Feminist Materialism and Covid-19: The Agential Activation of Everyday Objects

This article takes up and make the case for the study of Covid-19 through the lens of feminist new materialism and asks how this approach might draw out perspectives and insights overlooked by other frameworks. I begin with a brief introduction to Covid-19 followed by an analysis of the virus through the lens of feminist new materialism by drawing on the work of Karan Barad (2003, 2007), Rosi Braidotti (2011, 2013a, 2013b), and Jane Bennett (2004, 2010). I contend that the interconnected frameworks articulated by each of these theorists provides the basis for a more robust understanding of the viral non-human (Covid 19) and everyday objects (the toilet roll and medical masks) whose agentic power is embedded in larger assemblages of natureculture. This kind of analysis is urgent in light of our current media-saturated, interconnected, highly politicized, and expert-adverse environment.

Keywords: New materialism; Covid-19; feminism; masks; toilet rolls, agentic; materiality

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Introduction

Top of mind for many scholars in this time of tumult and alarm is how their particular kit of scholarly interest and expertise can be used to better understand and assess our current context. As such, and for the foreseeable future, philosophers, sociologists and critical theorists will be searching for ways in which to take up and understand virality not as a social media phenomenon, but as a socio-biological one in which novel and unanticipated outcomes will reveal significant insights into how society is structured, how we understand these structures, and how we might navigate and negotiate the various networks of co-construction that make up our world.

This article, takes up and make the case for the study of Covid-19 through the lens of feminist new materialism. This approach is best placed to tease out reach conclusions about the impact of Covid-19 as well as helping to determine how we might deal with its complex consequences. I begin with a brief introduction to Covid-19 followed by an analysis of the virus through the lens of feminist new materialism by drawing on the work of Karan Barad (2003, 2007), Rosi Braidotti (2011, 2013a), and Jane Bennett (2004, 2010). I contend that the interconnected frameworks articulated by each of these theorists provides the basis for a more robust understanding of the viral non-human (Covid 19) and everyday objects (the toilet roll and medical masks) whose agentic power is embedded in larger assemblages of natureculture. This kind of analysis is urgent in light of our current media-saturated, highly politicized, and expert-adverse environment.

The case for utilizing feminist non-human ontology is based on an understanding of feminism as a site of theorizing, a pedagogical mode of engagement, and a form of praxis that, “in their post-Cartesian inclinations—avoid[s] dialecticism and teleology” while also eschewing “linear [and]…oppositional sequences” including that of nature/culture and the discursive/material (Harris 2010, 240; Coole and Frost 2010). Drawing on concepts like natureculture, intra-actions, agential cuts, hybrids, assemblages, vitalism, and nomadic subjects, new materialism redefines what it means to be human, testifies to the a priori imbrication of the human and the natural world, and does so in pursuit of an epistemology that lays bare the contradictions, inequalities, injustices, and prejudices of neoliberal capitalism. Covid-19 brings all of these conflicts to the fore by revealing the myopic and exploitative way in which we relate to the ‘natural’ and the nonhuman. I demonstrate this
through the production of two agential cuts consistent with a novel application of feminist new materialism:

1. **Medical masks** – Covid 19 – social communication – neoliberalism – Covid 19 – hospitals – supply chains
2. **Toilet paper** – Covid 19 – abject/abjection – hoarding behaviours - vulnerability

Agential cuts are boundary making practices aimed at temporarily stabilizing entities that exist within messy material and discursive assemblages. This allows us, as researchers, to enact cuts that enable a “cutting together-apart (that is entangling differentiating), in one move” (Barad 2012, 80) Because we cannot ‘see’ everything at once, Barad maintains that it is only through different enactments of agential cuts, different differences, that it can come to know different aspects of ‘itself’” (Barad 2007, 432, chapter 4, footnote 42; Arlander 2017).

Following an in-depth analysis and rendering of each of these cuts, I turn to a solutions-based rejoinder to the conflicts and social fissures these assemblages expose in the conclusion.

The first nonhuman object listed in each of these cuts (medical masks and toilet paper/rolls) are the focus of this article for the reason that they represent mundane, everyday objects whose agency has been enacted by Covid-19 in some remarkable ways. When examined closely, they reveal a number of things about how we relate to self and Other, how we regulate and manage our gendered, raced, and classed identities, and how institutions, states and objects form networks of inter-relationship that either impede or support inventive forms of power, resistance, and intra-action.

