

The perfect subject (postcolonial object studies)

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Abstract

This article argues that the late 20th-century tradition of material culture studies, as well as its more recent object-oriented offspring, emerged as a response to the 1980s crisis of representation and the deeper postcolonial critiques that accompanied this crisis. As it became more and more difficult to study and make claims about non-Western people, anthropologists and scholars in related disciplines began to explore the advantages of treating non-human objects as quasi-human subjects. Things proved safer to study than people and the popularity of ‘thing theory’ grew, at least in part, for this very reason. More importantly, the analytical shift of focus from people to things had the effect of salvaging – and, indeed, greatly amplifying – the representational authority of Western scholars at the precise moment when that authority seemed to be evaporating.

Keywords

material culture, postcolonial theory, posthumanism

But why should ‘things’ suddenly seem so interesting? (WJT Mitchell, 2005: 111)

Why indeed? Readers of this journal hardly need to be reminded of the past quarter century’s efforts to spotlight material culture. Twenty years of articles in the *Journal of Material Culture* on clothing, carpets, cod, plows, and solar-powered lights speak loudly to the gathering strength of this intellectual movement. As does the viral popularity of Bruno Latour’s (1993) posthumanist advocacy for a ‘democracy extended to things’, the parallel inauguration of something dubbed ‘thing theory’ in both literary studies (Brown, 2004) and archaeology (Hodder, 2006), and the pages upon pages composed in recent years on the topic of materiality. We are, presumably, far enough into all this to stand back

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and consider the position of the turn toward things within the currents of late 20th- and early 21st-century social theory. The question that interests me, then, is historical rather than epistemological or ontological: not ‘why things?’ so much as ‘why things now?’

Ask the participants in these conversations and you are likely to run into two somewhat different answers.

Answer 1: ‘Are you not fed up ...?’

Some are quick to point out that the turn toward things is symptomatic of a general weariness with the social constructivism of the latter half of the 20th century. Having convinced themselves that the world is a set of unstable texts, argues the American literary critic Bill Brown (2004), scholars in the humanities now find themselves longing for the lost pleasures of touch, taste, and material encounter. From this perspective, thing theory marks a nostalgia, to use Brown’s metaphor, for dirty windows in the hall of mirrors we have created, for the real lurking in the shadows of its representations, and for brute matter in response to the apparent triumph of virtuality. ‘Are you not fed up with language games, and with the eternal skepticism of the deconstruction of meaning?’ asks Latour (1993: 90) in a similar vein. Such sentiments have prompted some to draft obituaries for ‘theory’ altogether (see, partly in response, Mitchell, 2004) and to embrace things as a kind of refuge from overgrown theorization. As Brown (2004) observes, however, the intellectual desire for things over theory ends up being impossible; on the contrary, it seems fated to initiate another round of irony and paradox, accompanied by playful texts on ‘the pencil, the zipper, the toilet, the banana’ that, as texts, aren’t really about these things at all. Things slip back into thing *theory*; material slips back into material *culture*; materials themselves into *materiality*; and the strange alterity of non-humans into the *social life* of things.

Be that as it may, the first answer to the question ‘why things now?’ squarely locates the movement within the internal ecology of academic debate, as a pendulum response to the excesses of prior theoretical fashions. Offering an addendum to Kuhn’s portrayal of paradigm shifts in the natural sciences, Sahlins (2002: 73–74) observes:

In the social sciences, the pressure to shift from one theoretical regime to another ... does not appear to follow from the piling up of anomalies in the waning paradigm, as it does in natural science. In the social sciences, paradigms are not outmoded because they explain less and less, but rather because they explain more and more – until, all too soon, they are explaining just about everything. There is an inflation effect in social science paradigms, which quickly cheapens them ... Paradigms change in the social sciences because, their persuasiveness really being more political than empirical, they become commonplace universals. People get tired of them. They get bored.

Something similar, one might conclude, has propelled the turn toward things. ‘Are you not fed up ...?’ asks Latour. ‘I am tired’, seconds the archaeologist Bjornar Olsen (2003: 100)

of the familiar story of how the subject, the social, the episteme, created the object; tired of the story that everything is language, action, mind and human bodies ... At some point it just stopped being fun conceiving everything as a text that writes itself. (p. 90)

Having succeeded in drawing all of reality into its orbit, human language games now feel a bit stale. Enter the alterity of non-human material things as an antidote to poststructuralist ennui.

Answer 2: 'Can't you see ...?'

A second answer frequently appears alongside the first even as it moves in an entirely different direction. Here the appeal is outward, beyond the elite confines of the academy and into the fracas of contemporary public life where, we are told, things are asserting themselves with such unprecedented force that intellectuals have no choice but to take notice. Theory, in other words, is said to be changing from the outside in, as we find ourselves compelled to attend to the newly visible powers and agencies of the object world. Indeed, in these strange times when material novelty seems to be forever on parade, simply opening the newspaper is said to provoke an ontological shock:

when we find ourselves invaded by frozen embryos, expert systems, digital machines, sensor-equipped robots, hybrid corn, data banks, psychotropic drugs, whales outfitted with radar sounding devices, gene synthesizers, audience analyzers, and so on, when our daily newspapers display all these monsters on page after page, and when none of these chimera can be properly on the object side or on the subject side, or even in between, something has to be done. (Latour, 1993: 50)

It is not just that we live in a time of pronounced growth in the sheer number of things, or that we, as humans, have recently come to delegate our lives to non-humans far beyond anything imagined by our ancestors (see Hodder, 2012). We also now confront the many material consequences of the past century's avalanche of industrial development. As infrastructures begin to decay and fail across North America, the faith we once had in our control over the world of things erodes. Now we find that the upkeep demanded of things even threatens to take priority over the care of people, as when the increasing medical costs of aging baby boomers competes with the increasing repair costs of aging pipes, roads and levies. These are the realities of 'Ethnography in late industrialism', as the ethnographer Kim Fortun (2012: 449) puts it:

The pipes that carry water to and waste away from households, hospitals, schools and businesses are now aging ... they leak and overflow ... they have no way to deal with what now passes through them: water laced with runoff from roads and effluents from manufacturing plants, but also with pharmaceutical residues, including synthetic hormones ... Much of the infrastructure, many of the paradigms that have held it up, are exhausted. Things are falling apart, again.

