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Materiality and the comfort of things: drinks, dining and discussion with Daniel Miller

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Daniel Miller is Professor of Material Culture at University College London. Miller's foundational work in consumption studies, material culture studies and the anthropology of materiality has made profound contributions to our understanding of consumption, markets and culture. He is particularly known for *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (1987), *A Theory of Shopping* (1998) and his edited collections *Unwrapping Christmas* (1995), the four-volume *Consumption: Critical Concepts in the Social Sciences* (2001), and *Materiality* (2005). He is a tremendously prolific scholar and has worked with a large number of doctoral students. His 2008 book, *The Comfort of Things*, has introduced Miller to a wider audience. This interview took place in London on 25 November 2008.

Keywords: consumption; material culture; materiality; ethnography; intersubjectivity; Daniel Miller

Over the years, Daniel Miller's theory of consumption has attracted considerable attention. However, few studies in consumer research have explicitly addressed the necessary relation that Miller highlights between consumption-based assumptions and theories of materiality. In *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, Miller argued that consumption is a process by which human beings materialize or objectify values and meanings, and moreover resolve conflicts and paradoxes in everyday life. Furthermore, he continued, theories of consumption imply theories of materiality – perhaps in the guise, for example, of researcher-engaged assumptions about subjects and objects and the relations between them. Whereas any number of alternative models of materiality might be conceived and proposed, Miller offered a theory of materiality based in ethnography-generated understandings of material culture and subject/object hybridity. In this way, Miller (1987) avoids the necessity of essentialist transcendent ontologies, yet surpasses in depth the purely epistemological.

Miller's theory of materiality challenges consumption researchers to articulate implicit models of subject formation or risk systematic misapprehension of the intersubjective self. To put this another way, acknowledging an underlying theory of materiality encourages researchers to comprehend consumer selves that form in relation to experiential modes of otherness – including aspects of material culture – and that emerge in contexts constituted through consumption practices and consumer culture. The called-for theoretical coherence and conceptual transparency point out the potential for understanding multiple investigative starting points, which draw upon materiality-based notions of subject formation, intersubjectivity and subject/object relations, and

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moreover engage concerns over pre-emptively designating particular notions of relevant “entities,” such as subject and object, and their apparent boundaries, or lack thereof.

In Miller’s view, material culture participates in the larger process of the development of any possible subject/subjectivity; that is, he insists upon the overall material environment’s role in creating us as subjects/selves. Members of a consumer culture – in which the processes of consumption facilitate and constitute contexts basic to human life – engage in and are engaged by particular consumption activities, objects and meanings that have the potential to create, transform, intensify or call into question consumer subject identity. However, without attention to related materiality issues, consumer research leaves fundamental questions unasked, venturing unreflective assumptions and inaccurate conclusions.

This interview with Daniel Miller at Hakkasan, a Chinese restaurant with a Michelin star and a style-conscious mood, catches him several months after the publication of *The Comfort of Things* (2008) – the outcome of a new London street ethnography, which he addressed to a more popular readership – and just prior to three month’s field study in the Philippines. His cooperative effort with New York University, the Material World blog, inviting statements and images of worldwide research is going strong, and in 2008, Miller was elected a Fellow of the British Academy and won the Royal Anthropological Institute’s Rivers Memorial Prize. It has been a pretty good year.

I arrived at Hakkasan about 20 minutes early for my interview with Professor of Material Culture and anthropologist, Daniel Miller, wanting to be certain that the quiet-ish table I had requested in the dimly lit, but often festively loud, restaurant indeed was ready; then I settled in at the bar with my Haka-tini, a signature cocktail, and Miller’s recent book, The Comfort of Things. Miller arrived before I had finished reviewing the Epilogue. He ordered a drink with a floating flower, and we were shown to our corner table. Miller is a relentlessly active researcher and prolific publisher, and I wanted to know what was on his current schedule.

Daniel Miller: There are two projects I’ve been concentrating on this year in terms of new fieldwork as against writing up past projects. One is part of my new initiative on denim detailed at www.ucl.ac.uk/global-denim-project. It’s one of three pieces of research I intend to carry out on denim, and it’s a return to the kind of street study I conducted for my work on shopping and more recently for *The Comfort of Things*. This fieldwork was carried out with Sophie Woodward, and we’ve picked a little area in North London with several streets in it working on people’s relationships to their denim blue jeans. It’s a slightly more homogenous social group, I think, than it was in the South London study, a higher portion of migrants from South Asia for example. As is often the case in my ethnographic research the final topic ended up as very different from anything we had envisaged before we began.

