WEBB KEANE

Signs Are Not the Garb of Meaning: On the Social Analysis of Material Things

How can we both understand things and do full justice to their materiality? The effort seems still to be haunted and confounded by such ancient dichotomies as form and substance, essence and accident, matter and spirit. Old habits die hard, and a host of promised poststructuralist and postmodern redemptions have not entirely shaken themselves free of their conceptual genealogies. Perhaps, as some have argued, we can't shake these dichotomies because they are so deeply part of our metaphysics of presence (Heidegger 1962), or then again, perhaps it's because we are so entrenched in reified consciousness (Lukács 1971)—because we have always been heirs of the Greeks or, conversely, because we are now capitalist moderns. In either case, we would be facing a tall order indeed.

MATERIALITY AS A SEMIOTIC PROBLEM

But consider a more specific arena: the lingering effects of certain models of the sign. Here efforts to rethink materiality are still commonly hampered by certain assumptions built into the lineage that runs from Ferdinand de Saussure to poststructuralism. Guided by these assumptions, we tend to divide our attention between things and ideas. Those whose attention centers on things may be tempted to relegate ideas to an epiphenomenal domain, subordinated to real, tangible, stuff. Conversely, attention to ideas often seems to render material forms into little more than transparent expressions of meaning. And the more social analysis stresses the intentions, agency, and self-understandings of humans (following, for instance, Weber 1978), the more it tends to reproduce the very dichotomy between subject and object it might better be putting under critical scrutiny (Keane 2003).

This chapter aims to develop an approach to signs for which the practical and contingent character of things is neither subordinated to, nor isolated from, communication and thought. It aims to shake off what has been described as "one of [Saussure's] most durable legacies" (Irvine 1996: 258), the radical separation of the sign from the material world. The result should be a better understanding of the historicity *inherent* to signs *in their very materiality*.

OBJECTS AS A PROBLEM FOR SUBJECTS

Throughout this chapter I will return to the example of clothing, which has an indisputably intimate relationship to persons—not just their appearance and social identities, but even their gestures and smell (Stallybrass 1996). Given this intimacy, we should perhaps wonder why anyone would think of clothes as superficial. Or worse: in 1854 the American Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau famously wrote, "I say, beware of all enterprises that require new clothes, and not rather a new wearer of clothes" (1971: 23). What's to fear? Beneath Thoreau's moralizing of things lie implicit and, today, widespread assumptions about signs. Thoreau's moralism dwells on the ways in which clothing marks social distinctions, subjects us to the vagaries of fashion, and displaces our proper concern with the immaterial. He observes that "there is greater anxiety, commonly, to have . . . clean and unpatched clothes, than to have a sound conscience" (1971: 22). Clothes form a material outside that distracts us from the spiritual inside, with the result that, in Thoreau's words, "We know but a few men, a great many coats and breeches" (1971: 22). In this ironic rhetoric, we may hear something in common with the words of Thoreau's junior by one year, Karl Marx. Recall how Marx (1967) famously appropriated "fetishism," a concept that had

until then been restricted to comparative religion, in order similarly to accuse his contemporaries of inverting the proper relations between animate and inanimate things.

But there is more. Caring about clothing gives us over too much to the opinion of others. Thoreau's discussion of clothing ends with an attack on fashion (1971: 25), which forces us to acknowledge the authority of others, whether that be the distant arbiters of style or the opinion of our neighbors. For Thoreau, the distinction between inner and outer provides ontological support for his individualism, which sees in social relations a threat to personal authenticity. For both Thoreau and Marx, despite their obvious political differences, the misapprehension of material things is not merely a mistake—it has grave consequences. It leads us to invert our values, imputing life to the lifeless and thereby losing ourselves. The proper understanding of material signs has moral implications. These hinge both on a particular understanding of the subject's fundamental interiority and on the subject's relations to other people, to the extent that they are mediated by signs. Signs are viewed, like other people, as thoroughly external to, or even at odds with, that interiority.

Thoreau's remarks about clothing suggest an important theme running from nineteenth-century Protestantism to the high modernist aesthetic of, say, the Austrian architect Adolf Loos a half century later. Thoreau would surely have welcomed Loos's assertion that "the evolution of civilization is tantamount to the removal of ornament from objects of use" (quoted in Gell 1993: 15), with its celebration of function over appearance, its rejection of surfaces not just as superfluous but as immoral.

Why should materiality be a moral question? Part of the answer involves the historical fate of a particular ontology that defines subjects in opposition to objects (Keane 1996, 2002). But there is a more specific manifestation of this ontology, in background assumptions about the sign common to much Western social theory. If social and cultural analysts still find it difficult to treat objects as no more than illustrations of something else, as, say, communicating meanings or identities, it is because we remain heirs of a tradition that treats signs as if they were merely the garb of meaning—meaning that, it would seem, must be stripped bare. As this tradition dematerializes signs, it privileges meaning over actions, consequences, and possibilities. Yet we must be wary of merely reversing this privilege and thereby inadvertently

reproducing the same dichotomy. Drawing on semiotic concepts such as iconicity and indexicality, and the ideologies that organize them in representational economies, I'd like to suggest some alternatives.

SIGNS IN THEIR CAUSAL RELATIONS

I want to argue that certain semiotic concepts can help clarify the relationships between causal and logical dimensions of material things in society, between contingency and meaning. Because this word is used in so many different ways, a brief word on what semiotics, as I use it, is *not*. One of the most original uses of Charles Sanders Peirce's key concept of the "indexical sign" is Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency* (1998). Despite this, Gell claims to eschew semiotics per se. This because he identifies semiotics with "language." This won't do for understanding things, he says, because he wants to attend to the qualities of the object itself. He writes, "We talk about objects, using signs, but art objects are not, except in special cases, signs themselves, with 'meanings'; and if they do have meanings, then they are part of language" (1998: 6). Fair enough; the problem here is that Gell too quickly assimilates "sign" to "meaning," "meaning" in turn to "language," and "language" to something like "coded messages." In this, Gell seems to accept Saussure's (1959) structuralist model of language, as consisting of signifieds which are encoded in the form of arbitrary signifiers, in order to be transmitted to someone else, who decodes them and thereby recovers the signified meanings.

