

Mediants, Materiality, Normativity

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Among the critical issues that have emerged in the context of the “new materialisms” (Coole and Frost 2010) in science, media, and cultural studies, one is the question of ethics, accountability, normativity, and political critique. The context for this concern is that a variety of thinkers, among whom we might count Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, Jane Bennett, Isabelle Stengers, Donna Haraway, and W. J. T. Mitchell, all with significant debts (more or less acknowledged) to Gilles Deleuze and through him to Henri Bergson and Baruch Spinoza, have agreed that human beings are not the sole repository of agency, intentionality, vitality, and purposiveness. These new materialists or vitalists argue that these qualities also are to be found in many other forms of animals and machines that surround us, and many of which we have ourselves created. In one way or another, these thinkers all subscribe to the importance of what Deleuze called “assemblages” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), which are temporary arrangements of many kinds of monads, actants, molecules, and other dynamic “dividuals” in an endless, nonhierarchical array of shifting associations of varying degrees of durability.¹

I am grateful to two groups of colleagues for providing contexts for developing some of the ideas in this essay. The first is the Cultures of Finance group based at the Institute for Public Knowledge (New York University [NYU]), which has been a source of inspiration and feedback for much of my thinking over the past three years. Key members of this group are Randy Martin, Benjamin Lee, Edward LiPuma, Robert Meister, Robert Wosnitzer, and Caitlin Zaloom. The second, more immediate stimulation has come from the PhD students in my fall 2013 seminar “Media and Materiality” at NYU, who put up patiently with various renditions of some of the ideas in this essay and have encouraged me to believe that I was not completely off track. In addition to these groups, my wife and collaborator, Gabika Bockaj, has shared with me her deep knowledge of the whole field of the new materialisms and has helped me sharpen many of the ideas in this essay over the past few years. I am also grateful to the anonymous readers of *Public Culture*, who have assisted me in clarifying the scope of my argument.

1. The idea of the “dividual” in anthropology has a long and confusing history, one that includes illustrious names such as Meyer Fortes, McKim Marriott, and Marilyn Strathern. It cannot be fully addressed in this context, but it is worth noting that the idea of the “dividual” that I also use in this

In other words, there are more forms of social life on earth than we have grown used to imagining.

Most of these thinkers acknowledge that there is some tension between the physics and metaphysics of most variations of this new materialism and our classical ideas of normativity and political critique. Some proponents of the new materialism have proved deft at sidestepping, postponing, or caricaturing these ethical or political worries about the decentering of humans from the field of agency. Others, such as Bennett (2010), have been commendably honest and constructive in recognizing that the new materialisms have yet to find a way to engage in ethical or political critique.

In this essay, I develop the outline of a new approach to the problem of mediation, materiality, and the distribution of agency across human and nonhuman entities, partly through an argument with actor-network theory (ANT), as developed by Latour (1993, 1999, 2005) over the past two decades. I contend that the normative paralysis that the new materialisms seem to induce can be avoided by moving our focus away from all “actants” (to use Latour’s famous term) to a smaller class of agentive entities that I propose to call “mediants.” This proposal is anchored in a different conception of the relationship between mediation and materiality than most other new materialist approaches have offered. Subsequently, I propose that a selective focus on “mediants,” and not equally on all “actants,” could support a more secure set of normative or critical interventions without reverting to a classic humanist view of the convergence of actor, self, person, subject, and agent, which the new materialisms have rightly done much to dethrone.

Religion, Media, and Things

A number of important findings have emerged in the past decade about the relationships between religion, media, and materiality as mutually constitutive processes. Dutch anthropologists have been at the center of these developments: Patricia Spyer’s (1998) work on iconicity in Indonesia, Peter Pels (1998) on the complexities of African fetishism, Birgit Meyer (1998) on the role of things in Ghanaian Pentecostalism, and Peter van der Veer (2009) on spirituality and iconoclasm in India and China.

