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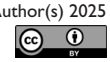

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New materialism, whiteness and the politics of vitality: Rethinking activity/passivity in critical security studies

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Abstract

New materialist thought has become particularly influential in critical security studies over the past decade. Advocating for an understanding of security that comprises and does justice to the vibrant, unpredictable and active role of materiality, scholars have significantly contributed to an array of debates within critical security studies. Engaging with post/decolonial, critical race studies and feminist literatures, this article offers a critique of new materialism that focuses on its embracement of ideas of vitality, activity and movement as a way to overcome modernity's pervasive subject/object dualisms. My argument is that this stance risks reifying an activity/passivity hierarchy that has been centrally interwoven with colonial, racial and gendered dynamics of subjugation. The idea is that new materialism's incisive critique has often failed to interrogate colonial modernity's abjection of passivity itself, a process that has been paramount in the historical production and securing of whiteness. This article's goal, however, is not only to push the analytical and political boundaries of new materialism. By rethinking the racial-colonial underpinnings of this activity/passivity hierarchy, the article also offers promising research avenues for critical security studies which help us understand and interrogate racial-colonial security structures and practices of policing, violence and exploitation.

Keywords

Activity/passivity, coloniality, new materialism, race, security, whiteness

Introduction

Over the past decade, international relations scholars have shown interest in opening the discipline to the agency of the material and non-human world. This emerging interest has been addressed by some in the discipline as a 'material turn' (Amicelle et al., 2015). Commonly associated with the new materialist literature, this scholarship has been advocating for a more serious analytical and

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theoretical engagement with the political role of objects, animals, technology, infrastructure, materiality, etc. Critical of the discipline's overreliance on discourse and language – particularly after the success of constructivist and post-structuralist approaches – as a way of understanding international politics, new materialists have convincingly argued for the political salience of the non-human/material world. Rather than an amorphous, passive aspect of international politics, the non-human world is regarded as agential, vibrant and animate.

This impulse towards materiality has been particularly influential in critical security studies. Inspired by new materialist thought, authors have proposed new forms of understanding and investigating security that go beyond the predominant discursive and/or linguistic frameworks employed by critical scholars in the field. Advocating for an understanding of security that comprises and does justice to the vibrant, unpredictable and active role of the material world in security studies, new materialist scholars have significantly contributed to an array of debates within security studies, including but not limited to discussions around critical infrastructure security (Aradau, 2010; Lundborg and Vaughan-Williams, 2011), border security (Boyce, 2016; du Plessis, 2018; Squire, 2014), war and intervention (Cudworth and Hobden, 2015; Holmqvist, 2013; Leep, 2018; du Plessis, 2017) and so forth. This has led critical security studies scholars to look more attentively at actors that were routinely overlooked in the literature or simply understood within more instrumental frameworks, such as animals, objects, bodies, drones, pathogens, technology and weaponry. Slicing across such contributions is a desire to uncover the active, affective and political nature of the material/non-human world in security processes, that is, the ways in which matter indeed *matters*.

Despite new materialism's revolutionary emergence and following consolidation in the social sciences and international relations as a theoretical and analytical perspective over the last decade, it has often been critiqued for its purported lack of engagement with more pressing political issues. In particular, new materialist scholarship has been accused of underrepresenting issues related to race and colonialism (Hinton et al., 2015; Jackson, 2020; Weheliye, 2014), failing to 'explore the historical mechanisms and interrelationships between nonhuman agency and human exploitation'(Taylor, 2023: 157) within colonial-racial systems of domination. Building upon such works, this article points to a central limitation underlying new materialism as a *political* and *critical* project. My argument focuses specifically on the idea – prevalent especially in new materialist vitalist strands – that the attribution of agentic vitality and activity to the non-human/material world leads to the dismantling of a Eurocentric and masculinist modern order predicated on the objectification and abjection of (gendered, racialized and non-human) bodies. As the article demonstrates, the idea that the abjection of the non-human/material world can be overcome through an onto-epistemology that reassesses it as vital and in motion *still* reproduces a certain activity/passivity hierarchy that has been centrally interwoven with colonial, racial, gendered and anthropocentric processes of subjugation and objectification. More specifically, I argue that this move reinscribes the colonial figure of a (mobile, active and powerful) 'white bourgeois Man' (Wynter, 2003) as the very ideal to be attained by bodies and entities that have been *objectified* by colonial and patriarchal orders (e.g. nature, matter and – racialized and gendered – bodies). The idea here is that, although new materialism has rightly challenged modernity's objectifying gaze, it has frequently failed to interrogate the *abjection* of passivity that accompanies this process. In doing so, it has unwittingly reproduced and sometimes naturalized colonial modernity's embracing and celebration of activity, mobility and vitality in such a way that erases how this attachment has been deployed politically as a colonial, gendered and anthropocentric tool of subjugation and exploitation.

This article draws inspiration from a long lineage of postcolonial and critical race studies in critical security studies and international relations (to name but a few, Agathangelou and Ling, 2004;