Indeed, this model is of little help in understanding objects. But we can go further: it's not even a good account of language. Saussurean "semiology" (not "semiotics") also makes it hard to perceive the role that language does play vis-à-vis material things. First, it treats language as something that exists in a plane of reality quite distinct from that in which any nonlinguistic things (material or conceptual) are found. It connects to those things only as objects of reference and denotation. Second, by seeing language only as coded meaning, Saussurean semiology fails to see the role linguistic practices play in the objectification of things, a point to which I will return at the end of this chapter. The problem is, semiotics has too often been treated, especially in cultural studies, as merely about the communication of meanings. Perhaps for this reason, Gell's use of the concept of index doesn't develop its

articulation with other aspects of the sign. As a result, I would argue, he doesn't fully explore the social and historical implications of the index. Instead he seeks a direct road to the transhistorical domain of cognition. I would like to show how semiotics can help us restore these social and historical dimensions to the analysis.

In contrast to those who treat signs as coded messages, Peirce located signs within a material world of consequences.[1] He insisted that concrete circumstances were essential to the very possibility of signification. Thus he criticized Hegel's idealism with these words: "The capital error of Hegel which permeates his whole system . . . is that he almost altogether ignores the Outward Clash. . . . [This] direct consciousness of hitting and getting hit enters into all cognition and serves to make it mean something real" (Peirce 1958: 43–44).[2] Peirce offers a way of thinking about the logic of signification that displays its inherent vulnerability to causation and contingency, as well as its openness to further causal consequences, without settling for the usual so-called materialist reductionisms. To see this we need to recognize how the materiality of signification is not just a factor for the sign *interpreter* but gives rise to and transforms modalities of action and subjectivity *regardless* of whether they are interpreted. I want to argue that this openness should be central to any theoretically principled effort to understand the historical dynamics of material things.

The Peircean model of the sign has two features I want to bring out here. First, it is processual: signs give rise to new signs, in an unending process of signification. This point is important because it entails sociability, struggle, historicity, and contingency. This interpretation of the model offers a challenge to the facile but commonplace claim that to take things as signs is to reduce the world to discourse and its interpretation, to give in to the totalizing imperative to render all things meaningful. Second, the Peircean model devotes considerable attention to the complex range of possible relationships among signs, interpretations, and objects. For purposes of material analysis, I will be concerned with relations between signs and their possible objects of signification, which can be one of resemblance (*iconicity*), actual connection (*indexicality*), or rule (*symbolism*).[3]

The best-known social analyses of materiality focus on production. Since production is, in a brute sense, a cause of the product, these analyses often

work with some version of indexicality. Take, for instance, Marx's distinction between the product of nonalienated and alienated labor. We could call the former indexical, insofar as the weaver can see herself in the cloth she weaves because it bears the evident stamp of her work. By contrast, alienated labor fails to index labor, since the industrial worker doesn't recognize himself in the factory output. In Bertrell Ollman's characterization, nonalienated human powers "exist in their product as the amount and type of change which their exercise has brought about. The degree of change is always proportionate to the expenditure of powers, just as its quality is always indicative [that is, iconic] of their state. . . . Man's productive activity leaves its mark . . . on [and thus is indexed by] all he touches" (1971: 143). In what is otherwise a vastly different approach, Heidegger also emphasizes the contrast between practical activity and the contemplative or theoretical attitude, and he favors the former for what seems to be its indexical character. He writes, "The shoemaker . . . understands *himself* from his things [the shoes]" (quoted in Munn 1986: 275, n. 12).[4] But indexicality is only one dimension of modes of signification. What I want to turn to now is the role of resemblance in the inherently social and historical character of material things.

BUNDLING AND THE OPENNESS OF OBJECTS

"She likes red," said the little girl.

"Red," said Mr. Rabbit. "You can't give her red."

"Something red, maybe," said the little girl.

"Oh, something red," said Mr. Rabbit.

—**CHARLOTTE ZOLOTOW**, *Mr. Rabbit and the Lovely Present*

One of the most sophisticated and far-reaching uses of iconicity in ethnographic analysis is Nancy Munn's (1986) account of a Melanesian system of production, consumption, and exchange. Her analysis gives a special role to those sensuous qualities of objects which have a privileged role within a larger system of value.[5] Their significance is borne by certain qualities beyond any particular manifestations in any specific objects. As Mr. Rabbit observes, redness must be embodied in something red. But the little girl's intuition is right too: for someone who likes red, in theory any number of

quite different objectifications will do. Similarly for Gawans, according to Munn, "lightness," for instance, can pertain to canoes, garden plots, decorations, bodies, and so forth.

Mr. Rabbit reminds us that qualities must be embodied in something in particular. But as soon as they do, they are actually, and often contingently (rather than by logical necessity), bound up with other qualities—redness in an apple comes along with spherical shape, light weight, sweet flavor, a tendency to rot, and so forth. In practice, there is no way entirely to eliminate that factor of copresence, or what we might call *bundling*. This points to one of the obvious, but important, effects of materiality: redness cannot be manifest without some embodiment that inescapably binds it to some other qualities as well, which can become contingent but real factors in its social life. Bundling is one of the conditions of possibility for what Kopytoff (1986) and Appadurai (1986) called the biography of things, as the qualities bundled together in any object will shift in their relative salience, value, utility, and relevance across contexts.

