are alive . . . there are billions of microscopic organisms thriving underground in dark, oxygen-free communities. . . . After having ingested the tiniest portion of leftover New Jersey or New York, these cells then exhale huge underground plumes of carbon dioxide and of warm moist methane, giant stillborn tropical winds that seep through the ground to feed the Meadowlands’ fires, or creep up into the atmosphere, where they eat away at the . . . ozone. (Sullivan, cited in Bennett 6)

Granted, the dump circumscribes a region where material life unfolds independent of human doing, and it is also a region where things interact with one another, thereby forming those assemblages that Latour has called interobjective. Bennett, eager to avoid an “anthropocentric style” of thinking, suggests “bracket[ing] the question of the human and to elide the rich and diverse literature on subjectivity and its genesis, its conditions of possibilities and its boundaries” (ix). Yet we cannot ignore the human factor if we consider the larger landscape of Bennett’s vibrant ontology: the dump—however energetic the interactivity of nonhuman forces within its bounds—is a site of human creation, a resting place for human products, the shit end, so to speak, of the ever shorter life cycles of capitalist production, including a sheer endless stream of disposables whose very purpose it is to be thrown away. From this perspective, then, the vital ecology of garbage is hardly independent of our economies: human purpose, profit, and planning enter into the mix and fuel the activities of the nonhuman in order to produce a truly Latourian-style “laboratory” of incalculable material agency.

One crucial insight gained from older materialisms, which is as compelling today as it was in the second half of the nineteenth century, is that the human and the nonhuman are co-constitutive in our political economy: the power of corporate capital, financial speculation, and unequally distributed means of production; people’s sweat, skills, and intelligence; animals’ flesh, bones, skin, and labour; Earth’s

¹ For a discussion of these seemingly contradictory tendencies, see our Introduction “Thinking Out of Sync: A Theory of Obsolescence” in *Cultures of Obsolescence* (2015). In this volume, scholars of various backgrounds explore obsolescence in different historical contexts—from consumer culture and architecture to digital media and the future of academic writing. They shed light on those forms of physical vivacity and disobedience that fall by the wayside of “progress” and endure beyond the economies that render them meaningful in human lives.

oceans, crops, guts, and other exploitable “resources,” are all assembled in the commodity. Together they constitute our (culture) industries and precarious ecologies, our global forms of trade, traffic, and obsolescence. Isolating a single episode of object life as independent from these complex economies runs the risk of the (involuntary) fetishism that Marx warned us about. Focusing exclusively on the commodity’s decline in the dump while disregarding its historical provenance is no less short-sighted than spotlighting only the heyday of its desirability and market value.

In the age of the Anthropocene or the “Capitalocene,” as Jason W. Moore and Donna Haraway prefer to call it, we cannot afford to abandon a dialectic mode of thinking that bears in mind that the new is always pregnant with the obsolete in our more-than-human economies, and that reflects the co-constitution of history and ecology, capital and class, coal and comfort.²

This is the crossroads where my notion of object life departs from Bennett’s and other philosophies focused on the autonomous reality of objects, especially those endeavours that try to determine the agency of matter by keeping humanity out of the picture. Timothy Morton defines object-oriented ontology as “an emerging philosophical movement committed to a unique form of realism and nonanthropocentric thinking” (*Hyperobjects* 2). OOO’s programmatic ‘thinking outside the human’ thus grants objects a reality independent of human cognition. Neither scientific nor philosophical concepts are seen to capture or “exhaust” that reality: “An object is profoundly ‘withdrawn’—we can never see the whole of it, and nothing else can either” (Morton, “Promise” 165). What is more, Morton coined the term “hyperobjects” to denote phenomena that cannot be squared with our spatiotemporal categories—entities such as “global warming,” the “biosphere,” “nuclear radiation,” or “tectonic plates”—they are unlocalizable because they are “massively distributed across Earth” (“Poisoned” 37, 39). Highly active, yet unfathomable, hyperobjects are seen to render obsolete our very notion of the *world*: “what is revealed in the age of global warming is that beings have a profound temporal and physical scope that transcends our ability to grasp them as ‘worlding’ in any meaningful sense” (39). In the wake of hyperobjects, so Morton tries to tell us, the *world* crumbles as the concept for a reliable ground we can walk on, one that orients us in time and space by distinguishing here and there, foreground and background. Incompatible with our worldviews, hyperobjects confront us with “our disturbing, uncanny coexistence with other beings” (39).

