

63

THINGS AND THING-POWER

Candace R. Kuby and Carol A. Taylor

Things. It sounds so unimportant. As a writer, if I use the word ‘thing’, editors often asked for me to be more specific, to replace the word. Things don’t seem to have much power, specificity or presence. The word *thing* comes across as vague and unimportant.

We say when we meet a friend: How are things? – a question which expresses interest and care but whose specificity is low, so gives the responder maximum space to say what they wish. Perhaps there is something in this mode of questioning that we can take up in the post-anthropocentric research frame. How can we activate this question’s equivalence to find out about things and what they do, their effects and affects, their relations and resonances? Jane Bennett (2010) gives us a clue. She recommends we follow the ‘scent’ of things (xv) and to pursue a thingly methodology by lingering in ‘those moments during which [we] find [our] selves fascinated by objects’ (17). This is helpful: let’s try it!

In post-philosophies, thing(s) are thought differently. Jane Bennett’s (2010) book, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, is instrumental in my understanding of the ‘vitality of things and thing-power’. Part of chapter two entitled “The Blackout” has stuck with me. She refers to an electrical power grid blackout in the US by quoting a newspaper:

the vast but shadowy web of transmissions lines, power generating plants and substations known as the grid is the biggest gizmo ever built . . . on Thursday [14 August 2003], the grid’s heart fluttered . . . complicated beyond full understanding, even by experts – [the grid] lives and occasionally dies by its own mysterious rules.

(Bennett, 2010, p. 25)

She goes on to write about nonhumans such as electricity, machines and grids. Electricity or electrons on the move are never totally predictable. Things have thing-power or, as she writes about in the book, distributed agency with other nonhumans and humans.

Bennett’s invocation drew me back to a specific classroom and to a particular series of objects-bodies-space entanglements. Via Bennett’s thing-power, I (Carol) re-viewed how mundane classroom materialities – a chair, a pen with a fluffy top, a flipchart, a T-Shirt – entangle with us in lively human-nonhuman assemblages of vital matter to constitute gendered relations. My advice is: Don’t ask what things mean. Ask what they do! (<https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2013.834864>)

This notion of distributed agency isn’t to anthropomorphise nonhumans, rather it is an ontological understanding about the liveliness of the world coming to be through relationships. The agency

or thing-power doesn't happen by an object (a person, art supply, animal, plant, etc.) but rather through/with/in relationship or among or between bodies as subjectivity doesn't exist a priori but instead in relational fields.

In my scholarship on young children becoming writers with a range of artistic and digital tools, I've thought about thing-power. For example, in an article entitled, "Persistence(ing): Posthuman Agency in a Writers' Studio" (Kuby et al., 2017), we focus on a three-dimensional paper cabin that came to be by the thing-power among a child, brown construction paper, tape, stapler, glue, the desk, and . . . and . . . We create the concept of persistence(ing) to discuss the thing-power or agency among all bodies. The human didn't control the nonhuman bodies but rather worked-with-them and was sometimes surprised and even frustrated by how the materials worked-with-her. There was a liveliness in the 3D cabin coming to life among all bodies! (See doi.org/10.1177/1468798417712067 for video clips of the cabin coming to life.)

Another time I pursued the lively matterings that tables produce. I explored how tables in posthumanist thinking recast how we think about ontology, epistemology and ethics. (see <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2016.1256984>)

I've also written about lively pedagogies in higher education, as doctoral students are invited to work with theories, data and artistic and digital tools (Kuby & Christ, 2019). We write about us-ing or the lively packets of relations in a qualitative research course, specifically focusing on one student, Gigi, and her making-thinking-creating-with-things (see doi.org/10.1177/1077800419843563). Pedagogical spaces are full of things and thing-power!

In another project, a colleague and I invited participants to tell us about the things they surrounded themselves with at work. We took a composite photograph of our collective things. This photo provoked two further things – a coaster and postcard, in ongoing entanglements and assemblages. (Taylor & Kellock, 2015)

We invite you to consider things and, more specifically, the relational, post-philosophies inspired ways of thinking about agency among/with/in things (human, nonhuman, more-than-human bodies) or thing-power. How might this provoke your research practices? Teaching practices? Or really, just living practices and how you see the world coming to be?

Further reading

The blackout information

www.energy.gov/oe/downloads/blackout-2003-final-report-august-14-2003-blackout-united-states-and-canada-causes-and

www.theatlantic.com/photo/2018/08/photos-15-years-since-the-2003-northeast-blackout/567410/#:~:text=On%20August%2014%2C%202003%2C%20a,blackout%20in%20North%20American%20history

Jane Bennett lectures

www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-lggQdkIIAwww.youtube.com/watch?v=q607Ni23QjA.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCDSKdZHOA0.