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Material as opposed to what? Three recent ethnographies of welfare, biological labor, and human dignity

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By Leo Coleman

Catherine Fennell. [Last Project Standing: Civics and Sympathy in Post-Welfare Chicago](#). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

Kalinda Vora. [Life Support: Biocapital and the New History of Outsourced Labor](#). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

Gaymon Bennett. [Technicians of Human Dignity: Bodies, Souls, and the Making of Human Dignity](#). New York: Fordham University Press, 2016

A new materialist studying housing projects, a feminist-Marxist postcolonialist, and a Foucauldian bioethicist—what do they have in common? This sounds like the start of a very bad academic joke. But a great deal of cultural anthropological research has in fact been motivated and disciplined—made readable as part of a common project—over the past fifteen or twenty years by such oddly overlapping interests in materiality or materialisms of diverse stripes, on the one hand, and reasoning about biology and the biological constitution of the human, on the other. Drawing on usefully heterogeneous philosophical and social-scientific currents, the discipline has turned to examine the physical effectiveness of things, networks, or infrastructures in shaping populations, and the medical and technical regulation of the biological life of these populations.

World-spanning (and world-making) institutions and infrastructures have been opened to ethnographic investigation under the rubrics of technopolitics and biopower. This was no mere scholarly “turn” but was impelled by real forces that included an intense medical and institutional recrafting of humanity itself as a global biological reality (Rees 2014), and the disparate impact of novel machines, techniques, and infrastructures that worked to disaggregate governance, individualize the political subject and materially support new authority for corporate and private actors (e.g., Dumit 2012; Sunder Rajan 2015). Meanwhile new claims on life itself, as the common substance of biological being, and demands for its biological protection or material support (in highly particular ways) emerged and were granted attention as ethnographic and ethical sites for challenging these besetting realities (Petryna 2002; Biehl 2006; von Schnitzler 2013).

The three recent books under review here each open different, perhaps radically so, perspectives on the contemporary anthropology of technopolitics and the political uses of biology, or “life and infrastructure” (to coin a phrase). At first glance these books might not seem comparable: Catherine Fennel’s *Last Project Standing* is a local ethnography of “post-welfare” politics and the (material) reform of public housing in Chicago; Kalinda Vora’s *Life Support* is a partly ethnographic, partly literary-critical study of outsourcing, transnational surrogacy, and “biological labor” in India; and Gaymon Bennett’s *Technicians of Human Dignity* is an examination of a high-level discursive politics of “intrinsic worth” since World War II, revisiting debates over human rights and human dignity at the founding of the UN, at the Second Vatican Council, and in George W. Bush’s President’s Council on Bioethics. Yet read together, they offer distinctive insights not only into their particular fields but also into anthropology’s engagement with contemporary political life in the broadest sense, pushing beyond the now-standard models (the Deleuzian materialist, the feminist-Marxist, the Foucauldian) for examining biopolitics and the material and technical infrastructures that regulate (and relegate) populations and their vitality. Together, these books show us how ethnographers can craft new perspectives on biopolitics and its material processes, by examining the reflective processes through which people understand themselves and others as *persons*, subjects enmeshed not only in material relations but in structured sets of moral ones, too.

Catherine Fennel’s book begins amidst a technopolitical moment of the sort with which we might now think ourselves very familiar: in the context of neoliberal welfare reform in Chicago, in the early and mid 2000s the city’s public housing administration was reorganized to accord with new logics of community empowerment and market-discipline (as well as newly limited budgets), and mass demolitions of older housing projects were begun. What replaced Chicago’s projects, piecemeal, were individualized subsidies for poor people to rent apartments on the private market (vouchers which had been around for a long time), and new developments of “mixed-income” housing designed to integrate (some) former public housing residents into renovated neighborhoods that would also attract middle-class homeowners and private developers. Both reforms had the explicit goal of fostering whole new patterns of civility and everyday sociality—if not through homeownership for the poor, then by mimicking the spatial patterns and enforcing the social routines and diurnal patterns of middle-class neighborhoods. For the “New Urbanist” planners and charitable foundations that advocated for housing reform, the architectural design of the old public projects and their physical decay and social problems were two sides of the same coin, and could only be countered by new forms of self-management and collective concern to be catalyzed by the very design of new public housing on the model of private homes, and by the management discipline imposed by privatized charity.