On completion of fieldwork, we’ve decided to begin writing a book next spring to be called *Denim: The Art of Ordinary*. And it’s really about under what circumstances do people actually strive to be ordinary. What kinds of aspirations are ordinary, and how does one achieve ordinarieness. In turn this is related to a whole series of wider issues, for example, we think this a much more subtle and nuanced way to look at the relationship between migrants and host communities, rather than simply asking someone something about identity. It’s less self-conscious and probably from their point of view actually rather more effective.

Janet Borgerson (JB): On the Material World blog, you posted a short piece about South India and how while some of the younger guys were willing to wear jeans that had a lot of decoration and more flare in some sense, the older men would never wear these styles.

Miller: In our London study, as opposed to South India, decoration is not particularly common really for any of the age groups we're concerned with, and actually one of the points that comes over, if you ask people what they think you're studying when you talk about denim, is that there's almost always an assumption that there's going to be an interest in things like brands, designer jeans, etc., but there's very, very little presence of any kind of brands. A surprising number of people could not tell you where they bought their jeans, wouldn't know what the shop was, let alone what the brand was. It's just not what those jeans are about. I think that the topic of ordinariness speaks much more to what is going on for most of these people, most of the time in their wearing of denim. And it's often ordinariness as when you don't necessarily want to be marked.

The waiter is starting to look anxious about taking our order as the restaurant fills up around us, so we decide upon vegetarian dim sum, which I know to be heavenly; soup and vegetarian prawn with sticky rice, along with a pink Rose-tini and something with coconut milk and pomegranate seeds.

JB: So, I've been reading *The Comfort of Things*, and thinking about methodology, how an anthropological methodology that was used to study kinship – you know within societies – and track relationships between people transforms to understand the kinds of things you were finding within these London households. In your Epilogue you bring that up. Basically, you say that what anthropologists used to study was entire societies that were undergirded by a kind of order, a cosmology, and what you suggest is that cosmologies exist within these individual households and sometimes within individuals themselves, or they have systems of order for themselves. Those don't necessarily ever need to be explained or justified, which raises questions of truth in a way. But you answered my question in a sense: the methodology can be engaged at a microcosmic level.

Miller: I think the question you raise concerns the relationship between the kinds of societies traditionally studied by anthropologists, and the work I was doing in London. With regard to kinship, one of the curiosities about the most traditional forms of kinship analysis is that in many respects they treat people like objects. People look askance at the idea that you are treating relationships to objects as though you were treating them as relationships to people. But, actually the original studies in kinship, people are not responding to each other with our particular kinds of liberal concern for the individual personality and their predilections and concerns. They are responding to each other as categories that are given by kinship classification systems. So you're not dealing with Fred, you're dealing with Fred in his capacity as your mother's brother. In that sense, the person, the individual, of traditional anthropological theory is in many ways object-like. Of course one of most important anthropological theories, *The Gift* by Marcel Mauss highlights this consideration of persons as things. So I don't think there's much of a problem in arguing that my study of relationships to things could have analogies with traditional kinship studies as relationships to given genres and categories of social relationships.

JB: You do say, hold your thought, that people manifest themselves to each other as material presences, so in a sense...

Miller: Anthropology is not the only group concerned with the thing-like properties of persons in relationships. Consider for example the feminist critique of pornography. In a recent article called "What Is a Relationship," I considered a recent book by Jennifer Mason and Janet Finch and the process of inheritance. On the whole in contemporary England, we distribute the main assets equitably, in other words regardless of whether this was a nice child, not a nice child, or the way they have treated you. We still give them the same amount.

What we are doing is treating people as an exemplification of a category, not in terms of their behavior or character or any other individualizing aspect of that person. So, we're not just talking about tribal kinship here, I think it would still be true in our society that a person is treated at least as an exemplar of a category if not necessarily a thing. But for anthropology the point is not just the analogy with a thing, but the systematic order exhibited by things. I am currently organizing our department's contribution to the celebration of the 100th birthday of Lévi-Strauss who really established this tradition.

The waiter has cleared our soup bowls, and returns with another round of steaming dishes, including vegetarian "prawns" that look surprisingly real and a bowl of reddish sticky rice. Miller muses that he spends a lot of his time in places where sticky rice is grown. On hillsides mainly, he says, as opposed to the lowlands. I recall that Miller has recently been awarded the River's Memorial Prize, given in past years to luminaries Malinowski, Evans-Prichard and Mary Douglas. I congratulate him as I serve myself something that looks like braised chard, and Miller leaps back into the discussion.

Miller: From Lévi-Strauss the route to consumption studies comes through Bourdieu, who showed that there were underlying systematic patterns which allow us to understand if you like almost the *aesthetic* represented by a given society; the way people look, their taste, the way they sit, move, do things in everyday life.