Anievas et al., 2014; Barkawi, 2016; Biswas, 2018; Gani, 2021; Geeta and Nair, 2013; Krishna, 2001; Manchanda and Rossdale, 2021; Sabaratnam, 2013), which have been persistently uncovering and interrogating the multiple ways in which international security is enmeshed with coloniality and racism. More specifically, this article gives continuity to recent postcolonial critiques that have illuminated how critical security studies theoretical frameworks and concepts reproduce whiteness and civilizationism, many of which were published in this journal (see Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2019; 2020; Manchanda, 2021). In light of their work, this article performs three main tasks. First, it contributes to a broader and transdisciplinary process of interrogation of new materialism that challenges not only its lack of engagement with dynamics of race, colonialism and whiteness but also its onto-epistemological commitments and assumptions (see Hokowhitu, 2021; Magnat, 2022; Panelli, 2010; Sullivan, 2012; Sundberg, 2014). Second, and relatedly, the article seeks to pave the way for a more constructive rapprochement between new materialism *and* post- and decolonial and race studies in critical security studies. The idea here is to provide an approach to race and coloniality in critical security studies that is methodologically attentive to the role of 'materiality' in security dynamics of racialization and coloniality *without, however, taking for granted colonial modernity's embracing of and longing for activity and vitality.* And, finally, the article offers analytical contributions to international relations and critical security studies by offering an account of the links between racialized dynamics of security and what I call here the 'abjection of passivity'. More simply put, it offers promising research avenues for critical security studies that connect colonial modernity's activity/passivity hierarchy to racial-colonial structures of policing, violence and exploitation.

This article is divided into three main parts. First, I introduce the new materialist reaction to modern dualisms in social sciences and critical security studies – especially to representationalism – and assess what I call here its vitalist politics as a form of surpassing anthropocentric subject/object, human/non-human and language/matter divides. In doing so, I highlight both its *onto-epistemological* underpinnings and *political* nature. Second, in conversation with post- and decolonial thought, critical race studies and feminist literatures, the article formulates a critique of new materialism's 'vitalist politics', exposing its onto-epistemological limitations and (colonial and racial) erasures and empirically illustrating them. The article then explores the political and analytical potentials of interrogating what I call the activity/passivity hierarchy in critical security studies by introducing avenues for future research.

New materialism and the vitality of matter

> Conceiving matter as possessing its own modes of self-transformation, self-organization, and directedness, and thus no longer as simply *passive* or *inert*, disturbs the conventional sense that agents are exclusively humans. (Coole and Frost, 2010: 10, emphasis added)

> If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated. (Bennett, 2010: 13)

New materialists have been particularly critical of the so-called dualist ontology advanced by representationalism within social sciences. According to new materialists, this dualist approach to the world has been particularly pervasive not only in post-structuralist and constructivist works but in critical scholarship overall (Barad, 2003). In representationalism, the focus tends to rely on how objects, things, or physical reality are represented or interpreted within social discourse. Materiality, in this sense, only matters when it is invested with social meaning. The idea is that, because all our contact with the physical world is mediated by language/discourse, we only have access to our *representation* of the world and not to things themselves (see for instance Butler, 2011). As a result,

rather than looking at materiality itself, representationalist scholars will often focus on society's representations of the material world and the consequences those generate in terms of politics. This can be summarized in Barad's (2003: 801) iconic words:

> 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.

For new materialist scholarship, representationalist frameworks reproduce a deeply anthropocentric posture that is predicated on questionable divides between human/non-human, discourse/matter, culture/nature and, centrally here, subject/object. It does so by sustaining a dualist understanding of the world in which the so-called human side – which includes notions of culture, representation and discourse – has all the power and agency to the detriment of a passive and powerless material/non-human world. Representationalism, in other words, is said to embody a particularly modern and Eurocentric understanding of humanness that is not only distinct from nature and materiality but also exceptional in its agentic capacities (Braidotti, 2013; Nayar, 2013). The image of discourse and language in representationalism, in summary, is said to mirror a particularly masculinist and Eurocentric image of humanness that has been historically associated with European Enlightenment and modernity as both an episteme and a political and social order (Frost, 2011; Hird, 2004; van der Tuin, 2011). Matter, on the other hand, is assigned what new materialists conceptualize as a 'feminized' role, that is, a passive, empty and amorphous position of subjugation. Representationalism, therefore, is said to reproduce a foundational *subject/object divide* that has been centrally interwoven with modernity's onto-episteme. This divide, it is argued, continually assigns to the (hu)man a position of agential mastery vis-à-vis a *passive* and governable non-human world – including here nature, animality and materiality. This onto-epistemological position, new materialists rightly note, impacts how 'humans' *ethically* and *politically* relate to the 'non-human' world, naturalizing a relation based on mastery, appropriation, possession and exploitation.

Although, as mentioned before, new materialism is a heterogeneous and malleable body of literature, it is possible to say that there is in new materialism an underlying desire to challenge modernity's anthropocentric subject/object dualisms, 'reintegrating human knowledge back into the material world' (Taylor, 2023: 153). This commitment can be seen in new materialist onto-epistemological contributions, which have often pushed against representationalism's dualisms in favour of an anti-hierarchical and monist ontology that questions the a priori separation between human and non-human, subject and object, language (or mind) and matter, and so forth. This ontological shift has been often accompanied by the challenging of the longstanding equation of matter with ideas of passivity within modern thought. Matter, in new materialism, is reassessed as 'an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable' (Coole and Frost, 2010: 9). Matter, more simply put, is seen as 'agentic' even if this agency is not necessarily seen as 'volitional', challenging, as a result, 'the presumption of an inert, malleable world onto which our interests and designs are impressed'(Washick et al., 2015: 64).

Even though the meaning of agency itself varies within new materialism, thus, there is an overarching understanding that what has been deemed 'matter' within modern thought and representationalism writ large *should not* be seen as passive, inert, dead, or motionless, but 'agentic'. This becomes particularly noticeable in Bennett's vitalist approach, where matter is seen as possessing an agentic vitality of its own, a certain immanent vibrancy, as it were (Bennett, 2010). As the author explains in her seminal book '*Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things'*, her aim

'is to theorize a vitality intrinsic to materiality as such, and to detach materiality from the figures of *passive*, mechanistic, or divinely infused substance' (Bennett, 2010: XIII, emphasis added). The attempt to challenge materiality's 'passivity' and bring to the fore its vital, aleatory and dynamic nature is also visible in other central new materialist theorizations. Coole (2013: 453), for instance, while introducing her new materialist conception of ontology, suggests that matter 'is not, then, the dead, inert, passive matter .... Matter is lively, vibrant, dynamic.' Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin also refuse modernity's understanding of the non-human world as an inert receptacle of meaning, highlighting that meaning-making always 'takes place on a two-way track' (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012: 110).