And again, 'something must be done.'

The second answer, then, claims that contemporary events are blowing away many of the old anthropocentric mists, forcing us to see human–thing relations soberly and in stark light. In an era of global warming, toxic landfills, viral images, exploding space shuttles, 9/11, and ebola, can anyone still write about the 'social construction of reality'? Is it not abundantly clear that the illusion of human mastery over things was simply that:

a tragic illusion? The archaeologist Ewa Domanska (2006: 172) is explicit on this point. ‘Another factor in the return to things’, she writes,

were the traumatic events of 9/11, which reminded us of the harshness of reality. In this sense, we might say that the reality of 9/11 itself constituted a critique of constructivism with its idea of the world as produced by a variety of discourses.

Such positions are typically premised on an appeal to empiricism, to a self-proclaimed realist attitude focused on the real qualities of real things (Latour, 1999). ‘Can’t you see ...?’ But more than this, there is an implicit claim that thing theory itself is somehow not a social construction, that this set of conversations is less a product of the scholarly imagination than of current events – or, rather, of the material currents of events. This is partly why the turn toward things is increasingly talked about as a matter of ontology rather than social theory, as a matter of how the material world truly is rather than how we understand or interpret it.

Why now? The argument in brief

My aim in this article is to offer an alternative historical reckoning of the rise of thing theory. I have no doubt that some have been drawn to object-oriented conversations out of sheer boredom with prior theoretical fashions, just as I am sure that others have been propelled by an earnest empirical contention that the world is pushing us toward a kind of ontological sobriety. But both these explanations are, in my estimation, only very partial accounts of what is going on. The historical sketch I offer below is more overtly political in the sense of being focused on the location of the turn toward things within the wider swirl of challenges to Western intellectual authority and its modes of representation. Particularly when the history of anthropology is considered, thing theory only really becomes legible, I suggest, once it is understood as a response to and extension of postcolonial critiques.

To put it bluntly: as it became more and more difficult for Western scholars to make authoritative claims about other people, as colonized or otherwise disempowered communities throughout the world challenged the right of anthropologists to study them, and as critical scholarship continued to pick and scrape at the imperial legacies bound up in the ethnographic project itself – in other words, as human subjects increasingly protested against being treated like objects – anthropologists began to explore the advantages of treating (non-human) objects like (quasi-human) subjects. Things have the advantage of being safer to study than people, and my argument is that they have been increasingly embraced, at least in part, for this very reason.

That a connection exists between the postcolonial critiques of the 1970s and 80s and the object-oriented methodologies that began to propagate in the 1990s is plenty evident in the way the latter has repeatedly employed the language of the former. As discussed below, one now regularly encounters thing theorists of various stripes referring to non-human objects as subalterns in need of defense, while human subjects are portrayed as an imperialist force bent on keeping things down. The rationale behind such metaphors is a complicated question that demands close attention to changing discursive conventions. But it also demands attention to the temporal unfolding of thing theory within the larger

disciplinary histories of anthropology and related fields. We would do well, then, to follow two parallel movements: a turn toward things, but also a simultaneous turn away from people as direct objects of study. Not entirely away from people, obviously. What I am referring to is more like a slight disciplinary turn of the head sideways, a shift of the anthropological gaze downward, away from humans and toward things. Human subjects thus come to be regarded more demurely as objects of study in the analyst's peripheral vision. Practically speaking, this has involved a transition from making strong claims about other humans (e.g. the beliefs of the Nuer or the cultural personality of the Kwakwaka'wakw) to making strong claims about the material extensions of other humans (e.g. the global movement of indigenous 'art') – and even, in some cases, to making claims about materials that have been liberated from humans altogether (e.g. the evaporation of moisture on the surface of a rock).

In tracing this alternative history of thing theory, my focus is firstly on developments within American anthropology (including anthropological archaeology, my own sub-discipline). Insofar as American anthropology has been influenced by European conversations about materiality, non-human agency, ontological alterity, and the like, I also draw upon key scholarship in Britain, France and Scandinavia. There are, of course, certain national differences in the style, tempo, and motivations behind the turn toward things, just as there are differences in the way this trend has manifested within anthropology, archaeology, art history, political science, and related disciplines. Nevertheless, my central argument is that the postcolonial critique of Western representational authority has been a driving impetus, cutting across both disciplinary and regional traditions to a significant degree. This is my justification for painting things with a broad brush.

In what follows, then, I first review the turn away from people as objects of study, proceed to trace the methodological priority that has come to be placed on things, and conclude with a consideration of the feedback loops between these two trends.