JB: There seem to be people I run into at consumer research conferences and organization studies conferences that get very agitated when you start talking about a dialectical process or an underlying order or you start talking about the resolutions of paradoxes.

Miller: One of the problems, with people from certain traditions of analysis, that includes the notion of an underlying structure that people aren't necessarily conscious of, is, actually, political. Some academics feel it's politically important that they assert certainties of agency, or what Giddens called *discursive penetration* – that people basically know what they're doing, and we have to respect their own voice or agency or their particular take on the world. If you talk of unconscious structures, this all becomes quite difficult. You can be accused of being almost condescending or projecting onto another person what it is they actually think, or why they think it.

Yet on reflection there are many academic positions, not only in anthropology, that take such a view. Think of Freud – positions that argue that the unconscious has a very powerful position in determining actions and agency. Indeed as a student of material

culture, I would say it gets even more confusing, because although the consciousness is articulated in language, there is the practice that is articulated in things, which is not necessarily something one can easily talk about.

So you may have a very clear idea as to why you like the taste of this variety of fish rather than that variety of fish, say cod as against salmon, but if I asked you to describe clearly in language what that difference in taste is, you would struggle. I am not usually concerned with language as against other communications or with consciousness against unconsciousness. For me it is more important to give acknowledgment to material practice as an expression of agency, decorations on the wall, the clothes people are wearing, the way things are ordered around the house, that's not something that people are necessarily talking about.

JB: It's interesting in the Epilogue of *Comfort of Things*, you remark that one way people have approached these issues is that they've contrasted the individual with society; however, you state, you will not begin with individual or society. And, I might say also from a philosophical position, you suggest not starting with a set notion of subject and object. Often, I hear people assuming that you DO start with subject or object, and I've argued that quite the contrary, you attend to emergences in the relation. In *The Comfort of Things*, you say, let's start with real people and ask them what it is that they feel is important for a full and fulfilling life, and the answers they give have to do with relationships, typically relationships with people.

Yet, when you're there and asking questions what also emerges is not just that a full and meaningful life is emerging out of relationships with people, but it's also emerging out of relationships with things. You are certainly emphasizing that the human subject, human individual is as much a product of those relationships as they are agents of those relationships. And what I think is specifically interesting, and you get a bit of a question about which comes first, is that the relationship creates the person and the objects are part of any relationship. Of course, if there are object-like qualities of persons –

Miller: I think one of the solutions to this is to go right back to Lévi-Strauss, because he was somebody who with clarity demonstrated that much of what we think of as entities don't exist in isolation.

JB: What entities? Society?

Miller: Society, a Person, an Object – there is no such thing as society or persons or an object, because fundamental to his structuralism was that things, persons, whatever, are only ever constituted by relationships. A person is what they are not, as much as what they kind of ARE. It depends on their contrast with others. It depends on where that boundary is that constitutes the being of them as opposed to the not-being of the other. And what structuralism did was to basically say that all you can study therefore is relationships within which distances of position give rise to our perception of the things being specific and particular. Now in my work I go somewhat beyond that stance, because to that kind of structuralism there's almost a synchronicity. Whereas what I hope I add to this is something more dynamic that comes out of a Hegelian tradition, that's more dialectical and that works more in terms of process. For example, in our book on the Internet, the argument is it's not about how Trinidadians use the Internet. It's about a process that constitutes the Internet as that which is used by

Trinidadians and Trinidadians as those who have been changed by their use of the Internet. I'm not ashamed to say that my outlook on life radically transformed when Lévi-Strauss's ideas first emerged.

JB: What was there before?

Miller: Before that, we all studied entities. We went and we studied a society, a person, and you looked at what society did or the person did. Now, when you read Lévi-Strauss what he did was say, ok, here are these societies, say on the northwestern coast of the US. But in his book, *The Way of the Masks*, the mask that each society has turns out to be the inverse transformation of the mask that the society next door has. So what that society believes in and what that society is, is the structural transformation of what another society is.

I am still influenced by the radical nature of this possibility. I found even in an ordinary London household, there are transformations of all sorts of things: in one or two, the order they present is a systematic inverse transformation of the orders represented by their parents. Or one can see the way a couple forms out of the order represented in the individual habitus of its two component parts.

JB: And you talk about the woman who is having the tattoos, you suggest she has come up with an internal consistency and integrity based on her own ability to express things around body piercing and –

Miller: When we study societies as anthropology, we are not amazed that these societies come up with what appears to us as extraordinarily exotic cosmology: beliefs about cannibalistic spirits, or men menstruating, which of course then seem completely normal. In other words if you're in a society that believes that men menstruate, and another society doesn't believe men menstruate, it's the latter that is seen as weird.

