

Why matter matters

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Why Matter Matters: Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and the Relevance of New Materialism

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Abstract

New materialism encompasses a heterogeneous range of perspectives – which share some common themes with Indigenous beliefs and cosmologies – that collectively recognise the vibrancy and affective capabilities of matter. This novel interdisciplinary article makes an important conceptual and empirical contribution to addressing the fact that, to date, scholarship on conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) has largely overlooked new materialism. The article is not seeking to convince readers that a new materialist framework is superior to other frameworks applied to CRSV research. The objective, rather, is to demonstrate that new materialism can further enrich how we approach and study CRSV. It explores how new materialism challenges us to think in expanded and more creative ways about two concepts that are widely emphasised in extant scholarship on CRSV – structure and agency. It also draws on interviews with victims-/survivors of CRSV in Bosnia-Herzegovina to practically illustrate the relevance of new materialism and to suggest some potential avenues for future research. The article makes clear that adding a new materialist lens to the study of CRSV is not about diminishing the importance of victims-/survivors, their experiences and narratives. It is about situating them within wider relational and affective assemblages, asking new questions and acknowledging the significance of non-human agencies.

Keywords

conflict-related sexual violence, matter, new materialism

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Pourquoi la matière importe : Les violences sexuelles liées aux conflits et la pertinence du néo-matérialisme

Résumé

Le néo-matérialisme comprend un éventail hétérogène de perspectives qui partagent des thèmes communs avec les croyances et cosmologies autochtones, et qui reconnaissent collectivement le dynamisme et les capacités affectives de la matière. Cet article interdisciplinaire novateur apporte une contribution conceptuelle et empirique importante pour remédier au fait que, jusqu'à aujourd'hui, les études sur les violences sexuelles liées aux conflits ont largement négligé le néo-matérialisme. Cet article n'a pas pour vocation de convaincre les lecteurs que le cadre néo-matérialiste est supérieur à d'autres cadres appliqués à la recherche sur les violences sexuelles liées aux conflits. L'objectif ici est plutôt de démontrer que le néo-matérialisme peut enrichir la manière dont nous abordons et étudions les violences sexuelles liées aux conflits. Il explore, par exemple, la manière dont le néo-matérialisme nous pousse à penser, de manière expansée et créative, deux concepts largement mis en avant dans les études existantes sur les violences sexuelles liées aux conflits : la structure et l'agentivité. Il s'appuie aussi sur des témoignages de victimes/survivantes de violences sexuelles liées aux conflits en Bosnie-Herzégovine, pour illustrer la pertinence du néo-matérialisme et pour suggérer de potentielles pistes pour de futures recherches. Cet article montre clairement qu'ajouter une perspective néo-matérialiste à l'étude des violences sexuelles liées aux conflits n'a pas pour but de diminuer l'importance des victimes/survivantes, de leurs expériences et de leurs histoires. L'objectif est plutôt de les situer dans un ensemble relationnel et affectif plus large, de poser de nouvelles questions et de reconnaître l'importance de l'agentivité non humaine.

Mots clés

violences sexuelles liées aux conflits, matière, néo-matérialisme

Por qué la materia importa: La violencia sexual relacionada con los conflictos y la relevancia del nuevo materialismo

Resumen

El nuevo materialismo abarca un abanico heterogéneo de perspectivas (que comparten algunos temas comunes con creencias y cosmologías indígenas) que colectivamente reconocen la vitalidad y las capacidades afectivas de la materia. Este novedoso artículo interdisciplinario realiza una importante contribución conceptual y empírica al abordaje del hecho de que, hasta la fecha, el trabajo académico sobre la violencia sexual relacionada con los conflictos (VSRC) ha pasado por alto en gran medida el nuevo materialismo. El artículo no busca convencer de que un marco neomaterialista sea superior a otros paradigmas aplicados a la investigación de la VSRC, sino que su objetivo consiste en demostrar que el nuevo materialismo puede suponer un enriquecimiento de la manera en que abordamos y estudiamos la VSRC. En él se explora, por ejemplo, cómo el nuevo materialismo nos reta a pensar en formas más expandidas y creativas sobre dos conceptos ampliamente enfatizados en la bibliografía existente sobre la VSRC: la estructura y la agencia. Además, a partir de entrevistas con víctimas/sobrevivientes de VSRC en Bosnia-Herzegovina, se ilustra de forma práctica la relevancia del nuevo materialismo y se proponen algunas vías posibles de investigación futura. El artículo deja claro que añadir una lente neomaterialista al estudio de la VSRC no implica reducir la importancia de las víctimas/sobrevivientes, sus experiencias y sus relatos, sino situarlos dentro de conjuntos relacionales y afectivos más amplios, hacer nuevas preguntas y reconocer la importancia de las agencias no humanas.

Palabras clave

violencia sexual relacionada con los conflictos, materia, nuevo materialismo

Everywhere we look, the social world is intermingling with the material world in complex and diverse ways.¹

Introduction

The octopus was confined to a small tank. It suddenly accelerated through the water, using jet propulsion, and reached the other side of the tank. I stood and watched it for several minutes. I focused on its tentacles. Haraway reminds us that ‘*tentacle* comes from the Latin *tentaculum*, meaning “feeling,” and *tentare*, meaning “to feel” and “to try”’.² Other visitors walked past the tank, barely looking at what was inside. Did they not wonder, as I did, what this spectacular animal might have been feeling? Did they not even try to imagine?

From simply thinking about the octopus, I have shifted towards ‘tentacular thinking’, a concept that challenges ideas of ‘human exceptionalism and bounded individualism’³ and accentuates relationality and entanglements. All of us are entangled in assemblages of human and non-human matter. It is impossible to discuss matter, in turn, without engaging with new materialism, a collective term encompassing an eclectic diversity of perspectives⁴ which together share a ‘turn to matter’.⁵ For new materialists, in short, matter is not something that is *acted upon*. Rather, ‘matter is “alive,” “lively,” “vibrant,” “dynamic,” “agentive,” and thus *active*’.⁶

New materialist ideas have been examined in many different contexts, and there is growing attention within the field of International Relations (IR) to matter and ‘the interconnections of human and non-human elements’⁷ – including their relevance to how we

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1. Nick Srnicek, Maria Fotou, and Edmund Arghand, ‘Introduction: Materialism and World Politics’, *Millennium* 41, no. 3 (2013): 397. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829813493064>.
 2. Donna J. Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 31.
 3. *Ibid.*, 30.
 4. Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, ‘Liberation for Straw Dogs? Old Materialism, New Materialism, and the Challenge of an Emancipatory Posthumanism’, *Globalizations* 12, no. 1 (2015): 135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2014.971634>.
 5. Nick Fox and Pam Alldred, *Sociology and the New Materialism: Theory, Research, Action* (London: SAGE, 2017), 3.
 6. Christopher N. Gamble, et al., ‘What is New Materialism?’ *Angelaki* 24, no. 6 (2019): 111. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2019.1684704> (emphasis in the original).
 7. Olaf Corry, ‘Nature and the International: Towards a Materialist Understanding of Societal Multiplicity’, *Globalizations* 17, no. 3 (2020): 421. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2019.1676587>.

think about security,⁸ international intervention⁹ and democracy.¹⁰ It is therefore interesting that these ideas remain heavily under-explored and neglected within research on conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). The originality and importance of this interdisciplinary article – as an expression of ‘tentacular thinking’ – lies in addressing that gap, both conceptually and empirically. To be clear from the outset, its argument is not that there is something unique about CRSV that gives particular resonance to new materialism. Furthermore, it is not seeking to convince readers that a new materialist framework – and the word framework is deliberately used very loosely here, for reasons that will become clear – is superior to or better than other frameworks (conceptual, explanatory, analytical) applied to CRSV research.¹¹ The objective, rather, is to demonstrate that new materialist literature offers expanded ‘thought-worlds’¹² that are highly pertinent to, and can further enrich, how we approach and study CRSV. In so doing, it poses the following key question: what is the conceptual and practical significance of thinking about victims-/survivors¹³ of CRSV as forming part of ‘an assemblage composed of human and nonhuman materials’?¹⁴

The article is divided into six sections. The first section reviews some of the ways that existing literature has discussed CRSV and focuses on two broad concepts that are widely emphasised – namely, structure and agency. In so doing, it compares and contrasts how these concepts are understood and approached within new materialist scholarship, as an important foundation for building the argument that ‘matter matters’¹⁵ for the

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8. Ana Ivasiuc, ‘Provincialising Security: Materiality and Sensoriality’, *Critical Studies on Security* 11, no. 1 (2023): 50–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2022.2091913>.
 9. Roger Mac Ginty, ‘A Material Turn in International Relations: The 4x4, Intervention and Resistance’, *Review of International Studies* 43, no. 5 (2017): 855–74. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210517000146>.
 10. James L. Smith, ‘I, River?: New Materialism, Riparian Non-Human Agency and the Scale of Democratic Reform’, *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 58, no. 1 (2017): 99–111. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apv.12140>.
 11. See, for example, Jenny Hedström and Elisabeth Olivius, ‘The Politics of Sexual Violence in the Kachin Conflict in Myanmar’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 23, no. 3 (2021): 374–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2020.1862690>; Sara Meger, ‘The Fetishization of Sexual Violence in International Security’, *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2016): 149–59. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqw003>; Philipp Schulz and Heleen Touquet, ‘Queering Explanatory Frameworks for Wartime Sexual Violence against Men’, *International Affairs* 96, no. 5 (2020): 1169–87. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaaa062>.
 12. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Young, ‘Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research’, *Qualitative Inquiry* 20, no. 6 (2014): 817. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800414530265>.
 13. The article uses the terminology of ‘victims-/survivors’, in recognition of the fact that some individuals who have experienced CRSV identify more with the term than the other, and some consider themselves to be both victims and survivors.
 14. Martin Coward, ‘Between us in the City: Materiality, Subjectivity, and Community in the Era of Global Urbanization’, *Environment and Planning D* 30 (2012): 468. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d21010>.
 15. Karen Barad, ‘Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter’, *Signs* 28, no. 3 (2003): 803. <https://doi.org/10.1086/345321>.

study of CRSV. It demonstrates, for example, that new materialist ideas challenge us to rethink – or at least to think differently about – the strong accent that is frequently placed on the structural causes of CRSV, including at the international policy level.¹⁶ The second section looks at new materialism in greater depth, drawing in particular on the work of Karen Barad, and gives some examples of its practical application in other fields of research. The third section introduces the empirical data on which the article draws – semi-structured interviews with victims-/survivors of CRSV in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH). The interviews were undertaken in the context of a larger comparative study about resilience, CRSV and transitional justice.¹⁷

The final three sections use examples from the qualitative data to evidence the significance of new materialism for thinking about and researching CRSV. It is essential to underline that applying new materialist ideas to CRSV is not about giving less importance to victims-/survivors and their experiences. Rather, it is about recognising that ‘all dynamic agentive beings are able to act¹⁸ – and being open to exploring what potential new insights this recognition could bring to the study of CRSV, including with respect to the role of non-human agencies in shaping how victims-/survivors deal with their experiences.

