25. The Scholar's Coffee

Liedeke Plate

In the debate about materiality, the human body has a special place. On the one hand, as "a gathering together of materials in movement," the body is "a thing" (Ingold, "Toward an Ecology" 437) and, as such, an object of study for the emergent field of cultural materials studies. On the other hand, as theorists of embodied knowledge—and embodied subjectivity, embodied cognition, "embodied this and that, embodied everything" (St. Pierre 139); in short, of embodiment—have pointed out, the site from which the body as a thing is approached is itself such a dynamic center of unfolding activity. We, scholars, are things as well; and we should, therefore, be wary not to reproduce the subject/object, self/other, (embodied) mind/body dichotomies that the new ontologies of new empiricisms and new materialisms are at pains to undo in their quest for a more ethical understanding of the entanglement of things in the world. As a feminist scholar, a former ballet dancer, and a woman in academia, I know how deeply Cartesian dualism's ontological gap is ingrained in academic life and thinking. In this chapter, I seek to circumvent this reflex by focusing on the "bodymind" or "mindbody" of the (cultural studies') scholar at work. The brevity of the chapter requires that I limit my subject. I will therefore center my discussion on a specific moment in its life: the coffee break. In this way, thinking from the materials that gather in the "intra-action" (Barad) of scholar and coffee and foregrounding the material and biochemical dimensions of the embodied subject of academic scholarship, I break a lance for materializing theories of embodied subjectivity.

The Scholar as Thing

"[P]eople are things too," Tim Ingold remarks in his essay "Toward an Ecology of Materials" (437). His observation that "the body . . . is a dynamic center of unfolding activity" (437), while banal in stating the obvious, also reminds us of how much a recognition of this has been left out of sites of knowledge production such as the lab, the lecture hall, and the office. To be sure, omnipresent coffee and snacks vending machines, adjustable desks in the office, food courts, and sports centers are nods

to the bodies of twenty-first-century universities' employees and students. Nevertheless, rarely is the thinking, reading, writing, discussing, debating, and arguing that form the core of the life of the humanities scholar thought from the materials in movement that is the scholar's body. While the number of popular science books on the influence of food on the brain and the brain-gut connection is growing (e.g., Enders; Mayer; Naidoo), these neuroscientific insights are rarely part of the humanities scholar's regimen. Unlike in professions like dance or sports, where much attention is devoted to the body and how to optimize its performance, no culture of the body exists in academia. And whereas magazines and websites for amateur cyclists, for instance, abound in advice on what and when to eat and drink for best performance on each ride, there are no such nutritional or lifestyle guides for academics.[1]

There are different ways of understanding materials. One is to think of them in terms of properties and attributes. Another is to know a material "not by what it is but what it does" (Ingold, "Toward an Ecology" 434). This performative, alchemical approach to materials accords well with my proposed inquiry into the academic's coffee break. While there is virtually no literature on nutrition and academics, the same cannot be said of coffee. Widely acknowledged as integral to many an academic life, with the central nervous system stimulating substance being called "almost a life source" for graduate students (on phdstudent.com) and a staple of most academics' experience of writing (e.g., Collini ix), coffee is nevertheless rarely thought about as part of the scholar's "gathering of materials."[2] Whereas one of my colleagues regularly dons his T-shirt that says: "Instant human: just add coffee," another received and followed her coach's advice to take a cappuccino break halfway through the morning as a moment for herself: a time-out for rest and reflection. A

1 My remarks here are inspired by a talk by Rosemary G. Feal at the 2007 Modern Languages Association of American (MLA) annual convention in Chicago. Feal, then executive director of the organization, spoke about "What I learned from running," discussing how food impacted her marathon-running performance. Delivered at a Sunday 8.30 AM conference session entitled "Strategies for Success: Autobiographical Meditations," the talk was not only inspirational. It was also ground-breaking: the first time a scholar of languages and literature delivered a talk at the premiere conference about the body in such a material way. On the one hand, the talk, which listed "Seven habits of highly successful athletes," was about mindset: the advocated "strategies" for a successful academic career, with advice such as to "carry your own water" and that "every run is different." While meant as metaphors for the academic "runs" (projects, grant applications, etc.) of the university scholar, the constant references to the foods, drinks, and their effects on the runner's performance made clear that in the (daily) life and performance of the academic, the materiality of the body and the composition of the foodstuffs that affect its biological activities also contribute to their performance in a significant but theoretically largely underrecognized way. The metaphor, however, is also fraught and has been under fire in the context of Dutch academics for a while now; see Levi and Young Academy Leiden.

2 For a notable exception, see Johnson and Mullen 55–56.

moment of "slow food" that is also a moment of "slow science" (Stengers) for a "slow professor" (Berg and Seeber), this cappuccino break not only forms an interruption of the culture of speed in the academy that ironically serves to sustain it, enabling the scholar to cope with it. It also disrupts deeply ingrained conceptions of being, knowing, relating, subjectivity, and agency.

The Scholar's Coffee Break

Let us follow the scholar on her coffee break. Having ordered her cappuccino and retired to a quiet place, she sits and lifts the cup to her lips. It is an industrial ceramic cup, hard to the touch. The heat of the coffee brew prepared with steamed milk foam has barely spread to the cup primed for heat retention. As her lips touch the microfoam that gives the cappuccino its distinct texture, a sensation of well-being spreads through the body. The moment she has been longing for is happening; it is taking place in the incorporation of the drink. As the coffee and milk foam make their way along the gastrointestinal tract and interact with the different bacteria that inhabit it, hormones are released. Though not the focus of her thought, which may already wander toward the class she will soon be teaching or still linger with the meeting she has just left, the internal transformation is not going unnoticed. After all, she deliberately takes this break to attend to her inward feeling.