JB: I remember reading *The Island of Menstruating Men* –

Miller: Ian Hogbin, I think. Such a construction of cosmology is not something that's just true of these collectivities; it's something even a household can come up with. For example, I have one household in which the walls are decorated with clothing, no pictures on the wall, only clothing, and another one puts objects to do with sex on the wall. There're all sorts of interesting and creative orders.

Now the only thing is that we recognize a society to be creative in its construction of cosmology. We also usually allow that an artist can be constructed in his/her relationship to cosmology. What we don't usually allow for is the possibility that in some ways, everybody is creative in their construction of cosmology. I think that is the vision of my book. To give them respect, the kind of respect that we would normally give a society in New Guinea, the kind of respect we would normally give to an artist, but now to give that same respect to your next-door neighbor.

JB: But that again could raise the idea that you are just championing the individuation that target marketing, with a focus on specific consumers who construct their identities, is also promoting. However, you maintain that a person only is capable of coming up with a cosmology in relation, so there's never just an individuated person who

becomes a creator of a cosmology, or an identity I suppose for that matter; it's that individuals become bearers of cosmology that emerge from their relationships with persons and things. But because of the particular sighting of it...

Miller: It can be relationships with persons, relations to a subculture like goth, a relationship to their home and the constraints of it, to their identity as working class. People do not spring *sui generis* out of the ether.

Miller sips a hazelnut cocktail topped with champagne foam in a rounded glass suggestive of a volcanic island. The dining room has become extremely crowded and loud, and I'm having trouble hearing him as we continue to eat and talk at the same time. As I lean forward, the elegantly dressed couple next to us glances suspiciously at the recording iPod on our table. Miller has been writing consistently for many years, and whereas certain of his books have become more influential than others in, for example consumer research, his articles, monographs and edited books form an impressive body of work, which is what the Rivers Memorial Prize specifically honors.

Miller: I work with a corpus of research, of work, a corpus of theory. ...

JB: So you have a lineage.

Miller: The problem arises when people look at my work and take just one particular book and say, "That's what he's saying." One of the points made at the beginning of *The Comfort of Things* is that it expresses an interest in diversity; it's looking for diversity. But I'm the very same person who wrote *The Theory of Shopping* (1998). *The Theory of Shopping*, using the exact same methodology, takes a street, takes all of the people in the street. Yet it doesn't look for diversity, on the contrary is full of extreme generalizations. Generalizations that hardly recognize even the possibility of individual divergence.

Theory of Shopping is a THEORY of shopping. It presupposes that even people who've been here as immigrants for a very short time more or less are doing the same thing. Now, I wrote that book, and later I wrote *The Comfort of Things*. I haven't changed my views, but I'm writing books to look at different aspects. It's rather like a person will look different if you look at them under a microscope or through a telescope. So, the person that said in a recent review that I don't believe in society hasn't read *Theory of Shopping*, which demonstrates that individuals can become extremely homogenized extraordinarily quickly. But not in every aspect...I'm exploring different views of the same elephant, but they are spectacularly different views. For me to understand British society, you need to comprehend both ends, what is creative at the smaller scale and the areas that are more creative at a larger homogenized scale. They're both us.

JB: I often attend consumer research conferences, and materiality has become more of a topic. And I've tried to use your way of thinking about a theory of materiality that a theory of materiality has to underlie any concept of consumption, because you have to have some model, I would go so far as to say, of what you're proposing the relations to be between subjects and objects, including any variability of what you even mean by subjects and objects. In other words, researchers have to have some idea of what they're talking about at that level in order to go forward and say what they mean around

consumption and issues of identity. And you have a definition of consumption that is very useful around the resolution of paradoxes and contradictions and materialization of value and meaning in everyday life. I think of this as a process, and I think that for me it was important for consumer researchers to get that sense, that if you're going to make claims about consumption, and identity construction through consumption – whatever they mean by that, consumption of brands or clothing or trips to Tahiti – that you have to have an underlying understanding of relationships and how notions of subjects and objects emerge and engage with each other.

When I think about the issues of co-creation and relations used in philosophy and existential phenomenology, right now you have Emmanuel Levinas, the Jewish philosopher and theologian, who pushed this idea that ethics is the relationship, ethics is the space between, and that that is prior to any entity that could ever be designated. So the idea is that the co-creation comes first. People have taken this up from Levinas in particular, though of course you can find it in a number of other places.

Miller: Of course, Levinas is influenced by structuralism, and he comes out of that tradition.