The questions this new body of work raises and addresses, which also belong

essay is not the same as the idea of the “person” that derives from Marcel Mauss and points to the cultural relativity of this category. Deleuze also used the concept of the “dividual” in a late (1992) essay with a sense much closer to my own, but he never developed his usage of this term systematically.

to a wider interdisciplinary discussion flagged under the rubric of “the new materialism,” are connected to developments in science and technology studies, actor-network studies, and studies of new media, so there is nothing narrowly anthropological about these questions. Let me indicate the scope of the current debate by making a sort of Deleuzian assemblage of some of the key questions in this new era of questions about the links between mediation and materiality.

More or less arbitrarily, let me start with the question dramatically posed by Mitchell (2006), “What do pictures want?” The title of Mitchell’s provocative book, this question leads him into a host of sparkling ideas about the animate life of images, about the ways images can be treated as organic life-forms, with their own desires, which, so considered, lead us to rethink the idea of “desire” itself. *Desire*, of course, is one of the key words of Deleuze’s (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) remarkable corpus and was his way to introduce multiplicity, vitality, energy, and creativity (following Spinoza) as alternatives to the more narrow machinic idea of “agency.” *Agency* remains our favorite word for the site in which body, intention, action, and resistance come together and thus is the linchpin of Latour’s ANT, which could be seen as an instrumentalized version of Deleuze’s ideas about assemblage, rhizome, and the machinic phylum. These later ideas about vitality are also visible in one of the central ideas of that tradition of anthropology, going back to Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1871), that recognized that what we called “animism” in primitive thought was uncomfortably close to many of our own most cherished ideas about nature, cosmos, and soul, up to and well beyond the Victorian period.

Thus the idea that we were “never modern,” Latour’s way of restating this old anthropological idea about the univocity of nature, is the center of Philippe Descola’s magnificent new book, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2013), which reminds us of the tradition that began with Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss and was brought to a sort of cerebral zenith by Claude Lévi-Strauss. This tradition was not wrong in its view of the fundamental categories of human thought but simply insufficiently radical in its recognition of the widespread and deep importance of relational thinking about humanity and the cosmos. Descola’s fascinating book, which tries to relocate Lévi-Straussian structuralism in a different tradition of comparative ontological inquiry, is part of a dense dialogue about what is now often called “relational personhood,” a concept that links anthropologists as diverse as Descola himself, Alfred Gell (1998), Nurit Bird-David (1999), Signe Howell (1996), Marilyn Strathern (1990), and McKim Marriott (1976).

Perhaps the best recent assessment of some of the challenges that face the study of the triangular relationship between materiality, religion, and various forms of

mediation is the collection *Things*, edited by Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer (2012). This collection and its rich introductory essay show how a certain narrow version of the Protestant emphasis on spirit over matter has infected many other fields, including the social sciences, so as to create a suspicion about the place of things in the study of religion. The contributors to this collection make an excellent case for showing that the most fruitful way to think about religion is as a space of anxiety and indeterminacy about the relationship between the visible and invisible orders. These orders are themselves differently understood in different social ontologies. Even more important, as Webb Keane (2007) has shown especially brilliantly, the way signs are seen as mediators between the visible and invisible orders is itself a product of different semiotic ideologies, so that in situations of religious missionization or conversion, one side's animism becomes the other side's fetishism and one side's incarnation becomes another side's idolatry. In other words, religion is always a tricky effort to read the invisible out of the visible, the tangible, or the sensible, but the logic of this mediation is all too easy to misread as an erroneous version of one's own ideology of visibility.

In reading these efforts to come to terms with the richness of the ways materiality can be reframed so as to expand our sense of religion and even of sociocultural processes more generally, it is becoming increasingly clear that what is needed is a richer and more robust theory of *mediation*, one that can accommodate our newfound interest in the range of vitalities, energies, and agencies that bind the human order to other natural orders and the visible to the invisible within the ontologies of different human orders. Some astute contributors to the new materialism debates, such as Matthew Engelke (2010) and Mitchell (2006), have already arrived at this conclusion. Put another way, perhaps we have come as far as we can to revise our conceptions of matter and materiality, whether conceived as the substantial, the bodily, the sensory, the essential, or the thingly. And perhaps we can now move our thinking forward by asking again about the light that materiality and mediation can cast on one another.

