Thinking about “thinking like a brick”

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Introduction and aims

In 2015-16 I wrote an essay entitled ‘Thinking Like A Brick: Posthumanism and Building Materials’ that became part of Carol A. Taylor and Christina Hughes’ edited collection, *Posthuman Research Practices in Education* (Author, 2016). I now present here a candid reflection on how I came to write that essay, and why I presented the views in it that I did. I do so in order to provide an account of the ways in which a rising posthuman sentiment reached me (someone working away from its intellectual heartland) a decade ago, and how due to my disciplinary positionality I struggled to fully embrace or translate it into my fields of work.

This reflection has been prompted by my having been invited to reflect upon my 2016 essay as an invited speaker at the Australian Association for Research in Education’s Qualitative Research Methodologies Special Interest Group’s 2024 series of online workshops on 'Decentring the Human in Qualitative Research'. It has been further fuelled by the incisive suggestions of an anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this paper. Their clever critique has provoked further reflection by me on how far my scepticism about what I characterised as the posthuman project actually stood from the ‘positive’ posthumanism which I define below, and also how a curious reader of the essay might benefit from a more fulsome disclosure of my disciplinary background and how that influenced my 2016 essay’s lines of flight.

Towards the end of my 2016 essay I quoted Bruno Latour’s suggestion that the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of an object’s genesis could be revealed by recalling the “state of crisis” (2007, 81) in which it was born. And such examination is as beneficial for the explanation of the emergence and development of an intellectual line of flight as it is for the accounting for material creations. I seek by this analysis to give a candid depiction of that interplay of biography, disciplinarity, contingency and mess which characterises the production of any thing, whether that thing is an assembly of words on a page or gears and cogs in a machine. The three crises which I will frame my reflection around aren’t dramatic crises – but they are each contextual factors which drove the analysis to develop in the direction that it did. Thus, they are crises in a (vaguely) dialectical sense in that they called forth appropriate resolutions to my positionality and thesis, rather than that they were overly affect-ridden traumas.

This account seeks to be confessional in the sense that it honestly reports the uncertainty and fluidity of journey towards certain conclusions in that 2016 essay, but it is not a *mea culpa*. I am neither changing my mind nor re-asserting or re-defending my position. I am simply adding colour and context to a ten-year old piece of work and acknowledging it as a thing-already-in-the-world which has taken on a life (and meaning for others) separate to what I might have intended. I do not seek to reclaim that meaning. I am happy for other interpretations to have been placed upon it. I am proud of what I wrote a decade ago, but also strangely divorced from it. I feel like a parent, in that I am happy for that essay to live its own life and to travel its own road. I appreciate that offering-up an interpretative account might curb speculation which might otherwise have free reign. But whilst acknowledging that possibility, I think this – essentially deconstructive – intervention opens up further scope for play and diffraction rather than closing it down. My account for ‘my’ piece of work is but one

reading of that text, and it seeks to present an interpretation of factors in play (including emergent discursive formations) in a specific moment in time (2015-16) as perceived at another specific moment in time (2024-25).

The following account of the 'why' and how' of my 2016 essay portrays a theory-shaped journey in 2015-16 that ultimately led to me failing to align with what I then took to be a truly posthuman position, but instead to call for greater attentiveness to how our human desires and practices are inexorably intertwined with the nonhuman things that surround us. Whilst firmly located within a humanistic mode, in which the evolution of lines of thought are accorded a primacy for interpreting a (human) chosen scenario to account for, my 2016 essay argued how and why a thingly attentiveness could be fostered and deployed within research which is primarily concerned with understanding the logics and practices of human projects. Accordingly, my approach to decentring the human involved adding a greater attentiveness to our (human) thingly relations into the 'centre' of the analytical frame whilst also leaving the human there in the centre. It was a call for a celebration of our hybridity, rather than attempting to remove, or subdue, human centrality.

This reflective account helps to explain why I positioned this in my 2016 essay as at best a 'weak' posthumanism, but I now concede that it was closer than I perhaps acknowledged to what I style 'positive' posthumanism below. Wrestling in 2015-16 with the notion of 'posthuman teaching', my (despairing) immersion then in a bleaker, nihilistic form of posthumanism, and the shaping weight of the managerialistic directives of my own disciplinary origins all made it difficult for me to see that at the time, and this account explains why. These were the crises in which my 2016 essay was forged.

How I came to write 'Thinking Like a Brick'

After a 17 year career as an environmental lawyer, I stepped back into Higher Education in 2007, taking up a role at my local university as a lecturer teaching built environment law to land and construction management students. Returning to academic ways of thinking at 40 years of age proved to be both a shock to the system, but also an opportunity for a renaissance, as it suddenly seemed that not everything I did had to be directly related to advancing a particular project for a client. Taking up the opportunity of further study in my new role, I completed a Masters (in qualitative social research methods, with a focus on cultural studies) and then a PhD, and in doing so I reached back in time to my undergraduate studies – back in the mid 1980s – and instinctively sought to re-adopt and apply into my research and scholarship work the hardline social constructionism, which had been the hallmark of that era.

For my first few years back in the academy I was confident that everything was a figment of discourse and its power-channelling operations, that nothing was real and that everything was relative, and a product of situated meaning-making. But then, slowly, I attuned to a newer paradigm, loosening my faith in my resurrected and rather 'old hat' 1980s social constructionist stance, and progressively allowing-in the early intellectual shoots of an emergent 'new materialism' sentiment, one having a variety of origins and precursors, but brought into a newly declared prominence across the social sciences and humanities by Jane Author's 2010 book '*Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things*' and its potent alignment of the politics of human affect and of non-human material agencies in the world. (I use 'New Materialism' in this article to refer specifically to the feminist theory of that name, and 'new materialism' to refer more

broadly to a variety of emergent schools of thought which seek to foreground (to a variety of degrees) the non-human, thingly world).

Around 2010, as part of my PhD, I'd been researching the role of "situated knowledges" (Haraway, 1988) within a variety of land management and recreational trespass scenarios, and in particular the role of "interpretive communities" (Fish, 1980) in governing the range of permissible circulating meanings within each situation (Author, 2015). My final case study was of communal epistemic control over the practices of hobbyist 'bunker hunters' – persons who engage in visiting and recording abandoned military (and governmental) concrete redoubts. As part of that I'd spotted a call for papers which might suit some of the historical-contextual information that I had accumulated about these strange ruins, and their reverberation in wider culture.

So, perhaps the first conscious step in my journey away from extreme social constructionism was this: having submitted my first piece of writing on bunkers to the journal *Culture and Organisation* (Author 2011), I received the peer reviewer's report. They liked my quirky attempt to explore the reverberation of the (mental) image of 'the bunker' as a potent metaphor within management discourse and wider cultural-political fora, but please (they asked) could I say more about the role of the materiality of these bunkers (as both an image/idea, *and* as a thing-in-itself). This was fair comment as the journal special issue to which my paper had been submitted was concerned with a (claimed) 'material' turn in organisation studies – one in which the physicality of buildings was to be singled out for analytical attention, in order to counter it being an under-examined aspect of the design and operation of organisations. So, I searched the organisation studies literature, and in doing so came across Karen Dale's concept of "social materiality" (Dale, 2005). Drawing her inspiration from the work of anthropologist Daniel Miller's (2009a; 2009b) influential work in material culture studies, Dale's approach to materiality helpfully retained the notion that material objects were props with which (appearances of a) reality were constructed, but it also gave a nod to the importance of not reducing material objects (in my case concrete bunkers) to weightless signs. Account needed to be taken of their mass too, and the inertia that their solidity brings into a social situation. Dale's concern was that attention be paid to the interrelationship between objects and people, specifically how "…humans are part of the material world, not transcendent gods or magicians able to manipulate the material without being incorporated or changed by it" (2005: 652).

I revised my manuscript accordingly, anchoring newly-added ruminations on how the physicality of these bunkers resisted and/or shaped (some of the) human action within them. In doing so my ruminations became pretty dark, including encounter with and use of this matter and affect-rich quotation from Captain Beerman, an officer who had visited the scene of Hitler's final days in his bunker beneath Berlin in 1945:

> "The whole atmosphere down there was debilitating. It was like being stranded in a cement submarine, or buried alive in some abandoned charnel house. People who work in diving bells probably feel less cramped. It was both dank and dusty … the ventilation could now be warm and sultry, now cold and clammy. The constant loud hum of the Diesel generator … the fetid odours of boots, sweaty woollen uniforms, and acrid coal tar disinfectant. Towards the end, when the drainage packed in, it was as pleasant as working in a public urinal." (quoted in O'Donnell, 1979: 26)

Having opened this door, I then travelled onward, for the purposes of later writings and musings, into the more extreme ontologies of (feminist) New Materialism (Coole & Frost 2010), Actor Network Theory (Latour, 2007) and Object Oriented Ontology (Harman 2002, 2011, 2012; Bogost, 2012; Morton, 2013). And many of these onward explorations came to be written up as playful mini-essays in my blog for which I had set the task of "tracing the spectacular within the humdrum of the built environment" (https://lukeAuthor13.wordpress.com), but occasionally also featured as aspects of (or orientations for) academic papers.