JB: Do you think there's something here about ethics and religion? If someone wanted to come toward these studies of consumption and material culture, and they wanted to reject the notion of an ethic? Is it somehow more ethical to recognize the co-creation than to designate the entity?

Miller: Most people who come from some kind of social science, like anthropology, start with a relatively well-explicated concern with welfare. They're not just studying people. They actually have concerns. And fundamental to anthropology is empathy. The quality that I have been happy to see recognized in *The Comfort of Things* is the quality of empathy. To follow like Levinas on the constitutive nature of ethics, can arise from this concern with empathy.

But what Bourdieu's *Distinction* doesn't do, what Levinas doesn't do, and what I think is basic to the way I work, is that empathy is expressed through ethnography. One understands these abstract principles, but you want to see and respect how they are realized in everyday practice by people who are not chosen for anything in particular. They are whomever you happen to come across in the course of the ethnography itself. At the same time, what you're taking from this tradition, the structuralist tradition, is that I see these people as striving toward cosmology which could be seen as religious in some sense or another even if its within an entirely secular milieu. The modern individual is not seen as a disordered, machinated, unconnected fragment. Actually, there are sorts of striving there toward ordered cosmology, reasoned transcendence, that parallel what we normally think of as conventional religion, but they are constructing this in much larger measure for themselves than would be the case if they followed any given religion.

JB: OK, but what that makes me think is that there's this move back toward a Golden Calf. Where instead of there being some broader order of things that has a kind of cosmology that goes beyond the human individual ... I mean this is where the relationship part becomes really important, but if what we allow is that individuals can create their own cosmologies even if they are never brought to justification: it's flipping it. ... It's through relationships with material objects that human beings can

create their own cosmologies; through relation with material culture, individuals have the potential to emerge in ways, where there are cosmologies that function for them.

...

Miller: Bourdieu was thoroughly against taking the individual as the unit of analysis. He studied societies; he studied structures. But in another way he says exactly what you just said. Material culture is a form of practical taxonomy. The way we actually just deal with the world is how those orders reproduce themselves in the form of individuals' habitus; the expectations they have, but they also can transform those. It's not a deterministic process. They accept those orders, they are socialized into those orders, and later on they transform those orders creatively.

Now, my work comes from the same tradition, but applied to the individual. In other words, an individual does not create order out of nothing. They themselves have been created through processes of socialization, some social, some parental, some from peer groups at school. And they play within that, in some ways, highly constrained, highly structured order, but they play creatively. They make up something that is quite possibly unprecedented. And can be assigned to them as creativity.

But I would say Bourdieu – whom no one ever accused of privileging individuals – would say much the same thing. He did so on the rare occasion he wrote about individuals such as Flaubert. I just happen to be studying in a place like London where people are pulled apart in some degree, rather than socialized collectively into these households, and even then it may be households, rather than individual persons, that are the unit of creativity. So I think what we're studying is a process. People are the vehicles by which orders of material culture become transformed. And they in turn re-socialize other individuals.

JB: I just wonder, because if there's this contradiction between letting go of some sort of transcendental order...that we believe exists prior to...to any particular...It's coming back to a kind of materialism, granting power to an object.

Miller: The point that Lévi-Strauss makes against the notion of Society is that if this society's mask is the inverse transformation of that society's mask, then you can't just privilege individual society. There's an order that flows through societies. Each society thinks it's a progenitor itself, and each individual thinks, you know, that they are the creative person with taste. But these things and patterns flow through. I may be influenced by you; I may also abhor who I see, think your taste is utterly disgusting and only finally realize what I like because I'm sure as hell it doesn't have to do with that stuff you like. That might produce the equivalent of Lévi-Strauss's structural inversion in which I systematically strive to be the opposite of whatever it is I think you are.

JB: People who have become fascinated by actor network theory seem to be in a great hurry to evoke the agency of objects, and one of the things that you've discussed is the danger of taking the metaphor of subject agency – that many of the actor network theory people want to reject right off, agency in the subject – and granting something like that agency to the object.

Miller: It's an interesting point. I think one of the faults of those working in this field, and you see it in Alfred Gell as well, is they've taken something problematic in the

first place, which is to separate agency out that belongs as a property of the person, and then think that they're being radical by transferring it from the person to the thing. Opposed to that is the dialectical position, which actually privileges, not the agency of the person, and not the agency of the thing, but privileges process and relationships and transformation and flows, which at different times constitute persons and things, but only within a network of relationships, *not* a network, but a network of relationships. That's not quite the same thing. Just to talk of the agency of things is probably on the whole not that useful. Things don't operate as entities in themselves anymore than people do, in fact rather less, I should think. This is not where agency lies.

