
On the Matter of Enchantment

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NEW MATERIALISM HAS GIVEN me a lot to think about. At a macro level, the theory re-places humans and human history fully within a world of material things. As a theoretical framework it breaks down conceptual distinctions, arguing that there is no human history distinct from something called nature. Humans are and have always been, in Timothy J. LeCain's words, "deeply embedded in and the product of a dynamic and creative material environment."¹ Although New Materialism resembles historical materialism, its proponents have no interest in reviving the latter's tendency toward mechanistic reductionism.² Instead they offer an expansive vision of the complexity of the material world. More specifically for the readers of this journal, New Materialism frames agriculture as an entangled project of humans with animals, plants, microbes, and elements, each with their own limits and agency (or at least "thing power").

What interests me most about New Materialism is not so much its framing of the material world (its ontology) but its ways of perceiving that world (its epistemology and methodology). How do we as historians attune our senses and our research methods to perceive this "vibrant matter"? What oracles should we consult to understand what we perceive? In this, LeCain's *Matter of History* provides an interesting model. The book combines archival research with forays into the sciences for insight, most notably materials science, evolutionary biology, and environmental health. Physics explains the thermodynamics of smelters. Chemistry unravels the mysteries of the copper atom. Entomology provides counsel on the habits and lifeways of the silkworm. It is, in other words, a work of environmental history. What is intriguing is the way LeCain not only reads and talks to scientists but also takes up the practices of a scientist. In his hands, historical research becomes a type of fieldwork and experiment. The image of Tim LeCain the historian tinkering with his copper downspouts to understand the material nature of copper, past and present, is compelling, all the more for having a touch of

eccentricity about it.³ He seems to take seriously the insights of the phenomenologists: that humans understand the world as we live in it, not as we distance ourselves from it. For me this turn toward embodied storytelling is the most exciting promise of New Materialism. By embedding historical praxis in a dynamic material world, New Materialism provides a framework to send agricultural historians into the field to learn, in a small and faltering way, what was the daily practice and implicit knowledge of the farm laborer, surveyor, sawyer, or gardener.

How might we historians become enchanted by the agricultural world of the past? For my part, when I have tried to attend to the material world of agriculture, I have found my hands weak and my senses dulled. It seems that the world whispers these truths to the poets, the mystics, and, at times, even to the scientists more than to the historians.⁴

Confronted by these limits of perception and urged on by glimpses of vibrant matter, I have ventured off in a direction the new materialists might not have expected. I have taken up an apprenticeship with the poets.⁵ I was enticed there by a line from Robert Frost's poem "Mowing": "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows."⁶ These mysterious words, which Frost hears his scythe whisper to the grass as he mows, seems to sum up the kind of presence in the world that New Materialism calls for. This enchantment is not a disembodied or ethereal state, but a firm rootedness in fact, in place, and in time. Embedded in a life of contemplation through labor as well as rest, Frost was attentive to the agricultural world around him—a world in which the verb *mow* spoke to silence and attention as well as sweat and labor. The poem entices but never fully satisfies with this kind of experience when it describes the heat of sun, the feel of the tool, and the sound of the metal on grass.⁷

At this point I expect some readers may cry foul. This talk of poetry seems the leading wedge of a leisured romanticism that celebrates its communion with some nature while countenancing the exploitation of people and other nature that made that leisure possible. It is a fair warning. Agricultural labor and rural landscapes have often looked sweetest to those who are a generation removed from toil and whose ancestors were not subject to either landlord or lash. I'll admit, though, that I do not see this particular blindness in most agricultural poets. Frost, for his part, was no stranger to long days of labor in the field. He warns against the thoughts of "idle hours" and the "fay or elf" of the romantics. As he put it, "Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak." The spiritual apprehension and aesthetic appreciation of