While Morton claims nothing less than “the end of the world” in the name of a realist ontology, theorists of narrative such as Hayden White or Mieke Bal do not consider narration and ontology as incongruent modes of conceptualising reality; they see narrative as an essential mode of rendering real events and historical experience intelligible. Their views cannot be squared with an ontological understanding of reality as a realm beyond our epistemological grasp. But is ontology really so incommensurable with narrative? And doesn’t OOO provide narratives of its own? Stories of “alluring” and “withdrawn” objects certainly define particular forms of relationality. But there is another affinity between OOO and “radical” forms of realism: Much of the current debate about reality and ontology is reminiscent of the nouveaux romanciers’ demands for a radically new form of writing that eschews a structuring point of view, as Hanna Meretoja has argued.

Radical arguments “against narrativity” tend to depend on ontological assumptions that are characteristic of an empiricist-positivistic tradition of thought. The argument according to which narratives impose meaningful order on the real assumes the prior existence of “raw,” disconnected units of experience, such that only what is independent of human meaning-giving processes is truly “real.” (Meretoja 95)

While it is not my intention to accuse OOO of crude empiricism, I share Meretoja’s view that narrative is constitutive for our being-in-the-world, and that, from a phenomenological perspective, it makes little sense to draw a sharp line between meaning and matter, representing and producing worlds. As embodied beings and “storytelling animals,” we cannot escape a human perspective on the world (Meretoja 99). “Perhaps there is no need to choose between objects or their relations,” as Bennett suggests, and perhaps we get closer to the heart of things if we consider philosophical and literary texts alike as figurations that unfold in the world rather than beyond. “Texts are bodies that can light up, by rendering human perception more acute,

² For Moore’s argument in favour of *Capitalocene* for its greater historical accuracy over the more common concept of the *Anthropocene*, see his chapter “Capitalocene or Anthropocene” in *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (2015).

those bodies whose favored vehicle of affectivity is less wordy: plants, vehicles, blades of grass, household objects, trash” (“Systems and Things” 227, 232). According to Gadamer’s hermeneutic view, perception and interpretation are “not an additional procedure of knowing but constitute the original structure of ‘being-in-the-world’” (cited in Meretoja 96). And as literary scholars, we are well aware that narrative worlding is rarely an order-inducing affair that renders reality plausible and coherent. Rather, literature has its share in troubling our habitual worldviews and refreshing our perceptions, especially by enacting nonhuman agency and recalcitrance in unforeseen ways.

Literary Worlding

The life of objects, then, can be grasped only within our earth-bound existence and through the imaginative forms of worlding that literature, art, and other cultural expressions afford. Literary world building engages the reader in an interactive practice with the text, an imaginary and affective investment that generates a dynamic universe by extending the reader’s *Lebenswelt* toward imaginary scenarios in the process of reading. A literary world thus never constitutes a clearly defined diegesis, but is equally real and imagined, fuzzy and concrete, and animated by the reader’s own powers of immersion. Accordingly, narrative fiction as well as nonfictional modes of storytelling, do not prompt us to create a fictional land elsewhere but invite us to expand the experiential and imaginative range of our world. “Literary worlds,” writes Joseph Natoli, “bring about transfigurations of character, time, place, and event, of, in short, the external world precisely because they are involved in *producing* as well as in *representing*” (3).