Fennell argues, by contrast to New Urbanism's focus on material lay-outs, that the success of the new developments—and of any civic future of mutual care—also really depended on sympathetic relations and imaginations that would enabled mutual recognition and civic cooperation among a broader urban citizenry. On this account, while the old projects had in fact provided some basis for mutual concern and forms of sympathy—often through the physical experience of breakdowns and dilapidation—the very materiality and temporality of the housing reforms militated against the formation of such bonds of attachment and care, at least in ways that would have made the housing reforms a success on their own terms (whether or not they were ever intended to succeed is another question altogether). Fennell is careful to show that the kinds of sympathy and attachment formed by the old public housing projects were not simple responses to the physical environment, and therefore were not amenable to reform by demolition and renovation. Moreover, such “old” attachments remain active forces within the new housing, durable as *habitus* and expectation, and continue to be recalled and articulated by relocated public-housing tenants as they forge their own understandings of, and way of life within, the new developments.

These claims are not presented as straightforward contradictions to the notions of organization and formal order, and materiality, integral to the efforts at reform that she studies. Rather, Fennell pins her analysis to a “materialist concept of sympathy” (p. 12) that helps her track how common concerns are provoked by interactions with others, within different material contexts and amidst fluctuating flows of resources. She describes her work as an account of the “physics” of social provision, the ways in which persons and spaces, goods and money, and communities of neighbors and strangers are all mutually constitutive. Through the analysis that these concepts empower, Fennell shows that the success of the new projects depended upon sympathetic participation by and adoption of new forms of sociability among not only former residents of public housing but also other citizens of diverse classes and races. But this was a kind of material participation which became harder to secure in the aftermath of the 2008 housing market collapse, and which easily declined in one direction into defensive protection of property (new forms of property and market-value being the whole point of reforms), and in the other into an empty sentimentality as the last material reminders of public obligation were demolished.

In the last chapter of the book, Fennell takes up this problem of the varying material sources for and depth and durability of sympathetic attachments, to push the limits of her own sophisticated framing of her project as a materialist account. She turns her attention to plans for a national museum of public housing in Chicago (as yet unrealized), related to campaigns for the preservation of a 1930s public housing project

named after the 19th century activist and reformer Jane Addams. It is a significant fact that the “last project standing” is in fact from the 1930s, an earlier moment of social welfare than that which, after civil rights, produced the mass housing of African Americans in urban projects. Places like the Jane Addams houses have a distinct history, as (temporary) pedagogical spaces for (white, ethnic) immigrants who would emerge to build industrial Chicago and settle its suburbs. The barely-preserved materiality of the Addams Houses thus offers a site of civic memory which is frankly exclusionary of the very denizens of public housing who actually need to be rehoused after reform and demolition. Fennell takes care to point out that the planned museum includes the history of black Chicago only as part of a generalized “cultural heritage” (p. 235), and that facts of structural exclusion from homeownership and racial discrimination were generally elided in this planned museum of a mostly demolished material project.

If earlier chapters of Fennell’s book examine truly material, even biological, experiences in public housing—risks to bodily health, dilapidation—that formed the biopolitical ground beneath the legal and political marginalization of black Chicagoans (and the basis for sympathetic attachments and mobilizations for reform), in the last chapter she examines how still-pressing material realities and sympathies now evanesce in a fog of sentiment, not least through museum-ification and social-science reconsiderations of the supposed problems and pathologies of public housing. Sympathy is no longer cultivated in shared experiences, or given purpose by the real stakes of living together in a city, but instead is provoked by imagistic reminders and decayed remainders of a misunderstood past. This leaves Fennell at best ambivalent about whether material sympathies can still forge more inclusive urban relations, and indicates some sort of lesson—not fully spelled out here—about the durability of race in America as the sharp edge where sympathetic relations, in their very materiality, are cut across by other powerful forces that hierarchically order both affective identifications with, and material investments in, black America.

I strongly recommend Fennell’s concluding discussions for close attention by any reader seeking to be better armed against the forced sentiment so often enjoined by talk of decay and decline in the post-industrial Midwest, and wishing to challenge the narrow social and racial limits set on notions of “rust belt” suffering and anomie. The “rust belt” includes inner cities and public housing, too! But on the evidence of her last chapter, even deeply material sympathies and common bonds forged in shared spaces may be fatally compromised by other processes of identification. To be sure, we are now in an political impasse of mutual non-recognition that has become deeper than she could have predicted: we are caught between moralized and racialized narratives of public squalor and urban danger,

and rosy images of a past of industrial solidarity under the penumbra of corporate beneficence (the latter image untroubled by acknowledgement of either biopolitical exclusion or demands for inclusion). These political imaginations both stand in relation to material realities of decay and disinvestment, which could be made the starting point for sympathy and common concern. But racial antipathy and nativist longing for an imagined past maintain stern separations between past and present, and between public and post-industrial forms of ruin. What can connect them up again—to each other, and to contemporary conditions—may not be a materialist concept of sympathy itself, but rather an act of reflection that only truly comparative engagement can provide. Fortunately, Fennell's ethnography provides an internal example of just such reflection, across the temporal lines and material differences that divide old projects from new houses.