Centrally here, challenging the deadness, passivity and inertness of matter within modern subject/object dualisms is not *simply* part of an onto-epistemological and methodological project. As new materialists often suggest, there is also an underlying *political* and *ethical* ethos to this project. The removal of matter – and other objectified bodies – from this passive position of subjection plays a central political role within new materialism. First, it pushes scholars to look at the role of what was often seen as 'dead' matter in *political* process of governance and exploitation within contemporary global capitalism (Connolly, 2013). It poses the question: how can we have a richer understanding of political and 'social' processes by looking at the material world as an 'active' domain of our realities? Second, and this becomes particularly evident in feminist new materialisms, the so-called 'emancipation' of matter from this passive role within modernity is assessed as a part of a broader 'feminist' politics of emancipation (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012: 93). Implicit here is the understanding that the 'celebration of the body and materiality – those aspects normally associated with the feminine – would overturn a gender hierarchy that has always attributed active mind to man and passive body to woman' (Colebrook, 2008: 59). In other words, if the woman is reduced to 'bodily' existence, then questioning the passivity of the body is essential to question the myth of women's passivity itself (see Frost, 2011: 72). Third, the reassessment of matter as agentive also plays an important role in new materialism's political and ethical project by challenging modernity's subject/object, human/nature and human/animal divides. Such divides often posit the 'human' as a masterful and agential entity entitled to possess, govern and exploit the 'non-human' world. Confronting this dualist view of the world through a focus on a shared understanding of agency, new materialism pushes for an immanent ethical human/non-human relation that extends – rather than dissipates – our ethical commitment to and accountability for the 'non-human/material' world (See for instance Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013; Conty, 2018; Coole, 2013; Washick et al., 2015).

The 'material turn' in critical security studies: Materiality and the production of (in)security

The reassessment of matter as vital, animate and dynamic within new materialism has played a significant role in critical security studies over the past decade, as part of a so-called 'material turn' (Amicelle et al., 2015; Mutlu, 2013). In critical security studies, new materialism's emergence has been framed as a response to theories and methodological approaches that prioritize language and discourse in their understanding of security. In representational approaches to security, one often starts from the ways in which things, bodies and events are linguistically/discursively constructed *as* threats or simply otherized in such a way that leads to practices of violence, policing, war, etc. This is particularly noticeable in securitization theory (Buzan et al., 1998; Buzan and Wæver, 2009), which focuses more deeply on the linguistic construction of threat, and in post-structuralist and social constructivist scholarship, which in turn prioritizes discursive processes of othering and their security implications (see for instance Hansen, 2006; Zehfuss, 2002). As Aradau (2010: 493, emphasis added) argues when addressing the idea of securitization in critical security studies:

> Securitization has been seen as largely part of the linguistic and social constructivist turn in international relations .... As performative and intersubjective practice, securitization has largely *ignored the role of 'things' in the articulation of insecurities.*

Inspired by new materialist onto-epistemologies, critical security studies scholars have been more and more open to the 'agentic capacities' of non-human agents in their analyses. A desire to illuminate how security practices affect and are affected by non-human/material objects, things, animals, etc. has contributed to the emergence of a body of insightful and innovative works (see for instance Salter, 2015, 2016) Those authors share, on one hand, the understanding that security practices in international politics cannot be restricted to mere discursive or representational theoretical and analytical frameworks (Lundborg and Vaughan-Williams, 2015). And, on the other, they share the belief that security regimes are essentially constituted of a complex interaction of dynamic and affective human/non-human circuits and networks (Acuto and Simon, 2014; Aradau, 2010; Austin, 2019; Bengtsson et al., 2019; Hochmüller, 2023; Madianou, 2019; Wiertz, 2021). In short, this scholarship opens critical security studies and international relations theory as a whole to the indeterminate and complex role of 'matter', evidencing the way matter is not a mere receptacle of discourse, but has a certain *vitality* of its own. This becomes particularly visible in Leese and Hoijtink's (2019: 2) description of the agential role of technology in security studies:

> Technologies are political agents – not in a liberal sense that would presuppose that they act as conscious subjects whose actions are predicated upon volition and free will, but in the sense that they have effects on political action.

Within new materialist scholarship in critical security studies, particular attention has been given to the active and vitalist role of material objects in critical infrastructure. Drawing on both Barad and Bennett, for instance, Aradau (2010: 505) argues that '[I]nfrastructures are not simply out there, passive objects waiting to be secured in order for societies to function smoothly. Infrastructures break down, fail, corrode, rust or, as the case may be, stop flowing, leak, outflow, seep, and so on.' In other words, they actively produce and police borders between persons, locations and objects. Similarly, Tom Lundborg and Nick Vaughan-Williams' vitalist approach advocates for a materialist perspective of critical infrastructure in international relations that is open to the *vitality* of objects. Drawing on Bennett's work, the authors 'analyse the ways in which the *objects* of CIs (Critical Infrastructures) do not form part of an inert backdrop for practices of (in) securitization, but are *themselves* active in the management of flows' (Lundborg and Vaughan-Williams, 2011). This concern with the vitalist nature of materiality in critical infrastructure is also noticeable in Martin Coward's theorization of the inextricable connections between contemporary urbanization and global security (Coward, 2009). For the author, any understanding of political subjectivity and security in international relations needs to take into consideration the political and active role of the objects of critical infrastructure (Coward, 2009: 413).