The animate character of the material world resonates in the thingness of literature, and the relations of the literary and the material, thing theory and ecology, as well as the manifold associations of the nonhuman and the human, constitute one of “the most lively fields in literary studies” (Felski, “Latour” 737).³ My book *The Literary Life of Things* (2014) contributes to this field by tracing different forms of object life in American fiction, both the ways in which literary texts invite us to imagine inanimate things that actively make, merge, and meddle (with) human lives, and the way narratives themselves hinge on these material dynamics and render them palpable in their aesthetic form. What I have called the *material imaginary* is neither restricted to, nor is it independent of, the world of human affairs, but brings into view the manifold entanglements between people and things—the modes in which objects afford, affect, and mold, but also challenge and trouble social practices, memories, self-images, affective bonds, and cultural orientations.

In five case studies, I show how American literature stages objects in many different roles, endowing them with faculties and tendencies that go far beyond predefined functions, uses, and values. Objects become witnesses and playmates, teachers and tyrants, ambassadors and antagonists. They provide shelter and comfort, trigger fear and agony, demand attention, discipline, and care. They inveigle you, speak to you, hit on you. Some are in your way. Others play hide and seek. Many of them simply don’t care. Objects can be therapeutic, endearing, and sacred (Harriet Beecher-Stowe); charming, oppressive, and ghostly (Charlotte Perkins Gilman); malicious, recalcitrant, and enchanting (Vladimir Nabokov); tenacious, lingering, and life-saving (Jonathan Franzen). They can serve as models for selfhood, express prestige and distinction, elicit disgust, and convey inner worlds and intimate stirrings that are otherwise incommunicable (Edith Wharton). And these are just some of the roles objects take on in literature. While they display a vitality of their own, this vitality is neither withdrawn nor self-sufficient, but a force encountered in the physical world and imbued by the affective and immersive powers of human characters (including readers), even and especially as literary texts make their own materiality palpable.

I propose that literature offers its own kind of theory; in its fictional and figural modes, it can conjure material worlds as lifeworld, as the setting of who and what we are—our daily existence and social identities, and the very stuff we use, produce, aspire to, invest in, value, discard, and are bound up with. Just imagine yourself for a day or two without your phone: on your own, cut off from the networks that connect you

³ Among the notable recent publications in this field are David J. Alworth’s *Site Reading: Fiction, Art, Social Form*, Princeton University Press, 2016; Bill Brown’s *Other Things*, University of Chicago Press, 2016; and Kate Marshall’s *Corridor: Media Architectures in American Fiction*, University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

with the world, that are your job, your mobility, and that “wire” you to your friends and family. You may object that these are smart devices, more versatile than ordinary things such as toothpicks, cups, chairs, or zippers. Yet why should we assume that analogue objects are less intricate or form less complex networks with our human strivings, longings, and articulations than the digital infrastructures we depend on today? In his time, Marshall McLuhan proposed that a simple light bulb can make all the difference. Night becomes day.

Edith Wharton conveys the shock of modernity at the turn to the twentieth century, dramatising, for instance, how electric light offended social respectability. Whenever mentioned in *The House of Mirth*, artificial light—always “blazing” or “glaring”—is harsh, hostile, and associated with vulgar new lifestyles. The novel thus denounces but also accommodates a modern culture that was rendering the familiar markers of intimacy obsolete. In the penultimate chapter, electric light comes to serve as a metaphor for Lily Bart’s mental anguish—her desperate need to subdue “the supernatural lucidity of her brain” in the sleepless hours of her last night: “It was as though a great blaze of electric light had been turned on in her head, and her poor little anguished self shrank and cowered in it, without knowing where to take refuge” (339). While Wharton’s social satires can be acid in their denigration of modern fashion and technology, her astute psychological portrayals convey how subjectivity not only is deeply invested in things but relies on the object world as an indispensable setting for the self. Lily has an astute ability to imagine and arrange herself as a beautiful object among objects. Her gradual social decline tragically reveals how the failure of these socio-material arrangements can lead to a loss of selfhood. In the end, “her mind shrank from the glare of thoughts as instinctively as eyes contract in a blaze of light” (339, 340). After debating with herself the risk of chloral as a sedative, she eventually takes a lethal dose that will numb her misery for good.