Although this article does not take up Covid-19 outside of its existence as an instantiation of natureculture (whose agentic properties give lie to the idea that there is any distinction between nature and the human world), it is necessary to give some background into its genesis and the ways in which this particular coronavirus has been framed as a medico-scientific phenomenon. Covid-19 RNA is zoonotic virus originating in wildlife – likely in a wet market in Wuhan, China in late 2019. This particular coronavirus was first detected in pneumonia patients and, not unlike SARS, infects airways by “inducing inflammatory cytokines” (also known as a “cytokine storm” or “cytokine cascade”), resulting in some form of organ damage and, for the most vulnerable, death (Jian 2019, 3; Bernheim et al 2020).

Covid-19 has followed the trajectory of related respiratory diseases like SARS and MERS, both coronaviruses, and Ebola. As such, its proliferation can be understood as an outcome of everyday human practices that promote transmission. This is particularly the case when those practices include humans interacting in close proximity to wild animals (e.g. wet markets, wildlife trafficking, the consumption of bushmeat etc.) (Jonson et al 2015).

With respect to public understandings of Covid-19, and despite the conceptually materialist nature of this piece, it is important to point out how current media and governmental statements and reports, as with SARS, MERS, Zika, and Ebola, have worked to produce a discursive landscape in which the humannature relationship is estranged and binarized; where the virus itself is raced and exploited for nationalist ends; where science is hived off into spheres of expertise removed from the public; and where the potential for public engagement with processes of knowledge production and viral treatment are left underexplored (Wen et al 2020; Monson 2017; Sell et al 2018). It is also important to note that feminist new materialism, in its thematization of naturecultures, makes room for both materiality and discourse in its analysis (Haraway 2006).
Climate disruptions and environmental degradation have contributed to the rise in the number of zoonotic ‘jumps’ we have experienced as well as their severity. Modern forms of factory farming that bring human and nonhuman actants into close proximity, coupled with the introversion and spread of unregulated capitalist ‘development,’ have created the ideal conditions for pathogenic spread (Sehgal 2010; Olivero et al 2020). As Toez and Murray put it, the causes of pathogenic proliferation are “likely to include some of the new ‘Anthropocene’ forces of climate change, deforestation, economic downturns and poverty, and the changing patterns of human migrations and urbanization” (Toez and Murray 2017). The result is the concatenation of economic, political, and ecological dynamics from which novel and risky material and discursive forms, including viral ones, emerge.

Having provided this background, I now turn to an explanation of feminist materialism before engaging in an analysis of the agential cuts articulated above.

Feminist Materialism

Feminist materialism is a particularly illuminating way in which to reconceptualize the relation between humans and nonhumans – both living and non. This approach has been applied to the study of everything from prosthetics, media, nature/ecologies, and atoms in order to adumbrate the binaries that make up much of Western thought (Åsberg 2010; Parikka 2012; Forlano 2017).

Terminologically, feminist materialism has produced its own set of neologisms that are conceptually useful. Setting the framework for this analysis is Karen Barad’s notion of intra-actions and agential cuts. For Barad, it is the inseparability or entanglement of technologies, media, nature, humans, and the environment that form the basis of her realist ontology. She contends that epistemology and ontology, or knowing and being, are co-constructed and thus both theory and experimentation should be seen as “dynamic practices that play a constitutive role in the production of objects and subjects and matter and meaning.” Intra-action, as opposed to inter-action, sees entities as mutually constituted and undisentangleable rather than existing separately or as constituted a priori. Agential intra-actions are what make particular articulations meaningful. As such, it is “not about intervening (from outside) but about intra-acting from within, and as part of the phenomena produced” (Barad 2007, 56). Put another way, this means that the networks of technologies, humans, discourses, animals, and institutions discussed are produced in and through practices that set the conditions for the ability to study them. These assemblages are therefore not predetermined but formed through intra-actions or agentic forces that exist only in relation to one another. These entanglements exist a priori meaning that knowledge production is not about capturing an independent ‘out there,’ but a process of ‘cutting’ the material-cultural world in ways that are intelligible.