Using it as a "technique of the body" (Mauss) that enables her to grapple with the outside world, for the scholar, the coffee break becomes a situated and embodied moment of being, knowing, doing, and relating. In her book *Eating in Theory*, the anthropologist of the body Annemarie Mol describes how the transformative entanglements of eating, tasting, chewing, swallowing, digesting, and excreting invite us to rethink what it is to be human. Taking her cue not from "'the human's' cognitive reflections *about* the world" but from "human metabolic engagements *with* the world" (3), the shift Mol proposes "interfere[s] in vested understandings of 'the human'" (24). It interferes in the hierarchy of the senses that governs the university as an institution and "western thought" more broadly, valuing sight and hearing above smell, taste, and touch (52–53; see also Howes; Fiore). It also interferes in the subject/object dichotomy and the worldview it sustains. "Here is the bottom line," Mol explains: "as an eater I do not first and foremost apprehend my surroundings, but become mixed up with them" (30).

Telling the Materials' Histories

"To understand materials is to be able to tell their histories," Ingold writes (434). Indebted to Karen Barad's notion of matter as "ongoing historicity" (821) and to Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of "becoming," Ingold's conception of the historicity of materials and his injunction that we follow the life of materials is central to a cultural studies approach to materials of culture. The focus on materials in itself is a critical shift, providing a necessary counterpoint to the genesis amnesia that has come to dominate the Global North's consumer culture. As Karl Marx already knew, forgetting how things were made stands at the heart of the commodity.[3] This forgetfulness extends to the materials of which things are made. Inviting us to attend to the "meshwork" of "entangled lines, of bodily movement and of material flow" (435), Ingold's admonition furthermore directs our attention to the journeys of materials, of where they have been and where they go.

"The living body," Ingold writes, "is sustained thanks only to the continual taking in of materials from its surroundings and, in turn, the discharge into them, in the processes of respiration and metabolism" ("Toward an Ecology" 438). In *Bodies of Water*, Astrida Neimanis offers a posthumanist feminist approach to this material entanglement of self and other/world by focusing on the material "water" and how our "watery embodiment" implicates us in other animal, vegetable, and planetary bodies through various hydrological cycles. As she writes, "the flow and flush of waters sustain our own bodies, but also connect them to other bodies, to other worlds beyond our human selves" (2). In *Eating in Theory*, Mol similarly comments on the entanglement of the self with its surrounds, noting how, as an "internally differentiated being"—since "distinct body parts relate to foodstuff in different ways"—she is continually "getting enmeshed in intricate ways with pieces of my surroundings" (36). These surroundings are not limited to her immediate vicinity. Indeed, in our era of globalization, we need to acknowledge the materials' journeys not just through time but also across the globe, which make the human body a gathering of materials in movement from very different and distant places.

The coffee break entangles the scholar in the world and in complex histories. Roasted, ground, and percolated into the cappuccino, the coffee bean traveled to the scholar's coffee distributor from places around the globe, where it was grown and

3 As I write in "Amnesiology," the commodity is to be understood as suppressing the memory of its production process and, consequently, as having lost its capacity to remind people of where it has been, its history, and its travels (Plate 148–49). In "Orientalism's Genesis Amnesia," Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi builds on Bourdieu's concept of genesis amnesia to argue that the formation of Orientalism as an area of European academic inquiry systematically obliterated the dialogic conditions of its emergence and the production of its linguistic and textual tools.

harvested under poor labor conditions (Wild). The emergence and development of coffee drinking as central to Western Culture in general, and Dutch culture in particular, is part and parcel of its colonial history.[4] In *Black Gold: The Dark History of Coffee*, Anthony Wild describes how the drink became popular in seventeenth-century Holland, as the Dutch managed to obtain coffee seedlings from Yemen and started coffee plantations in their new tropical colonies. These became very lucrative businesses for the plantation owners, enabling Dutch wealth in the ensuing centuries and the culture of coffee drinking that continues to play an important role in Dutch everyday life to this day.[5] Thus, as she savors her cappuccino, traces of the travels and encounters of the coffee plant make their way into and through the scholar's body. And as they become part of her, mixing and becoming-with other materials' histories, including those of milk and her genes, they connect her in a very material way to other bodies, other times, and other worlds, both human and nonhuman.

"Materials are not *in* time; they are the stuff of time itself," Ingold writes (439), inviting us to think of time and temporality as in themselves material, as well as of the different times that gather at the moment. Giving us pause to think, sense, feel, taste, swallow, ingest, and digest, the coffee-drinking break thus becomes a starting point for a more ethical understanding of being, knowing, and relating, to ourselves and others, human and nonhuman, in the present and from the past.

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4 My use of the term "Western Culture" here is meant to refer to the geopolitical formation formerly known as such while resonating with the quip attributed to Gandhi, who allegedly responded to a journalist's question, "What do you think of Western civilization?," by saying: "I think it would be a good idea."

5 Tea, chocolate, and sugar have parallel and intersecting histories; the latter's uses include sweetening and mitigating the bitterness of coffee. The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam recently exhibited Rembrandt's portraits of Marten and Oopjen accompanied by the following explanatory wall text: "Marten and Oopjen's wealth had everything to do with the money that Marten's father, and later the couple themselves, made processing raw sugar from Brazil in Amsterdam. It was sugar grown, harvested, and processed by enslaved Africans. Much money was made in Europe from sugar, which had quickly become very popular. The Amsterdam sugar industry supplied much of Europe's demand. This huge production could only take place through large-scale use of people in slavery" (trans. Deepl.com). See also Stam, which discusses coffee drinking and its connotation of homeliness and coziness (in Dutch, "gezelligheid") as contested Dutch immaterial heritage (23–32).

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