

Contact Tracing: The Materiality of Encounters

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Keywords

Materiality, history, encounter, embodiment, trace, track

Abstract

This article introduces the special issue on ‘Material Encounters’ by addressing the praxis of materiality across time, disciplines, areas of study, and technologies. We use the metonyms of track and trace and the distinction of objects and things to disentangle ways in which materials and understandings of the material mediate dynamic encounters with specific people or places, particularly in Oceania. These material encounters generate diverse, unstable forms of knowing on all sides, through the uneven flux of human embodiment (in encounters) and embodied materialization (in object, inscription, representation, memorialization). We juxtapose the assumed, if increasingly challenged priority of materials in object-oriented fields such as archaeology and museology; the reflective revival of material culture studies and the ‘material turn’ in anthropology from around 1990; and the belated recognition of the salience of materials and materialities by historians, whose craft depends on present material traces of the pasts they seek to elucidate. With reference to the agency of persons, places, time, or things, we stress the plurality of materialities and their related ontologies, and the qualities of movement, instability, and incompleteness inherent in all encounters.

Introduction: material encounters

The *dama* [spirits] walked right past this place. I wasn't there when they passed, but later I saw their footprints... A boy had covered them over with a wild taro leaf so that I could see them later. The footprints had no toes. I heard the sound of the guns, then I saw the footprints, then I saw the men that they had killed...

When I saw the toeless footprints, I was convinced they were *dama* (Baowa Ngawe, interview with Chris Ballard, 26 May 1991)

During October 1934, strange signs of an impending encounter materialized among Huli-speakers of the New Guinea Highlands: small chips of wood, hewn from trees and passed down into Huli territory from their Ipili and Paiela trading partners to the north. Nothing should have been more unremarkable for Huli horticulturalists than the detritus of a daily activity such as working with wood. But these fragments had been cut by steel, a substance then unknown to Huli people; turned over in the hand, their preternaturally sharp edges examined closely, they provoked awe and consternation, inspiring some to think that the world was ending and others to slaughter and eat their precious herds of pigs.¹ Some said that the wood chips were the work of the *dama* spirits Mara Howe and Mara Mongolo, using the sacred axes Gole Lebe Ayu and Gole Herebe Ayu, and that they would be coming next to the Huli.

Over a period of about two weeks in November 1934, these spirits did indeed arrive, in the form of a party of mining prospectors. Led by twin brothers Jack and Tom Fox, they crossed Huli territory from west to east over a period of two weeks, slaughtering anyone who challenged them as they crossed successive clan boundaries and leaving nothing in their wake that might be interpreted as the work of humans, such as tokens of exchange or compensation (Ballard 2003; Fox and Fox 1936). The bodies of the dead were clear testimony to the passage of these spirits but some of the more telling traces were the marks of their feet, imprinted in the mud of Huli ditched walkways. Later, those who had been too terrified to approach the spirits, or too far away during those few tumultuous days, were shown these prints, carefully curated under large leaves of the wild taro plant. Familiar and yet terribly strange, they were interpreted variously as animal claws or the hoofs of some kind of pig, or perhaps a foot-covering made of wild pandanus leaf.²

The interests in the materiality of encounters animating the contributions to this special issue and addressed in this essay shadow the approach of these curious Huli witnesses to ‘first contact’ in focusing on the tracks of participants and the trajectories of materials in historical encounters, along with the material traces or sequelae of their interactions. What is left, what is knowable of historical encounters, and how do their traces come to us? Or, perhaps, how do we arrive at the encounter?