Fennell acknowledges often that there is no one outcome of reforms for all the residents of public housing, except for their physical removal from the projects that had stood as both the symbol of state-supported welfare and the crucible of its successes and its supposed pathologies. But in some ways that act of removal and distancing is the most important thing she examines: physical dissociation and distancing from old flows of sympathy and resources provide Fennell's informants with their most pointed understandings of the new housing as well as their most telling insights into the old. They talk not only about what they have lost, but at the same time also reflect on the social life that fills—or fails to—the spaces they now occupy. Fennell's great achievement rests on her ability to capture those critiques of the new housing not as a nostalgia for the old—that kind of thing is the preserve of the social scientists and the museum-advocates in her narrative—but rather as a negotiation of the difference between sympathetic attachments and abstract, sentimentalized obligations to anonymous others. This negotiation between past and future, and reconfiguration of sympathy that it entails, is what grants her ethnography its point. In some respects, since this is an ethnography of post-reform housing, it is an ethnography of what Sarah Franklin (2013) has called in a different context “the after.” For Franklin and, implicitly, for Fennell, coming ethnographically *after* some *thing* that is in the process of being figured as an *event* (after reform here, after IVF for Franklin) necessarily involves a reflective process of historical comparison and moral contrast, for the ethnographer and her informants alike. Such reflection, I would argue, is always culturally richer, and ethnographically more revealing, than an account of the material effects of a technique or the costs and benefits of a political reform alone.

A kind of physics of life that operates within and through material infrastructures, and a complex moral process of reflection and understanding, are both also integral to Kalinda Vora's critical reading of

outsourcing, transnational surrogacy, and affective labor in globalized India. “Strange affinities,” she writes, bind the work of conducting customer service or back-office IT work in India for American businesses and customers, to the biological labor of bearing babies there for foreigners and non-resident Indians to take “home” to the West (p. 19). In both cases, according to Vora, “vital energy” is depleted in one place to provide critical “life support” to plans and projects unspooling elsewhere. She examines one side of these unequal exchanges only, focusing on the training, self-fashioning, and physical labor of birth demanded of and borne by bodies in India. Still, the *transmission* of vital energy, its reciprocal accumulation and depletion in different locations, provides her key analytic metaphor (p. 13), and her use of literary fiction and sociological vignettes allows her to juxtapose images of high-flying corporate elites and everyday American (debt-fueled) consumption practices against the straitened lives and yet equally vast imaginative horizons of service workers in India.

Vora’s analysis in terms of “vital energy” is given particularly force because of her choice to set labor of a very literally embodied sort—the biological labor of pregnancy, “commissioned” by intending parents from far away and compensated by a flat fee—alongside capital flows that are easier to mistake as simply financial and immaterial. Her comparison returns us sharply to the biological substance or embodied materiality of all labor (she builds especially on A. Aneesh’s important account of “virtual migration” as a labor-regime). To have critical purchase, however, beyond the argument that Indians are unfairly paid less for comparable work than people elsewhere might be, the comparison needs to be pushed further than Vora takes it, to highlight the moral work at stake here—the work of comparison and judgment—which generates *values* that legitimate and license transfers of energy. Such values are integral to the cultural production that matters to her, in that they give some people free rein to move and to act while binding others in place and being, and allow both (and others) to reflect on their stations in life. Fortunately, materials exist in Vora’s ethnographic chapter on a surrogacy clinic in Delhi, where Indian surrogates interact with both biotechnologies and “commissioning parents,” that capture just such acts of reflective and reflexive comparison.