One of the reasons Munn focuses on qualities, I think, is that it permits her to find identities among quite distinct things (canoes, garden plots, and so forth). Any analysis of signs in society needs to provide an account of how entities that are materially different in their qualities or, minimally, in their spatiotemporal coordinates, count as *the same thing*, without simply reproducing the conventionalism exemplified by the type-token relationship in structuralist linguistics—without assuming, that is, that people go around with a code book or set of rules in their heads. Abstracting qualities from objects offers a way of bringing discrete moments of experience into an overarching value system on the basis of habits and intuitions rather than rules and cognitions. But it is the cultural totality that makes it possible for Munn to speak of these instances as being "the same." That is, there is still some governing principle that makes of possible instances realizations of the same thing, and thus the possibilities—and recognizability—of future actions.

Icons in and of themselves remain only unrealized potential. In Munn's analysis, for instance, lightness partakes in a network of possible causal relations. To give food away rather than eating it fosters exchange relations with expansive potential across social space and into future time. What is given value by the specific aesthetic in which lightness plays this pivotal role

are *causal* relations (eating food makes it unavailable for exchange). These relations are, for instance, registered by effects on the body: one who eats instead of giving comes to have a heavy and sluggish body. The very objectualization and thus legibility of iconicity (sluggishness), in this case, entails indexicality (the causal effects of eating). But these causal relations would still hold even if no one took them to be socially significant, being, say, in America rather than Melanesia.

If the properties of a material thing exist even if never taken as iconic elements of a sign, the reverse is also the case. An icon can resemble an object that doesn't exist—a map, say, of a fantastic land, or a cloud that looks like a unicorn. Since all objects have qualities, *any* given object potentially resembles *something*. This means any object can suggest possible future uses or interpretations. The artist's preliminary sketch for a sculpture makes use of this characteristic openness of iconicity as a means of discovery, "suggesting . . . new aspects of supposed states of things" (Peirce 1955: 106–107). The object in this case plays a role in the creation of something new that is not reducible to the acting subject's intentions. Rather, the interaction between the possibilities suggested by form and the taking up of that suggestion by the sculptor are a version of what Bruno Latour (1993) calls hybrids. Moreover, since resemblance is underdetermined, icons require some further guidance to determine how exactly they are similar to their objects. After all, even an ordinary portrait photograph is normally flat, immobile, and much smaller than its subject (see Pinney 1997). This guidance is thoroughly enmeshed with the dynamics of social value and authority—they are not merely external and supplementary to the force of iconicity.

CLOTHING AND POSSIBILITY

Take the example of clothing. The openness of iconicity was at work when colonial subjects turned Western shirts upside down and wore them as pants; it is at work when European tourists buy "ethnic cloth" and hang it on the wall as art. Resemblance, however, can only be with respect to certain features, and therefore depends on selection. To hang a flat, rectangular ikatted waist cloth from the Indonesian island of Sumba as wall art encourages one to overlook its bilateral inversion, since the images at each end are upside down relative to one another—the viewer tends to look only at those

that are "right-side up." Determining what features count toward resemblance commonly involves larger questions of social value and authority. This is especially easy to see in colonial clashes. For instance, the Western sense of propriety, in colonial southern Africa, was offended by multifunctional apparel (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 270). Accustomed to one set of clothes for dining and another for gardening, one kind of textile to cover tables and another beds, Europeans were scandalized when Tswana used the same blankets as garments, ground cover, market bundles, and baby carriers. In time, a successful hegemony would restrict such potential uses, constraining which iconic possibilities would be recognized in practice.

Iconicity is only a matter of potential. The realization or suppression of that potential cannot be ascribed simply to the qualities of the object in themselves. There must always be other social processes involved. These processes may involve varying degrees of self-consciousness and control. Semiotic analyses have tended to favor the more strictly regimented domains as royal or liturgical ritual, high fashion (Barthes 1983), or connoisseurship (Bourdieu 1984). But there are far less well organized dimensions to social life. Even in the more controlled domains, however, since those material qualities that are suppressed do persist, objects bring the potential for new realizations into new historical contexts (see, e.g., Thomas 1991).

SEMIOTIC IDEOLOGY

One of the fundamental distinctions between icon and index concerns the nature of the inferences they will support. An icon tells us something about the qualities of its object but not whether that object actually exists. An index affirms the actual existence of its object, but not what, exactly, that object is. In different ways, each in itself "assert[s] nothing" (Peirce 1955: 111). Therefore, as Alfred Gell (1998: 14–15) and others have observed, making sense of indexicality, for instance, commonly involves ad hoc hypotheses. The observation is useful because it doesn't require us to assume everyone goes around with a preexisting code or cultural rule book in their heads. Yet the social power of indexicals demands some further account of their social regimentation or at least their recognizability—their coherence across discrete moments of intuition. Indexicality must be furnished with instructions (Hanks 1996: 46–47). It is semiotic ideology that helps do that.

By *semiotic ideology* I mean people's background assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world.[6] Such assumptions help determine, for instance, what people will consider the likely role that intentions play in signification to be, what kinds of possible agent (humans only? animals? spirits?) exist to which acts of signification might be imputed, whether signs are arbitrary or necessarily linked to their objects, and so forth. Thorstein Veblen's (1912) notion of conspicious consumption, for instance, seems on the face of it to be a clear-cut example of indexicality. One appreciates the value of a classical education or high-heeled shoes by recognizing their lack of utility, and from that draws the inference that someone who can afford to dispense with utility must hold a certain status. But this recognition is mediated by what you assume about the world. Knowing Latin or wearing high heels are not useful, for example, only if you believe Latin doesn't have magical power or that height is immaterial to selfhood. Semiotic ideologies are thus concerned not just with signs per se but with what kinds of agentive subjects and acted-upon objects might be found in the world. There is no reason to conclude, however, that semiotic ideologies are total systems capable of rendering all things meaningful. Indeed, I would suggest below that the openness of things to further consequences perpetually threatens to destabilize existing semiotic ideologies.