My view of the relationship between mediation and materiality, put briefly, is as follows: mediation and materiality cannot be usefully defined except in relationship to each other. Mediation, as an operation or embodied practice, produces materiality as the effect of its operations. Materiality is the site of what mediation—as an embodied practice—reveals. Thus speech is the materiality from which language—as mediation—takes its meaning. Pictures are the materiality—as Mitchell (2006) shows so nicely—from which images, as practices of mediation, take their meaning. The eye (and its sensory-neural infrastructure) is the materiality through which seeing—as a practice of mediation—takes its effect. Most

generally, mediation may be seen as an *effect* of which some sort of materiality is always the condition of possibility. But this materiality does not preexist mediation, any more than speech preexists language, pictures preexist images, or the eye preexists vision. The two sides of this relationship always exist and work together, as two sides of the same thing.

This relationship between mediation and materiality can be explored and exemplified in a variety of domains of everyday life. I consider two such examples in what follows. Each of them relates to an elementary feature of human life: the need for housing, the material incarnation of the need for shelter, the earliest and most widespread context for design and architecture in human life. The housing-related examples I discuss show that housing as materiality cannot be understood without reference to complex and highly varied practices of mediation.

Housing and Home in the Bollywood Dream Factory

The first example comes from Mumbai, where I have done research on slum housing and on a network of housing activists that spans many cities, countries, and continents in its pursuit of secure tenure for the urban poor. My work, reported on in the middle section of my recent book (Appadurai 2013), grew out of an earlier interest in the relationship between ethnic violence and the spectrality of housing in Mumbai in the 1990s (Appadurai 2000). I continue to be interested in how housing shapes the fabric of the urban imaginary in Mumbai.

In the rich archive of Bollywood films, the life of the urban poor is a central motif. The slum setting of a 1950s Bollywood classic like *Awaara (Tramp)* (starring and directed by Raj Kapoor; 1951) seems virtually pastoral compared to the latest slum romance, *Slumdog Millionaire* (dir. Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tandan; 2008), or a host of recent Mumbai noir films in which slums are the scenes of hyperviolence, criminality, and sexualized romance. The dreamworlds of these films and the dreamworlds of the urban poor are linked by the recurrent themes of corrupt developers, greedy politicians, and, frequently, the drama of housing, which is also a drama of the streets, since the two are hardly separable in Mumbai's slums. In one crucial scene in *Slumdog Millionaire*, for example, the two brothers at the center of the plot meet on an unfinished high floor of a skyscraper under construction and look down at the ocean of slums beneath them, and one of them remarks that the tall buildings they see have grown right in the heart of the slums where they grew up. In another of the Mumbai noir films, a corrupt developer builds weak structures that lead to building collapses and massive injury and death, followed by brutal reprisals and retribution.

The nexus of developers, police officers, politicians, and thugs is ever visible in a series of noir films about Mumbai. And we can see in these films that the Bollywood urban dreamscape is not narrowly escapist. It is a populist commentary on a city where people are made and unmade by virtue of houses built and destroyed, mansions for the rich, hovels for the poor, and on an ongoing preoccupation with the water's edge in which freedom, air, light, and love are to be found. True, these are not political films, and they are certainly not part of an organized critique of Mumbai's housing nightmares. But they are not mere fantasies either. They are a form of cinematic realism in which Mumbai's poor can insert self-narratives and add movement, plot, and character to their own dreams about new, secure, and sustainable habitation. Indeed, housing is a major site where the dream work of Bollywood and the housing dreams of the urban poor come together. If salvation can be seen as defined by secure housing for Mumbai's poorest—a roof over one's head—then it is possible to read a major strand of Bollywood film, from its very beginnings, as tied up not just with urbanity but with salvation.