Written more than a century ago and anticipating McLuhan’s view of media as extensions of the human nervous system, Wharton’s novel dramatises the co-constitution of matter and mind, medium and metaphor, electrical and nervous energy, and demonstrates in a concrete fashion how human consciousness is coextensive with medial form. Electric light is shown to transform not only spaces, schedules, and daily routines, thereby turning New York into the city that never sleeps, but it also colonises the mind and impacts people’s capability of finding physical and psychic rest. As digital technologies today, electricity made itself felt in all arenas of life in the early twentieth century, whether people embraced its affordances or tried to curb out times and places unaffected by it.

Some objects have played a privileged role in American literary history. In a number of texts—ranging from Stowe to Franzen—chairs embody a close affinity between humans and things by providing not just physical support, but also psychological comfort, a comfort embodied in the marks of constant companionship that I have called *sentimental patina*, and that serves as emotional bulwark against the threats of contingency and change. But also appliances with a much shorter life-expectancy can acquire sentimental value. No reader of Nabokov’s *Pnin* will forget how 1950s gadgets—from alarm clocks to coffee machines—can wreak havoc and let you down. It’s precisely the recalcitrance of objects that confronts us with their thingness and with the existential way in which we depend on them.

For Hannah Arendt, durability is a key feature of the object world that defines the human condition; her phenomenological approach to the political as ‘being-in-the-world’ accentuates the material dimension of human existence. Our sense of the factual world relies on objective structures that help transform intangible thought, feeling, and memory into the “tangibility of things” (Arendt, “Human Condition” 95). Arendt and Nabokov both wrote their books in a 1950s American exile after fleeing the Nazi regime in Europe; her philosophy and his fiction articulate a keen sense of our need for reification—for anchoring the “living activities” of the mind and the soul in the “thing-character” of the world (95). Both writers have shown us that our emotional and intellectual life and our material existence constitute each other.

While tables are among the favourite objects of philosophy, and chairs rank high in American literature, in this day and age digital devices have become dear to us. The smartphone is such a material anchor that contributes to building our individual and collective worlds. Lacking furniture’s promise of longevity, and endangered by the obsolescence that lingers in our longing for the newest model, the phone nonetheless fulfils the need for a constant companion, a reification of the self in the fast-paced virtual landscape that our social world has become. Digital devices help not only to maintain our social connections, but also map

the terrain of our mobile existence, navigate us through space, keep track of our files, friends, and freezers, measure our day, our finances, and our heartbeat, and are, above all, a medium of the self: much like Lily Bart's *tableau vivant* or the commodity displays that serve as models for self-fashioning in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, our individual gadgets are essential to hook us up to the world of social media—the stage, forum, and marketplace—that has long merged with the “factual world” that Arendt still envisioned as a separate dimension.

All this is to say what Stowe, Wharton, and Nabokov have said all along: things are part of the family, things are media of social traffic, things nestle in our bodies and hearts, things are against us, in short: things constitute our world. Hence the *new materialisms* can benefit from attending to such literary-imaginative modes of thinking objects along with subjects. Literature reflects its own situatedness, and the spatiotemporal orientation of narrative offers its own creative epistemology, one that does not hallucinate an ontological elsewhere independent of a perceiving agency. Self-consciously imaginative, literary texts convey the condition of their own embodiedness, their creative power of worlding through words. Literature cannot capture the material world as such, but it can register the “materiality effect” of thingness as it impresses itself on the mind, touches the senses, stirs our emotions, and resonates in our imagination.

Latour, Literature, and the Mississippi

Shedding light on the way nonhuman agency figures in literature constitutes an alternative to ontological accounts that uphold the distinction between being and telling. As the cross-fertilisation between thing theory and literary criticism has shown in recent years, the material imaginary of American literature and art suggests a different picture of object life; one that has never been so disenchanting, so devoid of agency as the strict philosophical divide between subjectivity and objectivity suggests. In his 1996 essay “Interobjectivity,” Latour paved the way for ANT, and it is not only the narrative, but also the subjective point of view, that is considered crucial for an account of the nonhuman: “We never get away from interaction, but this latter forces us to follow numerous instances of shifting out. How can an actor endure in the midst of this diversity? Through the work of narrative creation that permits an ‘I’ to hold together over time” (239).