JB: One of the things I've tried to bring forward in thinking about materiality, and taking the metaphor of agency from the subject and transferring it to the object, is that what people seem to mean by the agency of the object is really more like an unintentional effect or unintentional capacity to effect change or create alteration.

Miller: They're not saying the object has intentionality; they're saying an object has agency where agency is often constituted by the unintended consequences of a thing. But the problem is we're still talking about things. Now, with regard to *The Comfort of Things*, there is not a single portrait in that book that's about a thing. I discovered very early when I was doing that work that when you try to concentrate on a thing, it's almost always useless. The theoretical structure of that book is based around the concept of aesthetics that I picked up because frankly nobody knows what the hell aesthetics is, because nobody is interested in the concept of beauty anymore. The concept of aesthetics was going begging, and I can use it really to talk about an order that basically people were comfortable with and made sense. To go back to structuralism, we never deal with a thing; we deal with an order expressed by a pattern of things.

The waiter is beginning to hover, asking about dessert, and when we order another set of drinks, a Purple Emperor and a Basil Bramble, I can see he's wondering if we're intending to give up the table at the agreed upon time. The interview would seem to be entering its final act, and I ask Miller about the work he's currently finishing up.

Miller: Basically I'm summarizing all the publications I've done in the past, trying to rewrite them in a style that's much more accessible and with better jokes. And that's going to come out in the form of two books, one that is more oriented toward material culture and one more toward consumption. The first is called *Stuff* (forthcoming), and the second is called *Consumed By Doubt*. The first one is basically written and will be published by Polity. I have also some additional projects, such as an edited book that looks at how anthropologists write about individuals, and that has a number of papers in it that are on subjects such as fake brands, and is very much a material culture volume. And then I'm also working on a volume now that has to do with how material culture is employed when people have to deal with loss, which includes things like death, divorce, dumping and being dumped, and children leaving their parents' homes.

JB: And I think I remember asking you before, this involves both the act of keeping but also getting rid of things. Is that right?

Miller: Well, for example, in leaving your parents' home, you leave things behind and you take things with. And often the nice thing about that is there's a level of ambiguity, and it's hard to say exactly when one has left one's parents' home. And actually I argue that something of that kind of gentleness of the process by which people may leave their parental homes turns out later on to be quite helpful when they are dealing with more traumatic forms of loss like being dumped, divorce and death. Very different in some ways from the psychological and psychoanalytical tradition, which wants to go from what happens to infants when they're in their first six months to what happens when dealing with death at sixty. I feel I'm doing all the bits in between.

JB: I was thinking about this the other day, from a personal perspective because I'm not married, and I've never gone through the process of being married. And there's that more traditional sense, that the woman leaves the parents' home and goes to be with another household that becomes her household, and in a sense, if you go back to your parents' house, it's almost like you've left your husband. In traditional cultures you may just be taken away, so I was thinking, the sense that I've never really left my parents' home may make my partner's life more complicated. ... I am still enmeshed in my childhood home and childhood relationships in a much stronger way than I might be if I had gotten married and moved away and done things in a more traditional kind of way.

Miller: But I think there's also a positive aspect because as I said the gentleness of that process gives a certain sense of stability and comfort and potential return as it were that more defined or definite or dramatic acts of leaving don't. The other thing that I think is innovative in terms of my current work is that yes, I talked about this project that I personally am doing in relation to denim and ordinariness, but we recently published this paper called the "Manifesto for the Study of Denim" (Miller and Woodward 2007). And what Sophie Woodward and I argued in that paper, among other things, is that typically when academics choose a topic to study, they do so on the basis that this is something that nobody else is studying right now, and is being neglected.

Whereas in the "Manifesto," actually instead of choosing our topic in terms of what people aren't studying, choosing a topic in terms of what people are studying suggested that I will certainly be writing on two or three projects to do with denim over the next five years, as will Sophie Woodward who's working on the project with me. Why not see if there are other people who are interested in working on denim? We put up this website, and it's not like we have any organization or any money. We simply set out the idea, and now I think we have nearly 18 projects on that website – of people who have decided on the basis of that call to a kind of an open-source social science in which people collaborate and they add ... a free exchange of material between those people that I think is going to be quite an effective form of new research. I think denim lends itself, having discovered that more than 50 per cent of the world's population on any one day are wearing it.

JB: I love that. Great example of *establish importance first* –

Miller: And it's going to be profound about many different things, but I'm delighted by the fact of this random process whereby you can throw open an item of consumption and say, who wants a piece of it? Already its produced a wonderful eclectic range

of research projects. So you've got somebody working on denim shoddy, which is what happens to denim fiber when it's tracked back into denim fiber; and people working on denim in different locations: Brazil; my work on denim India; you've got high fashion denim; denim and sex; you've got ordinary denim.