This new seam of scholarship that I was by then mining into encouraged revelation of a "weird realism" (Harman, 2012). By this mode of phenomenological analysis any worldly scene could be analysed (and rendered alien-seeming through a skewed narrative framing) by focussing-in not on the constitutive force of language or even that of human intentional actions, but rather – instead – by seeking to point to the material agency (and alien-ness) of mundane objects as they entwined into a variety of human projects. But that weird realism ultimately thwarted an investigation of entanglement. In the alienated thing-world of "alien phenomenology" (Bogost, 2012) all entities "are shy, retiring octopuses that squirt out a dissembling ink as they withdraw into the ontological shadows" (Morton 2013, 11). This version of posthumanism called for an attentiveness to the non-human other but then summoned the prospect that, at best, one entity can only ever know a caricature of the other (Harman, 2011). Any deeper insight or relation is blocked off. Creeping close to a perception of that other thing required playful (broadly psychogeographical) journeys: poetic stratagems of juxtaposing normally non-associated items and/or inverting conventional framings such that the background comes to be the foreground were the order of the day.

Finding my limits in posthumanism

My dalliance with these provocative sources and their encouragements (and epistemological pessimism), led to a productive proposition from my then colleague, Carol A. Taylor, who was a fellow member of my University's Space & Place Group – a very loose confederation of interdisciplinary researchers and artists interested in the question of how places (and by extension their materiality) can be investigated. Carol invited me to contribute to her then forthcoming edited collection (with Christina Hughes) on *Posthuman Research Practices in Education* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). I happily agreed to write an essay under the title 'Thinking Like a Brick: Posthumanism and Building Materials'. My aim was to reflect primarily on an experience from a few years before where, at an interdisciplinary seminar on the theme of 'work', I'd taken a dirty house brick from my garden and brought it into the clean lecture theatre, and the centre of my presentation, thus disrupting (in the spirit of wierd realism) presentational and situational conventions. In my proposal I offered to analyse how and why my (physical) foregrounding that very prosaic artefact and exemplar of 'work', had summoned an alien provocation into the proceedings, and what the impacts of that had been.

But as I set to work writing the essay I increasingly struggled. I came to realise that I'd not been paying full attention when I agreed to the task, and that I'd over-looked the *"…in Education"* part of the proposed work's title. This became increasingly problematic for two reasons.

First, my path into new materialism was alienated, bleak and not based in the positivity of Carol's version of New Materialism. Carol was deeply versed in New Materialism from a complex meshing of feminist and Deleuzian perspectives (see Taylor & Ivinson, 2013; Taylor, 2016). The New Materialism of the likes of Karen Barad (2007), Jane Author (2010) and Rosi Braidotti (2013) offered up an emancipated, optimistic weirding along the lines of Queer Theory. Meanwhile – in contrast – my flight-path into (a different) new materialism was a darker (and noticeably more male dominated) trajectory. In my sources, posthumanism was an apocalyptic "world without us" (Weisman, 2008) in which objects sit apart from each other, connecting only approximately. This posthumanism was an alienated place, not a new, improved platform for human learning, and equitable being-in-the-world. The version of posthumanism that I was reacting against (increasingly viewing it as a dead-end) channelled a human self-disgust and a fetishisation of non-human forms of being. I feared that posthumanist's fondness for calling out anthropomorphism was summoning a disanthropomorphism in which a refusal to see the world in a human way (which seems to me the only way that we humans can successfully engage the world) would not lead to anywhere good for humankind.

Secondly, my academic engagements with objects lay outside my own teaching and (core) research practice. It was only playful with (and celebratory of) thing-power in my playful writings. My day-to-day teaching, comprising introductory-level law teaching for property management and construction students, was untouched. Other than the frisson with the brick I had no success stories to report about having enhanced my own teaching practice via an embrace of a posthuman stance. Teaching law remained largely a story of simplifying complex discursive rule-formations and urging students to see their contextual and pragmatic relevance 'in the real world' that their professional futures would inhabit.

Through reviewer's requests for the refinement of my line of argument and my own increasing sense of discomfort my text evolved. It became ultimately a manifesto for a *very* modest embrace of a weak form of posthumanism, one in which we would gain by being more attentive to the things around us, but in which human projects and perceptions remained at the heart of framing of the encounter. I simply couldn't bring myself to embrace the human self-disgust and nihilism which I found at the extremity of what I had encountered as posthumanism's extinctionism.

So, my essay (published under the title stated above) as a chapter, felt like a bit of a cop-out when I'd finished with it (for I felt that I'd failed to support the implicit, positive agenda of Taylor and Hughes' book). I hadn't found a found a form of 'posthuman teaching' that I felt that I could advocate, and I'd failed to reject humanism (as the goal of education) or offered up anything other than a human-centric orientation for the positioning of the essay's analysis. The essay stayed squarely in the camp of declaring that 'things matter to us' rather than 'things matter in their own independent right'.

For these reasons it has been a surprise to me that my essay has been read and commented on by more readers than I would ever have expected for it, and that a decade later I was asked to give a talk about it.

What does decentering the human mean to me?

My presentation to the 2024 online seminar series politely set out my essay's argument that the human cannot be fully removed from (human) activities, and neither could it be fully decentred. However, what my 2016 essay had advocated (reached as

a result of my own search for a solution to my dilemma explained above) was to *add* the non-human into the central frame, thereby aspiring to a more holistic account of our human-thingly relations (this might perhaps break the rules of what a 'decentering' of the human can entail. But in my view, moving more than just the human into the centre works to dilute the human, even if the human (in my formulation) remains there in the centre). I therefore interpreted my essay as a call for greater appreciation of our co-existence with and pragmatic motivations for our relationships with non-human things. And this focus upon pragmatics – in the sense of intentional human projects and their goals – lay at the heart of why I was advocating a greater noticing of our interdependence with things. Writing in 2015-16 that ultimately felt like humanism rather than post-humanism.

Undoubtedly, the opportunity to look back at my essay in 2024, and to present and debate it with the audience helped to focus my reflection and self-understanding. It has also, in turn, sparked this reflection on the circumstances by which I (this human) came to contemplate the limits (and benefits) of a 'thingly' awareness within both education and the world of work.

In the essay I quoted from Alexander Styhre's (2008) study of the thingly relations of rock drillers, and how they attentively listen to (and learn the subtle speech of) rock as it is drilled into, in order to keep their tunnelling task on track. When writing the essay I saw this quote as still somewhat esoteric, but more recent reflection has brought to mind how this attunement connects to the actual research that I had been doing in the years immediately leading up to writing the essay. In a more modest (and anthropologically inclined manner) my own research work had become increasingly concerned with how managerialist disciplines like law and property management arrange their relations with material objects, and in particular how humans seek to 'read' those objects in order to manage them and the places that they form part of.

In 2007, finding myself – middle aged – back in Higher Education and with an appetite to research something. I (perhaps inevitably) chose to draw upon experiences from my former career as an environmental and safety lawyer, and I therefore set out to research how law's abstract commands become locally interpreted and applied by lay actors, and how therefore 'law in action' comes to differ from 'law in books'. Because I was based in a department focussed upon built environment education, training property managers, I chose case studies for my research which concerned the management of physical sites, and the awkward objects found within them. My three main case studies were graveyards (and the management of elderly tombstones) (Author & Gibbeson, 2010), street trees (and the management of the risk of trees falling over) (L. Author, 2010) and abandoned quarries (and the risk of people suffering injury from accessing the sites rock faces and flooded excavations) (Author, 2020).

Whilst I hadn't fully realised it at the time, what I thought of then as a matter of local social construction (the meaning making practices of 'interpretive communities', in circulating and regulating their pragmatic interpretations of applicable legal codes) was actually, already infiltrated by a strong dose of materialist sensibility. The weight of gravestones, the alienness of trees and their growth and (in)stability, the standing-beyond-language complexity of quarry faces and depths – all were *also* at work affecting how these communities were – in the specifics of their situations – coming to terms not just with the abstract encoded requirements of safety laws, but also the shaping material influence of the bulky, awkward and not-fully-predictable non-human, thingly nature of these objects of concern.