The most obvious way housing comes up in the Hindi films of the past decade or so is in the depictions of corrupt construction magnates and centers and their ties to equally corrupt politicians, police officers, and criminal mafias. These portrayals, particularly prominent in the Mumbai crime films of the past two decades, are of the evil forces that define low-quality housing, corruption, and the unavailability of housing for the masses. These characters are usually fat, cowardly, and venal. Yet some of the most cherished Bollywood characters are slum heroes, street vagabonds, hustlers, and Robin Hood figures, living either in one-room hutments, *chawls*, or in true street-based slums. This tradition goes back to the 1950s to the great Raj Kapoor figure in *Awaara*, in which Kapoor combined the Charlie Chaplin tramp with the Mumbai slum flaneur. It recurs time and again in a variety of figures, ranging from the lovable Robin Hood types (such as Sanjay Dutt in the beginning of *Vaastav: The Reality* [dir. Mahesh Manjrekar; 1999]) to Hrithik Roshan in the recent remake of *Agneepath (The Path of Fire)* (dir. Karan Malhotra; 2012) as well as a score of Amitabh Bachchan's characters that are slum-bred angry young men. This contrast, between evil housing magnates and the slum-bred "angry young men," is one element of the pantheon of the housing cosmology of Mumbai cinema.

But the housing dreamscape of Bollywood is by no means this simple. In fact, the variety of ways in which the semantics of the Hindi word *ghar* are played out by Bollywood reveals the richness of the relationship between "hearth," "home," "family," and "native soil" in the Bollywood lexicon. The word *ghar* has all these meanings in Hindi, and the cinematic world takes full advantage of this range.

To begin with, the term *ghar* is always closely connected to the idea of the family, which is both the *mise-en-scène* and the primary moral value that underlies the terrain of Hindi cinema. In some instances, in explicit lines of dialogue, the idea of the house (*makaan*) and the home (*ghar*) are explicitly contrasted, with a superior value placed on the home, because of its indexical relationship to the family. The home, as the *mise-en-scène* of the family, is rarely a site of personal privacy. Rather, it is the primary terrain in which the social is born, challenged, redressed, and restored. Family relations are invariably domestic relations, and domestic relations always revolve around marriage, motherhood, and, above all, the relationship between mothers and sons. In Hindi cinema, it is impossible to separate the house, the domestic world, and the world of primary values and valuation. While the importance of the family and kinship in Hindi cinema has been frequently remarked on, it has not been clearly linked with the spatial forms of domesticity, of which the house is the most important. Both poor and rich are defined by their domestic spaces (hovels, huts, streets, palaces, mansions, and the like). But because Mumbai is itself haunted by the spectrality of housing (Appadurai 2000), especially for the poor and working classes, domesticity can itself become spectral, ephemeral, haunted, and transient.

In the 1990s and in the new millennium, the theme of borders, Partition, family, love, and separation has been exploited in numerous Bollywood films, most recently by the hugely popular *Veer-Zaara* (with Shah Rukh Khan, Rani Mukherjee, and Preity Zinta) (dir. Yash Chopra; 2004), as well as by numerous potboilers about Kashmir, terrorism, and armed conflict between India and Pakistan. All these films make the link between home, house, territory, and identity. What *Garm Hawa* (*Hot Winds*) (dir. M. S. Sathyu; 1973), a pathbreaking film about the impact of Partition on a Muslim business family in Agra, shows most clearly is that the link between family, housing, domestic property, and national identity is a grounding narrative about eschatology and soteriology in contemporary India, brought together in the discourse surrounding the primary value of the *ghar*. Other sorts of films take the idea of *ghar* in different directions and emphasize different elements of its semantic range: sometimes it is domesticity, sometimes it is kinship and marriage, sometimes it is property and security, sometimes it is identity and territory. But it is never mere shelter. In this sense, the cinematic dreams of property and housing that concern me most are about a deeper sense of the meanings of urban survival than they appear to be at first sight. They are about space and salvation, insofar as the idea of the house in this cinematic tradition knits together a series of values, which range from kinship and affinity to shelter and identity.