Thinking About CRSV

The Bigger Picture

The octopus in the small tank. I focused on its tentacles (more correctly, its arms). ‘The tentacular’, as Branlat et al. underline, ‘embodies the processes of knowledge production, not according to the figure of the human brain but rather in a more-than-human multiorgan’.¹⁹ It is interesting that an octopus has approximately the same number of neurons as a dog, but these neurons are not confined to its brain. Rather, they are distributed throughout its body and primarily in its arms. The body, thus, ‘has, if not a mind of its own, then a set of proto-minds in each arm that make their own decisions’.²⁰ An octopus’ physiology

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16. Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, ‘Statement of SRSG-SVC Pramila Patten at the Security Council Open Debate on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence’ (14 April 2021). Available at: <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/statement/statement-of-srsg-svc-pramila-patten-security-council-open-debate-on-conflict-related-sexual-violence-accountability-as-prevention-ending-cycles-of-sexual-violence-in-conflict-wedne/>. Last accessed May 3, 2023.
 17. See Janine Natalya Clark, *Resilience, Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and Transitional Justice: A Social-Ecological Framing* (London: Routledge, 2022).
 18. Mary P. Sheridan, et al. ‘Intra-Active Entanglements: What Posthuman and New Materialist Frameworks Can Offer the Learning Sciences’, *British Journal of Educational Technology* 51, no. 4 (2020): 1278. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.12928>.
 19. Jennifer Branlat, et al. ‘Tentacular Classrooms: Feminist Transformative Learning for Thinking and Sensing’, *Journal of Transformative Education* 21, no. 1 (2023): 30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15413446211068556>.
 20. Philip Ball, *The Book of Minds: How to Understand Ourselves and Other Beings* (London: Picador, 2022), 236.

and the complexity of its motor-control system thereby challenge the idea that ‘experience must be a tightly integrated whole’.²¹ This, in turn, is a useful starting point for thinking about CRSV, as an adaptation of Haraway’s ‘tentacular thinking’.²²

As extant literature implicitly makes clear, experiences of CRSV never constitute ‘a tightly integrated whole’. First, individual experiences of such violence are often diffuse, extending across war/‘peace’ dichotomies and highlighting deeper cyclical dynamics and continuums of violence that cannot be neatly contained.²³ Second, CRSV does not just affect the direct victims-/survivors. That the arms of an octopus are extremely flexible and dexterous means that they can easily manoeuvre their way into small spaces and crevices. CRSV, similarly, has tentacular dimensions, reaching into different aspects of individuals’ social ecologies (environments), including their families and communities.²⁴

The increased attention that the issue of CRSV now commands within international policy circles, however, does not always sufficiently reflect this experiential complexity and diffuseness. Discussing the award of the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize to the Congolese gynaecologist Dr Denis Mukwege and the Yazidi activist Nadia Murad, for example, Stern argues that a multiplicity of voices and experiences of CRSV ‘can easily become subsumed into a focus on only a few stories (such as Mukwege’s or Murad’s) that garner global and political leverage’.²⁵ Relatedly, some scholars have underlined that the common framing of CRSV as an insidious ‘weapon of war’²⁶ effectively elevates some experiences over

21. Ibid., 238.

22. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 30.

23. See, for example, Jessica Anania, ‘Transitional Justice and the Ongoing Exclusion of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by International Interveners’, *International Affairs* 98, no. 3 (2022): 897. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaac056>; Jelke Boesten, ‘Of Exceptions and Continuities: Theory and Methodology in Research on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 19, no. 4 (2017): 513–514. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2017.1367950>; Kirsten Campbell, ‘Producing Knowledge in the Field of Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict Research: Objects, Methods, Politics, and Gender Justice Methodology’, *Social Politics* 25, no. 4 (2018): 484. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxy025>.

24. See, for example, Sarah K. Chynoweth, Dale Buscher, Sarah Martin and Anthony B. Zwi, ‘Characteristics and Impacts of Sexual Violence against Men and Boys in Conflict and Displacement: A Multicountry Exploratory Study’, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37, no. 9–10 (2022): 7470–501. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520967132>; Carlo Koos, ‘Decay or Resilience? The Long-Term Social Consequences of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Sierra Leone’, *World Politics* 70, no. 2 (2019): 194–238. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887117000351>; Marlet A. Woldetsadik, Grace Acan and Okwir Isaac Odiya, ‘Becoming Secondary Survivors: Exploring the Effects of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence on the Health and Well-Being of Families in Northern Uganda’, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 38, no. 3–4 (2023): 3395–420. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605221107057>.

25. Maria Stern, ‘Courageously Critiquing Sexual Violence: Responding to the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize’, *International Affairs* 95, no. 6 (2019): 1242. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz105>.

26. See, for example, European Union, ‘Ensuring Accountability for Sexual Violence and Other Violations of International Humanitarian Law’ (6 September 2022). Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-new-york/ensuring-accountability-sexual-violence-and-other-violations-international_en. Last accessed December 7, 2022; Save the Children, ‘Weapon of War: Sexual Violence against Children in Conflict’ (2021). Available at: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/weapon-of-war-report_final.pdf/. Last accessed January 22, 2023.

others.²⁷ As Meger asserts, the weapon of war narrative ‘enforces a de facto hierarchy of atrocity that considers strategic and instrumental sexual violence inherently worse than “everyday” rape and civilian-perpetrated sexual violence’.²⁸

As such hierarchies have practical implications as regards service provision,²⁹ they can also strongly shape individual narratives in ways that further help to marginalise other forms of violence. Discussing the Democratic Republic of Congo, which infamously became known as the ‘rape capital of the world’,³⁰ Autesserre has pointed out that for many Congolese women, claiming that they have been raped has been the only way of getting access to healthcare.³¹ This example thus illuminates the larger point that when such a complex and multi-dimensional conflict becomes associated with a particular type of violence, this not only compresses individual experiences but can also contribute to ‘sexuo-racialised tropes’³² about that conflict and its people.

All of this raises larger questions, in turn, about how to think about and research CRSV. This section focuses on two concepts – structure and agency – that are prominent within extant scholarship on CRSV. Significantly, they are also important within new materialist literature (which, moreover, rejects structure/agency binaries and other Cartesian dualisms, such as nature/culture and subject/object).³³ Hence, after discussing some of the ways that structure and agency are invoked in relation to CRSV, this section moves on to look at them from a broad new materialist perspective. This is a crucial part of demonstrating how new materialism is relevant to CRSV and what it can potentially contribute to this field of research.

Structure and Agency

Scholarship on CRSV places a strong emphasis on structures, attributing to them considerable explanatory and causal power. Houge and Lohne, for example, refer to ‘broader

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27. Mary E. Berry and Milli Lake, ‘Women’s Rights after War: On Gender Interventions and Enduring Hierarchies’, *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 17, no. 1 (2021): 469. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-lawsocsci-113020-085456>.
 28. Meger, ‘The Fetishization of Sexual Violence’, 150.
 29. Sahla Aroussi, ‘Perceptions of Justice and Hierarchies of Rape: Rethinking Approaches to Sexual Violence in Eastern Congo from the Ground Up’, *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 12, no. 2 (2018): 283. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijy005>.
 30. United Nations (UN), ‘Tackling Sexual Violence Must Include Prevention, Ending Impunity – UN Official’ (27 April 2010). Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2010/04/336662>. Last accessed November 9, 2022.
 31. Séverine Autesserre, ‘Dangerous Tales: Dominant Narratives on the Congo and their Unintended Consequences’, *African Affairs* 111, no. 143 (2012): 216. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adr080>.
 32. Chloé Lewis, ‘The Making and Re-Making of the “Rape Capital of the World”: On Colonial Durabilities and the Politics of Sexual Violence Statistics in DRC’, *Critical African Studies* 14, no. 1 (2022): 65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2021.1902831>.
 33. Diana Coole, ‘Agentic Capacities and Capacious Historical Materialism: Thinking with New Materialisms in the Political Sciences’, *Millennium* 41, no. 3 (2013): 454. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829813481006>.

social and structural conditions that foster and allow for sexual violence to take place’;³⁴ Kreft maintains that ‘Both CRSV and sexual violence that occurs in conflict-affected settings but is not perpetrated by armed actors . . . share a common basis in patriarchal structures’;³⁵ and Luedke and Logan highlight ‘the “everyday” structural violence that lies beneath predominant accounts of sexual violence as a “weapon of war” in South Sudan’.³⁶ Concomitantly, there is a heavy accent placed on the need for policies aimed at addressing, and ultimately transforming, the structures that enable and perpetuate CRSV.³⁷ Indeed, international policy discourse also frequently references the crucial role of structural factors, and structural forms of violence, underpinning the occurrence and persistence of CRSV. In a recent report, for example, the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, António Guterres, underscores that ‘Concerted action and investment are urgently needed to prevent sexual violence in the first instance and to tackle the structural root causes that perpetuate these crimes’.³⁸

Viewed from a new materialist perspective, however, such arguments give too much weight to structural factors. In Latour’s words, ‘Asymmetries exist, yes, but where do they come from and what are they made out of?’³⁹ In other words, attributing causal power to structures is essentially akin to putting the proverbial cart before the horse. It also neglects crucial material interactions and obscures ‘the relational character of events, actions and interactions’.⁴⁰ Hence, we cannot understand what structures ‘are made out of’ without exploring assemblages, their ‘heterogenous components’⁴¹ and the dynamic flows between these components.