This vitalist approach to materiality has also contributed significantly to theorizations and analyses of border and migration security. Inspired by new materialist accounts of materiality's active and dynamic agency, authors have explored how non-human objects and artefacts 'affect and mediate military, surveillance or police operations, and how this mediation in turn conditions the composition and geography of state practice' (Boyce, 2016: 246). Gitte du Plessis, for instance, looks at the ways in which pathogens play an active role in producing 'real borders that are not dependent on human meaning-making or identity, while also not being detached from these' (du Plessis, 2018: 393). Similarly, authors have looked at the active roles of other non-human agents such as dirt (Nyers, 2012), plants and animals (Brito, 2024; Pallister-Wilkins,

2022; Sundberg, 2008), trash (Squire, 2014), landscape and border posts (Frowd, 2014), etc. in dynamics of border security.

New materialist understandings of vitalist agency have also contributed significantly to debates on critical animal studies in critical security studies, a body of literature that has been excavating the historical and contemporary roles of animals in wars and policing (Cudworth and Hobden, 2015; Fougner, 2021; Leep, 2018; Mitchell, 2014). Other scholars have emphasized the role of military robotics, artificial intelligence and drones in current warfare, elucidating the ways in which it complexifies common understandings of sovereignty and human agency (Brandimarte, 2023; Holmqvist, 2013; Walters, 2014; Wilcox, 2017a). Inspired by new materialist understandings of matter's vibrancy, scholars in critical security studies have also questioned the 'instrumental understanding of weapons that would see their design and uses emanating straightforwardly from purposive human intentions' (Bousquet et al., 2017: 3) and have argued for a deeper inquiry into the material agency of weapons beyond understandings of human volition (see for instance du Plessis, 2017; Bousquet, 2017). Finally, new materialist literature in international relations has also pushed critical security studies to reckon with the agency of the body as a locus of action, mobilization and resistance in dynamics of war and security (Palestrino, 2022; Wilcox, 2015), challenging previous conception of the body as a passive and inert receptacle of power and discourse.

The 'material turn' in critical security studies, ergo, relies upon new materialism's reassessment of 'matter' – including here non-human animals, objects, things, etc. – as an active, animate and vital part of security. Rather than a passive receptacle of meaning, critical security studies scholars have unearthed the ways in which matter is 'actively' entwined with practices and dynamics of (in) security globally. As this scholarship has rightly argued, recalibrating matter as vital and dynamic brings more texture to contemporary analysis of international security and draws our attention to the multiple, complex and affective human/non-human interactions – or intra-actions, to use Barad's parlance (Barad, 2007: 141). New materialism's challenging of matter's feminized position of passivity and inertness, thus, has operated as a revolutionary force within critical security studies, changing the ways in which the field understands the enactment of (in)security. Bearing that in mind, the next section looks more specifically at this embracing of materiality's dynamism and vitality (Colebrook, 2008) within the 'material turn', a trend that is particularly visible in vitalist strands of the literature. In so doing, the section assesses the political and critical limitations of this move and interrogates to which extent it risks unwittingly reproducing a colonial and patriarchal modern order that privileges activity and vitality over passivity and inertia.

Colonialism, race and the abjection of passivity

> as long as the 'life' of vital matter is deemed to be creative, productive, and intensive, then we remain caught in an age-old moral resistance to those aspects of life that remain without relation, thereby repeating the *gender binary that privileges act and production over inertia and passivity.* (Colebrook, 2008:56, emphasis added)

The previous section has engaged with new materialism's interrogation of materiality's passivity, showing its onto-epistemological underpinnings and explaining how this turn to 'matter' has been manifested in critical security studies. In this section, I argue that new materialist abjection of passivity and celebration of vitality in critical security studies risks not only reproducing methodological whiteness (Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2020: 11; Machold and Charrett, 2021: 44) but also eliding central dynamics and structures of coloniality, racism and whiteness that pervade how (in) security is performed (Baker, 2021). Specifically, I contend that, by ignoring the racial, colonial and gendered underpinnings of the activity/passivity divide, new materialist thought tends to

'abstract' (Roland Birkvad and Stoffel, 2023) and indeed 'sanitize' colonial violence (Krishna, 2001; Sabaratnam, 2020: 12).

To start with, it is central to reiterate that new materialism's concern with the assigned passivity of matter within modernity is not of mere philosophical interest. New materialist scholars, particularly within feminist strands, understand that the 'Cartesian understanding of the passivity of matter was figured in racialized, gendered and class terms that in turn were used to justify racial, gender and class inequities' (Frost, 2011: 72). Within this modern episteme, women, racialized people and 'lower' classes were associated with the *passive* body, and, thus, 'subject to the determinations of the biological or animal functions of the body and as vulnerable to a kind of a behavioral determinism' (Frost, 2011: 72). More simply put, modernity has historically underpinned a masculinist and colonial order that separates bodies into 'active' subjects (white bourgeois men) and 'passive' and 'objectified' bodies (gendered and racialized bodies). To dismantle this subject/object binary, it has been argued, one must therefore 'challenge the very notion that matter is passive' (Frost, 2011: 72), bringing the inherent and immanent 'vitality', 'dynamism' and 'activity' of matter to the fore – a position that becomes particularly prevalent in new materialism's vitalist strands.