Karen Barad puts it best in an interview in which she states that matter, as a “morphologically active, responsive, generative, and articulate becoming,” only becomes meaningful through intra-actions with other objects and matterings that rendered it ‘study-able.’ Hence, “different intra-actions iteratively constitute different phenomena, and exclude others” and matter’s significance is only brought forth through ever changing relationships with other entities. Barad sees this lack of fixity as hopeful since it leaves room for intra-actions and agential cuts that produce “a buildup of energy and the creation of new fault lines…[that] disrupt, unsettle, and undermine even the most seemingly solid grounds” (Juelskjær, Barad, and Schwennesen 2012, 79-80). It is this uncertainty and flux that produces the conditions social
change. In an apposite article by Hinchliffe, Allen, and Lavau, the authors use Barad to trace the mutations and movements of food borne illnesses which they describe as a co-generative process wherein pathogens intra-act with cells, surfaces, tipping points, and spaces that determine whether or not a disease is transmitted (Hinchliffe, Allen, and Lavau 2013).

Rosi Braidotti is another feminist materialist scholar of note who borrows from Donna Haraway’s work in animal studies. For Haraway (2010), much of her recent writing focuses on the study of animals we rely on and cohabit with (as pets). Conceptions of trans-species egalitarianism, non-purity, and contamination bring to light the ways in which ordering structures like patriarchy and industrialism have constructed barriers to a more capacious understanding of community (Haraway 2008). For Braidotti, the (re)turn to materiality subjectivizes matter and does so using a theoretical framework that is bio-centred, rather than discursive, and posthuman. Braidotti’s theories of naturecultures, ‘humanimal’ transversal bonding, and posthumanism are particularly useful in that they highlight the vital force between humans, non-human actants, and technologies. As Braidotti puts it, her “aim is to develop a relational ethics of affirmation resting on a new alliance between human and non-human forces and agents, so as to turn the posthuman predicament into a normatively robust moment of affirmation.” The ‘post’ of posthuman refers to the movement beyond a (hu)man-centric ontology and towards one that is “zoe/geo/techno-bound” (Braidotti 2019, 3). Zoe refers to the secular/non-human/non-political. In thinking of life beyond the humanistic self, Braidotti formulates a critical posthumanism that is life affirming, nature-centric (of which we are a part), and which centres an “affirmative bond that locates the subject in the flow of relations with multiple others” (Braidotti 2013b, 50). Moreover, this affirmation of matter, characterized instability, and impermanence starts from a place of relatedness and immanence rather than stasis and identity. Accordingly, Braidotti’s new ontology is not only useful in assessing the role nonhuman actants like toilet rolls, face masks, and viruses play in the assemblages articulated below, but also leaves room for the revealing of power relations, a critique of capitalism, and the articulation of a kind of de-segregated egalitarianism (Braidotti 2016, 2015).

In addition to the posthuman, Braidotti’s theory of the transversal is particularly useful in its articulation of how links, relations, and forces are produced between humans and others in relations of care. Transversal relations are constituted by bonds of co-presence, connection, and affirmative Otherness. It is through the transversal that indigeneity, and the “critique of western imperialism and racism provides an added critical distance – an extra layer of dis-identification – that positions these posthuman critical thinkers closer to the dispossessed and the disempowered, adding that many of those are neither human nor necessarily anthropomorphic” (Braidotti 2019, 50). This is particularly necessary in light of a global pandemic in which finding ways to connect, engage, and challenge forms of racial and colonial violence is increasingly difficult. Some of these inequalities and injustices become expressed with and through mundane objects that become representative of wider cultural trends.