Vora introduces us to the surrogates’ own moral aspirations and understandings of the transfer they are engaged in, and with this introduces a critical contrast that buttresses her critique of transnational biocapital as an unequal exchange of vital energy. The surrogates, mostly recruited from rural villages, are shown to hope for and even plan for long-lasting exchanges with their “commissioning parents” (as the clinic calls the other parties to this labor relation). They model their work of surrogacy and the relations they hope to sustain with the commissioning

parents on patron-client relationships with which they are familiar from their own quotidian lives of labor and subordination (pp. 130, 139). Transactions of a durability and quality that would sustain any such (still exploitative) moral economy of long-term relations between parents and surrogates are of course barred in advance by the contracts the surrogates sign and by the organization of the industry in which they perform their biological labor. Moreover, it is only a grim reminder of the legitimation work of globalization that the clinic where Vora worked encouraged the “commissioning parents” to think of the money they paid to their surrogates as charitable donations providing salvation from poverty, and even talked of providing the surrogate mothers with training in managing this payment as a kind of capital extracted from a gift-exchange, rather than a wage (see Coutin, Maurer, and Yngvesson 2002). Vora’s important and surprising observation is that clientage and patronage are real moral possibilities for the surrogates, albeit in ways that are systematically obscured from the commissioning parents. When they imagine long-term relations of clientage, these women also make explicit something that is equally present in the rest of Vora’s material: a yearning for some *relational* return on the work which consumes vital energy. An ethical response to these yearnings for socially-thicker relations might involve explicitly cultivating *patronage* roles for commissioning parents, insofar as such roles would demand mutual engagement by both commissioning parents and surrogates with the fact of material differences between them. Patronage, on these terms, could be a distinct and novel site of moral work and even offer terms for the reconstruction of bioethics beyond the contractual and the transactional.

In this regard, one might also note that the work of the surrogates is *not only* embodied biological labor but is itself enabled by a technological ensemble that is itself the subject of, and in part constituted by, intense and highly professionalized moral debate. These technologies are not just material, reproductive ones: they are also moral technologies. The cultivation of novel relations, interests, and aspirations through their deployment is a part of their very technical efficacy, for those who use them and those who are used by them—even when the realization of those relations may be otherwise blocked or barred. Rather than just a materialist reading of how they transfer “vital energy,” then, such technologies may require a different kind of critique, one that puts the conditions they materially instaurate under the description of distinct and specific moral vocabularies. The point is general, and applies to the communications technologies of outsourcing as well as the reproductive technology of IVF, but it is perfectly exemplified by the way the moral imagination of the surrogates themselves, with their *unsentimental* understanding of patronage, allows us to consider moral possibilities that are opened by, but not reducible to, the configuration of the technology of IVF and its material and legal conditions.

Bennett's book on dignity as way of figuring the human being, and its protection, since World War II, provides an extended study of just such a process of putting material and technical realities under a new description in order to create conditions for acting upon them. He examines processes of "articulating a logic of governance and care that could subsequently be turned into [the] infrastructures and practices" of humanitarian intervention and bioethical regulation (p. 8). Importantly, for him the "figuration" of human dignity in the course of defining distinct institutional and practical aims is what comes *first*, rather than a history of the concept or an account of its practical successes and failures. Thus, he examines throughout his book the "reflective practices undertaken by concerned actors to give articulation to what human dignity means, signifies, and requires" (p. 276).

Much of this is a story of micropolitical negotiations, and of cautious delimitations of legal and political authority. If dignity has won a central place in normative philosophy, Bennett shows just how far it remains from being the universal institutional principle that its advocates claim for it (and neither he nor I are entirely convinced by those claims). But that distance between the articulation of a norm, its immediate conditions, and its potential realization is in fact the point: as an "event in the history of truth and power" dignity is worth studying anthropologically not because it allows us to answer material questions of justice or inclusion, but precisely because it offers a moral principle, an object of ratiocination rather than rationalization, around which a surprising array of actors and actions have gathered, often in response to modernity's most terrible extensions of power over life. As Bennett argues in conclusion, "if talk of human dignity is not identical to the real-world apparatuses that have developed in connection to that talk, one needs to take care not to disregard such talk as utopian" (p. 284).

In Bennett's terms, the task is not to describe epochal shifts in the bases of truth or power in the modern West, or to identify the origins and trajectory of an "age" of dignity. Rather, Bennett shows us dignity as a concept in formation in response to perceived breakdowns in care for human beings and their life, in the wake of and in response to state violence, secularism, or biotechnologies. This focus on breakdown and remediation is what makes his book seem relevant to the vastly different projects and concerns of Fennell and Vora. In both of those works, too, a breakdown is at stake, a failure to sustain life materially—whether because of the neglect and decay of public housing, or because of global inequalities that justify lower compensation for equivalent labor to some kinds of workers—and ethnographer and subjects alike find themselves dealing with the consequences of what only belatedly and through reflection emerge as critical events with significant moral consequences.

