

# The Challenging Middle of New Materialism and Intersectionality

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IN  
REVIEW

***New Materialism and  
Intersectionality: Making  
Middles Matter***

Edited by Katve-Kaisa Kontturi, Taru Leppänen,  
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**REVIEW**

*New Materialism and Intersectionality: Making Middles Matter* aims to both deepen and widen the engagement between intersectionality theories and feminist new materialisms, arguing that they can enrich each other both theoretically and empirically. First, by weaving the theoretical threads of intersectionality, such as race, colonialism, and inequality, together with those of feminist new materialism, such as non-anthropocentrism, intra-action, and agential realism, the book demonstrates that what has previously been perceived as conflicts are in fact fruitful frictions that can contribute to a transversal understanding of complex, context-specific realities. The book then introduces the concept of ‘the middle’ and the practice ‘middling’ as a heuristic or analytic device, which is capable precisely of “working from the *middle* of the friction” (p. 13) instead of trying to erase it. Second, by employing the concept and practice of middling to an array of different topics unfolding in various contexts. The book is divided into three thematic parts: ‘Non-Anthropocentric Intersectionality’, ‘Makings of race in the middle’, and ‘Responsible Relationalities’, and the chapters explore empirical, affective, memory-based work in various contexts, e.g. art-based environmental activism, birthing-stories of Laestadian women, memory work with affect, waiting as a socio-political intersectional matter in studying asylum-seekers, allergies as a way of rethinking debility studies and trans-corporality, outlining an ethics of ‘unease’ with regard to the uneasy topics of transgender and race, and more.

In its introduction, the book presents a very enlightening conceptual and temporal mapping of the frictional relation between intersectionality and feminist new materialisms and how this relation has brought to light certain possible limitations of each perspective. For instance, feminist new materialism has accused intersectionality approaches of a non-dynamic tendency towards freezing identity formations and power structures into more or less static essences and positions. Related to this non-dynamic tendency is an overemphasis on discursive and linguistic structures of power and subjectification, which, according to feminist new materialism, risks overlooking the

formative relations with other-than-human beings and agencies. In turn, feminist new materialism has been critiqued for not being critical enough and for abandoning sociopolitical and socioeconomic issues of race and class.

By way of their methodology of ‘middling,’ the editors have composed a volume in which the perspectives of intersectionality and feminist new materialism enrich rather than combat each other *through* their mutual frictions and limitations. As such, the focus of ‘middling’ is on how issues like agency, temporality, spatiality, and materiality beyond the human are implicated in identity formations and the shaping of social differences. The suggestion is that difference, subjectivity, power, identity, and therefore also race, gender, class, etc., are neither pre-given nor purely social, but emerge through relations among material, human, and more-than-human elements: *in-between* spaces, times, processes, and intra-actions. Rather than static places and measurements, ‘middles’ are thus presented as dynamic relational zones, and ‘middling’ as an ongoing methodological practice and ethical gesture that seeks to trace how intersectional and material differences unfold in concrete, situated contexts.

## BEYOND BINARIES

The effort to combine intersectionality, which often emphasizes sociopolitical and socioeconomic relations, identity axes, etc., with feminist new materialism, which emphasizes matter, agency of the nonhuman, relational becoming, etc., is ambitious, well-conducted, and offers fresh theoretical and methodological tools. Offering the ‘middle’ as a concept and ‘middling’ as a method and practice, the volume helps to move beyond binaries such as the social/material, human/non-human, inorganic/organic, and fixed/fluid in useful and enlightening ways. By offering empirically rich case studies and affective, memory-based research, the contributions ground the theory rather than leaving it too abstract. This helps illustrate how the concept and method of ‘middling’ can work in practice. However, even if the

book gestures toward coalitional politics, ethics, and responsibility, it is less clear how the method and practice of ‘middling’ translates into concrete political action or change. How do scholars or practitioners use the concept of middle and method of middling in activism, policy, or political organizing? More work might be needed on the possibility of such extended praxes of middling.