The feminist valence of new materialism, for Braidotti and others, is expressed in the foundational and material effects of the gender binary and the asymmetrical power relations it uncovers in different networks. As Van der Tuin and Dophijn maintain, new materialism it is a distinctly feminist project aimed at “push[ing] towards qualitatively stronger de-territorializations” (Van der Tuin and Dophijn as cited by Braidotti 2006, 134). Which is to say that it does more than merely diversify and, instead, “break[s] through the naturalising tendencies of both sexist humanism and the de-naturalising tendencies of modern and
postmodern feminisms” (Van der Tuin and Dphijn 2010, 158). Therefore, the feminist dimension of new materialism is reflected in its situatedness – which is to say that it is feminist in light of the experiences of the gendered subjects who bring different kinds of questions, interests, and methodological approaches to the fore (Harding 2009; Wylie 2013). New materialism is also feminist in its activation of an ethico-politics that helps to “diagnose, infer, and transform gendered, environmental, anthropocentric, and social injustices from a multidimensional angle” (Revelles-Benavente and Rogowska-Stanget 2019, 297).

Finally, Jane Bennett, in her work on vitalism, materialism, and enchantments draws attention to how agency is distributed amongst a range of actors and actants in a kind of constantly changing ‘pluriverse.’ For Bennett, movement, both in thought and action, is critical. She refers to this kind of thinking as a ‘throbbing’ that fluctuates between wholes, networks, and local specificities without compromising the integrity of either (Bennett 2012). This (vital) materialism or vitalism demonstrates how objects of all kinds have the capacity to not only “impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (Bennett 2010, viii).

In her book Vibrant Matter (2010), Bennett begins with an account of the 2003 blackout which she uses to demonstrate the dispersed nature of agency and the role played by multiple actants in the coming together of a particular event. Political action emerges out of attempts to collectively intervene into these dispersals which offers a way to effect non-anthropocentric social change. The vibrancy of vibrant matter comes from its ability to effect chaos such that “All forces and flows (materialities) are or can become lively, affective, signaling. And so an affective, speaking human body is not radically different from the affective, signaling nonhumans with which it coexists, hosts, enjoys, serves, consumes, produces, and competes” (Bennett 2010, 116–17). This approach allows scholars to think about relationality and objects at the same time while also integrating emergent, distributed, and lively notions of agency. As Bennett states, “There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an inter-folding network of humanity and nonhumanity; today this mingling has become harder to ignore” (Bennett 2010, 31).

The liveliness or enchantedness of matterings features prominently in Bennett’s work through which she injects an energy not found in other materialisms. For her, vital materialism sees networks, humans, and objects as immanent and emergent rather than possessive which sets the stage for matter/objects to be seen as agentic and alive rather than passive and inert (Haynes 2014; Bennett 2001).

Taken together, these perspectives highlight the centrality of entanglements wherein perceived separabilities are the effects of engagement. This draws attention to the ways in which an invisible virus like Covid-19 cannot be disentangled from its hosts, the air, droplets, surfaces of all sorts (from doorknobs in homes to the seats in planes), settings (the laboratory, home and hospital environments), as well life-saving PPE like sanitizers, face masks, and gloves. The meaning we impose on these assemblages are important, as are the actants that make up their co-constitutive structures. Vis-a-vis Covid-19, this includes the cultural significance of medical masks and toilet paper as mediating technologies that shape our experience of life under social distancing.

Cut one: Medical masks – Covid 19 – social communication – neoliberalism – hospitals – supply chains
Medical masks serve as boundary objects plastic enough to act differently based on context, while being sufficiently stable to maintain its impact in different domains. As a material-semiotic entity, its role as a node within the network that forms the title of this section “materializes in social interaction” (i.e. it is not a priori). As Haraway argues, objects “shift from within” and are thus “generative, productive of meaning and bodies” (Haraway 1988 200-201). This nodal placement imbricates the mask into a field of distributed agencies which is less of a capacity or intention and more of a mess of connections and vitalities that can only be studied by “identify[ing] the contours of the swarm, and the kinds of relations that obtain between its bits…” (Bennett 2010, 32).

Historically, surgical/medical face masks were first used by the wider public in the early 20th century, particularly in China, to prevent the transmission of the plague. It returns again and again in the public domain as waves of various pathogens emerge in subsequent decades. Medical masks communicate a sense of personal responsibility and seriousness to others while also working to construct a boundary between the inside and the outside, self and other (Palmer and Rice 1993; Moshenska 2010). Wearing a mask is made necessary by the agential power of the virus and is made concrete by social communication and culture, public health recommendations, and the market which, together, concretizes this particular network.