the natural world are not reducible to masks that obscure oppression, though they have long been used to that end. They can also be paths to mourning and lament for the burdens of life and of the sins of the past. Frost is just one voice among many. When hauling his own fields of Vermont hay by tractor, Hayden Carruth saw in the work a glimpse of cruciform suffering, calling down curses on the “sons of bitches who would drive men and women / to the fields where they can only die.”⁸ Attending to the material world will quickly confront us with the pain, violence, and sorrows that are never far from its beauty. This is what Richard Wilbur saw on the side of a road on trash day: “The sun shall glory / in the glitter of glass-chips, / Foreseeing the salvage / of the prisoned sand.”⁹ Derek Walcott lamented over the “disjected membra” of a ruined plantation in the Caribbean, “a green lawn, broken by low walls of stone.” There he found a way to tell his soul-crushing tale of the costs of empathy and the labor of reconciliation in places and among people where “the rot [of empire] remains.”¹⁰

I admit that I am no materialist. I find it fascinating, then, to find the new materialists leaving room for mystery. Or, at least, a temporary stay on demystification. Political theorist (and new materialist) Jane Bennett, for instance, calls us to seek out “moments of sensuous enchantment with the everyday world” (yes, materialist enchantment). As she puts it (admittedly in rather unpoetic language), “The capacity to detect the presence of impersonal affect requires that one is caught up in it. One needs, at least for a while, to suspend suspicion and adopt a more open-ended comportment.” Elsewhere she approaches an almost mystical framing in *Vibrant Matter*, calling for us to “bear witness to the vital materialities that flow through and around us.” She goes on to argue, “Maybe it is worth running the risks associated with anthropomorphizing (superstition, the divinization of nature, romanticism) because it, oddly enough, works against anthropocentrism: a chord is struck between person and thing, and I am no longer above or outside a nonhuman ‘environment.’”¹¹ On that shared foundation of humility in the face of the world’s complexity, I gladly join the new materialists in working for a more materially vibrant, embedded, and multivocal agricultural history.

But how? What does this mean for the practice of agricultural history? Should conferences include scythe classes, visits to outdoor ecology labs, and poetry workshops? I’ll admit that I’m interested. If historians are to attend to the material world, we will probably have to leave our conference rooms from time to time. Paying attention to matter has as much to do with our hands and ears as it does with our eyes, as much with the dust of the field and the dust we are made of as it does the dust of the archive. It also might mean

sitting in silence among the ruins, the places of violence and waste that we are inheriting. For me this has meant getting out of my office. It has meant stopping the car to look at a collapsing cotton seed oil press or a rusted-out cotton gin. It has meant picking up my wife's grandfather's rusted scythe and struggling to find the point of balance between the blade and handle. It has meant learning to spot the particular slope and vine-wrapped fence line of a superfund site. It has meant picking up the strange hedge apples of the Osage Orange tree, whose thorns fenced the fields of the West before factories refashioned them out of steel as barbed wire. We live in a world of wonders whispering for our attention—a world whose history is ours, but not ours alone.

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Notes

1. LeCain, *Matter of History*, 11.
2. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 62–81.
3. LeCain, *Matter of History*, 244–45.
4. Burt and Thompson, *Curious about Nature*.
5. In a recent *Environmental History* article, William Thomas Okie finds one such guide in the nineteenth-century Swedish travel writer and novelist Frederika Bremer, who, in his words, made “herself porous to the world about her with a combination of material sensitivity, aesthetic appreciation, and spiritual apprehension.” This type of “aesthetic habitation,” as Okie terms it, echoing the anthropologist Tim Ingold, seems a posture worth emulating. But it has its limits. Bremer’s experiences of the material world emerged out of leisured contemplation rather than labor and out of travel rather than rootedness, narrowing the world that she perceived. Okie, “Beauty and Habitation,” 259. Also see Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*.
6. Frost, “Mowing,” 17.
7. Here I am indebted to Nicholas Carr, whose blog entry “The Love That Lays the Swale in Rows,” on *Rough Type*, sent me on a long journey into Robert Frost’s poetry. “I do not see why I should e’er turn back.”
8. Carruth, “Emergency Haying,” 32–34.
9. Wilbur, “Junk,” 261–62.
10. Walcott, “Ruins of a Great House,” 19–20.
11. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xi–xii, xv, x, 120.

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