The book does not stay in theory but shows a heightened ethical and political sensitivity by reflecting on what kinds of power relations, exclusions, or coalitions emerge when thinking with and by ‘middling.’ Not only does it attend to both intersectional concerns, such as race, gender, trans, and more-than-human concerns, such as environment, vegetal biodiversity, and geopolitics. It also shows how the two ‘types’ of concern are intimately related. Moreover, there is a constant and vigilant attention throughout the volume to how methodological decisions matter ethically and politically. For scholars in feminist studies, gender studies, queer theory, cultural studies, art studies, etc., this volume provides and opens new pathways for thinking about and researching difference, identity, embodiment, materiality, environment, and power.

Although, I generally find the book to be very nuanced and non-reductive in its engagement with both theoretical perspectives and empirical topics, I find the presentation of how poststructuralist and postmodern perspective have overlooked the nature/culture-divide by overemphasizing “linguistic and discursive aspects of living and reality” (p. 18) to be a reductive generalization. One can find many engagements with and reflections on precisely this difference in so-called poststructuralist thinking. To mention but a few examples, Jacques Derrida’s seminars on *La vie la mort* from 1975-1976 (2020) or *La bête et le souverain* from 2001-2002 and 2002-2003 (2009; 2011) focus specifically on the deconstruction of the distinctions of life and death, organic and inorganic, spiritual and material, as well as that between the human and non-human animals. Moreover, the relational ontology by Jean-Luc Nancy

is deeply concerned not only with human intra-actions but with the constitutive intra-actions of human with non-human, since, as he writes: “We would not be ‘humans’ if there were not ‘dogs’ and ‘stones’” (Nancy, 2000: 18). One could also highlight the work of Bernard Stiegler (e.g. 1998, 2018), which drawing on deconstructive work by Derrida and Simondon among others, is thoroughly committed to the advancement of non-anthropocentric, and indeed non-entropocentric, thinking and practice. While I am aware that this is not an explicit focus point of the book, a more careful description of so-called post-structuralist thinking would have suited the volume.

### UNABASHEDLY AMBITIOUS

Overall, *New Materialism and Intersectionality: Making Middles Matter* is a strong, theoretically ambitious, and well-composed volume that contributes significantly to ongoing debates in feminist theory, intersectionality, new materialism, as well as to broader disciplines of the humanities and social sciences, such as philosophy and sociology. It moves the existing literature forward by proposing new ways of thinking about and researching identity, difference, and power that take materiality, spatiality and temporality seriously, yet remain sensitive to sociopolitical and socioeconomic dimensions. It will be especially useful for scholars who already have some grounding in both intersectional theory and new materialist and non-anthropocentric thinking, and who are seeking to explore how to do research, both methodologically and ethically, in ways that do not privilege one dimension (for instance, social vs material, human vs non-human) at the expense of others.

As is often the case with works at the intersection of new materialism and intersectionality, the language is sometimes quite dense, theoretical, and conceptually heavy. For readers less familiar with intersectional and new materialist philosophy or with some of its philosophical genealogies (Deleuze, Barad, Haraway, etc.), some chapters might be challenging with regard to accessibility and complexity. That said,

I personally enjoyed the unabashed insistence on the complex reality of both things and thought as well as on the ethical and methodological implications of 'staying with the trouble' of such complex realities.

I estimate that the book will be very useful for doctoral students, researchers in feminist theory, gender studies, cultural studies, art studies, philosophy, sociology, etc., especially those interested in theory and methodology. Also, it will be valuable for people generally interested in rethinking identity

categories, relational ontologies, and posthumanism. The volume will perhaps be less immediately helpful for those looking for clear, prescriptive guidebooks for teaching, activism, or policy-making, or for those who are new to the theories engaged with. While many undergraduate and graduate students might find the volume too inaccessible, it can still serve as an aspiration or inspiration to engage with the complex middle of new materialism and intersectionality.

- Derrida, J. (2009). *The Beast and the Sovereign I*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington. University of Chicago Press.
- Derrida, J. (2011). *The Beast and the Sovereign II*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington. University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Derrida, J. (2019). *Life Death*. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. University of Chicago Press
- Nancy, J-L. (2000). *Being Singular Plural*. Trans. Stanford University Press.
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