Unlike Graham Harman and Timothy Morton, Latour embraces narration as a way of conceptualising the entanglements of people and other earth-bound agents (whether human, animal, organic, climatic, tectonic, technological, or fictional). Turning to Gaia and debating the interactive “modes of existence” in the age of the Anthropocene, Latour's recent matter of concern revolves around the modes of telling our “geostory.” In “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene,” he postulates that Earth has assumed “all the characteristics of a full-fledged *actor*. Indeed, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has proposed, it has become once again an *agent of history*, or rather, an agent of what I have proposed to call our common *geostory*. The problem for all of us in philosophy, science, or literature becomes: how do we tell such a story?” (3). Philosophy and science, too, rely on storytelling in order to think the nexus between our planet and its earth-bound creatures and things. Relevant in this context is not just ANT's reliance on narratology,⁴ but also Latour's understanding of agency in the Anthropocene, where our planet has (once again) become an “active, local, limited, sensitive, fragile, quaking, and easily tickled envelope” rather than simply an unperturbed Galilean planet spinning in its orbit (3). His project is to reflect “what sort of agency this new Earth should be granted” (4). Challenging the idea of the object world's inanimation, he states that it is not an animistic worldview that is puzzling, but the “naive belief that many still have in a world of mere stuff; just at the moment when they themselves multiply the agencies with which they are more deeply entangled every day” (7).

Latour objects to the very distinction between the animate and the inanimate, and, rather than telling his geostory from a planetary perspective, he zooms in on certain “natural agents” as they are presented in scientific and literary accounts. One of the lively nonhuman characters is the Mississippi River.⁵ In his

⁴ For a longer account of ANT's indebtedness to narratology see my *The Literary Life of Things*, 28-34.

⁵ The other “characters” he discusses and compares in his essay are Prince Kutuzov from Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, and the CRF receptor, a potent receptor and active agent in drugs used to mediate responses to different forms of stress.

reading of John McPhee's *Control of Nature* (1980), "a remarkable set of stories about how heroic humans are dealing with invincible natural agents—water, landslide, and volcanoes" ("Agency" 8), Latour reconstructs the complex physical negotiation between nonhuman actors, the Mississippi and the smaller but deeper Atchafalaya, and the US Army Corps of Engineers over the direction of the river's flow. The odds are that the Mississippi might change its man-made course and follow its "natural" tendency of joining the Atchafalaya so that it "would end up many kilometers west of New Orleans" rather than east of the city (9). Latour shows how the various agents have their share in a struggle of competing forces—the two rivers and "the principles of nature" that threaten to breach the man-made dams, the lower riverbed of the Atchafalaya that might "capture" the wider Mississippi, the engineers that "feed" the smaller river some of the larger stream's water because they do not have the means to "kill" it (9). His 'reading' sorts out the distribution of agency between the rivers and the different technologies that aim at upholding the tenuous equilibrium that keeps the Mississippi from flooding New Orleans and interfering with one of the United States' major economic infrastructures.

Latour's interpretation is premised upon a rather mechanical understanding of storytelling as a mode of singling out the forces at play. Not unlike the way we have learned to unravel Latin sentences by looking for the predicate, Latour looks for verbs and action nouns to identify the players in the game. He considers his semiotic reading superior to a "scientific worldview" that adheres to simple cause-and-effect relations and defines actors by their "competences," which in turn predefine the "performances" to follow ("Agency" 11). What is more, the agents are seen to perform their own stories: "Meaning is a property of all agents in as much as they keep having agency. This is true of [Tolstoy's character] Kutuzov, of the Mississippi, as well as of the CRF receptor. . . . *As long as they act, agents have meaning*" (12). Accordingly, storytelling is more than just a "property of human language," discourse, or fiction: it is "one of the many consequences of being thrown in a world that is, by itself, fully articulate and active." Latour believes that our geostory needs many narrators—"novelists, generals, engineers, scientists, politicians, activists, and citizens" in order to get "closer and closer within . . . a common trading zone" (13).