THE OPENNESS OF THINGS IS INHERENTLY HISTORICAL

What do material things make possible? What is their futurity? How might they change the person? As the references to Thoreau and Loos above suggest, there are times when these questions become urgent. For example, missionary history across the colonial world shows a persistent and troubling tension between the hope that clothing will change people, and the danger that people once clad will invest their clothing with too great a significance (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 223; Hansen 2000: 26, 30–32; Spyer 1998). On the one hand, proper dress is essential to the inculcation of modesty, propriety, and civility. Yet how much should one hope clothing will transform people? Not so much that they forget it is but a surface that can be removed. There are many dangers. They may, for instance, become frivolous and vain. Colonial writing is replete with depictions of dandi-

fied or otherwise ridiculous natives. Morality thus depends on the correct understanding of the materiality of things and the immateriality of persons, a balancing act that invites perpetual anxiety.

It is not only missionaries who are unsettled by the question of how much change we ought to expect from a change of clothes. Transvestitism, after all, is serious business. In Indonesia, the capacity of Buginese *bissu* to mediate between the world of the living and the dead, for instance, requires mixed gendered dressing. And certainly new historical ambitions seem to demand new clothes. Across the Malay world, to convert to Islam required that one take on new kinds of clothing and food regulations, which is one reason people figured the same must be true of Christianity (Aragon 2000; Taylor 1997). By the end of the nineteenth century, young nationalists in the more urban parts of the Dutch East Indies were asserting their modernity and new capacities through sartorial transformations, and in the twentieth they resisted calls for a Ghandi-like return to indigenous cloth (see Schulte Nordholt 1997, especially the chapters by van Dijk, Danandjaja, Mrázek, Taylor).

We must be clear: at issue here is not just the expression of "identities." For instance, clothing cannot be understood without the experience of comfort and discomfort, both physical (see, for instance, Banerjee and Miller 2003) and social (Elias 1994). And these have little to do with meaning, expression, identity, nor even, as Marcel Mauss (1979) would remind us, with some universal phenomenology of bodily experience. We drape ourselves in habit, competence, and constraint—with what clothing makes possible. Sumbanese cloth allows the comforting gesture of draping it protectively around oneself, as they say, like a hen huddled against the rain. The man's waistcloth leaves legs free to straddle a horse; his headcloth is good for everything from wiping sweat off the neck to transmitting magical power to asserting his individuality (Keller 1992). Men and women's clothing has no pockets. But special objects can be hidden in their folds. And the very insecurity of this draping can be played to advantage. One man told me how he got rid of a powerful talisman that, while useful, was becoming dangerous. Knowing it would be even more dangerous if he intentionally disposed of it, he folded it into his waistcloth and started on a long cross-country trip. Somewhere, perhaps in crossing a river, the talisman was lost, as it were, accidentally on purpose. We could say he thereby elicits the very

agency of the thing. At the other end of the spectrum, Indonesia's early nationalists struggled against the discomfort of tight shoes and neckties in their effort to open up new possibilities. For them, "wearing a Western suit with tie did facilitate a handshake instead of a humble *sembah* [a respectful Javanese gesture of greeting], and wearing trousers did lend itself to sitting on a chair instead of being seated on the floor" (Schulte Nordholt 1997: 15).

New clothing makes possible or inhibits new practices, habits, and intentions; it invites new projects. Nicholas Thomas (1999) observed that the adoption of the so-called poncho by western Polynesian Christians didn't merely *express* their new modesty; in practical terms, by offering new ways of covering themselves, it made it *possible*. If we are to treat things "in their own right," and not just as the tangible garments draped on otherwise invisible and immaterial ideas, we must consider their forms, qualities, practical capacities, and, thus, their place within causal relations. For if, in Marilyn Strathern's (1988) terms, objects are revelatory, it is not simply because people say so, nor even because the anthropologist can impute to people certain beliefs. If things mediate our historicity, we cannot be content to ask only what meanings people attribute to them now. And even of those meanings, we must be attentive to the ways in which they are (for the time being) regimented and brought into relation to other things—much of this being the task of social power.

CLOTHING TAKEN TO BE MEANINGFUL

Material signs in themselves, unaided by semiotic ideologies and the various modalities of social regimentation, assert nothing. And social analysis that depends on assertions—that tries to "read" signs—is commonly confined to the retrospective glance. It works best for highly regimented systems of socially conventional signs. Indeed, in their most totalizing form, concepts such as culture, discipline, episteme, and hegemony are responding to the constant struggle within societies to regiment signs by taking the outcome as a given. But as I have been stressing here, the semiotic character of material things means that outcome is not, in principle, settled. It is not simply that their meanings are underdetermined, but also that their semiotic orientation is, in part, toward unrealized futures. Take the most ordinary of things. George Herbert Mead remarked, "The chair is what it is in terms of its

invitation to sit down" (1934: 279). What interests us as embodied actors rather than, say, spectators, is the chair's instigation (by virtue of its form, that is, iconic suggestion) to certain sorts of action—and, thus, its futurity. This instigation may be most powerful when actors are least aware of it, something typical of what Daniel Miller (1987) calls "the humility of objects." And as instigation, the chair can only invite actions, not determine them: people in the colonial Indies may not have responded even if the Dutch had permitted them to rise from their floor mats. To realize some of the potentials of things, and not others, is the stuff of historical struggles and contingencies. The reason this seemingly obvious point is worth stressing is that it points us beyond the retrospective character of common ways of understanding signs, seeking to read them in terms only of what they presuppose and express.

What did Western dress worn by people of the Indies in the early twentieth century index? What possibilities did people hope to effect by a change of clothes? Acceptance of European culture, a desire to be part of a sophisticated world, acquiescence to Dutch rule, assertions of equality to Europeans, hostility to Islam, rejection of village society, being modern, access to fungible wealth, or short-sighted extravagance? And why did some of these attempts at cross-dressing fail and others succeed? When the Dutch, for instance, refused to acknowledge Indonesians' sartorial assertions of equality, they were helped by a semiotic ideology that told them clothing is merely skin-deep—a message of little consequence.