One long crisis of representation

As every student of anthropology knows, the so-called crisis of representation and the challenge to ethnographic authority became certified preoccupations of the discipline in the 1980s. 'A series of historical pressures have begun to reposition anthropology with respect to its "objects" of study' wrote James Clifford (1986: 9) as the depth of the crisis was coming to be widely felt. 'Anthropology', he continued, 'no longer speaks with automatic authority for others defined as unable to speak for themselves.' Edward Said – arguably the most influential scholar to apply this historical pressure directly onto anthropology – put it this way:

There is some (justified) fear that today's anthropologists can no longer go to the postcolonial field with quite the same ease as in former times. This of course is a political challenge to ethnography on exactly the same terrain where, in earlier times, anthropologists were relatively sovereign. (Said, 1989: 209)

One of the most memorable articulations of this political challenge was pictorial. For the cover art of *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, Marcus and Fischer (1986) chose an

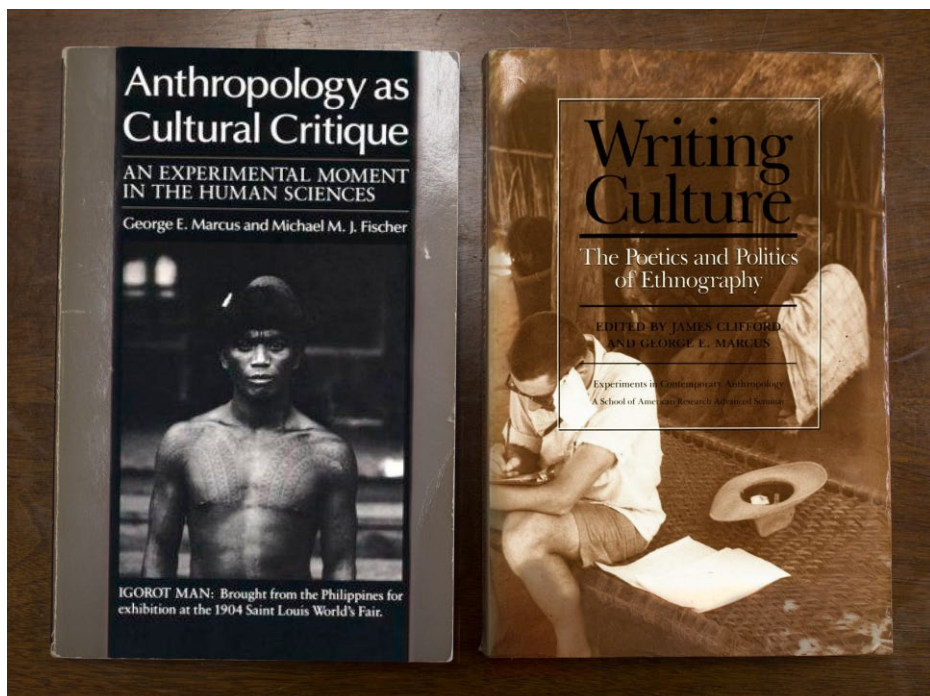


Figure 1. The crisis of representation: left, the native looks back (Marcus and Fischer, 1986); right, the anthropologist looks down (Clifford and Marcus, 1986).

early 20th-century photograph of an Igorot man (Figure 1). His bare chest is decorated with tattoos; his body is rigidly upright; and the image has been cropped in such a way that we are unsure if he is clothed below the waist. It is an intentionally heavy-handed example of anthropological objectification, reminiscent of the hundreds of anthropometric photographs orchestrated by colonial officials and self-fashioned anthropologists in Africa and South Asia during the 19th century. Moreover, he is labeled: 'IGOROT MAN: Brought from the Philippines for exhibition at the 1904 Saint Louis World's Fair.'

The cover image plays upon two central ambiguities. First, it is ambiguously anachronistic, pointing to a mode of colonial anthropology that was both long past and – as the agenda of the volume underscored – still insidiously with us as unfinished business. Second, the Igorot man – with his direct gaze, furrowed brow, and eyes positioned in the precise center of the book – presents us with a complex expression that can be read as scared, confused, confrontational and accusatory all at once. The effect is powerful, not unlike that of the Asmat shields of Papua New Guinea analyzed by Alfred Gell, which are decorated with faces expressing not fierceness, as one might expect, but fear. The shield designs work because they present opponents on the battlefield with a kind of mirror: 'submitting to their [the images'] fascination, we are obliged to share in the emotion which they objectify' (Gell, 1998: 31). The cover art of *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* might be understood as a similar mirror. The image confronts and accuses to the

degree that it obliges the anthropological viewer to share in the Igorot man's fear and confusion over what the discipline has done in the name of science.

Needless to say, the crisis of representation didn't end in the 1980s; it continues to produce just as much anthropological anxiety today. But neither did it arise for the first time in the 1980s. Earlier critiques of the Orientalizing practices of anthropologists in the East, as well as the Negritude movement's politicization of anthropology in Africa and the Caribbean are frequently cited precursors (Clifford, 1983). As a student of New Mexico's indigenous past, however, I have always been more strongly drawn to Native American challenges to the discipline's representational authority. The realities of settler colonialism led Native Americanist anthropology to enter into a period of representational crisis before – and, I would argue, more deeply than – other parts of the world precisely because anthropologists and their objects of study stood in such close spatial proximity. Unlike indigenous communities elsewhere, Native Americans generally had access to and could read the early ethnographies written about them, and this led many to contest anthropological research from the start. Various tribes in the American Southwest, for instance, formally prohibited photography as well as all conversations with outsiders about native religion. Some banned speaking to anthropologists altogether.