The ethos of separateness the medical mask facilitates is demonstrative in that it functions to elide and undermine a basic sense of connectedness enabled by the presence of the face. A Levinasian (1979, 1996) treatment of the face, when understood metaphorically, gives rise to a transformation in how we relate to others. For Levinas, the face is a site of responsibility, the locus through which we encounter one another, and a site of relation from which we cannot turn away. His’ description of the face is as a medium that “obliges me,” “invites me to a relation” and “demands justice” (Levinas 1979, 207, 198, 294). The mask disrupts this relationality and anonymizes the self and Other. It also attenuates the responsibility we might feel towards the Other which, for Levinas, is no choice since, “The will is free to assume this responsibility in whatever sense it likes; it is not free to refuse this responsibility itself; it is not free to ignore the meaningful world into which the face of the Other has introduced it” (Levinas 1979, 218-219). Significantly, Levinas does not extend this ‘face relation’ to the nonhuman but, in a 1988 interview, does suggest that “we still have obligations toward nonhuman animals because they can suffer” (Davy 2007, 42; Wright et al. 1988). This responsibility has been sorely tested.

In producing a barrier towards the Other, the ‘thing power,’ of the mask, materially ‘presents’ new kinds of interactions, processes, and flows (Bennet 2004), – most of which serve to entrench mechanisms of Othering. In light of this, an important distinction needs to be made between the surgical masks used by surgeons to keep germs inside, so as to not infect vulnerable patients, and the N95 mask which is designed to keep offending microbes out. This is a materially significant difference. The N95 mask is meant to act as a physical barrier against foreign and harmful agents that do not respect borders – both territorial and physical (Youde and Rushton 2015). As such, the discourses that surround the control of microbial disease tend to map onto and mirror that of refugee flows in which the “dramatic utilization of immigrants and scapegoats” is par for the course (Didier 2011, 221; Theodore 2011).

Fraunhofer, drawing on Braidotti, makes a direct connection between the 2015 refugee crises, in which governments exerted forms biopolitical control (i.e. control of populations), and the rhetoric and enactments of immunity and control found in the regulation of natural-zoological life (Fraunhofer 2019). As Du Plessis contends, “The idea that a superpower can make
pathogens “respect” its borders relies on a premise that humans are capable of controlling their environments and that threats can be managed with strategies of elimination” (Du Plessis 2018, 19-20) Policing social behaviour, keeping racialized groups of people associated with the disease out, and the performative wearing of masks as part of this apparatus of control can be seductive, yet it is not necessarily effective. Which is not to suggest that masks should not be worn, but that we must be aware of how they might perpetuate the kinds of racism (particularly anti-Asian xenophobia vis-à-vis Covid-19) that seems to only exacerbate political polarization.

A final enactment of mask wearing under conditions of viral pandemic is how it instigates practices of neoliberal responsibilization that “increasingly transfers responsibilities for managing health risks from the state to individuals” as evidenced by important, but not sufficient, behaviours like “cough etiquette,” social distancing, and self-isolation (Horii, 2014; Löwenheim 2007). These behavioural norms work agentially to institute what Horii refers to as an economy of passive mitigation that “substitutes for the active agency of states, institutions, and transnational classes in reproducing neoliberal world order by mitigating some of the manifestations of capitalist contradiction” (Horii 2014). In the context of Covid-19, a more effective response would include health system that is well funded and sufficiently equipped to treat, test, and support vulnerable populations. Decades of austerity have made this a vanishing prospect in most countries (Sparke 2017; Ruckert and Labonté 2017). It would also necessitate grappling with a central contradiction of capitalist expansion in which the socio-economic impetus to grow, travel, and consume runs up against material realities, inclusive of pandemics and climate change, that throw the viability capitalist life into doubt.

