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Suitcases, Selfies, and the Global Environment

Material Culture, Materiality, and the New Materialism

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An object in possession seldom retains the same charm that it had in pursuit.

Pliny the Younger

Introduction

For scholars, the category “handbook” carries certain expectations. A guide to methodology, a catalog of traditions, or an encyclopedia of ideas and people may come to mind. Public historians James Gardner and Paula Hamilton suggest that handbooks “stake a claim to [the field of study’s] significance, chart its trajectories across time and space, and push its boundaries.” Our goals for *The Cambridge Handbook of Material Culture Studies* build on these foundations and push against the boundaries of what a handbook can be. The “mission” of this handbook is to be inclusive and current, while offering an interdisciplinary, post-disciplinary, and even undisciplined view of developments, methodologies, and theories in the field/s of material culture. In order to accomplish these project goals, we have structured the volume around broad themes that cross disciplinary and theoretical boundaries and embrace both the classic and the emerging in material culture, materiality, and new materialism studies.

In planning this project, we identified established and emerging leaders in the field who could address both past and contemporary theory and practice as well as look toward future trends in material culture studies. Their chapters outline transformative moments in material culture scholarship and challenge and enrich existing paradigms of material culture research. This volume is neither wholly comprehensive nor a definitive

roadmap for “doing” material culture. Instead, the volume provides readers with a snapshot of current approaches and a review of disciplinary contributions to material culture study. This volume gives readers a taste of the multiple ways scholars engage with material culture and guides readers to useful scholarly literature and “signature” studies.

The volume incorporates projects based in the Americas, the British Isles, Western Europe, Australia, and China. Authors represent institutions in the United States, Canada, Colombia, Australia, England, Denmark, Turkey, and Hong Kong. As a result the authors address and acknowledge differences and similarities that exist between the understanding of, framing of, and study of material culture in an international context. The project is global in scope, but Anglophone in practice and we are indebted to authors working with translators and editors when English is not their first language.

The handbook is written for an audience of students and professionals in a variety of material culture disciplines, including anthropology, the historical disciplines, and cultural studies. It is designed to serve as a central text for material culture courses, even as each chapter and section contributes to thematic and topical courses and scholarly reading lists. The breadth and depth of case studies contribute to a “functional” text for teaching and not simply a thought exercise.

What Is Material Culture Studies?

What is material culture? A list assembled from the chapters in this volume offers a provocative, comprehensive image of material culture: teaspoons; Emily Dickinson’s poem-objects; the human body; the unprecedented crisis to the global environment; gated communities around the world; Qhapaq Ñan, the Andean road system; a knife used in a concentration camp by a Holocaust survivor; remains of individuals murdered during the 1994 Rwandan genocide; a late-baroque mahogany high chest; corsets; Minik, a young Greenland Inuit boy brought to the American Museum of Natural History in 1897; a *kendi*, a Chinese blue-and-white porcelain jug; migrants’ suitcases, chests, backpacks, and belongings packed therein; the waters of Australia; maps; Picasso’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* and a Trobriander garden in Papua New Guinea; bird feathers; a hammer; a thirty-four-foot-tall memorial statue of Confederate leader George Davis, erected in 1910 in Wilmington, North Carolina; a piano; the Ross Female Factory, a mid-nineteenth-century Tasmanian prison; a circa 30,000-year-old limestone figure from southern Austria labeled the “woman of Willendorf”; an abandoned paper mill in Hamina, Finland repurposed as a Google digital data center; and “selfies.”¹

Material culture includes objects, living and dead bodies, and parts thereof, although as author Emily Moore reminds us, many Indigenous

populations, and others, find this categorization highly offensive. Buildings, landscapes, images, texts, and elements of the biosphere are all elements of material culture, but it is not limited to these categories. As Julian Yates states, “it is the involutions of substance, ideas, belief, design, and form that produce a built world.” For Sebnem Timur Ogut, material culture emanates power by “embracing all the representative load of the thing/object, [while] it still remain[s] still and silent with the singular, one and only thing itself, with its iconic, indexical and symbolic qualities; its visceral, behavioral, and reflective characteristics; its mundane, material, everyday existence,” even as it is being “reproduced, re-experienced, recontextualized or reenacted in different settings, contexts, scenarios” by and with any kind of agents.