In fact, these tensions were already bubbling to the surface during the 19th century. Consider the situation of Frederick S Dellenbaugh, an artist, who traveled to Hopi First Mesa in 1884. Dellenbaugh, like many of his contemporaries, had an exoticizing fascination with the alterity of the Southwest and its native occupants. 'The waves of civilization are advancing toward the valley', wrote Dellenbaugh, 'but we heard no sound of them there. The life of another race and of another time pervades the air – we are out of the world.' Dellenbaugh wanted to paint these exotic Others, but the Hopi refused to pose for him. 'I was obliged to content myself with making studies of houses and inanimate objects', he commented with regret (see Hieb, 2006: 115). This sense of material culture (houses and inanimate objects) as a fallback alternative to the study of human subjects was a quiet pre-echo of the representational crisis that would transform anthropology a century later.

Be that as it may, American Indian peoples continued to be *the* dominant research focus in North American anthropology from the late 19th century right up until the 1960s. During this period, most leading figures in the discipline conducted at least some fieldwork among the indigenous groups within their own national boundaries, and American Indian case studies figured prominently in the development of new anthropological theory. But by the close of the 1960s, this situation had begun to change for good. In fact, the last volume of *American Anthropologist* to include a strong presence of articles on Native American peoples was printed in 1968 (vol. 70, no. 6), wherein one will find studies of the Blackfeet, Hupa, Apache, Wabanaki, Beaver Indians and Navajo. It was a kind of swan-song volume for Native Americanists, among the last of its kind.

The rapidity of the subsequent collapse of American Indian ethnography was due in large part to the publication of Vine Deloria's widely read *Custer Died for Your Sins* a year later. 'The fundamental thesis of the anthropologist', protested Deloria in 1969,

is that people are objects for observation, people are then considered objects for experimentation, for manipulation, and for eventual extinction. The anthropologist thus furnishes the justification

for treating Indian people like so many chessmen available for anyone to play with. (Deloria, 1988[1969]: 81)

Within the discipline, Deloria is best remembered for his sharp parody of ‘the Anthro’, but his writings raised serious challenges to anthropology’s epistemological conventions, disciplinary structure, temporal orientation, and particularly its discursive strategies for representing human subjects.

Ethnographers left Native America in droves. And those who remained found themselves working in vastly different political contexts with sharp limits set by tribal leaders who only permitted research that was in their community’s direct interest. Writing in the early 1990s, Peter Whiteley (1993: 142–143) observed that whereas the discipline, as a whole, was weathering its alleged crisis perfectly well, things looked very different in the anthropology of Native America. ‘What has changed in the last twenty years or so’, he observed,

is the role of Native Americanists and their subjects within anthropology. Both have become marginal in critical debates and prestige discourses of the discipline – a factor reflected in both teaching and research ... With respect to research, graduate students are urged to work in Highland New Guinea, Amazonia, Indonesia, or some other suitably exotic, overseas elsewhere.

In the wake of Deloria’s critiques, only a dedicated few sought to reinvent Native Americanist ethnography; most simply abandoned it.

What I find particularly interesting about this situation, however, is that the sharp decline in anthropological representations of Native American *people* during the second half of the 20th century was accompanied by an even sharper rise in anthropological representations of Native American *things*. There are, in fact, more Native Americanists in the discipline today than ever before; they are simply archaeologists rather than ethnographers. The exponential increase in the number of archaeologists studying Native America has had much to do with the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966 and the subsequent growth of cultural resource management projects. But even in academia the number of archaeologists working on Native American material culture has grown. Moreover, archaeologists have taken over much of the work that would otherwise fall under the purview of ethnographers, for example providing testimony about indigenous traditions on behalf of tribes in land claims litigation.

North American archaeologists navigate their own political minefields, particularly when human remains are involved. Indeed, much native opposition to archaeological excavation derives from a core worry that buried ancestors will be physically disturbed in the process. But this simply underscores the fact that the political consequences of directly studying Native American subjects, living or dead, is now very great indeed, prohibitively so for most anthropologists. Pottery, chipped stone, animal bones, phytoliths, charcoal, and the like – things, in other words – are comparatively uncontroversial, which partly accounts for their ongoing analytical popularity in an age of heightened indigenous critiques.

‘There is an old and deeply rooted inferiority complex among some archaeologists’, observe Olsen et al. (2012: 2), ‘... an embarrassment that archaeology studies “just

things,” in contrast to the supposed cultural richness and subjective presence of text and voice.’ True enough. Despite the stated goal of reaching ‘the Indian behind the artifact’, it is nevertheless the case that the lion’s share of archaeological energy is centered quite decisively on the design, chronology, composition, distribution, and transformation of objects. And herein lies a point of friction with sociocultural colleagues, who, along with Edmund Leach (1973), do not quite understand why archaeologists cannot be more ‘concerned with people rather than things’. I am arguing, however, that it is precisely the presumed meekness of archaeological evidence (‘just things’) relative to ethnographic evidence (‘complexly human acts and utterances’) that has permitted archaeology to persist and thrive in a politically charged context like the anthropology of Native America. Again, making claims about the structure of indigenous ceramic assemblages generally comes across as less presumptuous than making claims about the structure of indigenous human communities, just as constructing typologies of arrowheads comes across as less overtly political than constructing typologies of tribal groups. There is a certain safety – and within posthumanist scholarship, a certain virtue – in studying mere things that reflect upon people only indirectly.