My research subjects were actively involved in attuning not just to legal codes, but also to their inter-relationship with the trees, gravestones and rock faces under their care, and that the manner of that thingly-sense making could be tactile, and at the outer limits of discourse's reach. Looking back at these studies I see that I'd featured (in L. Author, 2010) a quote from a judge in a case concerning whether a tree safety inspection had been careful enough, and its depiction of (there is no other word for it really) 'groping' as a way of coming to adequately 'know' a tree. This showed how even the arid, discursive-fixated realm of a judicial decision could experience a breakdown of register – and uncertainty of language – in the face of describing how a tree's intimate acquaintance should be made:

> "…a level two inspector […] would have appreciated that decay could lie beneath this overhang. The very purpose of the examination was to eliminate this very hazard. It would have been imperative to *feel carefully into the space – to scrape and discover*." (Justice MacDuff, quoted in L. Author 2010: 149 [emphasis added])

This summoned an embodied and approximate form of knowing into the heart of a supposedly totalising linguistic field. To know via groping rather than to know via scientific measurement or textual exegesis pointed to something new, but also something familiar and every-day. We – professionally and simply in our physical navigation of the world – 'feel our way'. We make sense of the object-world by bumping into it (and learning how to avoid that stumble next time). That physical and embodied engagement and coming-to-know had no presence in legal scholarship, and certainly seemed worth investigating. In particular, I wanted to study how such prosaic knowledge of objects and how to cope with them was formulated and shared within particular practitioner communities (for instance what is a 'safe' street tree?). But, given their origins in the managerialistic disciplines that I was working within these studies remained rooted in a concern with human projects, human ways of doing and human meaning-making. They were not celebrations of the fundamental unknowability of gravestones, trees and quarried rock faces, they were studies of human accommodation to and with things, and specifically of how to deal with the gap of knowability – the inevitable gap between the human and other entities. They were studies of awkward (and potentially dangerous) co-relation, within chosen human projects and frames of reference anchored around anxieties about accidents and liabilities.

The foregrounding and explication of cultural relations between humans and things is a stock feature of anthropology, and it is a perennial problem of attempts to bring anthropological questions and methods 'home' and into cultures familiar to the researcher and/or the reader that the unearthed logics do not feel anything other than 'obvious' when reported. But the obviousness arises when the phenomenon has been pointed out: a flaming roof is obviously indicative of a burning house, once the homeowner has been woken and told of the ensuing situation. But until woken, it was far from obvious to them – because it had not yet been brought to mind. Therefore, the advantages of thingly relations being brought to mind: how, why and when that is done (or not done) and the (re)action that ensues is what has always interested me. In part the importance of this 'awakening' dimension was prompted by Martin Heidegger's 'tool analysis' (as appropriated and extended in a new materialism direction by Harman, 2002) whereby a hammer is only 'noticed' when it hits a worker's finger rather than the intended nail. In short, we only notice things when they don't

function as we intend them to. Effective site owners (motivated by the prosaic expectations of risk assessment) were seeking to 'notice' their awkward objects in advance of any such accident, thus seeking to find ways to bring them to consciousness, and to examine and perhaps reconfigure the thingly relations so as to avoid possibility of an otherwise future accident or other failure of the tool as co-opted into human projects.

'Positive' posthumanism

In my 2016 essay I framed posthumanism as a bleak extinction fetishism and solipsistic wallowing in the impossibility of knowing other objects. A reviewer of an earlier draft of this essay pointed out to me that that's not what posthumanism is to them at all. And here it is important to note that posthumanism does have more identities than the 'positive' (and dominant in the discipline of education studies) version that the reviewer was pointing me to. I make no apology for having focussed in my 2016 essay on a version of posthumanism that is less commonly spoken of in education studies, and which certainly has less to offer progressive minded scholars. Indeed, perhaps my 2016 essay has received the attention that it has because it (as a rarity) summons this alternative vision of the posthuman (that being 'the world without us').

To the reviewer, posthumanism stands for challenging the 'natural' claims to human centrality and supremacy and their attendant cloak of neutrality. They saw the decentring of the human as ultimately an ethical (rather than a literal) step. My 2016 essay had been concerned with the impossibility of being anything other than our human selves, and had concluded that the best we could aim for would be to acknowledge more our co-dependence upon surrounding objects that make up the world. For them posthumanism is a call to notice and embrace our entangled relations in and with the world.

So for them, my argument had misfired because posthumanists do not aspire to become rocks, they seek to challenge human exceptionalism, and that's what decentring the human is meant to be about. The reviewer pointed out that many writing in the 'positive' realm of academic posthumanism fully accepted the limitations of stepping outside of human positionality, but that despite this they still assert the value of the *attempt* to do so as a progressive reach for humility and co-existence. The reviewer pointed to the origins of such lines of thought in Baruch Spinoza's acknowledgement that we can only know other entities through the affections they produce in us (as examined in Robinson & Kutner, 2019). Learning (in that sense) flows from allowing others (persons or non-human entities) to touch us, and thereby affect a reaction within us. The reviewer also emphasised that positive posthumanism seeks to queer our sense of the world so as to render 'unnatural' dominant relations and logics. In this sense positive posthumanism is another decolonial project, with a special emphasis upon the decolonisation of (human) relations with the world of things around us.

Put this way (and the point was acknowledged to a degree in my 2016 essay) my affiliation to a 'weak' (and humanistic) posthumanism is aligned to positive posthumanism's avowal of a more aware and humble relationship with things. But where I remain somewhat adrift is around the purposes of that attentiveness. As I have shown above, due to the motivations of my research projects, my professional background and the managerialistic orientations of the disciplines to which I affiliate, I

remain pragmatically aligned, in that the benefit of the attentiveness is to the human rather than a pursuit of an ethical embrace of co-dependency. And that orientation – I now see – comes from the disciplines through which I came to this field. Law, risk management and property management are all control regimes geared to human dominion over the things of the world. These disciplines a steeped in pragmatic (human) project-making. Injecting positive posthumanism's ethics of humility and co-dependence has taken longer to embed than in other more receptive disciplines (like teaching studies) and to this day the penetration remains modest.

Socio-Material Constructionism

The process of reflection set out in this article was spurred by the interest shown in my 2016 essay. John Law (2004) has advocated importance of leaving 'mess' in social research, in the sense that something is lost with the (common) tidying up of data and findings as presented in conventional academic literature. To present uncertainty, contingency and/or to admit that you weren't entirely sure what your position was even when you submitted your paper into peer review, are all (traditionally) signs of weakness and not the way to pave a career towards impact and authority. But if we as researchers can't identify our own mess and offer it up as part of the 'full story' then we are failing to give the full story, and not enabling our peers to see how ideas, positions are formed, sustained and adapted.

If the reflective journey taken in this article feels rather circular – in it claiming both to be an account of a weakening of social constructionism's grip upon my analytical lens, but with that account being presented essentially as a social constructionist analysis of how I came to add a social materialism dimension into my mode of analysis – then that circularity is both acknowledged, and intentional. My 'inviting in' of a new materialism sensibility reflected my becoming aware of new bodies of thought, intersecting across a variety of disciplines and offering up a conceptual vocabulary in which our relationships with non-human things could be taken up into analysis of human projects. To that end, maybe I have never escaped a social constructionist outlook (and I believe that for a scholar originally affiliated to legal studies that break would be almost impossible to make, in entirety).

Revisiting the genesis of my 2016 essay has encouraged me to see the influence of pervasive bodies of thought (and trends attached to them) in the 'allowing-in' of materiality to social science analysis within the last couple of decades. Undoubtedly, bodies of knowledge and debate around environmental sustainability have been instrumental in calling communities to have greater regard to our human dependencies upon, and constant interactions with, the non-human (early attention raising instances for me being formative encounters with Easterbrook (1996) and Lash *et al* (1996). These certainly set a context for my thingly-awareness). And my interest in the pragmatics of being-in-the-world, and of the normative frameworks which condition that awareness, flows from my training as a lawyer (law is always for something, it does not comfortably sit apart from context and application), and rising embrace of a new materialism sentiment in some quarters of legal studies, including occasionally talk of a 'posthuman' law (a misnomer because law is always of-human, even if it has the ability to take on a life of its own once released into the world) (see, for example, Boulot *et al*, 2021). In particular, David Delaney's 2010 text *Nomospheric Investigations*, has greatly influenced my thinking as it focusses-in on how human actors intentionally draw together spatiality, materiality and the law into their projects, thereby enacting the 'pragmatics of world-making', by fusing texts, humans, non-

humans, proximity and distance in order to create situations. In short, we intentionally weave together ideas and things, and arrange places, in order to 'construct' our lives and our world.

Legal scholars are now happy to speak of law's material manifestations and co-options, and whether with trees (Braverman, 2009), hedges (Blomley, 2007) or court architecture and materialities (Schliehe & Jeffrey, 2023). And so, I end this reflective account happy that a workable materialist sensibility is now abroad in my home discipline of law, and that adoption of that stance has not required a 'throwing of the baby out with the bathwater', whereby legal studies might need to (somehow) find a path to being posthuman, by tracking down bodies of non-human laws, upon which to focus. Taken to its extreme only studies of gravity or of the clan codes of wolf packs could present as a truly 'posthuman' law. Instead, the materialisation of legal scholarship enables an appreciation of the material manifestation (and intertwining) of law as a helpful adjunct to the (beneficial) embrace of an essentially discourse focussed - social constructionist - sentiment.