Studying material culture qualities, characteristics, existences, and scenarios, Anna Grasskamp demands that we attend to “aesthetic, economic, social, political, ecological, technological, terminological, cultural, and ideological approaches and factors.” Interrogating “materiality” is also required, or as Yates suggests, questioning “the winking in and out of being of our awareness of the pull things have upon us, [and] the ways in which what passes as media does more than mediate.” More than objects or mass, Sarah Wasserman reminds us that material culture *represents*, and our studies pursue the material dimensions of subject-object relations even when they are opaque or available to us only *as* representations. Indeed, many authors in this volume examine meaning as the “work” of material culture.

For Peter Roe, understanding the ways people invest life in objects occupies the center of material culture study. Grasskamp points out the importance of tracing objects’ “global lives,” the ways both “social circumstances and the variable conditions of cultures and places connected in a global network” define their biographies. Ryan Cordell expands these focuses to include “the ways material cultures imbricate across time.” For Laura McAtackney, this involves probing “our legacy from the past, what we live with today and what we pass on to future generations,” our heritage. She explains that it is about the materials, practice, process, legal designation, value, the global, the national, and the individual. In sum, this volume’s contributors, like archaeologist Victor Buchli, understand material culture studies as “united by an abiding concern for the materiality of cultural life and its diverse and at times conflicting vitality.”²

We also encouraged the authors to use their essays as a platform for promoting growth and change in the field. The result is three entangled themes, threaded through the volume: the relationships between materiality and immateriality; the posthumanism of the “new materialism”; and the political nature of contemporary material culture studies. In her politically inspired critique, for example, Gretchen Sorin characterizes the study of American material culture as “more about style than substance – aesthetics than meaning.” American museums are crowded with “objects

in praise of great wealth” that celebrate the values of “materialism and consumption” and deny the injustices of the colonialist policies and practices that enabled the accumulation of such wealth. Cordell identifies the digital, which pierces the boundaries between the material and immaterial, as the “fastest-growing domain of material culture . . . understanding and theorizing [it] is thus one of the field’s most pressing mandates.” Buchli has politicized this position, linking the “increasing alienability of our material world” with its increasing immateriality, and thus one of the most important challenges facing students of material culture.³ New materialism scholars like Yates pose another challenge to material culture studies’ fundamental assumption of human dominance of the material world, one with its own political implications. He asks, “What might material culture studies look like if we assumed that our objects necessarily play host to” other-than-human forms of “writing?”

People have long revered and studied the physical world, but the term and concept of material culture first appeared in the nineteenth century and expanded in use in the mid-twentieth century. It had formative stages in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the growth and formalization of disciplines like anthropology and history alongside the creation of museums dedicated to decorative arts, design, and the study of cultures. As Hutchings reminds us, the legacy of material culture studies’ academic origins is not only intellectual, but itself has real environmental consequences as we face an era of climate crises and extirpation of flora and fauna worldwide. And as recent events underscore again, each of these traditions developed within and supported systems of exclusion and trauma for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color worldwide.

Perspectives

In this volume, we embrace multiple approaches to defining, theorizing, and doing material culture scholarship. Our aim is for readers to apprehend the scope of scholarship in the field from the perspective of proponents and critics of different traditions. We charged authors to present theoretically informed definitions of material culture and materiality; disciplinary, social, and political agendas; and methodologies. They assess the contributions, relevance, values, significance, critiques, and implications of the positions they advance in their chapters. In this volume, readers will engage with Marx, performance, embodiment-phenomenology-sensory studies, culture, communication, text, aesthetics, functionalism, structuralism, biography, postcolonial theory, structure and agency, transculturalism, and multiple imaginaries. The result is a series of essays that vary in tone, approach, and agenda, and that demonstrate well the scope and diversity of material culture studies

today. All are well thought out and executed, but be prepared for a disruptive reading experience.

Moreover, in the volume, we unabashedly highlight multi-, inter-, post-disciplinary, and undisciplined approaches. In doing so, we counter the position that Dan Hicks and Mary Beaudry profess in the *Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies*. They introduce their handbook goals by noting that “as anthropological archaeologists, we were bothered by the idea of material culture studies as representing a new cross-disciplinary field of enquiry, rather than a place for conversation.” Like them, we acknowledge that disciplinary traditions remain strong in material culture studies and share a “commitment to the value of situated, extended studies of particular items or bodies of material culture.” Rather than lamenting that the value of such studies is “all too often lost in theoretical debates about material culture or materiality,”⁴ we view the interplay between theory and practice as a great strength of the field. We both trained in the interdisciplinary field of American studies, which incorporated theory, method, and content from anthropology, archaeology, art history, folklore and folklife studies, history, geology, literary studies, material culture studies, preservation studies, and sociology.

