

Lecture Series: New Developments in Theory

LITERARY STUDIES, STORYTELLING, AND LATOUR

RETHINKING AGENCY IN A MORE-THAN-HUMAN WORLD

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Abstract

The talk will take up questions raised in current debates on materiality, the agency of objects, and concepts of the nonhuman in the Anthropocene. Critically engaging with claims made in the context of object-oriented ontology (OOO) and speculative realism, I argue that the new materialisms can benefit from attending to imaginary rather than just speculative modes of thinking. Engaging Bruno Latour's recent ideas on "Agency in the Age of the Anthropocene" (2014), the talk considers both the affordances and the limits of actor-network-theory and its reliance on narratological models for conceptualizing nonhuman agency. Taking up Latour's example of the Mississippi River I will discuss ways of imagining the nonhuman by taking a closer look at literary renderings of the river, its specific power and personality. William Faulkner's portrayal of the Mississippi allows us to see that nonhuman agency is registered in a particular literary mode and mood. Exploring narrative forms of world building and theorizing imaginary practices of reading, I mean to show that these creative registers allow us to push the conceptual boundaries of new materialist thought beyond a narrow focus on the ontology of things and the physical world.



Babette B. Tischleder is professor of North American Studies and Media Studies at the University of Goettingen, Germany. Her book *The Literary Life of Things: Case Studies in American Fiction* (2014) offers a critical materialist approach and engages with a range of texts, from Harriet Beecher Stowe to Jonathan Franzen, disclosing our affective, aesthetic, and ethical entanglements with the object world. Recent publications include *Cultures of Obsolescence: History, Materiality, and the Digital Age*, edited with Sarah Wasserman (Palgrave, 2015); "Earth According to Pixar: Picturing Obsolescence in the Age of Digital (Re)Animation," in *America After Nature: Democracy, Culture, Environment*, ed. Catrin Gersdorf (2016); and "Thickening Seriality: A Chronotopic View of World Building in Contemporary Television Narrative" *The Velvet Light Trap* 79 (Spring 2017).