I'm confident that Dale's (2005) formulation of a "social materiality", and making that an operationalisable domain for research and teaching that goes (someway) to a productive 'decentring' of the human, is both achievable and desirable, for it centrally connects to the motivation to understand (and build competence for doing) key steps in human projects, whilst rightly inviting into the centre of that analysis a wider range of influencing factors.

As material culture studies theorists have argued, it is not matter *per se* that needs to be studied in the social sciences, it is 'materiality', the state and circumstances of humans having an inter-relationship with non-human things (Miller, 2010 a & b; Hodder, 2012, Olsen, 2013). In short, Dale seems to offer an important bridge between the situational pragmatics of social constructionism and the (at times esoteric) realism of new materialism, to forge – in effect – a Socio-Material Constructionism, a desire to understand our condition of 'living with' stuff. I personally, see little to be gained in seeking to remove the human dimension from such projects, by leapfrogging to (attempted) research and/or instruction around (trying to portray) non-human projects, stripped of any connection to human goals or human scales of perception. I remain content with my 2016 essay's conclusion that:

> "…posthuman approaches that prioritise accounting for 'the world without us' have little productive to offer any human-centric endeavour like human education and in contrast suggest that posthumanism can best challenge the hubris of anthropocentricism when the investigation is framed as an attempt to account for 'the world with us'. This is attainable if researchers balance an attentiveness to human purpose and positionality with a holistic and appreciative 'more than human' (Whatmore, 2006) access to the non-human aspects of the world." (Author 2016, 61).

Conclusion

My 2016 essay would have been easier to write if I had selected positive posthumanism, rather than its bleaker variant as my discussion point. Yes, there are ways of decentering the human and encouraging an inter-entity ethics of dependency in the spirit of a positive posthumanism approach to education as many of the other contributors to Taylor & Hughes' (2016) edited collection showed. Indeed, much of contemporary ecological education does this as a matter of course (National

Association for Environmental Education – UK, 2024). In such figuring human actors remain present, but with extractivist relations unmasked and human dependencies upon the non-human laid bare (Cowman, 2022). Instead, I set myself the (I eventually realised) the impossible goal of finding a (human) educational gain in extinctionism and in the impossibility of knowing other entities. To square the circle I ended up improvising a call for attentiveness to our material relationships. That call had an affinity with positive posthumanism as to method and disposition, but struggled to align in terms of ethics and/or pragmatics.

As explained above, my disciplinary orientation (and the research projects flowing from that) have motivated my studies of human-material relations as under-examined instances of place and liability management. These disciplines (and the professional practices attached to them) have managerial (and potentially extractivist) logics. They foreground human projects and thus cannot represent a full affiliation to positive posthumanism's ethical project. However, they do co-opt positive posthuman ways of seeing and knowing, to explicate the human-centred projects and pragmatics at work in disciplines like law and risk management. That analysis can – of course – be critical in orientation but whether critical or extractivist the focal point remains human-thing relations, with the human centre stage.

This reflective account can only touch on this issue anecdotally, and in terms of my own particular journey and situation. But there is clearly a study yet to be written by someone to examine the ways in which (and limitations upon) the adoption and translation of posthumanism into other disciplines, particularly those of the 'applied' end of the social science spectrum. In this outer-world human purposefulness is 'baked in' and opportunities for decentring the human within the learning of those disciplines' core practices are harder to engage using all of positive posthumanism's dimensions, and in particular those of its ethical standpoint. In this outer-world positive posthumanism may adapt its form and project in interesting (or troubling) ways.

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Thinking about 'Thinking Like a Brick'.

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Introduction and aims

~~In this reflective self-analysis – which was prompted and encouraged by my participation in~~In 2015-16 I wrote an essay entitled 'Thinking Like A Brick: Posthuman and Building Materials' that became part of Carol A. Taylor and Christina Hughes' edited collection, *Posthuman Research Practices in Education* (Author, 2016). I now present here a candid reflection on how I came to write that essay, and why I presented the views in it that I did. I do so in order to provide an account of the ways in which a rising posthuman sentiment reached me (someone working away from its intellectual heartland) a decade ago, and how due to my disciplinary positionality I struggled to fully embrace or translate it into my fields of work.

This reflection has been prompted by my having been invited to reflect upon my 2016 essay as an invited speaker at the Australian Association for Research in Education's Qualitative Research Methodologies Special Interest Group's 2024 series of online workshops on 'Decentring the Human in Qualitative Research'~~– I present a contextual account~~. It has been further fuelled by the incisive suggestions of an anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this paper. Their clever critique has provoked further reflection by me on how far my scepticism about what I characterised as the posthuman project actually stood from the 'positive' posthumanism which I ~~came to write~~define below, and also how a curious reader of the essay ~~'Thinking Like~~might benefit from a ~~Brick: Posthumanism and Building Materials' which was published in 2016 in Carol A. Taylor~~more fulsome disclosure of my disciplinary background and ~~Christina Hughes' edited collection, *Posthuman Research Practices in Education* (Bennett~~how that influenced my 2016 essay's lines of flight.

Towards the end of my 2016~~). It~~ essay I quoted Bruno Latour's suggestion that the 'why' and 'how' of an object's genesis could be revealed by recalling the "state of crisis" (2007, 81) in which it was born. And such examination is ~~an account~~ as beneficial for the explanation of the emergence and development of an intellectual line of flight as it is for the accounting for material creations. I seek by this analysis to give a candid depiction of that interplay of biography, disciplinarity, contingency and mess which characterises the production of any thing, whether that thing is an assembly of words on a page or gears and cogs in a machine. The three crises which I will frame my reflection around aren't dramatic crises – but they are each contextual factors which drove the analysis to develop in the direction that it did. Thus, they are crises in a (vaguely) dialectical sense in that they called forth appropriate resolutions to my positionality and thesis, rather than that they were overly affect-ridden traumas.

This account seeks to be confessional in the sense that it honestly reports the uncertainty and fluidity of journey towards certain conclusions in that 2016 essay, but it is not a *mea culpa*. I am neither changing my mind nor re-asserting or re-defending my position. I am simply adding colour and context to a ten-year old piece of work and acknowledging it as a thing-already-in-the-world which has taken on a life (and

meaning for others) separate to what I might have intended. I do not seek to reclaim that meaning. I am happy for other interpretations to have been placed upon it. I am proud of what I wrote a decade ago, but also strangely divorced from it. I feel like a parent, in that I am happy for that essay to live its own life and to travel its own road. I appreciate that offering-up an interpretative account might curb speculation which might otherwise have free reign. But whilst acknowledging that possibility, I think this – essentially deconstructive – intervention opens up further scope for play and diffraction rather than closing it down. My account for 'my' piece of work is but one reading of that text, and it seeks to present an interpretation of factors in play (including emergent discursive formations) in a specific moment in time (2015-16) as perceived at another specific moment in time (2024-25).

The following account of the 'why' and how' of my 2016 essay portrays a theory-shaped journey in 2015-16 that ultimately led to me failing to align with what I then took to be a truly posthuman position, but instead to call for greater attentiveness to how our human desires and practices are inexorably intertwined with the nonhuman things that surround us. Whilst firmly located within a humanistic mode, in which the evolution of lines of thought are accorded a primacy for interpreting a (human) chosen scenario to account for, ~~this account shows~~my 2016 essay argued how ~~(~~and why~~)~~ a thingly attentiveness ~~can~~could be fostered and deployed within research which is primarily concerned with understanding the logics and practices of human projects. Accordingly, my approach to decentring the human ~~involves~~involved adding a greater attentiveness to our (human) thingly relations into the 'centre' of the analytical frame whilst also leaving the human there in the centre. ~~In short, it calls~~It was a call for a celebration of our hybridity, rather than attempting to remove, or subdue, human centrality.

~~Moving beyond social constructionism~~

This reflective account helps to explain why I positioned this in my 2016 essay as at best a 'weak' posthumanism, but I now concede that it was closer than I perhaps acknowledged to what I style 'positive' posthumanism below. Wrestling in 2015-16 with the notion of 'posthuman teaching', my (despairing) immersion then in a bleaker, nihilistic form of posthumanism, and the shaping weight of the managerialistic directives of my own disciplinary origins all made it difficult for me to see that at the time, and this account explains why. These were the crises in which my 2016 essay was forged.

How I came to write 'Thinking Like a Brick'

After a 17 year career as an environmental lawyer, I stepped back into Higher Education in 2007, taking up a role at my local university as a lecturer teaching built environment law to land and construction management students. Returning to academic ways of thinking at 40 years of age proved to be both a shock to the system, but also an opportunity for a renaissance, as it suddenly seemed that not everything I did had to be directly related to advancing a particular project for a client. Taking up the opportunity of further study in my new role, I completed a Masters (in qualitative social research methods, with a focus on cultural studies) and then a PhD, and in doing so I reached back in time to my undergraduate studies – back in the mid 1980s – and instinctively sought to re-adopt and apply into my research and scholarship work the hardline social constructionism, which had been the hallmark of that era.