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34. Anette Bringedal Houge and Kjersti Lohne, ‘End Impunity! Reducing Conflict-Related Sexual Violence to a Problem of Law’, *Law & Society Review* 51, no. 4 (2017): 783. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lasr.12294>.
 35. Anne-Kathrin Kreft, ‘“This Patriarchal, Machista and Unequal Culture of Ours”: Obstacles to Confronting Conflict-Related Sexual Violence’, *Social Politics* 30, no. 2 (2023): 656. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxac018>.
 36. Alicia Elaine Luedke and Hannah Faye Logan, ‘“That Thing of Human Rights”: Discourse, Emergency Assistance and Sexual Violence in South Sudan’s Current Civil War’, *Disasters* 42, no. 1 (2018): 111. <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12273>.
 37. Inguanzo, I., & Rodríguez Rodríguez, A. (2023). Analysis of the Colombian Constitutional Court’s Transformative Approach to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence. *Social & Legal Studies*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/09646639231159048>
 38. UN, ‘Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: Report of the United Nations Secretary-General’ S/2022/272 (2022), para. 15. Available at: <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/auto-draft/SG-Report2021for-web.pdf>. Last accessed February 12, 2023.
 39. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 64.
 40. Nick J. Fox and Elise Klein, ‘The Micropolitics of Behavioural Interventions: A New Materialist Analysis’, *Biosocieties* 15 (2020): 231. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41292-019-00153-9>.
 41. Manuel DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 20.

In their new materialist research on gender-related violence (GRV), for example, Fox and Alldred – drawing on the work of Latour⁴² – stress that ‘the micropolitics of GRV are enacted at the level of the affective assemblages that make up daily life, while it is these structuralist “explanations” [meaning explanations emphasising concepts such as heteronormativity and patriarchy] that themselves need explaining’.⁴³ They use the illustration of a date-rape assemblage, which, in addition to the bodies of those directly involved, might also include other more peripheral bodies (a taxi driver, a bartender, a doctor), as well as non-human matter (alcohol, clothing, mobile phones, physical locations). For Fox and Alldred, it is the relationships and affective flows between these multiple materialities – in the sense of how they affect each other and are affected, and which together form a ‘gendered violence-assemblage’ – that are crucial for explaining the date-rape and analysing what happened.⁴⁴ Even if one takes issue with such arguments or does not fully embrace them, the point is that they invite deeper critical reflection on structuralist explanations of CRSV and some of their potential limitations.

Agency is also an important theme within research on CRSV, with scholars increasingly accentuating the agency of victims-/survivors.⁴⁵ Drawing on research in Croatia and northern Uganda, for example, Touquet and Schulz analyse two particular ways that male survivors⁴⁶ of CRSV demonstrate and manifest agency: namely, by making their own choices about when to remain silent and when to speak about their experiences (and which parts of their stories to speak about in which spaces), and by actively seeking out and accessing assistance. In this way, the authors directly challenge emasculating portrayals of male survivors as having neither voice nor agency.⁴⁷

42. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.

43. Nick Fox and Pam Alldred, ‘New Materialism, Micropolitics and the Everyday Production of Gender-Related Violence’, *Social Sciences* 11, no. 9 (2022): 380. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11090380>.

44. *Ibid.*

45. See, for example, Hedström and Olivius, ‘The Politics of Sexual Violence’; Ann-Kathrin Kreft and Philipp Schulz, ‘Political Agency, Victimhood, and Gender in Contexts of Armed Conflict: Moving beyond Dichotomies’, *International Studies Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (2022): sqac022. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqac022>; Julia Margaret Zulver, ‘The Endurance of Women’s Mobilization During “Patriarchal Backlash”: A Case from Colombia’s Reconfiguring Armed Conflict’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 23, no. 3 (2021): 440–462. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2021.1901061>.

46. In this case, I use the term ‘survivors’ rather than ‘victims-/survivors’, consistent with the terminology that Touquet and Schulz use.

47. Heleen Touquet and Philipp Schulz, ‘Navigating Vulnerabilities and Masculinities: How Gendered Contexts Shape the Agency of Male Sexual Violence Survivors’, *Security Dialogue* 52, no. 3 (2021): 226. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010620929176>. The authors also comment on the significance of ‘local opportunity structures or “choice architectures” that both constrain and shape the forms that the agency of male survivors takes’. *Ibid.*, 217. Linking back to the previous discussion, this could be viewed as another example of giving too much causal power to structure. Reframing these ‘local opportunity structures’ as ‘local opportunity assemblages’ would mean exploring ‘the range of affects and materialities’ – human and non-human – that constitute these assemblages. See Fox and Alldred, ‘New Materialities, Micropolitics’.

In their own research in northern Uganda, Oliveira and Baines highlight the agency of mothers who gave birth to children ‘born of war’. They examine, inter alia, how these women – who were formerly abducted (in most cases as children) by the Lord’s Resistance Army – fight for their children to be recognised as citizens with concomitant rights and ‘seek to re-embed their children within patrilineal kinship ties’⁴⁸ by establishing relationships with the paternal clan. Their work, like that of Touquet and Schulz, reflects a relational approach to agency. Agency, from this perspective, is not simply about individuals. It is about what Burkitt calls ‘relational connections and joint actions’⁴⁹ – and about people collectively creating particular effects through these connections and actions.

Existing work on agency in respect of CRSV is important and broadens the analytical focus from what has been *done* to victims-/survivors to what they themselves are *doing* as they deal with their experiences – in unique socio-cultural contexts – and seek to actively move forward with their lives. It also, thus, provides a crucial counterbalance to homogenising narratives and discourses about those who experience CRSV,⁵⁰ by effectively reasserting and accentuating the individuality of these women and men. Such work, however, remains heavily anthropocentric. New materialists, in contrast, go much further in their approach to agency, decoupling the concept from human action and acknowledging diverse non-human forms of agency. As Cudworth and Hobden summarise, ‘For new materialists, accounts of agency that are human-centred and human-exclusive fail to attend to the powers of the non-human world in making and remaking our shared world’.⁵¹ Agency, in other words, is distributed.⁵²

These ideas, discussed in more detail below, share important similarities with Indigenous cosmologies.⁵³ Watts, for example, an Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee scholar, presents the Indigenous concept of ‘place-thought’, noting that it is ‘based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive

48. Camile Oliveira and Erin Baines, ‘“It’s Like Giving Birth to This Girl Again”: Social Repair and Motherhood after Conflict-Related Sexual Violence’, *Social Politics* 29, no. 2 (2022): 753. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxab033>.

49. Ian Burkitt, ‘Relational Agency: Relational Sociology, Agency and Interaction’, *European Journal of Social Theory* 19, no. 3 (2016): 232. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431015591426>.

50. For some examples of this, see Janine Natalya Clark, ‘Helping or Harming? NGOs and Victims-/Survivors of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina’, *Journal of Human Rights* 18, no. 2 (2019): 246–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2019.1581055>.

51. Cudworth and Hobden, ‘Liberation for Straw Dogs?’, 52.

52. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 38; Coole, ‘Agentic Capacities’, 457; Nick Fox and Pam Alldred, ‘Social Structures, Power and Resistance in Monist Sociology: (New) Materialist Insights’, *Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 3 (2018): 318.

53. John Borrows, ‘Living Between Water and Rocks: First Nations, Environmental Planning and Democracy’, *University of Toronto Law Journal* 47, no. 4 (1997): 417–468; Zoe Todd, ‘An Indigenous Feminist’s Take on the Ontological Turn: “Ontology” is Just Another Word for Colonialism’, *Sociology Lens* 91, no. 1 (2016): 4–22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12124>.

agency through the extensions of these thoughts'.⁵⁴ Coulthard, a member of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation, explains that in his community's language, 'land' (*dè*) is understood relationally as including not just actual land but also, inter alia, people, animals and livestock, trees and lakes.⁵⁵ In other words, human beings are a part of the land in the same way as any other element and, by extension, they are 'not the only constituent believed to embody spirit or agency'.⁵⁶

It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the synergies between new materialism and Indigenous onto-epistemologies. As a prelude to the next section, however, which takes a closer look at new materialism, it is important to underline that many new materialist ideas are not new in themselves. To treat them as such is to overlook an entire 'Indigenous tradition of thought'⁵⁷ – which remains insufficiently acknowledged within new materialist scholarship⁵⁸ – that long pre-dates the first references to new materialism during the 1990s.⁵⁹

Taking a Closer Look at New Materialism

This section engages in greater depth with new materialist literature, further unpacking its de-privileging of human agency and recognition of multiple and entangled forms of agency. It begins by looking at the work of Karen Barad – one of the key figures within new materialist research. The second part focuses on another significant concept (linked to both structure and agency), namely flat ontology. The final part presents some recent examples of research that engage in a very practical sense with new materialist ideas.

Agency, Intra-action and Matter

In one of her seminal articles, Barad asserts that 'Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter'.⁶⁰ Captured in this statement is her trenchant critique of representationalism⁶¹ – the idea that there exists an ontological distinction between

54. Vanessa Watts, 'Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency Amongst Humans and Non-Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European World Tour!)', *Decolonization* 2, no. 1 (2013): 21.

55. Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 61.

56. Ibid.

57. Jerry Lee Rosiek, Jimmy Snyder, and Scott L. Pratt, 'The New Materialisms and Indigenous Theories of Non-Human Agency: Making the Case for Respectful Anti-Colonial Engagement', *Qualitative Inquiry* 26, no. 3–4 (2020): 334. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800419830135>.

58. Todd, 'An Indigenous Feminist's Take'.

59. Iris van der Tuin and Rick Dolphijn, 'The Transversality of New Materialism', *Women: A Cultural Review* 21, no. 2 (2010): 153. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2010.488377>.

60. Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity', 801.

61. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 48.

practices of representation, on one hand, and that which is being represented, on the other, as if the two are independent of each other.⁶² Drawing on the work of the late Danish physicist Niels Bohr, and strongly influenced by his rejection of a metaphysics that understands the world in terms of independent ontological entities with clearly defined properties and boundaries, Barad both embraces and builds on his argument that phenomena constitute the principal ontological unit.

According to her agential realism, ‘phenomena are ontologically primitive relations – relations without preexisting relata’.⁶³ In this ‘ontological indeterminacy’,⁶⁴ there are no such boundaries as ‘subject’/‘object’. It is only ‘through specific agential intra-actions that the contours and properties of the “components” of phenomena become determinate and that particular embodied concepts become meaningful’.⁶⁵ Everything is ‘intra-acting’ – and hence ‘lively’⁶⁶ – and it is these intra-actions that enact agential ‘cuts’, thereby separating ‘subject’ and ‘object’.⁶⁷ These are not, however, absolute separations. They are contingent, ‘*within* phenomena’.⁶⁸

Agency, therefore, is not an attribute or something that only human beings can exercise. Agency is relational, dynamic and fluid, distributed among agentially intra-acting materialities that produce phenomena. It is “doing”/ “being” in its intra-activity’.⁶⁹ It follows, thus, that for Barad and other new materialists, matter is not something passive and inert. It has its own ‘vitality’⁷⁰ and ‘creativity’;⁷¹ it is ‘intelligent’,⁷² ‘productive’⁷³ and an active ‘actant’.⁷⁴ In Barad’s agential realist ontology, ‘matter is a dynamic expression/articulation of the world in its intra-active becoming’.⁷⁵ Indeed, she insists that we do a fundamental disservice to matter, and to the scope of its capacity, by not recognising its agency.⁷⁶

62. Barad, ‘Posthumanist Performativity’, 804.

63. *Ibid.*, 815.

64. Karen Barad, ‘On Touching – The Inhuman that therefore I am’, *Differences* 23, no. 3 (2012): 214. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-1892943>.

65. Barad, ‘Posthumanist Performativity’, 815.

66. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 33.

67. Barad, ‘Posthumanist Performativity’, 815. See also Karen Barad, ‘Nature’s Queer Performativity’, *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (2011): 125. <https://doi.org/10.5250/quiparle.19.2.0121>.

68. Karen Barad, ‘Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting-Together Apart’, *Parallax* 20, no. 3 (2014): 175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2014.927623> (emphasis in the original). See also Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 393.

69. Barad, ‘Posthumanist Performativity’, 827.

70. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, viii.

71. Manuel DeLanda, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 1997), 16.

72. Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 60.

73. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, ‘Introducing the New Materialisms’, in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*, eds. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 9.

74. Bruno Latour, ‘On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications’, *Soziale Welt* 47, no. 4 (1996): 7.

75. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 392.

76. *Ibid.*, 66.

Flat ontology and the Eschewal of Structuralist Explanations

The above ideas, in turn, help to elucidate new materialism's flat (or monist) ontology,⁷⁷ which is connected to its aforementioned rejection of dualisms. Cutting across these dualisms, flat ontology puts all actors and actants on an equal footing,⁷⁸ rather than privileging some over others.⁷⁹ In this sense, it is deeply anti-hierarchical. Discussing, for example, actor-network theory (ANT) – which explores the myriad actors, human and non-human, that form a network – Latour highlights ANT's claim that 'modern societies cannot be described without recognizing them as having a fibrous, thread-like, wiry, stringy, ropy, capillary character that is never captured by the notions of levels, layers, territories, spheres, categories, structures, systems'.⁸⁰ Working within a relational flat ontology, in short, means that there is little place for structuralist explanations – which are also incompatible with new materialism's emphasis on immanence⁸¹ and the idea that there are no externally governing systems and structures⁸² – because attributing power to structures neglects to deal with the crucial question of where this power comes from. To cite Latour, 'power, like society, is the final result of a process and not a reservoir, a stock, or a capital that will automatically provide an explanation. Power and domination have to be produced, made up, composed'.⁸³

The concept of flat ontology, however, is controversial and raises a number of important issues. One of the criticisms is that flat ontology is deeply discordant with the fact that we live in a world that is far from flat. How do we reconcile, for example, the idea of flat ontology with the existence of privilege and inequality?⁸⁴ Relatedly, how do we talk about flat ontology when the effects and dynamics of key processes that are fundamentally shaping the world we live in, such as climate change and globalisation, are the very opposite of 'flat'?⁸⁵ Another set of concerns is that flat ontology leaves dangerous loopholes, in the sense of detracting from harms caused by human activities – and thereby

77. See Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), 51; Bruno Latour, Graham Harman and Peter Erdélyi, *The Prince and the Wolf: Latour and Harman at the LSE* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011), 89.

78. Simon Choat, 'Science, Agency and Ontology: A Historical-Materialist Response to New Materialism', *Political Studies* 66, no. 4 (2018): 1031. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321717731926>.

79. Coole, 'Agentic Capacities', 454.

80. Latour, 'On Actor-Network Theory', 370.

81. Gilles Deleuze, 'Immanence. A Life. . .', *Theory, Culture & Society* 14, no. 2 (1997): 3–7.

82. Åsa Andersson, Peter Corp and Anne B. Reinertsen, 'Thinking with New Materialism in Qualitative Case Studies', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 19 (2020): 1. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920976437>.

83. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 65.

84. Ruth M. Van Dyke, 'Ethics, not Objects', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 31, no. 3 (2021): 487–489. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959774321000172>.

85. Eric Sheppard, 'Trade, Globalization and Uneven Development: Entanglements of Geographical Political Economy', *Progress in Human Geography* 36, no. 1 (2012): 58. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132511407953>.

diluting responsibility for those harms.⁸⁶ Van Dyke, for example, asserts that ‘If we are only interested in charting relationships among entities, and we consider people no more important than any other entities in the network, then we have no logical means by which we can hold perpetrators of violence and suffering to be accountable for their actions’.⁸⁷

Significant questions have been asked, therefore, about the practical utility of a flat ontology that treats human and non-human actors equally, without recognising ‘the distinctive properties/powers that human beings possess’⁸⁸ – and about the ‘naïveté’ of conflating agencies that are manifestly very different (e.g. the agency of an animal and the agency of a human).⁸⁹ With regards to CRSV, moreover, one could easily question the merits of a flat ontology that would appear to negate or discount the significant gendered inequalities that are an everyday reality for many victims-/survivors.⁹⁰

There is not space within this article to offer an in-depth analysis of flat ontology or to explore in detail the many critical voices problematising and challenging the concept. In response to some of the above arguments, however, it is important to emphasise the following three points. First, new materialism, to reiterate, is not a single school of thought, and not all new materialists embrace a flat ontology – or do so in the same way. While Bennett, for example, refers to ‘a heterogenous monism of vibrant bodies’,⁹¹ Conty points out that some new materialists contest a flat ontology that makes no distinction between different agencies, ‘such as anthropologists Tim Ingold and Eduardo Kohn, who seek to transform the human/nonhuman distinction into an animate/inanimate distinction that is able to differentiate between stones and anteaters’.⁹²

Second, rather than focus only on some of the possible problems associated with flat ontology, it is also necessary to consider what it can potentially offer in terms of new insights and understandings – including with regards to how we think about power. This, in turn, highlights that flat ontology is far from being apolitical. Jones et al., for example, maintain that ‘the flat ontology is *deeply* concerned with questions of politics, and that assuming that power only flows through a logic of scale, taken as a given from the outset

86. Marie-Eve Morin, ‘An Ontology for Our Times’, *Angelaki* 26, no. 34 (2021): 149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2021.1938410>.

87. Van Dyke, ‘Ethics, not Objects’, 489.

88. Michiel van Ingen, ‘Beyond the Nature/Culture Divide? The Contradictions of Rosi Braidotti’s *The Posthuman*’, *Journal of Critical Realism* 15, no. 5 (2016): 537. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767430.2016.1211371>.

89. Ståle Knudsen, ‘Critical Realism in Political Ecology: An Argument against Flat Ontology’, *Journal of Political Ecology* 30, no. 1 (2023): 15.

90. See, for example, Sara E. Davies and Jacqui True, ‘Reframing Conflict-Related Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: Bringing Gender Analysis back in’, *Security Dialogue* 46, no. 6 (2015): 505–506; Aisling Swaine, ‘Addressing the Gendered Interests of Victims/Survivors of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and their Children through National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security’, *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 7, no. 2 (2020): 160. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347797020938963>.

91. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 121.

92. Arianne Françoise Conty, ‘The Politics of Nature: New Materialist Responses to the Anthropocene’, *Theory, Culture and Society* 35, no. 7–8 (2018): 75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418802891>.

(whether it looks like this \Downarrow or this \leftrightarrow , etc.) restricts rather than enhances its analysis'.⁹³ Relatedly, Fox and Alldred draw attention to how non-human matter itself can play a part in fostering and sustaining social advantage and disadvantage.⁹⁴ In other words, flat ontology can offer an expanded approach to causal analysis.