All three of these writers seek to provide the basis for a critical

reconstruction of values and mutual obligations in the present. Fennell and Vora turn explicitly to the recent materialisms of affect, infrastructure, and biological life to do so. This is very different from the analysis of reason that Bennett undertakes. The first two projects both build upon broad critical challenges to liberal fictions such as “equality” that have long been pursued by materialisms of various stripes. Both working in contexts that have already been overwritten by ideological (contractual or constitutional) claims of equality, their critical labor brings material structures of inequality into view. Bennett turns the lens around, to see how a liberal fiction of universal dignity retains its form as a “constitutional object” in very different projects of institutionalization. The questions that impose themselves in the context of this reading, however, are these: is Bennett *only* studying a binding abstraction, a discourse, a figuration (as he explicitly says he is); and does this necessarily conflict with a more “materialist” attention to how that discourse is assembled into a larger, more besetting reality, or with a subsequent account of the unanticipated possibilities of action and relation that the new material configuration allows?

Of course, these alternatives are already unduly polarized. But sometimes an overstated dualism is necessary to clarify the shape and limits of an overweening monism. While “materiality” is certainly one way of designating historical processes, and thinking about the forcefulness of bodies and physical energy within them, it is important to remember that as a critical term, a point of intervention which justifies a certain way of organizing data, it has more than one genealogy and meaning. Not so long ago, in a very different critical moment, materiality itself designated the starting point of an uncontrollable proliferation of meaning, while also being a way of shifting the ground under other critical accounts of fixity and certainty. The literary-critical practice of deconstruction once situated “the materiality of the letter” as a marker of the final impossibility of fixing sign to signified, of sense to substance; in this regard, Mark Greif (2015) has recently noted how important it is to recall that deconstruction was itself part of a long reaction against reparative attempts to secure some essence for “Man,” some kernel of life and reason that would not be corrigible under the impact of overawing technical and political forces. New materialisms gain many of their important insights from this lineage in which deconstruction stands at the branching point of, precisely, a newly materialist challenge to technical determination and fixity. They too use materiality to mark the starting point for a proliferation of possibility, and make—like the whole philosophical and political movement of which deconstruction was a part—a virtue of indeterminacy and anti-essentialism. In this earlier moment, however, Stanley Cavell asked his critical colleagues to reconsider this move of playing indeterminacy against determination. If indeterminacy promised to free readers from illusions of essential meaning and humanistic finality, Cavell noted, we might first wish

to be sure that the politics of this promise were “based on a true knowledge of what our illusions are” (Cavell 1982: 178).

Our illusions today have little to do with the essential qualities of “Man” or even of some group of people—against which indeterminacy would be a useful weapon—and even less to do with formal promises of liberal equality, in which case another materialism would be just the critical tool we might need. What illusions we have, I would wager, have to do with the potential and power of life itself (or sympathy, or affect—whatever it is, it is bodily and non-intellectual) to transform given conditions. Such potentials are said to emerge from and repair the material fixity of besetting material institutions and infrastructures. But Fennell, Vora, and Bennett indicate, by contrast, that the really significant unknown, one ever-obscured by false confidence in our knowledge equipment, is about what differently located and constituted persons actually understand to be the substance of their happiness, and how they orient their action toward that goal within and through material and technical conditions (“the substance of their happiness,” remember, is what Malinowski said the true object of ethnography ought to be). The people at issue in any given ethnography these days might include theologians, or defenders of universal human rights, or subalterns in the contemporary empire of science and technology, or the subjects of neoliberal programs of control. But what remains important is that their self-understandings are responsive to existing moral accounts of the relations that are possible, desirable, and materially sustainable for the kind of person they happen to be in the world in which they live. This self-understanding is built up over time through negotiations with the material realities of life and the judgments and assessments of others, and the moral accounts on which such people draw are in turn always under revision, or subject or repudiation. But figures of justice, morality, and solidarity—which these ethnographies show us are indeed given point and purpose by material experiences and structures of exploitation—do not stand opposed to materiality, or as the exhausted alternative to potential, but rather are the very resources with which persons can arrive at some common understanding, and set to work anew on the material conditions they inevitably share.

Leo Coleman is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Hunter College, City University of New York. His book [A Moral Technology: Electrification as Political Ritual in New Delhi](#) is forthcoming from Cornell University Press. leo.coleman@hunter.cuny.edu

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