Seeing storytelling as a way in which the world itself generates meaning, Latour pays little regard to the particular voice and irony of a wonderful passage from Mark Twain's *The Life on the Mississippi* (1883), which he cites:

One who knows the Mississippi will promptly aver—not aloud but to himself—that ten thousand River Commissions, with the mines of the world at their back, cannot tame that lawless stream, cannot curb it or confine it, cannot say to it, "Go here," or "Go there," and make it obey; . . . the Commission might as well bully the comets in their courses and undertake to make them behave, as try to bully the Mississippi into right and reasonable conduct. (Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, cited in "Agency" 9)

Latour gives "great novels" much credit for "disseminating the sources of action in a way that the official philosophy . . . is unable to follow" (8). I agree, but is that really all literature has to offer? What distinguishes Twain's characterization of the Mississippi from Latour's scene of distributed competences is that it is rendered from the perspective of a narrator who *knows* the river, and who makes a difference between his (better) knowledge, and what he is willing to aver, namely that people will never be able to tame it, and that even considering such a possibility is an expression of man's preposterous hubris. What is more, the irony of Twain's dramatic monologue is a double one, as is evident in the rhetorical gesture of sharing his "secret" knowledge with the reader, while pretending to keep it to himself. Twain thus ridicules the official language and efforts of the River Commission, suggesting an unspoken alliance between two kinds of disobedience—his lyrical objection and the Mississippi's truculence. At stake, then, is not simply the question of competence or agency, but of competing narratives: on the one hand, the familiar story of man's conquest and domestication of nature that is unable to acknowledge the individual character of the nonhuman "antagonist" and, on the other, a personal memoir that respects not just the river's agency, but also its independent "personality." The personal, then, is valorised over the official account of the commission, both as a quality of the nonhuman and as a quality of his storytelling.

Like Twain's memoir, Faulkner's "Mississippi" (1954), is a narrative dedicated to "the Old Man" and the history of the people who have lived near and of it from the beginning of indigenous settlements. Once

again it is people's futile attempt to control or contain the river's power that comes to characterise the agency of the nonhuman.

The Old Man: all his little contributing streams levee'd too, along with him, and paying none of the dykes any heed at all when it suited his mood and fancy, gathering water all the way from Montana to Pennsylvania every generation or so and rolling it down the artificial gut of his victims' puny and baseless hoping, piling the water up, not fast, just inexorably, giving plenty of time to measure his crest and telegraph ahead, even warning of the exact day almost when he would enter the house and float the piano out of it and the pictures off the walls, and even remove the house itself if it were not securely fastened down. (Faulkner 9)

Needless to say, agency is distributed unequally. The Mississippi holds sway, the only latitude left to humans is to measure the magnitude of their failure to hinder the river's relentless course. The Old Man's anthropomorphous traits seem more human than the people he enjoys playing with. His playfulness is reminiscent of a child's temper that enjoys playing with her toys and dolls for a while before tossing them about. Meanwhile, humans cling in vain to the ineffectual tokens of their achievements, afraid and in awe of his "mood and fancy." The Old Man puts man to test in a casual, almost generous way, allowing time to foresee the course he will take:

Piling up the water while white man and Negro worked side by side in shifts in the mud and the rain, with automobile headlights and gasoline flares and kegs of whiskey and coffee boiling in fifty-gallon batches in scoured and scalded oil-drums; lapping, tentative, almost innocently, merely inexorable (no hurry, his) among and beneath and between and finally over the frantic sandbags, as if his whole purpose had been merely to give man another chance to prove, not to him but to man, just how much the human body could bear, stand, endure; then, having let man prove it, doing what he could have done at any time these past weeks if so minded: removing with no haste nor any particular malice or fury either, a mile or two miles of levee and coffee drums and whiskey kegs and gas flares in one sloughing collapse, gleaming dully for a little while yet among the parallel cotton middles until the fields vanished along with the roads and lanes and at last the towns themselves. (Faulkner 9)