For my first few years back in the academy I was confident that everything was a figment of discourse and its power-channelling operations, that nothing was real and that everything was relative, and a product of situated meaning-making. But then, slowly, I attuned to a newer paradigm, loosening my faith in my resurrected and rather 'old hat' 1980s social constructionist stance, and progressively allowing-in the early intellectual shoots ~~and shuffles~~ of an emergent 'new materialism' sentiment, one having a variety of origins and precursors, but brought into a newly declared prominence across the social sciences and humanities by Jane ~~Bennett's~~Author's 2010 book '*Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things*' and its potent alignment of the politics of human affect and of non-human material agencies in the world. ~~(Please note that (~~I use 'New Materialism' in this article to refer specifically to the feminist theory of that name, and 'new materialism' to refer more broadly to a variety of emergent schools of thought which seek to foreground (to a variety of degrees) the non-human, thingly world).

Around 2010, as part of my PhD, I'd been researching the role of "situated knowledges" (Haraway, 1988) within a variety of land management and recreational trespass scenarios, and in particular the role of "interpretive communities" (Fish, 1980) in governing the range of permissible circulating meanings within each situation (~~Bennett~~Author, 2015). My final case study was of communal epistemic control over the practices of hobbyist 'bunker hunters' – persons who engage in visiting and recording abandoned military (and governmental) concrete redoubts. As part of that I'd spotted a call for papers which might suit some of the historical-contextual information that I had accumulated about these strange ruins, and their reverberation in wider culture.

So, perhaps the first conscious step in my journey away from extreme social constructionism was this: having submitted my first piece of writing on bunkers to the journal *Culture and Organisation* (~~Bennett~~Author 2011), I received the peer reviewer's report. They liked my quirky attempt to explore the reverberation of the (mental) image of 'the bunker' as a potent metaphor within management discourse and wider cultural-political fora, but please (they asked) could I say more about the role of the materiality of these bunkers (as both an image/idea, *and* as a thing-in-itself). This was fair comment as the journal special issue to which my paper had been submitted was concerned with a (claimed) 'material' turn in organisation studies – one in which the physicality of buildings was to be singled out for analytical attention, in order to counter it being an under-examined aspect of the design and operation of organisations. So, I searched the organisation studies literature, and in doing so came across Karen Dale's concept of "social materiality" (Dale, 2005). Drawing her inspiration from the work of anthropologist Daniel Miller's (2009a; 2009b) influential work in material culture studies, Dale's approach to materiality helpfully retained the notion that material objects were props with which (appearances of a) reality were constructed, but it also gave a nod to the importance of not reducing material objects (in my case concrete bunkers) to weightless signs. Account needed to be taken of their mass too, and the inertia that their solidity brings into a social situation. Dale's concern was that attention be paid to the interrelationship between objects and people, specifically how "…humans are part of the material world, not transcendent gods or magicians able to manipulate the material without being incorporated or changed by it" (2005: 652).

I revised my manuscript accordingly, anchoring newly-added ruminations on how the physicality of these bunkers resisted and/or shaped (some of the) human action within

them. In doing so my ruminations became pretty dark, including encounter with and use of this matter and affect-rich quotation from Captain Beerman, an officer who had visited the scene of Hitler's final days in his bunker beneath Berlin in 1945:

> "The whole atmosphere down there was debilitating. It was like being stranded in a cement submarine, or buried alive in some abandoned charnel house. People who work in diving bells probably feel less cramped. It was both dank and dusty … the ventilation could now be warm and sultry, now cold and clammy. The constant loud hum of the Diesel generator … the fetid odours of boots, sweaty woollen uniforms, and acrid coal tar disinfectant. Towards the end, when the drainage packed in, it was as pleasant as working in a public urinal." (quoted in O'Donnell, 1979: 26)

Having opened this door, I then travelled onward, for the purposes of later writings and musings, into the more extreme ontologies of (feminist) New Materialism (Coole & Frost 2010), Actor Network Theory (Latour, 2007) and Object Oriented Ontology (Harman 2002, 2011, 2012; Bogost, 2012; Morton, 2013). And many of these onward explorations came to be written up as playful mini-essays in my blog for which I had set the task of "tracing the spectacular within the humdrum of the built environment" (https://~~lukebennett13~~lukeAuthor13.wordpress.com), but occasionally also featured as aspects of (or orientations for) academic papers.

This new seam of scholarship that I was by then mining into encouraged revelation of a "weird realism" (Harman, 2012~~) – a~~). By this mode of phenomenological analysis ~~by means of which~~ any worldly scene could be analysed (and rendered alien-seeming through a skewed narrative framing) by focussing-in not on the constitutive force of language or even that of human intentional actions, but rather – instead – by seeking to point to the material agency (and alien-ness) of mundane objects as they entwined into a variety of human projects. ~~For such (broadly psychogeographical) journeys~~But that weird realism ultimately thwarted an investigation of entanglement. In the alienated thing-world of "alien phenomenology" (Bogost, 2012) all entities "are shy, retiring octopuses that squirt out a dissembling ink as they withdraw into the ontological shadows" (Morton 2013, 11). This version of posthumanism called for an attentiveness to the non-human other but then summoned the prospect that, at best, one entity can only ever know a caricature of the other (Harman, 2011). Any deeper insight or relation is blocked off. Creeping close to a perception of that other thing required playful (broadly psychogeographical) journeys: poetic stratagems of juxtaposing normally non-associated items and/or inverting conventional framings such that the background comes to be the foreground were the order of the day.

Finding my limits in posthumanism

My dalliance with these provocative sources and their encouragements~~,~~ (and epistemological pessimism), led to a productive proposition from my then colleague, Carol A. Taylor, who was a fellow member of my University's Space & Place Group – a very loose confederation of interdisciplinary researchers and artists interested in the question of how places (and by extension their materiality) can be investigated. Carol invited me to contribute to her then forthcoming edited collection (with Christina Hughes) on *Posthuman Research Practices in Education* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). I happily agreed to write an essay under the title 'Thinking Like a Brick: Posthumanism and Building Materials'. My aim was to reflect primarily on an experience from a few years before where, at an interdisciplinary seminar on the theme of 'work', I'd taken a

dirty house brick from my garden and brought it into the clean lecture theatre, and the centre of my presentation, thus disrupting (in the spirit of wierd realism) presentational and situational conventions. In my proposal I offered to analyse how and why my (physical) foregrounding that very prosaic artefact and exemplar of 'work', had summoned an alien provocation into the proceedings, and what the impacts of that had been.

But as I set to work writing the essay I increasingly struggled. I came to realise that I'd not been paying full attention when I agreed to the task, and that I'd over-looked the *"…in Education"* part of the proposed work's title. This became increasingly problematic for two reasons.

First, my path into new materialism was alienated, bleak and not based in the positivity of Carol's version of New Materialism. Carol was deeply versed in New Materialism from a complex meshing of feminist and Deleuzian perspectives (see Taylor & Ivinson, 2013; Taylor, 2016). The New Materialism of the likes of Karen Barad (2007), Jane ~~Bennett~~Author (2010) and Rosi Braidotti (2013) offered up an emancipated, optimistic weirding along the lines of Queer Theory. Meanwhile – in contrast – my flight-path into (a different) new materialism was a darker (and noticeably more male dominated) trajectory. In my sources, posthumanism was an apocalyptic "world without us" (Weisman, 2008) in which objects sit apart from each other, connecting only approximately. This posthumanism was an alienated place, not a new, improved platform for human learning, and equitable being-in-the-world. The version of posthumanism that I was reacting against (increasingly viewing it as a dead-end) channelled a human self-disgust and a fetishisation of non-human forms of being. I feared that posthumanist's fondness for calling out anthropomorphism was summoning a disanthropomorphism in which a refusal to see the world in a human way (which seems to me the only way that we humans can successfully engage the world) would not lead to anywhere good for humankind.

Secondly, my academic engagements with objects lay outside my own teaching and (core) research practice. It was only playful with (and celebratory of) thing-power in my playful writings. My day-to-day teaching, comprising introductory-level law teaching for property management and construction students, was untouched. Other than the frisson with the brick I had no success stories to report about having enhanced my own teaching practice via an embrace of a posthuman stance. Teaching law remained largely a story of simplifying complex discursive rule-formations and urging students to see their contextual and pragmatic relevance 'in the real world' that their professional futures would inhabit.