Another way of saying this is that if archaeologists have been critiqued for treating ‘pots as people’, then the parallel critique of ethnographers – and the reason for their abrupt removal from Native America – is that they have historically treated people as pots. ‘As people we have been studied as “social artifacts”’, complained Vernon Masayesva, a Hopi elder, to an academic audience after more than a century of ethnographic research in his community (see Whiteley, 1993: 140). Studying objects, rather than subjects, as objects dodges this ontological offense. This is a lesson the wider discipline would learn soon enough.

Subjects lost, subjects gained

Let us return, then, to the wider disciplinary challenges that flared up in the 1980s and the broader crisis of authority in Western representations of the non-West. How did other anthropologists respond to the loss of their traditional subjects, to the loss of native informants who spoke but didn’t speak back?

Certain responses were already clear by the end of the 1980s. Many anthropologists, argued Said (1989: 209), ‘have in a sense retreated to the politics of textuality’ – ‘poetics being a good deal easier to talk about than politics’, he went on to add (pp. 220–221). In his portrayal of the poetic or textual turn in ethnographic writing as a retreat from the front lines of the postcolonial critique, Said was responding perhaps less to Marcus and Fischer’s *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (1986) as to the widely influential volume *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), which was published the same year and even more strongly asserted an emergent ‘experimental moment’ in ethnographic writing as the vanguard response to the crisis of representation. If the cover design of *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* presents us with an iconic image of this crisis in the figure of the native who has inverted the ethnographic gaze and is powerfully looking back, then the cover art of *Writing Culture* depicts the anthropologist’s response: the ethnographer sits in his field hut, hunched over, all his attention directed toward the text he is composing (Figure 1). He does not look at the natives directly, even though they are all around him

and presumably are reflected in his written words. In this sense, the photograph seems to suggest that the ethnographer is using his text as a kind of mirror with which to look upon the human objects of his study obliquely. The heat of the exotic field site has also led him to drape a wet cloth over his glasses as he writes, though it seems to double as a blinder to keep his eyes from straying from the text, the true object of his attention. This, perhaps, is what Said had in mind when he wrote of a retreat into textuality.

If a focus on ethnographic poetics was one response to the crisis of representation, the growing rapprochement between anthropology and history must be understood as an important second response. Interest in historical anthropology exploded during the 1980s, and while the trend gained a degree of momentum derived from purely academic debates – particularly the critiques leveled against the ahistoricism of prior structuralist approaches – there is no question that basic challenges to the representational authority of ethnographers played a key role in the refashioning of anthropology as a mode of historical inquiry. ‘In anthropology’, observed the Comaroffs (1992: 15),

the liberal urge to speak for others has had its comeuppance. Social history may seem less vulnerable to counterattack: Its subjects, often well dead and buried, can neither answer back nor be affected any longer by the politics of knowledge.

History (like archaeology) has its own epistemological perils and political challenges, of course, but it goes without saying that ‘doing ethnography in the archives’ usually involves far fewer direct representational challenges than ‘doing ethnography in the field’ with living human subjects. Suffice it to say that historical anthropologists – whose people are doubly distanced insofar as they are both of the past (‘well dead and buried’) and only secondarily reflected through archival documents (unlike archaeologists, historical anthropologists never dig up the actual bodies of the dead) – have no need of Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.

I do not mean to diminish the theoretical contributions of work in either ethnographic poetics or historical anthropology, which in both cases has obviously been very great. Moreover, both traditions also tend to be overtly ‘political’ in their engagement with critical theory, postcolonialism, subaltern studies and the like. But I do want to underscore the fact that, with respect to the politics surrounding the study of *living* human subjects, both were productive strategies of redirecting ethnographic attention toward other things – toward texts, toward the past. To talk about a ‘turn away from people’ in this sense is more specifically to talk about the turn away from directly and authoritatively representing the attitudes, beliefs, actions and motivations of living subaltern others. ‘Ethnography does not speak *for* others, but *about* them’, argue the Comaroffs (1992: 9, emphases added). One might question this distinction; as Alcoff (1991) observes, ‘speaking about’ is often difficult to distinguish from ‘speaking for’. Regardless, I have argued that it is the directness with which others are spoken about – perhaps one should say spoken *around* or even spoken *toward* – that is critically at issue.

A final trend of the 1980s requires brief attention, namely the growing popularity of, as Laura Nader (1972) put it, ‘studying up’. In this redirection of the anthropological lens toward the privileged and powerful in the West we encounter another species of ethnographic reform, one that does not avoid the crisis of representation but rather

redeploys it as an explicit tool of cultural self-critique. Marcus and Fischer (1986) referred to it as anthropological repatriation. New studies of, for example, American capitalist dynasties (Marcus, 1992), reproductive politics (Ginsburg, 1989), religious culture (Whitehead, 1987) and scientific communities (Latour, 1987; Latour and Woolgar, 1979) underscored the obvious fact that the anthropological moment in question involved a crisis of specifically *subaltern* representation. Asserting representational control over those who already speak very loudly is not only *not* a moral problem for anthropologists; in the 1980s, it became a kind of moral solution. Thus could Latour freely talk about the bizarre practices of strange tribes when his tribesmen were well-paid Californians in white coats, for now such primitivizing language had been refashioned into a critical tool. (That scientists soon objected to the representations anthropologists were offering of them, and that science studies subsequently came to focus much more on networks of non-human agency, are both trends that bear directly on the growth of more recent object-oriented approaches in anthropology, though this deserves an essay of its own.) In the UK, Miller's (1987, 1994, 1998) turn to the anthropology of consumption patterns in the modern West marked a parallel move that married material culture studies with an 'anthropology of us', as did the work of the archaeologist William Rathje (1992) who was simultaneously immersed in new excavations of modern trash disposal and landfills in the US.