In *The Material Culture Reader*, a compilation of representative work of the Material Culture Group at University College London, editor Buchli makes a compelling argument for considering material culture studies an “intervention between disciplines” rather than a discipline like history or interdisciplinary like American studies. The “interstitial positions” it occupies “provide a platform for a critical engagement with materiality” and therefore with “those key materializing and transformative processes” shaping a wide range of matter, such as gender fluidity, genetic engineering, and the Internet.⁵

Others have proposed that material culture studies prototype another approach to scholarly investigations: post-disciplinarity.⁶ This construct, unsurprisingly, has also been demarcated in diverse ways. Some post-disciplinary social scientists unite around their common research topics and questions aimed at understanding humans rather than around disciplines. The shared topical interests have ensured that, in contemporary practice, “good ideas, approaches and perspectives are not unique for a particular discipline.”⁷ Post-disciplinary social scientists seek out these “parallels in knowledge constructions” and welcome flexibility and innovation in defining objects and methods.⁸ Post-disciplinarity “opens up the field to anyone and everyone who may have contributions to the study of humans and societies, both in the past and the present.” Disciplinary boundaries, proponents argue, are hindrances and obstacles to learning when they “become more structures of dominance and weapons of exclusion . . . These are good reasons to challenge the old hegemonies and work inter-disciplinary and post-disciplinary.”⁹ Archaeologist Christopher Tilley and his

editorial colleagues promoted a similar post-disciplinary conception of material culture study in their *Handbook of Material Culture*. Hicks and Beaudry critiqued the approach precisely because it disregarded “disciplinary histories, allegiances, and intellectual debts.”¹⁰ They argue that it is “the complexity, mess, and diversity ... from which [disciplinary] knowledge emerges” that forms the foundation of our practice.¹¹

For other archaeologists, post-disciplinary embraces the undisciplinary as well as the interdisciplinary. In their introduction to *After Ethics: Ancestral Voices and Post-disciplinary Worlds in Archaeology*, Alejandro Haber and Nick Shepherd define post-disciplinary archaeology as having multiple aims, of which knowledge production is but one. They reference archaeology as a capitalistic practice, and archaeologists’ complicity in the “expansion of marketplace-like relationships” in contexts such as cultural resource management, development, and the heritage industry. They counter this unethical archaeology with “un-disciplined archaeology,” characterized as “the skill of following (with the body and the soul) disconnected and dismembered threads expressed in a diversity of languages, textualities and forms of expression, including repressed histories, and spectral presences.”¹²

Post-disciplinary and undisciplined scholarship expand the postcolonial critique initiated in post-World War II political activism. In support of anticolonial liberation and nationalism, the postcolonial critique unmasked the ways that colonialism and European culture are deeply implicated within each other, founded in Western thought systems on notions of the “other.” This work exposed the disjunction between European Enlightenment concepts of reason and humanism and reductionist colonial deployment of “White settler male” supremacy. Self-reflexive, political, and committed to understanding power relationships, postcolonial perspectives provide the “fundamental ethical basis in examining oppression and inequality in the present.”¹³

We will return to material culture studies and these disciplinary critiques in our conclusion.

Contents and Organization

Together, the contributors to this handbook present a reflective critique of geographical and disciplinary and interdisciplinary traditions and agendas of material culture studies. Their work is grounded in and informed by American studies, anthropology, archaeology, architecture, art and visual studies, art history, cultural theory, decorative arts and connoisseurship, design and design history, digital studies, folklife, geography, history, literary studies, popular culture, social studies of medicine, and sociology. Each author also introduces, applies, and critically assesses relevant

theory, intellectual approaches and perspectives, sources of evidence, and methods. The contributors' work addresses materiality in the wide-ranging genres of architecture, body, costume, landscape, furnishings, information technologies, literature, tools, and visual culture.

The volume is organized into five parts: "Scholarly Genealogies," "Relevant Pasts," "Engaging Across Cultures and Around the Globe," "Cultural Production and Reproduction," "Experience," and "Materiality and the Digital World," introduced here.