While it is undeniable that the turn to matter's vitality has been analytically, ontologically and politically salient, as I have shown above, I argue here that it is still central to pay closer attention to what I call a certain activity/passivity hierarchy that is sometimes reproduced by new materialist literature. My point here is that, while new materialist thought has convincingly interrogated the modern subject/object dualisms that underlie modernity's onto-episteme, it has been less concerned with interrogating what I call here the *abjectification* of passivity and related ideas of inertness, inactivity, etc. As I have explained, more often, the attempt to dissolve this subject/object dualism occurs through an elevation of matter – and, as a consequence, modernity's objectified bodies – towards a position of vitality, motion, activity and vibrancy. The underpinning idea, thus, is that to resist and challenge the abjection of matter, one must detach it from its 'passive' position. The problem here, however, as Colebrook (2008: 59, emphasis added) explains, is that, despite new materialism's important critique of matter's abjection, 'what we have not overturned, though, is *a horror of the inert*, the unproductive, and the radically different: that which cannot be comprehended, enlivened, rendered fertile or dynamic'.

My argument here is that the overt and conscious embracing of vitality as a way to dissolve modernity's violent subject/object dualisms and challenge matter's abjection still seems to conserve a fundamental hierarchy intact. Despite the fact that new materialist scholarship challenges the abjection of 'matter', *it does not seem to go as far as challenging the normative abjection of 'passivity' itself associated with it*. Passivity – and here I include associated ideas such as inactivity, motionlessness, inanimateness, etc – is still assigned an inferior position, something to be overcome and detached from. More succinctly put, this vitalist politics does not deeply question the gendered and racialized agency/passivity hierarchy cultivated within modernity. In its stead, it once again repositions ideas of activity, vibrancy and vitality as the hierarchically superior pole vis-à-vis feminized and racialized ideas of, inter alia, passivity, inactivity and inertness. The problem with this position, as Braunmühl (2018: 231) astutely observes, is that 'declaring nature or matter to be just as active, or similarly active, as culture or mind . . . reinforces the privilege which activity tends to be accorded vis-à-vis passivity within masculinist discourse'. In doing so, it risks unwittingly reproducing a modern rationale that has been central to colonial and racial capitalist orders, wherein passivity is both *abjected* and *assigned* to racialized and gendered bodies.

To summarize, I suggest that, although new materialism rightly points to the ways in which matter has been deemed passive and, thereby, inferior, there has been less effort devoted to: 1) understanding *why* and/or *how* passivity becomes deemed 'inferior', and 2) breaking with the

association between passivity and/as inferiority. The critique of modern subject/object, human/non-human dualisms instigated by new materialism, thus, does not lead us to a critique of the patriarchal and colonial activity/passivity hierarchies that underpin them but once again reinstates the 'natural' supremacy of activity. As a result, it replicates a common understanding that colonial modernity's gendered, racialized and 'non-human' others (passive) *should be brought into modern civilization* (active) (see Behera et al., 2021: 11; Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2020, 7). As I explain below in more detail, beyond pushing the onto-epistemological and political boundaries of new materialist thought, exploring and challenging the primacy given to activity also allows for a deeper understanding of whiteness, coloniality and racialization under colonial modernity and racialized capitalism.

The 'lazy', 'motionless' and 'uncivilized' racialized other

Postcolonial accounts of security have long emphasized how colonial and racial hierarchies structure global dynamics of war, policing, violence and surveillance (Barkawi and Laffey, 2006; Machold and Charrett, 2021; Manchanda and Rossdale, 2021). Challenging the long enmeshment of security studies with Eurocentrism and coloniality, for instance, scholars have shown how racialized constructions of rational/irrational, civilized/barbaric, secular/religious, saviour/victim, etc. shape dynamics of security globally and reproduce colonial and racial capitalist structures of dominance (Agathangelou and Ling, 2004). This has been accompanied by an effort to uncover how seemingly neutral concepts such as 'sovereignty', 'anarchy', 'war', 'security', 'humanitarianism', etc. are permeated by civilizationist and colonial assumptions (Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2020; Manchanda, 2021; Sabaratnam, 2020). This section gives continuity to these debates by uncovering how the almost intuitive embracing of 'activity' and rejection of 'passivity' – often celebrated within new materialist thought – intersects with historical and persistent colonial and racial systems of (in)security and oppression.

The production of racialized bodies as 'objects', that is, as non- or less-than-human 'things' to be mastered, possessed and exploited, has been a central topic within postcolonial, decolonial and critical race literatures. Singh (2017), for instance, explains that colonial modernity has been foundationally predicated on the construction of racialized, gendered and 'non-human' bodies as passive 'objects'. As the author explains, the production of such entities as non-human 'things' was fundamental to the simultaneous co-production of whiteness – as Wynter's White bourgeois man – as the very equivalent of modern agency, that is, a powerful, mobile and vital entity that was destined to master the world. This process is also addressed by Aimé Césaire as a process of 'thingification' in his seminal *Discourse on Colonialism* (Césaire, 2000). For the author, the colonial encounter fosters whiteness' sense of superiority by essentially producing the colonized as a 'thing' that 'cannot possess civilization or a culture equal to that of the imperialists' (Kelley, 2000: 9).

The objectification of racialized bodies as passive and, *thereby*, inferior, however, only makes sense within an order wherein *passivity itself* – and, with it, ideas of inertness, motionlessness and inactivity – is deemed inferior. And here lies an important dimension of colonial objectification that is often missed by the literature. The politics of objectification within colonial modernity *necessarily* involves what I call here the enforcement of an activity/passivity hierarchy that privileges activity (masculine and white) over passivity (feminized and racialized). The superiority assigned to activity within colonial modernity's onto-episteme has been central to European imperial and colonial projects, allowing for an image of Europe's 'white civilization' as superior due to its purported capacity to act, move, produce, etc. As Braunmühl explains, within colonial modernity, to be a subject 'is to be worth more than an object because *one is capable of activity or has "agency"*'

(Braunmühl, 2018: 233). More circumspectly put, what Wynter (2003) conceptualizes as the figure of the 'white bourgeois man', or 'the masculinist, bourgeois, Eurocentric subject of Western philosophy' (2003: 233), comes into being as a superior entity within colonial modernity due to, among other things, his self-professed and purported 'unique' inclination to activity, mobility, progress, etc. Racialized, feminized and non-human entities, as representative of modernity's objectified *others*, in turn, have been rendered abject through their association with abjectified notions of passivity, inertness, inanimateness, etc. which reinforced their status as 'inferior' and incapable of subjecthood.