Third, a flat ontology does not mean that the world *is* flat and that there is no inequality. Rather, it means that things have 'no innate inequality',⁹⁵ and, hence, everything must be treated a priori as having equal importance. It is significant to note in this regard that because so many acts of violence have historically been committed against discriminated 'others' and those deemed inferior, 'Flat ontologies are thus considered an antidote to such violent forms of distinction'.⁹⁶

Some Practical Applications of New Materialism

Scholars have examined, inter alia, how new materialism challenges the field of IR⁹⁷ – and how relational theories more broadly reflect, in part, an 'impetus to decolonise IR conceptions of "the world" (as one)'.⁹⁸ The complexities of new materialism, however, mean that its practical application is not always immediately obvious. To build on the foregoing discussion, therefore, it is useful to briefly look at some of the ways that scholars have used new materialist ideas and theories such as ANT in their own work. As the ultimate aim of this article is to demonstrate the relevance of new materialism to the study of CRSV, the commonality running through the following examples is that all of them relate to conflict, justice or gender-based violence.

Coward's work on the destruction of urban infrastructures and built environments (urbicide) during war does not directly refer to new materialism, yet there are various new materialist ideas woven into his arguments. Presenting modern urban life as 'a complex assemblage of heterogeneous parts, human and nonhuman',⁹⁹ for example, he underlines

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93. John Paul Jones III, Keith Woodward and Sallie A. Marston, 'Situating Flatness', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32, no. 2 (2007): 269 (emphasis in the original).
 94. Nick Fox and Pam Alldred, 'Bodies, Non-Human Matter and the Micropolitical Production of Sociomaterial Dis/Advantage', *Journal of Sociology* 58, no. 4 (2022): 500. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14407833211002641>.
 95. Ehren Helmut Pflugfelder, 'Rhetoric's New Materialism: From Micro-Rhetoric to Microbrew', *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 45, no. 5 (2015): 450. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0273945.2015.1082616>.
 96. James Ash, 'Flat Ontology and Geography', *Dialogues in Human Geography* 10, no. 3 (2020): 348. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820620940052>.
 97. See, for example, Tom Lundborg and Nick Vaughan-Williams, 'New Materialisms, Discourse Analysis and International Relations: A Radical Intertextual Approach', *Review of International Studies* 41, no. 1 (2015): 12. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210514000163>; Ananya Sharma, 'Decolonizing International Relations: Confronting Erasures Through Indigenous Knowledge Systems', *International Studies* 58, no. 1 (2021): 26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020881720981209>.
 98. Milja Kurki, 'Relational Revolution and Relationality in IR: New Conversations', *Review of International Studies* 48, no. 5 (2022): 828. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210521000127>.
 99. Coward, 'Between us in the City', 469.

that the phenomenon of urbicide challenges anthropocentric framings of political violence. He further demonstrates that buildings are not just structures, emphasising that they are material environments ‘in and through which individuals live their lives’ – and indeed are constitutive of those lives.¹⁰⁰ When buildings are destroyed, therefore, so too are entire assemblages and, thus, the possibilities of ‘being-with-others’.¹⁰¹ Golańska’s research, also focused on urbicide, is explicitly new materialist. She discusses urbidal violence against Palestinian communities in the context of Jewish settlement policy, arguing that it ‘operates in an assemblage-like manner’.¹⁰² She illuminates, for example, the significance of the landscape, noting that:

the natural scenery co-constitutes the ideologically shaped apparatus of visual control, operationalizing its disciplinary panoptical qualities. Whereas the inside of the settlements located on elevated positions remains inaccessible to the Palestinians’ gaze, the former’s villages and towns, situated down in the valleys, are exposed to visual penetration by settlers and IDF [Israel Defence Forces] soldiers, creating traumatizing mechanisms of permanent optical invigilation.¹⁰³

Her research thus unpacks the entanglement of human and non-human agencies – and their mobilisation – in the perpetration of urbidal violence against Palestinians. By extension, it illustrates how these entanglements, as complex assemblages, ‘produce discriminatory geographies of displacement’¹⁰⁴ that have wider regional and geopolitical implications.

Working within the tradition of science and technology studies (STS), Campbell offers a novel application of ANT – which has its roots in STS – in the context of international justice. Building on ANT’s rejection of ‘the social’ as an explanatory concept and Latour’s emphasis on the advantages of ‘dissolving the notion of social force’,¹⁰⁵ Campbell explores the role of legal practices in constructing ‘the social’, through a specific focus on the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY)¹⁰⁶ and transitional justice mechanisms in BiH. Examining these processes as ‘practices of association’,¹⁰⁷ she assesses ‘how international criminal law and transitional justice offer distinctive practices that reassemble society during and after conflict in different ways’.¹⁰⁸

100. Martin Coward, *Urbicide: The Politics of Urban Destruction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 16.

101. *Ibid.*, 15.

102. Dorota Golańska, ‘Slow Urbicide: Accounting for the Shifting Temporalities of Political Violence in the West Bank’, *Geoforum* 132 (2022): 126. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2022.04.012>.

103. *Ibid.*, 130.

104. *Ibid.*, 126.

105. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 66.

106. The ICTY completed its mandate in 2017.

107. Kirsten Campbell, ‘Reassembling International Justice: The Making of “the Social” in International Criminal Law and Transitional Justice’, *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 8, no. 1 (2014): 54. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijt024>.

108. *Ibid.*, 61.

This is a very novel way of thinking about international criminal justice and transitional justice (including the differences between them), and about how we might ultimately evaluate their impact, successes and failures. Relatedly, Christensen's work explores the transversality of power across different sites of justice, underscoring how these sites affect and are affected by each other – as justice assemblages. Rather than accentuate the agency of institutions, therefore, his sites of justice framework 'points toward a more global, pluralistic, and relational idea of the fight(s) against injustice'.¹⁰⁹ It thus draws crucial attention to the multiplicity of actors and agencies – too often overlooked in Euro- and Western-centric legal discourses – involved in the pursuit of justice.

More directly related to the thematic of CRSV, in Renold's project 'Relations Matter' (an unplanned spin-off from a larger project focused on young people in the Welsh Valleys), she worked with six 15-year-old girls in a school in Wales. Part of their discussions centred on how young people, including the girls themselves, experienced sexual and gender-based violence. Renold notes that in the first meeting, one of the girls described how some boys in the school would lift up girls' skirts using rulers. Another girl immediately materialised this occurrence in ink, writing 'RULER TOUCHING'. The ruler's 'human-non-human vitality', in turn, prompted deeper reflections on what else it 'could be and become'.¹¹⁰ Rulers, thus, were one of the materials that emerged from the discussion as important non-human actors in larger 'sexual violence assemblages'.¹¹¹

Prioletta's research draws on feminist new materialism to unpick the significance of matter for explaining gender violence among children in kindergarten (nursery school). Focusing on children's play objects, and specifically on building blocks, she examines these blocks as 'key actors in the perpetration and perpetuation of hierarchal gender divisions and of gender violence between students'.¹¹² Based on her time in two kindergartens in Ontario, Canada, she describes, inter alia, boys 'stockpiling' the blocks – to prevent girls from using them – and building structures that limited girls' access to and movement within the play environment.¹¹³ Emphasising the power of these 'boy-block assemblages',¹¹⁴ the pivotal point, for Prioletta, is that the boys could not maintain control and dominance by themselves. Rather, 'human and nonhuman matter assembled and produced gendered affects and effects'.¹¹⁵

Finally, it is important to note Fox and Alldred's previously mentioned research examining how new materialism – notably its post-anthropocentrism, flat ontology and

109. Mikkel Jarle Christensen, 'Justice Sites and the Fight Against Atrocity Crimes', *Law & Social Inquiry* (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1017/lsi.2022.46>.

110. Emma Renold, "'Feel What I Feel": Making Da(r)ta with Teen Girls for Creative Activisms on how Sexual Violence Matters', *Journal of Gender Studies* 27, no. 1 (2018): 43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2017.1296352>.

111. *Ibid.*, 39.

112. Jessica Prioletta, 'Unearthing Gender Violence with/in Kindergarten Play Environments', *Gender and Education* 34, no. 8 (2022): 977. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2022.2118441>.

113. *Ibid.*, 983.

114. *Ibid.*, 982.

115. *Ibid.*, 983.

emphasis on relationality – can contribute to our understanding of GRV. It is particularly clear from their work that adding a new materialist lens to the study of CRSV would represent a major – and indeed radical – ontological and epistemological shift. They argue, for example, that ‘From a relational perspective, GRV is the flow of violent affects within assemblages of materialities’.¹¹⁶ These assemblages necessarily consist of both human bodies and non-human matter, meaning that the actors within each ‘gendered violence-assemblage’ are multiple. Fox and Alldred also foreground, therefore, the micropolitical level as the focus of analysis; the subordination of women emerges from myriad everyday interactions, ‘rather than from some unseen, top-down yet all-pervasive patriarchal social relation’.¹¹⁷ As to how we might practically research GRV, they suggest a research question that takes as its starting point the violence-assemblage and aims at unpacking the myriad materialities and affects that constitute this assemblage. Concretely, ‘a study of rape used as a weapon of war might ask: what are the micropolitics of sexual violence during military conflict?’¹¹⁸ Another angle of enquiry would be to analyse how ‘patterning of gendered power and privilege are produced and reproduced within the assemblages of everyday living’.¹¹⁹

Taken together, these various examples illustrate the richness of new materialism and some of the multiple and creative ways that it can be used in different (and overlapping) fields of research. In short, it ‘fizzes with possibilities’,¹²⁰ and the remainder of this article explores some of these possibilities with respect to CRSV. Because its arguments draw on fieldwork data, it is essential – as a lead-in to the three empirical sections – to first provide some crucial information about the data.