The papers gathered in this collection were originally presented at the ‘Material Encounters’ conference, hosted by the National Library of Australia in Canberra in February 2015.³ The conference was the culmination of two projects funded by the Australian Research Council: ‘Naming Oceania: Geography, Raciology and Local Knowledge in the “Fifth Part of the World”, 1511–1920’, and ‘The Original Field Anthropologist: Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay in Oceania, 1871–1883’. Both projects privileged materiality in their understanding of historic encounters in Oceania, working along the intersection between two fields that are rarely addressed within the same frame: if encounters are most commonly approached as a clash of mentalities rather than materialities, materialities are seldom considered within the shifting, mobile contexts of encounter. To address this question, we asked conference participants to focus on the three-way relationship between human encounters in place, materiality, and texts—that is, how materials mediate between encounters and texts, construed broadly as any material vehicles for meaning, whether written, drawn, or fabricated. Contributions addressed a Gordian knot of intersections—between the materiality and the content of texts; their coproduction through embodied encounters in place and their subsequent acquisition, curation, and reworking; the transformation of material traces of encounter into published works; and all the reverse processes—now increasingly dialogic—of the recovery of meaning, significance, and intentionality.⁴ In the brush of presentation and discussion and through subsequent development of the papers published here, intimations of the delicate skein of connection between the tracks and traces of historical acting and thinking emerged.

Concepts

‘Track’ is understood here to indicate the movement in time and space of bodies and materials, towards, through, and beyond the moment and setting of their convergence and interaction in the encounter. Our capacity to retrieve tracks depends substantially (but not exclusively) on their

material imprint, which ranges from the ephemeral—desire paths through grass, a ship’s wake, vapour trails; to the more concrete—voyages inked on a globe, the vigorous strokes marking the passage of a pencil across paper, the accretion of labels on an archived skull. In its verb form, track also invokes the acts of seeing, interpreting, registering, and mapping each of these forms of movement, and of pursuing the provenance or circuitry of curated material traces. A ‘trace’, figuratively, is: ‘A non-material indication or evidence of the presence or existence of something, or of a former event or condition; a sign, mark’ (*OED Online*). Our notion of trace retains the active sense both of things in motion and of the ongoing interpretation of their passage or collision, of matter not being visible to all in the same way, and of the variable durability of different materials, which require or invite particular acts of curation or memorialization.

In ‘Western’ thinking over considerably more than two millennia, so-called materialism in varied guises or dialectical relationships has been blasphemy to the orthodox and unquestioned truth to proponents (Lange 1877–81). The *OED Online* dates the term in English, German, and French to the first half of the 18th century, defined thus: ‘The theory or belief that nothing exists except matter and its movements and modifications; (more narrowly) the theory or belief that mental phenomena are nothing more than, or are wholly caused by, the operation of material or physical agencies’. That narrowly secular conception must be broadened to acknowledge the metaphysical materialism of the widespread religious ‘theory or belief’ that spirits or gods are immanent physical phenomena, or are capable of being so.

Whereas materialism refers to abstract theorization, the contributions to this special issue are concerned with ‘materiality’ as a domain of practice, action, and history. The term is defined by the *OED Online* as ‘The quality of being composed of matter; material existence’. Dated to the late 16th century, the English word is paired with the Middle French term *matérialité*, meaning ‘material, concrete character of something’. The *Trésor de la langue française informatisé* attributes this French usage to an early 16th-century published edition of an anonymous manuscript of 1470 which opposes ‘the soul’ to ‘the materiality of the body’ (Anon. 1537, folio 97r). A Cartesian dichotomy of consciousness and matter is still taken for granted in much popular and even scholarly discourse, including in embedded Darwinian or Marxist guises. Darwin (1859, 459) long agonized over the religious and moral implications of his fundamentally materialist theory of ‘descent with modification through natural selection’. Marx

(1904, 11–12) expounded what Engels later termed ‘historical materialism’: ‘The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but ... their social existence determines their consciousness’.

While acknowledging widespread human recourse to dichotomization, our theme is the active interplay of knowing and matter (Appadurai 2006:18), rather than the abstract notion of materialism or theory per se. We address overlapping concepts of materiality and the material invoked, enacted, or manifest in fields represented in this special issue: anthropology, archaeology, art, bureaucracy, cartography, geography, history, museums, and photography. The contributors’ primary concern is the ways in which materials mediate the knowledge generated in encounters between particular people and with specific places—the shifting interaction, ‘movement’, or ‘becoming’ (Ingold 2012, 435, 437) of human embodiment (in encounters) and embodied materialization (in object, inscription, representation, memorialization). This focus on the historical nexus of embodiment and materiality, articulated through encounters, breaks new ground.