~~My paper therefore became, as my text evolved – both through~~Through reviewer's requests for the refinement of my line of argument and my own increasing sense of discomfort –my text evolved. It became ultimately a manifesto for a *very* modest embrace of a weak form of posthumanism, one in which we would gain by being more attentive to the things around us, but in which human projects and perceptions remained at the heart of framing of the encounter. I simply couldn't bring myself to embrace the human self-disgust and nihilism which I found at the extremity of what I had encountered as posthumanism's extinctionism.

So, my essay (published under the title stated above) as a chapter, felt like a bit of a cop-out when I'd finished with it (for I felt that I'd failed to support the implicit, positive agenda of Taylor and Hughes' book). I hadn't found a found a form of 'posthuman

teaching' that I felt that I could advocate, and I'd failed to reject humanism (as the goal of education) or offered up anything other than a human-centric orientation for the positioning of the essay's analysis. The essay stayed squarely in the camp of declaring that 'things matter to us' rather than 'things matter in their own independent right'.

For these reasons it has been a surprise to me that my essay has been read and commented on by more readers than I would ever have expected for it, and that ~~in March 2024 I was invited to give a talk about the essay as part of the Australian Association for Research in Education's Qualitative Research Methodologies Special Interest Group's series of online workshops on 'Decentring the Human in Qualitative Research'~~a decade later I was asked to give a talk about it.

What does decentering the human mean to me?

My presentation to the 2024 online seminar series politely set out my essay's argument that the human cannot be fully removed from (human) activities, and neither could it be fully decentred. However, what my 2016 essay had advocated (reached as a result of my own search for a solution to my dilemma explained above) was to *add* the non-human into the central frame, thereby aspiring to a more holistic account of our human-thingly relations (this might perhaps break the rules of what a 'decentering' of the human can entail. But in my view, moving more than just the human into the centre works to dilute the human, even if the human (in my formulation) remains there in the centre). I therefore interpreted my essay as a call for greater appreciation of our co-existence with and pragmatic motivations for our relationships with non-human things. And this focus upon pragmatics – in the sense of intentional human projects and their goals – lay at the heart of why I was advocating a greater noticing of our interdependence with things. ~~That~~Writing in 2015-16 that ultimately ~~is~~felt like humanism rather than post-humanism.

Undoubtedly, the opportunity to look back at my essay~~,~~ in 2024, and to present and debate it with the audience helped to focus my reflection and self-understanding. It has also, in turn, sparked this reflection on the circumstances by which I (this human) came to contemplate the limits (and benefits) of a 'thingly' awareness within both education and the world of work.

In the essay I quoted from Alexander Styhre's (2008) study of the thingly relations of rock drillers, and how they attentively listen to (and learn the subtle speech of) rock as it is drilled into, in order to keep their tunnelling task on track. When writing the essay I saw this quote as still somewhat esoteric, but more recent reflection has brought to mind how this attunement connects to the actual research that I had been doing in the years immediately leading up to writing the essay. In a more modest (and anthropologically inclined manner) my own research work had become increasingly concerned with how managerialist disciplines like law and property management arrange their relations with material objects, and in particular how humans seek to 'read' those objects in order to manage them and the places that they form part of.

In 2007, finding myself – middle aged – back in Higher Education and with an appetite to research something. I (perhaps inevitably) chose to draw upon experiences from my former career as an environmental and safety lawyer, and I therefore set out to research how law's abstract commands become locally interpreted and applied by lay actors, and how therefore 'law in action' comes to differ from 'law in books'. Because I was based in a department focussed upon built environment education, training property managers, I chose case studies for my research which concerned the

management of physical sites, and the awkward objects found within them. My three main case studies were graveyards (and the management of elderly tombstones) (~~Bennett~~Author & Gibbeson, 2010), street trees (and the management of the risk of trees falling over) (L. ~~Bennett~~Author, 2010) and abandoned quarries (and the risk of people suffering injury from accessing the sites rock faces and flooded excavations) (~~Bennett~~Author, 2020).

Whilst I hadn't fully realised it at the time, what I thought of then as a matter of local social construction (the meaning making practices of 'interpretive communities', in circulating and regulating their pragmatic interpretations of applicable legal codes) was actually, already infiltrated by a strong dose of materialist sensibility. The weight of gravestones, the alienness of trees and their growth and (in)stability, the standing-beyond-language complexity of quarry faces and depths – all were *also* at work affecting how these communities were – in the specifics of their situations – coming to terms not just with the abstract encoded requirements of safety laws, but also the shaping material influence of the bulky, awkward and not-fully-predictable non-human, thingly nature of these objects of concern.

My research subjects were actively involved in attuning not just to legal codes, but also to their inter-relationship with the trees, gravestones and rock faces under their care, and that the manner of that thingly-sense making could be tactile, and at the outer limits of discourse's reach. Looking back at these studies I see that I'd featured (in L. ~~Bennett~~Author, 2010) a quote from a judge in a case concerning whether a tree safety inspection had been careful enough, and its depiction of (there is no other word for it really) 'groping' as a way of coming to adequately 'know' a tree ~~came to show~~. This showed how even the arid, discursive-fixated realm of a judicial decision could experience a breakdown of register – and uncertainty of language – in the face of describing how a tree's intimate acquaintance should be made:

> "…a level two inspector […] would have appreciated that decay could lie beneath this overhang. The very purpose of the examination was to eliminate this very hazard. It would have been imperative to *feel carefully into the space – to scrape and discover*." (Justice MacDuff, quoted in L. ~~Bennett~~Author 2010: 149 [emphasis added])

~~But,~~This summoned an embodied and approximate form of knowing into the heart of a supposedly totalising linguistic field. To know via groping rather than to know via scientific measurement or textual exegesis pointed to something new, but also something familiar and every-day. We – professionally and simply in our physical navigation of the world – 'feel our way'. We make sense of the object-world by bumping into it (and learning how to avoid that stumble next time). That physical and embodied engagement and coming-to-know had no presence in legal scholarship, and certainly seemed worth investigating. In particular, I wanted to study how such prosaic knowledge of objects and how to cope with them was formulated and shared within particular practitioner communities (for instance what is a 'safe' street tree?). But, given their origins in the managerialistic disciplines that I was working within these studies remained rooted in a concern with human projects, human ways of doing and human meaning-making. They were not celebrations of the fundamental unknowability of gravestones, trees and quarried rock faces, they were studies of human accommodation to and with things~~.~~, and specifically of how to deal with the gap of knowability – the inevitable gap between the human and other entities. They were studies of awkward (and potentially dangerous) co-relation, within chosen human

projects and frames of reference ~~(e.g.~~anchored around anxieties about accidents and liabilities~~).~~.

~~On excavating the obvious~~

~~Just as with my conclusion in the 'Thinking Like a Brick' essay – that humans would gain for their projects by being more attentive to the matter entangled in them – so, on reflection, my studies had been showing that the managers of these places (collectively and individually) both by adapting generic rule frameworks to form something pragmatically workable in the local situation, and by developing ways of 'reading' the non-human elements in their situation, so as to factor them into their working out of what a 'reasonable' level of safety should look like in their situations. This conclusion is – in some senses – a statement of the obvious. For instance, of course a car driver has to take account of the road and of its ice, in order to safely and successfully complete a journey.~~

~~But 'that's obvious' is an insult that can be hurled at many research projects – particularly those working within a broadly qualitative register, in which description of what has been observed is the main insight (research finding) offered. Indeed, much research is about seeking to identify and then report in analytic register, what passes in that situation as the 'common sense' patterns and processes by which the world operates. In this sense, 'that's obvious' should be taken as a verification of an accuracy, in that it reflects a fit between the short-hand (intrinsic) understanding of the reader and the researcher's long-handed excavation of the logics of the situation or practice in question.~~

~~Such excavations of cultural relations between humans and things is a stock feature of anthropology – and analysis of such relations in cultures and contexts unfamiliar to the reader may appear profound and incisive, whereas to the indigenous community that has hosted the researcher, the insight may indeed seem 'obvious'. It~~The foregrounding and explication of cultural relations between humans and things is a stock feature of anthropology, and it is a perennial problem of attempts to bring anthropological questions and methods 'home' and into cultures familiar to the researcher and/or the reader that the unearthed logics do not feel anything other than 'obvious' when reported. But the obviousness arises when the phenomenon has been pointed out: a flaming roof is obviously indicative of a burning house, once the homeowner has been woken and told of the ensuing situation. But until woken, it was far from obvious to them – because it had not yet been brought to mind.

Therefore, the advantages of thingly relations being brought to mind: how, why and when that is done (or not done) and the (re)action that ensues is what has always interested me. ~~But this sense of the thingly realm is not posthuman, because it is fundamentally co-opted into human projects, and the success or failure of human projects may depend upon how non-human objects are brought into the situational calculus.~~

In part the importance of this 'awakening' dimension was prompted by Martin Heidegger's 'tool analysis' (as appropriated and extended in a new materialism direction by Harman, 2002) whereby a hammer is only 'noticed' when it hits a worker's finger rather than the intended nail. In short, we only notice things when they don't function as we intend them to. Effective site owners (motivated by the prosaic expectations of risk assessment) were seeking to 'notice' their awkward objects in advance of any such accident, thus seeking to find ways to bring them to

consciousness, and to examine and perhaps reconfigure~~)~~ the thingly relations so as to avoid possibility of an otherwise future accident or other failure of the tool as co-opted into human projects.

