

**Call for Applications**  
**Center for Material Culture Studies, University of Delaware**

**Thing Tank: A Research Forum in Material Culture Studies**  
**2021-22 Forum Topic: Ecomaterialism**

**Application deadline: April 15, 2021**

The Center for Material Culture Studies (CMCS) invites applications for a new scholarly initiative: Thing Tank, an annual research forum for UD faculty and graduate students. Modeled on humanities seminars at peer research universities, Thing Tank will support the research and professional development of graduate students and faculty by creating a space for sustained intellectual exchange on topics related to the study of material culture.

Each year, CMCS will appoint 2 Faculty Fellows and 6 Graduate Fellows as part of a year-long cohort. Together, they will collaborate to explore a major topic in material culture studies. Fellows will workshop writing-in-progress, attend biannual public talks by prominent guest lecturers, and participate in field studies to regional collections or sites. (See below for more details.)

The forum topic for 2021-22, **ecomaterialism**, focuses on the relationship between environment and materiality. It was once common to think of these terms as distinct. Where “nature” signified the physical world of plants, animals, landscapes, and other features of the earth, “materiality” named the matter and objects created and acted upon by humans. But recent scholarship has eradicated such distinctions, revealing how the entanglement of humans and other-than-human entities is crucial to understanding climate disaster. Ecomaterialism is an approach to material culture studies that asks us to consider the inextricable links between the many beings, objects, and substances that make up the physical world.

By bringing together material culture studies (especially new materialism) and the environmental humanities, ecomaterialism initiates an interdisciplinary conversation. Ecology, the branch of biology that deals with the relations of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings, insists on the interconnectedness and entanglement of things. New materialism likewise stresses that interaction occurs between objects of all kind and explores matter as dynamic, agentic, and self-organizing. It holds that all human subjects are constructed and acted upon by the objects around them, but also considers the autonomous capacities of inorganic matter, technologies, and nonhuman organisms.

Ecomaterialism, then, names a paradigm in which the physical existence and flow of energy, materials, and resources is integral to an understanding of the environment. Moreover, ecomaterialism presents materiality as a potential strategy for converting environmental neglect into responsible stewardship. We can no longer think of material practices—production, consumption, the creation and disposal of waste—as divorced from the environment. Nor can we imagine that environmental concerns are divorced from issues of systemic racism, wealth inequality, imperialism and colonialism. Ecomaterialism demands that we recognize the relations and entanglements between people, possessions, and planet. As Stacy Alaimo and Susan

Hekman write, “Nature is agentic—it acts, and those actions have consequences for both the human and nonhuman world.” (*Material Feminisms*, 4-5).

Through workshops, lectures, and site visits, participants in Thing Tank will explore ecomaterialism from various disciplinary angles. Could a more concerted effort to understand the ecology of matter help us address the existential threat of climate death? Can historical and new materialism illuminate the environment? How does ecological thinking teach us anew about our objects of study? How can we bring together the methods of the environmental humanities with those of material culture studies? We invite a diversity of critical perspectives to consider innovative approaches to one of the most important issues of our times.

### **Topic Directors:**

Wendy Bellion (CMCS Director, and Professor and Biggs Chair, Art History Department)  
Sarah Wasserman (CMCS Associate Director and Assistant Professor, English Department)

### **CMCS Thing Tank Graduate Fellows:**

CMCS will select six advanced Graduate Fellows in the humanities and social sciences (MA or PhD) for the 2021-2022 Annual Research Forum. Each student fellow will receive a \$500 research stipend (\$250 distributed per semester) and become a member of the Thing Tank’s cohort and forum. Students should be conducting thesis or dissertation research related to the Center's theme for the year in which the award is granted. Fellows are required to attend the Thing Tank Research Forum, held Thursdays from 12-1:30\* during the academic year, and present their work at one of the sessions. Seminar members also include Faculty Fellows and the CMCS directors. *\*Interested applicants are advised to check well ahead with their department/s to avoid conflicts with class schedules and other obligations.*

### **CMCS Thing Tank Faculty Fellows**

CMCS will select two Faculty Fellows to participate in the 2021-2022 Annual Research Forum. Applicants must be full-time UD faculty and CMCS affiliated members. Each Faculty Fellow will receive up to \$1000 in research support (dispursed through reimbursement for research expenses dated prior to June 30, 2022) and become a member of the Thing Tank’s cohort and forum. Applicants should be conducting research and/or developing and teaching courses related to the Center's theme for the year in which the award is granted. Faculty Fellows are required to attend the Thing Tank Research Seminar, held Thursdays from 12-1:30\* during the academic year, present their work at one of the sessions, and serve as interlocutors and mentors for the Graduate Fellows. *\*Interested applicants are advised to check well ahead with their department/s to avoid conflicts with class schedules and other obligations.*

## **TO APPLY:**

Please submit the following materials as a single PDF via email to [materialculture@udel.edu](mailto:materialculture@udel.edu). Application deadline: April 15, 2021. Applicants can expect notification from CMCS in early May.

### Graduate Student Applicants:

- Project Abstract and Application Letter (1250 words maximum)  
Please begin with a title and short abstract of your project (250 words maximum). The application letter (1000 words maximum) should clearly articulate how your research pertains to the theme of ecomaterialism and describe projected outcomes of your participation in the seminar (e.g. advancing an article, dissertation, thesis, collaborative project, or other research initiative).
- Name and contact information for one faculty reference who can support your application
- A short, up-to-date CV (no more than 2 pages)

### Faculty Applicants:

- Project Abstract and Application Letter (1250 words maximum)  
Please begin with a title and short abstract of your project (250 words maximum). The application letter (1000 words maximum) should clearly articulate how your research and/or teaching pertains to the theme of ecomaterialism and describe projected outcomes of your participation in the seminar (e.g. advancing an article, book project, collaborative project, pedagogical undertaking, or other research initiative).
- A short, up-to-date CV (no more than 2 pages)