So what does this interpretation of housing in the dreamworld and the dream work of the urban poor in Mumbai tell us about mediation and materiality? It tells us at least three things that a different type of analysis might have missed. First, it tells us that Bollywood films are a technology of religion, if we agree to see religion as primarily a form of mediation between the visible and the invisible orders, in this case the invisible order of family, kinship, territory, and belonging that can be found only in the visible order of housing, however insecure, unstable, and temporary such housing might be. Second, it allows us to see films and film viewing as a vital part of Mumbai's infrastructure, which allows ordinary, often poor, citizens to communicate and contest messages about the power, wealth, security, and transportation that flow all around them and that often seem impossible for them to share in, in a just manner. Third, and most important, it allows us to identify, through the lens of housing, a linked set of *mediants*, among the numerous actants who compose the multiple and shifting assemblages of construction, development, law, finance, and politics that characterize the Mumbai housing scene. These mediants include filmmakers, film audiences, developers, real-estate brokers, and politicians whose mediant capacities are not simple aggregations of their actant roles in other assemblages in cinema, finance, real estate, and politics seen as traditional human domains in which humans distribute their various social roles. The mediant role allows us to detach that portion of various human actants that characterizes their shifting and temporary participation in housing-related assemblages, in which the materialities they mediate also involve nonhuman mediants and actants, such as cameras, billboards, cash, cement, construction equipment, water pipes, and electricity lines.

Among these mediants, *the ones that are primarily defined by their human dividuality* play a vital role in mediating the force of other mediants and actants, both human and nonhuman (and frequently combinations of the two). So, from a traditional sociological point of view, the idea of the mediant allows us to foreground the socialities that emerge through specific materialities, such as housing, without ignoring other actants, and without insisting on the priority of whole human "individuals," of the classical variety.

The Subprime Mortgage and the Derivative Form

Let us now look at housing from a quite different perspective, that of mortgages, specifically housing mortgages in the United States. The bizarreness of this form of mediated financial materiality has only risen to public attention because of the 2008 meltdown, in which new forms of bundled mortgage derivatives played

a massive role in the market collapse, the effects of which are still very much with us.²

Even a simple housing mortgage is a mysterious thing. It is an instrument of home “ownership” in which the so-called home owner owns the mortgage but not the house, except at the end point of a long horizon of amortization, which is itself a somewhat mysterious mechanism. In this interval, the lending bank is the real owner, and, like a dying shark, only with its last breath does it give up its deadly hold on the house. Meanwhile, the cost of this peculiar form of co-ownership is borne by the mortgage owner in the form of interest, which is substantially the profit of the bank. The effort to evacuate the principal and front-load interest is what produced the most toxic categories of bad mortgage loans in US history over the past decade.

Amortization is itself a fairly mysterious way to repay debts for loans over a long period (with variable amounts of principal and interest combining over time to repay the loan). That amortization has become part of the common sense of any home owner in the United States is a testimony to the depth at which the abstracting logics of contemporary financial capitalism have become naturalized as common sense. Housing loans (mortgages) are an essential part of the material life of financial objects in the United States because they take on a mythic element of the contemporary cosmology of capitalism, in which one’s “own” house is treated as the mark of financial adulthood and security, all housing values are always supposed to rise, and though what one owns is a piece of paper, one is led to believe that one actually owns a house. The bizarre materiality of the mortgage-backed American house is that while its visible material form is relatively fixed, bounded, and indivisible, its financial form, the mortgage, has now been structured to be endlessly divisible, recombinable, salable, and leverageable for financial speculators, in a manner that is both mysterious and toxic.

The fact is that this financial rematerialization of the American home is made possible not merely through the mechanism of the mortgage (which is, after all, simply a particularly complex long-term loan) but through the most complex form of financial mediation the world has known, or what is generally called the derivative. In its simplest form the derivative is any form of asset that is based on the possible (usually future) form of an underlying commodity, whose present value is known but whose future value is unknown. Thus commodity futures (related to the grain markets of Chicago in the mid-nineteenth century) are the earliest

2. My understanding of the story of the subprime mortgage crisis of 2007–8 is deeply indebted to Michael Lewis’s riveting book *The Big Short* (2011).

form of the derivative, a tradable instrument whose price is based on an agreement between buyer and seller about the potential future price of some amount of some commodity. The modern derivative has taken immeasurably complex forms because of the endless structural iteration of the form, which now allows financial institutions and traders to buy and sell derivatives of derivatives, with unlimited distances between the instrument and the underlying commodity. In short, derivatives are assets that embody the risks of the rise and fall of underlying assets, which may themselves be derivative in nature.