Semiotic ideologies are vulnerable, not least by their exposure to the openness of things. Consider the effects of what I have called bundling. Necessarily embodied in some particular objectual form, a given quality is contingently (rather than by logical necessity or social convention) bound up with other qualities—redness on a cloth comes along with light weight, flat surface, flexibility, warmth, combustability, and so forth. There is no way to eliminate (nor, entirely, to regiment) that factor of co-presence or bundling. This points to one of the obvious, but important, effects of materiality: redness cannot be manifest without some embodiment that inescapably binds it to some other qualities as well, which remain available, ready to emerge as real factors, as it crosses contexts. Western slacks treat the legs independently of one another. This permits a longer gait than does a Javanese sarong, inviting (but not determining) athleticism and giving them

the potential for becoming socially realized conventions, that is, symbols understood as icons, of, say, "freedom." In Indonesia they have tended to be more expensive than the sarong as well, and thus indexical of relative wealth and, by extension, urban life. But now that the sarong has come to be purposefully deployed as a conventional symbol of Islam (indexical, but only by decree), slacks also threaten to be indexical of the not-wearing of sarong.[7]

These associations provide raw material for ideological consolidation. Middle-class men in Indonesian cities today have a rule-governed sartorial repertoire: a neotraditional outfit for weddings, safari suit for official meetings, long-sleeved batik shirt for receptions, shirt and tie for the office, sarong and *pici* for Friday prayers (Danandjaja 1997; van Dijk 1997). These are coordinated with bodily habituses: the Javanese *sembah*, sitting on mats and eating with hands while in neotraditional clothes; firm handshake, direct eye contact, chairs, and utensils in office attire; Islamic *salam* while in sarong. This cluster of habits, expectations, and constrained possibilities is the outcome of several generations of semiotic regimentation and stabilization. In addition to the direct effects of government regulations over its vast civil service, other responses reinforced them. For instance, a popular "uniform fever" swept Indonesia in the 1970s, as people at the margins of citizenship sought to distinguish themselves from the anonymous masses by identifying themselves sartorially with the bureaucracy (Sekimoto 1997). Some people took to wielding uniforms as apotropaic talismans against corrupt police and vigilantes (Danandjaja 1997). It is against the background of such self-consciously communicative and highly systematized treatments of clothes that other modes of emblematization emerge, such as the taking on of more Middle Eastern styles of head covering by women (Brenner 1996). Now, in these tightly regimented circumstances, a communication model of the sign actually does a great deal to explain style. But not all social life in all domains is so tightly controlled and totalized. If we take signs to be expressive of meanings, we must be prepared to ask under what historical circumstances, and guided by what semiotic ideology, that is possible.

This consolidation, I think, is what Georg Simmel meant by saying that "style is always something general" (1950: 341). Without denying the complexity of the idea of style, we might take from this comment an insight into how a relatively stable style produces a certain orientation toward the future.

Style allows one to recognize, across indefinitely many further occasions, instances of "the same thing." But the work of selecting and stabilizing the relevant bundles of iconicity and indexicality, the semiotic ideology this involves, is a project that can in principle never be completed, or fully consolidated (on the limits of totalization, see Laclau and Mouffe 1985). As such, semiotic ideology is necessarily historical.

CLOTH MADE TEXT

I began by arguing against language- or text-based approaches toward material things. Yet we also know that things can, *under some circumstances*, be treated as meaningful in textlike ways. This should lead us to take textuality *not* as a model for signification, but rather as that which needs to be explained (see Silverstein and Urban 1996). What are the conditions, for instance, under which cloth does or does not come into view as a bearer of iconography, with meanings that can be "read"? Sumbanese ikats are only produced in a small number of villages, although they circulate through exchange and are highly valued across the island. Some aspects of meaning don't travel well: the fact that the smell of indigo dye vats is iconic of rotting flesh (Hoskins 1989) is quite significant in weaving villages but not elsewhere. Even in weaving villages, explanation of motifs was restricted to male specialists, not the women who actually wove. In central Sumba, where weaving was carried out but the technique of ikatting forbidden, ikatted textiles were ritually, economically, and socially potent, but their imagery drew little attention. The functions of Sumbanese cloth shift by turns from wrapped garment to folded exchange valuable, open curtain, shroud draped on a corpse, shield against ritual heat, suspended banner, object of verbal exegesis, hidden relic, and, nowadays, art on a wall. In the past, once a cloth was off the loom, there were few normal uses in which the imagery was laid out and made clearly visible as a whole. Most uses reveal only fragments of the pattern, in constant motion. In practice, the qualities that come to the fore are brightness and busyness, fragility or durability (depending on context), capacity to block light and retain heat, softness, absorbency, ease of manipulation, and bilateral symmetry (see Keane 1997b: 80–81).

Under what conditions, then, do iconology and exegesis become significant? In old Sumba, the most common ikat motifs included *patola* designs drawn from Indian trade cloth, dragons from Chinese porcelain, and rampant heraldic animals from Dutch coins (Adams 1969). These require little exegetical knowledge beyond an awareness that they index the power of distance, conveyed through the capacity of objects to move across space and time. In recent decades, however, enormous attention has been drawn to motifs (but not, for instance, their repetition across the cloth, which gets overlooked). What has changed? Cloth is increasingly encountered as a plane parallel to the stance of the viewer. That is how they are displayed by sellers, illustrated in books, and hung on collectors' walls. They are visible as rectangular frames, taken in at a single glance, with a top and bottom. As frames for imagery, cloths become instances of the category "traditional" art. They enter a series that also includes Balinese painting and Javanese shadow puppets, which encourages cross-reference among them. Commercial competition is also driving a focus on motifs, one of the main ways of differentiating producers and allowing them to display esoteric knowledge to the buyers (see Myers, this volume). Motifs (and some of their formal features, such as the jagged edges produced by the ikat dyeing technique) readily circulate independently of waist-clothes or their technologies, to T-shirts and murals. Discrete motifs become objects of discourse. This discourse plays a crucial role in objectifying cloth as bearer of motifs. Exegetical talk itself is becoming an indexical icon of male authority and of the "tradition" embodied in the commodified cloth (Forshee 2000).