The Underpinning Study

This article draws on data from a now-completed five-year research study (henceforth ‘the study’) about some of the ways that victims-/survivors of CRSV demonstrate resilience.¹²¹ While resilience has received surprisingly little attention within extant literature on CRSV, outside of this context there exists a wealth of research on the concept. Given the diversity of approaches to resilience across different disciplines, from psychology and human geography to education and neuroscience, it is important to briefly note that the study on which this article draws conceptualised resilience as a process that is ‘co-facilitated by individuals and the systems of which individuals are part’.¹²² This framing

116. Fox and Alldred, ‘New Materialism, Micropolitics’.

117. Ibid.

118. Ibid.

119. Ibid.

120. Elspeth Probyn, ‘Women Following Fish in a More-than-Human World’, *Gender, Place & Culture* 21, no. 5 (2014): 593. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2013.810597>.

121. See Clark, *Resilience, Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and Transitional Justice*.

122. Linda Theron, Diane Levine, and Michel Ungar, ‘African Emerging Adult Resilience: Insights from a Sample of Township Youth’, *Emerging Adulthood* 9, no. 4 (2021): 361. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696820940077>.

is consistent with a larger shift within resilience scholarship away from person-centred analyses towards more complex social-ecological and multi-systemic theorisations.¹²³

The study centred on three countries that have all experienced high levels of CRSV over different time periods – namely, BiH, Colombia and Uganda. A crucial rationale for this comparative approach was to explore what resilience ‘looks’ like, and how it manifests, in different social-ecological environments, and to examine the functioning of key resilience enablers in highly varied cultural contexts. The comparative design also added to and enhanced the study’s originality. Research – and in particular empirical research – on CRSV most frequently focuses on a single country, although there are exceptions.¹²⁴

The quantitative part of the study involved the design, piloting and application of a questionnaire. Between May and November 2018, a total of 449 female and male victims-/survivors of CRSV in BiH, Colombia and Uganda completed the questionnaire, the data from which have been presented and analysed elsewhere.¹²⁵ The questionnaire included the Adult Resilience Measure (ARM), a 28-item scale that measures an individual’s protective resources across individual, relational and contextual sub-scales.¹²⁶ Participants’ total ARM scores were used to create quartiles; and in the qualitative part of the study, interviewees were selected from each set of country quartiles. Ensuring an even spread of scores within the interview sample was important for exploring whether and how these scores translated into the qualitative data in the sense of core themes. A total of 63 women and men were involved in the interview stage of the research (21 in each country). The interviews – which I and two postdoctoral researchers undertook in BiH, Colombia and Uganda respectively – took place between January and August 2019.

The research received full ethics approval from the host institution and the research funder. Additionally, ethics approvals were secured from relevant bodies in each country. In BiH and Colombia, the study was reviewed and approved by university ethics committees in Sarajevo and Bogotá. In Uganda, where a national process exists, approval was sought and obtained from a government-authorised local ethics committee (this approval had to be renewed on an annual basis) and from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology. An independent ethics board, made up of eight highly experienced scholars from six different countries, also played a crucial oversight role and provided valuable input.

During the many months that it took to put in place all of the necessary ethics approvals, there were a number of complex issues that had to be comprehensively addressed and worked through – from ensuring that participants (and in particular those with low literacy levels) were giving genuinely informed consent and dealing with unexpected

123. See, for example, Michael Ungar, ed., *Multisystemic Resilience: Adaptation and Transformation in Contexts of Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

124. See, for example, Chynoweth et al., ‘Characteristics and Impacts’; Touquet and Schulz, ‘Navigating Vulnerabilities and Masculinities’.

125. Clark, J. N., Jefferies, P., & Ungar, M. (2022). Event centrality and conflict-related sexual violence: A new application of the Centrality of Event Scale (CES). *International Review of Victimology*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/02697580221116125>

126. Resilience Research Centre, ‘The Resilience Research Centre Adult Resilience Measure (RRC-ARM): User’s Manual – Research, May 2016’ (2016). Available at: <https://cyrn.resilienceresearch.org/files/ArchivedMaterials.zip>. Last accessed March 11, 2023.

findings to minimising the risks of potential re-traumatisation and maximising fair benefit sharing – issues that I have written about in previous work.¹²⁷ Several in-country organisations played a fundamental role in facilitating the fieldwork in BiH, Colombia and Uganda; and their involvement, in turn, created an important support and referral network within the project design. In cases where, for example, participants sought legal advice, they could be helped to find trusted sources of information.

Many of the Colombian participants were actively involved in women’s associations, and some of them were social leaders and had their own associations. In other cases, however, and particularly in BiH and Uganda, the research created space for participants to meet other victims-/survivors of CRSV, particularly through the reflections workshops that took place during the penultimate year of the study. These workshops – which had to be significantly downsized due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to ensure social distancing – were also a valuable opportunity to share, explore and discuss with small groups of participants some of the core research findings.

As much of my work to date has drawn on the entire qualitative dataset, in this article I will focus specifically on the fieldwork and interviews that I conducted in BiH. Using pseudonyms throughout to protect the interviewees’ identities, I will also note their gender and ethnicity. This is relevant because existing scholarship on CRSV during the 1992–1995 Bosnian war has overwhelmingly centred on women – and in particular Bosniak women – and hence one of the study’s core aims was to ensure that the research samples reflected some of the heterogeneity of victims-/survivors of CRSV in BiH (as well as in Colombia and Uganda). In contrast, it was not one of the aims to analyse the data using a new materialist lens, and indeed new materialism formed no part of the research design. In what follows, however, I present some recent and exploratory reflections on non-human agencies and forces within interviewees’ social ecologies (environments) – and how they potentially ‘matter’. I also give examples of new materialist-type questions that I might have asked had I designed the research differently. To reiterate an earlier point, the empirical sections make clear that new materialism, as this article approaches it, is fundamentally *not* about diminishing the importance of victims-/survivors’ experiences and narratives, but, rather, about more fully contextualising them within wider relational and affective assemblages. As Bennett argues, ‘humans are always in composition with nonhumanity, never outside of a sticky web of connections or an ecology’.¹²⁸

An Interview by the Lake

The interview guide used in this study (for all three countries) included the question ‘Who or what is the source of support in your life?’ In BiH, one of the interviewee’s

127. See, for example, Clark, *Resilience, Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and Transitional Justice*; Janine Natalya Clark, ‘Thinking about Resilience through the Interdisciplinary Lens of Connectivity: A Study of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 17, no. 1 (2023): 99–118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2022.2084237>.

128. Jane Bennett, ‘The Force of Things: Steps Toward an Ecology of Matter’, *Political Theory* 32, no. 3 (2004): 365. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591703260853>.

answers particularly stood out. While interviewees overwhelmingly spoke about support from their families and children, ‘Nusret’ – a 55-year-old Bosniak man – focused on a local lake. In his words:

Well, I have been hoping that things will get better. This is a hope I have. And, well, this birthplace, everything I have learned here. In fact, the water, water is to me . . . I possibly would not have returned here ever [following his experiences during the Bosnian war], but it is my birthplace, and this lake that I have had since I was a child – as they say I was born in the lake. This is something that keeps me going here.¹²⁹

This quotation could simply be interpreted as evidencing that the lake was a significant resource in Nusret’s life. It was something that he used (he also spoke about taking his boat out on the lake when he felt particularly under stress) to help him deal with the past. Yet, this is to emphasise *his* agency and to disregard an intra-active conceptualisation of agency as reflecting ‘the mutual constitution of entangled agencies which come to be by virtue of bodies and things being co-located’.¹³⁰ Thinking about Nusret’s words from a new materialist perspective, thus, means acknowledging the agency of the lake itself (‘This is something that keeps me going here’). This is not, however, to suggest that there is no difference between Nusret’s agency and the lake’s agency. Discussing ANT, for example, Latour stresses that it is not about establishing ‘some absurd “symmetry between humans and non-humans”’.¹³¹ The point is that we should not impose ‘some spurious asymmetry among human intentional action and a material world of causal relations’.¹³² In other words, we should not make a priori judgements about what is important – and what ‘matters’.

Thinking about the lake also accentuates a central linkage between agency and the Spinozian idea of affect – ‘an ability to affect and be affected’.¹³³ Scholarship has examined some of the many ways that victims-/survivors of CRSV may be affected – physically and/or psychologically and emotionally – by their experiences. What remains unexplored are the affective capacities of materiality. Just as Nusret affected the lake (and some of the wildlife that visited it and lived in it) by rowing in it, occasionally fishing in it, sitting by it, so too it affected him. He would often spend hours sitting by the lake. As he explained: ‘I rest here. I rest mentally. Like this, I observe the ducks, fish. Pigeons come along. I feed the ducks. Like that, and I don’t think about problems’.

129. Interview, 10 April 2019.

130. Anna C. Hickey-Moody, ‘Arts Practice as Method, Urban Spaces and Intra-Active Faiths’, *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 21, no. 11 (2017): 1091. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2017.1350317>.

131. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 76.

132. *Ibid.*

133. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), xv.

As I re-read Nusret's interview now, four years on, I think about the water, a 'world of flows, connections, liquidities, and becomings'.¹³⁴ I think back to the octopus in the tank, confined, unable to fully explore this world. Tentacular thinking. Tentacularity as relationality. Human bodies – the bodies of those who share their stories with us and our own bodies as researchers – are 'always part of, and intra-acting with other bodies (human and non-human)'.¹³⁵ I interviewed Nusret in his work shed located right next to the lake. He sat the entire time with his body facing towards the water. A radio was playing when I arrived. 'I put the music on, over there, like that. . .'. He drank a bottle of beer as we talked. 'I also like to drink, and I sit and find solitude and that's it. Until it goes away a bit, and, you know, that's it'.