The global financial crisis of 2008 was in no small part created by the crash of housing prices (of the underlying commodity, in other words) that had been leveraged into a complex and massive set of traded derivatives whose values were out of all proportion to the actual value of homes. This yawning gap between home values and derivative prices was in large part due to the creation of certain derivatives, which allowed a large number of subprime mortgages to be made to first-time home owners. A subprime mortgage is a loan by a bank or other lender to a buyer whose creditworthiness, in terms of income, credit history, and collateral assets, is very poor. The big question about the mortgage crisis, a primary driver of the financial meltdown of 2007-8 in the United States, is, why did so many banks make so many weak or risky loans?

The answer is that in the decades that preceded the global financial crisis, and especially after 1990, the housing market was identified by the financial industries as being capable of yielding far more potential wealth than it had historically done, through the mediation of new derivative instruments. One of the two new principal instruments that banks used were mortgage-backed securities (MBS), which are a specific form of something called asset-backed securities (ABS). These securities allowed large numbers of mortgages to be “bundled” into a single tradable instrument whose value depended on different ideas about the future value of such bundles between buyers and sellers. This bundling also had another feature: subprime mortgages could be bundled together with mortgages with superior credit ratings, and with the connivance of the credit rating agencies, toxic loans were in effect laundered by being bundled together with better loans and thereby disguised under an overall superior rating. This practice meant that many lenders could make money by originating subprime loans so they could be bundled and resold by being mixed in with higher-quality loans. The second derivative instrument that enabled this dangerous alchemy was called a collateralized default obligation (CDO), which allowed these bundles of mortgages to be divided into tranches or levels that had different credit ratings. What is important, though technically a shade more obscure, is how the higher-value tranches were used to bury, hide, or

disguise the more toxic tranches. Imagine selling a house that has a beautiful view from the upper floor but a leaky basement, the knowledge of which is hidden by some mysterious financial instrument that groups all houses and uses the grading of the top stories to disguise all the leaky basements. This trading of MBSs and CDOs was a roaring business through the early 2000s, riding the wave that the rising value of all housing would indefinitely postpone the flooding of many millions of basements. Well, housing prices did eventually fall precipitously and the metaphorical basements did flood, leaving hundreds of lenders holding toxic assets and hundreds of home owners holding mortgages (rightly called underwater mortgages) on which they owed more to the bank than their houses were currently worth. And because these and other derivative instruments connected the massive collapse of the mortgage market to all other credit markets, the entire US financial system was on the brink of disaster until the government pumped in a vast amount of public funds to secure this avalanche of bad loans and debts, in the first weeks of Barack Obama's first administration.

So what is the moral of this story for our purposes today? The moral is that the derivative is, above all, a new form of mediation. What it mediates—by endless exploitation of the spreads between emergent prices and the unknown future values of commodities—is the always-evolving distance between the commodity and the asset, the latter being the commodity as its unrealized potential for future profit. In this process, derivatives are not mere financial instruments (however exotic). They are practices of mediation that yield new materialities, in this case, the materialities of the asset, which are potentially available in all commodities. Notice how far this chain of mediations has brought us from the house as a simple materiality. Mediated in the capitalist market, the house becomes the mortgage; further mediated, the mortgage becomes an asset, itself subject to trading as an uncertainly priced future commodity. Mediated yet again, this asset becomes part of an ABS, a new derivative form, which can be further exchanged in its incarnation as a debt obligation. At every step, the financial form serves as mediating practice, which produces a new order of materiality. Notice that in our current financial world, this iterative chain of financial derivations also affects other materialities, apart from housing, such as food, health, education, energy, the environment, and virtually everything else that can be mediated into new forms of materiality. So the home—as a material fact—does not exist in our highly financialized world apart from its availability to the mediation of the derivative form. Conversely, it is only by materializing new wealth out of assets such as housing, food, health, and education, among many other assets, that the mediating powers of the derivative become realized, and real.

