

LOUISE STEEL AND LUCI ATTALA (EDS.) *EARTHY MATTERS: EXPLORING HUMAN INTERACTIONS WITH EARTH, SOIL AND CLAY*. DURHAM: UNIVERSITY OF WALES PRESS 2024. 242 P. ISBN: 9781837721351

ANNA L. MALPAS¹

In a new edited volume, Louise Steel and Luci Attala explore the earthy potentials of soil, dirt, earth and clay. Following their previous texts, *Plants matter* and *Body matters*, *Earthy matters* dives down into the world underneath our feet and explores the materials that come to be enmeshed with the social lives of human and more-than-human entities. The evocative nature of the ‘earthy matter’ discussed in this volume is rich with possibilities, and each chapter presents a thoughtful way in which those possibilities may be activated.

The result of this assemblage of chapters is explicitly political. Claiming that their series ‘dethrones the human by drawing in materials’ (xv), Steel, Attala, and their contributing authors turn away from objects and instead highlight the materials themselves. *Earthy matters* leans into the New Materialism turn in anthropology, with most of the highlighted accounts drawing heavily from scholars such as Tim Ingold (2011, 2012, 2013) and Jane Bennet (2009). However, the political urgency of this volume is not just rooted in theoretical concerns. Steel and Attala want readers to reimagine the Earth itself in a more sustainable fashion, whether that be through listening to Indigenous voices, or by imagining humans as fully enmeshed with, and influenced by, the vibrant matter beneath our feet. This is a point made most explicitly in Simone Sambento’s chapter on caves, in which she suggests that human actors must take responsibility for the relationships we cultivate with the world we are entangled with. This political call to action resonates throughout the volume.

Louise Steel begins by exploring ‘the vibrant capacities of ochre’ and highlighting the ways in which the earthy substance helped to co-create the material world of ancient peoples (31). Rather than focusing on the symbolic qualities or character attributed to ochre, Steel instead considers the material properties of ochre, and how its thing-power (through its vibrancy and staining abilities) created new material entanglements with the humans interacting with it.

Simone Sambento’s third chapter investigates the relationships between humans and caves – a relationality that some caving communities describe as ‘love affairs’ (57). She explores how caves and the speleologists that investigate them are involved in an affective relationship of co-creation as bodies and stone come into contact. Sambento notes that caves have a significant life both before and beyond human existence. However, she also suggests that human explorers leave an indelible imprint in those long-term stories. By describing the intimate processes of crawling and bodily manipulation through which speleologists come to know the cave, Sambento suggests that the cave and the explorer could be understood as

¹ DPhil candidate, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford. Email: anna.malpas@anthro.ox.ac.uk

‘forming each other’ (65). The relationality of earthy material and humans is also explored in Joanne Clarke and Alexander Wasse’s fourth chapter on people and plaster. Clarke and Wasse attend to the material properties of plaster, and question how those qualities inform the development of both symbolic meaning and the relationships between the people working with those materials.

Chapter five applies assemblage theory to a Kissonerga Mosphilia ceremonial hoard. In this chapter, Natalie Boyd discusses how the hoard has transformed over time from a tactile relationship to a visual one to be appreciated from behind the glass of a vitrine. Boyd draws attention to the flows of matter and networks that became a moment in time during the hoard’s journey to becoming ‘the “underneath” for the building’ that was subsequently built atop it (116). Following the thread of buildings, the sixth chapter looks at the agencies of concrete and brick, and how they are constituent parts of the relational convergence of people and matter. Alexander Scott considers the ‘physical, socio-economic and ideological landscapes’ that are created through material actants such as concrete and brick (125). He points to how the choices of brick or concrete as material have shaped the development of the built environment in at times unexpected ways.

In Chapter seven, artist Eloise Govier presents a powerful investigation of somatic correspondences between humans and plastics. By showing how one may come to know the ‘layer of litter forming and coming to know the floodplain beneath us through sound and feel-under-foot’, Govier demonstrates the ways in which plastics can become composite parts of the earth (155). Connections between somatic correspondences and earthy substances are also evident in Chapter eight. Benjamin Alberti investigates Candelaria anthropomorphic ceramics – presenting these pots as forms that are touched and formed in a process that should be understood as a kind of growing.

In the final chapter, Luci Attala returns to the political thesis of the volume with a compelling depiction of how soil is both teeming with its own vibrant life, but also materially intertwined with generations of people. Attala’s confident examples of the processes of deliberately creating (growing) compost, utilising night-soils as material resource, and turning human bodily remains into soil suggest ways in which new vibrant earthy lives can be created through the cultivation of death and waste.

The studies presented by these chapters span vast temporalities, geographies, and forms of material entanglement and extraction. *Earthy matters* attempts to draw these extremely disparate case studies into conversation, suggesting the many ways in which the ‘quivering potential’ of earthy materials could be offered analytical primacy (31). However, while in many ways this breadth is a strength, at times it feels that the subject matter is too disparate, and results in a diffusion of some of the earthy qualities that need further attention. At times the thematic thrust of the volume feels less engaging than it could be, as chapters bounce from Argentinian ceramics, to caves, and concrete buildings in Liverpool. Nonetheless, *Earthy matters* opens a tantalising discussion and leaves readers hungry to spend more time delving deeply into the shimmering potentials that might be hidden beneath their feet. This text will be of particular interest to anthropologists working within a framework of New Materialism or those interested in multispecies and human-environmental entanglements in the Anthropocene.

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