~~On living with and using objects~~

~~After studying how 'awkward objects' were engaged with by their managers, I turned my research attention to examining the meaning-making cultures of recreational trespassers to modern ruin sites (and in particular to the role of online interpretive communities in shaping how the concrete bunkers left behind after the Cold War are visited and interacted with). That follow-on study also melded together a concern with the symbolic meaning-making associated with these places (as wrapped up in the discourses of aesthetics, heritage and exploration) but it also took the time to consider how these visitors were learning from their online forums how to engage with the materiality of these places, both in terms of matters of safety and attempts at a 'thingly' phenomenology (such as Paul Virilio's bunker phenomenology: see Bennett 2017).~~

~~Stated simply, the developmental journey of each human is a journey of progressively learning how to safely and effectively use and co-exist alongside other objects (and the situations and settings in which they combine as complex assemblages). Some of this learning is overt, didactic instruction: how to safely use a lathe for example. But much learning is situational, learnt interactively through play, trial and error and motivated by instinct, observation and/or pragmatic usefulness. Thus, learning to walk is a progressive experiment with immersion in gravity, variable degrees of friction (of surfaces on which the walking is attempted) and reading of the surrounding environment, such as to anticipate the stabilising aid that reaching out to an adjacent chair, table or sofa may likely provide. A conscious declaration of interest in (or appreciation of) the thingly realm beyond discourse (or a thought-provoking lecture on that topic) is not needed in order to achieve the necessary motive competence.~~

~~So, where is the gain for taking on board a wider appreciation of our co-dependence with the (non-human) rest of the world? The origins for this would appear to line in the value of an ecological sensibility. I choose my words carefully here and position 'ecological' as a notion of the world as an interconnected system, in which the system can fall out of balance (with myriad adverse inter-effects as a result). The essence of a (humanist) ecological mindset is that we (humans) need to avoid destabilising the ecological system within which we nested. Thus, the awareness of the way in which the ecological system operates, and of its limits and frailties is essential to achieving a sustainable human future. Yes, ultimately this is an instrumentalist ('world for us') positionality. As I note in 'Thinking Like a Brick', the alternative formulation would be a (more posthumanist') 'world without us' appreciation, an attempt to notice and celebrate the independence (and indifference) of all that is non-human for its own sense, and its own intrinsic value. But – as my 2016 essay shows – I can't get beyond the pragmatics of a human presence in the world, and the likelihood that what we notice, and value in nature is determined by our human perceptual range, even if we somehow manage to abstract ourselves from the ecological needs of our own species survival and its priorities.~~

~~But, what of the transcendental value of the world around us glimpsed via art, affect, and spirituality? Yes, that still matters – but I don't believe that it is eliminated by my avowed 'pragmatic' orientation. The recipient of the artistic enjoyment, of the affective frisson, or the spiritual resonance is us (humans). Projecting these perceptions into~~

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the non-human realm is a decidedly human project, because it is ultimately discursive (shaped by the meaning making practices of the local culture) and can never be disconnected from the human perceiver's being-in-the-world. This is not to say that a conservationist sentiment towards bees is in some way an act of bad faith, but it is to suggest that it can never be entirely selfless when viewed at the level of human culture. It might be selfless for one gardener to give up their garden to weeds for the benefit of the birds and bees who will then thrive, but at a species-wide level it is in humanity's best interest to foster biodiversity (and thereby encourage the ecological services that pollination brings). Such action would only be truly selfless (at species level) if no benefit (ecological or artistic or affective or spiritual) would ensue, or if indeed the option chosen was contrary to our species interest. An example of that, acting species-selflessly, would be creating reservations in which a virus like polio or smallpox could be conserved (although – of course – even this example struggles to escape potential human benefit (and motivation) as preserving such pathogens creates a resource for future study, in order to develop medicines or bio-weapons).

So, for me, greater attentiveness to our relations with the non-human is important, but it cannot be anything other than for human-centric (i.e. pragmatic) motivations and human-level perceptions.

But in addition to this ecological imperative for a greater engagement with our thingly interdependence, I would suggest that there is a second dimension that warrants greater attention. As Jane Bennett (2010) has shown, things act upon us and shape our moods (sugar being an obvious example), in that very primal sense 'you are what you eat'. Thus, greater attentiveness in learning how to appreciate the positive and negative effects of our intimate relationships with the non-human is a key requirement for a healthy and happy human life. As is a wider understanding of the psychology of consumption and how our identities are forged in our relationships and dependencies with external objects. Our high culture (visual arts and literature) give some insight into the inter-action between us and things, and how we project value, desire and/or mnemonic significance onto certain cherished objects, but perhaps competence (and survival) in the modern world requires more, are we taught about the psychological drivers and consequences of consumerism? Do we learn about the drivers for over consumption and/or hoarding disorders? Might analysis of fetishism helpfully augment sex education? Would it be helpful for school children to better understand the powerful link between objects and sentimental attachment?

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In my case I think that would have been helpful. As a closing contribution to sketching out a basis for an 'us entwined with things' pedagogy, let me sketch out two instances of thingly crisis that I encountered in the first few years of secondary school. 'Crisis' is probably too strong a word to claim for these events – but at the time each instilled a panic and dislocation in me. The first event concerned the loss one day of a pencil case. I don't recall the circumstances of the loss, but I have a strongly instilled mental image of me feeling alone and overwhelmed with emotion at the moment of that loss dawning upon me. And my primary feeling (as I recall it) was of a concern for the welfare of that pencil case, that it had fallen from my care and was now along in the world. As these thoughts flooded over me I tried to summon an image of where that pencil case was now sitting, whether it was happy and whether it felt alone. Clearly this was an emotional transference of some sort, and it was a strange mis-fire of emotions. It would be normal to have such strong views for a lost pet, but not for a pencil case. It occurs to me, that in the years that followed I became progressively less

~~sentimentally attached to objects and their loss, and I wonder how I came to learn that separation as a necessary competency for entering adulthood.~~

~~The second event (which I think happened a couple of years later) involved the aftermath of a Physical Education session. At the end of that class we got changed back into our regular school clothes, and – as it was the end of the day – left the school grounds to go home. My recollection here is of being on a bus and having very strong feelings that the vest that I had put-on in the changing room was not mine. I became fixated on the thought that I was wearing my classmate's vest, and that he was wearing mine. That pupil was on the bus, and I felt an overwhelming wave of social anxiety – a realisation of the complexity of confronting this classmate and (trying to) persuade him that we were wearing each others' clothes. My memory of the emotion is a strong one, but the specifics of the confrontation that then ensued is vague. I recall being laughed at, and there was not bus-top undressing and clothes swapping. I continued my journey home thwarted and feeling physically wrapped in something alien.~~

~~I suspect that the vest was mine all along, but my ability to suddenly alienate from it and to feel a wave of social complexity tumbling down from this situation remains palpable to this day. Interestingly (for the purposes of this rather prosaic confessional) is that I had no sentimental feelings for 'my' vest and how it might feel about being on the wrong body. Instead, my preoccupation was with the social codes (ownership, civility, being grownup, negotiation) that swirled around my mind as the occurrence dawned upon me. And a heightened sense of wearing a vest that came from the feeling of disgust of believing that the property and sweat of another body was sitting upon mine, and that there was little that I could do about it because of the weight of social conventions sitting – like the vest – upon my young shoulders.~~

~~I offer these two glimpses of my own youthful – and awkward – thingly-relations as an acknowledgement of how intertwined (and dependent) even our core identities and sense of self are with non-human objects.~~

'Positive' posthumanism

In my 2016 essay I framed posthumanism as a bleak extinction fetishism and solipsistic wallowing in the impossibility of knowing other objects. A reviewer of an earlier draft of this essay pointed out to me that that's not what posthumanism is to them at all. And here it is important to note that posthumanism does have more identities than the 'positive' (and dominant in the discipline of education studies) version that the reviewer was pointing me to. I make no apology for having focussed in my 2016 essay on a version of posthumanism that is less commonly spoken of in education studies, and which certainly has less to offer progressive minded scholars. Indeed, perhaps my 2016 essay has received the attention that it has because it (as a rarity) summons this alternative vision of the posthuman (that being 'the world without us').

To the reviewer, posthumanism stands for challenging the 'natural' claims to human centrality and supremacy and their attendant cloak of neutrality. They saw the decentring of the human as ultimately an ethical (rather than a literal) step. My 2016 essay had been concerned with the impossibility of being anything other than our human selves, and had concluded that the best we could aim for would be to acknowledge more our co-dependence upon surrounding objects that make up the world. For them posthumanism is a call to notice and embrace our entangled relations in and with the world.