WORDS AND THE OBJECTUALIZATION OF THINGS

I have been arguing against approaches to material things that privilege language, or even received notions of meaningfulness, as their model. By emphasizing the mediating role of semiotic ideology in the consolidation of objects as components of social life, I have also tried to bring out the historicity implicit in semiotics. I want briefly to sketch out one illustration of historical transformation and objectualization in which language *does* play a critical role.

It has been observed that the formal organization of Sumbanese cloth seems to echo that of other material forms in Sumba (Adams 1980). And, as Émile Durkheim and Mauss (1963) recognized long ago, such forms offer privileged sites for the expression or concretization of social struc-

tures and cultural meanings. Yet, as Michel Foucault (1972: 44) observed, "one cannot speak of anything at any time." What makes textile, village, or house readily available for talk about cultural meanings in objectual form, with what material consequences? Here I want to turn from clothing to architecture.

I have suggested (Keane 1995) that the concreteness of the house as a cultural object, that is, as a repeatable, relatively stable, and intertextually rich representation (see, for instance, Bourdieu 1979), derives in part from certain features of the ways of speaking that purportedly refer to it. In Sumba, these features include an emphasis on canonical poetic forms such as parallelistic couplets and schematic list-making, and a pragmatic structure that tends to create a powerful center within the ritual performance that can be linked to nonvisible, and normally absent, agents such as ancestor spirits (Keane 1997b). The various discursive possibilities afforded by the house take as their authorizing foundation, interpretative content, and structural guide verbal performances that seem to trace a pathway through the house, naming its parts one by one. This verbal structure is shaped, in turn, by certain presupposed conditions for ritual speech. Chief among these is the invisibility and possible nonpresence of the spirit addressees, for whom the space of ritual encounter must be mapped out in order to guide them into the presence of the speakers—hence the diagrammatic character of the verbalized house. That is, the materiality of the house comes to the fore as a response to a certain material condition—the invisibility of interlocutors.

How does this help us understand the consolidation of material things as social objects? I argue that the significance of the material qualities of the house—and thus the "bundling" of distinct material qualities provided by the objectualization of the house as a unified entity—changes when the conditions for ritual speech change. For self-consciously modern Christians, the spirits cease to be real addressees. Their invisibility ceases to be a materially objective reality. Yet ritual speech persists, increasingly as a text understood as carrying traditional wisdom and Sumbanese ethnic identity. The materiality of its poetic form reproduces the structure of the house, but now as the object of reference, rather than as the sequence for a potential real-time unfolding of an encounter with invisible agents. This unfolding, I should note, did not in the past require that there be an actual house to

match the verbal structure—any virtual house, even a mat on the ground, meeting proper ritual baptismal conditions, could serve. But as the use of ritual texts shifts—from addressing spirits in order to bring about consequential encounters, to entextualizing cultural meanings in order to render them visible and interpretable—so do the relations to materiality they presuppose.

This is part of a general shift in semiotic ideology distinguishing and linking words and things. If, for example, ritual speech (ideologically) functions to refer to the world, the felicity of reference depends on the physical existence of actual houses that match those which are being denoted. Any apparent mismatch between words and the world reinforces the sense that they exist in separate and self-contained domains. No amount of *ritual* felicity can bring about changes in the *material* qualities of the house being referred to. At the same time, as contemporary Sumbanese increasingly come to see their immediate surroundings in terms of the material absence of exemplars of what is now thought of as the traditional house, something else is going on. On the one hand, they may perceive the lack of the appropriate physical structures as indicating the loss of tradition; they may even work to preserve token houses of the proper type. On the other hand, as Protestants, they are learning that verbal prayers are merely the outward expression of sincere inner thoughts that are, in essence, wholly immaterial, like the soul who intends them (Keane 1997a, 2002). They deny any significance to the material form that their words take. Language, like sacrificial goods, has become "merely symbolic" and thus ideologically dematerialized. In short, an explicit ontological claim, reinforced by new liturgical speech practices, along with a host of other mundane practices of modernity,[8] underwrites the transformation of the dominant semiotic ideologies within which the objectivity of material things comes to play its emergent social roles. Whereas language should not be the privileged theoretical model for a semiotics of material things, discursive practices *do* play a crucial role in ideological *consolidation* or semiotic regimentation (Silverstein 1996) in rendering objects legible, full of stabilized "meaning."

The idea of semiotic ideology should not be taken to imply totalization. Different orders of semiosis are differently subject to determination or autonomous logics. Thus the more indexical aspects of any configuration of signs will be more subject to direct transformation in response to material

circumstances, whereas a system of conventions is subject to quite distinct modes of determination and transformation. Technological change may quietly alter the genetic content of the food on our table and labor economics the sources but not the look of our clothes. Meanwhile, legal rights are being reshaped in highly public verbal debates, whose outcome depends on the dynamics of argument, precedence, and party politics. Each of these processes involves very different temporalities, social logics, and consequentialities. But since even the most conventional signs are instantiated in material forms, they are, at least to that extent, subject to material causality. Conversation requires a shared language and a medium of communication; yam prestation requires a garden; the phone call requires electricity and a telephone—something so obvious as to be commonly overlooked.