The designing and reproduction of an activity/passivity hierarchy within colonial modernity, however, has not been rooted in fixed understandings of what both terms mean. The terms activity or passivity are not 'fixed', and their meanings are flexible enough so that they can mean different things in different contexts, allowing what Quijano (2007) calls 'white civilization' to be continually positioned 'at the top', as an ideal to be followed by its objectified others. This flexible and abjectified outsider has been operating as a constitutive outsider to 'whiteness', being therefore central to the constitution and maintenance of whiteness as an active, mobile and *superior* entity. In constituting and elevating whiteness, this political phenomenon has been central to colonial and racial capitalist orders, reproducing and policing a racial structure centred around white supremacy (da Silva, 2007; Wynter, 2003).

One central example of this process of abjection of 'passivity' can be found in the colonial production of the colonized other as 'lazy' and 'idle', that is, a body that showed 'little love for work (and) lack of activity'(Alatas, 1977: 71). This so-called 'ideology of indolence was necessary to perpetuate control in the colony, and eventually across what is to become the Global South' (Radics, 2022: 134). As Radics (2022: 135) explains, European and US colonizers would often impose a view of Indigenous people's habits and cultural values as the very expression of their 'idle' and 'lazy' nature and as impeditive for their ascendance towards civilization. Being cast as 'lazy' also symbolized, in the colonial imaginary, the closeness of Indigenous populations to 'savagery' and 'animality' and their consequent distance from modernity's civilization, purportedly predicated on 'superior' values of activity, industriousness and labour (Alatas, 1977). The politics behind the association of such people with inactivity is not to be missed. By simultaneously abjecting laziness – often conflated with Indigenous behaviours that challenged their economic exploitation by colonialism – and promoting 'industriousness' as an ideal to be emulated, the idea was to enforce a racial capitalist system based on racial exploitation (Melamed, 2015: 80). The internalization of 'civilization', in this sense, has been portrayed as a passage from inactivity and laziness towards activity and progress, a process that pushes Indigenous populations closer to 'modern civilization' (Taylor-Neu et al., 2019). This colonial 'ideology of indolence', which portrays indigenous people as 'lazy', 'inactive' and 'indolent' and, therefore, *inferior*, continues to this day (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999: 53–54), reinforcing the racial otherness of Indigenous populations and reproducing white supremacy.

Another instance of this process can be seen in the very ideology of 'progressive time' that has been foundational to colonial modernity (Agathangelou, 2024; Al-Saji, 2013). The production of a linear timeline that places whiteness as temporally advanced vis-à-vis its racialized and colonized others plays a central role in the global affirmation of whiteness as a superior entity. This process of 'temporal othering' is premised on the understanding that racialized people are not simply temporally backwards but also that they are incapable of temporally 'moving' forward (Ngo, 2019). They are, in other words, reduced to a position of 'temporal' inertia that purportedly explains their position of 'inferiority'. As Hunfeld (2022: 105) explains, 'under the colonisers' master narrative of time, the colonized were positioned in "an anterior stage in the history of the species, in this unidirectional path" and thus imagined as inferior latecomers, backwards, and as vestiges of the

past'. Once again, the idea here is that temporal movement and progress – which is not accidentally equated with white civilization itself – is *in itself* 'superior', while temporal stillness and inertia are abjectified and assigned to racialized and colonized others. This activity/passivity hierarchy, thus, is pivotal for this process of 'temporal racialization' to take place, allowing for a construction of non-white bodies and cultures as not only 'stuck' in the past but also irremediably inferior. At the same time, this process reproduces colonial and paternalist understandings that it is only through access to white civilization that such 'inferior' civilization will be able to progress temporally and challenge their purported 'inertia'.

A third dimension of this hierarchical divide between activity/passivity can be seen in the settler colonial desire for movement and motion and rejection of geographical fixity or inertia. This becomes particularly noticeable in the association of 'natives' with the idea of 'stasis' that structured the colonial encounters with Indigenous populations. This process generated a figure of the 'native' within the colonial imaginary as not only frozen in the past but also geographically 'static', that is, essentially constricted to their land or even as part of the land itself (Engelhard, 2023; Mandani, 2012). The construction of the 'native' as a motionless entity has been a central aspect of settler colonialism, 'producing an understanding of the Native as inert and less than fully human, which (was) coupled with attempts to materially fix some people in place'.(Engelhard, 2023: 21) The geographical fixity of the 'native' has been, in turn, a defining aspect of their inferior status within colonial modernity, enabling settler colonial dynamics of subjugation that depended upon the containment of 'natives' in geographically delimited reserves (Mandani, 2012). Furthermore, the inferiority attributed to stasis has also allowed whiteness to define its settler colonial endeavours around the globe as part of its superior drive to movement, motion and progress.