This, then, was the anthropological soil in which the seeds of thing theory, broadly conceived, were sown. And there is a sense in which the new object-oriented research was very much of its time, insofar as it offered yet another strategy for deflecting ethnographic analysis away from subaltern human subjects: not just inward to poetics or backward to history or upward to the West, but now also outward to the alterity of the object world itself. Appadurai's edited volume *The Social Life of Things* (1986) has become a conventional point of departure for those seeking a foundational text, and this at least has the virtue of providing us with a satisfying chronological convergence. Indeed, 1986 not only saw the publication of the two most influential statements of anthropology's crisis of representation and its experimental search for new representational strategies (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Marcus and Fischer, 1986) but it also saw the publication of the first major call for a new 'anthropology of things' (Appadurai, 1986). I see these as entirely intertwined developments, the narration of the biographies and shifting values of things being one more chapter in anthropology's 'experimental moment'.

The Social Life of Things did consider the objectification of human subjects; Kopytoff (1986) even used the human slave as a model for non-human things generally. But this is not what energized the volume. Its focus was instead on what Appadurai provocatively referred to as a kind of 'methodological fetishism' in which non-human objects are 'subjectified' as a heuristic device. Now squarely in the center of the anthropologist's focus, objects came to be reimagined as subjects with social lives of their own.

We have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories ... even though from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context. (Appadurai, 1986: 5, emphases in original)

Postcolonial critiques were met with posthumanist methods – or at least with the early hints of what would grow into a kind of quasi-posthumanist anthropology in which objects freely assume the position of subjects.

There is no easy way of summarizing the diverse object-oriented research that subsequently arose with such force in the 1990s. Methodological fetishism continued to flourish in work on the biographies of things in non-Western settings and in studies of the global flows and recontextualizations of objects as they moved in and out of colonial settings. The rise of material culture studies and of symmetrical anthropology during this period, stimulated by the prolific writings of Daniel Miller and Bruno Latour, respectively, came to have particularly wide impact. Most of the contributors to these literatures would probably protest mightily against any characterization of their project as part of a turn away from people, though I think it is fair to say that most would also readily acknowledge that their work explores the mutual constitution of people and things through a methodological focus on the non-human side of the dialectic (*sensu* Miller, 1987). And this is precisely what I mean by the turn away from people – a turn that, in an age of ongoing calls for decolonization, still appeals in part because it shifts the directness of anthropological inquiry from humans to non-humans.

Certain recent anthropological conversations have been moving much further in this direction, bringing to the surface the formerly latent posthumanist tendencies of thing theory. We might consider, for instance, the scholarship of Tim Ingold, who started out writing about ethnic politics among the Skolt Saami peoples in the 1970s, moved through questions of human–animal relations and human–tool relations, and now is engrossed in the lively flux of materials themselves, his most memorable case study being that of a stone slowly drying on his desk (Ingold, 2007). (See also Hugh Raffles's, 2012, recent reflections on the ongoing legacy of *Writing Culture* in which he is prompted to consider ethnographic questions such as 'What is a stone?' Both Raffles and Ingold, incidentally, include similar photographs of their new ethnographic subject: a round stone sitting attentively on a table, Figure 2.) With his vision of 'an anthropology that has been liberated from ethnography' (Ingold, 2013: 6), in which exploring the affordances of sand and sticks is considered a form of participant observation, many would regard Ingold as having replaced anthropology with material philosophy, effectively evacuating matters of culture and politics and obviating the crisis of representation altogether. He is joined by some archaeologists: 'The rapport between human and wall should be no more or no less privileged [within archaeology] than that between rain and exposed mud plaster', propose Olsen et al. (2012: 10). 'Rushing water washing against concrete pillars will "interpret" or "feel" the concrete surface as well as any hermeneut or phenomenologist.' They advocate, then, research into 'how things exist, act, and affect one another apart from any human relations, whether or not this interaction eventually also affects human life' (p. 13).

Perhaps the only overarching characterization one can make is that thing theorists of the past three decades have collectively participated in the progressive subjectification of the object world. Outright rejections of the basic subject/object ontological edifice abound in this literature, but practically speaking, no one is interested in taking subjectivity away from humans. (The politics of this would be difficult to sustain.) Rather, most intellectual energy has been devoted to wiping away the stigma of objecthood from

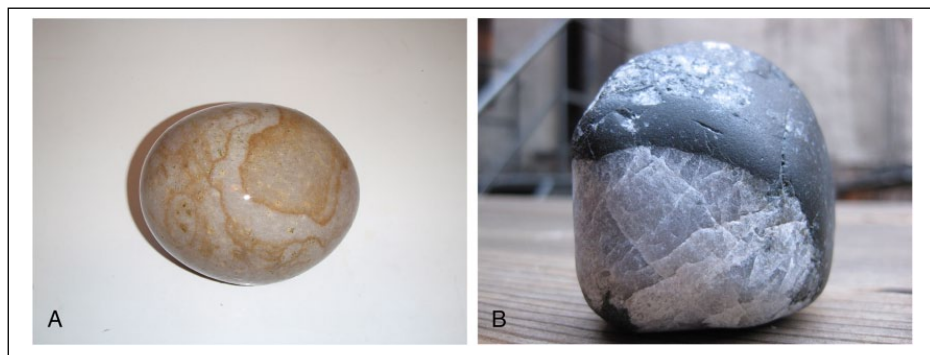


Figure 2. The new ethnographic subject: (A) Tim Ingold's (2007: Figure 1) stone; (B) Hugh Raffles's (2012: Figure 1) stone.

non-humans and to welcoming them back into our models of the social as subject-like participants.