OBJECTS AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF SUBJECTS

I have argued elsewhere that matter and materialism pose special difficulties for mainstream Protestants (Keane 1996, 2001). The effort to regulate certain verbal and material practices, and the anxieties that attend them, center on the problem of consolidating a human subject that is at its core independent of, and superordinate to, the world of mere dead matter (this greatly simplifies a complex story). What for anthropologists is a problem of social and cultural analysis—how to understand material things within human society—is faced by these missionaries as a practical problem—how to free humans from false relations to things, as in fetishism, animism, or naturalistic materialism. This view of signs has roots in an ontology that goes back before either Protestantism or modernity, to be sure, but it reaches a particularly strong and influential expression in their alliance, as expressed by the quotations above from Thoreau and Loos. It underwrites much of our contemporary social theory as well.

To take clothes in particular, and objects more generally, as expressions of meanings that really lie elsewhere is to depend on certain assumptions not just about objects, but about signs. Clothing seems most superficial to those who take signs to be the clothing of immaterial meanings. Like clothing, in this view, the sign both reveals and conceals, and it serves to mediate relations between the self and others. These are the very grounds on which Thoreau and many other Protestants and modernists are suspicious of clothing and, often, of semiotic mediation altogether. In unmediated transparency they hope to discover unvarnished souls and naked truth.

Iconism and indexicality function by virtue of meta-level semiosis. First, the very existence of a sign as such, for an interpreter, depends on a mode of proto-objectification. That is, before an object of signification can be specified, something must first be specified as a sign. And in the process, its objects must be determined to be objects. It is a historically specific semiotic ideology that determines what will count for the interpreter and actor as objects and in contrast to what subjects. A yam prestation that falls short of expectations, or a telephone call not returned, may index malevolent human intentions, an individual's forgetfulness, the disfavor of spirits, abstract social forces, one's own fate, mere happenstance, or something else altogether, only with reference to a specific ideological context that makes these plausible and relevant inferences. Thus the Protestant anxiety about the relative autonomy of the human subject from the material world constrains what will count as signs, as intentions, and as actions—excluding, like Weber, such things as the contingent materiality of things from the proper domain of the human. A semiotic analysis of the social power of things would thus demand an account of the semiotic ideologies and their discursive regimentation that enter into or are excluded from the processes by which things become objects, for these are the same processes that configure the borders and the possibilities of subjects.

NOTES

This chapter has benefited from the comments of Judith Irvine, Adela Pinch, and Christopher Pinney, and was completed during a fellowship year at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (Stanford, Calif.).

1. A useful selection from Peirce's vast, complex, and mostly unfinished and unpublished writings is Peirce 1955. For (necessarily selective) appropriations of Peirce in the context of contemporary cultural and social analysis, see Daniel 1996, Lee 1997, Parmentier 1997, and Silverstein 1976.

2. Note that he seems to be saying not that this "consciousness" provides the meaning of the cognition, but rather that it gives that meaning its reality effect.

3. The "symbol" here includes those arbitrary social conventions, such as Saussure's "language," which have dominated cultural analysis. For Peirce, symbols can encompass icons and

indexes. For instance, the arrow on a "one way" traffic sign is legible only because we have conventions for understanding arrows. But we take it be indexical, as pointing in the actual direction we should go, in the here and now.

4. Compare Lukács: "[T]he diversity of subjective attitudes orientates praxis toward what is qualitatively unique, toward the content and the material substratum of the object concerned. . . . theoretical contemplation leads to the neglect of this very factor" (1971: 126).

5. She calls these *qualisigns*, a Peircean category of iconicity.

6. This idea expands on the concepts of "linguistic ideology" (Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998) and "ethnosemiotic assumptions" (Parmentier 1997).

7. As pointed out in note 3 above, symbols can be taken as iconic or indexical.

8. These practices include the handling of money (Keane 2001), the effort to speak sincerely (Keane 1997a, 2002), and the treatment of exchange valuables as symbolic of abstract social values (Keane 1996, 2001).

REFERENCES

Adams, Marie Jeanne. 1969. *System and Meaning in East Sumba Textile Design: A Study in Traditional Indonesian Art*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies.

——. 1980. "Structural Aspects of East Sumbanese Art." In James J. Fox, ed., *The Flow of Life: Essays on Eastern Indonesia*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Appadurai, A. 1986. "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value." In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Aragon, Lorraine V. 2000. *Fields of the Lord: Animism, Christian Minorities, and State Development in Indonesia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Banerjee, Mukulika, and Daniel Miller. 2003. *The Sari*. Oxford: Berg.

Barthes, Roland. 1983/1967. *The Fashion System*. Trans. A. Lavers and C. Smith. London: Jonathan Cape.

Bourdieu, P. 1979/1970. "The Kabyle House, or the World Reversed." In *Algeria 1960*. Trans. R. Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

——. 1984/1979. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Brenner, Suzanne. 1996. "Reconstruction of Self and Society: Javanese Muslim Women and 'the Veil.'" *American Ethnologist* 23:673–697.

Comaroff, John L., and Jean Comaroff. 1997. *Of Revelation and Revolution*, vol. 2: *The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Danandjaja, James. 1997. "From Hansop to Safari: Notes from an Eyewitness." In Henk Schulte Nordholt, ed., *Outward Appearances: Dressing State and Society in Indonesia*, 249–258. Leiden: KITLV Press.

Daniel, E. Valentine. 1996. *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Durkheim, E., and M. Mauss. 1963/1903. *Primitive Classification*. Trans. R. Needham. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Elias, Norbert. 1994/1939. *The Civilizing Process*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Cambridge: Blackwell.

Forshee, Jill. 2000. *Between the Folds: Stories of Cloth, Lives, and Travels from Sumba*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Foucault, M. 1972/1969. *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. Trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon.

Gell, Alfred. 1993. *Wrapping in Images: Tattooing in Polynesia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

——. 1998. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Hanks, W. F. 1996. *Language and Communicative Practices*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview.

Hansen, Karen Tranberg. 2000. *Salaula: The World of Secondhand Clothing and Zambia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Heidegger, Martin. 1962/1927. *Being and Time*. Trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson. New York: Harper and Row.