Engaging materiality

The priority of the material has always been a given in object-oriented fields such as archaeology, physical anthropology, museology, and material culture studies (e.g., Barbieta, Choyke, and Rasson 2009; Gould 1996; Richard 2015; van Dommelen and Rowlands 2012). However, the meanings attributed to materials in such endeavours could be unproblematically presentist, racist, or ethnocentric. For example, archaeologists might take for granted the past pertinence of recent ethnographic presents, thereby sustaining the myth of the timeless primitive (Brumfiel 2003, 208); physical anthropology long rested on the premise that human races were actual physical entities whose reality was proven by comparative bodily measurement, especially craniometry (Buck 1954, 13–15); the dominant visualism of modernist modes of apprehension is usually assumed or tacit in museum practice, at the expense of other sensory registers significant in mundane or Indigenous experience (Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006); and the concept of material culture itself may still bear traces of its mid-nineteenth-century European origins as a primary index of progress in unilinear models of social evolution (Buchli 2002, 2–5).

From the 1980s, the so-called ‘material turn’ in anthropology and eventually history saw burgeoning attention paid to the enduring material presence of past worlds, generating a dizzy array of overlapping or contested definitions and deployments (Trentmann 2009). Materials, things, objects, artefacts, bodies, commodities, material culture, collections, and materiality are among the key terms in these cross-disciplinary approaches, but they are often used indiscriminately and interchangeably. In positioning the papers of this collection within this disparate field, our goal is not to add to the proliferation of definitions but to show how our focus on the materiality of tracks and traces of encounter draws upon and to some extent departs from these varied strands of enquiry.

Material culture, regarded as ‘the manifestations of culture through material productions’ (Prown 1993, 1, cited in Harvey 2017, 8) or ‘physical entities that resonate with communities of humans’ (Gaskell and Carter 2020, 2), marks a common historical point of origin for most disciplinary approaches to materiality. Thus, archaeology’s longstanding emphasis on technology and material culture, as the primary source in ordering and reconstructing culture histories (Hicks 2010; Taylor 2008; Tilley 2006), finds recent counterparts in history’s persistent focus on manufactured objects and changes in their production and consumption (Stahl 2010)—‘the “choosing, making, and use” of material things rather than any attempt to ascertain their meaning’ (Gaskell and Carter 2020, 11; see also Cole 2013, 6)—and in anthropology’s concern for questions of choice, value, and commodity in human engagement with the material world (Appadurai 1986; Chua and Salmond 2012).

The return of material culture studies from the late 1980s has revived and transformed debates around materiality, retraining attention on the centrality of objects in the constitution of culture and social structures, the analysis of agency and personhood, and understandings of the relationship between mind and matter (Hicks 2010, 22ff; Miller 2005). For historians, this shift has allowed for the development of an important distinction: between ‘object-driven’ histories written from things (treating ‘objects as primary sources’); ‘object-centred’ histories focused directly on things (‘the object ... as the very subject matter of analysis’); and histories written alongside things (objects positioned ‘outside history altogether’) (Riello 2017, 28–29). An expanded understanding of the material world engages built environments and landscapes as contexts for the practices and products of material cultures (David and Wilson 2002; Tilley 2004).

Where the distinction is maintained, the contrast between objects and things is critical in decentring the human subject and opening up further space for enquiry. Martin Heidegger's (1967) interrogation of 'the thing' and the question of 'thingness' was extended by Bill Brown's (2001, 4) exploration of the distinction between the 'unspecificity' of things and the specification of objects, which assume their social role by being ordered 'through codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful': 'As they circulate through our lives, we look through objects (to see what they disclose about us), but we only catch a glimpse of things'. Jonathan Lamb (2011, xi) usefully located the object-thing contrast in the context of eighteenth-century encounters in Oceania, drawing the distinction:

between objects that serve human purposes and things that don't. The properties of objects of most interest to us are their mobility in the world of exchange, expressed as commercial and symbolic value, and their interpretability as specimens and curiosities, expressed as knowledge. We are interested in their contribution to the circulation of information, goods, and money because of the importance it imparts to us, the owners of them. Things, on the other hand, are obstinately solitary, superficial, and self-evident, sometimes in flight but not in our direction; they communicate directly only with themselves, and have no value in the market that they reckon.