I asked Nusret questions about his life, about the war, about justice. I could have given attention to the 'affective flows'¹³⁶ between the different materialities that constituted a fundamental and highly fluid assemblage in his life. The lake; ducks; fish; pigeons; his boat; his work shed; his work tools; the radio; beer. I could, for example, have tried to better understand how the lake affected him. Did it always affect him in the same way? Were there seasonal aspects to how it affected him? Did it affect him differently depending on whether he was merely looking out at the lake or more actively engaging with it (e.g. by fishing or being out on his boat)? How did other materialities within the assemblage influence and affect each other? Did beer and his level of sobriety affect what he listened to on the radio, and how the sounds affected him? Did the type of work he was doing, and the particular tools he was using, affect how he engaged with other parts of the assemblage? What about when other human agencies entered the assemblage (he 'loved being alone', but said that sometimes friends came and sat with him by the lake)? Did this alter the affective capacities of the assemblage and, if so, how?

Wood underlines that 'To neglect the analysis of assemblage is to overlook the relational and processual detail of a happening'.¹³⁷ Nusret's assemblage was a central part of his story and integral to understanding how he was dealing with what had happened to him during the Bosnian war. He had been imprisoned in several different camps and maintained that he had survived 'Golgotha'. I might have explored with him what the different materialities in his life (and with which he intra-acted) had 'done' to his memories of that Golgotha and to the frequency with which he re-lived his experiences. I also wondered whether part of the explanation for his deep attachment to the lake was that it had given him back the sense of freedom that was once taken away from him.

134. Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters, 'Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume through Oceanic Thinking', *Environment and Planning D* 33, no. 2 (2015): 248. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d14148p>.

135. Pauliina Maapalo and Tone Pernille Østern, 'The Agency of Wood: Multisensory Interviews with Art and Crafts Teachers in a Post-Humanistic and New-Materialistic Perspective', *Education Inquiry* 9, no. 4 (2018): 385. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2018.1424492>.

136. Nick Fox and Pam Alldred, 'Doing New Materialist Data Analysis: A Spinozo-Deleuzian Ethological Toolkit', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 25, no. 5 (2022): 632. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2021.1933070>.

137. Martin Wood, 'Agency and Organization: Toward a Cyborg-Consciousness', *Human Relations* 51 (1998): 1216. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1016929829839>.

Ultimately, it is impossible to talk about Nusret's interview without also talking about the lake. The two were deeply intertwined. What the interview illustrates, thus, is the significant scope that exists for analysing how matter and non-human agencies affect victims-/survivors of CRSV, their relationship-building processes and how they deal with the multiple legacies of their experiences. The larger point is that part of what makes new materialism highly relevant to CRSV is that it 'invites researchers to open research relationships, thinking, and representations to beings, things, and objects previously ignored as active agents'.¹³⁸

Soil Stories

Mentz's fascinating work explores our embeddedness in a world of brownness; 'Brown fluids and solids surround us; we cannot live without touching them'.¹³⁹ When I think about the colour brown, I think about soil and about two particular interviews that included soil stories. The first of these was my interview with 'Dubravka', a Bosnian Croat woman in her early 60s. She lived alone and spent a lot of time working on her land, which she described as her resource. She had received lavender through a non-governmental organisation, as part of its occupational therapy programme, and spoke about the work that she had done to prepare the soil – and continued to do to keep it healthy. She also talked about how she benefitted from her interactions with it; 'the soil draws out all the negative energy from me'.¹⁴⁰

It could just be argued that Dubravka, like Nusret, had found a way to heal herself, in this case through gardening. Thinking about this from a new materialist perspective, however, the pivotal point is that soils are not 'inert substrates waiting to be shaped by humans', but, rather, 'intricate and dynamic assemblages that are very much alive'.¹⁴¹ The soil not only positively affected Dubravka's mood and wellbeing, but it had also helped her to flourish in new ways. Her efforts on the land had paid off and she had made a success of growing the lavender; she now distilled it, bottled it and made her own boxes and labels. 'So, I have discovered my creativity', she enthused. Again, and to be very clear, I am not arguing that human and non-human agencies are the same. What I am highlighting is that when we think about victims-/survivors of CRSV and their everyday lives, we rarely think about or give attention to 'the vital affectivity of all matter'¹⁴² – and how it affects their lives.

'Fatima', a Bosniak woman in her early 40s, also talked about soil, but in a very different way. She and her family were internally displaced within BiH and she had no

138. Robyn Dowling, Kate Lloyd and Sandra Suchet-Pearson, 'Qualitative Methods II: 'More-than-Human' Methodologies and/in Praxis', *Progress in Human Geography* 21, no. 6 (2017): 824. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132516664439>.

139. Steve Mentz, 'Brown', in *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 207.

140. Interview, 30 January 2019.

141. Eric Guibert and Alec Tostevin, 'The Fictional Soils of a "Sustainable" Anthropocene: A New Materialist Story of the Soils of the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park', *Journal of Landscape Architecture* 17, no. 2 (2022): 77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18626033.2022.2156104>.

142. Fox and Alldred, 'New Materialism, Micropolitics'.

desire to return to their pre-war home. To put down new roots, she had taken out a bank loan to build a small house. It was located among several other houses up a steep hill. From the outside, the house looked unfinished and neglected. Inside, she pointed to a dark patch on the ceiling in the lounge, explaining that the family had to dry their clothes in the room, which had created a problem with mould. The log-burning stove remained unlit during the interview, although it was February, and Fatima mentioned several times that she felt cold.

She also talked about earlier mudslides, the result of heavy rains, which had led to significant soil erosion and caused damage to her home; 'When the slopes moved, the soil from above came down onto the house'.¹⁴³ Her words evoke Bennett's argument that we are 'always engaged in an intricate dance with nonhumans, with the urgings, tendencies, and pressures of other bodies, including air masses, minerals, microorganisms'.¹⁴⁴ There was a sense that the 'pressures' exerted by the soil had added to the pressures that Fatima felt in her life. 'Everything is pressuring me', she maintained. She was still paying off the bank loan, which was a considerable financial strain, and the damage caused by the soil had made her question her decision to construct the house. 'Everything is building up and it is worsening my situation'.

Comparing and contrasting the two interviewees' soil stories, soil was a very positive agency in Dubravka's life. She emphasised that when she worked with the soil, 'I am in my own world'. She reinforced this when, early in the interview, she explained that having recently retired, 'I am living another phase of my life, the one I wished for; where I would have the whole 24 hours for myself, without other people impacting my life, like they did until now'. She was still living in the same place, but she now had much more time to devote to her land, and this change in her circumstances had altered her relationship with the soil and the latter's 'thing-power', meaning 'a force exercised by that which is not specifically human (or even organic) upon humans'.¹⁴⁵

The soil's 'thing-power' was linked, in turn, to the care that Dubravka extended to it. Pertinent here is Guibert and Tostevin's reference to soil as assemblages 'created by plants, animals, fungal networks and the care of human communities'.¹⁴⁶ This neglects the reciprocal dynamics of care as a relationship to which both carer and cared-for contribute.¹⁴⁷ Viewed through a new materialist lens, moreover, the identities of carer and cared-for are not stable. As Johns-Putra argues, 'care has to be recognized as intra-active: carer and cared-about are identities formed in a dynamic of agential separability. These entities come to be, that is, they come to matter, in the very terms of the encounter'.¹⁴⁸ Thinking in this way raises important questions about the different materialities involved

143. Interview, 3 February 2019.

144. Jane Bennett, 'The Agency of Assemblages and the North American Blackout', *Public Culture* 17, no. 3 (2005): 454. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-17-3-445>.

145. Bennett, 'The Force of Things', 351.

146. Guibert and Tostevin, 'The Fictional Soils', 86.

147. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 64.

148. Adeline Johns-Putra, 'Environmental Care Ethics: Notes Toward a New Materialist Critique', *Symploke* 21, no. 1–2 (2013): 129. <https://doi.org/10.5250/symploke.21.1-2.0125>.

in acts of care in the context of CRSV – and how they ‘have agency and identity in their coming together’.¹⁴⁹ Such questions are highly relevant to the issue of how we extend care to victims-/survivors of CRSV, what is involved in this process and how they themselves engage in acts of care towards different agencies, human and non-human.

Returning to Fatima’s story, here the agency of the soil was far more negative, a brown, dirty and unwanted intrusion. To better understand this agency, however, it is also important to know more about Fatima’s life and marriage. She spoke about her husband’s relationship with alcohol, cigarettes and money – materialities that strongly affected his behaviour towards her; ‘I just needed a sensitive, caring husband’. Her decision to take out the loan was about putting a secure roof over her children’s heads, but it was also about asserting herself within the marriage. Choosing ‘capable’ as one of three words to describe herself (together with ‘strong’ and ‘smart’), she stressed that: ‘I have three children in school, I feed them, I cook for them, I go to one job, then to the other job [she worked as a cleaner]. This house, here, it would not be standing if it was not for me, if I did not take out a loan and do two jobs’.

It was through this decision, however, that she had entered into an affective relationship with the soil; and the materiality of the soil had affected her life and helped to sustain her feelings of frustration – both with respect to her marriage and her life more generally. In particular, it was as if the movement of the soil had affected Fatima’s sense of her own possibilities to move. She told me: ‘And now, this soil started moving. And now, you have to move forward. You have to go somewhere. You cannot now . . . I wish . . . If I could, I would leave all this and go somewhere’. Indeed, as Mentz argues, ‘The problem with brown mixtures . . . is that we can get stuck in them’.¹⁵⁰

Fatima’s interview, thus, ultimately highlights a bigger point about flat ontology and structure. Like many of the interviewees, Fatima did not experience the world as flat – and her relationship with her husband was a key factor in this regard. As previously discussed, however, a new materialist analysis would not explore this unevenness by reifying agency ‘in abstract structures that serve as hidden actors’.¹⁵¹ The focus, rather, would be on identifying how multiple agencies help to create and sustain it – and this would certainly be another important and novel contribution to scholarship and research on CRSV. Had I been working with a new materialist framework, for example, I would have wanted to explore Fatima’s marriage as an assemblage – and the various materialities and affective flows that constituted that assemblage. I would also have given more attention to her soil story and to the soil’s aforementioned ‘thing-power’, both within the assemblage of her marriage and her life more broadly.