So for them, my argument had misfired because posthumanists do not aspire to become rocks, they seek to challenge human exceptionalism, and that's what decentring the human is meant to be about. The reviewer pointed out that many writing in the 'positive' realm of academic posthumanism fully accepted the limitations of stepping outside of human positionality, but that despite this they still assert the value of the *attempt* to do so as a progressive reach for humility and co-existence. The reviewer pointed to the origins of such lines of thought in Baruch Spinoza's acknowledgement that we can only know other entities through the affections they produce in us (as examined in Robinson & Kutner, 2019). Learning (in that sense) flows from allowing others (persons or non-human entities) to touch us, and thereby affect a reaction within us. The reviewer also emphasised that positive posthumanism seeks to queer our sense of the world so as to render 'unnatural' dominant relations and logics. In this sense positive posthumanism is another decolonial project, with a special emphasis upon the decolonisation of (human) relations with the world of things around us.

Put this way (and the point was acknowledged to a degree in my 2016 essay) my affiliation to a 'weak' (and humanistic) posthumanism is aligned to positive posthumanism's avowal of a more aware and humble relationship with things. But where I remain somewhat adrift is around the purposes of that attentiveness. As I have shown above, due to the motivations of my research projects, my professional background and the managerialistic orientations of the disciplines to which I affiliate, I remain pragmatically aligned, in that the benefit of the attentiveness is to the human rather than a pursuit of an ethical embrace of co-dependency. And that orientation – I now see – comes from the disciplines through which I came to this field. Law, risk management and property management are all control regimes geared to human dominion over the things of the world. These disciplines a steeped in pragmatic (human) project-making. Injecting positive posthumanism's ethics of humility and co-dependence has taken longer to embed than in other more receptive disciplines (like teaching studies) and to this day the penetration remains modest.

Socio-Material Constructionism

The process of reflection set out in this article was spurred by the interest shown in my 2016 essay. John Law (2004) has advocated importance of leaving 'mess' in social research, in the sense that something is lost with the (common) tidying up of data and findings as presented in conventional academic literature. To present uncertainty, contingency and/or to admit that you weren't entirely sure what your position was even when you submitted your paper into peer review, are all (traditionally) signs of weakness and not the way to pave a career towards impact and authority. But if we as researchers can't identify our own mess and offer it up as part of the 'full story' then we are failing to give the full story, and not enabling our peers to see how ideas, positions are formed, sustained and adapted.

If the reflective journey taken in this article feels rather circular – in it claiming both to be an account of a weakening of social constructionism's grip upon my analytical lens, but with that account being presented essentially as a social constructionist analysis of how I came to add a social materialism dimension into my mode of analysis – then that circularity is both acknowledged, and intentional. My 'inviting in' of a new materialism sensibility reflected my becoming aware of new bodies of thought, intersecting across a variety of disciplines and offering up a conceptual vocabulary in which our relationships with non-human things could be taken up into analysis of

human projects. To that end, maybe I have never escaped a social constructionist outlook (and I believe that for a scholar originally affiliated to legal studies that break would be almost impossible to make, in entirety).

Revisiting the genesis of my 2016 essay has encouraged me to see the influence of pervasive bodies of thought (and trends attached to them) in the 'allowing-in' of materiality to social science analysis within the last couple of decades. Undoubtedly, bodies of knowledge and debate around environmental sustainability have been instrumental in calling communities to have greater regard to our human dependencies upon, and constant interactions with, the non-human (early attention raising instances for me being formative encounters with Easterbrook (1996) and Lash *et al* (1996). ~~This~~These certainly set a context for my thingly-awareness~~,~~). And my interest in the pragmatics of being-in-the-world, and of the normative frameworks which condition that awareness, flows from my training as a lawyer (law is always for something, it does not comfortably sit apart from context and application), and rising embrace of a new materialism sentiment in some quarters of legal studies, including occasionally talk of a 'posthuman' law (a misnomer because law is always of-human, even if it has the ability to take on a life of its own once released into the world) (see, for example, Boulot *et al*, 2021). In particular, David Delaney's 2010 text *Nomospheric Investigations*, has greatly influenced my thinking as it focusses-in on how human actors intentionally draw together spatiality, materiality and the law into their projects, thereby enacting the 'pragmatics of world-making', by fusing texts, humans, non-humans, proximity and distance in order to create situations. In short, we intentionally weave together ideas and things, and arrange places, in order to 'construct' our lives and our world.

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Legal scholars are now happy to speak of law's material manifestations and co-options, and whether with trees (Braverman, 2009), hedges (Blomley, 2007) or court architecture and materialities (Schliehe & Jeffrey, 2023). And so, I end this reflective ~~essay~~account happy that a workable materialist sensibility is now abroad in my home discipline of law, and that adoption of that stance has not required a 'throwing of the baby out with the bathwater', whereby legal studies might need to (somehow) find a path to being posthuman, by tracking down bodies of non-human laws, upon which to focus. Taken to its extreme only studies of gravity or of the clan codes of wolf packs could present as a truly 'posthuman' law. Instead, the materialisation of legal scholarship enables an appreciation of the material manifestation (and intertwining) of law as a helpful adjunct to the (beneficial) embrace of an essentially discourse focussed - social constructionist - sentiment.

~~So, in conclusion,~~ I'm confident that Dale's (2005) formulation of a "social materiality", and making that an operationalisable domain for research and teaching that goes (someway) to a productive 'decentring' of the human, is both achievable and desirable, for it centrally connects to the motivation to understand (and build competence for doing) key steps in human projects, whilst rightly inviting into the centre of that analysis a wider range of influencing factors.

As material culture studies theorists have argued, it is not matter *per se* that needs to be studied in the social sciences, it is 'materiality', the state and circumstances of humans having an inter-relationship with non-human things (Miller, 2010 a & b; Hodder, 2012, Olsen, 2013). In short, Dale seems to offer an important bridge between the situational pragmatics of social constructionism and the (at times esoteric) realism of new materialism, to forge – in effect – a Socio-Material Constructionism, a desire to

understand our condition of 'living with' stuff. I personally, see little to be gained in seeking to remove the human dimension from such projects, by leapfrogging to (attempted) research and/or instruction around (trying to portray) non-human projects, stripped of any connection to human goals or human scales of perception. I remain content with my 2016 essay's conclusion that:

> "…posthuman approaches that prioritise accounting for 'the world without us' have little productive to offer any human-centric endeavour like human education and in contrast suggest that posthumanism can best challenge the hubris of anthropocentricism when the investigation is framed as an attempt to account for 'the world with us'. This is attainable if researchers balance an attentiveness to human purpose and positionality with a holistic and appreciative 'more than human' (Whatmore, 2006) access to the non-human aspects of the world." (~~Bennett~~Author 2016, 61).

Conclusion

My 2016 essay would have been easier to write if I had selected positive posthumanism, rather than its bleaker variant as my discussion point. Yes, there are ways of decentering the human and encouraging an inter-entity ethics of dependency in the spirit of a positive posthumanism approach to education as many of the other contributors to Taylor & Hughes' (2016) edited collection showed. Indeed, much of contemporary ecological education does this as a matter of course (National Association for Environmental Education – UK, 2024). In such figuring human actors remain present, but with extractivist relations unmasked and human dependencies upon the non-human laid bare (Cowman, 2022). Instead, I set myself the (I eventually realised) the impossible goal of finding a (human) educational gain in extinctionism and in the impossibility of knowing other entities. To square the circle I ended up improvising a call for attentiveness to our material relationships. That call had an affinity with positive posthumanism as to method and disposition, but struggled to align in terms of ethics and/or pragmatics.

As explained above, my disciplinary orientation (and the research projects flowing from that) have motivated my studies of human-material relations as under-examined instances of place and liability management. These disciplines (and the professional practices attached to them) have managerial (and potentially extractivist) logics. They foreground human projects and thus cannot represent a full affiliation to positive posthumanism's ethical project. However, they do co-opt positive posthuman ways of seeing and knowing, to explicate the human-centred projects and pragmatics at work in disciplines like law and risk management. That analysis can – of course – be critical in orientation but whether critical or extractivist the focal point remains human-thing relations, with the human centre stage.

This reflective account can only touch on this issue anecdotally, and in terms of my own particular journey and situation. But there is clearly a study yet to be written by someone to examine the ways in which (and limitations upon) the adoption and translation of posthumanism into other disciplines, particularly those of the 'applied' end of the social science spectrum. In this outer-world human purposefulness is 'baked in' and opportunities for decentring the human within the learning of those disciplines' core practices are harder to engage using all of positive posthumanism's dimensions, and in particular those of its ethical standpoint. In this outer-world positive posthumanism may adapt its form and project in interesting (or troubling) ways.

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