Scholarly Genealogies

The two chapters in "Scholarly Genealogies" present multivocal genealogies outlining the ways scholars have vested and represented cultural ideologies and meanings in materials and bodies over time and across space. Authors approach their topics from three intellectual "places": the material, the embodied, and the represented. Julian Yates opens Part I with his musings on how "materiality" shapes current conversations in material culture studies. "Question your teaspoons," he suggests, to disclose a multiplicity of stories about tea, cutlery, opium wars, colonialism, and the world made by tea-drinking. Teaspoons and other objects do not belong to one time or place but to many. They are multiple, and in aggregates or assemblages, they produce different temporal and spatial effects. They may be subjects and objects or challenge us to reject this distinction. Informed by the new materialism and the multispecies or "ontological" turn in anthropology, Yates urges us to think of materiality as comprising objects' animal, plant, mineral, bacterial, and viral remainders that encode ways of conceiving of the products of human labor, valuing them, using them, and preserving them.

Material culture "represents" and "re-presents" people, places, other objects, taste, soundscapes, and more in meaningful ways. Sarah Wasserman selected Emily Dickinson's poem, "Perception of an Object Costs," to encapsulate representation. The absolute being of any object for Dickinson and Wasserman is lost in perception; perception, in fact, turns the object into any object. Our attempts to approach it, capture it in our gaze, or represent it on the page only push the truths of the object further away. Wasserman's work highlights the inherent tensions between thing, representation, and meaning that are central in so many of the discussions in the book.

Relevant Pasts

In Part II, eight author teams explore the implications of past practices on and for the future. An emphasis on the political and the silenced links the diverse essays from scholars in Colombia, Australia, Denmark,

Britain, Canada, and the United States. Indigeneity, inequality, environmental exploitation, war, and genocide constitute “Relevant Pasts” confronting material culture scholars, museum and heritage curators, cultural resource managers, and reenactors. Their stories emerge from a wide range of things and places, from objects as small as a knife to human bodies and the global environment and are the subject of often fiercely contested politics. In this part, authors ask who has the right to speak on whose behalf. Who has the authority to define what constitutes “heritage”? Whose stories are privileged, whose are ignored, and how is material culture complicit? In Chapter 10, Heather Fitzsimmons Frey and Marlissa Schweitzer reflect on the politics of reenactment and reenactors’ investment in critiquing or sustaining received historical narratives. Acts, or more accurately, “reenacts” like donning a corset make the past physically present and “body forth” the lived experiences of others.

Can a handcrafted knife that a Holocaust survivor used in a concentration camp do the same? Bozena Shallcross (Chapter 7) reviews how scholars may incorporate material culture as they interrogate the meaning and chronology of war, peace, occupation, and Holocaust. To do so, she engages with objects that evidence the debased and brutalized existence instigated by war. She attends to the degraded system of war economy driven by human and material losses, expensive technological innovations, and civilians’ simple mode of survival that generated wartime objects’ overarching material and materialistic concerns. These objects were “damaged, displaced, and dispossessed even as, simultaneously, they at times represented some sense of stability, facilitating survival and suturing one’s broken memory and identity.” She asks how we can describe such a multivalent, yet easily destroyed, world of objects today? What are the elements that constitute a wartime artifact in a time of peace? Wherein lies its authenticity?

In Chapter 9, Gretchen Sorin considers the institutionalization and professionalization of preserving and representing the material past in the present. Museums, government agencies, preservation organizations, and various social and community groups collect, conserve, interpret, and present material culture of their own and of others’ pasts. Sorin queries the “relevant past” of a late-baroque mahogany high chest in a fine art collection that was preserved for its aesthetic value and as a representation of the furnishings of elite eighteenth-century Americans. She presents the need and value of viewing the chest from different perspectives, so we can understand how one woman’s high chest is another woman’s oppression. The chest embodies both the wealthy woman owner and the enslaved makers of the chest. It contains the stories of the dangerous work engaged in by the enslaved harvesters of mahogany trees and the resulting technological changes that led to deforestation in the Caribbean and Central America. Discussing mahogany chairs and tables as both trees and fine

furniture – commodities and luxuries – broadens the story to include the entire supply chain, linking object and environment, and opens up questions surrounding authenticity and authentication, values, meanings, authority, ownership, and stewardship.