Without denying autonomy and agency to things or assuming any correspondence between things as raw or prior and objects as manufactured (Trentmann 2009, 289), it is objects that are typically *invested* with personhood and agency, value and fungibility, and social lives and life histories (Appadurai 1986; Hoskins 1998; Jeudy-Ballini and Juillerat 2002)—as things that have either become, or been fashioned as, 'objects of fascination, association, and endless consideration' (Daston 2004, 11). In a move we return to below, Tim Ingold (2012, 435–6) introduced motion to the contrast, identifying an object as 'a complete and final form that confronts the viewer as a *fait accompli*', while a thing is a more fluid 'gathering of materials in movement—a particular knotting together of the matter-flow'.

The ways in which objects hold our attention and things fail to are expressive of different ontological accounts of materiality, of what it is that constitutes the material in our worlds. They are not simply, or not only, different regimes of value (Appadurai 1986, 4). As David Pye (1968,

47, cited in Ingold 2007b, 13) contended, ‘We each have our own view of what stoniness is’, but the collective and communicated form of such a view is a specific orientation to the material, a materiality. An obvious corollary to this observation is that there is no single materiality, no single regime governing the visibility of materials, but rather multiple materialities reflecting multiple ontologies (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007, 23, 27), necessarily constrained to a degree by the ‘brute intransigence of matter’ (Daston 2004, 16). To paraphrase Marshall Sahlins (1985, x), different cultures, different materialities.

In approaching the question of material encounters, or perhaps the encounter of materialities, we place particular emphasis on the dynamic and unstable qualities of encounter: the anxiety and miscommunication that commonly attends exchanges and interactions, whether across cultures, classes, genders, age groups, and so forth. This dynamism is equally evident in the material traces of encounter and in the very instability of the material itself (Thomas 1991): ‘In a world of materials, nothing is ever finished: everything may be something, but being something is always on the way to becoming something else’, said Ingold (2011, 3), possibly echoing Arjun Appadurai, for whom ‘all things are congealed moments in a longer social trajectory ... only momentary aggregations of material’ (2006, 15). We take seriously Appadurai’s (1986, 5) injunction:

to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things. Thus, 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 (original emphasis).

The papers in this collection draw upon and seek to contribute to these strands of thought around materiality, but they do so with a particular inflection, which promotes the idea of the material trace. Ingold’s (2007a, 43) definition of the trace as ‘any enduring mark left in or on a solid surface by a continuous movement’ signals both the importance of movement and the conjunction and mutual influence of different surfaces in the production of a trace. The trace may be either additive—produced through the application and addition of a substance (ink) to a surface (such as paper or bone); or reductive—involving the removal of part of a surface through

various forms of incision. Crucially, the production of a trace requires an encounter between things: citing Locard's Exchange Principle, Ruth Tringham (2013, 180) identified as 'the main premise of contact trace studies in archaeology' that 'any contact between two materials will leave traces (physical abrasions or chemical changes including residue additives) that can be identified by observation with or beyond the naked eye'.

Archaeologist Rosemary Joyce (2015, 181, 185) offers a particularly compelling program for the investigation of material trace, grounded in her own professional trajectory 'away from the archaeological fascination with things to understanding materiality as the embodied, experiential and dynamic medium of practice'—a practice in which sites (or encounters) are approached as a series of 'material traces at multiple scales of temporal granularity'. Recalling Brown's thing-object contrast, the trace is thing-like in the way that it resists conventional regimes of value, the unexceptional (woodchips struck from a tree) enduring beyond expectation, always pointing elsewhere to the movement of other materials: 'Trace ... captures the sense that what we are interested in is more than the thing itself, while reminding us that the thing itself is *part* of what interests us'. According to Joyce (2012, 129, 124), what archaeologists bring to 'an understanding of life with things is a sense of material in constant motion, in transit from hand to hand and place to place, blurring the boundaries of person, place, and thing'; reconstructions of the past are thus 'the itinerary of things, evident in the traces of their passages'.