Cumulatively, the trans-corporeal effects of the mask made manifest by the material agency of Covid-19, when examined through the framework of new materialism, draws attention to a number of agential effects and diffractions of a significant nonhuman object that would normally go unexplored. Before moving on to a discussion of the toilet roll as a second site of nodal energy, it is worth noting a secondary impact N95 masks have had on economic supply chains and consumption patterns. The lack of masks have effected everyone from hospital staff and care workers to pharmacists and grocery workers for whom they are occupationally necessary (MacIntyre et al 2011). Masks have also become important for people in their everyday lives for whom they serve as powerful object, what Burgess and Horii refer to as a ‘safety blanket,’ through which to exert control under chaotic circumstances (Burgess and Horii 2012). The sheer demand for masks, who has access to them, and who has the ability to pay is important since their exchange value becomes inflated due to external shocks (Koch 2002). Moreover, nationalistic attitudes have become enacted in light of the tenuousness of global market chains, particularly with respect to medical masks produced in China, and nationalistic leaders who weaponize this for economic and political gain (Bradsher and Alderman 2020; Legrain 2020). The rise of designer masks as a site of distinction and aesthetic communication is likely to rise with fashion designers incorporating them into design, as was done in 2015 during Paris Fashion week (although many have also begun to produce the regular mask for health care workers), and others selling luxury, patterned ones (Rahman 2020).

In the next section I examine another emergent network with a nodal object of interest in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Namely, the toilet roll.

Cut Two: Toilet paper – Covid 19 – abject/abjection – hoarding behaviours - vulnerability
In this particular cut, Covid 19 has enacted a range of cascading network effects that coalesce around the toilet roll. The toilet roll has become a centripetal object in this assemblage brought about by Covid-19 by taking on a unique form of agential power. An analysis of the toilet role in this context demonstrates concretely the ways in which “the material [the toilet roll] and the discursive [its meaning and framing] are mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity” (Barad 2007:149).

To being with, Covid-19 has produced a novel diffraction in which the toilet roll is fixed as a material-semiotic object representing a whole host of fears, relations, and norms. Diffractions are the effects of difference and heterogeneity (rather than causality and reflexivity) produced by and through complex assemblages in which the researcher is a part. According to Barad, diffractions are “not only a lively affair, but one that troubles dichotomies, including some of the most sedimented and stabilized/stabilizing binaries, such as organic/inorganic and animate/inanimate” (Barad 2014, 168). The chain of actions that led to the enactment of the toilet roll’s agency appears to have begun in Australia and spread via mainstream and social media to other countries – mostly in the West. On a superficial level, the materiality of the toilet role as a bulky object whose absence is visually noticeable on store shelves might help explain why this particular object becomes salient for so many. Which is to say that in this entanglement or assemblage, the toilet role is made meaningful at “the meeting point between things…at each step losing some properties to gain others” (Latour 1999, 71).

As a socio-material object, the toilet roll’s utility is relatively straightforward – it acts as a necessary tool or technology of hygiene in the course of everyday life. The most obvious motive for hoarding this item is the perceived danger of a disruption to something on which we rely. Toilet rolls thus becomes “vibrant things with a certain effectivity of their own, a perhaps small but irreducible degree of independence” (Bennet 2010, xvi). It is important to note that the toilet roll only becomes anxiety inducing when situated in a network of other human and nonhuman subjects and objects.

In relation to panic-buying behaviour, the purchasing of toilet paper mirrors the 1918 Spanish Flu induced run on Vick’s VapoRub as well as the mass purchasing of salt during SARS in China (Barry 2009; Jinqui 2003). In their discussion of SARS, Jackson and Everts draw attention to how the everyday practice of dealing with anxiety included new forms of “shopping, for example, when specific items are, deliberately or not, avoided or favoured” (Jackson and Everts 2010, 2802). There is a significant amount of research on pre and post disaster panic buying with respect to psychological and socio-cultural motives, demographics, and media influence that dovetails with this particular iteration. (Drury, Novelli and Stott 2013; Xianghua et al 2017; Hori and Iwamato 2014).

A further factor that makes this instantiation of panic buying so interesting is with respect to how it intersects with an ethos of cleanliness and bodily integrity. In a recent article for The New Yorker, Henry Alford describes what the Covid-19 induced over purchasing of toilet rolls reveals about citizen anxieties and our relation to bodily control:

Toilet paper…is inextricably bound in our minds with defecation, and is one of our few public acknowledgments of it. Perhaps it makes sense, then, that a café in Australia recently decided to accept toilet paper as currency (three rolls for a coffee, thirty-six rolls for a kilo of beans) (Alford 2020).
The activation of this ethos of cleanliness and regulation can also be understood in terms of relations with the Other, proximity to civilization, conceptions of progress, and appropriate forms of embodiment. Drawing on feminist materialist and phenomenological conceptions of the body as simultaneously discursive, material, and embodied, I contend that in times of stress, anxiety and fear, it is the maintenance of embodied bodily integrity that becomes of paramount concern. On the one hand, bodily waste it is seen as taboo, grounded in sociological behaviours that have evolved to deal with danger – a central feature of which is its “untouchability: if a forbidden taboo is touched, be it involving a person or an object, both become taboo and untouchable…” (Brodersen 2019, 2).