Like Sorin, Richard Hutchings (Chapter 4) exhorts material culture scholars to accept responsibility for our complicity in silencing stories of capitalist exploitation. Targeting North American archaeologists and cultural resource managers, his analysis of the literature exposes the critical need to reflect, self-critique, and self-confront the ways our capitalist universities, institutions, and practices created and promote the unprecedented global environmental crisis we now face.

In Chapter 5, Claire Smith, Jordan Ralph, Cherrie de Leiuén, and Kellie Pollard also engage with our contemporary material world, its role in social movements, and its importance in limiting and expanding efforts for social justice. Regulation of space, use of objects to uphold or erode bias, and construction of objects as political tools are but some of the relationships outlined by scholars who position the material world as inherent to political and social actions. In places such as gated communities, the authors expose the role material culture plays in reproducing an unequal distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society. They ponder how we can deploy material culture to promote greater equality and explore ways we can promote social justice in our practice.

Cristóbal Gnecco tackles the same questions in the colonized landscape of South America as he exposes the role of material culture in negotiations of power, in gifting, as regulatory tools, and as modes or tools of empowerment and connection or, conversely, disinheritance and disregard. In Chapter 6, he literally and figuratively follows the history of Qhapaq Ñan, the Andean road system, and the places and people it connected and disenfranchised. Now a UNESCO designated World Heritage Site, Gnecco demonstrates the opportunities heritage like Qhapaq Ñan presents as a privileged theater in which to confront issues of engagement and authority, of violence and hierarchies, of dispossession and exclusion.

The painful legacy of human remains appropriated as material heritage claim the attention of Laura McAtackney and Emily Moore. Global and cross-cultural in scope, McAtackney's Chapter 8 considers the discourses of heritage across national, ethnic, and regional traditions. Examining the remains of Rwandans murdered in the genocide of 1994 and other examples, she fashions a compelling impression of the tangle of preservation, memory, horror, denial, and "raw" authenticity wrapped up in such "dark heritage." In Chapter 11, Moore examines repatriation and Indigenous meanings, values, and uses of material heritage. She probes the global legacy of conquest that postcolonial scholarship and advocacy are challenging, and shares the story of Minik, the young Greenland Inuit boy and his father brought to the American Museum of Natural History in the 1910s to

support anthropologist Franz Boas' cultural studies. Upon his father's death, the museum resorted to subterfuge to deny Minik his body for burial, and then displayed his skeleton until the 1990s. It took an exposé for the museum to finally return the skeletons to Greenland for burial. This tale exemplifies the amalgamation of colonial subjugation, paternalism, and the fight for sovereignty that saturate the objectified Indigenous body.

Engaging Across Cultures and Around the Globe

The three chapters in the Part III highlight different approaches to the movement of materials, goods, people, and ideas around the world. Examining different regions and times, the authors probe the ways that cross-cultural and global exchange, change, and difference have shaped the material world, social identifications, and human agency. Anna Grasskamp in Chapter 12 interrogates a Chinese blue-and-white porcelain jug, a *kendi*, made in China and received in Europe, a type of “transcultural” object. Analyzing the *kendi* from a multidisciplinary perspective and in its wider material, cultural, and historical contexts, she introduces readers to “transcultural” material cultural scholarship. Transcultural interpretative approaches transcend Europe-Asia interactions, and conceptualize the agency, social, and global lives, and vital materiality of objects in the diverse cultural contexts they touch.

In Chapter 13 Magdalena Naum reviews cultural exchange, change, and continuity through the lens of population movement: migration, refugees, displacement, diaspora, and the modes of transportation that brought diverse people into direct engagement with each other. She turns our attention to “translocal,” sometimes “transnational,” objects, the suitcases, chests, and backpacks that hold the precious belongings people take with them when they move (or are moved). Her interests lie in migrants' relationships with material objects in moments of packing, unpacking, and furnishing new homes; the impact of displacement on people's real and imaginary engagements with objects; and objects' roles in shaping identity and structuring the migration experience. Her analysis reveals the complexities and even contradictions engendered in experiences with these possessions in motion. Their physical presence and the memories surrounding them help migrants to experience a continuity of life even as their association with the past provoke painful reminders of loss. Indeed, the power of translocal and transnational objects lies in their connectivity, compensating for physical absence and maintaining social relations.

In the context of globalization, postmodernity, and transnationalism, identity, for most people, is no longer securely located in specific material environments. Yet the desire to “ground” identity in place by acting in and