And the third element that I am working on is the rise of *ethical* denim – not only doing this around the global denim project, but also persuading potential students who want to come and work with me, because I'm in a lucky position to have quite a large number of people who want to work on PhD's with me, and I'm able to suggest to them topics that I'm interested in. So this year, my new PhD students consist of somebody working on denim in China, in Sweden and in South Africa.

JB: And as long as each of them goes to their own zone and looks at how things are working there ... the project has very little to tie them together in any kind of universalistic way other than there is a certain kind of material –

Miller: Anthropology, though to live up to this promise and this premise, is supposed to be a basically comparative difference: the premise is you can understand denim a hell of a lot better in China if someone is also working on denim in Brazil and other places. And in this case, I'm doing that quite systematically. Because I also have people working in Brazil and in other sites, probably we're going to have a six-country comparison at the end of this. That's what anthropology was supposed to do. I think that this also responds to the notion of a global product in which the notion of global does not become just a glib term opposed to the local, because the nice thing about denim is that wherever you are it has its specifics, but its specifics are meaningful in relation to the way people have interpreted something that they are usually very well aware of, which is that denim is global. In a sense, however local you go, denim remains global, and however global you go, denim remains local. And I think again it provides a more profound way of engaging with that kind of activity than just theory or speculative projections onto products. These are full blown ethnographies. They will be deep and local. ... The global exists in those local areas, and I think that that's a promising project. And I'm really looking forward to it.

JB: And what about the *Stuff* book?

Miller: *Stuff* is a summary of all the work I've done on material culture, but it will also take a particular stance. The first chapter is called "My Life as an Extremist," but you'd have to read the book to understand exactly what I mean by that. And it is really in some ways an introduction to material culture, at least as I have studied it over what is now decades, I guess.

JB: You've got to admit that now, I suppose, that it's been decades?

Miller: Given that I'm only 30, how strange. As a time lord we could do these things. Anything else?

JB: I think the effect of the third cocktail is a slow-down of my undying curiosity. I don't know, what else? You've been interviewed on the radio, have you had interviews published?

Miller: Not many interviews.

JB: Not after three cocktails ... but *Comfort* has been reviewed and –

Miller: *The Comfort of Things* was intended to be a popular book. So in some ways I've been pleased that it's been reviewed in the kind of press where people who are non-academics have come across it, and it's being read. In my department, it's being read by the secretaries and not just the academics. And that's important to me, I wanted to reach out to a wider audience and that they could enjoy it, relate to it. And one of the curious things about democratized reading is that with the internet basically anyone can email you. And for the first time with this book, more or less anybody is. I'm getting emails all the time from what you might call random readers. I mean people in the US who'll say, you know, somebody told me that I would identify with this person in the book, and I read it and I identified with all the people in the book. That's an email I got yesterday. Or somebody else saying they were dealing with the loss of their mother and the things that were left, and reading the book gave them some kind of comfort in actually dealing with that. But these people have been looking me up, find my email address and email me, and that's a different experience than you might have being an academic.

JB: And are you getting people writing to you saying, I read your book; this is very interesting. I myself collect things; I want to put something on your Material World blog?

Miller: No, it's not necessarily linked. More a personal acknowledgement, what they thought about it.

JB: Do you get people asking about the Epilogue? I felt in reading the Epilogue I could see you going over the elements of the book, but at the same time trying to clarify some of the more theoretical points.

Miller: Yes, but I think that appeals to a more academic public. I don't think people who are reading from their sense of empathy or identity with the characters in the book are going to be focused on the Epilogue itself. Some reviews refer to it, and I think have misunderstood it, as if I were saying that society does not exist, or should not exist, which is not at all what I say. What I say is that people do not privilege a relation to society against which they understand themselves.

JB: Well, again that same point, if you hypothesize society first or you hypothesize the subject first, it's easier to miss the point that these are co-created. But I like the idea that if you question the notion that society is an object of study, you can question the notion of a "social science," and then I was thinking of Husserl and some of the others who pushed forward a notion of the "human sciences," and of course that suffers from exactly the same problem, because if you hypothesize what human is prior to study or observation, then you think you know what you're looking for.