As Weinberg and Williams put it “[c]learly we are embodied when we defecate as we bring our body into consciousness and follow socially appropriate corporeal practices to eliminate fecal waste” (Weinberg and Williams 2005, 315). Maintaining appropriate boundaries between the inside and outside is thus seen as essential and, left uncontrolled, becomes manifest in feelings of disgust and fears of contamination that are more about culture than hygiene. Turner, in elaborating on this perceived threat, makes the case that its source is the fact that “the fluids that flow from inside of bodies to the outside are [seen as] dangerous and contaminating because fluids on the outside of our bodies challenge our sense of order and orderliness” (Turner 2003, 5). Proximity to sex organs (another source of taboo and shame), as well as attendant taboos around menstruation explain precisely how toilet rolls become mediators of perceived risks as agential actors (Black and Fawcett 2016; Houppert 1999). It would be interesting to examine how the fears around toilet roll scarcity break down along gender lines and how these findings dovetail with gendered experiences of bodily integrity and control.

For feminist materialists, in addition to deconstructing the human/nonhuman binary in pursuit of delegating agency to the nonhuman, the attendant mind/body binary is also seen as inherently regressive. Elisabeth Grosz’s work chronicling and critiquing the privileging of the “purely conceptual or mental over the corporeal” (Grosz 1993, 187) in Western knowledge practices, and the attendant denigration of the body as a site of feminine unreason, aligns with current apprehensions around the management of volatile bodies. For Grosz, volatile bodies are those bodies, often female identified, that are socially encoded as out of control, “as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid...a disorder that threatens all order” (Grosz 1994, 203). The notion of the abject in this context is useful as it attention to the psychic dimensions of what the toilet roll elicits and enforces within this particular network. Namely, a concern with regulating bodily fluids that “attest[s] to the permeability of the body, its necessary dependence on an outside, its liability to collapse into this outside ... to the perilous divisions between the body’s inside and its outside” (Grosz 1994: 193).

Another way in which the toilet roll serves as a locus of emergent forces within this particular constellation has to do with its entanglement with relations of Otherness and difference. It is significant that it is mostly countries of the Global North that experienced toilet roll shortages which speaks to larger issues of socio-cultural norms since the hygiene practices used after visits to the toilet do vary. Bidets, water, and cloths are just a few of the options used in many non-Western countries reflecting a divide that has often been laced with judgement around the perceived cleanliness of the Other (Smith 2008; Ashenburg 2011). As Moore and McFarlane argue, countries of the Global South have been constituted by “imaginative geographies of contamination” that are “underwritten by a close association with disgust at the colonial Other, the uncivilised, racialised polluting bodies viewed as less amenable to self-government” (Moore and McFarlane 200, 649).
A historically informed argument can thus be made that discrete acts of panic buying are partly constituted by a resurfacing of colonial imaginaries wherein the relation to the Other, i.e. the non-Western ‘Asian,’ Other, resuscitates longstanding raced stereotypes and prejudices rooted in the perceived superiority of Western modernity. This perception of innate evolved-ness is reflected in beliefs about appropriate hygiene practices which function as a totem of progress, self-mastery, and control over the body. A Freudian reading of bodily waste and the development of the psyche, while not necessarily relevant in this context, is worth mentioning with respect to how others have connected it to the history of sanitation and technological progress in which the sewage system and forms of bodily regulation become indicators of civilization (Reid, 1993; Mann 2007). As such, the toilet roll becomes an instigator of deeply held fears of the unruly body that intersects with the agential force of Covid-19 and, together, works to exacerbate suspicions of bodies invaded and out of control. As Bordo argues, “the human body is itself a politically inscribed entity, its physiology and morphology shaped by histories and practices of containment and control” (Bordo 1993, 21).

