



Department of American Studies: Literature and Media at the Faculty of English, AMU, Poznań

Re-Examining American Literature Student Symposium (REAL)

CALL FOR PAPERS

“You’ll know Her – by Her Vest:” Objects in American Literature and Culture (Online Symposium, MS Teams)

March 22, 2025

The Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

What is the theme of the conference?

Landmark works such as Appandurai's *The Social Life of Things* (1986) suggest that there has been an increasing interest in material objects in aesthetic and literary theory: things are no longer relegated to anthropological study of material culture, but "strike back" as agents, symbols, narrators, focal points of cultural activity, and by their sheer ubiquity, as the "stuff" that permeates individual and collective lives entirely. Things have become "vibrant matter", they are "incorporeal", they are alive! But how do they feature in culture and literature? What are the conventions of representation of objects and matter? Consider two examples: Smith College, the *alma mater* of Sylvia Plath, holds several thousand items of clothing, as a kind of fashion library, including the largest collection of aprons in the world, and Sylvia Plath's girl-guide uniform. The collection custodian, Professor Kiki Smith, asks: "For a women's college to celebrate women's clothing instead of somehow feeling it devalues the achievements of the college to study ordinary shmattes? It takes guts" (Friedman). The importance of such collections for cultural history is unquestionable, but would that be a previously overlooked background for literary history too? Another example comes from the 1940s: relatively few people bring back the fact that F.O. Matthiessen, author of *The American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, found it necessary to start the book with a photograph of a noted shipbuilder – to illustrate and define a literary movement in mid-19th century. Why would anyone do that? What objects, or object-makers, would be defining for contemporary literature?

From a more philosophical angle, what do things have to do with philosophical materialism? What does realism have to do with materialism? What roles do things play in fiction, poetry, art, history, geography, politics and media? Does it matter that books and media are things too? How about people: to what extent, and how can persons be materialized and objectified? How do things help shape identities and personalities? Is fashion a materialistic phenomenon? Finally, there are environmental issues: what happens when the world drowns in things? Or in garbage? Consider also Morton's recent concept of hyperobjects which has shaped our thinking about our inseparable entanglements with the environment.

We cordially invite B.A., M.A. students and doctoral candidates, to submit conference papers (approx. 20-minute presentations) on American literature, theater, film and art, concerning (but not restricted to) the following issues:

- Materialities in literature, arts, culture; minimalization and gigantism
- Literature and art related to things in everyday life: clothes, jewelry, tools, foods, kitchen utensils, hygiene items, toys, cars, houses, instruments, furniture, and such
- "The lives of things" in fiction and poetry: symbolic objects, objects as themes, and it-narratives (i.e. narratives with things as narrators, POV's, or characters)
- "The social life of things:" fashions and crazes, accessories, gadgets, personal items, prestige and stigma related to things, subversive objects
- Consumerism, retromania and objects, nostalgic objects, souvenirs
- Objects in arts, art objects in public space; texts as objects, found objects, document and assemblage, avant-garde objects, books and other literary objects
- Media as things: personal media as fashion items, social history of media
- Ecology, garbage as theme and as imagery, nature as object, objects in landscapes and cityscapes, recycling as theme and as literary practice
- "What is it like to be a thing": posthuman characters, dehumanized characters
- Realism, conventions of realist representation, the role of things in realism
- Literary genres and things: fantastic literature and magical objects, sf and objects; speculative realism and object oriented ontologies, crime fiction and forensic objects, detective fiction and objects, novel of manners and objects, the Western and things, Gothic objects, postapocalyptic fiction and objects, life writing and objects
- Literary style and things: camp and objects, neobaroque and objects, decorative style, collage and assemblage scrapbooks and objects
- Ekphrastic objects in poetry and prose
- Film/ theatre/musical and objects
- Theories of "materialist turn," "continental materialism," and "new materialisms": Arjun Appadurai, Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Rosi Braidotti, Bill Brown, Elizabeth Grosz, Vicki Kirby, Bruno Latour, Frank Trentman, and Manuel DeLanda
- Metaphysics of matter: (weird) science, passion for things, symbolic force of things, material objects in magic and religion, also very large and very small scales (particles or atoms, buildings, cities, continents, galaxies, universe)

Who is our keynote speaker?

Our keynote speaker will be **prof. Kacper Bartczak (The University of Łódź, Poland)**, a critic, poet, and translator of poetry; author of *In Search of Community of Communication: The Poetry of John Ashbery* (2006), *Świat nie scalony* (2009) and *Materia i autokreacja: dociekania w poetyce wielościowej* (2019).

Suggested theoretical books, articles, websites:

Appadurai, Arjun. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge UP, 1986.

Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007.

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010.

Bogost, Ian. *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing*. U of Minnesota P, 2012

Braidotti, Rosi. *Posthuman Knowledge*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017.

Brown, Bill. *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*. Chicago UP, 2003.

Bogost, Ian. *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing*. U of Minnesota P, 2012.

Bryant, Levi R., Graham Harman, and Nick Srnicek, editors. *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. re.press, 2011.

Festa, Lynn. "The Lives of Things: Objects, It-Narratives, and Fictional Autobiography, 1700–1800." *A History of English Autobiography*. Ed. Adam Smyth. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 133–147. Print.

Friedman, Vanessa. "Should These Clothes Be Saved?" *NY Times*, April 29, 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/29/fashion/smith-college-clothing-collection.html>

Grosz, Elizabeth. *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism*. The University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Kirby, Vicki. *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal*. Routledge, 1997.

Latour, Bruno. "When Things Strike Back: A Possible Contribution of 'Science Studies' to the Social Sciences." *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2000, pp. 107-123

Moore, A.W. *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things*. Cambridge UP, 2012.

Shaviro, Steven. *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism*. U of Minnesota P, 2014.

Trentman, Frank. *The Consuming Passion: How Things Have Seduced, Enriched and Changed Our Lives*. Berg, 2015.

DeLanda, Manuel. *Materialist Phenomenology: A Philosophy of Perception (Theory in the New Humanities)*. Bloomsbury Academic. 2021.

[Parliament of Things — Speculative research based on Latour's work. \(theparliamentofthings.org\)](http://theparliamentofthings.org)

[New Materialism - Literary and Critical Theory - Oxford Bibliographies](#)

What should you send to us and when?

Please send an abstract of 200-300 words, stating also your name, email address and institutional affiliation by **January 15, 2025** to the conference secretaries: kkasia@amu.edu.pl (dr Katarzyna Macedulska) and malgorzata.olsza@amu.edu.pl (dr Małgorzata Olsza).

All submissions must include a 100-word biographical statement (a short paragraph in which you state your affiliation, research interests, and other academic achievements).

Please make sure your abstract and your bio note are in the same Word file. Please name your file in the following manner: LAST NAME_FIRST NAME_Abstract REAL 2025 (e.g. KOWALSKI_JAN_Abstract REAL 2025).

The submissions will be evaluated by the scientific committee, and you will receive our decision by January 25, 2025.

All queries should also be sent to the conference secretaries kkasia@amu.edu.pl (dr Katarzyna Macedulska) and malgorzata.olsza@amu.edu.pl (dr Małgorzata Olsza).

There is no conference fee. The Symposium will take place online on MS Teams.

REAL Organizing Committee:

dr hab. Paulina Ambroży, prof. UAM
dr Katarzyna Macedulska
dr Małgorzata Olsza

Scientific Committee:

dr hab. Paweł Stachura, prof. UAM
dr hab. Wiesław Kuhn, prof. UAM
dr Justyna Fruzińska

Conference webpage: [LINK](#)