Most impressive is the river's coolness, the nonchalance with which he takes first the sandbags, then the drums, kegs, flares, and finally the rest of the human settlements. But if the river is a teacher, what is the lesson to be learned? What is there for man to prove? Not much. Purpose is only "as if"—no motive or mindedness on the river's part. In fact, the flow of the Mississippi seems to dissipate all meaningful distinctions; neither race nor class matter in the wake of its inexorable waters. Black and white people toil, coffee boils, sandbags get frantic: human and nonhuman actants are united in their struggle against the river, and physical endurance becomes the scale for agency. The water makes no difference between subject and object: what is in the way will go under. Yet at stake is not the river's omnipotence, nor the humans at its mercy. What matters is that which the Mississippi lacks: haste, malice, mercy, purpose. The river flows, and when it has collected more water than usual, it overflows. A matter of confluence and gravity. Hence the challenge is not only hardship or the lost cause. The challenge is that the flood, the calamity, and the loss are neither the Flood nor trial or tragedy. They just happen. Hard to accept from a human point-of-view, then, is the utter indifference the river displays, the total lack of purpose that is characteristic of the way (some) things go.

And yet, it is precisely by granting the river a subjectivity of his own, casting his coolness and casualness as heroic character traits, that the text enacts the emotions at play in the encounter with the nonhuman. Admiring the river as Old Man, seeing a gleaming face rather than untroubled water, renders the story self-consciously human; the storytelling itself betrays the need for meaning where there is, in fact, none. The story is born out of this necessity to dramatise that which amounts to terror and anguish for the human animals. When fate hits, we do not want to believe in a world without design or destination, without gods and demons—a world thoroughly inanimate. What, then, is the difference between Latour's and Faulkner's stories? Both narratives accord agency and willpower to the nonhuman, and both see these characteristics distributed between a multitude of actants. Yet it is by casting the river's personality—the grandeur of its sweeping gestures—in human terms that Faulkner manages to grant a sort of subjectivity to both agents. The river's indifference thus becomes "his" generosity of

letting man prove “not to him but to man, just how much the human body could bear, stand, endure.” And it is “man,” literally thrown upon himself, who copes with this adversity by the last means at his disposal: storytelling.

Faulkner’s wonderful irony is that his narrative grants us a dual perspective: one that recognises the Mississippi’s alterity and difference—the river’s riveriness so to speak—while it quite obviously anthropomorphises these ‘traits’ and turns the river into the antagonist that invites telling a heroic tale. This dual perspective, then, simultaneously acknowledges and disavows the difference of the nonhuman. Rather than dramatising the event of the flood, Faulkner’s “Mississippi” enacts the struggle of imagining the other, showing that we can recognise the subjectivity of the object (as other) only by accounting for the embodied perspective we depart from.

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American Studies has always been a “thick” academic field by virtue of combining literary-historical inquiry, aesthetic analysis, and critical thinking, or more specifically, by exploring creative ways of world building along with philosophical ones. My contribution means to encourage taking critique in a direction where practices of writing and reading help us push the imaginative limits of theory. While Latour offers us a way of conceptualising the distributed relatedness of animate and inanimate forces, the narratives of Faulkner, Twain, or Wharton permit us to see that what emanates from many different bodies (human, nonhuman, geological, virtual, digital) is not only agency but also subjectivity. Hence the “human” character of the nonhuman in Faulkner: his narrative enables both a recognition of the Mississippi’s erratic personality, and a misrecognition, in that the river’s attitude, whether perceived to be truculent or nonchalant, is by no means an attitude oriented toward the human, but the river’s very own way of being in the world. Literary worlding thus confronts us with the irreducible ambiguity of sharing the world with other beings, creatures, and characters, though without ipso facto sharing their worldviews. Recognising kinship in the other (whether “man,” critter, tree, stone, phone, trash, or cloud) presupposes telling stories that will not cease bearing the traits of our own embodiment and mindedness in a more-than-human world. It is through such imaginative forms of worlding that we inhabit a messy, plentiful, and promiscuous universe and begin to fathom our entanglements in things small and large.

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