Finally, it is worth noting that the toilet roll is also imbricated in material economic chains of production and consumption further revealing inequalities of access, income, and knowledge (much like the mask but in a much less medicalized and more direct manner). Disadvantaged groups without the means to purchase necessities (low income, the retired) and lacking the information needed to source the right equipment (e.g. masks), exacerbates inequalities and leads to large portions of the population going without (Dick 2020; French and Monahan 2020). That there is no lack of supply is hidden by the opaqueness of supply chains and storage capacity. Moreover, the fact these behaviours could actually lead to overstock in the future is a knock-on effect of the enacted agency of the roll itself wherein power is distributed in unanticipated ways (Shih 2020; Raymond 2020).

Conclusion

Taken together, the face mask and toilet roll act as nodal technologies within the assemblages of objects (human and non), relations, institutions, and structures. They been constituted by the researcher’s ‘cut’ producing a momentary stabilization such that “once a cut is made (i.e. a particular practice is being enacted), the identification is not arbitrary but in fact materially specified and determined” (Barad, 2007: 154-155). Covid-19 acts as an enacting instigator of these cuts thereby revealing the myriad agential effects of these technologies including, for medical masks, new conceptions of responsibility, troubling relations to the Other, xenophobia, the activation of the desire for control, the rise of neoliberalism, supply chain bottlenecks, and changes to social communication. With respect to toilet roles, these effects include media panics, the deification of hygiene, a concerns with bodily integrity, the resurgence of taboos, the feminization of the body, neo-colonial logics, the (re)signification of the abject, and an emphasis on inequalities related to access.

I would like to discuss two ways through which to attempt some sort of a reconceptualization of these networks so as to open up the potential for change with the intention of challenging acts of Othering and xenophobia, neoliberal social structures, and stigmatizing body norms. The first is a more meta-level act and involves precisely what I have done in this article – which is to draw attention to the force of nonhuman things and highlight the need for more multiperspectival and heterogenous ‘cuts’ in order to produce novel forms of intra-active relation and sites of knowledge. As Coole and Frost argue, this requires that we fully recognize how our existence depends…on myriad micro-organisms and
diverse higher species, on our own hazily understood bodily and cellular reactions and on pitiless cosmic motions, the material artefacts and natural stuff that populate our environment, as well as socioeconomic structures that produce and reproduce the conditions of our everyday life” (Coole and Frost 2010, 1). Utilizing these ‘effectivity’ requires the production of empowering sensibilities that encourage a “more radical sense of material connectedness and a more radical critique of anthropocentrism” (Watson 2013, 153). In the context of the toilet roll and medical masks, changes in understanding of this sort will expose and obviate many of the harmful behaviours and assumptions I have articulated. Yet, as is often the case, consciousness raising is rarely sufficient in producing social change.

The second step is more reparative involving acts of being, doing, and thinking as human beings embedded in a nonhuman world. This requires the active centring of interrelationship, ‘what Braidotti calls ‘affirmative nomadic ethics’ and Bennet terms ‘vibrant materialism, coupled with social activism. The inclusion of the nonhuman expands the demos and opens up opportunities to reconfigure and produce new networks based on co-existence and action. Bennet, in advocating for such an approach, demonstrates how this new configuration can open up space for the “(ontologically heterogenous) “public” to coalesce around a problem” (Bennett 2010, 108), while positioning ethical responsibility in ways that engender collective change. As Alaimo asserts, “We are always on the 'hook' – on innumerable hooks – ethically speaking, always caught up in and responsible for material intra-actions” (Alaimo 2014, 195). Small but significant acts of agential subversion might include the adoption of transparent medical masks, the demand for public provision of toilet rolls and masks as collective goods (particularly in times of crisis), the enactment of clear conversations about where responsibility for healthcare should lie, the challenging of regressive taboos, and the overturning of forms of knowledge that carry racist, and misogynistic consequences.

Covid-19 has produced a surfeit of assemblages that require the kinds of agential cuts and materialist analysis I have undertaken here. I myself hope to engage in much more of this important work going forward.

Bibliography