The subjectification of objects, as an interdisciplinary project, becomes most visible when we consider the unfolding questions addressed to things. If much scholarship in the second half of the 20th century was consumed with the interpretive question of what things mean (e.g. Barthes, 1972[1957], and Baudrillard, 2005[1968], but extending into the analysis of the shifting values of things in Appadurai, 1986, Thomas, 1991, and the like), then late 20th-century scholarship provocatively redirected us toward the question of what things do. Early contributions to this latter question include the study of non-human actors and the translation of goals in science studies (e.g. Callon, 1986; Latour, 1988), study of the agency of images in art history and anthropology (e.g. Freedberg, 1989; Gell, 1998), as well as a flurry of new interest in fetishism, animism, idolatry, and powerful objects (e.g. Bird-David, 1999; Pietz, 1985; Spyer, 1998). From meaning to agency, the questions posed to things have recently pushed the subjectivity of objects to new heights: Mitchell (2005) provocatively inquires into the *desires* of pictures; Bennett (2010) asks how *affect* might be understood as a property of non-humans; Harman's (2005) 'carnal phenomenology' challenges us to explore how objects *perceive* and are given to each other. Things that act, perceive, feel, and desire – this is quite a different methodological fetishism than what Appadurai had in mind, but it is a natural extension of a line of inquiry in which the lives of things assume center stage.

A perpetual Orient

I have argued that the shift from people to things – and the subsequent reimagining of objects as anthropological subjects – has a history that is interdigitated with the unfinished postcolonial critiques of Euro-American representational authority. Part of that argument is anchored in the disciplinary context of thing theory's emergence: in retrospect, object-oriented anthropology comes to appear as one of many methodological experiments arising in response to the representational crisis of the 1980s. A second way

of exploring this connection is through the language of thing theory itself, much of which is saturated with postcolonial tropes.

The figure of the slave, as noted above, served as Kopytoff's (1986) model for the biographic object as it passes through phases of commoditization and singularization. But the narrative of slavery – or, more precisely, of an object world that has been colonized, othered, enslaved, and exploited by human subjects – has much deeper resonance within thing theory (see Brown, 2006), particularly amongst so-called symmetrical anthropologists. Echoing Said's (1978: 108) discussion of an 'anthropocentrism allied with Europocentrism' residing in the heart of the colonial project, Latour (2004: 46) has forcefully argued that posthumanism and postcolonialism must be understood as conjoined undertakings. When he writes of 'two symmetrical exoticisms', he has in mind the exoticism of non-Western cultures (which Westerners, as modern beings, have risen above and claimed mastery over) and the exoticism of non-human nature (which humans, as cultural beings, have risen above and claimed mastery over). These paired imperial projects, he suggests, entirely depend upon one another. Not only do subaltern humans come to appear as mere objects. Objects come to appear as subaltern humans: 'At best, they [objects] are loyal servants', he laments. 'At worst, they are brutes or slaves' (Latour, 1993: 80). Undoing the subject-object divide thus emerges as central to undoing all manner of insidious inequalities between humans.

The critical study of things and the subjectification of non-human objects, then, might be imagined as contributing to a political project in which the final goal remains the emancipation and self-determination of subaltern people. In fact, Russian productivists of the 1920s developed their own version of thing theory more or less along these lines, arguing that objects must be empowered as 'comrades' to assist in the socialist revolution (see Kiaer, 2005). Here is the great irony within contemporary scholarship, however: many thing theorists appear to have taken on board a posthumanist position with such dedication that the very notion of subsuming their studies within a human political project – socialist, postcolonial, or otherwise – comes to appear as simply one more round of anthropocentric imperialism. As the emancipation of non-human objects becomes as an end unto itself, all struggles between human subjects – including between anthropologists and 'the natives' – fade into the background.

This, at least, is what I take away from something like Daniel Miller's (2005) treatise against the 'tyranny of the subject', by which he means the tyranny of humans over non-humans, people over things. Indeed, Miller (2005: 37–38) has gone so far as to argue that anthropology will only 'gain maturity by burying the corpse of our imperial majesty: society' and by building, in its place, 'a dialectical republic in which persons and things exist in mutual self-construction and respect for their mutual origin and mutual dependency'. Pinney (2005: 258), in the same volume, writes in a similarly militaristic register about 'the battle between the object world and the world of human relations' in which even those who are 'ostensibly concerned with objects and materiality' turn out to be double agents involved in 'the further colonization [of objects] by the social and the subject'. And Olsen (2003: 100) brings archaeologists into the fray with the suggestion that 'archaeologists should unite in a defence of things, a defence of those subaltern members of the collective that have been silenced and "othered" by the imperialist social and humanist discourses' (see also Olsen, 2010).