A further dimension of the trace is its fugitive quality, sometimes bordering on the immaterial or absent. Valentina Napolitano (2014, 47, 62) sought to restore the centrality of the trace as a methodological tool in exploring the materiality 'that resides at the intersection of the seen and the unseen, sound and silence'; the manner in which former objects, such as migrant settlements, are written out of official archives and become forgotten, as traces or things. The focus here is on 'the forms that forces of lingering histories, attachments and marginalities, unmediated by conclusive structures of meaning, may take'. Absence is itself a form of trace: whether as the 'trace-being' of the disappeared bodies of *desaparcidos* in Argentina (Domanska 2006, 346); the phantom pains of 'sensing the presence of people, places and things that have been obliterated, lost, missing, or missed, or that have not yet materialized' (Bille, Hastrup, and Sørensen 2010, 3); or the 'dematerialized' bodies of Pompeian victims of Vesuvius, awkwardly 'rematerialized' in plaster (Reilly 2015).

History and encounters

Along with materiality, history is the connecting thread in this special issue, in that each essay addresses traces of encounters embodied in a particular time and space and the contributions are sequenced in roughly chronological order. Every paper tackles a variation on the myriad ways in which ideas, preconceptions, theories, canons, or traditions are enacted in embodied encounters; materially traced in material mediums such as maps, landscapes, writings, drawings, photographs, paintings, or objects; and confirmed, challenged, or reconstituted in the process.

Four contributors deal primarily with visual traces of encounters. Ethnohistorian and historian of science Bronwen Douglas uses maps to materialize the erratic interplay of concepts and experience in relation to encounters with places and people that, from the early sixteenth century, informed European ignorance, imagining, or knowing of the sea passage between modern Papua New Guinea and Australia. Artist Nicola Dickson positions the iconography of the eighteenth-century South Sea expedition of Joseph Antoine Bruni d'Entrecasteaux within overlapping past and present contexts: contemporary French ideologies; the voyage artist Jean Piron's drawings of his situated encounters with Indigenous people; their distanced reinscription in metropolitan engravings; and Dickson's artistic strategies to re-present visual histories of encounters in her paintings. Historian Chris Ballard addresses the interstitial genre of marginal inscriptions on drawings of Western Pacific Islanders, their material culture, and their milieus by the nineteenth-century Russian anthropologist Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay. Ballard contrasts Miklouho-Maclay's spatial ordering of image and inscription on paper with historians' orthodox ascriptions of centrality and marginality in the past. Historian of photography Antje Lübcke examines embodied photographic encounters between the English Protestant missionary William George Lawes, his camera, and Papuan populations in late nineteenth-century New Guinea, as materialized on glass-plate negatives and paper.

Three contributors explicitly consider objects, their movements in encounters, and their shifting salience. Archaeologist James Flexner intermeshes past and present perspectives to elucidate inscriptions of places in landscapes in South Vanuatu. He correlates archived paper records of nineteenth-century land sales and associated exchange goods with Indigenous histories told informally by local partners in his own archaeological practice, which is enabled by diverse exchanges with them. Historian of science Ricardo Roque investigates the inscription of colonial toponyms on 'stuffed human heads' seized from Papuan settlements by Australian

patrol officers who read them as crucial diagnostic materials for racial anthropology—signs of headhunting and cannibalism. Relocated in early twentieth-century museum collections, place names marked on stuffed heads were exploited by the Cambridge anthropologist Alfred Cort Haddon to materialize and condense his anthropogeographical concept of ‘culture areas’ in New Guinea. Cultural historian Martin Thomas focusses on encounters during the 1949 American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land to highlight the intrinsic materiality of scientific fieldwork, like intercultural meetings generally. He shows how distribution of trade goods, especially tobacco, underpinned local engagements with expedition members and their collection of knowledge and objects, particularly artwork.