Likewise, this analysis of the derivative as mediating practice allows us to further illuminate the idea of the mediant, as a more politically potent way to look at transhuman assemblages of vital materiality. In the context of the derivative, the relevant mediants, which belong to a larger world of actants, are, at first glance, traders, their managers, investors, or funders, as well as their customers, contacts, and regulators, as well as the wider median world of analysts, ratings agencies, and journalists who process opinions and analysis about derivatives. Of course, these parahuman mediants are always in critical interaction with machinic mediants such as their “screens,” the back-office equipment and databases of their companies, the fiber-optic wiring that underpins all financial trading, and more. And the universe of relevant actants, both human and otherwise, is even larger. As with the Mumbai housing narratives of cinema, so too in the world of subprime mortgages and trade in derivatives, the mediants we can identify are not “whole” human subjects but aggregations of the dividual elements of humans who are mediants only insofar as elements of their “dividual” beings are periodically in contact with other mediants and actants, beyond the human sphere, which permit the larger world of derivative trading to emerge and thrive.

This view of mediants, as humans in regard to a specific sphere of material assemblages and energies, is not a mere version of what we used to call “roles” in traditional sociology. That is, traders are not just men and women in their roles as “traders,” rather than their “roles” as parents, friends, taxpayers, churchgoers, and the like. Rather, the mediant is that dynamic assemblage of the human dividual that is available to blend with and catalyze other nonhuman mediants (and actants) to produce effective and durable patterns of assemblage, which we subsequently label as financial systems or other quasi-institutionalized fields of action.

Conclusion

The examples I have discussed pertain to one form of materiality—housing—but they could be extended to other forms, both elementary and more complex, involved in material life. They allow me to return to the codependency of mediation and materiality in social life. I initially proposed that we have come a greater distance in our current understandings of materiality than in our understandings of mediation. Part of the reason for this lag is our strong tendency to view materiality as something that preexists mediation and is fully formed before any practice of mediation acts upon it. This bias, in turn, might be the result of a built-in Protestant methodological bias against mediation as such, which has produced a secondary bias against materiality. Together these linked methodological errors

have prevented us from fully pursuing the possibility that mediation and materiality are coproduced effects, which never exist apart from each other.

At first glance, this proposal might appear to be no more than a restatement of some well-known tenets of ANT, as most forcefully enunciated by Latour, so I need to return to my reservations about ANT.

The primary difference I am claiming here between my proposal and the major features of ANT concerns mediation. As for ANT, the key words are *association*, *translation*, and *formatting*, all descriptors of the relationships between actants that are said to be ways of avoiding all the mystifications of that sort of view of sociality, going back to Durkheim, which attributes an a priori collective force to what is no more than the shifting energy of interactive actants. What this vocabulary does is avoid the question of what mediation in fact is and does.³ It reduces sociality to plumbing and thus replaces processes such as mediation, interpretation, and voicing with terms such as *association*, *network*, *collection*, and *linkage*.

If we really take Deleuze more seriously, and along with him his roots in Bergson and Spinoza, then we have the beginnings of a view of mediation, which is in fact neither more nor less than a dynamic theory of divided, vibrant, or vital materiality. Mediation, in my view, is more than just translation, communication, or association in any of their conventional meanings. As I suggested in the beginning of this essay, materiality and mediation are best treated as mutual conditions of possibility and as effects of each other. Seen this way, mediation is more than simple association, relation, or juxtaposition. It becomes something more like a “mode of materialization,” the definition I would propose for *mediation* as a practice, assemblage, or site, as clearly distinguished from *media*, which is the specific historical technology of this mediation, such as print, telegraph, cinema, and so forth. This definition has the virtue of tying mediation and materialization to each other, while also recognizing that not all aspects of infrastructure are technological.