A number of discursive strategies are deployed in this refashioning of objects as sub-alterns. It is common, for instance, to find an emphasis placed on the object's lack of voice, both literally and figuratively. In his review of the contributions of literary studies to thing theory, John Plotz (2005: 110) identifies 'what can be called an "immanentist" scholarship that ardently desires things qua things to speak to us, in some kind of mysterious yet comprehensible outsiders' language ... [a] kind of anti-semiotics.' 'Can the sofa speak?' he playfully asks us, echoing Spivak. Anti-semiotics is a nice way of describing WJT Mitchell's exploration of, as he puts it, the lives and loves of images (which are special sorts of objects, but objects nonetheless). 'We need to account', he writes, 'for not just the power of images but their powerlessness, their impotence, their abjection' (Mitchell, 2005: 20):

That is why I shift the question from what pictures *do* to what they *want*, from power to desire, from the model of the dominant power to be opposed, to the model of the subaltern to be interrogated or (better) to be invited to speak. (pp. 33–34, emphases in original)

This leads Mitchell to think through comparisons between the image and the woman, the black man, and the domesticated animal.

Orientalizing images are often invoked as well, as when Latour (1993: 48) refers to the world of quasi-objects as a 'Middle Kingdom, as vast as China and as little known' or when the archaeologist Carl Knappett (2005: 27–28) finds his key example of object agency in the story of the 'Automatic Turk', an 18th-century chess-playing contraption outfitted with a turban and cloaked in mechanical mystery. Graham Harman (2005: 140), whose speculative realist philosophy is now having wide impact, puts it in bolder terms: 'For all the endless diatribes against "Orientalism", objects themselves are a perpetual Orient, harboring exotic spices, guilds, and cobras.'

More is going on here than just metaphors run amok. There may be entirely good reasons for reassessing the roles of non-humans in our models of society, or of things in the translation of our goals, or of objects in the making of subjects. We may indeed decide that prior understandings of the social must be reassembled, or even that basic ontological revisions are required. But these undertakings do not require a moral discourse. One does not need to talk about non-humans as oppressed when they have simply been misunderstood. Nor does one need to talk about humans as tyrants when they have simply been poor analysts. Why all the language of imperialism and subalterns, then?

It does not take a Freudian to sense that there is some sort of transference at work. Critiques of the Western colonial project and of the human sciences' contribution to this project have been deflected onto the world of things. Eurocentrism has been discursively reconfigured as anthropocentrism. And the effects? First, the special culpability of the West in the perpetuation of global inequalities is muted, insofar as all humans are tyrants in relation to the world of things. Second, we can now assume a moral stance in defense of things without worrying about whether or not things actually want to be defended by us. Like damsels in distress, grateful to the knights who guard their honor and care for their physical wellbeing, objects mutely submit to being saved. Objects, in short, make very convenient subaltern subjects.

Conclusion

Anthropology's turn toward things has itself been turning into other things, most prominently into philosophy, leading some anthropologists to reimagine their project as ontological and to entertain conversations about – infamously – the literal existence of multiple worlds, sometimes described as existing within things themselves (e.g. Alberti et al., 2011; Henare et al., 2007). There is a sense in which the new figure of the anthropologist-cum-philosopher marks the consummation of a political undercurrent I have suggested runs just beneath the surface of much object-oriented scholarship. If the authority of anthropological claims about human subjects was eroded by the postcolonial critiques of the latter half of the 20th century, and if studying non-human objects emerged as a methodological way-out that salvaged scholarly authority by steering its objectifying practices into safer waters, then the new ontological anthropology demonstrates just how successful this strategy has become. Western anthropologists are now able to assert even greater authority than was ever possible in the old days of colonial ethnography.

Indeed, anthropological philosophers now find themselves empowered not just to make claims about the basic entities of the world itself (or, as some would insist, of 'the worlds themselves') but also to develop schemes for 'how things could be' (Holbraad et al., 2014; cf. Bessire and Bond, 2014), all by 'thinking through things' and without bothering much about the active political struggles of anthropology's traditional human subjects, subjects who now quietly retreat into the blurred backdrop. In this new 'game of alterity',

... all you need ... is a set of assumptions and some body of material that appears to contradict it ... What is at stake are the ideas, not the people who might 'hold' them. So if, as [Tim Ingold] notoriously said, anthropology is philosophy with people in it, I'd say he is right, but only without the people. (Holbraad, 2010: 185)

The turn toward things not only salvaged anthropological authority; it became a stepping-stone toward its radical expansion.

In *System of Objects*, Baudrillard (2005[1968]: 96) argued from a Lacanian perspective that objects have always been 'the finest of domesticated animals', and by this he meant that whatever we are unable to project onto other humans, we project onto our pets or, better yet, our objects. 'As a mirror the object is perfect, precisely because it sends back not real images, but desired ones', he wrote:

In a word, it [the object] is a dog of which nothing remains but faithfulness. What is more, you can look at an object without it looking back at you. That is why everything that cannot be invested in human relationships is invested in objects.

Would it be too embarrassingly retrograde to suggest that we have something to learn by placing anthropology itself on the couch and inquiring into its growing investment in objects, materiality and the like?

My proposed diagnosis is that the turn toward things in anthropology can be read as a response to postcoloniality and the politics of representation as much as to postmodernity and the play of representation. The subjectification of objects

springs, to a great extent, from a disciplinary longing for a kind of anthropological informant that once existed in the colonial era but that has since disappeared or at least come to assume a very different global position. When the West lost its ability to write about non-Western people however it liked, non-humans surfaced as surrogate objects of study. Non-humans were socialized; they were empowered; they were dis-empowered; they were fought over, cared for, and defended; for many, they became full-fledged Others with an analytical value equal to that of humans. With one important exception: non-humans remained silent, a 'perpetual Orient', outside the true politics of representation. Objects emerged, in other words, as anthropology's perfect subjects because, as subjects, they can so easily be objectified. And as objects-turned-subjects-turned-objects we can continue to save, enslave, represent, delegate, denigrate and emancipate them as it suits us.

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