The final essay—because its subject is the most recent—is political scientist Nick Cheesman’s forensic inquiry into linkages between Supreme Court files and judicial verdicts delivered under military dictatorship in 1990s Myanmar. He identifies ways in which the banal materiality of paperwork simultaneously enabled and camouflaged the casual brutality of arbitrary bureaucratic encroachments on personal lives in an authoritarian regime.

Historical materialism aside, academic historians have been slow to embrace reflection on materials and especially on materiality. After about 1990, studies of the practical significance of things in specific historical contexts proliferated (Trentmann 2009) and the archive as artefact attracted increasing attention—from other disciplines as well as history (e.g., Dever, Newman, and Vickery 2009; Farge 1989; Ladwig et al. 2012; Stoler 2009; Zeitlyn 2012). The thingness of inscriptions or images on paper or objects is a key concern in this collection. However, materiality is integral to the craft of all historians in one crucial, inadequately acknowledged respect: because pasts, though real, are accessible only through their present traces (Barthes 1967, 74; Collingwood 1946, 242–9; Douglas 1998, 14–17). So, with respect to Oceania, Douglas (2014, 20–2) differentiated the overt signs, latent markers, or inadvertent countersigns of Indigenous presence strewn through outsiders’ representations of encounters. She read such residues critically as traces of the impact of Indigenous agency on visitors’ perceptions and reactions. Traces are embodied in human memory and performance—as oral histories, stories, poetry, songs, dances, re-enactments. They are materialized in very varied mediums: notably in writing—script, typed, printed, and now often digitized; but equally in places, drawings, maps, photographs, films, tapes, buildings, sculptures, carvings, objects, fabrics ... Historical knowing is multiply embodied: in everyday human existence which is indexed, understood, shaped, and

recalled with ongoing reference to past experience, events, and precedents; in protagonists in past human encounters, whose recorded testimony, reports, recollections, stories, oral histories, or traditions constitute the professional historian's 'sources' or 'texts'; and in self-consciously practising historians themselves. Texts and histories not only image or imagine the world but are generated in and by it. Their very composition, content, style, tone, and techniques bear the stamp or traces of time, place, and human agency, through encounters, authorship, discourse, convention, technology, and the vagaries of knowledge creation, acquisition, transformation, and loss.

All but one contribution address encounters in Oceania; the exception is located in the neighbouring zone of mainland Southeast Asia. Oceania has long been a key site for critical thinking about encounters between Indigenous inhabitants and incomers, largely Europeans, especially in two dramatic contexts of 'first'—or at least early—'contact' (Jolly, Tcherkézoff, and Tryon 2009): during maritime expeditions from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries (Denning 1995; Douglas 2014; Sahlins 1981; Salmond 1992; Smith 1969; Thomas 2003), paralleled here in the contributions of Douglas and Dickson; and during the more recent terrestrial travels of colonial actors, mainly in the interior of Papua New Guinea (Schieffelin and Crittenden 1991; Gammage 1998; Kituai 1998), illustrated by Roque. This literature commonly treats encounters as sites for the meeting or clash of contrasting ontologies or knowledge systems and exchanges between them (Gascoigne 2014; Newell 2010; Smith 2010). Anthropological fieldwork or expeditions, discussed by Ballard and Thomas, produced a wide, relatively systematized range of rich material traces of encounters. More routine Indigenous engagements with missionaries, traders, colonial officials, and settlers generated a fragmentary but copious written or oral archive and prolific material legacies but are less often treated explicitly as encounters. However, the trope's heuristic utility is patent in the papers by Lübcke and Flexner. Cheesman's gripping rendition of bureaucratic entanglements in Myanmar might seem peripheral to the collection's dominant spatial and thematic focus. But his essay is integral because its concern for class and status dimensions of encounters brings into analogic relief the cultural or geographic orientations of most other contributors.