Fire, Matter and Interview Dynamics

It was a crisp and sunny February morning when I arrived at the home of ‘Fazila’, a Bosniak woman in her early 50s. She lived in what I have always considered to be one

149. Ibid., 132.

150. Mentz, ‘Brown’, 199.

151. Coole, ‘Agentic Capacities’, 459.

of the most beautiful parts of BiH. I removed my footwear, as is customary in Bosnian homes, and she immediately admonished me for not wearing socks and for standing barefooted in her hallway. This was not our first meeting. Several months earlier, Fazila had completed a study questionnaire. Prior to that, I had met her back in 2014 through a mutual acquaintance. In the lounge, she opened a cupboard that was full of woolly socks and gave me a pair to put on. Socks that I still have in a drawer at home; socks in which there is ‘memory materialized’¹⁵²; threads that keep me connected in some way to that period of fieldwork and to the feelings and emotions that it evoked for me. Before we started the interview, Fazila bustled around, making coffee, bringing over some home-made biscuits and checking on the wood-burning stove, to which she twice added logs during the interview.

‘How do you understand the term “survivor”?’ All interviewees were asked this question (and also how they understood the term ‘victim’). While many of Fazila’s responses had been quite short, she now gave an unexpectedly detailed answer. For me, it was the most powerful part of the interview, and it is therefore important to share what she said in full, with the exception of those sentences that could potentially reveal where she lived. In her words:

Now, well, I was here, my sofa was down there, there was a small kitchen; this current one was not built. The bullet went above my head, like this, there in the wall, and this is some kind of survival. I rushed out of the fire. I went there into one room. Soldiers were walking around. You see everything burning. Where will you go, what will you do? You worry about what is happening with the neighbours. I got up and walked here, around the house. I see everything burnt, everything turned to soot . . . Well, this is it, well, as they say . . . It takes all the courage in you to, well, survive it.¹⁵³

As I reflect on this paragraph now, I think about the interactions of these different materialities. A war crime assemblage; ‘a network of human and non-human actors exerting force and agency in dynamic interaction’.¹⁵⁴ I think about the possible memories stored within the materiality of the house, the parts of it that survived the attack. The entwining of matter and memories.¹⁵⁵ I imagine a whizzing sound. The power of a bullet to force itself into a human body; to transform a human body ‘from living to dead’.¹⁵⁶ At the time

152. Anna Kouhia, ‘The Knitted Fabric of Finland: Contemporary Handcrafted Woolly Socks Depicting the Nation State’, *TEXTILE* 18, no. 2 (2020): 186. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759756.2019.1652430>.

153. Interview, 23 February 2019.

154. Rosanne Kennedy, ‘Reading Prosthetic Memory through a New Materialist Lens: A Response to Stuart Murray’, *Parallax* 23, no. 4 (2017): 455. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2017.1374515>.

155. Christina Tsoraki, et al., ‘Making Marks Meaningful: New Materialism and the Microwave Assemblage’, *World Archaeology* 52, no. 3 (2020): 499. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2021.1898462>.

156. Marika Cifor, ‘Stains and Remains: Liveliness, Materiality and the Archival Lives of Queer Bodies’, *Australian Feminist Studies* 32, no. 91–92 (2020): 11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2017.1357014>.

of the interview, I distinctly remember how my focus shifted from the flames of the log fire (which also made me think back to Fatima's unlit fire) to the fire that had engulfed the house more than 20 years earlier. I imagined it so vividly. A war crime that I had only ever read about. 'You see everything burning'. The power of the interviewee's words came not just from her, but also from the log fire. Its agency. It helped me to imagine the scene. I can still imagine it.

As the interview discussion moved to other topics, the fire's energy changed. It became comforting. Warmth radiated from the burning logs, accompanied by occasional crackling sounds. The flames gently danced, mixed with the rich aroma of Bosnian coffee. The woollen socks felt coarse against my skin but also snug, generating additional warmth. At one point, Fazila leaned forward to pick up her packet of cigarettes from the coffee table. She lit up and shifted her position, her legs now curled up next to her on the sofa. A curl of smoke drifted through the air. Dennis suggests that 'smoking pleasure and the smoker herself are emergent in and through relations with an air that has its own agency'.¹⁵⁷

When I think back to that morning in February four years ago, what stands out is how matter intra-actively and agentially shaped the atmosphere of the interview and its dynamics. Rarely is the significance of matter acknowledged in qualitative research, including research on CRSV. We mainly focus on what the interviewee is saying, on demeanour, body language, reactions. Storytelling, however, 'is not just a property of human language, but one of the many consequences of being thrown in a world that is, by itself, fully articulated and active'.¹⁵⁸ In other words, storytelling (and interviewing) is an intra-active process that implicates matter. Exploring this in the context of CRSV would not only be something entirely novel, but it would also enrich discussions about methodology and how we interview victims-/survivors of CRSV.

This could also be taken further. If we proceed from a basic new materialist starting point that nothing has ontological primacy, we cannot presume to know in advance what is important – or how exactly we will undertake a research study (although university ethics committees/institutional review boards and research funders typically require us to be very specific about this). For example, 'how do we determine the "object of our knowledge" – the "problem" we want to study in assemblage?'¹⁵⁹ Looked at in this way, thus, there is a case to be made for engagement with post-qualitative inquiry. As St. Pierre underlines, post-qualitative inquiry is not a methodology – and nor does it 'begin with or use *any* preexisting social science research methodology'.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, she is much

157. Simone Dennis, 'Becoming Enwinded: A New Materialist Take on Smoking Pleasure', *International Journal of Drug Policy* 51 (2018): 74. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2017.11.004>.

158. Bruno Latour, 'Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene', *New Literary History* 45, no. 1 (2014): 13. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2014.0003>.

159. Patti Lather and Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, 'Post-Qualitative Research', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 26, no. 6 (2013): 630. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2013.788752>.

160. Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, 'Post Qualitative Inquiry, the Refusal of Method, and the Risk of the New', *Qualitative Inquiry* 27, no. 1 (2021): 5. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800419863005> (emphasis in the original).

clearer about what post-qualitative inquiry is *not* rather than what it *is*; yet this is precisely the point. According to St. Pierre, ‘It never exists, it never is. It must be invented, created differently each time’.¹⁶¹ Each invention and creation, in turn, can potentially offer novel insights into CRSV and the complex assemblages within which it unfolds.

Conclusion

Addressing the fact that existing scholarship on CRSV is yet to substantively engage with scholarship on new materialism, this interdisciplinary article began by asking the question: what is the conceptual and practical significance of thinking about victims-/survivors of CRSV as forming part of ‘an assemblage composed of human and nonhuman materials’?¹⁶² It has endeavoured to answer this in two key ways. First, it has examined how new materialism has unexplored relevance to how we think about and use the concepts of structure and agency in research on CRSV. Second, it has drawn on interviews with victims-/survivors in BiH to practically demonstrate what new materialism can potentially contribute to scholarship on CRSV, including through the types of questions that we ask and the ontological starting points that we proceed from. Ultimately, it has made clear that thinking about CRSV through a new materialist lens is quintessentially ‘a matter of questioning what is being made to matter and how that mattering affects what it is possible to do and to think’.¹⁶³

It is important to return to two specific points that the article has highlighted. The first relates to the fact that there are critical gaps in new materialist literature as regards acknowledging the significance of Indigenous cosmologies and scholarship. Reflecting on a talk that she attended in Edinburgh given by Bruno Latour, for example, Todd – an Indigenous feminist scholar – recalls: ‘I was left wondering, when will I hear someone reference Indigenous thinkers in a direct, contemporary and meaningful way in European lecture halls?’¹⁶⁴ CRSV is an important area of research in which the synergies between Indigenous beliefs and new materialism could be usefully explored (which should not deflect from the fact that Indigenous histories and experiences fundamentally challenge new materialism’s flat ontology) as part of a bigger process of pluralising how we think about such violence and expanding ‘the space for other forms of knowledge’.¹⁶⁵

The second point is that new materialism, when applied to CRSV, is not about making victims-/survivors less important. It is about exploring and acknowledging their entanglement with matter – and how this ‘matters’. Bennett poses the question ‘Why advocate the vitality of matter?’¹⁶⁶ She also gives her own answer: ‘Because my hunch is that the

161. Ibid., 6.

162. Coward, ‘Between us in the City’, 468.

163. Bronwyn Davies, ‘Ethics and the New Materialism: A Brief Genealogy of the “Post” Philosophies in the Social Sciences’, *Discourse* 39, no. 1 (2018): 121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2016.1234682>.

164. Todd, ‘An Indigenous Feminist’s Take’, 7.

165. Tuck and Yang, ‘Unbecoming Claims’, 817.

166. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, ix.

image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption'.¹⁶⁷ Elaborating further, she explains that 'It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies'.¹⁶⁸ The cardinal point is that these 'nonhuman powers' need to be taken seriously in research on CRSV, not least because they form an intrinsic part of the wider relational and affective assemblages within which victims-/survivors deal with their experiences and rebuild their lives.

The idea for this article developed in part from an active assemblage. The octopus in the tank, unable to move in the way it wanted to. Perhaps this is the reason that it so affected me and the reason that I still vividly remember it. Its arms and suckers pressed up against the glass. My own fingers touching the glass on the other side, wanting to make a connection. 'We must continually ask, what conditions do we need for each body to flourish here?'¹⁶⁹ This question is no less relevant to research, scholarship and, ultimately, policy work on CRSV.

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167. Ibid.

168. Ibid.

169. Alyssa D. Niccolini, Shiva Zarabadi and Jessica Ringrose, 'Spinning Yarns: Affective Kinshipping as Posthuman Pedagogy', *Parallax* 24, no. 3 (2018): 337. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2018.1496582>.