# Reimagining Agricultural Embodiment with Feminist Foundations

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When evaluating the significance of the New Materialism for agricultural history, it is crucial to acknowledge that this framework developed out of feminist science studies. Scholars such as Karen Barad and Jane Bennett reapproached what would now be considered the "old" materialism (narrative emphases on how technological and production systems formed human society) with careful consideration of its theoretical limitations. Women's studies, queer studies, and feminist philosophy ultimately shaped how New Materialism manifested as a scholarly conversation, methodological toolkit, and theoretical scaffold in the humanities. To understand what New Materialism could do for agricultural history, it is essential to see where these ideas come from and how they are distinct from previous Marxist materialist efforts.

New Materialism emerged out of much longer conversations about what a focus on physical conditions and things can do in science studies, animal studies, and commodity histories, with some of these discussions overlapping with the developments and trajectories of agricultural history. Feminist theorists wondered about the best ways to talk about the use of "sameness" and "otherness" in the formation of class, gender, and racial hierarchies in human society, and it was unclear whether a focus on materialism (rooted in patriarchal dualisms) could do this work. Proposed ways to think about more equitable future configurations seemed to need to go beyond the human and human-made. Donna Haraway, for instance, proposed thinking with "cyborg," which later evolved into "companion species," with both informing her "speculative future" work in the context of the climate crisis.[1]

In efforts to meld these theoretical projects with more grounded politics and attention to ethics, feminist philosophers such as Rosi Braidotti embraced positionality and embodiment as important methodological frameworks to make sense of the rapid technological changes, stark political

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divisions, and increased structural inequalities that define the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.[2] Embodiment enabled theorists to take materialist (physical, tangible) and vitalist (active, ephemeral) positions of a subject seriously at the same time. It allowed researchers to suspend the cultural constraints mapped onto material conditions while also acknowledging their existence (especially in distinctions and debates about sex and gender). Positionality emphasized the importance of recognizing one's place in power and ever-shifting social and political circumstances, with scholars using it to illustrate how one's identities intersect and enable different forms of privilege and discrimination, and how scholarship as a whole is informed by the identities and experiences of the researcher.[3]

These developments in feminist scholarship deeply informed the mission and ethos of New Materialism. New materialists actively seek out ways to obliterate bifurcations and, in this vein, philosophically experiment with "intra-actions," intermediaries, hybrids, and parities.[4] Methodological and narrative efforts in New Materialism challenge the assumed dualisms that anchor "modern" thought: male and female, nature and culture, mind and body, human and nonhuman, and even hard-to-reach history with the ever-evolving present. One of the ways this is done is through troubling anthropocentric storytelling and opting to tell histories with focus on nonhuman places, animals, and things. This is where stories of sheepdogs, chickens, and compost have bubbled out of New Materialism, topics near and dear to those in agricultural history.

In this way, agricultural history has already passively engaged with projects in New Materialism, as the field's evocative subject matter naturally weaves bodies, matter, and chemicals together. As Kendra Smith-Howard rightly notes in this roundtable, agricultural history "pulses with materiality!," and scholars in the field have found ways to tell rich stories about how nonhumans (from soil microbes to animals and plants) have shaped human interactions across time. Beyond agricultural topics, historians of agriculture have also grappled with the theoretical intricacies of feminist studies that make up the basis for many questions in New Materialism. More recently, scholars in the field have used this literature to make sense of the gendered dimensions of 4-H clubs and animal breeding, commercial advertising, rural politics, wartime farm labor, and the adoption of agricultural technologies.[5] However, these projects do not propose to be extensions of the vision of New Materialism, nor were they designed to take on or speak to its overarching mission.

An active engagement with New Materialism would force agricultural historians to reimagine some of the older methodologies used in the field,

including, for instance, actual work done in a farmer's field (at a historical farm or through ethnographic work). New Materialism encourages the documentation of seemingly mundane actions that get lost in time, including how different beings and bodies work together (or resist one another) to keep larger, often invisible structures moving, sustaining, or oppressing others. Positionality forces researchers to stay honest about why they came to a topic and how they worked within it—literally and figuratively—based on their place and identity across academic, public, and personal communities. There is a place for participating in agricultural work in researching agricultural history, and that physical experience can help bring sharpness, contrast, and life to sources found in the archive. There is also a place for self-awareness about the privileges afforded to those who can do that work as a researcher in contrast to the laborers who rely on it for their livelihood.

Just as New Materialism may encourage the embodiment of farm work as a methodological exercise for agricultural historians, it may also challenge scholars to experiment with traditional storytelling. New Materialism work can incorporate art, film, poetry, and theater in ways that are not always explored by agricultural historians today. The framework may help bridge discussions between museum curators and writers with reflections on interactions between bodies and objects. New Materialism as an educational tool could prove useful in the classroom, as it encourages lectures to be set in and around the subjects of study, with students experiencing firsthand the frictions and textures that exist between humans and nonhumans in agriculture. Creativity is not only mobilized but needed in New Materialism, and it could be further fostered in agricultural history.

My excitement to embrace New Materialism comes from my love for executing different methodologies and acknowledging spaces of interdisciplinarity. Methodologically speaking, New Materialism is a fruitful space that challenges scholars to think outside the space of the archive and get their hands dirty (quite literally in muddy fields). It encourages the recognition of researchers' positions of power and aims to use that power to dismantle established hierarchies both within academia and in society more generally. New Materialism also gets agricultural historians talking to feminist theorists, anthropologists, and science and technology studies researchers, who would benefit just as much from the scholarship coming out of this field as aggies would gain from them. Related, as we critique the intellectual trajectory of New Materialism, we join in important conversations about Indigenous scholarship and the need to acknowledge and cite these related, longer-standing ways of knowing the world. New Materialism is not "new," except in those pervasive Western attempts to juxtapose and classify.[6]

However, my hesitancy toward New Materialism comes with this attention to the human subjects we are talking to, and those I write about and wish to reach with my own work. The politics of New Materialism is rooted in its subversion: to challenge authority and break boundaries through its starkness and, often, strangeness. There are many academic benefits to this kind of work, but there is also a fragility to the stories we tell: the ecological and economic disasters attached to these systems, the harsh realities of the abuse of agricultural laborers (yes, human and nonhuman), and the struggle to use history to make sense of past challenges in anticipation of future ones. To evoke positionality, there is much at stake here and much privilege in academia to tell these stories in the ways we see fit. New Materialism, then, may have a space for some audiences of agricultural historians, but not for others.

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## Notes

1. Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto"; Haraway, *When Species Meet*; Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

2. Dolphijn and van der Tuin, *New Materialism*, 25.

3. Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism versus Post-structuralism"; Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins."

4. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

5. Rosenberg, *4-H Harvest*; Rosenberg, "No Scrubs"; Hajdik, "'Bovine Glamour Girl'"; Johnson, *Just Queer Folks*; Jellison, "Get Your Farm in the Fight"; Anderson, "'You're a Bigger Man.'"

6. Todd, "Indigenous Feminist's Take."

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