Until recently, the literature on Oceanic encounters typically reduced an 'encounter' to a general clash of reified homogeneous cultures—a 'crosscultural' event occurring during 'culture contact'. In contrast, we treat encounters as fluid episodes involving multiple relationships between varied individual agents or clusters of agents—including places and objects—in a particular temporal setting or present. The understandings or knowledges thereby created were sometimes

opposed and usually ambiguous but provided stimuli for acting, including representing and memorializing, mediated by materials (Douglas 2014, 18–33). We pluralize and complicate encounters through renewed attention to the diverse interactions that generated their material traces: what Anna Tsing (2005, 1) called the ‘friction’ provoked through global connection, ‘charged and enacted in the sticky materiality of practical encounters’.

Material traces such as inscriptions were central to the performance of encounter, ranging from James Cook’s orders to ‘establish and leave “Marks and Inscriptions” that would “remain as Traces and Testimonies of your having been there”’ (Schaffer 2007, 102), to the systematization of journal-keeping and astronomical observations that convinced European voyagers (though not necessarily Indigenous protagonists) of the reality of their asymmetrical accumulation and projection of knowledge/power. Simon Schaffer’s (2007, 90–91) retelling of the scene in which the astronomer William Gooch is invited by a Marquesan man to apply his pen and ink to the Islander’s skin as a tattoo speaks to the acts of translation of each other’s materialities that accompany both initial and subsequent encounters. Material objects are positioned ‘as both creative processes and as products of these complex entanglements’ and their subsequent transformations serve as registers of both foreign and ‘local theorisations of materiality’ (Bell and Geismar 2009, 4, 16). Sujit Sivasundaram (2020) shows how the ‘physicality of print’ intersected with Polynesian genealogies, transmitted through oral performances that were themselves embedded in the materiality of accompanying bodily expression, within the setting of carved meeting houses that served as mnemonics for history.

Technologies

Attention to the technologies productive of traces of encounters weaves through the collection, manifesting Ingold’s (2012, 435, original emphasis) strategy of ‘following their materials’ in ‘a process of *correspondence*:... the drawing out or bringing forth of potentials immanent in a world of becoming’. By juxtaposing successive methods of visual representation, Dickson exemplifies Appadurai’s (2006, 16) notion of the ‘corrosion of history’, which ‘supports and intensifies the inherent tendency of things to move on to some new state in their social lives’: Piron’s artistic techniques for materializing experience in drawings; their transformation in the work of engravers; and her own artistic practice using quotation and metamorphosis of engraved images to re-present encounters for modern audiences. Ballard queries the marginalization of

drawing in field anthropological practice. Lübcke details the physical and technological settings of photographic encounters in New Guinea. Cheesman shows how typeface, tabulation, and concatenation, as technical qualities of bureaucratic paperwork, facilitated arbitrary intrusions into the lives of citizens by Supreme Court judges in Myanmar. Douglas draws heavily on the virtual materiality of digital imagery, which is enabling and democratizing unparalleled access to global map collections.

Agency, time, and precedence

The question of the agency of things or objects in human affairs has been energetically debated, particularly by anthropologists with reference to widely varied ethnographic settings (e.g., Chua and Salmond 2012; Gell 1998; Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell, eds, 2007; Ingold 2007b, 2012, 436–438; Miller, ed. 2005). The entangled agencies that animate encounters between people, places, and things and generate their ambiguous material traces are recurrent themes in this collection. Douglas charts the power of place and Indigenous agency in shaping the movements and knowings of European travellers over nearly four centuries. Dickson examines Piron’s experiences of local agency and materializes them in her own artwork. Ballard ponders Indigenous influence on and responses to Miklouho-Maclay’s naturalistic portraiture. Lübcke shows that Indigenous agency was a significant, if ambiguous element in both encounters and Lawes’s photographic representations of places and persons. Thomas tracks a concatenation of agencies in action during the Arnhem Land expedition: members’ ruthless exploitation of addictive Aboriginal craving for tobacco; the expedition’s reciprocal dependence on tobacco as their prime exchange commodity; the non-negotiable demand of Aborigines for tobacco in exchange for their work and contributions; and the devastating impact of tobacco on human bodies in its movement from substance to smoke, from thing to no-thing.