Viewing mediation as a mode of materialization also clarifies why there is so much anxiety, in many cultures, about mediation, because it is through mediation, whether in the mode of seeing, touching, feeling, hearing, or tasting (or through more complex infrastructures), that matter becomes active, vital, energetic, agentive, and effective in the world around us. Whatever the ideology of matter and

3. This disinterest in mediation is part of a remarkable effort, especially by Latour, to disregard language as a social fact altogether and to minoritize the most powerful strand of French philosophy and social theory, which runs from Ferdinand de Saussure to Lévi-Strauss and includes Émile Benveniste, Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel Foucault, to name only some of the key figures.

mediation that defines a particular cosmology, it is in and through some such ideology that matter comes to matter. Without mediation, itself always a culturally defined set of techniques, matter does not exist, in the sense that it does not mediate anything that counts. It is one reason why the Protestant suspicion of all forms of mediation, except the few that it authorizes in its own cosmology, is in fact a suspicion of those ideologies of mediation that it does not authorize. It is a fear of unregulated semeiosis, rather than of unregulated matter.

If the broad view of the irreducible linkage between materialization and mediation I have proposed in this essay is valid, then it also suggests a way to address some of the major ethical and political dilemmas that all the new materialisms continue to struggle with, and that is the question of how to address the classic problems of justice, power, and inequality in a world that is no longer composed exclusively of human agents. Put differently, if agency in all its forms is democratically distributed to all sorts of individuals, some of which may temporarily be assembled as humans and others as machines, animals, or other quasi agents, then do we need to permanently bracket all forms of intrahuman judgment, accountability, and ethical discourse? Will future courts only be judges of assemblages of hands-guns-bodies-bullets and blood or of syringes-heroin-junkies-dealers or of ricin-envelopes-mailboxes-couriers and the like? And, worse, who will be the judges, witnesses, juries, prosecutors, and defenders? Will our very ideas of crime and punishment disappear into a bewildering landscape of actants, assemblages, and machines? If the only sociology left is the sociology of association, then will the only guilt left be guilt by association?

To answer this question without embarrassment is difficult, since few of us are quite ready for this transhuman ethical world, just as very few of us would want to seem to be outdated humanists, pleading for a world where human bodies, souls, and agency have a special and unique dominion over nature and the cosmos. I suggest that the point of view I have proposed in this essay allows us to revitalize—not abandon—our classic sociology, a sociology of and for humans, this time without the naive idea that we are the only actants that count. If we can see that materiality and mediation are always connected and that our place in a world of multiple vitalities, agencies, and animated machines is not theologically guaranteed, then we do have one intermediate option, and that is to replace the sociology of the social not with the sociology of the assemblage but with a deeper sociology, this time not seen as a matter of reason, mind, will, or soul (as in an older Kantian or Durkheimian dispensation). I would like to call this space a sociology of mediation, and its key movers are what I have called *mediants*, neither actors nor actants.

This term allows me to point to a land somewhere between Durkheim and

Latour, which privileges what we used to call human actors (or subjects or agents or persons or selves), seen this time as mediants, mediators among other mediators, but reserving for human mediants a special responsibility in the larger world of mediants.⁴ This time the responsibility is as traffic police, as regulators, and as trustees of a larger world of mediants, mediants who have cost the planet—in what many now see as the Anthropocene epoch—much more than all the mediants that surround us and that therefore owe to the planet some special consideration in return.

The question of what new forms of normativity, in law, politics, and everyday life, this proposal about dividuals and mediants may open up cannot fully be addressed in this context.⁵ Suffice it to say that once we recognize the dynamic materiality of mediants, seen as dividuals that interact to produce various materialities, ideas such as class, interest group, multitude, mass, and public all will need to be rethought, both because their elementary units are no longer sovereign post-Enlightenment subjects and because their mediant energies make sense only in relation to many nonhuman mediants and actants. If we provisionally name this new territory something like mediant assemblage theory (MAT), then we will at the least have marked the importance of bringing normativity back into the new materialisms.

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4. I must postpone for another occasion a more fulsome engagement with the ethics of ANT, about which there has been vigorous debate for at least the past decade. I can signal my general sympathies and orientation by pointing to the important corpus of the Dutch philosopher Peter-Paul Verbeek and in particular his article titled “Cultivating Humanity: Towards a Non-humanist Ethics of Technology” (2009).

5. I explore the idea of the dividual more fully in chapter 7 of my forthcoming book, *Banking on Words: The Failure of Language in the Age of Derivative Finance* (2015).

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