Hoskins, Janet. 1989. "Why Do Ladies Sing the Blues? Indigo, Cloth Production, and Gender Symbolism in Kodi." In Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider, ed., *Cloth and Human Experience*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Irvine, J. T. 1996/1989. "When Talk Isn't Cheap: Language and Political Economy." In D. Brenneis and R. K. S. Macaulay, eds., *The Matrix of Language: Contemporary Linguistic Anthropology*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview.

Keane, Webb. 1995. "The Spoken House: Text, Act, and Object in Eastern Indonesia." *American Ethnologist* 22:102–124.

——. 1996. "Materialism, Missionaries, and Modern Subjects in Colonial Indonesia." In Peter van der Veer, ed., *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity*, 137–170. New York and London: Routledge.

——. 1997a. "From Fetishism to Sincerity: Agency, the Speaking Subject, and Their Historicity in the Context of Religious Conversion." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39:674–693.

——. 1997b. *Signs of Recognition: Powers and Hazards of Representation in an Indonesian Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

——. 2001. "Money Is No Object: Materiality, Desire, and Modernity in an Indonesian Society." In Fred C. Myers, ed., *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.

——. 2002. "Sincerity, 'Modernity,' and the Protestants." *Cultural Anthropology* 17:65–92.

——. 2003. "Self-Interpretation, Agency, and the Objects of Anthropology: Reflections on a Genealogy." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45:222–248.

Keller, Edgar. 1992. "Head-dresses as a Medium of Self-Expression in Laboya: Sumbanese Attire in Historical Perspective." In Marie-Louise Nabholz-Kartaschoff, Ruth Barnes, and David J. Stuart-Fox, eds., *Weaving Patterns of Life: Indonesian Textile Symposium 1991*. Basel: Museum of Ethnography.

Kopytoff, Igor. 1986. "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process." In A. Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.

Latour, Bruno. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Trans. C. Porter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Lee, Benjamin. 1997. *Talking Heads: Language, Metalanguage, and the Semiotics of Subjectivity*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Lukács, Georg. 1971/1922. "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat." In *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Trans. R. Livingstone. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Marx, Karl. 1967/1887. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling. New York: International.

Mauss, Marcel. 1979/1950. "Bodily Techniques." In *Sociology and Psychology: Essays*. Trans. B. Brewster. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Mead, George Herbert. 1934. *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Miller, Daniel. 1987. *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Mrázek, Rudolph. 1997. "'Indonesian Dandy': The Politics of Clothes in the Late Colonial Period, 1893–1942." In Henk Schulte Nordholt, ed., *Outward Appearances: Dressing State and Society in Indonesia*. Leiden: KITLV Press.

Munn, Nancy. 1986. *The Fame of Gawa: A Symbolic Study of Value Transformation in a Massim (Papua New Guinea) Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ollman, Bertell. 1971. *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Parmentier, Richard J. 1997. "The Pragmatic Semiotics of Cultures." *Semiotica* 116 (special issue).

Peirce, Charles Sanders. 1955. *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*. Ed. Justus Buchler. New York: Dover.

——. 1958. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. 8: *Reviews, Correspondence, and Bibliography*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Pinney, Christopher. 1997. *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Saussure, Ferdinand de. 1959. *Course in General Linguistics*. New York: Philosophical Library.

Schieffelin, Bambi B., Kathryn A. Woolard, and Paul V. Kroskrity, eds. 1998. *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Schulte Nordholt, Henk. 1997. Preface to *Outward Appearances: Dressing State and Society in Indonesia*. Leiden: KITLV Press.

——, ed. 1997. *Outward Appearances: Dressing State and Society in Indonesia*. Leiden: KITLV Press.

Sekimoto, Teuo. 1997. "Uniforms and Concrete Walls: Dressing the Village under the New Order in the 1970s and 1980s." In Henk Schulte Nordholt, ed., *Outward Appearances: Dressing State and Society in Indonesia*, 307–337. Leiden: KITLV Press.

Silverstein, Michael. 1976. "Shifters, Linguistic Categories, and Cultural Description." In Keith H. Basso and Henry A. Selby, eds., *Meaning in Anthropology*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

——. 1996. *Indexical Order and the Dialectics of Sociolinguistic Life*. Austin: Texas Linguistic Forum (SALSA III).

Silverstein, Michael, and Greg Urban, eds. 1996. *Natural Histories of Discourse*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Simmel, Georg. 1950/1923. "Adornment." In Kurt H. Wolff, ed., *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 338–344. New York: Free Press.

Spyer, Patricia. 1998. "The Tooth of Time, or Taking a Look at the 'Look' of Clothing in Late Nineteenth-Century Aru." In Patricia Spyer, ed., *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Places*, 150–182. New York: Routledge.

Stallybrass, Peter. 1996. "Worn Worlds: Cloth and Identity on the Renaissance Stage." In Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Stallybrass, eds., *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Strathern, Marilyn. 1988. *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Taylor, Jean Gelman. 1997. "Costume and Gender in Colonial Java, 1800–1940." In Henk Schulte Nordholt, ed., *Outward Appearances: Dressing State and Society in Indonesia*. Leiden: KITLV Press.

Thomas, Nicholas. 1991. *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

——. 1999. "The Case of the Misplaced Poncho: Speculations Concerning the History of Cloth in Polynesia." *Journal of Material Culture* 4:5–20.

Thoreau, Henry D. 1971/1854. *Walden*. Ed. Lyndon Shanley. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

van Dijk, Kees. 1997. "Sarong, Jubbah, and Trousers: Appearance as a Means of Distinction and Discrimination." In Henk Schulte Nordholt, ed., *Outward Appearances: Dressing State and Society in Indonesia*, 39–83. Leiden: KITLV Press.

Veblen, Thorstein. 1912. *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*. New York: Macmillan.

Weber, Max. 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Trans. E. Fischer et al. Berkeley: University of California Press.

MATERIALITY

EDITED BY DANIEL MILLER

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS
DURHAM AND LONDON
2005