Encounters and their histories bear traces of the subtle agency of time. The slippage from embodied encounters to material productions is temporally complicated because protagonists in later encounters draw on earlier precedents and generate modifications and revisions in material inscriptions. Temporality is thus manifest in recursive materializations of multiple encounters. In this collection, Douglas tackles ambiguous temporality in two ways: via an anti-teleological but sequential narrative of the empirical creation, loss, or recovery of cartographic knowledge in maps and place names; and by juxtaposing varied chrono-logics—existential, Indigenous,

Ethnographic, Archaeological, digital—which intersect, qualify, or disrupt academic History’s linear temporality. Dickson and Flexner interlace pasts and presents: Dickson by re-presenting eighteenth-century encounters and motifs in her paintings; Flexner by correlating nineteenth-century paper archives with modern oral histories. In similar vein, Ballard alludes to ways in which Pacific communities have drawn on Miklouho-Maclay’s drawings of their ancestors and his associated marginalia to produce dialogic present histories. Ballard highlights the temporal theme of depletion, ruination, or fragmentation inherent in all archives (and histories and collections), but camouflaged by conventional history’s ‘urge towards completion’—the conceit that archives and histories can be whole or made whole again. Thomas considers the significance of precedents, embedded in public consciousness, in guiding the material trappings of expeditions over centuries—their invariable equipment with an inventory of trade goods supposedly attractive to ‘primitive’ people.

Conclusion: taphonomies of encounter

The materiality of encounters extends from considerations of setting—the *mise en scène* of the surrounding landscape, the approach paths or trajectories of bodies and other materials—to the kinetics of collision or friction, the materials produced or exchanged through the encounter, and its multivalent material traces. The dynamic material processes that flow from the moment of encounter are perhaps productively addressed through the metaphor of taphonomy—the study of the formation of the fossil record—as a frame for understanding both how the traces of encounter take shape, or become absent, in the archaeological record or the historical archive and how we might understand or interpret them. Fragmentation, ruination and incompleteness play their part (Stoler 2013), but the re-integration of traces within new systems or orders of meaning—their registration, regimentation, authentication, comparison, and ongoing representation and transmission—is equally powerful in structuring the material record of past events (Ladwig et al. 2012). These recursive processes, now understood on a vastly expanded temporal canvas extending well prior to the encounter and through contemporary presents to imagined futures, should direct our attention to the continuous unfolding of histories of encounters and their materialities.

Endnotes

¹ Specific references to the 1934 wood chips come from interviews by Chris Ballard with Kewage Barabia (17 March 1991), Bole Pimbirali (18 March 1991), Gela Leme (20 March 1991), Yaliduma-Dai (11 April 1991) and Bari-Wayama (21 June 1991).

² In addition to Baowa Ngawe, others who recalled the boot prints include Hamburi Awe (29 May 1991), Magaya Dimbabu (11 March 1991), Balua Lendebe (4 April 1991), Hondomo Baiyulia (4 June 1991), and Andagali Giwa (15–16 August 91).

³ Apart from the contributors to this special issue, the following scholars delivered papers to the ‘Material Encounters’ conference: Felix Driver, Philip Jones, Helen Gardner, Elena Govor, and Jude Philp. Those by Driver (2020) and Philp (2021; Lilje and Philp 2021) have resulted in separate publications.

⁴ To fix materials at the centre of conference discussion, we took advantage of the National Library’s spectacular collection to stage a viewing of historical items nominated by participants. They included the earliest map of New Guinea and the Solomon Islands (Jode [1593]); a coconut said to have been ‘carved by sailor’ on James Cook’s *Endeavour* (Anon. [1668–71]); a Presbyterian missionary’s translation of *Jenesis* (Genesis) into the Kwamera language of Tanna, in modern Vanuatu (Watt 1883); an annotated copy by the missionary-anthropologist Lorimer Fison of an offprint of his seminal article ‘Australian Aborigines’ (Fison 1872); and a selection of Myanmar Supreme Court files.

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