New materialism, thus, has played a central role in challenging colonial modernity's objectification of the world by driving our attention to the ways in which purported inert bodies 'vibrate' and 'matter'. However, its critical ethos has been partially limited by a certain reproduction of an activity/passivity hierarchy that has been central to the colonial positioning of whiteness as a progressive and superior entity. The embracing of vitality within new materialism often reproduces a teleological and progressive colonial order wherein whiteness – as the very embodiment of agency and power – is positioned as an ideal to be followed and attained. As I have shown, the violent process of objectification of racialized bodies within colonial modernity, after all, relies on the hierarchical positioning of ideas of movement, motion and activity – often associated with whiteness – as inherently superior. This hierarchy has been centrally interwoven with colonial systems of oppression, enabling and reproducing racial capitalist and white supremacist orders of subjugation and dominance. Challenging the privilege of activity and abjection of passivity, thus, allows us not only to assess another dimension of coloniality, but also to *interrogate* the very basis upon which whiteness has been constructed as superior.

Decolonizing new materialism? Beyond methodological whiteness

Challenging new materialism's reproduction of this activity/passivity hierarchy can also be seen as contributing to a broader movement of decolonization of new materialism within social sciences. This movement has not only questioned some of new materialism's onto-epistemological commitments but has also questioned the field of study's overall elision of questions of race, power and coloniality (Panelli, 2010; Puar, 2012). Sullivan (2012), for instance, formulates a critique of what she conceptualizes as new materialism's 'white optics'. According to the author, new materialist scholarship reproduces and somewhat reifies 'whiteness-as-humanness' through the universalization of 'agentic matter' as an 'unnamed centred' for its ethical, political and analytical investigations. This critique is mirrored in Sundberg's (2014) engagement with new materialist ontology.

For Sundberg (2014: 34), new materialism, despite being often silent about its location, tends 'to reproduce colonial ways of knowing and being by enacting universalizing claims and, consequently, further subordinating other ontologies'. Indigenous studies scholarship has also challenged this unwitting complicity between some new materialist theorizations and colonial modernity by bringing new materialism into conversation with Indigenous onto-epistemologies (Hokowhitu, 2021; Kohn, 2013; Magnat, 2022).

Specifically, my critique interrogates a common posture within the field – particularly noticeable within vitalist strands – that unwittingly reinstates an 'active' and 'vital' version of white bourgeois manhood as a universal ideal to be attained by colonial modernity's objectified bodies. The problem here is not only the oft-uncritical embracing of vitality as a way out of modernity's problems, which, as I explained before, reproduces an activity/passivity hierarchy that is entwined with colonial and patriarchal orders of domination. The universalization of vitality as a political solution is undertaken without a more profound analysis of its location – and indeed its provinciality – and, more importantly, its constitutive terms, exclusions and political uses (Chakrabarty, 2000). By taking vitality as a universal stance, an ideal that takes us beyond colonial modernity's objectification, new materialism not only remains 'within the orbit of Eurocentered epistemologies and ontologies' (Sundberg, 2014: 35). In so doing, it also seems to reproduce what Bhambra (2017) conceptualizes as 'methodological whiteness', that is:

> A way of reflecting on the world that fails to acknowledge the role played by race in the very structuring of that world, and of the ways in which knowledge is constructed and legitimated within it. It fails to recognize the dominance of 'Whiteness' as anything other than the standard states of affairs and treats a limited perspective – that deriving from White experience – as a universal perspective.

The universalization of vitality in new materialism, thus, performs 'racial work' (van Munster, 2021: 90) by reproducing and indeed naturalizing whiteness in global politics (Gani and Khan, 2024; Hobson, 2007; Sabaratnam, 2020; Vitalis, 2016). My point here is that new materialist embracing of vitality reproduces 'normative whiteness' by implicitly positioning whiteness as what Alison Howell and Melanie Richter-Montpetit conceptualize as a 'moral imperative'(Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2020: 13). This ahistorical and universal positioning of 'activity', in other words, by erasing its location and historical situatedness, re-enacts whiteness 'as an irresistible and universal historical dynamic' (Sabaratnam, 2020: 13). Breaking with new materialism's politics of vitality, thus, constitutes a central task, one that I hope can bring new materialist scholarship in critical security studies closer to questions of race, coloniality and whiteness and vice-versa. The question that remains, however, is 'How can the challenging of colonial modernity's activity/passivity hierarchy contribute to international relations and, more specifically, critical security studies?' In the next section, I explain how the rethinking of new materialism's vitalist politics can push the boundaries of current scholarship within critical security studies both in terms of its analytical capacity and critical ethos.

Beyond the politics of vitality? The activity/passivity hierarchy and critical security studies

Reflecting on the political production of this activity/passivity hierarchy under colonial modernity, I contend, is more than a mere philosophical exercise. Beyond expanding new materialist analytical, critical and political ethos, it also pushes scholars within critical security studies to grapple with the often-overlooked entanglements between the abjection of passivity, security and colonial and racial structures of oppression. As I show below, looking at the 'activity/passivity' hierarchy takes us to promising research avenues for critical security studies at the same time that it opens

room for a more productive rapprochement between new materialism, post- and decolonial thought and critical race studies.

First, it is central to understand *why* it is important to remain suspicious of a politics of vitality within critical security studies that does not interrogate the supremacy of activity and abjection of passivity within colonial modernity. To be precise here, challenging the naturalness of this hierarchy is not only a way of *interrogating* colonial modernity's activity/passivity hierarchy. This also offers critical security studies scholars the opportunity to analytically investigate *how* this hierarchy is (re)produced in and through security dynamics as well as its racial, colonial and anthropocentric effects. This entails investigating the connection between security dynamics *and* colonial, racialized and anthropocentric conceptions of movement, activity and vitality. More simply put, it encourages scholars to investigate the ways in which racialized dynamics of abjection of 'passivity' and 'inertness' – and a simultaneous celebration of activity – reproduce, enact and/or contribute to 'transnational, colonial and racial capitalist networks' (Manchanda and Rossdale, 2021: 37).