Miller: In the last section of the introduction to the materiality book I'm addressing this problem, that it's as though we felt this need to put something on a pedestal, and

in a way it's a legacy of religion: you put god on a pedestal, you destroy the notion of god; you put society on a pedestal, as in social science, you destroy that; you put the subject on a pedestal: and the point I make at the end of that introduction is that I don't want to put objects on the pedestal or material culture on the pedestal. I just want to leave the pedestal empty. We need to live, work in an unprivileged environment that allows ourselves to be surprised, as a matter of fact, in any given instance; the driving force can be cosmology, or it can be the weather, personal imagery or it can be collectively, or it can be an aesthetic, or it can be saturated with a plethora of things. What we need to remain in awe of is unexpected possibility in the world, that we are open to by virtue of the openness of our research not the awe of sacrifice to something on a pedestal.

JB: I'm hearing a sort of social constructionist notion, say recalling Judith Butler, that there's repetition, but through repetition things new are created. There's always slippage, and there's always change. I know you don't really put yourself in that camp, but in a sense based on the things you were arguing, this fits in quite well, which is why I think it's disturbing when people seem to refuse to understand that aspect of your argument.

Miller: Well, maybe one benefit of writing a book like *Stuff*, which sets together a large number of my projects, is that such a document helps preclude judging a program of work based on what is only a single element in a corpus. For me any particular research project only makes sense in relationship to others. If I feel one research project accentuated, say, diversity, the next project tries to balance it by looking at homogenization. I don't devote myself to a single theme, and then try to realize that through successive projects.

JB: Do you think the notion, though, that households and individuals can create an integrity or a consistency that ... what about participatory democracy? I mean, I don't even know if that exists, but is there some kind of an assumed notion that if people can look to their own creations that they are less likely to become involved?

Miller: Not at all. I think that this is precisely the kind of forced narrowing down of my work that I was talking about. If you start by looking at things from the household level, people presuppose that you are somehow taking away the possibility of creation at a collective level. That's ridiculous. You can't encompass all the different levels of human creativity in one project.

I wrote that piece on virtualism where virtualism is about as macro as you can get. In virtualism, capitalism is negated by the authority of the consumer being taken away: at that level I'm not even talking about collectivities of persons, I'm talking about history. People that are worried that I'm disturbing their understanding of the sanctity of society by concentrating on the individual are probably worried that I've disturbed the sanctity of the concept of the person by the fact that I'm also talking about history.

To my mind any academic (at least one following in the kind of tradition that I would wish to follow) does this. It goes back to the notion in fact of being an extremist. You have to be working on all these fronts. You have to understand history, society, households and the individual, each in terms of their own scale and each in terms of their relationship to other scales of enquiry.

Some academics want to study just one register, or one scale. They're comfortable with that, and they stick to that. I prefer to go up and down the register. If I have just done some theorizing at the level of history or society, then the next thing I'm going to do is try to look at something at the level of individuals, perhaps based on fieldwork.

JB: And I think from the point of view of *The Comfort of Things*, people are already connected into the broader system of objects and persons and relationships and institutions, in order to even BE in a household.

Miller: Yes, although that book is largely about households and individuals, I try to make clear in the final section that the only reason that they are able to have that kind of degree of creative control over stuff is because the state and political economy work in a way that provide increasing autonomy. It is part of the liberal ideology that tries to give a certain license to individuals. But this is only something individuals can make use of when they are also granted the resources to do so, which in the case of London – unlike some of the extreme forms of poverty I deal with when working in places such as Jamaica – seems to give rise to the kind of diversity of consumption that is documented in that book. Again you need to understand the wider context, but a particular study may put political economy into the background and households in the foreground, and the next study reverses this.

JB: Some of the people I find myself arguing with around these issues themselves seem to neglect co-createdness – of individuals, societies, objects; all co-created. It's classic, the very people who make the criticism are neglecting the very thing that underlies their criticism of somebody else.

Miller: I go further in promoting this range of research in the new Global Denim project, which includes individual research at a wide range of levels. Even in my own work, this goes from intimate issues of a particular individual's relation between denim and sex, right through the political economic considerations of how the relationship between denim mills and manufacturing sites affect the rise of ethical denim in transnational trade. My aim is to keep shifting between foregrounds and backgrounds and how different scales emerge, something that Marilyn Strathern has written extensively on. ...For pities' sake, give us another cocktail.

He's joking of course, and our table is in demand. Soon we're making our way up the broad, dark stairway out into the obscure, somewhat grungy alley that hides the Hakkasan entrance, and continue on to the bustle of Oxford Street. Miller, hands in the pockets of his lightweight leather jacket, joins the crowd and disappears down the stairs into the Tube station, and I begin my long walk south. After a few blocks I'm thinking that when you spend several hours with someone who exudes that much energy, enthusiasm and intellectual curiosity, it's a good idea to have some distance to cover before trying to focus on anything else.

Note

The Material World blog can be found at <http://www.materialworldblog.com/>

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