A promising avenue of research here are the links between the persistent abjection of 'idleness' and 'laziness' and contemporary dynamics of security and policing. The criminalization of vagrancy, for instance, is particularly common across the Global North, often targeting racialized people who are affected by structural economic conditions. Being considered 'idle' and 'unproductive' is often associated with the idea of criminality and lawlessness, which makes so-called 'vagrants' into common objects of carceral and policing systems of oppression (Agee, 2018). England and Wales, for instance, registered more than 1,000 prisoners under the Vagrancy Act only in 2021 (Wall, 2023). Another interesting avenue of research has to do with the justification of contemporary practices of occupation, land grabbing and dispossession within settler colonial states, which rely on racialized constructions of Indigenous populations as idle, lazy and, therefore, an impediment to 'progress' (Mandani, 2012). Focusing on the links between laziness, unproductiveness and race can also offer a new perspective on dynamics of migration security, specifically the use of racist construction of the racialized migrant as a lazy and idle 'parasite that undermines economic prosperity' (Erel et al., 2016: 1348). This link has been central to the enactment of migrants as a racialized security threat in the Global North.

Another example takes us to contemporary investigations on mobility and border security within critical security studies, specifically within postcolonial circles. Much has been said about the ways in which Global North borders act as (post)colonial tools for the preservation and securing of racial hierarchies, postcolonial inequalities and racial capitalist systems of domination (Brito, 2023; Danewid, 2017; Dey, 2024; Mayblin and Turner, 2021; Sharma, 2020). Thinking more deeply about colonial modernity's celebration of 'movement' and simultaneous association between movement and whiteness, however, pushes us to think about the ways in which border security in the Global North operates as a global vector of white supremacy. After all, if Global North borders, through passports, walls, surveillance and violence, operate by restricting and severely policing Global South and racialized people's mobility and enabling whiteness' movement globally, this essentially means that borders also work towards the reproduction of this pervasive link between *whiteness* and *movement* globally (Engelhard, 2023). In the scenario, the question then becomes 'How do regimes of border security contribute to the maintenance of an active, mobile and progressive construction of whiteness?' Relatedly, 'In which ways does global mobility mirror and deepen colonial modernity's abjection of geographical inertness *and* its simultaneous assignment to racialized bodies?' Grasping this link between movement, white supremacy and border security, thus, allows us to reassess borders as central tools to preserve and police the supremacy of whiteness due to its mobile nature and its consequent proneness to progress and historical agency.

Second, interrogating the supremacy of 'vitality' and 'movement' and understanding its enmeshment in politics also opens up new political avenues and strategies that go beyond the embracing of vitality as a way out of colonial, racial capitalist and anthropocentric structures of oppression.

While an appeal to movement, vitality, or activity can sometimes be seen as a form of resistance to, for instance, carceral structures of immobilization, border regimes, and so forth, it does not constitute the only political alternative. An appeal to what is often regarded as 'fixity', 'inertness' or 'laziness' can also be seen as a form of resisting racial capitalist and colonial regimes of oppression (Shahjahan, 2015; Vergès, 2021). 'Laziness' as a refusal to participate in racial capitalism's structures of oppression, for instance, can be seen as what Danewid (2023) would call a strategic form of refusing racialized forms of dispossession. Relatedly, movement is not always an expression of resistance. It can also operate as a form of settler colonial structures of domination (Manchanda, 2024; Veracini, 2016), like in currently occupied Gaza, and migration governance, like in Calais, France, where migrants are continually set in movement by border and police authorities as a strategy of governing migration through hyper-mobility (Aradau and Tazzioli, 2020: 219). In these scenarios, the fight for the right to 'remain' and 'fixate' can be seen as emancipatory and liberating in itself and a form to resist (post)colonial dynamics of subjugation and dispossession.

Finally, my interrogation of the naturalization of activity, movement and vitality as 'superior' within new materialism *is not* the same as disregarding new materialist paramount call for a broader and deeper analysis of the ways in which materiality intersects with, constitutes and enables dynamics of security. Quite the contrary; looking into the role of the so-called 'non-human' within dynamics of racialization should be seen as a central step for critical security studies scholars. Doing so, after all, allows for a deeper grasp of the ways in which infrastructures, 'non-human' objects, animals, viruses, technology, etc. participate in the production and policing of racial difference and the perpetuation of colonial and imperial structures. Yet, its potential notwithstanding, such works remain scant in international relations and critical security studies, despite important exceptions (see for instance Brandimarte, 2023; Brito, 2024; Wilcox, 2017b). Bridging the gap between new materialism, post/decolonial literature and critical race studies, thus, remains a fundamental task for critical security studies scholars, a task that can bring us to a more complex and nuanced understanding of the intimacies between security, materiality, race and coloniality in international politics.

Conclusion

New materialist scholarship has brought important insights to both international relations and critical security studies and has an important legacy that cannot be understated. It has, after all, not only provided access to a material domain of security that has often been neglected or deemed to be less important by scholars, but also challenged the anthropocentric and masculinist nature of an important parcel of critical investigations on security and international relations writ large. The critiques I espouse here, thus, are not aimed at closing the doors for constructive engagements between new materialism and, say, decolonial and critical race studies in critical security studies. My major goal, instead, was to illuminate what I consider to be limitations in new materialism's politics of vitality, in particular its reproduction of an activity/passivity hierarchy that has been, as I have shown, entangled with colonial, anthropocentric and gendered dynamics of subjugation. Reflecting upon the limitations of new materialism's *vitalist* politics, I have argued, not only pushes new materialist scholars to engage more deeply with post- and decolonial literature and critical race studies and vice versa, it also expands the critical, political and, not less importantly, analytical potentials of critical security studies as a field of study.

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